Moral sympathy and the "Lucifer effect." Evil and redemption in *Breaking Bad*

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Abstract

Introduction. This article analyzes the dramatic and cognitive mechanisms that activate viewers' emotional identification with antihero protagonists of serial fiction, taking *Breaking Bad* as a case study. **Methods.** The analysis of the mechanisms that enable identification is based on cognitive media theory (Carroll; Plantinga; Smith), and is reinforced through media psychology, applied through a close reading of the last season of the series. **Theoretical framework.** The notion of "structure of sympathy" (Smith) is used to identify four dramatic strategies that modulate the spectatorial moral judgment against the antihero, while the concept of the "expanded narrative" is used to explain the familiarity established with the protagonist. **Discussion.** In its fifth season, the story destroys the viewer's moral sympathy for the character, but rebuilds it in the last episodes of the series through the aforementioned four dramatic strategies. **Conclusion.** The concept of moral sympathy is proposed as a synthesis of narrative familiarity and moral modulation of the ethical perspective.

Keywords

Television; Breaking Bad; Series; Emotions; Antihero; Morality.

Contents

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1. Introduction

Breaking Bad (AMC, 2007–2013) narrates the conversion of "Mr. Chips into Scarface." This premise of the series, coined by its creator, Vince Gilligan, seems to explore the moral border described by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: "the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." *Breaking Bad* is a morality tale that narrates the loss of moral scruples of its male protagonist, a character who knows how to do good but insists on doing evil. Cancer, a sort of narrative pretext, acts as a metaphor for the moral disease of a clean man (Walter White) on whom the shadow of evil (his alter ego, Heisenberg) spreads.

There are many variants —narrative, social, industrial—that help to explain the success of a product in contemporary popular culture. In fact, the academic literature around *Breaking Bad* continues to grow, as evidenced by the many references used in this article. However, we should point out that our intention is to avoid totalizing explanations; we will only study the question of moral identification with the protagonist, one of the many reasons that account for the appeal of the series. As we will see, the critical and popular success of this series has come about both thanks to and in spite of its protagonist. This article seeks to unravel this paradox: we analyze the dramatic and emotional mechanisms deployed in this extensive audiovisual narrative to keep the mass audience attentive to the misadventures of a character whose behavior is often (but not always) morally repellent, especially as the plot advances. For this reason, our textual analysis will focus on the last season, in which the protagonist is more inclined towards villainy and, thus, viewers' identification with his actions is more complicated.

There is consensus in cataloguing Walter White as one of the most representative icons of the charismatic antihero, present everywhere in so-called "Quality TV" (cf. Lury, 2016), from Tony Soprano, born to the small screen in 1999, to Frank Underwood of *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013–), and including key characters of the third golden age of TV series, such as Vic Mackey, Nancy Botwin, Tommy Gavin and Dexter Morgan. This is an archetype capable of conquering the contemporary viewer through character traits that oppose the hero's inherent virtuousness and, often, collide with a commonly shared set of moral values. *Breaking Bad* constantly appeals to the conscience of the viewer, who is torn between the positive emotional bond forged with the protagonist and the negative moral judgment towards many of his actions. As Turvey warns, antiheroic narratives show that narrative enjoyment does not only, nor necessarily, depend on moral identification with their characters:

> In general, fascination with their complex, even contradictory traits, as well as discovering the psychological and other motivations for them, is a major source of the appeal of antiheroes, I contend, and our struggle to understand them gives rise to much of the pleasure we derive from them. We are captivated by the riddle posed by their personalities, and seek to solve it even when we find their actions deplorable. (Turvey, 2018)

This fascination with morally conflicting characters —when not blatantly evil, as is the case with *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013–15) and *Wolf Creek* (Stan, 2016–)— reveals a mutation of the concept of the antihero, which has evolved from classical definitions based on its inferior status or capacity with respect to the audience (Frye, 2006:151) towards understandings closer to David Hume's "rogue hero" **[1]**, where the emphasis lies in the character's corrupt, mischievous and cunning nature. Despite those defects, contemporary antiheros are perceived as "forces of good" in the story, to the point that, as Fitch has written, "The anti-hero is often a reluctant saviour – the one that we follow and adore if only because of his own fallibility and fundamentally flawed human nature. He or she is someone who resembles ourselves, reminding us not only the ambiguous morality of existence but also the possibility of redemptive change and transcendence" (2016:8).

Three important types of reason explain the current artistic interest in and popularity of antiheroes (cf. García, 2016:53–55): cultural (the moral relativism that characterizes postmodern stories), industrial (American cable TV's need to differentiate itself from network TV) and narrative. It is necessary to explain the latter motive in detail, since it is the most relevant for our purposes. *Breaking Bad*, like other series that have revolutionized scripted television, has been considered an "expanded narrative" or "television novel," equating television with literature on the basis of their narrative unity, episodic consumption and textual magnitude. As with 19th-century serial novels, these titles show their artistic aspirations through a narrative flow defined by its abundance of characters and, by extension, of relations and subplots in which conflicts and dilemmas proliferate. In this way, television stories have gained moral, affective and political diversity. As Nelson writes: "A scope of between eight and twenty-four hours' screen time allows for more complex storytelling and character-developing in relation to changing circumstances. It can in short, deal with shifts in fortune and the consequences of actions over time" (2007:121). This "complex story," as Mittell (2006) names it, has had a remarkable effect on the emotional involvement of the viewer with morally ambiguous characters—who are subjected to these changes of fate and to the consequences of actions over time—as "adorable villains," which we are exploring in these pages.

2. Methodology

This article is linked to a fruitful current in recent television studies, which we can put in general terms, following the recent book by Carl Plantinga, under the term "ethics of engagement": "Critics who write about ethical issues are also interested in how viewers respond to and are influenced by audiovisual stories. The moral psychology of those stories on the screen, then, is a central issue" (2018:2). In fact, for many authors, the "central issue" deals with the peculiarities of antiheroism in fiction television (see Martin, 2013; Lotz, 2014; Vaage, 2016; García, 2016; Bernardelli, 2016; Hagelin & Silverman, 2017; Buonanno, 2017). In our case, the hypothesis is that the moral psychology of *Breaking Bad*—the dialogue that is established between the main character of the text and the spectator in moral terms—is strongly conditioned by the emotional involvement of the viewer and is cultivated over many years. The temporal expansion of the narrative and its focus on this character allow for the establishment of a continuous back and forth, an "oscillating structure of sympathy" (Vaage, 2016:110), between a criminal Walter and a Walter with whom the audience can identify and, therefore, connect emotionally.

To perform a thorough analysis from narrative, emotional and psycho-sociological points of view, we combine three complementary methods. Our main approach rests on cognitivism as developed in film studies by authors like Murray Smith, Noel Carroll and Ed Tan. These theorists have paid much

attention to the importance of emotion, and some of them (Margrethe Bruun Vaage, Robert Sinnerbrink and Carl Plantinga) have studied specifically how viewers' emotional involvement with the moving image —engagement, in cognitivist terms— operates. Thus, based on the ideas of cognitive media theory, we argue that television fiction, given the serial nature of the narrative, represents a privileged space to develop a "structure of sympathy" (Smith, 1994:39–43) that allows the viewer to identify with morally problematic characters.

To delve into such a dramatically saturated TV series, this article also relies on the developments of media psychology, and in particular on the work of Raney and Janicke pertaining to the relationship between morality and media entertainment. The psycho-sociological approach is completed with contributions made in the field of philosophy of emotions, and especially in those dealing with guilt and the limits of man-made evil. It is precisely for this reason that the title of the article borrows a concept from Zimbardo's book *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil*. This psychologist synthesizes the concept of human evil in the following terms:

> Evil consists in intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanize, or destroy innocent others — or using one's authority and systemic power to encourage or permit others to do so on your behalf. In short, it is "knowing better but doing worse." (2007:5)

That last clause —knowing better but doing worse— is a categorical expression of human freedom and constitutes the dramatic key of *Breaking Bad*. Here is where the third methodological tool emerges: a *close reading* **[2]** of the last season that focuses on how the narrative produces certain emotions in the viewer and tests the limits of our sympathy for its protagonist.

3. Theoretical framework

All forms of dramatic narrative are intrinsically emotional insofar as they are designed to represent and produce emotions in both characters and viewers. This quality of the narrative is especially acute in its audiovisual expression, since "Once the viewers have decided to address what is on screen, they become inevitably caught in the diegetic effect" (Tan, 1994:29) to the point that they may not be aware of the emotional reactions that they display before the screen. The design process of this emotional device encompasses the creation of characters, their features and conflicts, and the strategies that facilitate viewers' sympathy and identification with the characters depicted in fiction.

3.1. Emotional identification with TV characters

Cognitivist theory —in a different way than psychoanalysis— usually employs the term "identification" to explain our emotional bonding with a character. It considers that the viewer identifies with certain characters when he or she values —and perhaps desires— their positive qualities, which are often heroic in the classical sense: ability or skill, courage, wit, and dedication to others. But in the case of antiheroes, all these virtuous qualities coexist with other, more obscure traits. In this case, as we will argue in the following pages, the narrative deploys a series of dramatic and aesthetic strategies that dim these negative traits through wider contextual knowledge of the character, his or her biography, relations and dramatic conflict, while presenting us with a number of positive and sympathy-triggering attributes. In this way, the viewer recognizes common traits of humanity in the antiheroic character —that is, emotions and experiences that, regardless of whether they are positive or negative, encourage indulgent understanding and emotional connection.

Precisely because this reflection brings into play ethical assessments, it becomes necessary to highlight how the degree of identification varies depending on whether we confront a real person or a fictional character, and whether the viewer perceives the ordinary world or the possible world of fiction. We can infer that, faced with a similar reality, identification is easier to achieve in fiction, because not all the feelings promoted by a narrative would be acceptable in the context of real life (Keen, 2006:220; Vaage, 2013). This intuition that the paradigm of interpretation is different when dealing with real-life events and events represented in fiction has also been empirically proven in the field of moral psychology. It is what Ranicke and Raney have called "moral disengagement" (2017), a cognitive mechanism that human beings employ to excuse immoral actions, whether it is their own doing or the actions of others, by restructuring them to fit an adequate moral paradigm, and by justifying them, for example. In the case of fiction, Ranicke and Raney argue that this moral disengagement is essential to being able to continue enjoying stories that feature morally contradictory protagonists, who are capable of performing abhorrent actions.

Stories with antiheroic characters are precisely a natural space for the exploration of this gap between what is permissible to endorse —what we can sympathize with— as individuals and as viewers, and what goes beyond the limits of our moral tolerance. In what constitutes another mark of their sophistication, antiheroic serial stories draw attention to themselves insofar as viewers are amazed at their ability to foster emotional bonds with —to create sympathy for—characters like Walter White, whom they would probably hate in real life. So how are these apparent contradictions articulated and what mechanisms are activated in the viewer to make them compatible?

To answer this question, it is useful to clarify a previous relevant terminological distinction in the cognitivist approach to cinema (and television), which involves the terms "sympathy" and "empathy." In general terms, sympathy refers to the ability of an individual (viewer) to "feel for another" individual (character), regardless of what the latter feels. Empathy, on the other hand, is to "share the feelings [...], experience the same thrill that he/she [person/character] experiences" (Neill, 1996:175–6) **[3]**. Consequently, according to this distinction, it is more accurate to describe the viewers' relationship with Walter White as sympathy, since our emotions do not necessarily match those of the character, but can move in a spectrum ranging from fear for what may happen to him to contempt for his feelings and actions. This is what happens, for example, in an event of the fifth season that allows us to clearly see the difference between empathy and sympathy: the murder of Drew Sharp, the kid who had captured a tarantula in the desert ("Dead Freight," 5.5.). Initially, we share with Walter feelings of horror and revulsion, but this supposed empathy disappears when we witness his indifference later, when Jesse hears him whistle blithely in the following episode.

This elasticity will be better understood when we examine how stories of audiovisual fiction articulate varying levels of engagement to generate a specific framework —that is, a structure of emotional interpretation. Murray Smith coined and developed the concept of "structure of sympathy" to break down the moral and emotional relationship of the viewer with a character. This structure articulates three levels of imaginative activity that viewers develop when facing a fictional narrative. The first level —the most obvious, automatic and phenomenological— is "recognition," i.e., the mental process by which we build a character. More complex are the other two levels: "alignment," understood as sharing the character's point of view and position, and "allegiance," which refers to the viewer's "loyalty" and complicity.

Alignment is a property of the narrative that "describes the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters [especially to the main characters], in terms of access to their actions and to what they know and feel" (Smith, 1994:41). It is, therefore, a "spatiotemporal relationship" that positions us as companions of the character in his/her environment (typically domestic and professional), with a controlled degree of "subjective access" to his/her psychological and emotional intimacy. This alignment is related to the narratological concept of "focalization", which is "a restriction of 'field', [...] a selection of information" that opposes omniscience (Genette, 1998:51).

Allegiance, on the other hand, is a prerogative of the viewer, who becomes an accomplice of the character by approving his/her behavior from an ethical perspective: "Allegiance pertains to the moral and ideological evaluation of characters by the spectator" (Smith, 1994:41). In other words, allegiance works as a translation of the moral sympathy that we have discussed since the title of the article. This complicity, as defined by Smith, depends on a moral judgment, a judgment that is also influenced by the visceral emotion triggered by the story and not only by purely cognitive and rational reasoning, as we will examine in the next subsection. In the same way, a broader knowledge of the diegetic context— for example, the backstory— facilitated by the expanded nature of the television narrative allows for the modulation of our moral judgment. Therefore, for allegiance to be successful in the case of antiheroes, it is required that the viewer have the opportunity to form a system of *ad hoc* moral values for the character, the situation, and the fictional world in which they operate. That is, the latter cannot exist without the former. What occurs, therefore, is not a suspension or cancellation of the moral criterion, but rather a reconfiguration of such judgment based on emotional and circumstantial reasons (relating to the character and the situation, respectively).

When a character performs immoral actions, our moral allegiance/sympathy towards him/her will be affected. This moral tension emerges as part of the dramatic appeal of antiheroic narratives. In this sense, the very nature of the serial narrative plays in favor of the complicity with the antihero, because one of the defining features of the antiheroic serial is that it questions, for dramatic purposes, our allegiance to the antihero as a strategy to advance the plot, generate suspense, and renew its dramatic conflicts again and again. Authors have to cyclically revive the sympathy that viewers feel towards the antihero—despite his/her immoralities— so that the conflicts multiply and the narrative can expand for several seasons. As Plantinga explains, "We might consider allegiance – our allying ourselves with, focusing on, rooting for a character – to be a relationship established only after appropriate narrative and character development" (2010:41). This emphasis on a sufficient narrative and dramatic elaboration is significant, since television series enjoy a greater opportunity than other formats to develop characters, relationships, and plots, thanks to their extensive textual duration. This is, obviously, the first and most striking difference between the television narrative and others of shorter duration, such as feature films. As Blanchet and Vaage note, the length of the serial narrative allows viewers to develop a more intense bond with characters, since it increases the viewers' perception of sharing a story with characters, due to the duration of the narrative and because viewers' life progresses alongside a show's seasons (2012:28).

A conclusion derived from this fact is that alignment—the closeness of the viewer with the character, sharing his/her perspective—usually ends up generating allegiance. This is not so much due to strict cause and effect, but rather because the broader and deeper knowledge of the character's life —a more multifaceted understanding that is not limited to their criminal role— as well as the long accompaniment of the audience, manage to generate a familiarity between viewer and protagonist that allows the former to develop affective ties capable of overcoming the moral rejection of the actions of

the latter. This relationship, which seems intuitively obvious, is confirmed when examining television series with morally ambiguous or perverse protagonists: the greater the access to the intimate life of the character—to his/her inner world, the foundations of his/her life projects, the understanding of the reasons for his/her conduct and conflicts—the greater the emotional complicity of the audience with him/her. Here, the "friendship" metaphor proposed by Blanchett and Vaage as a characteristic of television antiheroes acquires its fullness: the television narrative, expanded for hours, enables familiarity —friendship— with characters, thus promoting allegiance (2012:28). However, as we will see below, the mere temporal exposition does not generate by itself moral sympathy for a character, particularly when the latter exercises questionable behaviors. Therefore, all television narratives have a number of tools designed to strengthen allegiance.

3.2. Strategies to reinforce sympathy

Vaage details how the *mise-en-scène* generates a recurrent counterpoint in *Breaking Bad*. The frenetic visual suspense of Mr. White and Jesse in their facet as drug traffickers contrasts with the tedious pace of Walter's domestic scenes:

> Long sequences take place in the family context, where Walter seems trapped and is rendered passive. These sequences are filmed with a steady camera, there is no non-diegetic music – often, long stretches of conversation with Skyler has a clock ticking as the only sound breaking the awkward silences. These sequences are often remarkably uneventful and long. They are slow, and typically they emphasize the disillusionment and entrapment. (Vaage, 2016:80)

Vaage's visual analysis is relevant because, as Noël Carroll has explained, the narrative imposes a certain predetermination about the viewer's moral assessments (1999:30). The ethical judgment we form in response to an audiovisual fiction is largely influenced by emotional responses and, as a result, can be manipulated: "[We] tend to think of moral judgments as being issued after a chain of reasoning. However, … moral judgments are generally fast, automatic, intuitive appraisals; in short, they are emotions" (Carroll, 2010:8) **[4]**. Vaage's visual description and this quote from Carroll show the potential of the audiovisual narrative to alter the moral emotions the viewer displays in response to an event narrated in a story. An example of this manipulation of emotional responses is seen in the crosscut sequence of simultaneous murders in "Gliding All Over" (5.8), which shows Walter White transformed into the scariest villain of the series as a pleasant, jazzy music underscores a sizzling montage that subtracts severity from the murder of several potential witnesses in prison. The cleverness of the plot along with the playful *mise-en-scène* generates an a/moral distance with the killings perpetrated on screen.

The prison slaughter in "Gliding All Over" illustrates the influence of aesthetics in the interpretation of the narrated events: the audiovisual form contains emotional markers capable of tipping the balance of the viewer's moral sympathy in one direction or another. The emphatic music, the lyrical dialogue, and the plastic aspect of the production design that encompasses light, composition, and movement are extrinsic elements to the plot that create a mood in the spectator that predisposes his/her criteria. This generates what Stadler calls an "emotional transfer" (2017:21), which is precisely what audiovisual fictions generate through their stylistic power to physically convey the emotional experiences of the characters to the audience.

However, these uses of the form, despite being significant elements of reinforcement, cannot, on their own, weave this network of relations and tensions between characters and the audience. Instead, there

are various dramatic mechanisms that generate that positive attitude, that loyalty between the spectator and the antiheroic character. *Breaking Bad* employs, the four strategies that are typical of this type of account.

First of all, moral advantage is granted to the antiheroic protagonist against other evil characters thanks to the comparison made between different degrees of evil. As *Breaking Bad* progresses, Walter White defeats fierce villains such as Tuco Salamanca and Gus Fring, the narrative predisposing the viewer to always interpret Walter's actions as "the lesser evil." Without denying his moral shortcomings, it is inevitable that, compared to other moral choices within this fictional world, we choose—or rather, respond with—emotional loyalty for the protagonist. As we will see in the "Discussion" section, this will concur as one of the keys to dispel the sympathy for Walter in the fifth season.

The second strategy to reinforce moral sympathy for the antiheroic protagonist consists of providing him with a morally noble motive that is shared by the viewer: in many cases, it is the family unit. Family is an excuse, a seemingly justifiable reason to carry out radical, extreme, and ethically questionable actions. However, in addition to being a pretext and a dramatic motivation necessary to sustain the narrative, the family unit acts as an element of characterization for the protagonist. Although Walter soon corrupts the domestic space with his lies and secrets, the family home is initially presented as the environment in which the best human virtues of the character shine through: the characteristic virtues of a husband and a father who takes care of his children and wife and meets their emotional and material needs. This genuine love for his loved ones—which is threatened by a growing, and ultimately excessive, pride and self-love—brings the character closer to an everyday-life reality that is more familiar and attractive to the audience.

The third mechanism is remorse. When a protagonist crosses the line of what the viewer is willing to tolerate morally, writers often resort to scenes in which the character expresses a strong reaction of guilt that re-humanizes him/her in the eyes of the viewer. In *Breaking Bad*, the growing moral degradation of Walter is not completely linear, but offers involutional passages in which, faced with a dominant self-delusion, the character exhibits a conscience that admits the wickedness of his actions and, consequently, gives way to a feeling of guilt. This is what transpires in his fit of rage at the good news of his cancer going into remission ("Four Days Out," 2.9) and the self-flagellating reflections of "The Fly" (3.10). "Guilt is elicited by the appraisal of an emotion-eliciting situation as a failure of behaviour. It involves a negative evaluation of specific behaviour and is typically accompanied by feelings of tension, regret and remorse, and action tendencies to confess, apologise, and undo the consequences of the behaviour" (Van Dijk et al., 2017:617). Consequently, by assuming his share of blame, the protagonist of *Breaking Bad* manages to reduce the scope of his transgression so that the spectator can restore the damaged moral sympathy for the character.

The fourth strategy used by the narrative to promote sympathy for a morally problematic protagonist is victimization. The suffering of misfortune and injustice by others are natural sources of sympathy, in real life and in audiovisual fiction. As Plantinga argues, "we sympathize with characters when we believe that they are in danger and must be protected, when they are suffering or bereaved, or when we believe that someone has been treated unfairly" (2010:41). The pilot of *Breaking Bad* is a canonical example of this strategy: during the first half of its 58 minutes, the episode introduces and reinforces the image of Walter as a victim of other characters and, also, of fate ... until he decides to "break bad" [5]. As we will discuss below, the "structure of sympathy" deployed in the pilot also has in its favor a television-specific feature that has already been mentioned: the familiarity of the expanded narrative.

3.3. A comprehensive familiarity

Although the previous mechanisms to reinforce sympathy appear recurrently, their presence in the premise of the series—and more specifically, in the pilot episode—creates a "framework of interpretation" in which viewers are inserted and which thereafter modulates their moral perspective. Any judgment of the conduct of the protagonist will be, therefore, carried out through the same lens, the same mental system in which the "structure of sympathy" is forged.

The allegiance between the antihero and the viewer is a crucial asset in the very nature of the expanded narrative: the length of the story and the company of the character's build, over a prolonged period, a familiarity that determines the criteria of the audience in favor of those characters, including the antiheroes. Vaage argues that this familiarity breeds a bias that can blind our moral judgment (2014:269). This does not mean that we are not sickened by unheroic immorality, but instead that the continuity of the narrative rebuilds the routes to return to moral sympathy.

Even if we share Vaage's intuition, we understand that the metaphor of "blindness by familiarity" could lead to misunderstanding. Thus, it is more suitable for us to speak of a "comprehensive familiarity": as it occurs in a family, the expanded narrative allows the viewer to get to know the protagonist with a depth that goes beyond his/her moral dimension and his/her antiheroic social profile. As in a family, experience, the time shared, is a source of emotional connection with the character, and these ties transcend —but do not cancel— the moral consideration or judgment of his/her despicable acts. Expanded serial fiction shares this specific attribute of family (and, by extension, friendly) relationships, which differs from the reductionist tendency of social relations and public opinion, where the complexity of people tends to be reduced to unambiguous roles. In the case of *Breaking Bad*, the viewer establishes an emotional connection with Walter White that goes beyond his colossal criminal status.

The analysis confirms, in short, that the continuity of the expanded narrative can cushion the effects of an immoral or criminal behavior by providing it with a broader framework of interpretation. Precisely, we have already seen how the narrative relies on four strategies as sources of sympathy, which are often employed at the end of disturbing scenes caused by the wickedness of the protagonist: for example, the revealing sequence of "Full Measures" (3.13), in which Walter cradles his daughter Holly after having killed two thugs in the previous episode and before ordering the assassination of Gale. Between both scenes, we are presented with the virtuous, fatherly dimension of the character, contrasting his violent facet with his domestic tenderness, which allows us to continue on Walter's side.

However, as part of his narrative and dramatic evolution, Walter White, like so many other antiheros, increases his degree of evil as the narrative advances, slowly embracing the "animalization" that Zimbardo describes in his study. In that perverse progression, the original framework of interpretation seems to break, or at least is subjected to tensions that threaten to break it. Familiarity, then, can "breed contempt" (Turvey, 2018:n.p.), rather than facilitate a comprehensive moral framework. While this framework serves as a modulator of our moral judgments, *Breaking Bad* tests to the limit our willingness to remain within its coordinates and, occasionally, even takes us out of them deliberately.

To explain our allegiance with characters in an advanced state of moral degeneration, Smith has proposed the notion of "partial allegiance," according to which our generally favorable inclination for a character does not imply the approval of all of his/her attitudes and actions (2011:86). Vaage, broadly

speaking, also agrees with this idea (2016:6–7, 72–74): the allegiance of the audience can suffer significant erosion, but never disappears completely **[6]**. On the other hand, the more extreme transgressions—the ones that lead us to question the limits of our allegiance—are compensated through a return to the more human aspects of the character, the circumstantial reasons which attenuate or justify his/her behavior, giving rise to the phenomenon of "cyclical re-allegiance" (Garcia, 2016:63–66). This cyclical dynamic reflects one of the specific narrative features of the serial narrative that make it ideal for the exploration of the limits of sympathy: against the confined duration of film narrative, TV series can weaken the moral sympathy of the viewer through the incrementally serious transgressions of the protagonist because, once the red line is crossed, the narrative still has time to rebuild strategies to mitigate and justify his/her actions, thus recovering the faith of the audience in the character. This is what happens in the fifth season of *Breaking Bad*, which takes its viewers across the spectrum of moral emotions in a journey of agonizing tension.

4. Discussion: the limits of sympathy in *Breaking Bad*

Having outlined the theoretical basis for the analysis and having discussed the relationship that *Breaking Bad* establishes between emotion, morality, and reception, the last part of our article focuses on the analysis of the final season of the series, in light of the oscillating "structure of sympathy" that it establishes with its protagonist. As mentioned, the expanded narrative allows for the evolution of the viewer's identification with the protagonist: the moral transformation of Walter White is subtle, gradual, and not free from ups and downs. Yet, there are "unforgivable" acts, like the ones we will discuss below, that make the viewer seriously question —and even lose— his/her moral sympathy for the protagonist.

According to the emotional dynamics that govern the series, the moral conscience is particularly powerful in its earliest phase. However, the remorse and shame of Walter clearly vanish in the first half of last season (hereafter, season 5-1), since Walter progressively does away with the two corrective premises on which guilt is founded: the rectification of a bad action, and avoiding its reoccurrence (Lewis, 2010:748). In this sense, the fifth season adopts a "V" structure, since the first eight episodes (season 5-1) delve into his almost total loss of scruples, while the last eight (season 5-2), especially after the catastrophe of "Ozymandias" (5.14), perform his moral redemption with the subsequent rebuilding of the allegiance of the audience.

4.1. The descent into villainy

During the first four seasons of *Breaking Bad*, Walter White commits various morally reprehensible acts that mark his metamorphosis from a cautious parent into a fearsome gangster. His despicable actions and his pride increase gradually and slowly, according to the logic of the serial narrative. Thus, at the beginning, it is easy to excuse his self-defensive actions that result in the death of Emilio in the first episode. The seriousness of his crimes increases from that moment, although the narrative maintains, as a kind of moral counterweight, some of the dramatic strategies that we mentioned in section 3.2. For example, the gruesome act of letting Jane die ("Phoenix," 2.12) has, in the moral scheme of the story, two mitigating circumstances: Walter is not an active subject, but rather a passive one (he denies assistance), and the subsequent effect of that decision is to set Jesse free from the clutch of drug addiction. Something similar could be argued about the murder of Gale (3.13): it is not Walter who pulls the trigger and, as tragic as it is, Gale's death is the only way to protect himself and Jesse. However, even in the two moments in which Walter does get blood on his hands, the moral equation tends to absolve him: in one case, he runs over and shoots two of Gus Fring's ruthless assassins, who

had just killed a kid and were going to kill Jesse ("Half Measures," 3.12), and in the other, Walter blows up Gus Fring, who until then had been the absolute villain of the series, who wanted to kill not only Walter but also his family ("Face Off," 4.13).

This brief description is necessary for placing both the narrative situation and the moral counterweights that operate at the beginning of the fifth season. It is the early episodes, when the story deprives the protagonist of the aforementioned dramatic strategies, that promote sympathy. Thus, first, in episode 5.1, with Gus Fring eliminated, Walter White lacks a villain to make him "morally preferable" and to play the self-defence card. The balm of the family as moral "bleach" —the second strategy— is also invalidated, as evidenced by the fear and suffering that Walter inflicts on Skyler, to the extreme of turning their relationship into one of domestic abuse. This explains why the character played by Anna Gunn attempts to commit suicide in the pool ("Fifty-One," 5.4) as a way to escape the hell that their home has become.

The third strategy —the signs of remorse— had also been regularly present during the four previous seasons; Walter's last emotional collapse takes place in "Salud" (4.10), when he cries in front of his son and asks for his forgiveness. In contrast, in season 5-1, the only trace of remorse can be found just after the impulsive murder of Mike ("Say my Name," 5.7), with a mournful reaction that, however, has no consequences for the conscience of Walter, who repeatedly denies the murder to Jesse. The murder of Drew Sharp has more resonance for the structure of sympathy, as described in section 3.1. After the tragedy, Walter twists reality to fit his web of self-justifications and (self-)deception, which blocks any sign of bad conscience. His lack of moral objection acquires perfidious tones when he argues: "If you believe that there's a hell [...] we're already pretty much going there, right? But I'm not gonna lie down until I get there" (5.7).

Finally, the descent into villainy and the collapse of our moral sympathy for the character is completed with the subversion of the last strategy: victimization. During season 5-1, Walter is further away from being perceived as a victim than ever before. On the contrary, he is a perpetrator. There is no trace of cancer, which is in remission. He does not suffer threats of physical violence, as had occurred in all previous seasons. In contrast, in episode 5.8, he orchestrates the killing of eight of Mike's henchmen, who are in jail. Walter's arrogance and pride appear continuously in his interactions with the other characters, who know his criminal side, to the point of making his enemies kneel before him and pronounce his name (5.7). To all of this, we must add a crucial fact: his overwhelming "professional" victory. By episode 5.8, Walter no longer has competition in local drug trafficking, and he acknowledges that he is not "in the drug business" but "in the empire business." It is no coincidence that, in the middle of season 5-2, the viewer's sympathy is more inclined towards Skyler, Jesse and Hank [7] than towards Walter, who is trapped by the *Lucifer effect* of "knowing better but doing worse" (Zimbardo, 2007:5). Thus, season 5-1 of *Breaking Bad* is an experiment testing the viewer's allegiance to its limits before then focusing season 5-2—and the redemptive finale—on an act of redemption, which revives the moral allegiance of the viewers and intensifies their emotional satisfaction, as we will describe below.

4.2. The return of sympathy

Finally, season 5-2 addresses viewers' most burning questions: What will happen when Hank finds out the identity of his brother-in-law? How will Walter Jr. react? Where will Skyler's loyalty lie? Did the flash-forward of "Live Free or Die" (5.1) anticipate the defeat of Walter or will he end up

victorious? All these questions have their corresponding influence on the structure of sympathy of the narrative.

In tune with the dynamics of the entire series, the changes that occur in Walter throughout the last stretch of his tragedy are not sudden but progressive, and they admit regressions and specific questions. However, overall, it can be said that, during season 5-2, Walter is rehumanized as a character through the four dramatic strategies mentioned above.

Firstly, a perverse antagonist emerges —the Aryan Brotherhood— which makes Walter desirable against the sadism of Jack Welker's band and Todd's cold-blooded murder of Andrea, in one of the most devastating scenes ever written by Vince Gilligan's team. Likewise, the importance of the family unit as the motive fueling Walter's actions even involves the complicity of Skyler during six episodes, until the indefensible death of Hank (5.14). The support of Skyler is very relevant, since in season 5-1 she had been the one among the dramatic agents who, faced with psychological abuse by Walter, had contributed most to the viewer's antipathy towards him. This implies that during this last stretch, certain basic moral codes reappear (the family as a boundary to evil: Hank cannot be "eliminated"), while the feeling of guilt —even if begrudgingly— returns through the fate of loved ones (with the death of Hank, and with the "kidnapping" of Holly).

In fact, the third strategy —remorse and moral scruples— arises, especially in the last two episodes of the series, following the dramatic earthquake of "Ozymandias." Although we delve into this later, we can anticipate that the series reflects Walter's desire to expiate his guilt, through his final attempts to repair the damage caused, making sure that Walt Jr. will receive his "inheritance," freeing Jesse from captivity, and confessing his guilt to the main martyr of his pride: Skyler ("Felina," 5.16).

Finally, in the process of recovering the viewer's moral sympathy for Walter, we must mention his return to the status of victim: the cancer comes back, as evidenced by his physical deterioration, and becomes terminal. On several occasions, we see him exhausted and impotent as a result of the disease. And, in contrast to the ease with which he pulled the criminal strings in season 5-1, he no longer cooks, he is retired, and he is away from the pride of the "empire business." Nevertheless, he cannot escape. He is chased by other characters—Hank and Gómez, Jesse Pinkman, the law, the neo-Nazi drug dealers—as that kind of inescapable burden from the past so characteristic of *film noir*. Only in the last two episodes of the series, when the catastrophe is inevitable, does Walter try to restore the broken order, betting on true redemption. His death, as we will discuss, is the passport to the final restitution of our moral sympathy.

4.3. Road to redemption

Serial fictions are exposed to the risk of being judged —hastily indeed— before they reach their definitive closure. However, the resolution of the drama is precisely what grants a categorical reading that gives the viewer the key to interpret the moral implications of the story. Obviously, television series offer intermediate and provisional resolutions at the end of each season, but it is not until the series finale that the viewer can judge the full meaning of the text. As Creeber puts it: "Endings are important because they allow a drama to make a final statement, to wrap up loose ends, offer some kind of closure and perhaps even hint at a moral conclusion" (2015:33).

To win appraisal from the public and critics, those endings are forced to procure emotional satisfaction for the audience, which is only possible if, as O'Sullivan argues following Aristotle, they achieve a

balance between the inevitable and the surprising (2017:204 and ss). This fulfilment, in turn, is only attainable through the intercession of a protagonist whose inner journey culminates in a pleasant experience from which the viewer draws an instructive outcome. In the case of *Breaking Bad*, the resolution redeems the protagonist, restores the viewer's moral sympathy for him, and thus stabilizes definitively that "structure of sympathy" that had been oscillating until this point.

Breaking Bad carries out this process by formulating a reading that is consistent with the doctrine about forgiveness and redemption that is so characteristic of the Judeo-Christian intellectual tradition **[8]** and of moral philosophy.

In the two final episodes, Walter meets the criteria, as outlined by philosopher Charles Griswold, to effectively achieve forgiveness: taking responsibility for past actions, expressing regret for the harm caused, committing to be a better person, showing understanding of the nature of the harm from the victim's perspective, and building a truthful account of the change undertaken (2007:48–51, 149–150). Revealingly, Walter's internal tension leads him to seek forgiveness from his son. Faced with Flynn's absolute disdain ("Why won't you just die already? Just die!" – he shouts at Walter in "Granite State," 5.15), Walter is depicted as more broken than ever, to the point that he does what we would have never expected of him: he calls the police to surrender. He seems to accept all the consequences of his guilt, and take full responsibility for his actions, not only legally, but also with the social humiliation that it entails. And this is where, for the last time, Heisenberg's pathological pride comes to the rescue of Mr. White: in a circular narrative movement, Gray Matter acts, again, as a catalyst for one last operation, powered by a wounded hubris. But not only that.

This is because the series finale also reveals a protagonist in search of canonical forgiveness: "the desire to ease the burden of guilt—Griswold writes—is surely the most common and urgent reason to apologise" (2007:52). In his desire to "fix things," Mr. Lambert —the new alias that symbolizes the failure of both Mr. White and Heisenberg— returns to Albuquerque with a plan that mixes justifications derived from his guilt and from his fatuity, and hence the peculiarity —that makes it radically human, for its contradiction— of his request for forgiveness.

Thus, before dying while contemplating, with a smile, the lab where his "work of art"—blue meth— is still being produced, a fugitive Walter White goes to say goodbye to Skyler and his children, accepting his evil, his excessive pride, his Heisenberg: "I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it and I was really … I was alive," he admits with a mixture of pride and sadness. This phrase —without renouncing to an admission of his criminal self— contains the features that Griswold (2007:56) attributes to the genuine apology. Walter has reviewed his conscience for months and now takes responsibility, as he no longer uses the family to justify his actions; he recognizes the evil of his acts, because he tries to explain the whereabouts of Hank and Gómez; he changes his attitude and condemns his actions, since he accepts that his huge ego has been the engine of his behavior; and he promises not to repeat the offense, since he has come back to say goodbye and, therefore, will disappear from the lives of his loved ones, forever.

This honest request for forgiveness also seems essential to fully restore our allegiance, as it enables him, in the words of Mahon and Mahon, to "recover lost moral ground" (2017). Along with that scene, and without denying the moral complexity of that last conversation with Skyler and his gentle caressing of Holly's face —Walter admits his selfishness and accepts the punishment for his misdeeds, while at the same time asking for indulgence from those he has harmed the most— the closure of the plot after releasing Jesse and eliminating the Nazis is a perverse happy ending, in keeping with the moral

sympathy that the viewer demands. Walter pays for his sins, not only with the loss of the family he sought to save, but with his own sacrifice. To close the circle of blame, Walter still pays a final, and ultimate, price for his crimes: his own life.

The fate of the protagonist gives meaning to the whole story: thanks to Walter White's expiatory acts, we recover the original allegiance that had been forged, first, through a series of justifications, and was then tested repeatedly in an exercise of moral trial and error, before being completely subverted in the most climactic moments of the series (season 5-1). In a way, it should be argued that the sacrifice of the protagonist became mandatory from that moment in which the strategies of sympathy became entirely inadequate to hold the allegiance of the viewer.

5. Conclusion

Audiovisual fictions generate emotional relationships with their audiences. Particularly, through characters, they create psychological and emotional connections, which are usually grouped under the term "identification." This connection causes and encourages the viewer to wish for the success of the efforts of the protagonist against the conflicts of the story and, at the same time, demands an assessment of his/her behavior from an ethical point of view. In other words, the viewer not only evaluates whether the actions of the character serve his/her dramatic purposes, but also appraises the pertinence and adequacy of these actions with respect to an implicitly shared value system. It is, therefore, understood that identification depends, to a greater or lesser extent, on the positive qualities of the character in question.

However, there are narratives with antiheroic protagonists that make us wonder how these mechanisms operate. Especially in the television serial narratives of the last two decades, the antihero and the ambiguous moral premise have been prolific sources of quality dramas. In this regard, cognitive studies and moral psychology provide the necessary tools to address the processes of adherence of the spectator to an immoral character. On the one hand, sympathy —positive emotional inclination— towards a fictional character should not be confused with empathy, which demands a shared experience of the same emotions. On the other hand, the difference between "levels of engagement" reveals that audience–character allegiance is preceded by an extensive knowledge of the story, which allows a special understanding of the character's personality and situation. Thus, in this article, we propose the concept of moral sympathy, understood as a synthesis of familiarity and modulation of the ethical perspective, as the central mechanism of the process of identification with antiheroic protagonists.

To make this moral sympathy possible, audiovisual stories resort to the potentialities of its aesthetic language, but also and especially to dramatic and narrative strategies: the comparison with the greater evil; a noble motivation—love, usually embodied in the form of the family unit; the expression of guilt and remorse; and the accumulation of victimizing circumstances. These dramatic tools are used to build loyalty in the viewer, since they allow for a better understanding of the motives and the context that justify or explain the reprehensible actions of the protagonist, despite the moral revulsion that those actions could cause in the viewer.

Breaking Bad is a privileged case study for the analysis of these mechanisms, as it uses them to their maximum potential through an exploration of the limits of the viewer's sympathy. Although the knowledge of Walter White's noble motives, extenuating circumstances, doubts of conscience, and comparative advantages can modulate our moral judgment of his most reprehensible acts, the story dares to exceed the limits of our tolerance and thus creates an oscillating structure of sympathy between

the audience and the character. Finally, in its last, double season, the series strips its protagonist of any justification, but does so in order to redeem an antihero who went too far down the path of evil.

After having managed to convince the viewer to loyally accompany Walter White in his degeneration for more than fifty episodes, *Breaking Bad* adopts a redeeming sense through the narration of the return journey. The end does not blur the line of good and evil, but, on the contrary, illustrates the causes and effects of crossing that line and proposes, against Zimbardo, that the journey back from hell is also possible.

6. Notes

[1] A.W. Eaton (2012:84), using the term "rogue hero" offers a sub-division that can be easily applied to television characters: the admirable Devil (Klaus in *The Vampire Diaries*), the glorified criminal (Tony Soprano, Gus Fring), the sympathetic killer (Dexter Morgan in *Dexter*), the pleasant sexual offender (Hank Moody in *Californication*), the comprehensive sadist (Tommy Gavin in *Rescue Me*, Jack Bauer in *24*) and the attractive petty person (Enoch Thompson in *Boardwalk Empire*, Captain Flint in *Black Sails*).

[2] Herrnstein Smith describes *close reading* as "a technically informed, fine-grained analysis of some piece of writing, usually in connection with some broader question of interest" (2016:58).

[3] Academic debate about the differences between sympathy and empathy is far from closed, so the conciliatory proposal of Robert Sinnerbrink is promising. In an attempt to make progress on the static duality between sympathy and empathy that still prevails in contemporary film theory, Sinnerbrink bets on a conceptual and fluid suture called "cinempathy": "A cinematic/kinetic expression of the synergy between affective attunement, emotional engagement, and moral evaluation that captures more fully the ethical potential of the cinematic experience" (Sinnerbrink, 2016:n.p.). It is a "dynamic movement between poles of empathy and sympathy, moving smoothly between central and peripheral imagining, thus enabling spectators to both emotionally engage with and ethically evaluate the fictional characters within a plausible cinematic world" (Sinnerbrink, 2016:n.p.).

[4] In his recent book, Carl Plantinga implicitly discusses Carroll's assertion, pointing to an assessment that occurs in two stages: "The fact that films elicit moral emotions does not imply that the overall experience of the film does not incorporate more deliberative cognition as well" (2018:n.p.). We believe that this statement does not contradict our reasoning, since we do not expect the evaluation of moral emotions by the spectator to be automatic and unquestionable. On the contrary, they are elements that add up to establish a "structure of sympathy" which, of course, also operates in the second stage of moral evaluation described by Plantinga.

[5] It is a Southern regionalism that could be translated as "abandoning social norms and morals, regardless of the consequences."

[6] The fact that our moral sympathy for a character disappears does not, necessarily, mean that we lose interest in the character and abandon the story. There are other elements that come into play to sustain interest, whether textual features (suspense, narrative anxiety), extra-textual elements (social success of the story, marketing campaigns) or reception (concluding a story to optimize time invested in it). In addition, as our argument suggests, we share with authors such as Turvey and Eaton the idea that the contradictory and, on occasions, repellent moral complexity of a character is an element of fascination and aesthetic enjoyment.

[7] In this article, due to limitation of space, we only study the ethics of engagement and the evolution of the structure of sympathy with the protagonist of the series. However, the narrative and moral wealth of *Breaking Bad* encourages similar studies for many of the secondary characters. Perhaps the most striking case is Skyler, given the 180-degree turn that the story provokes in her "structure of sympathy," most acutely in the fifth season (see Donnelly, 2014:147–50 for a partial analysis of this issue).

[8] Instead of proposing a reading of forgiveness from the perspective of moral philosophy, as we do in the text, the forgiveness of Walter White could be analyzed from a Christian perspective. Religious principles are, logically, very similar to those proposed by philosophy, from Joseph Butler to Charles Griswold. No wonder Walter White goes through five steps that, according to Catholicism, make the sacrament of forgiveness effective: soul-searching, contrition for sins, purpose of amendment, confession of misdeeds and doing penance.

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