Meth, Markets, Masculinities: Action and Identity in AMC's *Breaking Bad*

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Abstract:

The television series *Breaking Bad* presents a concept of identity as a product of complex processes involving assemblages of human and non-human elements. The development of characters' identities over the course of the series is unpredictable, not only because they must constantly be responding to pressures over which they have no control, but because of the vitality of the matter with which they interact. The protagonist is chemistry teacher Walter White. The narrative follows Walt's attempts to use a substance – crystal meth – as an instrument in the construction of an identity that will enable him to exercise some control over his life and his world. The attempt does have an effect, on Walt, on his environment, and on the people he loves. Like the chemistry experiments that Walt enacts in class for his students, the interaction of various substances often results in dramatic transformations. But those classroom demonstrations are deceptive; there Walt appears to manipulate matter as one manipulates tools – he is the actor who, bringing his knowledge to bear on inert substances, produces effects that are always desired and always predictable. However, his as the series progresses, and Walt applies his skill to the production of crystal meth, the hierarchical model of the human agent effecting change through the manipulation of matter is inadequate to explain the enfolding narrative. What happens to Walt and his family is the effect of a non-hierarchical assemblage of human and non-human elements. In *Breaking Bad*, meth itself, along with other non-human bodies, is an actant. The transformations produced through their interaction with human bodies are dramatic, often dangerous, and always surprising.

Drawing on the works of actor-network theorists such as Latour and Bennett, this paper will examine *Breaking Bad*'s challenge to anthropocentrism, where objects are also actants, and transformation occurs through the assemblage of the human and the non-human.

Introduction

Season 2 of the AMC television series *Breaking Bad* opens with a sequence of close-ups showing objects that would be commonplace the back yard of a suburban home: a dripping hose, a snail on a garden wall, a glass containing the remnants of something that looks like ice tea. Suddenly there is a shot of a plastic eyeball floating in the pool, rolling upward toward the sky – almost as if it could see – followed by a shot of a bright pink teddy bear submerged in the water. Half of the bear is charred black, and one of its eyes is missing. We notice the sound of sirens in the background. Over the course of the season, the opening sequences of episodes one (Gilligan, Roberts and Cranston 2009: *Seven Thirty-Seven*), four (Gilligan, Catlin and Dahl 2009: *Down*), ten (Gilligan, Walley-Beckett and Abraham 2009: *Over*), and 13 (Gilligan and Bernstein 2009: *ABQ*) show more objects that seem out of place in this otherwise familiar domestic environment. They are being gathered, placed in evidence bags and assembled by people in Hazmat suits. We see a car's broken windshield, body bags, a tie hanging from a tree and a sign on a front lawn that reads "Evidence – Do Not Remove." The opening sequence of *ABQ* (Gilligan and Bernstein 2009), which is also the last episode of the season, ends with the camera shifting to a long shot. Two plumes of smoke rise in the background, as the suburban streets swarm with hazmat-suited investigators. It is only by the end of the season that we understand the reason for this odd and evolving assemblage of objects. Two planes have collided in mid-air, showering debris – a watch, a charred soft-cover book, a stuffed animal, eyeglasses, body parts – over this suburban neighbourhood. This series of vignettes gradually reveals one outcome of the complex relationships between people and things that will be traced throughout season two.

In this article, I will use *Breaking Bad* as an illustration of some of the concepts developed by Actor Network theorists, particularly Bruno Latour, and consider how ANT relates to some of the complex views of identity, moral agency, time,and visibility that the series raises. I will also connect ANT with some of R.W. Connell's work on masculinities. I argue that despite the dramatic changes the protagonist's character undergoes over the course of the series, he is always enacting a form of masculinity. Masculinity translates into a wide range of characteristics – some of which actually seem to be inconsistent with each other – depending upon the assemblage of actants with which it is associated.

Television is, to a large extent, a visual medium, and so this paper will consider these ideas as they are conveyed through visual means such as cinematography, costume design, and editing. But the concept of visibility in modern life goes beyond our sense of sight, like the senses of hearing or taste. It also connects to "vision as an alias for intellectual apprehension" (Brighenti 2007: 327) – what can be perceived and understood, what is concealed, and the complex relationship of these things to power (Brighenti 2007; Thompson 2005). ANT engages the issue of visibility by considering the often-unseen networks of associations that, for Latour (2007), constitute the proper focus of sociological inquiry.

Actants and Agency

In criminal law ideas regarding individual responsibility generally turn on a pretty direct concept of agency, wherein responsibility for criminal offences – usually encapsulated in the concept of *mens rea* – is in most cases a matter of a subject forming the intention to commit a particular act matching the description of *actus reus;* the subject acts upon the environment and to the extent that the consequences of that those acts reflect his/her intention, responsibility is made out. A stable subject that is distinct from the objects it manipulates is presumed *a priori.* Issues relating to the pressures that were involved in the formation of the subject's identity might be relevant to sentence as a mitigating factor, but they

are generally conceptualized as irrelevant with respect to the question of culpability.[2]

ANT destabilizes this picture by rejecting the subject/object dichotomy (Bennett 2010). Bruno Latour, for example, sees social relations in terms of "humans" and "non-humans" (Latour 1999), all of which have agency – or in Latour's phrase, all of which are "actants." Both the Cartesian tradition of action and the empiricist position are flawed because they require a distance between subject and object (Latour 1999). When we understand the world in terms of subjects and objects, we fail to grasp the power of "objects" to effect action.

He also rejects the structuralism that is sometimes seen as the main challenge to liberalism's concept of human subjectivity. For Latour, "society" as it is usually understood does not exist. When we say things are socially constructed it suggests that "the social" can be understood as separate and apart from the "things" it is constructing (Latour 2007). By this account, the society doing all this constructing is made of nothing. Thus Latour disputes both the Kantian concept of agency as subjects acting upon objects and the structuralist perspective that has action determined by society. Instead, *action* is only possible through assemblages of human and non-human actants. For Latour, social science is properly the study of the various networks connecting actants to each other.

In this vision acting requires attachment – associations of human and non-human elements within local sites (Bennett 2010; Latour 2007). Each locus acts on, and is acted upon by, other loci, and more associations produce more activity – thus agency is almost the antithesis of independence. These associations are made possible through mediators, which themselves produce shifts – translations – in the thing being transported from one site to another. The assemblages of actants, making connections between different sites, and producing novelty through new associations, suggests also that

[2] There are doctrines – necessity and duress – that may provide an accused with a complete defence if the crime was committed in response to certain kinds of serious pressure, but they are considered to be rare exceptions.

outcomes are always somewhat unpredictable. This is not just because the goal of an individual human might prove unattainable due to unforeseen intervening factors. It is the assemblages that make action possible, and the ways in which they shift over time through new associations and new transforming mediators, change not only the competencies of actants but their goals as well (Latour 1999).

A human actant is just part of an assemblage of actants. He or she cannot be understood as the subject who acts upon objects because action itself requires associations involving humans and non-humans. The human actant changes with changes in the composition of the assemblage of which he or she is a part. At some point assemblages become stabilized to the point where they are "black boxed" (Latour 1999: 183). They are named, become facts, and develop a cohesive surface so that we no longer see the networks that constitute them. The task of the ANT scholar is to make those networks visible, to bring the links between actants to the foreground where they can be traced. This enterprise can only be partially successful, however; because of their complexity some of these links must remain in obscurity, some assemblages remain black boxed.

We see some of these ways of understanding action through assemblages of human and non-human elements, the unpredictability produced by these assemblages, and the opacity of the links creating them in the narrative of *Breaking Bad*. Briefly, the series traces the story of Walter White, a resident of Albuquerque. White was once a brilliant chemist with a PhD and a promising future, but for reasons that are not entirely clear he wound up as an underappreciated high school chemistry teacher who is so poorly paid that he has been moonlighting for the past four years as a cashier at a car wash. Shortly after his 50th birthday, Walt is diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. The consummate family man, he is worried about the future for his pregnant wife and 16-year-old son. He discovers that one of his ex-students, Jesse Pinkman, is involved in Albuquerque's crystal meth trade. He tracks Jesse down and proposes a partnership – Walt will use his chemistry expertise to cook the purest product around and Jesse will contribute his

knowledge of the crystal meth market. Jesse, who failed Walt's chemistry class in high school, has gone on to become a consummate slacker. Despite his misgivings, and despite the strange combination of this likeable but slightly dim stoner and the upright, meticulous family man, Jesse agrees.

Initially Walt's reasons for getting involved in the drug trade are connected to values that are deeply associated with a certain type of masculine virtue – that of the responsible family man. However, many of the people involved in the meth trade are capable of extreme violence, and Walt is required to respond in kind just to survive; ultimately he is indistinguishable from the other players in the drug business. His transformation – "from Mr. Chips to Scarface" (Sepinwall 2012: 340) – is so extreme that he becomes unrecognizable even to the family he sought to protect. One might see here the story of a man losing his identity when he embarks on a course of action that erodes the basic moral structure on which he has based his life – "horizons of significance" (Taylor 1991), that provide a kind of moral stability, a benchmark against which he measures the moral quality of his actions.

But Walter's tragic flaw is not his loss of stable values. He in fact appears to have horizons of significance, and he goes to great lengths to live by them. Walter consistently tries to embody one of numerous masculinities, which shift depending on the network with which he becomes associated. Prior to his involvement in the Meth business Walt performs as the good husband, good father, selfless provider, dedicated educator, rational scientist – all endorsed by society as a whole and very closely associated with traditional masculine virtues and with Walt's identity when the series begins. Indeed, the need to be the good provider is Walt's rationalization for his criminal activities in the first place. However, what it means to be a man shifts as his competencies shift with the assemblages of human and non-human elements with which he becomes connected. Walt asserts his self-image by resolutely embodying whatever masculine virtues seem to be required or available. Those virtues take very different forms, depending on the site in which they are practiced.

This idea of multiple masculinities has emerged in the last two decades among gender theorists, who observe that qualities associated with masculinity are quite diverse, and in fact often seem to be in conflict with each other (Beasley 2012; Connell 2005; 2009; Faucette 2014). We can see how this concept of masculinities is more amenable to ANT methodology than a binary concept of male/female, because it suggests that masculinities are constructed through different assemblages at different sites – to achieve different goals. Moore and Singh make a similar observation in suggesting that a unitary concept of patriarchy is often unhelpful in understanding issues that concern feminists, because

> …to begin with patriarchy is to begin with an assumption of structure that impedes the ability to actually describe what is happening in a particular site, who is influencing whom, how power is circulating and so on. (Moore and Singh 2015: 72)

The transformations that Walt goes through in *Breaking Bad,* I argue, can be seen as the result of shifts in how masculinity is performed within different assemblages. As Walt's competencies and activities are increased by involvement in various networks of actants, these networks necessitate the creation and recreation of masculinity through yet more assemblages. The series plausibly portrays Walt's performance of all these masculinities by making links that constitute the assemblages visible. The translations of things being drawn into these assemblages often work, but sometimes, we will see, they do not. Walt embodies a wide range of characteristics associated with masculinities throughout the series; these include being the family breadwinner, a loving father (Connell 2005), a risk-taker (Lyng and Matthews 2007; Nardi 2014), an entrepreneur, a rational scientist (Connell 2005; Weatherbee and Weaver 2013), a handyman, as well as being violent, ruthless, domineering, and skilled with firearms.

Time, Transformation and Visibility

Episodes of television series often begin with a "cold open" – a scene designed to introduce the action and also to draw the viewer into the coming narrative (Sánchez-Baró 2014). Episodes of *Breaking Bad* frequently open with a shot of a thing or series of

things in an unusual configuration or assembled in a surprising way; the assemblage is a result of the narrative that the coming episode is about to tell us. As a filmic technique, it provides a visual suggestion of Latour's concept of history. Modernists, failing to trace the threads of assemblages that constitute things, are forced to understand historical epochs as a series of revolutions that have the effect of eradicating the past (Latour 1993) For Latour, the complex relationships between things, and the effects of mediation, result in a different conception of history. Events, inventions, changes in how the world is perceived involve connections that can be traced to already existing networks. Thus the past is not "abolished" by the passage of time. "(E)very contemporary assembly is polytemporal" (Latour 1993: 74). However, the linkages between actants that form assemblages are only visible when they are problematic in some way (Latour 2005). Once an assemblage stabilizes, the complex of links through which it is constituted becomes invisible. It becomes a "black box," named, recognizable as a thing, but impenetrable in terms of its constitution (Latour 1999: 183).

The transformations Walt experiences in the series might seem, on their face, to be similar to these modernist "revolutions." Absolute novelty seems to spring from nowhere, so that the past is not contained in the present. But time in *Breaking Bad* "folds" (Brown and Captivila 1999); when the narrative traces the effects of mediators in Walt's life, the connections between the various identities he assumes emerge; there is no longer an absolute break between past and present.

In the gentle, responsible and law-abiding Walter White that we meet at the beginning of the series there is implied two extreme transformations over two temporal planes. The first change occurs over the two years following his 50th birthday when he becomes an aggressive, homicidal player in the drug trade. This is the transformation traced by the series. The second trajectory has already taken place when the series begins; the Walt that we see at age 50 was once a confident and promising young chemist, a PhD who, with his friends Elliot and Gretchen Schwartz, founded an up and coming company called "Grey Matter." For reasons that are

unclear Walt sold his interest in Grey Matter to Elliot and Gretchen for $5,000. Grey Matter went on to become enormously successful, making Elliot and Gretchen extremely wealthy. If we juxtapose high-school teacher Walt with the extreme points of either trajectory – the confident young entrepreneur/scientist or the crystal meth manufacturer – the transformation seems impossibly unlikely. It is as if three different men sprang out of nowhere. However, the series actually traces the effects of associations involved in high school teacher Walt's evolution into meth manufacturer Walt, making extreme transformation seem plausible.

The series does not perform the actor network theorist's task of making visible the associations involved in creating the meek 50-year-old schoolteacher that we see in *Breaking Bad*'s first episodes; this Walt is a "black box." We catch glimpses of the entrepreneur/chemist Walt of 20 years ago in flashbacks (Freeley 2014). In one flashback (Gilligan 2010: *Full Measure*), a real estate agent is showing a young Walter and his wife Skylar a house they are interested in purchasing. Though the house is empty, we recognize the interior as the house that the Whites still live in. Skylar is very pregnant with their first child, Walter Jr. We learn through the conversation that Walt at this point is still working as a chemist on cutting-edge projects. He is relaxed and confident, and says to Skylar, "Why buy a starter house when we'll have to move up in a year or two…why be cautious? We have nowhere to go but up." In this scene the optimism suggested by the dialogue stands in stark contrast to the interior of the house that we see on the screen. The audience by this time is aware of the complex assemblages that that not only make up a life, but make life unpredictable, and from our vantage point this scene is really quite melancholy. We know that this will be the last house Walt and Skylar ever live in together. How this youthful, vigorous Walt became the defeated, disappointed Walt we see in the first episodes of the series is almost a complete mystery. We never find out exactly what made Walt sell out his interest in Grey Matter, or why he decided to become a high school teacher. We certainly do not know why, with a PhD in chemistry, he finds it necessary to work part-time at a car wash, which in popular culture epitomizes the lowest rung on the labour market hierarchy.

However, the series' failure to explain the events that brought this brilliant man to such a state is not a flaw in its narrative structure. By showing the transformation of schoolteacher Walt to meth lord Walt, *Breaking Bad* demonstrates how drastic shifts in identity seem plausible once we see the effects of more minute shifts that occur through the assemblages of various actants. The connections underlying these shifts only become visible to us when a problem occurs (Latour 2005). We would not be interested in deconstructing and examining the links that constitute the "black box" of 50-year-old Walter White unless we knew enough about his past to think that something had gone wrong.

Purity, Chemistry, Violence, and School Boards

Walt's tragedy is that he fails to account for the effects of the new networks that his activities will create. His scientific know-how gives him a real edge over his adversaries in law enforcement and the other players in the drug trade. But Walt's concept of himself as a scientist and the materials he works with – and also his idea of what he is going to achieve by cooking meth in the first place – is very much along the lines of the subject/object binary that Latour rejects.

In the first episode of the series (Gilligan 2008: *Pilot*) there is a scene of Walt in his classroom, explaining that chemistry is the study of transformation:

> Technically chemistry is the study of matter, but I prefer to think of it as the study of change…Electrons – they change their energy levels. Molecules, they change their bonds. Elements – they combine and change into compounds. (Gilligan 2008: *Pilot*)

For Walt, through careful, meticulous scientific practice the subject manipulates matter, combining elements and changing the assemblages of molecules in a way that yields predictable results. Within the dry classroom environment, with its rows of desks and neatly arranged lab equipment, this appears to be the case. But as it turns out Walter's self-image as a scientist who achieves his goals

by manipulating matter is an illusion. For Walt the immediate goal is to produce pure methamphetamine, and the means to this purity is respect for the chemistry – which means doing everything according to strict protocols, and maintaining a clean lab that is free of contaminants. What he does not see is that whatever chemical process is used, crystal meth is never just crystal meth, and the chemist is never just the master of the technical skills involved in its manufacture. Both in fact are part of an assemblage, which consists, among other things, of an unstable economy, laws, police, lab equipment, school administrators, masculinity, cancer medication, family, cell phones, the composition of bodies, malignant cancer cells, addiction, and so on. As they become part of various assemblages, their characters are affected and affect other actants of those assemblages.

Initially Walt and Jesse set up their meth lab in an RV that they drive out to the New Mexico desert. The wilderness of the American southwest provides the setting for many classic Western films, symbolizing the freedom of pre-civilization[3], sometimes associate with a heroic "man of the frontier" (Connell 2005: 185) whose defining characteristic is his independence. However, the desert, which at least superficially looks empty and lifeless, provides an interesting backdrop to a narrative where everything – everyday objects, vehicles, chemical compounds, money, and even the plans generated by the human mind, seem to have a life of their own.

Once Walt and Jessie find a remote area for their RV lab, Walt strips off his clothing before starting his cook. He does this to avoid smelling like meth when he comes home. But the result also suggests Walt's determination to treat meth cooking as an essentially neutral means to achieve a laudable goal, as if the through the purity of his chemical process, the location of the activity in the barren, so-called natural environment of the desert, and the lack of identifying garments, Walt could temporarily extract himself from the assembly of connections that constitute his current identity in order to make money to leave his family. Jesse ridicules Walt's appearance in these scenes (significantly, given the series'

[3] A fictitious conception, which assumes the West's Aboriginal inhabitants did not have a civilization.

theme of masculinities, he calls Walt a "homo"). In fact the sight of this serious-looking man in tighty-whiteys and a gas mask is comical because it seems so incongruous. But to a casual observer this image would not present an uncontroversial black box in the way that the more easily identifiable images of a schoolteacher or family man do; in fact the incongruity of stripped-down Walter would make an observer question what was behind the image, to try to make visible the networks that gave rise to such a strange apparition. It also suggests the futility of Walt's attempt to compartmentalize his criminal activities. Indeed, we soon find out that despite Walt's insistence on meticulous chemistry procedures, meth cooking cannot take place without additional assemblages of actants – wholly or partially concealed linkages that often lead to unpredictable results.

For example, meth can be made using pseudoephedrine, which is contained in Sudafed. Thus Sudafed, an apparently harmless cold remedy, has other characteristics when associated with the manufacture of crystal meth. As a result, regulations stipulate that it is only available at pharmacies and cannot be purchased in large quantities. Jesse not only understands the meth market but also has a network of "smurfs" – people who will buy small quantities of Sudafed at a number of pharmacies and thus provide Walt with pseudoephedrine. Walt is not even aware of these connections until a problem arises – that is, when it becomes obvious that he and Jesse will be unable to procure an adequate supply of the cold remedy to fulfill their obligations to their distributor.

Walt has also taken the equipment he needs for his lab from the supply cabinet for his chemistry class, so that gas masks, boiling flasks, and Bunsen burners are now part of an assemblage that includes crystal meth, as well as guns, prison, poison gas, addiction, police. Nonetheless, the equipment is also connected to school administrators, high school students, boards of education, regulations, locked store rooms, keys, and particularly inventory lists and labeling practices.

Hank, Walt's brother-in-law, works for the DEA, and many of his activities resemble those of an ANT scholar, as his investigations often require him to meticulously follow threads connecting one

thing to another. In the DEA headquarters this is represented quite literally; Hank pins photographs of various players in the meth trade on a board and uses pieces of yarn to link them together (Gilligan, Catlin and Johnson 2012: *Fifty-One*).

Walt's failure to isolate the manufacture of meth from other actants with which he is associated is exposed when Hank manages to trace a gas mask found at the cook site to Walt's school, and determines through examination of inventory records that lab equipment suitable for manufacturing meth has gone missing from the chemistry class storeroom. The threads connecting the equipment to the meth lab are so complex, however, that Hank fails to follow the trail to Walt. For Hank, Walt is still a "black box." Suspicion falls on Hugo, the gentle school janitor. There is no evidence that Hugo is involved with crystal meth, but in the course of his investigation Hank does discover that Hugo has a minor criminal record and is in possession of a small about of marijuana. Hugo has become unwittingly connected to crystal meth and its networks of associations, which now include an organization of concerned parents who are outraged that the school hired someone with a criminal record. He winds up charged with possession of marijuana and losing his job. Hugo is Aboriginal, and the fact that it is he and not Walt who falls under suspicion suggests that race is also part of the assemblage Walt inhabits.

Though meth may seem to be an integrated "thing," the end product can be deconstructed on the basis of its appearance. Initially Walt and Jesse assess the quality of their product by how clear it is; cloudy meth is visual evidence of impurity caused by inadequate chemistry procedures. Clear meth is visual evidence of Walter's meticulous approach to his cook. When Walt decides that the amount of pseudoephedrine Jesse can procure is not sufficient to make meth in worthwhile quantities, he decides to secure a supply of methylamine in its stead. The new process is indicated by the fact that the meth has a blue tinge. Ultimately, to the consumers of the product, Walt's meth is also "black boxed," and named "blue sky;" it is not the methylamine that becomes the "brand" that marks this particular kind of meth as special. Rather it is the meth's blueness that identifies it.

Meth and Markets

Meth can only be a means of wealth creation because it is not pure in the larger sense. It has to act in the world, have a social significance, and become part of various networks in order to produce wealth. Walt's knowledge of chemistry enables him to "deconstruct" crystal meth in the sense that he can identify its component parts and assemble them into the chemical product he desires. But nature and culture are not separate entities (Latour 2007); if meth is to perform the function of wealth creation Walt has to depend on a variety of connections that invest the process with a variety of meanings. Moreover, many of these connections have to be invisible to Walt's family, friends, and law enforcement officials. The visibility of some linkages, in effect, masks other linkages that, if exposed, could prove to be his undoing.

Walt becomes dissatisfied with the money Jesse is able to make selling small quantities of his product on his own. This leads them to make connections to another level of the market – a distributor named Krazy-8. Krazy-8 and his associate Emilio end up posing a threat to Walt and his family, thus becoming the first two people whom Walt kills. Another attempt to establish connections to markets has Jesse employ three of his friends as dealers. However, through these activities additional connections are made inadvertently; another group of meth dealers decides that Jesse's crew is encroaching on their territory. Jesse's friend Combo is shot dead by Tomas, an 11-year-old boy on a bicycle who was recruited by the dealers. Tomas turns out to be the brother of Andrea, a woman Jesse ends up having a relationship with. The dealers turn out to be employees of Gus Fring, a major player in the Southwest's crystal meth market who also eventually persuades Walt to work for him. These connections prove to have unexpected consequences.

Many characters develop competencies through their connections with assemblages connected to "legitimate" businesses – although the distinction between the meth trade and other forms of commerce is not always clear (Wagner 2014). Gale Boetticher, whom Fring hires to be Walt's assistant, has a graduate degree in chemistry. A self-described "nerd," neither he nor Walt come across as criminals.

Gale evokes a neoliberal's conception of free markets when he explains the rationale for his involvement in the meth trade:

> I'm definitely a libertarian. Consenting adults want what they want. And if I'm not supplying it they will get it somewhere else. At least with me they're getting exactly what they pay for. No added toxins or adulterants. (Gilligan and Shiban 2010: *Sunset*)

To Gale, the market, like chemistry, is pure. But like chemistry the markets are never just markets. They form networks, create meaning, and affect chains of activity. Sequestered in Fring's "superlab," which probably resembles the labs he worked in as a graduate student, Gale does not clearly see these networks or their effects on the complex assemblages that constitute meth and markets.

Fring, who owns a chain of fast food restaurants called "Pollos Hermanos" as well as a large dry cleaning plant, is seen as a local business leader, philanthropist, and supporter of the police. Fring has built a "superlab" in the basement of his dry cleaning plant. It is ideal, as chemicals used for dry cleaning will mask the odours of the meth manufacturing business. The lab is outfitted with the most high-end equipment, designed to efficiently produce the purest meth in large volumes. The meth is sealed inside plastic bags, and concealed in pails of frying batter. Pails, batter, refrigerator trucks, cell phones, deep fryers – all part of an assemblage that creates a fast food business – change their character once further associated with crystal meth, sophisticated laboratory equipment, guns, street-level drug dealers, police and surveillance cameras.

The cleanliness of the lab, its physical remoteness from the outside world, its gleaming, pristine, state-of-the-art equipment all suggest Walt's ideal of chemistry's purity may have come true. The assemblage of legitimate business and the meth market is invisible to most observers – indeed it must be so. But it becomes starkly visible to the audience when images of mundane corporate life are juxtaposed with images of criminality. For example, when Fring has a meeting with members of the Mexican drug cartel at his factory chicken farm he brings a tray of cheese cubes on a round plastic tray

with a clear plastic cover. There is also a coffee maker, which almost becomes a delivery mechanism for the deadly poison ricin. When Walt goes to work at the lab, we see him carefully putting on a tidy dress shirt, and bringing with him a brown paper bag containing a sandwich with "Walt" written on it.

These are the kinds of things one might associate with middle management in a very ordinary corporate environment. They are also part of an assemblage that not only enables the meth trade on a large scale but also conceals it. There is partial opacity that allows the characters in *Breaking Bad* to use visibility selectively as a "strategic resource" (Brighenti 2007: 339), manipulating the assemblage so that elements become visible or invisible as the situation demands. They take advantage of the "segregated audiences" afforded by the complexity of their networks (Goffman 1959: 49). Thus Walt can appear to be a father figure, a dedicated high school teacher, a loving husband, a coldly logical scientist, a rational businessman, or a terrifying crime lord. Gus can appear a benevolent boss, a philanthropic member of the business community, a menacing criminal, or a hospitable friend, as circumstances require.

Walt's relationship with Gus Fring deteriorates when Jesse, having discovered the identities of the two dealers responsible for the murder of Combo and the corruption of Andrea's brother, decides to seek revenge. Armed with a pistol, he approaches the two dealers and it seems clear he will be killed in the confrontation. Walt intervenes and runs over the two dealers with his car, infuriating Fring. Fring continues to employ Walt, but the lab that once seemed to promise a pure, liberated chemistry has become a prison (Guffey 2014), outfitted with security cameras. Walt is now under constant surveillance and fears for his life. He realizes that he must kill the likeable Gale because once Gale develops the skills to match Walt's standards of purity in meth production; Fring will have no reason not to kill Walt. It is in this context that Fring's selective visibility takes on a new dimension. Fring realizes that he must let Walt live, but he also wants to demonstrate his dominance. He picks up a box cutter that, in the episode's opening sequence, we see Gale had used

to open the packaging of the superlab's equipment. He now uses the same implement to cut the throat of Victor, his own assistant, just to demonstrate to Walt and Jesse of his capacity for cold-hearted violence.

Walt ultimately prevails over Fring, killing him and one of his associates by means of a cleverly placed bomb. But the connections between meth and markets continue, as the business compels Walt to become associated, first with a pest control company, and ultimately Madrigal, a large German corporation. Madrigal, while black boxed as a multinational corporation, is not a superstructure; we see that the threads connecting Walt to a wider collectivity still emanate from micro locales. A young man employed by the pest control company has a crush on Lydia, an executive employed by Madrigal. Lydia uses her job, which entails managing the shipping of goods from place to place, keeping track of locations, and making records, as a cover for shipping large quantities of meth overseas. Lydia, Walt and Jesse all become connected to the young man's uncle, who is a member of an organization resembling the Aryan Brotherhood. Because of these connections, Walt becomes implicated in a number of homicides, some intentional, some inadvertent.

In all of these activities Walt's self-concept as the rational scientist creating a chemically – and morally – pure substance seems increasingly implausible. Walt's connection to meth necessitates a range of other connections. Meth may be a chemical compound but it also interacts with other things in other networks in ways that are beyond the chemist's control. As Latour asserts, more varied networks make action possible – and Walt the meth cook is now anything but passive. But not being passive, it turns out, is not the same thing as being in control. Meth the actant has given Walt the power to affect his environment, but its networks have also dramatically affected Walt. The Walter White who approaches Jesse about becoming partners in a meth cooking operation is not the same Walt who conceives of a scheme to kill Gus Fring.

Meth and Masculinities

> Masculinity as an object of knowledge is always masculinity in relation. (Connell 2005: 44)

In various stages of *Breaking Bad* we see different iterations of the image of masculinity embodied by Walt. Masculinity is not a singular concept but one that is constructed out of various assemblages. It shifts as the actants within those assemblages are added or subtracted. Strange as it may seem, the motivation for Walt's decision to cook meth in the first place suggests a set of pretty conservative values that conceive of men as financially self-sufficient heads of families. Although his sense of personal failure seems to be a bit emasculating, Walt begins the series as a traditional family man in many ways; his stance toward his adoring son is loving and paternal. His relationship with his wife Skylar, while lacking in passion, seems to be stable and caring. He has foregone his youthful dreams but still slogs along, making hard sacrifices for the good of his family and to ensure his wife and children are provided for. He is also responsible and completely law-abiding (as suggested by Skylar's shocked reaction when he tells her – falsely – that he has been smoking pot).

But we have seen that meth itself is an actant; when it becomes part of the assemblage of Walt's life the traditional masculinity with which he is clearly associated prior to his cancer diagnosis metamorphoses – he still sees himself as the independent breadwinner, the one who makes huge personal sacrifices to ensure that his family is provided for. But this masculinity has undergone a shift – it has taken on the violent, aggressive form that is actually necessary if Walt is to survive in the drug trade. This shift is demonstrated dramatically in *Más* (Gilligan, Walley-Beckett and Renck 2010) when Gus Fring is trying to convince Walt to work for him. Walt had decided to give up cooking meth, but Fring insists on showing him the super lab – an environment with gleaming, pristine surfaces that is a stark contrast to the cramped interior of the dilapidated RV. In the following passage Fring, with a hard voice and expressionless face, evokes a concept of masculinity, but it is no longer the loving husband and father:

> What does a man do, Walter? A man provides for his family. When you have children, you always have family. They will always be your responsibility, your priority. And a man, a man

> provides. And he does it even when he's not appreciated, or respected, or even loved. He simply bears up and he does it. Because he's a man. (Gilligan, Walley-Beckett and Renck 2010: *Más*)

The warmth that we saw between Walt and Skylar and particularly Walt and his son has been transformed by the presence of meth in the assemblage – and the myriad connections meth brings with it. Walt now embodies a different kind of responsible masculinity – one that is strong, bound by duty, and stoically bearing the fact that his life is bereft of love.

There are also frequent references to the "self-made man" concept of masculinity (Connell 2005: 93; Faucette 2014: 75), wherein Walter emphasizes that he "earned" his money; in fact in some cases he puts himself at risk in order ensure that this is understood. Here masculinity is associated with money, with a neoliberal ethic of self-creation and self-sufficiency. Walt embodies another image of masculinity that is intrinsically connected to neoliberal economics; Jesse asks him "are we in the money business or the meth business," to which Walt replies "we're in the empire business." In this scene, Walt is shot from below, seated in an armchair, looking like a powerful, aggressive business kingpin, also connected to masculinity that networks with markets, corporations, and political structures.

Walt also displays a handyman's skill with tools and technology – giving him competence and also enabling him to survive. These skills also convey of the theme of transformation through association as well as a kind of know-how apart from the high science of the PhD in chemistry – that is, the practical capabilities associated with blue-collar masculinity. In his own home he installs a new water heater himself (significantly, he purchased the expensive new unit with money earned through the meth trade), and then gets involved in a huge home-repair project to remove wooden beams from the basement that have been infected with "rot." In addition, when the RV's battery dies, Walt is able to improvise a battery out of available chemicals, coins, and other objects found in the vehicle to get it started again. He also installs a machine gun in his car, jerry-rigged so when he presses the car's remote control, the

gun will automatically sway back and forth while firing, spraying bullets over a wide area.

Ultimately, when Walt metamorphoses into a violent and remorseless killer he displays another form of masculinity – quite different from the gentle paternal figure we met in season one. This Walt finally becomes visible to Skylar when, afraid for Walt's safety, she urges him to go to the police. Walt famously replies, advancing on her with a menacing growl:

> No, you clearly don't know who you're talking to, so let me clue you in. I am not "in danger," Skylar. 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. (Gilligan, Hutchison and Slovis 2011: *Cornered*)

This dramatic "disruptive disclosure" (Goldsmith 2010: 919) makes it impossible for Skylar to maintain the last vestiges of Walt's appearance of a normal family man. Once she understands the extent of the violence Walt has become capable of, she becomes terrified not for him, but of him. In agony and totally cornered, she sits on the bed as Walt towers over her, and says, "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" (Gilligan *et al*. 2012: *Fifty-One*). Walt never physically assaults her, but she wordlessly, helplessly obeys him, as a severely abused woman might do. At the same time, he tries to perform the role of the loving husband and father. He tries to comfort the terrified Skylar with assurances that he has made them safe; he chats casually about the family business or touches her tenderly on the arm as he climbs into bed next to her. The combination of the responsible, caring suburban husband and the (now visible) homicidal meth manufacturer bent on forcing his way back into his family's lives is monstrous. It is perhaps an illustration of an unsuccessful mediation, as Skylar is unable to accept Walt in the role of gentle family man, once his associations with meth, guns, police, corruption, and violence have been revealed.

Identity, Cancer, and Methamphetamine

Walter's physical transformation throughout the series also suggests how various linkages might move to the foreground or recede into obscurity depending on his activities at a given moment. We see, for example, a shaved head as indicative of various states of being. When Walt first undergoes chemotherapy, he begins losing his hair. He shaves his head – baldness signifying to many people the presence of malignant tumours, chemicals used in cancer therapy, which are created by various corporate bodies that make possible scientific research into cancer, insurance, HMOs, and possibly assemblages creating manufacturing concerns whose activities expel carcinogenic toxins. The connection between Walt's appearance and cancer is further reinforced by the fact that his oncologist also has a shaved head. Such associations convey a sense of a person weakened by illness, but also perhaps someone who is to be admired for a particular kind of strength: a strength that makes people stoic in the face of adversity, confronting a loss of dignity and even death with firm determination. But baldness is also associated with aggression, violence, criminality and ruthlessness, as many of the people in the meth trade that Walt deals with also have shorn heads (Tuco, No-Doze, Gonzo, Emilio, Markowsky, Mike). And in fact, Walt's baldness, with the addition of sunglasses and a porkpie hat, is no longer associated with the loving family man courageously fighting a deadly disease, but is transformed into a signifier of a tough criminal adversary who seems to fit quite well into the crystal meth milieu. This flexibility is made possible by the body's "impenetrability to sight" (Brighenti 2007: 327); the casual observer cannot see the tumor in Walt's lungs directly. Its presence can only be inferred by Walt's appearance – and his appearance means different things depending upon the associations that are visible at the moment.

For the purposes of his criminal activities Walt uses the alias Heisenberg, which is significant in view of the themes of the series. Werner Heisenberg, like Albert Einstein, was a German theoretical physicist, known in part for his uncertainty theory, which held that the position and momentum of subatomic particles could never be established with complete certainty (Brodesco 2014; Freeley 2014).

But his story also seems to suggest *Breaking Bad's* theme of the relationship between agency and association. Unlike Einstein, Heisenberg remained in Germany after the rise of Hitler in the 1930s. Einstein is widely revered in the West for his brilliance and his advocacy for peace. Heisenberg's legacy has always been shadowed by questions about his possible cooperation with the Nazi regime in Germany during World War II. Science – even science as abstract as theoretical physics – is never pure, but takes on moral characteristics depending on the actants with which it becomes associated.

Transformation and the Non-Human

In *Breaking Bad* non-humans often play a prominent role. They also change their nature depending on the actants with which they are associated (Bennet 2010), so that "the identity of the thing undergoes constant revisions according to the kinds of common notions it presents, the relations it forms" (Brown and Capdevila 1999: 41). I have already suggested that crystal meth in the series is more than just a chemical compound, that it has transformative effects on the things – human and non-human – with which it becomes associated.

Cell phones and surveillance cameras are often key elements of *Breaking Bad*'s narrative, but they are deployed in very different ways depending upon the actants involved. They are not simply surveillance devices; they are part of a "surveillant assemblage" (Haggerty and Ericson 2000). Cell phones permit a fortuitous phone call from Fring to a pair of Cartel assassins, which saves Walt's life. They make the killing of Gale (one of the most shocking crimes Walt commits) possible. Because of their ability to transmit digital images Hank can send Walt a photograph of the corpse of Tuco's man Gonzo, inadvertently alerting him to a possible threat from Tuco, which in turn incites Walt to make poisonous ricin. Walt purchases a second cell phone for use in the meth business. When Walt disappears mysteriously in season two Skylar tells Hank that just prior to Walt's disappearance his cell phone rang. Hank traces Walt's phone records and finds no evidence of the call, leading both

he and Skylar to suspect that Walt has a second cell phone. In season 5 of the series, Hank persuades Jesse to help him secure clear evidence of Walt's involvement in crime. Jesse calls Walt and claims to be at the site where Walt has buried several barrels of money. He threatens to set fire to the barrels, texting an image to Walt's cell phone that looks like one of the barrels buried in the sand. It is, in fact, a mock-up. Jesse doesn't know where the money is buried, but the image goads Walt into racing out to desert to stop Jesse from destroying his cash. The GPS in Walt's cell phone makes it possible for Hank to track Walt to the site. Not realizing that it is Hank who is on his trail, Walt uses the same cell phone to contact his associates in the Aryan Brotherhood for help. They arrive and kill Hank before the horrified Walt's eyes. Cell phones are elements of the assemblage that can be used by and also against different actants in different ways – they also can be used either to provide clarity or to deceive.

Once Walt and Jesse have killed Gale, Fring continues to employ them, but now Fring considers Walt to be an enemy. He installs surveillance cameras in the lab; thatWalt can never be sure whether he is being watched or not and this unidirectional visibility establishes Fring's dominance. But cameras create a type of "mediated" visibility that allows one's field of vision can be "stretched" across space and time (Thompson 2005: 32-33). They do not just transmit images, but create a record of them, and this record can be moved between various assemblages that are both spatially and temporally distant from each other. They change in character depending on the actants they become associated with, serving different functions and helping to achieve different goals. The images of Walt and Jesse captured by the oppressive surveillance cameras in the superlab were downloaded to Fring's laptop, so they survive even after the camera itself has been destroyed in a fire. But once Fring is killed, DEA agents seize the laptop. Now the surveillance technology is transformed into evidence of Walt's involvement in meth manufacturing that can be used in a court of law. Technological devices enable Walt's activities but also may threaten to expose him. Surveillance mechanisms are used in turn by law enforcement and various players in the drug trade. These mechanisms are also strangely reminiscent of the surveillance – CT

scans and the like – to which Walt is subjected at the cancer clinic (Wetherbee and Weaver 2013), and which make visible the otherwise concealed tumors in his lungs.

These examples suggest Thompson's argument that Foucault's panoptic structure of power is incomplete (Thompson 2005). ANT's picture of complex networks, of things constructed of assemblages of actants that themselves are connected to other assemblages suggests that surveillance and power is better represented by the image of the "oligopticon" than the panopticon (Latour 2007 175). But just as the ANT theorist can never trace all the connections that constitute the assemblages she is studying, visibility can never be anything but partial.

Breaking Bad also troubles the distinction between human and non-human in terms of the subject/object dichotomy both structurally and visually. The cinematography frequently arranges the elements of a shot so that what a more conventionally directed sequence would place in the background becomes the foreground (Latour 2005). The shots also frequently appear to be from the point of view of objects, suggesting that they have a life of their own. A camera is mounted on a shovel being carried by Jesse. Walt and Jesse break meth into crystals, seen from the meth's point of view. Walt manipulates an air vac, with the camera mounted on the air vac. In some cases the objects turn out to have a hidden significance in the narrative: the camera focuses on a nondescript potted plant in the White's back yard. Later we discover that it has been used to poison a child.

At the beginning of this paper I described the structure of season two – the "cold open" of each episode consisting of shots of seemingly incongruously assembled images, with each episode's opening containing more visual information. By the season's end we discover that the narrative traces a range of relationships that lead to a plane crash, and these objects are now evidence collected by investigators who will trace these relationships backward in time (Latour 1999). How the plane crash connects to Walt is through a series of relationships – a simple recounting of the narrative would go something like this: Jesse falls in love with Jane, a recovering

addict. Jesse's friend, Combo, is murdered by a group of rival meth dealers after Jesse sends him to deal meth in disputed territory. Guilt over his part in Combo's death drives Jesse to binge on drugs. Jane, as a result, begins using again. While sleeping, Jane begins to choke on her own vomit. Walt has an opportunity to save her, but stands by and watches her die. Jane's father is an air traffic controller. Grief stricken at Jane's death, he is unable to concentrate on his job and his errors result in two planes colliding, killing all aboard. Jane's father commits suicide. Jesse now feels responsible for all these deaths.

In an effort to comfort Jesse, Walt says that he is not to blame for the tragedy, that the air traffic control system is "1960s technology." And in a way, perhaps he has a point. We see in *Breaking Bad* that lines of responsibility do not seem to be very direct. The scene we just watched was an assembly of many things – crystal meth, heroine, Jane, Walt, outdated air traffic technology, law enforcement, vomit, a bicycle, neurochemistry, the drug market – one could go on.

Conclusion

Latour argues that traditional theory tends to focus on object and subjects, while the actor network theorist looks at the web of linkages that make up things – or rather that constitute the assemblages of actants that we ultimately name as things. He calls these named assemblages "black boxes" to convey the idea that once they reach a certain point of stability, they become impenetrable, and the complex of associations that constitute them invisible. Of course we need these black boxes in order to make sense of the world. But there is always a possibility that events will destabilize these associations, making the black box transparent, and exposing it as a knot of linkages to other assemblages. Strangely, by this account instability and confusion are actually essential to perception.

The idea that action is only possible through assemblages of human and non-human actants suggests a complex relationship between intention and outcomes – one that challenges traditional concepts of identity and moral responsibility. Walter White is not simply a subject who manipulates objects to achieve his goals. He is part of

an assemblage; he may act upon the other elements of that assemblage but they also act upon him, not only in terms of his capabilities but also in terms of his moral values. His associations enable action but, paradoxically, deeply destabilize his identity as a subject.

The transformations Walter experiences through the course of the series seem bewildering. But strangely enough it is only when Walter becomes unrecognizable, that we begin to know him. It isn't that Walt is, deep down, "really" an aggressive criminal whose true nature is revealed near the end of his life. Rather, when circumstances destabilize the "black box" of Walter White the schoolteacher and law abiding citizen we are made to look more carefully at that links that made him what he is, and what he is to become. Is it a moral code that makes him the gentle, responsible family man that we meet in season one of the series? Or is that persona simply the incarnation of the version masculinity that seems to be available to him? Is there, somewhere in this complex picture of action and identity, any meaningful conception of moral agency?

In *…And the Bag's in the River* (Gilligan and Bernstein 2008) there is a scene that acts as a meditation on matter and what it means to be human. It takes place after Walt has killed Krazy-8's associate Emilio – his first homicide. Walt instructs Jesse to place the body in a polyethylene container and dissolve it with hydrofluoric acid – hydrofluoric acid does not dissolve polyethylene. But Jesse instead places the body in his bathtub. The acid dissolves the tub and the bathroom floor, and a mass of goo has come crashing down to the first floor of Jesse's house. We see Walt and Jesse cleaning up the deconstituted body of Emilio, interspersed with flashbacks of a much younger Walt, perhaps when he was a graduate student. He and Gretchen are calculating the chemical composition of the human body – 63% hydrogen, 9% carbon, .00004% iron, etc. When they calculate the total they find that they are left with a remainder – 0.111958% cannot be unaccounted for in this breakdown of the matter constituting a human body. What is this remainder? Gretchen suggests it is perhaps the soul, to which Walt replies, "there is nothing but matter here."

One possibility is that matter is never fully accounted for by a breakdown of its chemical elements, and it is this unknown and unpredictable potential that makes it an actant. This is not only true of organic matter – for all Walt's meticulousness he never succeeds in producing 100% chemically pure meth. There always a minute amount – sometimes less than 1% – that cannot be accounted for. Both human and non-human matter is just a bit more than its assembled chemical elements. Another possibility is that this remainder is the always-elusive transcendent moral agent, the one that might the concept of the moral subject meaningful.

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