Crisis and Masculinity on Contemporary Cable Television: Tracing the Western Hero in *Breaking Bad*, *The Walking Dead* and *Hell on Wheels.*

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Lennard: "You've been working on string theory for the last 20 years and you're not closer to proving it than when you started!"
Sheldon: "Yeah? Well, I've had a lot on my plate. We happen to live in a golden age of television!"
(*The Big Bang Theory* S07E20).

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You were never a man
in the television sense of the word
(Fuhrman, 50)

1. Introduction

> "Like America itself, television has always existed in a state of transformation, being continually reshaped and occasionally reinvented by a wide assortment of technological, commercial, and social factors" (Edgerton, 2).

> "[T]he Western is a universal frame within which it is possible to comment on today" (Sam Peckinpah qtd. in: Parkinson & Jeavons, 182).

> "The two most successful creations of American movies are the gangster and the Westerner: men with guns" (Dashiell Hammett, qtd. in: Weidinger, 97).

What do we expect men to be like? And what do men expect themselves to be like? When we watch a Western that we know nothing about beforehand, we inevitably expect to encounter a male main character and, to some degree, we just know what he is going to look like and how he is going to behave – the strong, silent type with a towering presence in the world, who might do bad things but who can eventually be counted on.

Similarly, expectations concerning men surface in commonplace statements such as "boys don't cry" or "a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do." These statements can be understood as expectations that shape narratives – the narratives of our lives and of fiction. Imagine a Western that does not conform to these expectations, a Western that features a hero who does cry and who does not do what he has got to, for example seek revenge for the wrongful murder of a friend. Would this be considered a 'real' Western or rather a parody?

Expectations about manhood seem to have generic implications. Lee Clark Mitchell convincingly argues in his study *Westerns. Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (1996) that the Western is "deeply haunted by the problem of becoming a man" (4). However, Western-type conceptions of masculinity not only have a place in the Western, but in narratives of other genres or genre hybrids as well.

I argue that contemporary cable television series such as *Breaking Bad* (2008 – 2013), *The Walking Dead* (2010 – present) or *Justified* (2010 – present), amongst others, are heavily informed by the Western and its representation of masculinity. How do these series construct the masculinity of their male main characters? Does a contemporary Western series like *Hell on Wheels* (2011 – present) still adhere to century-old conceptions of masculinity and the West as a space for regeneration? Why do we find so many Western-type constructions of masculinity in narratives mostly set in our day and

age, more than a century after the American frontier experience? Do these constructions of masculinity fulfill our expectations or is this recourse to an arguably outmoded model of manhood used for different ends? The following pages seek to find answers to these concerns and place them within a context of America in crisis.

The influential HBO drama series *The Sopranos* (1999 – 2007) is very much concerned with masculinity and crisis tendencies. It has also paved the way for the series under investigation in this project. The male main character, Tony Soprano, is both a Mafia boss and a suburban family man trying to navigate the demands of an all male business environment and his assumed responsibilities as a family man. This is not an easy task as he is suffering panic attacks for which he seeks treatment in psychotherapy. It can be argued that it is his expectation of what a man should be like that drives him to therapy – more than once he wonders "whatever happened to Gary Cooper, the strong, silent type?" (S01E01). The reference is of course not Gary Cooper as a person, but the actor who starred in many Westerns such as *High Noon* (1952) or *Man of the West* (1958). The demands of family life are seemingly incommensurable to his expectations about manhood and arguably construct one on-going crisis for this man. His own son, Anthony, Jr., does not conform to his father's idea of how a man should behave. Thus, when Anthony, Jr. is heartbroken after his fiancé left him, we see that boys in fact cry and in this particular case, a lot and openly. His father advises him to go out and "get a blowjob." There is, after all, plenty of fish in the sea and Anthony, Jr. has, according to his father, much to offer: "You are handsome, and smart, and a hard worker, and... lets be honest: *white*. that's a huge plus nowadays" (S06E17).

Anthony Jr. should feel lucky, his father tells him: being a white male in America carries certain privileges. Being a male-sexed person in itself however does not provide the best benefits. Being white *and* heterosexual *and* male seems to be the ideal prerequisite to success. Nevertheless, like Tony Soprano, white middle class men on television are increasingly shown to turn to crime to uphold a privileged status.

The 'Other', that is women as well as ethnic and sexual 'minorities', has voiced its appetite for a fair share of the pie. This circumstance has its ramifications. Civil rights groups' pleas for equality however surface as a crisis: the crisis of (white) masculinity.

Looking at how the crisis discourse is held and how men are presented on the television series I investigate here, one might infer that clinging to white male privilege is what a "man's gotta do." Thus, one of the main concerns of this project is to look at

the representational patterns at work in these series – how they relate to the aforementioned crisis discourse and whether they communicate to social, political and cultural issues at work in the contemporary USA. I argue that dramas airing on the basic cable channels AMC and FX are influenced by the economic crisis that erupted in 2007 and/or wrestle with the ramifications of 9/11. Broadly asking, how do the televisual constructions of masculinity resonate with these issues? Does the resurgence of an old ideal of masculinity on some cable channels communicate to crisis tendencies in America? In answering these question, I will look at how these televisual narratives construct masculinity and whether these constructions can be traced in a historical lineage of representations of American manhood.

Masculinity itself has been said to be "in crisis" for quite some time now and it could be argued that the return of older forms of masculinity on television has something to do with this crisis discourse. The crisis of masculinity has been a widely discussed subject throughout various academic fields and will be elaborated on in more detail in the first chapter. This discourse has also been an anchor to various investigations into popular culture, most notably film, theater, and performance art. Kaja Silverman's *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992) looked at the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder and how the marginal masculinities there undercut what she terms the dominant ideology. Sally Robinson's *Marked Men* (2000) more explicitly looks at how the marking of the white male was responsible for crisis announcements by enabling investigations into white male hegemony. The narratives she investigates deal with how these crisis announcements are used to reclaim patriarchal privilege. Pivotal to her and following inquiries into white masculinity was Richard Dyer's *White* (1997), a critical investigation into how "the equation of being white with being human secured a position of power" (9). Hamilton Carroll's *Affirmative Reaction* (2011) and Claire Sisco King's *Washed in Blood* (2012) follow a similar approach as Robinson, while Fintan Walsh's *Performing Male Trouble* (2010) focusses on the performance aspects of both crisis and masculinity. Most of the scholars I have just mentioned base their analyses on Judith Butler's groundbreaking understanding of gender as performative in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity in *Masculinities* (1995).

Even though it is recognized that there are various forms of masculinity competing simultaneously for hegemony, these investigations often focus on a masculinity

perceived as hegemonic, a masculinity, moreover, that announces a moment of crisis in order to reclaim patriarchal privilege perceived as lost. Similar in tackling representations of masculinity in light of this perceived crisis, this project seeks to sidestep discussing a more generalized, Western white masculinity as the hegemonic form of manhood in the USA and in the Western Hemisphere: the masculinities under investigation in Walsh's *Performing Male Trouble* or Silverman's *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* are not analyzed by both as expressions of or diversions from a culturally specific expression of manhood, but more of a universal, that is Western, expression thereof. Even though idealized conceptions of masculinity are somewhat similar throughout the Western hemisphere, they do differ among nations and regions – just consider how differently obedience figures in American and German conceptions of manhood and national identity throughout history.

Such considerations made it necessary to dive into an understanding of the American Adam and his primary representational realm. The serial narratives under investigation, I argue, are informed by a culturally specific, American branch of idealized manhood – one that has its roots in the American frontier experience. At first glance, the frontier seems to be a historical and regional concern. Yet, as O'Connor and Rollins maintain, "[t]hroughout our cultural history, Americans have been in awe of their frontier experience, and it has been rendered to comment on vital national issues, which it actually may have helped shape [...] the West was a training ground for national character" (4-5). The American Adam can thus be understood as bound to ideas connected to the frontier and nationhood and is referred to as cowboy or frontier hero throughout this work.[1] Since this project deals with representations of masculinity in popular culture and these in turn are informed by an idealization constructed through popular culture – dime novels, television and Hollywood Westerns[2] as well as paintings and advertising – these terms reference these representations and not the empirical cowboy, scout, trapper or frontier town sheriff. Even though much of my reading

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1 "Frontier hero" can be understood as an umbrella term for trapper, scout and cowboy, the latter of which has come have the greatest resonance: "The image of the frontier hero took shape in America in the late eighteenth century through the popular stories of Daniel Boone. [...] The first western heroes were mountain men or scouts, and the cowboy appeared in the late 1880s in popular dime novels. He soon became the definitive hero, the symbolic frontier individualist" (Wright, 6).

2 The Western as a genre is of particular importance in American cultural production within Hollywood. This is largely due to its setting: referring to social and political conflicts at the hand of and analogous to new frontiers is ingrained in the genre's DNA (see Wolfrum, 116). Moreover, "Hollywood Westerns explore in a large mythic framework (where mythic self-consciousness is an attempt at a form of collective self-knowledge) representations and enactments of the political psychology characteristic of a distinctly American imaginary, and [..] this imaginary both concerns and is itself central to the nature of the political in the American experience" (Pippin, 102)

references the frontier experience, this is not to imply that the narratives analyzed here are necessarily Westerns: because the frontier is "so steadfast and ingrained in American culture that it can effortlessly and endlessly [be] recycled in other genres and genre-hybrids, even a century after the 'West' as an unsettled space" (Jacobs, 60). In fact, this project is not about the Western as a genre. The term frontier hero bears, like his setting, the frontier, a mythic connotation. Concepts such as gender, manhood, the cowboy hero, the frontier and myth will all be defined and contextualized in the first chapter of this project.

Moreover, the aim of this project is not to look solely at the crisis of masculinity and how patriarchal privilege may be reclaimed through narrative strategies, but at how masculinity and the perceived crisis thereof can be connected to crisis tendencies in America. This means that this project is based on the assumption that political, social and cultural events leave their mark on culturally produced texts. This follows an understanding of the nation as an imagined community that finds a common identity in the stories the community tells about itself:

> it is now conventional to define the nation as a mapping of an imagined community with a secure and shared identity and sense of belonging, on to a carefully demarcated geo-political space. The nation, from this perspective, is first forged and then maintained as a bounded public sphere. That is to say, it is public debate that gives the nation meaning, and media systems with a particular geographical reach that give it shape. [...] National identity is, in this sense, about the experience of belonging to such a community, being steeped in its traditions, its rituals and its characteristic mode of discourse (Andrew Higson qtd. in: Hinterkeuser, 26).

The analysis of popular culture narratives therefore is a productive means to draw inferences about the respective culture's condition at the time of their production. How do concepts of masculinity encountered in contemporary television interact with the fictional worlds created around them? How do these interactions resonate with political, social and cultural developments outside of their texts? Furthermore, how can we assess these interactions in light of a historical lineage of cultural production in the USA? Considering that idealized frontier masculinity was implicated in American imperialism, the crisis of masculinity and representations of the American middle class in crisis bear a post-empire connotation. The American empire built by heroic men is perceived as crumbling.[3]

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3 This is of course purely speculative and it should be noted that similar sentiments have been voiced before. That the USA had lost its hegemony was already declared four decades ago: "For many American scholars, it seemed no accident that the decline of order in the world economy and its financial system coincided in the mid-1970s with a time of weakness and humiliation in the conduct of United States foreign policy and, as many of them came to think, of American power" (Strange, 555). This is an interesting point since the proclaimed crisis of US hegemony was followed by a return to old strengths personified by one of Hollywood's cowboy heroes cum president: Ronald Reagan. Such

This is not to say the American empire is really in its death rattle – the USA still has the most powerful economy and military industry in the world: 9/11 and subsequent wars have not changed this. The crisis atmosphere permeating the narratives discussed in this project as well as recent headlines concerning the imminent-but-averted bankruptcy of the USA (resulting in a federal government shut down on October 1 2013) as well as concerns regarding an ever-increasing intelligence apparatus have a lot to do with what we might call a disenchantment with the American Dream after 9/11 and subsequent policies, most notably the Patriot Act. In *Breaking Bad*, for example, the self-made man in pursuit of his dreams is a villain. *Hell on Wheels* similarly looks at the construction of the transcontinental railroad as a ruthless capitalist enterprise – not necessarily a new sentiment given revisionist Westerns with the same *sujet*, yet relatively new in television, a medium long perceived as pacifying – a vehicle to sell consumerism. The latter remark, then, brings us to another critical term I will discuss for the remainder of this introduction: television.

Ever since the first broadcasts in the 1930s, television has historically not been a darling of scholarship. As "the central element in the media-based public sphere in the last half of the twentieth century," it did however trigger many responses (Gripsrud, 3); yet these were largely negative – Adorno, who actually did not write much about television, dismissed it as "a medium of undreamed of psychological control" (Adorno, 476). A couple of decades after Adorno, Neil Postman's bestseller *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) continued to excoriate TV. The alleged dumbing down of the masses by an increasingly fragmented, present-centered flow of images was Postman's main concern: everything turns into mindless spectacle on the television screen. Politics, religion and education have become showbusiness vehicles. Drawing on Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1931) and comparing television to the drug soma, Postman claims television exerts control by ways of mindless amusement (7-12). The written word loses its importance as people indulge in a fragmented experience of passively sitting in front of their television sets (124). Such sentiments are probably the reason why intellectuals love to proclaim they do not even own a television set. If we leap to today, however, this proclamation has become virtually pointless.

Watching TV and owning a television set do not require one another anymore.[4] The

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shifts find expression in texts of cultural production (see following chapter).

4   See, for example Gripsrud: "The TV set has long since become a multipurpose screen for audio-visual texts – first we had VCRs and video cameras, now also DVD players, gaming machinery, computers

times have changed and so has TV – not only as a technology, but also the narrative forms whose primary medium used to be the television set. Amanda Lotz's *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (2007) and the reader *Television after TV. Essays on a Medium in Transition* (2004, edited by Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson) chronicle how television has significantly changed as an institution, industry, and cultural form. Both books proclaim that the medium has entered a new phase of existence with the new millennium: "if TV refers to the technologies, industrial formations, government policies, and practices of looking that were associated with the medium in its classical public service and three-network age, it appears that we are now entering a new phase of television – the phase that comes after 'TV'" (Spigel, 2). These changes have had their ramifications for the act of watching television:

> We may continue to watch television, but the new technologies available to us require new rituals of use. Not so long ago, television use typically involved walking into a room, turning on the set, and either turning to specific content or channel surfing. Today, viewers with digital video recorders (DVRs) such as TiVo may elect to circumvent scheduling constraints and commercials. Owners of portable viewing devices download the latest episodes of their favorite shows and watch them outside the conventional setting of the living room. Still others rent television shows on DVD, or download them through legal and illegal sources online. And this doesn't even begin to touch upon the viewer-created television that appears on video aggregators such as YouTube or social networking sites. As a result of these changing technologies and modes of viewing, the nature of television has become increasingly complicated, deliberate, and individualized. Television as we knew it – understood as a mass medium capable of reaching a broad, heterogeneous audience and speaking to the culture as a whole – is no longer the norm in the United States (Lotz, 2).

The increasingly individualized practice of watching television has implications for the content created for television. Different shows and channels target different audience groups – a significant change considering the early stages of television in the USA when ABC, CBS, NBC and their local affiliates comprised all of television: "popularity was defined in terms of brute ratings and ruled by 'lowest common denominator' or 'least objectionable' programming philosophies" (Rogers et al., 43). In Brian L. Ott's estimation, these rules still apply to broadcast network television today when he uses terms such as "risk-adverse" and "conservative [...] in an aesthetic sense" to describe their programming. Broadcast television still offers security and comfort, Ott argues, "by its predictability and reproduction of prevailing cultural norms and values." In short, it "pacifies and placates, rather than shocks and unsettles" (97-98). This has a lot to do with television's characteristic mode of representation: "Television realism places the viewer in the position of a unified subject 'interpellated' with, or folded into, the

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and more. We could perhaps propose to change its name to [...] 'the AV set" (10). Television sets are now also sold as smart TVs that can be connected to the internet and used for browsing the web and streaming video content.

discourses of a dominant ideology, subjected [...] to a version of reality in which he or she misrecognises himself or herself" (Bignell, 191; see also Fiske 1987, 39). As mentioned, times have changed and the big networks, to which we can add Fox (launched in 1986), have lost their firm grip on audiences with each successive phase of television history, which can be divided into three periods:

> First, the 'network era' (from approximately 1952 through the mid-1980s) governed industry operations and allowed for a certain experience with television that characterizes much of the medium's history. The norms of the network era have persisted in the minds of many as distinctive of television, despite the significant changes that have developed over the past twenty years. I therefore identify the period of the mid-1980s through the mid-2000s as that of the 'multi-channel transition.' [...] The final period, the 'post-network era,' begins in the mid-2000s [...]. What separates the post-network era from the multi-channel transition is that the changes in competitive norms and operations of the industry have become too pronounced for old practices to be preserved; different industrial practices are becoming dominant and replacing those of the network era (Lotz, 7).

Since this project solely deals with narratives of the post-network era[5] (all series discussed here in detail began airing after 2007), I will now shift my attention to a phenomenon brought about by the changes that Amanda Lotz amongst others describe in more detail: 'quality TV'. I do so because most, if not all, narratives at the center of this project can be regarded as what is considered 'quality TV'.

None of the selected TV series air on HBO, a premium cable channel largely responsible for the emergence of 'quality TV' – not only due to its 'quality' programming but also because of its court battles with the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) ("the HBO aftereffect" [Ritzer, 12]).[6] HBO started out as a subscription channel for first-run movies and sports events, most notably boxing such as the "Thriller in Manila" in 1975 (Edgerton, 2). Yet with the technological developments already outlined above, subscribing to a channel for movies and occasional sports events lost its persuasiveness in the era of DVDs, TiVo, and the internet. Already existing during the multi-channel transition, HBO changed its programming structure and thereby – at least in terms of content – also helped to bring about the 'quality TV' that is so characteristic

5   There does not seem to be a real consensus as to how this current stage of television should be termed. Rogers et al. for example refer to this period as "the age of brand marketing" (48). Writing in 2008, media scholar Marc Leverette also takes issue with the phrase post-network era: "even though cable passed network TV in total numbers of viewers back in 2002, with television no longer being TV as we know it, the phrase post-network is becoming increasingly impotent. With the rise of YouTube, the iPhone, iTunes downloading of shows, DVDs, and On demand services, television is increasingly less like television, existing in no singular time, place, or technology" (147).

6   In terms of programming, HBO's court case against the FCC in 1977 is crucial: "One of the most significant outcomes of HBO's court battle with the FCC was that the Court of Appeals declared cable, which is purchased as opposed to 'freely distributed' like radio and broadcast television, to be more akin to newspaper publishing, which is offered protection under the First Amendment. This ruling would have a profound impact on the content of HBO's programming, which could incorporate nudity, violence, and vulgarity in ways that the networks could not. As a result, almost all of HBO's original series, from the dramas to the sitcoms, contain material that could not be included on network TV" (Santo, 25).

of television's current era. In 1996, HBO launched a marketing campaign with the slogan "It's not TV. It's HBO." Through this slogan, HBO distanced itself from the norms of the network era. Since these norms were, as we have seen, most of the time evaluated negatively, HBO establishes its brand as something better for the simple fact that it claims not to be TV. The new slogan was accompanied by a new programming strategy as the channel increasingly invested in original programming, i.e. films and series that are produced to air on HBO:

> HBO transformed the creative landscape of television during the first decade (1995-2004) of TV's current digital era. It pursued the unusual and atypical strategy for television of investing more money in program development (from $2 million to $4 million per prime-time hour), limiting output (thirteen episodes per series each year instead of the usual twenty-two to twenty-six), and producing only the highest-quality series, miniseries, made-for-pay-TV movies, documentaries, and specials that it could (Edgerton, 8).

From 1996 on, 'quality TV' became the new catch phrase and for the first time in television history, quality does not refer to quality demographics (the desired 18-49 years audience segment) but to actual production values (see Santo, 31). And thus we now find phrases such as "boutique programming" (John Caldwell qtd. in: Leverette 2008, 141) or an "Aristocracy of Culture in American Television" (Christopher Anderson in his essay of the same title) when reading about HBO and the series it has been producing since 1997. In recent publications such as *It's Not TV. Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era* (2008, edited by Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott and Cara Louise Buckley), *The Essential HBO Reader* (2008, edited by Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey Jones), *'quality TV'. Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (2007, edited by Janet McCabe and Kim Akass) and the *Reading* series published via I.B. Tauris (for the most part edited by Janet McCabe and Kim Akass), television and its pleasures are examined in a manner distinctly different in tone from earlier eras.

Pointing out that developments in technology and new marketing strategies have fundamentally changed the face of television, some contributors also suggest that 'quality TV' be rather understood as a generic distinction within television than one of value per se. Sarah Cardwell's description of quality-TV focusses on styles and themes:

> American quality television programmes tend to exhibit high production values, naturalistic performance styles, recognised and esteemed actors, a sense of visual style created through careful, even innovative, camerawork and editing, and a sense of aural style created through the judicious use of appropriate, even original music. This moves beyond a 'glossiness' of style. Generally, there is a sense of stylistic integrity, in which themes and style are intertwined in an expressive and impressive way. Further, the programmes are likely to explore 'serious' themes, rather than representing the superficial events of life; they are likely to suggest that the viewers will be rewarded for seeking out greater symbolic or emotional resonance within the details of the programme. American quality television also tends to focus on the present, offering reflections on contemporary society, and crystallising these reflections within smaller examples and instances. The 'everyday incidents' that are the

stuff of more straightforward, nonquality soap operas and sitcoms are here transformed by a suggestion that they may be read symbolically, reflexively or obliquely in order that broader truths about life or society might be found (26).

McCabe and Akass add that HBO's and other cable channels' stressing of authorial vision behind their shows also contributes to the air of exclusiveness and artistic distinction as this kind of authorship – the dependence on an author's artistic *vision* – places the productions in a highbrow neighborhood of theater, art cinema and literature (87).

The difference in programming between broadcast network television and the cable variety is to a large degree due to their differing revenue systems: "Once [network] broadcasters realized programs that evoked disturbing emotions in the audience or triggered thoughts that challenged deep-seated cultural assumptions could result in a loss of advertising revenue, they inevitably came to terms with the need to create relatively 'safe' programming" (Kelso, 47). Cable programming executives do not have to worry about disturbing content as the viewer pays directly for the content (also because of their status outside of FCC regulations) and since original programming is integral to the channel as marketable brand, disturbing emotions can be part of the sought-after experience of watching a channel like HBO. As Marc Leverette remarks, "HBO, as a premium brand, offers its consumers a place where it's okay to be transgressive with regard to mainstream television" (144). Basic cable channels like AMC and FX share similarities with both network television and premium cable in their revenue system: "basic cable channels aren't governed by the FCC, but they do have deals with their advertisers and in some cases with the cable companies that carry them – that leaves certain words off the table [...] no one could ever say 'fuck'" (Sepinwall, 149).

Quality series are often looked at as a visual equivalent to the 19th century serial novel (see Mittell 2006, 30; Lavik, 81-83). They are not dependent on televisual flow anymore as they can be watched when, where and how the viewer wants. Like books, they can be purchased as DVD box sets and be watched again and again (one can also pause, stop, jump to specific scenes or watch each episode with the director's or creator's commentary). Consider, for example, which conclusions Erlend Lavik draws from investigating David Simon's *The Wire* (HBO, 2002 – 2008):

> *The Wire*'s non-redundancy and lack of episodic self-sufficiency might be ill-suited to television's ephemeral flow. However, on DVD it exists as a material object, like a book, and can be watched in the manner that its complexity warrants: repeatedly and without interruptions. Thus, by returning to allegedly outmoded and analogue literary predecessors, David Simon et al. may have hit upon the narrative format of the digital future (86).

Like any art that is being sold, 'quality TV', too, is a profit-oriented business, but the business model has changed from network practices insofar as the quality of the product is marketed to the customer and *not* the popularity of a product to advertisers (although network shows such as ABC's *Lost* (2004 – 2010) and Fox's *24* (2001 – 2010) were also successful as box sets, an indication that 'quality TV' has also migrated to non-premium cable channels).

The large budget invested in the production and the creative freedom given to the creators[7] attract big names such as Alan Ball, who won the Oscar for Best Original Script for *American Beauty* (1999) and went on to create, write and produce the critically acclaimed drama series *Six Feet Under* (2001 – 2005) and *True Blood* (2008 – 2014) for HBO. The fact that esteemed writers, directors and actors are involved in producing these shows and that an air of selectivity surrounds them, influenced the way television is now understood and talked about. Here we also find another link to Rogers et al.'s term of 'the age of brandmarketing':

> If TV feminizes all who watch it, and feminization is linked to a loss of power and status brought about through the act of consumption, then HBO's brand offers to 're-mark' subscribers as 'masculine,' thus repositioning its audience as powerful bearers of cultural capital that is free from the commercial trappings of regular television (Santo, 34).

As this quotation by Avi Santo indicates, broadcast network television and narrowcast cable television to some degree are dressed in a language that resembles that of the binary gender opposition of masculine and feminine. The act of passive consumption seen by critics as characteristic of the first two periods of television history is marked as feminine, compulsive and powerless. Quality programming into which, as Sarah Cardwell described earlier, 'broader truth' can be read, calls for active engagement with the text. And as 'quality TV' to a large degree is divorced from television flow that includes commercial breaks and trailers for upcoming shows, it is seen as less commercial.[8] Consequently, the implied binary opposition of 'regular TV' and 'quality TV' also confers status upon those who prefer the latter – an observation Charlotte

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7   *The Sopranos* creator David Chase ties this among other things to the use of language: "Instead of saying 'scumbag', you have to say 'dirtbag'. And it makes you feel dirty that you're doing that, that you're not being true to the English language, not being true to humanity. It's a human, human life, you know, as it's really lived" (qtd. in: Lawson, 214).

8   Such an assessment is problematic and is hardly applicable to basic cable programming. If we consider Matthew Weiner's *Mad Men* (2007 – present), arguably one of the more critically acclaimed 'quality TV' series, we see that 'quality TV', too, is a commercial enterprise first and foremost. Airing on the basic cable channel AMC, this drama series is in fact interrupted by commercial breaks. Moreover, as it chronicles the goings-on in a New Yorker advertising agency, it is well-suited for product placement. Thus, brands such as Lucky Strike and Heineken were featured prominently in the series. The legendary Lucky Strike slogan "It's toasted" is for example attributed to the series's male main character Don Draper.

Brunsdon delivers with a hint of irony:

> Addiction, a metaphor prominent in the twentieth century in relation to soap-opera viewers, and particularly 'housewives', condenses judgments about television fiction and its viewers. It proposes an involuntary, non-cerebral relation to the medium, an out-of-control habit. [...] This new, good television, in contrast to old, bad, addictive television is not broadcast network television, but television which one either pays to see, or watches on DVD. Instead of being associated with housebound women, this new television is young, smart, and on the move, downloaded or purchased to watch at will (65).

This "young, smart" and therefore "good television" is not passively absorbed in an endless circle of consumption, but binged, which "describes bad television watching ('piggy pleasures'), as opposed to the watching of bad television" (65). Clearly, the distinction between quality and non-quality television is very concerned with marketing an image. Yet Brunsdon also wonders whether "'bingeability' [can] also be seen as a textual property" (66). Focussing on crime drama and turning her attention towards the DVD box set, she leans towards 'yes' as "new modes of television production and distribution foster different types of story" (72). Even though this does not solely concern "aesthetic issues, but also interpretative ones," this does not necessarily imply a distinction of value (73).

Let me summarize here: The fragmentarization of audiences set in during what Amanda Lotz calls the multi-channel transition. With this, television lost some ground as a powerful force of social integration as it became increasingly rarer that a single program gathered the majority of viewers. With digitization, this process of fragmentarization was driven further. Moreover, the medium once perceived as putting the viewer in a passive position more and more made possible active engagement with what was being televised. What is more, televising in itself becomes outmoded: 'screening' (DVD) or 'streaming' (internet services) would be just as applicable to new viewing practices.[9] Furthermore, channels now market themselves as brands that have a specific image. HBO, for example, could be described as "transgressive" and transmitting "cultural capital" (Santo); attracting an audience that is "educated, middle-class, more or less well-to-do" (Gripsrud, 11). Also, the original programming that HBO started to produce beginning in 1997 was transformative for television narratives on a larger scale as well as for the ways in which television narratives are dealt with (i.e. detailed readings of individual series).[10]

Fiske and Hartley once described television as

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9   Viewing (network-era television) and using (internet) can be blended into a term such as 'viewsing' (see Lotz, 17).

10 The first quality drama to air on HBO was Tom Fontana's critically acclaimed *Oz* (1997 – 2003). This series is often overlooked as HBO's successive shows *Sex and the City* (1998 – 2004) and *The Sopranos* (1999 – 2007) achieved far greater popularity and drew more academic attention.

a mediator of language, one who composes out of the available linguistic resources of the culture a series of consciously structured messages which serve to communicate to the members of that culture a confirming, reinforcing version of themselves. The traditional bard rendered the central concerns of his day into verse. We must remember that television renders our own everyday perceptions into an equally specialized, but less formal, language system.

Second, the structure of those messages is organized according to the needs of the *culture* for whose ears and eyes they are intended, and not according to the internal demands of the 'text', nor of the individual communicator (85-86).

Considering all of the above, one has to wonder to what extent Fiske's and Hartley's "bardic function" of television is still applicable as "the possibility for building a strong public opinion which can really have an effect on will-formation and decision-making in the political centre is reduced. More importantly, perhaps, it might lead to an erosion of a common ground for debate" (Gripsrud, 13). "Such a premise," Amanda Lotz asserts, "remains relevant in a narrowcast environment, but with the difference that television articulates the main lines of cultural consensus for the particular network and its typical audience member rather than for society in general" (40).

Moreover, topics and themes that surface in one form or another across networks might also indicate relevance to society in general (see ibid., 39). The series selected for this project air primarily on the basic cable channels AMC and FX, yet programming by Showtime, Cinemax and HBO will be mentioned as well. Moreover, a drama series like *Breaking Bad* did extraordinary well with critics, winning a total of ten Primetime Emmy Awards and being named the highest rated TV series of all time by the *Guinness Book of World Records* (see Janela, n. pag.). *The Walking Dead* (2010 – present), on the other hand, has become the most-watched drama series in basic cable history (see Bibel 14 Oct. 2013, n. pag.). Moreover, I selected only texts that have been renewed at least for a second season, an indication that the production of the respective series is profitable, which in turn means they draw consumers' interest. Further text selection criteria were that the series feature male main characters and that the respective series references the Western in its construction of masculinity.

As we have seen further up, 'quality TV' is often considered transgressive. Some go so far as to claim that due to its often 'edgy' content (nudity, cursing, violence) and the fact that they often warrant symbolic readings to gain some broader truth about society, quality series are always left-liberal (see Blanchet, 65). Fiske, however, argued that television usually naturalizes the point of view of those who are in power, namely white, male, middle-class and middle-aged members of society (see 1987, 44). It can be argued that 'quality-TV' series do not subvert this mechanism as most shows do indeed feature

white, middle-aged, middle-class males as their central characters and male behavior often accounts for much of the 'edgy' content (i.e. violence) contained in these series. Narratively constructing characters and worlds along the gender binary, we might wonder to what extent these serial narratives are transgressive beyond their at times very explicit depictions of violence. In terms of gender, we might ask whether these series self-consciously construct gender relations in this way to challenge the normative gender binary or whether they are merely conservative and reaffirming in this regard? A close reading of the selected texts will provide answers to these questions.

In *Fernsehen wider die Tabus* (2011), Ivo Ritzer tackles the very question of transgression and subversion in 'quality TV'. He does so, however, by questioning whether one could consider explicit representations of sex and violence as moments of transgression (such as female ejaculation in Darren Star's *Sex and the City* [HBO, 1998 – 2004] and male frontal nudity in David Milch's *Deadwood* [HBO, 2004 – 2006]) only to dismiss the subversive value of these series in the final third of his book. Drawing on Freud's taboo theory, Ritzer attests these series the potential for a subversive moment by violating aesthetic conventions and thereby articulating the possibility of changing the aesthetic and social status quo (49). Nevertheless, since channels are compelled to market themselves as brands in order to remain competitive, these series' goal is to ensure the channel's survival in the market instead of being grassroots movements challenging the social order. The value of the transgressions unfolding on-screen is, he maintains, therefore purely economic.[11] He illustrates this at the hand of the short-lived FX series *Over There* (2005), which was the first television series set in a still-ongoing war. Marketed as "TV's most controversial series," *Over There* presented a very grim and graphic outlook on proceedings in Iraq. Ritzer takes issue with the fact that this was a deliberate marketing attempt to sell a product instead of voicing dissent – especially because FX is owned by Fox, which in turn is owned by Rupert Murdoch, whom he considers a right-wing conservative. The breaking of taboos is thus institutionalized in a purely economic context (82-84). This leads Ritzer, being influenced by Jean

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11 This is a valid argument when we consider the standings of AMC and FX before they invested in original programming. The latter suffered from ratings in the decimals and was therefore in a position to experiment with new forms – they had nothing to lose. (see B. Martin, 215) AMC, too, was on the verge of becoming entirely meaningless: "[AMC CEO Josh Sapan's] point was this: AMC doesn't need worry about ratings at the moment. What AMC needs is a show, a critically acclaimed and audience-craved show that would make us undroppable to cable operators. Because AMC, as a movie network, was mostly second-tier movies or ones you could get anywhere [...] [t]hey were very worried that the likes of Comcast were creating their own movie channels, and that they would be dropped completely off the systems. Josh knew that he had to have something that the public wanted really bad" (Rob Sorcher, qtd. in: Sepinwall 2013, 303).

Baudrillard here, to suggest that US television seeks to establish consensus in dissent by essentially eliminating dissent altogether (88). There is no politicization of art to be found in these series, but an aesthetization of politics, he concludes. Neither their narrative strategies, nor their representation of nudity, sexuality and violence are transgressive, but only capital's mode of operations that overrides all boundaries – be they of taste, aesthetics or legitimation. In this regard, these narratives solely meet the expectations placed on them (110-111).

Writing in 2008 and thus before the "HBO after-effect" had gathered full force, Tony Kelso similarly suggested that "[a] rigorous critical textual analysis would probably indicate that HBO does not systematically challenge capitalist American ideologies or dominant myths regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, or other identity issues" (61). Given that the selected texts feature white male main characters, this seems to be a fair assumption regarding the series discussed here. There have been two recent publications that are documents to this phenomenon's male-centeredness: Brett Martin's *Difficult Men* (2013) and Alan Sepinwall's *The Revolution Was Televised* (2013). Both books are very similar in their approach as they both chronicle the rise of 'quality TV' by giving an overview of preceding series (e.g. David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* [1990 – 1991]) and by detailing a behind-the-scenes history of what Martin calls "the signature American art form of the first decade of the twenty-first century" (11). This is to say that no narrative is analyzed academically but merely looked at from a production context point of view. Reading both books, one comes to the conclusion that not only are these series for the most part about white middle-aged men, but also created by such. Martin attests these series also a particular cultural resonance that, I have to point out, understands the culture at large as white and male: "viewers were willing to be seduced [...] because these were also men in recognizable struggles. They belonged to a species you might call Man Beset or Man Harried – badgered and bothered and thwarted by the modern world" (5).

The terms Martin uses here calls for associations with the crisis of masculinity discourse. Who is meant when he refers to the "Man Beset"? This is a universal claim he does not back up with any research on the matter at hand. Neither is this claim differentiated in any way – what he means is that *white* masculinity is in crisis and not *all* men and their expressions of masculinity. None of the series he mentions in his book feature Asian or Native American men in any significant way. The issue of race is largely sidestepped and when he writes that "middle-aged men predominated because

middle-aged men had the power to create [these series]," we might wonder why they have so much power if they are so beset and harried (13)?

While Martin's book documents how what he calls the "Third Golden Age" of television is both created by and is about difficult men, Sepinwall suggests these shows are – also because they concentrate on troubled main characters – "about the end of the American dream" (112). This however leaves open the question whose American dream is actually ending? Given that the series Sepinwall discusses almost exclusively feature white middle-class males at their center, the American dream seems to be filtered through the perspective of a specific demographic. Since it is such a dominant feature, he, too, addresses the matter of gender:

> Because the revolutionary dramas were mostly about men, and male anti-heroes at that, and because viewers tend to bond most with the main character of a show, there was a side effect to the era, where characters who on paper should be the sympathetic ones become hated by viewers for opposing the protagonist. And the greatest vitriol has been unfortunately saved for the wives (359).

This is an observation that will surface in the analysis of the selected texts, especially *Breaking Bad*. It has to be mentioned that neither book was written in an academic context. In this regard, research on masculinity and television is surprisingly sparse.

One of the few comprehensive studies of masculinity on television is Rebecca Feasey's *Masculinity and Popular Television* (2008), which "seeks to examine the representation of men, masculinities and the male role in a wide range of fictional and factual television genres" (4). In her study, she presents brief case studies of British and American representations of masculinity on popular television. She sorts these by genre, ranging from soap operas, to animated series, workplace dramas and reality television as well as advertising. Due to the book's wide scope, her case studies are necessarily short and placed within a larger theoretical framework as she looks at both British and American texts. This means that masculinity figures as Anglo-American masculinity in a more general sense. Moreover, she also includes texts that span a wider time frame than this project does since she also includes series that aired in the 1990s and have already been concluded. However, her book provides a good overview of how masculinity in general is encountered on television during the last two decades. She states that

> this examination of masculinities is crucial, not because such representations are an accurate reflection of reality, but rather, because they have the power and scope to foreground culturally accepted social relations, define sexual norms and provide 'common-sense' understanding about male identity for the contemporary audience (4).

Feasey also laments that little work has been done on representations of masculinity as

opposed to those of femininity, which "is due in part to television's status as a domestic medium that was aimed at a female consumer during the early 1950s." Moreover, feminist television scholars were mostly concerned with representations of femininity "and as such, they chose to overlook the representation of masculinity" (2). Since 'quality TV' is full of troubled men, we can expect this to change in the near future and the following pages are my entry to a body of research that is surely growing at the moment.

2. Masculinity, Crisis and the West

> "Even if we now know that there are different masculinities that have always been competing for cultural attention, it is still the case that we must continue to critique, rather than just celebrate, their performance of gender" (Bristow, ix).

> "[T]he history of the American frontier is as much the history of an idea as much as it is the history of a place" (Rommel-Ruiz, 105).

> "A crisis, like all other news developments, is a creation of the language used to depict it; the appearance of a crisis is a political act, not a recognition of a fact or a situation" (Murray Edelman qtd. in: Hirschbein, 15).

Every male in almost any society is sooner or later faced with the question of what it means to be a 'real man' in his society. The answer to this question, however, is increasingly harder to find. The abounding literature on men and masculinities – from self-help books to academic publications ranging over diverse disciplines such as psychology, sociology, history, political science to film, literature and theater studies – complicates matters even further. The question itself is probably best understood with respect to debates surrounding a proclaimed crisis of masculinity: discourses oscillate between laments of men having gone soft ('feminized') and accusations of men being the root of all evil (hence they need to become 'soft').

After outlining how scholars have defined gender and masculinity, my inquiry will turn towards idealized conceptions of masculinity in the USA. Idealized American masculinity, I argue, has its roots in the young nation's frontier experience. The images of masculinity representing the frontier experiences have first and foremost been perpetuated by the Western genre – at first in dime novels and in later years Western cinema and television, but also in advertising (e. g. the Marlboro Man). Since these representations preserved an ideal image of what passes as a 'real man' in America, crisis announcements can be understood in reference to how masculinity is defined in these representations. In the succeeding chapters, cable series are analyzed that construct masculinity along conceptions thereof strikingly analogous to Westerns. This chapter, then, forms the basis for reading these series' constructions of masculinity and embedding them in the larger context of the crisis of masculinity discourse.

2.1. Gender and Men's Studies

Today's primary understanding of sex and gender is that the first is a biological given, whereas the latter is acquired and as such it can be theorized as "the cultural interpretation of sex" (Butler 1990, 7). Looked at this way, "gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one" (ibid., 6). Consequently*,* "the body is figured as a mere *instrument* or *medium* for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related" (ibid., 8).

Since gender is not biological, but cultural, Judith Butler describes it as performative: "There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (ibid., 25). Moreover, this "performance of gender [...] retroactively [produced] the illusion that there was an inner gender core," which leads Butler to the conclusion that "gender is produced as a ritualized repetition of conventions [...] compelled in part by the force of a compulsory heterosexuality" (1995, 31). Therefore, gender can be understood as an "imitation" of "ideals that are never quite inhabited by anyone" (ibid., 31). With this, Butler's post-structural understanding of gender presents a significant departure from essentialist views that have persisted long into the 20th century.[12]

David S. Gutterman states that "it is useful to conceive words like *boy* not as nouns but rather as adjectives that describe a subject" (59). This means that upon discovering the sex of a newly born male infant, the announcement "it's a boy!" already prescribes a certain set of meanings and expectations on the subject that differ from what would be associated with a female-sexed body. This act of differentiation is called gendering and has already been observed in several studies during the 1970s. As an example, consider a study by Rubin, Provenzano, and Luria (1974), who interviewed couples about their newborn children:

> The parents were asked to describe their children on a special form. Overall, the girls were judged as gentler, smaller, nicer, less attentive, and more delicate. The boys were judged as firmer, sturdier, more alert, stronger, and better coordinated. Actually the fifteen newborn girls and fifteen boys did not differ in length, weight, or Apgar scores, a test of basic body functions given shortly after birth (Jalmert, 138).

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12 Sandra Lipsitz Bem states that the essentialist position is based on two lenses through which some people look at gender. The first, gender polarization, "superimposes a male/female distinction on virtually every aspect of human experience." Thus, gender can be seen as being integral to all forms of social interaction. The second lens, androcentrism, "defines males and male experience as a neutral standard or norm and females and female experience as a sex-specific deviation from the norm." Biological essentialism then "rationalizes and legitimizes both of the other two lenses by treating them as the natural and inevitable consequences of the intrinsic biological natures of women and men" (51).

[...]
Worth mentioning is also the study of Condry and Condry (1976). More than 200 persons saw a short videotape in which a nine-months-old child looked at different objects and reacted to them. From all the objects, the child chose to play with a jack-in-the-box. After a while the child started to cry. The observers were asked to explain why the child reacted in that way. Half of them, who thought they saw a boy, said the reaction was one of anger. The other half, who thought they saw a girl, said that 'she' became afraid (ibid., 139).

These studies evidence that bodies are interpreted according to discourses that, speaking with Foucault, "systematically form the objects of which they speak" (1972, 49). The child is born into these discourses that are always "out there" and is consequently socialized according to these discourses (and also aspires to these idealizations).[13]

Cross-cultural surveys show that "[a]ll societies have cultural accounts of gender, but not all have the concept 'masculinity'" (Connell 1995a., 67). From this, it becomes clear that these accounts of gender must have different purposes in different societies.[14] Since masculinity lacks an "inner core", expressions of maleness differ across the globe:

David D. Gilmore demonstrated in *Manhood in the Making*, his comprehensive cross-cultural survey of masculine ideals, manliness has been expressed as laboring-class loyalty in Spain, as diligence and discipline in Japan, as dependence on life outside the home in the company of men in Cyprus, as gift-giving among Sikhs, as the restraint of temper and the expression of 'creative energy' among the Gisu of Uganda, and as entirely without significance to the Tahitians. 'Manliness is a symbolic script,' Gilmore concluded, 'a cultural construct, endlessly variable and not always necessary' (Faludi, 15).

Therefore, masculinity can be understood as "a value system set by individual societies" (Sussman, 1). This leads us to an understanding of gender as a structuring element in a society. There is a political dimension to this that anchors K. A. Cuordileone's study *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (2005). In this book, Cuordileone also traces the history of the term 'masculinity' itself and goes on to show how certain values were attached to it in the USA:

the terms 'masculine' and 'masculinity' had only just begun to enter the national idiom in the 1890s. Moreover, these terms were not synonymous with the terms 'manly' and 'manliness,' which were commonly used in the nineteenth century and carried distinct meanings rooted in Victorian ideals of manhood. The term 'manliness' had moral connotations. In contemporary dictionaries the word conveyed 'character or conduct worthy of a man'; it implied possession of the 'proper' manly traits: 'independent in spirit or bearing; strong, brave, large-minded, etc.'; and was equated with the state of being 'honorable, high-minded.' Such a definition of manliness reflected the values that underlay the Victorian male ideal., including those historians have identified as 'sexual self-restraint, a powerful will. A strong character.' On the other hand, the new term 'masculinity' (adapted from the French) was relatively neutral: it generally referred to the possession of any and all male characteristics,

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13 This means that subjects are not necessarily passive in that process: "Subjects are constituted discursively, but there are conflicts among discursive systems, contradictions within any one of them, multiple meanings possible for the subjects they deploy. And subjects do have agency. They are not unified autonomous individuals exercising free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred upon them" (Joan Scott, qtd. in: Gutterman, 61).

14 Judith/Jack Halberstam's book *Gaga Feminism* (2012) provides some examples of different expressions of gender that are not necessarily confined within an exclusive masculine/feminine binary. There are, for example, lady boys in Thailand or women who swear to remain virgins and therefore earn the 'right' to live as men (and be regarded as such) in Albania (75-77).

whether valued or not. As it began to appear in dictionaries, the word 'masculine' conveyed the possession of 'the distinguishing characteristics of the male sex among human beings, physical or mental ... suitable for the male sex; adapted to or intended for the use of males.' The term was initially rather empty of meaning, at least until it gained wide currency in the twentieth century and eventually became wedded to male traits now associated with 'masculinity' – aggression, dominance, physical strength, competition, and sexual potency. Its introduction into popular language was significant, Bederman suggests, for it reflects the need for a neutral, all-encompassing term for maleness shorn of some of the Victorian traits of manliness (e.g. self-restraint) that were being undercut by social and economic changes at the turn of the century (11).

The argument here is that the new term 'masculinity' was needed in an evolving capitalist marketplace that had little use for Victorian self-restraint but called for competitiveness, independence and aggression (this shift will be elaborated in more detail further down). In Cuordileone's investigation into American political culture during the Cold War, masculinity becomes an increasingly ideological term: communism and often the Democratic Party were constructed as a feminine Other and as such a threat to the masculine USA with its strong emphasis on individualism, independence and self-reliance during the Cold War.

On a more individual level, John MacInnes characterizes gender as "an ideology people use in modern societies to imagine the existence of differences between men and women on the basis of their sex where in fact there are none" and goes on stating that this ideology helps people to explain the substantial inequalities in (post-)modern societies that are "formally egalitarian" (1998, 1). While the concepts femininity and masculinity could be used to justify inequalities such as the division of labor, they also provide the individual "with some important psychological defences against the terror of modernity: [..] 'psychic insecurity'" (2). In other words, gender provides a structuring element to societies and individuals: "people could imagine themselves to become masculine or feminine, and thus be condemned (or rather chosen) to fashion their identities in a certain way, to find the meaning of their lives in a certain set of scripts providing answers to the terrors of some existential choices" (ibid., 28-29). As gender and what Butler calls the heterosexual matrix stabilize society or work for a better intelligibility of social agents, the agents themselves take up available gender discourses in their quest for identity validation in ever more complex societies.

Which are the conceptions of masculinity a male-sexed person then has to appropriate in order to validate his sense of self as a man in America?

2.2. Manhood in America and Crisis Tendencies

Connell's observation that masculinity is "historically changing and politically fraught" (1995a, 3) can be readily observed in E. Anthony Rotundo's *American Manhood. Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (1993), which traces changing concepts of an ideal masculinity in America back to colonial times. The fact that he identifies successive types of masculinity shows that manhood is indeed culturally produced and not eternal or natural, something that is part of a continuum that reaches back to the beginnings of mankind. Although Rotundo's approach is a little simplistic as he identifies *successive* types of masculinity and disregards that various types of masculinity exist *simultaneously*, his strong focus on the New England colonies and the types of masculinity developing there suffices for my purposes here.

The models of manhood Rotundo describes were each shaped by the socio-cultural forces at work in their respective times. In colonial New England, the church was the institution with the greatest social power and consequently was paramount in idealized constructions of manhood: "The ideal man [..] was pleasant, mild-mannered, and devoted to the good of the community" (13). The emphasis on communal usefulness was based on a fear of "a man who was contentious and willful, who stood up and fought for his own interests" (14). Communal manhood's devotion to the good of the community was also patriarchal as men held all power in their communities, both in the public (church and state) as well as in the private sphere: "It was the man at the head of the family who embodied God's authority in the daily life of each person. [...] To head a household, for all intents and purposes, was to be a man" (11).

Things changed as the revolution approached. Two decisive developments can be identified in changing idealized conceptions of manhood in the latter half of the 18th century. First, the Great Awakening furthered an increasing stress on personal independence. As Americans became "more comfortable with the notion of self-assertion" and "by throwing off their belief in the virtue of submission," they prepared for the independence of their nation: "The war for independence – and the change in attitudes toward individual initiative that came with it – were often framed in the language of manliness. The Declaration of Independence itself used the word *manly* to mean resolute courage in resisting tyranny" (16).

With puritan religion losing its significance and the confidence of newly found

independence as well as the development of romantic love and its emphasis on individuality, self-made manhood became the dominant form in the early 1800s:

> At the dawn of the nineteenth century, young men of the North faced a world of immense opportunity. The settlement of vast new areas inspired visions of great wealth. The Revolution had introduced a more dynamic view of the social order, and the new American governments had removed some of the old legal barriers to social advancement. Most of all, the spread of the market economy created new opportunities. [...] People now believed that a man could advance as far as his own work and talents would take him. This belief in a free and open contest for success shared a common assumption with another attitude that emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century: that the individual, not the community, was the fundamental unit of society.
>
> The shift in this thinking from community to person had profound implications for notions of manhood. Men rejected the idea that they had a fixed place in any hierarchy (19).

Personal fulfillment has little significance if the individual finds meaning in the greater good of the community. The notion of being assigned a place in society held no attraction after the American Revolution: the open continent and a shift in economic relations promised boundless opportunities for self-realization. The days of "civilized self-denial" were over once the 19th century had dawned and now those features feared earlier (willfulness, independence etc.) rose to dominance (5). The emphasis on individuality also worked, as Connell has earlier remarked (1995a, 67), to further differentiate men from women and to shape the binary opposition of masculinity and femininity as the ideology of separate spheres came into existence during the 19th century (see ibid., 68): "Women now stood for traditional social values, men for dynamic individualism" (Rotundo, 24). This way the binary opposition of both genders became defined in a way that is very similar to the terms associated with the frontier.

The new definitions of gender allowed for men "to be aggressive, greedy, ambitious, competitive, and self-interested, [and] it left women with the duty of curbing this behavior" (ibid., 25). In other words, men were wild and women were civilized. As these characteristics are acquired through social practices, new institutions developed:

> Academies, colleges, apprenticeships in commerce and the professions served some of these purposes [...] their youthful members socialized each other. In the absence of women and older men, they trained each other in the harnessing of passions and the habits of self-control. Aside from these self-created institutions, some young men turned to demanding life experiences – as sailors, cowboys, boatmen, forty-niners, wandering laborers, and (most dramatically) Civil War soldiers – to teach them the self-discipline needed for the active life in the marketplace (ibid., 21).

Aspects such as caring for the community were increasingly defined as feminine, whereas the new self-made masculinity placed a premium on self-control (with regard to emotions) and competition (with regard to other men and the marketplace), demands that were intricately bound to the new nation and the changing organization of labor: "As the nineteenth century opened, the United States was becoming a nation where no

formal barriers prevented white men from achieving positions of wealth, power, or prestige. [...] A man's social position depended, in theory, on his own efforts. Thus, men identified themselves closely with their work" (ibid., 168).

Being the god-ordained head of a household no longer determined a man's sense of self: "in a social sense, he was what he achieved – and so were those he loved" (169). In order to be competitive in the marketplace, there was "an imperative to independent action" (46) as "life [was conceived] as a never-ending series of individual combats" (45). In this ideology of self-support, boys were required to learn independently, either through all-male institutions or experiences in the open continent, testing themselves as what would become an icon of American masculinity, the cowboy. A man who famously left the 'overcivilized' East to get in touch with his maleness as a cowboy was Theodore Roosevelt.

Like other famous American men such as painter Frederic Remington and novelist Owen Wister, Theodore Roosevelt was one of the strongest advocates of seeking experience in the West, where he spent time on a cattle ranch in the Dakota Territory from 1884 to 1886. Civilization as established on the East Coast was perceived as castrating and thus men had to get in touch with their animal instincts out West in order to become a "manly man" (Theodore Roosevelt qtd. in: Comer, 240):

> A cowboy will not submit tamely to an insult, and is ever ready to avenge his own wrongs; nor has he an overwrought fear of shedding blood. *He possesses, in fact, few of the emasculated, milk-and-water moralities admired by the pseudo-philanthropists*; but he does possess, to a very high degree, the stern, manly qualities that are invaluable to a nation" (Roosevelt qtd. in: Savage, Jr., 96; my emphasis).

The fear of civilization repressing manhood and the conviction that passion and struggle were necessary to survive and dominate appealed to the culture at large and it positioned femininity more firmly in opposition to masculinity. It also worked to differentiate masculinities into the frontiersman and the married settler (and other subordinated, racialized masculinities), with only the former rising to the status of exemplary masculinity.

In Roosevelt, we also find the connection between the masculinity he aspired to in the West and empire building: "In different rhetorical forms and guises, Roosevelt promoted 'strenuous' endeavor as a means to masculine regeneration, national greatness, and imperial hegemony" (Cuordileone, 12).[15] Also, Roosevelt's experience in the West

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15 See also Gail Bederman: "If American men have ever lost their virile zest for Darwinistic racial contest, their civilization would soon decay. If they ignored the ongoing racial imperative of constant expansion and instead grew feminine and luxury-loving, a manlier race would inherit their mantle of the highest civilization. By depicting imperialism as a prophylactic means of avoiding effeminacy and racial decadence, Roosevelt constructed it as part of a status quo and hid the fact that this sort of

and what he made of it points to the contradictions inherent in masculinity. At once, it is the animal instincts that men have to get in touch with, but out West certain things are also learnt: "I do not believe there ever was any life more attractive to a vigorous young fellow than life on a cattle ranch in those days. It was a fine, healthy life, too; it taught a man self-reliance, hardihood, and the value of instant decision" (Roosevelt qtd. in: Slatta, 191).

The frontier not only promised to regenerate the manhood of individual men, but of the nation at large:

> [Roosevelt] used the symbolism of the Frontier Myth to argue that imperialism was the logical and necessary extension of the nations [*sic!*] 'westering' course of development [...]. By likening the Filipinos to 'Apaches' and the anti-imperialists to 'Indian-lovers,' he suggested that those who resisted imperialism were traitors to their race and recreant to their sex – emasculators of American manhood (Slotkin 1992, 106).

Roosevelt, who had been called 'four eyes' by the Dakota cowboys, assimilated quickly and earned their respect when a man called Mike Finnigan stole his boat.[16] The later President of the USA set out to capture him and did so at gun point: "To submit tamely and meekly to theft or to any other injury, is to invite almost certain repetition of the offense, in a place where self-reliant hardihood and the ability to hold one's own under all circumstances rank as the first of virtues" (qtd. in: E. White, 89). The individual experience in itself aside, Roosevelt used his cowboy days for constructing his public persona after his return to the Eastern establishment: "Going with the Rough Riders to Cuba and working on his ranch in the Badlands gave Roosevelt the same chance both to separate himself from the East Coast political establishment and to publicize his military exploits, or to promote his connection with the rugged frontier" (Allmendinger, 115).

When Roosevelt left Dakota in 1886, "masculinity and the ways in which it was exhibited had become inextricably bound up with his image of the West" (E. White, 93).[17] The connection of masculinity, the West as well as a certain type of statesmanship was taken up by later presidents as well, most notably Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush in their conscious efforts to construct an appealing masculine public persona that

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militaristic adventure was actually a new departure for American foreign policy" (qtd. in: Corkin, 54-55).

16 Structural to this endeavor of remasculinization was what Slotkin termed "regeneration through violence." Always outspoken, Gore Vidal remarked that "Theodore Roosevelt was a classic American sissy who overcame – or appeared to overcome – his physical fragility through 'manly' activities of which the most exciting and ennobling was war" (qtd. in: Weidinger, 78).

17 The characteristics the cowboy inhabits have also come to stand in for the West in general: "in the imagination of modern America, the West has come to stand for independence, self-reliance, and individualism. Rhetorically, at least, modern westerners see themselves as part of a lineage that conquered a wilderness and transformed the land; they spring from a people who carved out their own destiny and remained beholden to no one" (R. White, 57).

was a performance rather than warranted by any actual cowboy experiences (Kennedy's New Frontier resonates here as well)[18]: "Reagan *looked and acted* like a cowboy hero, given to straight talk and seemingly decisive action. He enjoyed strong support across the nation, but particularly in the western states" (Slatta, 192; my emphasis). In more negative evaluations, the talk shifts to "Reagan's cowboy politics of the 1980s" (Blom, 73).[19]

George W. Bush, too, conveniently resorted to cowboy language. With regard to Osama bin Laden, he proclaimed that "[t]here's an old poster out west, as I recall, that said, 'Wanted: Dead or Alive'", and announced a "Most Wanted Terrorist list" in order to "round up [...] the evildoers" (qtd. in: Sherry, 245).[20] It is interesting to note that those presidents who construct their masculinity according to a cowboy ideal seem to have had neo-liberal agendas as both are comprised of strikingly similar values.[21] It is not

18 See, for example, Michael Kimmel: "The word 'frontier' continues to resonate for American men, from John F. Kennedy's 'New Frontier' to Star Trek's declaration that space is 'the final frontier.' We have always believed that manhood lies at the edge of civilization, away from the emasculating seductions of urban lassitude, soul-deadening bureaucratic office work, and, of course, women" (2004, 327).

19 The association of Reagan and cowboy masculinity underlines the performative character of masculinity in general and how full of paradoxes it can be. Consider, for example, Susan Faludi's description of Reagan as submitting himself to corporate culture while fashioning himself as an independent and strong man: "The postwar deal had worked like a dream for Reagan; submission and verbal shadow-boxing at celluloid enemies had led to celebrity and political showmanship that felt, at least to him, like the other half of his manhood. [...] He was a man *because* he played one onscreen, on all the screens of his projected life" (361).

20 Michael Kimmel narrates the following oddity: "President George W. Bush was [...] a cowboy iteration derived less from the real western frontier than from cinematic westerns. (His wife called him a 'windshield cowboy,' since he didn't ride horses and surveys his ranch from a pickup truck.) Bush and his advisers clearly understood how masculinity is a 'social construction' and forgo few opportunities to construct their man as a real man. Recall, for example, the image of the president, in military flight fatigues, staging a photo op to announce the end of the war against Iraq. Not only was he the first president in the twentieth or twenty-first century to don military attire [...], but the entire event was a staged pseudo-event, taking place a mile off the San Diego coast with the boat positioned to obscure the view of the coastline" (Kimmel 2012, 278). What is perplexing about this examination is that Kimmel seems to believe in an authentic cowboy original ("the real western frontier than from cinematic westerns").

21 To clarify this oft-used term: "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defence, police and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets. Furthermore, if markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks the state should not venture. State interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market signals (prices) and because powerful interest groups will inevitably distort and bias state interventions (particularly in democracies) for their own benefit" (Harvey, 2). Scholars suggest that Ronald Reagan was, along with Thatcher, one of the first to put this theory into practice: "Reagan [...] set the US on course to revitalize its economy by supporting [Paul] Volcker's moves at the Fed and adding his own particular blend of policies to curb the power of labour, deregulate industry, agriculture, and resource extraction, and liberate the powers of finance both internally and on the world stage. From these several epicentres, revolutionary

necessarily surprising given the fact that both the mythic cowboy as well as neo-liberalism value instant decision, self-reliance and independence. This way, too, 'cowboying' has become a derogative term used by the left: "Indeed, the very word 'cowboy' has become synonymous with recklessness, and in twentieth-century American cowboy politicians or cowboy capitalists are those who earned their labels by the employment of unorthodox procedures designed to yield great great [*sic!*] rewards, but at great risk to fame and fortune" (Savage, Jr., 19; see also Goetzmann and Goetzmann, 390).

As the 20th century progressed, men had to relegate their male passions more and more to socially acceptable leisure activities, such as sports. The lack of a frontier on American soil and shifts in American civilization throughout the 20th century, however, have not changed certain expectations about manhood: "Our lives a century later are still bound by this reshaping of manhood [in the 1880s and 1890s]" (Rotundo, 222). The white master narrative, however, has lost its appeal for all those who refuse to believe in it – namely all groups who historically have found themselves in a subordinated position. Civilization has crept over all of the territorial United States. The Anglo-American male cannot claim a privileged position without resistance anymore. He does, however, live on in dime novels, advertising, movies and television series.

2.3. The Mythic West and (Revisionist) Westerns

It could be argued that the Wild West was is the process of being mythologized while it still was in the process of being tamed. James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking* tales (five volumes published between 1827 and 1841) and Buffalo Bill's (William F.

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impulses seemingly spread and reverberated to remake the world around us in a totally different image" (van Apeldoorn & de Graaff, 1). If the latter part of this quotation implicates imperialism, this is no coincidence. In the essay collection *Profit Over People* (1999) Noam Chomsky illustrates how state intervention worked to 'free' markets around the globe, especially during the cold war, and what the neoliberal project actually means for democracy. "The government should 'get out of the way' – hence the population too, insofar as the government is democratic, though the conclusion remains implicit. The decisions of those who impose the '[Washington] consensus' naturally have a major impact on global order. Some analysts take a much stronger position. The international business press has referred to these institutions as the core of a 'de facto world government' of a '*new imperial age*'" (20; my emphasis). It is also suggested that "US expansionism turned from territorial expansion (across the American continent) to economic, non-territorial, i.e., capitalist expansion" and thus made the US "the first capitalist empire" (van Apeldoorn & de Graaff, 209).

Finally, it needs to be pointed out that even though neoliberalism is primarily understood as economic theory and practice, Harvey also stresses that it has "become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world" (3).

Cody) Wild West Shows can be considered the earliest and two of the most popular fictional accounts of the West. Goetzmann and Goetzmann describe Buffalo Bill as a man who "had evolved from a famous scout into a skillful showman [...] [who] had come to understand the public thirst for entertaining images of western adventure" (338). This happened in the 1870s and thus before Turner pronounced the frontier closed in 1893. Already then, "fact and fiction about the West became inextricably intertwined" (Goetzmann & Goetzmann, 337).

One of the most enduring frontier heroes is the cowboy hero. In fact, it is often not clear whether cowboys or other men of the frontier are meant when the term cowboy hero is used. This might be due to the fact that the *mythic* cowboy hero bears little semblance to the *historic* cowboy. Lee Clark Mitchell finds he "was an odd choice for national hero [...]. And during the twenty-odd years in which the [cattle] industry boomed and collapsed, their daily routine continued to be monotonous and uneventful, more so than most occupations" (Mitchell, 24-5).

As insignificant as the historic cowboy may be, he has triggered many responses in the field of cultural production. He is featured prominently in Westerns, inspired fashion and was used to sell cigarettes, among other things:

> the cowboy hero serves two principal functions in American culture: he transmits social values, and he sells merchandise. The first of these is a political (in the sense of educational or, more often, indoctrinational) function, and the second is an economic one. They are interrelated to the extent that the first guarantees the efficacy of the second, while the second exploits and thereby extends the imagery of the first" (Savage, Jr., 118).

No matter the actual history of cowboys and men of the frontier – they have ascended to the status of myth:

> A myth is a story told or an oft-told story referred to by label or allusion which *explains* a problem (for example, 'that's his Achilles' heel,' or 'it was a Trojan horse'). Very often, the problem being 'solved' by a myth is a contradiction or a paradox, something which is beyond the power of reason or rational logic to resolve. But the telling of the story, or the re-creation of a vivid and familiar image which is part of a myth, carries with it – for those who are accustomed to the myth, those who believe it – a satisfying sense that the contradiction has been resolved, the elements of the paradox have been reconciled. Dramatic retelling provides catharsis, as Aristotle pointed out about tragedy, which the audience – the participants in the myth – takes to be an explanation, a structured understanding, of the original problem (Robertson, 6).

As symbolic stories that function as "the intelligible mask of that enigma called the 'national character'", myths give meaning to the present by representing the past in a way that transcends history (Slotkin 1973, 3). As history deals with change, the past must be fundamentally different from the present. Myth denies this "and thus denies 'history' itself" (R. White, 616). Instead of the "processes and change" history describes, "[m]yth describes a process, credible to its audience, by which knowledge is transformed into

power; it provides a scenario or prescription for action, defining and limiting the possibilities for human response to the universe" (Slotkin 1973, 7).

Not only the cowboy hero has mythic qualities, but his very setting, the frontier, as well. If we follow scholars like Slotkin, the frontier myth is one of the most important American myths:

> The myth of the frontier is one of our oldest myths, expressed in a body of literature, folklore, ritual, historiography and polemics produced over a period of three centuries. Its symbols and concerns shaped the most prevalent genres of both nineteenth-century literary fiction and twentieth-century movies. The myth celebrates the conquest and subjugation of a natural wilderness *by entrepreneurial individualists, who took heroic risks* and so achieved windfall profits and explosive growth at prodigious speeds (2001, 231; my emphasis).

If frontiersmen like the cowboy are taken to be one of the ideal expressions of American manhood, the frontier myth naturalizes masculinity and maleness while prescribing a certain set of behavioral characteristics: this is how real American men act, these are the men who conquered the "wilderness" of the North American continent. If we take into consideration the perspective of masculinity in crisis, this discourse laments that men have strayed away from this idealization or were made to stray away from it by the demands of a civilization coded as feminine.[22]

This pattern of the feminine encroaching on the masculine is not a contemporary concern but, like myth itself, transcends history. Frederick Jackson Turner's highly influential paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893) was written after the frontier was closed and in the process of being historicized/mythologized.[23] This in itself signals a moment of crisis as the space for masculine regeneration was feared gone. This regeneration, Slotkin famously argued, "became the structuring metaphor of the American experience." Acts of violence were often part of this regeneration (1973, 5). At the same time, as we have seen above, men living in the East were perceived as becoming 'soft' and sought experiences in the West. The pattern is comparable to today's perceived crisis of masculinity: it was civilization,

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22 The term civilization developed simultaneously to the concept of separate spheres: "we need to know something about the history of the word civilization. It entered the language in the eighteenth century. At the time, it referred to a condition of society that was raised above barbarism; it also referred to the institutions and arts of living which accounted for that elevated condition. Men of the eighteenth century were happy to take credit for the enlightened and refined developments that constituted civilization. The postrevolutionary generation in the United States changed the gender meaning of civilization, however, when they developed the notion of the separate spheres. While men were expected to toil in a cruel, barbaric marketplace, women were to maintain the moral values that kept men civilized. Thus, civilization developed female connotations" (Rotundo, 251-2).

23 This crisis is, Pippin argues, inscribed in the Western genre: "most great Westerns are in one way or another not about the opening and exploration of the frontier but about the so-called 'end of the frontier,' and that means in effect the end of the New Beginning that America had promised itself. America in the period covered by most Westerns, 1865 or so to 1890, is ceasing to be land of promise and becoming a historical actuality like any European country no longer a great, vast potentiality" (Pippin, 22).

i.e. femininity, that was endangering manhood. The frontier myth, then, becomes

> the story of the male innocent who escapes from civilization into the wilderness to become a man, free from the constraints of tradition and authority – cultural and literary studies have privileged the story of radical individualism to the exclusion of all other formulations of the American self. Within this privileged narrative of cultural self-definition, white women are assigned a symbolic role as the hero's other, made to stand for the repressive rules and constraints of white civilization, inimical to adventure, independence, and freedom (Georgi-Findlay 1996, 6).

Today, it would not necessarily be "white women" per se, but feminists, homosexuals, and ethnic minorities who encroach on male domains that of course cannot be defined as geographic places far from civilization, but spaces previously dominated by white men (e.g. politics or business). Furthermore, the white male's privileged position within what is widely regarded as America's central mythic entity automatically makes him the bearer of national strength (see Weidinger, 15). Crisis announcements then not only relate to white masculinity experienced by men, but to the nation at large. The frontier is inseparably bound to both conceptions of gender as well as to nationhood and masculinity (see ibid., 17). This equivalence can be readily observed in the post-9/11 rhetoric of George W. Bush and in the writings of Theodore Roosevelt (see above).

Largely a history about the heroics of white men written by other white men, New Western History with scholars such as Richard White, Richard Slotkin or Patricia Limerick and filmmakers such as Robert Altman, Clint Eastwood and Sam Peckinpah added a less heroic and much more grim perspective on westward expansion and the myths created around it. To be sure, New Western History and revisionist Hollywood Westerns are two different things – one devoted to 'facts' and the other to fiction, one intended to describe and educate, the other to entertain and make money. Yet, both seem to be influenced by the turbulent 1960s, the Civil Rights movement and Vietnam. This is to say that the heroism of westward expansion could also be regarded as violent oppression.

The implications, however, may sit uneasily with Americans: "the denial of empire operates as a founding element of American nationalism in general" and is instead displaced in a discourse of "benevolent supremacy" (Kollin, 7). The colonial discourse, it is argued, is masked – at least with respect to westward expansion – by the narratives that have been told and written about it. The American continent was constructed as an empty, natural and primordial place, an "unspoiled Virgin Land, a pastoral New World garden [...] inhabited by the American Adam, a heroic figure who began human history all over again" (Georgi-Findlay, 2). Therefore, it can be argued that

the West had been a colony. Richard Slotkin, Michael Rogin, Bruce Greenfield, and others have exposed the naturalization and dehistorization of America and the American West as essentially a masking of economic, ecological, and cultural consequences of westward expansion. In fact, the idea of an uninhabited, primordial, natural America reflected in 1830s and 1840s literary and political discourse, and especially in landscape painting, coincided with the beginnings of industrialization, the massive destruction of the American landscape, and the removal of Native Americans (ibid., 3).

The ideas connected to the West were "transforming the historically made into the naturally given" (ibid., 4). The sought-after passage to India was a project of capitalist expansion and likewise, the conquering of native peoples deemed inferior is a "prototypical colonial situation" (ibid., 18). These aspects, however, are incompatible with earlier American narratives and how the West was imagined: "The West became for Americans what America had been for Europeans, a fresh start and freedom from the decadence of old Europe, or of the 'Europeanized,' weak, clueless Easterners of many Westerns" (Pippin, 23). Therefore, "talking about nineteenth-century America in terms of colonialism has its own obvious pitfalls, considering that the master narratives defining the American national identity draw on the rhetoric of liberation and emancipation from English colonial oppression" (Georgi-Findlay, 18). In other words, in the (post-)colonial discourse, the oppressed have become oppressors.

Though they are hardly represented as oppressors and the obvious negative connotation associated with that word, frontiersmen were indeed part of the larger project of expansion and progress. As Connell points out, the development of the concept of masculinity is strongly connected to empire building and the evolving market economy; thus, this masculinity might just as well be called imperial masculinity: "With masculinity defined as a character structure marked by rationality, and Western civilization defined as the bearer of reason to a benighted world, a cultural link between the legitimation of patriarchy and the legitimation of empire was forged" (Connell 1995a, 186-187).

In a historical account of masculinity, Connell consequently begins with imperialism and traces it through secularization, the Enlightenment, technological development to modern day capitalism. America then was one of the sites of the articulation of a particular type of masculinity, though Connell does not credit Anglo-Americans as its forebears on the continent: "The men who applied force at the colonial frontier, the 'conquistadors' as they were called in the Spanish case, were perhaps the first group to become defined as a masculine cultural type in the modern sense" (ibid., 187). Thus, even though the cowboy is associated with American masculinity more than any other type, this masculinity, too, is part of a larger history with roots that are not necessarily

American per se, but more of the colonial experience operating on a larger scale.

Nevertheless, "it was the frontier that defined American history; both in reality and in fantasy, the frontier was also what defined American masculinity" (Kimmel 2004, 326). Empire building was moreover "a gendered enterprise" from the start as women only figured as servants or wives, though there have, of course, been revisions undertaken by women's history. With little responsibility to women or children and out of reach of any governmental authority, the frontier and the lack of order became the site where modern men were made: "Loss of control at the frontier is a recurring theme in the history of empires, and is closely connected with the making of masculine exemplars" (Connell 1995a, 187). The formation of an exemplary masculinity can thus be located in these sites through a process of (re-)gaining control. Many such men have become icons and readily come to the mind of anyone socialized in Western civilization:

> While such 'icons' exist across all continents, the place that has for over 200 years probably best symbolized the pioneering 'instincts' of men is North America. Although contemporary Americans may be reluctant to talk of an American empire as such, the legends and images of Davy Crockett, George Washington, the Alamo, Wyatt Earp, General Custer [...] are of white, heterosexual, Anglo-Saxon masculinities writ large; broad strokes of male heroism and tragedy painted across a physical and metaphorical landscape where the female (and black and gay men) is reduced to anxious spectator as a continent is 'civilized' by a 'rugged masculinity' (Whitehead, 121).

Whitehead furthermore stresses that America continues to be informed by masculine mythology as the West and all it came to represent in the American imagination[24] was basically an enterprise of masculinity, an enterprise that was moreover tied to imperial expansion. The masculinity that developed in 19th century America also informed conceptions of masculinity in other 'Western' places of the world: "A game I played as a boy in Australia was, extraordinarily enough, a ritual of imperial expansion in North

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24 See, for example, Edward G. White: "Of the three regions broadly conceived as subdividing the continental United States, the West has had the most dramatic impact upon the American imagination. For although the East has been the fountainhead of many of the energies which have directed the course of the nation's history, and the South has had its own powerful and poignant relationship with the nation, the West, far more than other regions, has tended to elicit imaginative responses, which stress the distinctiveness of its regional heritage while closely identifying that heritage with the intrinsic 'Americanness' of American civilization" (1). White's assessment can also be observed in Lee Clark Mitchell's study of the Western and the making of masculinity: "And just as scenery in Westerns need not match Far Western topography, some Western plots have had only the vaguest basis in actual conditions – conditions that in any event were marginal to the consciousness of most Americans. Cowboys, cattle towns, and long drives north formed a minor chapter in western history; range wars were simply labor strikes on horseback, and the 'lone gunman' a rare psychopath, regarded as such and with contempt. It is not unfair to say that few Americans attached more than passing significance to Indian wars, railroad extensions, mining and lumber operations – certainly vis-à-vis more pressing eastern considerations. And yet this negligible history was seized upon by writers, who transmuted facts, figures, and movements beyond recognition, projecting mythic possibilities out of prosaic events (Pat Garret's capture of Billy the Kid, Custer's last stand, the Earp-Clandon shoot-out at Tombstone's O.K. Corral). In fact, a reason why Western history could be transmuted into art so readily was because it was viewed by Americans as pleasantly varied but inconsequential" (5).

America, shipped across the Pacific in comic-book and Hollywood images of masculinity: a replay of frontier warfare between 'Cowboys and Indians'" (Connell 1995a, 185).

The establishment of 'civilization' through acts of violence against uncivilized 'savages' living in an 'untouched wilderness' was formative for today's conceptions of masculinity: "We cannot understand the connection of masculinity and violence at a personal level without understanding that it is also a global connection. European/American masculinities were deeply implicated in the world-wide violence through which European/American culture became dominant" (ibid., 186).[25] This violence is present in narratives of westward expansion and as Richard Slotkin explains, an integral ingredient of frontier mythology:

> In myth, both moral and material progress depend on success in violent enterprises. Conquest of the natural wilderness makes Americans 'better off,' but the struggle against the Indians and over the analogous classes of 'savages' within civil society makes the American a 'better man.' The moral problem, and its triumphant solution, is embodied in the Frontier's mythic heroes: the scouts and Indian fighters of popular history and literature, 'living legends' like Daniel Boone and literary myths like James Fenimore Cooper's Hawkeye. Their fables teach the necessity of racial solidarity against a common enemy, which cements a social compact that is otherwise imperiled by the ideology of self-interest. These figures stand on the border between savagery and civilization; they are 'the men who know Indians,' and in many ways their values and habits of thought mirror those of the savage enemy. Because of this mirroring effect, the moral warfare of savagery and civilization is, for the heroes, a spiritual and psychological struggle, which they win by learning to discipline or suppress the savage or 'dark' side of their own human nature. Thus they are mediators of a double kind, who can teach civilized men how to defeat savagery on its native grounds: the natural wilderness, and the wilderness of the human soul (Slotkin 2001, 232).

Following this, it comes as no surprise that "[e]very variety of Western has its characteristic form of violent resolution [...] Moreover, because the Western has been seen as a representation of American history, the genre's insistence on the necessity of violence amounts to a statement about the nature of history and of politics" (ibid., 233). From this, one could gather that violence seems to be a constitutive feature of American masculinity and that violence as an act in itself can sort things out: it is less of a problem and more of a solution in itself.

Despite the fact that the days of the cowboy and frontiersmen are long gone and the images one usually associated with them are largely created through myth, they are

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25 For the relationship of the West, masculinity, and violence, see also Christopher Forth: "Historically speaking, the act of thrusting oneself away from comfort and security in order to face trials, endure pains, defend one's nation or conquer new worlds has been regarded as an essentially male set of practices, a thing that (despite evidence to the contrary) women have long been thought incapable of doing by virtue of their different corporeal 'natures.' Yet however much masculinity is approached as the straightforward expression of male anatomy, then accomplishment of masculinity is usually linked to the result of a *process*, typically one that involves some degree of physical or symbolic violence" (Forth, 2).

incredibly persistent. Since this is the case, it can be argued that the Western holds interpretational sovereignty over the interpretation of Western history:

> the images are so powerful historically and culturally that there seems to be a general consensus about what we understand by the terms associated with the West without us actually being able to define them. In other words, they have become culturally ingrained in their conventionalized form (Blom, 28).

The American West seems to have come to have a symbolic meaning that supersedes the history of that region: "An almost universal familiarity with the images that have represented the historical West in the collective fantasy of America helps create the illusion of unity" (ibid., 15).

As already mentioned, the imperialism of westward expansion was masked in the discourse of America as Virgin Land, part of which is a notion of innocence. The imperialism underlying westward expansion is also implicit in the most popular representation of life on the frontier, the Western.

The Western as a genre has a necessary setting: time and place, to a large degree, are predetermined. Stanley Corkin in *Cowboys as Cold Warriors. The Western and U.S. History* (2004) suggests that even though "[a]s a rule, the Western film is set in the later days of the nineteenth century", the films are less about the time they are set in, but communicate much more about the time of their production (21). The territorial expansion of the 19th century can thus be read allegorically as capitalist expansion in the 20th century. In his book, Corkin presents detailed readings of sixteen films produced between the end of World War II and the beginning of the Vietnam War, thereby illustrating "how Westerns [...] are not only sensitive to the currents of historical change but also expressive of shifts in national mood and circumstance" (2). As Westerns inevitably "refer to a moment of continental conquest", they also often run the risk of being apprehended as nationalistic by their audiences (12). The time Corkin identifies as the boom years of the Western also coincide with "the intensely nationalist period from 1946 to 1962" (9). They do so because "they effectively conjoin history and myth to appeal powerfully to incipient nationalism in U.S. audiences" even if this is not necessarily the filmmakers' intention (6). It is not only nationalism that plays a part in Westerns of that era: "The repressed dimension of Westerns is their relationship to imperialism – and it is their indirect means of considering such activity that makes them the genre of the period after World War II, a time denoted by various commentators as 'America's Half Century.' It is within this context that these works resonate" (24). In his reading of films from the 1940s and 1950s he argues that

> [a]s elements of the cultural sphere, these films complement and supplement more direct material and polemic appeals to the mass of Americans to apply deeply rooted ideas of U.S. exceptionalism to the conditions of the late forties and early fifties. [...] *They ask audiences to engage affectively in a view of the United States that allows for acts of empire or hegemony* to be seen as the expression of a rational and moral imperative that will ensue progress and promote the development of civilization (28-29, my emphasis).

The classic Western has not only shaped the image of westward expansion. As a mythic story of origin for the USA, the Western has had a role in defining what might be understood as an American identity:

> [T]he authority of westerns to speak about American identity is founded on (among other things) a racialist discourse. If it is not always foregrounded that the subject of the westerns is an Anglo-Saxon male – and that this is therefore what is meant by American identity – it is almost always taken for granted. And it is impossible to offer up such a subject without also displaying what that subject is *not*: female, non-Christian, nonwhite, and nonheterosexual (Alexandra Keller qtd. in: Weidinger, 244).

With the beginning war in Vietnam, the great time of the Western came to a close: fewer films were produced, their popularity decreased and, more importantly, they shifted "toward irony and self-criticism, with Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah replacing John Ford and John Sturges as the leading directors [after 1962]" (Corkin, 2). This has a lot to do with a more critical view of westward expansion influenced by the Civil Rights era and revisionist history undertaken by scholars:

> Western movies released after 1968 ranged across the political spectrum, some of which self-consciously challenged traditional interpretations of Western history and corresponding cinematic representations, others of which were less revisionist but nevertheless reinterpreted the history of the American West in light of contemporary social and political issues (Rommel-Ruiz, 118).

The new spectrum encountered in movies such as *Little Big Man* (1970) or *Blazing Saddles* (1974) "reveal the loss of innocence, self-confidence, and optimistic ethos that characterized American society after 1968" (ibid., 119). In other words, the heroic Anglo-American men bringing civilization to a benighted world may also be regarded as something entirely different: professionals solely interested in personal gain. According to Lee Clark Mitchell, Sergio Leone's Westerns suggest "the West can be anywhere and [..] the western code has never been more than a form of ruthless capitalism" (10).

Whether it is Spaghetti Westerns or American revisionist Westerns, with very few exceptions, the Anglo-Saxon perspective on westward expansion remains firmly inscribed in the genre: "This lack of truly revisionist Western movies demonstrates just how fundamental Turner's mythic vision remains for the film industry" (O'Connor and Rollins,15). This is also why Alexandra Keller calls Kevin Costners *Dances with Wolves* (1990) nostalgic

> because it never problematizes [the] traditional historiophotic method. For, if what the film

'remembers' is more accurate than classical Westerns, it still attempts to recuperate the category of individual Anglos. Yes, white folks were institutionally terrible, the film suggests, *but this one was okay*. The Sioux Nation's renaming of Costner's Lieutenant Dunbar as Dances with Wolves permits him to colonize their historical prerogative, to speak in place of them while seeming to speak for and even with them (243).

Whether a general audience of films such as Leone's Dollars Trilogy (*A Fistful of Dollars* [1964], *For a Few Dollars More* [1965] and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* [1966]) also primarily read these movies as biting critiques of ruthless capitalism and take offense with the lack of minority perspectives or rather enjoy the performances of masculinity on display there, is anyone's guess. There is, however, little argument that the fears of emasculinization that have propelled men like Roosevelt to seek out male-coded experiences on the Western frontier have returned as the "crisis of masculinity."

2.4. The 'Crisis' of Masculinity

Rotundo's history of manhood suggests a succession of dominant forms of masculinity in America through time. This is, however, insufficient for talking about which forms become dominant. Connell introduced the term 'hegemonic masculinity' to discuss the relational character of masculinities among themselves:

> The concept of 'hegemony', deriving from Antonio Gramsci's analysis of class relations, refers to the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. This is not to say that the most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity are always the most powerful people. They may be exemplars, such as film actors, or even fantasy figures, such as film characters. [...] Nevertheless, hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual. So the top levels of business, the military and government provide a fairly convincing corporate display of masculinity, still very little shaken by feminist women or dissenting men. It is the successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony (though violence often underpins or supports authority) (1995a, 77).

Hegemonic masculinity, then, is that which is dominant in relation to other masculinities and to femininity: "to be a man signifies *not* to be feminine; *not* to be homosexual; *not* to be effeminate in one's physical appearance or manners; *not* to have sexual or overtly intimate relations with other men; *not* to be impotent with women" (Elisabeth Badinter qtd. in: Walsh, 22).

The hegemonic form of masculinity in America today would then be a man who fits Elisabeth Badinter's description along with certain attributes rooted in the frontier

experience, such as self-reliance, control of self and others and risk-taking, and last but not least, who is white. The much talked-about 'crisis' of masculinity stems from the perception that this hegemonic form has lost its power. How did this come about?

First of all, historical accounts of manhood such as that of Rotundo show that masculinity has often been in crisis. "This is," MacInnes explains, "because the whole idea that men's natures can be understood in terms of their 'masculinity' arose out of a 'crisis' for all men: the fundamental incompatibility between the core principle of modernity that all human beings are essentially equal [...] and the core tenet of patriarchy that men are naturally superior to women and thus destined to rule over them" (1998, 11).

Even though masculinity has a history of crisis, the challenging of male privilege has reached new heights in recent decades. The contemporary crisis of masculinity can be understood as the outcome of the liberation era and the headway women and minority groups such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) have gained. This went hand in hand with new directions in academia. While women and ethnic or sexual minorities had been subject to academic investigations by largely white men, the tables were turned during the 1980s, a decade which saw the emergence of men's studies: "studies of men and masculinity have never made masculinity itself the object of inquiry. Men's studies takes masculinity as its problematic" (Kimmel 1987, 11).

The crisis of masculinity is not about all biological men. Although "the crisis of masculinity" has become a common and accepted term, it is somewhat incomplete as it misses an essential adjective: white. Not only have 'men' and 'masculinity' become terms of critical investigations, but whiteness as well. This relates to an important aspect of power: power not only refers to material aspects, but also interpretational power. The crisis of (white) masculinity to a large degree is about how white men are not viewed as the norm of humanity anymore: white men described and investigated women and minorities as the Other, hence they constructed themselves as the norm. Richard Dyer in *White* (1997) and Sally Robinson in *Marked Men* (2000) discuss this in detail: "the position of speaking as a white person is one that white people now almost never acknowledge and this is part of the condition and power of whiteness: white people claim and achieve authority for what they say by not admitting, indeed not realising, that for much of the time they speak only for whiteness" (Dyer, xiv).

Therefore, white men became marked as a distinct ethnic category, a category that had been conflated with the human standard, much as feminists earlier worked to

counter notions of men as the human standard and women as its Other.[26] Early on, this marking is already attacked in Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* (1991) and Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). Both use this marking to position the white male, who up until this point dominated university curricula and politics and economy in general, as victim. This victimization narrative has become integral to the crisis discourse.

With its marking, white masculinity lost part of its power: "To be unmarked means to be invisible – not in the sense of 'hidden from history' but, rather, as the self-evident standard against which all differences are measured: hidden *by* history" (Robinson, 1). Being hidden by history then means that "white men [are] conflated with normativity in the American social lexicon" and as such are opaque to critical investigations (ibid., 2; see also: Whitehead, 5).

Contributing to exclamations of crisis is also the negative value that is being attached to certain characteristics rooted in an imperial (frontier) masculinity: "What were once claimed to be manly virtues (heroism, independence, courage, strength, rationality, will, backbone, virility) have become masculine vices (abuse, destructive aggression, coldness, emotional inarticulacy, detachment, isolation, an inability to be flexible, to communicate, to empathize, to be soft, supportive or life affirming)" (MacInnes 1998, 47). This assessment comes from a more left-liberal perspective and it describes a reevaluation of certain traits of a type of masculinity in a culture that seems to have a greater demand for collaboration than for independent heroism. Fintan Walsh even goes so far as to state "that the defining feature of masculinity became its dysfunction" (4).[27]

However, as Rotundo reminds us, the virtues MacInnes writes of have been perceived as vices before, i.e. when communal manhood was the hegemonic form: "If there is no stable or non-critical period to be found prior to the disturbance in question (and historians have not found one), then the very idea of a crisis makes little sense" (Forth, 3). Seen this way, the 'crisis' perceived as loss in economic and public power as well as a softening perceived as emasculation by a feminine civilization can also be understood as maladaptation: "the five traditional archetypes of masculinity – soldier,

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26 See, for example, Judith Butler: "Some feminist theorists claim that gender is 'a relation,' indeed, a set of relations, and not an individual attribute. Others, following Beauvoir, would argue that only the feminine gender is marked, *that the universal person and the masculine gender are conflated*, thereby defining women in terms of their sex and extolling *men as the bearers of a body-transcendent universal personhood*" (1990, 9; my emphasis).

27 See also: "In recent years writers have pointed out the maladaptive aspects of heterosexual masculinity in terms of physical health, personal happiness, and psychological adjustment. Additionally, to the extent that heterosexual masculinity dominates politics and international relations, it may increase the likelihood of interstate warfare and thereby maladaptive for the entire human species" (Herek, 73).

frontiersmen, expert, breadwinner, and lord – are now archaic artifacts, although the images remain" (Mishkind et al., 47). As the traditional images persist and are used for identification, male role norms are increasingly viewed as unsuited for the demands of an urbanized, democratic society, such as communication and collaboration: to be masculine still means to "conceal emotions and feelings that make men appear vulnerable, [men have to] dedicate themselves to work and supporting a family, acquire skills that warrant respect and admiration, become mentally and physically tough, become self-reliant, and be willing to take risks and engage in violence" (Thompson & Pleck, 27).

Being overly self-reliant and concealing emotions are traits unfit for community and family life; violence – especially against women – is seen as problematic and last but not least, the acquirement of skills that warrant respect and help to be successful in business in order to support a family are at odds with late capitalism's labor organization and its shift to the service industry (perceived as feminine). Moreover, in a society that is officially based on equality, claims to fulfilling the role of the good provider not only appear out-fashioned but also increasingly unrealistic: for men, wages dropped 20 per cent from 1971 to 1991 and have not regained since.[28] Only men with higher incomes can support a family on their own nowadays and as the gap between the rich and the poor widens, this holds true for ever fewer men (see Ehrenreich, 288). Strikingly, this decline in wages did not amount to increasing wages for minorities: "Lost ground does not mean lost advantage" (Wellman, qtd. in: Carroll, 5). This economic reality is at odds with the conception of masculinity that developed in the 19th century and informs images of it until this day (see Pleck, 88). The expectations about manhood are thus incompatible with the demands of an increasingly urbanized and egalitarian society. The crisis of masculinity seems to be born out of this contradiction.

The perceived crisis, however, is not blamed on maladaptive aspects of idealized conceptions of masculinity, but on what is understood as attacks from the Other: ethnic minorities, feminists and LGBT activists. The discourse of masculinity in crisis is then one of victimization – "the white male as victim: the angry white male, the sensitive male, the male searching for the Wild Man within, the white supremacist, the spiritual male" (Savran, 5). Ironically, this strategy was made possible by "the transformation of

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28 See also Jesse Bernard: "The good-provider role for males emerged in this country roughly, say, from the 1830s, when de Tocqueville was observing it, to the late 1970s, when the 1980 census declared that a male was not automatically to be assumed to be the head of the household. This gives the role a life span of about a century and a half. Although relatively short-lived, while it lasted the role was a seemingly rock-like feature of the national landscape" (150).

white masculinity from the universal into the particular, whereby the particular becomes a location from which privilege can be recouped" (Carroll, 6).

Nevertheless, for some scholars this defensive positioning is still unwarranted for there is hardly anything to be recouped: "men (particularly white, heterosexual, Anglo-Saxon men) control, directly or indirectly, most of the world's resources, capital, media, political parties and corporations" (Whitehead, 3). Men's talk of crisis might therefore be complaining on a high level: having more than anyone else and still being dissatisfied. Crisis announcements are, like masculinity and gender in general, a performance:

> To think of 'crisis' as a performance is to imagine that the disruption it signifies is actively or even carefully produced; or, to extend the theatrical analogy, even affected. Understood from this perspective, we might infer that there are active agents of crisis, and agents in whose interest crisis acts. We might even deduce that crisis somehow distributes agency, or that agency involves the distribution of always already critical terms and positions. To think of masculinity as an embodied, social, and political domain in which crisis might be performed is to conceive of gender and sexuality as a performative arena of sorts, where ostensible disorder does not simply signal the radical dissolution of form but rather its reorganization (Walsh, 1-2).

As Walsh and others argue, the self-positioning as a victimized minority group "is nothing more than a discursive strategy circulated by men in order to reoccupy centre stage and reclaim patriarchal privilege" (ibid., 7; see also Carroll, 2-3; MacInnes 1998, 11; MacInnes 2001, 311; Robinson, 9-10).

Furthermore and quite paradoxically, "white masculinity has responded to calls for both redistribution and recognition [by women and minority groups] by citing itself as the most needy and the most worthy recipient of what it denies it already has" (Carroll, 10). The crisis announcements can be seen to be rooted in economic, social and cultural shifts underway ever since the Second World War. Yet these changes did not necessarily amount to a disadvantage in terms of political and economic power. The white male in crisis is consequently a discursive construction that adopts the strategies that were used by those (feminists, Civil Rights activists, the LGBT movement) who undermined patriarchal privilege: "Not only are visibly victimized groups increasingly considered morally superior, but, arguably, a narrative structured around victims and victimizers becomes *the* national narrative in the post-liberation era. Irresistibly, perhaps, white men begin to be drawn to a rhetoric of crisis and wounding that, paradoxically, *re*centers white masculinity while announcing its *de*centering" (Robinson, 131).

Finally, I would like to return to this link between manhood and the nation already discussed in connection with Theodore Roosevelt. Like masculinity, the American empire is increasingly perceived as being in crisis, too. Other than clinging to a status

quo, a fear of decline has announced itself throughout the Western world. The fear of decline – regardless if warranted or not – can only result in defensive mechanisms. This, it could be argued, leads to a retreat to an idealized masculinity of a glorified past: the story has already been written, if we follow Fintan Walsh's observation that "throughout the twentieth century, national crises and trauma (translated as emasculating) have been quickly followed by periods of remasculinization" (9).

In the following chapters, rugged masculinity will again occupy center stage. In the selected 'quality TV' series under investigation, men are – like in most cable TV dramas – the main characters. Is this fascination with men on American cable TV an indication that white male hegemony is to be re-established despite its wounding? Looking at narratives centered around males through the discourse of masculinity in crisis is not new. Sally Robinson, for example, looks in *Marked Men* at narratives of wounded males and argues that through this de-centering, white masculinity becomes re-centered. The series selected here, however, do not necessarily present males that diverge from idealized conceptions of masculinity: they are, or in the case of *Breaking Bad* become, "traditional" American men. The question then is, can this re-centering of "manly men" be read as a nostalgic glamorization of the archetypal American male or do these series de-center white masculinity by re-centering it? In the reading of *Breaking Bad* presented here, for example, it is argued that through re-centering, the white American hero is turned into a villain: *Breaking Bad* presents the emergence an imperial masculinity from a perspective that – since it consciously draws upon the economic crisis – could be termed post-empire. Does this series then disavow a return to patriarchal privilege by dragging an aspiring patriarch into the limelight, or does the critically acclaimed series turn out to be another white master narrative? Furthermore, what conclusions can be drawn from the practice of reconstructing traditional masculinity in a context of a crumbling middle class? The question of how we may understand the reconstructions of a traditional brand of American masculinity within the context of contemporary crises is the thread running through all following analyses. Yet, the three chapters have also thematic variations: while *Breaking Bad* is read in light of the economic downturn of 2007, the chapter "Gunfighter Revival in an Apocalyptic Setting" places *The Walking Dead* and *Falling Skies* in the context of 9/11. The final chapter encompasses a larger sample of series and seeks to investigate both contexts at the hand of the traumatized male.

3. "I Am the Danger": Crisis and Masculinity in *Breaking Bad*

"Well, technically, chemistry is the study of matter. But I prefer to see it as the study of change. Now, just... Just think about this. Electrons. They change their energy levels. Molecules. Molecules change their bonds. Elements. They combine and change into compounds. Well, that's... That's all of life, right? I mean, it's just... It's the constant, it's the cycle. It's solution, dissolution, just over and over and over. It is growth, then decay, then transformation. It is fascinating, really" (*Breaking Bad* S01E01).

"Certain crises throw actors into situations in which they feel compelled somehow to live up to mythic, larger-than-life narratives militated by the remembered past" (Hirschbein, 17).

"[P]eople believe that cancer is a disease of insufficient passion, afflicting those who are sexually repressed, inhibited, unspontaneous, incapable of expressing anger" (Susan Sontag qtd. in: Birkle, 162).

In a nutshell, *Breaking Bad* (hereafter *BrBa*) is a serial drama set in Albuquerque that deals with a very grave midlife crisis. Its main character, Walter White (Bryan Cranston), leads the life of an ordinary if underachieving middle-American everyman who takes a turn for the worst when he is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. A talented chemist who somehow ended up being an overqualified high school teacher, he decides to 'break bad' by teaming up with a former student of his, Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), in order to make enough money through "cooking" methamphetamine (better known as crystal meth) to provide for his pregnant wife Skyler (Anna Gunn) and his son Walter, Jr. (RJ Mitte) after his death. Both the diagnosis of lung cancer and his subsequent descent into the criminal world set in motion a character transformation that turns this bland everyman into a king pin in the course of five seasons. In so doing, "the show ditches Rule No. 1 of series TV: the personality of the main character must stay the same" as "Walter White progresses from unassuming savant to opportunistic gangster" (Segal, n. pag.). This chapter describes the transformation of Walter as a process of remasculinization. It is argued that in depicting this transformation, the series references elements of the Western genre. Moreover, as the remasculinization of Walter White is embedded in a context of crises, this chapter seeks to analyze the relationship between the crises of Walter White and his quest to validate himself as a manly man.

In season one, Walter is diagnosed with stage-3 lung cancer a day after his 50th birthday. Upon riding along with his Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)-employed brother in law, Hank Shrader (Dean Norris), he encounters his former student Jesse Pinkman at a crystal meth laboratory. He decides to blackmail Jesse into working with him in order to make exactly $737.000, the money he calculates will be necessary

to pay for food, housing and college education for his two children. His first encounters in this new milieu are rather horrifying: he kills two dealers in self-defense and gets involved with a cartel-affiliated drug lord, Tuco (Raymond Cruz). At the same time, he is persuaded by his family to undergo treatment. Wealthy friends of his offer to pay for this treatment, yet he refuses. Instead, he uses the money he earns from manufacturing drugs to pay the hospital bills. Towards the end of this first season, it becomes doubtful that he is only doing this to provide for his family.

In the second season, he and Jesse are kidnapped by Tuco, who wants to take both and their incredibly potent crystal meth formula to Mexico.[29] He is also on the run as he killed one of his henchmen with his fists in S01E07. However, both Jesse and Walter are able to escape and Tuco is subsequently killed by Hank Shrader. Walter and Jesse continue working together with mixed results. The relationship between Walter and his family is increasingly strained. He is absent most of the time and fails to explain his absences plausibly to the family he supposedly does all of this for. At the end of season two, Walter and Jesse connect with Gus Fring (Giancarlo Esposito), a large-scale drug distributor who controls the crystal meth market in the Southwest. Meanwhile, Jesse develops a crystal and heroin addiction.

In Gus Fring, Walter believes to have found someone similar (but eventually not equal) to him. He considers the calm-mannered man a real professional, someone who is not as crazy as the people he has encountered in the milieu thus far. However, believing he is equal to if not better than Gus Fring is wishful thinking by Walter, whose behavior increasingly turns paranoid, aggressive and narcissistic. Because of some uninformed decisions by Jesse, the relationship between Walter and Gus hardens. The latter already has a replacement cook waiting to operate the underground super laboratory he set up beneath an industrial laundry. In order to save himself, Walter manipulates Jesse into

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29 The name Tuco can be understood as a reference to Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966). Both Tucos seem to have an affinity for gold teeth, have a taste for tobacco and are Mexican. Moreover, the personalities of both are rather cartoonish. Patrick McGee argues that Blondie (the Good) and Tuco (the Ugly) are very similar by maintaining that "the good" merely refers to Clint Eastwood's good looks. Walter White does not have the good looks Blondie has: yet their names seem to have the same purpose as they refer to ethnicity. The moral connotation of Blondie/the Good thus is solely based on ethnicity. Like Blondie towards Tuco, Walter feels (morally) superior towards Tuco. In the course of *BrBa*, as argued here, it turns out that Walter is no better (morally speaking) than Tuco. It is however not uncommon that the Western hero is strikingly similar to his antagonist. Following this, McGee's reading of Leone's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* also resonates with my reading of *BrBa*: "Blondie is not so much a real man as the walking manifestation of the dominant subject that has nonetheless been cut loose from its identification with the class system. [...] The dominant subject becomes good to the extent that it *subverts its own ideological value* by aligning itself with the subaltern like Tuco. It becomes bad when, like Angel Eyes, it puts itself in the service of capital, either by working for the capitalist or by *accumulating wealth through any means necessary without regard for the social consequences*" (177; my emphasis).

killing Gale (David Costabile), the replacement cook, in S03E13 (Walter killed two of Gus's drug dealers previously).

Season four resembles a game of cat-and-mouse. Gus cannot kill Walter as he would not have anyone to manufacture methylamphetamine for him. Yet, it becomes apparent that Gus sooner or later will find a replacement and kill Walter (at least this is what a paranoid Walter thinks). It appears that Gus has chosen Jesse to fill in this spot, thereby taking away Walter's partner, whom he is very protective of, but whom he also tries to have under his control at all costs. Despite Walter's statements, the partnership between the two is never equal. At the end of season four, Walter has poisoned the child of Jesse's girlfriend to manipulate Jesse into partaking in killing Gus. The plan eventually works out in S04E13.

In the fifth and final season, Walter now takes reign of the drug business. The promotional posters for the start of this season fittingly proclaimed: "All Hail The King." Meanwhile, Walter has forced himself back into his family, a process that began in season four. Skyler, who found out about Walter's drug business in season three, comes to find understanding for her husband in season four. She believes he is in over his head, that he made an uninformed decision he cannot take back. Also, she becomes morally poisoned when Walter brings home a bag of money, promising the world to her and to keep her safe. In season five, she comes to regret this: her husband has become a drug dealer and a murderer. Comparing promotional posters of season 1 and season 5 sheds light on the severity of change that has occurred in this man: the once rather insecure if not frightened man now himself looks frightening. In the premiere episode of season 5, the viewer witnesses the following exchange between him and his wife that would have been unthinkable in the first season:

Skyler: I'm afraid
Walter: Afraid of what?
Skyler: Of you.
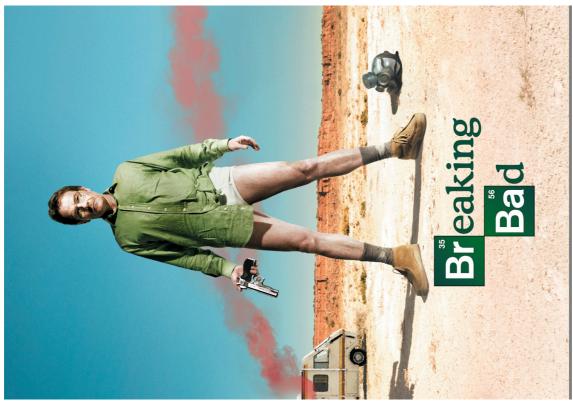
Figure 1 Promotional Poster Season I: By staging Walter White in a manner reminiscent of advertisements for Western movies, BrBa *also ironically breaks with the representational pattern by simply depicting the 'Western hero' without pants.*

Figure 2 Promotional Poster Season V: A man 'wearing the pants' after he has remasculinized himself through frontier-like encounters with savagery.

3.1. Locating Breaking Bad

Just like his creation, showrunner Vince Gilligan was suffering from a midlife crisis. In a *Vanity Fair*-interview he narrates the inception of *BrBa*:

> We [Gilligan and Tom Schnauz, now part of the writing staff of *BrBa*] were just joking around on the phone about what we should do next: Should we be greeters at Wal-Mart? Should we put a meth lab in the back of an R.V. and cook meth and drive around the southwest? And that image…I don't know, it just stuck with me. It jarred something within me. This image that started off as a meaningless joke on the phone turned into this show. I don't know why that idea sprouted in my mind as it did and so quickly, but in hindsight, the only thing I can think of is that I was a year or two away from turning 40, just dreading the terrible mid-life crisis. I guess that's why I felt like a kindred spirit with Walter White, because he's a man who's having the world's worst mid-life crisis, at least in my mind. But in the pilot episode he finds out he's having an end-of-life crisis, as I put it (interview w/ Ayers, n. pag.).

This perceived crisis turned out to be a fortunate event in Gilligan's professional life as well as for AMC, the channel that ultimately decided to order the first season of *BrBa* (the pilot was originally produced for FX). To date, *BrBa* has been received positively by viewers and critics alike, an average score of 9.5 out of 10 on metacritic.com testifies to this as much as repeatedly won industry awards, such as Emmy Awards, Writers Guild of America Awards, Critics Choice Television Awards, Television Critics Association Awards, and Satellite Awards. The show's final episode received massive media coverage and drew more than ten million viewers (see Bibel 1 Oct. 2013, n. pag.)

The idea of a regular citizen turning to the drug business could ring a bell for people who have watched episodes of Showtime's dramedy *Weeds* in which a Californian housewife starts dealing marijuana.[30] Yet *BrBa* breaches much darker territory, differing in tone, visual style and thematic scope. Generally, *BrBa* is a drama series that in terms of genre can be considered hybrid, as critic David Segal comments: "The structure — felonious dad copes with stress of work and family; complications ensue — owed an obvious debt to 'The Sopranos,' and the collision of regular people and colorfully violent thugs nodded to Tarantino.[31] The story and setting were an update of the spaghetti Western, minus the cowboys and set in the present" (n. pag.; see also: Lang and Dreher,

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30 This is something that Gilligan was made aware of during a pitch for *BrBa*: "Speaking of *Weeds*, it's a very good show. When I was pitching [*BrBa*], I had the whole pilot episode figured out; I was pitching it around to the different networks and I was in one particular meeting and 15 minutes into the pitch, one executive said, 'This sounds like the world of *Weeds*.' And I said, 'What is *Weeds*?' If I'd known of its existence, I might not have set out to make this show. *Weeds* had been on like a week or two, and, fortunately for me, I didn't get Showtime. You hate to be derivative. So I pressed onward and I've made sure that at least one of our writers was up on *Weeds* so we weren't infringing on their territory" (Gilligan, interview w/ Ayers, n. pag.).
31 The names Walter White and Jesse Pinkman could be interpreted as an homage to Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, alluding to Mr. White and Mr. Pink in that movie.

106-107).[32] Segal also maintains that *BrBa* is "much more satisfying and complex [than other 'quality TV']: a revolutionary take on the serial drama" that sets itself apart from other series by adding "a subtle metaphysical layer all its own" and posing "some large questions about good and evil, questions with implications for every kind of malefactor you can imagine, from Ponzi schemers to terrorists" (ibid., n. pag.). The hybridity is something *BrBa* shares with its contemporaries; a brief look at the other original programming AMC offers will testify to this. *The Walking Dead* is both a post-apocalyptic soap as well as survival horror, *Mad Men* blends social realism with workplace drama, soap elements and comedy. The implicit intentionality of its author ("large questions") is also something that has been discussed in other so-called 'quality TV' series, especially with respect to renowned "TV auteurs" like Alan Ball (*Six Feet Under*, *True Blood*). The "revolutionary take" that *BrBa* seems to bring to the table is something television scholar Jason Mittell remarks on in more detail:

> the show aims for a nearly unprecedented effect in television: chronicling how a character's core identity and beliefs can drastically change over time in a convincing manner. The Walter White who commits the unfathomable act of poisoning an innocent child at the end of season four is simply a different person than the broken-down school teacher who begins to "break bad" in the show's pilot, but his gradual transformation has played out onscreen in such a way that his behaviors never feel untrue to who he is at any given point in the story. [...] *Breaking Bad* is ultimately less invested in creating a realistic representation of its storyworld than in portraying people who feel true, and through this sense of honest representation the show engages with real questions of morality, identity, and responsibility (2011, n. pag.).

The drastic change in character and dedicating five seasons to this change is what sets *Breaking Bad* apart from its contemporaries. It is also what makes this series an interesting, but also challenging object of study for the simple fact that the identity of this man is always in flux, evolving with every episode: "the characters in *Breaking Bad* are in a state of constant change by design" (Gilligan, qtd. in: D. Martin, n. pag.).

In his paper "The Qualities of Complexity: Aesthetic Evaluation in Contemporary Television", Jason Mittell contrasts the narrative complexity of *The Wire* with that of *BrBa*. He deliberately chose the terminology 'complex' "to highlight [..] sophistication and nuance, suggesting [...] a vision of the world that avoids being reductive or

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32 Ross Douthat compares *The Sopranos* with *BrBa* for *The New York Times* in an article entitled "Good and Evil on Cable", in which he interprets the main characters as meditations on evil and free will: "Both shows are morality plays that implicate the audience in rooting for an evil person, but the reason we root for them is different: We root for Walter because of the decent person he used to be, and we rooted for Tony because we saw flashes (again, at least in the show's early going) of the decent person he might become, or could have become, if only he wasn't so wedded to his sins. Both shows are deeply interested in moral agency, but in 'Breaking Bad,' we're watching a protagonist who deliberately abandons the light for the darkness, whereas in 'The Sopranos,' we're watching someone born and raised in darkness turn down opportunity after opportunity to claw his way upward to the light" (n. pag.).

artificially simplistic" (2011, n. pag.).

Yet, both dramas achieve their complexity in different ways. Even though "both shows have somewhat similar focus on drug dealers, [...] while mixing intense drama along with a vibrant vein of dark comedy to explore contemporary struggles of men attempting to find meaning in their relationship to work and labor," he finds that "the two series are diametrically opposed, serving as stark contrasts among the range of options within the realm of serialized primetime dramas" (ibid., n. pag.). These differences are based on the respective aims and the way they are stylistically translated onto the screen. While Mittell finds that "*The Wire* embraces a fairly conventional mode of social realism" with what he calls "zero degree style", *BrBa* employs "a 'maximum degree style' through kinetic visuals, bold sounds, and unpredictable storytelling form" (ibid., n. pag.).[33] Thus, while *The Wire* tries to expose "[s]ystemic logic", i.e. the larger forces at work in society, *BrBa* drives for "centripetal complexity where the narrative movement pulls the actions and characters inward toward a more cohesive center to establish a thickness of backstory and [...] unmatched depth of characterization" (ibid., n. pag.). In short, "*Breaking Bad* strives more for psychological rather than social realism" (ibid., n. pag.). To remain with Mittell's somewhat literary classifications, one could say that *BrBa* does stylistically what modernism did after realism in order to explore the individual/psychological rather than the social.[34]

Christine Lang and Christoph Dreher would probably concur with this assessment, though they choose the terminology 'implicit dramaturgy' to describe *BrBa*'s narrative strategy. This, they write, refers to those elements of the narration that reference the knowledge of the audience. The focus, then, is on how the story is told. This means that it is not only necessary to have a general knowledge of Western civilization, but knowledge of distinction with regard to style, genre and lifestyle items through which much of the characterization takes place. As an example, they contrast Walter's beige-colored Pontiak Aztek with Jesse's flamboyant Monte Carlo. This amounts to a message about the lifestyle and the personality of the respective character: Walter tries not to stand out from the crowd and leads a very settled life, whereas Jesse likes attention and

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33 Alan Sepinwall estimates *Breaking Bad* to be "the most cinematographically daring show on television" (2013, 344). To give a few examples of this wide stylistic palette from which *BrBa* draws: there is a TV commercial for a fictional food chain, a music video for a narcocorrido that was written and performed by the Mariachi band Los Cuates de Sinaloa exclusively for *BrBa*, the use of color filters, time-lapses, sped-up montages, and exaggerated camera angles such as placing a camera at the end of a shovel or inside a tumble dryer.

34 In a similar vein, Erlend Lavik writes that "*The Wire* does not so much invite us to become amateur narratologists as amateur sociologists" (79).

seeks recognition by appearing 'cool' (see Lang & Dreher, 30 – 43).

A return to David Segal's thoughts on *BrBa* is revealing in terms of what this reading of this series is about: he writes that "[w]ith the death penalty of his diagnosis looming, Walt wakes from the slumber of an unfulfilling life, evolving from feckless drudge to reluctant part-time criminal, then gradually to something worse" (n. pag.). He certainly gets the character movement right; yet, the "unfulfilling life" part raises some questions, most importantly, what does constitute an actually fulfilled life *and to whom*? Furthermore, is Walter's life unfulfilled because he is fifty years old and works as a high school teacher, a job that does not promise any sort of promotion and seems barely enough to uphold his lifestyle? If that is so, "unfulfilling life" seems to have gendered connotations here as everything else in his life does point towards fulfillment in the sense available to the average citizen of the Western world: a good-looking, intelligent wife, a house with a pool, and a supportive family. Segal's observation of an unfulfilling life is uncritically assumed by Walter himself:

> **Jesse**: Tell me why you're doing this. Seriously.
> **Walter**: Why do you do it?
> **Jesse**: Money, mainly.
> **Walter**: There you go.
> **Jesse**: No, come on, man. Some straight like you, giant stick up his ass all a sudden at age, what, 60, he's just gonna break bad?
> **Walter**: I'm 50.
> **Jesse**: It's weird, is all. Okay, it doesn't compute. Listen if you've gone crazy or something... I mean, if you've gone crazy, or depressed... I'm just saying... That's something I need to know about. Okay, I mean, that affects me.
> **Walter**: I am *awake* (*BrBa* S01E01).

Walter's statement that he is "awake" is echoed by Segal's "slumber." It is one of the traps *BrBa* sets in its early episodes, where the viewer is given the impression that Walter *breaks bad* with *good reason*. Calling the life of a husband and high school teacher unfulfilling would be a slap in the face of every man leading such a life. Thus, what is at stake here, it seems, is the teeth-gritting question of what it means to live *a fulfilled life as a man in America*, i.e. what it means to be a man, and of being acknowledged as such. To position oneself in these questions firmly is however an intricate task: if *BrBa* as its title already suggests deals with fluid distinctions between good and bad, thereby presenting the viewer with differing masculinities that are, to complicate matters even more, performative and in flux, it does so without providing any moral compass. *BrBa* is about transformation and as things shift and shake, black and white turn into gray matter (which is also the title of S01E05). Segal's "slumber" then speaks of a man that is not acknowledged as such (culturally speaking) since the

word implies everything that can be considered unmasculine: passivity, a lack of agency and of control. Segal's comments can thus be understood in light of the discourse of masculinity in crisis: Walter White becomes the loser-turned-"angry white man" that this discourse so frequently mentions. This discourse is also implicit in the brief exchange between Jesse and Walter cited above. Being awake signals a shift in Walter, a realization that everything before was not enough, that it is time to "man up" and to get his piece of the cake (though he really wants all of it). Being awake also implies a feeling of entitlement.[35] From this moment on, it is suggested, being awake for a man means to engage in risky, potentially life-threatening behavior: to conquer the world. This is also visible in Jesse's reply as to why he does this: "money, *mainly*" (S01E01, my emphasis). What, then, accounts for the rest of his motivation for doing this when it is not *only* money?[36] It is the allure of making one's own rules and living by them, of being beholden to no one, of carving out one's own destiny.

In S03E07 ("Kafkaesque"), Saul Goodman (Bob Odenkirk), who becomes Walter's and Jesse's lawyer during the second season, advises Jesse to launder his money, reminding him that tax evasion is considered "a million times worse" than dealing drugs in the USA. He proposes to buy a nail salon, which Jesse – the uneducated wannabe gangster he is – of course refuses to do. But it is not only the unmanly establishment he is advised to buy that upsets him:

> **Jesse**: So you want me to buy this place to pay taxes? I'm a criminal, yo!
> **Saul**: And if you want to stay a criminal and not become, say, a convict, then maybe you should grow up and listen to your lawyer.

The money, it seems, is not merely as important to him as he claims in the aforementioned dialogue between him and Walter. Even though for Walter it is a different story as to why he engages in this risky business (i.e. pride and self-reliance, more on this further down), the allure of feeling like an outlaw is all too tempting and not at all surprising in a cultural consciousness that celebrates the "heroics" of a criminal like Jesse James (Jesse Pinkman indeed returns his money to the community after he realized that all of it is blood money).[37] The Spaghetti Western references, it

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35 In a review of S05E14, Todd Van Der Werff writes that Walter's "is the voice of white male privilege, the angry, unfiltered sense that one is owed something and has had it taken away" (n. pag.).

36 In a *Vanity Fair* interview with Michael D. Ayers, Gilligan also suggested that money does not account for all of the motivation Walter has for doing this: "The funny thing with his character is that all the good reasons for this bad behavior that he's embarked on have evaporated as the show progressed. That's one of the things I'm proudest of. Early on we were faced with a decision: should we keep Walter a likable guy to the audience? How hard should we continue to stack the deck against him? We came to realize that a guy who would make this desperate decision in the first place—to become a criminal—perhaps has more on his mind than simply making money for his family. After that money is made, there's still some itch left in this character that remains unscratched" (n. pag.).

37 In S05E03 Jesse James is even mentioned. After Jesse and Walter conspired to kill Gus Fring and with

turns out, are no coincidence: the frontier is a place in the mind. The fight between (castrating) civilization and (masculine) wilderness is fought along ever more elusive lines.

However, it would be of no service to see *BrBa* only in terms of masculinity and the supposed crisis thereof. The German press often receives *BrBa* in light of the economic and systemic crisis of the USA (see Moorstedt, 2; Borcholte et al., 3). It is not only that Walter White has to remasculinize himself in order to become the unflinching anti-hero Heisenberg,[38] it is also suggested that the economic and systemic crisis of the USA forces him to break bad. Both are, however, intricately intertwined. I argue Walter White becomes the very thing that is responsible for this economic and systemic crisis: a greedy white man lusting after power. Since Walter is the main character of *BrBa*, his partner in crime Jesse is often neglected in reviews. Paradoxically, his situation is fitting in the interpretation of *BrBa* as a commentary on the economic and systemic crisis of the USA, almost more so than Walter. His situation is much more symptomatic of our time and age than that of Walter's: it is not the parental generation that has the darkest outlook for the future, but the generation that came of age in the new millennium that is facing mass unemployment and a future that holds grim promises such as overpopulation and environmental destruction (see McMurtry, 123; Mierke, n. pag.; OECD, n. pag.). Jesse is one of those twenty-somethings that fell off the wagon. Neither he nor his friends have any positive perspective going forward with their lives. Not having college degrees, they drift through their lives, take up an occasional service job (such as Badger doing promotion in a dollar bill costume for a bank) or, in the case of Jesse, deal drugs. With regard to Jesse, *BrBa* is not so much about a process of

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him erased his distribution network, Gus's former henchman Mike tells Walter, who is frustrated that his own operation does not go as smoothly and profitable as imagined: "Listen, Walter. Just because you shot Jesse James doesn't make you Jesse James." This is an interesting statement as it raises the question what it is that makes one a Jesse James? Mike knows Walter has fooled Jesse into trusting and believing him, but Mike is a different story. What he implies by telling Walter that he is not Jesse James is that Jesse James, at least in the cultural narrative told in movie representations and folklore, did not mind sharing with his crew. The source of this disagreement between Walter and Mike is that Mike wants to divert money for a legacy fund. With this fund, the people Mike employs and Gus Fring employed will be compensated for prison time they might have to endure. Ensuring they have money through the legacy fund, they will not talk. Walter, however, does not see how this could be his problem: it is his money, he earned it, and he only reluctantly lets it go. In S05E05 Jesse James again is mentioned. In order to get their hands on methylamine, they rob a train.

38 On a side note: the German physicist Werner Heisenberg actually won the Nobel Prize. Thus it is not surprising that Walter chose this name to make his desires come true. Moreover, Darryl J. Murphy writes, "Walt has taken the name of the principle he seeks to exemplify. He's taken the name of the mataphysical truth he now embraces and embodies because Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle opens to him the possibility that he wasn't destined to be bad. Heisenberg allows Walter to believe that he chose to break bad and that he can choose to be good again. In the absence of a soul, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle opens up to Walt the possibility for redemption" (23).

transformation but of coming of age in a society that has little use for him other than being a consumer. Neither drugs nor consumerism give him any sense of purpose: Jesse's journey in *BrBa* is not of (re-)masculinization, but towards a higher consciousness, a connection to the world that is not based on exchange value. That his position within society is one of marginalization is already indicated by his feminizing last name: Pinkman. And indeed, no one in *BrBa* regards him as a 'real man' or associates him with the 'values' attached to traditional masculinity, which is a source of anger in him and certainly plays a part in his rejection of Saul's beauty parlor idea. Up until midway through the fourth season, Jesse finds himself in suspended adolescence – he is without purpose and without connection.

"Crisis" and "masculinity" seem to collapse into one another in *BrBa*. I argue that mechanisms of remasculinization and demasculinization are born out of crisis and/or constitute a crisis and/or bring about new crises. Some of the crises encountered in *BrBa* include not only the aforementioned midlife crisis,[39] but also health crises, a family crisis, a crisis of the middle class and, most of all, the drama of masculinity that seems *nothing but a crisis*. The latter resonates with a statement by Abigal Solomon-Godeau, who writes that she is "uncomfortable with formulations that imply some utopian or normative masculinity outside crisis. In this respect, I would argue that masculinity, however defined, is, like capitalism, *always* in crisis" (70, original emphasis). The relationship between masculinity, capitalism and crisis finds expression in the cancer of Walter, that is both cause and effect in the series' plot structure. The cancer as pending death sentence prompts Walter's transformation, but it is also its effect as the transformation metastases through everything related to this man.[40] To take things further, the crisis of masculinity is also the crisis of capitalism, which in turn is also the crisis of the middle class. Here, things come full circle: this crisis of the middle class is again one of the main factors for the crisis of Walter since the series constructs his cancer as the financial ruin for this middle class family.

As *BrBa* is a series about transformation, my reading will show how masculinities

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39 Midlife crisis as an empirical phenomenon is questioned by scholars such as Christopher Kilmartin who states that "[a]lthough middle age does not usually produce a crisis, it does present a set of developmental challenges" (545). In this way, the midlife crisis could also be theorized as a maladjustment to these developmental challenges. As such, "[m]any people use the so-called midlife crisis as a tool for constructing meaning in their lives. *They see this as a time to catch up to where they would like to be or expected to be when they were young*" (Elaine Wethingtin, qtd. in: ibid., 545, my emphasis). Following this, it could be understood as a caesura that might or might not occur.

40 To qualify this, I argue that *BrBa* constructs the drug business as neo-liberal capitalist environment that drives at nothing but unregulated profit maximization.

are constructed here. Which tropes and cultural narratives of masculinity do we encounter in *BrBa*?; does *BrBr* construct something of an ideal masculinity and to what end? Furthermore, how does Walter's remasculinization comment on the larger socio-cultural issues at work in the USA? The first season invites a reading as cultural commentary by suggesting that Walter White, economically unstable and underinsured, had no other option but to turn to the drug business. In this way, the series also invites the viewer to sympathize with this character and his increasingly amoral behavior. In later episodes, however, it becomes more and more clear that it was not a lack of options that made Walter White break bad, but that other factors connected to conceptions of masculinity are at work. This shift from empathy to disbelief in what this man eventually becomes, makes *BrBa*, if we follow Elahe Haschemi Yekani's definition thereof, a crisis narrative:

> Within narrative accounts, masculinity is not so much something one can claim; rather, it is a position that needs to be achieved often in terms of a heroic struggle. Plot structures are dependent on conflicts, and in this light, 'being-in-crisis' is also a privileged position within a narrative in general. In this context, the hero's fall often functions as a catalyst for the plot and struggling emphatically with him generates our engagement as readers with texts. However, crisis narratives are also narratives about a crisis of these aesthetic conventions (Yekani, 36-37).

What is interesting about *BrBa* in this respect is that it inverts the 'heroic' struggle toward masculinity: this struggle is not heroic, this struggle begins with Walter breaking bad and never turns heroic. Still, his being in crisis puts him into a position of privilege as the center of the viewer's emotional engagement with the series, at least in the beginning, where it is suggested that he has no other choice but to do this. In the following, I will look at how *BrBa* constructs, deconstructs and reconstructs masculinity and to what end: what is this series trying to accomplish with this strategy? I will do so by a close reading of the series' pilot episode: here, we encounter Walter White as an exemplar of "masculinity in crisis."

3.2. "Like Keith Richards with a Glass of Warm Milk"

BrBa begins with a cold opening that in its imagery suggests a Western. We see shots of the New Mexico desert, followed by shots of the deep blue sky. We then see a pair of gray pants flying upside down through the air. The pace speeds up as a recreational vehicle (RV) as a contemporary version of a stagecoach is seen driving through the frame and over the falling pants (see also Sanders, 69). The camera cuts into the driver's

cabin of the RV, at the steering wheel is a man wearing nothing but tighty-whitey briefs and a gas mask, another man is passed out in the passenger seat. We get a shot of the RV's interior back and what we see is broken glass, liquids and two unmoving bodies. The camera cuts back to the front, we see the man in

*Figure 3 Walter White's pants upside down (*BrBa *S01E01).*

the driver's seat wrestling the steering wheel, trying to keep the vehicle on the dirt road in what seems far away from civilization. The RV then crashes into a ditch and comes to a halt. The driver, panicked, exits the vehicle. He dresses into a green dress shirt and retrieves a video camera from the glove box. The extra-diegetic camera is now replaced by the diegetic video camera (see Figure 4). The man, clearly in distress, films himself and speaks:

> My name is Walter Hartwell White. I live at 308 Negra Arroyo Lane, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 87104. To all law-enforcement entities, this is not an admission of guilt. I am speaking to my family now... Skyler. You are the love of my life. I hope you know that. Walter Jr. You're my big man. There are... There are going to be some things... Things that you'll come to learn about me in the next few days. I just want you to know that no matter how it may look I only had you in my heart. Goodbye (*BrBa* S01E01).

In the background the sound of approaching sirens can be heard. Walter makes his way to the dirt road and points a gun in the direction of the sirens. This intense scene of a man in his underwear pointing a gun "at the viewer" as if refusing the camera's objectifying gaze is cut off by the series' title sequence. After the title sequence, the action does not return to the opening scene, but to a long shot of the White residence at

night. A caption informs the viewer that the following scenes take place three weeks prior to what was just seen. What follows, is an introduction to the life this man leads and how he ended up on this dirt road, how he came to leave civilization to find himself in the wilderness. This initial scene will

*Figure 4 "My name is Walter Hartwell White" (*BrBa *S01E01).*

then be completed at the end of *BrBa*'s pilot episode and thus frames the narrative.[41] What happens in-between shows what Walter White, a high school chemistry teacher, so perfectly describes in the epigraph to this chapter – just replace "chemistry" with the title *BrBa*. The pilot episode sets the stage for this transformation, a transformation that includes characters "changing their bonds", and "growth, then decay." In its more gruesome moments, it is also "solution, dissolution."[42]

To return to the information Walter gives the viewer in his self-made video confession, it needs to be stated that the viewer gets an image of how this man perceives himself (he is both actor and director). It seems odd that – even though Walter claims that whatever this is, it is "not an admission of guilt" – he states his full address even though it can be assumed that "the love of [his] life" knows where he lives. He also spreads his wallet and ID in front of him on the ground. From this, it is clear that there is a) some feeling of guilt involved, he just refuses to admit to it, and b) the viewer already gets a very telling glimpse of this man's character. He is as straight as can be: everything has to be in order, something integral to his understanding of professionalism as the viewer will learn in subsequent scenes and episodes. His facial expression is also of interest as it reveals a man who is frightened. Amidst the anxiety and distress he is under, his face also looks soft, like the face of a kind man, a face that will harden significantly in the course of the two years story time.[43] Moreover, as the series and the transformation of its main character progresses – Vince Gilligan refers to this movement as "taking Mr. Chips and transforming him into Scarface over the course of a number of seasons" (qtd. in: Ayers, n. pag.) – he will increasingly call and identify himself by another name: Heisenberg (the name of a German physicist).[44] Apart from these considerations, this brief video sequence is a means to various ends. Despite the cold opening, it serves as an exposition as plenty of information is transmitted: setting, character constellation and the vague hints at illegal activity. Moreover, from the point of view of reception, this opening pulls the viewer immediately into the action and builds suspense, raising the obvious question "What happened to this man?"

The second half of Walter's above-quoted video statement is also very interesting

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41 See also Lang's and Dreher's discussion of the pilot episode under the aspect of implicit dramaturgy (61-65).
42 In S01E02 the two bodies seen in the back of the RV are dissolved in acid. This is not the only time this course of action is taken to get rid of dead people. In S05E06 even a young boy is dissolved in acid.
43 With the final and fifth season of *BrBa* being cut in half, *BrBa* aired from 2008 – 2013. Yet the action portrayed covers two years story time.
44 The first time he introduces himself as Heisenberg is in S01E06.

when looked at from the vantage point of having watched five seasons of *BrBa* and having witnessed a transformation of character that does not fall short of what Vince Gilligan promised when he pitched the show.[45] Whatever Walter did to be so panicked and fearful of the sirens approaching from far away: he did it for his family ("no matter how it may look I only had you in my heart"). Again, it needs to be kept in mind that he is filming himself and thus presents himself as he wants to see himself, which is also the way he wants to be seen by his family. This thought-terminating cliché is, as will be argued, a mask for his true intentions (though he might not be consciously aware of it): those who speak on behalf of the family automatically find themselves in the position of moral superiority: you can only have the best intentions in mind when "doing it for the family" or speaking on behalf of the (American) family.[46] Thus, no matter what one does, it is justified if done for the family, which is something that surfaces in *The Walking Dead* as well. Also, doing things for the family in the sense of providing for the family financially carries connotations of patriarchy and is therefore an integral part of constructing masculinity.

Since I argue that the transformation of Walter White is essentially a process of remasculinization, the way he positions himself in relation to his family is of great importance. A man of science, he uses his family to rationalize his actions and mask his true desires, though he might not be aware of it at this point of the narrative. In season five, he does not fool anybody with this anymore, yet the words still come out of his mouth, the voice is just deeper, rawer, and his face has hardened. After Walter was responsible for numerous gruesome crimes, we witness the ultimate cynicism when he tells a horrified Skyler that "there's no better reason than family" as if this statement alone could grant him absolution (S05E02). With this, he does something that appears to be common sense. Common sense is, however, not always 'right', as David Harvey argues (drawing on Gramsci):

> Common sense is constructed out of longstanding practices of cultural socialization often rooted deep in regional or national traditions. It is not the same as the 'good sense' that can

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45 In S05E03, Walter and his son watch *Scarface*. When Skyler, who at this point is terrified by her husband, awakens to the sound of gun shots, she walks into the living room to find both laughing and enjoying themselves as they watch one of the later scenes of that movie. Skyler only watches them watching the movie in silent horror.

46 To get a better understanding of this, one only has to look at the ferocious culture wars that in part were fought on behalf of the American family since the 1970s (a theme that could be observed in the newly inflamed debates on gay marriage in the US presidential campaign of 2012): the war on drugs, the war against pornography, and the fierce resistance against equal rights for homosexuals (who were understood as predators whose prey was located in the American family – the children). See Ehrman, John. *The Eighties. America in the Age of Reagan*. New Haven et al., Yale U.P.: 2005 and Jenkins, Philip. *Decades of Nightmares. The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America*. New York, Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2006.

be constructed out of critical engagement with the issues of the day. Common sense can, therefore, be profoundly misleading, obfuscating or disguising real problems under cultural prejudices. Cultural and traditional values (such as belief in God and country or views on the position of women in society) and fears (of communists, immigrants, strangers, or 'others') can be mobilized to mask other realities. Political slogans can be invoked that mask specific strategies beneath vague rhetorical devices. The word 'freedom' resonates so widely within the common-sense understanding of Americans that it becomes 'a button that elites can press to open the door to the masses' to justify almost anything. Thus could Bush retrospectively justify the Iraq war (39).

The way it was possible for George W. Bush to justify the war against Iraq with common sense assumptions – the American belief in democracy and freedom – Walter in the beginning states that he does it for his family and he also uses this justification after it has become clear that his venture into the drug world is a neoliberal quest for money and power (see further down).

From his videotaped monologue, the viewer learns that Walter is a man who places a high value on accuracy, who is married and has a son who is named after him, that he did something illegal and that he did this with his family "in [his] heart". The opening frame, however, gives more away about Walter, though on a strictly visual level. He is introduced to us wearing almost nothing, which can be interpreted as signaling rebirth, a trope that will find completion at the end of this episode. Apart from this, it is also a pathetic sight signaling the crisis of masculinity. Even though masculinity and the sex category male are two different things, the male body as an expression of masculinity – or, as Judith Butler would have it, the body as the main tool for the "drag performance" that is gender – is in the case of Walter a testament to his softness, his lack of masculinity (see Butler 1990, 6; ibid. 1995, 32). He lacks muscle tone, has a couple of pounds too many, his body is never erect and he wears glasses:

> The white man has been the centre of attention for many centuries of Western culture, but there is a problem about the display of his body, which gives another inflection to the general paradox, already adumbrated, of whiteness and visibility. A naked body is a vulnerable body. This is so in the most fundamental sense – a bare body has no protection from the elements – but also in a social sense. Clothes are bearers of prestige, notably of wealth, status and class: to be without them is to lose prestige. Nakedness may also reveal the inadequacies of the body by comparison with social ideals. It may betray the relative similarity of male and female, white and non-white bodies, undo the remorseless insistences on difference and concomitant power carried by clothes and grooming. The exposed white male body is liable to pose the legitimacy of white male power: why should people who look like that – so unimpressive, so like others – have so much power? (Dyer, 146).

That Walter does not want to be looked at, or better, scrutinized, is suggested when he points the gun at the camera shortly before it fades to the title sequence.[47] This aspect of

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47 There is also another way of reading this. I will come back to this in a later point of this analysis when I connect Walter's remasculinization with John McMurtry's *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism*. This way, the white man as normalized human standard is also indicative of what McMurtry refers to as failing social immune system that simply does not recognize a cancerous invasion of the host body.

bodily display is also intertwined with control, a motive that is established in these opening shots as well: before we see Walter for the first time, we see his pants flying upside down through the air, a visual pun on the common phrase of "wearing the pants" that will also be

*Figure 5 Notice the stone face 'watching' Walter White(*BrBa *S01E01).*

taken up in later scenes.[48] Also, that they are in free fall and upside-down speaks to a loss of control. Likewise, we see him wrestling the RV's steering wheel that he is ultimately unable to control, and, when he makes his way back to the dirt road, pointing his gun at the sirens, we see something he is not aware of: a face of stone is watching him, a leifmotif that in variation runs through all of *BrBa*, though in differing images, such as the eye ball of a teddy bear[49] in seasons two and three or surveillance cameras, against whose controlling gaze he rebels, in season four.[50]

BrBa, to a large degree, is about various aspects of control: control of oneself – one's identity and one's life – and about control *of others* while resisting being controlled *by others*. The relationship between control and masculinity is reciprocal. Even though white men can be considered to hold the reigns of power, not every man leads a life in which he has access to power and is thus in a position to control. *BrBa*, to a large degree, is about a white male's struggle to do what white men have always done: control everything around them.

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48 This phrase is uttered twice between Jesse and Walter. The first time, Jesse tells Walter "Nice job of wearing the pants in the family" in S01E02 after Skyler confronted Jesse for selling marijuana to her husband. The second time it is a transformed Walter who says this to Jesse when he complies with his girlfriend Jane in blackmailing Walter in S02E12. The same episode Walter watches Jane choking to death in her sleep.

49 This eye ball in connection with the pink teddy appears in S02E01, S02E04, S02E10 and S02E13 as foreshadowing (the pink teddy is part of the plane crash wreckage for which Walter is indirectly responsible). In S03E01, S03E02 and S04E01 this eye ball reappears, this time without the teddy. This eye ball can also be interpreted as a moral accusation towards Walter, a reminder of his guilt. Gilligan refers to the plane crash and the teddy as a visualization of "all the terrible grief that Walt has wrought upon his loved ones, and the community at large" (qtd. in: Sepinwall 2009, n. pag.). Also, "[t]he pink teddy bear continues to accuse" after the plane crash (Bowman, n. pag.).

50 This imagery can be brought into contact with issues of control. S03E10 is entitled "Fly". This bottle-neck episode is entirely devoted to Water trying to kill a fly. This episode on a whole also falls into the motive of control (among other aspects, such as his claim that through the fly everything is contaminated in the lab where he manufactures crystal meth. The notion of contamination can be understood as a subconscious realization that it is he who has contaminated everything around him. He is like the cancer that is threatening his life: his amoral behavior metastasizes into the people connected to him. On a narrative level, Jason Mittell rightfully remarks that "[e]very character is defined primarily through his or her relationship to Walter White, and the narrative is focused on how his choices and actions impact each of their relationships" [2011, n. pag.]).

Control as something that is exercised on others, however, is only one side of the coin. Certain markers of masculinity, such as toughness, aggression and rationality also need control, but this time it is control of emotions: self-control. Controlling one's emotions and desires may take energy and suppressed feelings may erupt as something else, such as aggression. Upholding masculinity is in itself an act of control and according to Stephen Whitehead, "a key factor in men needing to control is a lack of confidence and inner security about their masculinity, maleness, sexuality" (165). The uttermost fear for a man, it seems, is to be exposed as being less than a man. Thus, if one considers the performative aspect of masculinity, the surveillance cameras against which Walter so vehemently rebels put him under the intense stress of maintaining the performance uninterrupted. Every weakness of performance, he fears, can be exposed and expose him as less than a man. Moreover, the cameras signal that despite his aspirations, he has not yet achieved hegemony (towards the end of *BrBa* it is he who controls other men). Consequently, in order to take advantage of hegemonic masculinity, one has to control oneself in order to exercise control as one of the benefits of masculinity as a collective practice. Men not only control the world, they also control each other and themselves. This aspect of control has historical roots with regard to idealized conceptions of masculinity in the USA and *BrBa* draws from these conceptions in its visual language, its Southwestern setting, and its constructions of masculinity. After *BrBa*'s opening sequence discussed above, the viewer learns that Walter White lacks all of the above: neither is he in a position to exercise control over others, nor is he completely in control of himself or his male body.

After a long shot of the White residence to establish setting, the camera takes the viewer into the Whites' bedroom. The following scene is non-verbal and, as often in *BrBa*, showing is more important than telling, which is something Gilligan learned from Chris Carter, whom he worked for during his time as a writer for *The X-Files*: "Show your story, don't tell it. Try not to depend too much on dialogue. Try to remember that it's very much a visual medium and that sometimes more can be said with a look between characters than a whole spate of words" (Gilligan qtd. in: Flaherty, n. pag.). This way, Gilligan also uses visualization for characterization or give insight into characters' emotional life by using specific colors for their wardrobe.[51]

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51 Vince Gilligan never tires of mentioning the thoughts put into the color of Walter White's clothing during the course of the series in the DVD audio commentaries. In the opening scene that frames the pilot episode, Walter is dressed in a lively green shirt, a green that could also be considered the corporate design color of this series (in the DVD audio commentary, the "Breaking Bad green" is frequently mentioned). In the scenes after the title sequence, he is seen in a gray pullover over a white

In the bedroom, the camera pans over the Whites' marital bed. We see Skyler sleeping soundly and Walter lying wide awake besides her. A shot of the alarm clock on Walter's nightstand tells us it is 5:02 AM. We then see him going into a room that might have been a home office but is in the process of being transformed

Figure 6 "Contributor to research awarded the Nobel Prize" (BrBa S01E01).

into a nursery (shots of diapers and stuffed animals are juxtaposed with shots of wall calendars and certificates). In this room, Walter is seen on a treadmill with the view towards a wall. On that wall hangs a diploma of which we get a close up. It informs the viewer that Walter was given this certificate for contributing to Nobel Prize winning research. Directly after this close up, we get a shot of Walter pausing, with a tired look on his face. This is followed by a shot from outside the room through the open door with his flaccid body at the center of the frame. This scene gains its full symbolic significance only in subsequent scenes and episodes. The arrangement, placing him on a treadmill while looking at this document, is not born out of coincidence. Assuming that this is his home office which is in the process of becoming a nursery and he – symbolically – walking towards a moment in his life which has long gone by speaks volumes of the situation this man feels himself in: it speaks of lost hopes of career fulfillment and it speaks of marginalization within his family (see also Lang & Dreher, 63). What is more, the masculine room – an office or a study – is transformed into its opposite, a nursery. This scene is a visualization of everything that is not manly about Walter, in fact, it comes close to representing the death of hegemonic masculinity as he appears subordinated to the demands of family and is unable to dictate the terms, something which becomes more clear in the following scenes. Walter's movement gives him no headway and is furthermore directed towards an artifact of the past, a past whose representation is about to be erased; his limp body, the tired look on his face and the coughing speak of resignation, of passivity and the total absence of classical markers of

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dress shirt and in gray pants. Even his car is gray. Vince Gilligan commented on this not only during the DVD commentaries, but also in various interviews: "Color is important on *Breaking Bad*; we always try to think in terms of it. We always try to think of the color that a character is dressed in, in the sense that it represents on some level their state of mind" (qtd. in: Flaherty, n. pag.). In the pilot episode, the colors of his clothing go chronologically from gray to beige to yellow to green. Green thus frames the pilot episode.

manhood such as stamina, virility, activity and conquest. While he is moving on the treadmill, he is also standing still. Since there is no permanence in masculinity, mobility is paramount as it has to be continually (re-)constructed (see Weidinger, 97). The stasis this scene constructs attests to Walter's complete loss of masculinity.

When Walter steps off the treadmill and reaches down to check for something, a cut occurs and we get a shot of a dish with omelet and bacon arranged to form the number 50 being placed on a table.[52] It is Walter's 50th birthday and after receiving his birthday wishes from his wife, he is also informed that the bacon is not "real" bacon, but veggie bacon, because, as Skyler tells him, "*we* are watching our cholesterol now" (*BrBa* S01E01, my emphasis).[53] He accepts this information and the attention turns to his son, Walter, Jr., who enters the dining room and complains about the dysfunctional water heater (this is the excuse he gives his mother for being late for breakfast). The water heater reference will be taken up again in S02E01, and S02E10. Each time, the reference is connected to disagreements within the family – something is not working the way it is supposed to. Moreover, it testifies to the financial strain on the family and Walter's failure to keep his house in order.

There are two more scenes in the pilot episode that need to be mentioned. The first because it is a representation of hegemonic masculinity and establishes the opposing masculinities of Hank and Walter, the other because it involves the sexual performance aspect of masculinity. Both scenes take place in the White residence on Walter's birthday.

Skyler throws a surprise birthday party for Walter to which he is late as he works a second job at a car wash. The overall setting of the scene manages to offer valuable

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52 One can google for the screenplay of the pilot episode. There, one finds an additional scene between breakfast and the previous one. In this scene, Walter is described as masturbating in front of a mirror. Upon examining his wrinkled face he loses his erection and gives up. In the DVD commentary, it is also mentioned that after receiving his cancer diagnosis, Walter goes to the hospital bathroom to masturbate. The latter scene was shot but not included in the pilot. The representation of a middle aged man masturbating is a pathetic sight and fits the way Walter White is presented in these initial scenes. Moreover, the fact that he loses his erection from looking at himself in the mirror is telling as well: he has no confidence in his manliness. Psychoanalytically speaking, he does not have the phallus (borrowing from Lacan, Judith Butler states that men are in the position of "having" the phallus while women inhabit the position of "being" the phallus: "'Being' the Phallus and 'having' the Phallus denote divergent sexual positions, or nonpositions (impossible positions, really), within language. To 'be' the Phallus is to be the 'signifier' of the desire of the Other and *to appear* as this signifier. In other words, it is to be the object, the Other of a (heterosexualized) masculine desire, but also to represent or reflect that desire. This is an other that constitutes, not the limit of masculinity in a feminine alterity, but the site of a masculine self-elaboration" [1990, 44]. Interestingly, Walter masturbating lacks this other and, if we follow Butler's argumentation, he is neither "having" nor "being" the phallus).

53 In S05E04, it is his 51st birthday. This time – after his remasculinization – it is real bacon that is being placed on his table. Here it becomes apparent that forming the number with bacon is a family ritual, only Skyler refuses this in this episode. When Walter, Jr. urges her to do it, she does so, but without care and – ironically – the number "1" ends up being very short.

glimpses of the milieu the White family inhabits: most of the people present do not seem to be friends or colleagues of Walter. Many of them are friends of Hank, most of them work for the D.E.A. The only person present that is related to Walter through blood is his son. Family in *BrBa* is mostly Skyler's side of the family. Apart from beer in plastic cups, there is also wine out of cardboard boxes. What becomes apparent in this scene and the following exchange between Hank, Walter and his son is that Walter is the only intellectual in this suburban middle class environment:

> **Hank**: Glock.22. That's my daily care [...] [Hands the gun over to Walter, Jr.]
> **Walter**: Uhm...
> **Walter, Jr.**: This is awesome right here.
> **Hank**: Isn't it?
> **Walter, Jr.**: Dad, come check this out.
> **Walter**: Yeah I see it.
> **Walter, Jr.**: Come on, take it [Walter, Jr. hands gun over to Walter].
> **Walter**: Uh... no, no... it's just *heavy* [smiles awkwardly].
> **Hank**: That's why they hire men. Jesus, it's not gonna bite you, all right? Looks like Keith Richards with a glass of warm milk. [Laughter] Hey Walt, everybody listen up, listen up, listen up. I'm gonna give a little toast... a little toast to my brother in law. C'mere. Walt, you have a brain the size of Wisconsin. We're not gonna hold that against you. [Laughter] But your heart's in the right place, man, your heart's in the right place. We love ya, man, we love ya. [Hank takes Walter's beer] To Walt, na sdorowje!

The symbolism and characterization of the viewer's first encounter with Hank, who is at times the series' only source of comic relief, might be a little heavy handed for its alignment of manliness and *the* phallus symbol per se, a gun. Then again, it fulfills the purpose: Hank has the phallus,

*Figure 7 "Like Keith Richards with a glass of warm milk" (*BrBa *S01E01).*

Walter does not; he actually seems frightened of it. Masculine authority is, therefore, grounded on the use of force here.

Hank and Walter, Jr. have a very friendly relationship. They joke often and Walter, Jr. is clearly impressed by his heroic uncle and fascinated by his handling of the gun. The heroics of Hank are on display when he turns on the TV to watch the news immediately after the toast: a report on Hank's latest drug bust is shown, which of course contributes to the admiration (in this way also diverting the attention of the person who is honored that day).[54] It is also Hank whom Walter, Jr. calls when he is in

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54 This is really a key scene in *BrBa* because Walter also watches the news report attentively, especially when the amount of confiscated money and the drug lab are shown, prompting him to agree to ride along with Hank the next time. Within the pilot's narrative structure, this scene is the inciting moment (see Lang and Dreher, 65). When Walter does the ride along he encounters Jesse, whom he watches fleeing the scene only to blackmail him into a partnership (if Jesse refuses, he would call his brother in

trouble (such as after he is arrested having tried to buy beer as a minor in S01E05). Other than the fact that Walter, Jr. finds his uncle much more interesting than his father, this scene nicely contrasts the two men's masculinities. As masculinity is something that is achieved rather than claimed, recognition of this "achievement" is of paramount importance. Hank has mastered this. He is doing tricks with his gun, he knows how to use it and gives the impression that he would not hesitate to do so if necessary.

Moreover, Hank has shown bravery and exercised power: everyone can see this in the local news. But it is also the confidence and stature he has in relation to Walter that marks him as a manly man. His stature leaves no doubt about his physical strength and in comparison to Walter, who holds the gun rather awkwardly in his hands and has a hunched composure, Hank, even though he is not as tall as Walter, stands squarely in the room: being an adult male means having "a physical presence in the world" (Connell 1995a, 57).

That Walter lacks this presence becomes most evident when Hank takes away Walter's beer to give a toast in honor of the person he just deprived of his beverage. Walter does not even protest the stolen beer: he just stands there hunched, smiling self-consciously, which is also his reaction to Hank's implicit accusation that he is not a man. His having a good heart only confirms this: it is okay to take his beer, he will do no harm, he will not fight back.

The final point that needs to be made about this scene is about class and gender. As mentioned, this is a middle class environment (neither lower nor upper, right in the middle of it) and Walter, an intellectual who lacks an impressive physical presence in the world, just does not fit: he is the odd man out. That he mastered chemistry does not make him a man in this environment, but an object of ridicule ("brain the size of Wisconsin"). Also: if he is so clever, how come his brains did not translate into a successful career? Even though Hank is less educated than Walter, he is more successful. Manliness then is in this environment figured through physical presence and success. Intellectualism does not play a part.

The second scene takes the viewer into the Whites' bedroom. An exterior long shot of the house (trash cans full of waste, it is dark) informs us that the party is over. Walter and Skyler are in bed, Skyler has a laptop on and is currently involved in some online bid. The bid goes for two minutes, which is also the duration of the scene. Looking at the computer screen, she begins to masturbate Walter. Walter asks concerned if this will

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law on him).

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be okay with the unborn baby, but Skyler tells him not to worry as "birthday *boy* [...] we're just doing you tonight" all the while talking about family management (such as reminding Walter to paint the nursery since he does not want her to step on a ladder). As "he" not instantly reacts

Figure 8 """Is 'he' asleep?" (BrBa *S01E01).*

to her rubbing hand, she even takes a peek, wondering if "he's asleep," which will be echoed by Walter's later statement that he is awake (see above). His being awake then is symbolically connected to the phallus. His being awake is also realized through sexual conquest at the end of the pilot episode (see below). As the online bid reaches its conclusion, so does Walter (it is implied) and her reaction "oh yes!" rather refers to her successful business transaction than to what should be a transaction of intimacy.

This and the aforementioned breakfast scene construct Skyler as the epitome of Philip Wylie's "momism" in *A Generation of Vipers* (1942). She is, in fact, very controlling and yet, "someone has to protect this family from the man that protects this family," as she says in S04E06 and is totally justified in this claim. The issue of "momism" is strongly dependent on point of view (even taste, one could argue). Even if she sometimes comes across as castrating, it needs to be taken into consideration that she is increasingly under stress: she is a pregnant woman in her late 30s, her first born is handicapped and the family is ill-prepared for the financial burden the new baby brings, let alone the terminal lung cancer that her husband suffers from.

Moreover, in S02E12 it becomes clear that Walter actually wants a stay-at-home mom without a career as he tells her that, with the new baby, she should stay at home for at least a couple of years: "We need to think what's best for the baby." He wants to be the good provider and does not like to share this role with his wife or anyone else as he rejects an offer by Hank to pay for making the family's pool baby-proof in the same scene. At the end, it is not about "what we think," but about what he thinks. Money here is strongly linked to control, those who bring in the money are those who decide what goes and what not.

So far, alter has been portrayed as unmasculine. He is passive, his penis fails to react to stimulation immediately and most of all, he does not seem to be all that interested anyway. The "animal instincts" that often surface in masculinity discourses, are, like his

penis, "in a slumber". This reversal of the binary opposition of men as active and women as passive is brought back to its 'proper place' by the series' final season (see below).

The pilot episode comes full circle when the opening sequence is concluded. At the end of this framing scene, the camera zooms into the barrel of the gun Walter points at the approaching sirens (it turns out that firefighters are approaching to extinguish a fire that was ignited by the cigarette butt of one of the now unconscious/dead men in the back of the RV) and at the viewer as well, as if he does not want the viewer to witness this pitiful performance of masculinity that this scene frames. Now the camera zooms out of the barrel of this gun and he takes it to his head and pulls the trigger, killing this unmanly man we have just observed some 40-odd minutes. However, as the clumsy handling of the gun during the birthday party suggests, he has not yet figured it out completely. No shot goes off, the suicide is only symbolic. As if to confirm this interpretation, Walter vomits. He then returns home to count the money he has made thus far and after this, enters the marital bed. In the extra-diegetic soundtrack we hear Mano Negra singing "Out of Time Man"[55] as he approaches his wife from behind, taking her like a man who "is awake" and not "in a slumber", to which she can only wonder: "Is that you, Walt?" (*BrBa* S01E01).[56]

The answer is yes and no. In the scenes framed by the opening sequence, Walter comes across the way his clothing does, bland and gray: this man is as exciting as rice cake and it appears to be out of the ordinary to dedicate a whole series to a character that is anything but ordinary. Here one feels reminded of John Updike's *Rabbit* novels in

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55 This is an interesting choice for a soundtrack as time plays a rather peculiar role in *BrBa*. First of all, of course, the series' main character has an expiration date: he will die and in this sense, he is running out of time. Then, time in *BrBa* is played with. The whole series spans the events of two years, the show airs over six years (the final season is split in two parts with eight episodes each). Then there are time-lapses based on photo stills, often with shots of the desert or the city of Albuquerque. People move, things happen and yet it is only time passing by. The universe is indifferent to human time, the image of the stone face watching Walter in the opening sequence speaks to this. Also, the pair of pants flying through the blue desert sky – a nudge towards Kubrick's *2001* – also speaks to this feeling of suspension. Walter's remasculinization to an idealized manhood that developed towards the end of the 19th century and is strongly connected to the frontier myth falls out of time and yet, it fits right into a neo-liberal business environment that the drug business seems to be in *BrBa*.

56 With this, the pilot episode follows Freese's theorization of the novel of initiation, *Die Intiationsreise* (1971), in which he identifies a three-stage structure, comprised of leaving, being away and returning. In this study, Freese describes coming of age novels accompanied by a case study of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Walter is of course no adolescent, yet *BrBa* fits easily into this structure, even the motive of vomiting as a symbol of rebirth is there. Moreover, he, after his return, seems better suited for the criminal milieu he descends into. Yet, and here we actually encounter a reversal of the initiation structure, he is increasingly ill-suited for family life. As he is forced to move out of the family home in season three, he "adolescences" himself. This, in turn, is again very telling of the type of American manhood that he aspires to: ideals such as independence, aggression, activity and the desire for adventure are characteristics of adolescence as well: "the American male is [...] an individual in a state of arrested adolescence" (Savage, Jr., 100).

terms of setting and the everymanness of it all: a white, middle-aged, suburban husband who lives on neither coast but in middle America.[57] As Alan Sepinwall remarks, "[h]e is, on the surface, the recession era's everyman" (2013, 357). Yet, of course, everything about this changes as his blandness becomes the perfect cover for the dark desires brewing inside Walter. The man who seemingly lacks control in all aspects of his life will later tell a frightened cancer patient to "never give up control. Live your life on your own terms. [...] Who's in charge? Me! This is how I live my life" (*BrBa* S04E08).

Despite everything that he causes to happen in the course of five seasons, Walter will always make it easy for Heisenberg to hide in plain sight. Walter becomes a gangster, a drug manufacturer and a killer. The bland person *BrBa* constructs in its pilot is an unlikely choice for taking such a path. Unlikely choices are, however, also very intriguing and this particular constellation can be read in two ways. First, one could make an argument about the erosion of the middle class. If so, *BrBa* becomes a biting commentary on the economic and systemic crisis of the USA as the critics mentioned above pointed out: there is an educated and overall nice family man who finds himself in a position in which he cannot single-handedly provide for himself and his family and thus he has to use his talents in illegal ways. As this seems to be the preferred reading of *BrBa*, at least in the first seasons, this will be elaborated on and deconstructed further down.

Another angle or approach to this unlikely choice is found when one refuses the empathy and identification this way of reading *BrBa* requires. In *Marked Men. White Masculinity in Crisis*, Sally Robinson writes that

> *invisibility* is a necessary condition for the perpetuation of white and male dominance, both in representation and in the realm of the social. Masculinity and whiteness retain their power as signifiers and as social practices because they are opaque to analysis, the argument goes; one cannot question, let alone dismantle, what remains hidden from view. This line of argument makes a good deal of sense, for it is clear that white male power has benefited enormously from keeping whiteness and masculinity in the dark. What is invisible escapes surveillance and regulation, and, perhaps less obviously, also evades the cultural marking that distances the subject from universalizing constructions of identity and narratives of experience (1).

If we consider representations of drug dealers, manufacturers and gangsters, we often find an ethnic component there: African-American gangs, Mexican-American cartels or

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57 Interestingly, the setting is also mirrored in *BrBa*'s audience, as David Segal remarks: "the top three markets for 'Breaking Bad' are Albuquerque/Santa Fe, Kansas City and Memphis; neither New York nor Los Angeles are in its top 10. The show, in other words, doesn't play on the coasts. It gets chatter, just not among what has long been considered the chattering class. Which might make Gilligan TV's first true red-state auteur. His characters lead middle-American lives in a middle-American place, and they are beset with middle-American problems. They speak like middle Americans too, and they inhabit a realm of moral ambiguities that's overseen by a man with both a wicked sense of humor and a highly refined sense of right and wrong" (n. pag.).

Italian-American mobs are the usual suspects. Being white and middle class and seemingly without any particular 'ethnic' background, Walter – or *Mr. White*, as Jesse calls him – has the advantage of being invisible with respect to the law and a white cultural consciousness.[58] Being a white middle class American male who seems to have roots on the East Coast is of course an ethnic category of sorts, but, as Robinson reminds us, one that is normalized as the human standard. This issue of being unmarked also has connection to the economic and systemic crisis reading of *BrBa*. Robinson's argument is that the white male became marked in the 1970s and subsequent years by feminists, ethnic minorities and LGBT rights activists. The man's movement and the discourse of masculinity in crisis that often reads as *white masculinity* in crisis can then be interpreted as a counter movement to this marking of the white male:

> Since the middle classes are arguably the source of normative representations of Americanness, those who speak loudest and more forcibly for the decline of America in post-sixties culture speak of the middle class 'falling from grace.' That this class is assured to be normatively white perhaps goes without saying; but the degree to which the crisis is afflicting the white middle class is also, and most forcefully, a crisis in masculinity, has become clear in recent years, with the vociferous cries of men who are contesting the claim that *they* are the villains in American culture. White men have, thus, been marked, *not* as individuals but as *class*, a category that, like other marked categories, complicates the separation between the individual and the collective, the personal and the political (ibid., 3).

This is where both ways of reading *BrBa* come together: the first approach does what Robinson criticizes. The victimizer becomes the victim – of dwindling economic opportunities and of castrating women like Skyler. Walter's descent into the life of crime then paradoxically becomes an act of rebellion by the "marginalized." Yet again, the careful observer will realize that the first route of reading *BrBa* falls utterly short if the series' construction of masculinity in all five seasons is not taken into consideration. This is not to say that such a reading is entirely unwarranted, but that it is much more complicated than that: Walter is *not* a victim and he *does* have a choice and as mentioned above, he now *is* put under surveillance.

In reading the masculinities in *BrBa*, I will take a cue from Jason Mittell and his assessment that it embraces "centripal complexity" and that "[e]very character is defined primarily through his or her relationship to Walter" (2011, n. pag.). Not only are characters defined in their relations to Walter, but he, too, is defined through his

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58 The fact that Walter's last name is White also brings attention to this. However, in an interview Gilligan explains the choice of name with regard to his color scheme: "Character names are a situation where you know it's right when you hear it, and 'Walter White' appealed to me because of the alliterative sound of it and because it's strangely bland, yet sticks in your head nonetheless — you know, white is the color of vanilla, of blandness" (Gilligan, qtd. in: Flaherty, n. pag.). This is in light of Robinson's book an interesting quotation since he does what she points to: the association of blandness, of an everyman, with the color white is exactly what necessitated the marking of white masculinity as such.

relations to them. This is especially vital considering the relational quality of gender as masculinity is not only defined in its relationship to femininity but also among other masculinities.

3.3. Psychological Wounds

In *Aus Leiden Freuden. Masochismus und Gesellschaft* (1977), Theodor Reik writes:

> Stolz ist eine bestimmte seelische Haltung, die sich auf die Wertung der eigenen Person bezieht. Sie ist nicht von Anfang da, sondern entsteht als Reaktionsbildung auf eine Schädigung der ursprünglichen, naiven Selbstliebe des Ichs, auf eine Störung des Narzißmus. Die freie und souveräne Einstellung des Kindes gegenüber der Außenwelt zeigt, daß es nicht stolz ist, solange es keine solche Enttäuschungen oder Schädigungen erfahren hat. Stolz entwickelt sich also als Reaktion auf eine Verletzung der ursprünglichen Selbstliebe und dient der Abwehr neuer Beschädigung. [...] Narzißmus ist die ursprüngliche und natürliche Liebe zum Ich, Stolz die sekundäre Ich-Verliebtheit, die als Ersatz nach einer Störung dieser naiven Einstellung folgt (285-286).

Narcissism is a genuine feature of the human psyche, as Lacan described it in his mirror stage, where the child recognizes its mirror image for the first time and falls in love with it. This, however, is not its unified self. What it can only see fragmentarily it can now recognize in its entirety: its body. This is where a split occurs: Lacan differentiates between the "je" (the looking child) and the "moi" (its mirror reflection). This mirror reflection becomes its idealized ego, between the "je" and the "moi" remains a gap that can never be closed as recognizing the "moi" is always a process of misrecognition (*méconnaissance*), an imaginary intersubjectivity (see MacCannell, 63; Pagel, 28-34).

This admiration and striving towards this idealized "moi" is the narcissism everyone has and that is not to be confused with the pathological variation: "We only have to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (Lacan qtd. in: Walsh, 19). Reik calls this narcissistic identification primary self-love. If this normal narcissism however is wounded, Reik writes, something else takes its place or, to use a bodily metaphor, comes atop this wound like a thick scar to protect further damage: pride or secondary self-love.

Strikingly, both narcissism and masculinity are both image-related. Men who want to be 'real' men aspire to a certain, highly valued image that their respective culture holds up to them. Narcissus falls in love with his own mirror image. Even though he finds himself in his reflection, he also loses himself in this reflection for what he loves – his ego – is never fully attainable for him (see Pagel, 28). In the *BrBa*'s early episodes,

Walter does not love his mirror reflection. But once he wears his black hat and has gained power, he falls in love with the image he created for himself (see figures 12 – 18).

The reason why Walter begins to remasculinize himself and why he starts cooking crystal meth is not solely to provide for his family after his death. Admittedly, he wants to fulfill the good provider role that was still fully engraved in the culture when he grew up to be a man. Yet, this, too, has a lot to do with pride and the wounding of his primary self-love. *BrBa* in its first and second seasons provides clues to this wounding. These ventures into his past also show that cooking crystal meth was never necessary to take care of his cancerous body or his family. It should also be noted that taking care of his family is in this mindset restricted to financial means. What he forgets is that he in a way disappears from his family before his death. Taking care, too, refers to psychological needs, needs that through his pride-induced transformation are completely abandoned.

From S01E01 to S01E04 Walter's situation seems desperate. He is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer and in S01E04 he finally comes out as having cancer in front of his entire family (that he waits this long speaks of shame/pride as well). In this episode, Hank tells him that whatever happens, "I'll always take care of your family", to which Walter replies with a look that speaks of nothing but anger and rage. Hank is man enough to do both, provide for his own family and that of Walter while Walter – this is the accusation Walter gathers from this offer – cannot. The scene foreshadows the beginning deconstruction of Walter's good intentions for breaking bad. Even if uneasy about the means and the milieu, the viewer thus far can only have sympathy with this man. Yet, this is not what Walter would want as his spiteful look towards Hank evidences. This sympathy is nothing but pity and other than their first letter, pity and pride do not go well together, they are mutually exclusive. Thus, while the viewer accepts Walter's decision to break bad without further inquiry, this changes in S01E05, which is fittingly titled "Gray Matter".

In this episode, Walter and Skyler drive to Santa Fe for Eliot Schwarz's (Adam Godley) birthday. As it turns out, Walter and Eliot were researchers in college. The viewer learns that Walter and Eliot were doing promising research and founded a business called "Gray Matter." This name is the translation of Walter's and Eliot's cooperative research (i.e. Walter *White* and Eliot *Schwarz/Black*). How come Walter did not see any profits from this cooperation that, as indicated in the pilot episode,

contributed to winning the Nobel Prize? This question remains open until S02E06, which is titled "Peekaboo", though *Gretchenfrage* would be just as good a title.

To remain with S01E05 for one more moment: Skyler informs Eliot of her husband's health condition since they used to be best friends and Eliot would be willing and capable of helping. He does so by offering a job at "Gray Matter" – salary bump and health insurance included – but Walter refuses and reacts enraged towards his wife: he will not accept charity. Neither did the idealized exemplars of masculinity that developed in late 19th century frontier America. A man can take care of his male body and his family on his own: a man fights his own battles. Independence here stands in stark contrast to community and Walter clearly chooses the path of independence and thus spiritually orphans himself from his family and friends (see also Lang and Dreher, 55). Since his path towards independent manliness has already taken him to a world of drugs and murder at this point, the money he makes there is not easily presentable. Therefore Heisenberg, his alter ego independent of family ties, uses Walter White as a mask. This includes telling Skyler that he talked to Eliot and his wife Gretchen (Jessica Hecht) after all and accepted their offer of paying for his treatment. He also instructs Skyler not worry about it or bother the Schwarz family any further. Skyler, who is constructed as (if somewhat naively) believing in civilized etiquette (thereby casting the feminine in its traditional role of the frontier narrative), disobays and thanks Eliot and Gretchen for their generosity (see also Lang and Dreher, 48).

Gretchen confronts Walter about this in S02E06. The ensuing dialogue shatters their relationship and we see Heisenberg breaking through the Walter-mask. It is also a testament to his pride and the wounding of his primary self-love:

*Figure 9 Walter and Gretchen talking (*BrBa *S02E06)*

Gretchen: When you were telling me your insurance was covering it, was that a lie? If you won't take our money, and your insurance isn't covering it, how are you paying for it?
Walt: This is not an issue that concerns you, Gretchen. Okay?
Gretchen: Excuse me, Walt. It *does* concern me, it concerns me greatly. You tell your wife and your son that I'm paying for your cancer treatment. Why are you doing this?
Walt: I will clear this up with them.
Gretchen: Walt, the look on Skyler's face, she is sitting there with tears in her eyes, thanking me for saving your life. Why would you do that to her?
Walt: As I said: I will clear this up. Just please allow me to do this in my own way, in my own time, alright? I will explain the whole thing to them.
Gretchen: Then when you're at it, explain it to me.

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Walt: I don't owe you an explanation. I owe you an apology and I have apologized. I am very sorry, Gretchen. There, I apologized twice now. I am humbly sorry. Three times.
Gretchen: Let me just get this straight: Eliot and I offered to pay for your treatment, no strings attached, an offer which still stands, by the way. And you turn us down out of pride or whatever and then you tell your wife that in fact we are paying for your treatment. Without our knowledge, against our will you involve us in your lie and you sit here and tell me that that is none of my business?
Walt: Yeah. That's pretty much the size of it.
Gretchen: What happened to you? Really, Walt. What happened? Because this isn't you.
Walt: And what would you know about me? What would your presumption about me be, exactly? That I should go begging for your charity? And you, waving your checkbook around like some... magic wand that's gonna make me forget how you and Eliot... *how you and Eliot cut me out* [pointing his fingers]!
Gretchen: What? That can't be how you see it!
Walt: *My* hard work. *My* research. And you and Eliot made millions of it.
Gretchen: That cannot be how you see it.
Walt: God, beautifully done... always the picture of innocence.
Gretchen: You left me!
Walt: Picture of innocence. Just sweetness and light.
Gretchen [shaking voice, stunned]: You left me! Newport, 4th of July weekend. You and my father and my brothers and I go up to our room and you're packing your bags, barely talking... wh-wh-what... did I dream all of *that*?
Walt: *That's* your excuse? To build your little empire on *my* work?
Gretchen: How can you say that to me? You walked away! You abandoned us. Me. Eliot.
Walt: You're a rich girl just adding to your millions.
Gretchen: I don't even know what to say to you. I don't even know where to begin. I feel so sorry for you, Walt.
Walt [leans closer]: Fuck you.

Up until this scene, the viewer is interpellated with the point of view of Walter, which is also the point of view of the crisis of masculinity discourse.[59] The ultimate line of dialogue is shot from Gretchen's perspective and for the first time, we see Walter not from an empathetic perspective and the narrative from this moment on gradually shifts towards representing Walter not as to whom things happen, but as a man consumed by pride and who causes (bad) things to happen (see figure 10).

Attack is Walter's best defense strategy here. When it comes to Walter, self-defense serves self-interest. "In psychodynamic terms," Gregory Herek argues, "defensiveness involves an unconscious distortion of reality as a strategy for avoiding recognition of some unacceptable part of the self.

*Figure 10 Change of point of view: Heisenberg breaks through (*BrBa *S02E06).*

One mode of defense is externalization of unacceptable characteristics through

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59 Interpellation is a common television studies term describing that viewers tend to assume the point of view a series constructs: "Television realism places the viewer in the position of a unified subject 'interpellated' with, or folded into, the discourses of a dominant ideology, subjected [...] to a version of reality in which he or she misrecognises himself or herself" (Bignell, 191).

projection and other strategies" (Herek, 70). In the above-quoted scene, Walter compensates for his own mistakes by turning Gretchen's concerns into aggression. In the drug business, preemptive violence is Walter's preferred mode of going about things despite his call for using "no more violence" in S01E06. Interestingly, he utters these words briefly before his first performance of Heisenberg and the adrenaline rush that accompanies it.

Through his rationalization, he is able to push his thinking onto others: he does this for his family, every obstacle is a threat to his family and himself. Even though he often declares him and Jesse equal partners, Jesse, who until the end keeps addressing Walter respectfully as Mr. White, never has any say in how to deal with what Walter terms threats: his approach is unilateral. His fears that someone is plotting against him surface as episodes of intense paranoia in the second season (and from the third season on the preemptive killing of supposed threats). Always afraid of the unknown threat, he develops his own schemes to erase the threat before it has the chance of becoming one. This intense fear of having something taken away from what he feels entitled to also resonates with the crisis discourse and the fear of losing privilege contained in it. Moreover, on a political level, the paranoia and appeal to preemptive violence he makes to Jesse also echo the US' latest war in Iraq and the intensely anxious atmosphere brought about by the fear of terrorism after 9/11 which also surfaces in Showtime's Emmy award winning series *Homeland*.

In the above quoted dialogue, Walter – and this pattern repeats itself throughout the series – blames a plot against him that deprived him of his well-earned millions (in S05E04 it turns out he sold his shares for 5.000 dollars). This strategy has a lot do with a lack of inner security evoked by threats he projects onto other people. More than once he supposes that something is up and that everybody wants to take what is his or wants to tell how to go about with what is his (his family is indeed his proudest possession, but it often comes across as just that, he loves it because it is his). This can be read as white masculinity in fear of losing privilege, an entitlement to the world based on heterosexuality, whiteness and a penis. As a white man in America, he feels entitled to the world – yet biological sex and "race" are not achievements but circumstance. They come, however, with certain expectations and as we have seen, Walter has not been able to meet these expectations. His increasingly aggressive reaction to this discrepancy more and more manifests itself as violence and again, shame, i.e. the inability to claim white male privilege, seems to be the trigger for these eruptions, at least if we follow James

Gilligan: "The emotion of shame is the primary or ultimate cause of all violence. The purpose of violence is to diminish the intensity of shame and replace it as far as possible with its opposite, pride, thus preventing the individual from being overwhelmed by the feeling of shame" (qtd. in: Faludi, 143-144).

That there was a time in his life when he was in fact sure of himself the way he is at the beginning of the fifth season is shown in a brief flashback in S01E03. Here we see a young Walter, presumably at college as a post-graduate student. He and Gretchen list the number and percentage of elements in the human body. This scene is cross-cut with him and Jesse in the present cleaning up body parts of a dissolved corpse. In this flashback, Walter and Gretchen cannot come up with the full hundred percent, to which Gretchen wonders "What about the soul?" Walter then leans in, so that he is face to face, and whispers in a very confident fashion: "There is nothing but chemistry here" (mirroring the "Fuck you" shot).[60] Consequently, the wounding of his primary self-love must have happened between this time as researcher and his life as a high school teacher.

The dialogue quoted above locates this wounding on a 4th of July and it seems his wounding is related to class. Apparently, Gretchen comes from a wealthy family while Walter does not. Still, both are in a relationship, romantically and business-wise. Yet, all of this falls apart when Gretchen leaves Walter alone with her brothers and her father for a brief moment. One can only guess the contents of this conversation between the men, but Walter's reaction – leaving without a word – and his subsequent development into the man we encounter in S01E01 suggest he did not see himself fit for what he encountered. He was unsure whether he could take the challenge of marrying into a family that might look down on him and abandoned both, his love and his career. Tellingly, he subsequently married into a family below his intellectual standards. Other than locating the point in time in which Walter became a man who could not stand up for himself, this scene also indicates how his identity is in flux. Gretchen, who must know how he is, is unable to recognize what is beneath the bodily surface and indicates how our bodies do not signify who we are. Thus, when she asks "What happened to you? Really, Walt. What happened? Because this isn't you," she is right, this is not Walter White she is talking to, but Heisenberg.[61]

60 This statement also situates Walter's point of view in strictly materialist terms (see Murphy, 16). Furthermore, "[t]his masculinist, scientific materialism combines with machismo to show a Walt far different from the bumbling, nervous, and effeminized male that began the series. This is a Macbethian man who has been buried within Walter White, impossible to perceive except in his own internal memory" (Bossert, 70).
61 *BrBa* actually offers a chemistry-related analogy of where the same appearance/*Gestalt* can have very different characteristics. In S01E02 Walter lectures his chemistry class on chiral: "Just as your left

Therefore, this episode indeed poses the Faustian *Gretchenfrage*: What are your true intentions? S01E05 shows that it is not the good of his family that is his uttermost concern, though the good of his family is of course at stake through everything he does: "the problem with the protection racket: the 'savior' is so often the real oppressor" (Faludi, 418). That it is the ultimate insult to feel sorry for him ("Fuck you") speaks volumes of his character. This way, *BrBa* also neatly places a mirror in front of the viewer. If empathy or pity is our only point for identification with this otherwise boring man, he rejects this identification based on sympathy with a "Fuck you." The question whether one still considers Walter a likable character whom one wishes to succeed in his endeavor then becomes a question of the viewer's morals and in this way also of the preferred construction of masculinity.

Then again, it could be argued that because of what happened in the past between Walter, Gretchen and Eliot, he will not accept help. But he also refuses the help a father should be happy about. Since everybody believes that the White family is almost broke, Walter, Jr. creates a website for online donations. Walter, who in the meantime earned a lot of money, is desperate for using this money. However, he still needs to come up with a way of laundering it. His lawyer Saul advises him:

> **Walt**: This is insane. I have so much cash on hand that I actually counted by weighing it on my bathroom scale. And yet, I can't spend it. I can't tell my family about it. All of whom think I'm right on the edge of bankruptcy. It's insane!
> [...]
> **Walt**: It *cannot* be blind luck, some imaginary relative who saves us. No! *I* earned that money. *Me*! And now my son created his own website, savewalterwhite.com,[62] soliciting anonymous donations! Do you have any idea how that makes me feel?
> **Saul** [typing the url]: Look at that. It's got Paypal and everything.
> **Walt**: Cyberbegging, that's all that is. Rattling a little tin cup to the entire world.
> **Saul**: Yeah, there's no deep seated issues there.
> [...]
> **Walt**: No, no. I know... you're thinking I should be funneling my money into my son's website, but absolutely not. No! I am not going to have my family think that some mystery *benefactor* saved us!
> **Saul**: Not some mystery benefactor. Singular. Right, that would raise too many questions. However, stay with me here: zombies.
> **Walt**: C'mon!
> **Saul**: I got a guy who knows this guy who knows this Rain Man type, right? He lives with his mother. [...] This guy can hijack random desktops all around the world and turn them into zombies to do his bidding. For instance: he can make it so 20 or 30 thousand little donations coming in from the US and Canada. 10, 15, 20 bucks a pop all paid in full, nice and neat, untraceable from the good-hearted people of the world to Mr. Walter H. White, cancer saint. I'm getting a warm fuzzy feeling just thinking about it.

Walter does not get "a warm fuzzy feeling thinking about it." Now that he is making

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hand and your right hand are mere mirror images of one another, right, identical and yet opposite, well so, too, organic compounds can exist as mirror image forms of one another all the way down at the molecular level. But, although they may look the same, they don't always behave the same."

62 This website really exists. It was made for promotional purposes but it does take donations. These go to cancer-related charity.

this incredible amount of money using his intellect – he makes far more than the originally desired $737.000 and will have made about eighty million by the fifth season – he wants the world to take notice. For obvious reasons, this cannot happen, hence one would suspect that he is both happy and proud of his son. Instead, he takes this as a source of embarrassment and shame. His pride has taken so much control of him that he is even unable to fake gratitude towards his son. In a reflection on Lacan, narcissim and the therapeutic situation, MacCannell writes of the narcissistic patient that "it would wound his *amour-propre* to be freed from disease by anyone or anything other than his ego. Trapped in his ego sphere, incapable of dialogue, he can only hear his own appeal for help returned to him in the form of his telling himself that he will be his own aid, his own salvation" (63).[63]

Walter does not see that his pride alienates him from his family. This spiritual alienation is mostly dealt with in the second season. During the time he is taken hostage by Tuco, his family is looking for him with "Missing"-flyers. After his return he has to look at a painting in which a family waves their husband/father good-bye in the hospital. That same episode, Walter also breaks into his home: he – or Heisenberg – has become an alien intruder.[64]

*Figure 11 Spiritual farewell (*BrBa *S02E03).*

Even though the dialogues quoted here thus far seem to be the opposite of silence, not speaking is with regard to emotions constitutive of Walter. He is silent about his disease until weeks after the diagnosis. He hardly speaks about it and Skyler as well bemoans the lack of communication ever since the diagnosis (S02E01). Walter however likes to talk about what he demands of others and about what he achieved, about what he considers his (research, skill, family). He also likes to lecture Jesse and people below

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63 This finds a visual expression in S02E05: after chemotherapy, Walter receives a button that reads "HOPE". Walter looks disapprovingly at the button and upon leaving the hospital, he throws it into a trash can: a man makes his own luck.

64 Walter has to make up a reason for his disappearance since he cannot let anyone know he was involved with a well-known drug dealer (Tuco). Since nobody knows what happened, he has to stay in the hospital. In psychological evaluation he tells the psychiatrist – assured that everything he says will be kept secret – that he ran away from his family. The stress is too much: he has terminal lung cancer, a pregnant wife and a son with cerebral palsy. Upon this "confession" he is released as his male psychiatrist believes this story. His disappearance then is officially labeled fugue state. Ironically, this is an almost fitting description of what happens in *BrBa*: Walter 'forgets' his identity.

his intellect, a constellation reminiscent of frontier heroes that, despite being men of action, often possess, like Wister's Virginian, also a certain eloquence.

As the series progresses, Bryan Cranston has Walter pronounce the words "I" and "my" with more and more emphasis as if almost barking the sounds (the smooth voice of S01 turns deeper and raspier with each new season). Walter as speaking subject either increasingly disappears and is replaced by actions that he cannot talk about openly or is replaced by his talking ego soon to become the legend superseding the actual man, Heisenberg. Consider the following:

> Valuing action over words, marking silence as the most vivid of actions, the cowboy hero throws us back onto the male physique, shifting attention from ear to eye in the drama of masculinity. Such an extreme laconic tic forms something of an ambivalent trait – a matter of knowing when to be silent but also an inability to make oneself known. In this regard, it is hardly surprising to learn that silence is a constitutive feature of narcissism or that resistance to language characterizes the reversion of a pre-Symbolic state in which the self looks to find its needs echoed back unaltered from the world (Mitchell, 165).

BrBa, similar to the Western, often throws the attention on the male physique. We see Walter (and Jesse) almost naked at the very beginning of the series, we see him undergo cancer treatment, we see him being beaten, we see him recuperating and what is most important here is that we often see him looking at himself in the mirror. We see his physical appearance changing. This change is part due to his cancer and part due to his deliberate efforts to create himself anew. The relationship of masculinity, the male body and the will to self-creation will be elaborated further in a moment. In terms of the Western's relationship to the male body, there is, however, an important way in which *BrBa* diverts from strategies of bodily display. In the Western, the hero suffers only to be restored again. Manhood is therefore strongly linked to the male body and its ability to recuperate and endure.

In *BrBa*, however, Walter will not be restored to who he was in the beginning and this has a lot to do with his psychological development reflecting on his surface. From the pilot episode on, his material development is directed towards decay: he will die. What is more, not only will his body rot, but – morally – so will his psyche. Another interesting aspect of Mitchell's observation quoted above is the male's desire to have his needs echoed back unaltered. This, too, communicates to the crisis of masculinity discourse and testifies to a sense of entitlement implicit in it – simply by the virtue of their sex, men expect to have access to what they want. If we reconfigure Mitchell's *pre-Symbolic* state, it can be viewed as referring to a *pre-marked* state of hegemonic white masculinity in a patriarchally structured society – the position from which cultural meaning originates (the white male as human universal) and which has been lost.

Figure 12BrBa S01E06: Looking with disgust at his weakened body.

Figure 13 Erasing the signs of his failing body/masculinity by shaving his head to become Heisenberg (BrBa S01E06).

Figure 14 Growing pains: Upon learning that his cancer is in remission in S02E09 he has to come to terms with what he is becoming.

Figure 15 Growing pains: Punching his reflection to look at his distorted self. In S05E08, Walter will look at the paper towel dispenser again. This time, however, we do not see his reflection, but the camera assumes the point of view of the reflection. This indicates the thorough transformation of this man. Moreover, we see him looking with disapproval at his previously conflicted self whereas in S02E09 he looks shocked at the hideous grimace staring back at him.

Figure 16 Practicing the performance in S04E02.

Figure 17 "[I]t is not violence at all which is the 'point' of the western movie, but a certain image of man, a style, which expressed itself most clearly in violence. Watch a child with his toy gun and you will see: what most interests him is not (as we so much fear) the fantasy of hurting others, but to work out how a man might look when he shoots or is shot. A hero is one who looks like a hero" (Robert Warshow, qtd. in: Mitchell, 169; Screenshot: BrBa *S04E02).*

Figure 18 All hail to the king: tipping his head towards his ego ideal Heisenberg in S05E01. In this scene, Walter sells his old middle class car (he looks at himself in its side-view mirror) to replace it with an upper class model - the right car for the new king pin of Albuquerque.

3.4. Narcissism and (Frontier) Masculinity

Gilligan's insistence upon showing rather than telling (see above) moves *BrBa* away from the dialogue-ridden television standard and closer to cinema. The stylistic similarities with the gangster and the Western genres have already been mentioned. The silence that seems constitutive of the Western hero is, albeit to a lesser degree, echoed in *BrBa*. Even during dialogues, the camera prefers to linger on the person who is listening, thereby looking for information to manifest itself on the surface. In Walter's mimics we find the earliest clues to what will happen *in* this man. Silence is constitutive to his character to a certain degree. Weeks go by until he tells his family he has cancer. Later, he cannot talk about what he is doing because it would expose his criminal intentions. He only reluctantly talks about his sickness. As if information is power, he keeps it all to himself. Understood as "a matter of knowing when to be silent but also an inability to make oneself known" (Mitchell, 165), silence works in many ways in *BrBa*. Though, of course, "inability" would be a peculiar choice of words. "Refusal" would, at least with regard to Walter, be the better choice. Neither Walter nor the Western heroes Mitchell investigates are mute. Therefore, a conscious decision not to talk, to refuse to make oneself known, seems to make more sense, especially with regard to the

masculinity to which end this silence serves. In the binary construction of gender, emotions – expressivity in general – are feminine. The refusal to make oneself known – emotions and weaknesses (or *emotion as weakness*) – then becomes an active part in the construction of masculinity. Silence can consequently be aligned with other classical markers of masculinity such as valuing action over words. A lack of words is also a lack of collaboration and thus paves the way towards self-reliance (there can be only one alpha male). The lack of emotional support may erupt as acts of violence or something else such as alcohol abuse (Walter drinks more as the series progresses). The lack of making oneself known through language is not only visible in Walter, but also in Hank, whose masculinity he aspires to.

Hank's sense masculinity in *BrBa* is shaken by crises as well. After he killed Tuco – presumably his first kill – he increasingly suffers from panic attacks. He keeps this to himself and as a reward is promoted to a job in El Paso. There he has to witness how his colleagues are blown up by a bomb. He survives unharmed because he suffers a panic attack at the crime scene, something which he masks as getting an evidence bag. This whole affair is put under investigation and Hank is thus sent back home. Unwilling to communicate with his wife about what happened, she calls Walter for help:

> **Hank**: I was... y'know... 'he was out getting an evidence bag and so... ends up without a scratch on his arm... so... must be something wrong with that picture.'
> **Walt**: So, you're home for good?
> **Hank**: [...] To be determined
> **Walt**: Think you might wanna talk it through with somebody?
> **Hank**: What, *a shrink*? No, no, no, no, no. Can't go down that road. Start going down that road, kiss your career good-bye.
> **Walt**: Or Marie. Or me, if ... if you like.
> **Hank**: [...] You know the things I deal with, you and me don't have much of what you might call an experiential overlap.
> **Walt**: What if I told you we do? [Hank looks at him] I have spent my whole life scared. Frightened of things that could happen. Might happen. Might not happen. Fifty years I spent like that. I find myself awake at three in the morning. But you know what? Ever since my diagnosis I sleep just fine.
> **Hank**: Ok.
> **Walt**: I came to realize is that fear that's the worst of it. That's the real enemy. So, get up [...] and you kick that bastard right in the teeth (S02E08).

This whole conversation plays out awkwardly. Both sit on the Shraders' marital bed, not looking at each other but straight ahead. This way, Hank does not have to show the emotions that may or may not manifest on his face. Other than that, it is the first time Walter finds himself in a more masculine position than Hank: both have looked death in the face, but this time, it is Hank who seems shattered by the experience while Walter – having crossed the frontier into wilderness and liking it (or his newfound self) there – is becoming remasculinized.

That silence is also constitutive of narcissism is an insightful observation by Mitchell. The narcissism he refers to, though, is not the primary self-love Reik or Lacan describe. Drawing from Lacan, Luchner et al. elaborate that

> Narcissism represents an important construct in both clinical and social/personality research because it relates to both normal development and pathological personality functioning. One challenge in investigating narcissism is that it does not represent a unitary construct but consists of two separate presentations that are linked by an inability to derive satisfaction without eliciting admiration from others (779).

Mitchell earlier referred to pathological narcissism (Narcissistic Personality Disorder) clearly, which again can be differentiated into overt and covert narcissism:

> In both overt and covert narcissism, selfabsorption, and sensitivity to slights constitute dominant characteristics [...]. However, overt narcissism is typically displayed through externalizing behaviors, whereas covert narcissism tends to manifest itself through internalizing behaviors, vulnerability, deflated selfesteem and hypersensitivity (ibid., 79).

Narcissism and masculinity become aligned in *BrBa* as Walter's remasculinization also turns him increasingly into an overt narcissist. This type of narcissism "is typically displayed through externalizing behaviors, arrogance, inflated self-esteem, aggressiveness and grandiosity" (ibid., 779). These behaviors can often be found when Walter talks to Jesse, whom he generally considers to be stupid, but also in other regards in which own mistakes are blamed on others and instances in which Walter talks about what is his, be that his family or his talents (the Gretchen dialogue is an example of this).

One could also argue that Walter turns from covert to overt narcissism in his process of remasculinization. Both types of narcissism strive for recognition and admiration by others. However, the covert narcissist hardly voices his/her desires. Instead, through selflessness, empathetic behavior and being a good listener, they seek recognition while eschewing open competition. This is reminiscent of Hank's estimation that Walter's heart is in the right place as well as of his behavior in the pilot and subsequent episodes. He hardly has a presence in the world, is always friendly and willing to help out. This, however, does not amount to the recognition he thinks he deserves. A weakness, his cancer, makes him the center of attention. This, however, he refuses by keeping quiet about it for several weeks and then declining to really discuss the situation. He decides to break out and get recognition elsewhere: his blue meth is the purest on the market and a highly sought after product that becomes an internationally distributed brand product and turns Heisenberg into a legend that will survive the death of Walter White.

Luchner et al. looked at the correlation between the two types of narcissism and (hyper-)competitiveness and, like their description of overt narcissism, their writing on

competitiveness echoes many features of hegemonic masculinity, which is something that is evident not only in the relationship between Walter and Hank, but every encounter Walter has with other men:

> competitiveness as the desire to win against others in interpersonal situations. As such, general competitiveness is a potentially adaptive trait across a wide range of occupational domains, including business, law, and sports. In contrast to general or ''normal'' competitiveness, hypercompetitiveness is associated with heightened self-worth fluctuating with underlying low self-esteem, decreased need for others, interest in admiration and recognition from others, and high levels of neuroticism (Luchner et al., 780).

This aspect of competitiveness is found in *BrBa* in many ways. Here, I will focus on two competitive relationships. First, there is the competitive relationship between Hank and Walter and then there is Walter's feud with his employer Gus Fring. This feud puts Walter's whole family in mortal danger. However, Walter refuses to seek the police's help (he probably could have made a deal for Gus Fring) and instead battles for the position at the top of New Mexico's meth chain (going to the police would also make Hank a winner in this interpersonal situation even though it would probably destroy his professional career). In his endeavor to kill Gus, Walter even risks the life of a child and is responsible for the death of a couple of other individuals (unlike the poisoned child they were related to the drug world).

After he managed to kill Gus, which marks the end of the fourth season, he calls his wife Skyler to tell her that they are safe now. He tells her "I won," which are this season's final words (S04E13). Susan Faludi has commented on the aspect of winning as "a particularly prominent aspect of the American masculine quest" (598). Clearly, after four seasons, Walter has mastered the quest and has thereby remasculinized himself. Hypercompetitiveness has a positive correlation with overt narcissism and the things Luchner et al. name as its features can all be found in the evolving personality of Walter White. What is especially interesting about their description of hypercompetitiveness is that they point towards underlying low self-esteem. This low self-esteem seems to be the driving force behind Walter's remasculinization and can easily be theorized as being founded upon the constructed nature of masculinity. Walter is introduced to us in the beginning as somebody we are culturally conditioned to recognize as a wimp, somebody who is not sure of himself, who lacks self-esteem and whose body language speaks of self-consciousness (Hank's body language is a testament to self-confidence).

Last but not least, silence is also a feature of shame: "the affective source of silence is shame, which is the affect that causes the self to hide", psychologist Gershen Kaufman writes (qtd. in: Raphael, 175). It seems odd at first glance to connect the

silence of the cowboy/Western hero with both masculinity, narcissism and shame, but the connection will become more clear in the following pages. As noted above, narcissism is often based on a low level of self-esteem, which in the case of Walter stems from the gap between his position within the power structures of his society and the fact that power usually resides in the hands of people who are like him both male and white. That Walter has cancer and will leave his family without much of an inheritance certainly causes shame in him. At first he is also ashamed of his decision to break bad, something which his attempted suicide at the end of S01E01 implies. This shame, the hiding of oneself, is also signaled by his being naked and pointing the gun at the camera right before he tries to shoot himself in the head. It goes without saying that this is also visible in his refusal to accept help, which he dismisses as "charity" or "cyberbegging" (see quoted dialogues above).

In terms of masculinity and narcissism, Walter's son is interesting as well. The choice of name is what sticks out the most in the beginning. It is revealing of character to give one's offspring their own name and calling them a junior version of oneself. This speaks of patriarchal pride as much as of narcissism. Additionally, Walter, Jr. suffers from cerebral palsy, a condition that in *BrBa* serves two ends. The first plays a big part in why *BrBa* can be read as commentary on the economic and systemic crisis in the USA: The handicap is a burden on the family, both in terms of emotional and financial effort. The lifelong treatment of cerebral palsy in a health care environment like the USA puts the family under financial stress. When Walter collapses in his second job at a car wash in the pilot episode, he tells the ambulance driver to drop him off because he does not "have the best insurance." Thus, Walter Jr.'s health condition is part of the plot. However, his condition, too, speaks to the issue of masculinity in *BrBa* for the simple fact that it is, patriarchally speaking, the sons who carry on a man's name, his legacy.

The relationship between fathers and sons is special. Without going into Freudian psychoanalysis in which the relationship of the son towards his father plays a paramount role during the Oedipus complex, the relationship of a father towards the son is of more interest in *BrBa*. Giving him his own name speaks volumes of Walter's vanity, but also of his identification with his son, something that is also observed in research on this topic. Lewis Yablonsky for example states that, at least until teen age, fathers tend to view their sons as an extension of themselves (see 12). The son as an "I-extension" as observed in *BrBa* then is unfortunate for Walter's masculinity. Disability and masculinity do not go together well: "Paralytic disability constitutes emasculation of a

more direct and total nature. For the male, the weakening and atrophy of the body threaten all the cultural values of masculinity: strength, activeness, speed, virility, stamina, and fortitude" (Robert Murphy qtd. in: Gerschick & Miller, 262). This finds expression in the pilot episode in which the White family is seen shopping. Walter, Jr. is trying on new pants while being observed and advised by his parents. A group of male teenagers then makes fun of Walter, Jr. for needing his "mommy" to try out new pants. Despite urges from both Skyler and his son to let it go, Walter, who has just been diagnosed with cancer, storms out of the backdoor of the shop only to reenter through the front and kick one of the teenagers in the leg. The insult towards his son is also insulting to him. Moreover, the situation gives him an outlet for the grim diagnosis he just received. Strikingly, Walter, Jr. is never seen struggling with his own masculinity. Of course he is annoyed by the comments, yet he does not seek revenge.[65]

Fathers need care, too. In season four, Walter finds himself under immense pressure. In season three, he becomes the crystal meth cook for Gus Fring. Towards the end of season three a bitter enmity between Walter and Gus develops, the reason for which is Jesse, who attempted to murder two of Gus's dealers (both killed the brother of his girlfriend). Walter then kills the dealers in order to protect his protégé. Gus has already a replacement cook waiting in line (originally to replace Walter when he dies of lung cancer). Walter knows this and has Jesse kill the replacement cook, Gale. In season four, things deteriorate between the two as Gus, who is great at manipulating people, separates Walter from Jesse in the drug enterprise. Walter, the master losing control of his puppet, urges Jesse to kill Gus the first chance he sees him. In order to monitor this, he places a bug in Jesse's car as a test of loyalty and an act of control. When this comes to light in S04E09, Walter and Jesse beat each other up. This is a day before Walter, Jr.'s birthday. When Walter, Jr. comes to visit his father, who moved out of the family home because Skyler – increasingly afraid of her husband – urged him to do so, he finds him all beaten up. The following dialogue happens in two scenes, which both take place at Walter's condo, one in the evening, the other the morning after:

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65 During the second season, Walter, Jr. demands to be addressed as Flyn. This can be interpreted as both an act of teenage rebellion in the quest for an own identity independent of parents and a reaction to his father's estrangement. The way Walter, Jr. develops an own identity, Walter, Sr., too, constructs a new identity. Both Walters do so by giving themselves new names: Flyn and Heisenberg.

Walter: Do not call your mother.
Walter, Jr.: Why not?
Walter: Because... I was gambling.[66] When you tell your mother... god I swear... I will never hear the end of it [...] Just keep it to yourself.
Walter, Jr.:I don't understand... How did you get into a fight? With whom?
Walter: [begins sobbing] I made a mistake, it's my own fault.
Walter, Jr.: Dad, it's ok.
Walter: It's all my fault, I'm sorry [cries].

[Walter, Jr. brings his father to bed]

Walter [now in bed]: How was your birthday?
Walter, Jr.: Good, get some rest.
Walter: The new car, did you drive it here?
Walter, Jr.: Yeah.
Walter: That's good... Do you like it?
Walter, Jr.: sure... I do, it drives great.
Walter: That's good, Jesse.

*Figure 19 Emotional breakdown (*BrBa *S04E10).*

*Figure 20 Walter and Walter, Jr. (*BrBa *S04E10).*

[Walter, Jr. closes bedroom door and stands in the living room, looking lost]
[The next morning. Walter finds his son sleeping in the living room]

Walter: Hey, how you're doing?
Walter, Jr.: Good... How are you?
Walter: I'm fine, but your mother is going to be worried sick
Walter, Jr.: I called her last night, I told her I was spending the night at Lewis's. It's cool. How are you?
Walter: I'm fine, son... I... I... Well, I took these painkillers that I had left over from my surgery and I made the brilliant decision to wash them down with a couple of beers. Not my most sterling moment, I admit, but I'm fine... I wish I could take back last night, it was your birthday, this shouldn't be on your mind.
Walter, Jr.: It's ok
Walter: No, it's not ok, I'm your father and I don't want last night to be... I mean... you, you really... can't think of me like...
Walter, Jr.: Like what? I don't understand
Walter: My father died when I was six... You know that, right? He had Huntington disease [...] My father fell very ill when I was four or five [...] I knew things about my father, I had a lot of information. It's because people would tell me these things, they would paint this picture of my father for me and I always pretended that was who I saw, too, who I remembered. But that was a lie. In truth, I have only one real, actual memory of my father. It must have been right before he died. My mother must have taken me to the hospital to visit him [...] Anyway, there, lying on the bed, is my father. He's all twisted up. [...] He just scares me. [...] I don't want you to think of me the way I was last night. I don't want that to be the memory of me when I'm gone.
Walter, Jr.: Remembering you that way wouldn't be so bad... The bad way to remember you would be the way... the way you've been this whole last year... At least last night you were real, you know? (*BrBa* S04E10).

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66 Skyler is a recreational short story writer. When she ultimately finds out Walter is a drug dealer, she fabricates this story that her husband has a gambling addiction. This gambling addiction serves as a cover for the money that was suddenly available to the White family and to explain the changed behavior of her husband, who occasionally disappeared without notice for several days (in reality he was cooking crystal meth).

This scene is interesting for various aspects. To remain with the father-son relationship for a moment, Walter in his drug-induced state confuses his disabled son with his protégé Jesse, to whom he has fatherly feelings. He is very protective of Jesse and in order to protect him, which to a certain degree always also means he protects himself, he does horrible things. For one, he watches Jesse's heroin-addicted girlfriend Jane choke to death. This death in turn leads to a plane crash that causes the death of 167 people (Jane's father was the air traffic controller working that day), he kills two dealers and he poisons the child of Jesse's new girlfriend. Other than killing the dealers, Walter does not make Jesse aware of the things he has done to 'protect' him. From this, it is clear that protection here is also defined in terms of control. As he spends more time with Jesse, he increasingly neglects his own son and family. The things he does he justifies with his family – either his real family or the fatherly bond he establishes with Jesse – are more often than not to his own benefit. In neither case is he honest about his intentions. It is less about the family, but more about their recognition towards him (i. e. Jesse's admiration for Walter's 'art of cooking'). Again, protection serves as a mask for control. Jesse confronts Walter about this: after Jesse fully fell apart mentally in the fifth season and threw all his money out of the window of a car (quite like a paper delivery boy), Walter wants him gone as Jesse is the one who could be responsible for his arrest. Walter tries to convince him that it is best if he disappeared:

> **Walt**: Jesse, will you let me help you? I don't like to see you hurting like this. [...] Leave all of this behind. [...] I really think it would be good for you.
> **Jesse**: Would you, just for once, stop working me? [...] Just drop the whole concerned dad thing and tell me the truth. I mean you're acting like me leaving town is all about me and turning over a new leaf, but it's really, really about you. I mean you need me gone. [...] Just tell me *you* need this! (S05E11).

Looking at how this scene is staged – in the middle of nowhere so that Jesse could be shot dead without anybody noticing – Walter's rhetoric is perplexing. Is he unaware of how this arrangement must appear to Jesse? It is clear to Jesse and for the viewer, suspense arises out of this recognition also because Jesse has become something of a moral compass during the show's run. Walter, however, still believes in his identity as Mr. White that made it possible to cover the horrible things he has done. Indeed – and Jesse's "concerned dad" remark points this out – Walter can be grasped as the father in a more symbolic sense: a creator of meaning and truth. Creating reality for others is where power lies. As the voice of reason, however, he is not convincing anymore: not regarded as a fatherly figure any longer, as an individual man who imposes his reality on others, he is now recognized as a suffocating force.

The symbolic function of the father surfaces in the earlier quoted dialogue with Walter, Jr. as well. In the concept of the Oedipus complex, it is the son who is in love with his mother and competes for this love with his father. The child has to give up on his love for the mother and instead has to identify with his father. This way, the child is introduced into the symbolic order, of which the father is a representative (the law of the father): "the Symbolic is [..] the realm of male authority" (Walsh, 19).[67] Walter's father, we learn in this dialogue, was never a figure for identification in Walter's eyes since he was unable to exhibit male authority. This in a way echoes Mitchell's assessment of the cowboy hero who in his narcissism finds himself in a pre-Symbolic state in which he wants his desires fulfilled unaltered (and thus *be* the Symbolic we might argue). This is highly interesting in the context of *BrBa* as the series elaborates on similar concerns as the Western, that often deals with the high tension between order and chaos, wilderness and civilization, things we have come to associate with the frontier.[68] *BrBa* translates this frontier into the mind and Walter's decision to break bad takes him from civilization to wilderness (quite literally as he and Jesse cook crystal meth in a RV somewhere on an Indian reservation), and from order (suburbia, family life) to chaos (lawlessness, drug business). To have one's desires echoed back unaltered, one necessarily has to leave order and civilization and as such, the law of the father as well. Walter's ("je") identification with his ego ideal ('moi') Heisenberg happens in the realm of the Imaginary. The Imaginary precedes the Symbolic: Walter/Heisenberg does not accept the law of the father anymore. This does not only refer to his lacking relationship/identification with his weak father, but also the institutions the father represents in the Symbolic, such as the law (see Silverman, 42). When Walter creates Heisenberg, he becomes his own father and his own law. This does not happen in a vacuum. Fintan Walsh states that by having a weak father, a "subject is condemned to seek definition by competing against imaginary fathers" (177). In the case of Walter, he

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67 See also David Savran: "The (male) narcissist [...] is the product of an unfortunate weakening of 'patriarchal authority' in a feminized culture. Because he no longer has 'loved and respected' figures to emulate, he retreats to fantasy and develops a 'sadistic superego' (derived from the id) that assaults his now masochistic ego" (168).

68 Mitchell elaborates on the rather formulaic aspect of the Western, which has a very specific setting in terms of time and place and also a recurring stock of characters. "These familiar materials, however, are only so many unwoven raw strands. What actually brings them together into the narrative we recognize as a Western are a set of problems recurring in endless combination: the problem of progress, envisioned as a passing of frontiers; the problem of honor, defined in a context of social expediency; the problem of law or justice, enacted in a conflict of vengeance and social control; the problem of violence, in acknowledging its value yet honoring occasions when it can be controlled; and subsuming all, the problem of what it means to be a man, as aging victim of progress, embodiment of honor, champion of justice in an unjust world" (3).

imagines what an authoritative father might be – American folklore is full of such men (and Hank might be a 'real' example of such in his world) – and becomes one himself.

In Freudian terms, the Symbolic can be located in the super-ego. As a person's identity oscillates between id, ego and super-ego (the super-ego works as the internalized law of the father) (see Freud, 36-47, 41, 61), Walter's dismissal of the Symbolic/lack of super-ego has his ego-ideal Heisenberg take control of him the way cancer eats up his body. It is also the super-ego that exerts feelings of guilt on the ego (see ibid., 66-67). Walter, however, never feels particularly guilty for any of the horrible things he does. Instead, he takes his or his family's life as a moral justification. James Meek comments that "Walter's mental refuge is that he is, of all people, the most rational" (n. pag.). This mental refuge is the Heisenberg part of his psyche.

Heisenberg, then, is ashamed of Walter in the scene quoted above (or Walter is ashamed of himself and thus hides his self through silence). The relationship of silence, narcissism and masculinity can thus be enhanced by shame, which as well finds silence as its main symptom. The drug-induced Walter does not hide his self, but it remains unclear for what he really feels sorry. That he confuses Jesse and his son may hint at that it is his lack of trust in Jesse he feels sorry for. He may feel sorry for losing his family as well. Most of all, he probably feels sorry for himself. In this particular moment in *BrBa*, he again lacks control and this lack is also signaled by the state of his body. He cannot control his emotions and feels ashamed the next morning for letting his guard down (even though he manages to keep up the gambling masquerade). Strikingly, this moment in which Heisenberg is sedated is the moment in which Walter, Jr. recognizes his father as real/authentic again. Thereby *BrBa* also points to the artificiality of the masculine construction of Heisenberg: it is a performance that overshadows what emotional life was there before. This, then, is also where the cancer metaphor comes into play once more. Heisenberg, the

*Figure 21 The death of Walter H. White (*BrBa *S04E11).*

performance he puts on to deal with the drug business, metastases into the inner make-up of this man. This dialogue in S04E10 is the last glimpse the viewer gets of the Walter H. White who introduced himself in the opening sequence of S01E01. In S04E11

("Crawl Space") he is symbolically buried beneath the White residence (see figure 21).[69]

3.5. Physical Wounds and the Becoming of Man in the West

To remain with the father-son dialogue quoted above: what we see is a man who was beaten. His wounds are on display and this usually means that this man has lost his masculinity and will regain it as soon as he recuperates. The vulnerability that the wounded body signifies is the opposite of masculinity and since this vulnerability is literally scratched into the body, it cannot be ignored through performance. The focus *BrBa* sometimes puts on the male body (there is far more male than female nudity, which is something out of the ordinary) as well as its Southwestern setting with stylized shots of the landscape puts it in close proximity to the Western, even though it falls out of the typical time frame, which would be sometime between 1850 and 1900. As mentioned earlier, both *BrBa* and the Western are "deeply haunted by the problem of becoming a man" (Mitchell, 4). This becoming of man is – even though essentially performative if we understand this phrase as becoming masculine – often staged through the body. This body is as mentioned earlier the vehicle of performance and more so, it is through the mutilation and recuperation of the male body that this becoming of man finds its visual expression:

> The frequency with which the body is celebrated, then physically punished, only to

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69 The crawl space has an extended symbolic meaning in this series. In S02E10, Walter begins to renovate the crawl space upon discovering that they have rot. In this episode, in which there is also an altercation between him and Hank after Walter made his son drink tequila, the tension in the White family takes center stage. At this moment of the narrative, Walter is unsure whether he will continue his ventures in the drug world. Thus, his attempt to frenetically eradicate the rot at the basis of his house can also be read as an attempt to eradicate the rotten desires brewing inside him. Also, if we follow Freud's construction of the human psyche, the Id would also find expression in the basement, that upon which ego and super ego are built. These psychological considerations aside, the fact that the family home has rot also speaks volumes of the situation the White family is in and presents a rather bleak outlook on the state of the American middle-class family. Furthermore, when Walter is busy renovating the crawl space of the house, he also forgoes family breakfast. Moreover, at the end of this episode he encounters a young man buying the things necessary for producing crystal meth at a DIY store. In a review, James Meek comments on this scene as a moment in which both personalities of Walter surface: "the patient teacher, pedantic, pernickety, but eager to help a future colleague – that his immediate reaction to the stranger's shopping list comes. He tells him he's buying the wrong matches" (n. pag.). After the stranger quickly leaves the store, Walter realizes something and it seems he begins to feel more comfortable with his rotten side: "At first Walter laughs and makes for the checkout. But as he waits in line we see his face harden and the new Walter assert himself: the criminal businessman with a market to protect from rivals. He marches into the parking lot and faces down the stranger's meat-mountain boss. 'Stay out of my territory,' Walter says, with utter conviction in his own menace; without a word, his nascent competitors flee the scene" (ibid., n. pag.). Considering this, in my interpretation of the above mentioned scene in S04E11 Walter becomes submerged completely in Heisenberg.

convalesce, suggests something of the paradox involved in making true man out of biological man, taking their male bodies and distorting them beyond any apparent power of self-control, so that in the course of recuperating, an achieved masculinity that is at once physical and based on performance can be revealed (ibid., 155).

[T]his concentration on male physiques also feeds a broader cultural longing for renewal, one that occurs in a special landscape (the American West) because that landscape is associated with personal transformation. Becoming a man [...] has been such a tired cliché of the Western that it hardly warrants comment. Yet this banal tag line of gender identity is tied up in the Western's focus of our gaze on the male body – a body that must [...] be beaten, distorted, and pressed out of shape so that it can paradoxically become what it already is. The American West is thus associated with crucial transformations to an untransformed body – as if the West and only the West were a place in which manhood might emerge yet remain what it was (ibid., 160).

When the male body is beaten and distorted beyond self-control, the man has lost his masculinity. By recuperating and regaining control of the body, the man becomes masculine again. Quite paradoxically, being beaten seems to be a prerequisite for regaining masculinity even though in a classical Western context, the hero was also masculine before being beaten. In *BrBa* this is, as I have illustrated above, not the case as Walter was not considered masculine before his body was "beaten."

Apart from the occasional black-eye as seen in the scene mentioned above, Walter's remasculinization with respect to representations of his body is largely focused on his recuperation from the diagnosis of terminal lung cancer. There is no full recovery, yet it seems that fighting cancer in itself works to enforce masculinity here. In the beginning, Walter's diagnosis offers grim prospects: he will be dead within months. The man who gets this diagnosis, as we have seen earlier, is constructed as a wimp. His cancer therapy then is part of the narrative only in the first and second seasons. We see Walter getting chemo and radiation therapy: his body is put on display and we watch him – or his cancer – go in remission. The news of remission in S02E09 is met with anger by Walter, who, after receiving the good news in the company of his family, goes to the bathroom and punches the reflection of his face that he catches in a paper towel dispenser (see figure 14).

This anger calls for an explanation: as mentioned earlier, the transformation Walter goes through is a continuous process and the realization of what he becomes takes him until the end of the second season. Becoming aware of something and accepting it, however, are two different things. In season two, it has dawned on him that he is capable of doing horrible things, yet he still justifies them by taking the financial security of his family as an excuse. Furthermore, he never really expected to live this long after hearing the diagnosis. Walter, the unmanly man of the pilot episode, was ready to give up and

die.[70] With the adrenaline and the recognition he receives in the drug business, a change occurred. Desires he at some point buried deep in his psyche were released when he crossed the imaginary line from order/civilization to chaos/wilderness.

The fact that he is in remission allows for a surgery to remove most of the tumor. This does not mean that he is cured of cancer, but that he bought himself more time than he could have expected. He should be happy, now that he has health, time and money. His secret double life has not yet been brought to light, which means that he easily could go back to his old self. The fact that he does not unveils his true desires. The things he has witnessed and done until this point have changed him and he has to face the truth that there will be no easy way out for him: his plan of entering the drug business, get all the excitement and money he desires and die in a timely manner will not work out for him. He realizes this the moment he buries his fist in the paper towel dispenser and he can do nothing else than to behold his distorted self. In S02E09 he is in equal parts Walter White and Heisenberg. This equation tips towards the latter in subsequent seasons until the former has completely disappeared in the fifth season.

In seasons three and four, Walter's cancer is almost forgotten. From the viewer's perspective, the most plausible death of Walter seems to be a gun shot wound (which is his cause of death in S05E16) or any other act of violence. For Walter and Jesse this holds true as well: their life is often in danger, but cancer does not figure in that fear. For his family members, the fact that he has made it thus far is a success story considering the initial prognosis: ironically, Walter Jr., who temporarily wanted to be addressed by another name, now insists on being called by his (father's) name again (only until his father's actions become public). The official story thus far is that Walter is – to borrow Saul's words – a cancer saint, a fighter and his son's personal hero[71] whereas Skyler, who separates when she finds out about his double life, is seen as the villain: it is she who destroys the marriage. Revealingly, Walter in his vanity sees it the same way. When she suggests divorce, he tells her "this is punitive. This is what it is. We're happily married" (*BrBa* S03E02). At this point he has not yet realized that he is not the man she fell in love with anymore. He even makes Skyler appear ungrateful when – referring to the horrible things he has done to earn his drug money – he calls his

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70 Interestingly, it is his handicapped son who calls him out during an intervention: Walter, Jr. draws attention to the trials he had to go through suffering from cerebral palsy, calling him a "pussy" and telling his father that it frustrates him his father "is scared of a little chemo" (*BrBa* S01E05).

71 After he set up a website to raise money for his dad's cancer treatment, a television crew visits the White residence. Walter, Jr. tells the reporter about his father that "he's just decent. He always does the right thing. [...] My dad is my hero" (*BrBa* S02E13).

behavior "sacrifices I've made *for this family*" all the while forgetting that it is he who destroys the family through his actions, his emotional and often physical unavailability as well as his changing personality (S03E03).

3.6. Male Sacrifice and the Good Provider

Convinced that he is always right, Walter wants undivided recognition for his righteousness. In his interpretation of the masculinity discourses circulating in his culture he is even right to a certain degree: like Christ himself, he endures pain and sacrifices himself for – so he thinks – his family. In this traditional conception of Western masculinity, a man exchanges public power for sacrifice and pain (see MacInnes 2001, 323).[72]

This simple equation is strongly connected to the role of the good provider. This is also the argument Gus brings up in season three when Walter essentially aborted his plans of becoming the greatest crystal meth manufacturer. At this point in the narrative, Walter has already lost his family and is consequently unsure of how to proceed as he has lost his official motivation and moral justification for entering the drug business. An old 'truth', however, draws him back into the subterranean world (literally as the following conversation takes place in an underground laboratory):

> **Gus**: What does a man do? A man provides for his family.
> **Walt**: This cost me my family!
> **Gus**: When you have children, you always have family. They will always be your priority, your responsibility. And a man... a man provides. And he does it even when he's not appreciated or respected or even loved. He simply bears up, and he does it because he's a *man* (*BrBa* S03E05).

Never is the link between being a man and providing this pronounced in *BrBa*. Gus, the great schemer, consciously draws upon this link: "The cultural function of masculine ideology is to motivate men to work" (Connell 1995a, 33). Gus takes Walter's official story as to why he does everything he does and turns it against him for his own benefits (see also Lang and Dreher, 48-49, 55). The irony of all of this, is, however, that Gus is a closeted homosexual who does not even have a family. In any case, whether he believes in what he tells Walter or not is besides the point, just as it is beside the point to argue whether Walter's decision to break bad can be justified or rationalized with regard to his

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72 In his reading of Walter as MacBeth, Ray Bossert voices an interesting thought regarding Walter's sacrifice: "He sacrifices for his family to prove to himself that he loves them, but his sacrifices also harm his family, satiating a subconscious resentment towards them because they limit him. He's desperate to prove his love because on some level he doubts it" (74).

health condition or the economic/systemic crisis of the USA: that a man "bears up" and is unaffected by the lack of emotional rewards for providing is a culturally specific discourse. The equation of "maleness with breadwinning" (Rushing, 108) is taken as 'the truth' and since this is so, this discourse can be used for specific ends. Making $15 million a year in an underground laboratory, thereby letting go of familial ties and committing hideous crimes, is not what a man *naturally* does.

Walter's sense of self-worth is increasingly defined by his success at his new job as a large-scale drug manufacturer. The money he earns and the power he gains through work supplement his manhood. This strong link between masculinity and work can have ideological/pathological implications: "as long as the man sustains his undivided attention on work, he is avoiding looking into his life and values – and the costs his actions incur for him and others" (Whitehead, 128). This way, a man can have his potency affirmed in work no matter how impotent he may be in other areas (i.e. the loss of family in *BrBa*). While masculinity as ideology keeps men working, the ideology can also become pathological: male virtues like independence and strength can become vices like coldness and violent aggression (see MacInnes 1998, 47; see also: Clare, 68).

Since Gus is one of the few recurring "ethnic" characters in this series despite the fact that Albuquerque's demographic makeup features a large Hispanic population, Todd Van Der Werff's short online review of *BrBa* as representing "the angry white men" contains insightful observations concerning the racial politics in this series. He mentions the minor and mostly stereotypical representation of Hispanics in *BrBa*, but explains it with the series's strong focus on Walter, who lives in a predominantly white neighborhood. This is in line with Mittell's earlier quoted observation concerning the narrative's "centripetal complexity." However, the rivalry between Walter and Gus has a race component – a white man wants what an "ethnic" man has achieved:

> The conflict between Walter and Gus is more complicated than Walter simply seeing Gus's position and saying, 'I want that!' [...] But the deeper the two get into their war, the more it looks like Walter simply doesn't want to have somebody else as a boss, the more it seems like he's just intent on taking something he believes is rightfully his simply because he saw it. Where Gus knows that he must be the picture of perfection if he's going to survive as a criminal, Walter thinks nothing of blowing up the world to get something he desires. Gus has to play the part of who Walter was at the show's beginning to get anywhere; Walter knows he can use the cover of his old identity to get away with increasingly heinous actions (Van Der Werff, n. pag.).

Gus's homosexuality, of which only the viewer is aware, is another interesting point in the investigation of masculinity, hegemony and the power of masculinity discourses in *BrBa*.[73] His homosexuality is never really pronounced, but it becomes evident in

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73 Jeffrey E. Stephenson maintains that Gus's implied homosexuality "serves to rock heteronormative

flashbacks (S04E08) and hints such as a photograph of him and his partner that is discovered after his death (S05E01). Gus is originally from Chile, which is also where he financed the chemical training of his partner. With him, he took off to the United States to develop his own thriving business with the blessing of a Mexican cartel. The price, however, is high: as a warning, his lover and chemist is shot to death (S04E08). Gus seeks revenge and ultimately reaches his goal in S04E10 when he kills the head of the cartel, Don Eladio. It was however not Don Eladio who pulled the trigger, but Tuco Salamanca's father, Hector. This man is already in a home for the elderly and receives visits from Gus on a regular basis. Gus refuses to kill Hector Salamanca as he wants to see him suffer: all his friends and his family have been killed by Gus by S04E10. That his legacy will die with him is, it seems, the ultimate punishment for such a man. The irony is, however, that Walter then teams up with Hector Salamanca in order to kill Gus. Here it becomes evident that Gus does buy into certain concepts of masculinity, concepts that are more rooted in Latin American drug culture as imagined by audio-visual representations thereof than in Anglo-American conceptions of it. Moreover, Gus's quest for hegemony is driven by a common trope of the Western: revenge. This thirst for revenge will make him 'blind' and will eventually be his downfall.

In an elaborate scheme, Walter convinces Salamanca to set up a meeting with the DEA. The point of this meeting is not to give away any information, but to get Gus's full attention. It works: this supposed affront against an unwritten law prompts Gus to visit and kill Salamanca with the following parting words: "What man talks to the police? No man." After this, a bomb blows both Salamanca (he 'sacrificed' himself for revenge) and Gus out of the world in S04E13. Consequently, Gus is seen to have fallen victim to a similar scheme he used in S03E05.

Visually, Gus's death is worth considering as well. Citing the John Woo action movie of the same title, the episode is titled "Face Off". The right side of Gus's face gets blown off, including the right eye ball. This mirrors the pink teddy bear and its missing eye ball and thus establishes continuity in the development of Walter, i.e. his transformation comes full circle: like in the John Woo film, Walter now finds himself in the body/position of his enemy. With Gus dead, he now is Albuquerque's king pin. Considering the Walter – Gus – Hector triangle, it becomes obvious that believing in the discourses of masculinity and living by them can be nothing but a process of self-destruction, at least with regard to those men that aspire to hegemony in the series. And

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assumptions. A powerful man emulated and feared by all who know him is gay? Why not!" (209).

evidently, other people get caught in the undertow of this destructive affair. As gender and masculinities among themselves are relational, the cancer of one metastases into the other. Like in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), we see that violence begets violence. *BrBa* serves this message with a twist: Unlike in Westerns, the anti-hero does not defeat the villain to right a wrong, but to take on the position of his antagonist himself.

While Walter through his experiences in the drug world and the fighting of cancer becomes increasingly masculinized, Hank's sense of masculinity suffers various setbacks. As mentioned above, Hank's and Walter's expressions of manhood are diametrically opposed. In the beginning, it is Hank who is in the hegemonic position. Through his career he is considered a hero. Moreover, he is healthy and has the means to offer financial support to the White family (thus he has both virility and the means to be a provider). Beginning with the second season, Hank's masculinity is deconstructed only to be reconstructed again in seasons four and five and to be completely negated through death in S05E14.

When Hank gets promoted to work in El Paso to counter drug trafficking, it is a panic attack that saves his life. These panic attacks are never discovered because Hank normally goes to the elevator in the DEA building to hide them. These scenes have a stark claustrophobic quality, filmed from various angles and with eerie percussion music in the extra-diegetic soundtrack. We see Hank clasping his chest, breathing heavily and sweating. When the elevator doors open on the ground floor, he exits fully composed again. This behavioral pattern has narcissistic connotations as described above: a panic attack would undermine his heroism and thus he remains silent and hides his self behind the performance of heroism and trash talking (every time he is required to talk about emotions he appears lost and clumsy; he often presents himself as jokester).

Masculinity, it turns out, is a bluff. The episode of *BrBa* that deals with this most explicitly is S01E06, fittingly titled "Crazy Hand Full of Nothing" (which references a scene in *Cool Hand Luke* [1967]). In one scene, we watch the White family play cards. In this scene, Walter beats Hank on a bluff and consequently out-mans him for the first time. It is also the first episode in which Walter performs Heisenberg. At the end of this episode, Walter has shaved his head, wears black and beats Tuco on a bluff. The episode ends in Walter blowing up Tuco's office and finds him overwhelmed by the rush of adrenaline.

After the El Paso incident, Hank concentrates on his hunt for Heisenberg, a hunt that hardly gives him any headway as this Heisenberg always seems to be a step ahead.

Moreover, he still suffers from what he perceives as the humiliation in El Paso as he was released from his duties there and later also refuses to go back. He claims that it is because of the Heisenberg case that he needs to see concluded. This, however, is only partly true. He could not act as the alpha male in El Paso. In fact, he was ridiculed because he cannot speak Spanish. Also, killing people himself and the witnessing of extreme acts of violence do take a psychic toll on him, as evidenced in his panic attacks. Thus he chooses to stay in Albuquerque, a place he considers safe and that allows him to save face: as mentioned, he has unfinished business there.

Hank knows that Jesse is somehow involved in the Heisenberg case and one time brutally beats him up. Previously, he had consciously picked a bar fight. Both fights take place after the El Paso incident and off-duty. These fights serve to prove his masculinity that in his self-image suffered setbacks such as panic attacks and his failure in El Paso. After beating Jesse, Hank is suspended and consequently suffers another setback. The day he gets suspended, his wife Marie is there to comfort him. When both enter the elevator, he breaks into tears. As soon as the elevator doors open we see him fully composed again. It should be noted that outbursts of emotions in *BrBa* almost always happen within confined spaces: Hank suffering panic attacks and crying in an elevator (S02E05, S02E08, S03E07), Walter laughing hysterically in the crawl space (S04E11), Jesse talking about substance addiction in dim backrooms (S03E09, S04E07), Walter and Jesse talking about personal things in the RV (S02E09) and the underground laboratory (S03E10).[74] This is contrasted by the open desert as cook spot and drug meet or other confrontations related to aspects of 'male' work. When Hank and Marie get back home after his suspension, the following dialogue ensues:

> **Marie**: Why should you be the one who pays? For doing the right thing?
> **Hank**: No baby, it wasn't the right thing. That's not what the job is. I'm supposed to be better than that.
> **Marie**: [whispers] But you made one mistake.
> **Hank**: No, it wasn't one mistake. I've been... [exhales]... I've been... *unraveling*, you know? I don't sleep at night anymore. I freeze. I freeze up. My chest gets so tight I can't breathe. Just... [whispers] I panic. Ever since that Salamanca thing... I mean Tuco Salamanca. If ever a scumbag deserved a bullet between the eyes... It changed me. And I can't seem to control it. I tried to fight it [sighs]. But then... El Paso. And it's just gettin' worse. What I did to Pinkman, that's not how I'm supposed to be. That's not me. All this [sighs]... everything that's happened... I swear to god, Marie, the universe is trying to tell me something. I'm finally ready to listen... I'm just not the man I thought I was [begins to cry] (BrBa S03E07).

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74 Walter's heroic project is at odds with its announced purpose. It dawns on him that isolated independence is an illusion for this independence is essentially meaningless if it was not somehow connected to what he left behind in the confinement of civilization. What is more, of course, is that even far off from civilization he has to cooperate with Jesse in order to save both their lives. Alone, he would be just as dead as the wolf decaying next to the RV (only the camera and the viewer are aware of that wolf).

Hank's confession that he has been unraveling is littered with masculinity signifiers. He "freezes up" and does not know how to act anymore, he panics instead of keeping his cool, and, most importantly, he has lost control. The realization that he is "not the man [he] thought [he] was" finally moves him to tears. The underlying discourse is that of what is considered a traditional American masculinity that existed in an intense tension of the binary oppositions represented by the frontier. A man values action over words, but has to know when to control himself. To give a visual example almost anyone will be familiar with are situations in Westerns when the hero's hands hover over his pistol and he still refuses to draw (see Mitchell, 183). Moments like this are full of suspension, a suspension symptomatic of the above mentioned tension. Connell's assessment that "[i]n contemporary Western society, hegemonic masculinity is strongly associated with aggressiveness and the capacity for violence" is only part of the story (Connell 1995b, 128). This violence, at least in the context of the American West, also served an end. Richard Slotkin's "regeneration through violence", according to Richard Dyer, "resonate[s] with the sense that an act of violence can sort things out" (Dyer, 34; see also Robinson, 166). The tension mentioned does not arise from violence itself, but from the fact that this violence cannot be an end in itself.

What Hank realizes about himself in the above-quoted scene is what Walter fails to understand. In this unspoken contest for hegemonic masculinity, Hank and Walter lost sight of what they claim is the greater purpose of their actions (the law/the good of the family). Almost beating Jesse to death serves no end at all. First, he is not the man behind the operation, a fact of which Hank is aware. Second, if he had killed Jesse, he would have lost a potential key witness for a future trial of the man behind the whole crystal meth operation. He would also have lost his job, which could have led to a collapse of both his public and private life. The violence Hank and Walter enact is without worth to society, it is only about male self-worth while the violence of the idealized frontier hero was – quite paradoxically – not only a proof of manliness but considered to be a contribution to the greater good of a developing society. Considering this, Susan Faludi's estimation that "[w]ithout a society, Daniel Boone would have just been a killer" sounds quite reasonable (38). What Hank up to this point and Walter all through *BrBa* are, then, are "[m]en [who] resort to violence when their power is threatened and in jeopardy" (Clare, 57).

Moreover, Patrick McGee claims in his reading of Westerns with regard to films emerging in the 1960s, most notably those by Anthony Mann amongst others, that

"masculine desire ultimately destroys one's humanity, if not one's life" (129). Hank's quest for control and power turn out badly for him. That he is not the man he thought he was may therefore also point towards his own misconceptions concerning masculinity as he was on the verge of losing his humanity by his overtly violent behavior and his emotional withdrawal from his wife. Mitchell makes a similar observation with regard to the Westerns of the 1960s:

> While the explicit violence of '60s Westerns served extramoral, even extradramatic, ends, then, most viewers nonetheless responded in conventional moral terms, educated by the genre itself to the virtues of restraint. The new heroes therefore seemed merely professionals doing a job, possessed of traditional gunslinging skills but committed to little else [...] these men formed a degraded version of the stalwartly moral Westerner whose vision now extended no further than his own well-being [...] and issues of right and wrong, appropriate behavior, and honorable acts are either disregarded or self-mockingly reduced to questions of skill, puncturing the 1950s ideal of the high-minded man with a gun (Mitchell, 224-225).

Walter's quest for hegemony has been already elaborated upon above. Hank, too, fits into this assessment as the El Paso incident and his inability to close out on Heisenberg threaten his power. What seems to be the final insult/threat to his masculinity is that Jesse Pinkman, the drug-afflicted *boy,* is at this point untouchable for Hank if he follows protocol, which is the reason why he loses control and is no longer the man who was introduced to us in the pilot episode (see above). While this example shows how Hank is stripped of his masculinity psychologically, his male body (and his overall masculinity) is yet to suffer even more as this loss of hegemony becomes manifest in his body. His trials and tribulations will however be rewarded: with patience he will find out, though coincidentally, who Heisenberg really is. Ironically, this scene of discovery is the Whites' bathroom (S05E08). Again, full recovery is linked to success in the public sphere. But this time, it is not aggression and risk that lead to (a temporary) triumph, but patience and an eye for details: "We discovered Hank is very, very good at his job [...] Hank is like a postmodern shout-out to Columbo" (Gilligan qtd. in: D. Martin, n. pag.). This, however, does not save him from being shot by killers hired by Walter.

Even though it is Walter/Heisenberg who is sought out by the Mexican cartel after the shooting of Tuco, Hank has to pay the price as Walter strives further towards hegemony in the relationship of the two. Even though the DEA is off limits for cartel hitmen, Gus, who has his own plot for hegemony in the cartel, tells them to go for Hank since it was he who pulled the trigger. Even though Hank survives their attack in S03E07, his body is severely damaged and with it his masculinity. A shell of his former self, the bed-ridden Hank starts collecting minerals. In S03E12 the masturbation scene of S01E01 (see above) is mirrored. Only this time it is Hank who is in the passive

position. His wife Marie bets that if he is able to get an erection, he has to leave the hospital. Hank at this point does not believe in his stamina anymore and accepts the bet. However, he "loses" the bet. Before masturbating Hank, she washes him with a sponge. This female role in the recuperation of masculinity is a common trope in Westerns. According to Mitchell, in no other genre do men bathe as often on screen as in Westerns (often with a female presence): "These scenes actually serve as miniature convalescence sequences in which the hero is reduced to a prone position so that the camera can display recovering himself. We watch, that is, men becoming men in the principal way the Western allows, by being restored to their male bodies" (Mitchell, 151).

Only when his advice is needed in the Heisenberg case does Hank begin to recuperate. He tortures his once acknowledged presence in the world back into existence through physical therapy. He becomes what he already was: a man. The irony of the situation is, however, that it is Walter/Heisenberg who actually pays for his therapy. Again, in order to fully recover, Hank needs the best

*Figure 22 Male presence tortured back into existence (*BrBa *S03E11).*

physical therapy available. The best treatment is not paid for by his insurance, which again could be interpreted as social/political commentary, and thus it is the 'gambling millionaire' Walter White, the man that once refused charity, who pays for physical therapy. Consequently, Walter remains in the hegemonic position, at least until Hank arrests him or he dies. The viewer's sympathy, James Meek comments, is however with Hank by the time he recuperates from his physical and psychological wounds: "as Hank endures near-fatal trials of his own and his decency, nobility and sense of duty emerge, we begin to long for the DEA man to step in and put an end to the chemistry teacher's megalomania" (n. pag.).

The way Walter's mastery in the chemistry of methamphetamine fills the void left by low self-esteem and is integral to his process of remasculinization, Jesse's self-worth, too, increases when he is successful at work (same goes for Hank of course, see above): "[work] is a primary vehicle for the otherwise contingent and unstable subject to achieve a sense of self, to become grounded and located in the social world" (Whitehead, 124). While his success in the drug trade helps to validate his sense of self, the by-products

that come with his line of work have severe consequences. Like Walter and Hank, he is on the verge of losing his humanity.

Sequences of being physically wounded and recuperated, from losing control of their bodies to regaining it, can also be observed in Jesse, who is more than once beaten and who has, it appears, a longer path towards traditional American masculinity than Walter or Hank. This brand of masculinity seems, as shown in the quotations further up, also appealing to him, although it is filtered through a different kind of outlaw masculinity. In both dress and speech Jesse seems to take African-American rappers' masculinity as model.

Jesse suffers even more setbacks than Walter. First, because he is violently beaten several times and his body thus hardly ever gets the chance to fully recuperate. Second, not only does he have a hard time getting his body to full strength and self-control, he also lacks control in the sense of inner restraint. The first four seasons he is an on-and-off drug addict. This lack of both physical and psychological control puts him in a marginalized position in the hegemony of masculinity. However, he does have what Walter utterly lacks and that puts him in proximity to the idealized frontier hero: moral insight.

Disinherited by his parents for his drug use, Jesse is, like the Western hero, orphaned (see Allmendinger, 123, 142). Yet, he, too, in his search for belonging, is blinded by the Walter-mask of Heisenberg. His early involvement in the drug business and the glorification of being an outlaw often is an empty pose that seems to be the vehicle for belonging to something as he has no family left and the only friends he has are other methamphetamine users in their twenties. What separates him from Walter is his inner moral compass that is visualized by images that indicate a lack of insight in Walter. In Westerns, Mitchell argues, ocular sight metaphorically stood in for moral insight, also with respect to the use of violence (29). *BrBa* establishes this visually in one of its main visual leitmotifs: shattered glass. Walter White is short-sighted, something that has less to do with an inability to scheme (he definitely knows how to plot), but with the fact that his life as such will not go on for long, something which deprives him of moral insight as much as his deliberate self-construction as an imperial male. The wind shield of his car gets broken three times (once by an angry Jesse), his glasses, too, break (also by way of Jesse): this man is morally dubious, he is not one of those early Western heroes who were, paradoxically, individualistic but for the good of the community. With this, *BrBa* sits less comfortably among the Westerns of the 1950s but more among what Sergio

Leone made of them. The violence in *BrBa* more often than not serves self-interest.[75]

While Walter/Heisenberg only at times appears to be concerned with the moral implications of his doings, Jesse struggles more with each season to gain some deeper insight even though this is at cross-purpose with his drug habit. From the beginning opposed to murder, he is manipulated by Walter into pulling the trigger when he kills Gale in S03E13. He does so with tears in his eyes and shaking arms. As the fourth season begins, Jesse is devastated. Convinced that he is a bad person, he begins using drugs again. When he is not working (i.e. producing drugs), he is throwing parties at his house. As a matter of fact, he throws one ongoing party for several days.

Realizing that he is on a path to nowhere and with feelings of guilt stacking up inside him (he also blames himself for Jane's death), he decides to 'man up' in a different way, i.e. by opening up. In S04E07, he visits his drug rehabilitation group and tells the story of killing Gale coded as killing a "problem dog" (this is also the episode's title). Close to tears, he wonders "if you just do stuff and nothing happens... what's it all mean? What's the point?" While for Walter the point is validating his self as a powerful man in his culture regardless of the costs for others, experiencing and bringing about death eats away at Jesse's consciousness. In this constellation, he is *Unforgiven*'s Schofield Kid who kills a defenseless man who did not see it coming and is shattered by "watching him go." Contrarily, Walter, like Munny, is eventually overshadowed by his own legend despite vows for civilized behavior. Thus Jesse wants his actions to have consequences, he seeks atonement. Money and power are meaningless to him because neither connects him to the world in a meaningful way. This long and intense scene in the grayish, dimly lit backroom in which Jesse's rehabilitation group meets, which is made up of people at the bottom of society, contains impotence and rage at the same time. The counselor's advice is simply to accept and move on: "what's done is done" (ibid.). Everyone else in the group wants Jesse to repent for killing an innocent animal. Jesse of course cannot do anything but kill himself or direct his rage towards the man pulling his strings the whole time, the latter of which he eventually does in the second half of the fifth season.

The whole issue of "you just do stuff and nothing happens" can also be viewed in light of the aftermath of the 2007 recession: this particular episode aired in the summer of 2011 and in terms of consequences for the reckless business practices at Wall Street

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75 This holds true for the visual aspects of *BrBa* as well. The stylistic similarities to Sergio Leone have been mentioned before. In S03E12 there is also what in the audio commentary to the DVD box set is called the "Sergio Leone shot." This is when Jesse wants to kill two dealers as a revenge for killing the brother of his girlfriend. This scene begins as a classic stand-off and is shot in dark colors with exaggerated camera angles and intense close-ups.

nothing happened. Towards the scene's end, Jesse turns the dialogue inside-out and reveals that his primary reason for attending sessions was to sell drugs: "You are nothing to me but customers!" (ibid.). By adopting the logic of the system within which he operates, Jesse turns into something he hates. His drug abuse turns into self punishment and he eventually tries to repay the damage he has done by giving away his money. He does not deserve this blood money. Walter's appeals to the risks they have taken and the sacrifices they have made for this money fall short: is it really a sacrifice in the Judeo-Christian tradition to kill and deceive in order to get rich? Jesse even cooperates with Hank to bring down Walter: he simply cannot stand the idea of Walter getting away with everything he has done but, alas, with little success. Hank's and Jesse's attempt to pin down Walter ends with Hank being shot dead and Jesse being given over to slave labor in another secret laboratory. Morals, it seems, faint when confronted with material values – neither the law nor the young generation can bring down neoliberal megalomania. It can only destroy itself: having gotten away in S05E15, Walter returns to Albuquerque to kill those who continue to produce his product without him and in the process liberates Jesse from slave labor and dies from a bullet wound.[76]

The scene quoted above penetrates the moral vacuum that makes it possible for Walter to become Heisenberg and still feel good about himself: as David Harvey mentioned earlier, one can always find a common sense reason for the things one did in hindsight. In his elaboration on *Violence*, Slavoj Žižek considers Hannah Arendt and the banality of evil. Looking at accounts of relatives and friends of 'monsters' such as Stalin and Hitler, he concludes that

> Hannah Arendt was right: these figures were not personifications of sublime Byronesque demonic evil: the gap between their intimate experience and the horror of their acts was immense. The experience that we have of our lives from within, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves in order to account for what we are doing, is fundamentally a lie – the truth lies outside, in what we do (40).

Thus it is possible for Walter to think of himself as the most reasonable person he knows, as someone who is caring and essentially good. However, when contrasted with the people like Jesse who he harms and manipulates, a different picture emerges: "He has a very specific view of himself and his place in the world, and in his mind he's not a murderer. And yet when you look at the cold hard facts of the matter he very much is"

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76 See also: "[Jesse] makes decisions based on heart and he's sort of the heart and Walter is the mind of the two, I suppose. And there is an element of Jesse that sort of, you know, is ready to kill at whim given the opportunity. You know, there's sort of a [...] heroic element to him, and they do what they do for very different reasons. For Walt it seems like self-preservation and sort of a desire to feel good about himself in general, and for Jesse if he's wrong that he feels he needs to right [*sic!*]" (Gilligan qtd. in: Poniewozik, n. pag.).

(Gilligan qtd. in: Poniewozik, n. pag.).

Again, it is all a matter of performance. The way Walter has become a man because he began acting like one, he likewise is a bad person because he acts like one. Interestingly, acting manly and acting bad go together here, which speaks to Whitehead's earlier assessment that masculine virtues have become vices (see chapter 2). Therefore, bodies do not determine who we are, but as they are the instruments for our performance of ourselves, the actions we do with them tell the truths about ourselves. Rationalizing them with common sense in hindsight is therefore only a way of constructing a perception of truth and not truth itself; and this is done most easily from the privileged and unmarked perspective of whiteness.

3.7. Malignant Man: Cancer, Capitalism and Violence

Thus far, I have shown how *BrBa* constructs masculinity, i.e. how hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to other masculinities and to femininity. Moreover, I have argued that Walter's development over the course of the series' five seasons is a process of remasculinization. This remasculinization follows certain gender discourses in America which originated during the time of westward expansion with prototypes such as frontiersmen and the cowboy. In the context of *BrBa*, however, the frontier is less a geographic space but located in the human mind. What are the effects of Walter's remasculinization with regard to contemporary crises?

John McMurtry published his book *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism* to little public interest in 1999. It is an uncanny read from the vantage point of today as it pretty much anticipates the economic crisis that began in 2007. He chose the book's title in all seriousness, stating in its preface that it is "not a provocative metaphor" (vii). What McMurtry in this book does is to look at patterns of carcinogenic development in the human body and patterns of neoliberal capital accumulation:

> Pathogenic patterns at the special level of life-organization are analysed in this study as *value programme mutations*. These regulating sequences are not genetically fixed, but are sets of presupposed principles of preference which mutate beneath notice and which, when diseased, come to select for exchanges within the social body that invade, deplete and strip the society's vital resources and functions. These mutating social value programmes underlie ideologies, which are merely their rationalizing disguises. They come, if not arrested, to be system deciders for the entire social host's reproduction and decline. They may appear law-like in their blind operations and even 'inevitable'. But they are in fact conditioned preference-programmes conforming to a gridlocked social paradigm which has delinked from the requirements of its social and environmental life-hosts and become a virulent system depredating and consuming them (viii).

McMurtry's main line of argument is that capitalism in its current stage is presented as the only alternative, the best of worlds, and that it is impossible to diverge from this point of view since public opinion (newspapers, television etc.) is controlled by those who profit the most from this system (the fact that his book was mostly neglected testifies to this): therefore, like cancer, the danger is not recognized as such by the social immune system (i.e. the public realm). Moreover, he cites cuts in public spending as well as deregulation and large-scale privatization of resources undertaken by neoliberal administrations, such as Reagan in the US and Thatcher in the UK, to reduce public debt and 'liberate' the market. This goal, he maintains, was never achieved as the national debt skyrocketed from 907.7 billion dollars to 2.643 trillion dollars in the US during the Reagan administration (see McMurtry, 75; see Chomsky, 66-67).

Moreover, as the public realm started to starve and the market was liberated, the mechanism of money accumulation changed: "as life-serving systems of social bodies are [..] cut back across national boundaries, their resources are dominantly rechannelled to the expansion of money-to-more-money circuits with no commitment to life function. The pattern is so aggressive that the signifiers of its agents do not disguise the underlying violence of the appropriation – [...] 'slashing public services', 'subjecting societies to shock treatments'" (115). Money accumulation, to a large degree, is not grounded on producing and selling goods anymore, but speculative investments: "turning money into more money as an end in itself" (108, see also van Apeldoorn & Overbeek, 5).[77]

In short, the market in its more traditional form as a place in which people exchange goods for their mutual benefit has mutated into something that does not support the life capability of those participating in the market. Instead, it depletes the life capabilities of the host (i.e. the community/society) to serve its own (cancerous) growth. Like cancer cells, which take the resources of their host body until that host eventually dies, neoliberal capitalism presents, in McMurtry's view, a danger to society. The main symptom of this is the widening gap separating (quite literally considering the gated communities of America) the rich from the poor throughout the Western hemisphere (106-107; see also Chomsky, 27-28). "Redistributive effects and increasing social

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77 See also Noam Chomsky: "In 1971, 90 percent of international financial transactions were related to the real economy – trade or long-term investment – and 10 percent were speculative. By 1990 the percentages were reversed and by 1995 about 95 percent of the vastly greater sums were speculative, with daily flows regularly exceeding the combined foreign exchange reserves of the seven biggest industrial powers, over $1 trillion a day, and very short-term: about 80 percent with round trips of a week or less" (23-24).

inequality," David Harvey writes, "have in fact been such a persistent feature of neoliberalization as to be regarded as structural to the whole project" (16).

What, then, does this have to do with *BrBa*? If, as I argue, Walter aspires to a form of hegemonic American masculinity that has been mediated through representations in the Western genre, the answer is: quite a lot. Critique of capitalism and the big corporation has often been a feature in many Westerns. McGee's reading of the Western focuses on capitalism and class struggle. *Shane* (1953), for example, "embodies the critique of private property and the class system" (12.).[78] "[O]ften remembered as the archetypal western, a self-conscious attempt to reproduce the familiar themes and characters in a classically pure state" (Saunders, 13), the film revolves around a conflict between homesteaders and the ascending cattle baron, Ryker. The gunfighter Shane enters the picture to side with the Starrett family and resolve the conflict through an act of violence. While the opposing Ryker wants to grow cattle (i. e. wealth), the Starretts want to grow a family. Frontier settlement was envisioned as a "re-enactment and democratic renewal of the original 'social contract'" (Slotkin 1992, 11). In myth, it represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of "separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and *regeneration through violence*" (ibid., 12). Shane's violence in the movie then achieves this renewal of the social contract: "His existence is a protest not only against the division of labor that constitutes the class system, but against the distribution of wealth that is justified by the argument that those who have wealth have earned it through work" (McGee, 13).[79] Shane here operates as a mythic hero: neither does he have a last name, nor a history. Since he leaves town after the deed, he does not seem to have a future either, he simply is a "mysterious stranger who emerges from almost nowhere at a time of flux, change or danger to guide the community safely through the crisis" (McVeigh, 135). Thanks to Shane, a certain Jeffersonian ideal is restored at the end of the film.

Later Westerns were more pessimistic and worked to deconstruct the myth of the West as a place for regeneration of democratic values and a classless society. *BrBa* is more akin to these revisionist Westerns. While Western references might not have been

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78 The significance of this movie cannot be emphasized enough: "*Shane* represents a vastly influential model for heroism and leadership that would find a permanent place in the American psyche [...] each version of the *Shane*-myth acting as an excellent barometer of and window on social, cultural and political feeling in the United States" (McVeigh, 125).

79 See also: "The compleat [*sic!*] 'American' of the Myth was one who had defeated and freed himself from both the 'savage' of the western wilderness and the metropolitan regime of authoritarian politics and class privilege" (Slotkin 1992, 11).

intended when the show was originally conceived, creator Vince Gilligan expressed his "love [for] westerns" in an interview with Bill Nevins: "Gradually, after the first *Breaking Bad* episode, it started to dawn on me that we could be making a contemporary western. So you see scenes that are like gunfighters squaring off, like Clint Eastwood and Lee Van Cleef" (n. pag.).

A classic Western hero, Shane "sacrifices himself for a community in which he believes more than he believes in himself or in the social viability of his skill with a gun" (McGee, 145). In Leone's Westerns, however, the male at the center of the narrative is a gunslinger who can be interpreted as an incarnation of capitalism or its agent. These men are only superior in the way that "professionalism in the arts of violence is the hero's defining characteristic" (Slotkin 1992, 379). As "violence artists" they are "valuing property and material goods over the wealth of family ties" (McGee, 183). A similar transformation can be observed in Walter White, even though he rather starts as a more feminized Joe Starrett and becomes Ryker or the Leonesque vision of Shane because he damages his family ties in his quest for male self-valuation based on the accumulation of wealth and the subordination of others. Writing about Anthony Mann's and other 1960s Westerns, McGee postulates that "there is usually a link between masculinity and the desire for money and power, with the implication that such a masculine desire ultimately destroys one's humanity, if not one's life" (129).

Since masculinity is of paramount importance in the genre, it became the site where the myth of boundless opportunity in a classless society could be exposed as such. The Man with No Name (Clint Eastwood) in Leone's *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) is "not moral or emotional, not altruistic but self-centered, not heroic but adept at violence" (Saunders, 173). The Spaghetti Westerns "stripped the Western form of its cultural burden of morality. They discarded its civility along with its hypocrisy" (Pauline Kael qtd. in: ibid., 177). The distribution of wealth was less dependent on hard work, but rather on the use of force. The violence of an individual like Shane could not transcend class but became an agent of ruthless capitalism in these visions. *BrBa* plays through this conflict not by having two groups fight each other for access to land or wealth, but it articulates class struggle *within* one man.

Walter inhabits both poles of the neoliberal dilemma outlined above: on the one hand, he is a victim of the neoliberal system that some argue took hold of the USA when Reagan was elected president (see van Apeldoorn & Overbeek, 1). Walter has insufficient health care and works two jobs to support his family and pay off the

mortgage to his suburban home. He becomes, however, also an agent of this system once he remasculinizes himself. Consider the following exchanges between Walter and his partner Jesse. The first takes place after a drug meet in S02E01. The scenery is telling as well: Walter chose a junkyard for the exchange. Walter's selection of place has comedic effect as Jesse and Tuco wonder why he did not choose a mall for the exchange. The joke, of course, turns sour as it actually indicates that the wilderness is not where we were socialized to suspect it. The animal in us is not necessarily brought to light in nature, but by the seductions of neoliberal society. Surrounded by car wrecks stacked as high as houses and just having witnessed how Tuco beat one of his henchmen to death, Walter calculates how much longer he will have to stay in this milieu until he has, as he claims, provided for his family. A man of science, his calculation, James observes, "lays out the crude needs of the struggling American middle class more precisely than a politician could" (n. pag.):

> a good state college, adjusting for inflation, say $45,000 a year, say two kids, four years of college, $360,000. The remaining mortgage on the home, $107,000, home equity line $30,000, that's $137,000. Cost of living, food, clothing, utilities, say two grand a month – I mean, that should put a dent in it, anyway. 24K a year, provide for, say, ten years, that's $240,000, plus 360 plus 137 – 737. Seven hundred and thirty thousand dollars, that's what I need. You and I both clear about seventy grand a week. That's only ten and a half more weeks. Call it 11. Eleven more drug deals and always in a public place from now on. It's doable. Definitely doable (*BrBa* S02E01).

Thus, this scene takes place in a visual representation of the death of the American Dream (see figure 23) – which is also the site for a drug deal and a killing at the same time – the audio track in the form of Walter's voice calculates the cost for upholding the American Dream and what is necessary – dealing drugs

*Figure 23 The death of the American Dream (*BrBa *S02E01).*

and exerting violence – to actually make it happen. Moreover, the cost of living for a few means death and destruction for unequally more people as the number Walter presents us with in his calculation, 737.000 dollars, is mirrored in the plane crash he caused in a butterfly effect fashion (read together, the titles of S02E01, S02E04, S02E10 and S02E13 form "Seven-Thirty-Seven Down Over ABQ").

This, as mentioned, is one part of the story that finds Walter, due to the neoliberal system in which he lives, as some sort of victim. Due to cuts in social spending,

privatization and commodification of social services, "[s]ociety's *real* systems of self-defence," John McMurtry writes, "universal health care, public education, life-long income-security, social safeguarding and care for the old, the young and the infirm [...] are in this way downgraded and deprived of their income support. They are seen as less important than protection of private corporate property at home and abroad" (93). This stands in stark contrast to the other, masculine safeguard of society, the military industrial complex. The accusations of socialism that Obamacare receives and the unchallenged spending the military industrial complex enjoys can ideologically be traced to ideas connected to the West/Western: individualism, self-reliance, and assertiveness versus feminine coded, community-based defense systems such as Obamacare.

In the fifth season, Jesse remembers Walter's calculation but Walter, after his remasculinization, wants more than he previously admitted:

> **Jesse**: When you... um... started this thing, did you ever dream of having five million dollars? I know for a fact that you didn't. I know for a fact all you needed was $737.000 cause you worked it all out, like, mathematically. Ok, selling the methylamine now means that no one else ever gets killed. And I vote for that, man. Hands down. And we could have it tomorrow. We would be out. You could spend time with your family. No more worrying about them getting hurt or finding out about everything. Isn't this what you have been working for?
> **Walter**: I have not been working this hard just to sell out!
> **Jesse**: It's not sellin' out!
> **Walter**: Yes, it is, Jesse. I... we have suffered and bled, literally, for this business. And I will *not* throw it away for *nothing*.
> **Jesse**: I don't know how else to say it, Mr. White: five million Dollars isn't nothing.
> **Walter**: Jesse, have you heard of a company called 'Gray Matter'?
> **Jesse**: No.
> **Walter**: Well, I co-founded it in grad school with a couple of friends of mine. Actually I was the one who named it. And back then it was just small time. We had a couple of patents pending but nothing really shattering. Of course we all knew the potential. We were gonna take the world by storm. And then... this... um... something happened between the three of us and... I'm not gonna go into details, but for personal reasons I decided to leave the company. And I sold my share to my two partners. I took a buy-out. For five thousand Dollars. Now, at the time that was a lot of money for me. Care to guess what that company is worth now?
> **Jesse**: Millions?
> **Walter**: Billions. With a B. *Two point one six billion* as of last Friday. I look it up every week. And I sold my share, *my* potential, for $5,000. I sold my kid's birthright for a few months rent.
> **Jesse**: This isn't the same thing.
> **Walter**: Jesse, you asked me if I was in the meth business or in the money business. Neither. *I'm in the empire business* (*BrBa* S05E06).

Until S05E06, Walter's mantra is that all he does is for his family. Following this, what Walter does is what Slavoj Žižek calls "*lying in the guise of truth*: even if what I am saying is factually true, the motives that make me say it are false" (85). Now that he has enough money to support *several* families, he finally spells out his true desire: he wants to build an empire and by the fifth season, he has everything in place. He achieved his

goal in a pattern resembling the frontier myth, only that this time around, neither the hero nor his community are regenerated. Walter, of course, turns out to be no hero at all. Despite his stated intentions, he is an empire builder and there is no Shane who is capable of winning over him – he can only turn himself in. Walter left his civilized life for the savage drug business, of which he knew hardly anything and thus figures as the Other.[80] This drug business was firmly controlled by Latin American "animals" (Walter in *BrBa* S02E01). By the fifth season, all influential cartel members either killed each other or were killed by Walter. He conquered this wilderness and pushed his own order onto it. He did this, as he proclaimed, for his family (i.e. civilization), but ends up confessing to his true intentions, money and power. Before, he was an 'emasculated wimp', now he is a manly man, someone who, like Theodore Roosevelt, transformed from four-eyes to a Rough Rider, someone who commands respect: the methylamine-deal he discusses with Jesse never materializes. He does, however, meet the interested buyers. When they ask him "Who the hell are you?", he simply replies "You know *exactly* who I am" (*BrBa* S0507). Granted, they do: Heisenberg. Not only they: after he has been exposed for what he has become, his blue meth has turned into a sought-after consumer good forever bound to his name. Walter White, suburban husband and father, has created a widely known legend, Heisenberg.

Figured as neoliberal business environment, the alignment of business and crime is even more remarkable: there are no social security contributions in the drug business. Walter, the cancer-patient-turned-drug-lord, does not offer any sort of insurance to his employees. If, however, they could become a risk to his enterprise, he simply has them killed.

After the murder of his former employer Gus, Walter seeks to use the far-reaching infrastructure Gus established. However, since the murder of Gus caught the attention of the DEA, many of Gus's former employees find themselves arrested. Gus established something that is referred to as a "legacy fund" to take care of his employees' families should they face prison time. This way, it was assured they would not talk to the police and simply do their time. These funds were however taken away by the DEA. Walter, after taking over the reigns, does not see why he should support these people with his money, even though he has more than enough of it. Consequently, in S05E08 he arranges to have all nine of them assassinated.[81]

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80 Interestingly, Oliver Stone's latest movie is about a conflict between Californian marijuana dealers and a Mexican cartel. The movie's title is *Savages*. The savages are found south of the border.

81 In an interview with Vince Gilligan, Denise Martin observes that this scene "echoe[s] the *Godfather*'s

There are more similarities between the drug business and neoliberal capitalism: the product crosses national borders, the sites of production are often found in low-income societies, whereas the places of consumption are located in first world countries, and there is fierce competition among corporations figured as cartels. In the end, despite the necessarily deregulated nature of an illegal business, power is accumulated in the hands of a few as one hierarchically structured cartel establishes a monopoly. In the case of *BrBa*, it is Walter that has both, the purest product on the market and by season five has eliminated his competition. Moreover, his product is distributed internationally (for example Mexico and the Czech Republic) with equipment that comes from transnational sources (Germany). Previously, Walter used public funds to finance his business enterprise by stealing equipment from the school that employed him. Also, in its distinct power over people fashion in which human beings figure as mere objects, the cartel even tries to buy Jesse (who later becomes a slave for the group of Nazis that takes over after Walter's retirement in S05E08).

That the border between illegal and legal business is blurry is evident in the fact that money in itself does not have any morals. Money has no values attached to it other than the exchange value it represents: when Walter counts his drug money, one of the bills is blood-stained (literally and metaphorically). This, however, does not alter the bill's 'value.' Series like *The Wire* and *Sons of Anarchy* illustrate how former drug lords take their money into legal business. The documentary *Cocaine Cowboys* similarly advances the idea that some of the billions made through the drug trade helped shape the cityscape of today's Miami during the 1980s. In *BrBa*, ironically, Gus is one of the DEA's biggest sponsors. Moreover, he launders his money through his fast food chain Los Pollos Hermanos,[82] which is a striving business that employs many people all over the Southwest: "business and crime are seen as proximate, intertwined or even

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baptism montage in which Michael eliminated his enemies" (n. pag.). Another *Godfather* reference can be found in S05E09 when Walter's neighbor recognizes the now wanted man and drops her grocery bag containing oranges.

82 The Los Pollos Hermanos logo, which displays two chickens in ponchos and sombreros, has become one of the *BrBa* merchandising items. There are also t-shirts with iconic Heisenberg images being sold – an indication that the series enjoys a cult following and fans of the show identify with it. Whether they do so because of the show's narrative quality or because they actually feel sympathy for its set of morally corrupt characters is an interesting question that unfortunately cannot be answered here. However, the idea of real or fictitious gangsters as objects of glorification is not without precedents – be it train robber Jesse James, Chicago mobster Al Capone (a fictional version of him is currently a side character in the HBO drama *Boardwalk Empire*), the whole sub-genre of gangster rap or Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos*. A rather ironic instance of *BrBa*'s fan following just recently made the news: a crystal meth cook wearing a Los Pollos Hermanos shirt was arrested in Chicago (see Leurs, n. pag.).

synonymous" (Meek, n. pag.).[83] Put provocatively, by constructing business and crime as synonymous, *BrBa* dares to ask us to ponder the (moral) difference between a hedge funds manager, who risks the bankruptcy of thousands (nations maybe), who is rewarded for it with a golden handshake (paid for by those he made suffer) and a king pin, who orders one of his henchmen to pull the trigger. The Wall Street broker and king pin, however, are eventually insignificant to the system that reproduces itself – once Walter is dead someone else will fill the vacuum he leaves behind. Demand, after all, will not suddenly disappear with him.

To return to *BrBa* as a commentary on the economic and systemic crisis of the USA: as I have shown earlier, in the first season, the pilot episode in particular, Walter is constructed as the epitome of the crisis of masculinity discourse and as somebody whose middle-class lifestyle has become hard to maintain. However, once he remasculinizes, he becomes an agent of crisis:

> we might infer that there are active agents of crisis, and agents in whose interest crisis acts. We might even deduce that crisis somehow distributes agency, or that agency involves the distribution of always already critical terms and positions. To think of masculinity as an embodied, social, and political domain in which crisis might be performed is to conceive of gender and sexuality as a performative arena of sorts, where ostensible disorder does not simply signal the radical dissolution of form but rather its reorganization (Walsh, 1-2).

His return to an idealized conception of manliness born at the turn of the nineteenth century and mediated through genres such as the Western helps him to overcome the financial struggles to remain in the middle class, but bring (fatal) crises to people related to him in one way or the other. What is more, within a single year he not only manages to maintain a middle-class lifestyle, he actually has the financial means to go way beyond the middle-class, which, concerning the erosion of the middle class, is already a statement in itself. While this might be viewed as a statement on social mobility, this mobility seems only to be possible outside the law. As law-abiding citizens, all signs pointed downwards for the White family before Walter's remasculinization.

As *BrBa* among its wide stylistic palette on occasion visually borrows from Sergio Leone's vision of the Western (most clearly in the extreme close-ups in S03E12) and is,

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83 See also: "Gus Fring, an entrepreneur who owns a chain of fast-food chicken restaurants across the South-West [...] It turns out that this is only part of an even larger multinational corporation, with tendrils reaching out to Germany. In a priceless scene, entirely in subtitled German, we see a business executive who knows he is about to be arrested munching his way through a bowl of processed chicken bites while seven pink food scientists in white coats explain the new dips they have concocted to seduce sugar and fat-loving Americans, replacing honey with high-fructrose corn syrup in their Honey Mustard, alleviating the potential for gastric distress in their Cajun Kick-Ass, and generally making the product sound less appetising and healthy than Walter's 99.9 per cent pure crystal meth" (Meek, n. pag.).

like the Western in general, deeply concerned with what it means to be a man, Mitchell's observation that Leone "transformed the landscape (the 'West') into a vague topography that might be almost anywhere and the western code into mere capitalist excess at its most ruthless" also applies to *BrBa* to a great extent (228). As Meek observes, city and landscape are both presented as deserts in *BrBa* and again, we find a parallel to Leone: "Town and landscape, in other words, collapse here into a single depressing symbolic entity, controverting the genre's traditional split between nature and culture, West and East, the wild and the civilized" (Mitchell, 229).

Figure 24 The desert as a place of death. This shot of a dead wolf in the foreground with the RV in the background recreates Andrew Wyeth's painting Christina's World. *The immobility of Christina's lower body is counterpointed by her strong will as we see her, head up, crawling towards the farmhouse in the right background of the painting. Furthermore, Christina's body handicapped by polio establishes another link to Walter in the form of his son Walter, Jr. (see above). Mobility in the context of* BrBa *receives class connotations. The weak body of Walter White contains a strong mind intent on moving upwards through a landscape, literally and metaphorically, characterized by death. Walter is also a walking dead man who just does not know it yet – this is also the message of the narcocorrido "The Ballad of Heisenberg" in the seventh episode of the same season. In the picture above, both Jesse and Walter are in the RV looking for a way out of their hopeless situation. Amongst other things, Walter ponders the perfect moment to die. (S02E09).*

This frontier pattern does not exclusively stay within the confines of the human mind: space does matter in *BrBa*. Albuquerque, apart from suburban homes, is presented as a desert-like place comprised of bleak office spaces, strip malls, filthy motels and spaces that are seemingly a facade for a frontier of some kind: the underground laboratory used for drug production or derelict places used for drug consumption.[84] In contrast, the desert that surrounds this bleak urban space is captured in beautiful long shots and rich colors. Still, this desert, too, is not an inviting place as it is crossed by illegals and drug traffickers. When the battery of the RV Walter and Jesse use for cooking dies, both must fear for their lives and barely make it back to Albuquerque (S02E09) (see figure 24). In some instances, the representation of urban civilization takes the form of biting satire: "Saul the criminal lawyer has an office on one of these [strip malls], with an inflatable Statue of Liberty wagging on the roof. He sits at his desk inside against a backdrop of fibreglass classical columns and a wall-print

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84 The underground laboratory could be read as a reference to the underground laboratory in Los Alamos where the first nuclear tests had been undertaken, especially considering the fact that both laboratories are/were used to manufacture death and as such can be regarded as implicated in empire building.

of the US constitution, dealing out counsel on how to lie, kill and cheat without being caught" (Meek, n. pag.).

In its fifth and final season, *BrBa* literally brings the savagery into the suburbs of Albuquerque and it does so in a visual language laden with meaning: at first, Walter and Jesse cook crystal meth in their RV in the desert. In season four, they take their talents into the underground superlab that Gus set up in an industrial area of Albuquerque. In the fifth season, they have to come up with a new strategy and – metaphorically speaking – Walter brings the rot of his own house into suburbia. With the help of a pest control company, Walter and Jesse move from one tented house to the next to produce their dangerous product. The irony is obvious: a pest control tent is used to produce another pest. What is more, however, the movement takes place from the desert right into the foundation of civilization: the family home. The threat civilization faces is not, it is suggested, to be found behind a frontier, but right at the core of civilization itself. It is men like Walter who in their lust for power inflict all kinds of violence on others – regardless of the costs for their own family or society in general. He is able to do so because, like a cancer cell, as an educated white family father he is not recognized as a threat by, to use McMurtry's terminology, the social body's immune system that turns a blind-eye when it comes to whiteness. When Skyler is afraid that someone will sooner or later come knocking at their door, Walter lashes out: "Who are you talking to right now? Who is it you see? [...] I am the danger. A guy opens his door and gets shot and you think of me? No. I *am* the one who knocks!" (S04E06). It is not some external danger that threatens the core of civilization – it is already at home and it is because of him that she will lose the house and will have to work for a taxi cab company to make ends meet. Skyler, like everyone else, mistakes her white suburban husband for a milquetoast. Dialogues like this turn the crisis of masculinity discourse inside-out. Furthermore, *BrBa* also figuratively – especially considering the pest tent imagery of the fifth season's first half – brings back the neoliberal crisis to where it started: in the credit crisis rooted in the American real estate market. The American Dream of an own house has quite literally become toxic.

For most characters in this series, the American Dream is defined in material terms. Jane, Jesse's girlfriend during the second season exclaims at the sight of 500.000 dollar in cash "This is freedom. This is saying I can go anywhere I want. I can be anybody. Who do you wanna be? Where do you wanna go?" (*BrBa* S02E12). She does not go anywhere as Jane will be dead this very episode. Freedom is equated with the freedom

to buy and, more specifically, that freedom can only be attained through financial means. Another non-material concept, time, is presented as purchasable. Walter will die eventually, but he can buy himself some extra months with expensive cancer treatment.

3.8. *"I'm your hostage": Women in* Breaking Bad

Quite often, women are in Walter's way in *BrBa* – usually to their disadvantage. The day she blackmailed Walter, Jane chokes on her own vomit with Jesse lying next to her. Walter, who broke into the apartment, does nothing but watch how one of his problems fades away into oblivion. Lang and Dreher discuss this scene and the character constellation from an obvious point of view (see 102-103): *BrBa* invites us to side with Walter as the logic behind his non-action, what we might call failure to render assistance in an emergency, is plausible. With Jane he would have lost Jesse as a business partner. Moreover, it is not far-fetched to think that he might have lost Jesse to a severe heroin addiction as well. Looked at this way, he even saves Jesse's life by letting Jane die. Yet, we should not forget that he also saves himself because Jane previously blackmailed him. Slavoj Žižek's suggestion that "Sometimes, doing nothing is the most violent thing to do" rings true in this instance (183). Žižek's reflections on violence are interesting in another aspect, too. He distinguishes between two forms of violence:

> subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint: subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perpetuation of the 'normal', peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this 'normal' state of things. Objective violence is visible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent. Systemic violence is thus something like the notorious 'dark matter' of physics, the counterpart to an all-too-visible violence subjected violence. It may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be 'irrational' explosions of subjective violence (2).

Dark matter is an interesting choice of words here, as *BrBa* frequently refers to Gray Matter, which is the firm Walter founded as a researcher. Walter inhabits both spheres: subjective and objective violence. He acts violently and through his actions and non-action, violence is done to others. He is also a victim of this systemic violence, at least in the pilot. He suffers from symbolic violence (i.e. through language) when Hank exposes him as unmanly on his fiftieth birthday. He suffers from systemic violence as the society that he lives in devalues feminine jobs like teaching (at least in financial aspects). Moreover, he is humiliated by his pupils from well-to-do families at his car

wash job. Also, the neoliberal system in which he lives puts people with lower incomes at a disadvantage in health care. The subjective violence also becomes a part of his remasculinization (for example when he is involved in physical altercations with Jesse or Mike) and an effect of objective violence since Walter would never have engaged in this process of transformation if it was not for the objective violence that made him feel powerless and without control of his own life. This objective violence is produced by both neoliberalism and, as I will show in the following paragraphs, our gender system.

With regard to Jane's death, we see that subjective violence is the result of objective violence. Lang and Dreher describe Jane as a person without scruples, someone who has only her own interest in mind and who leads Jesse on the wrong path (see 102). In this assessment, she becomes a *femme fatale* who is punished through Walter's non-action at the end of S02E12. They forget, however, that Jane was sober for 18 months before she met Jesse and that it is Jesse who reintroduces her to drugs. Moreover, Jesse was already in the middle of a downward spiral that has less to do with his involvement with Jane, but with Walter: in the beginning of the second season, Walter urges Jesse to push into "new territory" for selling their product in S02E07. As a consequence, Combo, one of Jesse's friends, is killed in S02E11. Since Walter shows no empathy, Jesse begins to numb his emotional pain and his own guilt by consuming even more crystal meth than he has before. It is only then that he introduces the sober heroin addict Jane, whom he met in S02E05, to crystal meth. Jane's father is the air traffic controller who, being devastated by the loss of his only child, causes the plane crash at the end of the season. The simplistic moral that can be drawn from this is that actions (or in this case non-action) have consequences. Read through Žižek, this chain of events also exposes the underlying objective/systemic violence at play here. The guilt of Jesse's demise in the second season is relegated to Jane even though forces prior to his involvement with her are at work.

Within the narrative of *BrBa*, Jane is solely defined through her relationship with other men: the troubled child of a concerned father, the girlfriend of Jesse, and the obstacle in Walter's quest for control over Jesse. Her death is a plot device: Jesse gets pushed further over the edge and for Walter – the narrative's undeniable master signifier – her death works as a reveal of character.[85] Setting aside the function the character Jane

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85 Paradoxically (given their negative description of Jane), Lang and Dreher also write that Walter has burdened himself with irrevocable guilt through what they simply call murder (see 103, 117). Denise Du Vernay argues Jane's purpose was that of the Other, which is why she opines that her character "is problematic for a feminist reading": "The role of Jane serves mostly as a means for developing Jesse as a character; his love and mourning for her makes him more compelling to the audience" (195-196).

plays for the narrative construction of *BrBa*, on the surface Jane can similarly to Skyler be understood as a woman who brings down her man. Less scrupulous about Jesse's involvement in the drug business, she nevertheless poses a threat to the Walter-Jesse duo at the center of viewers' emotional involvement with the series.

It is striking that the women at Jesse's and Walter's side are the victims of objective violence. Yet, following Žižek, it is not astonishing. Žižek claims that even liberal societies suppress women as the very characteristics of liberalism come with "a male twist" such as autonomy, public activity, and competition; thus "liberalism itself [...] harbours male dominance" (122-123). This, then, also has consequences for the treasured human rights that liberalism seemingly advocates, which turn out to be "the rights of white male property owners to exchange freely on the market and exploit workers and women, as well as exert political domination" (126). For Walter, this means that by *BrBa*'s final season, he has not only the skills but also acquired the infrastructure and material means to dominate the market for crystal meth. In the process, he subordinates his partners and eradicates his enemies, who are, as already mentioned, often non-white or female (Jane and Skyler).[86]

As Walter becomes both a manly man and a successful entrepreneur (the latter, it is suggested, is only possible through the former [see above]), his wife is made to suffer. After the junkyard scene discussed above, Walter almost rapes his then pregnant wife and thus it is her onto whom his anger, frustration and fear of powerlessness are displaced (*BrBa* S02E01). When she finds out that he is involved in the drug business, she makes him move out of the house. Still, in order to protect her son from disappointment and to protect Hank's career, she does not tell anyone why. Consequently, all the blame for her family falling apart is put on her. Walter then forces himself back into the family home in S03E03. When she calls the police on him, she still refuses to state as to why she wants him removed from the house. As he did not use *subjective violence* against her and she is unwilling to unmask him, he is allowed to stay. She is at the receiving end of *symbolic violence* from Walter, Jr., who calls his mother "a bitch" for separating from Walter (*BrBa* S03E01). This assessment is shared by some of *BrBa*'s viewers as a whole fan culture of hating her has developed.[87] After

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86 This does not always happen deliberately. After Walter steals lab equipment from the school he works in, a Native American, Hugo, is fired in his place in *BrBa* S01E06. Here, the objective violence is at play as the doer of a crime is automatically suspected to be non-white (on Native Americans in *BrBa* see also: Lang and Dreher, 80-81).

87 There is, for example, a whole Facebook page dedicated to hating Skyler White. The description of the page reads "Skyler White is a horrible person" (see https://www.facebook.com/SkylerWhiteYuck). Much of this, I suggest, has to do with her role as Walter's 'antagonist': instead of being grateful for the

the final episode aired, Anna Gunn wrote a co-ed article for *The New York Times* in which she describes her experiences as the actress who played this character, which included death threats directed at her:

> As the one character who consistently opposes Walter and calls him on his lies, Skyler is, in a sense, his antagonist. So from the beginning, I was aware that she might not be the show's most popular character.
> But I was unprepared for the vitriolic response she inspired. [...] As an actress, I realize that viewers are entitled to have whatever feelings they want about the characters they watch. But as a human being, I'm concerned that so many people react to Skyler with such venom. Could it be that they can't stand a woman who won't suffer silently or 'stand by her man'? That they despise her because she won't back down or give up? Or because she is, in fact, Walter's equal? (n. pag.).

Since Skyler is hesitant to cut all ties with her husband and is seduced by the money he lays at her feet she becomes a prisoner of Walter's actions (see figure 25). In S03E05, she ponders divorce and consults a lawyer. She states that she did not marry a criminal upon which her

*Figure 25 Money as seduction (*BrBa *S03E3).*

lawyer matter-of-factly tells her that she is now married to one and that by remaining with him, she is being made culpable and could lose everything, including the house. Her lawyer is also the only person in *BrBa* that calls Walter's stated motivation a fantasy: "He did it for the family, right? Well, guess what: that is one enormous load of horseshit. [...] You are now an accessory after the fact" (S03E05). Through his actions and her hesitation to divorce and unmask him after sixteen years of marriage, Skyler is forced into a position of passivity. It is paramount to note that this was not the case before Walter's remasculinization (see above). However, her reluctance to simply leave her criminal husband also has a moral connotation: she, too, is seduced by money and power.

In season four, Skyler actively engages in her husband's business through laundering his drug money. Her will to keep the family intact and the seduction of money come at a high cost, as she ultimately realizes in the series' final season. In S05E05 she declares "I'm not your wife, I'm your hostage." She suffers from objective violence that seems inescapable to her; also, it might be argued, because she herself was seduced by it. The imagery of imprisonment becomes most pronounced in S05E04 after she jumped in the

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risks her husband takes she begins to despise him.

pool with the intent, it seems, to drown:[88]

> **Skyler**: Stop it, Walt. Just stop. I don't need to hear any of your bullshit rationales. I'm in it now, I'm compromised but I won't, I will not have my children living in a house where dealing drugs, and hurting people, and killing people is shrugged off as 'shit happens'. We're back at it, fine. But the kids stay away and that's that.
> **Walt**: That's that? That's what?
> **Skyler**: I got them out of this house.
> [...]
> **Walt**: Like what? I mean specifically. What is your next move?
> **Skyler**: My next move is maybe I hurt myself, make it clear we need more time, let Hank and Marie see that we're still struggling.
> **Walt**: No, more like you're still struggling. So maybe next time I have you committed, put you in some in-patient facility while I take care of the kids myself. Is that what you want?
> [...]
> **Walt**: What are you gonna do? You gonna run off to France, you gonna close the curtains, change locks? This is a joke Skyler. C'mon, you wanna take me on, you wanna take away *my* children? What's the plan?
> **Skyler**: [screams] I don't know! This is the best I could come up with, okay? I... I will count every minute that the kids are away from here, away from you as a victory. But you're right, it's a bad plan. I don't have any of your magic, Walt. I don't know what to do. I'm a coward. I... I can't go to the police, I can't stop laundering your money, I can't keep you out of this house, I can't keep you even out of my bed. All I can do is wait. That's it, that's the only good option: hold on, bite my time, and wait.
> **Walt**: Wait for what? What are you waiting for?
> **Skyler**: For the cancer to come back (shot/counter-shot of their faces, Walt looks stunned, in Skyler a tiny glimpse of hope surfaces on her face] (S05E04).

Apart from the threat to be put into a mental facility, which automatically brings to mind this practice done to 'hysterical' women in the nineteenth century, Skyler also mentions that she cannot keep him out of her bed. Here she is referencing the closing frame of S05E01, which in turn alludes to the closing frame of S01E01: in both

*Figure 26 Objective violence: protection turns into oppression (*BrBa *S05E14).*

frames, Skyler is approached from behind by Walter. In the pilot episode, she is surprised by this outburst of passion in her husband and consequently asks "Is that you, Walt?" In S05E01 she knows it is not Walter anymore. Her frightened facial expression is chilling when he begins touching her while he is telling her that everything will be just fine and that there is no better reason than family. Seemingly paralyzed, she silently endures this act of sexual coercion. All in all, the relationship between Walter and his

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88 The pool is never used for swimming. As a symbolic space, it can be interpreted in Freudian terms as representing the unconscious (like the sea) as it is while sitting by the pool that Walter has the idea of getting into drug manufacturing. The pool can also be seen as a place representing the wish to return to innocence, of washing oneself clean: Walter, Jr. throws up into the pool after his father made him drunk, Walter throws his first drug money into the pool, the pink teddy bear falls into the pool and, finally, so does Skyler (see also Land and Dreher, 68-69, 124).

wife provides a good example of the objective violence at work in the narrative universe of *BrBa* and – considering the hate some viewers show towards Skyler – among some of the show's viewers. It is important to keep in mind that instances of objective violence are due to Walter's remasculinization and the changed, neo-liberal attitude towards work that goes with it (i.e. teacher versus drug lord). Sexual coercion and subjective violence such as rape are systemic as they are bound to culturally accepted forms of masculinity: "the socialization of most males has strongly endorsed the idea that it is normal for males to be sexually aggressive. [...] [M]en are *supposed* to try to coerce women into sexual activity" (Schur, 85).

Be that as it may, the question that begs asking is whether *BrBa* only reveals misogyny in its audience or is it also complicit in it? The show's main character is male, but with each season, this master signifier becomes an ever more menacing presence in the lives of the people related to him. There seems to be no man capable of stopping him and all things considered, it is in fact Skyler who is able to stand up against him and assert some degree of control – for example when she is able to get the children out of the house. Like all

*Figure 27 Civilization turns toxic (*BrBa *S05E08).*

characters in *BrBa*, she too is not without guilt. When Hank threatens to expose Walter, she still sides with her husband in order to protect her family. Like with her husband, protecting herself plays also a part in this course of action (not to forget all that money). Rather a one-dimensional suburban mom in the series's first two seasons, her character is increasingly layered in later episodes. In terms of judging Walter White, Alyssa Rosenberg writes, Skyler actually inhabits a privileged position: "I think Skyler sees Walt as we're meant to see him: a self-deluding, pathetic man, but a dangerous one. She punctuates the fantasy that there's anything admirable left about Walter White, that we should still root for the man" (2012, n. pag.). Looked at this way, her character works to shape viewers' opinions about Walter White and as such is more powerful than it initially appears. Skyler is moreover the only complex female character the show has to offer – Jane is a plot device, Hank's wife Marie is hardly fleshed out as a character. Her own story arc as a kleptomaniac is never fully explored and, apart from *BrBa*'s investment in showing dubious morals, appears too detached from everything else in the

narrative. Still, even though Skyler is a fairly complex female character and is important to the narrative construction as she is important in exposing Walter's ill intentions, she, like many other female characters in anti-hero dramas, is a "spoil-sport" (ibid., n. pag.). There simply is no sympathetic/entertaining female counter-part to Jesse or Hank in *BrBa*.

In one of his last books, Horst-Eberhard Richter wrote that in our time of male crisis (*Krise der Männlichkeit*), men lack the insight that one humiliates himself by proving one's self-worth through the humiliation of others. The pattern of preemptive violence and the construction of ever more dangerous and 'phallic' weapons is termed a 'god complex' by Richter (11). The fear of impotence (*Ohnmacht*) is compensated by a vision of grandiosity and omnipotence (193-194). He traces this development to a process of secularization: the weakening of patriarchal structures and of a belief in an almighty god as well as the feeling of security that go with it were replaced by science and men who believed themselves to be gods (39). This god complex perfectly describes Walter White in *BrBa*: he is a man of science, he believes himself to be the most rational, the most professional, and he begins to surround himself with or refers to symbols of phallic grandiosity.[89] Vince Gilligan himself states in the audio commentary to the second season DVD box set that Walter wants to dictate the universe. The concluding question to this chapter is, then, what does it mean to have such a person as the main character of a drama series?

The answer, again, can be found with Richter. From the standpoint of hegemonic masculinity, Walter in S01E01 is a pathetic sight. Yet, this does not really change after his remasculinization: "the very acts that make Walt feel more masculine simultaneously make him more shameful" (Bossert, 72). In his god complex, Walter humiliates himself: the good-hearted 'wimp' becomes an ill-intended 'manly man' – with grim results. He does not see this, of course. The viewer, however, does. At least s/he should. Which is also where we enter the 'problem' of *BrBa*'s implicit dramaturgy. The hatred Skyler receives on the internet is an example of this: for some, she is simply the castrating woman who does not have her man's back. *BrBa*'s implicit dramaturgy, however, also makes possible a deeper reading than its creator may have intended. The ill morals of its main character are, as I have shown, not a result of abstract ideas about

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89 This begins in S01E01 when he leaves his part-time job by grabbing his crutch, to the many times he dares others, Jesse in particular, to show some balls, he buys a Mustang in S04, and culminates in him buying and using guns.

morality in general, but strongly dependent on ideas about masculinity. In fact, masculinity – the transformation towards hegemonic masculinity – can be read as the driving force of this narrative: many of the choices the series' main character makes are dependent on becoming a hegemonic male. This development, this masculinity, is – from a psychological perspective – so convincing that unlikely events such as a chemistry-teacher-turned-drug-lord or the plane crash in season two seem plausible.

Despite its high degree of stylization, *BrBa* is often praised for its plausibility.[90] Much of this is accounted for by the series' constructions of gender. Gender scripts drive the show: much of what happens is based on Walter's conception of a real man and his transformation towards this ideal. Skyler, for the most part, is busy curtailing this behavior (unsuccessfully).

With regards to the systemic crisis of the USA as well as the crisis of masculinity, my reading of *BrBa* suggests that neither do the USA's economic and health systems suffer from any crisis in particular, nor does masculinity suffer from a crisis – crisis here rather works as the backdrop for the reorganization of white male hegemony. This is not to say that everything is fine but that crisis is an integral part of both neoliberalism (under which we can summarize the USA's economic and health systems) and masculinity. *BrBa* establishes a link between capitalism and masculinity: understood as practices, accumulating wealth and becoming a hegemonic male are intertwined. Furthermore, capitalism and masculinity should not be understood as *in* crisis but *as* crises simply because crisis is nothing that is done to them by some Other. The economic crisis, it could be argued, did not come from an outside attack, but was already contained within the economic system. Using the megalomanic Walter and the destruction he has in tow, *BrBa* turns Adam Smith's famous concept of the invisible hand in which the self-interest of individual agents in the marketplace are beneficial to a society into a resounding slap: self-interest is cancerous to the social body. At the same time, however, this self-interest has contaminated the social body, it almost seems as if society is driven by self-interest. Hank, for example, does not pursue Heisenberg at all costs because he loves the law, but because he wants to validate himself as a man and because it will be great for his career. Jesse is one of the few people who try to act beyond self-interest in *BrBa*.

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90 See, for example, Jason Mittell: "The program's flashy visual style signals that the world seen onscreen is less naturalistic than the thoughts and emotions playing out inside characters' heads, so even something as unreal as the plane crash triggered by Walt's selfish actions in the second season is grounded as psychologically plausible and consistent with the show's thematic and tonal approach" (2011, n. pag.).

With regard to whiteness and minorities, neither have white men lost all their power nor have they become subordinate citizens simply because women, LGBT groups or ethnic minorities have demanded and continue to demand *equal* rights. While this may be true for American society in general, this holds true in *BrBa* where a white man claims the world. While *BrBa* can be said to consciously make this point by making Walter unsympathetic, this also applies to the series as a whole since minorities do not have an own voice in this series.

In the end, Gilligan's insistence on morals falls a little short. "It's funny, isn't it? How we draw that line?", Walter asks Hank when the DEA man lights a Cuban cigar (*BrBa* S01E07). Every character in *BrBa* crosses that line, some further than others. If the moral of this story is that we are all capable of amoral behavior, *BrBa* dissolves the frontier in Arendt's banality of evil. However, the 'crises' at work here are, as I have shown, not necessarily an issue of behaving morally or amorally. It cuts deeper than this because we have to consider the values and norms that determine this behavior:[91]

> Walter White's economic plight is symbolic of a corrupting value system and of a society crumbling under the weight of its own unchecked commitments to the American dream of success and consumerism, which now comes at the terrible price of not only sacrificing virtue amongst its citizenry, but also of encouraging, if not out and out praising, viciousness (Stephenson, 211).

To empathize with, if not celebrate, Walter is to accept the materialistic and patriarchal value system on which he operates as just. White masculinity then is, to use Sally Robinson's term, re-centered. However, if the viewer chooses to object to his behavior, *BrBa* de-centers hegemonic white masculinity while exposing the corruption at the heart of it and the system within which it operates.

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91 Judith Butler writes that "the social norms that constitute our existence carry desires that do not originate with our individual personhood. This matter is made more complex by the fact that the viability of our individual personhood is fundamentally dependent on these social norms. [...] [D]esire is always a desire for recognition and that it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable being" (2004, 2).

4. Gunfighter Revival in an Apocalyptic Setting

> "It's hard to explain why the dead won't die, why they just keep coming back" (Lansdale, ix).

> "[T]he reason the dead keep returning is because they have not been properly buried, requiring a symbolic debit that still must be paid and then repaid" (Mitchell, 172).

In the previous chapter, I have argued that *BrBa*'s storyline is inseparable from the remasculinization process of Walter White. In my analysis, I have used the frontiersman and the depiction thereof in the Western genre as points of reference. The introduction of Western tropes into other genres can also be observed in the zombie horror series *The Walking Dead* (*TWD*), which also airs on the basic cable channel AMC. In this chapter, I argue that the postapocalyptic scenario this series produces is the perfect stage for the reemergence of the Western hero. Are similar concerns as in *BrBa* at the heart of this return to an older form of masculinity or does *TWD* follow a different strategy? Furthermore, do these references rather point to classic Westerns or the revisionist kind?

There are many categorizations in the abundant literature on the Western. The most basic is the differentiation of classic and revisionist Westerns. The former is often "reviled nowadays as retrograde and symptomatic of the nation's celebration of white patriarchal hegemony" (Strang, 27). The latter dominates the production of films today:

> Probably because of its past associations with racism, sexism, and imperialism, the genre looks about as uncouth to contemporary sensibilities as a brown-stained spittoon.[...] With fewer films but more of them worthy of critical attention, its status has changed into a boutique genre specialized for ideological critique. Ironically, the stain acquired from its past associations has become the focal point in the Western's recent resurgence (ibid., 2).

Brent Strang moreover identifies two types of revisionist Westerns: on the one hand there are politically correct Westerns like *Dances with Wolves* (1990), that "rarely do more than reverse the Western's fundamental binaries, re-positioning the marginalized as the good guys and the white male agents of civilization as savages" (ibid. 4). Then, there is what Strang refers to as the Postmortem Western, which "encumbers the Western's heroic mode with a sense of defeatism and heralds a transitional point for the masculine subject. Now is the time for the cowboy hero to lose, and never more so than when he 'wins' by accomplishing his goals" (1). These Westerns do not have to have the traditional Western setting, which means that they can also have a more contemporary setting (*No Country for Old Men* [2007] is one example). A very important point that Strang makes in his description is the observation that the masculine subject loses even though it might be seen winning: the same pattern can be observed in *BrBa*: Walter achieves his goal of building an empire. This, however, does

not make him a hero. The process depicted is not one of progress, but of decay – when he closes the forth season with the words "I won", he has already lost most of his humanity and with it the love of his wife.

The series investigated in this and the following chapter again construct masculinity along the lines of Western representations. Neither, however, depicts a process of transformation as thorough as *BrBa*. The male main characters of both *TWD* and *Hell on Wheels* (*HoW*) (both air on AMC) are recognizably more masculine than *BrBa*'s Walter, even though it can be argued that *TWD*'s Rick suffers from domestication in the beginning. Genre-wise, *TWD* is primarily a horror series with Western features whereas *HoW* is a Western set during the construction of the Union Pacific railroad.

4.1. Reanimated Corpses and Reaffirmed Masculinity

It seems as if zombies have replaced the vampire as popular culture's monsters of choice these days. It has been coming for a long time. With George A. Romero's *Dead* series (1968 – present)[92] and countless B-movie variations of the living dead, zombies have recently ventured out of their grindhouse habitat to become the pop culture monster *du jour*: after the successful comic book adaptations *28 Days Later* (2002) and *28 Weeks Later* (2007) as well as the video game adaptations of *Resident Evil* (2002, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2012), Brad Pitt made the undead a mainstream movie attraction in *World War Z* (2013). There is even a zombie book for children on the market (*A Brain is for Eating* [2013] by Dan and Amelia Jacobs). Thus it is no surprise that a comic book adaptation, *TWD*, has become the most successful cable drama in recent years: the season four finale drew more than sixteen million viewers, thereby becoming the most-watched drama series in basic cable history (breaking its own season three finale record) (see Bibel 14 Oct. 2013, n. pag.).

Despite (or because of?) the huge following, which may also be due to the cult status Robert Kirkman's comics enjoy, *TWD* draws a lot of criticism for its gender and race representations and has, to say the least, a rather conflicted relationship to the *auteur* concept that is so valued by advocates of the 'quality TV' idea. Within three seasons,

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92 On Romero's status and his inspiration for the modern zombie, consider Sutler-Cohen: "It would be unwise at any point of a zombie article not to mention George A. Romero as the veritable 'Godfather' of modern day Zombie cinema. Though he may argue to the contrary, admitting his theft of the core story of Matheson's *I Am Legend* to develop *The Night of the Living Dead*, Romero set the tone for what has become a maniacal obsession with all things Living Dead" (Sutler-Cohen, 189).

already two showrunners (*The Green Mile*-director Frank Darabont, who developed the show, and his successor Glen Mazzara) have left the show.

As mentioned, George Romero's classic *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) is considered the ur-text of modern zombie films[93] and has established the genre's conventions: "Zombies are the dead come back to life. Zombies feed on the living. Anyone bitten by a zombie becomes a zombie. The only way to kill a zombie is to shoot it in the head. All other zombie films obey these conventions" (Adkins, qtd. in: Moreman & Rushton, 2). There are, however, variations amongst zombies in different films. In the *28* series, for example, zombies are able to run fast whereas Romero's creatures are rather slow. Zombies in most movies are dumb creatures that have no resemblance with their former living selves other than their bodies: their brain functions are reduced to mere instincts, or rather, the instinct to feed on the living (there is obviously little need for survival instincts when you are already dead). The origins of the zombie apocalypse are often unexplained or vague, which means that the movies, comics, as well as AMC's *TWD*, begin in medias res:[94]

> In *Night*, a member of the media is heard blaming the zombie outbreak on a space probe returning from mysterious Venus. Many zombie texts take the 'space radiation' theory seriously [...] while others locate the catastrophe in a manmade virus or a military experiment gone wrong; these texts all make the zombie a matter of science fiction. But Romero has always been cagier, and his later films never mention Venus again [...] Instead, his characters are likelier to posit metaphysical explanations – hell is full, or God is angry that we're trying to find the secrets of his Creation (ibid., 2).

Since zombies are basically humans without humanity and their appearance is hardly ever explained, they have been used as rich metaphors to explore cultural anxieties and are as such highly adaptable. Moreman and Rushton for example observe that the zombie feels comfortable in many genres, or, seen the other way around, the zombie movie encompasses all other genres despite its own few rules: "As a genre built fundamentally on disruption of a status quo, in a generic sense the zombie apocalypse can be worked into any other genre, like a cuckoo's egg: romantic comedy (*Shaun of the*

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93 Moreover, the zombie has a long-lived tradition in Haitian folklore (see Bishop 2009, chapter 1). The first Hollywood productions featuring zombies such as *White Zombie* (1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) "have more to do with folklore, ethnography, and imperialist paranoia [...] Indeed, the 'monsters' of the voodoo-themed zombie films are not even the zombies, but rather the sinister priest or master pulling their strings" (ibid., 25). "These inherently racist movies", Bishop writes, "terrified Western viewers with the thing they likely dreaded most at that time: slave uprisings and reverse colonialization" (15-16).

94 *TWD* begins with a cold opening: we see Rick at a gas station where he encounters and shoots a zombified girl. This introduces the rules of the new world: the how and why are (by generic convention) not really disclosed, what matters is that it happened and it changed the rules. It is a cruel world, one in which even little girls can bring death, which is why they have to be shot in the head. The world has become a place without innocence, which is an observation fitting Bishop's argument with regard to the post-9/11 zombie renaissance.

Dead), cops and robber drama (*La Horde*), 1950s sitcom (*Fido*), air disaster narratives (*Flight of the Living Dead*), ad infinitum" (6). From a psychological standpoint,[95] the zombie as us makes for a perfect screen for projection: "Zombies, as an abject reflection of our individual mortality, and harbingers of social decay, force the viewer to consider the dark possibilities of a meaningless existence. [...] Or, at least, they force us to consider the nature of the meanings that we currently attach to self and society" (ibid., 7). Also, a political component has been there since the ur-text of the modern zombie:

> *Night of the Living Dead* established a firm narrative scenario by focusing on a motley group of survivors, led by an unconventional African-American hero named Ben (Duane Jones), who must spend the night in a besieged country house, waiting for the authorities to arrive. The movie also restored a seriousness and gravitas to the genre, for when the country militia finally does show up in the final reel, their first response is to shoot and kill Ben, the only survivor of the film's supernatural abattoir. The violence and grotesque images were unprecedented at the time, aiding this lowbudget horror film in its function as an allegorical condemnation of the atrocities of Vietnam, violent racism, and the opposition to the civil rights movement. [...] *Night of the Living Dead* protested the war by graphically confronting audiences with the horrors of death and dismemberment and by openly criticizing those who use violence to solve their problems (Bishop 2009, 17).

Romero went on to write and direct more zombie movies, a series that currently stands at six films. The underlying themes differ and are as diverse as a critique of mass media in *Diary of the Dead* (2007) to critiques of capitalism and consumerism in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). "Historically", Bishop writes, "zombie cinema had represented a stylized reaction to the greater consciousness – primarily social and political injustices" (2009, 19). The first wave of zombie films ebbed with the beginning of the 1980s until their recent renaissance these past ten years: "America in the 1990s settled perhaps into too much complacency and stability to warrant serious, classical zombie narratives" (ibid., 19).

Like Bishop, Warren St. John traces the return of the living dead into the public consciousness to 9/11 and its political aftermath:

> writers have long used zombies to get at broad societal themes. Those writers fit into two categories [...]: those who see zombies as metaphors for American culture and those who see zombies as representative of outside forces that threaten society. In Mr. Romero's movies, zombies have often represented America's ravenous consumerism. [...] On the other hand, it does not take much of a stretch to see the parallel between zombies and anonymous terrorists who seek to convert others within society to their deadly cause. The fear that anyone could be a suicide bomber or a hijacker parallels a common trope of zombie films, in which healthy people are zombified by contact with other zombies and become killers (St. John, n. pag.; see also: Bishop 2009, "Introduction").

Zombie films present a state of emergency to a degree that all social structures collapse, or, in the case of *TWD* as in most zombie narratives, already have collapsed.[96] The imagery of "chaos, disorientation, fear, and destruction" in the 2004-remake of *Dawn of*

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95 The zombie concept has also been explored in reflections about psychology and philosophy as the p-zombie. See, for example, David J. Chalmers's *The Character of Consciousness* (2010).

the Dead for example has "a tone disturbingly similar to the initial news footage broadcast on September 11, 2001" (Bishop 2009, 37). Moreover everyone is a potential enemy, in zombie narratives: both the zombies and the survivors who are often more dangerous than the dead in a lawless world: scenes of robbery, rape and murder have become a staple of the genre.

As critical allegories for xenophobia and paranoia, zombie films seem fit to speak to the cultural climate after 9/11. If we consider the two waves of zombie films, the 1970s and today, another parallel is striking: "In fact, the frequency of these movies has noticeably increased during periods of social and political unrest, particularly during wars such as those in Vietnam and Iraq" (ibid., 15). The imagery that zombie films generically present us with resonates with images perpetuated by the news in the past decade: "Scenes depicting deserted metropolitan streets, abandoned human corpses, and gangs of lawless vigilantes have become more common than ever" (ibid., 13).

With the first *TWD*-comic issued in 2003, this is also the cultural climate into which the TV series was born. The TV series, which is investigated here, began airing in 2010 with comic-book creator Robert Kirkman as a producer on the show. There are, however, some differences between comic and series. The brothers Merle (Michael Rooker) and Daryl Dixon (Norman Reedus) do not exist in the comic book series. Shane (Jon Bernthal), who is the main character's best friend and competes for the love of his wife, is a main character during seasons one and two while he already dies in the comic's first issue. The following analysis will exclusively focus on the TV series, though some of the secondary sources I use mention both the comic and the TV series.

When civilization falls apart, all there is left is wilderness and savagery. In a post-apocalyptic world, even a frontier is hard to come by. While the survivors become nomads looking for a place to finally call home again, they need to negotiate civilization and its values anew. In this chapter, I argue that *TWD* revives the frontier hero in the persona of Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln). In my reading, I establish a link between his "living dead" masculinity and the aftermath of 9/11. After giving a brief summary of the show's story until its third season, I will discuss the criticisms the show has received from mostly feminist commentators. Finally, I will illustrate how the series constructs the masculinity of Rick Grimes and how this masculinity can be read in terms of the

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96 See also: "This is not apocalypse in the ancient sense, a revelation of destiny being worked out. Above all, it is unexpected, with a key generic feature being the disruption of normal life" (Moreman & Rushton, 4).

cultural climate in which *TWD* was conceived. In this discussion, I will also briefly look at another post-apocalyptic cable series, Steven Spielberg's *Falling Skies*.

Rick Grimes, a police sheriff in rural Georgia, awakens in an abandoned hospital having fallen into a coma following a gun-shot wound during police duty. As he makes his way out of the hospital, he finds his hometown devoid of human beings, but full of corpses – both living and dead. After the initial shock, he sets out to find his family. Therefore, he goes to Atlanta, where he eventually finds his wife, son and his best friend in a survivors camp outside of Atlanta, which, too, is later overrun by zombies. At the end of the first season, the group encounters a surviving scientist, Dr. Jenner (Noah Emmerich), in Atlanta's Center for Disease Control (CDC), where they are informed that the whole world has been destroyed and that nothing is left of society's institutions. The CDC self-destructs at the end of the season and leaves the group on the road.

In the second season, they find a temporary refuge on Hershel's (Scott Wilson) farm after one of the group's children went missing in the woods. Initially, they planned to stay on the farm until they found the little girl. But, as it turns out, the girl was zombiefied and put into the farm's barn as Hershel, the farm's patriarch, believes the walking dead are just sick people that can be cured. Eventually, the farm, too, is overrun by zombies.

In the third season, the survivors find a home in an abandoned prison. This season's focus is on the violent conflict between the prison group and a community of survivors in a small town called Woodbury. This community is run by a man who calls himself The Governor (David Morrissey) even though he is less of a democratically elected leader but more of a power-hungry dictator, whose power is based on military might and the manipulation of public opinion.

TWD has drawn a lot of criticism in its early seasons from feminist critics. A Google search with the words "The Walking Dead Gender" delivered critiques of the show's representation of gender and race as the top ten results (search conducted in February 2013). Angry commentators pointed to stereotypical presentation of women as weak and in need of male protection. And with regard to race, the show's (mis)representation of Georgia's ethnic make-up is called into question: "despite being set predominately in Atlanta and elsewhere in the Southern USA, there are two black main characters" (TK, n. pag.). Furthermore, the single Asian-American character featured on the series

became an object of criticism for his stereotypical representation as

> the Asian fix it man, former pizza delivery man, and loyal friend of the white men in the party. Glenn is a post apocalyptic version of the model minority myth [...] Glenn's loyalty to Rick, and the system of white male patriarchal authority he embodies in the show, was symbolically 'rewarded' by the former's sexual union with Maggie, a white woman (DeVega, n. pag.).

While Judith/Jack Halberstam's claim that "insufficient masculinity is all too often figured by Asian bodies" seems to apply here (2), this supposedly insufficient masculinity in Glenn also allows for a stronger female in Maggie. When they have sex for the first time in S02E04, it is apparent that he does not have confidence in his sexuality: she is wearing a cowboy hat and initiates contact. Moreover, the tokenism of race representations in *TWD* and the link to the model minority myth surfaces in Maggie's father Hershel. In S02E07, he refers to Glenn as "Asian boy." When the love between him and Maggie becomes hard to ignore, the writers have Hershel say that "immigrants built this country" (S02E11). The commonplace nature of this statement is troubling insofar as Asian immigrants are racialized others. Hershel pronounces these words from the standpoint of unmarked whiteness.

While the ethnic composition of the survivor group in its first couple of seasons seems indeed a bit puzzling considering its Georgia setting, the accusation that *TWD* "is ultimately a story about how white male authority is enduring in a world populated by the undead" seems a bit harsh and premature (DeVega., n. pag.). Could it be that the dissolution of societal order not instantly produces a new, thoroughly just and egalitarian society?

In fact, *TWD* directly addresses the subjects of race and gender in its first season. In the pilot episode, Rick encounters the African-American Morgan Jones (Lennie James) and his son Duane. Not only do they rescue Rick, the son's name is also the name of the actor who played the African-American hero Ben in Romero's *The Night of the Living Dead*. Morgan, however, will only reappear one more time as crazy man who lost his son in S03E12. In the second episode, Rick encounters the group of survivors he eventually comes to lead through the postapocalyptic world. On a rooftop, the racist Merle brutally beats T-Dog (Robert Singleton). Both characters were invented solely for the TV series and consequently must have some significance. Before he gets beaten to death, Rick saves him from Merle and proclaims: "Things are different now. There are no niggers anymore. No dumb-as-shit inbred white trash fools either. Only dark meat and white meat. There is us and the dead. We survive this by pulling together, not apart." Pulling together, however, increasingly comes to stand in for doing whatever

Rick says (see below). The choice of language, of course, is also unfortunate. The dark meat refers to the zombies and again dark stands in for the abject body. What is interesting, though, is that this is an attempt to dissolve race within new divisions (dead/living). A similar pattern is suggested by *HoW* in which the distinction between Anglo-Americans and African-Americans is not thoroughly dissolved, but somewhat blurred because both find themselves on the same side fighting against the Native American as racialized Other.

In terms of gender relations, too, after also means before "advanced" civilization, at least in the show's early episodes. A scene that almost every time is taken as an example of conservative gender representations in *TWD* is the laundry scene in S01E03. While some of the men went back to Atlanta to rescue Merle, whom Rick had cuffed to a rooftop in the previous episode, the other men enjoy the fair weather and do either nothing, are on watch, or in the case of Shane teach Carl, Rick's son, how to catch frogs. The women in the camp are gathered by a lake to do the group's laundry. One of the women questions the division of labor, but the issue is not pursued further ("The world ended, didn't you get the memo?") and instead the women reminisce about technology: washing machines and vibrators. The latter comment prompts laughter, to which one of the men, Ed (Adam Minarovich), reacts violently by slapping his wife Carol. Shane steps in and subjects him to a brutal beating, thereby asserting his status as the group's temporary leader and venting off steam – he is not happy about the return of his best friend since he has begun an affair with Lori (Sarah Wayne Callies), Rick's wife. This scene is often cited as an instance in which "[w]e are reminded women are dependent on men to protect them [...] women have to prove their worth to the men by maintaining a domestic sphere that should have burned to ashes in the apocalypse" (Berry, n. pag.).

While online commentators use such scenes in which women represent a domestic sphere that "should have burned to ashes", it needs to be considered that the social order has just collapsed and the survivors now have to figure out how they can ensure survival and how life is going to be lived in this new world. This process of coming to terms with the end of civilization and of founding a new one is, apart from the attractions of the horror genre, what this series tries to depict. While *TWD* plays through this process of forming a new community, it presents the viewer with differing female characters. Some women like Lori seem unwilling to let go of their former role assignments and others like Carol and Andrea embark on a journey away from them.

The most criticized female character is Lori, who, like Skyler in *BrBa*, has a whole

Facebook page devoted to hating her.[97] This time, however, it is not because she is the woman castrating her victimized husband, but for being a cliché. In an article entitled "Everyone Hates Lori from 'The Walking Dead'" the comments section is full of spite towards this character. Somebody who calls himself 'Bruce Wayne' writes "She is the weakest, most insufferable, awful, stereotypical female character i've [*sic!*] ever seen." Another ('The Hammer') states "Lori [..] is probably every horrible aspect of a woman a man could conjure up. I mean the dudes that wrote the bible would applaud how much she sets her gender back" (n. pag.).[98]

Her storyline is that she begins an affair with her comatose husband's best friend the minute the apocalypse begins. To make matters worse, she becomes pregnant and does not know who the father is. When Rick has returned, she accuses him of always leaving her and Carl on behalf of saving others and contributes to the escalation between Rick and Shane, whom Rick eventually kills. Meanwhile, she also enjoys her status as the group's first lady and feels obligated to call other women out for not doing their female duties. In S02E10 she tells Andrea (Laurie Holden), who prefers to be on watch duty, that "the men can handle this on their own, they don't need your help [...] we are providing stability. We're trying to create a life worth living." In the same episode, she tells Maggie that "what happens out there, happens out there. We... we're just trying to keep it together until they come back." In this particular dialogue, Maggie is concerned about her blossoming relationship with Glenn, who "froze up" in a zombie encounter and blames his love for her for his failure. The wild man inside cannot do his job when he is caged by the love of a woman. To this the writers have Lori say that Glenn should "man up." Even though she is "defined by three things: mother, wife, and adulteress, and nothing else" (TK, n. pag.), one could also argue that the hatred she receives from viewers (not only feminist) may work to undermine the traditional role assignment she represents. After she died giving birth, other, less stereotypical female characters emerge.

As a former civil rights lawyer, Andrea tries to stay involved in discussions. She also learns to handle a gun and establishes herself as the group's best shot. Still, as a woman adapting to changed circumstances, her actions are circumscribed by men and the inconsistency with which she is portrayed. Ultimately, the show's critics evaluate her in a negative light. Even though she is represented as tough and one of the few women

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97 https://www.facebook.com/IHateLoriGrimesTheWalkingDead
98 http://www.uproxx.com/tv/2012/03/everyone-hates-lori-from-the-walking-dead/#ixzz2O5E755jw
   (retrieved 11 April 2013).

who know how to use a gun,

> she still is incapable of making an independent decision without male input [...] she attaches herself to whatever alpha male appears to be the toughest and then sticks with him until he dies or she realizes the error of her ways. It's a weak, insulting attempt to show strength by osmosis, as if Andrea is incapable of an adult decision without a man to point her in the right direction (TK, n. pag.).

In the first season Andrea has to kill her sister after she was bitten by a zombie. Now without any familial bonds and an overall grim outlook in terms of survival, she decides to remain in the CDC when it self-destructs. She is not the only one: the female African-American group member Jacqui (Jeryl Prescott) also decides to end her life there. Dale (Jeffrey DeMunn), another member of the group, however forces her to leave the CDC by saying that he, too, will die there if she does. Two things are striking in this situation. First, there is a man who takes away a woman's independent choice. Then, there is also an unfavorable race component: the death of the African-American woman Jacqui seems to have very little impact. While Jacqui silently disappears, Andrea is morally forced to live on through the post-apocalypse.[99] She is, however, deemed emotionally unstable now. Consequently, the gun she inherited from her deceased father is taken away from her. Thereby she is stripped both of independent decision-making and the ability to protect herself. She voices these concerns and calls for gun training for all women so that they are able to protect themselves.

Up until this point, Andrea's storyline is one of emancipation and the restrictions put on it by lingering gender roles. Pye and O'Sullivan, too, take her as a positive example of gender representation in *TWD*. In a volume of essays entitled *The Walking Dead and Philosophy*,[100] they use Judith Butler's approach to gender that leads them to an interesting observation. They use the zombie to illustrate Butler's concept of performativity: "they may be externally male or female, but they don't act masculine or feminine. [...] Zombies, like drag queens, 'trouble gender'" (108). Zombies are just bodies and since they are expelled from the symbolic order, they do not perform gender. Yet it should be stated that zombies do not reproduce through intercourse either (they multiply through biting human beings). Since zombies neither have an instinct for survival (i. e. defense strategies), it could be argued that they are removed from the

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99 The suicide of Jacqui is especially puzzling when we consider that she is the only group member who actually exhibits Christian faith. She even suggests that the zombie apocalypse is an act of god. By killing herself she would – in her world view – escape one hell just to suffer eternally in another.

100 A note on this series: this book is of the same publishers as *Breaking Bad and Philosophy*. I would call the collected essays here – all written for the volume – semi-academic. They draw on theories, most of them well-known philosophical concepts mostly written by academics, yet they fail to meet academic standards such as providing a bibliography.

reproductive circle – sex – altogether and thus using them as an illustration for Butler's theory falls a bit short. However, in other aspects Pye and O'Sullivan put it to good use: "there are clues that gender is learned, and can be learned differently, and these clues are the series's saving graces" (111). There are two scenes that lend themselves to these observations.

First, in S01E04 Andrea and her sister are seen fishing on the lake. They go back to the camp with many fish and Carl, who learned to catch frogs the previous episode from Shane, is impressed and wants to learn from them. Andrea is thus positioned diametrically opposed to Lori, who in the previous episode cuts Carl's hair ("in itself a way of maintaining gender differences" [ibid., 110]) and relegates 'manly' work or the instruction of her son thereof to other men. When the group lives on the farm in the second season, Lori also 'home schools' Carl and opposes any attempt of his to have a gun (Rick overrules her later). In any case, the cutting of hair is not solely an act of gendering, it is, like home schooling, also an effort to maintain civility and thus aligns femininity with civilization. This, then, makes Lori the apocalyptic version of the classical Westerns' schoolmarm or settler's wife (as in *Shane*). Robert Bly would surely concur: "A mother's job is, after all, to civilize the boy" (11). Unlike Lori, Andrea has little interest in being a civilizing presence. She inherited a gun from her father and Rick teaches her how to use it:

> A Freudian might say that her father passed on the phallus to her, and she didn't instinctively know how to use it, but Rick's (the man's) instruction alleviated that shortcoming [...] Andrea shows that not only can women learn to use guns, but guns are where the true power lies (Pye & O'Sullivan 112-113).

This quotation points to the prosthetic masculinity Judith Halberstam describes in *Female Masculinity* (see 3-5). When the "prosthetic extension" is taken away from Andrea in S02E01, she becomes thoroughly feminine, a blonde babe in need of protection. When the group encounters a horde of zombies in S02E01, she is trapped in the group's RV with a zombie. Through the roof window, Dale gives her a screwdriver that she can apply to the walker's brain to save herself. Read symbolically, the domestic sphere may be understood as a woman's death trap in *TWD*. By receiving a tool traditionally associated with men's work, she is able to survive. As with the gun, she needs a male facilitator to achieve this. While these scenes involving Andrea can be read as critique of encrusted gender roles, things change when she becomes the character TK describes as "incapable of adult decision" (see quotation above).

Andrea's development towards a strong female character capable of survival in a

hostile world is completed when she has to fight zombies alone after she was separated from her group in S02E13. In season three, however, she resumes a more dependent and passive role. After being overwhelmed by zombies in S02E13, she is rescued by the African-American sword fighter Michonne (Danai Gurira), who nurtures her through sickness in the beginning of the third season. Michonne and Andrea are then captivated by The Governor. While Michonne instinctively suspects something is wrong with the Woodbury community, Andrea falls in love with its leader and thus betrays her friend. Later, even Andrea has to realize that the man she fell in love with is a dictator and manipulator, who tortured members of her former group. When Carol advises her to give him the best night of his life and then kill him (supposedly this is how women do it), she does not in order to find a peaceful – civilized – resolution. Eventually, she has to pay for her betrayal with death in S03E16. Andrea does not want to be a victim in this new world, hence her efforts to become able to defend herself. However, she is only able to victimize de-gendered zombies, never men. Ultimately, she is victimized by a man who uses his effeminate scientist-turned-zombie to kill her (in the comic book series she is still alive).

Even though it is implicated that Michonne got along on her own for quite some time, she is often seen in service to someone else. Commentators have mostly criticized the changes being made when adapting the comic for TV. Michonne, TK writes, "is incapable of anything other than defensiveness and suspicion. And while the character is the strong, silent type in the comic books, there was always a deft intelligence and cunning behind her actions" (n. pag.). One bone of contention is the fact that in the comic it is Michonne who is raped by The Governor, while in the TV series it is Maggie who is assaulted: "Is the suffering of a white female character noteworthy, and the rape and abuse of a black female character anticlimactic and uninteresting?" (DeVega, n. pag.).[101]

Notwithstanding the changes made when adapting the comic, Michonne becomes an increasingly important character in the series. After Andrea's death she becomes more and more integrated into the group as she repeatedly shows that her skills as a sword fighter as well as her integrity are an asset to the survival of a group born out of

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101 Referencing the comic book version of this scene, Steiger writes that "[b]ecause *The Walking Dead* depicts a white man raping a black woman, it conjures up a dark period in American history. [...] Though perhaps Kirkman intended to drive home the point that the Governor is evil through this scene, it is troubling because it ends up reinforcing a historical reality that still hasn't been fully acknowledged or reconciled" (102-103). In this light, the TV series then sidesteps these historical implications. Yet, while it seems that Steiger would embrace this change, it remains unclear why this is so as ignoring it does not make it better either.

necessity.

Online commentators aside, there are also more balanced and positive criticisms of gender and race relations in *TWD*. Despite calling the above mentioned laundry scene "unsettlingly, perhaps even distastefully, retro" (107), Steiger in the end of his essay "No Clean Slate" defends Kirkman and the TV series's representation of gender:

> For all the objections to the depictions of race and gender in *The Walking Dead*, these critics, to some degree, are missing the point. Racism and sexism exhibit themselves every day in a world without a zombie apocalypse; we shouldn't expect these problems to disappear when humans are fighting for their very survival [...] depicting sexism or racism is not the same as endorsing it (Steiger, 112-113).

In its first two seasons *TWD*, to a large degree, depicts a process of redomestication for women, while men undergo a process of remasculinization. This, however, might be due to the fact that this series depicts a frontier-like situation. Faced with the unknown, people seem to be inclined to hold on to markers of civilization. It is not only gender concepts which the characters in *TWD* have trouble letting go – the law or democracy are also concepts that are not institutionalized anymore and that have to be negotiated anew.

This process of renegotiation will stay with the series until the survivor group has established a new and stable community. Still, even though typical role assignments with regard to gender are slowly but steadily fading from the narrative, *TWD* does not turn everything upside-down as it features Rick Grimes at the center of the series. With this, the narrative does not stray far from what Kaja Silverman calls the dominant fiction in which the "most central signifier of unity is the (paternal) family, and its primary signifier of privilege the phallus" (Silverman, 34-35). The phallus is in a privileged position, therefore it is the location from which all power originates.

Anthony Clare's description of the phallus "as the 'signifier of signifiers', the mark which positions the individual as male and locates him in terms of authority, control, dominance" remains true (9). The alignment of penis and phallus in this way becomes more than just symbolic, but can be read as naturalized. Both symbolically and structurally, Rick Grimes is the phallus in *TWD* (he also carries the biggest gun of the group, a .357 Colt Python). Therefore – this has become clear thus far – all other 'signifiers', such as women and racialized individuals, attain their position within the group hierarchy through their relation to him. This, for example, makes Lori Grimes the group's first lady: it allows her to openly criticize other women, it confers upon her the duty to defend her husband's decisions (if she likes them or not), and, of course, it

makes her, like everyone else, subordinated to Rick.[102]

Despite Rick's privileged position in the *TWD*, I would not thoroughly concur with the criticisms voiced by the online commentators as they almost seem to suggest that *TWD* promotes a return to or maintenance of old gender roles and race relations. Exceptions like *The Wire* considered, there are hardly any African-American main characters on American 'quality TV', which probably speaks more to the desired demographics these shows are to attract rather than to inherent racism on the writers' part. With respect to women in *TWD*, the series could also be read against the grain of its narrative. This, then, would lead to the conclusion that the encrusted gender norms at play here actually harm the survival of the group. It should also be considered that people need time to adapt to new circumstances: a soccer-mom will not transform into a fearless gunslinger over night and as the series progresses, women like Carol increasingly become more self-reliant and adept in killing zombies. Moreover, Michonne is capable of survival on her own – she is a woman who does not need a man. The criticism that her character is very one-dimensional compared to the comic books can be made with regard to many characters in this series. In his review of the season three finale, Zack Handlen writes "*once again*, there are characters behaving in ways that should've been better established over the course of the entire season, rather than just randomly getting pulled out of a hat in the last hour" (n. pag.; my emphasis). This may be due to the replacement of head writers, but the lack of development of characters in terms of psychological depth and plausibility is *TWD*'s biggest flaw as it "fails to find any investment in the characters' survival aside from the visceral fear of evisceration" (Mittell 2012, n. pag.).

4.2. From "Officer Friendly" to Will Kane

As we have seen, the female and racialized characters in *TWD* are in a subordinate position in the narrative's hierarchy. The survival of the group is often attributed to its leader Rick Grimes. How, then, is this character introduced to us and how does he develop during the series?

The first glimpse we get of Rick is in the series's cold opening when he shoots a

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[102]Gender representation becomes more flexible with the third season, maybe due to criticisms the series had to endure after its first two seasons. Michonne 's introduction in the third season is promising. Moreover, Carol shows Axel, a convict in the prison, how to use a gun in S03E10.

zombified girl after the apocalypse. After the title sequence, we are introduced to him and his partner Shane before the apocalypse. We see Rick and Shane in a police car and witness a dialogue enfold that is quite indicative of the gender representations described above with regard to the shows early episodes. This dialogue and its subsequent scene also set the stage for the transformation happening in Rick:

> **Rick**: What's the difference between men and women?
> **Shane**: That's a joke?
> **Rick**: No, serious.
> **Shane**: Never met a woman who knew how to turn off the light. They're born thinking the switch only goes one way: On. [...] Come home, house all lit up. And my job, apparently, is, because my chromosomes happen to be different, I have to walk through that house and turn off every single light that chick left on.
> **Rick**: Is that so?
> **Shane**: Reverend Shane is preaching to you now, boy. And the, the same chick, mind you, she'll bitch about global warming. This is where Reverend Shane wants to quote from the guy gospel: Darling, maybe you and every other pair of boobs on this planet just figure out that the light switch goes both ways, maybe we wouldn't have so much global warming. [...] How is it with Lori?
> **Rick**: She's good. Really good at turning off lights. [...]
> **Shane**: Not what I meant
> **Rick**: We didn't have a great night.
> [...]
> **Shane**: Share your feelings, that kind of stuff?
> **Rick**: Lately, whenever I try, everything I say makes her impatient... like she didn't want to hear it after all. It's like she's pissed at me all the time. And I don't know why. [...] Last thing she said this morning: 'Sometimes I wonder if you even care about us at all.' She said that in front of our kid. Imagine going to school with that in your head... The difference between men and women: I would never say something that cruel to her. Certainly not in front of Carl (*TWD* S01E01).

This dialogue characterizes both men quite well and points towards the conflicts they will have after the apocalypse: Rick is domesticated and struggling for control in his marriage, while Shane is in charge of his own life and thinks of women as inferior to men. Even though Rick sits in the driver's seat, he is not really driving this conversation. From what Rick tells Shane, it is also clear that Shane is willing to confront a woman, whereas Rick tries to act upon Lori's wish for communication and fails. He does not seem to know what she really wants from him – a tired cliché – and feels victimized by her. Not his inability to successfully communicate to his wife is at fault for the problems the couple seems to have, but her cruelty towards him. Consequently, Rick is not in the driver's seat when it comes to his marriage either.

The man talk ends when their assistance is needed in a road block. Here again, Rick's sense of manhood suffers an almost deadly blow: he is shot in the chest during police duty because he thought he was in control of the situation. The screen fades to white. The white screen is followed by shots in which a ghost-like Shane brings flowers to his hospital bed. When the comatose Rick finally comes to, the flowers next to his bed have

faded and the wall clock across his bed has stopped: a new time has come. The abandoned hospital becomes a birth channel. Barefoot, Rick enters a black staircase, a lit match is the only source of light guiding him towards eventual daylight (figure 28). When he reaches an exit door, the screen is again dominated by white against which we can make out Rick's silhouette (figure 29). Blinded by daylight, he is born again, as a new man into a new world. As we will see, new is an utterly relative term. The bare feet representing vulnerability, fear and innocence will become dirty. Until then, however, he will have to learn the new workings of the world and he will force his rules upon it:

he will not be vulnerable, he will not fear and he will lose his innocence. He will become what he always was, a man. But this time around, not as public servant (sheriff's deputy), but as a leader intent on surviving and guiding his kin through savage lands.

*Figure 28 Hospital staircase as birth channel (*TWD*, S01E01).*

Upon exiting the hospital, a bewildered Rick wanders the streets of his old home town that now is littered with corpses towards his home. When he finds it empty, he breaks down, crying and repeating the words "wake up." Then, he discovers that the family photo album is missing, which he takes as proof that his wife and son are still alive.

*Figure 29 Born again to lead in a world of decay (*TWD*, S01E01).*

When he leaves his home, he is knocked down with a shovel by Duane Jones, who mistakes him for a zombie. Morgan and Duane, who are squatting in Rick's neighbor's house, take him in and allow him to recuperate from the blow to his head, the gunshot wound he suffered before the apocalypse and the initial shock of waking up in a changed world.

In the pilot and subsequent episodes, it becomes clear that people have trouble letting go of their old ways. Pye's and O'Sullivan's remark that "human beings find comfort in the familiar" does not solely apply to gender representations here. Even zombies seem unable to completely let go: the girl in the series's opening scene still holds on to its

stuffed animal and Morgan's wife, who now roams the streets, stands in front of the house where her son and husband live now. On a meta level, one could also say that American audiences have trouble letting go of a certain brand of masculinity. Morgan, on his part, is unable to deal with the situation. He simply cannot kill his zombified wife, something he will come to regret in S03E12 where it is revealed that Duane fell victim to her: "the weak people like me have inherited the world," he tells Rick and thus becomes an inferior racialized character in *TWD*. More importantly in terms of gender, he was too weak to save his son from his zombie wife.

When Rick, Morgan and Duane have dinner the night before Rick leaves, Duane insists on praying. God, however, does not provide solace. During the night, Duane sobs uncontrollably. The homesteader Hershel, too, adheres to his faith by keeping his zombified family in a barn. His religion – like Duane's sobbing – endangers his and the life of others. In S02E04, Hershel urges Rick to pause in order to behold his beautiful land:

> **Hershel**: It's good to pause for an occasional reminder.
> **Rick**: Of what?
> **Hershel**: Whatever comes to mind. For me, it's all from god. No thoughts on that?
> **Rick**: Last time I asked god for a favor and stopped to admire a view my son got shot. [...]
> It's best we stay out of each others way (*TWD* S02E04).

Landed property and religion are not the only institutions that fail in *TWD*. Towards the end of the series's first season, the group takes great risk in traveling to the CDC. There, they hope for answers and shelter. However, as it turns out, most scientists have left the building when the apocalypse started, committed suicide or were killed by zombies. The only remaining scientist is just an assistant who basically waits there until the power fails. The CDC will self-destruct when the power runs out because it stores biological weapons: "the CDC appears as something of a gigantic monument to the failure of technology" (Paffenroth, 222). In a flashback in S01E06, we see the military shoot doctors, nurses and patients in the hospital in which Rick lies in his coma (see ibid., 222). As is often the case in the Western, the military and governmental authorities are not capable of providing help in *TWD* either. In flashbacks we learn that authorities advised people to seek shelter in Atlanta, ultimately an invitation to death. The military then bombs the city with napalm, which, of course, calls for Vietnam associations made by early modern zombie cinema (*TWD* S02E05). This distrust of intervention by the government and the inability to provide relief resonates with more contemporary struggles, both at home (Hurricane Katrina) and abroad (chaos in Iraq and Afghanistan).

The collapse and insufficiency of institutions is a common thread in zombie cinema,

which investigates how all responsibility is thrown upon individuals and the communities they form to increase their chances at survival. With regard to this, Romero's vision of humanity is bleak if not nihilistic:[103]

> Romero's films invoke the particularly apocalyptic paradox that the world must end in order for there to be any future for the world [...] his films are inherently moral, revealing the manner in which the cardinal virtues (love, kindness, cooperation) lead to survival – or, rather, that the lack of these virtues leads to death and, inevitably, to undeath (Moreman & Rushton, 4-5).

The complete lack of institutions and focus on individual responsibility towards establishing something resembling civilization becomes the ideal backdrop for creating a new social order and depicting processes of remasculinization in *TWD* – which are also concerns associated with the Western frontier.

After Rick's masculinity suffered a serious blow by him being shot and put in a coma, the series's pilot episode is busy reconstructing him. After having his wounds tended to by Morgan, he takes the two of them to his police station, where we see the men shower. Rick then dons his police uniform and packs the station's remaining guns. Lee Clark Mitchell would argue that by reducing Rick to his male physicality, these scenes serve to (re)construct his masculinity and indeed, now that he is cleaned up and wears his costume, there are no more signs of physical weakness: men become men by being restored to their male bodies (151).

Part of Rick's recuperation is having a purpose as driving force: since the family's photo albums are gone, he knows his family is alive and sets out to find them. "The uniform," Jonathan Maberry writes, "provides him with a kind of armor; it transforms him from survivor to knight. He will henceforth act upon his sense of duty [...] that sense of duty is the moral compass that will drive him" (25). Though this is true, at least during the first season, this is an external moral compass guiding him. This means that Rick, despite being born again, has not yet let go of the institutional affiliation that is also part of his (old) identity: he helps people in need. This stance remains true – it will make him a leader after all – yet the rules associated with the law become increasingly hard to uphold in the new order, or rather the complete lack thereof. With this, the establishment of order diverges from the Western, where a lawless frontier town is, over time, integrated into the law of the USA. In *TWD*, however, the USA has ceased to exist and an altogether new order has to be established. This comes with a lot of trial and

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103 In his reading of *The Night of the Living Dead*, R. H. W. Dillard concludes that "the real horror [...] is that there is nothing we can do that will make any difference at all. Whether that horror is the result of a cynicism with an eye to commercial gain or [...] a deliberate put-on or a genuine nihilistic vision, its depth and the thoroughness of its unrelenting expression make the film what it is" (28).

error for Rick, who has his own insecurities when it comes down to establishing his leadership.

By the third season, "Rick has gone from law-enforcer [...] to a law-maker [...] to a murderer" (Round, 158-159). Maberry summarizes his development similarly: "he goes from victim to father/husband/protector, to group leader, to a new kind of warlord" (24). Interesting is that Maberry describes Rick as victim in the beginning and as warlord in the end, thereby placing him in a similar position as Walter White in *BrBa,* who, of course, becomes a different kind of lord. This development takes less time in *TWD*. The duty that drives Rick remains with him along the way, though as the series progresses it is not *police* duty. Before the law-making and killing can happen, he has to shed his second skin in S02E04. He takes off his uniform; his police hat as well as his badge he passes on to his son "because he got shot" in S02E01. This, then, repeats the pattern of masculinity construction we have witnessed with regard to Rick in the first few episodes. The bodily, near-fatal wound and the (again) miraculous recuperation from it signal the becoming of man.

It is interesting to note that Carl gets shot the same episode the group's other child disappears in the woods and only reappears in S02E07 as a zombie that Rick has to put down. Without civilization, apparently, there is no childhood. With childhood, innocence disappears as well. In S03E04 Carl has to mercy kill his mother. In S03E16 Carl kills a young man from the opposing Woodbury community after that man surrendered. This same episode, Rick finds his police badge abandoned in the dirt. Carl thus follows the path his father has taken – a fact which, judging his facial expression, seems to trouble Rick. While this nihilistic chain of events falls in line with Romero's zombie films, it should be noted that some innocence remains alive: Lori's baby is seen as less a burden but more as a source of joy and community, which is also a common Western motif (for example in Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp" or John Ford's *Stagecoach*).

To remain with Rick's hat, its passing on can be read as a passing on of the torch: Rick no longer can uphold the ideals he identified with, but it relieves him to have his son carrying the torch of law and order. In terms of becoming a fully adult

Figure 30 Passing on the phallus in TWD *(S02E12).*

male, this transformation takes place in S02E12 when Rick hands Carl a gun, thereby acknowledging his son can defend himself and others.

To go back to Rick's remasculinization in the pilot episode. Rick runs out of gas on his way to Atlanta and exchanges his car for a horse. There is no indication of whether Rick has ever rode a horse before, but – instinctively, one might say – he knows how to ride one without a saddle. The imagery is Western iconography: a lawman riding on horseback through savage lands and from now on imposing his order on the land. The pilot's closing scene has Rick arrive in Atlanta. The city is teeming with zombies and Rick – after his horse buckled – finds refuge in a tank while the horse is attacked and eaten by zombies. Read symbolically, one might interpret this as a man being trapped in urban consumerism: while the zombies engage in mindless consumption in the streets of Atlanta, Rick is caught in a confined space. His agency is reduced to a bare minimum: he can either hope for help or kill himself. Though a metaphoric reading of zombies as consumers makes sense in this particular scene from the pilot, such a consistent reading for the entire series is hardly warranted. Commentators have noted that unlike in other zombie narratives, the walking dead are stripped of metaphorical meaning:

> Unlike Romero's zombies, Kirkman's are depoliticized: emptied of metaphorical or symbolic significance. They become a negation – they're certainly an aspect of this brave new world, but not its defining feature. Instead, the dominant elements of Kirkman's world are emptiness and stillness (Round, 166; see also Bishop 2011, 11).

George A. Romero has made it clear that this is one of the primary reasons why he declined all offers to direct a couple of *TWD* episodes: "it's just a soap opera with a zombie occasionally. I always used the zombie as a character for satire or a political criticism and I find that missing in what's happening now" (qtd. in: Mackenzie, n. pag.). Zombies are thus both a prop to construct a dangerous world and a negation: the difference between the living and the dead is their consciousness and as we will see, some of the living, too, lack consciousness on a level of morality. This is a world in which chaos reigns and one of the show's main concerns seems to be what kind of and how a new society may be established. This is also the perfect backdrop for a man who is trying to navigate life and death: dominated by negation, it is upon Rick to affirm life. The affirmation of life – survival – becomes a burden he is not entirely fit to shoulder in the pilot episode. Even though he wears the right costume, the performance from within needs work. "Officer Friendly," as Merle calls him, needs to get in touch with his darker side. His human antagonists will help him to get there.

Actor Andrew Lincoln has commented on the influences for his role as Rick Grimes. Original showrunner Frank Darabont urged him to watch *BrBa* to get a feeling for the atmosphere. Moreover, Lincoln found Gary Cooper as Will Kane in *High Noon* (1952) inspirational:

> *The Walking Dead* feels like a modern Western, and it gets more like that. There's a lot of classic old cinematography that Frank has brought to it. Also, the moral centre of Gary Cooper in *High Noon* inspired me. He's a divided man, between his responsibilities and his marriage. He's not like the Clint Eastwood figure, the loner. It's more complicated than that. He's got a softer heart, so that was definitely an inspiration for me as well (qtd. in: Jeffery, n. pag.).

Indeed, the similarities are striking: like Will, Rick is a lawman serving a group of survivors that has yet to become a community and that is not always welcoming of his help. In *High Noon*, Will goes to the shoot-out only after he has officially retired from his job, which, like Rick after he disposes of his uniform, makes him "a vigilante: a private man assuming the power of the law without submitting himself to the democratic process" (Slotkin 1992, 392).[104] Still, even though both men abandon their official ties with institutional law, like for Will, "his badge [is] his calling, the expression of his pride and honor" (ibid., 393). Moreover, Rick's abandonment of his uniform not only testifies to the extra-legal measures he takes, but also applies to Stephen McVeigh's observations regarding Kane resigning in *High Noon*:

> civic responsibility is the domain of everyone, not simply paid civil servants. Simultaneously, it also lends further support to the ideal of the heroic leader; that leadership and duty transcend mere employment but the necessary strength of character is rather a very real calling, *something born to* rather than trained for (102; my emphasis).

The end of this citation immediately resonates with how *TWD* presents Rick's awakening from his coma as a rebirth. The similarities between both characters do not end there: Richard Slotkin has pointed out that Will Kane is not all that different from the villain Frank Miller. In a conversation with the old marshal, we learn that Will, too, might have followed the dark path had the former not turned him around. Moreover, he is "too [..] willing to impose his will on the citizen" and his name (Will = the will to power; Kane = the mark of Cain) points towards his dark tendencies as well (Slotkin 1992, 394).

The way that Will Kane and Frank Miller resemble one another can also be observed in Rick's relationship with his antagonists. In the first two seasons, it is his best friend Shane and in the third it is The Governor. And then there is the curious case of Daryl, who becomes Rick's sidekick in the course of the series. Whereas we can look at the

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104Slotkin defines vigilantism as "the use of private violence for public ends, especially the elimination of criminal elements from a Frontier society" (1992, 99).

relationship between Rick and Shane with reference to the film *Shane*, his relationship with The Governor more closely resembles *High Noon*. Daryl, however, is the one whose masculinity is most clearly rooted in Western representations. Since his status in the social fabric of the group is very peculiar and he was solely invented for the TV series, I will briefly investigate him before I return to Rick as Will Kane. With regard to Daryl, it might be the case that he is one representation of marginalized masculinity that works to re-center white masculinity by de-centering it.

More than any man in *TWD*, Daryl is the prototypical frontiersman. Put in Slotkin's terms, he is "the man who knows Indians" (1992, 14). Before the apocalypse, he was distinctively Southern white trash, as Rick commented on his brother Merle. Daryl likes to ride a motorcycle with a *Schutzstaffel* (SS) sticker on it. Like his brother, racial slurs escape his mouth. His transformation in the series is – somewhat paradoxically given the situation – one towards civility without ever fully incorporating it.

We learn that he and his brother were abused as children and that Merle abandoned Daryl at some point during his childhood. We also learn that Daryl was on his own most of the time – escaping into the woods for days on end. He is an expert tracker and hunter, his weapon of choice is a crossbow. Even though he is part of the group and is eventually considered family, he never gets too close. He does not inform others of his whereabouts, when the group lives on Hershel's farm, he pitches his tent farthest away from the house. But despite eschewing connections other than to his biological brother, he is there for the group – he does things for the community without getting too comfortable in it. He saves T-Dog's life in S02E01; when Sophia goes missing, he is the one putting the most effort into finding her. He establishes a bond with her mother, Carol, even though he ensures she never gets too close. When Lori's daughter is born and Rick is becoming mentally unstable, he immediately is fond of the infant and burdens himself with more responsibility while Rick is grieving over his deceased wife. In S03E10 – after Daryl has left the group to be with his outcast brother – he saves the lives of Spanish-speaking survivors under attack by zombies. When Merle tries to steal supplies from them, Daryl points his crossbow at him: this group, too, has a baby and will not be robbed. While Daryl is away from the group in S03E09, Beth talks to Carol about their situation, how they are weakened without his help: "I'm pissed at him for leaving," to which Carol replies "Don't be. Daryl has his code. This world needs men like that." This intrinsic code that all good men evidently have is shares with Rick, which is why he becomes the second chief in command in season three. This moral code

connects them both to the heritage of idealized white masculinity. This moral code makes men what they are and it defines them as good. Even if they are a bad man like Daryl, it makes them good bad men.[105]

Eventually, Merle will come around as well, though not as a part of the group. Acknowledging that he will not find a place there after all that he has done, he sacrifices himself by attacking The Governor (he fails but manages to kill some henchmen). Merle is certainly not a very likeable character, but Daryl is.[106]

Be that as it may, there are two observations to be made here: first, Daryl is both sympathetic and thoroughly capable of survival without civilization because he is and always has been a frontiersman. The storyline of these two brothers takes them from backwards white trash to heroic men. Thus, these two characters come close to the strategies for recuperating white privilege Hamilton Carroll identifies in *Affirmative Reaction*:

> One of the principal tools of that recuperation, I would argue, is the transformation of white masculinity from the universal into the particular, whereby the particular becomes a location from which privilege can be recouped. [...] [A]s the politics of representation transform the grounds of identity, white masculinity turns to a reactive strategy under which it redefines the normative by citing itself as a marginal identity (6).

The white racist/white trash male is such a location for reaffirming white masculinity. Daryl's loose attachment to the group thus works two ways: it draws on idealized frontier masculinity and makes him a real man, a provider and protector, someone on whom the groups depends, but it also marks him as different from the rest of the group. Despite a multiracial cast he is the one who sticks out the most (Michonne claims this position in season three, though it remains to be seen to which end). Even though his qualities as tracker and hunter are valued, it is his white trash identity that makes him special. While the female and/or ethnic members of the group seem to naturally blend in, Daryl has to earn his keep. S02E05 explicitly deals with this. In this episode, Daryl is alone on a search for Sophia.

The little background information we have of him explains why it is so important to him to find the missing girl. He, too, wandered off into the woods when he was a child; though no one came looking for him. While the group is settling into domesticity on the farm, the search for Sophia keeps him active: there is nothing else to do, which is to say that there is no room for a real man in the zombie apocalypse rendition of *Little House*

105A classic example of the good bad man would be Ringo Kid (John Wayne) in Ford's *Stagecoach* (see McVeigh, 166).

106Daryl has even two popular Facebook fan pages: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Daryl-Dixon-The-Walking-Dead/167525660009631 and https://www.facebook.com/pages/Daryl-from-The-Walking-Dead/170853609604877.

on the Prairie.[107] Another reason lies in the paradox of the masculinity he represents: despite placing paramount value on independence, activity and risk, it also needs some sort of connection to community and civilization. This makes him a typical frontiersman who is external to the community whose very survival he makes possible. He willingly sacrifices himself during the search for Sophia: his horse buckles when a snake crosses their path and throws Daryl off a ravine. He is pierced by one of his own bows – sacrificing his blood for the cause – and in and out of consciousness from the fall. In this state, he hallucinates and sees his brother.[108]

His brother Merle surfaces here as some kind of internalized/symbolic father located in the Freudian super-ego. Daryl's lack of sociability comes from this location in his psyche: he marginalizes himself. The internalized Merle makes fun of him for his efforts regarding the group: "You're a joke. That's what you are. Playing errand boy to a bunch of pansy-asses, niggers and democrats. You're nothing but a freak to them, redneck trash. That's all you're. They laughin' at cha behind yer back. You know that, don't you?" (*TWD* S02E05). This whole hallucinated dialogue becomes a source of strength for Daryl. On the one hand, it serves to particularize Daryl so that he does not become too comfortable in the group's multiculturalism and the newfound domesticity on the farm. There are also instances that appeal to his masculinity. Merle laments "all those years I've spent trying to make a man of you" while Daryl lies unconscious in the dirt. When he regains consciousness, Daryl successfully kills two zombies and climbs out of the ravine. This is accompanied by Western-themed music reminiscent of Morricone. We also see Daryl eating a raw squirrel to regain strength. He moreover cuts off the ears of the zombies he killed as war trophies. Also interesting to note is that he motivates himself by saying "Stop being such a pussy." This is not necessarily specific to Daryl or *TWD*, but these words surface in *BrBa* as well. This is the symbolic violence Žižek speaks of. These words motivate people to be real men and not to be like women. Female genitalia become the location from which weakness originates, the phallus is a source of strength and power.

Finally, Daryl survives his ordeal. However, when he arrives at the farm, he is shot by Andrea. This, too, he survives. But it (ironically) undermines Andrea's status as the

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107 The search mission led by a racist man can also be read as a reference to the John Ford Western *The Searchers* (1956). Another Western reference (Leone's Man with No Name) with regard to Daryl is his wearing of a poncho in S03E05.

108 Merle only appears in S01E01 and S01E02 and then reappears in S03. After Rick cuffed him to a rooftop in Atlanta, he saws off his arm to free himself. In S03 he is reintroduced as one of The Governor's henchmen.

group's sharp shooter and increases the sympathy the viewer has towards Daryl. After he survives the wilderness, a woman brings him down, almost to affirm what his hallucinated brother told him.

Daryl's particularity serves the group well and is a source of authority for him, not only with regard to his survival skills. In S02E11, it is his task to torture a hostage from another group. The whole situation is the result of a questionable decision by Rick. He shoots two members of this group. When the remaining members run off, they leave another man behind: he would die if he was left there, but Rick decides to take him in: initially, not in order to obtain information through torture, but because it would be inhumane to leave him wounded in the street. Later, the group will discuss whether to execute the young man. They vote yes, but Rick is unable to follow through. In the end, it is Shane who does the deed in a ploy to get Rick killed.

All in all, Daryl becomes family to the other group members. Carol especially flourishes in his company (also another instance in which a woman's well-being is dependent on a man in *TWD*). Apart from that, both he and Merle redeem their redneck ways through sacrificing their bodies for the common good.[109] Even though we might not agree with what they do and say all the time, eventually they will 'do the right thing.' And often they do so without being acknowledged. They might even get shot. The initial antipathy we might have for them becomes their triumph in the end.

Even though Daryl has his own ways, he is mostly accepting of Rick's leadership. Rick has two antagonists in the series. He is very similar to both of them and his relationships to them are important with regard to working out his own style of leadership. Let us briefly look at Shane: he and Rick are police men and best friends, evidenced by their open conversation about the cruelty/irrationality of women. Shane can be read as Rick's shadow self and as soon as Rick has embraced the darkness in himself, it is time for Shane to disappear: Rick kills him before Shane kills him in S02E12.

Both Rick and Shane immediately assume leadership roles. Since Rick is late to the

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[109]The turning point for Merle is not the act of sacrifice in itself. The Governor demands Michonne because she took one of his eyes and killed his zombified daughter in S03E08. Since Merle fears that Rick will not give in to his demands, he captures her. When he is on his way to deliver her to The Governor, Michonne appeals to him through the one thing they have in common: their status of particularity within the group (not because she is black, but because she seems fully capable of survival on her own and a female sword fighter with two jaw-less zombies in tow is a rather peculiar sight even in the post-apocalypse). Merle thus lets her go unharmed. He finally overcame his racism by way of identification before he sacrifices himself for the multiracial group.

apocalypse, it is Shane who takes care of Rick's family and establishes himself as the hegemonic male in the camp outside of Atlanta. Maybe because they used to represent the law they come to be the law after the collapse of civil society. Shane's hegemony is not necessarily uncontested by other males: Ed believes in his own patriarchy by ways of superiority in his nuclear family. In S01E03 Shane subjects him to a brutal beating: women are not to be violated. Earlier in the same episode, Ed feels cold at night – an indication that this man is simply not cut out for rugged frontier life – and so he throws another log into his camp fire. Shane informs him that "cold don't change the rules." He then stands up and walks up to Ed: "You're sure you want to have this conversation?" No, he does not and caves in. Shane thus assumes a role quite similar to Rick in later episodes: he makes laws and he enforces them without much discussion.

There is, however, one thing that disqualifies Shane as an ideal man: he lacks constraint. Here, *TWD* makes visible the downside of male competitiveness and aggression. Immediately after the apocalypse, he starts an affair with Lori. After Rick is back, this becomes a problem as Shane seems unwilling to let go of her. He even confesses his love for her in S01E06. She rejects this love and Shane almost rapes her. Despite having feelings for Lori, he begins a physical relationship with Andrea early in the second season. In S02E04, he tells her with regard to guns that it is all about instinct: "Turn off the switch" (which is a reference to the conversation he has with Rick before the apocalypse). Shane is a classic case in which the male virtues turn into vices. That is so because he uses these virtues solely to his own benefit. He takes care of Lori and Carl because he wants to have this family, not because of his sense of duty. He sleeps with women because he wants to satisfy himself, not them. Moreover, although his violent behavior often executes the rules necessary for survival, it also serves his desire for power and supremacy (usually with regard to other men of the group). This is a common trope in zombie narratives. The real threat is not the zombie, but mankind itself: "self-centered savages [...] That's how we fall" (Maberry, 21).

The naming of this character is interesting considering the frontier-like setting of this series as it suggests the main character of the classic Western *Shane*. If the reference is intended, however, its intent is demystification. The dystopian vision of the human condition in many zombie movies hence parallels the pessimism of *Shane* revisions. Given my observations thus far, *TWD*'s Shane is not "the hero [who] sacrifices himself for a community in which he believes more than he believes in himself" (McGee, 144). The similarities between both Shanes are however startling: like the movie-Shane, there

is erotic tension between him and the wife of another man, only this time it is consumed. The movie-Shane is a man without history coming to the rescue of a small community: through extra-legal means (violence), he brings justice to helpless people. Shane in *TWD* also contributes to the survival of his community. However, he eventually undermines the stability of the community through his self-centered and self-righteous actions. Both Shanes are admired by a young boy (Joey/Carl) for their capability for violence. Yet, while Joey at the end of *Shane* shouts after the man he admires, Carl has to shoot a zombiefied Shane after he was stabbed to death by Rick. Strikingly, Shane and Joe towards the end of *Shane* brutally beat each other up and so do Rick and Shane towards the end of *TWD*'s second season. Yet, while the original Shane does so for the nuclear family to stay intact and to counter social injustice, *TWD*'s Shane's intent is to kill and replace Rick.

The selfish as opposed to selfless intentions of Shane make living in a community problematic. The original Shane, of course, disappears at the end of the film since he "is an aristocrat of violence, an alien from a more glamorous world, who is better than those he helps and is finally not accountable to those for whom he sacrifices himself" (Slotkin 1992, 400). Shane's violence transforms the people around him, yet "he cannot be part of the world he has made possible through his violence" (McGee, 19). Like the movie-Shane, *TWD*'s Shane should have left the group like he intended to early in the second season. In the farm's domestic setting, he clashes with Hershel's wishes more than once. He values actions over words to a degree that disturbs the peace of the community. And, most importantly, he undermines the sole institution that still counts in *TWD*: "all the horror action of the television series is sublimated to its primary focus on the family" (Bishop 2011, 9). *TWD* thus remodels the 'original' Shane into a disrupter of the peace, into a man who seizes the opportunity an end-of-the-world crisis presents to him for his own interests. Horror author Kim Paffenroth, too, believes that the family is at the center of *TWD*. As mentioned, all other institutions have proven to be pointless,

> Love and family are therefore more positive and powerful in *The Walking Dead* than they are in *Night of the Living Dead* or many other current versions of the zombie apocalypse. [...] love and family are reliable sources of purpose for the characters and are shown to be capable of withstanding the destructive forces of an undead world (225-226).

This positivity with regard to the family had not been evident in Romero's fiction. In *The Night of the Living Dead*, for example, a daughter feasts on her own parents. In contrast, the primary force in Rick's sense of duty is the urge to reconnect with his family. When he cuffs Merle to the rooftop, he tells him that he is not a police man

anymore, but that he is a man looking for his family and anyone who gets in his way will regret it. To rebuild society, its primary unit has to be intact. Paffenroth concludes that "Shane is the main problem not the zombies, because he undermines the stability of Rick's and Lori's family" (227). Even though this view is simplistic insofar that it denies Lori any agency in the fall-out between Rick and Shane, within the logic of *TWD* this is a fair assessment.

That he is a threat to the nuclear family is Shane's downfall. Yet this is not the sole reason why he becomes unnecessary in *TWD*'s narrative structure: unlike the movie Shane, *TWD*'s Shane lingered on for too long. Shane in the movie leaves the community and the family behind because his purpose was fulfilled. Rick, who like Joe Starrett is initially too domesticated to lead the group through the apocalypse, transforms into a Shane-like character, into someone "who knows Indians." That he eventually has to kill his best friend is one of the stepping stones here: hard decisions are to be made. But there is more to it: Rick and Shane form a dual leadership until Shane's death. Within this constellation, Rick lacks assertiveness. In S02E05, Shane tells Rick that "good intentions make us weaker" and that "survival is making hard decisions." Rick, ironically, follows through on this advice when he kills Shane. In this instance, Shane talks about the forlorn search mission for Sophia, whose survival in the woods is of course highly improbable. In S02E07, he tells Rick that "it ain't like before", which again refers to Rick's good intentions. This time it is with regard to Hershel's barn full of zombified family members. Rick tries to handle the situation with appeasement politics. Shane then takes control of the situation by opening the barn and shooting the zombies. The last zombie to exit the barn is Sophia, whom Rick shoots: a turning point for him as it leads to more assertiveness in his leadership role. This, then, also marks the point at which Shane should have left.

In S02E08, Rick kills two living men on instant decision-making. As it turns out, these two men were part of a larger group that roams the post-apocalyptic landscape to loot other groups and rape their women. Rick has changed and because this is so, just like in *Shane*, there is no need for Shane within the narrative anymore. Rick has thus become a gunslinger himself, though he is less a Shane-type because he actually has family ties. This longing for a community makes him more of a Will Kane character. The scene in S02E08 can be understood in terms of Kane's extra-legal shoot-out with Miller: "Kane forthrightly asserts the need for pre-emptive violence to prevent atrocities which he (apparently alone) believes are certain to follow" (Slotkin 1992, 393). This

course of action seems right because Rick's and "Kane's ultimate appeal is to the authority of his 'character' and his 'manhood'" (ibid., 393).

In its first two seasons, *TWD* shows how the group of survivors have trouble of letting go of the pre-apocalyptic past. While it takes time to come to terms with the new circumstances in which death lurks around every corner, the survivors make costly mistakes. Not everyone is equipped for instant decision-making in what are mostly life and death situations. The establishment of a new society is constantly put on hold as the survivors cannot find a place where they can settle down again – while we see them on the road for most of the first season, the farm in the second season did ultimately not offer enough security from the zombies. In the third season, they try to settle in a prison whose walls seem to offer shelter from the living dead. However, altercations with another group lead by an autocratic leader put this project in danger. In the following, I will show how the Woodbury community is constructed as a permanent state of exception and how Rick is on the verge of establishing the same kind of leadership.

4.3. The Apocalypse as State of Exception

The way Walter White turns into his own invention Heisenberg, Rick runs the risk of becoming like his antagonists after he killed Shane. Like Shane previously, he has little belief in democratic procedures anymore and declares his leadership a dictatorship in S02E13.[110] When he encounters another mirror-self in The Governor, he realizes that he is on his own path towards tyranny. At the end of the third season, Rick promises to assume a more democratic leadership role. Evidently, to be a hegemonic and good male is a balancing act on a very thin line. Often, Rick is in danger of falling off the wrong side. Also, this season contrasts two communities with each other. Whereas the community of Woodbury seems to have succumbed to complacency, Rick's group is shown as a good society in the making in which individuals act for the common good (e.g. by volunteering to do dangerous tasks or by collectively taking care of Rick's infant daughter).

TWD plays through a common Western theme in season three: the danger of falling into an autocratic regime when there is no law and order. The Hobbesian war of all against all in the zombie apocalypse seen as a state of nature allows for sovereign

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110To be fair, he does not force anybody to remain in the group. Everybody is free to leave. But those who decide to stay will have to abide by his rules.

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leaders to emerge:

> Without a credible Sovereign willing to enforce them, talk of rights is mere words. Even morality itself suffers the same fate without a Sovereign to determine its content and enforce it by the credible threat of violence. [...] [E]even the worst tyranny offers protections superior to the state of nature. As wretched as we might find the Governor's regime in *The Walking Dead*, for example, it would be hard to blame people for choosing to live under his rule in Woodbury rather than face life against the zombies alone (Walker, 84).

There are some striking similarities between Rick and The Governor: both lead a group of survivors and both do so autocratically. Both are on the verge of being consumed by two things: their power and the loss of family. While Rick mourns his deceased wife, The Governor has lost both his wife and daughter. Each tries to control their emotions through hiding and aggression, with the difference that Rick mostly directs his violence at the dead, not the living.

The walls of Woodbury had not been breached in a long time, which is why a sense of invulnerability reminiscent of pre-zombie days has set in. Now a group of "terrorists" has attacked Woodbury and Michonne has killed his zombified daughter. As a result, his sovereign rule in a state of exception becomes more pronounced: people should be ready at all time and no one is to leave the premises without permission. What becomes apparent is that Woodbury is not a frontier-like town in which authoritarian rule has been established as a temporary means. The Governor does not rule by force until there is a juridical law – he wants to establish his own order and the on-going crisis outside of Woodbury is used to fortify his continued claim to power.

The community's borders are sealed not only to the outside, but to the inside as well. The 'foreign' and the 'domestic' conflate into a state of emergency. The fear from outside forces (zombies, terrorists) and inside threats (traitors) enables a sovereign subject to emerge as loss is replaced by aggression. The relationship between loss and aggression is something Judith Butler elaborates on in the post-9/11 collection of essays, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004).:

> In recent months, a subject has been instated at the national level, a sovereign and extra-legal subject, a violent and self-centered subject; its actions constitute the building of a subject that seeks to restore and maintain its mastery through the systematic destruction of its multilateral relations, its ties to the international community. It shores itself up, seeks to reconstitute its imagined wholeness, but only at the price of denying its own vulnerability, its dependency, its exposure, where it exploits those very features in others, thereby making those features 'other to' itself (Butler 2004b, 41).

Similarly to *BrBa*, a subject's own vulnerability (here both as The Governor and the whole community of Woodbury) becomes the source of narcissistic grandiosity. Even though the living are outnumbered by a true other – the living dead – they other humans: "Throughout the series, survivors contrast their humanity with the savagery of others"

(Riley, 96-97). The viewer however knows that The Governor is capable of savagery. The Governor in turn constructs Rick's group as savages "who want what we have, who want to destroy us" (S03E16), which is – quite literally – a gated community not unlike those from pre-zombie days.

The Governor's savagery is not the only thing that renders him a villain if we take the Western as a point of reference. Similarly to Ryker in the movie *Shane*, he is a feudal landlord. Not only does he want to exert uncontested control over the people of Woodbury, he also seeks to expand it. When he learns about the prison group, he actively escalates the situation. His goal seems to be possession of the prison as well – whatever the cost. The situation however gets out of hand as he underestimates Rick and the other survivors. His pursuit of more power turns into a relentless quest for revenge for which he is willing to sacrifice the lives of those who depend on him.

The Governor's personal mission for revenge (the killing of his zombie-daughter and loss of an eye through Michonne) becomes the whole community's war made possible through deception and othering. The viewer knows that Rick's group violated Woodbury's sovereignty because they wanted to rescue hostages. Their act of 'terrorism' only countered another form of terrorism. The public, however, lives shunned away from death and decay outside of Woodbury. It is a community in which ordinary life goes on. Thankful that The Governor and his men guarantee their safety, they easily fall prey to his manipulations. They, too, are zombies: unable and unwilling to make (moral) decisions, which is an overriding theme in all of *TWD* and echoes *High Noon*'s main concern as well. Stephen McVeigh describes the latter as "Zinneman's intended attack upon a growing silent majority" (113). The community of Hadleyville stands for the silent majority as its individual members are unwilling to help Kane fight Miller and his gang even though it is certain that Miller will want to take over the town. Thus, "Hadleyville is simply prepared to allow any form of control from above, whether it be Kane or Miller. Its citizens' only requisite is that they avoid personal involvement" (ibid., 110). McVeigh goes on to illustrate this further with Eisenhower's presidency and Norman Mailer's sense of totalitarianism, a term less understood as political but as social – "a form of security for the masses, safe in the knowledge that someone else was steering the country" (ibid., 111). The same can be observed in Woodbury, whose inhabitants seem disinterested in taking on any political responsibility as long as The Governor and his men provide for their safety. This safety – which eventually turns out to be a lie – is his means to uncontested power.

The recklessness with which The Governor accumulates power becomes evident in the first episode that shows him. A helicopter crashes in the woods in S03E03. The Governor arrives at the wreck to find a survivor. He learns that the men in the helicopter were National Guardsmen looking for a safe place to stay. After obtaining information of the whereabouts of the other men, he kills them all and takes their guns and vehicles.

Not only does he use violence to increase his power, but also to sustain it. Only this time as entertainment. When Woodbury has a summer festival, its main attraction is a staged fight between his soldiers and zombies in S03E05 (see also Round, 161). Andrea finds this "barbaric," a comment that contains meta-fictional irony: violent entertainment is what *TWD* is, too, and thus the post-apocalyptic violence neatly falls in line with pre-apocalyptic entertainment choices.

When Daryl is captured during a rescue mission for the captured Glenn and Maggie, his brother Merle, who previously was The Governor's trusted henchman, is presented as a traitor to conceal his own involvement in the escalating situation between both groups. The brothers have to fight for their lives now. He asks his community what to do with him. In unison they scream "kill him!" (S03E08). His reliance on military might, the manipulation of the public opinion through both violent entertainment and false information may be read as a reaction and reference to the war on terror – especially considering that the war on terror and the zombie apocalypse are indefinite – and its influence on civil rights in the post-9/11 era. Stephen McVeigh argues that the "events early in the twenty-first century have created something of a resurgence of Western and frontier values in the American mainstream" (203), which is why Americans "willingly accepted [George W. Bush's] rhetorical style and Western imagery" (ibid., vii). If we consider how preferred masculinity is constructed in *TWD*, the post-9/11 revival of old masculinity ideals surfaces again. How can we understand this revival with respect to the political culture of the post-9/11 era?

While Rick and his group resemble a frontier community traveling through savage lands until they find a place to establish a new order, the Hobbesian state of nature surfaces as a state of exception with regard to the Woodbury community. Woodbury can be regarded as a continuation of pre-zombie days, not as an attempt to establish an altogether new community in a lawless territory. While it seems as if Rick's dictatorship is a temporary measure until the group has found a new safe haven, The Governor seeks to establish his sovereign rule on a permanent basis in a state of exception.

Exception as such is tightly bound to necessity, which we might best understand with

regard to the ancient maxim *necessitas legem non habet*. Literally this means that necessity has no law, which in turn can be interpreted as that the state of necessity does not recognize law or that it creates its own law (Agamben, 1, 24). Generally, the state of exception can be understood as enabling "exceptional measures [as] the result of periods of political crisis and, as such, [...] they find themselves in the paradoxical position of being juridical measures that cannot be understood in legal terms, and the state of exception appears as the legal form of what cannot have legal form" (ibid., 1). In theory, the state of exception is a temporary measure that enables quick decision-making during crises. Giorgio Agamben however argues that there has been a tendency in modern democracies to establish the state of exception on a more permanent basis (see 8-9). It is a "constitutional dictatorship" that "has, in fact, become a paradigm of government" (8). While it up for debate whether Agamben's observations fit the present condition of the USA, the post-apocalyptic Woodbury community finds itself in this situation – formerly a 'normal' US town in Georgia, it is now ruled by a leader who has suspended the law and has no intention of reinstating it.

Rick makes decisions for the group he leads on his authority alone, although he sometimes consults with Hershel or Daryl. Similarly, The Governor acts as the sovereign in Woodbury. Contrary to Rick, however, he never asks for advice. The authority he commands rests on the safety he and his henchmen provide and the fact that this protection is presented as a necessity. Thus, the people of Woodbury and Rick's community give up rights they had before the apocalypse in exchange for safety.[111] Yet, Rick proclaims his rule a dictatorship in the season two finale and renounces this at the end of the third season to establish a more democratic structure. He and his community have defeated The Governor and can now negotiate questions of leadership. By contrast, The Governor rather kills his people than give them power. The state of necessity is used to establish a state of emergency with sovereign rule on a more permanent basis.

As Agamben claims, the perception of multiple crises and outside threats has been with the United States for several decades and has intensified since 9/11:

> Because the sovereign power of the president is essentially grounded in the emergency linked to a state of war, over the course of the twentieth century the metaphor of war becomes an integral part of the presidential political vocabulary whenever decisions considered to be of vital importance are being imposed (ibid., 21).

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111 Writing about post-9/11 America, Susan N. Herman describes the assumptions on which such a decision is based: "The war on terror decade has generated a powerful frame for evaluating government antiterrorism strategies, based on three assumptions: (1) terrorism is an exceptional threat; (2) we need to adapt by giving up rights in order to be safe; and (3) our strategies for combating terrorism have to remain secret so we just have to trust the president, who is best able to operate in secrecy, to decide what rights we need to give up" (4).

The war on poverty, the war on drugs and the war on terror immediately come to mind here. Moreover, the latter has a special significance. Agamben states that "President Bush's order [...] radically erases any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally unnamable and unclassifiable being" (3) as evidenced in Guantánamo where "bare life reaches its maximum indeterminacy" (4). The Governor has Glenn, Maggie and eventually Andrea disappear in a torture chamber where these individuals do not even hold the rights to their own lives anymore. The analogy with the political climate after 9/11 becomes more evident in the zombie, who, like a terrorist, is less than human.[112] Furthermore, since neither zombies nor terrorists operate with official ties to nation states, they can be anywhere and can never be conquered. As the war on terror and the zombie apocalypse are both open ended, crisis and the drastic measures that come with it become the rule:

> President Bush's decision to refer to himself as the 'Commander in Chief of the Army' after September 11, 2001, must be considered in the context of this presidential claim to sovereign powers in emergency situations. If, as we have seen, the assumption of this title entails a direct reference to the state of exception, then Bush is attempting to produce a situation in which the emergency becomes the rule, and the very distinction between peace and war (and between foreign and civil war) becomes impossible (ibid., 22).

Since *TWD* is an open ended serial narrative whose plot is mostly concerned with survival in itself, peace and war conflate into one ongoing crisis in which anything can happen: the death of central characters like Shane, Lori and Andrea or, at least in the comic series, the mutilation of the narrative's protagonist (Rick loses a hand in the comic book). The anxieties that a state of emergency-cum-rule carries with it are, however, relieved because *TWD* features a paternalistic hero that can be trusted. This, again, is best understood in reference to Will Kane in *High Noon*.

While *High Noon* used the Western myth to explore the political climate of the early 1950s, *TWD* does something very similar with regard to the contemporary situation. Susan N. Herman describes the contemporary situation in *Taking Liberties. The War on Terror and the Erosion of American Democracy* (2011). In this book, Herman demonstartes how measures such as the Patriot Act have circumscribed democracy. Her book is also a lament concerning the complacency with which her fellow Anglo-American citizens accept this. With this, she also echoes Agamben's argument concerning how war and peace are becoming indistinguishable while democracy is weakened: "short-term emergency sacrifices of rights can be regarded as a break in our

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112 Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and Ira Chernus's *Monster to Destroy. The Neoconservative War on Terror and Sin* (2006) both show how terrorists are figured as an Other without humanity by the rhetoric of the Bush administration. The sentiment is not new as the Bush administration is perfectly in tune with the old frontier paradigm.

usual patterns. Continuing into a second decade and beyond, these emergency measures stop being temporary exceptions and become part of who we are: the New Normal" (6).

While The Governor is somebody to whom the state of exception is beneficial and who would like it to continue in order to ensure his own position of power, Rick assumes leadership in this situation while considering it a temporary measure born out of sheer necessity. Comparing Rick to the revisionism of Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), Erin Overbey states that "Grimes is a methodical and exquisitely restrained protagonist; with each act of violence he commits, he senses his humanity slipping away" (n. pag.). In Overbey's view, the men in *Unforgiven* are haunted by each murderous act they have committed. In the same vein, "'The Walking Dead' gives us a similar gunslinger who is supremely self-conscious of the violence he must commit and wary of the damage it's inflicting on his soul" (ibid., n. pag.). What redeems Rick's violence and his temporary dictatorship – in this respect he differs from Shane and The Governor or the men in *Unforgiven* – is that this violence, like that of Will Kane or the original Shane, does not serve self-interest but the well-being of his community.

The things Rick does for the greater good, however, come with a price: "perhaps Rick's fate is that of the archetypal Western lawman: to be able to travel between the wild world and the civilized one – the domains of Chaos and Order – but unable to find a permanent home in either" (Lowder, xv). Jonathan Maberry, too, draws parallels between Rick and the frontiersman:

> We all know that recording history is a sanitizing process. [...] Even now we talk about 'settling the West,' and not about the comprehensive germ warfare we carried out against Native Americans by giving them blankets known to be infested with smallpox and chicken pox. What matters to the modern, civilized person is that we are currently civilized and moral.
> Except that we're not. We are at war, and war is not fought nicely. We torture and we kill, we carpet-bomb, and sometimes innocent civilians die in order for a battle to be won or a significant enemy defeated. [...] [Rick Grimes's] story shows us how leaders emerge, how they are forged, how they are shaped, and how they are burned into the pages of history" (29).

With this in mind, *TWD* seems to bridge the gap between classical gunfighter Westerns like *Shane* and *High Noon*[113] and what Brent Strang describes as Postmortem Westerns: Rick is both, a hero and a broken man, who, even though he might 'win' in the end, loses his wife, his innocence and possibly his humanity in the process. This, then, shows that

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113 Consider, for example, how much the relationship between Rick and his group fits the following description of Will Kane and Shane: "Kane and Shane perform their feats and save these communities because the communities cannot save themselves. These works, despite their appreciation of the idea of the common good, ultimately suggest that such a social state can be catalyzed only by the acts of an extraordinary individual. That individual is marked by his capacity or willingness to exercise violence – however lamentable the necessity for such action may be" (Corkin, 153).

drastic measures have to be taken in states of necessity and it testifies to America's own loss of innocence in past decades (My Lai, Abu Ghraib). Maberry's above quoted observation is right insofar as the series confronts its viewer with the horrors of war and that no one can expect to remain innocent during the experience. This way, *TWD* is in tune with Bishop's observation that zombie narratives are both survivalist fantasies and a cultural expression of post-9/11 experiences as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq brought home disturbing images of war *and* war crimes, least not forget the trauma of 9/11 itself.

However, I would argue that *TWD* does not condemn war all together, or the US' involvement in such to be specific, nor does it provide a thoroughly nihilistic outlook on humanity. This also signals a departure from Romero's zombie visions. The strategies involved in *TWD*'s construction of masculinity lead back to Hamilton Carroll's *Affirmative Reaction*. Rick Grimes is, in fact, not only a post-apocalyptic Will Kane, but also very similar to *24*'s Jack Bauer. Even though institutional law has collapsed, he cannot shake off the sense of duty installed in him and has to negotiate his family's needs and those of the community he comes to lead. Ultimately, he is not able to save his wife (neither is Jack Bauer in *24*) or is presented as an overly involved father. After Carl had to mercy-kill his mother, Rick pats him on the back. He rather has his son protecting himself than being protected. What is more, even though his former police duty informs his identity, he must go beyond the laws he once represented. The revaluation of traditional masculinity, i. e. one tied to frontiersmen, is connected to the declared hero of 9/11, the police man in the persona of Rick Grimes. Consequently, Rick is reborn into "the space between the failure of the law and the state of exception" and thus "becomes sovereign" (Carroll, 38). Even though Carroll comments on Jack Bauer, Rick inhabits the same liminal sphere as the former. This status "is vested not in any specific authority [...], but in his person and, more significantly, in his character [...] [which becomes] the location in which justice resides – he is judge, jury, and executioner" (ibid., 44-45). *TWD* then becomes a test of character for Rick, who has to prove his exceptionality by being capable of being both cruel and genuine. Despite being on the verge of becoming tyrannical, he withstands and remains a good man. Thus, like the USA in the aftermath of 9/11, Rick's masculinity "has the right to act however it sees fit just as long as it believes that it is acting in a just way [...] we must trust in character and moral vision" (ibid., 45). This mechanism actually pre-dates 9/11 when we consider Richard Slotkin's assessment of the gunfighter film in which "the

defense of 'civilization' is more important than the procedures of 'democracy'" (1992, 393).

In *TWD*, there are undertones of falling for a frontiersman-like leader who turns out to be a dictator driven by self-interest (The Governor). However, the series reconciles these anxieties by presenting another frontiersman-like leader in Rick and invites the viewers to root for him. We do so, because he is willing to sacrifice himself for the benefit of others. We do not even have to understand sacrifice in physical terms: killing itself is presented as a sacrifice on a psychological level – Rick cannot enjoy any of his triumphs over human or non-human antagonists. In Sally Robinson's terms, white masculinity is re-centered through (potential) wounding. Neither feminism nor the threat of zombies wounds Rick, but the responsibility he willingly burdens himself with. This "therapeutic power of the male wound" makes possible the survivalist fantasy of *TWD* in which the white male again becomes heroic (Robinson, 131).

The aspect of wounding surfaces in various degrees in Rick: at the beginning of the series he is physically wounded through a gun-shot wound. Later, he becomes psychologically wounded through the violent acts he has to commit and through the loss of his wife. Moreover, the *responsibility as a burden and a source of these wounds* (police duty, protecting his kin) also becomes evident at the conclusion of the second season when his leadership is openly doubted: he takes on the responsibility no one else wants to take *even though he is not always appreciated for it*. Drawing from Robinson's term 'victim-hero,' Claire Sisco King in her book *Washed in Blood* (2012) looks at sacrificial films featuring a 'sacrificial victim-hero.' She understands sacrifice not in its vernacular usage, but as the ultimate sacrifice, the "noble death of men [...] as a ritualized practice" (5). *TWD*, of course, does not sacrifice its hero through death (at least not until this point in the television/comic narrative). Yet, there are a couple of things of interest here in terms of what these films (*The Omega Man* [1971], *Titanic* [1997], *Armageddon* [1998], *I Am Legend* [2007]) achieve according to Sisco King's reading:

> Sacrificial films typically deploy sacrifice as a strategy for managing the male victim-hero's positions of privilege and authority within the narrative and in relation to the larger cultural context from which the film emerges. [...] In all of these films, the sacrificial victim-hero weathers crises both public and personal; having lost his positions of institutional authority and/or suffered private losses, he begins his narrative arc in place of peril and uncertainty. So wounded is this victim-hero that he often bears the symptoms of trauma or what might be called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [...] the sacrificial victim-hero ultimately realizes that his salvific potential and obligation to others require resignation to noble death – a final act of self-loss, paradoxically, resolves his earlier traumas and restores his

imagined sense of selfhood. In fact, trauma and sacrifice enable the victim-hero to earn transcendent authority (4).

The last third of this quotation is where this description diverts from what we can observe in *TWD*. This may be due to the fact that the sacrificial victim-hero's death only occurs at the end of the respective narrative. This conclusion in *TWD* is still far in sight. Yet, Kirkman's willingness to kill major characters makes the eventual death of Rick Grimes not entirely unlikely. More to the point, however, are the observations in the first two thirds of this quotation as they perfectly describe Rick's situation. His position of authority within the narrative is often challenged, especially when he shares leadership duties with Shane and he suffers both private (disappearance of family, loss of wife) as well as public crises (wounded in police duty, leadership ability questioned). Moreover, "he begins his narrative arc in place of peril and uncertainty" in a twofold way: he is struggling in his domestic relationship and he is physically wounded and wakes from a coma to a changed world. In short, Rick is introduced to as as somewhat emasculated. With the ongoing narrative of *TWD*, however, this man reestablishes masculine hegemony through forms of sacrifice. Therefore, Rick can be understood in terms of "hegemonic masculinity's regeneration through victimization and self-inflicted pain" (Sisco King, 41).[114]

In sacrificial films, Sally Robinson argues, crisis becomes an "'enabling fiction' that constructs and manages cultural memory about the national masculine toward hegemonic ends" (13). Read allegorically in the wake of 9/11, *TWD* works though the emasculating event with the remasculinization of Rick while also providing a narrative setting that resonates with the open endedness of successive political measures (i.e. war on terror, state of exception).

In so doing, the hero must transform from passive to active. While crisis has happened and Rick endured it in the most passive form imaginable – a coma – his experiences after he came to demand him to be active. His altercations with Shane similarly push him towards a more pro-active manner.

High Noon resonates here to the extent that Hadleyville's population lacks this activity and needs a man like Will Kane who is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice: he takes matters in his own hands because he knows that his actions benefit the community although this community does not seem appreciative of him. Rick likewise struggles to get support from the group he leads.

114I interpret "self-inflicted pain" with regard to *TWD* as Rick's voluntary leadership role and the toll this takes on his psyche.

All of this, of course, would mean nothing if we did not consider the hero's character. Walter White in *BrBa* openly appeals to his wife with regard to the sacrifices he has made for his family (see previous chapter). As we have seen, these sacrifices served his ego better than his family. As a result, it can be stated that *BrBa* deconstructs male sacrifice as a means to male hegemony. When he recognizes his life as being in a state of necessity, he resorts to exceptional measures he envisioned as temporary in the beginning. The power he accumulated through these drastic measures are however so alluring that he seems reluctant to give them up again, which is something he shares with the US government and Barack Obama's continuation of some of Bush's policies (Guantánamo still exists, the war on terror morphed into the drone war, the Patriot Act is still in effect). Looked at through the lens of Sisco King's sacrificial victim-hero, *BrBa* subverts this concept as well. The male subject normally sacrifices himself through death "to earn transcendent authority" within the narrative and the cultural context that produces it (4). Walter White already knows that he will die and retroactively rewrites this death sentence into heroism: knowing he will die enables him to act out his fantasy of a hegemonic male precisely because his impending death makes him unaccountable for his crimes in the long term. In his mind, however, his death will be heroic because – paradoxically – his cancer gives him the strength (and/or recklessness) to provide for his family after his death. For the audience, however, it should be clear that he is not a hero as he ultimately leaves his family in shambles and committed heinous crimes.

As we have seen, the remasculinization process and male sacrifices work differently in *TWD*. Even though the masculinities of Rick Grimes, Walter White and The Governor draw on the same ideas about what it means to be a man, there is an abstract difference between the former and the two latter men. As mentioned, Richard Slotkin advanced the idea that Will Kane and Frank Miller are not very different: "The difference between them is Kane's latent instinct for goodness" (1992, 394). The blunt truth, it seems, is that the ends do justify the means in *TWD* as long as they are carried out and achieved by a good man. Writing on the paradoxical position of the state of exception in modern democracies, Giorgio Agamben writes that "good faith is enough to guarantee immunity" (23).

TWD is not the only cable series with a post-apocalyptic setting that can be read in light of a state of exception. The basic cable channel TNT, too, has its own take on what

a post-apocalyptic USA could look like. In *Falling Skies*, however, it is an alien invasion that threatens to extinguish humanity. The post-apocalypse seems to be en vogue on television these days, as *Revolution* (2012 – present, NBC) would be another American-produced example

Figure 31 Western imagery in Falling Skies *(S03E07).*

that is currently on air (BBC One has produced *Outcasts* [2011], which aired on BBC America). *Falling Skies* (TNT, 2011 – present) is produced by Stephen Spielberg and created by Robert Rodat (both collaborated on *Saving Private Ryan* [1998]).

Falling Skies is a much more family-oriented drama than *TWD* as it lacks the latter's overtly graphic depiction of violence as well as the despair that permeates the atmosphere of this show. In its first season especially, *Falling Skies* is rather domestic with a group of survivors camped in a former high school where they even have a movie night and often pause the action for mawkish dialogue sequences, which is why it sometimes feels like "watching the Walton family at the end of the world" (Hale 2011, n. pag.). Even though the comforts of civilization are scarce, the supply of hair spay seems to be never ending: the recurring female characters all have long, impeccable hair.

Stylistically, *Falling Skies* is conventional television. Close-ups and medium shots dominate in a series that rather tells than shows. It heavily relies on dialogue sequences with conventional shot/counter-shot patterns. The series also makes heavy use of a soundtrack comprised of sentimental piano and string arrangements in its dialogue sequences. Other than that, the plot is strikingly similar to *TWD*: the series begins only after the apocalypse and the main drive behind the characters' behavior is survival. This calls up thematic kinship with the Western genre, such as negotiating questions of law and order in a world characterized by chaos and death. Like *TWD*, *Falling Skies* features a male lead character who is, however, not as conflicted as Rick. All in all, *Falling Skies*'s vision of the apocalypse is more sanitized and the characterization of its characters draws largely on types (military men, scientists, doctors, outlaws).[115]

115The outlaw Pope (Colin Cunningham) is the most recognizable Western outlaw hero: essentially an opportunist, he opens up a bar in the Charleston camp and often rallies against the 'oppressive' government trying to regulate his activities. He does not feel overtly connected to the 'mainstream' population of Charleston, will, however, do what is right when push comes to shove.

Falling Skies' main character Tom Mason (Noah Wyle) is not a troubled anti-hero, but a clear-cut good guy. He is also a former professor of military history, which the show uses to draw parallels to (American) history. Even though he is an intellectual, he is also very apt at performing the art of violence.[116] The group of survivors is a military-lead resistance group and like a Continental Army regiment called Second Massachusetts. There are also allusions to the American Revolution and, more fitting to the series's set-up, to the history of Anglo-Native encounters. Consider, for example, the following dialogue between Mason and an alien leader taking place in a spaceship:

> **Alien**: "We've studied you in great detail, professor. We've drawn from that to make a proposal that would end hostilities between us. In exchange for sanctuary, we will set aside a protected area where human survivors will be relocated."
> **Tom Mason**: "Some kind of prison camp?"
> **Alien**: "A place where you would be allowed to live in peace. You must be familiar with the concept. It's taken directly from your own history."
> **Tom Mason**: "The worst of it. You can't hand pick from our darkest moments like Cambodia or Nazi Germany..."
> **Alien**: "[...] My Lai, the Trail of Tears. Please, professor Mason, we can think of dozens of more examples. Be honest: oppression is in your nature" (S02E01).

It is interesting to note that upon hearing the alien's proposal, the professor for military history thinks of foreign atrocities even though the removal of Native Americans to reservations immediately sticks out. This pointing out of the suffering Native Americans suffered at the hands of Anglo-Americans might be understood a revisionist gesture. The alien, of course, is not an American and does not make any differences between nations and considers the acts of America as a nation just as oppressive as that of other nations – it is human nature and 'the city upon a hill', too, has succumbed to it at various points in its history. This, then, speaks to a loss of innocence in the past. Paradoxically, it also frames Americans as innocent victims as (white) America now finds itself in a similar position as Native Americans: Anglo-American colonialization equals alien colonialization of the world. While big ideas such as these might give the impression of an unsparing investigation of American history, they remain at a surface level for the most part. More often than not, Mason references events in American history as positive examples for going forward in their struggle against the alien invaders. Critics have noticed this as well and regard this analogy as a means of balancing patriotism:

> the show is careful not to simply celebrate the American spirit while blasting alien intruders. The patriotic associations are undercut by moments when the survivors liken themselves to American Indians on the brink of extermination, and describe their struggle as an

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116He knows when to use violence and when to exhibit restraint. He also has a habit of tutoring less informed people. This pedagogical impulse he shares with the antecedents of the film Western, such as Cooper's Natty Bumppo or Wister's Virginian. Certainly, he is no Man with No Name. Moreover, his girlfriend is the group's doctor and thus whenever his body is wounded he always recuperates in the presence of a woman (on Western heroes as educators, see Mitchell, chapter 7).

'insurgency.' When Tom says of the aliens, 'We don't have to kill them all, just enough of them,' it sounds like the Taliban talking about us (Hale 2011, n. pag.).

Aligning the alien invasion with the colonization of the (North) American continent is, from a Western genre perspective, a revisionist gesture that, however, does not amount to much more than political correctness.[117]

In narrative practice, however, Native Americans exist only in reference to the past. Other groups that have a history of suffering from oppression in America only play a marginalized role. The minority group that gets the most representation is African-Americans. These characters are, however, not developed beyond their status as military men. They are also more likely to depart from the narrative world. In the hierarchy of this survivor group, white men hold all the reigns. Racism in the post-apocalypse is discarded for the most part as the various groups live in unison with one another in order to fight the new Other threatening their collective existence (just like *HoW*'s fraternization of Irish and black men against the Sioux [see next chapter]). Interestingly, some aliens join forces with the humans in the second and third seasons (one of them named after the Apache chief Cochise).[118] Xenophobia surfaces here among members of the human survivors and to diminishing effects for their

Figure 32 Patriotism in Falling Skies *(S02E09).*

chances of overcoming the invasion.[119] By allegorizing the issue of xenophobia in terms of an alien invasion that again refers to moments in America's *past*, an investigation of *contemporary* race issues is foreclosed.

Furthermore, aligning the intergalactic battle for earth with that of Native Americans can be interpreted as one of those instances Robinson, Hamilton and Sisco King have identified in which white masculinity reclaims hegemony through a discourse of

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117Brent Strang identifies two waves of revisionism. The second wave is what he terms Postmortem Western (such as *Deadwood*), whereas he describes the first wave with films such as *Dances with Wolves* (1990) as simply politically correct: "Such films reflect the cultural yearning to apologize for a shameful history by fantasizing narrative scenarios where otherwise marginalized groups and alternate ways of life are vindicated" (3).

118As an example of the rather sentimental speeches encountered on *Falling Skies*, Cochise remarks that "the human spirit remains *the* most powerful weapon on this planet" (S03E09).

119Mason is more than once taken hostage by alien forces. He also forms an alliance with an alien race that is oppressed by the same race invading the earth. This makes Tom Mason a man who knows Indians, a "[mediator] of a double kind who can teach civilized men how to defeat savagery" (Slotkin 1992, 14).

victimization even though it is humanity as a whole that is being victimized. Yet again, humanity is mostly figured through white men who are calling the shots in *Falling Skies*.

Even though the references to America's own colonial past work to make this series not overtly patriotic, such moments, however, do occur regularly. Since the breakdown of technology and the fight against an Other necessarily call for associations with the Western, *Falling Skies* uses these parallels to resurrect the positive expectations the Western myth contains (the plentiful references to the American Revolution do so as well). Freedom, independence, and democracy are the values held dearly by thosse characters the viewer is invited to identify with. The subject of nation building becomes most pronounced in the series's third season, in which a New American Government is established in Charleston. The (temporary) president of New America is Tom Mason, a development that evokes parallels to Teddy Roosevelt, another intellectual who became president after he had proven himself masculine enough in the West and as leader of the Rough Riders.[120] Furthermore, both on a national scale as well as on a personal level, the promise of a second chance is often appealed to: ex-cons and ex-junkies can become good righteous people that are regenerated through violence.

Additionally, the final sentence ("Taliban") of the Hale quotation above needs some elaboration. What he probably means is American involvement on Afghan soil: if they (Taliban/Americans) kill enough (Americans/aliens), they (Americans/aliens) will decide it is not worth the effort and leave (Afghanistan/the world). This aside, I would rather argue that *Falling Skies* communicates to the war on terror on a more subconscious level. The series's very title calls for associations with the falling Twin Towers. What is more, what America has become in *Falling Skies* is a state of exception in which the executive holds all the power, which is depicted as a necessity because they are attacked on American soil by evil, non-human monsters. This crisis as the new normal calls – like *TWD* – for a white male hero to emerge. Like in *TWD*, Tom Mason has not only to overcome the alien forces, but also human antagonists (i.e. the military) who push for autocratic leadership.

As we have seen, *TWD* and *Falling Skies* feature reworkings of the frontiersman in

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120Mason resigns because his new wife and newborn daughter have been kidnapped by aliens. The captivity narrative surfaces in various forms in *Falling Skies*. The aliens also capture children in order to uses them as slave laborers. Even when rescued from the aliens, the children retain a connection to their former masters, such as Tom's son Ben.

an apocalyptic setting. Unlike in *BrBa*, this return to a more traditional concept of masculinity does not lead to decay, but turns into a source of hope in a world already characterized by decay. *TWD* has no interest in deconstructing this masculinity; rather, it is reconstructed as a necessity in a state of exception. Still, Rick Grimes is far from being a perfect hero. Instead, *TWD* in part de-mystifies this brand of masculinity by confronting the viewer and its hero with the horrors of violence. Rick, then, is indeed a crisis masculinity: whereas Walter White in *BrBa* transforms from being in crisis to being an agent of crisis, Rick's masculinity is born through crisis. All of this takes a toll on this man and thus one could expect that Rick will return to a more domesticated brand of masculinity once he establishes a new civilized community (or, after experiencing and partaking in the horrors of a savage world, will never again be able to be civilized). That is to say that the remasculinization process is not an end in itself and does not serve self-interest as opposed to Walter White's transformation. The return of the frontier hero then becomes validated in *TWD* under certain circumstances.

5. Violence as Language: Trauma and Liminality in *Hell on Wheels* and *Banshee*

> "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (Walter Benjamin, qtd. in: Klein, 100).
>
> "Nations, like individuals, sustain trauma, mourn and recover. And like individuals, they survive by making sense of what has befallen them, by constructing a narrative of loss and redemption" (Thomas Laqueur, qtd. in: Kaplan, 136).

Cullen Bohannon (Anson Mount), the anti-hero at the center of *Hell on Wheels* (*HoW*), can also be understood in terms of crisis. *HoW* is set in 1865 at the time of construction of the transcontinental railroad. The date in itself already refers to a crisis, the Civil War, which ended that very year. Before we see any action, white lettering on smoky black background informs us that "THE WAR IS OVER. LINCOLN IS DEAD. THE NATION IS AN OPEN WOUND" (*HoW* S01E01). The show's title sequence is comprised of images of fire and smoke, with Bohannon amongst the flames – symbolically indicating his and the nation's liminal state between death/destruction and (re-)birth. The construction of the Union Pacific itself, too, may be understood in terms of crisis in many ways. It signals the beginning of the end of the Old West and the frontier values associated with it. The construction is moreover accompanied by altercations with native peoples and financial crises. This, like *TWD*, sounds like an ideal setting for the frontier hero to emerge.

In this chapter, I will look at the series' construction of Cullen Bohannon as a traumatized man and how his masculinity can be interpreted in the context of a series produced in the present about a time in the (mythic) past. Furthermore, as an investigation into American myths, I will analyze how this investigation resonates with contemporary concerns.

5.1. *"Ain't much fun killing them, but they seem to need it"*

Cullen Bohannon arrives in Hell on Wheels, the mobile encampment that moves along with the railroad, in search for the Union soldiers who murdered his wife and son during the Civil War. This constellation already indicates both a wounding of the nation and of the male subject at the narrative's center. A former plantation owner in Meridian, Mississippi, his going West is solely motivated by revenge. With this, the series's first season plot is strikingly similar to Clint Eastwood's *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976); a parallel that, albeit to a lesser degree because work largely brings them together, applies

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to the multi-ethnic camp he is thrust into: his sidekick is African-American, there is a woman who was held captive by Native Americans, a Christianized Cheyenne, Irish and German construction workers as well as an English genteel lady as love interest. While his quest for revenge is the driving force behind the series's first season, the second season turns towards altercations with the Sioux. From this brief description, it seems *HoW* is an amalgam of various Western sub-genres: revenge Western, railroad Western, and Indian Western.[121]

HoW presents the railroad camp not as an optimistic endeavor in the name of progress, but as a filthy place characterized by inequality and a project largely driven by corruption. The fragmented nation has not melted together after the Civil War, which is something that resonates with the contemporary USA and Obama's promise to bring the nation back together after the divisive years of the Bush administration. The spirit of optimism that comes with new beginnings remains however mostly absent from the series as *HoW* paints a picture of the West as already contaminated by past sins.

HoW's very title is already the antithesis of optimism and progress. The promotion to the series's premiere consequently featured the tag line "Blood will be spilled. Lives will be lost. Men will be ruined." This, too, contradicts notions of progress but suggests decay. As a result, *HoW* rather looks at the construction of the transcontinental railroad in a way reminiscent of Sergio Leone Westerns.[122]

The creators and showrunners of the series, Joe and Tony Gayton,[123] however, reference both classic and Spaghetti Westerns (also on a musical level as the soundtrack often evokes Ennio Morricone) as their influences when asked about that other critically acclaimed Western series, *Deadwood*, to which *HoW* is often compared:

> *Deadwood* was a great show but we're not anything like *Deadwood* [...] That show was built on artifice, the dialogue was very stylised, it felt almost Shakespearean. We're aiming to make something more accessible, something that harks back to classic Westerns and the spaghetti Westerns of the 1970s (Tony Gayton qtd. in: S. Hughes, n. pag.).

Despite the Gayton's attempts to get some distance between *Deadwood* and *HoW* here,

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121 Frank Grüber's classification of seven basic Western plots is often quoted in books on the Western: the railroad story, the homesteader story, the empire story, the lawman story, the revenge story, and the outlaw story (see Saunders, 5-6). Since *HoW* is a highly serialized Western series with different, intersecting storylines, a clear classification into one of the seven basic plots makes little sense. Even if one focuses on the story of its main character it is impossible to identify one of these plots that stretches from the first to the third season (though it can be classified clearly as a revenge story in the first season).

122 On the classic Western and Leone's revisionism, consider the following assessment by Brent Strang: "*How the West Was Won* stands in marked contrast to all succeeding epics, including *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Leone, 1968), in which the progressive drift epitomized by railroad expansion, city-building, and large financial interests is depicted as unequivocally evil" (26).

123 Both have resigned as showrunners after the series's first two seasons. John Wirth has taken over showrunner duties for the third season.

the comparison has been made by television critics numerous times and in each occasion, *HoW* came out on the short end. Alyssa Rosenberg for example calls this series "AMC's Disappointing 'Deadwood' Rip-Off" that suffers from the "misapprehension that it's better to tell than to show" (2011, n. pag.).

In an article for the *New York Times*, Alessandra Stanley calls *HoW* "*Deadwood* for Dummies. The theme music is startlingly similar, if more muted, and so is the faded sepia and gray cinematography. That bleached-out look has become so ubiquitous on AMC that it's almost as if there was a premium on bright color" (n. pag.). Willa Paskin calls *HoW* via a *Deadwood* comparison a "Fauxpranos" show. The neologism evokes the critically acclaimed HBO hit *The Sopranos* and describes "pseudo-dramas [...] that have the ambitions of 'quality TV', but come up short in actual quality" (n. pag.). Alasdair Wilkins criticizes the show's alleged "refusal to weave a coherent larger story." Moreover, "the characters remain either ciphers, maddeningly inconsistent, or both" (n. pag.). However, it could also be argued that the comparison to *Deadwood* is not entirely fitting with regard to how *HoW* approaches the mythic West.

While *Deadwood* seems to have literary ambitions with its highly stylized dialogues, the Gayton brothers found inspiration for *HoW* in Eastwood's Westerns, but also cite Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* (1995) and novelist Cormac McCarthy as influences (see Stanley 2011, n. pag.). All of these are critical reexaminations of the genre and as such depart significantly from what is considered the classic Western. However, the Gayton brothers refuse to go all the way in the deconstruction of heroic Western masculinity:

> Even though Anson's character is very dark, I think of *Unforgiven*. I think of *True Grit*: Those characters were very dark but at the end of the day, you could count on them and you could root for them. We want it to be gray. We don't want it to be black and white, but we still want a character in the center of it that, at the end of the day, people will root for; and I think we have that (Joe Gayton qtd. in: Goldberg, n. pag.).

The mythic West, at least in part, remains alive and holds people's attention more than historians' revisions and recent interpretations in film and television.[124]

The status of *Unforgiven* subject to debate: McGee, for example, points our attention to the fact that the names of *Unforgiven*'s three central characters all allude to currency and as such "signify their commodification by the social system [...] the plot of this film

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124Matthias Blom elaborates (drawing on Patricia Limerick) that "the public pays little or no attention to the renegotiations of the historical West that have been taking place within academia. [...] [T]he images are so powerful historically and culturally that there seems to be a general consensus about what we understand by the terms associated with the West without us actually being able to define them. In other words, they have become culturally ingrained in their conventionalized form" (Blom, 28).

is driven by money" (195). That "doing the right thing" (i.e. avenging the mutilation of a prostitute) is not what Eastwood's Will Munny is after is evidenced by his iconic one-liner "deserve's got nothing to do with it" right before he kills the already defeated Little Bill (Gene Hackman). One the one hand, the film's title already suggests that these men will never be forgiven for their action – there will be no redemption. Neither do they seem to think of themselves as deserving forgiveness. Yet again, one could also argue that through the violent purge at the film's conclusion, Eastwood is ultimately unable to escape the demands of the genre whose myths he tries to deconstruct.[125] This would mean that "whatever kinds of revisionism are attempted (even if truthful), the mystified, mythological (and vicious) 'spirit of the West' always returns" (Paul Smith qtd. in: McGee, 199).

Stephen McVeigh describes *Unforgiven* as "an autopsy" of the Western genre because of how the narrative progression is characterized by successive acts of violence (204): "Whereas, in a conventional Hollywood Western, there is an exhilaration in the depiction of violence, there is no such thrill in the acts of violence in *Unforgiven*. Rather, they are sickening in their sudden viciousness" (ibid., 206). *HoW*, too, is dominated by successive acts of vicious violence without redemptive or regenerating qualities. *Unforgiven* and *HoW* are hence very similar in the way that they suggest that the violence we see unfolding on-screen does not really solve any problems. Yet, in both film and television series, the 'art of violence' as carried out by Munny and Bohannon is a part of the entertainment. Moreover, as Eastwood seems to give in to the demands of the genre in *Unforgiven*'s final shoot-out, so does *HoW* with respect to the deeds committed by its male anti-hero.

When the Gayton brothers talk about Bohannon as a complex character that viewers are eventually supposed to root for, they of course advertise their creation: television series by convention invite us to emotionally engage with the plight of their central characters, which is also why *BrBa* is able to trick its viewers into rooting for Walter White in its initial episodes. Eastwood's Munny is a man who is known as a murderer of

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125Even though there seems to be a general consensus among scholars that *Unforgiven* is one of the most important revisionist Westerns, many also voice concern with regard to the film's climax that undercuts this revisionism. The most dissident voice is Lee Clark Mitchell: "*Unforgiven* is less revisionist than its 1990s audience assumed, adding little to the cinematic innovations introduced by Leone and Peckinpah a generation before [...]. While it addresses familiar issues linked to masculine self-construction (including self-presentation, education, convalescence, and moral codes), it stages these rituals in stock ways that fail to transform a genre or to resolve the conflicting ideologies that the genre entertains. Nor does it ever clarify a confusion about its own generic materials (Is Beauchamp's dime novel accurate or not? Does masculinity consist in self-restraint or violence? Is competence a matter of luck or effort?). Instead, the film traces an untroubled transition from pacifism to brutal intervention and then delights in the conventional violence that Munny is obliged to perform" (263).

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women and children – rooting for such a man is not necessarily what should be expected. Until the film's final shoot-out in the saloon of Big Whiskey, Eastwood shows Munny as a dysfunctional man: he has trouble mounting a horse, his pig farm does not go well, even his shooting skills seem not to live up to his legend anymore. What is more, his motives for riding into Big Whiskey are purely economic. Still, ultimately he is victorious and viewers for the most part probably rooted for him in purging Big Whiskey from the *other* dysfunctional men (Walter Erhart regards the film as the "Dekonstruktion von Männlichkeit" ["deconstruction of masculinity"] [342]). Michael L. Johnson's assessment of the film's subversion of cowboy heroism is insightful in that regard:

> Eastwood's bleak and reflexive vision of violence begetting violence displays John Wayne's world over the edge, burned out in nervous vengefulness, cruelty, alcoholic blur, cadaverous nothingness. [...] Munny may revert fully to his former ways toward the end, but any avenging heroism is profoundly qualified, even contradicted, by the tenacious undertaste of the horrible truth of killing. If you cheer him, you do so with an uncomfortable lump in your throat (242).

At the film's conclusion, McVeigh writes, Munny "has become exactly that which he has been denying throughout the film, and thus is elevated to the level of Western legend/hero." This contradiction within the film "seems to suggest that Eastwood is resigned to the fact that a complete deconstruction of the myth is impossible" (211). This impossibility of thoroughly deconstructing the myth is bound to the culture within which this myth resides:

> while Eastwood divulges the dark side of 'cowboy' or 'frontier' masculinities, he also reveals how audience expectation is still very much conditioned to celebrate and justify its own blood-thirsty, Darwinian impulses. The film's slippery final scene at once embraces and reproves its protagonist's behaviour, and thus puts forward the question of whether culture is actually prepared to accept a complete transfiguration of the Frontier Myth and the masculinities it prescribes (Strang, 6).[126]

When the Gaytons hope audiences will cheer for Bohannon, they seem to hope that two decades after *Unforgiven* the culture is still "conditioned to celebrate and justify its own blood-thirsty, Darwinian impulses." What *Unforgiven* does is to present us with a cast of dysfunctional men: we can hardly tell them apart in terms of good and bad.

Deadwood is arguably similar in this regard: its main characters, Al Swearengen (Ian McShane) and Sheriff Bullock (Timothy Olyphant), are complex characters made of shades of gray. The former is a misogynistic pimp, a racist and murderer with a soft spot for his community, the latter a 'good man' with such anger inside of him that he can

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126See also: "The last contradiction of *Unforgiven* is that it too is an example of what it is questioning. Even the most deconstructive Eastwood film (and *Unforgiven* probably is that) retains what is deconstructed: the transcendental-heroic Eastwood persona" (William Beard qtd. in: Strang, 56n24).

barely contain it (and often loses it).[127] Despite their failings, viewers engage with their plights as both are, for various reasons, deeply invested in their community and their entertaining performances of masculinity.

HoW features a similar character constellation in Bohannon, a traumatized yet good man fueled by rage and Thomas 'Doc' Durant (Colm Meaney), the crooked railroad entrepreneur.[128] The latter is, like Swearengen, the de facto mayor of this improvised community in an otherwise lawless territory, which leaves the execution of his rule in the hands of Bohannon. An important observation here is that he commands power because he is the one on whose money everyone in the camp depends – this improvised frontier community does not know juridical law, but the law of capital. This law of capital also saves Bohannon twice while at the same it curtails the transformations associated with the West, especially when Bohannon struggles for control of the railroad construction in later episodes.

This, means despite many differences in style, there is also a thematic kinship between both Western series as it relates to capital. The Gaytons' cited influences point towards an investigation of ruthless capitalism and masculinity. *Deadwood* seems more layered thematically and has been read as an allegory for the social impact of neoliberalism (see below), the aftermath of 9/11,[129] and a meditation on masculinity and the Western genre (Perlman, 104). Furthermore,

> *Deadwood* reworks the relationship between the Western and the history of the West in two ways: the series offers a self-conscious rebuke of the western myth in favor of a vision of the West that is brutal, indeterminate, ugly, and unheroic. Unlike previous Westerns, this is a past of profound misogyny and racism, of acts of violence neither redemptive nor progressive in their outcomes (ibid., 105).

Both *Unforgiven* and *Deadwood* have their contradictions. As the Western's "autopsy," *Unforgiven* towards the end sees the autopsied become a zombie, an acknowledgment that the frontier hero cannot completely be buried. Read as an allegory for neoliberalism in our day, *Deadwood,* too, seems unwilling to thoroughly turn its back on what it has put on the dissecting table. White heterosexual men are still very

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127Brent Strang calls both "shadow sides of each other, each embracing what the other tries to repress. Bullock can barely contain the murderous rage that Swearengen coolly summons for his own purposes. And while expressions of virtue are front and centre in Bullock's code of conduct, Swearengen's many monologues betray an ill-fitted, twisted-up compassion" (80).

128Thomas Durant is the only character based on a real person in *HoW* in its first two seasons. The third season features Ulysses S. Grant.

129David Drysdale suggests that "*Deadwood*, with its precarious liminal position between sanctioned political law and authority and the unofficial law exercised by persons in the camp, becomes an analog for the USA and its post-9/11 politics. Through this covert parallel, viewers can encounter their own social guilt regarding perceived injustices born out of the Patriot Act and the war on terror" (134).

much at the center of the narrative – the verbal and physical altercations they engage in are the show's main source of entertainment –; nor is neoliberalism laid to rest while we watch these frontier marketplace men interact: "*Deadwood* fights neoliberalism's ill effects on its own terms. That is, by making each individual entirely responsible for her/himself, surviving neoliberalism requires establishing strategic networks and shrewdly adapting to new socio-economic circumstances" (Strang, 93). These networks are connected through shared self-interest. What stands in the way of this more utopian vision of neoliberalism is a matter of scale: *Deadwood*'s villain turns out to be George Hearst and not Al Swearengen. While the gold extracted from the mines around Deadwood are reinvested into the community by a multitude of agents, Hearst simply wants all of the gold and does not seek to make it available to Deadwood's economy, but to take it away with him. *Deadwood*'s neoliberalism is value driven in a way that looks beyond the pure exchange value of gold (or takes this exchange value as the basis for social interaction to form a social body):

> Swearengen's 'just' neoliberalism is based on the premise that all agents are capable of rational entrepreneurial action and their interconnectivity is necessary for long-term success. This requires establishing a shared set of values, which, even if they are predicated on the marketplace, essentially strengthen human bonds and interpersonal relations (ibid., 99).

HoW, similarly, has its contradictions as well and they relate to the impression that the show sometimes seems unsure of its anti-hero's direction: *HoW*'s grayish cinematography presents the frontier as a place of misogyny, racism, and violence. This, however, does not amount to new insights into the genre's mythic basis and is eventually less critical than it appears. Much of a Western depends on the male at its center and despite all his failings, the slightly racist, prone-to-violence Bohannon eventually emerges as hero: Even though *HoW* exposes certain myths about the West as just that, it is ultimately also unable to break away from the mythic gunslinger.

HoW's vision of the West is one mostly stripped of idealism. The pioneering spirit dies a violent death with Robert Bell (Robert Moloney) in the series's pilot episode and it is upon his wife Lily Bell (Dominique McElligott) to see his dream become a reality. Both Durant and Lily rely on one man to get things done: Cullen Bohannon. While Lily represents idealism, Durant represents the corruption undermining idealism. This leaves Bohannon in the middle of these positions. In a nutshell, he can be described as a mixture of Wister's Virginian and Leone's Man with No Name with occasional John Wayne heroics scattered throughout the narrative.

The motives of this man are hard to pin down over the course of the series's first two seasons. While revenge seems to drive the plot early on, this aspect is increasingly relegated to the background as altercations with native peoples and among the camp's inhabitants, for example between African-American and Irish workers, are brought to the fore. At the same time, Durant's crooked railroad econimics put the whole construction in jeapordy. The revenge plot remains unresolved and the series shifts its focus more to the railroad construction and interpersonal relationships in the third season headed by the new showrunner John Wirth. How is Bohannon introduced in the pilot episode?

The series opens with shots of a union soldier on a street in Washington, D.C. In the background we see the Capitol, on the soundtrack we hear church bells. The soldier looks up the church's door, above which he sees a crucified Jesus. He enters the church and the confessional. What he presumes to be a priest – but turns out to be Bohannon – urges him to confess in order to redeem his sins:

> **Soldier**: "What we did... evil, unspeakable things."
> **Bohannon**: "You were a soldier, you were following orders."
> **Soldier**: "No. Not just orders, we opened a dark door and the devil stepped in" (S01E01).

Moments later, the window separating the confessionals opens and we see Bohannon's face for the first time. His face is partly obscured by the gun he points at the soldier's face. He shoots the man in the face and exits the confessional. Upon exiting the church he looks at a crucified Jesus, face unmoving, and leaves.

The next time we see Bohannon is on a train headed West. The Irish brothers Sean (Ben Esler) and Mickey McGinnes (Phil Burke)[130] are reading in a newspaper about the events that took place in that church:

> **Mickey**: "What is the world coming to?"
> **Sean**: "Well, I suppose the only consolation is that he got to heaven that much faster."

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130 The two brothers believe in the freedom the railroad promises ever since they hopped a train back in Ireland. They do not go to Hell on Wheels to do construction work, but to make money with a picture show. In a tent, they project images of Ireland and make their money off nostalgic Irishmen. Quite similar to Western cinema, one might argue. In *HoW*'s second season, their storyline is a bit reminiscent of what *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) and *Unforgiven* are concerned with regarding fact and fiction. When a prostitute is murdered, Eva has Elam kill the German responsible for her death. He does not do it because he, too, wants justice, but simply to win back Eva ("No one ever gutted a man for me" [S02E03], which resonates with Eastwood's *Unforgiven* to the extent that the chain of events is brought in motion by a woman. This flips the Western logic upside-down as it can be interpreted as a "reversal of civilization" ["Umkehrung der Zivilisation"] [Erhart, 342]). It is, however, Mickey who brags about having killed the man (neither him nor Sean are gunfighters) and thus becomes popular with the camp's prostitutes. Finally, after collectively killing the murderer's German friend, they have acquired themselves a reputation that will allow them to take over Hell on Wheel's bar (under the threat of violence) towards the season's end (on legend and fact in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, see: McVeigh, 158-159).

Bohannon: "How'd you come to that conclusion?"
Sean: "Well, he confessed his sins. He died in grace."
Bohannon: "So, god just, um, punches his ticket to heaven, huh?"
Mickey: "Well, yeah!"
Bohannon: "If that's how god goes about his business, you can keep him."
Sean: "Keep god?"
Mickey: "Do you not believe in a higher power?"
Bohannon: "Yessir, I wear it on my hip" [lifts jacket, camera pans to show his gun] (S01E01).

When the train arrives in Hell on Wheel, "So Far From Your Weapon" by The Dead Weather can be heard on the soundtrack (featuring lyrics like "Right away from the get go the bullet was cursed/ Ever since I had you every little thing hurts/ You wanna get up, let go, I said no").[131]

These early scenes in *HoW* do both introduce the character of Bohannon and the themes this show is concerned with. His belief system was shattered in the war. His revenge is an undertaking cursed from the beginning as the blasphemous opening scene already implies. He does not believe in redemption for these men and neither does he believe in redemption for himself.[132] In S01E02, *HoW*'s Reverend Cole (Tom Noonan) urges him to kneel down and pray, which Bohannon refuses "because I don't deserve forgiveness."[133] This also introduces Bohannon as a man tortured by his own conscience – an indication that he is not beyond redemption after all and that viewers should empathize with him.

Still, in its first season, the thesis of *HoW* with regard to the Western is that violence is not regenerative. In fact, most of the violence is connected to past events. Since the remaining men involved in the killing of Bohannon's family went West, he spends a great deal of time identifying and hunting them down. One of those man works as the foreman in Hell on Wheels, whom Bohannon replaces after his death. Even though it was not Bohannon who actually killed him (it was Elem), he is charged for murder and incarcerated. He escapes only to ask Durant for the dead man's job and continues his vendetta while overseeing the construction site.

The violence during the first season is not in service of a community. It is messy and

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131 In: *Horehound*. Sony Music, 2009. Track 4.

132 The Civil War and the death of his family is a traumatic event. One of trauma's consequences is that it destroys beliefs (see Vickroy, 23). Bohannon's traumatization will be addressed further down.

133 The reverend is a perfect example of men and their heroic projects and the self-centeredness underpinning them: he once rode with John Brown. Now in Hell on Wheels, he has converted the Cheyenne Joseph/Black Moon and regards him as his son. The reverend, however, already has a daughter he abandoned (much to his former family's relief – he is an erratic alcoholic prone to violence). Even though he is responsible for divorcing Joseph from his culture of origin, he begins a (self-)righteous war on behalf of the Sioux (with no intent of baptizing them) – he even kidnaps a train and takes Durant hostage. Furthermore, his daughter Ruth comes to Hell on Wheels and begins an affair with Joseph – a situation which the supposedly tolerant man cannot handle: "once he wanted to be a Christian, but what he really wanted was to be a martyr" (S02E07).

regularly followed by more violence. This violence is hardly regenerative and represents a downward spiral for Bohannon. The first season concludes with Bohannon riding off into the sunset after he killed the wrong man – he now is wanted and there is a price on his head (this scene is undercut by a rendition of "(This Train Is) Bound for Glory" by Jane & Anthony). If *HoW* had ended with this first season, the revisionism of this show would have been much more severe than it is after three seasons: it would have left Bohannon as one of the most un-heroic Westerners – his actions were often driven by self-interest (although he also saves Elam [Common] from by lynched), his killings were messy and the last one even unjustified (that is if killing someone can ever be justified). His stoic riding off into the sunset is as unglamorous as can be. Yet, as it turns out, many of these things are part of a deliberate (and hence not always plot-motivated) construction of a troubled 'dark' character, who – as we shall see – emerges as a hero nevertheless. This is so because most of his bad deeds remain inconsequential.

He begins the second season robbing trains. His bounty also includes the pay roll of his former construction workers. This source of conflict matters little in *HoW* after his return to the railroad as its head of security. At the end of S02E01, he is imprisoned and charged with murder, not the first time is faced with capital punishment. He already was to be executed for the death of the foreman Sergeant Johnson in S01E02. He escapes from captivity to approach Durant and ask for the dead man's job. Bohannon must have "big balls" for doing such a thing, Durant tells him, but Durant is convinced by Bohannon's description of building a railroad as war.

 Durant saves his life again in S02E02: "Like any benevolent god, I'm here to help you." Similarly to S01E02, capital overrides the law. During the second season, which ends with Bohannon taking charge of the railroad, Durant is on the verge of losing control of the railroad business, which is why he needs the man who earlier described the building of the railroad as a war. If Bohannon gives Durant his word to get the railroad under control, he will not be executed and be given his freedom once the railroad business is finished: there is the ruthless capitalist and his indentured servant. Durant also knows that he has no fear for his life because Bohannon's "word is stronger than any set of shackles" (S02E02). Bohannon is thus an asset Durant owns for the time being – a white man held hostage by the financial elite. The freedmen, too, are property of the Union Pacific: they are former convicts whose sentences the Union Pacific bought – both people and the law consequently appear as commodified in *HoW*.

The fact that Bohannon tries to make a war out of everything he is involved in speaks

to two things. First, violence and combat are constitutive of his masculinity. This savage aspect of his character is fairly conventional in a genre preoccupied with wilderness and civilization. The Western hero is a man who knows Indians, "a man who knows how to think and to fight like an Indian, to turn their own methods against them" (Slotkin 1992, 17). The most obvious example of this is when Bohannon from afar kills a tortured man whom the Sioux have taken hostage. He 'knows' the Indian, which is why he can spoil their actions in this particular instance. While Slotkin's assessment of the frontier hero as a man who knows Indians is based on the wilderness/civilization binary, the aspect of "knowing" does not need the binary in which the Indian necessarily inhabits the wilderness sphere. The savage side of Bohannon has little to do with Indian encounters, but with what the savagery encountered during the Civil War has done to him – he did not have to leave Anglo-American civilization to discover the savagery within himself.[134]

Moreover, his act of 'kindness' evidences that Bohannon is almost solely capable to *speak through violence*. The killing of a man who was doomed anyway is an act of kindness. Similarly, in S01E04 he mercy kills his horse after it was wounded by a man he was after to revenge his wife. When an old friend with whom he was involved in a couple of armed train robberies is sentenced to death, this man wants to be executed by Bohannon because – as foreign as this sounds from today's perspective – that man would "be truly honored if it was you to see me out of this world" (S02E06). Bohannon reluctantly complies with this man's wish even though he proposes to make a run for Mexico with him – further evidence that he is a good man that one way or the other is compelled to resort to violence: the world seems to demand male violence. The man refuses, he is tired of running "like a coward [...] ain't no honor the way I've been living." This foreshadows what is yet to come for Bohannon to be a heroic male: not facing his emotions and the ramifications of his actions compromises him.

Second, rhetorically framing the railroad construction as war could also be interpreted as containing contemporary connotations. The USA has begun rather unconventional wars in recent history: the war on drugs, the war on poverty and the war on terror. Note how neither the "railroad war" nor drugs, poverty or terrorism constitute a clearly identifiable enemy. While war-like altercations will surface eventually – the Sioux burn down Hell on Wheels in the second season finale – they are less dangerous

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134In S01E01 Bohannon has a conversation with the man he came to kill. They talk about war. The former union soldier tells Bohannon that he "blossomed" in war and that there were certain lines he crossed. Bohannon admits that he, too, "did plenty I was ashamed of."

than the threat within: corruption. War diverts attention away from the rifts within in order to unite a fragmented, wounded nation.

The war as which the construction of the railroad is conceived here not only surfaces as warfare with Native Americans, but also as a labor war. When the workers are increasingly afraid of hostile Sioux, they begin to strike. Bohannon's strategy is to have a train filled with willing laborers arrive in Hell on Wheels. From an elevated position, he watches on how a vicious brawl enfolds between the striking laborers and the new-comers. The strikers are successful in forcing the new-comers, many of them beaten brutally, back on the train. The victory, however, may only last for a short while. He will have a new train with workers arrive the next day should the workers still refuse to do their jobs. Out of this necessity, the Irish fraternize with the freedmen to the extent that they allow them to carry guns as a means of protection (S02E04). Again, *HoW* tells a tale of how an elite secures its position of power through coercive means:

> The neo-liberal policy with regard to unemployment in particular is perfectly clear. Whatever the rate of unemployment, in a situation of unemployment you absolutely must not intervene directly or in the first place on the unemployment, as if full employment should be a political idea and an economic principle to be saved at any cost. [...] [F]ull employment is not an objective and it may be that a reserve of unemployment is absolutely necessary for the economy (Foucault 2010, 139).

This means that workers are coerced into working under less than ideal circumstances because there is "a reserve *army* of labour (RAL)" always available to keep wages down and production going (Strang, 92n35; my emphasis). Frontier-othering helps to establish an alliance between black and whites against a common enemy, yet it diverts their attention away from the fact that their labor is exploited by an elite that has no regard for their lives.

This moment of coercion manages to add complexity to Bohannon. The darker shades of gray surface in the fact that Bohannon is compliant with the financial elite here. At the same time, this course of action shows his growing dedication to building the railroad. Furthermore, what happens as well is that a Southerner enables African-Americans to bear arms, which should further relieve fears about this man's take on racism.

Still, what the series depicts here is an act of coercion and as such it has little to do with freedom and democracy. *HoW* features other scenes in which the West is presented as a place in which these values are hard to come by. Boundless opportunity and justice are only available to people with the financial means or the prowess of a man like Bohannon. The West as America's second chance, the series seems to suggest,, was

already contaminated with the corruption of these values and the sown seeds have blossomed into contemporary issues such as financial speculation and the curtailment of democratic values by measures such as The Patriot Act. Nevertheless, even though the series dispells some myths of the West, it does not amount to a full-fledged deconstruction of the Western. This is so because, Bohannon is eventually a heroic male with integrity who will risk his life for the community. This heroization often works through the aestheticization of his body (see below).

Although *HoW* tries to present an unflinching look at frontier life and to construct a conflicted anti-hero, it remains ambivalent about what it wants to accomplish. The critique it voices aims upwards towards an elite. Yet at the same time it centers on the endeavors of a traumatized yet aristocratic man that eventually does take up the second chance promised by the open West when he reinvents himself as a railroad man. This is to say that on a surface level, *HoW*'s presents a bleak picture of westward expansion while, like *Unforgiven*, it still adheres to its myths as far as its main character is concerned.

To return to the first observation I made about Bohannon's use of violence as a way of expression, of valuing action over words: he kills a man in a church confessional in S01E01, he kills the wrong man in S01E10, and he makes a war out of the construction of the railroad, which is to say that death follows this man wherever he goes. *HoW* is of course a Western and not a horror movie – there is no evil demon possessing him. He is, however, possessed by a traumatic past.

Bohannon's violence is not a matter of spirit, but of psychology. What has been known as soldier's heart and later as shell shock has become post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in today's vocabulary. This is not to say that *HoW* is structured like a trauma narrative – at least not in the way more recent scholars of the trauma narrative such as Laurie Vickroy (2002), Anne Whitehead (2004) or Roger Luckhurst (2013) would describe their structure.

Trauma is the Greek word for wound. In *HoW*, both America and Bohannon are "AN OPEN WOUND." This wounding – given the pronounced statement prefiguring the actual narrative – is figured through the narrative's main character. Trauma is "defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organization" (Laplanche & Pontalis qtd. in: Vickroy, 2). It is furthermore characterized by "a gap between impact and understanding, influx and assimilation" (Luckhurst, 79). The

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disruption of identity (dissociation), the re-experiencing of the traumatic event through dreams and flashbacks, the avoidance of related emotions, the numbing of feelings, repetition compulsion,[135] aggression and hyper-vigilance are some of the diverse symptoms of PTSD (see ibid., 1). Often described as the unspeakable, "a crisis of representation, of history and truth, and of narrative time" (ibid., 5), trauma narratives are understood as a way of working through the experience and integrating it into a coherent past of oneself. They "internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying structures and sensibilities" (3). In writing, this often surfaces in the form of memoirs, while in film "plots [are] presented backwards, in loops, or disarticulated into mosaics that only retrospectively cohere [...] to convey the experience of traumatized subjectivity" (Luckhurst, 178). Jump cuts are used to represent dissociation and the "traumatic flashback" as a prime stylistic device is used to "disorient the viewer" (ibid., 182):

> The flashback is an intrusive, anachronistic image that throws off the linear temporality of the story. It can only ever be explained belatedly, leaving the spectator in varying degrees of disorientation or suspense, depending on when and whether the flashback is reintegrated into the storyline (ibid., 180).

These characteristics favor a nonrealist mode of representation. Therefore, stylistically *HoW* is not a trauma narrative because it is both linear and mimetic to aim for a certain degree of authenticity. *HoW* features two flashbacks in its first season that take the viewer to the day following the Civil War. The war itself gets no screen time at all. It only exists through dialogue references dealing with the horrors experienced and committed there. The pilot episode has two instances in which men responsible for the killing of Bohannon's family talk about crossing lines they never thought they would.

Both flashbacks are concerned with Bohannon's immediate past and occur before the title sequence is shown. The first appears in S01E03 when Bohannon looks through the belongings of the recently murdered Sergeant Johnson, where he finds a photograph of the other men involved in the murder of his family. As his eyes wander from face to face, we see the three men he has previously murdered. The first murder is the opening sequence of the pilot, in the second he shoots a man while he sits on a toilet – a reference to *Unforgiven* and the de-glamorization of violence undertaken there – and the final killing takes place in the man's bedroom. Neither of these killings is honorable or brave as none of the men had a chance to fight back. The second flashback ensues in

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135Luckhurst (drawing on Freud): "In essence, the psyche constantly returned to scenes of unpleasure because, by restaging the traumatic moment over and over again, it hoped belatedly to process the unassimilable material, to find ways of mastering the trauma retroactively" (9).

S01E10. This time the flashback is concerned with how Bohannon arrives at his plantation right after the war to find his wife hung off the porch and the barn – containing his son and his mammy – burned to ashes. This flashback scene, like the other, has no disorienting effect, neither does it reveal anything unbeknownst to the viewer. Even though they lack the characteristic stylization of trauma, the scenes still refer to traumatic events – moments in which Bohannon became a murderer and a widower immediately following an already traumatic war experience.

Staging the railroad as a war can consequently be understood as a repetition compulsion, a way to live through the traumatic experiences connected to the American Civil War. The repetition compulsion is based on Freud's observance with regard to his grandson's *fort-da* game as a way of mastering the absence of his mother: "children repeat unpleasurable experiences for the additional reason that they can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they could by merely experiencing it passively" (Freud qtd. In: Luckhurst, 9). Read with reference to trauma, Bohannon's enigmatic characterization contained in generic conventions can be understood as representing "the 'mimetic' pole of trauma theory, in which trauma is the unprocessed fragment of the thing itself [...] the unknowable fragment of history" (Luckhurst, 13). If we take this observation further and apply it to the whole genre, the Western in itself becomes a vehicle for a repetition compulsion on a mass-cultural scale that tries to work through the traumatic experiences of the broken promises of the American Dream: again and again a (anti-)heroic male has to fight against an avalanche of corporate capitalism, corruption, betrayal[136] and other threats. The loss of this ideal man and the setting itself signify American trauma – the disappearance of the Western frontier and the mythic American spirit that possessed it is experienced again and again

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[136] Before Elam and Bohannon establish something of a loyal friendship (even though Bohannon does not consider a black man an equal [see *HoW* S03E01]), they fight a lot. As this escalates, Durant uses it to appease careworn construction workers by having both men fight it out in a boxing match (this episode's title is "Bread and Circuses"). This boxing fight is interesting for two things: first, it underlines the theme of capital being the ultimate value. Sean McGinnes, the not very manly but conniving Irishman, bets all his money on Elam. To ensure victory, he adds pepper to the cloth with which Bohannon's face is wiped in between rounds. His brother Mickey confronts him about it after the fight. Flashing a stack of money, Sean announces that "this is my only friend" (S01E05). Second, the race component is interesting as well: the white male only loses to the black man because of foul play originating from another ethnic minority. This move sidesteps the history of black and white boxing matches (e.g. Joe Louis versus Max Schmeling) by letting the black man win while also allowing the narrative's white hero to save face. This boxing match is only one of the many instances in which Irishmen appear in an unfavorable light. In *HoW*'s hierarchy of masculinities, the Irish, Germans and Scandinavians are at the bottom. Durant, who grew up in New York's Hell's Kitchen, too is of Irish descent. However, capital overrides ethnicity in *HoW*. This is also the reason why Elam transcends race barriers in the camp and why Durant cannot as readily be identified as Irish. They do not define themselves with regard to ethnicity, but in monetary terms. In this respect, Durant is a class of his own in Hell on Wheels.

on screen – especially in times with traumatic potential such as Vietnam or 9/11.

In her important book *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Cathy Caruth recapitulates Lacan's analysis of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud described a dream a father has of his deceased son – after waking by his dying son's bed, the father in need of rest falls asleep. While he sleeps, his son passes on. The dead son is surrounded by candles, one of the candles burns the deceased. Simultaneously, the father dreams of his son approaching him, asking if he cannot see that he, the son, is burning. The father awakes to find the partly burned body of his son. This "dream is no longer about a father sleeping in the face of an external death, but about the way in which, in his traumatic awakening, the very identity of the father, as subject, is bound up with, or founded in, the death that he survives" (Caruth, 92). This is an accurate description of Bohannon, who is introduced to us as a shadowy figure standing among smoke and flames in the show's title sequence: the deaths he survives – those of his fellow Southerners and, more importantly, of his wife and son, define his subjectivity. Similarly, the nation as a whole is born anew in the aftermath of the Civil War – D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) refers to this and, as it happens, is also the first film to make use of the traumatic flashback (see Luckhurst, 180). Similar appeals have surrounded the events of 9/11 in which a diverse nation after the divisive presidential election of 2000 was once again reunited in and defined through tragedy. Considering the status of the Western in the American imagination and the fact that the genre often exhibits a significant degree of nostalgia for a time perceived as lost, we recognize a pattern of identity-formation based on loss.

Furthermore and on a slightly different note, the aspect of mastery and action as main components of the repetition compulsion leads to an understanding of masculinity being, even if insufficient, a coping mechanism for trauma. Since many Westerns, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* among them, are concerned with the traumatic experience of war (in *The Outlaw Josey Wales* the Vietnam War is implied), overcoming trauma could be considered an important element of the genre. The West then becomes the site in which a traumatized nation again regains mastery: "the Western is about man's fear of losing mastery, which leads it to jettison all things – from women and emotions, to religion and education – that threaten the illusion of control" (Strang, 36).

The traumatic experience – a traumatized male – is a castrating experience as it leaves the individual paralyzed. Integral to trauma is the loss of control the individual must experience by events so powerful and overwhelming that they escape language.

The laconic Western hero does not speak because there are simply no words capable of translating the Real into the Symbolic. Powerlessness and passivity are both conceived as emasculating, which is to say that a traumatic experience is also an emasculating experience. Research into masculinity and violence has found that, at least within Western conceptions thereof, violence is the primary means to counter feelings of powerlessness (see Clare, 57; Kaufman, 13). If Bohannon's aggressive style of masculinity is a way of coping with the wounding of both the nation and his sense of self, the pattern is strikingly similar to strategies following 9/11: "9/11 trauma discourse figured the nation as emasculated, critiques of America's militarized response identified the war on terror as hypermasculine, overzealous, and overwrought" (Sisco King, 130). E. Ann Kaplan in *Trauma Culture* (2005), a book heavily informed by the writer's own traumatic experiences in World War II and 9/11 (she survived an air raid on London during WWII and was in New York on 9/11), states that "the male leaders on television presented a stiff, rigid, controlling, and increasingly vengeful response – a response I only gradually understood as actually about humiliation" (13).

Furthermore, we may even understand the masculinity of Bohannon as both shaped by traumatic experiences and *as* traumatizing.[137] What is meant here is not necessarily – though valid as well – traumatizing other people, but that he is a source of trauma for himself (the fact that he refers to himself as beyond redemption testifies to this, too): the fact that he killed a presumably innocent man is a traumatic event brought about by his conception of masculinity. He was not sure whether that man was involved in the killing of his wife and despite the man's pleas murdered him nevertheless. Traditional masculinity, it seems, is counter-productive for resolving trauma – yet, at least in the series discussed in this chapter, trauma seems to give birth to hypermasculine formations to counter events perceived as emasculating. Thus, masculine reactions to trauma run the risk of being stuck in a repetition compulsion under the consideration that hypermasculine reactions to trauma – stoicism, autonomy, violence – are prone to bringing about new traumatic experiences: violence begets violence (see Fox & Pease, 25-26). The accepted gender binary prevents new strategies for dealing with trauma

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137To elaborate further on the relationship of trauma and masculinity, it is interesting to note that for boys the process of becoming a man is a traumatic experience in itself. Since traditional masculinity curtails emotional expression, boys are shamed into hiding "troubling experiences of men's selves, including the experience of vulnerability" (Fox & Pease, 25). Furthermore, realizing that one does not match the conceptions of ideal manhood can also be experienced as traumatic. Writing about Vietnam veterans, Fox and Pease report that "[i]t was this experience of the failure to conform to their understanding of masculinity – with its demands that they master potentially overwhelming personal threats as well as protect the weak and innocent (which women and children were expected to be) – that constituted the veterans' trauma, rather than the traumatic events themselves" (26).

since it "has long been treated as a feminine experience. A man experiencing trauma is [...] seen to be exhibiting feminine traits – as not being *him*self" (ibid., 21). *HoW*'s Bohannon has to learn this the hard way as his traumatic history repeats itself in the series's second season.

In the context of trauma, Bohannon's handling of the railroad as warfare has two reasons: first, it is the one thing he seems to be good at and, like Rambo in the film series of the same title, he actually has the chance to win this war. Since his identity is very much informed by his Southern heritage, this then has a lot to do with self-validation. Other than initially being a cover for his revenge plans, the railroad is the only thing he has left in his life.

Second, his continued being in a state of war prevents him from being reflective of his history: he discovered his family dead after the war and so he pretends war has never really ended. He is stuck on repeat. He has never grieved the death of his family – the flashback in S01E10 ends with Bohannon standing by the fresh grave without shedding a single tear. Instead of contemplation, he immediately turns towards action. Interestingly, he never really had a stake in the Civil War – married to a Northerner, he freed his slaves one year before the Declaration of Emancipation. He entered into the war out of a sense of duty towards his Southern heritage and to prove himself a (Southern) male (this of course also redeems his being a former plantation owner for the audience).

While he engaged in the male activity of warfare during the Civil War, his family died. This pattern repeats itself in the actual narrative of *HoW*. Cathy Caruth remarks on how

> the peculiar and sometimes uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them. [...] the experience of trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will [...] [an] unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind (1-2).

This is to say that the series suggests that Bohannon is not aware of his own repetition compulsion. Through his "unknowing acts" (acts whose ramifications seem to escape him) he is bound to re-live his past traumatic experiences that he simply cannot let go. All of this, to a certain degree, happens against his very will: "Ain't much fun killing them, but they seem to need it" *(HoW S02E05)*. Like in *TWD*, his killings are more a sacrifice than a triumph. Repeated insistence on being beyond redemption in this context – given he views the killings he commits as inevitable actions almost destined to happen and the viewers have no emotional stakes in the men he kills – then becomes an

example of affirmation through negation. Before this can happen, however, he has to relive his trauma in *HoW*'s second season.

Coming to terms with his own trauma involves Bohannon's main antagonist The Swede (Christopher Heyerdahl), who is actually a Norwegian and is less of a fully developed character than an agent of chaos. It is also The Swede who paradoxically opens a path towards redemption for Bohannon. As is revealed in S02E07, The Swede was held captive in the infamous Andersonville Prisoner of War (POW) camp operated by the Confederates, which, in his opinion, exposed the truth about human nature (cannibalism). Since Bohannon is a former Confederate soldier, The Swede tells him, "when I see you, I see them: I hated you before we met." This balances the war crime committed against Bohannon's family against those committed by confederate soldiers. It also brings into the limelight a rather unfavorable lineage of POW camps in America's past and present with Abu Ghraib and the still-operating Guantánamo Bay as the most recent examples. Moreover, the Swede maintains that "the reason you hate me is I'm a constant reminder of the capacity for evil that resides within you" (S02E07). In their capacity for evil both men mirror each other. This constellation is, as we have seen earlier in my discussion of *TWD* with regard to *High Noon*, very common in Westerns.

The Swede's thoughts are too much for Bohannon to digest and he wants to ride out of town just as he rode away at the end of the first season. When he is about to mount his horse, Lily Bell confronts and reminds him of his tendency to run away from responsibility. While this hints at the fact that the Western hero's individuality and inarticulateness prevents him from taking responsibilities beyond himself, such a revision is not pursued further. As paradoxical idealized masculinity can be, another value is appealed to: running away is cowardice and thus the appeal is to bravery. Lily slaps and, it appears, awakens him: the next morning, after they had sex, he is still in town and intent on seeing through the construction of the railroad with her. This, of course, constructs Lily as what Slotkin has termed "the redemptive woman" (1992, 388).

In order to fully open Bohannon toward redemption, however, Lily has to die. Just like his wife, she dies while Bohannon is engaged in combat. Nevertheless, he is bound by his promise to her and he will now dedicate himself to the task, which again figures the woman as the purpose behind a man's actions. This differs from the first season's revenge plot to the extent that the violence he will continue to inflict on others is directed at the future instead of an irretrievable past and that it happens within the

confines of the law: he now executes the law, not his lust for revenge.

Even though Bohannon appears to be both a cipher and a violent drunk in *HoW*'s first two seasons, there are many scenes scattered throughout the narrative that hint at the Gaytons' instance that he is – even though troubled – a hero. When a black powder shipment goes horribly wrong, Bohannon, hung over from the night before, saves a man from certain death even though this man threatened him earlier (S01E04). Ironically, Bohannon will kill this very man in S01E07 when he is involved in the attempted lynching of Elam. When the Confederate soldiers Bohannon previously rode with try to rob Hell on Wheels, it is Bohannon, "walking the streets like the risen Christ," who defends the camp by killing all men involved in the action. Mr. Toole later in that episode remarks that "he may be a son of a bitch, but he's our son of a bitch" (S02E05). In the season two

*Figure 33 The looks of a hero (*HoW *S02E10).*

finale, Bohannon organizes the resistance against the Sioux attack and is asked to conclude the construction of the railroad by government officials. In the closing frames of the season we see him filmed from a low-angle walking the railroad tracks, erecting a sign post just as he himself appears erect against the flat and empty landscape he surveys. He has a new purpose in life, he has invested himself in a community and the completion of the railroad becomes his path towards redemption.

5.2. *"A Man Who Hates His Sins Can Be Redeemed for It"*

Neither the revenge plot nor the railroad construction form tightly constructed plots in *HoW*'s first two seasons, which is why both the series and its main character often appear aimless. With the replacement of the Gaytons as showrunners, things change and both Bohannon and the railroad become more focused. The revenge plot – already a faint memory in the second season and never fully realized – is mostly abandoned and only surfaces in reference when Bohannon's position with the railroad is in jeopardy. The shell shocked Bohannon of the first two seasons has broken through the trance that took him from one violent encounter to the next (though violence is still very much part

of his actions). The man who thought himself to be beyond redemption seems intent on redeeming himself – and the railroad is supposed to do the trick, thus linking male self-worth to work.

The third season hence functions almost as a second pilot episode to *HoW*. The opening sequence finds a

*Figure 34 A man reborn: the primal masculinity of Bohannon (*HoW *S03E01).*

primal Bohannon in an abandoned railroad winter camp – dressed in fur, bearded and with shaggy hair. He even has to fight for his life against a wolf. While *Dances with Wolves*' Dunbar was integrated into nature by his inter-species friendship with a wolf (see Wolfrum, 29), this scene might be read as Bohannon having hit rock bottom in terms of savagery. He now leaves this realm towards civilization and progress. He makes his way back to a civilization that thought he was dead. Everything about this signals rebirth, both for the character and for the series on a meta level. Since Bohannon was presumed dead, he has to reclaim his position as the railroad's chief engineer, which he sets out to do as soon as he hears the news of his rumored death – he succeeds in doing so by appealing to his primal manliness – not in the sense that he identifies with wilderness, but because he is capable of conquering it. The urban men making decisions and intent on replacing Bohannon with one of their kind are simply not cut out for the hostilities – wolves and Indians and the like – and are eventually convinced by Bohannon's reasoning that includes showing off his wolf-bitten ear.

Earlier, I have described Bohannon as a mixture of Wister's Virginian, Leone's No Name and a classic John Wayne hero. The No Name component of his characterizations is supposed to make him a "gray" character, but eventually is restricted to both the grim violence of the series on a whole and to make Bohannon appear ambivalent. Despite his reckless behavior – killing the wrong guy and a decent amount of racism – he is a superhuman hero: he fights wolves, Indians and everyone else who gets in his or the railroad's way. Even though he is engaged in shoot-outs in almost every episode, he was not shot once so far. He might be reckless and arrogant, a murderer even – yet none of this disqualifies him. After he saved a man from a black powder explosion in season one, he is astonished that everyone in the camp greets him with respect despite his otherwise unsympathetic demeanor. Lily Bell reminds him that it is his very masculinity

and the sense of honor that informs it that makes him popular: "It's your manner, not your manners" (S01E05). This is also the only possible reason why a man like Mr. Toole, whom Bohannon threatened to fire and also intended to kill once, whose payroll he also stole during his brief stint as train robber, celebrates this man in S02E05.

Whereas in the first two seasons he is in shell shock and his transgressions (alcoholism, murders) can be explained with his lust for revenge and fractured subjectivity, his actions in the third season are motivated by hard decisions only a man of his stature can make. When the railroad construction crosses lands inhabited by Mormons, he vows to find a peaceful solution so that he does not have to uproot a Mormon family. It pains him when it becomes clear that they will have to move. The Mormon patriarch however is resistant, shoots Hell on Wheel's new head of security and later turns in his own son for the murder. In a gloomy scene, a consternated Bohannon now has to execute the law, which means that he hangs an innocent adolescent (S03E02).

Contrary to the fatal incident at the end of the first season, this time around one wishes he would take the law in his own hands and thus the deconstruction begun at the first season's conclusion is fully reversed. In the third season's first few episodes, he even visits a church a few times – only this time he does not go there to kill someone or hide from prosecution, but to ponder the toll all of this takes on his soul: "A man who hates his sins can be redeemed for it," Ruth tells him (S03E04). After he executed the young Mormon, things become equally explicit. A female journalist has arrived in the camp to report on the goings-on.[138] She takes special interest in the notorious Bohannon and informs the viewer about what she writes in her article:

> I came here to meet the man who replaced 'Doc' Durant as chief engineer of the Union Pacific railroad. I can tell you he is a man for whom honor is sacred, and virtue impermanent. In the brave new wilderness he calls home, integrity is important to Cullen Bohannon. Whether a man of integrity is what's needed to build the railroad we don't yet know. The railroad has always been the business of the unscrupulous and corrupt. I suspect our new chief engineer to be neither. And for that, my dear reader, we might all count our blessings. And say a prayer (S03E02).

Since a Western hero is by convention not very articulate about his convictions, we need characters such as the journalist to tell us about his character (or so the writers of *HoW* think). Yet, applying Lee Clark Mitchell's theory on making the man in Westerns, focusing on the looks of this man would suffice as well.

Mitchell argues that the "heroization [...] depend[s] less on what the hero was or did

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138 The journalist is also manipulated into writing an unfavorable article about Bohannon's past by Durant in his attempt to reclaim control of the railroad (S03E05 & S03E06).

than with the way he looked" (Mitchell, 163). There is hardly any nudity in *HoW* – neither the male nor the female body is overtly eroticized – yet the show's supposedly unflinching look at frontier life squints when it comes to the looks of its anti-hero. In the boxing match between Bohannon and Elam, both men's upper bodies are exposed (S01E05). The bearded and long-haired Bohannon – both historically accurate as opposed to the immaculately shaven gunslingers of classical Westerns and also in fashion among young men today – has a shaved chest. Why the decision was made to relieve Bohannon's upper body of hair can only be speculated on. Yet one might wonder if it was really too much to ask of actor Anson Mount to "go natural" while the audience is already asked for suspension of disbelief in face of the gleaming white teeth of all central characters involved in *HoW* (toothbrushes are hardly encountered props in Westerns). Both the beard and the shaved chest have become male beauty standards; Bohannon's look may thus be authentic as long as it is in accordance with contemporary beauty ideals.[139] Strikingly, the black body is left "wild" and is only able to overcome Bohannon because of foul play.

Furthermore, this partial nudity is only possible within the confines of the boxing match: the camera not simply gazes at a passive man, but we see how this concentration on the male body is used to prove masculinity through violence. Paul Smith also identifies a set of cinematic conventions for representing "the heroized male body," a semiotics found in the directional work of Don Siegel and Clint Eastwood (both collaborated on *Dirty Harry* [1971]) and which have developed into "an industry standard." One of its staple shots, the "under-the-chin shot," concludes the trauma repetition of *HoW*'s second season (see figure 36): "the heroized male figure, shot most often from the waist up, seems to loom above the spectator's eyeline," which is combined with strong backlight to give the hero's shape in silhouette (Smith, 83). This non-sexual centering on male physicality "is predicated on [the viewer's] pleasure of seeing the male 'exist' (that is walk, move, ride, fight) in or through cityscapes, landscapes, or more abstractly history" (ibid., 80). One could argue that this way of representing the male body relieves him of a personal identity for an universal, towering

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139Gilette, one of the world's leading manufacturers of shaving equipment, has recently launched a marketing campaign entitled "What Women Want." In this campaign, women state why they prefer shaved male bodies as opposed to unshaven. This whole campaign was necessary because Gilette has experienced a profit setback due to the increasing acceptance and desirability of male facial hair. Now that facial hair is trending, Gilette is in need of a new marketing strategy. The trend towards hairless bodies was thus very much welcomed by the company. Interestingly, this also has a crisis of masculinity component: since many men lost their jobs in the recession, those who previously held formal office jobs now have no reason to shave regularly anymore (see Kaiser, n. pag.).

American masculinity to emerge. This essentialist representation of masculinity in film and television has its counter-part in the fragile female body: "The male/boy/man is expected to transcend space, or to place his body in aggressive motion within it, in so doing posturing to self and others the assuredness of his masculinity" (Whitehead, 189).

This bodily heroization has implications for the violence in Westerns and for *HoW* in particular. As already mentioned, the series shows a lot of violence and with few exceptions, it is rarely cathartic or consequential – it could rather be seen as a source of entertainment for fans of pulp (*Sons of Anarchy* would be another, more extreme series that drives on excessive pulp violence ranging from male anal rape, various forms of mutilation to people being burned alive) and in some instances, paradoxically, as testimonials to the horrors of frontier life (e.g. Elam's scalping of Cheyennes in S01E09, see below). However, what violence mainly does is to construct Bohannon's manliness: the abundant brawls and shoot-outs are thus "less a means than an end in itself – less a matter of violating another than of constituting one's physical self as a male. The purpose is less defeat or destruction than (once again) display" (Mitchell, 169). That Bohannon seems haunted by the violence that dominates his recent past and present does not circumscribe this in any significant way – this is so because the viewers' sympathies are on his side, not on that of his victims.

Furthermore, he is not a sociopath without remorse. He owns up to his violence in the third season: it is something he burdens himself with, mostly because he thought it was necessary to defend the railroad or to deal out justice. After the trauma repetition of *HoW*'s second season, he has integrated the violence into an identity that does not solely consist of violence, but is more purpose-driven. "Done a lot of killing both during and after the war," he says in front of the Credit Mobilier's executive board intent to discharge him (future president Ulysses S. Grant [Victor Slezak] is also in attendance). "Killing ain't something anyone's born to, it's something you learn, and you're the one who has to live with it when it's done," he says. "I'm a killer and a railroad man; you can't pick one without choosing the other" (S03E06). This episode ends with him and Grant sharing a bottle of whiskey, smoking cigars and talking about how much they dislike Durant. Both men laugh when Bohannon says he wishes he could have been this close to the former Northern general three years earlier. The fact that the general – enamored with the symbolism of going into the presidential elections with a former Southern soldier in charge of the railroad – endorses him so that Bohannon can remain in charge of the railroad. Also, it is the first time Bohannon is able to communicate

without aggression to a Northerner, which provides evidence he is slowly but surely moving beyond his past.

The heroization of Bohannon is figured through both the aestheticization of his physique and the efficiency with which he applies this physique. His killings make him conflicted, yet the way he is represented and the fact that he both feels remorse for his deeds and that those were committed against people worse than him do not undermine his heroization. Bohannon is a hero because he is brave and because he continually puts his aestheticized male body in danger – yet the reasons as to why he does this change. In the beginning, he is on a path for revenge, but more and more his violence serves the community. There is no better way to put this: Bohannon is a badass, a man's man. Even though he is deeply troubled, Bohannon eventually comes through for the people he loves and for the projects he believes in.

Within the crisis of masculinity discourse, this assessment is affirmed. This is not a contemporary middle class family man who is, mostly out of self-interest and ego validation, responsible for the death of sympathetic people. He is not Walter White. In fact, he is quite the opposite. He is tormented by the things he does. And, most importantly, he has no interest whatsoever in money and recognition. At some point during the second season, this man realizes that the only thing he wants to do is to build a railroad. Doing so, he faces fierce opposition by what we might call a crisis broker: Doc Durant, who out of pure self-interest jeopardizes the great project of the transcontinental railroad and has no regard for the working man.

5.3. Lions and Zebras

Like many Westerns before, this series exhibits a very critical stance towards corporate capitalism and in doing so alludes to the 2007 economic downturn. As often argued with the Western, present crises are investigated through a historic lens: the present-day crisis finds one of its forebears in *HoW*'s Thomas 'Doc' Durant, who in the style of Brecht theater drunkenly addresses the audience at the end of the series's pilot episode:

> This business is not for the weak of heart. It's a thorny, brutal affair that rewards the lion for his ferocity. What of the zebra? What of the poor zebra? Well, the zebra is eaten as the zebra should be. Make no mistake: blood will be spilled, lives will be lost, fortunes will be made, men will be ruined. [...] But the lion shall prevail. You see, the secret I know is this: all of history is driven by the lion. [...] History doesn't remember us fondly. But then history

is written by the zebra for the zebra. Hundred years hence, when this railroad spans the continent and America rises to be the greatest power the world has seen, I will be remembered as a caitiff, a malefactor, who only operated out of greed for personal gain. All true. All true. But remember this: without me and men like me your glorious railroad will never be built (*HoW* S01E01).

This monologue is both an act of revisionism and another example for what Rosenberg remarked about showing and telling. This critique, of course, is concerned with style and points towards what may be considered a characteristic of 'quality TV': a stylistic mode that has shows narrated in such way (e.g. *BrBa*, *The Wire*, *Mad Men* or *Deadwood*) fare better with critics then shows with 'quality TV' ambitions and the production values associated with it.

Be that as it may, let us look at this monologue and the language that constitutes it. The animal binary of hunter and game can be understood in gendered terms and following this, that the hegemonic binary ("the lion") is necessary even though history (revisionist history that is) will disqualify *him* on moral terms. That, however, will not change the outcome, i.e. the extraordinary achievement of settling the West. Even though *HoW* is criticized for telling rather than showing, telling can complicate matters just as well. This is so because this monologue paradoxically dismisses and affirms politically correct revisionist Western history and Westerns: it revises classic Westerns by simply stating that good intentions or civilization and utopian conceptions thereof have little to do with settling the West. Instead, self-centered, greedy men like Thomas Durant and violence artists like Cullen Bohannon made the whole project of westward expansion possible.

Looking at these matters from the masculinity in crisis discourse qualifies this further. The traditional notions of masculinity that have taken on negative connotations over the past decades are rendered a necessary evil. What, then, is intended when we are informed that "the zebras" (women, minorities, unmasculine men) might look at "the lions" (hegemonic men) differently, yet the latter's actions eventually benefited all of America (not counting Native Americans in this context, of course)?

Through this Brechtian monologue, *HoW* points to its own status as a fictional representation of historic events. This does not necessarily undermine any notion of 'authenticity', but it rather enforces such notions for the simple fact that Durant not only points our attention to his being part of a fictional narrative, he also steps out of this narrative and the time frame within which it is placed: he transcends time and place by referring to a history discourse that in the storyworld (Nebraska Territory 1865) has not yet been written. This, then, serves as a commentary on the 'nature' of progress and the

'human nature' driving it as well as it delivers a grim truth: revisionism does not change the 'facts.' This railroad has been built, yet there are different ways of looking at it – either from a lion's or a zebra's perspective. This change of perspective, however, is essentially inconsequential because it does not amount to an alternate history nor does it suggest alternative models for progress going forward. More to the point, the fact that the origin of the territorial United States was made possible by genocidal war against aboriginal peoples and financial interest ("lion") is dragged into the limelight in this and other post-classic Westerns avows that this may be regretful from today's perspective ("zebra"). In terms of the financial aspect (race to a lesser degree), *HoW* suggests these attitudes have not been overcome since.

In gendered terms, the lion as a predator is the masculine, while the zebra as the lion's victim represents the feminine. A zebra in Durant's terms is not necessarily a female-sexed person, but can also be a male-sexed person that lacks the lion's will to power. The wealth of the lion is based on the exploitation of the zebra. This, consequently, leads us to the question of class and actually diverts us from idealized conceptions of frontier masculinity: Durant is not a cowboy/gunslinger. He does not have a code beyond his own self-interest. His power is not backed by physical performances, but by capital. Still, he is just as much an outlaw as those Western characters we would normally associate with this term (he is arrested for embezzlement in S02E10). This is not to say that characters like Durant are foreign to the Western (e.g. the banker in Ford's *Stagecoach*). *Shane,* however, features an outlaw who helps homesteaders in their fight against the big business represented by Ryker. *Shane* argues that the democratic homesteader community and idealistic men made the West. As such, it is itself part of the mythic West: it creates what it represents. *HoW* sits more comfortably among the later Westerns not only because it replaces the homesteader/peasant with the working class, but also because it has the gunslinger (Bohannon) work for the big business (Durant) – an interesting constellation given the fact that they are antagonists that however use each other for their own benefit: Durant needs Bohannon's force and Bohannon needs Durant so that he is not executed.

Durant's animal analogy testifies to the post-*Shane* transformation. The zebra is a horse and as such "a classic symbol of the uncontainable frontier spirit" (Klein, 97). This frontier spirit has fallen prey to the powerful corporate lion. This also translates to the characters populating the railroad camp. While Bohannon can be considered an uncontainable spirit – he gets away with murder more than once and seems disinterested

in financial gain – the railroad workers (both black and white) as well as the camp's prostitutes are reminiscent of the industrial proletariat dangerously close to being a *Lumpenproletariat*. In ignoring their common class affiliation and by being mosttly driven by self interest, they have little semblance to what earlier television and many classic Hollywood Westerns imagined a frontier community to look like. The regenerative potential of the West is not to be found in the encounter with the savage, but through human interaction and through capital that at the same time curtails these transformations. The escalating conflict with the Cheyenne towards the end of the first seasons shows that old divisions have not yet been overcome while new divisions develop.

After the Cheyenne have sabotaged the rail tracks in S01E08, a band comprised of former Union soldiers, Bohannon, Elam, and the converted Cheyenne Joseph Black Moon ride out to settle the issue. There are three things to be observed here, only the latter is related to capitalism: first, the verbal (and almost physical) altercations between the former Confederate soldier and the Union soldiers indicate that the "open wound" left by the Civil War is not yet ready to heal and any sort of regeneration is far in sight; second, when Elam, Bohannon and Joseph ride up to the Union soldiers, one of latter comments on this sight as "a rainbow." Indeed, the three ethnically diverse men earn each other's respect when they fight together against a common threat. Both the language and the sympathy the viewer is supposed to have for these three characters in the scene is

*Figure 35 Frontier rainbow (*HoW *S01E08).*

curious. The rainbow as the universal symbol for diversity mostly appropriated by gay rights movements in recent memory but also used by Jesse Jackson and his rainbow coalition is a peculiar choice by John Shiban, who has written and directed this episode. This minority affiliation constructs Bohannon as a sympathetic underdog. Since this is uttered from a "winner's perspective" (i.e. a former Union soldier), it identifies him with groups substantially more victimized. This establishes also another link to Eastwood's *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, where the Union also surfaces as victimizer. Bohannon, of course, is a white male in a position of power and by adopting the language of particularization and victimization, we encounter in miniature the kind of "affirmative

reaction" Hamilton Carroll describes. In Durant's words, the Northerners look at Bohannon as a zebra. In the following combat scenes, however, he proves to them that he is really a lion.

After this "frontier rainbow" has successfully killed the Cheyenne in a pulpy fighting scene that begins in S01E08 and ends at the beginning of S01E09, Elam remembers that Durant offered $20 per scalp. Neither Joseph nor Bohannon have interest in the reward, which leaves Elam to collect the money. The horrific sight of scalping testifies to the violence underpinning capital accumulation and for Elam marks a loss of innocence. Through violence and cynicism ("All this money lying around"), he is able to make a lot of money compared to the hard work of railroad construction. Durant is impressed: "I'm always looking for a man who is willing to get his hands dirty from time to time." Though his willingness to get his hands dirty and the money he receives for it award him the freedom to enter the saloon – thereby staging America's first sit-in with the help of Bohannon –, this capital also curtails this freedom. When he enters the saloon, he urges Bohannon to ask him to take a seat. This sit-in connects *HoW* to the Civil Rights Movement and the Westerns produced during that era, underlining the revisionist intention of this series with regard to the racism associated with the classic Western and Leone's vision in which the West has succumbed to capitalism. This scene then is a zebra's perspective on Western history. Upon informing him that he now directly works for Durant, Bohannon warns Elam by saying that it is a "slick slope you're slippin' down" (*HoW* S01E09). Eventually, Elam will realize that his participation in the American Dream is only purchased and not necessarily permanent, neither is it grounded on fairness. He is not really a free man, he is still an instrument for another man's accumulation of power and wealth.

Furthermore, the status Elam enjoys and the money he makes are both grounded on violence. In the second season, he is responsible for the railroad's security and thus becomes a gunslinger. His money and status also make him blind to values beyond exchange value. He has fallen in love with the prostitute Eva, yet refuses to settle down with her: "for the first time in my life I got money in my pocket; *my* money and *my* pocket" (S01E10). He does not want to belong to someone else (Eva) even though he already does (Durant). It will take Elam some time to realize that male independence and money are less satisfying than having a family.

Heterosexual gender relations are the tracks on which the narrative train rolls along and at times money serves as the engine driving it forward. *BrBa*, *TWD*, and *HoW* are all

shaped to a significant degree by and contained within the heterosexual matrix. Writing about the Western and women, Pam Cook states that "[d]espite their absence from the main scene, which such notions would suggest, women play a key role in the imagery of 'man in his world'. They exist, usually, as the purpose, the vulnerable, the flight from, the prize, the sought after, the protected" (qtd. in: Strang, 41). If we consider *BrBa* and the relationship between Walter and Skyler, we can readily observe this: for Walter, his transformation process is a flight from his wife who paradoxically also serves as the purpose for what he does. Elam in *HoW* wants to provide and protect, but would prefer to do so on a monetary basis without settling down (the uneasy transformation from sex-for-money to sex-for-love also serves as a commentary on how a freed slave conceives of freedom and opportunity in America: in monetary terms). This pattern cuts across narratives and is not necessarily restricted to the Western genre. Yet, the Western is perfectly suited since a gendered understanding of wilderness and civilization is fundamentally part of the genre. From today's masculinity in crisis perspective, the Old West signals a place in time before civilization (women) tamed wilderness (men) – even though, of course, the Old West was already perceived as a flight from an emasculating, urban East at the turn of the century.

The prevalence of the rugged male on American cable, most notably basic cable channels like AMC and FX, indicates that these fears of emasculating civilization are, at least in fantasy, – especially in light of recent economic and political struggles – as alive today as they were at the turn of the century. Furthermore, despite the crisis announcements of patriarchy's end, on a narrative level patriarchy is still in firm place on cable. If the fictional male characters discussed here did not have a woman to provide for/escape from (Walter in *BrBa*, Elam in *HoW*), avenge (Bohannon in *HoW*), or rescue/protect (Rick in *TWD*), these serial narratives would be completely different for the simple fact that the heterosexual matrix makes possible the causality of each plot (i.e. "I have to become a drug dealer to provide for my wife and kids" [*BrBa*], "I have to go West to kill the murderers of my wife and son" [*HoW*], "I have to go to zombie-infested Atlanta to reconnect with and ensure the survival of my wife and son" [*TWD*]). The gender binary organizes many of the characters' actions. "If gender is a norm [...] that produces the intelligible field of subjects," these storylines 'make sense' because they so faithfully adhere to this norm (Butler 2004a, 48). In fact, "*the norm produces itself in the production of that field* [of application]. The norm is actively conferring reality; indeed, only by virtue of its repeated power to confer reality is the norm

constituted as a norm" (ibid., 52). That most of the men on cable are troubled does not conceal the fact that within the narrative realm, they claim privileged positions – each narrative is predicated on their actions.

Elam is ready to settle down with the pregnant Eva only after he has become a gunslinger and proved his maleness,. In order to get permission to build a house for them – the railroad owns the land – he is asked to kill Lily Bell, whose actions are ultimately responsible for Durant's arrest in S02E10.[140] Considering the larger context, the "legal" status of his landed property is a statement in itself: this railroad possession is wealth founded on speculation, fraud and violence committed against Native Americans by the USA. Acquired through bloodshed, this piece of land is now supposed to change owners through more bloodshed as a cover-up for the illegal activities of Durant: he regards the government as a "teat" to be milked and furthermore uses railroad money to speculate on Wall Street. To do so, he aims to construct the railroad as cheaply as possible.[141] This resonates with the contemporary financial crisis in which the speculations of a few had to be bailed out by the many. The very mechanism of money accumulation is indicative of our present times and suggests that these practices have a long lineage in American history – New Western History scholars like Richard Slotkin, Richard White, Patricia Limerick and Stephen A. Ambrose have verified this. Production as an industrial manufacturing process is merely a decoy for the real source of wealth: speculation. After Durant is released from jail (money does the trick), he delivers the following pitch to a land owner in Omaha. People are aware of the fact that he lost control of the railroad and is broke. His logic, however, is convincing and reminiscent of the 2007 recession:

> **Mrs. Palmer**: "So you're borrowing money you don't have from a company your don't work for to buy property you can't afford to build a city that doesn't exist?"
> **Durant**: "Spearheading as it were. A new way of doing business in America" (*HoW*, S03E02).

The eventual completion of the railroad is hardly relevant to Durant's financial well-

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140 In the relationship between Durant and his 'employee' Elam, McGee's Marxist reading of Westerns finds its echo: "Marxists, and Marx before them, frequently make the point that, within the framework of the capitalist labor market, the exchange between the capitalist and the worker is not unfair because it has not been produced by an act of coercion. Exploitation lies in the relations of production that force the worker to sell his or her labor power in order to live. However, the economic power that enables the capitalist to exploit labor and enforce the class system derives from an act of capital accumulation that historically originated in violent if not overtly illegal activity" (96).

141 In S01E01 he discusses the route of the railroad with two of his men. One wonders "Why wouldn't we make it straight?", to which Durant replies "Let me elucidate. In case you hadn't heard, this undertaking is being subsidized by the enormous teat of the Federal Government. This never-ending, money-gushing nipple pays me sixteen hundred dollars a mile yet you build my road straight?" The engineer is thrown off the moving train for his failure to understand Durant's investment in the enterprise.

being (see footnote 145) – in *HoW*'s third season he even sabotages the railroad in order to regain control from Bohannon.

5.4. Myths and Money

The viewer is first introduced to Durant giving a speech in Chicago. He advertises the Union Pacific as "making manifest our destiny as a great nation" and thus clearly appeals to the myth of god's chosen people that masked the violent appropriation of manifest destiny as bravery. The following dialogue with Senator Jordan Crane ensues after the speech:

> **Durant**: "It's all horsecrap. The faster I shovel the faster they eat it up."
> **Senator Jordan Crane**: "But it was a truly inspirational speech."
> **Durant**: "Twaddle and shite I say."
> **Senator Jordan Crane**: "Then why am I here?"
> **Durant**: "You're here to play your part." [slides a stack of stock certificate across the table]
> **Senator Jordan Crane**: "Credit Mobilier?"[142]
> **Durant**: "It's a construction company I'm starting up. Credit Mobilier will be awarded all major construction contracts for the Union Pacific Railroad. I own it. And I'm giving you a chance to get in on the ground floor."
> **Senator Jordan Crane**: "So, you'll be paying yourself to build the railroad with government subsidies?"
> **Durant**: "Now that, my friend, is inspirational" (*HoW* S01E01).

As is suggested by Durent in *HoW*, the truly inspirational thing about the railroad construction is not manifest destiny, but how it is a way to achieve fame and fortune. Durant offers stock to the senator in exchange for his vote. When the senator tries to *negotiate the bribe*, Durant simply threatens to build the railroad around the land that the senator has speculated on. This scene indicates that the West was not necessarily "the opportunity for renewal, for self-transformation, for release from constraints associated with an urbanized East." Rather, Lee Clark Mitchell continues, things we associate with Western history, such as railroad construction, Indian wars or mining operations, were "certainly vis-á-vis more pressing Eastern considerations" (Mitchell, 4-5). The West then is less of a new beginning for the nation after the Civil War, but more of a continuation of Eastern practices. What is also at work in this scene is an autopsy of

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142 This is confirmed by historians. Stephen E. Ambrose informs us that "[g]reatly simplified, the process worked this way: The Union Pacific awarded construction contracts to dummy individuals, who in turn assigned them to the Crédit Mobilier. The UP paid the Crédit Mobilier by check, with which the Crédit Mobilier purchased from the UP stocks and bonds – at par, the trick to the whole thing – and then sold them on the open market for whatever they would fetch, or used them as security for loans. The construction contracts brought huge profits to the Crédit Mobilier, which in turn was owned by the directors and principal stockholders of the UP. In short, it didn't matter if the UP ever got up and running and made a profit, because the Crédit Mobilier would make a big profit on building it. Profit that it would pay out to its stockholders in immense amounts [...] it meant excessive profits" (93).

the ideology of manifest destiny that historians and other Westerns have previously undertaken:

> Manifest destiny was a myth to be sure, but because it served a particular purpose in a particular time – the late nineteenth century – it was not a myth that served the nation's self-understanding over the long term. Moreover, because the architects of manifest destiny constructed it on absolutized versions of all the other myths [...], it emerged as a particularly demonic transformation of values, encouraging Americans of that period to call the good evil and the evil good (R. Hughes, 192).

Manifest destiny has its appeal by believing that America is inherently good ("a city upon a hill"); consequently, its expansion can only be good, even if the means are violent: "the ethics of Western violence coincide with the imperatives of entrepreneurial ideology which are at the core of the political-economic mythology of the United States. However, the Western deflects, masks, or denies the validity of economic self-interest" (Slotkin qtd. in: Ramírez Berg, 8). *HoW* thus exposes this sentiment by bringing economic self-interest to the foreground.

Furthermore, Hughes's estimation that this myth's purpose is restricted to a particular time is short-sighted since this myth masked imperial action that did not suddenly disappear with the old frontier. It reemerged in Kennedy's New Frontier (see Faludi, 452), in "Ronald Reagan, the kindly grandfather of Neo-Manifest Destiny" (M. C. Anderson, 196), and in the latest invasion of Iraq, which was retroactively justified as a project to bring democracy and freedom – values dear to Western civilization – to the non-Western people there. Here we see that "a national myth/ideology will be essential to [a nation-state's] operation" (Slotkin 1992, 654). This is so because manifest destiny and the frontier are interconnected myths that constitute nothing less than a narrativization of the nation's origins. The act of narrativization is a continuous process authored largely by Anglo-American men about predominantly Anglo-American men and as such privileges Anglo-American men.

Myths as the dominant narrative of a nation are thus hegemonic narratives that favor one point of view over the other, that award privilege to one group while subordinating the other. Myths are imperative and interpellating (see Barthes, 106). This surfaces in the social Darwinism of Roosevelt's writing about the West, Wister's *The Virginian*, and Turner's frontier thesis (see Weidinger, 75-76). This, too, resonates in *HoW*: even though he is a man of his times and as such has racist tendencies, Bohannon develops a friendship with Elam. In this bromance, however, he reminds the former slave he will never be his equal (S03E02). This is so because Bohannon functions as a teacher to Elam, for example when he instructs him how to shoot a gun and thus allows him access

to phallic superiority (S01E07). This also holds true on a meta level: the white man is cast as a main character, Elam is only part of the supporting cast.[143] Moreover, Bohannon takes Elem's side when he is threatened by Irish construction workers. Because Bohannon is less racist than the other men in the camp and he fights alongside 'the Other' against these white men, he is also appears 'less white' than them. This constellation, Stefanie Hirsbrunner explains in her post-colonial reading of Hollywood films, makes white viewers feel good about themselves and relieves fears about their own racism precisely because they are interpellated with the point of view of a white man who fights alongside 'the Other' (96).

A more obvious example of a post-colonial perspective on manifest destiny in *HoW* can be observed in Durant's dealings with native peoples. In S01E06 Durant and Senator Jordan Crane sit down with Cheyenne leaders "to offer [..] a better way of life." Since this meeting takes place in Hell on Wheels, the Cheyenne are more than perplexed after they witnessed the dirt and prostitutes riding into the camp: "better than what?"[144] Earlier, Durant rhetorically frames the railroad as the "birth of freedom." He "cannot let that freedom be threatened by ragtag bands of marauding stone age primitives" (*HoW* S01E03). Because they are primitives, they should get in the back-seat of the 'progress' the railroad will bring to them. Obviously, the show suggests, manifest destiny contains a good deal of racism and conceals violent approximation of land through the supposedly benevolent betterment of 'primitive' lives. Benevolence is a word that Durant also uses to describe himself (see above) and that is occasionally used by commentators of American imperialism: The USA is an "empire in denial" (Colás & Saull, 10) and tries to perpetuate an oxymoronic image of "benevolent supremacy" (Kollin, 7). This contradiction is what myth resolves by associating violence with freedom and the destruction of wilderness with the betterment of life conditions.

143Consider, for example Alexandra Keller's elaboration that "the authority of westerns to speak about American identity is founded on (among other things) a racialist discourse. If it is not always foregrounded that the subject of the westerns is an Anglo-Saxon male – and that this is therefore what is meant by American identity – it is almost always taken for granted. And it is impossible to offer up such a subject without also displaying what that subject is not: female, non-Christian, nonwhite, and nonheterosexual" (qtd. in: Weidinger, 244).

144One of the first films to present an empathetic representation of Natives is Delmer Daves's *Broken Arrow* (1950). The number of such films increased in the early revisionist period with examples such as John Ford's *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964) and Sidney Salkow's *The Great Sioux Massacre* (1965): "most of them subordinated the particularity of Native American values and practices to a (mainly) White agenda of cultural revision which once again construed Native Americans as 'the Other', the opposite or negation of Anglo-American culture – only now that difference was seen as healthy opposition to a sick society" (Slotkin 1992, 630).

HoW depicts Durant as a man who blends fact and fiction for his own benefit. After Lily and Robert Bell were attacked by hostile natives, he visits the scene of horror. A reporter from the *Chicago Tribune* is already there to take pictures. The following dialogue enfolds:

> **Durant**: "Did you photograph this body?"
> **Reporter**: "Yes Sir, Mr. Durant. Just one body."
> **Durant**: "What is wrong with you, man?"
> **Reporter**: "I'm sorry, I-"
> **Durant**: "Just the one won't do. [...] I want an *unblinking look* at the horror perpetrated here... More arrows, *we need more arrows*!" (S01E02).

The "unblinking look" includes the manipulation of the scene of frontier violence as Durant fetches some arrows to stick them into the bodies of the deceased. As the bystanders watch in disbelief, a cut occurs and the camera now assumes the level of the corpse. What we see is not only a man who lacks decency, but also a god of sorts, a mythmaker, which suggests the image of the Old West was also a deliberate effort driven by self-interest. Lily Bell, the sole survivor of the attack, has disappeared with the maps of the

*Figure 36 Fact and fiction in the West (*HoW *S01E02).*

surveyed land into the woods. Durant then dictates the story of the "fair-haired maiden of the West" to the reporter in order to trigger the government into sending troops into the territory – not to save Lily Bell, but to secure the maps she has taken with her. She, he dictates, "means nothing but civilization itself" (S01E02). This remark is directly followed by shots of the wounded Lily stitching herself together in the wilderness. The fair-haired maiden of the West, it turns out, is not helpless and she will eventually force herself into the railroad business and be Durant's (temporary) downfall.

What the construction of the fair-haired maiden of the West nicely illustrates is that gender is central to the frontier myth (see Weidinger, 17) and that the gender binary has material implications. *HoW* exposes the settling of the West as an Eastern enterprise that was less achieved by individual bravery and by the appeal to bring in federal troops to clear the land. Just like in *Unforgiven* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, we see that myth-making was an active part in achieving this goal. The blonde woman captured by savages adds an emotional layer to what are essentially economic concerns: Durant wants the maps Lily carries with her, but the life of that woman means very little to him

since he eventually orders her assassination. The fabrication Durant dictates to the reporter mentions no word about the maps. The protection of women is a decoy employed by men to mask entrepreneurial interests, something which resonates in *BrBa* as well. When military intervention proves

*Figure 37 The fair-haired maiden of the West (*HoW *S01E01).*

unnecessary since this woman more or less made it back to camp by herself, he will use her and the image created for her as the face of the railroad to lure investors (S01E10).

Furthermore, since *HoW* is very much concerned with the cost of progress and capitalism, the image of journalism as integral to democracy is represented as severely damaged – it does not account to the public, but to capital. The Western, understood as a reflection on the time in which it is produced, evokes parallels in Durant's actions with false information perpetuated by the media in support for war in Iraq[145] and the frontier-othering of the Muslim.[146]

Durant may describe himself as a lion, but he rather is a zoo director who hates animals. His monologue at the end of S01E01 rather applies to Bohannon, whose reckless behavior makes possible the great achievement of the railroad. In the beginning, it appears his masculinity blocks his way towards redemption. In later episodes, however, it is the very thing that makes it possible: he could not, the series suggests, build this railroad without it. He is "a killer and a railroad man; you can't pick one without choosing the other." By troubling masculinity through trauma, *HoW* disqualifies and qualifies "the lion" who dares to achieve for what "the zebra" does not have the guts. This paradoxical circumstance does what the Western in its more classic form has often done: concealing these contradiction in a myth embodied by the frontier hero.

The *Unforgiven* comparison, it turns out, is fairly accurate. Brent Strang's evaluation

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145 David Harvey writes in his *Brief History of Neoliberalism* of the entanglement of news media and corporate interests: "All of the supposedly *independent editors* of [Rupert Murdoch's] newspapers worldwide supported the US invasion of Iraq" (4; my emphasis).

146 Judith Butler writes that "[i]n a strong sense, the binarism that Bush proposes in which only two positions are possible - 'Either you're with us or you're with the terrorists' - makes it untenable to hold a position in which one opposes both and queries the terms in which the opposition is framed. Moreover, it is the same binarism that returns us to an anachronistic division between 'East' and 'West' and which, in its sloshy metonymy, returns us to the invidious distinction between civilization (our own) and barbarism (now coded as 'Islam' itself)" (2004b, 2).

of the revisionism in Eastwood's film, too, applies to *HoW* as it engages in "a sort of neo-realist revisionism: the object of critique is not the white master narrative, but the nostalgic wash of the Western fable as set in a time of simplicity, communion with nature, black and white justice, and 'clean' kills" (51). A consideration of both narratives' main characters testifies to their similarity: Munny is introduced to us as a dysfunctional man capable of violence. His riding into Big Whiskey has nothing to do with noble motives. At the film's conclusion, however, he embodies the legend he supposedly had been before he became a failing pig farmer. Bohannon, too, is introduced as a dubious man whose violence is messy. Similarly, his motivation for arriving in Hell on Wheels has nothing to do with the stated purpose. Even though *HoW* has not yet been concluded, everything points towards his vices evaporating in the legend of a man who against all odds – namely a corrupt financial elite, the wilderness, and various ethnicized threats (Mormons, American Indians) – makes possible the first transcontinental railroad. A man, moreover, who is introduced to us as dysfunctional and victimized, who ultimately wins and with him the American nation – despite his failings: the great American project simply would not have been possible without him. This adds a layer of nostalgia to this series – by alluding to the current financial crisis, *HoW* suggests that the great American project is in peril.

5.5. Look Sharp and Fight Hard

On cable – whether basic or premium (and considering the success of *24*, network TV, too) – there seems to be a fascination with traumatized men in positions of liminality. The in-betweenness is, of course, what these contemporary men share with the Western hero and the frontier myth. *Justified* (2010 – present) and *Banshee* (2013 – present, Cinemax)[147] draw on this type of masculinity in different ways. Like Bohannon, the male main characters of these two series switch positions in the binaries of law and lawlessness, civilization and wilderness *ad libitum*. Despite its contemporary East Coast setting, *Banshee* references the Western not only in the way it constructs its man at the narrative's center, but also explicitly in its episode titles. In reference to the Clint

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147The HBO-owned channel seems to be specialized in catering to male fantasies. The channel features late night soft porn programming and is currently trying to re-brand itself through original programming, which largely includes the development of action series. Other than *Banshee*, it will air *Sandbox* and a TV-adaptation of *The Transporter*. The former features Afghanistan and Iraq veterans who find their home town infiltrated by criminals upon returning from duty.

Eastwood Western, S01E07 is titled "Behold a Pale Rider" while S01E09 references cowboy masculinity in its title ("Always the Cowboy").

Banshee's main character, an attractive white male, manages the same balancing act many Westerners before him have mastered – law (he assumes the position of sheriff) and lawlessness (he is a thief). We encounter the unnamed (a nod to Leone and Eastwood) protagonist (Antony Starr) when he is released from prison after serving fifteen years for stealing diamonds worth ten million dollars. His former girlfriend disappeared with the diamonds in the fictional small town of Banshee, Pennsylvania. When he arrives there, he witnesses how the town's new sheriff is killed and assumes his identity and name ("Lucas Hood"). The ex-con-cum-lawman now balances his old ways and his new identity doing police work and continuing a life of crime.[148]

The ultra violent serial is an amalgam of action thriller, cop show, gangster film and drama described as "an American Gothic noir with echoes of Jim Thompson, Frank Miller and, especially, Quentin Tarantino, [that] presents a different set of images and clichés to play around with" (Hale 2013, n. pg.). Its male lead is a laconic violence artist who would feel just as comfortable in any one of Leone's Westerns. Moreover, just like him, many of *Banshee*'s characters are divorced from their past, a commonality with the Western theme of reinvention.

Banshee also features a colorful set of characters: Amish people (thus establishing a direct temporal link to the 19th century), the Ukrainian gangster boss Mr. Rabbit (Ben Cross), Native American casino owners, the Thai transvestite Job (Hoon Lee), a black ex-con (Frankie Faison as Sugar Bates), and the sadistic, highly influential local gangster/businessman Kai Proctor (Ulrich Thomsen), who is also a shunned Amish. In this diverse cast of characters, the white male anti-hero has to fight his way through extremely violent encounters while upholding his newfound identity.

Since Cinemax is like Showtime and HBO a premium cable channel and as such enjoys great liberties in what it chooses to air, the images can be very explicit. There are extremely violent scenes in which we see limbs being cut off, open fractures and rape as well as soft porn sex scenes (in which the camera prefers to linger on the fully exposed female body). The people having sex on screen are all very attractive, which indicates that these scenes rarely serve any greater purpose with regard to plot or 'meaning' other than the visual pleasure of simply looking at them unfold on-screen. Even though the

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148 Hood's unorthodox way of going about the sheriff business raises some suspicions. However, they are off-handedly discarded since the original Hood was a Westerner and the people of Banshee just assume that things were handled differently out West.

men, who are necessarily part of these scenes (like in any other series discussed here, there are no on-screen homosexual acts), are mostly nude, the camera's gaze is clearly more focused on the female body. The male body, often bare chested (penis tucked away from the camera's view[149]), is rather fetishized as wounded: viewers are allowed to gaze at the male body only when he is satisfying a female body (i.e. is active/masculine) or when he is wounded, and often brutally so (i.e. figuring masculinity through physical resilience): "the erotic potential of the male physique can only be embellished when suppressed – a suppression regularly achieved through the open administration of pain" (Mitchell, 175).

The erotization of the male body in a series that seems to be directed at a male audience would automatically carry homosexual connotations. This, of course, stands in stark contrast with masculinity itself as gay men are, bluntly speaking, not real men, but *gay men* – they come with a whole different set of signifiers located in the female sphere of the gender binary (see Connell 1995a, 78). What is surprising about this with regard to *Banshee* is the fact that Alan Ball is the executive producer of this show and whose serials *Six Feet Under* and *True Blood* are pretty liberal when it comes to (homo-)sexuality. Yet, he is neither the creator (novelists Jonathan Tropper and David Schickler run *Banshee*) nor a writer (all episodes were written by Tropper and Schickler so far) or director on the show. This is to say that the show does not necessarily deliver the goods the *brand* Alan Ball promises. Here, hegemonic masculinity establishes itself against homosexuality, which surfaces as monstrous threat in S01E06. Since violence is paramount to this serial, I will read it along scenes of extreme violence.

In the first season, there are two fights that in their positioning within the respective episode are reminiscent of level-concluding video game boss fights in which the opponent is physically so impressive that the sole use of force will not suffice, but a good deal of technique and strategy is necessary as well. *Banshee*'s male lead "has" to fight the black mixed martial arts fighter Mr. Sanchez (Cedric Stewart) in S01E03. In S01E06, we see him fighting a gay albino (Joseph Gatt) during his time in prison (via flashbacks). Since in the chronology of Hood's life the latter incident preceded the former, I will investigate the prison fight first (in terms of dramaturgy, the prison fight demands more from Hood than the previous fight, i.e. the level of difficulty is higher;

149Rory du Plessis maintains that "it is in representations of the penis that perpetually challenge the phallus as privileged signifier of masculinity. As a signifier of masculinity, of power, strength and control, the phallus depends on the invisibility and negation of the penis, for the penis fails to live up to the commensurability of the phallus, for its dimensions (the majority of the time it is flaccid) and effects (volatility to stimuli) are worryingly variable" (3).

hence the later placement in the narrative).

To remain with the video game analogy: the whole narrative of the first season is structured this way. The Ukrainian gangster boss Mr. Rabbit does not live in Banshee. As it turns out, he is the father of the love interest (Ivana Miličević as Anastasia/Carrie Hopewell) Hood followed to Banshee. She and him had originally planned to escape with Mr. Rabbit's diamonds together. However, Hood sacrificed his freedom for hers and went to prison (more on this further down). Once he is released from prison and tries to reconnect with the love of his life, Mr. Rabbit sees his chance to find (and presumably kill) both. The threat of Mr. Rabbit thus looms over the series's storyline until the eventual confrontation as the first season's final enemy/boss fight.

Mr. Rabbit has charged an impressively muscular albino with making Hood's life a living hell. Since even in prison nothing seems as terrifying as homosexuality, this muscular menace is also gay. The homosexual's otherness is enhanced by the fact that he is an albino and as such dwells in shadows (therefore his whiteness is an anomaly, one of nature's freak accidents compared to the normal whiteness of our anti-hero). Also, this man has no name and thus is only referenced by his monstrous whiteness and sexuality, which, within the crisis of masculinity discourse, could be read as signifying the perceived loss of privilege of

*Figure 38 Lucas Hood faces a gay albino in prison (*Banshee*, S01E06).*

*Figure 39 The ultimate threat to masculinity (*Banshee*, S01E06).*

straight white men. The lack of a name, it seems, expels this man from the symbolic order like the Western hero. However, this lack of a name is not compensated for positively by either a fake name like "Hood" or "Blondie", but replaced by a word that exclusively focuses on his freakishness. The character constellation itself makes his namelessness a threat: *Banshee* already has a man with no name and this is precisely the one we are asked to identify with in the prison stand-off. Furthermore, the word albino draws attention to his whiteness and queers it the same way his sexuality does: this

double otherness is freakish and expels him from 'normal whiteness', i.e. the location from which the white male speaks as the unmarked universal human being. At the same time, it raises the question if one can be too white: if a gay man is whiter than everyone else and is the hegemonic male in an environment mostly composed of straight men, this construction speaks to a perceived loss of straight white male privilege. Now the straight white male has to subjugate himself to the demands of a homosexual who appropriated straight white male privilege. Even though this man prefers to linger in the shadows, there is also one scene in which he steps into the prison yard, using an umbrella and being escorted by an entourage of what are probably straight men. He can step out of the shadow and be recognized as powerful man or – equally threatening – may drag (pun intended) a man like Hood into the shadows of a subterranean life. What is astonishing about this discourse of a perceived loss is the complete lack of democratic ideals underpinning its logic: a privilege is something only one particular groups enjoys. The loss of this privilege surfaces as victimization in the discourse even though this loss would actually mean equality for all, including straight white men.

Even though the gay albino is hegemonic in a prison that for the most part seems to be inhabited by beefed up athletes, it is Lucas Hood who will undo his reign. He does what no one else seems to be willing to do: risk his body to withstand what the homosexual prison hegemon demands (fellatio): "When you do it, you gonna do it willingly. Gratefully. And while you're greedily sucking me off, like a babe suckling on its mother's tit, that's when you'll understand that I own your ass" (*Banshee*, S01E06). *Banshee*'s anti-hero is nobody's "babe" and after being nearly beaten to death by the gay man, Lucas Hood tortures his body back to fitness by using the prison walls as his punching bag when he spends ninety days in solitary confinement. He also spends some time in the prison's hospital. In this episode, *Banshee* plays through the whole pattern Lee Clark Mitchell has previously outlined in his book: it is a matter of "proving the body male" (151). Early in this episode, we see Hood being beaten within an inch of his life. In hospital, a feminized presence in the form of the unmanly Wick watches him as we watch him slowly regain strength (Wick feeds him, offers compassion, and advises him to meet the albino's demands to avoid more combat, which is to say he should assimilate into the prison's 'civilization').

When Hood is in solitary confinement, he restores his male body to strength and becomes even stronger in the process. Masculinity is here strongly tied to male physicality. How he ended in solitary confinement is interesting as well. The gay

albino's "main bitch" is a young, good-looking, former football player, who was sent to prison for killing someone in a traffic accident. Hood suggests that they fight the albino together, which the young man refuses (being the 'president's first man' probably has some advantages in such an environment). As a way to get into solitary confinement and by the same time as a means for punishing the boy's lack of heterosexual solidarity, Hood slices his face open.

The final showdown is interesting insofar as to how Hood emerges victorious. Fully recuperated in solitary confinement, Hood is approached by the gay albino. Hood has to kneel down and – as previously announced – has to ask for *it*. The representational pattern in

*Figure 40 Punishing the lack of heterosexual solidarity (*Banshee*, S01E06).*

terms of bodily display with regard to Hood and the albino occupying the same frame is indicative of the gender binary as well. Even though the albino is the prison's hegemonic male, as a gay man he is never seen with a shirt on and completely undresses twice, whereas the heterosexual prison population – including Hood – are all completely dressed at all times. This representational strategy is a means to two ends: first, it establishes the albino as musclebound threat, which means that the exhibition of his body serves this episode's dramaturgy by raising the obvious question: how is Hood going to overcome this threat?

Second, even though no male genitals are depicted, we get an all-around, front to back view of the gay man, who almost appears like a sculpture. In terms of representation, the male body is treated similarly as a female body: the albino, who has no backstory beyond being a gay, muscular albino, is completely objectified. Yet, this objectification has nothing to do with a desire for that body: this man seems to call for objectification by constantly undressing himself. Other than being constructed as a freak to be stared at, this man's willing objectification – his lust to be desired, to be asked for "it" – is suggested as being unmanly and will be his undoing. The heterosexual matrix would not allow it any other way. Consequently, holding a knife in close proximity to his own penis turns out to be a bad decision by the albino. Hood is able to at least partially cut off the man's penis and to take hold of the knife. He continually stabs him in order to weaken him. The fight, however, is far from over. At some point Hood

blinds the gay man, then chokes him until he loses consciousness and eventually smashes his head (this death seems not to influence the amount of time Hood has to serve in prison). All of this happens while a crowd of inmates watches on. David triumphed over Goliath and earned the respect of the other men: "men's violence against other men is one of the chief means through which patriarchal society simultaneously expresses and discharges the attraction of men to other men" (Kaufman, 20).

The representational pattern that takes the hero from objectification (figured through the homosexual's demands), through masochism to empowerment "is such a staple of action movies and Westerns in general that it can readily be called the orthodox structuring code for those movies" (Smith, 81). This three-stage rite of passage is, in order to counter the erotization of the male body, usually encountered in connection with homosexual/homosexualized villains:

> the two-stage exhibitionist/masochistic process must always be followed by a narrative revindication of the phallic law and by the hero's accession to the paternal and patronizing function of the third stage of the orthodox action-movie codes [...], many of these movies accompany the pleasure/'unquiet pleasure' that they establish with a quite marked antihomosexual sentiment – which is to suggest that the masochistic moment is often crucially antihomosexual in its significance (ibid., 83-84).

If we take into consideration the crisis of masculinity discourse, the violent acts become laden with symbolic significance: by taking away the bodily manifestation of the phallus, Hood strips the gay man of his maleness and in a world in which masculinity is so much figured through the body, this man's claims to hegemonic masculinity disappear with it. This suggests the oxymoronic gay phallus both symbolically and physiologically is an oppressive force bent on disenfranchising the straight white male. Furthermore, by taking away his sight, Hood takes away the objectifying gaze of this man. Both sight and genitalia work in tandem here, not only in terms of arousal, but also in terms of oppressive forces as the means through which Hood would turn into an object to be "owned." To be looked at and to be gazed at are different things (as evidenced by the way the camera prefers to gaze upon the *female* body). The latter suspends claims to subjectivity and makes the gazed upon a passive object.

The penis is an instrument of physical subjugation here: Hood has to go on his knees and is asked to service the homosexual's genitals. In his conception of masculinity, performing this act would have shattered his sense of self, which is also his sense of maleness. Paradoxically, this constellation adopts the language of feminism and other oppressed minority groups by turning the formerly oppressed (a gay man) into a

victimizer in order for the straight white male to re-emerge from under this victimization. However, against all odds, Hood defeats this threat and empowers himself since, as Fintan Walsh points out in *Male Trouble,* the "willingness to repeatedly risk his safety and endure pain [..] secures [a man's] position as the dominant male" (168). This implies a degree of masochism. David Savran in a book fittingly titled *Taking It Like a Man* (1998) looks at (sado-)masochism as a way to claim/prove maleness. The mechanism involved here is strikingly similar to what Carrol, Robinson and Sisco King describe:

> the masochistic fantasmatic [...] allows the white male subject to take up the position of victim, to feminize and/or blacken himself fantasmatically, and to disavow the homosexual cathexes that are crucial to the process of (patriarchal) cultural reproduction, all the while asserting his unimpeachable virility (Savran, 33).

Whereas Kaja Silverman sees masochism as forming a deviant masculinity that challenges the dominant fiction, Savran argues that it "functions precisely as a kind of decoy and that the cultural texts constructing masochistic masculinities characteristically conclude with an almost magical restitution of phallic power" (37). In Paul Smith's essay "Eastwood Bound", it is even submitted that male masochism has normative qualities: "the masochistic moment is *temporary*, a kind of trial, a rite of passage that we men know we have to go through" (96).

In Savran's investigation of 1980s Hollywood cinema with films such as the initial *Rambo* trilogy (1982, 1985, 1988), he maintains that "these heroes remonstrate against a culture made uneasy by traditional machismo by proclaiming themselves victims, by turning violence upon themselves and so demonstrating their implacable toughness, their ability to savor their self-inflicted wounds" (207). Similar strategies can be observed in *Banshee*: the numerous wounds Hood suffers (through external and internal violence) become his triumph, a testament to his masculinity. Like in the other series discussed here, the emergence of his masculinity is always based on some kind of victimization, only this time there is also an added sexual connotation. When deflecting the albino's homosexual desire for Hood's subjugation, a three-stage rite of passage to hegemonic masculinity can be observed: Hood nearly lost his life, had to recuperate, strengthen/torture himself and then risk his body again to overcome the threat.

When Hood chooses to fight Mr. Sanchez in S01E03, he has to endure verbal abuse by the impressively muscular black man who is – as a prize fighter – incredibly proficient in the art of violence. When Mr. Sanchez brutalizes a white woman he has sex with during a cocaine binge (it is consensual in the beginning but turns into rape), Hood

is faced with a dilemma. His duty as a sheriff calls for the arrest of this man. Kai Proctor, who paid for the fight to be held at the Indian casino in a development deal he has with them, urges Hood to postpone the arrest until after the fight – for the (financial) good of the community (as in *HoW* capital overrides the law). As Mr. Sanchez, however, continues to verbally abuse Hood and the woman he has beaten/raped, Hood settles the issue in a fist fight that essentially ends the career of the professional fighter.

Why is he taking this course of action? Now a representative of the law, he could simply arrest the man and send him to prison without risking his body. Hood, however, chooses to do the masochistic thing since all odds are against him winning this fight. Through his violence he does both, the "right" thing by punishing the mutilation of a white woman by a black man – this way attesting to the frontier-related belief that "an act of violence can sort things out" (Dyer, 34) – while proving his superior masculinity through the excessive wounding of his body. Moreover, Hood uses a technique he "learnt" from the albino to break Sanchez's wrist, which can be read as another indication of how white masculinity uses the "language" of the victimized to reclaim privilege.

Banshee's lead is like *HoW*'s Cullen Bohannon a traumatized male and S01E06 is the most traumatic episode, both in Hood's life and within the first season – and given its drastic images quite possibly for the viewer as well. Wick, the man who nursed Hood through injury in prison, turns up unexpectedly in Banshee. This triggers a series of flashbacks to Hood's confrontation with the albino. The flashbacks are presented in black and white, are ultra-violent (see above) and very disturbing in their atmosphere and explicitness. His encounter with the albino – the threat of sexual assault and possibly a slow and violent death – terrorized this man. All of this is unspeakable and thus next to nothing of this period is told through spoken words, but represented through disturbing images of violence. S01E06 is however not the only episode that contains flashbacks.

The use of flashbacks is one of the features of this narrative. As the series opens with Hood's release from prison – his lack of a name and the subsequent identity theft testify to dissociation of identity through a traumatic past that ended with him walking out of prison – calls for flashbacks to explain this character's past. We often see him waking up sweaty lying next to his bed. The arrangement of flashbacks in S01E06 is less disorienting than in other episodes. Disorienting here refers to the fact that they are easily classified as representing Hood's time in prison whereas other flashbacks

scattered throughout the whole season form a puzzle that only begins to cohere in later episodes. Often, the flashbacks are triggered by something Hood lives through in the present, which means that he is "working through" his traumatic experience by integrating them into the larger story of his life and self. This integration into one's life story is also visible in Hood's adaptation of the albino's fighting technique: he turns something he more or less experienced passively (his broken wrist) into something he actively does: breaking someone's wrist. Through this repetition, he achieves mastery (and with it hegemonic masculinity) and gradually overcomes trauma. The life and the identity taken from him is reassembled during the course of the first season: "only when the events of the past can be imagined not only to have consequences for the present but to live on in the present that they can become part of our experience and can testify who we are" (Walter B. Michaels qtd. in: Vickroy 3).

Read in reference to trauma, the results are strikingly similar to the crisis of masculinity discourse. The pattern takes a disenfranchised, wounded white male towards hegemony. The adaptation of a language of victimization characteristic of the crisis discourse aligns the male with the position of females in a patriarchally structured society and so does trauma. All of this is achieved through the undeniable male body that endures and empowers the male through acts of violence and sexual conquest (Anastasia/Carrie simply cannot withstand the sexual energy originating from Hood). Whereas *HoW* is uneasy about the violence that permeates the frontier and that paradoxically both prevents and enables Bohannon's path towards redemption, Hood's violence is in fact regenerative for his masculinity, much like post-9/11 political actions that were perceived as a hyper-masculine reaction in face of "castrating" events (see Sisco King, 130). His altercation with the homosexual albino is the most pronounced example of this in *Banshee*.

Another facet to be taken from this is the acknowledgment that trauma should not be understood as something solely brought about by external forces that suddenly violate the self: trauma does not happen in a vacuum. The traumatized can easily turn into traumatizers and often it is impossible to tell who threw the first stone. Moreover, trauma not only can actively be administered against others, but also against oneself. Achieving/maintaining masculinity itself is a traumatic experience and as such is necessarily a traumatic "event" both experienced passively (role expectations) and actively (the desire to fulfill these expectations) (see Fox & Pease, 25). The latter observation, as the Paul Smith quotation above already indicates, leads back to the

masochist trajectory.

Savran writes that "the masochist [...] suffers from a disturbance of the ego in which he alternates between feeling omnipotent and impotent, masculinized and feminized, phallicized and castrated" (75). These feelings of impotence (the very word sends shock waves through any male) surface in various aspects and

Figure 41 The Christ-like wounded male body in Banshee *(S01E06).*

paradoxically are the source for Hood's omnipotency. When he is incarcerated, he obviously feels impotent with regard to the challenge the albino represents (not to mention the loss of control the prison already signifies). When he arrives in Banshee to reconnect with his former partner/lover Anastasia/Carrie, he feels impotent because he cannot have her back since she now is a presumably happily married realtor with children (her teenage daughter turns out to be Hood's). Neither has he access to the diamonds he stole and for which he went to prison. In short, he is a victim and his love for a woman has a lot to do with it (he went to prison for her expecting she would wait for him with the diamonds).

However, as the narrative's master signifier, he is paradoxically often both impotent and omnipotent, which is to say that his presence within the narrative also determines the actions of the characters connected to him. The impotence he faces with regard to Anastasia/Carrie is also a source of power he holds over her. She still fantasizes about having sex with him and eventually they reconnect on that level. Furthermore, it is Hood's reappearance that eventually exposes Carrie as Anastasia when her father returns to kill them both and retrieve his diamonds. Even though Hood is nothing but a source of trouble for those connected to him (if not a threat to their very survival), his sheer charisma appears to do the trick for him. When he is about to lose his life in the first season's final episode, it is a band reminiscent of *HoW*'s "frontier rainbow" comprised of Anastasia/Carrie, the black ex-con Sugar and the transvestite Job who come to his rescue without any rational reason to do so. Those groups suppressed by white male privilege somehow feel obligated to the oppressor. Hood, of course, is never presented as a misogynist, racist or homophobe. The narrative to a certain degree does this for him: if it had not been for Anastasia/Carrie, he would not have gone to prison, her

refusal to give up her new identity as Carrie is a source of pain for him. Furthermore, representations of homosexual men bear negative connotations as with the monstrous albino. The transvestite Job is, reminiscent of *TWD*'s Glenn, rather an Asian fix-it man instead of a complex person with an identity beyond cross-dressing, curse language and his/her abilities as a hacker used to Hood's benefit: s/he is a comedic sidekick, a clown without sexuality. These ethnic/sexual minorities only exist within the narrative as far as their usefulness to Hood is concerned: neither Sugar nor Job (notice how their names refer to their ethnicity in a stereotypical way) are fully developed characters.

The development of Hood as a character works, as we have seen, through violent encounters. Since little is known about his previous life, he is mostly defined by the way his body performs and endures. We are introduced to him as a man with no name and the name he assumes is a fraud (as well as an indication of his status as an avenger of the disenfranchised, Robin Hood): what emerges, it seems, is a universal masculinity made possible through "the therapeutic power of the male wound" (Robinson, 131) and, to use Slotkin's terminology once more, regenerated through violence. His official identity as sheriff Lucas Hood is a decoy, an artificial construction that covers the *real man* beneath:

> This image of a simmering male body whose psychophysical energies are always circulating and recirculating in an effort to avoid both destruction and self-destruction constructs a masculinity that embraces pain as a manly credential even as it threatens to release those natural male energies that cause pain to others. Men *must* restrain their dangerous impulses, but men *cannot* restrain them; men *must* release their blocked emotions, but men *cannot* release them. It is in the space between the 'must' and the 'cannot' that the physically and psychically wounded man emerges, *not* as a pathological, or even 'failed' man, but as the norm of a masculinity that can only attempt to be 'healthy'" (ibid., 152).

Lucas Hood is not the only man in *Banshee* who occupies a space of liminality. In the Amish-cum-gangster Kai Proctor we find another man who is beyond the law but whose intentions concerning his community are not thoroughly bad. As a powerful man prone to violence, much of the community's economy seems to originate from/run through him. Moreover, towards the end of the first season, he helps Lucas Hood in defeating Mr. Rabbit's henchmen. He also takes in his niece Rebecca (Lili Simmons) after she is, just like her uncle, shunned by the Amish community.

The combination of Lucas Hood and Kai Proctor seems to work similarly like that of Bohannon/Durant and Bullock/Swearengen. Neither one of these pairs can be considered friends, yet they have to work together in their respective narrative worlds to achieve their goals (and often for the benefit of the community). Deals with the devil seem to be the prerequisite to success these days. In *Banshee*, the main character's past

remains enigmatic for the most part (which contributes to his transcendental masculinity), yet we learn some things about Proctor's past. Liminality not only applies to his status as a legal business man who uses extra-legal means, but also to his identity: he used to be an Amish and he has not fully overcome the trauma of being rigorously shunned. Again, a mechanism of impotence and omnipotence emerges: impotent in the regard that it is of course impossible for him to be reintegrated into his family of origin; omnipotence through the power he could only accumulate because he was shunned. After his niece has to leave the Amish community, he confronts his father:

> **Proctor, Sr.**: "[...] we did not reject her. You should know as anyone. It was she who rejected our ways just as you did. [...] You are a criminal and a trespasser [...]"
> **Kai Proctor**: "Be careful, father. I have swallowed your insults for years. But don't mistake my tolerance for weakness. You all live here because I choose to allow it. Not god, it's me, your 'dead son.' *I* allow it! And if I decide I don't want you here anymore, there is no god that'll be able to protect you from me. I'll show you all what it feels like to be cast out!" (S01E08).

On a psychological level, Kai Proctor is reminiscent of Walter-cum-Heisenberg. His father, of course, is not necessarily weak considering his being a respected man in a patriarchally structured community such as the Amish. Yet, within the larger context of the USA, an Amish man virtually holds no power (which is ironic given the fact they are the closest thing to Jefferson's idealized yeoman). This impotence with regard to the system that surrounds them is overcome by Kai Proctor's becoming a successful business man in whom the lines between neoliberalism and criminal activity are again thoroughly blurred. The impotence he must feel with regard to the family that cast him out is counter-balanced by the omnipotence he has acquired. Since he holds the reigns of this area's economy, he has enough power to influence the future of his former community of origin. As observed throughout this project, male violence originates from a feeling/fear of impotence. Furthermore, since Kai Procter has liberated himself from the law of the father, he has become his own master. Neither legal institutions nor his family can harm him in any way (two indictments against him fall apart in the first season alone). Literally, he is a self-made man. To what effect the psychologization of this character will eventually amount is hard to predict, as it only happens late in the series's only season thus far (a second season will air in 2014).

The pairing of a series's male lead with a strikingly similar antagonist is also apparent in *Justified*'s pairing of Deputy U.S. Marshal Raylan Givens (Timothy Olyphant) with the career criminal Boyd Crowder (Walton Goggins). Developed from Elmore Leonard's short story "Fire in the Hole" by Graham Yost and described as "Kentucky Western"

(Rosenberg 2011, n. pag.), this series returns to cowboy masculinity in a less serious manner than the other series analyzed so far. Marshal Givens is defined by his drawl, a quick draw and his Stetson. Olyphant has starred as a lawman before in the Western *Deadwood*. For *Justified*, he seems to contemporarize his previous performance in a way comparable to Eastwood's urban cowboy Dirty Harry in the film series of the same title. Moreover, Givens's youth was less than ideal. His father is an abusive career criminal and former war veteran suffering from PTSD. His mother passed away when he was a boy.

In his rural Kentucky environment, Marshal Givens is an oddity and the series self-reflexively plays with this: antagonists often mockingly remark on his cowboy mannerisms and he often faces criticism at his job for his go-it-alone mentality that more often than not ends with his antagonists in body bags. The first scene of *Justified* testifies to this. At this time working in Miami, he meets a gangster whom he has given a 24 hour deadline to leave town or else he will shoot him. This tense scene takes place in a café and takes the classic Western stand-off into a metropolis. Both men are armed, the gangster draws first, but Givens draws faster and kills him. This pattern repeats itself throughout the series and is the reason why Givens has to transfer from Miami to his home in Harlan County, Kentucky. Obviously, this man grew up idolizing the Western heroes and has mastered their performance and never dares to stray far from it.

As already mentioned, Givens is a continuation of Timothy Olyphant's performance as Sheriff Bullock in *Deadwood*. Both characters are representatives of the law, are quick to draw and despite their urge to be good men can hardly mask and contain the sheer anger inside of them. With the exception of *Falling Skies*' Tom Mason, all series discussed here construct their leading men and seem to suggest that men in general – good intentions or not – have an almost impossible-to-contain desire for violence within them. This is reminiscent of Robinson's statement quoted above: "Men must restrain their dangerous impulses, but men cannot restrain them; men must release their blocked emotions, but men cannot release them" (152). This harsh regiment necessarily makes these men rugged individuals. Being connected to such men can only lead to pain. One of Givens's many former lovers thus describes him the following way: "he's got the badge and the drawl and the whole squinty sexy thing and there was a time and I would've run right to him, done the whole marry-go-round. Now I see that for what it is and him for who he is. That man's an emotional disaster" (S04E07).

His antagonist Crowder brings to his attention that they are actually very similar:

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"You know what I'm wondering is what do you tell yourself at night when you lay your head down that allows you when you wake up in the morning pretending that you're not the bad guy?" (S04E13). They are, eventually, both murderers. Strikingly, both have their justification for killing people: Givens often provokes his antagonists to draw on him instead of doing everything in his power to prevent any violence so that he can simply arrest them. Since he puts the villains in positions in which they draw on him, he is always justified in shooting them (even though one might wonder why – given his superior aim – he not simply disables them).

Crowder, too, finds reasons for his criminal activities and he proves incredibly flexible in his endeavors. He begins the series as a white supremacist and thus justifies his acts with ideology, then he becomes a reborn Christian and uses religion as justification and finally the well-being of his fiancé Ava (Joelle Carter). Considerations such as these lend complexity to these characters. Yet, even though Givens is not very popular among his peers, the fact that his actions are legally justified and that the men he kills are never portrayed in a way that would have the viewer empathize with them or regret their violent deaths, *Justified* does not do much to deconstruct the cowboy hero myth, which is why showrunner Graham Yost describes Givens as "a kind of no-nonsense hero: he's got some stuff in his past, he shoots people and gets into trouble. But he's not – as we're getting a lot on TV these days – a tortured anti-hero. He's a hero. He walks the walk" (qtd. in: S. Hughes, n. pag.).

Givens then is a male fantasy (his own even) and although this seems to be contradicted in the above-cited remarks of his former lover, it is actually re-affirmed: such a man is not necessarily marriage material. Marriage/domestication, of course, would spoil the viewers' pleasure of watching his performance of masculinity that features shoot-outs, his good looks and his dry wit – a mix of characteristics appealing to men and women alike.[150] Even though he comes across "as an entitled, exploitative son of a bitch [...] he's just so much fun to watch as a laid back man of action, with failings that are mainly petty and personal. Ultimately, Raylan's one of the good guys" (Noel Murray, n. pag.). Apart from considerations of the respective cultural context that produces these representations and to which they communicate, this brand of masculinity is entertaining, which is surely one of the reasons why it has been

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150 The matter of looks is also where *BrBa* subverts the representation of Western masculinity – the fact that his development towards an idealized type of masculinity is in fact not ideal but troublesome surfaces in his lack of physical beauty: Cranston's middle-aged, physically weak and wrinkled Walter White has nothing to win in a male beauty contest against such good bad men like Mount's Bohannon (*HoW*), Reddus's Daryl Dixon (*TWD*) or Olyphant's Givens.

circulating in the culture and beyond for such a long time now. This also implies that it will continue to take its hold on what boys imagine real men to be like.

What is more, we are allowed to enjoy this performance as long as we keep our distance – neither of the men discussed thus far is the type with whom one might like to have a drink. Yet, they can be trusted to do what is necessary, which is why so many presidents have continually and successfully appealed to this type of masculinity. Even though Givens is not really a sympathetic man (in any case a subjective assessment), we can rely on him doing the right thing eventually. That this often involves the use of force that at the same time is a source of pleasure in the viewer testifies to the Darwinian impulses Eastwood's *Unforgiven* was unable to overcome before (see above). His performances as the Man with No Name arguably thrived on this pleasure. Considering the rugged American masculinity of Hood and Givens, we may infer that these representations contribute to a sense of maleness in those people who watch them perform their male bodies.

To briefly return to the aspect of liminality, there are two things that need further mentioning. It has already been pointed out that Givens walks a thin line regarding the legal status of his actions (as visible in his similarity with Crowder). In *Justified*'s fourth season, we see him stray further from his official position as he becomes a part-time bounty hunter (in cooperation with the lover quoted above). Winona Hawkins (Natalie Zea), his ex-wife, is pregnant with his child and in order to provide for the financial security of mother and child, he engages in this additionally risky job (both risky for his official job and risky for his health). Their relationship is rather stereotypical: she divorced him for his anger management problems and in fear of becoming a widow – which means that she was unable to "castrate" him towards a more civil life. If she had been (the way Skyler in *BrBa* is perceived), viewers could not enjoy his performance as much as they do with him being single. She is, however, also unable to completely let go of him and when Givens is shot in the series's third season, she rushes to his side and provides the female presence so necessary for the male Western hero to recuperate.

Apart from the classic gender binary, what is interesting here and what *Justified* has in common with many other series airing under the 'quality TV' banner, beginning with *The Sopranos*, is the suggestion that risk-taking and extra-legal measures have become standard means to manage the crisis of the American middle class, even though *Justified* is rather located in a working class milieu.[151] This of course does not mean that

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151Diedrich Diederichsen's book *The Sopranos* (2012) builds on the thesis that *The Sopranos* constructs criminality as coping mechanism for an eroding middle class.

crime is less prevalent – even though the stakes could be considered lower for people who already have very little to lose, crime in general is represented as the only way to overcome the growing gap between the rich and the poor, for getting one's piece of the pie. While *BrBa* and *Weeds* center their plots on this premise (and, as argued, expose it as the actions of self-centered individuals), it passes as a side note in *Justified* without further inquiry, which might lead to the question whether this has become the new normal.

The blurring of the lines between right and wrong with regard to economics has been integrated into *Justified*'s narrative as well. As already argued in *BrBa* and *Banshee*, business and crime seem indistinguishable. *Justified* adds the law to this equation in its fourth season. This season's plot resolves around a mystery that has not been solved for thirty years: a dead man fell out of the sky. As it turns out, this man had a significant amount of cocaine with him. This cocaine was used by Givens's and Crowder's fathers to get much of Harlan's economy going – money does not know right from wrong and extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. The punchline of the season four mystery plot is that the man bringing in the cocaine and throwing its carrier off a plane is Harlan's sheriff Shelby Parlow (a.k.a. Drew Thompson; played by Jim Beaver).

Sons of Anarchy is a different Western of sorts and while the men who largely make up this ultra-violent action drama could – given their experiences in the world – be very well traumatized, trauma rather surfaces in the form of bodily fractures experienced by the title giving motorcycle club's members and its many enemies largely located in the criminal underworld. Trauma, nevertheless, can somewhat be considered the main referent in the club's origin story. Originally, the club was founded by returning and disillusioned Vietnam war veterans. Instead of reintegrating into the society they supposedly defended abroad, they chose to form their own society, something that is beyond American civilization, but also in some way or another – so they claim – for the good of this civilization (their hometown Charming, California). The club/gang claims that they keep their hometown clean from drug traffickers and other threats to the common population while they themselves are engaged in actions that could be labeled "savage." In other words, the frontier understood as a concept separating wilderness from civilization, i.e. a meeting point of the two, can be found in this series as well. The main characters, of course, do not ride on horseback, but on their motorcycles. They also represent rugged masculinity as they prefer actions over words while their 'old ladies'

are, on the surface, at home waiting on their return from whatever violent endeavor they are currently engaged in. Behind the scenes, however, they, too, are pulling strings with the little public power they possess in the club's structure: "The contributions of women [...] especially the matriarchal figures of Gemma and Tara [...] have been vital to the club's existence and efficient functioning [...] they use their power in the private sphere to influence the public sphere and effect great change, albeit with little public recognition for their efforts" (Kolb, 178).

It would be tiring to list all the things happening on this show – a bone fracture is the least what happens when violence is at play. People get shot, drowned, skinned, burned, dismembered, and raped. This is to say that masculinity here is strongly linked to the male body's capability to endure and inflict pain, to recuperate and to see to it that enemies do not. Moreover, the club and its rules constitute the code that every member has to abide by.

Even though violence takes up a big part of the narrative, it is also interested in individual relationships, most notably that of fathers and sons. Of interest is of course the relationship the male main character Jax Teller (Charlie Hunnam) has to his deceased father – once the club's founding member and president – and his surrogate father Clay (Ron Perlman). Teller Senior has left a diary behind. In his writing, he details his dissatisfaction with the club's direction. This diary exerts great influence on Jax and, upon discovering that Clay was involved in the untimely death of his biological father, alienates him from his stepfather, who is now in charge of the club. Little has remained from the club's utopian founding ideas. Although the club indeed lives by its own rules, these rules have nevertheless been corrupted, most notably by Clay. This leads to Jax proclaiming that he is "tired of being crushed under the weight of greedy men who believe in nothing" (S05E11). Hence he takes it upon himself to bring the club back to the lost ideals of his biological father. This, however, involves a tremendous amount of violence. Here, the series seems interested in investigating not only male emancipation from the father generation, but also in male responsibility. Jax wants to take on responsibility, not only for himself, but also for the club and his family. His own ideas about performing manhood and the environment into which these were born, however, make this a very difficult task that at times is hard to differentiate from the behavior his antagonist Clay exhibits.

The "Sons" (this is how they refer to themselves) make money by trafficking guns they buy from the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which means they are dependent on

large-scale foreign capital. This and the various entanglements with other gangs lead to dissatisfaction among individual group members and to a lot of violence. What is interesting about this is that one might think that this is an extremely profitable business. Yet none of the group's members seems to be rich. There are hardly any distinctions through clothing as all wear their club-branded motorcycle clothing. Neither their houses nor anything about them looks like money. Thus both in demeanor, clothing and housing, they at least could be associated with the working class – and the incessant country and alt rock soundtrack underscores this. Since for the most part of the show the viewer is interpellated with the club's point of view, it is hard to get an outside view of the club other than that of law enforcement. But given scenes in which an old lady screams at and fights police officers, associating the club members with white trash does not seem like a stretch.

Even though showrunner Kurt Sutter describes his creation as "an adrenalized soap opera, [..] bloody pulp fiction with highly complex characters" (qtd. in: Sepinwall, p. 375), there are some thematic chords that indicate a higher ambition. For one, the series's set-up, at least in early seasons, follows Shakespeare's *MacBeth*. As already mentioned, Jax Teller, influenced by his father's diary, wants to get away from the gun trade and all the violence that comes with it. As it turns out, his father was murdered by Jax Teller's stepfather Clay. His mother, Gemma (Katy Segal), was also involved in the father's death and is a typical Lady MacBeth as she manipulates the men in her life. Like the Sons, she, too, is ruthless – yet her ruthlessness is not aimed at financial gain, but about having a strong influence on the men in her life, most notably Jax, who figures as MacBeth in this constellation. In this way she is not represented as doing the civilization work associated with women in the traditional sense. She has no interest in integrating anybody into legal society – yet she tries her best to keep the club's 'civil order' intact, which means policing the behavior of other women affiliated with the club and being some sort of mother figure to male club members. What is more, she and Jax have an Oedipal relationship as Jax wants his stepfather Clay gone and is overtly influenced by his mother, who nevertheless defines her power through her relationships with men: she was married to the first president of the club, then married his murderer and successor and is mother to the third president (Clay is replaced by Jax in the fifth season).

Even though a motorcycle club engaged in gun trafficking is largely a male affair, *Son of Anarchy*'s portrayal of women has received positive criticism despite the fact that the many women roaming the club's milieu are objectified (in later seasons the club is

involved in the porn industry). This has a lot to do with the complex female characters Gemma and Tara:

> The foremost maternal archetype in Western culture has long been the Virgin Mary, [...] Gemma may be a mother on a mission [...] but she's no Virgin Mary. *Sons of Anarchy* does a commendable job of avoiding the 'virgin-whore' dichotomy that has shaped many of our ideas about femininity and motherhood. Gemma is a vivacious woman who desires sex – one episode even deals with her battling vaginal dryness after menopause – but that isn't treated as something that in any way compromises her maternal role (Kolb, 180).

Alyssa Rosenberg, too, finds that even though *Sons of Anarchy* "represents the extreme of FX's exploration of contemporary masculinity [...] [it] also features some of the most interesting female characters and relationships between women of the anti-hero television age" (2012, n. pag.). Myles McNutt writes that the show garners high ratings among women and states that it is "a messy, chaotic show with a range of appeals, most easily understood as a masculine drama but containing elements that have clearly been embraced by women in the series' later seasons" (n. pag.). There is, however, also dissent to these opinions being voiced. Valerie Tejeda for example calls *Sons of Anarchy* "the most sexist show on television" because the women in this show "are basically afterthoughts – or evil, back-stabbing villains" (n. pag.). Nevertheless, in this particular instance, it seems that the critic is taking the actions portrayed on screen at face value – everyone, including the men, on this show is somehow evil and/or back-stabbing. This might actually be one of the show's main attractions: as said, this is an extremely violent soap opera.

Sons of Anarchy is also in its conception of society kindred to the Western. The government and its institutions are either corrupt or ineffective. This is already evidenced in the fact that Charming is "clean" because the Sons of Anarchy protect it from drug-trafficking gangs and not because of the town's police (which is, at least in its first seasons, in the club's pockets anyway). Moreover, the law is, given that the narrative centers on an outlaw male character's perspective, automatically villainous. If it is not weak or corrupt, it is a danger to the narrative world – viewers must root against law enforcement as there would obviously be no *Sons of Anarchy* without the Sons of Anarchy.

Equally notable in that regard is how the club's governance, albeit corrupt and self-centered with regard to Clay, is structured. The Sons of Anarchy club resembles the USA or early, republican visions thereof. There are multiple chapters, for the most part situated in the regional West of the US, that ride under the banner of Sons of Anarchy. This, then, functions like "the state." This state, however, does not have a centralized

government. Each individual chapter is largely autonomous in terms of what business they conduct. In cases of emergency or when other principal matters are concerned, the chapters meet to discuss the matters at hand and vote on it. The individual chapters are lead by a president who has a vice president at his side. The rest of the chapter is comprised of regular members and prospects. Serious issues, such as membership matters (allowing a prospect to become a member or to judge a member that has betrayed the club) or big business decisions, are discussed at "the table," voted on, and resolved with a judge's gavel. This, obviously, represents an institutionalized structure that furthermore is also hierarchically organized. The 'anarchy', therefore, only works in relation/opposition to the state.

Moreover, the model of masculinity these men abide by calls for hegemonic struggles and the hegemon, Clay, for the most part, is occupied with preserving and enhancing his power. He does so successfully until Jax's Oedipus complex becomes his undoing. By the end of the fifth season, Jax has claimed the club's throne. In the final moments of that episode we see him with his mother Gemma, not his wife, by his side. While Jax is this show's main character, it could be argued that it is actually Gemma from whose actions much of this narrative takes its directions. Not only was she involved in Teller Senior's death, she also "orchestrated the club from its beginning, having brought the club to her hometown of Charming in the first place" (Kolb, 179).

Opposition to the club's moral universe stems from Tara (Maggie Siff), Jax's wife and mother to his sons. An educated woman, she works at the local hospital as a talented surgeon. As a doctor, she steps in whenever a man is hurt. Moreover, her morals differ from that of the club's microcosm and since it is often talked about that she and Jax leave Charming behind, she is a civilizing figure (though with little success) and the potentially redeeming woman at Jax's side. Both went to high school together and reconnected after her return from college. Even though her journey began with her return to Charming, she has been desperate to get out ever since (yet only with the love of her life). By season six, her career is due to a serious wrist injury in jeopardy. Moreover, she is charged with complicity in murder. Her only way out, at least from persecution, is giving up her man and his club to the law. What matters here is that she is a civilizing voice who supports Jax in his wish to change the club's direction. Yet it is apparent that the homosocial bond between the men is more important to him than his wife. Considering how gender is constructed here, it seems implausible that he would give up his position of power to live the life of an unskilled worker with a woman who

has a significantly higher income. This is also evidenced by the fact that even though Jax despises the lethal violence that surrounds him, he is more concerned with the threat the gun trade poses to the club's survival – both the IRA and the FBI are threatening to the club's existence. Moreover, Jax himself is an extremely violent man who has killed dozens of people. Clearly, this is not a househusband – he could not see himself as a man anymore. This leaves women either as hardly visible "old ladies" waiting at home, manipulators or victims.

There is, of course, a difference between what is shown and how this might be understood. *Sons of Anarchy* surely is not making a case for more guns in America or is an advocate of violence. Yet it represents violence as entertainment. As the seasons progress, its representations become ever more extreme. S06E01 features a school shooting with one of the guns trafficked by the club. While in instances as such the show transmits that the environment in which the club lives is toxic and leads to decay, the shooting is hardly referenced in succeeding episodes and only figures as another threat to the club and less as the tragedy it actually signifies. As such, the shooting inhabits a rather awkward position: do fans of the show really want the shooting to have (possibly series-ending) ramifications for the club? Is the club vowing to exit the gun trade because guns are destructive to a society, or because they have become bad business and a threat to the club's existence? Indicative in this regard is the fictional hometown's name. These men are entertaining to watch. They do not hit women – the prostitutes in their universe are glad to have them as their protection – the oppressor figures as protector –, neither are these men racists (even though they prefer not to mingle). Apart from the violence, they are indeed quite charming and have love for their hometown. The entertainment one gets out of these representations of violent men, however, solely rests on representations of outmoded gender conceptions and while it brings the horror of violence to the home or mobile screen – it does so without giving up on identification with the club. As such, the series seems to critique a world that it also participates in producing. This is evidenced by the fact that it turns the sole sane person the narrative world has to offer – Tara – into our leading man's antagonist. With this, Tara finds herself in a similar position as Skyler on *BrBa*. Even though she is a strong, complex female character, it seems as if one of her main tasks is to spoil the anti-hero's fun.

Trauma and hyper-masculine reactions against traumatic events and the feelings of

impotence accompanying them abound on cable TV. The American nation as wounded has surfaced after the Civil War, Vietnam and 9/11. Even though only two of these events are addressed directly in the series discussed in this chapter, the reemergence of rugged American masculinity on television in this day and age is attributable to the cultural climate: for once, there is the decades-old but still popular crisis of masculinity discourse that bemoans a loss of patriarchal privilege and positions the straight white male as a victim of the progress achieved by women and ethnic as well as sexual minorities. These fears of emasculation are amplified by the 9/11 trauma discourse.

This return of the rugged American male has several implications – it depends on where one chooses to look: they can be interpreted as some kind of surrogate masculinity for the men at home watching these performances. Since all of these men are engaged in illegal activities or run the risk of becoming criminals, these constructions of masculinity are also an articulation of loss on an economic scale. The straight white male as the unmarked human universal then stands in to speak on behalf of all (Anglo-American middle class members, i.e. the target audience) about a corrupt economic system that favors an already established elite, an elite that is furthermore beyond the law (Durant in *HoW*, Mr. Rabbit and Proctor in *Banshee*). These men also symbolize a wish to return to simpler forms of frontier justice as all of these men are in one way or the other affiliated with "the law." With the latter, all of them appeal to the mythic cowboy hero the same way that George W. Bush did. This is not only appealing to men who want to share in on the masculinity performed by others, but also to the whole nation "emasculated" on 9/11 and during the economic downturn beginning in 2007. It speaks to an anxiety of America entering a post-empire period. Cullen Bohannon or Lucas Hood do their best to counter such notions. With this, these series do what Hollywood cinema has been doing for a long time:

> While masculinist fantasies of American resilience and redemption must be constantly reinscribed, they must also be carefully, even delicately, negotiated, especially when they are imperiled or called into question. When spoken too plainly, such fictions of American buoyancy can be [...] written off as narcissistic jingoism or outdated machismo. When quietly articulated within an allegorical register, these fantasies may create an identificatory paradigm that invites viewers to imagine themselves as part of an idealized American community. Although these films can never actually undo or repair the perceived wounds of the past, their performances of sacrificial redemption imagine the nation as rising, phoenix-like, from its own ashes and encourage audiences to share in this mythic triumphalism. Allegories turn back time, inviting new understandings of American experiences of terror and loss and providing a fictional cure, or a way to move on, for a wounded collective (Sisco King, 164-165).

All of these observations are eventually sides to the same coin: what we really see in these series is that through the language of wounding, the straight white male – at least

on basic cable channels like AMX and FX – remains hegemonic. It matters little that most of them are presented as troubled or morally dubious. Eventually, they will do the right thing. Regardless of how these fictional creations act within their narrative universes: all of these narratives hinge on what a man does. However troubled it might be: the performance of masculinity is very much the all-determining narrative ingredient in these shows. For the most part, these performances of white masculinity do not differ from earlier representations thereof – white masculinity still is a masculinity upon which others depend, a masculinity that is necessary for the benefit of all. Hence, even though patriarchy may be presented as troubled, it is alive and ready to lash out.

6. Conclusion: Parting Shots

> "World needs bad men to keep the other bad men from the door"
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> (*True Detective* S01E03).

In this project, I have sought to trace the construction of masculinity on popular cable drama series. These contemporary series, most of which are set in the present or a near future, make use of certain conventions of representing masculinity established in the Western genre and its antecedents. The Western reference works through stylistic choices with regard to visual language and soundtrack, through costume and props (cowboy hats, guns, men on horseback), through constructing frontier-like situations that seem to require a certain brand of masculinity as well as through traditional role assignments in which women are representatives of civilization while they mostly inhabit the periphery of the narrative and are absent from the main action. Like in countless Western movies before, men are compelled take action and are required to lead. While some series such as *TWD* and *HoW* are somewhat ambivalent about the men they create, series like *Falling Skies* or *Banshee* do not seem to have any real qualms about their leading men – Tom Mason in *Falling Skies* is a 'good guy' while *Banshee* takes special delight in its anti-hero's violent feats. *BrBa*, on the contrary, exposes the deeds of its angry white man as the misdeeds of a megalomanic narcissist – even though it refuses to completely doom Walter White in the series-concluding episode as he gets to save his former partner Jesse, repents to his wife and indeed manages to get his children the financial means to attend college.

Crisis plays an important part in these series and how they construct masculinity. Each series takes crises as a starting point, although for different purposes. In *HoW* it is the Civil War on a macro level and the death of the leading man's family on the individual level that are central to its plot. The worst crisis of all, the end of the world, is the context for the characters' struggles in *Falling Skies* and *TWD*. In *BrBa*, the relationship of crisis and masculinity is ever-shifting. Beginning with a crisis that many people can relate to in some way or the other, namely current economic crisis tendencies coupled with a very severe health crisis, which again is linked to the health care system, *BrBa* uses these crises as the backdrop for a character transformation that produces new crises.

Such crises have traumatic potential and as such, we see many of these fictional men

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stumbling through shattered lives trying to make themselves whole again by becoming what they always were – men. With these returns to an old model of masculinity, these series resonate within the contemporary cultural climate of the United States: the traumatizing and as such emasculating events of 9/11 and subsequent economic (recession) as well as social and political struggles (Katrina, health care, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, a deep division between Republicans and Democrats)[152] are worked through indirectly or addressed directly (the divided nation in *HoW*, the crisis of capitalism and health care in *BrBa*) in these televisual narratives. The reemergence of this old model of American masculinity can furthermore be linked to a real-life example such as George W. Bush, whose masculinity construction references the same lineage of representations as the series discussed here.

   The recourses to an older model of American masculinity cannot only be understood as expressions for dealing with contemporary crisis tendencies in the USA. As already mentioned throughout this project, most of the fictional men in these television series are conflicted. There is a high level of uneasiness accompanying them: the way *BrBa*'s Walter White is portrayed evokes both sympathy (especially in the first season) and antipathy (later seasons), *TWD*'s Rick is troubled by the decisions he has to make, but not all of them are presented to the viewer as 'right'. Neither *Justified*'s Givens nor *HoW*'s Bohannon are thoroughly likable characters – entertaining, yes, but ideal choices as the executioners of the law (sometimes they only execute their own laws), no, not necessarily. The fact that we encounter so many conflicted representations of cowboy masculinity may not only point to crisis tendencies per se, but also points towards rifts within American society with regard to responding to such perceived crises. After all, there is no 'authentic' masculinity that would be the answer to a 'real' crisis – both concepts are highly subjective and only make sense within the context of the culture that produces, qualifies and performs them. The dark underside of cowboy politics has been widely publicized (Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib, the 'drone war'), the reaction to 9/11 and fear of social inequality have divided America, a division that Barack Obama promised to overcome, which is something that resonates in the post-Civil War Western *HoW* especially.[153] The series analyzed in the project were not produced immediately after

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152See Edwards and King: "Bush found the widest partisan differences for any newly elected president in polling history. [...] In the 21-3 May 2004 Gallup poll, the differences between his approval among Republicans (89 per cent) and Democrats (12 per cent), was an astounding 77 percentage points! That gap of 70 points or higher has been common since Bush's fourth year in office" (3).
153During his presidential campaign, Obama asserted that "I don't want to pit red America against blue America. I want to be the president of the United States of America" (qtd. in; Goodwin, n. pag.).

9/11 when support for the Afghanistan War and Iraq War was relatively strong across the political spectrum, but only a few years afterwards when public opinion was diverging:

> For a substantial period following 9/11, the president was at historic highs in the polls, and there was a wide public consensus supporting his efforts to combat terrorism. Yet by the time of the Iraq war, the country was divided and this cleavage deepened as first chaos and then prolonged violence characterized the aftermath of the war. The expenditure of lives and treasure without signs of visible progress certainly contributed to the nation's polarization. More broadly, however, the Bush Administration's projection of a muscular foreign policy and its willingness to act without traditional allies raised concerns among a substantial segment of the public (Edwards & King, 6).

This rift in American society and political culture[154] surfaces in the men represented in these cable television dramas – hard decisions are to be made, but which is the right way to go? The men portrayed often struggle with the things they do, and so do the people affected by them. Often such anxieties are relieved because the polarization is inscribed in the male main characters these narratives produce – black and white appear blurred because they are faced with extreme situations. Often, however, these men inhabit the lighter spheres in the oft-mentioned shades of gray because their actions more often than not follow a moral code. Rick tortures and kills people, *but* only so he can protect his family; Bohannon also has killed many men, *but* mostly to avenge the death of his family or to protect himself or the transcontinental railroad; Marshal Givens shoots criminals, *but* only because these amoral criminals draw on him first. The significance of a moral code in violent men can also be observed in series that do not reference the Western, such as *Dexter* (2006 – 2013 on Showtime). In this series, the male main

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154Edwards and King write that the Bush presidency was a time of "extreme and unprecedented levels of polarization." They also establish a connection to the 1980s in his "ideologically driven agenda [that] depicts the war against terrorism in his speeches as an ideological struggle analogous to the Cold War." Furthermore, "[i]t seems reasonable to argue that Democratic opposition to Bush's domestic policies such as school standards and choice, medical savings accounts, partial privatization of Social Security, and cuts in individual income taxes reflects a basic fight over the classic goals of equality and freedom" (4). While such measures place a strong emphasis on freedom and individual responsibility, Bush also fought to curtail individual freedoms: "Bush has supported some strong governmental constraints on individual freedom. The president is willing to use federal power aggressively to achieve moral and cultural goals, including limiting abortion and stem cell research and prohibiting gay marriage. [...] There is an increasingly strong relationship between religiosity and party identification in the United States. As white, southern evangelicals have moved to the Republican Party, the Christian Right has become more central to its success. The Democratic Party, on the other hand, has become more assertively secular. It is not surprising, then, that Democrats have disdain for Bush" (6). Not surprisingly in the face of such disparate views, the 1990-term 'culture war' was reanimated. Writing in 2004 and citing gay marriage in Massachusetts and the tremendous amount of criticism Mel Gibson received for his controversial film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) by "[p]owerbrokers in Hollywood", Patrick J. Buchanan states that "the culture wars have been reignited" (n. pag.). In his opinion, the "radical Left aided by a cultural elite that detests Christianity and finds Christian moral tenets reactionary and repressive" are the aggressors in these new culture wars. This radical Left "is hell-bent on pushing its amoral values and imposing its ideology on our nation" (n. pag.).

character is a serial killer, *but* he only kills other killers;[155]

When we talk about representation, we also need to consider who is represented and for whom. Series like *The Sopranos*, *TWD* and *BrBa* have been widely discussed. Yet, as I have pointed out previously, these dramas that dominate the discussion of television series are very much an Anglo-American affair. If, as I argue, these series not only are there to entertain us, but also allegorize contemporary social, cultural and political struggles, then the white male again surfaces as our more or less normalized point of view for working through these issues. There are hardly any African-American, Latin-American or Asian-American heroes to speak of in the cable television series that attract mainstream attention. This should come as a surprise given the fact that there is an African-American man in charge of the Oval Office.

However, it needs to be acknowledged that this project could only deal with a relatively small sample of what is being televised. These new contemporary (anti-)heroes can be observed mostly on basic cable channels such as FX and AMC. Network television and premium cable feature a broader variety of performances of masculinity than a project like this could possibly deal with at once. As such, this project could only deal with a fragment of contemporary American television, albeit a

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155 Serial killers are in high demand on American television, surprisingly also on network television. NBC's *Hannibal* (based on the Thomas Harris novels) premiered successfully in 2013. The same year, the *Psycho* prelude *Bates Motel* premiered on A&E. *The Following* (2013 – present) chronicles the FBI investigation of a serial killer and his cult. Its set up is reminiscent of both Harris's Hannibal Lector and Charles Manson. This Fox drama's character lack the "shades of gray" characterization of many cable dramas and prefers to pose good versus evil. Other than the early seasons of *Dexter* and *Hannibal*, these shows have largely drawn mediocre responses from critics. The fact that *Dexter* had an eight season run and all of the other shows have been renewed for a second season, however, evidences that they are popular with audiences and profitable for their channels. This new popularity, although one might argue that America has been fascinated with the likes of Ed Gain and Ted Bundy for quite some time, has not gone unnoticed. What might be the reasons for this heightened popularity after 9/11? "Never before has serial killer pop culture been so mainstream, so accepted in American society as with Dexter; as such, Dexter represents a turning point in the willingness of Americans to embrace the serial killer as one of their own, as the personification of essentially American values. [...] For the most part, post 9/11 representations of serial killers shared marked similarities with their pre-9/11 counterparts, but, in some respects, the function of serial killers changed after the terrorist attacks. If serial killers had previously been the personification of random, terrifying evil, now they were on their way of being rehabilitated, or, at least, familiarized. [...] Dexter Morgan is the quintessential American serial killer of the post-9/11 era in that he is provided with an abundance of characteristics that make him a sympathetic, even identificatory, figure to the audience" (Schmid, 132-133). David Schmid goes on writing that violence, the witnessing of violence in the form of public executions, was part of American popular culture at its earliest stages, even in the Puritan period. He then argues that Dexter is not erratic, but very ordered and principled in his killings; hence he is unlike those he kills, who are vicious, erratic and malevolent and figured as the 'evil Other'. Even when they have a clear method, they never have a code (141-142). There is, I would argue, more to it than mere disavowal. Considering *Hannibal*, the main character is not necessarily the cannibalistic serial killer after whom the show is titled, but Will Graham (Hugh Dancy), who needs to get in touch with his own inner Hannibal in order to catch the real one (played by Mads Mikkelsen). This new-found and often identificatory popularity of serial killers may be interpreted as America getting in touch with its own 'dark passenger', to borrow a term from *Dexter* while deflecting it by having these killers face off with killers even worse than them.

very popular one: *TWD* still garners the highest ratings. Only recently, HBO introduced a new series, *True Detective*, that would fit right in this project with its focus on masculinity in a world portrayed as pretty much in male hands.[156] With Hollywood heavyweights Matthew McConaughey (as Detective Rustin Cohle) and Woody Harrelson (as Detective Martin Hart) as the male leads, the dark thriller "echoes [..] the bleak tradition of weird fiction" (Calia Jan. 2014, n. pag.) and is infused with many references to Robert W. Chambers's horror fiction (the series references both *The Yellow King* and the city of Carcosa, where the evil in the form of the killer resides and towards which the two detectives are inevitably drawn).

Set in rural Louisiana, *True Detective* chronicles the 17-year investigation of a serial murder case that is less interested in solving the murder mystery than in exploring the two dysfunctional men at its center. Women are to be found rather at the periphery of the series and as victims. The first female body to occupy the screen in the series's first couple of minutes is a mutilated corpse. Women largely exist in their capacity as wives, mistresses, prostitutes, as victims of symbolic, objective and subjective violence.

Whereas Detective Hart is a family man with old-fashioned ideas about manhood, Detective Cohle is a man from Texas without emotional connections. The latter has cultivated an aura of detachment, engaging his partner in existential discussions about the meaninglessness of life, of how personhood is a dream everyone dreams inside the "locked room" that is his or her head (S01E03). Cohle also qualifies as deeply traumatized: he looks haggard and sleep-depraved, suffers from hallucinations that started when he worked undercover in narcotics for four years straight and appears emotionally numb. He plunged into this unhealthy professional life after his two-year-old daughter died in a traffic accident and his wife divorced him. Working undercover, he witnessed and committed horrific crimes (and cultivated a drug addiction). In S01E02, for example, he visits a young prostitute to ask some case-related questions and to buy quaaludes. He tells her: "I'm dangerous. I'm police. I can do terrible things to people... with impunity."[157] This is very much in line with the shades of gray paradigm so characteristic of the bulk of the anti-hero dramas discussed here. It also speaks to a fear of authority while also espousing a certain fascination with men who command authority as Matthew McConaughey's performance here is absolutely captivating.

156The series is intended to be an anthology, meaning that the next season will deal with another crime story with a different set of characters. The first season consists of eight hour-long episodes.

157When asked if there were any rough encounters lately, the same woman characterizes men of Southern Louisiana simply as "'round here they're rough" (S01E02).

Moreover, Cohle's willingness – seemingly for the greater good of civilization – to disappear behind the frontier of the war on drugs and encountering a bleak, animalistic side of himself there, resonates with the long tradition of male fantasy in the United States that I have traced in the series investigated in this project. Creator Nic Pizzolatto, who is primarily a novelist and has written all eight episodes that have aired, however, has not drawn inspiration for his series from the Western genre:

> I read *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* and found it incredibly powerful writing. For me as a reader, it was less impactful as philosophy than as one writer's ultimate confessional: an absolute horror story, where the self is the monster. In episode one [of *True Detective*] there are two lines in particular (and it would have been nothing to re-word them) that were specifically phrased in such a way as to signal Ligotti admirers. Which, of course, you got. The philosophy Cohle promotes in the show's earliest episodes is a kind of anti-natalist nihilism, and in that regard all cats should be unbagged: *Confessions of an Antinatalist*, *Nihil Unbound*, *In the Dust of this Planet*, *Better to Have Never Been*, and lots of Cioran were all on the reading list (Pizzolatto qtd. in: Calia Feb. 2014, n. pag.).

It is also Detective Cohle who puts in words a certain kind of 'truth' that this project, too, is concerned with: why do we seem to need this kind of masculinity, why is it so enduring in our day and age, in a civilization that calls itself 'advanced'? It is rather simple:

> **Detective Hart**: Do you wonder ever if you're a bad man?
> **Detective Cohle**: No, I don't wonder. [...] World needs bad men to keep the other bad men from the door (S01E03).[158]

The type of masculinity at the center of this project, *True Detective*'s Cohle seems to suggest, is paradoxically necessary because of its existence in the world: we need good bad men in order to be safe from bad bad men. Showtime's *Dexter* is an arguably extreme case in point as the whole show centers on *a male serial killer with a code*. Here, we have the worst kind of man roaming Miami to appease his thirst for blood by killing men with similar afflictions, yet who do not have a code instilled in them (which is to kill only guilty people). Increasingly, it seems, the good bad men populating the American imagination are ever more troubled. Despite the fact that both men in *True Detective* are lawmen, with each episode it dawns on the viewer that something is not right with them. Detective Hart, for example, is reminiscent of Walter White as his ideas about masculinity as well as his professional life alienate him from his family. When talking about his family, it is always as if he is talking about a possession, something he owns and that no one should ever dare to take away from him.

 True Detective is narrated in two time lines. One takes place in 1995, the other 17 years later. In 2012, the detectives are interviewed separately about the murder

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[158]This might be a reference to *BrBa* when Walter tells Skyler that no one will come knocking on their door in order to kill him because he is "the one who knocks" (S04E06).

investigation in the past (needless to say that the investigation did not follow protocol as Hart shot one already restrained suspect dead at point blank). The not so good 'good guy' Detective Hart often elaborates on the troubles at home and the incommensurateness of his professional and private life during the interview in 2012 while we see his family fall apart in 1995: "you miss some things on the job. You know what I mean. You gotta... decompress before you can go being a family man. What you get into... working, you can't have the kids around that. So... sometimes, you gotta get your head right" (S01E02). Getting one's head right means drinking alcohol and having a mistress, both things that relate to his masculinity. Drinking serves as both a coping mechanism for the disturbing things he has to deal with in his professional life. Talking about these things would probably be a better strategy, yet this would also collide with the role expectations he holds up to himself. It also serves to separate his private from his professional lives while troubling the former: his wife is married to a man who is drunk very often and who does not talk about what is on his mind. The extramarital sex works in tandem with his drinking. The latter numbs disturbing emotions, the former provides 'release' that for reasons unknown he cannot get at home with his wife, or, for that matter, by himself. Thus, it is safe to say that self-validation, especially considering the powerlessness one might feel when working a tricky case, is just as important to him as 'release'. When his mistress decides that she has a life of her own – "I want things," she says (ibid.) – Hart cannot deal with this and tries to control her by beating up her love interest while pointing out that he can do as he pleases thanks to his profession.

Like *BrBa*'s Walter White and most fictional men discussed in this project, neither detective seems to have had a good relationship with their absent fathers. When Hart's father-in-law talks about the good old times – that is times with "more dignity," a time when activists were not "yelling about their rights" in the street – Hart calls him out on this "bullshit" (S01E03). Just one episode earlier, however, Hart himself reminisces about a time when "men wouldn't air their bullshit to the world" (S01E02). Here, he refers to emotions as bullshit. In either generation, what surfaces is an ill-adaptedness to the changed circumstances of this day and age and a refusal to let go of old ideals that were never ideal to begin with. These dialogues also serve to characterize white straight masculinity in negative terms as both, Hart and his father-in-law, lament the demands of the Other: it is of course women, ethnic and sexual minorities that "yell" about their rights in the streets and it is of course the lack of emotional expression that concerns Hart's wife. When Hart sends Cohle to his wife Maggie (Michelle Monaghan) in order

to apologize for his digressions, the following, very indicative dialogue unfolds:

> **Detective Cohle**: Kids are the only thing that matter, Maggie. They are the only reason for this old man-and-women drama [...] Men, women, it's not supposed to work except to make kids. [...]
> **Meggie Hart**: So at the end of the day you duck under rationalization same as any of them (S01E04).

Hard-boiled, American masculinity continues to be critically examined and/or glorified after *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad* and many others. As these last few quotations evidence, these dramas repeat themselves in terms of gender relations. Many aspects of *True Detective* in this regard are very familiar from the other series analyzed here. However, it seems that attention is slowly but surely shifting towards the Other: Few series since *Breaking Bad* have created as much buzz as HBO's *Girls*.

Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012 – present), which premiered when Dunham was only 25 years old, is a half-hour dramedy not only created by Dunham, but also produced, written and directed by her (along with other directors and her writing staff). She also plays the central character in the Brooklyn-set show about twentysomethings trying to navigate their post-college years in post-empire America. Other than capturing a new economic environment in which a college degree from a private university does not necessarily guarantee a well-paid job anymore, the series has especially been noted for its approach to feminism. Lena Dunham's body is rather Rubenesque and she is seen naked almost every episode. The other three women in *Girls* are more in tune with today's beauty ideals than Hannah, yet remain mostly dressed. Hence *Girls* can be said to break with the way naked women are usually presented – not only in terms of beauty standards, but also regarding the context of nakedness, which is not always sex but also such mundane things such as using the bathroom or shifting clothes.

Another new half-hour dramedy airing on HBO is *Looking* (2014 – present), which was created by Michael Lannan and is set in San Francisco.[159] Showtime had a gay-centered show before (*Queer as Folk* [2000 – 2005], based on the British series of the same title). Yet, *Looking* presents a further development of gay characters on television as issues such as HIV and coming out are largely sidestepped, which does not mean that these things are never mentioned. But the series focuses much more on the day-to-day lives of its three leading men, all of which are more or less regular guys who happen to like men instead of being fairy-like creatures such as those we know from network-TV sitcoms such as *Will & Grace* (1998 – 2006) or *Modern Family* (2009 – present), which

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159The series features one of new wave queer cinema's leading men, Andrew Haigh, as writer, director and producer on the show (Haigh wrote and directed *Weekend* (2011), winner of multiple film festival awards).

is to say that *Looking*'s leading men are not primarily defined through their relationship to their own sexuality, but rather through their inter-personal relationships in their public and private lives. For the most part, this show simply is not about what it means to be gay. Despite its low rating of less than a million the show has received a generally positive feedback from critics and was renewed to air for a second season in 2015. An interesting question with regard to *Queer as Folk* or *Looking* is: who watches these shows? Both series air on premium cable channels, which means that one has to make the conscious decision to watch and pay for these series. Is watching a show about gay men interesting to heterosexual people? It remains to be seen whether Looking can attract a larger, possibly more heterogeneous audience in its second season.

However, it is not necessarily premium cable on which exciting new television happens. The streaming service Netflix is currently re-defining television. So much so that it might be time to divorce the audio-visual series from the word television altogether.[160] Like cable television before, Netflix has invested in original programming recently and has made a splash with two shows especially. *House of Cards* breaches similar territory as *BrBa* in terms of featuring a narcissistic male hell-bent on gaining as much power as possible while at the same time containing concerns about the post-9/11 erosion of democracy [spoiler alert]: In the first season, Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) manages to become the vice president of the USA even though he was not on the ticket. In the second season, he manufactures government crises in order to take over the Oval Office and thus the USA is lead by a president who was never elected. Underwood not only achieves this through manipulation and manufacturing of political crises, but also by simply murdering off two potential stumbling blocks. In terms of gender, *House of Cards* constructs Underwood not along the lines of the frontier hero, which is one reason why it was not included in this project. However, it is worth mentioning that the representation of women in *House of Cards* is a little more well-balanced than in *BrBa*: Underwood's wife is also career hungry, she has her own mind and the marriage between these two cold-hearted people is actually warm and characterized by mutual respect of the other's intellect. Other female characters in *House of Cards* are seen antagonizing Underwood while they are looking for ways to gain more power (Underwood's protégée is actually female).

160New about Netflix is that it releases entire seasons on a single day and thus further removes the TV series from TV scheduling. Since quality TV series drew comparisons to literary realism in the 19th century, many of which were published in a serialized manner via magazines, *House of Cards* has its literary ambitions inscribed in its episode titles, which are called chapters. Furthermore, Netflix's revenue system is like that of HBO based on subscriptions and as such removed from FCC regulations.

Politics are not necessarily dominated by men anymore on television. In HBO's comedy *Veep* (2012 – present), Julia Louis-Dreyfus stars as the Vice President of the USA and, now in its third season, prepares her presidential campaign. Selina Meyer is an elitist, a negligent mother, self-absorbed and deeply invested in her career – yet less because she cares about the public but more because of prestige. ABC's political thriller *Scandal* also features a, independent, career-driven woman in Olivia Carolyn Pope (Kerry Washington), who is one of the few African-American female main characters on American mainstream television. In a recent *New York Times* article titled "Where Mean Girls Rule", Alessandra Stanley writes on the emergence of strong and complex female characters that "[g]reed, lust, envy, wrath and pride are the currencies of power in the nation's capital, and some of its most dangerous brokers are women on television. [...] There is gender equality of a kind in Washington. On television, it's the one place where it's safe to say that women are as bad as the men" (2014, n. pag.).

Another acclaimed drama series on Netflix is Jenji Kohan's first post-*Weeds* series, *Orange Is the New Black* (2013 – present), which is set in a prison, centers on Piper Chapman (Taylor Schilling) and was adapted from Piper Kerman's memoir, *Orange Is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison* (2010). Chapman, a blonde middle-class woman in her thirties, is sentenced to a 15-months prison term for smuggling drug money for her former girlfriend ten years prior to the conviction. Now engaged to be married to an aspiring author, she is confronted with her former, drug trafficking lesbian lover. The series is a lot about dealing with being confined to a new environment and takes its time to tell the individual stories of the other multi-ethnic female prison population. In this way, it does feel like a female version of HBO's groundbreaking prison drama *OZ* (1997 – 2003). The lesbian online magazine *Curve* has called *Orange Is the New Black* "the most queer feminist thing" (Lewis, n. pag.). In Lewis's opinion this is so because "the majority of conversations between these women are focused on their identities, their hopes, their fears and, most significantly, their relationships. The show puts female camaraderie at front and center, which is refreshing and, hopefully, precedent setting" (ibid., n. pag.). Moreover, the whole production context is in female hands for the most part: the writers are mostly female, Hollywood star Jodie Foster even directed the third episode of the first season.

While female and queer characters are more and more visible on subscription channels, it remains to be seen for how long the basic cable channels can maintain their momentum with their mostly testosterone-fueled original programming. AMC's one

series that revolved around a complex female main character, *The Killing* (2011 – present), was canceled twice and will now be concluded on Netflix. The other AMC series that manages to balance its male and female cast in terms of interesting storylines is the critically acclaimed and multiple Emmy award winning *Mad Men* (2007 – 2015), which will be concluded with its seventh season.[161]

While AMC and FX continue to be dominated by troubled male main characters, the premium channel Showtime has been consistently airing original programming that centered on women and LGBT characters: *Queer As Folk* was about a group of gay men in Pittsburgh, *The L Word* (2004 – 2009) chronicled the lives of a couple of lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in Los Angeles. The aforementioned *Weeds* was a dramedy about a self-centered soccer mom who turns towards the drug business after her breadwinning husband's untimely death. *The Big C* (1010 – 2013) and *The United States of Tara* (2009 – 2011) were two series about complex female characters dealing with cancer and schizophrenia respectively. Showtime's current hit show *Masters of Sex* (2013 – present) tells the story of Dr. William Masters and Virginia Johnson. Both revolutionized our understanding of sexuality at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, during the 1960s and subsequent decades. The show investigates the pride and arrogance of Dr. Masters, whose fascination with fertility and sexuality might have been founded in his own inability to produce a child naturally with his wife. His sex research was aided by his secretary Virginia Johnson, who becomes extremely valuable to the research program even though she never completed an academic education. Although the series title alludes to Dr. Masters, his and her storylines are given equal time in the series, with Johnson appearing to be the more sympathetic character of the two. More importantly, given the intimate subject matter and the relative social ineptness of Masters, the series suggests the whole research program would have been impossible without her.

On network TV, meanwhile, men have gone soft ever since Jack Bauer retired from saving the USA on nine extremely long days in *24*.[162] The dramedy format seems to fare

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161 Like *BrBa*'s final season, the seventh season of *Mad Men* will be split in half.

162 In Hamilton Carroll's reading of *24* as a neoliberal melodrama, he states that Jack Bauer "is a sovereign figure" and that the series all in all "focus[ed] on individual responsibility" by "reproduc[ing] traditional forms of American heroism that are then transformed in relation to the dictates of neoliberal forms of capitalist accumulation" (p. 27). Furthermore, "[b]y mobilizing traditional tropes of masculinist heroism *24* produces the self-regulating neoliberal subject as hero" (p. 30). Employed in a fictional anti-terror unit, Bauer has, like the men in other crime dramas, to manage his public and private life. Also, as an unflinching hero who does not hesitate to bend the law (for example through torture or drug abuse), of which he is also a representative, he is figured as a man who knows what has to be done to get things right.

better on premium cable, which is why most half-hour shows are plain sitcoms. Here, we have the sensitive men of *How I Met Your Mother* (2005 – 2013)[163] and the four unmasculine but heterosexual nerds of *The Big Bang Theory* (2007 – present). Seemingly unattractive and socially inept, three of them end up with attractive girlfriends. This kind of show is rather similar to mumblecore films of directors and/or writers such as Judd Apatow or Jason Segel that, according to Judith/Jack Halberstam, promote a "model of heterosexuality that invests in the idea that any guy who will marry you is marriage material" (2012, p. 22).[164]

The most successful comedy program on network television is ABC's *Modern Family* (2009 – present). The sitcom has won four Emmy awards as best comedy series and finds an aged Ed O'Neill (in an ironic rendition of his role as Al Bundy in *Married with Children*) as the 'patriarch' (his agreement is important to everyone in the family) of a *post*-modern family. He plays the father to a gay son and a daughter that is married to a real estate agent. Furthermore, his second wife is from Colombia and much younger. She also brings a son from a previous relationship into the marriage. This son, too, is not your stereotypical representation of American (or Colombian) boyhood: the 12-year old is an overweight intellectual who is obsessed with good manners, talks like an adult and cultivates an espresso addiction. Since it is a show that features representations of gay men who have adopted a child, one might wonder how progressive this series is. The integration of such a couple would certainly have been unthinkable 20 years ago. Yet, the two men's performances classify as camp. They are also hardly ever seen being intimate (e. g. kissing) with each other. In short, the two men hardly challenge the stereotype of the effeminate gay man. Maybe as a result of *Modern Family*'s success and a growing acceptance of homosexuality in general, NBC went even further by centering a whole sitcom on a gay couple that is about to have a baby via surrogacy. *The New Normal* (2012 – 2013), however, could not draw enough of an audience to be renewed for a second season. The representation of gay masculinity here again runs along the lines of gay stereotypes suitable for network television. The couple confirms to heteronormative role assignments – a feminized homemaker and a more 'regular' but

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163 Ironically, the hyper virile Barney Stinson is played by the openly gay actor Neil Patrick Harris "with a nudge and a wink. Why?", Michael Kimmel wonders and suggests "[p]robably because only single gay men are as sexually libertine as Barney is!" (2012, p. 289).

164 Mumblecore movies such as *Knocked Up* (2007, directed by Judd Apatow) feature male lead characters that could be characterized as losers: men without ambition and often without good looks (Seth Rogen stars in *Knocked Up*). By comparison, the female lead of such films is attractive and successful. They still settle for the loser guy. In Halberstam's estimation, "Mumblecore films provide a justification for a new form of parasitical masculinity that I like to call 'angler' masculinity, after the anglerfish" (2012, p. 21).

still very sensitive guy who is into sports – and hence somehow manages to uphold a traditional binary opposition within a non-traditional setting (*Modern Family*'s gay couple is also committed to the homemaker and breadwinner binary).

In terms of drama and crime series, we do find men verging on the dysfunctional. The investigators of the C.S.I. franchise are hardly one-dimensional good guys. Sometimes verging on the dysfunctional, they are mostly represented within their public roles as detectives and are, in fact, good guys executing the law and defending society against amoral or criminal subjects. Network TV only rarely asks its viewers to sympathize with a criminal like Tony Soprano, *Boardwalk Empire*'s Nucky Thompson (Steve Buscemi) or Walter White. This means that network television is very much the place of civilized and/or wimpish men or masculine men devoted to their jobs.

What does this brief panoramic view of American television tell us? Well, it tells us that network TV as a medium is driven by advertising money and as such is not inclined to challenge viewers with complex LGBT characters or men on the wrong side of good and bad. The content that brings advertising revenue is what is being aired. More and more, however, it is morally ambiguous characters that draw large audiences. Therefore, *Modern Family* in terms of sexuality or *Hannibal* in terms of moral ambiguity and violence can be regarded as steps towards more challenging content.

The American televisual landscape is probably just as fragmented as its society with a very persistent mainstream constituted of heteronormative, white citizens. Just like LGBT life centralizes in certain urban areas like San Francisco, New York, Paris or Cologne, representations of gay life beyond camp can be purchased from premium cable channels. The question of place is exactly what this project could not tackle: most of these series do not take place in New York or Los Angeles, but very often in the heartland. It is not only demographics like sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class and age that present interesting alleys for further research, but also the very question where a certain series is set and where it is popular. TV series are set in very different locations these days and given the fact that dialect plays an important part in many of them indicates that region does matter on TV. Recently, TV has taken us to places such as Louisiana (*True Blood, True Detective, Tremé*), San Francisco (*Looking*), New Mexico (*BrBa*), Georgia (*TWD*), Kentucky (*Justified*) Silicon Valley (*Silicon Valley* [2014 – present, HBO]), Atlantic City (*Boardwalk Empire*) and Utah (*Big Love* [2006 – 2011,

HBO])[165] amongst others. In terms of regionality within the confines of this project, one can say that the frontiersmen discussed here mostly exist in the American heartland. The urbanized coasts are rather the place of domesticated men, who, like *Modern Family*'s Phil, can even look back on a career of cheerleading in college.

Finally, can there be a female badass who is judge, jury and executioner, who is capable of crossing the frontier into a world of savagery in the world according to TV? *TWD*'s Michonne will surely continue to wave her sword. Moreover, the fact that *The Killing*'s Detective Linden got put down not once, but twice and still survived for a forthcoming fourth season may indicate that the next 'stand up guy' with a colt and a code might as well be a woman.

165The male main character Bill (Bill Paxton), like many more in the surge of 'quality programming' of the past 15 years, "is transgressing the American value system to pursue the American Dream" (Jan, p. 231). Bill's transgression is that as polygamist he has not one but three wives. Yet, his big family is not housed on an obscure compound, but in a suburban neighborhood. He is a respected member of his community as he maintains a very successful DIY store. Like *BrBa*'s Walter White, he hides in plain sight.

7. Appendix: Episode Guide

Breaking Bad. Prod. Vince Gilligan. AMC. 2008-2013.

Code	Title	Director	Writer
S01E01	"Pilot"	Vince Gilligan	Vince Gilligan
S01E02	"Cat's in the Bag..."	Adam Bernstein	Vince Gilligan
S01E03	"...And the Bag's in the River"	Adam Bernstein	Vince Gilligan
S01E04	"Cancer Man"	Jim McKay	Vince Gilligan
S01E05	"Gray Matter"	Tricia Brock	Patty Lin
S01E06	"Crazy Handful of Nothin'"	Bronwen Hughes	George Mastras
S01E07	"A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal"	Tim Hunter	Peter Gould
S02E01	"Seven Thirty-Seven"	Bryan Cranston	J. Roberts
S02E02	"Grilled"	Charles Haid	George Mastras
S02E03	"Bit by a Dead Bee"	Terry McDonough	Peter Gould
S02E04	"Down"	John Dahl	Sam Catlin
S02E05	"Breakage"	Johan Renck	Moira Walley-Beckett
S02E05	"Peekaboo"	Peter Medak	J. Roberts & Vince Gilligan
S02E06	"Negro y Azul"	Felix Alcala	John Shiban
S02E07	"Better Call Saul"	Terry McDonough	Peter Gould
S02E08	"4 Days Out"	Michelle MacLaren	Sam Catlin
S02E09	"Over"	Phil Abraham	Moira Walley-Beckett
S02E10	"Mandala"	Adam Bernstein	George Mastras
S02E11	"Phoenix"	Colin Bucksey	John Shiban
S02E12	"ABQ"	Adam Bernstein	Vince Gilligan
S03E01	"No Más"	Bryan Cranston	Vince Gilligan
S03E02	"Caballo sin Nombre"	Adam Bernstein	Peter Gould
S03E03	"I.F.T."	Michelle MacLaren	George Mastras
S03E04	"Green Light"	Scott Winant	Sam Catlin
S03E05	"Más"	Johan Renck	Moira Walley-Beckett
S03E06	"Sunset"	John Shiban	John Shiban
S03E07	"One Minute"	Michelle MacLaren	Thomas Schnauz
S03E08	"I See You"	Colin Bucksey	Gennifer Hutchison
S03E09	"Kafkaesque"	Michael Slovis	Peter Gould & George Mastras
S03E10	"Fly"	Rian Johnson	Sam Catlin & M. Walley-Beckett
S03E11	"Abiquiu"	Michelle MacLaren	John Shiban & Thomas Schnauz
S03E12	"Half Measures"	Adam Bernstein	Sam Catlin & Peter Gould
S03E13	"Full Measure"	Vince Gilligan	Vince Gilligan

S04E01	"Box Cutter"	Adam Bernstein	Vince Gilligan
S04E02	"Thirty-Eight Snub"	Michelle MacLaren	George Mastras
S04E03	"Open House"	David Slade	Sam Catlin
S04E04	"Bullet Points"	Colin Bucksey	Moira Walley-Beckett
S04E05	"Shotgun"	Michelle MacLaren	Thomas Schnauz
S04E06	"Cornered"	Michael Slovis	G. Hutchison
S04E07	"Problem Dog"	Peter Gould	Peter Gould
S04E08	"Hermanos"	Johan Renck	Sam Catlin & George Mastras
S04E09	"Bug"	Terry McDonough	Moira Walley-Beckett & Thomas Schnauz
S04E10	"Salud"	Michelle MacLaren	Peter Gould & G. Hutchison
S04E11	"Crawl Space"	Scott Winant	George Mastras & Sam Catlin
S03E12	"End Times"	Vince Gilligan	Thomas Schnauz & Moira Walley-Beckett
S04E13	"Face Off"	Vince Gilligan	Vince Gilligan
S05E01	"Live Free or Die"	Michael Slovis	Vince Gilligan
S05E02	"Madrigal"	Michelle MacLaren	Vince Gilligan
S05E03	"Hazard Pay"	Adam Bernstein	Peter Gould
S05E04	"Fifty-One"	Rian Johnson	Sam Catlin
S05E05	"Dead Freight"	George Mastras	George Mastras
S05E06	"Buyout"	Colin Bucksey	G. Hutchison
S05E07	"Say My Name"	Thomas Schnauz	Thomas Schnauz
S05E08	"Gliding Over All"	Michelle MacLaren	Moira Walley-Beckett
S05E09	"Blood Money"	Bryan Cranston	Peter Gould
S05E10	"Buried"	Michelle MacLaren	Thomas Schnauz
S05E11	"Confessions"	Michael Slovis	G. Hutchison
S05E12	"Rabid Dog"	Sam Catlin	Sam Catlin
S05E13	"To'hajiilee"	Michelle MacLaren	George Mastras
S05E14	"Ozymandias"	Rian Johnson	Moira Walley-Beckett
S05E15	"Granite State"	Peter Gould	Peter Gould
S05E16	"Felina"	Vince Gilligan	Vince Gilligan

The Walking Dead. Prod. Frank Darabont. AMC. 2010 – Present.

S01E01	"Days Gone Bye"	Frank Darabont	Frank Darabont
S01E02	"Guts"	Michelle MacLaren	Frank Darabont
S01E03	"Tell It to the Frogs"	G. Horder-Payton	Charles H. Eglee & Jack LoGiudice
S01E04	"Vatos"	Johan Renck	Robert Kirkman
S01E05	"Wildfire"	Ernest Dickerson	Glen Mazzara
S01E06	"TS-19"	Guy Ferland	Adam Fierro & Frank Darabont

S02E01	"What Lies Ahead"	Ernest Dickerson & G. Horder-Payton	Ardeth Bey & Robert Kirkman
S02E02	"Bloodletting"	Ernest Dickerson	Glen Mazzara
S02E03	"Save the Last One"	Phil Abraham	Scott M. Gimple
S02E04	"Cherokee Rose"	Billy Gierhart	Evan Reilly
S02E05	"Chupacabra"	Guy Ferland	David Leslie Johnson
S02E06	"Secrets"	David Boyd	Angela Kang
S02E07	"Pretty Much Dead Already"	Michelle MacLaren	Scott M. Gimple
S02E08	"Nebraska"	Clark Johnson	Evan Reilly
S02E09	"Triggerfinger"	Billy Gierhart	David Leslie Johnson
S02E10	"18 Miles Out"	Ernest Dickerson	Scott M. Gimple & Glen Mazzara
S02E11	"Judge, Jury, Executioner"	Greg Nicotero	Angela Kang
S02E12	"Better Angels"	Guy Ferland	Evan Reilly & Glen Mazzara
S02E13	"Beside the Dying Fire"	Ernest Dickerson	Robert Kirkman & Glen Mazzara
S03E01	"Seed"	Ernest Dickerson	Glen Mazzara
S03E02	"Sick"	Billy Gierhart	Nichole Beattie
S03E03	"Walk with Me"	Guy Ferland	Evan Reilly
S03E04	"Killer Within"	Guy Ferland	Sang Kyu Kim
S03E05	"Say the Word"	Greg Nicotero	Angela Kang
S03E06	"Hounded"	Dan Attias	Scott M. Gimple
S03E07	"When the Dead Come Knocking"	Dan Sackheim	Frank Renzulli
S03E08	"Made to Suffer"	Billy Gierhart	Robert Kirkman
S03E09	"The Suicide King"	Lesli Linka Glatter	Evan Reilly
S03E10	"Home"	Seith Mann	Nichole Beattie
S03E11	"I Ain't a Judas"	Greg Nicotero	Angela Kang
S03E12	"Clear"	Tricia Brock	Scott M. Gimple
S03E13	"Arrow on the Doorpost"	David Boyd	Ryan C. Coleman
S03E14	"Prey"	Stefan Schwartz	Glen Mazzara & Evan Reilly
S03E15	"This Sorrowful Life"	Greg Nicotero	Scott M. Gimple
S03E16	"Welcome to the Tombs"	Ernest Dickerson	Glen Mazzara

Falling Skies. Prod. Robert Rodat. TNT. 2011 – Present.

S01E01	"Live and Learn"	Carl Franklin	Robert Rodat
S01E02	"The Armory"	Greg Beeman	Graham Yost
S01E03	"Prisoner of War"	Greg Beeman	Fred Golan
S01E04	"Grace"	Fred Toye	Melinda Hsu Taylor
S01E05	"Silent Kill"	Fred Toye	Joe Weisberg
S01E06	"Sanctuary (Part 1)"	Sergio Mimica-Gezzan	Joel Anderson Thompson

S01E07	"Sanctuary (Part 2)"	Sergio Mimica-Gezzan	Melinda Hsu Taylor
S01E08	"What Hides Beneath"	Anthony Hemingway	Mark Verheiden
S01E09	"Mutiny"	Holly Dale	Joe Weisberg
S01E10	"Eight Hours"	Greg Beeman	Mark Verheiden
S02E01	"Worlds Apart"	Greg Beeman	Mark Verheiden
S02E02	"Shall We Gather at the River"	Greg Beeman	Bradley Thompson & David Weddle
S02E03	"Compass"	Michael Katleman	Bryan Oh
S02E04	"Young Bloods"	Miguel Sapochnik	Heather V. Regnier
S02E05	"Love and Other Acts of Courage"	John Dahl	Joe Weisberg
S02E06	"Homecoming"	Greg Beeman	Bryan Oh
S02E07	"Molon Labe"	Holly Dale	Bradley Thompson & David Weddle
S02E08	"Death March"	Seith Mann	Heather V. Regnier
S02E09	"The Price of Greatness"	Adam Kane	Mark Verheiden
S02E10	"A More Perfect Union"	Greg Beeman	Remi Aubuchon, B. Thompson & David Weddle
S03E01	"On Thin Ice"	Greg Beeman	Remi Aubuchon
S03E02	"Collateral Damage"	James Marshall	Bradley Thompson & David Weddle
S03E03	"Badlands"	David Solomon	John Wirth
S03E04	"At All Costs"	Greg Beeman	Heather V. Regnier
S03E05	"Search and Recovery"	Sergio Mimica-Gezzan	Jordan Rosenberg
S03E06	"Be Silent and Come Out"	Adam Kane	B. Thompson, David Weddle & John Wirth
S03E07	"The Pickett Line"	Sergio Mimica-Gezzan	H. V. Regnier & J. Rosenberg
S02E08	"Strange Brew"	David Solomon	John Wirth
S02E09	"Journey to Xibalba"	Jonathan Frakes	B. Thompson & David Weddle
S03E10	"Brazil"	Greg Beeman	Remi Aubuchon

Hell on Wheels. Prod. Joy Gayton and Tony Gayton. AMC. 2011 – Present.

S01E01	"Pilot"	David Von Ancken	Tony Gayton & Joe Gayton
S01E02	"Immoral Mathematics"	David Von Ancken	Tony Gayton & Joe Gayton
S01E03	"A New Birth of Freedom"	Phil Abraham	John Shiban
S01E04	"Jamais Je Ne T'oublierai"	Alex Zakrzewski	Jami O'Brien
S01E05	"Bread and Circuses"	Adam Davidson	Mark Richard
S01E06	"Pride, Pomp, and Circumstance"	Michael Slovis	Bruce Marshall Romans

S01E07	"Revelations"	Michelle MacLaren	Tony Gayton & Joe Gayton
S01E08	"Derailed"	David Von Ancken	Mark Richard
S01E09	"Timshel"	John Shiban	John Shiban
S01E10	"God of Chaos"	David Von Ancken	Tony Gayton & Joe Gayton
S02E01	"Viva La Mexico"	David Von Ancken	Tony Gayton & Joe Gayton
S02E02	"Durant, Nebraska"	Adam Davidson	John Shiban
S02E03	"Slaughterhouse"	Sergio Mimica-Gezzan	Jami O'Brien & Bruce Marshall Romans
S02E04	"Scabs"	Catherine Hardwicke	Chris Mundy
S02E05	"The Railroad Job"	Michael Nankin	Mark Richard
S02E06	"Purged Away With Blood"	Joe Gayton	Tony Gayton & Tom Brady
S02E07	"The White Spirit"	David Von Ancken	Jami O'Brien & Bruce Marshall Romans
S02E08	"The Lord's Day"	Rod Lurie	Mark Richard & Chris Mundy
S02E09	"Blood Moon"	Terry McDonough	Mark Richard & Jami O'Brien
S02E10	"Blood Moon Rising"	John Shiban	John Shiban
S03E01	"Big Bad Wolf"	David Von Ancken	Mark Richard
S03E02	"Eminent Domain"	Adam Davidson	John Wirth
S03E03	"Range War"	Dennie Gordon	Mark Richard & Reed Steiner
S03E04	"The Game"	Adam Davidson	Jami O'Brien
S03E05	"Searchers"	Neil LaBute	Bruce Marshall Romans
S03E06	"One Less Mule"	David Straiton & Deran Sarafian	John Wirth & Lolis Eric Elie
S03E07	"Cholera"	Deran Sarafian	Tom Brady
S03E08	"It Happened in Boston"	Rosemary Rodriguez	Mark Richard
S03E09	"Fathers and Sins"	Billy Gierhart	John Wirth & Reed Steiner
S03E10	"Get Behind the Mule"	Neil LaBute	Mark Richard & Jami O'Brien

Banshee. Prod. Jonathan Tropper and David Schickler. Cinemax. 2013 – Present.

S01E01	"Pilot"	Greg Yaitanes	Jonathan Tropper & David Schickler
S01E02	"The Rave"	SJ Clarkson	Jonathan Tropper & David Schickler
S01E03	"Meet The New Boss"	OC Madsen	Jonathan Tropper & David Schickler

S01E04	"Half Deaf Is Better Than All Dead"	Greg Yaitanes	Jonathan Tropper & David Schickler
S01E05	"The Kindred"	SJ Clarkson	Jonathan Tropper & David Schickler
S01E06	"Wicks"	OC Madsen	Jonathan Tropper & David Schickler
S01E07	"Behold a Pale Rider"	Dean White	David Schickler
S01E08	"We Shall Live Forever"	Greg Yaitanes	Jonathan Tropper
S01E09	"Always the Cowboy"	Miguel Sapochnik	Jonathan Tropper & David Schickler
S01E10	"A Mixture of Madness"	Miguel Sapochnik	Jonathan Tropper & David Schickler

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