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Wakeman, SJ (2018) The 'one who knocks' and the 'one who waits': Gendered violence in Breaking Bad. *Crime, Media, Culture*, 14 (2). pp. 213-228. ISSN 1741-6604

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The ‘One Who Knocks’ and the ‘One Who Waits’: Gendered Violence in *Breaking Bad*

Abstract

This article provides a cultural criminological analysis of the acclaimed US television series, *Breaking Bad*. It is argued here that – as a cultural text – *Breaking Bad* is emblematic of an agenda for change surrounding criminological theories of peoples’ propensity to do harm to one another. To exemplify this, the show’s central (male) protagonist is revealed to undergo a complete biosocial transformation into a violent offender and as such, demonstrate the need for criminological theory to recognise and further reflect upon this process. However, at the same time, the (re)presented *inability* of the show’s female characters to do the same is indicative of a number of gender-related questions that progressive criminological theories of violence need to answer. In considering these two fields in tandem the show’s criminological significance is established; it is symbolic of the need for criminology to afford greater recognition to the nuanced intersections of *both* biological and sociological factors in the genesis and evolution of violent human subjectivities.

Keywords

Biology, *Breaking Bad*, Gender, Interpersonal Violence, Popular Criminology, Transcendental Materialism

Introduction

You see, ‘technically’, chemistry is the study of matter. But I prefer to see it as: *the study of change*. Electrons change their energy levels, molecules change their bonds, elements combine and change into compounds. But that’s all of life, right? It’s the constant, it’s the cycle; it’s solution, dissolution, just over and over and over. It is growth, then decay, then *transformation*. It’s fascinating really – it’s a shame so many of us never take time to consider its implications.

Walter White, S01 E01

This article provides a cultural criminological analysis of the acclaimed US television series, *Breaking Bad*. It investigates this show as a form of ‘popular criminology’ (Rafter & Brown, 2011) and seeks to add to the theoretical advances made in recent years by scholars researching the multiple intersections between academic criminology and various popular cultural forms (e.g., Atkinson and Rodgers, 2016; Brown and Rafter, 2013; Carrabine, 2012; Linnemann, 2015; O’Brien et al., 2005; Phillips & Strobl, 2013; Rafter, 2007; Wakeman, 2014). It is argued here that – as a cultural text – *Breaking Bad* provides an ideal means through which three interlinked fields of criminological study can be advanced: those surrounding gender, violence, and the biosocial nature of the human subject. To support this claim the article works towards three aims: (1) to demonstrate the extent to which *Breaking Bad’s* (re)presentation of male violence resonates with progressive and transformative criminological theories of interpersonal violence (e.g. Hall, 2012a; Hall and Winlow, 2015); (2) to reveal the extent to which the show’s depictions of female violence (or lack thereof) problematises and complicates such theoretical developments; and then (3), to position *Breaking Bad* as emblematic of the need for

contemporary criminologists to think more openly – *yet no less critically* – about the role of biology in shaping and directing human action.

Breaking Bad is certainly a worthy site for an investigation like this. As part of the post millennium transformation of the TV medium (see Mittell, 2015) it ran for five seasons between 2008 and 2013. Like its contemporaries *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, it is essentially a crime drama focussing upon the increasing trials and tribulations of ‘difficult men’ (Martin, 2013). The show received considerable praise from numerous sources – the Writers Guild of America rank it as the 13th best written TV series ever; it won no fewer than sixteen Primetime Emmy Awards (out of almost 60 nominations); and it received the 2013 Golden Globe award for Best TV Drama Series. In addition to this it has also started to gain attention from within various academic fields: Kopak and Sefiha (2015) highlight its pedagogic potential with recourse to teaching Katz’s (1988) ‘ways of the badass’; Tzanelli and Yar (2016) usefully demonstrate its extended cultural significance through the ‘televisual tourism’ that has come to accompany it; Jaramillo (2014) designates it a key point in the cultural evolution of TV representations of Mexican drug dealers; and Linnemann (2016) uses it to great effect in his compelling analysis of methamphetamine’s ‘cultural imaginary’ in the U.S. drug war. Moreover, a recent edition (Vol. 45, Issue 2) of the *New Mexico Law Review* is dedicated to the show and its intersections with legal studies. However, as of yet, a thorough criminological investigation of the show’s depictions of violence is yet to be undertaken.¹

This dearth of criminological analyses of *Breaking Bad* is surprising considering its cultural reception, yet it is rendered even more so by the fact that this show is emblematic of a – perhaps even *the* – core criminological question. Namely, how is it that some people can go from being law abiders to law breakers? Why do some people ‘break bad’? How is it possible for someone to go from – in the words of the show’s creator, Vince Gilligan – ‘Mr Chips to Scarface’?² *Breaking Bad* constitutes an important cultural paradigm of the debates that surround these

questions and thus, its criminological significance should not be underestimated. A core claim made here is this: the transformation from Mr Chips to Scarface is just that – *a transformation*. And, moreover, one that occurs at both biological and sociological levels. In this respect *Breaking Bad* is emblematic of wider developments in social scientific/philosophical thought that seek to better integrate the biological and social sciences (see Braidotti, 2002; Johnston and Malabou, 2013; Meloni, 2014; Meloni et al., 2016; Rose, 2013; Wilson, 2004; Žižek, 2006). While some criminologists have embraced biosocial thinking (e.g. Delisi, 2013; Owen, 2012; Walsh and Beaver, 2009), cultural and/or critical criminologists have been somewhat hesitant to do so. As such, a core purpose of the present article is demonstrating the potentials of such engagement for cultural criminology.

Towards these ends the article opens with a brief introduction to the study of ‘popular criminology’ followed by an equally brief overview of *Breaking Bad*. The mainstay of the article is then split via two sections. The first is concerned with positioning Walter White (Bryan Cranston) as the ‘the one who knocks’, as the ‘transcendental materialist subject’ (Hall, 2012a, 2012b; Johnston, 2008) whose violent ways become inscribed at the very core of their being. The second is concerned with Walter’s wife, Skyler White (Anna Gunn) and the ways in which her apparent inability to ‘break bad’ in the same way as her husband problematises and complicates the aforementioned theory of transcendental materialism and its criminological extrapolation. Throughout both though, the overall goal remains constant: to position *Breaking Bad* as a cultural embodiment of criminological debates about violence in the ‘century of biology’ that Nikolas Rose (2013) has claimed we now live. Crucially, in working towards this aim, *Breaking Bad* is firmly revealed as emblematic of the future heuristic potentials (and pitfalls) of an increased criminological sensitivity towards the bio-social interface in debates about interpersonal violence.

Reading *Breaking Bad* as Popular Criminology

What follows below is predicated upon understanding *Breaking Bad* as existing as a cultural text, *as a form of 'popular criminology'*. Popular criminology is, for Nicole Rafter (2007: 415), a set of 'discourses about crime found not only in film but also on the Internet, on television and in newspapers, novels and rap music and myth'. There is significant utility to be found in studying representations of criminological subjects like these – they provide a means by which the criminological imagination can be extended. Criminologists have recognised this for some time now, and the discipline's relationship with cultural forms has progressed healthily from the days of understanding reality and representation as being discrete from one another. Questions are frequently asked now around the ways in which popular culture and academic theory can be fused to develop and enhance understandings of any given subject. That is, as Rafter and Brown (2011: 2) note, the study of popular criminology is about 'demonstrating that popular culture can expand formal theory—and that the encounter of theory with cinema [to give but one example] is an engagement that leaves both fundamentally transformed'.

Importantly for Rafter (2007), academic and popular criminologies should *not* be viewed as alternative forms of knowledge, *but rather as complementary*. However, as Carrabine (2008) sensibly notes, some caution is required around the need to recognise good and bad examples of both; while some strands of criminological knowledge do less than others to inform around their subjects, some representations do more than others to shape and redirect understandings of crime. The interface between strong examples from either side – and it is argued here that *Breaking Bad* is a strong example – has considerable heuristic potential. This is why, again for Carrabine (2008), the 'texts, audiences and industries' of popular culture must regularly

form the targets of criminological research. This however poses a number of questions around how such research should be done.

There are different epistemic/methodological approaches available here that can be roughly divided between those that take the more traditionally social scientific approach of viewing representations as ideological conduits that transmit meaning, and those that are more closely akin to literary theory which view representations as being tangled up in postmodern processes of meaning-making/negotiation. Both have their merits and limitations, and consequently the most appropriate course to take is one that incorporates the strengths of each; what Majid Yar (2010: 77) has usefully termed a 'synthetic and critical' approach to reading crime media. From such a position, the task is to understand *Breaking Bad* as both conveying meaning and being open to interpretation at the same time. This, for Yar (2010), allows for an appreciation of the diverse nuances of representations to be set alongside their wider social/political relevance. Thus, the study of criminological representations does well to start from a point similar to that which Stuart Hall (1981: 443) described as the 'double stake of popular culture'. That is, the double movement of containment and resistance which it always contains. As TV shows both generate and convey meaning at the same time, they are ideological conduits *and* challenge hegemony at the same time. This epistemic position facilitates the expansion and transformation of academic theory through engagement with representations. It encourages the questioning of the ways in which *Breaking Bad* conveys latent ideologies of gender and violence, *and* it also permits investigations of the ways in which the show challenges forms of intellectual hegemony surrounding these subjects concomitantly.

Breaking Bad: A Brief Summary

Before progressing into the analysis described above however, a brief overview of *Breaking Bad* is required for the unfamiliar reader. Set in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the show tells the story of Walter White, a high-school chemistry teacher in his early fifties who is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Lacking adequate health insurance, Walter realises that in the event of his impending death his wife, disabled teenage son, and unborn baby girl will be left in financial peril. He reads this situation as the latest in a long line of his failures, underpinned by his perceived inability thus far in life to fulfil his potential. He is a brilliant chemist, yet bought out early of the company he and his university friend set up as students (which to his further dismay is now worth millions). He is an impassioned teacher, yet his financial circumstances mean he has to take a second job at a car wash where his students mock him as he cleans the wheels on their sports cars. And, he is a loving father who would do anything for his children, yet his cancer will ultimately prevent him from fulfilling this potential too. All of the above come together in one moment in season one episode four (hereafter, S01 E04) when Hank Schrader – Walter’s hyper-masculine DEA agent brother-in-law (Dean Norris) – rather awkwardly lets him know that when he dies, he will provide for his wife and children in his place. For Walter, this is the final insult. It is at this point that something of a transformation starts to occur; from here on in Walter embraces the criminality the viewer has witnessed him flirting with in the opening episodes – *it is here that Walter White ‘breaks bad’*.

Walter then embarks upon a course of action that, through a reunion with a former pupil Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), involves producing and selling crystal methamphetamine. With his chemistry knowledge to assist him, Walt and Jesse produce the purest, strongest methamphetamine on the market and as such, are able to climb to the very top of the illicit drug trade. This ascent is anything but peaceful though; by the end of the show Walter has been directly implicated in the deaths of 27 people.³ Here the viewer sees the extent of Walter’s

transformation – he changes from a mild-mannered teacher to a calculating killer who on more than one occasion executes those who stand in his way without a second’s hesitation. Over the course of five seasons we see *Walter become something else*, he becomes ‘Heisenberg’. However, this is not just a ‘street’ name that Walt adopts, it is not just his alter ego, *Walter becomes Heisenberg at the very core of his being*. In this respect, the name is most apt.⁴

Through this transformation, Walter causes untold misery to those around him, but perhaps none more so than his wife. Their relationship and its deterioration is a key theme of the show as Skyler comes to know of Walt’s criminality and albeit to a lesser degree, becomes involved herself. However, the viewer does not see Skyler ‘break bad’ in the same explosively violent way as her husband – they see a more passive, indirect will to violence that is sexualised and inextricably bound up with her feminine form. Skyler does not break bad in the same way Walter does, and this has extensive symbolic importance. Thus, in *Breaking Bad* two distinct problematics are visible with theoretical significance to criminology: (1) a challenge to some of the field’s dominant understandings of interpersonal violence through Walter’s transformation; and (2), the reaffirmation of patriarchal values around women’s propensities towards, and capacities for, this same type of violence through Skyler’s apparent inability to engage in it in the same way the show’s men do.

The One Who Knocks: Walter White as the ‘Transcendental Materialist Subject’

Who are you talking to right now? Who is it you think you see? Do you know how much I make a year? I mean, even if I told you, you wouldn’t believe it. Do you know what would happen if I suddenly decided to stop going into work? A business, big enough that it

could be listed on the NASDAQ, goes belly up. *Disappears!* It ceases to exist, *without me!*

No, you clearly don't know who you're talking to, so let me clue you in: I am not *in* danger,

Skyler – *I am the danger*. A guy opens his door and gets shot and you think that of *me?*

No. *I am the one who knocks!*

Walter White, S04 E06

In the above extract Walt makes something clear to Skyler – he is no longer the passive, weak, failure of a man that he thinks she sees him as. *He has changed*. To add some context, Skyler has recently heard of the death of a man connected to Walt's meth business and is pleading with him to get out of the trade. She suggests he is 'in over his head' and that he calls the police to confess all and seek protection. She intimates that he does so as the cancer-stricken school teacher, as a 'victim' of ruthless gangsters who have exploited him and his circumstances. However Walter no longer sees himself in this light, and for very good reason too. When he declares himself to be '*the danger*', he means it. By this point Walt has changed, in his appearance as well as his attitude and demeanour. He has become Heisenberg; he is the same man, but different. This matters because it is this transformation that is emblematic of a potential challenge to criminological theories of the ways in which people become violent. Walter's transformation is not just discursive, nor is it merely symbolic, and neither is it some sort of social constructionism either. While it retains elements of all of these, it is so much more; it is a foundational change at the very core of his material being, *he has become something that previously he was not*.

Such pathways into violent offending have been studied by criminologists for a long time, and there are multiple accounts surrounding the ways in which they can be understood. To make sense of them thematically, Ray (2011) notes that in the case of interpersonal violence like Walter's, there is a broad conceptual divide between theories that are primarily biological

and of an ‘evolutionary’ nature (those that hold violence to be an ‘adaptive trait’ present in all humans and necessary to our evolution), and those that are more ‘social’ in their nature (those that stem from the fields of psychology, sociology and criminology). Regarding the latter, these extend from what might be termed ‘the foundational’ right up to the contemporary/progressive. For example, there are established theories that point towards the social environment that Walter finds himself in and the ways in which it can encourage the adoption of similar behaviours – the social learning theory of Burgess and Akers (1966) is indicative of this type of thinking. Similarly, strain theories contend that certain structural contexts combined with certain cultural goals/ideals underpin deviant responses such as Walter’s (i.e., Merton, 1968). Additionally, there are rational choice/routine activity-based theories that understand criminality as basic goal-orientated action designed to achieve given ends (Cohen and Felson, 1979). Whilst there is certainly some merit in these, their ability to account for Walter’s actions is perhaps limited by its complexity; they remain foundational works that have since been superseded by an array of contemporary criminological theories more directly focused upon interpersonal violence.

Katz’s (1988) concept of ‘righteous slaughter’ is certainly noteworthy as a more contemporary theory of violence, as is his more recent analysis of U.S. school shootings (Katz, 2016). Additionally, there are a number of compelling accounts involving gender and the ways in which masculinity in particular is associated with a will to violence (e.g. Messerschmidt, 2012, 2013). And then finally, the progressive and evolving corpus of psychosocial criminology offers significant and nuanced explanations for violent offending through incorporating the teachings of both psychology and sociology (see Gadd, 2003; Gadd and Jefferson, 2007; Robinson & Gadd, 2016). However, despite their layers of complexity, the above do not recognise to the extent that they perhaps could what Hall (2012a) termed the ‘thorny’ issue of biology. That is, they do not take account of the fact that human action is

underpinned by biological processes, many of which the agent has limited or no control over or knowledge of. This is not to discredit the aforementioned works as they did not set out to cover cover biosocial concerns – rather, it is to highlight the fact that the biological sphere is currently not recognised as comprehensively as it could be in contemporary criminologies of a cultural and/or critical nature (see Delisi, 2013).

This represents something of a missed opportunity on criminology's part; the incorporation of contemporary biology has great heuristic potential in terms of accounting for the violent transformation the *Breaking Bad* viewer witnesses. In order to realise it however, it is important to recognise the development of what Walsh and Beaver (2009) call biosocial criminology as actually being much bigger than 'criminology'; there has in recent years been an intellectual shift across the social sciences towards more materialistic, biologically-informed understandings of the human subject. The collection of works representative of this is both diverse and eclectic, yet the core claim running through them is roughly congruent – that human action is underpinned by the interactions *between* biology and environment (see Braidotti, 2002; Johnston and Malabou, 2013; Meloni, 2014; Rose, 2013; Wilson, 2004; Žižek, 2006). That is, humans do what they do, and become who they become, because of their biological makeup *and the way it interacts with their social environment*. Epistemologically, this is predicated upon the convergence of two fields: sociology (and by association, criminology) and biology. As Meloni notes: '*sociology is becoming more open to biological suggestions, just at a time when biology is becoming more social*' (2014: 2, original emphasis). To exemplify this, sociologists are currently using neuroscience to help understand the changing nature of life in the modern city (Fitzgerald et al., 2014), and Chung et al. (2014) have convincingly positioned epigenetics as a 'science' of social science. Importantly in the present context, the above collected are concerned with the nature of *being* – with the ways in which human beings exist in their worlds.

Philosophical understandings of the ways in which things exist are complex and convoluted, but an excellent overview can be found in Alain Badiou's (2009) seminal text, *Theory of the Subject*. Badiou (2009) notes that understandings of human existence (*being*) frequently hinge upon the relationship between the external world (*material*) and the thinking being (*the ideal*). He recounts five main philosophical understandings of this matrix: (1) 'subjective metaphysical idealism' where everything exists through ideal thought alone; (2) 'objective metaphysical idealism' (*à la* Kant) where the ideal thinking being exists as real, but only in so far as it is different to all other materially-existing 'things-in-themselves' which can only ever be perceived; (3) 'dialectical idealism' (*à la* Hegel) where thinking beings produce their externally existing realities; (4) 'metaphysical materialism' which reverses this and posits everything as existing in a purely material sense regardless of any thought or perception; and finally (5), 'materialist dialectic' (*à la* Marx) in which the material world and thought continually interact with each other to (re)produce both in a cyclical manner (Badiou, 2009: 117-119. See also, Badiou, 2005). While the intricacies of these perspectives are not important right now, Badiou's model is useful in that it provides the philosophical foundations for a line of thought that has significant relevance to the debates about violence of interest here, that of *transcendental materialism*.

The term transcendental materialism was coined by the American psychoanalyst and philosopher Adrian Johnston (2008), and is predicated on his reading of the philosophy of Slavoj Žižek. It can be understood as forming a sixth addition to Badiou's typology from above, one that understands the material and the ideal as being irrecoverably intertwined in a mutually constitutive process of becoming. It has recently been highlighted as holding great potential in criminology (Hall, 2012a, 2012b; Hall and Winlow, 2015; Winlow and Hall 2013). As a distinctive philosophy, it is best understood as an 'ontology of the subject' whereby: 'cogito-like subjectivity ontogenetically emerges out of an original corporeal condition as its

anterior ground, although, once generated, this sort of subjectivity thereafter remains irreducible to its material sources' (Johnston, 2008: xxiv). That is, this is a model of the human being whereby subjectivity (*being*) is understood to arise out of a bodily base (the human brain), but then needs to be understood as existing as 'more than' (as *transcendental of*) its material grounding. In other words, the conditions of human possibility are rooted to the human body as it is out of this material entity that subjectivity arises. Yet, crucially, once the subject has arisen it is no longer reducible to its material base as it is now caught up in a mutually constitutive relationship between the external webs of meaning that are culture/society, and the continually changing synaptic network of the human brain from which the subject emerges.

In very basic terms, transcendental materialism is a synthesis between the teachings of critical social theory and contemporary neuroscience – *between biology and sociology*. The inference is as follows: an identifiable human subject arises out of its material basis and then begins to interact with the social world it is thrust into, this interaction causes feedback which results in changes to the material body through the processes of neural plasticity that social neuroscientists are starting to reveal (see Cacioppo and Berntson, 2004). This is admittedly a somewhat crass reduction of a complex set of neurobiological processes, but the essence of the theory is this: as the human being acts, the synaptic connections in the brain are either strengthened or weakened. The brain exists in a state of plasticity – it changes in terms of its structure and functionality as the subject interacts with their worlds. The implications of this for social theory are only just becoming apparent, but they are significant and should not be ignored (see Malabou, 2008, 2012). If the brain is the central point out of which human subjectivity arises, then the fact that it exists in a transformative state must be relevant to knowledge of how people become what they are. In essence, transcendental materialism holds that new and evolving subjects are continually emerging out of continually transforming human

bodies as they interact and reproduce their social worlds. In this respect, the theory is bigger than crime and criminality – it is a way to theorise the very nature of social life.

In this respect then, the adoption and extrapolation of transcendental materialism into criminological theory ought to be understood as the progressive evolution of a specific line of thought. Hall's (2012a) earlier work overviews his notion of the 'pseudo-pacification process' whereby the everyday violence of times gone by was repressed not through any sort of civilising process, but through the imperatives of capital that required a social order of civility to facilitate trade and the expansion of markets. It is through this process that Hall (2012a) argued that status and prestige came to be associated with consumer symbolism over and above physicality. This is neatly outlined in full detail by Hall and Winlow (2015: 115-120), but matters here in brief as it establishes the link between the material conditions of society and the changing nature of human subjectivity that transcendental materialism is ultimately predicated upon. In this respect, *Breaking Bad* is again neatly symbolic – it is arguably the case that Walter's pathway into violence was, in a large part, originally motivated by his rejection of pacification. The material and symbolic rewards he witnessed others reaping were not forthcoming in his life, and this played a significant role in both him overcoming his aversion to violence, and then maintaining and embracing his newly found violent ways.

While this article can only provide a brief overview of what is undoubtedly a complex philosophical orientation, it should be enough to underpin the core claim made here: *that Walter White is the transcendental materialist subject*. He is a cultural embodiment of this line of philosophical thought. He is the same person, but he has changed – this change is rooted in the interactions between the violent world he is now enmeshed within, and the plasticity of the human synapses that his subjectivity emerges out of. As he sees, thinks, desires, fears and does, *so he slowly but surely becomes*. This transformation is startlingly evident across the show: when he warns the rival meth cook, 'stay out of my territory' without so much as a blink

of the eye (S02 E10); when he insists that a gang of neo-Nazi thugs conduct a series of brutal murders *exactly* the way he wants them to be carried out (S05 E08); and then when he stands in the desert and instructs a rival drugs kingpin to ‘say my name’ before he will let a business transaction proceed (S05 E07), *Breaking Bad* is demonstrating that Walter has changed – *that he has become Heisenberg*. In this respect, the show is more than congruent with a progressive line of criminological thought surrounding the ways in which people become and stay violent offenders; it challenges the hegemony of discursive and social constructivist accounts of human behaviour that relieve it of its material core.

It is for this reason that Walter’s cancer is central to understanding *Breaking Bad*; it is *metaphorical*. Cancer works, at the most basic level, through the transformation of cells – in this respect it is symbolic of Walter’s *transformation* into Heisenberg.⁵ As transcendental materialism suggests – as one *does*, so they *become*. This is a kind of ‘fluent’ determinism, the transcendental materialist subject becomes what s/he is at the core of their being as part of their ongoing *process of becoming*. The sceptical reader is reminded that as Walter becomes Heisenberg, he is at the same time on his way to becoming someone/something else. The core of this argument is visible here through *Breaking Bad*: criminologists ought to think more openly about the role of social neurobiology in their field. When viewed in this light, this show constitutes an important cultural manifestation of ongoing criminological debates surrounding human agency and violence. However, as promising as it might appear, this presents some questions. Questions that are neatly (re)presented through *Breaking Bad*’s depictions of female violence.

The One Who Waits: Skyler White and Female Violence

Skyler: I don't know! This is the best I could come up with, okay? I will count every minute that the kids are away from here, *away from you*, as a victory. But you're right. It's a bad plan. I don't have any of your magic, Walt. I don't know what to do. I'm a coward. I can't go to the police. I can't stop laundering your money. I can't keep you out of this house. *I can't even keep you out of my bed*. All I can do is *wait*. That's it. That's the only good option. Hold on, bide my time, and wait.

Walt: Wait for what? What are you waiting for?

Skyler: For the cancer to come back.

Walter and Skyler White, S05 E04

The above is poignantly emblematic of *Breaking Bad's* depiction of a reduced feminine capacity for violence. The scene takes place in the bedroom, with Skyler in the marital bed and Walter stood next to it looking down over her. This is exactly the same positioning of the scene quoted to open the previous section in which Walter declared himself to be 'the danger', and the symbolic importance of this should not be underestimated. To add context again, Skyler is now embedded in Walter's criminality. She works in the car wash business he has purchased laundering his money, all the time keeping it secret from their family. To keep up appearances, Walter is now back living in the family home and acting like all is well, yet Skyler does not share his optimism. Her realisation in this scene is that she is trapped – that there is nothing she can do about her predicament and that, crucially, *this is reducible to her femininity*. As she admits, she has none of Walt's 'magic'; she cannot be violent in the same way he can.

The only way she can enact violence against him is through *waiting*, through standing back and waiting for his cancer to return and kill him because, ultimately, as a woman she lacks the ability to do this herself.

The ‘double stake’ of popular culture is evident here; while *Breaking Bad* challenges the hegemonic grip of symbolic interactionist theories of human agency in criminology, it concomitantly conveys and strengthens patriarchal ideologies of gender. In this respect, the show is not alone; it is certainly not ground-breaking to claim that popular culture misrepresents women at best, and at worst is purely misogynistic. The processes by which popular media (mis)represent women have been rendered clear elsewhere, and importantly, the ways in which this is criminologically significant have too (see Humphries, 2009; Rafter, 2006; Rafter and Brown, 2011). In *Breaking Bad* the viewer sees ample evidence of these processes at work. Through Skyler, female violence is (re)presented very differently to that of the show’s men; her violence is passive, indirect, and at times, highly sexualised. This is categorically not to imply that it is any less harmful; in this instance, ‘passive’ and ‘indirect’ are used to refer to more *symbolic* than physical manifestations of violence. The crux of the matter is that Skyler’s violence is (re)presented in this show as being markedly different to that of the male characters, and as such, *Breaking Bad*’s imposition in the present context is that it requires special attention theoretically to understand it.

Skyler demonstrates the indirect nature of her violence in the opening quotation above, but a prime example of the ways in which it is sexualised comes in S03 E03 (entitled, *I.F.T.*). Having moved back into the home and having avoided Skyler’s attempts to have him removed by the police, Walter is preparing dinner when Skyler returns from work. While Walter talks of the progress he thinks they are making in their relationship, she calmly leans towards him and tells him that she has slept with her boss (‘I Fucked Ted’). This is not (re)presented as a woman making free sexual choices however, it is instead emblematic of a woman enacting

violence upon a man through her sexuality. This is Skyler being violent towards Walter in the only way that she, *a woman*, can. In this respect, the show has significant congruence with emerging pathways of criminological research that position sexuality as a key concern of the intersections of feminist and cultural criminologies (Naegler and Salman, 2016). However, the core point to make here is this – *Breaking Bad* presents both a challenge to some of criminology’s dominant conceptualisations of the will to violence (as exemplified above), but it can also provide a piercing critique of such theory through its gendered representations of peoples’ capacities to do harm.

There is also a lot to be achieved here through using *Breaking Bad* and its misrepresentation of gender to problematise and critique the very same emerging and progressive theories of violence that it has been positioned above as emblematic of. Feminist criminology has a long history of challenging the androcentric ‘malestream’ nature of the criminological enterprise (Smart (1976) being the classic example, Cullen et al. (2015) being a more contemporary one), and the current arguments are very much intended to follow this same path. For example, while the criminological significance of transcendental materialism has been convincingly mapped out already (see Hall and Winlow, 2015; Winlow and Hall 2013), it would seem only in so far as it pertains to *male* offenders. It is important to note here however that there are some very good reasons for this. Winlow and Hall, as the chief architects of this theory, are undertaking its development as part of their wider project that is highly critical of the cultural study of gender and the ways in which it has figured in left-leaning ‘identity politics’. Their most recent work stresses this fact: that criminology must discard its fascinations with the fields of ‘gender’ and ‘culture’ and work towards a model of progressive materialism in the form of what they call ‘ultra-realism’. This, for Winlow and Hall (2015) is a new perspective on crime and deviance based upon the conceptual apparatus of transcendental materialism and the pseudo-pacification process. Yet, this position can be fruitfully interrogated through *Breaking Bad*.

The ontology of transcendental materialism that Hall and Winlow (2015) rely upon is – despite multiple layers of complexity and nuance – reducible down to the biosocial interface described above, to a synthesis between the fields of philosophy and neuroscience.⁶ That is, this model of human action is predicated upon understanding subjectivity as emerging out of a material (as in, *neurobiological*) base, and then becoming enmeshed in a dialectic interplay between this base and the social symbolic sphere that it is located within. In this sense, the human subject is understood to exist in a ‘third space’, somewhere between the body and the environment (Žižek (2006) uses the analogy of a ‘parallax view’ to explain this). However, *if* this is the case, then there are questions that *must* be asked around gender. This is because, very bluntly, there are a number of well-established biological *and* sociological differences between male and female material bodies and the ways in which they are socially experienced. Thus, if criminology is to direct its attention towards the rapidly advancing field of neurobiology – and it is argued here that it absolutely should, and should do so quickly – then one of the first tasks that this must involve is the sustained interrogation of how the process operates along the lines of gender. That is, questions have to be asked around whether or not the transcendental materialist subject advocated by Winlow and Hall, and so poignantly symbolised through *Breaking Bad*, has gendered elements to its existence or is in fact a universal subject? Again, this is not an attack on the works of ultra-realist criminologists – the theoretical developments they have spearheaded are some of the most promising in criminology’s history.⁷ However, it *is* to assert that the question of gender must be engaged with more comprehensively if this model of the human subject is to fulfil its posited potential.

In this respect then, the heuristic utility of *Breaking Bad* is further solidified; it is emblematic of a general conveyance of patriarchal ideology that circulates through popular culture and some sections of academic criminology alike. Again, it represents the double stake of hegemony and change that cultural forms always contain. *Breaking Bad* is at the same time

challenging of intellectual hegemony, and a conduit of patriarchal ideology. It (re)presents male and female propensities for criminality differently, and this matters. For example, Skyler's sister, Marie Schrader (Betsy Brandt), is a shoplifter, and in later seasons the viewer sees her visiting 'open houses' to steal people's possessions while faking her interest in buying the property. However, this is (re)presented as something more akin to a 'phase' that she is going through than it is actually petty criminality. This feminine-type of offending does not seem to need the intervention of the criminal justice system, but is actually treatable through the therapy that Marie is revealed to seek for it. The show, like some sections of criminological theory, appears to have difficulty accounting for women's propensities to 'break bad' – it (re)presents them differently to those of men.

However, even with the above considered, the best example of the show's distinctions between the masculine and the feminine is to be found in S05 E04, which sees Skyler walk fully clothed into a swimming pool in the company of Walter, Marie and Hank at Walt's 51st birthday celebration. This is (re)presented as her cry for help; it is her showing her family that something is wrong. This scene is crucially important – it is by the same pool that Walter regularly sits and plots his activities. In an early episode, the viewer witnesses him flicking matches into the pool as he schemes, they float atop of the calm water. In the face of his crisis, Walter, *the man*, stays afloat – metaphorically, *he swims*. Yet in the face of her crises, Skyler sinks.⁸ In this respect, *Breaking Bad* can be firmly situated as symbolic of contemporary criminological debates about violence; there is a strong heuristic parallel to be drawn between the (mis)representation of female offending in the show and its intellectual neglect in some sections of progressive criminological theory.

Towards Some Conclusions

Skyler: I didn't marry a criminal.

Attorney: Well, you're married to one now.

Skyler White and her Attorney, S05 E03

The above exchange takes place in the office of the attorney Skyler is talking to about her options for leaving Walter. Upon receiving assurances of confidentiality, she is tearfully attempting to make sense of her situation. In her mind, she did not marry a bad man. However, her attorney's response is more than prescient here: Skyler *is* married to a bad man *now*, Walter is not Walter anymore, *he has become Heisenberg*. In this respect, the show has been presented as symbolic of ongoing criminological debates about the ways in which people become violent. This matters to criminology at present because the increasing strength and intellectual capabilities of the biological sciences mean they can no longer be dismissed as easily as they once were. Biosocial theory is not neo-phrenology, and criminologists who would write it off as such do so at their peril. It is hoped that the present article has gone some way towards making this case.

This considered, it is important to think critically about the above in closing. For example, it is noteworthy that the growth of neuroimaging research and technology – that all the neuroscience alluded to above is effectively predicated upon – has not occurred without critical voices of dissent accompanying it. In a controversial essay Edward Vul and colleagues, prominent neuroscientists themselves, call into question the methodological validity of many studies presenting 'puzzlingly high correlations' between personality measures and brain activations (Vul et al., 2009).⁹ Their argument is centered upon the use of unsound statistical

measures of correlation between these two variables. They go on to note however, that there is a much wider reaching implication of this – that many studies purporting the brain’s significant role in any given phenomena may be unsound. The brain might very well be doing *something* viewable and measurable through new technologies like the fMRI machine, but whether or not this directly correlates with significant outcomes in the human subject – their behaviour, motivations, thoughts and/or proclivities – is far from definitively established at present.¹⁰

Furthermore, it is not just potentially dubious science that ought to be considered critically. There are also philosophical questions that theorists adopting transcendental materialism perhaps ought to address. The most paramount of these being the somewhat cold reception the model has received from Slavoj Žižek himself (the very thinker whose ontology Johnston (2008) developed the model through). In what is arguably his most comprehensive work to date, *Less Than Nothing*, Žižek (2012: 906) calls transcendental materialism an ‘oxymoron’, and then later goes on to stress in *Absolute Recoil* the fact that it is Johnston’s term, and that he does not use it himself (2014: 224). Whilst this need not necessarily be problematic in of itself, it perhaps requires some sort of explanation/clarification to help the criminological extrapolation of the model stand up to scrutiny.

These limitations of the biosocial interface must be recognised and critically reflected upon by criminologists. Yet, at the same time, it must also be recognised that this field has come a long way since Cesare Lombroso was measuring the distances between people’s eyes. There is significant potential to be found in contemporary philosophies of the human subject that recognise its material basis, and the ways in which neural plasticity impacts upon people and their actions/reactions. As a model of human subjectivity, the transcendental materialism advocated by Hall and Winlow (2015) is arguably one of the most significant theoretical advances criminologists have made to date. But, as outlined above, the model remains

critically under-theorised with recourse to gender. This is *not* a direct critique of Winlow and Hall's work – their task was to highlight the potential of the theory and reveal its criminological significance. They have more than achieved this. Rather, it is offered here as a call to others to pick up this challenge and seek to investigate critically the potential strengths and weaknesses of alternative conceptualisations of the human subject such as this in criminology.

It is for this very reason that *Breaking Bad* has been presented as a means to this end – it exists as a cultural component of ongoing criminological debates such as the above around the nature of interpersonal violence. Its criminological significance is more than assured, and as such it is very much hoped that this article has further strengthened the position of cultural analyses like this in criminology. As a representation of a criminological subject, *Breaking Bad* provides a means by which some orthodox theories within criminology can be challenged, but it also provides a platform on which their progressive alternatives can be as well. In this sense, the show does the same as all other truly great examples of fiction – it invites its viewer/reader/listener to think differently about the worlds in which they live. Walter White opened up the show by arguing that life is about chemistry, and that chemistry is basically about understanding that things change. In this respect, it can be argued here to close that criminologists might do well to think about chemistry and change a little more often too.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers at *Crime Media Culture* for their helpful and constructive comments on an earlier version of this article. I would also like to say a special thank you to Judith Aldridge who, a few years ago now, told me that I simply *had* to see the new TV show she was watching about a teacher who became a drug dealer.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. As a possible exception to this there is a short essay at the end of Guffey and Koontz's (2014) *Breaking Bad* companion volume concerning the 'violentization' thesis of the sociologist Lonnie Athens (1992) as it pertains to the show. Interesting as this is, it is far too brief to be considered a full and/or sustained analysis.
2. *Breaking Bad* was originally pitched to studio executives as the tale of a man who transforms himself from 'Mr Chips', the eventually gentle and loving central protagonist of Sam Wood's (1939) cinematic classic *Goodbye, Mr Chips*, to 'Scarface', the alias of Tony Montana, the psychotic drug lord in Brian De Palma's (1983) masterpiece of the same name.
3. This number excludes those killed in the plane crash. If Walter's role in this is recognised as causal (which it very probably should be), he is responsible for 194 deaths across the show's five seasons.
4. When calling himself Heisenberg, Walter is making reference to W. K. Heisenberg, the famous German quantum physicist whose 'uncertainty principle' is neatly emblematic of the Walter-Heisenberg transformation. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle states that in knowing two variables, the more precise one is on the qualities of one, *the less certain they can be around the qualities of the other*. That is, in the relationship between X and Y, the more one knows of variable X, the less they can hope

to know of variable Y, and vice versa. Thus, the more the *Breaking Bad* viewer comes to know Heisenberg, the less they can know of Walter.

5. The symbolic significance of this should not be underestimated; the show is full of such symbolism. Walter does not *have* cancer, he *is* cancer. The show is not about methamphetamine, it is actually symbolic of it too – rarely if ever do users have just one pipe of meth, like rarely if ever do viewers watch just one episode of *Breaking Bad*.
6. In actuality, there are three fields relevant to this synthesis, with the third being the psychoanalytic work of Jacques Lacan (e.g. Lacan, 2006). However, as this forms a core component of Žižek’s work, it is understood here as already figuring in the philosophical component of the two-way synthesis outlined above.
7. This admittedly bold statement can be supported by looking at the ways in which these ideas are being embraced by a range of new and emerging criminological thinkers (e.g., Ellis, 2016; Raymen, 2016; Smith and Raymen, 2016; Wakeman, 2015, 2016).
8. Of course, this analysis of the situation is based upon my own subjective reading of this particular piece of crime media. During the peer review process one of the article’s reviewers suggested that my interpretation was wrong, that it was in fact Walter who sinks deeper and deeper into his own internal toxicity – that even if he does float, he does so ‘without a mooring’. While I stand by my original reading I found this alternative suggestion to be more than compelling, and certainly worthy of recognition here.
9. Vul et al. (2009) was originally titled ‘Voodoo Correlations in Social Neuroscience’, but was renamed at the request of the editors of the journal it was published in. The paper drew considerable response, positive and otherwise, most of which has been collected by Vul and is viewable on his website: www.edvul.com

10. Interestingly here, Fine (2013) has noted these discrepancies to be gendered too; she argues that ‘neurosexism’ is present in contemporary neurobiology, as many studies of the human brain continually seem to reaffirm patriarchal ideologies.

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Biography

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