

Television drama and the urban diegesis: Portraying Albuquerque in *Breaking Bad*

Ian R. Cook

Northumbria University

Ishan Ashutosh

Indiana University Bloomington

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Abstract

Albuquerque, New Mexico is the filming location and setting of the popular television drama *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013). Albuquerque is not merely a passive backdrop to the action in the show but a focal point of the series. So much so that in the geographical imaginations of many, Albuquerque and *Breaking Bad* have become synonymous with each other. This paper critically examines the representation of urban life within the show. To do this it draws upon and expands the existing multi-disciplinary literature on cities and films/television. As well as focusing on the influence of setting and filming the show in Albuquerque on the urban diegesis (i.e. the on-screen city), it also examines three visions of Albuquerque that are projected through the show: (1) Albuquerque as a crime-ridden city; (2) Albuquerque as a spatially divided city; and (3) Albuquerque as a city to escape from.

Keywords: Television drama, urban diegesis, crime, suburbia, Albuquerque

Introduction

In the summer of 2013, a number of identical billboard posters appeared across the city of Albuquerque, New Mexico. In large, capital letters the billboards read: "THANKS ALBUQUERQUE! WE HAD GREAT CHEMISTRY TOGETHER!" Behind this text were two serious-faced men standing back-to-back in the New Mexico desert. Their names are Walter White and Jesse Pinkman, the lead protagonists in the AMC

television crime drama *Breaking Bad*, which was filmed and set in Albuquerque. At the time of these billboards being shown, the fifth and final season of *Breaking Bad* was about to restart following a mid-season break. The billboards were, therefore, both a thank you to the city that had hosted them as well as a reminder to watch the show. More than this, the billboards spoke to the centrality of Albuquerque within the series. Albuquerque was a focal point of the series, a city 'on show' often somewhat unfavorably to millions of viewers throughout the world. For many, *Breaking Bad* and Albuquerque had become synonymous with one another.

The billboards were not alone in making connections between Albuquerque and *Breaking Bad*. By the fifth season, many newspapers and magazines from other parts of the US and abroad were also keen to explore the connections between the show and the city. A number of reports written either by Albuquerqueans or journalists visiting the city were published proclaiming to show 'the real Albuquerque' (cf. Carey, 2013; Syme, 2013; Walker, 2013). These would often focus on the similarities between Albuquerque and the diegesis (i.e. fictional world) of *Breaking Bad*, the residents' reaction to the show, and the 'outbreak' of *Breaking Bad*-themed merchandise and tourism in the city (see also Tzanelli and Yar, 2016). The reports would typically feature quotes from local business owners or City officials expressing their gratitude for the show putting Albuquerque 'on the map', not only as a place worth visiting as a tourist, but also a place to make films and television shows in. One quip by Ann Lerner of the City's Film Office was regularly used: *Breaking Bad* has also meant that people elsewhere are now able to spell Albuquerque!

The premise of *Breaking Bad* is well known. Walter White is a frustrated middle-aged Albuquerque suburbanite, husband and father who works as a chemistry teacher and as a part-time car wash attendant. Diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, he becomes a crystal meth manufacturer alongside Jesse, his former high school student. Across the five seasons (airing between 2008 and 2013), the show traces Walter's transformation, as the show's creator Vince Gilligan terms it, "from Mr Chips to Scarface" (quoted in MacInnes, 2012, n.p.). It shows Walter earning (and losing) millions of dollars on the way, causing considerable suffering to those around him (including Jesse) as well as to himself. *Breaking Bad* concentrates primarily on Walter's personal transformation and its effects but, in telling this story, it also provides a powerful portrayal of the urban condition in Albuquerque and American cities more widely.

Given the well-known association between Albuquerque and *Breaking Bad* and the considerable popularity of the show, it is important therefore to critically analyse the ways in which it represents urban life in the show. This is the purpose of this paper. To do this, it will begin by examining the multidisciplinary literature on the representation of cities within television and film paying particular attention to the work of Steve Macek, Douglas Muzzio and Thomas Harper. It will then detail the methodology that underpins this paper before detailing how the decision to film and set the show in Albuquerque has influenced the urban diegesis on screen. Following on from this, it will then examine three inter-linking visions of Albuquerque that are projected through the show: (1) Albuquerque as a crime-ridden city; (2) Albuquerque as a spatially divided city; and (3) Albuquerque as a city to escape from. The paper

will conclude by considering whether the show offers a conservative and anti-urban vision of Albuquerque and offers suggestions for future research into televisual cities.

Cities on screen

There has been a steady growth in academic literature examining the complex relationship between cities on the one hand and film and television on the other. Across multiple disciplines, scholars have tended to concentrate on two issues. The first is the urbanization, clustering and global networks of the film and television industry (e.g. Storper and Christopher, 1985; Coe, 2001; Scott, 2005; Lukinbeal, 2006; Scott and Pope, 2007; Johns, 2010). The second, which we shall concentrate on in this section, is the representation of cities in film and television drama.

Building on early studies by Gold (1985) and Bruno (1993) as well as edited collections by Clarke (1997) and Shiel and Fitzmaurice (2001), a significant body of work has emerged on the urban 'screenscape' (e.g. Macek, 2006; Mennel, 2008; Corkin, 2011; Shiel, 2012; Clapp, 2013; Parker, 2016; Lawton, 2017). While much of the recent scholarship on the cinematic city has centred on "its tensions and tempos, its patterns and social relationships, its morals and mannerisms" (da Costa, 2003, p. 195), the emphasis of this work and the cities studied have varied. Shiel (2012), for instance, explores the relationship between the urban development of Los Angeles, its mutating film industry, and the representation of Los Angeles in films since the 1910s. Focusing on New York City in the 1970s, Corkin (2011) considers the changing

political, economic and cultural landscape of the city alongside and intertwined with its representation in films such as *Mean Streets*, *The French Connection*, *Taxi Driver* and *Manhattan* (see also scholarship on New York films by Blake, 2005 and Pomerance, 2007). Elsewhere Parker (2016) considers how residents of Johannesburg receive films set and filmed in Johannesburg and how these films influence their everyday practices.

Studies of the cinematic city such as those mentioned above are important for three reasons. First, cities are often viewed as important characters within films, influencing the narrative of the story rather than being a passive backdrop (Clapp, 2013). Second, cinematic representations of the city can provide important and nuanced understandings of the urban experience. Third, filmic representations of cities shape how cities are imagined and engaged with by audiences (Parker, 2016). These justifications can also be applied to the study of televisual cities. The justifications also resonate with Clarke and Doel's (2016: 3) point that "the cinema is a pre-eminent thinker of the city". So too is the television.

In contrast to cinematic cities, however, cities in televisual dramas have received surprisingly little attention, reflecting a wider inequality between the sizeable academic work on film and the less substantial body of work on television across the social sciences. HBO's crime drama *The Wire* is a notable exception for it has received critical attention as well as praise from academics for its portrayal of urban life and the deep-rooted social, economic and political problems within Baltimore (Atkinson and Beer, 2010; Beilenson and McGuire, 2012; Corkin, 2017). Steve Macek

(2016) echoes much of this praise, highlighting the show's humanisation of Baltimore's African American population and social critique of the structural forces at work in Baltimore. He does, however, argue that the show echoes aspects of mainstream, conservative media portrayals of the inner city in its repeated focus on inner-city lawlessness and its "fatalistic foreclosing of the possibilities for collective action and political change" (p. 231). It is also important to note here the work by Fletchall *et al.* (2012) on Orange County and the television shows set there. Their focus in this work is on the drama *The OC*, and the reality shows *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* and *The Real Housewives of Orange County* – television shows and a place quite different from that of *The Wire* and Baltimore. Fletchall *et al.* provide an important insight into televisual urbanism by considering how television becomes an active part of place-making and drawing on a post-structuralist ontology which contests a 'reel/real' distinction between the 'fictional' place on-screen and the 'actual' place off-screen. Exploring the landscape of Orange County in the three shows as well as audience interactions with the shows and television-themed tourist experiences of Orange County, they argue that Orange County and place more generally "as an amalgam, simultaneously real and mediated" (p. 21).

Returning to the work of Steve Macek, his 2006 monograph *Urban Nightmares: The media, the right and the moral panic over the city* is perhaps the most thought-provoking study of cities on-screen. Drawing on a political economy rather than a post-structuralist perspective, Macek explores "the role played by the mass media – from the news to Hollywood films to advertising – in inflating the perceived menace of the postindustrial metropolis and legitimating the right's "law-and-order" remedies for

the nation's urban ills" (ibid, p. xiii). It is worth exploring Macek's argument further. In a chapter entitled "the cinema of suburban paranoia", Macek locates a number of tropes about the city that echo populist right-wing assessments of the urban condition. Here he argues that many Hollywood films of the 1980s and 1990s – from *Home Alone* to *Predator 2*, *Falling Down* to *Dangerous Minds* – "articulated a shrill anti-urbanism" (p. 202) – that present a nightmarish vision of the city. In painting this "scary picture of... urban life" (p. 291), Hollywood films cast the city as "a racialized zone of unfettered criminality and social pathology" (p. 204) and "the embodiment of an absolute, often supernatural evil" (p. 204). The inner city, Macek notes, is especially vilified in Hollywood films and by the political right, both portraying it as a "war-torn jungle" (p. 202) and "lawless killing zone" (p. 209).

Macek (2006) focuses in particular on the David Fincher film *Seven* (see also Macek, 1999). As the film focuses on two cops on the gruesome trail of a serial killer, the unnamed city in which the film is set becomes a character in itself. Portrayed as a living hell, the city in *Seven* echoes middle class tropes about the city:

"*Seven's* portrayal of the city as a blighted, decaying zone of unfettered criminality and vice, as a place where one finds "a deadly sin on every street corner", more or less directly [echoes]... the reactionary view of urban problems promoted by the mainstream news media and the conservative punditocracy. Like countless other Hollywood films that have come out since the early 1980s, it validates middle-class suburbia's revulsion for a (mostly poor, mostly of color)

urban core understood as *essentially* unruly and beyond hope.” (Macek, 2006, pp. 249-250, original emphasis)

What is more, Macek (2006, p. 252) argues that *Seven* decontextualizes urban crime, painting it as “the result of individual psychological aberrations or personal moral failing rather than the product of systemic social and economic forces.” The film, therefore, taps into suburbanite right-wing understandings of the individual failings and moral depravity of the inner city working class. Macek’s work shares similarities with Muzzio’s (1996) assessment of the depiction of American cities in Hollywood films. Muzzio notes that on the one hand, some films have portrayed the city as being “a center of culture and civility, as mosaic, as [a] center of freedom and opportunity, as a feast/bazaar/place of excitement, and as a place of romance” (p. 196, see also Corkin, 2011). On the other (much larger) hand, he reasons, since the 1970s cinematic cities “have been grim almost irrespective of genre, location and director” (p. 196). Similar to Macek, Muzzio shows how the city is regularly evoked as being socially divided and hellish, a jungle and a killing field.

In a later article, Muzzio, together with Halper, explore the representation of suburbia in Hollywood films for, as they argue, “[i]n *fin de siècle* American movie making, the suburbs emerged as a cinematic fixation” (Muzzio and Halper, 2002, p. 44). They argue that suburban centered films such as *American Beauty* and *Happiness* – where suburbia is not just the setting of the film but is fundamental to the ‘nature’ of the film – have portrayed the American suburbs in a particularly negative light. In these films, life behind the picket fences is parodied in a clichéd fashion argue

Muzzio and Halper. Here, suburbia is positioned as a place of “inauthenticity, dreariness and conformity” (ibid, p. 563). More than this, suburbia is presented as “a den of dysfunction” (ibid, p. 548) where “[s]uburban life is a twisted nightmare of repressed desires and shattered hopes” (ibid, p. 548). Huq (2013) also shows how suburbia is presented as dysfunctional, conservative and largely white in US and UK film and television.

Macek (2006) positions the cinematic suburbs somewhat differently from Huq as well as Muzzio and Halper, for he argues that films not only valorize suburban living over inner city living but also portrays suburbanites as being under threat from inner city residents. In films like *Home Alone*, for instance, the suburban home is under threat from (inner city) outsiders – home invasion being a familiar theme or genre in Hollywood film (see for instance England, 2006; Fiddler, 2013). Other films like *Judgment Night* show the dangers of the middle class getting lost, or being abandoned, in the dangerous inner city. “If *Judgment Night* has a coherent politics”, Macek (2006, p. 216) decries, “it surely centers on its valorization of the suburban domesticity over and against the deviance and wildness of urban life”.

A brief methodological note

Methodologically this paper draws on several influences. The primary influence being what Sharp and Lukinbeal (2015, 2017) term the author-centred approach. Here the text – in this case, *Breaking Bad* – is view as being embedded within political and

economic relations of production that shape its form. The onus, then, is on examining “how the text is influenced by the conditions of production, including the filmmakers, cast and crew, location of production, and sociohistorical milieu” (Sharp and Lukinbeal, 2017, p. 1). We also draw upon the methodological ideas of da Costa (2003) who argues that studies of the cinematic city on screen need to pay close attention to the filmmaker, the (filming and setting) locations, camerawork, sound, inter-textuality and narrative structure. Following on from this, we are also influenced by ideas from narrative analysis which is founded on the belief that there are different ways in which to tell a story. Narrative analysis, therefore, is about exploring the ways in which stories are structured and edited; how characters, themes and locations are featured and represented; and how these come together to tell a particular story in a particular way (Moore, 2014, pp. 177-192). The ideas of narrative analysis therefore encouraged us to think critically about the characterization of both the characters and the city itself; the development of themes; and how the characters, city and themes changed over time (and space) and fitted into the wider narrative. In terms of the practicalities of doing the research, this involved us repeatedly watching and analysing *Breaking Bad* as well as other secondary data sources related to the show such as the published interviews with Vince Gilligan.

Entering Albuquerque

In order to explore the on-screen city of *Breaking Bad*, it is important to reflect briefly on the decision-making behind filming and setting the show in Albuquerque. This is especially important given that Albuquerque was not the original choice for the show’s

setting or filming location. Vince Gilligan, a resident of Los Angeles, originally wrote the pilot episode with nearby Riverside County in mind as both the setting and filming location. The show was subsequently switched to Albuquerque in New Mexico, following pressure from Sony Pictures Television, the show's production company. Why? Because they wanted to take advantage of the state of New Mexico's tax credit scheme whereby the state would refund 25% of qualified production and post-production expenditure incurred in the state. Gilligan and Sony's decision to shift filming to New Mexico was made not long after the state's tax credit scheme refund level was increased in 2005 to 25% from its original level of 15% set in 2002 (see MNP, 2014). *Breaking Bad*, therefore, is one of many 'runaway productions' from California within the television and film industries (see also Lukinbeal, 2006; Scott and Pope, 2007). Likewise, the tax incentive scheme by the state of New Mexico is one of many financial schemes to arise within and beyond the US during the 2000s in order to attract film and television production (Christopherson and Rightor, 2010).

Alongside the decision to film in Albuquerque, Gilligan made the decision to set the show in the city also. He did not want Albuquerque to 'double' for Riverside (that is, film the show in Albuquerque but label the city as Riverside on-screen). Other producers in film and television have faced this issue and many in fact have gone ahead with what Lukinbeal and Zimmerman (2006, p. 319) humorously call "crimes against geography". Recent productions filmed in Albuquerque, for instance, have also doubled; with the city standing in for other sunbelt cities such as Phoenix in the film *Spare Parts* and San Antonio in the television shows *The Night Shift* and *Killer Women*. However, Gilligan felt that with the Sandia Mountains in full view from the

city, it was more practical for outdoor shootings to set the city in Albuquerque rather than Riverside (Brown, 2013).

Filming and setting the show in Albuquerque rather than Riverside therefore has had implications for the urban diegesis that appears on screen, not least in terms of the audio and visual elements captured in recordings, particularly when shooting on location. The switch also influenced aspects of the narrative of the show as we will demonstrate later. Nevertheless, the move from Riverside to Albuquerque did not require substantial changes to the central storyline of the show (Walter's transformation) or the script of the pilot. Indeed, *Breaking Bad* is set in a city within easy reach of the desert – a description that fits both Riverside and Albuquerque. This proximity is important to the show as Walter and Jesse regularly escape to the desert in their recreational vehicle (RV) to secretly cook meth. The juxtaposition of city and desert was important as the show continually asked questions about the relative freedoms and dangers in both places. In addition to this, both Albuquerque and Riverside are medium-sized cities (with respective populations of 556,000 and 316,000) and both have long-standing social problems in terms of relatively high levels of poverty and unemployment as well as high levels of crime and drug use. Equally important is that Albuquerque, like Riverside, is an American city and the American context was vitally important to the show – especially in its parodying of the American dream and the American health care system (Butkus, 2015; Di Leo, 2015). In short, both cities fitted the diegesis that Gilligan was developing.

Albuquerque in *Breaking Bad* functioned as a metonym for the failure of the American dream and it is likely that Riverside would have played a similar role if the show remained there. The American dream Albuquerque-style repeatedly came crashing down across the series, from car and airplane crashes to, of course, the failure of Walter White as a suburban patriarch and the collapse of his drug-empire by the end of season five. The Albuquerque that Gilligan arrived in and has since worked in for over a decade (on *Breaking Bad* and its prequel *Better Call Saul*) is also a city where many of its residents are unable to reap the financial rewards promised by the American dream and some have attempted to reach these rewards through illegitimate means. Albuquerque would, therefore, provide an on-going source of inspiration for the makers of *Breaking Bad* as well as a believable setting.

With the wider context of the move from Riverside to Albuquerque in mind, the paper will now consider the ways in which Albuquerque is represented in *Breaking Bad*. Here it will focus on three important and inter-linking visions of Albuquerque that are played out throughout the show: (1) Albuquerque as a crime-ridden city; (2) Albuquerque as a spatially divided city; and (3) Albuquerque as a city to escape from.

A crime-ridden city

Breaking Bad's Albuquerque is represented as a 'hot-spot' for drug production, distribution, sales and consumption, with much of the city's crime linked to the drug industry. Such a representation has encouraged numerous journalists to report on the

prevalence and problems of drugs in the 'real' Albuquerque and make parallels with *Breaking Bad* (e.g. Romeo, 2013; Glionna, 2014). On the show, drugs, crime and the city of Albuquerque are represented as being dark, dangerous and destructive, characteristics which heighten as the show progresses. The same can be said of the show's anti-hero Walter. Working often antagonistically with his former high school student, Jesse, together with their criminal defense lawyer Saul Goodman and three different gangs (led in turn by Tuco Salamanca, Gus Fring and then Jack Welker), Walter's list of offences grows considerably throughout the show. We see him engage in, for instance, meth production and distribution, theft, arson, assault, rape, multiple murders, and money laundering (with the help of his wife Skyler), all the while trying to evade the Drug Enforcement Administration who his brother-in-law Hank Schrader works for. Alongside Walter's misadventures, the show spends considerable time charting the operations of the Drug Enforcement Administration in trying to apprehend the elusive Heisenberg (Walter's alter ego) and his associates (see Jones, 2015). While the show is not particularly critical of the war on drugs, it does lament the harms that meth addiction and drug gang activity brings to the residents of Albuquerque, a topic we will return to (see also Brace and Arp, 2012; Linnemann, 2016).

Through Walter primarily, *Breaking Bad* poses the question of why people engage in crime. Walter's initial involvement appears to be a reaction against a world whose rules he has played by but with little reward. Walter left a now highly profitable company, Gray Matter Technologies, too early (it remains unclear why) and he subsequently became an overqualified high school chemistry teacher and part-time car wash attendant. Added to this, he also feels emasculated at home (Weckerle, 2014). He is bitter and sees his life as a series of failures and missed opportunities.

He longs for the promise of the American dream – a bigger house, job satisfaction as well as more money, recognition and respect from those around him – but appears ineffective. Struggling to meet the cost of living already, his diagnosis with inoperable lung cancer with poor medical insurance has left him with huge medical bills to pay and no legitimate means of doing this. He will not accept charity and even when he *earns* the money to pay for the medical bills, he wants more, insisting on being the patriarchal ‘provider-protector’ for *his* family before and beyond the grave (Faucette, 2014; Weckerle, 2014). There is, however, more to his involvement than this, as he reveals to Skyler in the final episode: “I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And I was really, I was alive”. In saying this, he echoes Hank’s words to him when smoking a Cuban cigar in season one: “sometimes forbidden fruit tastes the sweetest” (*‘A No-Rough-Stuff-Type-Deal’*, 2008). Walter therefore brings together a number of characters from criminological theory: the aggressive, patriarchal man (Wakeman, 2017), the thrill seeker (Hayward, 2007), the strained individual who turns to crime as the only way of meeting societal expectations (Merton, 1968), and the opportunist (Clarke, 1995).

Just as importantly Walter is presented as a man working both against the state as well as one who embodies many of the facets of neoliberalism that the US government promotes such as self-reliance, calculated risk-taking and generating income through enterprise (De Leo, 2015). Walter’s story can therefore be read as a parody of neoliberalism and as a warning that there is always potential for a ‘law-abiding’ citizen to turn to crime. It is tempting to also read Walter’s turn to crime as Gilligan’s take on the effects of the American recession, but it is worth noting that the filming of season one predates this.

In telling the tragic story of Walter's engagement with the criminal 'underworld', *Breaking Bad* echoes the city-as-hell trope highlighted in Macek's (2005) account of American cities in film. For instance, the show uses a number of subterranean spaces (Guffey, 2014) such as the crawlspace under the White residence where Walter's money is concealed in bags looking eerily similar to body bags. Gus' superlab where Walter and Jesse work in during season three is also underground. Symbolically the superlab is painted red and concealed underneath a predominately blue and white laundry. The superlab is later set on fire by Walter and Jesse, with fire and water reoccurring symbols in *Breaking Bad* (Weckerle, 2014). Taking the hellish theme further, in season five, Walter is called the devil twice, jokingly by Skyler's sister and Hank's wife Marie ('*Blood Money*', 2013) and meaningfully by Jesse ('*Rabid Dog*', 2013).

The city-as-hell trope runs alongside the city-under-siege trope within *Breaking Bad*. Here Albuquerque is portrayed as being under attack not only from its own residents such as Walter but also from 'external' threats crossing the city's boundaries with relative ease, most notably the drugs and personnel of the Mexican cartels. The city-under-siege trope also draws on a key narrative within Western films. This, as Dawe (2015, p. 36) notes, is the idea of the homestead and family being under threat from a wild, outside force and the protection offered by the risk-taking 'family man' (with Hank and Walter aspiring to take this role). Indeed, Gilligan has talked in interviews about the influence of the Western films by John Ford and Sergio Leone (*Charlie Rose*, 2013) in making "the show a post-modern sort of western" (quoted in

Stedman, 2013, n.p.). Gilligan has also commented that the relocation to Albuquerque brought out both Western motifs in the show as well as the centrality of the Latin American cartels and drug-related violence in the show, none of which were in the script for the pilot (*Charlie Rose*, 2013; Freñán, 2010). The distinctive aesthetics of the New Mexico desert – described by Gilligan in one interview as “the beautiful clouds and the amazing Sandia Mountains and the scrub and the tumbleweeds and the prairies and all of that” (quoted in Gallagher, 2011, n.p.) – encouraged him to think reimagine the show as a Western. The show’s focus on the violence linked to the Latin American cartels, Gilligan has stated, was influenced by the continuous new stories about “unpleasant and unfortunate drug violence along the border” that he felt could not be ignored in the show (quoted in Freñán, 2010, n.p.). The representation of crime in *Breaking Bad*, therefore, has been fundamentally shaped by the show’s relocation to Albuquerque and that city’s positioning as the site of multiple borderlands – between legality and illegality, between the US and Latin America, and as we will see in the next section, between suburbia and the inner city.

A spatially divided city

Taking some inspiration from a city, state and country that has sharp economic and social divisions, Albuquerque in *Breaking Bad* is spatially divided. Here wealth and power are not evenly distributed between its residents and neighbourhoods. For the most part this is reflected on-screen in a spatial division between the inner city and the suburbs. That said, as we will reveal *Breaking Bad* does not provide a conventional portrayal of a divided city.

Much of the on-screen drama takes part in family homes situated in the Albuquerque suburbs, with suburban houses used as filming locations in north east Albuquerque (for the White and Schrader homes) and the south west of the city (for Jessie's family home). While much of the show is set and filmed in the suburbs, we frequently encounter the inner city, primarily through Jesse's interactions with the area and its residents. Almost all the named characters we meet here live in dire circumstances and are connected to the drug trade, primarily as (heavily addicted) drug users. One such person is Wendy, a meth-addicted street sex worker, who Jesse meets for sex in one episode ('...*And the Bag's in the River*', 2008) and to encourage her to do other illicit tasks for him in further episodes. "With an emaciated body, sunken cheeks, discolored rotten teeth, and a lifeless blank stare" (Linnemann, 2016, p. 27), Wendy lives in a room in the Crossroads Motel and solicits in the Motel's parking lot. The Crossroads Motel makes a number of appearances in *Breaking Bad*. Away from the show it is a real motel with the same name situated on Central Avenue SE, in the show it is regularly visited by Jesse but first seen on-screen when Hank takes Walter Jr. there to warn him of the dangers of using marijuana. There he tells Walter Jr.:

"I figured we'd come over here and check out how the other half lives. This here is what we call the Crystal Palace. Now you know who lives in the Palace? Meth heads. Nasty, skeezy meth heads who'd sell their grandma's coochie for a hit... [E]very single one of these miserable wastes of skin got started how? ... What do you think it was that they were all doing before graduating to shoot

meth in their dicks? The gateway drug, that's what we call it... [t]hat gateway drug was marijuana every time, understand?" (*'...And the Bag's in the River'*, 2008).

Another inner city location regularly featured is the neighborhood where the Cantillo family reside. The area is not mentioned in the show but it is shot on-location in the low-income, predominately Hispanic neighborhood of Barelás in south west Albuquerque. The first Cantillo we meet here is 10 year-old Tomás when he shoots and kills one of Jesse's gang, Combo, who is selling meth on a rundown street corner in the neighborhood. Jesse then develops a relationship with Tomás' estranged sister Andrea after meeting her at Narcotics Anonymous (initially unaware of the family connection). He also forms a strong bond with her six-year-old son Brock. In bed with Jesse, Andrea describes the incident, in so doing she paints a grim picture of the neighborhood (*'Abiquiu'*, 2010):

"This whole neighborhood is run by gangs. They run the drugs, they control the streets. They sort of took Tomás in. No dad around, eight years old. They got Tomás singing, part of some crew. Then when he was ten, some initiation or something, they made him kill somebody. I heard the rumors and didn't believe it at first. Then I saw him like a week later and he told me, yeah, he did it. They gave Tomás a gun. They gave him a choice. Him or some dude. So he did it. He told me all about it like it was nothing.... [He killed] some dealer, from some outside crew, right around the corner from here. Over on the central. Just rode up on his bike and shot him."

The inner city and its residents, therefore, are presented as being poverty-stricken and caught in the crossfires of the violence and addiction attached to the production of meth. Power and wealth are concentrated elsewhere – that is, in the largely but not exclusively white suburbs. However, power and wealth are not easily attained or retained by suburbanites and are certainly not equally distributed across the suburbs as Walter’s story suggests. Remember that the show starts with an emasculated Walter who, in order to “scratch out a barely middle-class life” (Linnemann, 2016, p. 23), works both as a chemistry teacher and part-time car wash attendant. He is unable to afford his medical bills and jealous and resentful towards the wealth and success achieved by his co-founders of Gray Matter Technologies, Elliot and Gretchen Schwartz. Walter does become wealthy and powerful but the show ends with Walter possibly dead, estranged from his family, and having lost his drug empire and millions of dollars.

All is not well in the suburbs of *Breaking Bad*, but it would be a stretch too far to suggest that they are represented as ‘slumburbia’ – or as Schafran (2013, p. 131) puts it, “the urban slum reborn in a suburban location”. They are, however, traumatic and crime-infested and this becomes very apparent to the audience when we enter the homes of the suburbanite characters on the show. Outside their homes it seems peaceful and respectable, with birds tweeting, plants being watered and people jogging. Inside the homes, and echoing other television shows and films, we encounter a series of problems including addiction, anguish, resentment, financial struggles, violence and murder. Crime is a central but hidden aspect of suburban life

in *Breaking Bad's* Albuquerque. Unlike the inner city where drug dealing, sex work and, indeed, murder occurs in public space during daylight, crime in the suburbs is largely hidden behind closed doors. In contrast to Macek's (2006) reading of American films where the suburbs are under attack from the inner city, the suburbs in *Breaking Bad* are positioned differently: they are places where offenders live such as Walter, Jesse and Gus as well as where generally 'law-abiding' suburbanites occasionally commit minor misdemeanors. Despite bringing more crime to the suburbs, Walter is especially keen to separate his suburban home life with his illicit meth business. He envisions his suburban home as a retreat from his work and continually tries to separate the two. As part of this, Skyler and Walter Jr. are continually kept in the dark about his business activities wherever possible, and Walter is usually very hostile when Jesse contacts him at home. Yet no matter how hard he tries, he cannot successfully separate work from home.

It is perhaps no surprise then that relocating from the inner city to the suburbs does not allow you to escape crime within the show's urban diegesis. This is exemplified by Andrea and Brock who, under instruction from Jesse to get "out of that shit-hole of a neighborhood", move to a suburban home in the city and Brock changes school (*'Thirty-Eight Snub'*, 2011). The suburbs are a dangerous place for Andrea and Brock: Walter goes on to poison Brock and later Andrea is murdered as a punishment for Jesse who attempted and failed to escape from his imprisonment in the desert in the final season. The dangers of Albuquerque's drug trade have a long reach.

In season five, the suburban setting of crime is particularly emphasized. After Gus is killed, Walter, Jesse and Gus' former enforcer Mike partner with a pest control company to cook meth in suburban houses while they are being fumigated and the owners are away (*'Hazard Pay'*, 2012). No longer are they cooking in the desert – in the RV (now crushed) or in Gus' superlab (now destroyed). They are, to paraphrase Gus in an earlier episode, 'hiding in plain view' (*'I See You'*, 2010). The suburbanization of crime is captured metaphorically when Hank finds out that Walt, his brother-in-law, is Heisenberg and drives off in a daze (*'Blood Money'*, 2013). Hank crashes through a white picket fence of a suburban house. Crawling out of the car, he is confused and his vision of the fence is blurred – symbolizing his incomprehension of what actually happens in the suburbs of Albuquerque. To summarise then, crime manifests itself across the city, but operates in different ways in the suburbs than in the inner city. More generally, Albuquerque is a spatially divided and unequal city in *Breaking Bad* but the inequalities are more nuanced than the stereotypical stark divide between the crime-free, wealthy and powerful suburbs and the crime-infested, poor and powerless inner city.

A city to escape from

Escaping is an everyday and often temporary human activity and desire, according to Tuan (2000). Escaping is also a recurring theme within literature, film and television. Here, characters are frequently positioned as being trapped in something – such as a lifestyle, job, social group or place – that they wish to permanently rather than temporarily escape from. In short, they desire to be someone better or somewhere

better. The narrative often charts their 'escape journey', focusing on the before (often when escape appears out-of-reach and dangerous), during (the change itself), and, if it happens, after (where they frequently struggle to adapt their new lifestyle or surroundings).

Breaking Bad also explores the theme of escapism through the residents of Albuquerque in a number of ways. To begin, the show is premised on the inescapability or inevitability of Walter dying from cancer (Freeley, 2014). Walter interprets his looming death as both an opportunity to 'break bad' and to do things his way, but also as a ticking clock demanding he makes money as quickly and, indeed, as ruthlessly as possible. The show is replete with characters that want to be someone or somewhere else. Walter, of course, is frustrated with his status and becomes Heisenberg. Like Walter a number of other characters develop pseudonyms over the course of the show – for instance, Jesse becomes Captain Cook, Walter Jr. becomes Flynn, and Gustavo becomes Gus. In the season four episode '*Open House*' (2011) Marie visits three houses pretending to be a prospective buyer taking three different identities each time – Tori, Charlotte and Mimi – with different backstories. Here, as Guffey and Koontz (2014, p. 218) note, Marie is "trying to escape the hard realities of her current life, even if only for a little while". In *Better Call Saul* we also learn that Saul was previously called James McGill.

The desert functions as a social and spatial site of escape for both Walter and Jesse. It is here where they first cook meth together and where they frequently return. The remote desert landscape – usually accessed via their RV (acting also as a mobile

meth lab) – provides Walter and Jesse with a hideaway, a place of rugged individualism where they can work away from prying eyes and beyond the reaches of the state (Guffey, 2014). In contrast, suburbia is frequently positioned as a place where social conventions must be followed, at least on the surface anyway. Yet despite its allure, the desert offers neither Walter nor Jesse a sanctuary – instead both are subjected to near famine at one point, threats to their life, violence and, in Jesse’s case, imprisonment and forced labor in the desert. Like the desert, meth is also something that offers a (dangerous) form of escape for Jesse. Yet for Jesse and others meth is also extremely addictive and difficult to escape from. Just as Jesse regularly fails to ‘go clean’ despite initial intentions, Walter seems unable to turn away from meth – that is, its production rather than its consumption. Hank, too, becomes fixated with meth, obsessed with tracking down the meth manufacturer Heisenberg, working from morning to night, at home and work to do so.

A number of characters seek to move away from Albuquerque; for some they never achieve this, for those who escape they do so in dire circumstances. In the season four episode ‘*Cornered*’ (2011) Skyler takes her daughter, without Walter’s knowledge, to the Four Corners Monument – where New Mexico meets Arizona, Colorado and Utah – to decide whether or not to move elsewhere. Standing at the intersection, she tosses a coin to pick a state. It lands in Colorado twice before Skyler drags back into New Mexico. Conflicted, she opts to stay. Later on, Mike also flees from the city, this time on the run from the DEA. En route, he dies after being shot by Walter (‘*Problem Dog*’, 2011). Walter, Jesse and Saul also attempt to leave the city, using transportation and new identities arranged by Saul’s contact named ‘the disappearer’ (‘*Bullet Points*’, 2011). On deciding he would like to move to Alaska,

Jesse decides to stay in Albuquerque at the last minute having worked out that Walter poisoned Brock. Walter is unable to afford the cost of disappearing (\$500,000) before attempting it again sometime later, when under a different threat he is successfully moved to an isolated hut in snowy New Hampshire, while Saul is moved at the same time to Nebraska (a location Saul is not best pleased with). Although Saul earlier tells Walter that 'disappearing' is "an end game... there is no coming back" (*Bullet Points*, 2011), Walter does return to Albuquerque in order to exact revenge on Elliot and Gretchen Schwartz, who he sees dismissing his importance in the early days of the Gray Matter Technologies on a television talk show. It is unclear if Saul eventually returns to Albuquerque, but for both Walter and Jesse, returning to Albuquerque is a double-edged sword: it allows them to attend to unfinished business but also brings considerable danger and misery.

Like Walter, Jesse and Skyler, Hank is also drawn back to Albuquerque after he gets a promotion in season two that requires him to split his work between the DEA offices in Albuquerque and El Paso, Texas. Marie remains in Albuquerque as she cannot stand El Paso but instructs Hank to "do your time like a good little boy and I could see us in a cute little condo in Georgetown [Washington DC] in a couple of years" (*Breakage*, 2009). Hank, however, returns to Albuquerque following a near death experience in Mexico, refocusing his energies on searching for Heisenberg (a search that ultimately gets Hank killed). Marie never makes it to Georgetown. Across these storylines, a familiar theme emerges: Albuquerque is hard to leave and if you do leave, the return has considerable risks.

Conclusion

To conclude, *Breaking Bad* provides an unrelentingly grim representation of Albuquerque; according to the show it is crime-ridden, spatially divided, and a city from which many would like to escape. The urban diegesis in *Breaking Bad* shares important similarities and differences with commonplace characteristics of American cities and suburbs in films. To begin, it echoes city-as-hell trope that Macek (2006) identifies in 1990s American films but also taps into a city-under-siege trope drawing on ideas from the Western genre (not identified by Macek). It also strongly resembles aspects of cinematic suburbs identified by Muzzio and Halper, most noticeably the suburbs as dysfunctional and “a twisted nightmare of repressed desires and shattered hopes” (ibid, p. 548). Yet, it diverges from Macek’s assessment that the primary threat faced by the suburbanites and the suburbs is the inner city and its residents. Instead, the suburbs, while dysfunctional, are where crime and violence is orchestrated from, which inner city residents are often caught up in.

There is also the question of whether the show offers a conservative and anti-urban vision of the city in the way Macek suggests 1990s American films offer. On the one hand, there are indeed signs that it is conservative: it does point to the choices made by individuals in committing crime, delivers comeuppances for those engaging in crime, graphically shows the dangers of meth, and presents the DEA in a generally positive light. Indeed, Gilligan has been on record as saying that “I’m probably more conservative than most folks in the business” (quoted in Brown, 2013: n.p.). Yet, *Breaking Bad* does point to certain structural problems for residents of Albuquerque

such as those associated with the American Dream and health care as well as the systematic nature of poverty and inequality in the city. It is both conservative and radical. We would also not go as far as to suggest the show was anti-urban; it does present the city of Albuquerque in a grim light but it does not go to the extent of presenting it as being “beyond redemption” (Macek, 2006, p. 254).

This article has provided an insight into the ways in which the urban diegesis is represented on one television show. Suffice to say, much more scholarly work and critical reflection on the links between cities and television drama is needed. There are multiple ways in which this could progress. For us, three interlinking paths stand out. First, future research should explore the transnational re-making of television drama as this is a widespread practice within the television industry (Perkins and Verevis, 2015). One such example is the episode-by-episode Spanish-language telenovela remake of *Breaking Bad* entitled *Metástasis*. Walter White and Jesse Pinkman became Walter Blanco and Jose Miguel Rosas respectively with the show filmed and set in Bogotá, Columbia. With this example and others, research could explore the working practices, places and networks behind remaking dramas as well as the urban diegeses transnational remaking produces. Second, studies of original and adapted television drama need to pay attention to smaller towns and cities such as Albuquerque that act as settings and filming locations. This, of course, should be done alongside rather than instead of studies of bigger cities. Such research would dovetail with calls to broaden the spatial focus of urban theory and enquiry (Robinson, 2006; Bell and Jayne, 2009). Third and finally, studies of both televisual and cinematic cities need to be more methodologically transparent, including those studies

concentrating on the on-screen representation of cities and urban life. In short, there is much to research in exploring the relationship between television drama and cities.

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