



# THE BFI MEDIA CONFERENCE

30 June – 1 July 2016

@BFI #BFIMediaConference





**Long Form TV Drama:**  
**Platforms, Audiences and**  
*Breaking Bad*

# Overview of the session

1. Pros and Cons. **Why study long form drama?**
2. The **institutional context**: US television drama reborn and the problem of UK drama.
3. Platforms – **the changing use of technology?**
4. Audiences – **the changing market?**
5. A brief case study: *Breaking Bad*
6. Questions, problems, discussion points...

# Why study long form drama?

- ✓ Provides a chance to study 'rich' texts which fulfil the criteria for 'critical' and theoretical approaches for current...and future (?) A level Media specifications.
- ✓ Enables students to engage with more complex media representations and issues that genre-heavy UK drama isn't addressing.
- ☐ How can you study this format with the time pressures of modern teaching?



# The Institutional Context

## US Network Television



1. US **network** broadcasters must satisfy their advertisers and hold market share. They are also controlled by federal regulation.
2. The impact of this on content is a reliance on highly formalised genre conventions and normative values which meet mainstream audience expectations but generate conservative drama.



# The Institutional Context:

## US Cable Television



1. Launched in the 1970s **HBO** was the first US national subscription **cable** tv channel.
2. Other major US players include **FX**, **Showtime** and **AMC**. Many are subsidiaries of media conglomerates (**HBO/Warner**, **FX/Fox**).
3. These **subscription** based cable channels can take more risks with content and form.
4. By early 2000s *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* won awards, audiences and created 'water cooler' tv.



# The trouble with UK tv drama?

- UK [broadcasters](#) have failed to meet the challenge of the US cable channels move to long form, with their risk-taking content & style.
- **BBC** and **ITV** 90s> relied on genre-based, formula drama. [Heritage](#) and [crime drama](#) are prime examples. Impact of White Paper/Charter renewal?
- **Sky** co-opted success of US long form with Sky Atlantic.
- [Commissioning](#) remains tightly controlled and conservative in outlook.

*source: Jukes, 2009/2015*

# Changing Platforms?

## Subscription VOD

- Content viewing via a **TV** still dominates in UK.
- $\frac{3}{4}$  of households (UK) have **PVR** uptake but it has plateaued.
- Use of **timeshift** is increasing.
- Growth of **SVOD** web based channels such as **Netflix, Amazon Instant Video & Now TV** (Sky) is considerable.
- **Netflix** dominates with 24% of UK market & 5m subscribers. 10% growth 2015-16.

[source: BARB, 2015](#)

# Audiences

- Rise of **binge-watching** started with DVD in late 90s/early C21. Partially due to syndication problems in the UK.
- A move from 'water cooler' tv to 'shared universe' fandom (as with cinema).
- US long form drama often uses **easter eggs**, and **mid-season breaks** to generate fan intensity and maintain media profile.

# Chasing the ABC1 Audience?

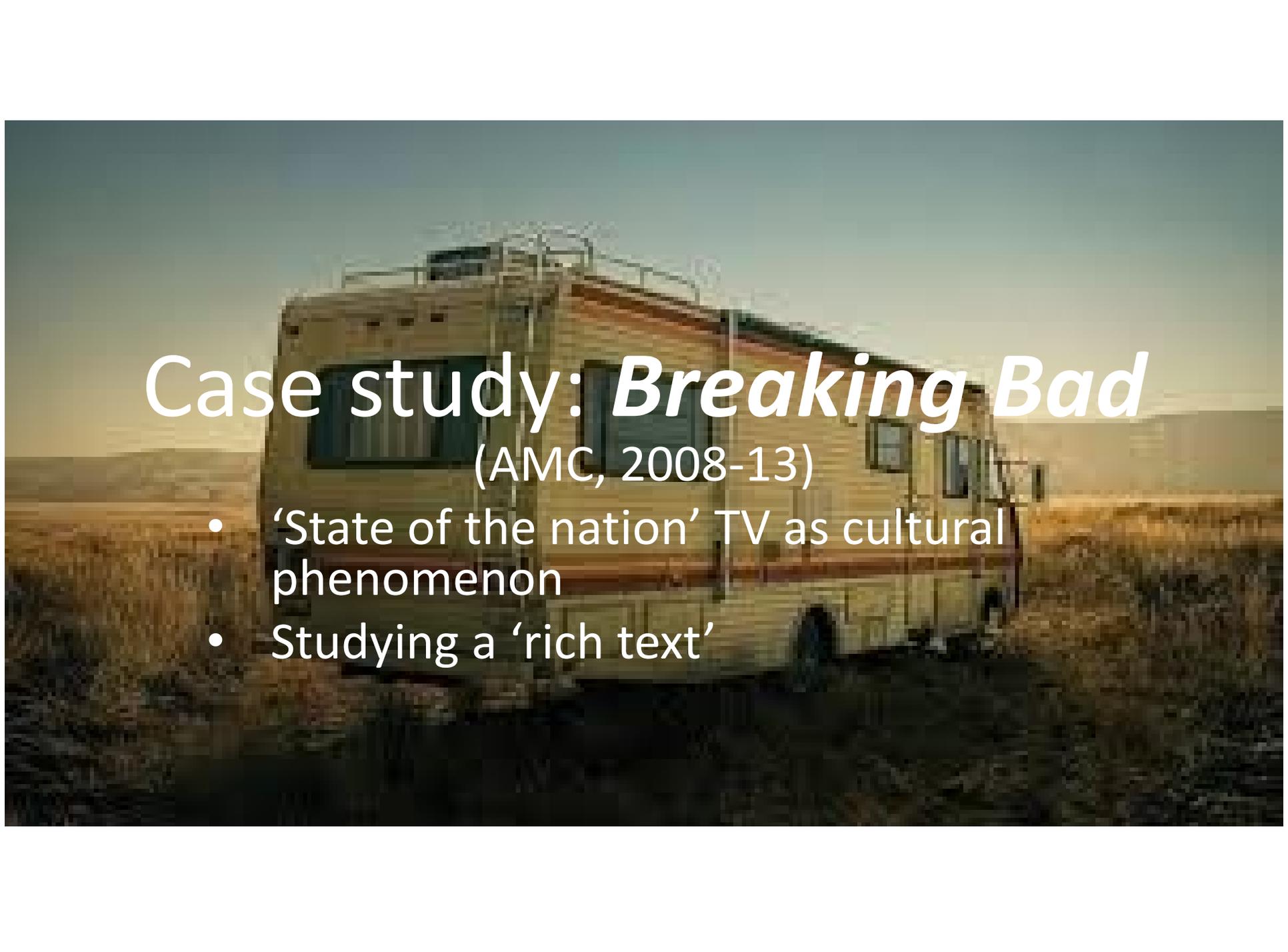
Channel 4 & BBC4 have identified foreign language/subtitled long form shows are ratings winners.



WALTER  
PRESENTS

From Channel 4



A yellow and brown mobile home is parked in a field of tall grass. The scene is set during sunset or sunrise, with a warm, golden light illuminating the sky and the landscape. The mobile home has a dark roof and several windows. The overall atmosphere is quiet and somewhat desolate.

# Case study: *Breaking Bad*

(AMC, 2008-13)

- 'State of the nation' TV as cultural phenomenon
- Studying a 'rich text'



# 'State of the Nation' TV

- Long form shows challenged the simplistic storylines and stereotypical characters that dominate network TV in US e.g. *CSI*
- HBO (Time Warner) launched *The Sopranos* in 1999 (to 2007), which was a huge commercial & critical hit. Increasingly these shows were about the crisis of US identity & hegemony.
- Other shows followed including *The Wire* (2002-2008) which won awards and turned US TV into a medium for serious subject matter and critique.

# <sup>35</sup>Br<sup>56</sup>eaking Bad

## Production Context

- BB's creator is experienced TV writer Vince Gilligan who wrote episodes of X Files, & who describes the show as “Mr Chips becomes Scarface”. It could be argued ‘long form’ is a writers medium not a directors medium.
- BB aired on US cable channel AMC in 2008 building to a crescendo in 2013.
- After a quiet initial reception its **critical** reception was quickly established with Emmy Awards and **popular** success peaked at its end in 2013.

# Breaking Bad as cultural meme



# Semiotics of Breaking Bad

## COLORIZING WALTER WHITE'S DECAY

The moods, events, and impact of Walter White on the lives of Breaking Bad characters, using every color worn

### WALTER WHITE



- SEASON 1
1. Cancer diagnosis
  2. Bathtub through the ceiling
  3. Strangles Krazy 8
  4. Appearance of Heisenberg/  
"This is not meth."

- SEASON 2
5. Abducted by Tuco/"fugue state"
  6. Contacts Saul Goodman
  7. First sells to Gus, Holly's birth
  8. Lets Jane die
  9. Skyler kicks him out; airplane collision

- SEASON 3
10. Roof pizza
  11. Confronts Ted after "L.F.T."
  12. Begins cooking in Gus Fring's lab
  13. Fly
  14. Aztek bowling to protect Jesse

- SEASON 4
15. Gale Boetticher shot
  16. "I am the one who knocks"
  17. Fights with Jesse; cries in front of Walter, Jr
  18. Crawl space
  19. Face off

- SEASON 5
20. Flash forward
  21. Walter, Jr's new car
  22. Say my name
  23. Crystal blue persuasion

### SKYLER WHITE



- SEASON 1
1. Baby shower for Holly
  2. Walt's "fugue state"
  3. Begins working for Ted

- SEASON 2
4. Throws Walt out of the house
  5. I.F.T.
  6. Finds Walt's stash of money

- SEASON 3
7. Car wash purchase, complicit in Walt's crimes
  8. Ted's tax problems
  9. Submerges herself in the pool

### JESSE PINKMAN



- SEASON 1
1. Desert confrontation with Emilio and Krazy 8
  2. Bathtub through the ceiling
  3. Abducted by Tuco

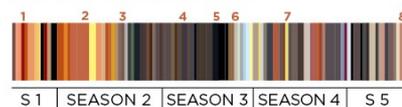
- SEASON 2
4. Falls into the port-a-potty
  5. Jane dies
  6. Rehab
  7. Trapped in RV, then beaten by Hank

- SEASON 3
8. Shoots Gale
  9. Taken away by Mike
  10. Travels to Mexico, helps Gus after poisoning cartel members

- SEASON 4
11. Girlfriend's son Brock is poisoned

- SEASON 5
12. Train heist/Drew Sharp shot

### HANK SCHRADER

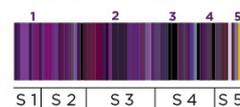


- S1 | SEASON 2
1. Searches Walt's lab for missing equipment
  2. Hank shoots Tuco
  3. Hola DEA

- SEASON 3
4. Bar fight
  5. Finds Jesse's RV; beats him
  6. Survives attack by Marco and Leonel

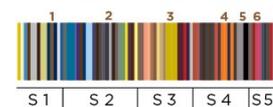
- SEASON 4
7. Begins to suspect Gus Fring
  8. Realizes who "WW." is

### MARIE SCHRADER



- S1 | S2 | S3 | S4 | S5
1. Gives a stolen tiara to Skyler
  2. Hank in the hospital
  3. Kleptomania resurfaces
  4. Threat on Hank's life
  5. Just before Hank realizes who "WW." is

### WALTER WHITE, JR.



- S1 | S2 | S3 | S4 | S5
1. Busted trying to buy beer
  2. Walt's cancer goes into remission
  3. Hank in hospital

4. Helps Hank stake out Gus
5. Protective custody after threat on Hank's life
6. New car

*"I want to do the color timing for each of these episodes where you sit with the colorist and make sure that the color of each individual scene is just the way you want it."*

— Vince Gilligan,  
IndieWire interview, July 2012



# Breaking Bad – Narrative Arc

- Walter White represents an ‘everyman’ character but the hero’s journey is [inverted](#)
- The tragedy - ‘hero tempted’ motif
- He moves from protagonist to antagonist – and represents ‘the false hero’ or the ‘anti-hero’? Still sympathetic?!
- Jesse as helper, donor, dispatcher? Walter is a distorted version of guru /Father-figure to Jesse. Is Jesse our (audience) proxy?



# Narrative – Style & Exposition

- Mainly linear narrative based on ‘cause and effect’ resolution.
- Also makes telling use of ellipses, flashbacks & flash-forwards.
- Montages and [time-lapse](#) are also used to provide key moments of disorientation and a more ‘interrogative’ narrative drive.
- Realist & surrealist tropes blended for a ‘pop culture’ ‘po-mo’ savvy audience.
- A signature [POV](#) shot is used in every episode – but is not a traditional character associated shot.



# Breaking Bad - Genre

- BB is an example of genre *hybridity*. It uses elements of the western, crime/gangster/noir, psychological drama and black comedy.
- Critics also suggest it draws on generic elements in US TV sit-coms, drama & literature of the 'Father holding the family together' trope. Domestic melodrama?



# Walter White



- Walter was emasculated by his position in life. Humiliated by Bogdan, Chad, Hank et al.
- Narrative suggests he regains his masculinity as he turns to criminal activity and ‘cooking’.
- He regains independence but loses the ties to family as he becomes the alter ego of **Heisenberg** (the false hero or split personality)
- This represents a crisis of masculinity and social class anxiety (c.f. S1 Ep5 Grey Matter/ Elliot’s party).



# Representation: American Dream as Nightmare?

- Other characters also have a 'reverse character arc' or are dysfunctional.
- Hank is arrogant and macho – but slowly loses his nerve, gets traumatised and is paralysed (emasculated) in a shoot out caused by Walter. But finally identifies WW as the kingpin.
- Skylar becomes corrupted & an accomplice to Walter's drugs empire – helping to launder his cash through Bogdan's car wash.
- Marie is a kleptomaniac & OCD sufferer (note the purple house). A mindless, unhappy consumer?



# Age of Uncertainty?



- Does Hank's 'arc' represent diminishing military and commercial confidence of US?
- Walter's skills are only acknowledged through crime – recognition via his pure crystal meth. Working hard and being good do not count. Heisenberg – the uncertainty principle?
- Jesse initially tries to go straight but crime provides more opportunities. Still rejects it!
- Saul represents the corruption of the legal system – sharp suit and sharp practice.





# Key Themes



- **Social Class** – the demise of the respectable, hard working, middle class. Rampant insecurity as the new norm? American capitalism broken? Using [Marxism](#) as a critical approach.
- **American Family** – key US ideological construct. Undermined by neo-liberal economics of 80s+
- **War on Drugs** – How drugs has poisoned American social & cultural discourse & relations with Mexico. Corruption of Walter White = the corruption of ‘middle America’?
- **The American Dream** – potent national myth. Demise of middle class dream? Fame, celebrity and get-rich-quick culture dominates. The 1% & the 99%? ‘Kardashianisation’.
- **Health care crisis**– c.f. Michael Moore’s *Sicko* and ‘Obamacare’. Millions of Americans cannot afford or don’t have decent health care insurance. State of the nation tv?

**“I’m not in danger, I am the danger”**



# Tapping into the zeitgeist





## [Acknowledgments](#)

*[www.curriculum-press.co.uk](http://www.curriculum-press.co.uk)*

*Sight & Sound (September 2013, June 2016)*

## [Contact Details](#)

Twitter: [@parkmediandfilm](https://twitter.com/parkmediandfilm)

You Tube: TM Dams

Email: [tmdams@gmail.com](mailto:tmdams@gmail.com)

# Questions?

