

## The deserts of Breaking Bad: on new television series and the malaise in culture

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**Abstract:** The role played by television series within culture have become increasingly prominent over the past two decades, with their contents significantly influencing subjectivities. This study addresses dramatic series of this new television era based on the discontents arose from these works – hitherto uncommon in television programming. For that, the show *Breaking Bad* was analyzed under the psychoanalytic interpretation that approaches the cinema as a singular language, articulating the TV show with the Freudian concept of Malaise in culture. Of these reflections, the audiovisual work intensively exploits the spatial dimension through formal resources, figuring in a way to evoke the issue of malaise.

**Keywords:** television series, *malaise* (psychoanalysis), film language, television.

### Introduction

Around two decades ago, transformations in the American cultural industry triggered what would come to be called the “Third Golden Age” (Martin, 2014, p. 27) of television. This new age took place by means of one of the longest-lived formats of this medium, present since its beginnings in several countries: the series (Jost, 2018). Productions as *Oz* (Fontana, 1997-2003); *The Sopranos* (Chase, 1999-2007); *The Wire* (Simon, 2002-2008); *Mad Men* (Weiner, 2007-2015), and *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan, 2008-2013) are part of this group.

In a process of reinvention that permeated authorship styles, television conventions, characterization of characters, the “very idea of narrative” (Jost, 2018, p. 147) and also production, exhibition and consumption formats, the works that comprise this *Third Golden Age* of American television<sup>1</sup> proved to be representative products of the maturation of a market and the configuration of its own form of art (Martin, 2014).

About these shows, Martin (2014) reports that they “had become the signature American art form of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the equivalent of what the films of Scorsese, Altman, Coppola, and others had been to the 1970s” (p. 29). Thus, studies even claim that, in our times, *seriephilia* replaces *cinephilia* (Jost, 2018).

Despite the peculiarities of artistic forms and the constitutions of the audiences that are linked to them, the ample space that these audiovisual series have occupied in culture is undeniable, as well as the significant way in which their contents have been influencing subjectivity.

This incidence has been observed in listening performed in psychological care, especially with young individuals. Similar to the references made to song lyrics, excerpts from narratives and film fragments, speeches about the series often emerge as ways of speaking of themselves and their perceptions about the society in which they live. Speeches that include characters, scenes, and even artistic and technical aspects (François & Froemming, 2017).

Throughout this study, some questions were raised about these works, as the individuals’ speeches in relation to the series brought something beyond satisfaction in fantasy, obtained through what Freud called “enjoyment of the artworks” (Freud, 1930/2015), that is, they felt more than the “mild narcosis” so common to the viewer of regular soap operas. Thus, the individuals also seemed to express something on the order of restlessness and a certain *malaise*, either by reference to anti-heroes, dark and problematic characters or by the marked density of film diegesis.

It was sought, then, to know and study some of these works, especially those referred to by the individuals assisted, as well as those with great audience acceptance. Among the series observed, one has stood out for having been significantly mentioned by different individuals. This is *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan, 2008-2013), whose central characters are Walter White and Jesse Pinkman.

It revolves around Walter’s story, a high school chemistry teacher, overqualified for his role and

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1 “The first of these ages would have corresponded to the blossoming of creativity in the early days of this medium and the second, ‘a brief period of unusual network excellence during the 1980s’” (Martin, 2014, p. 27).

underpaid, who early on in the plot finds himself with inoperable lung cancer and without financial resources for treatment. Jesse, on the other hand, is a Walter's former student who, after leaving school, starts to produce and sell methamphetamine. In the plot, Jesse is introduced as he escapes a police raid on a clandestine laboratory. Walter, who unusually accompanied his brother-in-law – a narcotics department employee – on a work incident, is the only one who witnesses Jesse's escape. Then he decides to invite his former student to start producing methamphetamine along with him (François & Froemming, 2017).

From the contact with the series and its viewers, questions were raised about what led these young people to be captured in such a way by a production like this, whose plot presents an exponential increase in violence and dramatic charge. There seemed to be a notable difference there in relation to the series that were once successful with this audience (François & Froemming, 2017).

In addition to the considerable amount of fans who, according to the broadcaster responsible for the series (AMC company), turned Walter White into a “cultural icon”<sup>2</sup>, *Breaking Bad* has been pointed out as a work of good technical quality, being critically acclaimed, as demonstrated by its 230 award nominations and its 118 awards received in different categories<sup>3</sup>.

Given these particularities, it was decided to analyze the series considering that it would present interesting elements to think about the contemporary individuals that make up its audience, as well as the context of the cultural industry from which it emerges. Thus, *Breaking Bad* is approached as an integral part of a set of works (series) that, like cinema, literature and the visual arts, say something about our time (Fora de Série, 2017).

Observing the Freudian approach to artistic/creative productions (Freud, 1908/2015), this article proposes to take them as “antennas,” capable of capturing fantasies of a given period, or as “beacons,” which “with their flashing lights indicate deviations in our crossings” (Souza, 2015, p. 318), bringing with them enigmas and challenging our reason and sensibility.

To deal with the questions that the series evokes, the analysis carried out in this study is divided into two stages. In the first, considering *Breaking Bad* as part of a specific typology of works, which presents itself as a novelty in the segment of audiovisual series, the analysis focuses on its set. Some points are made about what these products have in common, trying to pay attention to the repetitions and slips that they present, establishing preliminary dialogues with psychoanalytic

theory. Issues related to production, exhibition and consumption formats are also observed.

In the second moment, the focus is on the formal composition of the work, having as reference the psychoanalytic research that looks at the cinema as a singular language. Here, although it does not fail to make some articulations about the narrative, one seeks to prioritize “the operations, repetitions, variations, alternations, etc. – through which the film signs refer to each other, giving rise to meaning effects” (Weinmann, 2017, p. 8).

The results obtained are discussed based on the articulation with the Freudian text on *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930/2015). In this work (which, as Froemming (2016) observes, was written in “dark times”), the author returns to the theory of the death/destruction impulse, already present in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920/1996), and intersects it with other psychoanalytic research, proposing to think about issues related to human culture and its contemporary world.

In this paper, we trust that the propositions made in the Freudian text continue to offer valuable elements for us to think about the social bond in contemporary culture.

## The Third Golden Age of television

About the context of emergence of *Breaking Bad*, Brett Martin (2014) reports that this “Third Golden Age of TV” brings as one of its characteristics the presence of protagonists belonging to “a species that you might call Man Beset or Man Harried – badgered and bothered and thwarted by the modern world” (p. 21). In addition, the author highlights that the works belonging to this “age” are marked by ambiguities and do not offer the public catharsis or easy resolution, and although a good part of these productions contain strong humor components (comic relief), they are all categorized as “dramatic” series.

The category “drama” is conventionally used to name an intermediate genre between tragedy and comedy. The expression crosses the entire history of cinema, but with multiple declinations, which denotes both its plasticity and its importance (Aumont & Marie, 2006).

In the first movie catalogues, it designates

an action that is most often violent or pathetic, in which characters historically and socially inscribed in a believable space face each other. Even if comic elements are likely to be integrated into the action, the dominant nature must always be seriousness. (Aumont & Marie, 2006, p. 87)

It is possible to observe that the composition of the atmosphere in which the “tormented men” of these series

2 Article about the series retrieved from the AMC website (in the Portuguese language): <https://bit.ly/3xDhuGI>

3 The IMDb website provides the complete list of nominations and awards. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0903747/awards>

are inserted brings as important elements the aspects that Aumont and Marie (2006) point out in their classic definition of the category.

It should also be noted that this genre tends to give more relevance to the characterization of especially complex characters. Thus, the consequences of situations of adversity or conflicts for those who live them are the most important from a narrative point of view (Nogueira, 2010).

The predominantly dramatic style of construction of characters is one of the significant innovations these works bring to the television universe. To illustrate this statement, it is enough to remember that some of the most popular series released over different decades were mostly associated with categories such as comedy or action<sup>4</sup>, both considered exemplary forms of cinema hedonism. This is explained by the perception that comedy, even if it has variations according to its subtype, necessarily seeks to cause laughter; the action, on the other hand, seeks to offer entertainment to the viewer through “production effects”. These are genres that feature characters most commonly marked by simplism and Manichaeism, with heroes and villains clearly distinct and opposed (Nogueira, 2010).

Therefore, there is something very different in the protagonists of this new television age, who, in turn, are full of ambivalence in their characterization, usually involved in transgressions of social norms and often in outbursts of violence.

The first character named as an iconic member of this group of productions, a predecessor to Walter White, is Tony Soprano (from *The Sopranos*<sup>5</sup>). Martin (2014) qualifies him as a “bald, stocky, flawed but charismatic boss” (Martin, 2014, p. 20). After *Tony* has appeared, the author observes that, in a short time, the channels began to present several variations of the character. Sometimes these variations between characters from different series were quite subtle: they slipped from “leading a bunch of mobsters” to “leading a bunch of corrupt cops,” for example. Among the types which viewers were introduced to, he cites the “alcoholic, narcissistic police officer,” the “ruthless drug lord” and the “alcoholic, self-destructive firefighter grappling poorly with ghosts of 9/11”.

These were characters whom, conventional wisdom had once insisted, Americans would never allow into their living rooms: unhappy, morally compromised, complicated, deeply human. They played a seductive game with the viewer,

daring them to emotionally invest in, even root for, even love, a gamut of criminals whose offenses would come to include everything from adultery and polygamy... to vampirism and serial murder. (Martin, 2014, p. 21)

It is noteworthy that there is nothing new in the fact that transgressive characters or with “morally reprehensible” characteristics are shown on television. The point is that these characters (even the charismatic ones) were usually reserved for the roles of villains. The innovation here is that characteristics of heroes and villains merge into the same character, which the audience is invited to identify with.

It is also important to point out that we are not treating this as something new in the panorama of all cultural productions and not even in cinema, as this type of character has achieved some popularity a few decades ago. The peculiarity is that works like *Breaking Bad* are now produced for television, aired at high audience times and consumed by a significant amount of viewers. It seems that there is a growing public, from the most diverse segments, interested in this *malaise* on the scene.

In addition, the series under analysis puts an ordinary person, middle class worker, suburban resident and family man (Walter White) to lead this type of act (crimes, transgressions, outbursts of violence). This is the kind of resource that illustrates what Martin refers to as the fact that these shows feature men “in recognizable struggle” (Martin, 2014, p. 21).

This is something that is certainly exacerbated in the example of Walter who, already in the Pilot Episode, is presented to us as a middle-class person with two jobs and difficulty in keeping his accounts up to date; undervalued and even humiliated in the workplace; with a pregnant wife, a teenage son with cerebral palsy, and finding himself with inoperable cancer and uninsured by his health plan. There are many struggles placed in the same character’s trajectory, which is perhaps one of the great mottos of *Breaking Bad*.

In part, it was because of this that the audience started being receptive to the series and accept that these individuals would enter their living rooms and be shown on their screens, in prime time, when the family comes together to watch television.

The viewers we refer to, in turn, by identifying themselves with these anti-heroes’ struggles, gain a kind of license to be in the shoes of these “morally reprehensible” individuals, but who allude to the ambivalence of a common subject and not to the sordidness of a linear fairy-tale villain. This refers to one of the references made by a young man being assisted (which is not an uncommon speech about this type of work), who reported getting surprised in the middle of the series when realizing that he was “rooting for the villain.”

4 Some examples of series that have been successful with young audiences over the past decades: *Star Trek* (Roddenberry, 1966-1969); *Chaves* (Bolaños & Segoviano, 1971-1980); *Charlie’s Angels* (Goff & Roberts, 1976-1981); *Alf* (Fusco & Patchett, 1986-1990); *The Fresh Prince of Bel-air* (Borowitz & Borowitz, 1990-1996); *Friends* (Crane & Kauffman, 1994-2004).

5 Chase (1999-2007).

## **Civilization and its Discontents by Freud**

It is in this way that we started to think about the possibility of a dialogue between these series and the text on *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930/2015), as in it Freud presents the landscape of our culture marked by an unavoidable impulse of aggression. As a consequence, he places destructive, antisocial and anticultural tendencies in all men, thus refusing “to reduce the contrast of human nature in social antitheses between established groups and outsider groups” (Costa, 2016, p. 1/4).

In the unfolding of these formulations, the line that separates “well-educated” and civilized citizens from barbarian, transgressive or marginalized individuals becomes a little more subtle.

Man’s natural aggressive impulse, that is, the hostility of each one against each one, is presented by Freud as the most powerful obstacle of culture<sup>6</sup>, since, as Costa (2016) points out, the formation of human communities demands the curtailment of rivalries between supposed peers.

To curtail these competitions, several cultural transformations have taken place throughout mankind’s history, in which the subject is now required to modulate the passions according to the current social framework, as well as increased self-control and consequent relaxation of aggressiveness exercised against the peer (Elias, 1939/1994).

In part, this was made possible because physical violence was no longer for everyone, but confined to “barracks”. Such modifications made daily life freer from sudden twists of luck. For this, monopolistic organizations of power started to stand guard at the margins of social life, as they control the individual’s conduct.

From now on, “Part of the tensions and passions that were earlier directly released in the struggle of Man and man, must now be worked out within the human being” (Elias, 1939/1994, p. 203). This is made possible by the development of *moral conscience* and the *feeling of guilt*, functions attributed to the psychic instance called *superego*<sup>7</sup> (Freud, 1930/2015).

It is from these developments that Freud defends the thesis about the existence of a *malaise* inherent in the social bond, which is evidenced by the contrasts between satisfaction and what the individual is forced to submit to because of demands of life in society. In the words of Freud (1930/2015): “Civilized man has

exchanged come part of his chances of happiness for a measure of security. (p. 131).

Furthermore, Freud’s theoretical reformulations over time result in the fact that this conflict starts to be seen as of a structural, unavoidable order. The forms of organization and control of social life are not, therefore, sufficient to suppress the decisive influence that physical violence (including the threat it emanates) exerts on the individuals’ lives, either aware of it or not.

In the text about the *malaise*, the idea of a possible safe domain of the drives is abandoned, coming to understand as necessary a kind of endless management of the conflict by the individual, “in the face of incurable helplessness” (Horst, 2016, p. 2/5).

## **Analysis of *Breaking Bad***

The work under analysis refers to the concept of *malaise* already in its initial plot, with Walter immersed in dramatic tension related to (non) compliance with social rules and violence.

At first, the protagonist can be seen as an example of the individual who, in exchange for security, accepts a less emotional and pleasant daily life, in which the containment of impulses takes a toll on him as *malaise*. This will become more evident below, with the analysis of some scenes.

Furthermore, it is not just from the plot that it is possible to weave dialogues with the theme; since the way in which the relationships between film elements in the series are engendered can also be related, from the opening shots, to issues related to the concept of *malaise*.

This assertion emerges from the film analysis that was carried out in the production of the dissertation from which this paper was extracted (François, 2018). To this end, we sought to list scenes that would enable a dialogue with the concepts discussed and, at the same time, think about possibilities of associative chains between scenes from different times of the work (either between scenes of the same episode or between different episodes and seasons). In an attempt to choose scenes that presented these and other peculiarities of the format of the series, the importance of the Pilot Episode was evidenced.

The following are fragments of the analysis carried out from this inaugural episode. Such fragments will be brought to demonstrate method and style, as well as for the presentation of some film elements and associative chains from which the conclusions of this study were drawn.

## **Analysis of the scene: *The desert***

The opening scene features three short shots (about two seconds each) of the desert landscape: one with cactuses in the foreground and rocky mountains in the background, and another two with mountains

6 Culture here is “a process... in the service of Eros, which aims at binding together single human individuals, then families, then tribes, races, nations, into one great unity, that of humanity” (Freud, 1930/2015, p. 142).

7 The superego is a Freudian proposition that makes up his *Second Theory of the Psychic Apparatus*, a consequence of the developments that the concept of *death drive* brought to his drive theory. This instance, as pointed out by Endo and Sousa (2015), while enabling a psychic alliance with culture, civilization, social pacts, laws and rules, is also responsible for the guilt, frustrations and demands that the subjects impose on themselves, many of them unattainable.

in the foreground. They are establishing shots, which reveal the environment in which the characters and the action will be inserted sequentially. The predominant colors are brown and green. There are off-screen noises of crickets and birds<sup>8</sup>.

Following, there is a deep blue sky low-angle shot, that is, the camera is below eye level and facing up. In this sequence, at the same time that we hear the noise of fabric in motion (rubbing against the air), an off-screen high-pitched sound starts<sup>9</sup>, which increases progressively while a pair of khaki pants “falls from the sky”. When the pants hit the desert road, we see them being run over by an RV. Almost at the same time, a non-diegetic frantic song begins, in which percussion beats become increasingly accelerated. The vehicle carries a hanger with a green shirt in the rearview mirror.

Here we have scenic elements that will accompany the audience throughout the series (becoming increasingly important): the desert, the RV, and the blue sky. There is also an emphasis on the clothes and their colors. In this scene, the pieces are not worn by the character. They appear even before him, preceded in order of appearance only by the elements of the landscape. Their coloring is similar to the desert colors (the pants are similar to the sand color and the shirt has a light green tone, like that of some vegetation). In addition, the camera angles stress the importance of both the scenography, revealed in long shot, and the scene objects, such as the vehicle and clothes.

On settings and colors, Thomson (2017) proposes that it is practically impossible to talk about *Breaking Bad* without seeing what he calls “scathing blue sky” or “oppressively blue sky.” As the author recalls, this color appears at moments and in crucial elements of the series. An example is the name of Walter’s wife, Skyler. He adds that this blue, in addition to the commonly exalted beauty of the skies on sunny days, can refer to something of a biting and oppressive nature, which interests our analytical perspective.

Blue is also the color of the methamphetamine crystal that Walter produces, which is a novelty (since methamphetamine is usually white), and it is inexplicable to the experts of the plot. Thomson (2017) explains that this could refer to a magical or demonic nature.

The colors are also present in the names of the characters Walter White and Jesse Pinkman. The reference to white in Walter’s surname, according to costume designer Kathleen Detoro, illustrates the emptiness that is sought to be associated with the

character at the beginning of the plot. Likewise, his initial costumes are conservative, with neutral colors. The change of colors throughout the series composes the arc of transformations that occurred with Walter (Thomson, 2017).

The pieces of clothing that we see falling and on the hanger, even before we see Walter, mark a point of transformation for the character. So, as he starts to show the first changes in behavior and produce methamphetamine, his costume gradually changes from neutral colors (such as khaki pants) to more vivid, saturated tones. From there, green (like the shirt) and blue tones enter his color palette.

Such colors, as mentioned, are also found in the desert, a setting that is used by a wide range of artistic and cinematographic works and is part of historical film locations, biblical stories, science fictions, futuristic works, and westerns. The western movies, by the way, are one of the great inspirations to *Breaking Bad*. In the series there are narrative elements and scenes that directly pay homage to some well-known works of the genre.

Thus, in *Breaking Bad* there is certain intent to produce a modern western, crossing the extensive Southwest deserts in the realization of a kind of renovation in the landscape and iconography.

Returning to the scenes, after the passage described, right after the “pants being run over,” Walter appears driving the RV, wearing underwear and a gas mask and looking worried at the boy in the passenger seat, who appears in reverse shot<sup>10</sup>, apparently unconscious. There is a noise of breaking glass and two bodies (people apparently unconscious) are shown in the back of the RV, which roll along the floor as the vehicle moves.

Next, in a long shot, we see the RV skidding, suggesting loss of control of the vehicle. Then, Walter is seen in profile, and a subjective camera angle (point-of-view shot)<sup>11</sup> puts us driving the vehicle along with Walter. Next, we start to see from a distance, through the vegetation, the vehicle moving quickly along the road. There is another close-up of Walter, who looks to the side, worried<sup>12</sup>. The music rhythm slows down a bit and there is a close-up of the blurry gas mask he seems to try to take away. The viewer also sees the blurry image from the subjective camera angle.

This is followed by alternations between subjective cameras that refer to Walter driving the RV with poor visibility and the vehicle skidding on the road. Then the RV is shown from the front, pulling off the road, going

8 Off-screen sounds are those not visible in the image, but which can be placed imaginarily in the time-space of the fiction shown. In this case, the sound is diegetic, that is, it can be inserted in the fictional universe, in the “world” suggested by the work.

9 “It emanates from an invisible source located in another space-time that is not represented on the screen; extradiegetic or heterodiegetic sound” (Vanoye & Goliot-Lété, 2012, p. 46).

10 “Reverse shot is part of the decoupage technique, assuming an alternation with the foreground, then called ‘shot’” (Aumont & Marie, 2006, p. 62).

11 “The subjective camera starts being the character, behaving according to their point of view and their movements” (Primeiro Filme, 2017).

12 This is when the camera is very close to the subject, so it takes up almost the entire scene (Primeiro Filme, 2017).

down a small bank and hitting a mound of earth. There is an abrupt pause in the music.

It is possible to observe, in the case of the scenes described above, how the music is used to reinforce the action on the screen, accentuating its rhythm, in addition to the use of a sound break, to mark a cut. The viewer can now slow down, take a breath, and try to understand who this guy is and what's going on with him.

In a long shot, we see desert dust around the car. The vehicle door opens, liquid runs from the inside. The man gets out of the vehicle, coughing and trying to rip off his mask. Then he puts on a pair of glasses, looks up and softly says "Oh my god!" and shouts angrily "Shit!" He throws the mask away, puts his hands on his head, and starts swearing.

Sirens are heard. The man is increasingly nervous. We see him putting on his shirt. The image from inside the car also reveals the young man lying on the dashboard, still unconscious. He enters the RV, takes a gun from one of the bodies and puts it in the back of his underwear. He goes to the front of the vehicle, pushes the unconscious man's head to reach the glove compartment, from where he takes documents and a camcorder. He gets out of the RV quickly, coughing.

At the sound of sirens, he points the camera at himself. Then, a shaky frontal close-up reveals the recording of what would be a last message for his wife and children.

When recording the message, Walter looks very emotional and at the same time nervous. At times, when he seems to be almost crying, he stops speaking for a few seconds.

By the content of the speech, it is possible to think that he is trying to justify himself for something he did, and say that he has not stopped thinking about the family. He also seems to imagine that will not be there to give explanations when the family learns things about him.

At the end of the message, Walter takes the gun out of his underwear, walks to the road, and points it to the direction from which cars with sirens are coming. The screen dims and the opening vignette of the show begins.

This man, showing a mixture of despair and fury, invokes what would be the ultimate symbols of a religion and then we watch him in a suicidal act (apparently) of confronting the law.

For a brief analysis of these two elements, religion and suicide, we seek the approach that Froemming (2016) makes in the text *O presente e a presença do mal-estar* [The present and the presence of malaise] on the dialogue established between Freud and Romand Rolland. The author points to a fragment of *Civilization and its Discontents*, in which Freud questions himself about the concept of "oceanic feeling," which would be, in Rolland's conception, the genuine source of religiosity, from which she observes that Freud:

ironizes in saying that such a position by Rolland is similar to the extravagant comfort offered to a suicidal subject, "out of this world we cannot fall", whose variation known today would be something like "stop the world I want to get off". (Froemming, 2016, p. 1/3)

Is this what we have in this scene, a man in his last appeal to his "father" for protection before he "stops the world and gets off"? Or do we watch him there, full of despair, in a manifestation of revolt and giving up any kind of comfort or protection?

## Discussion

Regardless of the answers, such questions are permeated by a presentation of character marked by helplessness. As noted by Freud (1930/2015), this feeling, evident in childhood, is preserved in the individuals' adulthood due to fear of the superior forces of fate.

It is worth noting that the production seems to reiterate this dimension of helplessness due to the camera angles and types of shot: alternating between extreme long shots and long shots, with close-ups and subjective cameras. The first ones (extreme long and long shots) make the subject in the scene seem small in relation to the environment, in relation to the "world" that the locations and the scenography represent; the other two (close-up and subjective cameras) allow for the production of intimacy between viewer and character. The character, in turn, gives signs of anguish and despair all the time.

Moreover, the desert landscape is highlighted by extensive long shots of New Mexico's desolate landscapes. Thus, this "additional character" and nothing arbitrary that is "the place of action" was there to symbolize, from the start, the "fight of man against nature" (Thomson, 2017, p. 158).

The desert can also, due to the landscape breadth and the extent to which there are no landmarks or civilizing buildings, refer to the indeterminate open, to our mismatched wandering, to the familiar stranger who inhabits us (Dunker, 2015). Thus, it is common for narratives to show subjects going to the deserts to do things that would not be possible in other settings.

In the desert, place of strange events and to escape from law, the individuals may not remember their names, according to the song *A horse with no name* says<sup>13</sup>, honored by the title of one of the episodes of the series (*3X02, Caballo sin nombre*).

It is precisely in this indeterminate open desert that Walter and Jesse decide to plunge into in the "most possible evasive" way inside their "mobile meth lab", built in an RV.

On the other hand, in *Breaking Bad* there are also locations that symbolize enclosures. Thus,

13 *A Horse with no name* is a single by British band *America*, released in 1971.

the presentation of Walter's routine shifts the character from one environment to another, in a home-to-work-to-the-other-work-to-home-again style.

This presentation of the routine takes place right after the opening vignette of the show, when we start watching a flashback sequence, which occupies most of this episode. In it, Walter appears in his family, work, and social context.

For this, there is a cut that starts in the couple's room, moves through the baby's room that he and his wife are waiting for, passes the family breakfast table and goes to the scenarios of Walter's two jobs: a school and a car wash. Later, the living room also appears, transformed into a surprise party scene for its 50<sup>th</sup> birthday.

More of these scenes are yet to come, but at this point it is possible to see a sequence of events in which Walter seems uncomfortable, upset or annoyed, although he hardly expresses it in words.

Along with diegetic features that accentuate annoyance, embarrassment and even humiliation, we have interesting camera sequences, performed at different times, in medium close-up or in close-up. This allows us to observe in detail the facial expressions performed by actor Bryan Craston, bringing us closer to some of his emotional reactions, even if they are not revealed yet through speech and more explicit actions.

In subsequent scenes, Walter discovers that he is suffering from lung cancer. Knowing the diagnosis, together with the problem of the lack of resources for treatment – which is neither financed by the State nor covered by the health plan that the family can afford – marks a turning point in history.

From there, we watch changes in Walter's behavior, whose unfolding lead to the scene in which he and Jesse produce, for the first time, their blue methamphetamine in the middle of the desert. Then, when they try to sell the drug to a pair of Latino drug traffickers Jesse previously did business with, they run into problems, and Walter, in an attempt to protect his life and Jesse's, carries out his first murder, using chemical substances of their laboratory as weapons.

The deaths of the characters Emilio and Krazy-8 are the first two of this journey that Jesse and Walter have just entered. From now on there will be more and more bodies and violence, and science will be the strongest weapon in our anti-heroes' arsenal. Each of them will react in their own way. Jesse will become "more mature" and to some extent stronger, but he will also become more melancholic and the feeling of guilt will appear in characterizing him as an evident and tormenting element. Walter, in turn, will progressively be characterized by a "destructive force" associated with a "dark ingenuity" (Thomson, 2017, p. 106).

As these characteristics become evident, Walter is moved from the place of the subject who "is in danger" to that of the subject who "is the danger," as he himself states to his wife (in episode 4X06, *Cornered*).

As familiar as we are with the characters, in *Breaking Bad* we are constantly led to brood in front of them, especially in front of the figure of Walter. And for this there is a considerable contribution of the innovative cinematography of the work, which offers viewers a strange and distorted view of reality that refers to the perspective of the Walter and Jesse's disturbing journey throughout the series.

## Final considerations

Summarizing our analyses, it is evident that *Breaking Bad* brings into play the issue of *malaise* through film resources that make up the place or space of the scene.

This is made possible, in part, because the aforementioned new age of television, from which the work comes, brings as one of its marks the enrichment and innovation of work with the film space. This exploration of the spatial dimension through formal resources present in the work makes it possible to deepen the relationship between the characters and the scenarios, which enables a very rich approach to symbolic aspects relating to the place of individuals in the worlds they inhabit.

Thus, it is the *malaise* in its spatial dimension, something that dialogues with the perspective brought by Dunker (2015), as the author points to an evident and direct connection, in the Freudian text, between the concepts of *malaise* and of the world (Welt).

Thus, *malaise* would be more related to an existential feeling of loss of place, to the real experience of being out of place, than to just an unpleasant feeling or a circumstantial fate (Dunker, 2015). Based on these formulations, Froemming (2016) observes that this concept of *malaise* must be demarcated as topological, something of the spatial order.

Under this look at the spaces, it is clear that, at the beginning of the plot, the narrative of Walter's perspective signaled the unbearable nature of an excess of social standards, determinations and enclosures. Jesse's perspective, on the other hand, points to the unsustainable char of wandering, of life on the sidelines. The construction of the character refers to a universe of outsiders for whom there is no place in public space. Finally, the evasion and drift in which both find themselves, despite the initial tone of adventure, are transformed into violent, dangerous and even deadly. As a common space, the construction of both seems to deal, in a way, with the search for a place that saves the subject from drift, without becoming claustrophobic for that.

Thus, *malaise* is interpreted as the impossibility of being, the denial of being, and not just the denial of well-being. These are individuals affected by this lack of belonging, by this "impossibility of a clearing when walking in the forest of life" (Dunker, 2015, p. 192), and by certain moral or psychological misery related to their position in the world of which they are part.

This moral and psychological misery, in the work, appears permeated by elements that refer to existential emptiness, transgression of social norms and violence. The transgressions, in Walter's trajectory, lead him from the position of loser to winner and, sequentially, transform him from victim to executioner.

Thomson (2017) observes that the tensions between winners and losers appear in the work in a socioeconomic context in which most Americans were losing, since *Breaking Bad* was launched in 2008, the height of the financial crisis that devastated the country and that would produce effects on the entire world economy.

The author states that, although there are not many references to the outside world, one cannot help noticing in the series reverberations of this period, which he characterizes as "American decline towards helplessness," in which "everything is wrong or dangerous" (Thomson, 2017, p. 9).

It is from this context that *Heisenberg*, Walter White's alter ego, emerges. He leads the viewer, starting

from identification with the "oppressed subject" by the modern world, through a journey of apparent cathartic potential, flirting with a certain passion for the real, through assertions of power and outbursts of violence (Žižek, 2003).

However, in the sequence, he transforms our hero into a more violent and immoral villain than all those criminals present in the work, typified, for the most part, with old clichés of villains, dark, scary and uncivilized. Thus, the "civilized" subject is more frightening than those who would represent the outsiders.

In a scenario in which it becomes increasingly common to find what is dangerous and threatening in the figure of the *other*, the *different*, the *foreigner*, as well as trying to isolate this "danger" through bars, condominiums, walls and borders, *Breaking Bad* puts on stage, through the hesitation of the place of the self, what is aggressive and disturbing in each one of us; it puts on stage this foreign family member (Freud, 1919/1996) who inhabits us.

### **Os desertos de *Breaking Bad*: sobre as novas séries televisivas e o mal-estar na cultura**

**Resumo:** As séries televisivas têm ocupado cada vez mais espaço na cultura, de forma que seus conteúdos incidem significativamente nas subjetividades. Este estudo aborda as séries dramáticas desta nova era da televisão, iniciada há aproximadamente duas décadas. Atenta-se para certo *mal-estar* evocado por essas obras, até então incomum na programação televisiva. Toma-se a série *Breaking Bad* como objeto de análise delimitado e utiliza-se como referencial a pesquisa psicanalítica, que olha para o cinema enquanto linguagem singular. Neste artigo são abordados os resultados obtidos a partir da articulação da série analisada ao conceito freudiano de *mal-estar na cultura*. Dessas reflexões, destaca-se a dimensão espacial, que é explorada em profusão pela obra audiovisual por meio de recursos formais e que aparece de forma propícia a evocar a questão do *mal-estar*.

**Palavras-chave:** séries televisivas, mal-estar (psicanálise), cinema, televisão.

### **Les déserts de *Breaking Bad* : sur la nouvelle série télévisée et le malaise dans la culture**

**Résumé :** Les séries télévisées occupent de plus en plus d'espace dans la culture et leurs contenus ont influencés considérablement les subjectivités. Cette étude porte sur les séries dramatiques de cette nouvelle ère de la télévision, qui a débuté il y a environ deux décennies. On souligne le malaise suscité par ces œuvres, jusqu'alors rares dans la programmation télévisuelle. Pour délimiter l'objet de l'analyse, nous prenons l'un d'entre eux – *Breaking Bad* –, et utilise la recherche psychanalytique, qui considère le cinéma comme une langage singulière, en tant que référence. Cet article traite des résultats obtenus à partir de l'articulation de la série analysé au concept Freudien de malaise dans la culture. De ces réflexions, la dimension spatiale est mise en évidence, exploitée à profusion par l'œuvre à travers des ressources formelles y présent et apparaît de manière propice pour évoquer la question du malaise.

**Mots-clés :** série télévisée, malaise (psychanalyse), Cinéma, télévision.

### **Los desiertos de *Breaking Bad*: sobre las nuevas series televisivas y el malestar en la cultura**

**Resumen:** Las series televisivas vienen ocupando cada vez más espacio en la cultura y sus contenidos inciden de modo significativo en las subjetividades. Este estudio trata las series dramáticas de esta nueva era de la televisión, que se inicia hace aproximadamente dos décadas. Se atenta para cierto *malestar* evocado por esas obras, hasta entonces inusual en la programación televisiva. Para delimitar el objeto de análisis se toma *Breaking Bad*; y se utiliza como referencial la investigación psicoanalítica que piensa el cine desde un lenguaje singular. En este artículo se abordan los resultados obtenidos a partir de la articulación al concepto freudiano de *malestar en la cultura*. De estas reflexiones, se destaca la dimensión espacial, que es explotada en profusión por medio de recursos formales presentes en la obra y que aparece de forma propicia al evocar la cuestión del malestar.

**Palabras clave:** series de televisión, malestar (psicoanálisis), cine, televisión.



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