BREAKING NARRATIVE:
NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY IN CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION

by

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Abstract

Emerging from the “quality TV” shows of the early 1980s, contemporary American television shows such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999 - 2007), *Lost* (ABC, 2004 - 2010), *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011 - ) and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008 - 2013) have been frequently praised by critics and scholars for their narrative complexity. However, often neither critics nor scholars define what narrative complexity specifically constitutes. That is to say, what are intricate plotlines? What distinguishes complex characters from “simple” ones? And in what ways do complex television narratives differ from complex feature films?

This study takes a cognition-based approach to the topic and discusses the AMC series *Breaking Bad* as one of the prime examples of narrative complexity in contemporary television. The series revolves around Walter White (Bryan Cranston), a fifty year old high-school chemistry teacher, who is diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer and decides to team up with a former student of his to produce methamphetamine in order to secure a financial future for his family before he dies. *Breaking Bad* frequently uses “puzzling” narrative devices such as flashbacks, flashforwards, time-jumps or cold opens and aligns its viewers with a main protagonist whose actions are often morally objectionable.

During the course of this study, which is primarily based on the works of theorists such as David Bordwell, Edward Branigan, Thomas Elsaesser, Murray Smith and Jason Mittell, I discuss how narration in visual media storytelling operates, what narrative complexity in the television medium constitutes, and how watching “Complex TV” has changed how viewers process television narratives on a cognitive level. In particular, I explore the ways in which contemporary television narratives have adopted trademarks of what Elsaesser has termed “mind-game” films and how engaging with complex characters over the course of several seasons of a series can
influence our understanding of the narrative as a whole. However, the study of “Complex TV” has only begun and this work is primarily supposed to generate more discussion about a narrative trend that has left its mark on the current “Golden Age of Television.”
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, O. Kroener. A version of chapter two was presented on June 6th, 2013 at the FSÁC – ACEC Annual Conference in Victoria, British Columbia.
Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii
Preface ................................................................................................................................. iv
Table of Contents ...................................................................................................................... v
List of Figures .......................................................................................................................... vi
Chapter One: Introduction ..................................................................................................... 1
Chapter Two: Narration & Narrative Complexity ................................................................. 12
Chapter Three: Television Narration & Narrative Complexity in Breaking Bad ............... 30
Chapter Four: Complex Characters ...................................................................................... 51
Chapter Five: Conclusion .................................................................................................... 70
Bibliography .......................................................................................................................... 79
List of Figures

Figure 1  External focalization in *Breaking Bad* .................................................................56
Figure 2  Walt contemplates helping Jane ............................................................................57
Figure 3  Walt reacts to Jane’s death ....................................................................................57
Chapter One: Introduction

The image fades in to establishing shots of a desert: We see cactuses, red rocks, and a shadow crossing over a hill. For the first few seconds there is no sound except for the wind and the birds. Finally, during a long shot of the clear blue sky, the soundtrack sets in as a pair of khaki-coloured pants fly in slow-motion into the frame. The camera pans down and follows them on their way to the ground. When they hit the ground, they get run over by an old Winnebago RV and with that, the image switches back to normal speed.

The soundtrack transforms from sparse, ambient sounds into a pulsating rhythm and all of a sudden we find ourselves in the middle of a chase sequence. The driver of the RV is wearing nothing except for a gasmask and his underpants. He frantically looks over to the unconscious young man sitting to his right, who is also wearing a gasmask and has bruises on his face. As the driver looks over his shoulder, we see that two bodies are rolling around on the camper floor, in what looks like a mix of brown liquid and blood. Apart from the bodies, blood-drenched dollar bills, and pieces of some sort of technical equipment are scattered over the floor of the camper. The sequence crosscuts between interior shots of the driver and exterior shots of the camper speeding down a dusty desert road. As the scene goes on, the editing becomes more rapid, which for the viewer adds a sense of confusion. A brief POV shot that puts the viewer in the driver’s position suggests that he is barely able to see anything under his gasmask. Consequently, he loses control of the vehicle and crashes into a bush next to the main road.

The music stops and for a moment there is complete silence. The audience is left with the image of the crashed camper, covered in a cloud of dust. The door opens and brown liquid runs

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1 Note: Throughout this work, I use the terms viewer and spectator to refer to an idealized common viewer. This approach is rooted in cognitive Film Studies. For example, Bordwell states that when watching a cinematic narrative unfold, viewers apply the same skills they have developed to make sense of the world in their everyday lives. He refers to this process as “folk psychology” (Bordwell, Film Futures 90).
out of it, followed by the driver. He jumps out of the RV, takes off his gasmask, and exchanges it for his glasses. Now we get our first full look at the mysterious driver. He reveals himself to be a short haired, middle aged man with a moustache. The driver, still only wearing glasses, underpants, and shoes and socks, nervously stumbles around in front of the camper. He throws away his gas mask, mumbles something indistinguishable, and grabs his head in despair. When he recognizes the sound of a siren in the near distance, he becomes even more nervous. A close-up of his face signals that he is desperately looking for a way out of his situation. He puts on his shirt, which was hung up on a coat hook attached to the car’s side mirror, and goes back into the camper. Back inside, the driver collects his wallet, a camcorder, tucks a handgun into the back of his underpants, and rushes out of the camper. He coughs and almost throws up afterwards, which signals to the viewer that he must have worn his gasmask for a reason. Nervously he tries to switch on the camcorder while the image switches from close-ups of him fumbling around with the device to long-shots that emphasize how bizarre the situation is: in the middle of the desert, a man is standing in his underwear in front of a crashed RV, attempting to switch on a camcorder while frantically muttering to himself: “Come on, come on, come on” (“Pilot”). Eventually the driver succeeds and the image cuts to footage that was supposedly captured by his camcorder. He starts talking into the camera:

    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. [He turns around, looking for the police] Goodbye. (“Pilot”)
With that, Walter White puts the camera down and places his wallet, open so it shows his ID, next to the camcorder in the dust. Breathing heavily, he pulls out his gun, leaves the crash site, and walks towards the main road. The music sets in as the approaching sirens grow louder and louder. Walt stands in the middle of the desert road, his back turned to the viewer and his shirt tucked into his underpants—ready to fight whatever may come his way. With a determined look on his face, he points his gun towards the sound of the approaching sirens and the image fades to black.

This cold open\(^2\) is how television audiences were introduced to *Breaking Bad* when the show first premiered on AMC in January of 2008. It throws viewers into the narrative without giving them a chance to orient themselves and confronts them with a narrative puzzle right from the start. There has been no setup for the initial chase sequence, the spectator does not know who the mysterious driver of the RV is, and the viewer is also left in the dark as to why the driver is only wearing underwear. As a result, most viewers will probably be confused by the beginning of this episode and struggle to bring the narrative information they are bombarded with into a coherent form. This deliberate deception of the audience points to a trend in contemporary American television: narrative complexity.

Since the early days of television, the television medium has passed through different phases. For example, in the time period from roughly 1947 to 1960, which is often referred to by critics and scholars as the “Golden Age of Television,” viewers could switch on their TVs and would find highbrow programmes such as *The Pulitzer Prize Playhouse* (ABC, 1950 - 1952) next to Shakespeare adaptations such as *Coriolanus* (CBS, 1951), *The Taming of the Shrew* (CBS, 1950) and *MacBeth* (CBS, 1951). Yet, as Robert J. Thompson notes, much of this seemingly

\(^2\) According to Coulthard, the cold open can be defined as a pre-credit teaser that is not necessarily or directly tied to the episode itself. Instead, it functions as an attraction on its own terms that is primarily supposed to generate the viewer’s interest (Coulthard n. pag.).
highbrow content was not as good as viewers remember it (Quality TV 12). He claims the fact that many viewers still recall the 1950s as the “Golden Age of Television” is mostly based on nostalgia and not on the actual quality of the programmes that aired during that time period.

Thompson asserts that the real renaissance of American television began in the 1980s with shows such as Hill Street Blues (NBC, 1981 - 1987) and St. Elsewhere (NBC, 1982 - 1988). When these shows originally aired, critics did not put on label on them. However, they still acknowledged that “a new type of programming was emerging that they thought was better, more sophisticated, and more artistic than the usual network fare.” (Thompson, Quality TV 12).

Thompson regards the era from the early 1980s to the mid 1990s as the origin of what he refers to as “quality TV.” He states that “quality TV” brought back art to a medium that had long been considered artless. “Quality TV” broke rules by taking traditional genres and transforming them3 or defining new narrative theory previously unexplored by television.4 Moreover, Thompson asserts that by the beginning of the 1990s, viewers knew what a “quality TV” show looked like as by then all the innovative elements that had come to define “quality TV”, even its unpredictability, had become predictable (Quality TV 16).

Thompson’s study on “quality TV” was first published in 1996. Since then, American television has entered what many critics and scholars consider as yet another golden age (Martin 9). By the beginning of the new millennium, producers and network executives had employed the trademarks of “quality TV” to more television shows than ever before. As a result, “quality TV” had become a super-genre, a formula unto itself.” (Thompson, Quality TV xvii). Among the programmes considered to be the forerunners of this third golden age of television were shows

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3 According to Thompson, Hill Street Blues did this with the cop show, St. Elsewhere with the doctor show, and Moonlighting (ABC, 1985 - 1989) with the detective show.
4 Examples for this include Twin Peaks (ABC, 1990 -1991) and thirtysomething (ABC, 1987 - 1991)

In terms of quality, many critics have referred to these contemporary television shows as being on par with cinema and literature (i.e. see Carey n. pag.) For example, one critic writes about *The Sopranos* that “from the moment it hit cable airwaves, [the show] was in the pantheon, but as it aged it deepened and grew, not only matching great filmed epics line for line and shot for shot but blooming into a work of literature” (Miller and Traiser n. pag.). Another critic claims that “when television history is written, little else will rival *The Wire*, a series of such extraordinary depth and ambition that it is, perhaps inevitably savoured only by an appreciative few” (Lowry n. pag.). In addition, through their critical and scholarly appreciation, this new generation of television shows has also brought prestige to the television channels producing them—mostly premium cable channels such as HBO, FX, AMC or Showtime, but since 2013 also the former video on demand streaming provider Netflix.\(^5\) Network slogans such as “Story Matters Here” (AMC), “There Is No Box” (FX), and “It’s Not TV, It’s HBO” (HBO) further indicate how significantly these post-network era television shows have shaped the identity of the cable networks.

Brett Martin notes that “not only were these new kinds of stories, they were told with a new kind of formal structure” (Martin 6). For example, on cable television, the seasons are usually shorter than they are on traditional networks. This is important because shorter seasons also mean less financial risk for the networks, which ultimately led to the creators of these shows having more creative freedom than ever before (Martin 6). According to Martin, the results are storytelling structures in which each episode can be seen as satisfying on its own, but also

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\(^5\) As of this writing, Netflix original series include *House of Cards* (2013 - ), *Hemlock Grove* (2013 - ), a fourth season of the previously cancelled FOX show *Arrested Development* (2003 - ) and *Orange is the New Black* (2013 - ).
functions as part of a season-long story arc that can be linked to the series as a whole (6). An example for this kind of structure is the widely praised HBO show *The Wire* in which each season focuses on a different institution of the American city. Moreover, this newly-found creative freedom allows the creators to tell their stories and develop their characters over the course of several seasons.

As previously mentioned, the changes in television as a narrative format are also rooted in changing production practices. According to Jason Mittell, creating an ongoing series that could possibly run for years is an entirely different process from producing a feature film (Mittell, *Complex TV* n. pag.). In feature films, the production passes through three segmented phases: pre-production (writing, rehearsing & planning), production (filming), and post-production (editing, special effects & sound mixing). In contrast, as a result of the serial format, in television production these phases frequently overlap, meaning usually while one episode is shooting, another one is still being written, while yet another one is already in post-production. The television production cycle requires oversight and management, which is a job that is usually attributed to the producers of a show and has lead to the common assumption that television is a “producer’s medium.” Mittell states that the role of the television producer has significantly changed over the last few decades. While in the past many prominent television producers also were the stars of the show (i.e. *I Love Lucy* [CBS, 1951 - 1957], *The Cosby Show* [NBC, 1984 - 1992], or more recently, *30 Rock* [NBC, 2006 - 2013]), in many contemporary television series the executive producer takes up the position of the head writer.

Of course, every television series is organized slightly differently, but there are certain standards that have developed over the years that are similar for most television shows (Mittell, *Complex TV* n. pag.). Typically, a television series is created by a writer or a group of writers, who then pitch it to a production studio, broadcast network or cable channel. If the series gets
picked up, a collaborative team of actors, designers, directors, and other technical crew is assembled. A pilot episode is produced and if the network executives are satisfied with the pilot, they have the option to order a whole season. Once a network has ordered a season, the creator hires a team of writers and producers to oversee the ongoing production. The creator usually takes over the role of executive-producer and head writer, which is unofficially often referred to as “showrunner.” Besides being the head writers on a show, showrunners are what directors are for feature films. They oversee the whole production and have the right to make the final decisions on every aspect of the production cycle. For example, Mittell states that in most television productions the editor creates an initial rough cut of an episode, then the director comes in to refine it, but ultimately it is the showrunner who works together with the editor to create the final cut of the episode (*Complex TV* n.pag.).

In addition, the writing process takes up a more central role in the television medium. While there is a lot of rotation when it comes to television directors, the writing staff is usually more stable and consists of six to twelve writers who work together in the so-called “writer’s room,” which Mittell refers to as “the creative nerve center of a show” (*Complex TV* n. pag.). The writing staff meets a few weeks before production starts in the writer’s room to map out season-long arcs, benchmarks, and goals, and decide on the narrative structure of the season/show. The next step in the writing process is that writers start to “break episodes,” meaning they map out the specific plots, story beats, and structure for each episode. During this phase of the writing process, the showrunner usually assigns episodes to his writers. That is to say, the writer works from what has been discussed in the writer’s room and turns it into a full screenplay. According to Mittell, the goal of a television writer is not to put their own stamp on a screenplay, but to create a draft that fits with the overall tone and style of the show while also adhering to the creative vision of the showrunner. Often, after a writer has finished a script, it returns to the
writer’s room where the other writers can give feedback and make suggestions for final changes before the production starts.

As previously mentioned, the changes in television production are significant for the current golden age of American television, and have forced critics and scholars to rethink their definition of “quality TV.” In addition, the creative freedom that many showrunners enjoy today has given rise to a narrative trend that previously had not been associated with the television medium: narrative complexity. One should note that anytime we label a series as “quality TV,” we make a value judgment whereas the term narrative complexity is more neutral as it primarily refers to the structural aspects of a series. Shows such as Lost (ABC, 2004 - 2010), Game of Thrones (HBO, 2011 - ), Mad Men (AMC, 2007- ), The Sopranos, The Wire (HBO, 2002 - 2008), Boardwalk Empire (HBO, 2010 - ), Justified (FX, 2010 - ), and Breaking Bad (AMC, 2008 - 2013) are frequently praised for their intricate plotlines and complex characters. Yet critics rarely go into detail when it comes to defining the terms related to narrative complexity. In other words, what makes a narrative complex in the first place? What distinguishes complex characters from “simple” ones? And, in what ways does narrative complexity in television differ from narrative complexity in feature films?

Mittell suggests that “at its most basic level, narrative complexity redefines episodic forms under the influence of serial narration—not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms, but a shifting balance,” and adds that “rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form, narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres [...].” (Complex TV n.pag.). While I do agree with Mittell that television as a medium is ideally suited for narrative complexity, I would argue that narrative complexity in television and cinema is primarily related to the structure of a narrative. I believe that, instead of taking a historical approach as many television studies have done, one has to take
a step back and look at how viewers process cinematic narratives on a cognitive level in order to understand what narrative complexity in contemporary television constitutes. As a result, throughout this work, I will look at narrative complexity in contemporary television from a Film Studies perspective. Taking a cognitive approach, I argue that in any form of visual media storytelling, narrative complexity is based on the way in which the narrative conveys knowledge to the viewer. That is to say, how a narrative arranges its narrative information for the viewer not only constitutes the viewer’s comprehension of the unfolding story, but it also determines the amount of cognitive effort that he or she has to employ to bring it into a coherent form. While the ways in which a narrative can juggle narrative information to misguide the viewer are basically infinite, I argue throughout this work that there are certain narrative techniques that have become synonymous with narrative complexity in contemporary television. For example, complex television narratives frequently employ specific narrative devices such as flashbacks, flash-forwards, time jumps, and cold opens and encourage viewers to engage with complex characters. However, this study will also focus on elements inherent to television as a narrative form (i.e. seriality) that might instigate narrative complexity.

While many contemporary television shows feature some complex narrative elements, the AMC show *Breaking Bad* encompasses a multiplicity of complex narrative devices and therefore is the perfect example for narrative complexity in contemporary television. In particular, the show repeatedly uses cold opens, flashbacks, and flash-forwards to disperse narrative information, often inserts narrative clues into the narrative that point to the resolution of specific plotlines, and aligns viewers with a morally objectionable protagonist. In that way, *Breaking Bad* not only accentuates the way in which the narrative is told, but also deliberately confuses its audience, thereby turning the story into a narrative puzzle for the viewer.
The series first premiered on AMC in January of 2008 and was created by Vince Gilligan⁶, who is also the showrunner of Breaking Bad. Prior to Breaking Bad, Gilligan has primarily worked as a writer and co-executive producer on The X-Files (FOX, 1993 - 2002), a show that has also frequently experimented with narrative structure (Delasara 41). Breaking Bad revolves around Walter White, a high school chemistry teacher in his early fifties, who lives with his wife Skyler (Anna Gunn) and his teenage son Walt Jr. (RJ Mitte) in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He is diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer and decides to team up with a former student of his to cook methamphetamine (also known as crystal meth) in order to secure a financial future for his family before he dies. Although this premise gets slightly reconfigured over the course of the show (which, as of this writing, is in its fifth and final season), this is the initial setup of Breaking Bad.

The first chapter of this study will function as an introduction to narrative theory and narrative complexity. It explores aspects that are crucial for the spectator’s understanding of the unfolding story: how filmic narratives convey knowledge to the viewer, how certain storytelling techniques can add to a narrative’s overall complexity, and how viewers engage with characters on film. It is supposed to give the viewer an understanding for how cinematic narration functions and provide them with a theoretical framework for the subsequent chapters in which the theories discussed in chapter one will be specifically applied to Breaking Bad.

Chapter two explores the ways in which television and cinema differ in terms of narrative format and structure, and specifically focuses on how narration in Breaking Bad functions. The chapter investigates how the structure of an episode or a season, the multiplicity of plotlines per episode, the inclusion of narrative clues into the plot, and the use of “puzzling” narrative devices (i.e. flash-forwards, flashbacks, cold opens) can add to the narrative complexity of a show.

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⁶ Gilligan formerly worked as a writer and co-executive producer on The X-Files (FOX, 1993 - 2002).
The third chapter concentrates on the ways in which the viewer engages with complex characters. More specifically, this chapter discusses Murray Smith’s structure of sympathy, which could be described as a theoretical measurement scale to determine the viewer’s level of engagement with a specific character, with regard to Walter White. The chapter explores how viewers engage with Walt during the course of the series. I argue that as the narrative progresses, engaging with Walt becomes puzzling for the viewer because his actions become increasingly morally objectionable, which makes it difficult for the viewer to sympathize with him. Yet as the narrative has closely aligned the viewer with Walt at the beginning of the series, the audience is still invested in what happens to him, even when he has turned into the villain of the series.

While so-called “mind-game,” “mind fuck,” or “puzzle films” are a recent cinematic trend that has already been extensively analyzed when it comes to feature films, this work will specifically explore what narrative complexity in contemporary television constitutes. In the early days of the television medium, rather linear, self-enclosed procedurals were the norm, but the post-network era has seen the emergence of more and more complex television narratives. By adopting trademarks of the mind-game film, these complex television narratives frequently misguide or deceive the audience. With this work I aim to explore what a complex television narrative is in the first place and how watching complex television shows has altered the ways in which viewers experience narratives on a cognitive level.
Chapter Two: Narration & Narrative Complexity

In this chapter, as a preliminary step to discussing narrative complexity with regard to *Breaking Bad*, I take a closer look at how narration in visual media works and identify what narrative elements constitute narrative complexity in the first place. Narration is inseparably tied to how spectators processes information and bring it into a coherent form on a cognitive level. Consequently, cognitive film theories, which are concerned with the thought processes and emotional reactions that come into effect anytime the viewer is exposed to a series of moving images, will provide the theoretical framework for this work.

In particular, I use the theories of David Bordwell, Edward Branigan, Murray Smith and Thomas Elsaesser to explore how narration in visual media operates. The first part of the chapter focuses on Bordwell’s and Branigan’s narrative theories as both theorists are primarily concerned with how filmic narration comes into being. Smith and Elsaesser, on the other hand, are more concerned with specific aspects of cinematic storytelling such as how the way in which spectators engage with fictional characters shapes their understanding of the narrative, and how narratives that adopt certain narrative devices can become a mind-game for the viewer. This means while the first part of the chapter will focus on narration in general, the second part of the chapter will specifically focus on how the ways in which a narrative distributes knowledge can make the narrative more complex and transform the viewing experience into a cognitive challenge for the viewer.

David Bordwell claims one of the main goals of any filmic narrative is that the viewer is able to comprehend the story. He states that “given a representation, the spectator processes [this representation] perpetually and elaborates it on the bases of schemas she or he has to hand” (93). That is to say, viewers use the information a narrative provides them with, process it on a cognitive level, and transform it into a coherent narrative. A common objection to this
cognitive approach to film is that one can never be sure how another person processes the same narrative information. In other words, we do not know if the person next to us understands the narrative the same way we do. Bordwell argues that examples from our everyday life prove this objection wrong. For example, he contends that if two people observe a driver who is drinking while driving and is unable to drive his car in a straight line, probably both observers would come to the conclusion that the driver must be driving under the influence (93). Although this example cannot be as easily applied to narrative theory as Bordwell makes it seem, he still has a point. Cognitive processes may be too complex to claim that two people are experiencing a narrative in exactly the same way, but there is a commonality in how viewers understand narratives and that commonality is what authors rely on when they are telling their story. Bordwell compares narration to helping viewers navigate their way through a building. He explains:

A narrative is like a building, which we can’t grasp all at once but must experience in time. We move from static spaces to open ones, peripheral areas to central ones – often by circuitous routes. That journey has been arranged, and sometimes wholly determined, by architectural design. Narration in any medium can usefully be thought of as governing our trajectory through the narrative. (96)

With this statement, Bordwell makes clear how much power the author has over the narration and emphasizes that it is not only the content that shapes a narrative, but also how narrative information is conveyed to the spectator. To further prove this point, he gives another example. He rearranges the structure of a sentence to demonstrate that with each rearrangement the meaning of that sentence changes. This example is supposed to make clear how important the structure of narrative information is for the way in which the viewer makes sense of the unfolding story on a cognitive level.
Bordwell also claims that any theory of filmic narration has to include matters of style because the way in which narrative events are arranged stylistically also relates to the way in which the audience understands the story (97). There are several options for a filmmaker to arrange a scene stylistically and each option will render the narrative events in a slightly different way. For example, if we imagine a scene depicting a conversation between two characters, a medium shot of them talking to each other would probably be the most obvious way to frame the scene. Yet the filmmaker could also frame the scene in a stylistically less conventional way by using only point of view shots, picture-in-picture shots or extreme close-ups, for example. In other words, the possibilities seem to be endless and whatever stylistic choice the director makes will affect the audience’s viewing experience.

Based on these observations, Bordwell forms his own definition of a filmic narrative. He refers to the Russian formalists by incorporating the terms *fabula*, “the story’s state of affairs and events” and *syuzhet*, “the arrangement of them in the narrative as we have it” into that definition (98). For instance, with regard to *Breaking Bad*, the *fabula* is what the viewer would consider to be the overall story of the show: Walter White’s chronological transformation from high school chemistry teacher to drug kingpin. The *syuzhet*, on the other hand, is how the narrative events are arranged within this larger narrative framework. Bordwell defines narration as “the process by which the film prompts the viewer to construct the ongoing *fabula* on the basis of *syuzhet* organization and stylistic patterning” (98). That is to say, the spectator constructs the narrative based on the arrangement of events and their stylistic presentation.

While this definition is closely tied to Bordwell’s claim that a narrative should always be comprehensible, not every narrative is supposed to be understood in the same way. Instead, filmmakers want to lead the audience through the story in a certain way. That way can involve diversions and blind alleys. Common examples for such diversions and blind alleys are
flashbacks, flash-forwards, cold opens or unmarked ellipses. For example, Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* (2000) misguides the viewer by basing the murder mystery on an unusual arrangement of the *syuzhet* (the events are arranged backwards, meaning *Memento* ends with a murder that chronologically takes place at the beginning of the *fabula*). Bordwell summarizes the function of the *syuzhet* as follows:

The *syuzhet* can juggle the order of *fabula* events, providing a flashback or flashforward. It can manipulate *fabula* duration, stretching out or compressing the time that story events consume. It can present simultaneous events successively (via crosscutting), and successive events simultaneously (through split screen or other devices). (99)

While an unusual arrangement of the *syuzhet* is a simple way to prevent the audience from gaining narrative information, it also affects how the viewer experiences the unfolding story on a cognitive level. To go back to the *Memento* example: arranging the events backwards is an effective way to conceal the identity of the murderer until the end of the movie, but watching a film that is arranged backwards also makes for a unique viewing experience. Bordwell elaborates on the effects of rearranging the *syuzhet* by stating:

A flashback isn’t just an abstract rearrangement of story incidents. Its function is to trigger interest in finding out what led to what we see. [...] *Curiosity* stems from past events: What led up to what we’re seeing now? *Suspense* points us forward: What will happen next? *Surprise* foils our expectations and demands that we find alternative explanations for what has happened. *Syuzhet* arrangements of events arouse and fulfill these cognition-based emotions. (100)

With this quote, Bordwell states that an unusual arrangement of the *syuzhet* is not only an effective way to conceal information from the spectator, but also affects how the audience engages with the narrative. An unusual arrangement of the *syuzhet* can trigger curiosity, surprise,
and suspense in the viewer, even in scenes that on their own would not have triggered those emotions if the *syuzhet* had been arranged in a more conventional way.

Apart from these *syuzhet*-based options to influence the viewer’s understanding of a story, filmmakers also have a variety of stylistic options such as point-of-view shots, voice over commentary, and sound at their disposal to guide viewers through the narrative—most of which are unique to the medium. Bordwell states that “if two fabula events are occurring simultaneously, you can present them successively or simultaneously in the *syuzhet* [whereas] literature is ineluctably successive (words follow one another), and on the page you can’t strictly show two things happening at the same time” (100). What Bordwell describes here relates to the way in which filmic narratives convey knowledge to the viewer. It is significant for visual media storytelling that two events can literally happen at the same time because filmmakers often use this technique to convey a lot of narrative information in a limited amount of time. *Syuzhet* arrangement and stylistic patterning determine how much the viewer effectively knows as they can either limit our level of knowledge or give us access to more information. Referring to how narratives attach viewers to a particular character or a number of characters, Bordwell notes:

A common pattern of cinematic narration is to attach us to one character for a scene or two, then move to another character’s range of knowledge, creating a sort of shifting restrictiveness. Cinematic narration can also be more less objective, remaining resolutely on the ‘outside’ or pulling us into character’s minds via memories, dreams or imaginings.

(99)

That is to say, a film’s style and *syuzhet* arrangement are often influenced by the filmmaker’s decision to focus on a particular character or shift focus between various characters. Bordwell further emphasizes that every narrative depends on uncertainties and the interplay among characters’ versus spectator’s knowledge as these obstructive levels of knowledge shape the
curiosity, suspense, and surprise the spectator feels when engaging with the story. Although Bordwell recognizes the significance of narrative uncertainties, they are for him only one important aspect of storytelling, whereas Branigan regards the “disparities of knowledge” as the foundation for any form of narration.

Branigan distinguishes between two fundamental concepts that are required to analyze narration—how an event is presented and what is presented. According to Branigan, asking only what questions reduces a narrative to an object or end result of some mechanism while the more important how questions are concerned with the audience’s comprehension of the story and the characters. Branigan states that we can differentiate between procedural knowledge (related to how a narrative works) and declarative knowledge (related to what is actually shown on screen) (65). Both of these knowledge systems are simultaneously at work anytime the viewer watches a narrative unfold.

The disparities of knowledge are fundamental for narration because “narration comes into being when knowledge is unevenly distributed—when there is a disturbance or disruption in the field of knowledge” (Branigan 66). This means that in a hypothetical universe, where all knowledge would be evenly distributed and thus every observer is all knowing, narration would not be possible. As Branigan puts it, in order for there to be narration, there needs to be “a subject in an asymmetrical relationship with an object” (66). Or, in other words, in order for there to be narration, someone needs to know more than someone else. This asymmetrical relationship between subject and object can function on multiple levels as the subject can either be the spectator, the narrator, the author, a character in the story, or someone else entirely.

While one can imagine several different scenarios for an asymmetrical distribution of knowledge within a narrative (i.e. the spectator could know more than a character in the story, a character in the story could know more than the spectator), it seems impossible for the viewer to
imagine a situation where the spectator knows more than the author. Branigan elaborates on the asymmetrical distribution of knowledge when he refers to melodramas and soap operas. He claims that these narrative forms are filled with characters that spy upon, eavesdrop, and gossip about other characters. This produces a chain of tellings and retellings of the same narrative event. Each retelling can provoke different reactions to the same narrative event (i.e. outrage, sympathy, envy, puzzlement, and scheming). Melodramas and soap operas often exhaust the possible reactions to a narrative event by filtering them through different characters that all dispose of different levels of knowledge (67). This means the level of knowledge a character within a narrative possesses can significantly shape the story—in particular in genres where not primarily the narrative events, but the impact they have on the characters is most important.

Moreover, Branigan suggests that viewers can easily be overwhelmed the amount of narrative information they receive. He gives the example of a telephone conversation between a character A and B to emphasize this. As previously mentioned, cinematic narratives offer filmmakers a variety of ways in which a scene can be depicted (in terms of stylistic patterning and syuzhet arrangement), all of which result in a different viewing experience for the spectator. For example, “non-character knowledge” like “a musical chord coupled with the expression on a character’s face that ‘tells’ us all we need to know; a ‘tell-tale’ glance; or, a narrator’s whispered commentary on what B must be saying on the telephone to A,” all factor into how viewers perceive an event within a story (Branigan 71). Consequently, because audiences are sensitive to the ways in which knowledge is conveyed to them and can easily be overwhelmed by an excess of narrative information, they create so-called “hierarchies of knowledge” for themselves. Branigan suggests that creating these hierarchies of knowledge helps viewers to put the cluster of narrative information they are bombarded with in order. He states:
It should be clear from previous examples that the problem of describing narration becomes increasingly complex as one adds variables associated with character action, \textit{mise-en-scène}, editing and dialogue, and considers their change \textit{through time}. One must also expand the notion of a spectator’s ‘knowledge’ beyond immediate ‘seeing’ to include various effects produced by the sound track, our \textit{memory} of previous scenes, anticipated pleasure or anxiety, generic and cultural expectations, and so forth. Thus the knowledge we acquire need not coincide with ‘visual’ forms of knowledge nor on-screen knowledge even in simple cases. (72)

One important function of the hierarchies of knowledge is that the higher levels of the narrative are often concealed from the spectator. This means certain aspects of the narrative are hidden from the viewer to delay the end of the story. The concealment of these aspects is possible because the viewer only has access to the diegesis and therefore has to rely on “‘less knowledgeable’ agencies (e.g. characters) at appropriate moments” (Branigan 74). That is to say, the viewer is, to a certain extent, supposed to be misled by these less knowledgeable agencies. Discussing the hierarchies of knowledge also means discussing “the organization of a group of disparities” (Branigan 74). With “a group of disparities,” Branigan refers to the characters of a narrative as each character disposes of a different degree of knowledge. He uses D.W. Griffith’s \textit{The Girl and Her Trust} (1912) as an example. In this short from the early days of cinema, two tramps assault a telegraph office with the plan to steal money from a train. Before the tramps manage to enter the office, the telegraph girl Grace informs another train station about their plan which leads to the tramps’ capture at the end of the story. For \textit{The Girl and Her Trust}, Branigan organizes the disparities of knowledge as follows:
1. Spectator
2. Tramps (early events)
3. Grace
4. Tramps (later events)
5. Hero (Branigan 74)

In terms of knowledge distribution, this narrative puts the viewer in a superior position as throughout *The Girl and Her Trust*, the viewer knows more than any of the characters. More importantly, Branigan suggests that the way in which any narrative disperses knowledge results in a specific emotional response from the viewer. According to Branigan, there are three categories to which the distribution of knowledge and the viewer’s emotional reaction correspond:

- Spectator > Character: suspense
- Spectator = Character: mystery
- Spectator < Character: surprise (75)

This diagram gives an overview of possible configurations of knowledge distribution and puts them in relation to the emotional effect they have on the viewer. Although it looks fairly simple, apparently even such renowned filmmakers as Alfred Hitchcock have modelled their films after it (Branigan 75). However, these three categories should only be regarded as broad categories as the viewer’s emotional response to a narrative has presumably more facets than the few that are suggested here. Ultimately, Branigan defines narration as the process through which the viewer acquires knowledge within a narrative. This acquisition of knowledge is closely tied those who are in the position to know. With “those who are in the position to know,” Branigan refers to the characters within a story as every character disposes of a different level of knowledge (76).
The way in which both Bordwell and Branigan define cinematic narration makes clear that narration in visual media storytelling is always tied to how knowledge is conveyed to the viewer. While in Bordwell’s definition of narration the distribution of knowledge is only an underlying factor, for Branigan it is the single most important aspect. As a result, one has to consider the order of a narrative’s syuzhet, the way in which narrative information is filtered through a specific character, and a narrative’s audiovisual style as different ways to arrange knowledge for the audience. While Bordwell and Branigan are first and foremost interested in how narration comes into effect, with his theory of the mind-game film, Thomas Elasaesser goes one step further because he explores at what point a narrative becomes a cognitive challenge for the viewer.

While most viewers might not immediately associate contemporary television narratives with Elsaesser’s theory, I argue that Breaking Bad includes many of the trademarks that Elsaesser attributes to the mind-game film. First and foremost, mind-game films involve some kind of puzzle, which means misleading and/or disorienting the spectator are key elements of these narratives. As previously mentioned, a common technique to mislead or disorient viewers is to withhold narrative information from them. This enables mind-game films to trick or surprise the audience (often through plot twists at the end of the narrative). One key difference that Elsaesser identifies when comparing mind-game films to detective films or, more generally speaking, murder mysteries is that while the narrative as a whole is still coherent, mind-game films often feature narrative details that do not add up. While earlier examples of suspense cinema can be regarded as the origins of the mind-game film (such as the works of Fritz Lang, Alfred Hitchcock, Luis Buñuel, and Alain Resnais), these films usually only mislead or disorient the viewer for the duration of the narrative. This means once the film ends all loose ends have been resolved. With mind-game films this is not always the case. Instead, these films often feature
narrative clues that are purposely left unresolved and in that way change how the viewer engages with the narrative.

According to Elsaesser, recent cinematic storytelling has become more “intricate, complex and unsettling,” a trend that is not only found in European auteur or art films but also in “mainstream cinema, event-movies/blockbusters, indie films, not forgetting (HBO-financed) television” (19). Mind-game films are discussed among narratologists because through their use of features such as “single or multiple diegesis, unreliable narration, and narratives, embedded or ‘nested’ (story-within-story/film-within-film) narratives, and frame-tales that reverse what is inside the frame” they call attention to how the narrative is told (19). This means we have to distinguish between mind-game film plot mechanics such as the motifs Elsaesser lists and narrative devices that directly affect the arrangement of the *syuzhet*. The latter make the narrative more ‘puzzling’ for the audience because the viewer has to put in more cognitive effort in order to bring the narrative information she or he receives into a coherent form. In addition, by applying a variety of narrative devices that are supposed to confuse or mislead the viewer, mind-game films alter the relationship between spectator and text. As Elsaesser notes:

Mind-game films at the narrative level, offer—with their plot twists and narrational double-takes—a range of strategies that could be summarized by saying that they suspend the common contract between the film and its viewers, which is that films do not ‘lie’ to the spectator, but are truthful and self-consistent within the premises of their diegetic worlds, that permit, of course, ‘virtual’ worlds, impossible situations and improbable events. (19 - 20)

According to Elsaesser, many theorists including David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Murray Smith, regard mind-game films as a phenomenon that can be regulated by extending narrative theory and thereby treating it as business as usual (Elsaesser 21). Yet approaching
mind-game films from this point of view is trying to solve the puzzle without acknowledging that the author intended the spectator to experience the narrative in a different way. Moreover, attempting to categorize mind-game films into an already existing scheme disregards that how we define the term narrative is constantly evolving. Elsaesser suggests that instead of regarding narratives as pre-structured schemes, viewers should consider regarding them as databases that provide them with the tools to form their own narratives (quite similar to web-browsing or playing videogames). From this point of view, mind-game films (or, more generally, complex narratives) become a product of our time because to be modern, is to “remain flexible, adaptive, and interactive, and above all, to know ‘the rules of the game’” (34). As an example, Elsaesser discusses watching an episode of *Dallas* versus watching an episode of *The Sopranos*. Whereas *Dallas* is rather linear, repetitive and thus, easy to understand, watching *The Sopranos* can at times become a challenge for the viewer’s cognitive skills because she or he has to keep track of a wide array of characters and multiple plotlines per episode. According to Elsaesser, for contemporary cinema the contract between spectator and film is not solely based on “ocular verification, identification, voyeuristic perspectivism, and ‘spectatorship’ as such” but also on the rules that make spectatorship possible in the first place (37). In calling attention to the “rules of the game,” these narratives test and challenge the audience while also providing them with a different viewing experience.

While Bordwell and Branigan explain how filmic narration functions, explore how viewers make sense of the unfolding story on a cognitive level, and Elsaesser defines the narrative elements that transform a narrative into a cognitive challenge for the audience, none of them discuss in detail how the way in which viewers emotionally respond to what they see on screen influences their understanding of a narrative. Thus in order to understand how the viewer’s
emotional reaction to a narrative changes how she or he processes it on a cognitive level, one has to take a closer look at how viewers engage with characters in filmic narratives.

Murray Smith states that narration, as the ultimate organizer of the text, makes the viewer able to engage with fictional characters in the first place. He introduces three major questions that function as the backdrop of his theory: How does a narrative generate the characters on which it depends? What is the result of ‘filtering’ a narrative through a specific character? And how does the attraction or repulsion we feel towards a specific character affect our understanding of the narrative? (75) Smith sees a system at work that he labels the structure of sympathy. Within this system, one can distinguish between three core components, “recognition,” “alignment,” and “allegiance”. These three components can be regarded as different levels of relating to a character. Essentially, this makes the structure of sympathy a more differentiated model of what we commonly refer to as identifying with a character. In addition, by avoiding the term “identification,” Smith sets his theory apart from other theoretical frameworks in which identification constitutes a prominent element such as feminism or psychoanalysis, for example. Elaborating on the structure of sympathy, Smith asserts:

In this system, spectators construct characters (a process I refer to as recognition).
Spectators are also provided with visual and aural information more or less congruent with that available to characters, and so are placed in a certain structure of alignment with characters. In addition, spectators evaluate characters on the basis of the values they embody, and hence form more-or-less sympathetic or more-or-less antipathetic allegiances with them. (75)

What is remarkable about the structure of sympathy is that it is not tied to moral judgements. For example, when stating that we identify with a particular character, this already implies that we feel sympathetic towards that character whereas the term allegiance removes any moral
implications. However, while the structure of sympathy can be applied to narratives of any genre, not every narrative provides the spectator with equally complex characters. For example, viewers are more likely to find complex characters in melodramas than in action films. Moreover, one can assume that for narratives that are more character and less plot-driven, the way in which viewers engage with the characters also becomes more important for their understanding of the unfolding story.

To further set apart his theory from other character-based narrative theories, Smith makes clear that instead of only engaging with one particular character, the viewer can engage with various characters as she or he watches the narrative unfold. The number of characters the viewer can engage with differs from narrative to narrative. While some narratives only feature a limited number of characters, others feature a multiplicity of characters, which automatically translates to more options for engagement for the viewer.

As previously mentioned, narrative events are often filtered or focalized through specific characters. Consequently, looking at the ways in which viewers engage with fictional characters on an emotional level can be crucial for our understanding of a narrative. When engaging with a character, viewers can either lose themselves in the protagonist—meaning that for the duration of the narrative, they imagine being that person—or they can imagine what a person in the protagonist’s situation would feel like. The third option for engagement that spectators have is to imagine themselves in the same situation as the person on screen. According to Smith, the way in which viewers engage with characters on film is usually a combination of these three options. For example, at times they might imagine being the main character while at other times they might only imagine themselves in the same situation as the protagonist. Ultimately, whatever option for engagement viewers consciously or subconsciously choose will alter how they emotionally react to a character. The structure of sympathy is not bound to one of these options and should be
regarded as a bridge between the spectator and the text because it emphasizes how the text produces the conditions for different levels of engagement for the viewer.

Smith asserts that recognition, the first aspect of the structure of sympathy, alludes to how the viewer constructs a character in his or her mind. It refers to how spectators attribute the bodies they see on screen to a particular character. Smith states that although viewers know that the characters they seen on screen are fictional, they still expect them to behave like a real person. As he notes, “just as persons in the real world may be complex or entertain conflicting beliefs, so may characters; but as with persons, such internal contradictions are perceived against the ground of (at least) bodily discreteness and continuity” (Smith 82). While recognition is often regarded as obvious, it makes sense that as a preliminary step viewers have to perceive a character as a continuous whole before they are able to align themselves with that character.

Alignment is the process through which the spectator is put into relation with a character. This process is quite similar to the literary notion of ‘focalization’ and indicates to what degree the narrative is told from a particular character’s point of view. Alignment can be divided into “spatio-temporal attachment” and “subjective access.” While spatio-temporal attachment refers to the amount of time the narration is restricted to the actions of a specific character, subjective access refers to the level of access the narrative grants the spectator to what a particular character thinks or feels. During the course of a narrative, viewers usually get aligned with various characters that each dispose of a different level of subjective access. Combined, spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access “control the apportioning of knowledge among characters and the spectator [and] the systematic regulation of narrative knowledge results in a structure of alignment” (Smith 83). That is to say, alignment is also closely related to the disparities of knowledge. For example, it will have an impact on the audience’s comprehension of the story if they are closely aligned with one particular character. The same can be said about subjective
access as seeing a narrative unfold from a subjective point of view will also influence how the viewer understands the story.

Allegiance, arguably the most important aspect of the structure of sympathy, refers to the spectator’s moral evaluation of fictional characters and is probably closest to what we commonly refer to as identification. Once viewers have what they take to be “reliable access to the character’s state of mind” and an “understanding of the character’s actions,” they are able to “morally [evaluate] the character on the basis of this knowledge” (Smith 84). While watching the narrative unfold, spectators constantly rank and organize characters according to this moral evaluation in a system of preference. For example, if viewers are angry or outraged at a character’s actions, they memorize this as undesirable behaviour and take it into consideration for their moral evaluation. Allegiance differs from recognition and alignment in that it involves an emotional response on the spectator’s side.

While recognition and alignment refer to recognizing a character and getting aligned with him or her, allegiance involves taking into consideration everything we know about a character and making a moral judgement. Depending on the narrative, this can become rather complex as aspects such as character action, iconography, and even the style of a narrative factor into the viewer’s moral evaluation of a character. Recognition and alignment are closely tied to allegiance because the viewer could, for example, recognize the facial expressions or gestures of a character as angry, happy or nervous, and based on that recognition form an allegiance with him or her. Thus allegiance has to be seen as the end result of a variety of processes.

As Smith puts it, the viewer has to “understand the narrative situation, including the interests, traits and states of the characters” in order for allegiance to occur (85). The traits of a character neither have to be complete nor immutable in order for the viewers to form an allegiance with that character; viewers only have to be convinced that the narrative has given
them a basis for their moral evaluation. However, if viewers categorize a character as sympathetic, this does not necessarily mean that they inhabit this character’s state of mind, it only means that they feel they understand the character and the narrative context well enough “to respond emotionally in a manner appropriate to both the evaluation and the context of the action” (Smith 86).

While it is not clear if on a cognitive level every viewer understands a narrative in a similar way, Bordwell argues that there is at least a commonality in how viewers process narrative information, which is what filmmakers rely on when they tell their story. In addition, according to Branigan, any form of narration is based on the disparities of knowledge and it is crucial for the spectator’s understanding of a story how the knowledge she or he receives is conditioned. For example, *syuzhet* arrangement and stylistic patterning do not only influence how viewers process a narrative on a cognitive level, but also have an effect on their viewing experience (i.e. the audience will experience a narrative differently if it is only told in flashbacks or slow-motion). Mind-game films specifically utilize on this aspect of visual media storytelling. They frequently misguide or deceive their viewers by integrating plot twists, surprise endings, narrative clues, and narrative devices that directly affect the arrangement of the *syuzhet* into their narrative. Moreover, as Smith suggests, how viewers react to fictional characters also adds to the narrative complexity of a narrative. For example, if the spectator is closely aligned with a particular character and forms an allegiance with that character, this also has an impact on how she or he emotionally responds to the narrative and makes sense of it.

However, while these cognitive narrative theories give us an understanding of how narration comes into being, how viewers process narrative information on a cognitive level, how engaging with fictional characters can influence the viewer’s understanding of a narrative, and how mind-game films can become a cognitive challenge for the spectator, they do not exactly
define what a complex television narrative constitutes. This originates from the fact that narrative complexity in contemporary television in large part stems from narrative elements that are inherent to the television medium.
Chapter Three:

Television Narration & Narrative Complexity in *Breaking Bad*

While television and cinematic narratives are in many ways comparable, they probably differ most notably in the way their respective narratives are arranged—meaning while the *fabula* of a TV show can be similar to the *fabula* of a feature film, the arrangement of the *syuzhet* will inevitably differ. In contemporary cinema, franchises or sequels (recent examples include the *Twilight* series [2008 - 2012], the *Harry Potter* films [2001 - 2011], *The Lord of the Rings* saga [2001 - 2003] or the *Marvel* films [2008 - ]) are becoming more common, yet feature films usually tell a self-enclosed story whereas many television series are told in serial form. The main difference between the procedural and the serial is that serials tell a continuous story that advances on a weekly basis whereas procedurals consist of several stand-alone episodes (K.Thompson 101).

Sitcoms (i.e. *The Cosby Show* [NBC, 1984 – 1992], *Friends* [NBC, 1994 – 2002]) and police procedurals (i.e. *CSI* [2000 - ], *Law & Order* [1990 - 2010]) are the prime examples for the procedural format. For example, police procedurals generally start out with some sort of crime (usually murder) and then follow an investigator who collects clues that will eventually lead him/her to the arrest of the culprit. Usually, the crime is solved within one episode, allowing the protagonist to proceed to the next case in the following episode; this is why police procedurals are often referred to as “case of the week” shows. To a certain extent, procedurals reset the events with every new episode because characters do not develop over the course of the series and, in extreme cases, do not even seem to remember past events of the show. This means each episode could exist completely separated from the rest of the series. It should also be noted that nowadays many procedurals incorporate elements of the serial into their narrative (i.e. some shows feature relationships that develop over the course of the show). As a result, shows that one would
consider procedurals in the strictest sense have become a rarity. When it comes to attracting new viewers, the advantage of the procedural is that viewers can tune in at any given point of the series without getting lost in the plot. Thus, in comparison to serials, procedurals might be more likely to attract new viewers—although in recent years critics have argued that once viewers have started watching a serial, they are more likely to tune in on a weekly basis as they become intrigued by the continuous storyline.

In its essential form, the serial tells one continuous story over the course of several episodes or seasons of a show, which substantially alters they way in which we process the narrative (K. Thompson 59). Probably the most prominent subgenre of the serial is the soap opera, in which we follow the daily lives of a manageable number of characters who are intertwined in several romantic relationships. It is typical for soap operas or, serials in general, to focus more on relationships and less on action because the narrative events are not as important as the impact they have on the characters. TV scholar Jason Mittell notes:

> [...] the narrative events of serial dramas traditionally focus more upon relationship changes than the chains of cause-and-effect actions that are typical episodic procedural dramas or sitcoms; when soap operas do feature narrative events like murders, accidents, and schemes, they are typically narrated so that viewers focus upon the ripple effects any given event has upon the community more than suspense over what may happen next.

*(Film and Television Narrative 164)*

While in *Breaking Bad* narrative events are occasionally used to generate suspense over what might happen next, they first and foremost take place to initiate the ripple effects Mittell refers to. In that way, *Breaking Bad* functions similarly to melodramas or soap operas as it significantly relies on what Branigan has termed as the disparities of knowledge. That is to say, the narrative events in *Breaking Bad* are often filtered through different characters that each dispose of
different levels of knowledge. This also coincides with *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan’s concept of the show:

> The writers and I love the idea of revisiting previous moments in the show because we love the idea that all actions have consequences. We know that in our day-to-day lives, but very often in television storytelling characters say things or they do things and a particular episode ends and there's not necessarily much in the way of resonance. On this show, we very much like a character's actions to have repercussions in ways that we identify with in real life. (Neuman, “Vince Gilligan Answers Fan Questions (Part I)” n. pag.)

Some important events in *Breaking Bad* (i.e. Walt’s poisoning of Brock at end of season four) take place completely off-screen which further emphasizes that it is not so much the events but the effects they have on the characters that are crucial to the show’s narrative. In addition, serial narratives often feature so-called cliffhangers. A cliffhanger is an unforeseen plot development that gets introduced at a pivotal point of an episode in order to trigger the audience’s curiosity. For example, it could be a surprising revelation about a character or a storyline that gets introduced right at the end of an episode. While cliffhangers do not always have to be big revelatory moments, there is a trend for “bigger” cliffhangers to occur in the season finale of a show as the writers want to make sure that viewers are still invested in the series’ narrative when it returns almost a year later (K. Thompson 97).

With regard to how serial narratives function, Mittell explains that once “serial storylines do resolve, they are often replaced with even more suspenseful or engrossing narrative enigmas to keep viewers watching” (*Film and Television Narrative* 164). This means a crucial difference between serials and procedurals is that serials deny their viewers a sense of closure. Leaving the audience with loose ends influences how viewers experience the narrative on a cognitive level. It
can become challenging for the viewer because some serial narratives provide us with narrative clues without resolving them for several seasons. An extreme example for this technique is *Lost*, a show in which solving the mystery becomes a substantial part of the viewing experience.

Mittell describes the experience of watching *Lost* as follows:

The internal norms of *Lost*’s complex chronology and focalization require a highly active mode of cognitive engagement to comprehend its long-form narrative, as each episode adds new revelations to the show’s central enigma while opening up new mysteries concerning both past and future events. Viewers are expected to pore over minutiae from each episode to piece clues about larger narrative mysteries and conspiracies. *(Film and Television Narrative 170)*

While *Breaking Bad*’s narrative does not rely as much on a central mystery as *Lost* does, Mittell’s assessment of *Lost* (2004 - 2010) still applies to *Breaking Bad* as the show equally features narrative clues concerning past and future events (the cold opens at the beginning of each episode come to mind) and also requires an active mode of cognitive engagement to comprehend the long-form narrative. This means although in *Breaking Bad* the narrative clues do not lead up to the resolution of a particular mystery (like they do in *Twin Peaks* [1990 - 1991], *Lost* or, more recently, *The Killing* [2011 - ]⁷), they still pile up in our subconscious mind and with that influence our viewing experience.

In the past, it seemed to be fairly easy to distinguish between procedurals and serials, but many modern television narratives exist as hybrids of the two formats. While there are examples of past TV shows that could also be regarded hybrids (i.e. *Babylon 5* [1994 - 1998], *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* [1993 - 1999], *The X-Files* [1993 - 2002]), when they first aired, these shows were still exceptions to the norm. Today an increasing number of shows incorporate aspects of

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⁷ based on the Scandinavian television series *Forbrydelsen* (2007 - 2012)
both formats into their narrative, albeit to various degrees. While we might regard *The Wire, Boardwalk Empire* (2010 - ) or *Game of Thrones* (2011 - ) as serials in the strictest sense because they primarily feature plotlines that span several episodes, or even several seasons, classifying shows like *Justified* (2010 - ) or *Sons of Anarchy* (2008 - ) becomes more difficult as these shows incorporate stand alone episodes into their continuous storylines. The same is true for *The Sopranos, Mad Men* (2007 - ), *The Walking Dead* (2010 - ) as well as *Breaking Bad*. For example, the main storyline of *The Walking Dead* follows a group of survivors who, after the outbreak of a virus that has turned the majority of the world population into zombies, struggle for survival. This means while the overall storyline is about the group’s struggle for survival, the single episodes are concerned with specific problems like the group having to find shelter and supplies, or simply moving safely from point A to point B. With that, the episodes become part of an overarching storyline while still bearing resemblance to the procedural format. Similarly, while overall *Breaking Bad* is “a story about a man who transforms himself from Mr Chips into Scarface,” the single episodes of the show are often concerned with obstacles that could slow Walt down, or stop his rise in the criminal underworld (MacInnes n. pag.). These obstacles include competing drug kingpins, Hank’s hunt for Walt’s alter ego Heisenberg and Walt’s constant attempts to hide his criminal life from his family.

Television narratives—procedurals as well as serials—are also differently structured than feature films. Cinematic narratives are regarded to follow the three-act structure, a model based on Aristotle’s *Politics & Poetics*, which Kristin Thompson paraphrases as follows:

> [...] a story is composed of three sections: a *beginning* introduces a complication to a character’s life, launching the story. The *middle* section presents developing action, a series of *revolutions* and *discoveries*, which drives the story forward. The *end* resolves the story conflict, often through a reversal of fortune for the main character. (38)
The three-act structure has primarily been advocated by Syd Field, whose seminal work *Screenplay* was first published in the late seventies and has since then influenced a myriad of aspiring screenwriters. Although Field’s three-act model is quite similar to the Aristotelian one, he refers to beginning, middle and end as setup, confrontation and resolution. Field argues that acts are divided by plot points, each of which “moves the story forward, toward the resolution” (111). While we can find several plot points within one act, the end of each act is marked by a distinct plot point. This plot point is an “incident, or event, that ‘hooks’ into the story and spins it around in another direction,” often also referred to as the turning point (Field 111). In *Storytelling in the New Hollywood*, Kristin Thompson argues that the three-act model is inaccurate as most cinematic narratives actually consist of four acts. Although the four-act model she proposes is still based on the Aristotelian model, it incorporates another act. Therefore it consists of setup, complicating action, development and climax. Setup, complicating action, and climax are fairly similar to Aristotle’s beginning, middle, and end so what stands out is the third section. Bordwell defines this section, which Thompson names “the development“ as follows:

> [...] the Development, launched at approximately the midpoint of the film, in which efforts to achieve the goal are thwarted. Although there may be some forward movement in the main action, some portions are likely to be rather static, emphasizing subplots, character revelation, or simple delays. Characteristically, the Development ends with a piece of action that puts the achievement of goals into a crisis. (105)

While cinematic narratives either adhere to a three-act or a four-act structure, most hour-long television drama shows follow a four-act structure. Yet in television the four-act structure functions slightly differently. Most notably, as a result of the difference in running time, the acts on hour-long TV shows run shorter than they would on a feature film. Technically, the script for *Breaking Bad’s* pilot episode is divided into five acts—cold open, act one, act two, act three and
act four. While the cold open only consists of three pages, the other three acts are about thirteen pages long. One page of a screenplay translates to one minute of on-screen time; consequently, the *Breaking Bad* pilot runs fifty-six minutes (which is slightly longer than the usual *Breaking Bad* episode). Despite the slightly longer running time, the pilot establishes a structure that becomes the outline for every subsequent episode of the show. Looking at the episode in more detail, with Thompson’s four-act structure in mind, it becomes clear that the *Breaking Bad* pilot stays fairly close to the model she proposes.

While the cold open sets the tone for the show and establishes the main protagonist, it is primarily designed to trigger the audience’s curiosity as it ends on a cliffhanger: Walt pulls out his gun and walks onto the desert road, ready to fight whatever may come his way. Then the image fades to black and cuts to the opening credits. Within the first act, the viewer is introduced to the show’s main characters and learns more about Walt. We get to know that he works as a high-school chemistry teacher, but has to work a second job at a car wash to make ends meet. It is also established that he is frustrated with his life. The scene that is emblematic for his frustration takes place at the car wash. Walt is on his knees, scrubbing the aluminium rims of a car when it turns out that the car belongs to one of his students. The student is amused by the fact that his teacher is washing his car and even takes a picture of Walt. Moreover, following Walt’s birthday party, there is a sex scene between him and Skyler, which is devoid of any passion and acts as another reminder of his frustrations. The first act ends around the sixteen-minute mark with a turning point. Walt is working at the car wash when he, all of a sudden, has trouble breathing and collapses. This first act is the beginning of the story. It establishes the main characters, builds the story world and, through Walt’s collapse at the car wash, introduces a complication to the main protagonist’s life.
The second act starts with Walt getting rushed into a hospital where the doctor tells him that he has inoperable lung cancer. Instead of telling his family about the disease, Walt quits his job at the car wash in a fury. He then takes his brother-in-law Hank (Dean Norris), who works for the D.E.A., up on his offer to ride along with him during a drug bust. As Walt rides along with Hank, we get introduced to Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), who is a former student of Walt’s and now earns his money as a drug dealer. The act ends with Walt blackmailing Jesse into producing methamphetamine (also referred to as “crystal meth”) together. As is typical for narratives that adapt a four-act structure, act two mostly consists of revelations and discoveries. Walt learns that he has inoperable lung cancer, Hank tells Walt that there is a lot of money to be made in the drug trade, and Walt discovers that Jesse is involved in drug-trafficking. The turning point at the end of the act is crucial for the whole show because it is basically Walt’s decision to “cook” crystal meth that sets every other major event of the show in motion.

Act three focuses on Walt’s and Jesse’s preparations to produce crystal meth. Walt steals chemistry equipment from school and together with Jesse decides to buy an old RV they plan to use as a mobile meth lab. The act ends with a confrontation at a clothing store. Walt recognizes that some teenagers are mocking his handicapped son. He prevents Skyler from intervening and instead disappears into the back of the store. As Skyler advises Walter Jr. to ignore the bullies, Walt storms into the front door and attacks the leader of the group. After a short confrontation, the teenagers leave and the scene ends with the White family in shock because they cannot believe how Walt handled the situation. The third act is what Thompson defines as the development. Although Walt’s goals do not get completely thwarted, the action slows down significantly when Walt and Jesse prepare to produce crystal meth. This part of the episode is not primarily concerned with moving the plot forward but instead focuses on developing the relationship between Walt and Jesse. While the turning point at the end of the act is entertaining
to watch, it does not necessarily spin the story in a new direction. Instead, it only emphasizes that Walt is changing—a point that had already been made when he quit his job at the carwash and blackmailed Jesse.

The last act of the episode opens with Walt and Jesse cooking crystal meth in the middle of the desert. Throughout this final act, the newly formed team gets more and more involved with Krazy-8 (Max Arciniega), a drug dealer and potential buyer for their product. The act reaches its climax when Krazy-8 tries to kill Walt and Jesse. From here on, the episode leads into the situation depicted in the episode’s cold open—only this time the viewer gets to see what happens after Walt steps onto the desert road. Walt’s fortune gets reversed as it turns out that the sirens that threatened him in the cold open belong to the fire department and not, as the audience was previously lead to believe, the police. The episode ends with another sex scene between Walt and Skyler that emphasizes the excitement and sense of empowerment that Walt feels as a result of his new gangster lifestyle.

The *Breaking Bad* pilot balances resolving some plotlines with leaving loose ends for the viewer. For example, while we get to know the origin of the events depicted in the cold open, we are unsure as to where Walt’s decision to become a criminal will ultimately lead him. We also have no idea what will become of his cancer or how his family will react if they find out that he has become a drug dealer. This means the show provides us with enough answers to satisfy us for now but also triggers our curiosity by leaving us with unanswered questions. While it might not come as much of a surprise that the single episodes of the show follow a specific structure, the four-act structure also translates to whole seasons of *Breaking Bad*. The show functions like a Russian doll where one four-act structure (single episode) exists within a larger four-act structure (whole season). This becomes clear if we take a closer look at how the first season of the show is structured.
The first three episodes of the show establish a detailed, distinctly stylized world in which the main characters’ stories unfold. This is followed by a series of complications that are introduced to Walt’s life, the main complication being his cancer. For example, once Jesse and Walt have decided to cook crystal meth together, they are faced with problems like having to find a buyer for their product or they have to get rid of a dead body while Walt constantly has to hide his criminal endeavours from his family.

Quite similar to the middle part of a single episode, the middle of the season is a series of revelations and discoveries. As Hank follows the trail of the blue crystal meth, he finds out more about Krazy-8 and Heisenberg while Walt finally reveals to his family that he has cancer. This revelation leads directly into the development phase of the season as what mainly delays the plot from moving forward is Walt’s inability to decide on how to deal with his cancer. At first, he categorically refuses to go into cancer treatment. Then, once he has finally decided to go into treatment, it is unclear how he will finance the therapy as his initial goal of making money in the drug trade is, at this point of the show, in crisis because he fears that a life in crime will require him to threaten and murder people on a regular basis. In the end, even when an old friend offers to pay for his treatment, Walt is too proud to accept the offer and instead decides to go back to cooking crystal meth.

Once Walt and Jesse are back to cooking crystal meth, the plot also moves forward again. With Tuco (Raymond Cruz), a drug dealer affiliated with the Mexican cartel that randomly beats up and kills people, they find a new buyer, but the scale of his drug operation also requires them to produce more drugs. While their money problems have been temporarily solved, which gives the season a sense of closure, it is also clear that the psychopathic Tuco will become a problem at some point in the future. Although one might question how much of a difference it makes if a narrative follows a three-act structure, a four-act structure, or any structure at all, the way a story
is structured influences how we process it on a cognitive level. Even if the audience is not aware that they are watching “the complicating action” or “the development,” it seems reasonable to assume that viewers at least recognize these structural patterns on a subconscious level. These patterns can guide the audience through the narrative and help them make sense of the unfolding story, especially in complex narratives that often feature a multiplicity of plotlines. For example, it seems likely that if the viewer should feel lost within a narrative, their inner sense of structure will tell them that the second act is about to end or that they are watching the resolution of the plot. Another example that proves that audiences do develop a sense for structure is that even casual viewers will notice whenever structurally something about a narrative is “off.” Most viewers have been trained to digest narratives that have been arranged with a three-act structure in mind which means that any narrative that differs from this model will strike audiences as unusual (Bordwell 105). While this does not mean that we are not able to adapt to divergent structures, it emphasizes that we do recognize the difference.

What is particularly interesting with regard to hour-long television drama shows is the rapidity with which the plot unfolds. Feature-films have accustomed us to a first act that runs approximately half an hour, a second act that runs about an hour, and a final act that runs half an hour (Bordwell 105). For hour-long television shows, the rules are different as every act runs about eleven to twelve minutes which also means that viewers have to be much more adaptive when it comes to plot developments. With regard to structure, Thompson states:

Such divisions of programs into acts, whether rigidly or flexibly proportioned, are not simply arbitrary. They give an episode a sense of structure, much as the balanced movements of a classical concerto do. They provide the spectator with a sense of progress and guarantee the introduction of dramatic new premises or obstacles at intervals. They allow for the rising and the falling action that many writers refer to as crucial to good
plots. Regular turning points also give variety to a story, ensuring that the action does not simply involve a character striving toward a goal and meeting a series of familiar obstacles. Thus there are reasons why even television episodes are broadcast without breaks would draw on act structure. (K. Thompson 54-55)

Apart from these structural aspects, contemporary television serials commonly feature multiple plotlines per episode which further adds to their narrative complexity. While each episode of a TV show features a main plot, we can usually also identify several subplots per episode. Subplots often focus on particular characters and can, quite similar to the main plot, be continuous or self-enclosed. How many plotlines per episode a show features varies from show to show. K. Thompson argues that in the nineteen eighties Hill Street Blues (1981 - 1987) tested the limits of how many plotlines per episode audiences can take in without getting confused. As a result of the multiplicity of plotlines per episode, the first half-season of Hill Street Blues was a failure. Thus, NBC, the network the show aired on, renewed it only on the condition that at least one plotline per episode had to be resolved. Interestingly enough, the Hill Street Blues model, in which multiple plotlines run through one episode of a series while at least one of them gets resolved, is still valid today. Like cliffhangers, this storytelling technique originates from the soap opera. Thompson explains:

The technique of interweaving several important storylines goes back to soap operas, which long have used this strategy. A modern American hour-long daytime soap opera typically keeps eight to ten stories going at once. The same technique was imported to prime-time television in the U.S. through Dallas (1978 to 1991) and Dynasty (1981 to 1989). These, in turn, inspired what are sometimes termed ‘professional dramas,’ such as Hill Street Blues, St. Elsewhere, L.A. Law, The West Wing and Boston central. The Sopranos creates an iconic variant on this genre. (K. Thompson 55-56)
The Hill Street Blues example shows how multiple plotlines per episode add to the narrative complexity of a show, but also makes clear that there is a limit to how many plotlines the audience can process. Still, we might ask ourselves why TV shows followed this principle in the first place. A simple explanation is that it introduces a certain sense of realism to a narrative. As Thompson puts it:

In a single episode of E.R. or Bad Girls, the individual scenes are mostly very short, providing only a slight bit of progression in a given plotline. By moving quickly among plots, the narrative gives the impression of considerable density and “lifelikeness”. (K. Thompson 57)

In addition, advancing multiple plotlines per episode can make the narrative more appealing to the audience. That is to say, while some viewers might dislike a particular plotline, they might still be emotionally invested in another one. Another appeal of watching a show featuring a multiple plotlines is that each plotline progresses at a different pace, which adds a surprise element to the viewing experience. In other words, while we have been trained to expect at least one plotline per episode to resolve, we do not know which plotline it will be or how it will resolve. Advancing multiple plotlines per episode also means that viewers are expected to be able to distinguish between different plotlines and know their history, as only then they will be able to appreciate their progression or resolution. Thompson asserts that “multiple story lines, whether in sitcoms or dramas, do give the impression of cramming a great deal of action into a relatively short time span,” which means that not only do we have to be aware of the history of each story arc, but we also constantly have to adapt to the narrative as it jumps from plotline to plotline (K. Thompson 57).

While each Breaking Bad episode advances multiple plotlines, “ABQ,” the finale of the second season, is an exceptional example for how contemporary television series interweave
multiple plotlines per episode and make use the disparities of knowledge to tell their story. Taking a closer look at “ABQ,” it becomes clear that the key to almost every plotline in *Breaking Bad* is Walt as nearly everything that happens on the show can be traced back to him. The relationship between Walt and his family, and the relationship between Walt and Jesse are crucial to the show. Consequently, with every episode the series balances the time spent on each of these relationships. For example, while “Phoenix,” the penultimate episode of season two, focuses more on the conflicts between Walt and Jesse, “ABQ” shifts the focus to the growing problems within the White family. To identify how many plotlines we can find in the season two finale and how these plotlines advance over the course of the episode, it makes sense to look at each plotline separately.

In “ABQ,” we can divide what I will call the family plot into two interlaced plotlines. For almost two seasons the main plot has revolved around one question, namely: Will Skyler and Walter Jr. eventually find out that Walt has become a drug dealer and, if yes, how will they react to this revelation? The continuation of this plot becomes part of the climax of “ABQ,” while the first half of the episode focuses on a subplot that has been introduced the week before.

In “Phoenix,” Walter Jr. creates a website to raise money for a lifesaving surgery Walt has to undergo as part of his cancer treatment. When he shows the website to his father, Walt is not enthused as he does not want to accept charity and also does not like the attention. Because he has made enough money in the drug trade to pay for his surgery, Walt and his lawyer Saul (Bob Odenkirk) come up with the plan to hack Walter Jr.’s website to make it seem as if people are donating money for Walt, when in reality the money comes out of Walt’s drug money. This is where “ABQ” picks up the plot.

While Walter Jr. and Skyler are excited about the incoming donations, Walt is annoyed by the whole situation. He wants to tell his family that he is able to pay for the surgery on his own,
but also knows that he has to lie in order to conceal his criminal endeavors from them. Eventually even a local TV channel asks for an interview with the White family because the charity website has become an internet phenomenon. During the interview the camera lingers on Walt, who is clearly uncomfortable in the situation, while Walter Jr. tells the interviewer that he regards his father his personal hero.

The next time we see the White family is before Walt’s surgery, indicating that the subplot involving the website has now been resolved. While it did not advance the main plot substantially, it has re-emphasized certain aspects of the show. Walt keeps lying to his family, is still too proud to accept help from others, and Walter Jr. still does not know anything about his father’s life as a drug dealer. Moreover, Skyler gets angry at Walt because she does not understand how her husband can be so dismissive about the website their son has created. Although these developments are not directly related to the big question—will Skyler and Walter Jr. eventually find out that Walt is a criminal?—they successfully add tension to the family dynamic. Before the surgery, Skyler asks Walt where he put his cell phone to which a medicated and confused Walt answers: “Which one?” This is a crucial moment of the episode that throws the viewer right back into the main plot. The script for “ABQ” elaborates on Walt’s accidental revelation as follows:

This brings Skyler up short. There’s more than one? She looks at her husband, startled. We’ll remember this was an unsettling mystery for Skyler way back in the beginning of our season. All the doubts she had tried hard to put on hold come rushing back. (“The Writer’s Lab”)

The excerpt from the script shows that the writers clearly have intended the scene as the resolution to a plotline that has been started at the beginning of the season. As previously stated, with regard to Lost, Mittell argues that “each episode adds new revelations to the show’s central
enigma while opening up new mysteries concerning both past and future events” (Film and Television Narrative 170). This is also true for the plotline involving Walt’s second cell phone. Breaking Bad suddenly refers to a plotline that has been started weeks ago and expects viewers to adapt to this narrative shift immediately. While most viewers will remember that Walt lied to Skyler about his second cell phone, it had been left unclear if, and when this aspect of the plot would come into play again. For the remainder of the episode, “ABQ” focuses on the consequences of Walt’s accidental revelation. After the surgery, the doctor tells Walt that everything went well while Skyler wants to know how soon Walt can be on his own.

The situation builds up tension as a result of the way narrative information is conveyed to the viewer. Branigan states that “narration is the overall regulation and distribution of knowledge which determines how and when the spectator acquires knowledge, that is, how the spectator is able to know what he or she comes to know in a narrative” (76). On a very basic level, Walt’s slip in the hospital scene accomplishes that the viewer now knows that Skyler knows that her husband had been lying to her. However, what is even more important is that because Walt has been sedated, he does not remember anything he said. This is an interesting way of putting the audience in a position where they know more than the main character—which automatically creates suspense. For example, as a result of the disparities of knowledge, the scene in which Skyler asks the doctor how soon Walt can be on his own functions on multiple levels. Walt does not read anything into Skyler’s question because he does not remember telling her about his second cell phone, but the viewer already senses that she is planning on leaving Walt.

Back home, the situation escalates. Skyler calls Walt to account for his lies while Walt tries to justify himself by claiming that whatever he said before the surgery was nonsense because he had been sedated, but this time his wife does not believe him. Instead, she reacts with listing every time she caught him lying. In terms of viewer engagement, this is another shift as we,
together with Walt, suddenly realize that we had underestimated Skyler. While she does not know that her husband has become a drug dealer yet, she knows more than the viewer anticipated. The plotline ends on a turning point: Skyler takes the car and drives away so it is clear that Walt and Skyler’s relationship has changed, but it is unclear how it will develop in the following seasons.

“ABQ” also advances Walt and Jesse’s relationship. The episode opens with Jesse trying to re-animate his girlfriend Jane (Krysten Ritter), who in the previous episode died in her sleep by choking on her own vomit. After realizing that Jane is dead, Jesse vanishes until later on in the episode Walt finds him on the floor of a crack house. When Walt picks him up, Jesse starts crying and confesses that he “loved [Jane] more than anything,” while the look on Walt’s face implies that he might just have realized how much harm he has done to his partner (“ABQ”). Plot-wise the scene works on various levels. It is the reconciliation of Walt and Jesse who, for the latter half of the season, have mostly shared arguments. In addition, Jane’s death has initiated a major character development for Walt and the complications evolving out of her death will loom over Walt and Jesse’s relationship from season two onwards.

Apart from the plotlines focusing on the White family and Jesse, the finale of season two features another plotline that is crucial for the entire season. The show has introduced Jane’s father Donald (John De Lancie) at the midpoint of the season, but up until the final episode, we do not know a lot about him - aside from the fact that he is concerned about Jane because she has had a history of drug abuse. In “Phoenix,“ there is a scene in which Donald and Walt coincidentally meet in a bar and have a brief conversation. Shortly after, Walt goes over to Jesse’s apartment and watches Jane die in her sleep as a result of a drug overdose. Although for a moment Walt contemplates helping her, in the end he decides against it as Jane has caused problems between him and Jesse in the past. While Walt and Donald do not know each other, the
viewer knows both of them. Their casual meeting comes as a surprise and creates tension because we are unsure as to how they would react to each other if they knew in what ways they are connected. In addition, knowing that Walt talked to Jane’s father only shortly before he let her die, adds more impact to the already tragic ending of the episode. Yet even after the events of “Phoenix,” it is unclear how Donald will exactly fit into the overall plot.

At the beginning of “ABQ,” Donald arrives at Jane’s apartment and has to witness his daughter’s dead body being put on a stretcher and carried out of the house. While the viewer might expect Donald to scream at Jesse or even try to beat him up, Donald does not even look at him. Instead, he just quietly leaves the room. After another scene in which we see a grief-struck Donald pick out a dress for Jane’s funeral, the episode jumps a few weeks ahead in time. At this point of the episode, it is revealed that Jane’s father works as an air traffic controller. In the episode’s script it says: “Now we finally know what Donald does for a living,” making clear that the writers intended the scene to be a revelation (“The Writer’s Lab”). At the end of the episode, Donald causes the collision of two airplanes in midair and with that, not only has his purpose for the overall storyline finally been revealed, but his plotline has also been resolved.

Not every serial is automatically a complex narrative but the serial format still lends itself to narrative complexity. The episodes of most contemporary television dramas are structured similarly to feature films—meaning they consist of setup, complicating action, development and climax—but acts unfold at a more rapid pace and the single episodes usually also feature a multiplicity of plotlines which means viewers have to adapt to the narrative as it unfolds. Moreover, the serial format allows writers to create a narrative network that is based on the way knowledge is distributed and can evolve over the course of several seasons, meaning the distribution of knowledge becomes an integral aspect of the storytelling. As Bordwell states:
Every narrative of any complexity-withholds some story information from both viewers and characters. This creates gaps in our knowledge, disparities among various characters’ states of knowledge, and mismatches between a character’s knowledge and the viewer’s knowledge, all the while generating Meir Sternberg’s response trio of curiosity, suspense, and surprise. Every film’s narration depends upon regulating the flow of information, and we don’t have perfect information until the end (if then). In this respect, every narrative harbors secrets. (150)

The finale of *Breaking Bad*’s second season exemplifies how contemporary television narratives regulate the flow of information and make use of the mismatches between the viewer’s knowledge and a character’s knowledge, in particular whenever a crucial aspect of the plot is revealed (i.e. the hospital scene in which Walt accidentally tells Skyler about his second cell phone). In addition, “ABQ” consists of multiple plotlines, some of which are resolved while others are only advanced which leaves the viewer with loose ends. Referring to the multiplicity of plotlines, Thompson asserts:

> The conventions of multiple-story dramas encourage writers to pace the plotlines differently from those of more conventional programs. Typically the self-contained story to be closed off within the episode proceeds at a brisk pace. Action intended to arc over several episodes moves a bit more slowly, and really long-term plotlines add only a tiny bit of information each time they surface. (K. Thompson 63)

This is exactly what we find in “ABQ.” While the subplot involving Walter Jr.’s charity website gets resolved, the Walt/Skyler, Walt/Jesse plotlines advance significantly, but do not get resolved. Apart from advancing the main plot, the episode also adds bits of information to long-term plotlines such as Hank’s hunt for Heisenberg, Walt’s involvement with Gus Fring (Giancarlo Esposito), and also hints at the fact that Walt’s cancer might be (temporarily) gone.
More importantly, “ABQ” resolves the subplot involving Jane’s father which had been intertwined with several other plotlines and provided the show with a season-long mystery. When asked in an interview about the difficulty of creating a season-long story arc, Breaking Bad creator Vince Gilligan commented as follows:

> It was really tough, and the writers and I all got major headaches trying to figure out where to begin this season and how to then build in little bits and pieces throughout that would get us to the ending we wanted from day one. Uh, I'm not real eager to try it again. I don't think Season 3 will take that shape, partly because it was an awful lot of hard work, but also because the best thing this show can do is to continue to surprise viewers when they think they know what's going to come next. (Neuman, “Q & A” n. pag.)

Throughout the season, several black and white cold opens gave the viewer a glimpse of a scene involving a swimming pool and a pink teddy bear (the teddy bear being the only colored object). These narrative clues were introduced early on in the season and from then on re-appeared in the cold opens of several episodes, indicating that at some point they would factor into the plot. Finally, in “ABQ” it was revealed that the cold opens hinted at a plane crash, resulting in plane parts and the pink teddy bear, which viewers already knew from the cold opens, falling from the sky and landing in the White family’s swimming pool.

Contemporary television shows often introduce plotlines or narrative clues without resolving them immediately (i.e. Jane’s death in Breaking Bad). This alters the way in which we processes the narrative on a cognitive level as it requires us to memorize plotlines or clues while we wait for them to come back into play again. In “ABQ” the viewer starts putting the narrative clues together when it is early on in the episode revealed that Jane’s father Donald works as an air traffic controller. This, in combination with the mysterious cold opens (which, with every cold open give away a little bit more information) and the title of the episode, referring to the airport
code of Albuquerque, already hints at the ending of the episode. In that way, Jane’s death does not only become the initiating event for the plane crash but also advances Walt’s character, changes the relationship between Walt and Jesse, and indirectly makes Walt responsible for the death of hundreds of people. This means while it ostensibly resolves Donald’s plotline, the plane crash at the end of season two is also an example for how narrative complexity generally works in Breaking Bad as, for the audience, the season-long plotline becomes a narrative puzzle, anchored in the narrative structure of the show and based on the disparities of knowledge.
Chapter Four: Complex Characters

While the study of complex characters in visual media storytelling has been part of scholarly discourse for decades, most cognitive narrative theories discussing complex characters (i.e. the works of David Bordwell, Edward Branigan, and Murray Smith) have focused on feature films. In contrast, how viewers engages with television characters on a cognitive level has received less scholarly attention although the viewer’s emotional response to fictional characters can be integral to a television show’s overall narrative complexity. In his theory of the mind-game film, Thomas Elsaesser specifically associates protagonists who participate in events whose meaning or consequences escape them, or seem deluded or mistaken about the difference between reality and imagination with the mind-game film, but contemporary television shows suggest that television characters can be puzzling in various ways (17).

For example, Lost (2004-2010), a show that tells the story of a group of survivors who are after a plane crash stranded on a mysterious island and is famous for its intricate plot mechanics, repeatedly uses flashbacks to fill in the audience on the characters’ back stories. Thus Lost repeatedly forces viewers to reevaluate their opinion about the characters of the show, based on what has been revealed about them in the flashbacks. Taking a different approach, the writers of the HBO fantasy show Game of Thrones (2011- ) continuously add new characters to the ongoing storyline and have also repeatedly killed off characters many viewers considered to be main characters of the show (i.e. in “Baelor” and “The Rains of Castamere”). In this way, Game of Thrones offers an interesting approach to character-based narrative complexity as the series perpetually forces viewers to reassess who the main protagonists of the show actually are.

Meanwhile, Mad Men (2007 - ), Homeland (2011- ), Hannibal (2013 - ), and Breaking Bad are all shows that are concerned with questions of identity.
Consequently, the narrative complexity of these shows largely stems from the characters directly. For example, the complexity of characters such as Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini, *The Sopranos*), Nucky Thompson (Steve Buscemi, *Boardwalk Empire*) and Walter White is rooted in the moral complexities they confront the audience with and the way in which the viewer engages with them. Applying Smith’s structure of sympathy to Walt makes clear why one has to consider him a complex character in the first place and, more importantly, reveals how complex characters enhance the puzzling aspects of the narrative as a whole. While the structure of sympathy is in many ways similar to what we commonly refer to as identification, it provides us with a more differentiated model of character engagement (Smith 93). With regard to how the way in which we are aligned with a character or a group of characters can form the overall storyline of a narrative, Smith states:

The knowledgeability of a narration pertains to the ‘range’ and ‘depth’ of story to which it claims access. A narration may have great range, moving freely among different characters and across time. On the other hand, it may restrict itself spatially and temporally to the actions of a single character. Furthermore, a narration can provide access not only to the ‘objective’ world of the story, but also to the purely subjective experiences of characters, through dream imagery, for example. Such variations pertain to the depth of the narration. (74)

Smith makes clear that any narrative is shaped by the way in which it shifts its focus between different characters and disperses narrative information. That is to say, a narrative that focuses on a group of characters will be different from a narrative that only focuses on a single character or a handful of characters. Branigan distinguishes between two kinds of characters: agents, who are defined by their actions, which means we learn about them “through their actions and speech in much the same way that characters learn from each other,” and focalizers (100). According to
Branigan, an agent is “a subject with a presumed, but as yet unspecified, set of personality traits, or subjectivity” whereas “focalization (reflection) involves a character neither speaking (narrating, reporting, communicating) nor acting (focusing, focused by), but rather actually experiencing something through seeing or hearing it” (101). For Branigan, agents and focalizers are two different character-based ways in which the viewer can obtain narrative information. While gaining narrative information through agents is a communicative process (i.e. we could gain knowledge from listening to a conversation two characters are having on screen), focalization is a private process because we are restricted to a particular character’s point of view. As Branigan puts it, “focalization represents the fact of character perception, even if we may discover later that the character misperceived and even if our misconception about the character turns out to have other consequences in our ongoing experience of the story” (103). However, we have to distinguish between internal and external focalization. While both internal and external focalization restrict our knowledge to what a particular character sees and hears at a specific point of the narrative, external focalization is only “semi-subjective” as it requires us to infer that what we are shown is exactly what that character sees and hears at this moment of the story (Branigan 103). External focalization, on the other hand, is fully private or subjective because it renders for us the experiences of a character that no one else could possibly have access to. This includes dream sequences, flashbacks, hallucinations, and memories. While focalization—internal focalization in particular—suggests that we feel empathic towards a character, Smith notes with regard to the structure of sympathy:

Neither recognition nor alignment nor allegiance entails that the spectator replicate the traits, or experience the thoughts or emotions of a character. Recognition and alignment require only that the spectator understand that these traits and mental states make up the character. With allegiance we go beyond understanding, by evaluating and responding
emotionally to the traits and emotions of the character, in the context of the narrative situation. Again, though, we respond emotionally without replicating the emotions of the character. (85)

Smith here suggests that no matter how much a narrative restricts our point of view to a specific character, our reaction to that character will always remain “rather sympathetic than empathic” (85).\(^8\) Focalization is also related to alignment as how we are aligned with a character primarily depends on “spatio-temporal attachment” and “subjective access” (Smith 83). Spatio-temporal attachment refers to how a narration can either focus on a specific character or switch focus between various characters whereas subjective access refers to the level of access a narrative grants the viewer to a particular character’s thoughts and feelings (our level of subjective access usually varies from character to character). In addition, Smith puts forth that recognition is always a prerequisite for alignment and allegiance to occur. This makes sense as a narrative can only be focalized through a character once we have recognized this character (this does not necessarily mean that we have to know in detail who that character is—it just means we have do recognize her or him as a construct).

While *Breaking Bad* features a variety of characters and multiple plotlines per episode, Walter White always remains the focal point of the series. In the cold open of the pilot episode, the narrative events are already focalized through Walt. Even before Walt records a message to his family, which functions as an expository monologue for the viewer, we have been aligned with him. For example, as he turns around while driving, we get shots of the camper floor that are clearly taken from his perspective. These are followed by probably the most obvious instance of

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\(^8\) Although Smith notes that the structure of sympathy does not imply that we empathize with a character, one should not underestimate the power of alignment and allegiance. For example, while in later seasons of *Breaking Bad* viewers might not be able to form an allegiance with Walter White, he still remains the main protagonist of the series. As a result, many viewers perceive characters that stand in opposition to him as obstacles. This can be seen with Skyler White, who, judging from looking at the users’ comments on websites such as avclub.com or aintitcool.com, seems to be the most hated character on the show (Gunn n. pag.).
internal focalization we can find in the cold open—a POV shot from Walt’s perspective that reveals how little he can see through his gas mask. During the course of the show, our spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access switch to also include other characters—most notably Skyler, Jesse, and Hank—yet Walt always remains the main focus of the show as well as the primary focalizer. As the narrative progresses, the focalization becomes increasingly complex and puzzling for the viewer because more and more morally objectionable narrative events are focalized through Walt.

Jane’s death in “Phoenix” is a useful example for this narrative technique. The scene, which is for the most externally focalized through Walt, is crucial for the show because it sets other major narrative events in motion and marks an important turning point in Walt’s transformation from suburban high school teacher to drug kingpin. While the viewer has seen Walt act morally objectionable before, this scene is one of the first instances where he does harm to other characters the viewer cares about. When Walt enters Jesse’s apartment and walks into his partner’s bedroom, the show provides us with a shot of Jesse and Jane lying in bed that is taken from Walt’s perspective (the shaky handheld camera movement further emphasizes this). Throughout the scene, we are spatio-temporal attached to Walt; the camera follows his movements and the viewer is restricted to only what he sees. Walt is presented as “subjectively transparent” to the viewer as he reveals “his inner [state] through actions, expressions, and language” (Smith 87). The sequence contains a multiplicity of close-ups of Walt’s face that rely on the viewer to interpret his thoughts. He walks towards the bed and tries to wake up Jesse, but does not succeed. When Walt finds a needle next to the bed, it becomes clear to the viewer that Jesse and Jane did heroin before passing out. The scene intentionally creates narrative gaps for the viewer by inserting shots in which the camera just lingers on Walt’s face, encouraging the spectator to interpret his thoughts. All of a sudden, Jane starts throwing up in her sleep. As Walt
moves around the bed, we get another shot of her throwing up—this time taken from Walt’s position to further strengthen our alignment with him. While the viewer expects Walt to help her as he moves towards Jane and mutters “No, no, no” to himself, another close-up of his face reveals that he might have changed his mind (see fig. 1-2). The sequence becomes a perfect example of external focalization because, as a result of the narrative build-up, the viewer is able to retrace Walt’s thought process throughout the scene although it features hardly any dialogue. Instead, it capitalizes on the viewer’s knowledge of prior narrative events. We know that Jane and Walt’s relationship has been problematic because of Jane’s influence on Jesse, but we do not expect Walt to let her die to get rid of the problem.

Figure 1  
External focalization in *Breaking Bad*. Source: “Phoenix.”

While Jane chokes on her vomit, the camera stays on Walt so viewers are able to interpret his facial expressions and follow his change of mind. In the end, although he made no effort to help Jane, Walt is still affected by her death. The episode ends with yet another close up of Walt. He stands next to Jane’s body and is holding back the tears (see fig. 3)
Figure 2  Walt contemplates helping Jane. Source: “Phoenix.”

Figure 3  Walt reacts to Jane’s death. Source: “Phoenix.”
Engaging with villainous characters poses a moral challenge to the viewer because these characters behave in ways that are morally questionable. Yet engaging with morally ambiguous characters also emphasizes the difference between alignment and allegiance. Smith notes that while most narratives “do elicit sympathy for those with whom they align us,” this is in no way fundamental to the viewer’s engagement with a character (188). According to Smith, otherwise it would be impossible to conceive of anti-heroes, which Smith defines as protagonists around which the alignment structure of the film is built while they remain unsympathetic (188). David Chase, the creator of *The Sopranos*, had to deal with outraged fans when *The Sopranos* ended because he refused to let Tony Soprano get punished for his crimes at the end of the show. The comments Chase made when he asked in an interview about the fans’ reactions to the final episode of the series shows that viewers often find themselves in a moral dilemma when engaging with morally ambiguous protagonists:

The way I see it is that Tony Soprano had been people's alter ego. They had gleefully watched him rob, kill, pillage, lie, and cheat. They had cheered him on. And then, all of a sudden, they wanted to see him punished for all that. They wanted ‘justice.’ They wanted to see his brains splattered on the wall. I thought that was disgusting, frankly. But these people have always wanted blood. Maybe they would have been happy if Tony had killed twelve other people. Or twenty-five people. Or, who knows, if he had blown up Penn Station. The pathetic thing — to me — was how much they wanted his blood, after cheering him on for eight years. (qtd. in Martin n. pag)

Chase here comments on a problem that is inherent to protagonists whose behaviour is questionable on a moral level. When discussing *The Sopranos* with Smith’s structure of sympathy in mind, it is safe to say that throughout the series viewers had been aligned with Tony Soprano and, to a large degree, formed an allegiance with him. Yet, according to Chase, the
audience still expected Tony to get punished for his crimes. Without speculating about what narrative resolution viewers would be most satisfied with for *Breaking Bad*, we can assert that by slowly turning Walt into the villain of the show, the creators have added another layer to the moral dilemma that morally ambiguous protagonists pose to the audience.

The final scene in “Phoenix,” which is almost entirely focalized through Walt, already hints at this fact. Prior to Jane’s death, Walt could have been conceived as a remodeled version of the antihero, but towards the end of the second season the writers slowly begin to turn him into what we might refer to as a villainous protagonist. Walt is introduced as a middle-aged family man who has to work two jobs because he struggles to make ends meet. Thus, when he is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer and decides to cook crystal meth in order to secure a financial future for his family before he dies, the viewer can understand his motivations and is up to a certain point willing to forgive him for his crimes. When asked in an interview that took place shortly after the second season of the show had aired if he could still a lot of himself in Walt, *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan replied:

> One of our biggest struggles is how to keep it so the audience can continue to sympathize with Walt after doing so many wretched things. And the funny thing is, I still do see a lot of myself in Walt. I think there’s a lot about Walt that we can all relate to. I rationalize all kinds of things I do. And that’s one of the most human conditions there is. Nobody thinks of themselves as a bad guy—Walt certainly doesn’t. I believe in the fundamental goodness of human beings, but I think that the universal thing we all have in common is that given the right set of circumstances, for a day or an hour or five minutes we could be bad guys; we could be very bad guys. And I think if folks watching can realize that about themselves, then they can always find a way to sympathize with Walt, or at least understand why he’s making the choices he makes. (Neuman “Q & A” n. pag)
Gilligan’s concern that at some point viewers might not to be able to sympathize with Walt anymore explains why in antihero narratives we often find protagonists that, while being flawed in some ways, still inherit enough redeeming qualities to make sure the audience can sympathize with them. This is ultimately not the case with *Breaking Bad*. Especially in later seasons of the show, the writers do not seem concerned about Walt being a sympathetic character anymore. Instead, apart from letting Walt betray and kill Walt more people each season, the creators use a variety of narrative techniques to alienate the viewer from Walt. In particular, in seasons four and five it becomes clear that Walt’s transformation “from Mr Chips to Scarface,” which has always been the integral aspect of the show, is now almost complete (MacInnes n. page).

For example, in “End Times,” Walt and Jesse have a tense conversation in which Jesse points a gun at his partner because he is convinced that Walt has poisoned Brock (Ian Posada), the son of his girlfriend Andrea (Emily Rios). The scene begins with a close-up of a grim-faced Walt, sitting all by himself in a chair in his dim-lit living room. Because Walt is afraid that rival drug lord Gus Fring (Giancarlo Esposito) might send someone to kill him, he becomes nervous when the door bell rings until he realizes it is only Jesse at the door. During their conversation, the composition of the scene underlines that the former partners have grown apart from each other as whenever Walt and Jesse share the frame, there is a visible gap between them. The viewer mostly gains narrative information from listening to Walt and Jesse’s conversation, but it also uses external focalization to align the spectator with Jesse. For example, throughout the scene we can find multiple shots that are taken from Jesse’s position. While the reaction shots of Walt also encourage us to interpret his thoughts, our inability to do so emphasizes our alienation from him. Furthermore, Walt’s facial expression signals to the viewer that he is legitimately concerned about Brock. Yet he has betrayed and lied to so many people during the course of the narrative that the viewer is not sure if Walt only puts on an act in order to deceive Jesse. The
scene almost becomes a reversal of earlier episodes such as “Phoenix,” in which our level of knowledge was restricted to only what Walt knew and, even if we did not approve of his actions, we were at least able to follow his thought process. In “End Times” the viewer takes on Jesse’s position. Not only is the narration partially focalized through him, but viewers also does not know if they should trust Walt when he claims he had nothing to with the poisoning of Brock. Finally in “Face Off,” the last episode of season four, it is revealed that Walt did indeed poison the son of Jesse’s girlfriend. While at this point of the narrative it has already been made clear that Walt is slowly transforming into the villain of the show, this revelation still comes as a surprise to the viewer as most viewers probably did not expect him to poison a child in order to get Gus Fring killed. In addition, that the viewer feels shocked and betrayed by Walt’s behavior is largely influenced by how the show renders the narrative events for the spectator. In earlier seasons, Breaking Bad closely aligned viewers with Walt and granted them subjective access to his actions. Consequently, in earlier episodes, the viewer was for the most part aware of Walt’s plans. This is not the case with the poisoning of Brock, which takes place off-screen, and with that heightens the viewer’s sense of surprise and betrayal.

In season five, Walt is even more established as the villainous protagonist as his actions are not any longer motivated by his wish to secure a financial future for his family before he dies, but by his deluded plan to build a meth empire. This becomes obvious in “Buyout” when Jesse tries to convince Walt to sell his share of their drug operation for five million dollars so they can quit cooking crystal meth once and for all. The scene is reminiscent of traditional gangster films: Walt is framed as a sinister drug kingpin that grants Jesse a hearing while low-angle shots of him sitting in his chair and occasionally taking a sip from his drink underline his power position. Quite similar to “End Times” the viewer is put in Jesse’s position, in particular when he asks Walt questions that have also been lingering on the viewer’s mind:
JESSE. You could spend time with your family. No more worrying about them getting hurt or finding out about everything. Isn’t this what you’ve been working for?

WALT. I have not been working this hard just to sellout.

JESSE. It’s not selling out.

WALT. Yes, it is, Jesse. I have…We have suffered and bled, literally, for this business and I will not throw it away for nothing.

The conversation goes on with Walt explaining how he already once made the mistake of selling his share of a company which, in Walt’s mind, cost him millions of dollars. He concludes his monologue as follows:

WALT. Jesse, you asked me if I was in the meth business or the money business. Neither. I’m in the empire business.

JESSE. I don’t know…Mr. White, is a meth empire really something to be that proud of?

(“Buyout”)

Before Walt can answer Jesse’s question they are interrupted by Skyler. The dialogue emphasizes how Walt’s motivations have changed during the course of the show whereas Jesse basically voices the concerns of the audience. The beginning of the subsequent episode in which Walt, in the midst of conducting a drug deal in the desert, forces his potential business partner Declan (Louis Ferreira) to acknowledge his power position makes it even more clear that Walt now thinks of himself as a full-blown drug lord:

DECLAN. (laughing.) Who the hell are you?

WALT. You know. You all know exactly who I am. Say my name.

DECLAN. Do what? I…I don’t have a damn clue who you are.

WALT. (interrupting.) Yeah, you do. I’m the man who killed Gus Fring.

DECLAN. Bullshit, cartel got Fring.
WALT. You sure? … That’s right. Now, say my name.

DECLAN. You’re Heisenberg.

WALT. You’re goddamn right. (‘Say My Name’)

The scene shows that Walt now fully embraces his drug lord alter ego as previously whenever he conducted a drug deal in public he disguised himself by wearing a black hat and sunglasses. Walt’s lack of concern about disguising himself any longer signals that he has finally transformed into his drug lord alter ego and only play the part of Walter White, loving husband and family man, whenever it grants him some sort of advantage (this becomes obvious at several points in season five when he tries to manipulate Jesse, Skyler, or Hank). At the beginning of Breaking Bad, we get closely aligned with Walter White. Such a close alignment with a particular character can, according to Smith, influence our recognition of subsequently introduced characters. He states:

Once a character has been recognized, and we have been placed in some form of alignment with that character . . . the recognition of any new character may be subject to the effect of mediation produced by the alignment. Thus, alignment may affect subsequent recognitions. (144)

Yet Smith also states that we should be careful not to confuse this “filtering effect” with alignment in general as “in its purest form, the alignment pattern which produces this filtering involves a continuous and exclusive attachment to a character combined with subjective transparency” (144). That is to say, only if we have been aligned with a character and have subjective access to her actions, our recognition of other characters might be filtered through that character. Consequently, at the beginning of Breaking Bad, when we have been closely aligned with Walt and have subjective access to his actions, our recognition of other characters might be
filtered through him, but once the narrative grants us less subjective access to Walt, the filtering effect also dissolves.

More importantly, as the narrative grants us less subjective access to Walt’s actions, it also becomes more difficult for the viewer to sympathize with him. Show creator Vince Gilligan has talked about the difficulty of engaging with Walt in various interviews. In an interview with AMC, he states:

When [Walt] became actively unlikable? Gosh, that's a harder moment to point out. Oddly enough, poisoning young Brock, as bad as that was, it made sense at least because he needed Jesse on his side—otherwise his whole family was going to perish. But now, in Season 5, I guess he does terrible things in order just to better his station in life and make himself more money, and that's probably where I have to draw the line. (Neuman, “Vince Gilligan Answers Fan Questions (Part II)” n. pag)

Gilligan acknowledges here that the way in which we engage with Walt changes during the course of Breaking Bad. This ties in with Smith, who states that we may respond differently to the same character at different point in a narrative, or may engage simultaneously with different characters in different ways within a sequence (93). In addition, according to Smith, “plural identification—the ramification of character engagement, number of characters, and time—lies at the heart of the complexity of experience a narrative can offer us” (93). As previously mentioned, right from the beginning of Breaking Bad, the spectator gets closely aligned with Walt. Forming an allegiance with him, on the other hand, becomes much more complex as our moral evaluation of a character is always a prerequisite for allegiance. Smith explains:

Allegiance depends upon the spectator having what she takes to be reliable access to the character’s state of mind, on understanding the context of the character’s actions, and having morally evaluated the character on the basis of this knowledge. Evaluation, in this
sense, has both cognitive and affective dimensions; for example, being angry or outraged at an action involves categorizing it as undesirable or harmful to someone or something and being affected—affectively aroused—by this categorization. On the basis of such evaluations, spectators construct moral structures, in which characters are organized and ranked in a system of preference. (84)

What we find with *Breaking Bad* then, is a narrative that aligns us closely with a character, encourages us to sympathize with him, but then continuously lets this character act in a way that is morally objectionable. This means that while at the beginning of *Breaking Bad* viewers might be able to form an allegiance with Walt, during the course of the show this allegiance is put to the test and will likely collapse at some point of the narrative. Meanwhile, for other characters such as Jesse Pinkman or Mike Ehrmantraut (Jonathan Banks) the opposite is true. As the series starts out, our recognition of these characters is filtered through Walt. We recognize Jesse as Walt’s slightly simple, but loyal partner and Mike “The Cleaner” as a threat to both Walt and Jesse as he works for Walt’s rival Gus Fring. However, during the course of the show, as we get more closely aligned with them and gain more subjective access to their actions, our perception of these characters changes. In contrast, during the course of the narrative, sympathizing with Walt becomes increasingly difficult for the viewer as he continues to betray and murder other characters while the narrative grants viewers less and less subjective access to him. In addition, after Walt has undergone surgery in season two, his cancer is in remission (although it is left unclear if it will at some point of the narrative come back into play again). Taking the cancer out of the equation completely changes Walt’s motivations. When Walt started out as a criminal, he was driven by the wish to secure a financial future for his family before he dies. However, without suffering from cancer, he is exposed as being a criminal because he is obsessed with gaining more money and power, which makes it harder for the viewer to sympathize with him.
Yet even as Walt turns into a despicable human being, it takes a while until the allegiance that most viewers have formed with him finally collapses. According to Bordwell, this reluctance on the audience’s side to reevaluate Walt is largely influenced by the way in which viewers have been initially introduced to him. Bordwell explains:

Narratives play on other folk-psychology shortcuts. The primary effect that I mentioned earlier—the power of first impressions to establish the conceptual ground rules—is strengthened by ‘belief perseverance,’ our tendency to resist changing a judgment, as well as ‘confirmation bias,’ our unwillingness to entertain evidence that would countermand an initial expression. Narratives are designed to give strong and accurate first impressions of their characters, and rarely is a narrative designed to introduce evidence that would make us change our judgments.

With regard to Breaking Bad this means because Walter White has been introduced to the viewer as a suburban family man, spectators are somewhat reluctant to change their judgment of him—no matter how questionable his actions might become. Moreover, the audience’s close alignment with Walt in earlier seasons of the show arguably also adds to the viewer’s unwillingness to reevaluate him on a moral level. Smith describes a related phenomenon when he discusses alignment in Hitchcock’s The Man Who Knew Too Much (1956):

The exclusive alignment with the McKennas, combined with the Manichean moral structure, create the optimal conditions for an intense, sympathetic engagement with them; and this emotional bond carries through the second movement of the film, in spite of the self-conscious, mocking interventions of the narration, ensuring that when the narration does disperse our attention by developing an alternating alignment pattern, we still care enough about the characters to want a good outcome for them. (92-93)
While it is questionable if by the end of the series the viewer still wants a good outcome for Walt, our close alignment and sympathetic engagement with him during the first half of the show ensures that we are still invested in Walt’s fate, even as he slowly turns into the villain. In addition, the show occasionally incorporates scenes into the narrative that somewhat function as callbacks to earlier points of the narrative when the viewer was still able to sympathize with Walt. One of the most obvious examples for this technique is a dialogue from the season three episode “Fly,” in which Walt tells Jesse that he thinks he already missed the perfect opportunity to die:

WALT. You know, I was thinking maybe before the fugue state, but before the fugue state I didn’t have enough money. So no, not then. And plus, my daughter wasn’t born yet. It had to be after Holly was born.

JESSE. Mr. White—

WALT. Definitely before the surgery. Oh, Christ. That damn second cell phone. I mean, how could I possibly...? (pause.) I know the moment. It was the night Jane died.

Yeah, I— I was at home and we needed diapers and so I said I’d go, but it was just an excuse. Actually that was the night I brought you your money, remember?

JESSE. Yeah, I remember. (“Fly”)

While in general, during the course of the show, *Breaking Bad* slowly distances the viewer from Walt, the writers occasionally insert scenes such as this dialogue from “Fly” into the narrative. These scenes act as a reminder of our previous allegiance with Walt as they offer us subjective access to Walt’s thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, Walt’s admission of guilt in this scene, in combination with his realization that he might have crossed a line on the night that Jane died, further encourages viewers to sympathize with him. Walt almost confesses to Jesse that he let
Jane die, which not only creates suspense, but also plays with the audience’s yearning for emotional catharsis. That is to say, although his confession would have most likely destroyed Walt’s relationship with Jesse, it also might have been a chance for him to morally redeem himself. Scenes such as the dialogue from “Fly” could be described as nostalgic allegiance because the viewer only temporarily sympathizes with Walt whenever the show refers to a point in the narrative where Walt was a more sympathetic character.

In the fifth season of the show, when Walt’s transformation into a menacing drug lord is almost complete, it is questionable if viewers will still be able to form an allegiance with him. Smith discusses a comparable case when he refers to how engagement in *Maniac* (1982) functions. He states that “[the film] . . . develops an alignment pattern in which the narration attaches us to a subjectively transparent protagonist whose actions (a series of horrible rapes, murders, and scalping) are morally repugnant, denying most viewers the necessary conditions for a sympathetic allegiance with the characters.” (95). Walter White does not rape or scalp his enemies and, in later seasons of the show, is only partially subjectively transparent, but he does frequently commit crimes that are morally objectionable. Thus it seems likely that the way in which viewers engage with him is quite similar to how engagement in *Maniac* functions. That is to say, in later episodes of the show, the viewer is still often closely aligned with Walt, but unable to sympathize with him.

At the beginning of *Breaking Bad*, viewers are likely to form an allegiance with Walt because they are closely aligned with him, have subjective access to his actions, understand his motivations, and enjoy the sense of empowerment that results from his criminal behavior. However, as outlined throughout this chapter, during the course of the show we also get aligned with other characters, gain less subjective access to Walt’s thought process, and are consequently forced to reevaluate his actions. That is to say, the viewer morally evaluates Walt at the
beginning of the narrative and based on that evaluation ranks him with the other characters in a system of preference, but as the narrative progresses and Walt slowly turns into the villain of the show, our initial moral evaluation is called into question — although we are still invested in what happens to him. This means ultimately Walter White’s complexity as a character stems from his moral ambivalence. The way *Breaking Bad* aligns viewers with Walt and encourages them to sympathize with him, before turning him into the villain results in a complex engagement pattern in which the spectator, over the course of five seasons, continuously switches between alignment and allegiance with Walt. With that, *Breaking Bad* makes clear that while the structure of sympathy consists of three interacting levels of character engagement—recognition, alignment, and allegiance—each of them also functions as an individual process. Moreover, *Breaking Bad* reveals that for the viewer, engaging with morally ambiguous characters can become an open-ended narrative puzzle because, since often we are not fully able to finish our moral evaluation of these characters, we are caught somewhere between alignment and allegiance with them.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

Since the early 1950s when television became a mass medium, it has constantly evolved as a narrative form. According to Robert J. Thompson, the time from 1947 to 1960, often referred to as the “Golden Age of Television,” was in fact a golden age of mass distributed theatre because most of the high-brow programming during that time were established plays that followed the traditions of the stage instead of taking advantage of the unique narrative abilities of the television medium. In particular, most of the programs that aired in North America during that time period did not make use of the medium’s unique ability to “play fast and with time and space, an ability TV now shares with film” (Thompson, *Golden Age* 31). In addition, most of the “Golden Age of Television” programs were anthologies, meaning they failed to develop what is one of television’s most unique narrative elements, the serial format (Thompson, *Golden Age* 31).

Television’s second golden age began in the early 1980s when shows such as *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981 - 1987) and *St.Elsewhere* (NBC, 1982 - 1988) invented specific aesthetic and narrative trademarks that identified them as “quality TV.” These sophisticated television narratives were still formulaic, but the formula now included “thoughtful writing, innovative stories, and strong performances among its principal characteristics” (Thompson, *Golden Age* 192). The development of “quality TV” can be seen as a huge step forward for a medium that, for the longest time, had not been taken seriously by either scholars or critics as a significant contributor to culture and society. Instead, for decades television had been regarded as an “intruder, complicator, as rogue or polluter” to cultural discourse, its reputation ranging “somewhere between comic strips and just above religious pamphlets” (Newcomb 1; Martin 9).

The “quality TV” shows that aired during the 1980s raised the overall expectations of commercial television and initiated an upswing of television shows that followed the “quality TV” formula. This ultimately led to what Martin refers to as “a new Golden Age—by most
counts the third in television’s short lifetime, the first being the flowering of creation during the earliest days of the medium, the second a brief period of network excellence during the 1980s” (Martin 9). During this third golden age of television, which is still ongoing, the “quality TV” formula has been applied to countless television series.

However, the post-network era has not only seen the commercialization of “quality TV” on a mass scale, but the changing production practices have also granted television writers more creative freedom than ever before. As Amanda Lotz puts it: “the willingness and ability of the networks to pursue unconventional scheduling strategies has aided the resurgence of serial drama and diversified the range of stories the medium offers” (106). This new creative freedom has resulted in the emergence of complex television narratives that continue to push the narrative boundaries of the medium.

In order to distinguish complex television narratives from television series that operate on a more traditional narrative level, Mittell has referred to them as “Complex TV.” Using cognitive film theory as a foundation for his study, Mittell explains that comprehension is at the core of the way in which the viewer engages with any narrative. Moreover, he notes that “one of the central shifts stemming from the rise of narrative complexity is television’s growing tolerance for viewers to be confused, encouraging them to pay attention and put the pieces together themselves to comprehend the narrative” (Mittell, Complex TV n.pag.). Mittell argues that while in the past television shows have rarely featured an avant-garde level of abstraction, contemporary television shows deliberately misguide viewers and leave it up to them to put the pieces together. As I have argued throughout this work, narrative complexity in visual media storytelling is based on the way in which narratives arrange narrative information for the viewer. More specifically, if we regard narration as the process that assembles narrative information so that it becomes a comprehensive story, then narrative complexity is one of the results of that process. While
complex television narratives originate from “quality TV,” they bear even more resemblance to a narrative phenomenon that scholars have termed “mind-game” or “mindfuck” films. Although Jonathan Eig’s essay on the “mindfuck” film is primarily concerned with questions of identity, he also claims that “the most typical audience reaction to any mindfuck movie is confusion. Given an audience’s tendency to empathize with the hero, viewers likely experience confusion tinged with helplessness” (Eig n. pag.). It is this confusion that lies at the heart of narrative complexity.

As Bordwell asserts, an unusual arrangement of the syuzhet not only makes it more difficult for the viewer to understand the fabula, but also changes how viewers react to a narrative on an emotional level. For example, rearranging the syuzhet can trigger cognition-based emotions such as curiosity, suspense, and surprise in the viewer. In other words, the way in which narrative information is arranged also changes how the audience emotionally reacts to a story. Elsaesser elaborates on what constitutes narrative complexity in feature films. He states that mind-game films often use narrative devices that directly affect the arrangement of the syuzhet (flashbacks, flash-forwards, time jumps, and cold opens) to mislead or deceive the viewer. Moreover, they often provide the audience with narrative clues that either point to the resolution of a specific plotline or, in some cases, do not add up to anything, in which case they are only meant to further confuse the viewer. Elsaesser suggests that in comparison with narratives that are told in a more linear way, mind-game films provide the viewer with a different viewing experience. Therefore, they should not be regarded as merely an alteration of traditional storytelling techniques that can be regulated by simply extending narrative theory. I argue that the same is true for complex television narratives.

As discussed throughout this work, *Breaking Bad* adopts many mind-game film characteristics. The series frequently uses cold opens and flash-forwards to misguide viewers, leaves plotlines unresolved for several seasons, provides the audience with narrative clues that
point to the resolution of particular plotlines and, in season two, confronts the viewer with a season-long narrative puzzle. Yet it is still important to differentiate between mind-game films and complex television narratives because there are aspects that add to the narrative complexity of a television show that are inherent to the television medium.

For instance, leaving the audience with loose ends is intrinsic to the television serial. Until a television serial ends, it never really grants the viewer with a sense of closure. The main plot usually runs like a common thread through the whole series while only subplots get resolved. Mittell states that even when serial plotlines do get resolved, they are usually replaced by new storylines that are more engrossing and suspenseful than the ones they replaced (Film and Television Narrative, 164).

Similar to mind-game films, complex television narratives provide the viewer with narrative clues that often point to the resolution of specific plotlines, but the way in which viewers process these narrative clues on a cognitive level is different from mind-game films. That is to say, it makes a difference for the audience’s viewing experience if a film provides them with a narrative clue and expects them to memorize that clue until the end of the film or if a television show inserts a narrative clue into its narrative without resolving it for several episodes or seasons of a show. The season-long narrative puzzle involving the mysterious pool scene and the pink teddy bear in Breaking Bad’s second season is a good example for this. The pink teddy bear is shown at the beginning of the first episode of the second season, but the show does not resolve how it fits into the overall storyline until the last episode of season two. This means during the season’s initial run, viewers had to wait twelve weeks until it was finally revealed that the teddy bear fell out of an airplane that collided with another airplane right over Walt’s house.

However, even after the mystery surrounding the pink teddy bear has finally been resolved in “ABQ,” the show references it again in the last episode of season four when Gus...
Fring (Giancarlo Esposito) is killed. As Gus’ face gets literally blown off at the end of the episode, the last shot of him bears a striking resemblance to the teddy bear viewers have come to know from season two.\(^9\) Yet there are other examples in *Breaking Bad* where narrative clues are planted early on in the series, but do not factor into the plot until several seasons later.

For example, the series makes several references to the works of Walt Whitman that are later on in the show revealed to have been important narrative clues. The first time Whitman is mentioned is in the third season episode “Sunset.” In this episode, Walt’s new assistant Gale Boetticher (David Costabile) cites the Whitman poem “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” in front of Walt. Later on in that episode, Walt is shown reading Whitman’s poetry collection *Leaves of Grass* while talking to his brother in law Hank on the phone. In the season four episode “Bullet Points,” which takes place after Walt has ordered the murder of Gale at the end of season three, Walt and Hank have a conversation about Gale’s murder. During their conversation Hank notes that in the lab report that was found in Gale’s apartment after his death, a mysterious “W.W.” is mentioned and jokingly adds that this “W.W.” might refer to Walter White. Yet Walt quickly points out that the “W.W.” in Gale’s report must refer to Walt Whitman as the lab report also contains a transcription of a Whitman poem.

The next time Whitman is referenced is in the fifth season episode “Hazard Pay” when Walt, in high spirits because he is moving back in with his wife and son, finds his copy of *Leaves of Grass* in a box while unpacking. He decides to leave it out, presumably to read it later on.\(^{10}\) However, the most prominent Whitman reference occurs in the season five episode “Gliding Over All,” which is titled after a Whitman poem from *Leaves of Grass*. The White family is having a BBQ and Hank has to use the bathroom. He sits on the toilet and browses through some

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\(^9\) In the last shot of Gus Fring, his face is half-burned and he is missing one eye.

\(^{10}\) As Walt is in high spirits at this point of the show, many viewers have speculated that this scene is also supposed to be reference to the Whitman poem “Song of Myself”.
magazines before finding Walt’s copy of *Leaves of Grass*. Hank opens the book and finds an inscription that reads “To my other favourite W.W. It’s an honour working with you. Fondly, G.B.” (“Gliding Over All”). Right after Hank’s discovery, the episode ends with a close-up of his face that suggests that Hank might have finally realized that the drug kingpin Heisenberg that he has been hunting for several years is his own brother in law.

Apart from such narrative clues as the pink teddy bear and *Leaves of Grass*, which are clearly tied to the resolution of a specific plotline, there is also more abstract symbolism to be found in *Breaking Bad*. For example, in the third season episode “Fly,” Walt becomes obsessed with killing a fly. While it is never made explicit what the fly stands for, television critics have argued that it is a symbol for the crimes that Walt has committed during the course of the show (see McNutt n.pag.). Although at the end of the episode Jesse succeeds in killing the fly, another fly appears in the cold open of “Gliding Over All,” indicating that no matter how hard Walt will try to bury his crimes, his actions will have consequences. There are certainly other ways to interpret the symbolic meaning of the fly, but this example shows that the creators of the series incorporate mysterious symbols into the narrative and expect the viewers to think about their meaning. Other, more abstract symbols include the reoccurring close-up shots of watches that are often accompanied by a loud ticking sound (i.e. in “Fifty-One”) or the reoccurrence of the colour pink.

The series also adds narrative complexity to the unfolding story by concealing narrative information from the viewer to postpone the resolution of specific plotlines. For example, at the end of season two, *Breaking Bad* shows how Walt lets Jane die without helping her. The viewer knows that this is an important plot point that will most likely set major narrative events in motion. Yet, while the show plays with the idea of resolving the plotline (in “Fly,” Walt almost confesses to Jesse that he let Jane die), Walt still has not revealed to Jesse that he could have
saved Jane as of this writing (one can only assume that the show is saving this revelation for one of the last episodes of the entire show). Another example of this narrative technique is Walt’s cancer. At the beginning of the show it seems as if Walt’s cancer gets progressively worse from episode to episode. But after he undergoes surgery, the cancer goes into remission and from then on is barely mentioned. However, in “Live Free or Die,” the first episode of season five, a flash-forward in which Walt takes some kind of medication suggests that the cancer will at some point of the story come back into play again.

In addition, as discussed in detail in chapter three, how viewers engage with morally ambiguous characters also adds to the narrative complexity of a television show because it influences the viewers’ emotional reaction to the narrative and their perception of narrative events. Again, it is important to point out that there are aspects that are unique to the television medium that affect how we engage with television characters, the most obvious one being time. While, as Smith discusses, there are cinematic narratives that also encourage viewers to engage with morally ambiguous characters or villains, this functions slightly different in the television medium because of the time that a television show has to closely align viewers with a character. That is to say, when *Breaking Bad* closely aligns viewers with Walter White and encourages them to form an allegiance with him before slowly turning him into a villainous protagonist, this affects viewers differently than it would in a feature film simply because they have spent more time with Walt. How the viewer engages with characters is an integral factor of narrative complexity because it influences the spectator’s understanding of the narrative. For example, when viewers are closely aligned with a character, the narrative often restricts the viewer’s knowledge to only what a particular character knows and in that way guides the narration. Moreover, the ways in which viewers engage with characters also influences how they interact with the narrative. For example, as discussed in chapter three, because Walter White is a morally
ambiguous character, engaging with him becomes a complex process for the audience and the viewer constantly switches between alignment and allegiance with him.

Narrative complexity in contemporary television is a recent narrative phenomenon that is based on the way in which television narratives arranges knowledge for the viewer. That is to say, many modern television narratives specifically arrange narrative information in a way that is supposed to mislead or deceive the viewers. This misguidance of the viewer is often based on how television shows employ specific storytelling techniques or narrative devices that affect the way in which knowledge is conveyed to the viewer. The storytelling techniques include advancing multiple plotlines per episode and letting plotlines play out over the course of several seasons, while the narrative devices that affect the way in which knowledge is conveyed to the viewer include flashbacks, flash-forwards, and cold opens. In addition, the flow of narrative information in these complex television narratives is related to how they align audiences with what often are morally ambiguous protagonists.

However, while many contemporary television series qualify as complex narratives, they may use different tools to arrange their narrative information. That is to say, while *Breaking Bad* frequently uses its cold opens to misguide the audience or inserts narrative clues into the plot that point to the resolution of a specific plotline, the narrative complexity in *Game of Thrones* stems more from the show’s multiplicity of plotlines and characters. In that regard, further studies that specifically concentrate on different complex narrative devices or storytelling techniques could be carried out. Although television scholars such as Jason Mittell have acknowledged complex television narratives as a narrative trend, the study of complex television narratives has only begun. While this work has taken a cognitive approach to narrative complexity, using *Breaking Bad* as a case study and specifically exploring the series’ narrative ties to the mind-game film, there are other approaches one could take to this topic. For example, studies that specifically
focus on the changes of television production in relation to the rise of complex television narratives, or studies that explore complex television narratives from a reception studies point of view have yet to be undertaken. However, in my opinion, approaching this topic from a cognitive point of view is still the logical first step as how viewers make sense of any form of narrative lies at the heart of “Complex TV,” a narrative trend that emerged from the “quality TV” shows of the early 1980s and has become a substantial part of the current golden age of television.
Bibliography


