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***Breaking Bad* and Narrative Complexity¹**

Abstract: In this paper I deal with the phenomenon of narrative complexity in TV serial production, and as an example I will discuss *Breaking Bad*. Pointing to this phenomenon as a creative revolution, characterized by a new visual style, I will discuss its self-reflexivity. This means that the mechanics of producing narrative are realized by making the audience follow not just the plot of the story, but also recognize formal aspects of the construction of the storyworld, its characters, and relations. I will illustrate the paradigm shift in television studies from a cultural approach to textual analysis, which focusses on formal aspects of producing the serials. My approach to *Breaking Bad* will apply both approaches. In cultural analysis, I will focus on the masculinity in crisis which is taking place within the context of American neoliberalism. After that I will deal with the mechanics of visual narrating which is a crucial component of *Breaking Bad*.

Keywords: *Breaking Bad*; narrative complexity; masculinity; neoliberalism; self-reflexivity; visual mechanics

Introduction

The opinion that the television narrative in the last two decades dramatically changed has become a commonplace.² Earlier TV dramas were made in the form of simple narrative line with the clear division between bad and good characters. In order to delineate the genealogy of television narratives, various television theoreticians trace the history that goes back from 17th century domination of drama as a genre. While from mid-19th century novel was positioned as the dominant genre, in mid-20th it became film, and from the beginning of the 21st century television drama finally obtained the status of an artistic genre.³ Alan Sepinwall emphasized that revolutionary moment for television

¹ This text is written as part of a project “Knjiženstvo: teorija i istorija ženske književnosti na srpskom jeziku do 1915” supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia, no. 178029.

² Dubravka Đurić, “Globalizacija, medijski imperijalizam i kompleksna narativnost televizijskih serija,” *Zeničke sveske* 21 (2015): 50–62.

³ Dafydd Wood, “Files and One-Eyed Bears: The Maturation of a Genre,” in *The Methods of Breaking Bad: Essays on Narrative, Character and Ethics*, ed. Jacob Blevins and Dafydd Wood (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015), 11.

was when it did “step out from the shadow of the cinema.”⁴ In many discussions of quality TV,⁵ the notion of the cinematic⁶ is used to point to the sophisticated film style that now could be recognized in the production of TV serials. This “creative revolution”, as Brett Martin referred to this phenomenon in the sub-title of his book *Difficult Men*,⁷ was made possible thanks to crucial changes in television technologies. Consequently, television entered the “multichannel era”⁸ with alternatives for producing series characterized by narrative complexity,⁹ as well as with new ways of dissemination. The new possibilities that we could watch TV series in DVD format meant we could watch them independently of the TV scheme, while before we had to organize our daily routine around it. For the success of this kind of serial another important factor should be mentioned: new television products experiment not only with the inherited forms and genres, but became anchored in the formal and narrative possibilities of the very medium: television and its seriality. This meant that TV serial is now considered as autonomous media for and by itself, and could not so easily be compared with literature and film as quite distinct form from them, with its own artistic development and procedures.¹⁰ Describing the self-consciousness of serial television form, Logan emphasized “a peculiar tension between the unified and the fragmentary, between the discrete parts and the greater whole, which are at once separate and connected.”¹¹ The phenomenon of blurring the boundaries between high-brow and low-brow culture, which in the period of postmodernism became the usual approach in making literature, visual art, as well as more popular forms, in the time of neoliberal globalism became accompanied with the process of appropriation of literally every characteristic of modernist and avant-garde art (narrative complexity, discontinuity, collage, montage, hybridity, etc.) by consumer and popular culture.

⁴ Alan Sepinwall, *The Revolution was Televised: The Cops, Crooks, Slingers, and Slayers who Changed TV Drama Forever* (New York: A Touchstone Book, Simon & Shuster, 2012), 3.

⁵ The term *Quality TV* is introduced to denote the fact that the production of TV series changed in quality. According to Bignell, “[q]uality television drama means an aesthetic ambitious programme type with the literary values of creative imagination, authenticity and relevance.” Jonathan Bignell, “Seeing and Knowing: Reflexivity and Quality,” in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, ed. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (New York: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2000), 162.

⁶ Visual aesthetic used to be seen as privilege characteristic of art cinema (Robin Nelson, “Quality TV Drama: Estimations and Influences through Time and Space,” in *Quality TV*, 48). In 1974 US television theorist Horace Newcomb made the following influential distinction: primary characteristic of “broadcast television are intimacy, continuity and immediacy” therefore narrative forms which produce verisimilitude are privileged. On the other side, he made a tight connection between cinema and visual stylishness (Bignell, “Seeing and Knowing,” 158). That is why many early commentators emphasized cinematic character of quality TV.

⁷ Brett Martin, *Difficult Men. Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad* (London: Penguin Press, 2013).

⁸ Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 17.

⁹ According to Mittell, “[t]elevision’s narrative complexity is predicted on specific facets of storytelling that seem uniquely suited to the television series structure apart from film and literature and that distinguish it from conventional mode of episodic and serial forms.” *Ibid*, 18.

¹⁰ Sanja Kovačević, *Kvalitetne TV serije: milenijsko doba ekrana* (Zagreb: Jasenski & Turk, 2017), 31.

¹¹ Elliott Logan, *Breaking Bad and Dignity: Unity and Fragmentation in the Serial Television Drama* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1.

Complex changes that occurred thanks to this appropriation are accompanied with the appropriation of terminology used by theoreticians in their discussion of new serial production. In his book *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* Seymour Chatman applied narratological analysis to the film as a medium, pointing to the tensions between sound track and visual track.¹² According to Gaby Allrath et al., the relationship between these two tracks became fundamental for narratological approach to any audiovisual media.¹³ As an example, dealing with *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008–2013) and its effect upon viewers, which is based on constant manipulation and disorientation, Dafydd Wood uses Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky's term defamiliarization.¹⁴ The term is offered at the beginning of the 20th century in the discussions of high literature. Defining defamiliarization Shklovsky wrote: "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged."¹⁵ In further discussion we will see how in *Breaking Bad*, as one of the most complexly produced serials, Shklovsky's defamiliarization or Barthes' "zero degree style" work as an explanatory tool.

In this context it is worth mentioning that cultural analysis dominated in the previous period of television studies.¹⁶ At the moment already for some time we are witnessing the turn in analytical approach towards "television's mechanisms of storytelling."¹⁷ The cultural approach emphasized the issues of cultural representations embracing the meanings that circulate in society, articulating "norms of American identity, the role of the state, and perception of foreign threats in the recognized cultural landscape",¹⁸ with foregrounding of gender politics, ethnicity and race. The shift away from the cultural studies approach now occurs and the focus is directed on narrative mode, i.e., on formal aspects of the media. According to Mittell in this paradigm we don't ask "what does this mean?", but "how does this work?"¹⁹ Or, as Logan stresses, the aim of criticism is now to discuss the articulation of the meaning, investigating how it is constructed by the details of the style inherited in the specific (television) media.²⁰

My approach will follow both these lines. First I will apply cultural analysis, discussing the context in which *Breaking Bad* was created, plus neoliberalism as well

¹² Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 135.

¹³ Gaby Allrath, et al., "Introduction: Towards a Narratology of TV Series," in *Narrative Strategies in Television Series*, ed. Gaby Allrath and Marion Gymnich (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1–43.

¹⁴ Wood, "Files and One-Eyed Bears," 18.

¹⁵ Quoted in Saul Morson, "The Russian debate on narrative," in *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. Patricia Waugh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 216.

¹⁶ Dubravka Đurić, "Kratak uvod u studije televizije," *Treći program Radio Beograda* 150 (2011): 9–17.

¹⁷ Mittell, *Complex TV*, 33.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁰ Logan, *Breaking Bad and Dignity*, 3.

as the crisis of masculinity represented in the show. Then I will focus on the analysis of the form since through it meanings in the serial made by formal procedures are made available to us as viewers.

Neoliberalism and masculinity in *Breaking Bad*

Breaking Bad's pilot episode appeared in 2008, the very year of the economic crisis in the USA. It could be said that it is the story of the character Walter White, an antihero, who during the course of the serial undergoes a dramatic transformation. Vince Gilligan, the series creator, described it as: “transformation of going from a normal shlub [a high school chemistry teacher] to a bad guy and ultimately to a king-pin.”²¹ Or as David P. Pierson wrote, the character of Walter was transformed from an emasculated schoolteacher with terminal cancer diagnosis, “to a self-confident, aggressive drug lord.”²² This transformation has to do with the neoliberal production of individuals as winners and losers. In most discussions of *Breaking Bad*, as is the case with *The Wire*,²³ theoreticians emphasize that it is the critique of neoliberalism. Jeffrey R. Di Leo even calls the narrative style developed in it *neoliberal magical realism*,²⁴ because of its “underlying neoliberal vision”, suggesting to us that an indebted individual in free market could become entrepreneur if only he or she decided to abandon the moral and social norms, and embrace violent criminal activities. Dealing with these issues, *Breaking Bad* functions as “a site of critique and resistance to the terrors of neoliberalism in America.”²⁵

In many of the serials with narrative complexity, the story is male-centered, which means that the narration is about manhood, male power and combats.²⁶ *Breaking Bad* deals with the question of white masculinity.²⁷ But masculinity is always performed in the specific historical and cultural context, so that in *Breaking Bad*, we could point to the fact that this serial is dealing with “policies and discourses” of neoliberalism.²⁸ Walter’s story is taking place in neoliberal post-welfare²⁹ social condition

²¹ Quoted in Mittell, *Complex TV*, 151.

²² David P. Pierson, “Breaking Neoliberal? Contemporary Neoliberal Discourses and Policies in AMC’s *Breaking Bad*,” in *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays on the Context, Politics, Style, and Reception of the Television Series*, ed. David Pierson (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 30.

²³ Dubravka Đurić Dubravka, “Hybridity, narrative complexity and neoliberalism in *The Wire*,” in *Proceedings of ICA 2016: Aesthetics and Mass Culture* (Seoul: Seoul National University, 2016), 184–87.

²⁴ Jeffrey R. Di Leo, “Flies in the Marketplace: Nietzsche and Neoliberalism,” in *The Methods of Breaking Bad: Essays on Narrative, Character and Ethics*, ed. Jacob Blevins and Dafydd Wood (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015), 27.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁶ Martin, *Difficult Men*, 12.

²⁷ Logan, *Breaking Bad and Dignity*, 3.

²⁸ Pierson, “Breaking Neoliberal?” 16.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

in which democratic institutions are systematically eroded. The neoliberal discourses and ideologies are here rooted into the story of Walt's crises of masculinity in the market driven society in which every person is responsible for her or his well being. Walter White's character is constructed within television serial storytelling which, with its complex narrative strategies, constructs the 21st century neoliberal social space in which health care doesn't function, the economy is destroyed, gender roles became flexible and are turned upside down, gun violence becomes normalized and the ethnic other is believed to be a threat.³⁰ In the course of *Breaking Bad's* narrative, in which an ordinary decent schoolteacher, father and husband is humiliated on a daily basis, the resolution for him is "to take his destiny into his own hands", which leads him to become a methamphetamine cook and criminal. It could be cynically said that 'criminal' in neoliberalism became one of the occupational choices. Walter became a neoliberal entrepreneur, and in the process his normative masculinity is restored. When the promises of powerful and well-to-do individuals of neoliberalism failed, and the knowledge economy in which Walter participated resulted in the debt economy, producing the docile subjects,³¹ he was unable to earn the money necessary for the treatment of his illness. From an "in-debt man" he undergoes the transformation into an "entrepreneurial man", i.e., to Walter's persona Heisenberg. As in many television serials, the antihero principle operates in *Breaking Bad*.³² Walter's transformation from chemistry teacher to his persona Heisenberg made him an antiheroic villain, whose deeds are celebrated even in a *narcocorrido ballad*.³³ This transformation is also visually marked in his appearance: Walt as Heisenberg shaved his head, and appears in a black porkpie hat. The importance of the figure of antihero is also paradigmatic for the complex TV of the post-millennium, which presents a "mixture of masculine decline and empowerment".³⁴

That the show deals with the crisis of masculinity is suggested from the start. In the pilot episode, in the opening image we see a pair of khakis trousers floating in the breeze, which could be understood as symbolizing the question "who *deserves* to wear or own the pants"?³⁵ Because it is felt that 'traditional' modes of masculinity are threatened, the protagonists like Walter "must embrace older models of masculinity based on violence, intimidation, and control in order to re-masculinize themselves."³⁶ According to Pierson:

³⁰ Jacob Blevins, "Introduction," in *The Methods of Breaking Bad*, 2.

³¹ Di Leo, "Flies in the Marketplace," 42.

³² Martin, *Difficult Men*, 6.

³³ Mittell, *Complex TV*, 155. In second season episode titled "Negro y Azul" we see the video of Mexican narcocorrido song about Heisenberg. This is "a genre of Mexican folk song whose lyrics glamorize tales of real-life drug smugglers and criminals" (Wood, "Files and One-Eyed Bears," 21).

³⁴ Jason Landrum, "Say My Name: The Fantasy of Liberated Masculinity," in *The Methods of Breaking Bad*, 105.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 94.

³⁶ Brian Faucette, "Taking Control: Male Angst and the Re-Emerging of Hegemonic Masculinity in *Breaking Bad*," in *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays on the Context, Politics, Style, and Reception of the Television Series*, 74.

[n]eo-liberalism's economic-rational individualism is conflated with aggressive, hyper-masculine behavior in the series. Neoliberalism, with its prime concentration on promoting aggressive individualism and self-interest, does not leave much space for non-aggressive emotions, like compassion and humility, nor for socially-directed actions such as charity, working for social and economic justice, and community building.³⁷

And the question is posed for us now what devices are used in order to create *Breaking Bad* storyworld³⁸?

Self-reflexivity and visual mechanism in *Breaking Bad*

Breaking Bad is an extremely complex narrative which, like *The Wire*, foregrounds formal strategies so that the audience can enjoy not only following the development of the story but also figuring out the formal way it is produced. They are engaged in consideration of its mechanisms of producing meanings, because the show investigates its own narrative organization and strategies of storytelling, making them visible to the viewer. Because the audience now has better media narrative and visual literacy, their expectations changed. That is why in dealing with the “structural innovations and experimentations” in *Breaking Bad*, Wood, as already mentioned, used Shklovsky's term defamiliarization, while Mittell uses Roland Barthes concept of “zero degree style”. This usage points to the paradigmatic shift in television studies towards formal analysis, although Mittell stresses that his model is not strictly formal, i.e., textual approach derived from structuralism, because textuality could never be separated from the context.³⁹ Using defamiliarization and zero degree styles, both Mittell and Wood point to the *Breaking Bad*'s most important devices: fragmentation, discontinuity and disorientation. In theorizing TV serials, Wood states that guiding aesthetics of this show could be denoted by Shklovsky's term “making strange” or “defamiliarization” for it “involves twisting in some way the representation of or perspective on a quotidian object”.⁴⁰ Barthes' concept of “zero degree style” is used for designating “transparent mediacy.”⁴¹ It points to the earlier television style which aims at making itself quite invisible,⁴² permitting audience watching TV serial to easily

³⁷ Pierson, “Breaking Neoliberal?” 26.

³⁸ The term *storyworld* refers to a fictional universe or fictional-narrative world created by television serials “populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time” (Mittell, *Complex TV*, 10, emphasize in original).

³⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

⁴⁰ Wood, “Files and One-Eyed Bears,” 18.

⁴¹ Quoted in Pierre Barrette and Yves Picard, “Breaking the Waves,” in *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays on the Context, Politics, Style, and Reception of the Television Series*, 123.

⁴² Jason Mittell, “The Qualities of Complexity: Vast Versus Dense Seriality in Contemporary Television,” in *Television and Aesthetics of Style*, ed. Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 49.

grasp the meaning generated in it, putting them in the position of passive consumers. In other words, as Jonathan Bignell explains, zero-degree television drama style does not “draw attention to the mediation of narrative by specific audio-visual forms.”⁴³ The opposite is the “maximum degree style”, Mittell applied to *Breaking Bad*,⁴⁴ designating the television style, which requires the audience to have active engagement in the reception. *Breaking Bad* is characterized by atemporal storytelling and playing with different visual styles, which are important to the mechanics of creating its storyworld.⁴⁵ Barrette and Picard described this style as a “meta-textual device”, pointing to its self-reflexivity.⁴⁶ In a detailed explanation of this phenomenon, Mittell uses Neil Harris’ term “operational aesthetics” and Jaffrey Sconce’s term “metareflexive” to refer to “the pleasure of unraveling the operations of narrative mechanics”,⁴⁷ especially when narrative is told by visual language. In this regard I will emphasize different kinds of visual spectacles which function in opposition to verbal narration.⁴⁸ Generally, self-reflexivity in TV shows like *Breaking Bad* reveals itself in the domination of visuality over orality, with important usage of telescoping and editing, or of the montage. Analyzing three sequences from the episode “Seven Thirty-Seven”, Barrette and Picard commented that in an indoor scene turning camera “too close to and then too far from the narrative situation, the *mise en scène* makes us think about its power to interpose its gaze and to impose its presence however it wishes.”⁴⁹ Therefore the special attention could now be directed to the experiments with cold open or teasers, which are visual narratives playing with flashforwards and flashbacks, whose function is, according to Logan, to dislocate “us from a stable, orienting narrative context the signaling of an end point draws us in by slightly different means [...] providing a strong ratchet of anticipation by which the tightens our bind to the fiction.”⁵⁰ Cold opens or teasers could be understood as “unique narrative pieces”⁵¹ defined by David Lavery as “minisodes”,⁵² which means that they are narratives within the narrative. Important feature of the *Breaking Bad* visual style is making decontextualized patterns with persisting visual shots, which reappear with variations through different episodes.⁵³

The teaser of the first episode of *Breaking Bad* that was already discussed above as a symptom of masculinity in crisis, will be discussed now as a symptom of the

⁴³ Bignell, “Seeing and Knowing: Reflexivity and Quality,” 159.

⁴⁴ Mittell, “The Qualities of Complexity,” 49.

⁴⁵ Mittell, *Complex TV*, 22.

⁴⁶ Barrette and Picard, “Breaking the Waves,” 124.

⁴⁷ Mittell, *Complex TV*, 42–43.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁹ Barrette and Picard, “Breaking the Waves,” 127.

⁵⁰ Logan, *Breaking Bad and Dignity*, 29.

⁵¹ Rossend Sánchez-Baró, “Uncertain Beginnings: *Breaking Bad*’s Episodic Openings,” in *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays on the Context, Politics, Style, and Reception of the Television Series*, 140.

⁵² Quoted in *ibid.*, 140.

⁵³ Wood, “Files and One-Eyed Bears: The Maturation of a Genre,” 19.

show's experimental style. Its function is to suggest to the audience what they will be faced with in the show. In it we see the sky over the desert, a man in his underwear with gas mask over his face, and his trousers flying towards the sky. These strange, decontextualized images could have a confusing effect on viewers, who could find themselves disoriented, which suggests that unpredictability is the main narrative device. The function of decontextualized images, absurd humor, enigmatic acts as well as time discontinuity points to the fact that this drama should be understood as a radical formal experimentation.⁵⁴

Conclusion

At the center of my discussion of the TV series *Breaking Bad* is the contemporary phenomenon of complex narrativity. This term is connected with the notions of the creative revolution and quality TV, which are the results of technological advances in producing and disseminating of television programs. Because of the changes in neoliberal production of commercials and products of popular culture, modernist and avant-garde devices are transferred into these productions, including the TV serial. TV serials became narratively extremely complex, television changed from an orally dominated to a visually dominated style. Self-reflexivity became an important characteristic of TV serials which especially in *Breaking Bad* became visible in different complexly visually narrated events. At the centre of the storyworld in *Breaking Bad* is the transformation of the leading character, Walter White, from a decent schoolteacher to a criminal. This transformation is motivated by neoliberal economical transformations, which position most citizens in the role of 'losers' thanks to the logic of 'winner takes all'. Walter became a criminal, and transformed himself from an emasculated into re-masculated man. The story is complexly mediated by visual style and narrative spectacular effects characterized by discontinued narration, fragmentation, and visual narration. The discussion of masculinity in crisis is embedded in the cultural studies approach, while discussion of formal mechanics of the narration is embedded in formal analysis of media text. I follow both lines of analysis, pointing to the paradigmatic turn in television studies.

⁵⁴ Sánchez-Baró, "Uncertain Beginnings," 142; Wood, "Files and One-Eyed Bears," 18.

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Article received: April 28, 2018
Article accepted: May 10, 2018
Original scholarly paper