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Television from the Superlab: The Postmodern Serial Drama and the New Petty Bourgeoisie in *Breaking Bad*

MORGAN FRITZ

This essay considers the television series *Breaking Bad* in light of Nicos Poulantzas's concept of the new petty bourgeoisie and Bruno Latour's notion of the production of "monsters" in modern society as a result of the compartmentalization of science from society. *Breaking Bad*, which has received near universal praise from the popular press, established itself as the most recent dominant show in the recent wave of serial dramas. As a show that resembles the experimental vacuum chamber described by Latour, *Breaking Bad* succeeds in naturalizing its own terms so that they go unquestioned by viewers. My article views the character Walter White not as the everyman antihero presented by the show, but rather as a representative of what Poulantzas has termed the new petty bourgeoisie. A contention made in this essay is that the quarantined nature of such serial dramas allows them to work as vehicles for ideologies that go unexamined by their viewers.

Breaking Bad (2008–13) has now run its course, part of a new wave of complex television shows destined for significant academic inquiry at the time of airing rather than as artifacts of a past era. The near universal praise received by this show should prompt us to examine it as a significant moment in the development of its genre, which could be termed the "postmodern serial drama." What I want to argue here is that *Breaking Bad*'s success (measurable in overwhelming critical praise and the 10.3 million viewers for its final episode¹) is attributable to its very effective self-containment, a characteristic for which the show's laboratory preoccupation serves as a metaphor. After an initial "leap" from the viewer's real world to a reasonably realistic fictional one, the show meticulously sets the rules that govern its alternative world and this world's causality. The leap occurs in the first episode, whose proleptic opening portrays the main character three weeks after the beginning of the story, frantically driving a Winnebago through the desert clad only in underwear

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¹ John Jurgensen, "Breaking Bad' Finale Draws Record 10.3 Million Viewers," *Speakeasy, Wall Street Journal* blogs, 30 Sept. 2013, at <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2013/09/30/breaking-bad-finale-logs-record-10-3-million-viewers/tab/video>.

and a gas mask. The intersection of social circumstances and ethical tergiversation that brought an honest teacher and scientist to this state will remain the focus of the series until the end. Despite a temporary sense of disorientation at such moments as the show's jarring embarkation, this laboratory process turns out to be the inverse of what the Russian formalists called "estrangement":² while the most enterprising among the postmodern serial dramas involve the imaginative defamiliarization of facts of contemporary reality so that we apprehend them with renewed freshness, in *Breaking Bad* the social and political relations of the alternative world are hewn off from external reality and naturalized, persuading viewers to accept the fiction entirely on its own terms and forgo historicization and detached analysis.

The usual popular approach to the show revolves around questions of good and evil and a debate about the main character's status as a potentially innovative "antihero." This limited range of inquiry apparently entangles scholars as well. In *BBC News Magazine*, professor of philosophy David Koepsell promotes an anthology of scholarly work on *Breaking Bad* with an argument that the show "is meant as a morality play," conveying the straightforward lesson: "Don't become a Walter White."³ Against this superficial current, a logical starting point for analyzing *Breaking Bad* is the reconsideration of Walter White from a demystifying perspective. I intend to think about Walter not as an Everyman turned villain but rather, more concretely, in terms of his "new petty bourgeoisie" (structural Marxist Nicos Poulantzas's term, discussed below) class position and the immediate historical context of the Tea Party movement. I will also explore how the ethics-based view of the show and its protagonist connects with the motif of laboratory conditions in *Breaking Bad*. Walter's obsession with purity and perfection reaches its greatest intensity in the underground "superlab," where he mass-produces extremely pure crystal methamphetamine yet paradoxically finds himself imprisoned. In turn, this approach to production has significant parallels to the narrow conceptualization and execution of *Breaking Bad* itself. In fact, the quarantined world of the show's events and themes has already been noted by popular critics, albeit indirectly. For example, *New Yorker* television critic Emily Nussbaum recently described *Breaking Bad* as "a stark chess game rather than a sprawling world-builder."⁴ Nussbaum's apt assessment of the show's minimalism overlooks the fact that *Breaking Bad* is less an

² See especially Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in Victor Shklovsky, Boris Tomashevsky, and Boris Eichenbaum, *Russian Formalism: Four Essays*, 2nd edn, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Maron J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 3–24.

³ David Koepsell, "Is Walter White One of TV's Truly Evil Characters?" *BBC News Magazine*, 26 Sept. 2013.

⁴ Emily Nussbaum, "'Breaking Bad' Returns" *Culture Desk*, *New Yorker* blogs, 12 Aug. 2013, at www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/breaking-bad-returns.

allegorical chess game than a “chess problem,” played by one side as an experiment unfolding from a highly artificial starting point.

The insight of sociologist of science Bruno Latour is instructive in thinking about laboratory conditions in *Breaking Bad*. In his pathbreaking study of the genealogy of postmodernism, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour finds the symbolic birth of modern society’s defining bifurcation in the seventeenth century, with Robert Boyle’s invention of the experimental vacuum chamber.⁵ For Latour, Boyle’s quarantining established powerful conceptual boundaries, facilitating a host of innovations that would have been prohibited to cultures in which science has not been alienated from society. According to this logic, the isolation of science inside the experimental chamber allows scientists, engineers, and others to perform their work unencumbered by concerns about the broader social consequences of their discrete projects. It in turn brings about “the accelerated socialization of nonhumans, because it never allows them to appear as elements of ‘real society.’”⁶ The nonhumans or “monsters” that Latour envisions are products of science, technology, and industry whose origins cannot readily be explained except by specialists. An everyday example could be a genetically modified tomato, whose mysterious background includes not only its genes’ laboratory history but also its actual point of origin, the chemical fertilizers and pesticides involved in its growth, the processes of its transportation to market, the machinery that harvests it, etc. Our willingness to take final products at face value puts us in a superficial and dangerous relationship with the world of things. This process of hybrid production does not stop at simple products, and if we follow Latour’s logic then works of entertainment and even art are ensnared in the networks of hybrids.

Even if we take his arguments at their pessimistic face value, the mere ability of a scholar like Latour to think outside this cultural blindness suggests that through philosophy and theory we can overcome the antinomy between science and society in order to perceive a complex and meaningful reality rather than a web of uninterrogated, monstrous facts and objects. Furthermore, we know that experimental methods can be used to illuminate social relations; although the critic lacks the experimental resources of other intellectuals, the analytical scrutiny of a device like the vacuum chamber can turn a tool of alienation into a metaphor useful in the anthropology of modern society. Something like this sort of illumination has unfolded in the realm of the new genre of the postmodern serial drama since

⁵ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Latour builds his discussion of this controversy upon the work of Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer in *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

Oz (1997–2003), a fictional show about an innovative rehabilitation unit within a maximum-security prison. Beginning with *Oz* and *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), a spate of television dramas have sought to illuminate the operations of selected social relationships by taking as their starting point highly artificial and previously inconceivable premises. *The Sopranos*, for instance, imagines the intersection between Old World organized crime and East Coast bourgeois society by means of a New Jersey mobster modern enough to seek out a therapist. This premise allows for the critical examination of the role of violence in a competitive and aggressive American society, and the bourgeois impulse to keep past and present violence contained and at a distance. It also foregrounds how our interest in something as nefarious as the Mafia is rooted in a nostalgic longing for an alternative form of social organization to twenty-first-century American capitalism. Such shows are postmodern at the deliberate level, as in their ironic self-referentiality, and their deconstructive approach to genre, characters, and narrative. They are postmodern as well as being products: created, packaged, and consumed in increasingly labyrinthine ways. *Breaking Bad* survived where numerous other underwatched shows with artistic merit perished, because it gained momentum from the new phenomenon of “binge-watching” on the streaming service Netflix. It survived long enough to seize the place of prestige occupied by *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* (2002–8) before it, but also signaled a shift in the trajectory of the genre.

This shift is an important moment in the lifespan of the postmodern serial drama, itself a product of what Amanda D. Lotz describes as the “post-network era” and the rise of “narrowcasting.” The post-network new era has offered a host of possibilities for creative expression due to the breakup of decades-long network dominance; but it also creates a scramble of competitors hoping to win audiences. A survival mechanism prompted by this new environment, narrowcasting denotes the strategy of forgoing the hope of mass viewership and instead patching together targeted niche audiences.⁷ I believe that in the midst of a fertile but competitive upheaval that has given rise to the postmodern serial drama, *Breaking Bad* completes the circuit of the genre’s relationship with ideology: having emerged with a power to lay bare social relations obscured by ideology, the rules of the serial drama have now been codified for the process of straightforward marketing and consumption. *Breaking Bad* demonstrates that the twenty-first-century drama can obfuscate just as readily as defamiliarize a host of aspects of contemporary society, and that these shows can valorize ideologies that their elite, educated viewers might find chilling if confronted with more directly.

⁷ See Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: NYU Press), 2007.

Breaking Bad imagines an “ordinary,” middle-aged white male American breadwinner drawn into one of the most sordid sectors of the contemporary economy, the crystal methamphetamine trade. A diagnosis of lung cancer forces high-school chemistry teacher Walter White to face his failure to provide for his teenage son and pregnant wife; his peerless laboratory skills make methamphetamine production a feasible way for him to escape this failure. Prior to his diagnosis, White’s ethical slate is entirely clean; indeed, Walt initially seems so straight-laced as to impress us as unmanly or sterile. His surname itself bluntly connotes inexperience, moral purity, and blandness at the same time that it signifies his race, class, and gender status as an average white male. The show’s deliberately unlikely scenario roughly parallels *The Sopranos*. While Tony Soprano’s psychiatrist, Dr. Melfi, serves as the viewer’s point of access in that show, *Breaking Bad* situates an educated Everyman in proximity to the underworld to reimagine the meth trade and the extent of its penetration into American society, and presses us to consider the role of violence in our daily lives. The show’s setting, relatively close to the US–Mexico border in Albuquerque, prompts the viewer to think about the intricate drug and violence-related reciprocity between not only the governments and criminal organizations of these two nations, but between their business communities and ordinary citizens as well.

In keeping with its self-containment, *Breaking Bad* offers viewers the most readily digestible interpretation of the rich geopolitical context of its story, shoring up conventional American views of the US–Mexico relationship. *Breaking Bad* premiered amidst negotiations over the Mérida Initiative, which contributed US resources, including funds and especially aircraft, to the war on drugs bound from Mexico to the US and Europe. Intensified from 2006 by President Felipe Calderón, the war on the cartels has even been described by a US State Department official as “armoring NAFTA.”⁸ Ironically, this inflow of military resources is paralleled by a huge inflow of smuggled firearms. The cartel infighting, provoked at least indirectly by the US, contributed – along with the post-NAFTA displacement of millions of agricultural workers – to turning Mexico into a breeding ground for exotic violence and heightened its perceived difference from the US. Despite the richness of its setting and subject matter, *Breaking Bad* gladly reinforces a narrative of Mexican otherness and portrays its central characters as standing firm against threats from the South.

⁸ The unguarded statement is from a 2008 speech by US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon. Quoted in Julien Mercille, “Violent Narco-cartels or US Hegemony? The Political Economy of the ‘War on Drugs’ in Mexico,” *Third World Quarterly*, 32, 9 (2011), 1637–53, 1645.

The US–Mexico contrast is emphasized midway in Season 3, in an episode titled “One Minute.” The chain of violence begins with a beating inflicted by Walter’s federal agent brother-in-law, Hank, upon Walter’s former student and present accomplice, Jesse Pinkman, at the latter’s home. Jesse has recently diverted Hank from his trail by falsely reporting that Hank’s wife is injured and in the hospital. When Hank discovers the ruse, his rage at the personal nature of Jesse’s maneuver causes him to disregard protocol and attack in a way that threatens his future with the DEA. Preoccupied with his disciplinary proceedings, Hank is vulnerable, and as it happens his earlier shooting of a rabidly violent drug dealer, Tuco Salamanca, makes Hank a target for revenge by a Mexican cartel. Over preceding episodes, a pair of nearly robotic assassins, related to Tuco and known as “the cousins,” have made their way from Mexico to Albuquerque and catch up with Hank in a strip mall parking lot. Tipped off by an anonymous caller “one minute” before the cousins’ attack, Hank is wounded and nearly paralyzed; however, he manages to kill or maim his assassins and wins the day.

Most of *Breaking Bad*’s male characters express their identities primarily through their relation to violence. The violent conflict in this episode enacts this expression on a large scale, revealing a “clash of cultures.” Hank twice in this episode demonstrates a violent, brutal directness that nevertheless is also calculated and efficient. His assault on Jesse Pinkman puts him briefly on the wrong side of the law, but it also marks a more or less justified retaliation for Jesse’s symbolic violation of Hank’s domestic space. Excessive as his treatment of Jesse is, Hank retains our sympathy. He immediately takes responsibility for the act and feels remorse, and soon thereafter experiences physical suffering himself. Meanwhile, Hank’s reaction to the cousins’ attempted attack unfolds in a manner befitting a dogged and systematic government agent: he patiently waits until they engage, and then responds methodically and directly. As it happens, Hank pins one hitman to a car with his SUV, and shoots the other to death. During their attack on Hank in Albuquerque, the cousins approach slowly, with robotic deliberateness. When one of the cousins has a seemingly disarmed Hank cornered, he imprudently returns to his vehicle for a chainsaw; this lapse in judgment allows Hank to load a loose bullet into his empty weapon and kill his attacker. One of the show’s implicit messages, demonstrated here, is the reiteration of those fearing the contagion of Mexican cartel violence: the primitive and ritual dimensions of this violence, it turns out, are liabilities, exposing its practitioners to more dispassionate and efficient modes of killing.

In contrast to Hank, the assassins are distanced from the viewers by taking violence perversely personally. “One Minute” begins with a telling scene from their childhood. One of the boys destroys the other’s toy within sight of their uncle. The uncle laughs it off; however, the upset boy persists in demanding

punishment. The uncle presses the offender's head into a tub of ice water until his shocked accuser first repents, and then punches the uncle until his grip loosens. As adults, these cousins have previously thwarted Hank by executing a Mexican confidential informant named Tortuga. Not immune to irony, they cut his head off and place it, rigged with explosives, on a huge tortoise at the site of a DEA surveillance stakeout on the border in Texas. When the task force finds it in the desert, one of the agents taunts a nauseated Hank by remarking, "You act like you never saw a severed human head on a tortoise before." Hank is contrasted here not only with the cousins, but also with the bilingual, seasoned yet jaded, El Paso–Juárez task force, whose casual relation to violence subsequently exposes them to the deadly blast of the trap.

In the experimental context created by the show, the contrasting modes of violence of the government agent, Hank, and the malevolent cultural "others," such as the cousins, are circumscribing givens. Within these boundaries, the ordinary subject Walter has to develop his own mode of violence consistent with his personality. His sense of his own values leads him to try to use violence in an efficacious yet measured and justifiable way; after all, his stated objective remains to simply accumulate enough to provide for his family. Hank may serve the federal government, but Walter personifies the ideology and method of Western interventionism – he goes to great lengths to place a "red line" between himself and his adversaries. When that line is crossed, or when he can justify killing in the interest of his family or for the purpose of obviating further bloodshed (as in the logic of Western humanitarian interventions), then he proceeds bearing a conviction that he commits violence cleansed of guilt. Walter gladly uses proxies, whether hired or simply manipulated by him to believe that their self-interest requires violence against a mutual foe. These proxies range from his former student, Jesse, to a white supremacist prison gang that becomes Walter's affiliated death squad. Nor is Walter above using violence so extreme that it mirrors that of the cartels: for example, one of his first victims is ultimately melted down in acid, echoing the disposal methods of the real-world cartels' *pozoleros*.⁹ He kills another rival with a bomb strapped to a wheelchair in a nursing home. Nevertheless, the scientific quality of these killings maximizes Walter's emotional and physical distance whenever possible. Likewise, Walter always attempts to eradicate all traces of both deed and victim. For its first few seasons, the most artful aspect of *Breaking Bad*'s storytelling was the way in which Walter retained an apparently intact ethical and moral core even as slain enemies and innocent bystanders accumulated.

While Walter's murderousness gradually pushes him beyond the pale of viewer sympathy into evil, his cross-border foes are perceived as savages outside

⁹ William Booth, "Stewmaker' Stirs Horror in Mexico," *Washington Post*, 27 Jan. 2009.

this code to begin with. Walter's (and Hank's) impersonal, purposive methods of employing violence distinguish them from the cartels, who embrace violence as an art form and leave monuments to their killings like Tortuga's severed head. These boundaries, nestled conveniently along the US–Mexico border, stake out the space in which the show's experiment unfolds; the verisimilitude of this space, which draws on readily accepted ideology, in turn lends credibility to the terms of the experiment. As Stuart Hall once noted, the delivery and receipt of mass communication begins with tacit decisions about what ideological codes to distribute to viewers. Transmission turns out to be not a simple single-direction circuit, but one in which viewers who receive these coded messages can decode the intended message selectively or even according to an "oppositional code" that can break down and then "retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference."¹⁰ Hall's empowered form of viewing is seen every day in oppositional readings, for instance using feminist or Marxist recodings. Nevertheless, as Hall concedes, there are codes "so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture . . . that they appear not to be constructed but to be 'naturally' given."¹¹ *Breaking Bad* thrives by relying on the most "natural" of codes, especially the fundamental concepts of good and evil. These concepts underpin equally naturalized versions of social and political reality that audiences tend to receive uncritically and without recourse to Hall's oppositional codes.

This is not to say that the show is unaware of its complicity in these conventions. First, it is arguably the most realistic television portrayal of the cross-border drug trade on American television to date. For example, Walter's conflict with the cartels provokes a *narcocorrido*, or drug ballad, threatening him on behalf of the cartel patrons of the musicians. No doubt the *narcocorrido* was an unknown genre to many viewers. Second, Walter's partnership with a white-supremacist prison gang after his vanquishing of his Latin American rivals suggests his proximity to fascism, in contrast to the more purely criminal, apolitical Mexican gangs. Indeed, his initial encounter with them in a motel room demonstrates creator Vince Gilligan's skill at creating redolent visual subtexts: Walter's indifference to their very apparent swastika tattoos reinforces the importance of shared racial identity to their partnership, and his rationalization and improvement of their brutal methods (using their gang network, he orchestrates ten killings across a number of prisons within a two-minute window) demonstrates the mutual utility between this new petty bourgeoisie figure and the paramilitary-like criminals. In a resolution that rang false with many television critics, Walter's final acts

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, eds., *Media Studies: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 61.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

distance him from these accomplices: his self-sacrificial massacre of these neo-Nazis demonstrates that this aspect of the character, while revelatory, has gone too far to be consistent with a show that relies on hope for the central character's redemption even when he proves most alienating. It is understandable that Gilligan might ultimately want to rescue his character from overt fascism, and to distance his vision from complicity with the misogynist white male fans behind the online campaign against Walter's wife, Skyler, due to her initial resistance to his criminal entrepreneurship and her brief adulterous tryst at the height of her alienation from her husband.¹² Nevertheless, it also restores moral superiority to his competitors, whereas his earlier alliance with the neo-Nazi gang suggested that his fascism might contain something more sinister than the cartels.

The ultimate redemptive ending of the series, in which Walter kills the neo-Nazis and successfully caches money for his children, provoked the skepticism of media critics; but such scrutiny has not been typical in considerations of the show. In addition to Nussbaum, quoted above, other major commentators and outlets have gladly permitted the show to set its own interpretive terms. National Public Radio reported the show's creator, Gilligan, as claiming that he pitched the show in terms of White's metamorphosis: "You take Mr. Chips and turn him into Scarface."¹³ In the *New York Times*, David Segal evinces the willingness of critics to foreground this formulation in their analysis:

it was soon clear that "Breaking Bad" was something much more satisfying and complex: a revolutionary take on the serial drama . . . Gilligan and his writers have posed some large questions . . . with implications for every kind of malefactor you can imagine, from Ponzi schemers to terrorists. Questions like: Do we live in a world where terrible people go unpunished for their misdeeds? Or do the wicked ultimately suffer for their sins?¹⁴

Ungrounded, ahistorical questions such as these are of the variety that professors dissuade undergraduates from examining in their writing. Nor are they even the first questions that come to mind regarding a narrative that deals with subject matter including the meth epidemic, Mexican drug cartels, cross-border violence, and money laundering. Nevertheless, because *Breaking Bad* sets its own interpretive terms so successfully, questions about class and ideology are broached by critics in a way that blatantly mirrors the logic of the show itself.

¹² The titles of anti-Skyler Facebook pages include "Kill off Skyler White," "I Hate Skyler White," and "Fuck Skyler White." See the opinion piece about experiencing online abuse by the actress who plays Skyler: Anna Gunn, "I Have a Character Issue," *New York Times*, 23 Aug. 2013.

¹³ "Breaking Bad': Vince Gilligan on Meth and Morals" *Fresh Air*, National Public Radio, 19 Sept. 2011.

¹⁴ David Segal, "The Dark Art of 'Breaking Bad'," *New York Times*, 6 July 2011.

Segal notes as well that the show plays better in some “red-state” markets than in New York and California, a fact that, when combined with the demographics and setting of the show itself, recommends Gilligan to Segal as “TV’s first true red-state auteur.”¹⁵ Although this seems like an untenable label for an NYU-trained writer, it has been adopted by others, including conservative bulldog Jonah Goldberg, who cites it as proof of “the inherent conservatism of *Breaking Bad*.”¹⁶ Goldberg is partly correct, I believe, but for the wrong reasons: Walter White is not so much directly conservative as emblematic of the enraged new petty bourgeoisie constituency of the so-called Tea Party. Neither Segal nor Goldberg provides evidence of the conservative ideology of the viewers; they each simply assert that the show’s popularity in red states is sufficient proof.¹⁷ For Goldberg, the show engages with the theme of “the fragility of civilization: Preserving it requires a constant struggle.”¹⁸ Presumably Goldberg means that people in modern civilization somehow need to fight for humanity through self-restraint; but the slippage in terms is telling, because it seemingly endorses Walter’s sensed need to fight for home and family. Goldberg’s confusion of combativeness with advanced civilization itself captures an important tension within the ideology of the embattled new petty bourgeoisie as well as the within Tea Party.

To the extent that *Breaking Bad* constitutes a sociological–artistic success in the sense of a series such as *The Wire*, I believe that it does so in its exploration of the existential paradox of a nebulous yet almost all-encompassing American class fraction. Critics’ blindness to class in the show gives rise to superficial, boring interpretations of Walter as an Everyman drawn into a life of crime: from this perspective, once his fateful decision is made the interest in the show derives from the thrills and jolts involved in his path toward doom, along with the ramifications for those close to him. In fact, though Walt may envision himself as bourgeois, he is merely “middle-class” in the vague and obfuscating American sense of the term. He is not a stakeholder or decision-maker, and his resentment of this fact is ultimately his primary motivation. The baldest acknowledgment of this state of mind occurs in the wake of one of the show’s most horrifying events, when a member of Walter’s crew murders an adolescent boy who stumbles upon them during a methylamine heist. As Jesse begins to disintegrate under the weight of this crime, Walter tries to remind him of their achievements: “Now, finally, we are self-sufficient,” he urges, “Finally we have everything we need and no one to answer to except ourselves.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Jonah Goldberg, “Life and Death on Basic Cable” *National Review* digital, 19 Aug. 2013.

¹⁷ As one of the anonymous readers for this essay noted, this assertion about red-state viewership is faulty in the context of factors such as Internet piracy and post-airing binge-watching on Netflix and elsewhere.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

We run our business *our way*.” During this rhetorical *coup de main*, uttered sincerely yet with the calculated goal of assuaging Jesse’s doubts, Walter reveals to Jesse what viewers already know: that Walter once held a major stake in a young and ultimately very successful biotechnology firm, from which he withdrew for the regular salary of public service.

In this scene Walter voices mixed aspirations, for both entrepreneurial self-determination and a life among the extremely affluent. Both desires separate Walter from a would-be parvenu or arriviste such as *The Wire*’s “Stringer” Bell. Unlike Bell, who hopes to invest drug money in legitimate businesses in order to escape from a life of crime forced upon him by poverty, Walter sees financial security as his birthright. In this he concurs with the neo-Nazis with whom he soon allies himself, who understand their criminal work as part of a rebellion against invading minorities. Walter White’s bourgeois perspective turns out to be a self-delusion: intelligent and educated, his bourgeois veneer strips away when he experiences the reality of his class position. His plight, combining bourgeois valorization of economic individualism with resentment against the bourgeoisie, evokes the Marxist concept of the petty bourgeoisie. For Marx, the petty bourgeoisie is defined by its condition of

fluctuating between proletariat and bourgeoisie and ever renewing itself as a supplementary part of bourgeois society. The individual members of this class, however, are being constantly hurled down into the proletariat by the action of competition, and, as modern industry develops, they even see the moment approaching when they will completely disappear as an independent section of modern society, to be replaced in manufactures, agriculture and commerce, by overlookers, bailiffs and shopmen.¹⁹

Marx imagines that as the thin, disintegrating buffer between bourgeoisie and proletariat, the petty bourgeoisie would simply be absorbed into the proletarian agents of bourgeois dominance. The failure of this trend to materialize forced later Marxists to try to imagine the place of this nebulous and troublesome class in the two-class conflict.

Trotsky subsequently held to Marx’s vision of the petty bourgeoisie as a bourgeois supplement, but tried to reconfigure it for a new context by positioning this internally fragmented class closer to the site of ongoing social change and ideological production, as a double-edged tool of the bourgeoisie that also generates the ideology embraced by the bourgeoisie, which “very correctly fears its tendency to break down the barriers set up for it from above.”²⁰ In this account, the petty bourgeoisie is the stooge of the dominant class, but by no means a safe one; it is more like the brutal right-hand enforcer

¹⁹ Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. Frederic L. Bender (New York: W. W. Norton), 1988, 78.

²⁰ Leon Trotsky, *Fascism: What It Is and How to Fight It* (London: Pathfinder, 2006), 20.

who views its boss's vacillations and inconsistencies as an opening for its own rise to power. He laments that if the petty bourgeoisie is not won over (through show of strength rather than concessions) by the proletarian party, then the dictatorship of the proletariat would be impossible in a number of countries in which the petty bourgeoisie constitutes the majority of the nation and, more than that, it would be rendered extremely difficult in other countries in which the petty bourgeoisie represents an important minority.²¹

Trotsky's pronouncement is ominous when considered in light of the subsequent history of petty bourgeoisie expansion. According to Nicos Poulantzas's delineation of late twentieth-century class formations, nothing so convenient or straightforward as the reallocation described by Marx has taken place. On the contrary, it has expanded and grown more complex. In Poulantzas's terms, as a class the petty bourgeoisie is defined negatively: it is "not at the centre of the dominant relations of exploitation, i.e. the direct extraction of surplus-value, [and thus] undergoes a polarization that produces very complex distortions and adaptations of the political and ideological relations in which it is placed."²² One troubling existential aspect of the new petty bourgeoisie is precisely its experience of exploitation in spite of its dislocation from the site of struggle. The existence of the new petty bourgeoisie is both determined and complicated by the modern division between mental and physical labor; this split is reproduced throughout various sectors of the economy, creating fractions within the new petty bourgeoisie at the same time as it keeps the entire class at odds with the working class.

For Poulantzas, Walter as a state-employed teacher is exploited "in the form of extortion of surplus labour," not for the sake of surplus-value, but merely by dint "of the unequal situation in the exchange between [state employees] and capital."²³ As a teacher, Walter even functions as a gatekeeper of this system. As Poulantzas notes, "the 'training' of manual labour essentially consists, within the school, in excluding it from mental labour, the very condition of the training of mental labour by the school being this internalized exclusion of manual labour (keeping it in its proper place)."²⁴ Walter's subject, chemistry, is a culturally and ideologically neutral one that rewards both aptitude and fascination with the inner workings of matter and energy; it is a subject as obstructive to the entitled indolent as it is to the underprivileged. Ironically, this very position proves humiliating for Walter, who finds himself on the bottom half of the mental/manual divide at the carwash job he takes to supplement his paltry income. His dual, divergent working life exposes him

²¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

²² Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*, trans. David Fernbach (London: NLB, 1975), 207.

²³ *Ibid.*, 215.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 266.

to extra doses of ridicule, for example when he scrubs the tires of a recalcitrant student's sports car. His Romanian boss pushes him from register duties to detailing interiors and extended hours when other employees miss shifts; one of Walter's eventual triumphs involves buying out the owner of this concern to use it to launder his cash. The carwash offers Walter and his eventual accomplice, Skyler, an escape from his criminal life in the form of small-business ownership. By this time, though, he has outgrown the desire for \$737,000 that he imagined would secure his family's future needs, and is convinced that only great wealth has any meaning. Indeed, the falsity of this arbitrary number as a symbol of emancipation manifests itself with the crash of the 737 caused by Walter's pursuit of this early goal.

Walter represents not only the resentment characteristic of the new petty bourgeoisie, but also the confusing role and status of that class position in contemporary society. In the US, the current expression of petty bourgeoisie ideology is the Tea Party, a convoluted outburst against liberalism and neoliberalism. Though incoherent and narrowly backed, it represents those who feel hostility toward both the Wall Street elite and the working class and the poor; its members see legislative intransigence and violent entrenchment of the national borders as the only hope of preserving an embattled national culture. As Mike Davis recently put it,

The destruction of \$19 trillion of personal wealth in the United States since 2008 coupled with the fears of economic stagnation and minority ascendancy have crazed the base of the Republican party. Something indeed has run amok when the merely wealthy stop obeying orders from the rich or when the privileged 20 percent mutinies against any concession by the peak 0.1 percent.²⁵

For Davis, the elites have given rise to a constituency that aspires to prosperity and resents government incursions in the form of social programs, invasions of privacy such as wiretapping (a stance that distinguishes them from Republicans in general), and taxation, but feels that only some massive calamity will free them from a condition they perceive as untenable. Their activities swing wildly from attacks on the poor and immigrants to attempts to grind the government and aspects of the economy to a halt. Importantly, after 2008 wealth destruction and job loss swept across the entire population and increased the ranks of the poor, but the only salient response has been the Tea Party, which has thus gained clout out of all proportion to the size of its constituency.

Walter, an ersatz drug kingpin who never secures a stable organization but becomes wealthy through a series of bold moves, intrigues viewers in part because he flouts all the right institutions: the IRS, the federal police,

²⁵ Mike Davis, "The Last White Election?", *New Left Review*, 79 (2013), 5–52, 52.

the healthcare industry, and the waged-labor system. He innovates on the crime-lord figure because he ties this achievement to a starting point as an ordinary, put-upon taxpayer. By some accounts, 90 percent of the employed US workforce is in the service industry.²⁶ With that in mind, and based on the admiration for the show on the right, we can regard the popularity of *Breaking Bad* as a result of the ubiquity of Walter White's dilemma. What is interesting here is the relationship between the omnipresence of Walter's crisis and the specificity of his demographic, anchoring him to the narrow yet disproportionately influential Tea Party. According to recent polling research, "The 18 percent of Americans who identify themselves as Tea Party supporters tend to be Republican, white, male, married and older than 45."²⁷ The same study describes self-identified Tea Party members as wealthy and well-educated relative to the population at large. According to this study, Tea Party members are Walter Whites.

Like the Tea Party adherent, Walter is a liberal subject under duress, pushed to a dangerous point where he can no longer maintain faith in any of the institutions that he feels should serve him. Social conservatism is not what primarily defines this constituency. Tea Party constituents are slightly more anti-abortion than the Republican electorate, and less anti-gay-marriage; their intense pro-gun and anti-immigration stances are what distinguish them from Republicans.²⁸ According to Pew Research, "98% favor stronger enforcement of immigration laws."²⁹ As demonstrated by their ability, despite their small numbers, to precipitate the fall 2013 government shutdown, Tea Party constituents are also characterized by intransigent hostility to the government, seeing little value in its operations or the programs it funds. Walter's cancer is a straightforward metaphor for an enemy that proves all the more devastating because the victim cannot locate it precisely. For White, the physical cancer is not what provokes his break with legitimate society; it merely reminds him of what his long workdays, loving family, and modest possessions shielded from him, namely the fact that he has accumulated no resources with which to respond to threat, catastrophe, or desire.

The show's expression of "new petty bourgeoisie" discontent is further demonstrated by the utopian aspect of Walter's criminal life. What Walter

²⁶ Associated Press, "Service Sector Increases at Slowest Pace in Two Years," *New York Times*, 5 July 2012.

²⁷ Kate Zernike and Megan Thee-Brenan, "Poll Finds Tea Party Backers Wealthier and More Educated," *New York Times*, 14 April 2010.

²⁸ Pew Research, "The Tea Party and Religion," Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, 23 Feb. 2011, at www.pewforum.org/2011/02/23/tea-party-and-religion.

²⁹ Pew Research, "Strong on Defense and Israel, Tough on China," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 7 Oct. 2011, at www.people-press.org/2011/10/07/strong-on-defense-and-israel-tough-on-china.

gains from escaping his niche is twofold: the ability to actualize himself by producing something akin to a work of art, and access to the proverbial sack of gold (as in Chamisso's *Peter Schlemiel*) – as Fredric Jameson argues in an essay on utopianism in *The Wire*, “to displace some of the purely mystery and detective interest onto a fascination with construction and physical or engineering problem solving – that is to say, something much closer to handicraft than to abstract deduction.”³⁰ Likewise, Walter White's meth production liberates him from exploitation and meaningless work, for which he substitutes scientific work bordering on art in its quest for perfection and purity. White's work blurs class boundaries: he is engineer, production-line worker, and businessman. But the comparison ends there. His freedom from his class position operates like a black hole on the social fabric around him: at one point, he is the indirect cause of a deadly plane crash, when in a bizarre twist of fate an overdosed user's distraught father misdirects a flight at his job as air traffic controller.

In laying the groundwork for viewers' acceptance of sensational and significant moments like the crash of the Wayfarer 515, the most effective element of the show is its narrowness: by allowing so little to penetrate this world, the creators achieve the pure intensity sought by the fictional drug producers. Ending on the day before the recent government shutdown began, the timing of this show has been almost magically fortuitous. *Breaking Bad* premiered in January 2008, coinciding with not only the Mérida Initiative but also the moment when a series of major US financial and automotive corporations reported multibillion-dollar losses that would tumble the Dow along with the investment portfolios, pension funds, and home values of much of America. Yet *Breaking Bad*, entering onto the scene during the major historical crisis of the Great Recession, completely ignores that context. Gilligan explains that the show is “timeless,” so that for him an anachronistic reference to the 2011 Osama bin Laden assassination in the show's time of 2008 is viewed as totally irrelevant by its creator.³¹ But I believe that his defense of the show's incomplete but sought-for detachment from reality is part of what merits an interpretation as a Latourian hybrid or monstrous thing, which we take for granted and which fails to account for, or even obscures, its own origin. As in the experimental chamber envisioned by Latour, Gilligan's experimental enclave is “extended and stabilized”; however, the inherent limitations of scientific discovery do not apply to *Breaking Bad*,

³⁰ Fredric Jameson, “Realism and Utopia in *The Wire*,” *Criticism*, 52, 3–4 (2010), 359–72, 363.

³¹ June Thomas, “A Conversation with Vince Gilligan,” *Slate*, 6 Sept. 2012. According to this interview the show's events begin in 2007, and conclude roughly a year later.

whose events are transcribed into apodictic insights without passing through the scrutiny of historicization and contextualization.

Breaking Bad's preoccupation with laboratory conditions is a tidy metaphor for the method of the show itself, which seeks to create characters and situations of a desired level of purity in terms of intensity and consumability. The superlab that Walter and Jesse operate for much of the series is ostensibly a chemist's paradise, but also a factory, a prison, and a tomb. It allows Walter his best opportunity at purity, but is owned by a violent boss who cares only about his return on investment. One defining aspect of the contemporary serial drama is its nature as a commodity produced by corporations in one of the most competitive and shifting sectors of the economy. Although television studies scholars such as Lotz are acutely aware of how this environment shapes television production, their optimism for new possibilities for on-screen representation outweighs their scrutiny. The postmodern serial drama's experimental power has its obverse in the genre's monstrous or hybrid origin. The production of the serial drama is becoming increasingly more hybrid and exotic: *Mad Men*, which like *Breaking Bad* runs on AMC, exists through a calculated symbiosis involving AMC, Lions Gate Entertainment, and (one step downstream) Netflix. The complicated dance between these publicly owned corporations notoriously malfunctioned in the case of *Mad Men*, which led to a nearly two-year break between the beginnings of the fourth and fifth seasons. The negotiations posed the possibility of cutting cast members to lower costs, along with adding commercial time and product placement.³² The corporate scrutiny, particularly over characters' fates, belies the media portrayal of the show's creator Matthew Weiner as an indefatigable auteur.

Breaking Bad has encountered its share of salary and cost disputes, but without losing episodes or delaying airing. One could speculate that its relatively smooth course benefited from its hermetically sealed, even shrinking, universe. A remarkable feature of the ideological expression of the show is its almost accidental, haphazard nature. *Breaking Bad* enters into the immediate historical crisis recklessly, as if without forethought of the show's relationship with history. And yet this is perhaps fitting for a drama of the new petty bourgeoisie in the Great Recession: Walter White's response manages to capture the *du jour* ideology of the Tea Party while also demonstrating the impossible situation of the Recession's victims. The serial drama has developed into a form uniquely suited to "speaking for" any one of a host of class fractions. The self-referentiality and irony of these shows make them effective

³² Brian Stelter, "Season 5 of 'Mad Men' Is Delayed until 2012," *New York Times*, 29 March 2011.

at drawing critics into a mode focused more on ludic exploration than on analysis. Demystifying them means first tracing out their connection to history, and then being willing to forgo a superficial reading in favor of a critical reading situated, even if peremptorily, in the concepts that seem immanent in the works themselves.