Memorable and Ambiguous: the Dramaturgy of Violence in Complex Serial Drama

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT 5

DECLARATION 8

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 10

INTRODUCTION 12

0.1 TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY TELEVISION: COMPLEX SERIAL DRAMA 18
0.2 THE WILLINGNESS TO ENGAGE WITH VIOLENCE AS THE CONCEPT OF THE 'PAYOFF' 23
0.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY 25

CHAPTER ONE 29

STUDYING TELEVISION VIOLENCE 29
1.1 VIOLENCE IN THE NETWORK ERA: THE 1950S – 1970S 32
1.2 VIOLENCE AND NARRATIVE COMPLEXITY 48

CHAPTER TWO 59

THE DRAMATURGY OF VIOLENCE: VIVIDNESS IN COMPLEX SERIAL DRAMA 59
2.1 VIVID MEDIA VIOLENCE 68
2.2 VIVID VIOLENCE: GLENN RHEE'S DEATH IN *THE WALKING DEAD* 74
2.3 ELABORATING AND REMEMBERING VIVID INFORMATION 82
2.4 THE DRAMATURGICAL EFFECTS OF VIVID VIOLENCE IN COMPLEX SERIAL DRAMA 93
2.5 EXPERIENCING COMPLEXITY THROUGH VIVIDNESS 104

CHAPTER THREE 108

THE FORCE OF VIOLENCE: MORALLY TRANSGRESSIVE PROTAGONISTS 108
3.1 STARTING AT THE END: CHARACTER-DRIVEN VIOLENCE 112
3.2: MORALLY TRANSGRESSIVE PROTAGONISTS 120
3.3 ENGAGEMENT 131
3.4 ALLEGIANCE REVISITED: INTUITIVE RESPONSES TO CHARACTER 147
3.5: THE BIAS OF VIVID VIOLENCE IN CHARACTER ESTIMATIONS 161
3.6 VIOLENCE MADE VISIBLE 170

CHAPTER FOUR 177

THE STORYTELLING OF VIOLENCE: AMBIGUITY IN *THE SOPRANOS* **177**

4.1 TONY SOPRANO AND AMBIGUITY 180

4.2 SECOND-DEGREE STYLE 202

4.3 MONSTER ANTAGONISTS AND STATEMENTS OF JUSTICE 226

4.4 MORALLY TRANSGRESSIVE PROTAGONISTS ARE ULTIMATELY AMBIGUOUS 252

4.5 MAKING CHOICES ABOUT MORALLY TRANSGRESSIVE PROTAGONISTS 273

CONCLUSION **295**

IDENTIFYING WITH VIOLENCE IN COMPLEX SERIAL DRAMA **295**

BIBLIOGRAPHY **299**

EPISODES **299**

SONGS **304**

PRIMARY SOURCES **304**

SECONDARY SOURCES **306**

Abstract

Content warning: *This thesis contains information and descriptions about, and images depicting, graphic physical violence and sexual assault. It may be triggering for some readers and reader discretion is advised.*

This thesis offers an appraisal of violence depicted in twenty-first century U.S. complex serial drama that is conducted over four chapters. It employs textual analysis to evaluate the affective roles of violence in the relationship between these series and their viewers. These affective roles are contextualised by the cumulatively serialised narrative structure of complex serial drama, and its character-driven stories that focus on moral transgressions. The arguments in this thesis are informed by research aimed to identify three components of this affective relationship: how viewers engage with violence; the relationship between violence and character information; and how visual style can be used to convey ambiguous truths.

Beginning with a graphic example from the ultra-violent complex serial drama, *The Walking Dead*, the thesis identifies the characteristics of violence that affect comprehension. These characteristics are the clarity of its depiction, how close to the violence the viewer is made to feel, and the intensity of the emotions characters express. The perception of violence affects viewer comprehension by eliciting heightened levels of cognitive attention, concentration, and interpretation, as well as easily recalled memories created through its experience. The thesis argues that these features demonstrate both the short-term and long-term affects of violence upon narrative comprehension.

Complex serial drama encourages viewers to psychologically investigate protagonist characters. Textual examinations of *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* reveal how developing an appreciation for protagonists is essential for sustaining engagement. This appreciation informs the perception of character information communicated through violence, and the evaluation of violence influences what is subsequently noticed about character behaviour. This

demonstrates a feedback loop between interpreting character and interpreting violence.

The thesis performs a close textual analysis of *The Sopranos* to demonstrate how it employs visual style to create narrative ambiguity. This ambiguity is created by the depiction of multiple conflicting, yet equally viable, truths. Violence in complex serial drama increases viewer engagement with narrative information. The ambiguity of truth restricts rational comprehension, elevating the role of personal value in accepting what is true.

The arguments in this thesis contextualise depictions of violence to provide the basis for a broader understanding of the affective relationship between complex serial drama and its viewers.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis:

1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and

2. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Acknowledgments

This thesis would have been impossible without the unyielding support of two people in particular: my partner Alice Bitmead, and my sister Jessica Ellis. It cannot be understated how influential their tireless encouragement and patient support has been, as I simply would not be submitting this thesis without it.

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The deft and intelligent input of my secondary supervisor Nicholas Godfrey has also been instrumental to this thesis, offering me perspectives that I would not have considered otherwise. The work of my associate supervisor Craig Taylor provided me with a basis upon which to consider many of the questions in this thesis, and for that I am extremely thankful.

Finally, I thank my family and my friends, for continuing to fill my life with the same immutable value throughout this project that they always have.

Introduction

There’s a beast in every man, and it stirs when you put a sword in his hand.
~Jorah Mormont (Iain Glen), *Game of Thrones*.[1]

Violence has been a central storytelling feature of U.S. television drama since the 1950s. In these early days, violence was most consistently found in the Westerns and crime dramas that dominated prime-time broadcast programming. Initial bouts of violence committed by criminals would be used to build conflict, establishing their antagonism. Violent confrontations between the criminals and law enforcement protagonists would then resolve the conflict in often-fatal retribution. These depictions were broadcast in low resolution, black-and-white footage received on television screens rarely larger than fifteen inches in diameter, providing crackling audio lacking in bass. Violence in twenty-first century television drama is, in comparison, an audio-visual phenomenon. High resolution footage fills television screens so large they are frequently mounted on walls. Cutting edge technology is used to enhance how immersive the content looks and sounds, while creative direction uses visual style to emphasise its grisliest and most grotesque details. Depictions of violence in the twenty-first century create a range of vivid experiences, offering close physical and emotional proximity to crimes such as sexual assault and domestic violence, and epic orchestrations of shockingly violent mass-killings in prisons and at weddings. These visuals are supported by rich audio experiences that allow us to clearly identify every instance of blunt force trauma against the human skull, and every slice accompanying the vision of a knife slitting a throat. We no longer simply watch and hear this violence: we experience it.

This thesis concerns the narrative ramifications of how we experience violence in the serialised U.S. television dramas of the twenty-first century.

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[1] Episode 3, Season 3. ‘Walk of Punishment’. David Benioff, D. B. Weiss (writers, creators, and showrunners), David Benioff (director). *Game of Thrones*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 14 April 2013.

The term I use to identify these series is Trisha Dunleavy's definition of 'complex serial drama'.[2] Dunleavy's definition hinges on the following four features.[3] The first is that their ongoing narrative information cumulates depth and scope through serialised episodes. The second is that they are individuated by their aesthetically novel content that does not obey traditions of television genre. The third is that their stories are character-driven and pertain to protagonists whose lives are defined by morally transgressive behaviour. The fourth and final feature is the depiction of certain content, such as sex, coarse language, and violence. This is noteworthy for being more explicit than traditionally found in twentieth century television drama. I aim to contribute to this area of study by demonstrating how violence offers a unique dramaturgy in complex serial drama when experienced by engaged viewers. The series most closely analysed to demonstrate this argument are *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Mad Men* (2007-2015), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), and *The Walking Dead* (2010-present as at November 2019). The reasons that I have chosen these series relate to their recognition as among the most critically and commercially successful serialised television dramas to have aired in the twenty-first century. As a result, there are rich and active ongoing discussions surrounding these series, which provides valuable research which I use to apply my study of violence. However, the central argument that I conduct in this thesis is applicable to all violent, serialised dramas released in the twenty-first century. To make this point, I also analyse more limited examples from a variety of other series.

This thesis began as an exploration of serialisation within these dramas, and the moral ambiguity of their protagonists. I knew that I wanted to focus on how immoral behaviour featured within these series, but I only began to think about the significance of violence after I watched a particularly gruesome scene in AMC's ultra-violent post-apocalyptic drama *The Walking Dead*. The scene, which is explored in depth in section 2.2 of chapter two, depicts a man on his knees being bashed to death with a baseball bat in front of his pregnant

[2] Trisha Dunleavy. *Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television*. Routledge. New York City, New York. 2018.
[3] Dunleavy. *Complex Serial Drama*. Pp 5-6.

wife and friends.[4] As I watched the scene unfold—home and alone, I might add—I felt nauseous, and feelings of sympathy and disgust began to overwhelm me. The scene uses close-up shots of the character after he has been hit with the bat, depicting his forehead caved in by its impact. His left eyeball is protruding from its socket as blood streams down his forehead, and he emanates strangled moans which suggest severe brain damage. What made this experience so affecting was not only the gruesome depiction, but the complexity of my thoughts and feelings about this character. As an engaged viewer, I was emotionally invested in the character—who had featured in almost all the previous eighty-three episodes. *The Walking Dead*, like all these serialised dramas, focusses on character exploration, demonstrating a complex gamut of their thoughts, feelings, philosophies, and behaviour relating to the apocalyptic world around them. When this character was killed, it was not only the experience of watching *someone* die in that gruesome way that affected me—such an experience is a regular occurrence on the series. It was that I watched the character Glenn Rhee (Steven Yeun), a warm, loving, and compassionate man whom I had grown to know well over the previous eighty-three hours of the story, suddenly and horribly bludgeoned to death in front of his pregnant wife and friends. It is easy to understand how and why this depiction would create such an emotional response, as this written description alone is hopefully apt enough to relay. However, I argue that these experiences of violence are unique and crucial to our comprehension of these serialised narratives.

This thesis explores how cumulating narrative information informs our experience of violence, and how these experiences in turn inform how we comprehend narrative information. Chapter one explores how research into television violence has been approached, drawing out the history of its study from the 1950s into the 2010s. I draw a comparison between quantitative studies, which focus on the frequency of different types of violence, and qualitative studies, which conduct interviews with participants regarding their experience of violence. While quantitative studies are useful for measuring the

[4] Episode 1, Season 7. 'The Day Will Come When You Won't Be'. Greg Nicotero (director). Scott M. Gimple (writer). *The Walking Dead*. Scott M. Gimple (showrunner). AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 23 October 2016.

frequency and content parameters of violence, they are less useful for understanding how it is experienced. Qualitative studies provide insight into how we seek narrative understanding when we experience violence, which renders them particularly helpful in application to the intricate narratives of complex serial drama. This demonstrates how the activity of textual analysis of violence allows us to arrive at a different conception of violence than we can have without it. This provides the context for my argument that engagement with serialised narratives significantly impacts how we experience and understand violence.

Chapter two introduces Karyn Riddle's concept of 'vivid media violence' to identify the most significant features of how we experience these explicit depictions of violence, and how their 'vividness' constitutes a unique dramaturgy.[5] I closely outline the aforementioned example of violence from *The Walking Dead* to illustrate Riddle's concept of vivid media violence. The most significant conclusions developed from this outline are that vividly violent experiences draw a higher level of our cognitive attention and subsequent scrutiny than other, less vivid, experiences. Within the context of complex serial drama, 'vividness' identifies what is meant by Dunleavy's fourth defining feature of 'explicit' content. The vividness of this violent content allows us to remember our experience of it clearly, as opposed to simply remembering the information that it communicates. We are not only more likely to automatically memorise these vivid experiences than other narrative information, but we are more likely to draw on them within future processes of narrative comprehension. In this content, the depiction of violence offers a unique dramaturgy within complex serial drama.

Chapter three focuses upon the central importance of character engagement within our vivid experiences of violence. How we understand character informs what violence is visible to us. For example, seeing a police officer strike a criminal with a baton is visible to us as violent in a different way than it would be if the roles were reversed. The role of our emotion in each of these instances is pivotal to how we understand the behaviours. How we

[5] Karyn Riddle. 'A Theory of Vivid Media Violence' in *Communication Theory*. Iss 24, No 3. International Communication Association. 2014. Pp 291-310.

emotionally understand characters in complex serial drama is similarly important to constituting what is visible to us as violent, and therefore what that violence means in terms of rational narrative comprehension. I first outline how the variety of psychological information about protagonists leads to complex portraits of their humanity that offer a variety of potential readings. While we cannot objectively account for all such readings, we can assert that we are most likely to draw on their most vividly presented behaviours. 'Morally transgressive protagonists' is the term I use to define them. I then draw on Margrethe Bruun Vaage's work regarding character engagement to demonstrate the central role of both nonrational emotions and rational thoughts in our response to and comprehension of the morally transgressive behaviour of these characters.[6] Using examples of protagonists in AMC's *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*, I demonstrate the link between how we think and feel about characters, and how we think and feel about violence that involves them. The heightened cognitive attention and emotional responsiveness elicited by vividly violent scenes, in turn, biases how we comprehend future character behaviour, inferring that these experiences are of central importance to understanding them.

Finally, chapter four applies the concepts developed in the previous three chapters to a close textual analysis of HBO's *The Sopranos*. I draw on Craig Taylor's concept of character ambiguity to create a parallel with the characterisation of *The Sopranos*' protagonist, Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini).[7] This analysis demonstrates how *The Sopranos* uses ambiguity stylistically to encourage an ongoing and definitively imperfect understanding of Tony. This ambiguity is unyielding to rational argument, as the series perpetually offers multiple, conflicting, perspectives upon the truth. This is performed through the technique of 'second-degree style' which provides multiple perspectives upon narrative information, each of which is viably 'true'. This forces the viewer to understand truth only insofar as they occupy a perspective. In this context, the role of nonrational emotional response is

[6] Margrethe Bruun Vaage. *The Antihero in American Television.* Routledge. New York City, New York. 2016.
[7] Craig Taylor. 'Literature, Moral Reflection, and Ambiguity' in *Philosophy.* Iss 86, Vol 1. 2011. Pp 75-93.

elevated within our comprehension, as rational thought is limited by the multiplicity of ‘true’ perspectives. This means that the way our emotionally-derived preferences are met by these different perspectives is as contingent on our understanding of narrative ‘truth’ as our rationally-derived evaluations of their validity. I outline a variety of these different approaches upon truth in *The Sopranos*, the most significant of which relates to whether Tony feels empathy, or whether he is a sociopath incapable of feeling empathy. The uncertainty that surrounds scenes of violence involving Tony is central to elevating the significance of this ambiguity. Ambiguity is central to the psychological exploration of morally transgressive protagonists in complex serial drama, prompting us with vivid experiences of violent character behaviour that cannot be resolved rationally.

Depictions of violence draw our cognitive attention, particularly when they elicit our emotional responses. When we intuitively engage with these depictions of vivid violence we experience an emotional response. This leads to the dedication of cognitive energy to comprehend what has happened and for what purpose. Violence of this kind encourages us to interrogate its narrative meaning. The way that these dramas communicate their information, however, subverts our attempts to isolate and understand a single meaning. This permits multiple perspectives within an analysis. These scenes are memorable and ambiguous and, as this thesis argues, this makes them significant to understanding our engagement with the complex serial dramas of the twenty-first century.

The rest of this introduction is separated into two sections. The next section performs a closer examination of what constitutes complex serial drama. The final section outlines my research methodology.

0.1 Twenty-First Century Television: Complex Serial Drama

The most important key term for this study is Trisha Dunleavy's identifying concept of 'complex serial drama', which I use to denote the spectrum of dramas that concern this thesis. Trisha Dunleavy defines complex serial drama using the conceptual terminology of Jason Mittell's 'narrative complexity'. These studies are among many that demonstrate the transformation of storytelling in primetime television drama at the turn of the century. This is particularly owing to the pioneering HBO series, *The Sopranos*.[8] One feature of these studies is the demonstration of how HBO afforded a bigger budget to these series, relative to decades previous, to enhance the quality of their production—a strategy that has since been widely adopted.[9]

One of the most influential contributors to the study of television drama in the twenty-first century is Jason Mittell, most notably for his approach to conceptualising their serialised storytelling structures as possessing 'narrative complexity'. Mittell develops his concept primarily through three texts, the first of which is his 2006 essay 'Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television'.[10] There, he describes narrative complexity as demonstrating a

> reconceptualization of the boundary between episodic and serial forms, a heightened degree of self-consciousness in storytelling

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[8] For more detailed studies of these specific changes, see the following texts that complement those considered in this section:
Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (editors). I. B. Tauris. New York City, New York. 2007.
It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-television Era. Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley (editors). Routledge. New York City, New York. 2008.
Dean J. Defino. *The HBO Effect*. Bloomsbury Publishing. New York City, New York. 2014.

[9] For example, see:
McCabe & Akass. 'It's not TV, it's HBO's original programming'.
Brett Mills. 'What does it mean to call television 'cinematic'?' in *Television Aesthetics and Style*. Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock (editors). Bloomsbury. New York City, New York. 2013. Pp 57-66.
Deborah L. Jaramillo. 'Rescuing television from 'the cinematic': The perils of dismissing television style' in *Television Aesthetics and Style*. Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock (editors). Bloomsbury. New York City, New York. 2013. Pp 67-75.

[10] Jason Mittell. 'Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television' in *The Velvet Light Trap*. The University of Texas Press. No. 58. Fall. 2006. Pp 29-40.

> mechanics, and demands for intensified viewer engagement focused on both diegetic pleasures and formal awareness.[11]

In his 2013 essay, 'The qualities of complexity: Vast versus dense seriality in contemporary television', Mittell offers a more succinct definition of the term that focusses first on a clarification of what is meant by 'complex':

> To call something complex is to highlight its sophistication and nuance, suggesting that it presents a vision of the world that avoids being reductive or artificially simplistic. It suggests that the consumer of complexity needs to engage fully and attentively, and such engagement will yield an experience distinct from more casual or partial attention.[12]

He writes that to evaluate something as 'complex' requires it to be deemed "multifaceted and intricate enough to require a complex account to accurately gain insight".[13] Mittell's most comprehensive account of narrative complexity is found in his 2015 text *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*.[14] There he carefully introduces the narrative features that convey complexity, of which the most important is cumulatively serialised storytelling: 'a television serial creates a sustained narrative world, populated by a consistent set of characters who experience a chain of events over time.'[15]

These series become complex through their cumulatively serialised systems of information, which Mittell defines in contrast to 'conventional episodic' television series. These 'conventional episodic' series focus upon episode-length stories and an adherence to the conceit of their genre:

> Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form, narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres. Complex television employs a range of serial techniques, within the

[11] Ibid, P 39.
[12] Jason Mittell. 'The qualities of complexity: Vast versus dense seriality in contemporary television' in *Television Aesthetics and Style*. Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock (editors). Bloomsbury. 2013. P 46.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Jason Mittell. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York University Press. New York City, New York. 2015.
[15] Ibid, P 20.

> underlying assumption that a series is a cumulative narrative that builds over time, rather than resetting back to a steady-state equilibrium at the end of every episode.[16]

The combination of cumulating narrative information and the demonstration of continuity creates an intricate system of "events, time, characters, and storyworlds within the spectrum between contained episodes and ongoing seriality."[17] For the purposes of the present study, this is what is most essential to understand about narrative complexity.[18]

While narrative complexity is an ideal concept to apply to these twenty-first century serialised dramas, he also defines it in relation to a wide range of other television content. Narrative complexity is not definitively synonymous with serialised storytelling but, in the context of serialised twenty-first century television drama, it is a hallmark feature. For this reason, Dunleavy builds upon Mittell's work with specificity to these dramas, outlining their definition as "complex serial drama".[19] There are four formal features that are crucial to this definition which I will outline: cumulative serialisation, aesthetic individuation, morally transgressive protagonists, and explicit content. The fourth of these formal features, explicit content, is the area of complex serial drama that this thesis aims to make the most significant contribution.

The first formal feature that Dunleavy outlines within complex serial drama is a narratively complex mode of "persistent seriality" that indicates a cumulatively linear "narrative progression".[20] This progression does not pertain to a potentially endless storytelling structure—as, for example, those found in soap operas—but are designed to "develop and conclude within a limited number of episodes".[21] Dunleavy outlines two additional characteristics that define how this foregrounds a single story through its use of persistent and cumulative serialisation. The first is that they focus on character

[16] Ibid, P 18.
[17] Ibid, P 30.
[18] Mittell refers to narrative complexity in application to a variety of other areas of television, but the focus upon complexity created by serialised information is always essential.
[19] Trisha Dunleavy. *Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television.* Routledge. New York City, New York. 2018.
[20] Ibid, P 164.
[21] Ibid, P 99.

exploration, as opposed to "story-generating" institutions "(police stations, hospitals and lawyers' offices)" that previously defined "American long-format drama tradition."[22] While complex serial drama frequently feature these institutions within their stories, their stories focus on the characters whose lives sometimes involve these institutions. This is opposed to a focus on these institutions as a conceit. This limits the length of complex serial drama to the character portraits that define their "central 'overarching' story", as opposed to the generation of episodic stories. The second is that seriality in complex serial drama elicits an "intense form of audience engagement" owing to the intricacy of its narrative complexity.[23] By clearly establishing the purview of its story, foregrounding character exploration, complex serial dramas individuate their stories as unique topics ripe for interrogation. While storytelling conventions in traditional episodic dramas define, for example, the 'police procedural' as a topic, each complex serial drama creates its own topic through the narrative complexity of its series-long cumulatively serialised story.

The second formal feature that Dunleavy identifies is that complex serial dramas employ unique aesthetic techniques to assist their individuation. Refraining from the aforementioned "tried-and-tested institutions" of traditional episodic dramas, complex serial drama develops unique aesthetics through their "genuine diversity of settings and milieux":[24]

> Strongly highlighted in complex serials' elaborate title sequences, these settings and milieux entail unusual attention to mise-en-scène, verisimilitude, cinematography and the use of musical scores to evoke a particular mood.[25]

While a consideration of the status value of complex serial drama has been a central feature of its study,[26] it is not a focus of this thesis. Style and aesthetics are approached in this thesis insofar as they pertain to violence.

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[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid, P 5.
[25] Ibid.
[26] See:
Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (editors). I. B. Tauris. New York City, New York. 2007.

The third formal feature that Dunleavy outlines is that its “primary characters” are “conflict-riven and usually transgressive”.[27] Dunleavy argues that the psychological profile of these characters emphasises their capacity to be “villainous, duplicitous and changeable”.[28] This insight is explored in depth in chapter three of this thesis.
The fourth and final definitive formal feature of complex serial drama is how it depicts “more explicit content than is possible for American broadcast dramas.”[29] Dunleavy recognises ‘explicit content’ as “depictions of violence, nudity and sex, along with the use of profane language.”[30] For the purposes of this thesis, violence is the only component of explicit content that is relevant to the definition of complex serial drama. Dunleavy’s examination of explicit content outlines the industrial circumstances that have led to its commonplace depiction in complex serial drama. These circumstances are not relevant to the discussion in this thesis. The most important aspect of explicit content is that it is recognised as a defining formal feature of complex serial drama.

It is within this context of complex serial drama, defined by these four formal features, that this thesis is situated.

It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-television Era. Marc Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley (editors). Routledge. New York City, New York. 2008.
Dean J. Defino. *The HBO Effect*. Bloomsbury Publishing. New York City, New York. 2014.

[27] Dunleavy. *Complex Serial Drama.* P 5.
[28] Ibid, P 6.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

0.2 The Willingness to Engage with Violence as the Concept of the 'Payoff'

Throughout this thesis I will use moral philosopher Matthew Kieran's concept of the 'payoff' to explain how we are able to enjoy engaging with depictions of violence.[31] Kieran's concept focuses upon content that depicts immoral behaviour and deeply negative outcomes: facets of the world that we are naturally averse to engaging with.[32] A 'payoff' is the detection of one or more features in this sort of content that, when engaged with, provide our experience with a benefit that outweighs our natural aversion. Kieran extrapolates this concept by identifying the features that provide these benefits: aesthetics, emotional intensity, narrative artistry, cognitive gains, drives and desires, and artistic values.[33] We can find pleasure in these formal features (aesthetics); we can value the strong feelings the content elicits from us (emotional intensity); we can appreciate how the content conveys its message (narrative artistry); we can value what we learn through the novel way that it makes us think (cognitive gains); we can appreciate it for allowing us to pursue fantasies that we do not or cannot pursue in reality (drives and desires); and we can simply approve of its existence as a piece of art (artistic values). Whichever aspect of our engagement we value is the payoff that allows us to enjoy violent content despite the immoral behaviour that it engenders.

In complex serial drama, the payoff describes what it is about our experience of violent content that positively countermands the negative feelings we have in response to it. It is what makes these components seem interesting or enjoyable, rather than exclusively off-putting. Kieran asserts that a payoff is at the mercy of our perspective, taste, and personal situation:

> In some cases allowing my moral scruples to be overridden looks likely to bring some kind of payoff and in other cases it doesn't.

[31] Matthew Kieran. 'Art, Morality and Ethics: On the (Im)Moral Character of Art Works and Inter-Relations to Artistic Value' in *Philosophy Compass* 1(2). 2006. P 137.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Matthew Kieran. 'Emotions, Art, and Immorality' in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*. Oxford University Press. 2009. Pp 694-700.

> […] I sometimes even find my responses varying according to, psychologically speaking, where I am in my life.[34]

The long-term ‘payoff’ in complex serial drama must be one that can consistently sustain a narrative perspective that we approve of. This means, Kieran writes, that we must approve of what “we take to be expressed by the teller and, thus, what we take ourselves to be doing”.[35] For us to sustain our enjoyment of complex serial drama, to allow us to remain committed to comprehending the complex and interconnecting strands of its narrative, there must be something that we enjoy about the experience of violence. Accordingly, we must then approve of that experience. What is integral about the concept to the payoff in this thesis is that it elevates the analysis of violence in these series on the grounds of their popularity: it demonstrates the cultural significance of violence in these series because so many viewers, and critics, within our society find a payoff in its engagement.

The detection of a payoff is central to the consideration of how violence influences our narrative engagement. As discussed in chapter two, the intense depictions of violence in complex serial drama require us to perceive a payoff while we engage with them, and if we do not then that violence will be detrimental to our ongoing engagement. In these circumstances, without the mitigating qualities of a payoff, the unpalatability of the violence serves to obstruct viewer engagement. Understanding how these series create payoffs is crucial to the study of violence in this project, as they are of paramount importance in maintaining viewer engagement.

Narrative complexity, complex serial drama, and the payoff are the necessary concepts required for this thesis to progress into chapter one, wherein I will consider how violence has been studied. In the next and final section of this introduction, I will outline my research methodology.

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[34] Kieran. ‘Art, Morality and Ethics’. P 137.
[35] Ibid, P 142.

0.3 Research Methodology

The research methodology I pursue in this thesis is neoformalist textual analysis. My approach is to focus upon the affective relationship between the aesthetic object of complex serial drama and its viewer. My aim in this approach is to identify the role and importance of violence in this relationship.

My approach to textual analysis is one that follows in the same methodological footsteps as Mittell and Dunleavy. Mittell identifies his approach as the study of television poetics, focussing upon how they communicate meaning, which he outlines as the question: "how does this text work?"[36] This question also governs my use of textual analysis, which I use to to identify the role that violence has within the serialised narrative structure of complex serial drama, and the significance of the affective responses it elicits in this role. Crucial to Mittell's approach, he writes, is that it does not pertain to deeper activities of interpretation:

> This focus on poetics is different from more common questions of interpretation, which seek to answer "what does this mean?" or of cultural power, asking "how does this impact society?"[37]

Mittell clarifies that these questions are not "off-limits", but that they "operate on a different analytical level."[38] In my textual analyses, I will draw on examples of narrative interpretation to outline the different ways that violence can impact comprehension. The aim in doing this is not to assess the validity of these interpretations, but to outline what they reveal about this engagement.

Mittell adopts his understanding of poetics from David Bordwell's application of poetics to cinema, first in his 1985 text *Narration in the Fiction Film*.[39] Bordwell describes "*descriptive* poetics" as revealing the "historical manifestations of theoretical categories" that are used in the process of

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[36] Mittell. *Complex TV*. P 5.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] David Bordwell. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. The University of Wisconsin Press. Madison, Wisconsin. 1985.

making meaning in cinema.[40] Bordwell examines these poetics through questions concerning the identification of "narrational procedures" as storytelling conventions, the discernment of these conventions within formal features of cinema and its visual style, and the range of historical influences that help to create these "narrational norms".[41] Addressing these questions, Bordwell argues that filmmakers operate in relation to these "narrational norms" to create meaning, as do audiences in the act of comprehension.[42] For the purposes of the present study Bordwell's 1989 text, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, offers a more useful discussion of poetics.[43] Here, Bordwell aims to counter the interpretive study of cinema narratives, specifically the use of theory to impress external meaning upon the text:

> Interpretation takes as its basic subject our perceptual, cognitive and affective processes, but it does so in a roundabout way—by attributing their "output" to the text "out there." To understand a film interpretively is to subsume it to our conceptual schemes, and thus to master them more fully, if only tacitly.[44]

Instead of assessing the "output" of such interpretation, the aim is to identify what "conceptual schemes" it invites. My approach to analysing the interpretive arguments of complex serial dramas will similarly consider the variety of "conceptual schemes" that they identify. I will do this to demonstrate how different responses to violent content is a central differentiating feature between interpretations of the same narrative information. Vital to this approach is that it accounts for how we experience violence, as these experiences are fundamental to the argument of this thesis.

My approach considers affective responses uniquely elicited by the depiction of violence in complex serial drama, and how they are cognitively significant within the ongoing act of comprehension. This follows the methodological precedent that Mittell establishes, wherein he distinguishes the unique

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[40] Bordwell. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. P xiii.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid. Pp. 149-151.
[43] David Bordwell. *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1991.
[44] Ibid, P 257.

cognitive act that allows us to "actively construct storyworlds".[45] Specifically, Mittell takes from this model the premise that:

> we can best understand the process of viewing […] by drawing on our knowledge of cognition and perception and then positing how the formal elements in a text might be experienced by such a viewer—while viewers are not reduced to their mental mechanics, the insights of cognitive psychology inform how we imagine the possible ways that viewers engage with film or television.[46]

Mittell asserts that this demonstrates the potential to understand how the "processes of comprehension and memory" impact our engagement with complex serial drama.[47] My research applies a cognitive understanding of this kind within my textual analysis, to understand how we make sense of scenes of violence.

My research aims in this thesis is to make sense of how violence in complex serial drama communicates meaning. I draw on sociological studies that consider cognitive experiences of violent television series, using their evidence to demonstrate the ways that we engage with violence in complex serial drama. The research that I explore to this end contains two primary modes of analysing violence: quantitative studies that gauge and collect violent data through its observation in television series, and qualitative studies that collect information about how that violence is experienced through interviews with participants. Many of these studies are performed to address the question of whether engagement with audio/visual representations of violence are detrimental, primarily to the mental and developmental health of children and adolescents. My research does not address this question in any way, and I instead draw on these studies for their extensive evidence relating to how we cognitively process and store violent experiences. These insights provide crucial perspectives of our affective responses to violence that I use to analyse its depiction in complex serial drama.

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[45] Mittell. *Complex TV*. Pp 164.
[46] Ibid, P 6.
[47] Ibid.

Textual analysis demonstrates the poetical processes by which texts make meaning, increasing the importance of the text itself within the qualitative study of viewer experiences. My approach to textual analysis evaluates the logical structures of narrative information communicated in complex serial drama, as well as how the aesthetic device of violence functions to influence our affective relationship with that structure. This permits an inclusive understanding of interpretations that is necessarily open-ended. For example, it is important to establish that we do not all experience or comprehend violent depictions in the same way. The experience of violence and the comprehension of narrative are each dependent upon the affective circumstances that define personal engagement. My approach in this thesis allows me to address the affective processes elicited by depictions of violence by appreciating the structures of narrative information that surround them. If Mittell's poetical approach asks: "how does this text work?"[48] my approach aims to demonstrate that a significant component of how complex serial dramas work is through their depictions of violence.

A final addendum to my methodology is to assert that my textual analysis will often include the use of screencaps of content. I use these screencaps because some content in complex serial drama is better referenced through imagery rather than written description—particularly in the context of outlining the experiences that these violent depictions elicit. I have manually recorded these screencaps from DVDs and Blu-ray discs in my personal collection, played on my personal computer.

[48] Ibid. P 5.

Chapter One

Studying Television Violence

In this chapter I will demonstrate how the introduction of cumulative serialisation has changed the audience's experience of violence in US television drama, and why a discussion about its relationship with the narratives of these series is relevant. While violence has been the subject of study in cinema, notably in Stephen Prince's 2000 edited collection *Screening Violence*[49] and Henry Bacon's 2015 text *The Fascination of Film Violence*[50], the unique relationship between violence and the ongoing television serial is underexplored. In complex serial drama, violence regularly communicates intricate narrative information that pertains to the ongoing serialised story. For example, when primary protagonist Ned Stark is executed in the penultimate episode of *Game of Thrones*' first season, the information communicated is diverse and far-reaching, influencing the story and most of its characters in an ongoing way. To comprehend the event itself *requires* intricate narrative context because it exists within an ongoing story that both defines it and is defined by it: to understand why it happened requires the viewer to have seen every episode to that point, and to comprehend the story thereafter requires the viewer to have seen it. Narrative is embedded in the violence of complex serial drama in a way that is inextricable. This is a feature of these series that I will demonstrate is inextricable to the study of their violence.

Violence in television drama has been approached in many ways. The discussion has frequently revolved around the effects that television violence has upon viewers, particularly young viewers. As this discussion has increasingly dominated the study of television violence, the field of social sciences has grown to be the only field that regularly studies it directly. As demonstrated in the introduction to this thesis, contemporary work in the fields of humanities and cultural studies rarely recognises violence specifically as a

[49] Stephen Prince (editor). *Screening Violence*. Rutgers University Press. New Brunswick, New Jersey. 2000.
[50] Henry Bacon. *The Fascination of Film Violence*. Palgrave Macmillan. New York City, New York. 2015.

formal feature within the purview of its study. In section 1.1 of this chapter I will explore how depictions of violence in prime-time episodic drama has been discussed in humanities, cultural studies, and social sciences throughout the twentieth century. Across these fields, violence has been studied in terms of how it serves the simple storytelling of its featured series, offering entertainment through a spectacle disassociated from the attempt to mimic reality. These works demonstrate binary conflicts between criminal antagonists and heroic protagonists, with its outcome predictably constituted by the divide of this binary. Due to the simplicity of these narratives, studies of violence in the social sciences from the twentieth century are largely quantitative in nature, measuring its frequency and its constitution. Section 1.2 first explores several contemporary quantitative studies and argues that the value of this data in the study of episodic dramas is less fruitful to its study in complex serial drama. This is because complex serial drama utilises cumulatively serialised narrative information that renders its violence more inimitable to its specific story. It is constituted by the complexity of the ongoing story as opposed to binary conflicts contained to individual episodes. I will refer to other, qualitative, studies that are better equipped to approach this narrative component of its constitution and argue why this approach is significant to the study of complex serial drama more broadly. My contention in this chapter is that the study of violence in complex serial drama is inseparable from the study of narrative. Developing an understanding of this relationship between the serialised narrative structures of these series and their use of violence is the central aim of the following chapters My aim is to give critical context to Trisha Dunleavy's definition of complex serial drama as possessing 'explicit content': it is not purely the explicitness of the content that renders it noteworthy, but how it influences and is influenced by serialised storytelling. As this thesis will continue to demonstrate, experiencing violence in complex serial drama is so distinct a mode of communicating narrative information that it constitutes a unique dramaturgy. In this sense, narrative context is essential to understanding this violence, and experiencing this violence is essential to understanding the narrative.

While the focus of this project is upon violence in prime-time television drama, it is important to note that violence in other genres of television drama have already proven fertile grounds for study. For example, in her 2007 text *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television*, Elana Levine explores the increasing prevalence of depictions of rape in daytime soap operas in the late-1970s and early-1980s.[51] While this study is related, and is particularly noteworthy due to the serialised storytelling native to soap opera, the additional scope required to explore the contours of daytime television renders it outside the parameters of the present study.

[51] Elana Levine. *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television*. Duke University Press. Durham, North Carolina. 2007. Pp 208-210.

1.1 Violence in the Network Era: the 1950s – 1970s

Explicit depictions of violence were a quick addition to fictional television programming soon after its inception. In this section I will introduce a history of violence in television drama from this era, as well as how it has been studied and criticized within humanities, cultural studies, and social sciences. The aim is to demonstrate how television violence in this early era provided a spectacle that was as narratively simplistic as the dramas they belonged to. This simplicity is profitably suited to quantitative studies, as its constitution is similar enough between different television dramas that quantifying it provides can provide accurate data using relatively simple parameters. Finally, the lack of real-life mimicry was explored, demonstrating an adherence to social norms that propagate the narrative.

Historical Analysis

There are two historical analyses that I will primarily draw on to demonstrate the production philosophies regarding violence within the television industry. The first is authored by seminal US television historian Erik Barnouw. Barnouw's contribution to the history of US television can be summarized with his three-volume text, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States*.[52] Writing for *The New York Times* in 1975, John Leonard describes the magnitude of Barnouw's contribution to television history through his trilogy:

> Quite simply, Erik Barnouw's threevolume [sic] "History of Broadcasting in the United States" […] is what everybody who writes about television steals from. Mr Barnouw […] did all the work, burrowing through the bins of business and government, bringing back every fact that was portable. Those of us who play with the subject, impulsive sermonizers, soi-disant popcultural hit-men, rely on his trilogy the way mountaineers rely on the

[52] Erik Barnouw. *A History of Broadcasting in the United States*. 3 vols. New York City, New York: Oxford University Press. 1968-1990.

> mountain: because it is there, we can be, too.[53] *(Square brackets mine)*

Barnouw's 1,131-page historical documentation of both the radio and television broadcast industries in the United States spans from 1933 to approximately 1970. His research is drawn from a wealth of sources that is as exhaustive as the scope of his project: from notes handed between executives and producers, which he scavenged after the fact, to transcripts of public speeches and interviews, and articles released in trade journals and magazines. In 1975, Barnouw condensed the three volumes into a single 518-page tome that focusses solely on the broadcast television industry—*Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*—which he then updated with a further 98 pages of information in 1990 to incorporate the evolution of the industry in the interceding years.[54] *Tube of Plenty*'s discussion of television violence primarily comes from Barnouw's analysis of its depiction in 1950s and 1960s dramas, contextualized by private messages Barnouw cites between the creative staff on series such as the notably violent ABC crime drama, *The Untouchables*.[55] Barnouw also discusses this violence by documenting the vocal negative response it received from the Federal Communications Commission under President John F. Kennedy. His work draws out the conclusion that the frequent depictions of violence were created because broadcast networks believed that it gripped the attention of the audience.[56]

Tube of Plenty also offers a history of television's impact upon America, exhaustively documenting its role in journalism and politics. The television industry is the focal point of Barnouw's research, as opposed to its viewership. For example, when documenting the broadcast of the Apollo spacecraft in 1968, Barnouw writes:

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[53] John Leonard. 'Tube of Plenty'. *The New York Times*. Nov. 30, 1975.
[54] Erik Barnouw.*Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (2nd revised edition). New York City, New York: Oxford University Press,1990.

[55] Ibid, P 263.
[56] "Action programs became the principal weapon in the struggle. In their orders to Hollywood studios the networks demanded more action. They never—or seldom—said "violence," but that is what they got." Ibid P 263.

> During the first manned Apollo flight—163 times around the earth—television viewers shared the view of the earth from orbit, and became acquainted with the euphoria that seemed to overtake men in weightlessness.[57]

This is the full extent to which Barnouw mentions the *viewer*'s experience as he quickly turns to a socio-political analysis of the event. While Barnouw does on occasion use Nielsen ratings, for example, to demonstrate the popularity of certain series, his focus remains on how they were produced, and not those who watch it. In contrast, there are other works that perform research into the early years of television that do emphasise the audience. To provide this insight, I will draw on another television history text by historian J. Fred Macdonald with his 1990 work, *One Nation Under Television: The Rise and Decline of Network TV*.[58] MacDonald's text considers "the American experience with television", pivoting from a focus on the television industry alone to the experience of its viewership.[59] His research regards a more sociologically-centered assessment of television. MacDonald's research into television violence is drawn from a combination of opinion and data, lifted primarily from trade journals from the time, as well from video recordings of its programming.[60] To this end, while Barnouw's evidence is used to document violence in television dramas within a snapshot of the industry, MacDonald's is used to argue how viewers experienced it. He argues that these audiences enjoyed violence, particularly if it was "packaged in morality tales of police and private eyes."[61] MacDonald compares ratings data between violent and nonviolent episodes of television drama to make the point that

> Sex and violence may have been criticized, but they were chronic winners. And by the late 1970s there was little attempt to program anything except those genres and forms that survived the decades.[62]

[57] Ibid, P 424.
[58] J. Fred MacDonald. *One Nation Under Television: The Rise and Decline of Network TV*. Pantheon Books. New York City, New York, 1990.
[59] Ibid, P x.
[60] Ibid, P xi.
[61] Ibid, P 95.
[62] Ibid, P 203.

Using a combination of research that complements the primary research of Barnouw and MacDonald, I will demonstrate how violence in these early television dramas was used almost entirely as a spectacle. These spectacles were encased within narratives that had a simplistic focus upon plot, largely divorced from its characters.

After an initial wave of critically acclaimed performance drama that was broadcast live, from the late-1950s onward television drama was almost exclusively produced on telefilm. These included westerns, such as *Cheyenne* and *Gunsmoke*[63], as well as crime dramas such as *The Untouchables* and *The Defenders*[64]. As J. Fred MacDonald writes, one of the biggest benefits of telefilm was its ability to be re-broadcast multiple times, meaning "the producers of filmed programs did not need to recoup all their costs during the first run of their series."[65] It was also a matter of tone: where live performance dramas frequently offer existential reflections upon life in postwar America, advertisers preferred the simple, attention-grabbing, formula of the Hollywood-produced telefilm series because, as Barnouw explains, they complemented their advertising philosophy:

> Most advertisers were selling magic. Their commercials posed the same problems that Chayefsky drama dealt with: people who feared failure in love and in business. But in the commercials there was always a solution as clear-cut as the snap of a finger: the problem could be solved by a new pill, deodorant, toothpaste, shampoo, shaving lotion, hair tonic, car, girdle, coffee, muffin recipe, or floor wax. The solution always had finality.[66]

Like these advertisements, these telefilms offered convenient solutions to simple problems, as Barnouw continues:

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[63] Both of which began in 1955 and remained in production until the mid-1960s and mid-1970s respectively. These series were almost always filmed in the west coast of the United States, utilizing the dessert in California and Arizona.
[64] Crime dramas were more popular in the 1960s onward, and were primarily filmed in studios
[65] Macdonald. *One Nation Under Television*. P 96.
[66] Barnouw. *Tube of Plenty*. P 163.

> Above all, the [Hollywood] series *formula* offered security: each program was a variation of an approved ritual. Solutions, as in commercials, could be clearcut.[67]

Barnouw notes that as television drama moved toward the telefilms of Hollywood, the nature of these "clearcut" solutions increasingly became those that involved a spectacle, which meant violence:

> In their orders to Hollywood studios the networks demanded more action. They never—or seldom—said "violence," but that is what they got.[68]

There is irony in the idea that content depicting existential problems proved to be too serious, while the spectacular depiction of deadly violence proved to be compatible with advertising solutions. It is within this irony that violence in the early years of television drama is best understood: gripping for the life-threatening activities it depicts, but reliable for the convenient outcomes that eventuate—the law-abiding protagonist would always defeat the nefariously criminal antagonist.

Violence thrived within prime-time television drama in the 1950s, with thirty different western series featuring in the weekly prime-time schedule across the networks in 1958.[69] As Barnouw notes, this focus on spectacle came at the expense of nuanced character development and morally ambiguous conflict:

> Although many fine films throughout film history have dealt with internal character conflicts, such conflicts were seldom important in telefilms. Telefilms rarely invited the viewer to look for problems within himself. Problems came from the evil of other people, and were solved—the telefilm seemed to imply—by confining or killing them.[70]

The success of this formula was reflected in the increasing demand for television through the 1960s. Advertising revenue saw the medium flourish, as MacDonald writes:

[67] Ibid, Pp. 166-167. Square brackets added.
[68] Barnouw. *Tube of Plenty*. P 263.
[69] Ibid, P 212.
[70] Ibid, P 214.

> Almost every American had access to TV, and for a growing number it was in living color, too. Manufacturers continued to churn out new receivers for eager buyers: 5.7 million sets in 1960, 11.4 million in 1968. With the average household using TV five to six hours every day, only sleeping occupied more human time.
> […]
> The three networks and 565 stations in 1963 realized $1.8 billion in total revenues.[71]

Television drama groomed its audiences for the advertisements that were peppered throughout it, and the growing profits that companies reeled in making television one of the greatest national success stories of twentieth century capitalist America. In 1959, almost a quarter of the series broadcast on prime-time television were Westerns, watched by up to sixty million viewers every evening.[72] The American Broadcast Corporation (ABC), the newest and previously the lowest-rated of the three broadcast networks, enjoyed the greatest success at this time with these programs, rising to be the highest rated network in 1960. [73] Its success was owed in large part to a surge in profitability of its original dramas, with a strong correlation held between their ratings and its rising stock prices.[74] Its slew of violent dramas throughout its weekly programming were its main prime-time offerings, in particular with Western series *Cheyenne*, *Rifleman*, and *The Rebel*, and Crime Dramas *77 Sunset Strip*, *The Untouchables*, and *Hawaiian Eye*.[75] *The Untouchables* in particular is noteworthy for its violence, and so it is towards the dramaturgy of its violence that I will explore now.

The Untouchables: The Novelty of Violence

The Untouchables was particularly noted for its violence, with fatal depictions involving criminals featuring multiple times an episode. The series, loosely based upon real people, follows a team of Prohibition agents, made famous for assisting in the downfall of Al Capone, as they endlessly pursue a war

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[71] MacDonald. *One Nation Under Television.* P 149.
[72] MacDonald. *One Nation Under Television*. Pp 121-122.
[73] Barnouw. *Tube of Plenty*. P 263.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid, P 261.

against mobster crime in Chicago. The format of the series follows a single storyline that documents the criminal activity of an Italian-American mob outfit, as the prohibition agents attempt to contain and foil them. There is little in the way of character development external to this central plot. Similarly, violence dramaturgically serves the plot of the single, discrete episode in which it appears, often by depicting a violent act of criminal instigation that is later met with another violent act of justice involving the Prohibition agents. To this end, the series was controversial for, by the standards of the time, its extreme use of violence—it was averaging five deaths per episode.[76] For example, the season three episode 'The Gang War' follows a conflict between gangs after one gang procures a source of superior whiskey that threatens the business of the other.[77] The episode opens with the narrator providing exposition regarding this conflict, before a violent gunfight erupts in a Speakeasy between the two gangs—killing five people, including an innocent woman. By the end of the episode an additional three deaths have accrued in a shootout between the criminals and the protagonist agents, all of them criminals—two are shot, and one is caught in an explosion as the result of errant gunfire. The series is exemplary of how creative killing was made to be in this period, with a requirement seemingly placed upon novelty when it came to how deaths were depicted. Erik Barnouw quotes *The Untouchables* producer, Quinn Martin, in a letter he wrote to one of the series' writers demonstrating this requirement:

> I wish you would come up with a different device than running the man down with a car, as we have done this now in three different shows. I like the idea of sadism, but I hope we can come up with another approach to it.[78]

While this philosophy of depicting original violence in each episode was controversial, it generated higher ratings than dramas without it, and so the controversy did little to dissuade networks from airing series like it.[79] As

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[76] David Marc & Horace Newcomb. *Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture*. University of Pennsylvania Press. 1996. P 80.
[77] Episode 13, Season 3. 'The Gang War'. *The Untouchables*. ABC Network. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: January 18 1962.
[78] Barnouw quoting Quinn Martin. *Tube of Plenty*. P 257.
[79] Jason Mittell. *Television and American Culture*. Vol 2, *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoon in American Culture*. Routledge. New York City, New York. 2004. P 142.

MacDonald writes: “In U.S. television, commercial mandate begat national culture.”[80]

The Vast Wasteland

In the 1960s, violence was a primary concern of the negative criticism that television drama was receiving from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), as it increasingly became a publicly discussed issue. These criticisms were also expressed by television critics, such as the New York Times’ Jack Gould, and the New York Herald Tribune’s John Crosby, who were critical of how violence cheaply served to invigorate simplistic storytelling.[81] In return, the television industry publicly spurned their critics as cultural elitists who did not understand, or care about, the exercise in democracy that television’s mass audience performed through their viewership.[82] However, public discontent regarding the potential impact of violence upon the American citizenry, particularly children, was escalating in line with this violence. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy ordered a congressional investigation to study the psychological effects of television violence and, later that year, the FCC began threatening to regulate it. To demonstrate his abhorrence of television content—particularly its violence—the chairman of the FCC, Newton Minow, delivered his famous ‘vast wasteland’ speech to the National Association of Broadcasters. [83] He invited his audience to observe television content:

> I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland. *[…]* You will see a procession of game shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons. And endlessly, commercials -- many screaming, cajoling, and offending. And most of all, boredom. True, you'll see a few things

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[80] MacDonald. *One Nation Under Television.* P 170.

[81] William Boddy. *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics*. University of Illinois Press. Chicago, Illinois. 1990. Pp. 233-235.

[82] Melissa Crawley. *The American Television Critic: A History*. McFarland & Company. Jefferson, North Carolina. 2017. Pp 36-38.

[83] Newton N. Minow. "Television and the Public Interest", address to the National Association of Broadcasters, Washington, D.C., May 9, 1961.

> you will enjoy. But they will be very, very few. And if you think I exaggerate, I only ask you to try it.[84]

Minow's criticism encapsulates how this violence was understood dramaturgically: it drew attention away from the shallow and repetitive writing with the excitement of its spectacle, servicing the requirements of network advertisers. In turn, the networks waved off these criticisms, asserting that they demonstrated opinions that were out of touch with the public and their viewing needs, and that previous, nonviolent, offerings had been overrated.[85] To support their argument the networks pointed to their ever-increasing ratings, alleging that critics argued from a pretentious viewpoint, and that they were overlooking their democratic approach to programming.[86] Regardless of these arguments, television drama was a vital cog in what had become one of the biggest success stories of the postwar national economy, and no regulatory force was permitted to interfere with its violent content.[87] However, through these criticisms some of the earliest studies into violence were funded, with its depiction in twentieth century television drama analysed and measured for the first time.

Quantitative Content Analysis

Some of the earliest television studies were created due to the criticism leveled at its violence, which was demonstrated through 'content analysis'. In 1954, pioneer media academic Sydney W. Head argued in his quantitative analysis of U.S. television drama that the "content dimensions" of this audio/visual form should be classified into four groups:

> (1) interaction dimensions, which encompass the dynamics of the play as a whole unit; (2) temporal-physical dimensions, which have to do with locale and period; (3) character dimensions, which have to do with character traits; and (4) behavioral dimensions, which have to do with specific actions of the characters.[88]

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[84] Ibid.
[85] Mary Ann Watson. *The Expanding Vista: American Television in the Kennedy Years*. Duke University Press. Durham. 1994. P 28.
[86] William Boddy. *Fifties Television*. Pp. 233-235.
[87] David Marc & Horace Newcomb. P 80.
[88] Sydney W. Head. 'Content Analysis of Television Drama Programs' in *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television*. Vol 9, No 2. Winter, 1954. P 179.

Head asserts that television violence *forces* viewer engagement, because its content does not need to be interpreted, like for example the content of literature, it only requires basic exposure. This was true also of narratives in this era of television, as the episodic plots were simple enough that a gunfight, for example, could always be explained by recognising that protagonists fight antagonists simply because one party is good and the other is bad. Head argues that television dramas in this period demonstrate an adherence to "conventional, conservative values", against which characters are depicted as 'good' or 'bad' accordingly:[89]

> Characters are classified according to ethical status and affective status. The former refers to the behaviour of the character with reference to conventional norms of morality. A character who violates such norms is classified as bad. Affective status refers to the polarity of the character with respect to the viewer's sympathies. Approximately equal numbers of major characters are coded good (74 per cent) and sympathetic (76 per cent). Goodness goes with sympathy and badness with nonsympathy 90 per cent of the time, thus establishing norms for the coincidence of ethical and affective status.[90]

To put this another way, the reason that an antagonist of a series is bad is synonymous with how its creators predict viewers will feel about their behaviour. In these early stages of television, violent content is encoded with suggestions of how to respond to it, both morally and emotionally. The spectacle of violence in this era was measured frequently, as its depiction within simplistic narratives meant that, with appropriate parameters for differentiating between its narrative contexts, it could be quantified as raw data.

One of the most popular modes of studying violence that evolved in this era is 'content analysis', first used by Head and then notably adopted by George Gerbner from 1967 until 1985. During this time, Gerbner was appointed at the head of a team of researchers which formed the backbone of a government-

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[89] Head. 'Content Analysis of Television Drama Programs'. P 193.
[90] Ibid, Pp 182-183.

funded investigation into network television violence. As part of their ongoing investigation, Gerbner et al. began to produce an annual 'Violence Profile' which documented "the role and symbolic functions, as well as the extent, of violence in the world of television drama."[91] Gerbner's team, the 'Cultural Indicators Research Team', did this by counting its occasion in a 'Violence Index', which it used to measure its frequency and pervasion throughout dramas. The methodology of this approach can be understood with reference to Gerbner's 1970 study, 'Cultural Indicators: The Case of Violence in Television Drama'.[92] Gerbner identifies four dimensions of violence within his coding of it—*Existence*, *Priorities*, *Values*, and *Relationships*—which are created to "yield measures of *attention*, *emphasis*, *tendency*, and *structure*" of violence in television drama.[93] Each of these measures regards the observation of a pattern within the drama: *attention* is tied to Existence, and records what is depicted, with what frequency, and with how much intricacy; *emphasis* is tied to *Priorities*, and observes which aspects seem to hold the most narrative significance; *tendency* is tied to *Values*, and indicates what is represented as morally right or wrong, and how; finally, *structure* is tied to *Relationships*, wherein associations that are too intricate to be understood through any one or two of the previous measures are drawn into an interrelated *structure* that encompasses them.[94] Using this metric, which was adjusted to account for other measures as time passed, Gerbner and his team conducted a content analysis of television drama regarding its violence, and offered that data as evidence for other studies. Resoundingly, both these studies and cultural studies focused upon the impact that television violence has upon viewer behaviour. As this topic is not within the scope of this thesis—which aims to focus on how violence constitutes a narrative feature—these studies, and this ongoing debate, will not be addressed. It is enough to understand that content analysis, using parameters that could account for the simple variation between types of violence that occurred on these dramas,

[91] George Gerbner, Larry Goss. 'Living With Television: The Violence Profile' in *Journal of Communication*. Spring, 1976. P 174.
[92] George Gerbner. 'Cultural Indicators: The Case of Violence in Television Drama' in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Iss 388, Vol 1. 1970. Pp 69-81.
[93] Ibid, P 73.
[94] Ibid, Pp 72-73.

was popularised in this period. An understanding of specific context was not as imperative to the study of violence in these dramas, as the character-driven nuance that features in more narratively complex series was not present. This is a point that I will return to in section 1.2. I will conclude the study of television violence in this era with the cultural analyses offered primarily by Horace Newcomb, and John Fiske and John Hartley.

Cultural Studies: The Semiotics of Violence

The final insight I will provide into the violence of prime-time television drama in this early period is from two of the first texts that discuss television narratives 'seriously', studying it as cultural studies. The first is Horace Newcomb's 1974 text, *TV: The Most Popular Art*.[95] Newcomb's text attaches significance to television drama that is entrenched in how it communicates and what it is communicating about, as Newcomb reflects in 2005:

> *The Most Popular Art* […] attempts to explore two main lines of analysis, two major questions. […] Put in very direct terms, the first question is, How does television tell its stories? […] The second question, again in its simplest form, is, What is the relation of television's stories and storytelling strategies to American (and, by implication, any other) society and culture?[96]

Newcomb's approach to television is textual, founded in the traditions of literary criticism, which he uses to critique the cultural statements it makes. As Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz write, the fundamental questions which Newcomb brought to the study of television "illustrate the multifaceted ways that examinations of television programs might explore the politics and culture of the worlds they represent without explicitly focusing on matters of power or ideology."[97] Newcomb offers a deep consideration of television drama to this end, considering both their capacity to be artistic and to be vehicles for socio-cultural meaning. From here he argues that, in 1974, television was maturing

[95] Horace Newcomb. *TV: The Most Popular Art*. Anchor Press. New York City, New York. 1974.
[96] Horace Newcomb. 'Reflections on *TV: The Most Popular Art*' in *Thinking Outside the Box: A Contemporary Television Genre Reader*. G. R. Edgerton & Brian Geoffrey Rose (eds). University Press of Kentucky. 2005. P 25.
[97] Jonathan Gray, Amanda D. Lotz. *Television Studies: Second Edition*. Polity Press. Cambridge, UK. 2019. P 46.

as an expressive medium, despite the shallow demands of the consumerist formula:

> The interrelationships among these shows, the historical and comparative relationships between simpler and more sophisticated versions of formulas, indicate that television is in the process of developing a range of artistic capabilities that belies the former one-dimensional definitions.[98]

Newcomb suggests that, because of this, in 1974

> it should no longer be possible to discuss "violence on television" without recognizing the aesthetic structure within which that violence occurs. It should no longer be possible to categorize the audience in terms of social and cultural values without examining the artistic context of those values as presented on television.[99]

The assertion here is that, pivotal to recognising the use of violence in television, we focus upon the devices it utilises to makes it enjoyable for its audience. Newcomb continues:

> It is precisely because the devices are value expressions themselves, and because the content of television is replete with values, judgments, and ideas deeply imbedded in our culture that we must continually offer new and supplementary ways of observing, describing, and defining it.[100]

Newcomb's approach to television violence, as with television generally, is that its discussion cannot be as simplistic as its narratives immediately present themselves: beneath the veneer of its violent spectacle is a form of cultural expression that is in touch with the American imagination, and exploring it in this way is crucial to understanding what makes it so important.

Operating with the same approach to studying television is John Fiske and John Hartley's seminal semiotic study of the medium, *Reading Television*, first published in 1978.[101] Similarly to Newcomb, Fiske and Hartley consider the

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[98] Newcomb. *TV: The Most Popular Art*. P 263.
[99] Newcomb. *TV: The Most Popular Art*. P 263.
[100] Ibid, P 264.
[101] John Fiske & John Hartley. *Reading Television: Second Edition*. Routledge. New York City, New York. 2003.

semiotics of television drama as "a principal mechanism by which a culture could communicate with its collective self."[102] Fiske and Hartley fiercely defend the study of television in this way on the grounds that it inspires in its audiences the activity of meaning-making. They argue that television is often discredited as hollow in this regard, the target of "uninformed prejudice against it, emanating especially from intellectuals, schoolteachers and politicians."[103] Their text is concerned with how the popularity of television renders it an important semiotic expression of culture, a "gigantic empirical archive of human sense-making."[104] One of their central concerns, to this end, is how television criticism has historically attacked the medium "as if it were a disorderly child", and that the response of television has been a great dumbing-down of its content:

> The response of TV was to make itself as safe as possible, not to be too adventurous, to be disciplined in the way that a boarding school is supposed to be disciplined – by prohibition and uniformity. TV was wasteful, pulled its punches, got by with euphemism, turned a blind eye, was craven and accommodating to authority, its aspirational philosophy was to 'aim low and miss' like Homer Simpson, because it feared regulation.[105]

Fiske and Hartley similarly understand the history of violence in this era of broadcast television with this philosophy: as with the dramaturgy of all television, it was simplistic because it could not afford to be anything else.

Reading Television's most significant insight into the specific dramaturgy of violence in this period is that it was "used in the pursuit of the socially validated ends of power, money or duty, and is *inter*personal although *im*personal: that is, takes place between strangers."[106] Fiske and Hartley draw this conclusion by studying reports of television violence, most notably George Gerbner's aforementioned 1970 report, 'Cultural Indicators: The Case of Violence in Television Drama'.[107] Using Gerbner's study, they analyse what

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[102] Ibid, P xvi.
[103] Fiske & Hartley. *Reading Television*. P xviii.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid, P xvi.
[106] Ibid, P 19.
[107] Gerbner. 'Cultural Indicators'. Pp 69-81.

it means that violence in this period took place largely between characters that were not known to one another, with the audience understanding the protagonist's humanity at the expense of the antagonist's. This is a vital demonstration of how television narratives in this early period does not attempt to realistically reproduce violence in its depictions, and instead demonstrates uses it to reinforce the same internal rules that governs the rest of its narratives:

> Violence on television, then, is not a direct representation of real-life violence. Unlike real violence, its internal rules and constraints govern what it 'means' in any particular context to the observer, rather than to the combatants themselves. Its significance in a television fiction is that it externalizes people's motives and status, makes visible their unstated relationships, and personalizes impersonal social conflicts between, for example, dominant and subordinate groups, law and anarchy, youth and age. It is never a mere imitation of real behaviour.[108]

They argue that violence is "controlled by rules which are themselves derived from social values", meaning that our ability to connect with its spectacle is limited by a simple recognition of the rules that govern the genre in which the violence features.[109] This means that it does not communicate *real* violence, meaning chaotic and destabilizing, within a fictional context, but a predictable stability that these rules insist upon:

> We know, as we approve of the death of the socially deviant villain under a hail of socio-central police bullets, that we would not approve in the same way if the equivalent real-life villain were gunned down in front of us.[110]

Fiske and Hartley demonstrate what becomes a key point of difference between the dramaturgy of violence in the early and contemporary periods of television drama. As the narrative form of drama continued, its violence became more 'real' (to use Fiske and Harley's measure), and has been increasingly defined by precisely the opposite of these features: it is not

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[108] Fiske & Hartley. *Reading Television.* P 20.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.

another vehicle used to reinforce the “internal rules and constraints” of the texts, and is often a climax to social conflicts between ambiguous characters who are not so simply defined by their group.

Fiske and Hartley’s study demonstrates why the content analyses conducted by Head, and Gerbner et al., were able to quantify narrative information as raw data. The simplicity and predictability of narrative outcomes in these episodic series means that the conflict driving their violence will almost always lead to the same outcome, wherein ‘good’ triumphs over ‘evil’. Content analyses need only account for basic variables within this paradigm, i.e. whether the characters involved know each other, to quantify data in this way. With complex serial drama, however, cumulative serialisation offers ambiguous meanings within its violence which cannot so easily be quantified: recording the amount of times that stabbings are depicted in different complex serial dramas, for example, loses significant data about that violence by quantifying it. The narrative complexity that surrounds these scenes of violence require specific contextualisation to understand what exactly is being depicted.

1.2 Violence and Narrative Complexity

While narrative complexity increased in the 1980s and 1990s as broadcast dramas were frequently produced with elements of serialisation, they remained definitively episodic in terms of their structure. Trisha Dunleavy writes that this example of serialisation is best considered as “serial subplots”, wherein while some narrative information might carry between episodes they are “otherwise episodic programming”.[111] In-depth content analyses continued to be performed throughout the 1980s and 1990s, measuring the rate and constitution of violence in more narratively complex episodic dramas.[112] In this section, I will explore an alternative method of studying violence that is better suited to the formal narrative properties of complex serial drama. This method accommodates the narrative experience, and in so doing demonstrates why such an approach to studying the experiences of television violence are vital to its study. Before elaborating upon this any further, I will discuss the issues with content analysis in studying complex serial drama.

In the twenty-first century, the formal study of violence has continued to feature broad content analysis of the kind outlined in the previous section, despite the shifting constitution of television narratives. For example, Andrew J. Weaver’s 2011 ‘Meta-Analytical Review of Selective Exposure to and the Enjoyment of Media Violence’ considers a wide body of studies and research to demonstrate that “violence increases selective exposure”, meaning that we are drawn in by television series featuring it, but that it also “decreases enjoyment of content.”[113] For Weaver, the task of the meta-analysis is to ask

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[111] Trisha Dunleavy. *Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television*. Routledge. New York City, New York. 2018.. P 100.

[112] See: Nancy Signorielli, Larry Gross, and Michael Morgan. ‘Violence in television programs: Ten years later.’ in *Television and behavior: Ten years of scientific progress and implications for the eighties*. Vol 2. 1982. Pp. 158-173.
Steven F. Messner. ‘Television violence and violent crime: An aggregate analysis’ in *Social Problems.* No 33. Vol 3. 1986. Pp. 218-235.
Barbara J. Wilson, Stacy L. Smith, James Potter, Daniel Linz, Edward Donnerstein, Dale Kunkel, Eva Blumenthal, and Tim Gray. ‘Content Analysis of Entertainment Television: The 1994-1995 Results’ in *Television Violence and Public Policy* [ed. James T. Hamilton]. University of Michigan Press. Chicago, Michigan. 2000. Pp 105-148.

[113] Andrew J. Weaver. ‘Meta-Analytical Review of Selective Exposure to and the Enjoyment of Media Violence’ in *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. Iss 55, Vol 2. 2011. P 232.

why "would violent content increase the former but decrease the latter?"[114] Weaver's focus, then, is on how we *feel* about depictions of violence—not any violent depiction specifically, but violent depictions in general. His discussion begins with the assertion that the reason there is an "abundant amount of violence" on television series is because it is seen by "many producers" as "a necessary ingredient in creating content that appeals to audiences."[115] Weaver argues that this belief is misguided: we do not prefer watching violent content over nonviolent content.[116] Instead, Weaver suggests that sometimes people find an appealed in the *idea* of violent content because it is "perceived as less socially sanctioned and thus more "forbidden.""[117] He also asserts that it is likely some viewers pursue its "voyeuristic appeal", providing a "curiosity associated with the actions and outcomes of these antisocial behaviors."[118] To understand why violence decreases our enjoyment of these narratives Weaver admits that "Little theorizing predicts such an effect", but he hypothesises several possibilities.[119] He suggests that some people have an emotional aversion to it, a form of "disgust", and because it is "highly salient" it might "pull attention away from other, more enjoyable features of the content."[120]

Weaver's meta-analysis draws on studies and research that abstracts the understanding of human experience of violent content from an understanding of the narratives that contain that violent content. To a degree, he cites some studies as observant of the fact that violence within the context of sport (which he recognises as socially sanctioned) is different than violence in television series (which is not socially sanctioned). However, depictions of violence in twentieth century episodic dramas share predictably similar narrative contexts and outcomes. For example, if I watch ten episodes of a violent episodic crime drama, such as CBS's *CSI* (which Weaver discusses in the introduction to the meta-analysis), I will have a fundamentally different experience of

[114] Ibid, P 244.
[115] Ibid, Pp 232-233.
[116] Ibid, P 244.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid, Pp 244-245.
[119] Ibid, P 245.
[120] Ibid.

violence than if I watch ten episodes of a violent complex serial crime drama, such as HBO's *The Sopranos*. The reason that the experience of the violence is different is because the narrative that I use to comprehend the violence is different: in *The Sopranos*, violence does not serve a narrative formula. Jason Mittell writes that these "formal narrative properties" of complex television series "have been so ignored" due to "the assumption that television storytelling is simplistic."[121] This assumption is couched, as validated in the previous section, by the bulk of television narratives produced in the twentieth century:

> Previous accounts of the medium's narrative tendencies tend to focus on the centrality of genre formulas, repetitive situations, redundant exposition suited for surfing viewers, and structural constraints based around commercial breaks and rigid schedules.[122]

However, the complexity of these narratives offer a unique experience in comparison and, as Mittell writes, it "must be examined on its own terms."[123] Each experience of violent content within the narrative structure of complex serial drama is significant because of how it uniquely pertains to the ongoing story. In comparison, for episodic crime dramas such as *CSI*, violence serves the episodic needs of its formula, its narrative information comparatively contained and isolated within the episode it takes place. It is a piece of violence that pertains to a forty-minute story, whereas violence in complex serial drama pertains to an eighty-hour story. For this reason, content analysis of this kind does not lead to as apt an understanding of violence in complex serial drama as it does with other, episodic, dramas.

There are multiple studies which support the argument that narrative complexity has a significant impact upon the comprehension of violence. For example, Anne Bartsch and Marie-Louise Mares 2014 study, 'Making Sense of Violence: Perceived Meaningfulness as a Predictor of Audience Interest in Violent Media Content', a sample of "482 German and U.S. adults aged 18-

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[121] Jason Mittell. *Television and American Culture*. Vol 1, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling.* Routledge. New York City, New York. 2015. P 142.P 4.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.

82", were asked to watch "movie trailers that varied in pretest ratings of gore and meaningfulness."[124] Bartsch and Mares' found that violent trailers appealed to the participants: 'a negative influence of gore on viewing likelihood was compensated at high levels of meaningfulness.'[125]
Bartsch and Mares concur with Weaver's previously explored sentiment regarding the desirability of violent content, writing that a "growing body of research" suggests

> violence is not intrinsically appealing for most audiences but that it increases exposure indirectly, because it signals the presence of other desirable content characteristics and viewing experiences, such as thrill and suspense.[126]

However, they point to research into other "nonhedonistic motives and responses" that could be used to explain why we pursue violent content, such as "a search for deeper insight, meaning, and purpose in life" and, more importantly, "processes by which individuals strive to make meaning out of negative experiences".[127] This suggests that the high level of meaning conveyed through narratively complex dramas might *increase* their enjoyment, so long as that violence contributes enough significance to the story. However, it is important to note that Bartsch and Mares are not writing about the significance of story but significance external to the text, postulating that the "motive for watching acts of violence" might be drawn from "the need to make sense of similar acts of violence in the real world."[128] Bartsch and Mares acknowledge the limits of their study to this end, writing that an "important next step" is to link the influence of this violence "to the perception of specific content features that should arouse and satisfy a need for meaning-making".[129] They suggest that research could "ask more specifically about acts of violence that violate the viewers' just-world beliefs, and about the compensation of victims in terms of immaterial rewards such as deeper

[124] Anne Bartsch & Marie-Louise Mares. 'Making Sense of Violence: Perceived Meaningfulness as a Predictor of Audience Interest in Violent Media Content' in *Journal of Communication*. Iss 64. 2014. Pp 956-976.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid, P 956.
[127] Ibid, Pp 959-960.
[128] Ibid, P 960.
[129] Ibid, P 971.

insight, social connectedness, and personal growth."[130] It is in this context that I argue for an additional line of inquiry into the influence that narrative complexity might have in our response to violent content.

In their 2009 study, 'The Role of Graphic and Sanitized Violence in the Enjoyment of Television Dramas', Andrew J. Weaver and Barbara J. Wilson use an episode from five complex serial dramas to examine how violence influences "audience enjoyment".[131] For their experiment, they "edited five programs from five different primetime television series to create nonviolent and violent conditions for each", creating multiple "versions of the same program" to provide "better control of the variable of interest (violence)."[132] Weaver and Wilson declare that "none of the episodes wrapped up with satisfactory conclusions", and that they are "representative of both serialized dramas" and "primetime television violence as a whole."[133] What makes their study less useful for the present thesis, then, is that the episodes they use are shorn from their cumulatively serialised narrative context. Without the knowledge of previous narrative information, our ability to comprehend an episode of complex serial drama will be significantly diminished. This is integral, because Weaver and Wilson's study regards whether viewers enjoy violence, but what it means to enjoy violence in complex serial drama is tied to a narrative discussion: as an abstract idea, I do not enjoy watching immoral characters commit domestic violence, and I would not enjoy watching such scenes if they were all I saw. This is irrelevant though, because we *do* see them within the context of an ongoing story, and so the degree to which we can make assertions about them hinges upon our ongoing comprehension of the story they help to tell. For example, *Big Little Lies* features scenes depicting domestic violence. Part of what drives the series' appeal is this unflinching portrait of domestic abuse, how casual it can be at times and how intensely violent it can be in others. To remove its depictions to this end would render its story almost nonsensical: we comprehend what its characters think

[130] Ibid, Pp 971-972.
[131] Andrew J. Weaver & Barbara J. Wilson. 'The Role of Graphic and Sanitized Violence in the Enjoyment of Television Dramas' in *Human Communication Research*. Iss 35. 2009. Pp 442-463.
[132] Ibid, P 444.
[133] Ibid, P 446.

and feel, and why they speak and behave as they do, because we have narratively *experienced* the abuse that some have suffered, and others committed. *The Sopranos* also features scenes depicting domestic violence, but to relate them to the scenes in *Big Little Lies* because they both demonstrate ‘domestic violence’ is arbitrary and careless. The complex narrative surroundings of each cannot be ignored: in *The Sopranos* the depiction of domestic assault is yet another criminal act committed by the mobster characters, but its focus in *Big Little Lies*’ explores the toxic relationships that contain and suffer it, the personal histories that breed it, and the contemporary humanity that lives with it. It is narrative context that defines ‘domestic violence’ in these series, not the abstract concept itself. These implementations of content analysis regarding violence in complex serial drama suffer from their inability to record crucial constitutive data.

Qualitative Studies of Narrative Experience

Experiencing the scenes of violence that occur in complex serial drama necessarily requires engagement with narratively complex information. Unless we watch these scenes clipped from the series that they belong to, for example through video streaming platforms such as YouTube, these depictions of violence sit within this cumulating narrative information. Some studies demonstrate how we engage in processes of meaning-making when we experience violence in film and television. Rachel Louise Shaw’s 2004 study into the “function of film violence” provides a helpful model for observing this process which she compares with “violence encountered in real life.”[134] She considers “the role of narrative in individuals’ meaning-making processes”, and argues that her findings show:[135]

> real life violence is experientially distinct from film violence but narrative was found to be central to participants’ quest for the meaning of violence in both contexts.[136]

[134] Rachel Louise Shaw. ‘Making Sense of Violence: A Study of Narrative Meaning’ in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Iss 1. 2004. P 131.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid.

Shaw's study draws on interviews with six individuals[137], with the aim of exploring their "subjective experience".[138] Crucially, Shaw asserts, what is constituted as 'violent material' was determined by each participant, as opposed to it being defined for them.[139] This was so it could be ascertained

> what participants felt was violent in the hope that the retelling of their experience would enable them to verbalize what they actually defined as violent and how they were able to make it meaningful.[140]

The participant's definition of violence is expressed through their retelling of its experience within a narrative context, and this is pivotal for Shaw's study. This act of retelling makes visible the conditions under which violence is perceived, how severe it is seen to be and, most importantly, what about it is understood as meaningful. This was done because Shaw's analysis rests upon the understanding that

> any study of human experience must be concerned with meanings and how they are attributed to everyday life by adopting a phenomenologically sensitive approach[141]

This "phenomenologically sensitive approach" to the study of human meaning-making is drawn from Donald Polkinghorne's 1988 seminal text, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*.[142] Polkinghorne asserts that the construction of narrative within the human mind is an ongoing process:

> the realm of meaning exists in a different form than natural objects do. It is an activity, not a thing. It cannot be picked up and held, nor measured by an impersonal instrument. […] The meanings are continuously being reconstituted as the rudimentary

[137] A small sample size is recommended, Shaw asserts, for a study of this kind, citing research psychologist J. A. Smith's 'Interpretative phenomenological analysis' in *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*. J. A. Smith (editor). Sage Publishing. London. 2003.
[138] Shaw. 'Making Sense of Violence'. P 133.
[139] Ibid, P 133.
[140] Ibid, P 134.
[141] Ibid, P 132.
[142] Donald E. Polkinghorne. *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*. State University of New York Press. 1988.

> perceptions of consciousness change. The activity of making meaning is not static, and thus it is not easily grasped.[143]

That our processes of meaning-making return different conclusions over time, as our "rudimentary perceptions of consciousness change", is demonstrative of how pivotal narrative context is to our comprehension of the cumulatively serialised information in complex serial drama. As we ruminate on the information we accumulate through our engagement, our experience of violence increasingly relies on our evolving comprehension of that information. Shaw demonstrates this concept by using Polkinghorne's cognitive understanding of meaning-making to inform her exploration of "which, if any, narrative structures helped participants to make sense of their experiences of violence."[144]

Given the ongoing activity of meaning-making leads to different understandings, Shaw's multiple interviews were able to chart if the individuals' experience of violence changed over time. To discern this, her findings regard

> the identification of narrative structures within participants' meaning-making processes.[145]

Shaw explores the different ways that her participants responded to the violence, with significant variation between participants regarding violence is justified and what is gratuitous—all of which related to narrative structure and reflection upon narrative themes.[146] The portrayal of character was also found to be significant, as Shaw describes:

> Most stories involve human actors interacting with each other as a series of events unfold. Violent films are no exception to this rule but the roles of the characters appeared to be of particular consequence to the ways in which participants made sense of violence portrayed. […] In essence a viewer requires access to the traits and flaws of film characters to provide a means through

[143] Ibid, P 7.
[144] Shaw. 'Making Sense of Violence'. P 134.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid, Pp 136-138.

> which understanding and therefore justification and meaning can be reached.[147]

Engaging narrative structures featuring psychologically informative information about characters that are linked to violence permits viewers insight into the function of that violence. Shaw suggests that this insight introduces a pragmatism to the experience violence, wherein we can be rationally guided toward avenues of thought that help us to comprehend its meaning.[148] With these features, Shaw asserts that when narratives surround violence, our pragmatic approach to understanding it can become an educational exercise in imagined emotions and experiences, allowing us to "speculate about human nature".[149]

Three aspects of Shaw's conclusion are particularly illuminating for this thesis. The first is that our experience of violence is dependent upon the degree to which we can pragmatically comprehend its event with a narrative explanation:

> individuals are able to make sense of their experiences of violence both via film and in real life through interpreting the narrative structure provided. When meaning is frustrated it is due to the lack of a narrative framework in which to place events. This is more likely to occur in real life because in film a ready-made story is usually, although not always, accessible.[150]

This corroborates the idea that the intricate narrative structures of complex serial drama provide us with a greater capacity for pragmatism within our comprehension, in comparison with the episodic dramas of decades past. The second conclusion is that these narratives are paramount for understanding how violence is experienced, because they provide our cognitive processes with information that yields meaning:

> Narrative was found to be central to participants' meaning-making processes. If an encounter with violence in real life or a violent film was not contextualized by narrative it was extremely difficult

[147] ibid, Pp 138-140.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid, P 141.
[150] Ibid, P 148.

> to gain any sense from it. However, in the act of retelling events, apparently meaningless experiences were framed within a contingent narrative which subsequently led to understanding.[151]

The phrase "apparently meaningless experiences" is indicative of the subtlety of this narratives influence in our experience: as an observer, Shaw noted that the framing of these narratives were integral to their comprehension, but as viewers her participants did not demonstrate awareness of the extent of this influence. This is key, because it is my contention that our comprehension of narrative information in complex serial drama is also fundamentally influenced by how we experience violence, which is demonstrated by the third conclusion:

> The function of violent film is dependent on both the story it tells and the narrative devices it employs in telling it. Only if film violence can be rationalized and considered crucial to the story can it serve a purpose.[152]

The narrative devices that complex serial drama employs center on cumulative serialisation, encouraging the viewer to remember nuanced elements of the ongoing story and draw links between these elements. In this sense, violence "serves a purpose" within the stories of complex serial drama by frequently providing significant narrative details that impacts our comprehension of these complex structures of interrelated information. The repercussions that this has for the study of violence in television drama using is stark: as the narratives of complex serial drama are defined by the intricacy of their cumulatively serialised information, when we engage with them we afford a greater capacity to rationalise violence and consider it crucial.

Shaw's research is helpful for providing an illustration of the significance of the relationship between the study of violence and the study of narrative in complex serial drama. This is extended by a 2006 study from Karyn Riddle et al. that observes:

> judgments about the degree of violence in the narratives were more strongly associated with their perceptions of the graphicness

[151] Ibid, Pp 148-149.
[152] Ibid.

> of the violent acts and the harm to the victims than with other factors such as the number of violent acts or the seriousness of those acts.[153]

Their study aimed to broaden the examination of how "the public constructs its judgments" of what is violent in television.[154] They found that the sheer number of violent depictions within a single episode, for example, did not relate "strongly to ratings of degree of violence for the program."[155] Instead, they found that judgments of violence were more strongly related to "ratings of seriousness and especially ratings of explicitness."[156] However, their study used episodic dramas, not complex serial dramas, nor did it measure judgments of violence that pertain to the serialised viewing experience.

The approach towards studying the narrative effects of violence illustrates a significant method by which we can understand how complex serial drama communicates its narrative. This is as opposed to abstracting its depictions of violence from their narrative context which, due to cumulative serialisation, leads to more speculative data than observational: in complex serial drama, the question of *what* is violent is less informative than *why* it is violent. Studies that invoke the narrative context of violence, as Shaw's study does, can observe the meaning-making that viewers draw on to understand it. This approach possesses a stronger foundation for inquiry into the effects of violence in the context of complex serial drama. In the next chapter I will demonstrate this directly by conducting textual analysis in tandem with evidence derived from the contemporary study of television violence.

[153] Karyn Riddle, Keren Eyal, Chad Mahood, and W. James Potter. 'Judging the Degree of Violence in Media Portrayals: A Cross-Genre Comparison' in *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. Iss 50, Vol 2. June. 2006. P 270.
[154] Ibid, P 274.
[155] Ibid, P 279.
[156] Ibid.

Chapter Two

The Dramaturgy of Violence: Vividness in Complex Serial Drama

You mean how I cracked open his skull and popped out his goddamn eyeball? How I bashed his big, beautiful brains into the ground over and over, while you and his little friends watched? Is that what you mean?
~Negan (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), *The Walking Dead*.[157]

In the third season of David Benioff and D. B. Weiss's HBO drama *Game of Thrones* a brutally violent scene takes place, commonly referred to as 'the red wedding'.[158] The scene runs for approximately five minutes, and in that time the viewer is exposed to the deaths of three primary protagonists:[159] King Robb Stark (Richard Madden), his pregnant wife, Queen Talisa Stark (Oona Chaplin), and his mother, Catelyn Stark (Michelle Fairley). The protagonists are attending a wedding, an act aimed to ally them with a Lord whose forces they need to join their war effort. As they enjoy the celebration in a large banquet hall, the Lord, who reveals that he has joined forces with their enemies, betrays them. The suddenness and shock of this betrayal is exacerbated by how it is revealed. The first visibly violent act that takes place is against the pregnant Queen Talisa Stark, who is repeatedly stabbed in her abdomen—killing her and her unborn child almost immediately:

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[157] Episode 5, Season 9. 'What Comes After'. Matthew Negrete (writer), Greg Nicotero (director). *The Walking Dead*. Angela Kang (showrunner). AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 4 November 2018.
[158] Episode 9, Season 3, 'The Rains of Castamere'. David Benioff & D. B. Weiss (writers, creators and showrunners). David Nutter (director). *Game of Thrones*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 2 June 2013.
[159] As well as a host of unnamed characters who form the army that the characters are leading.

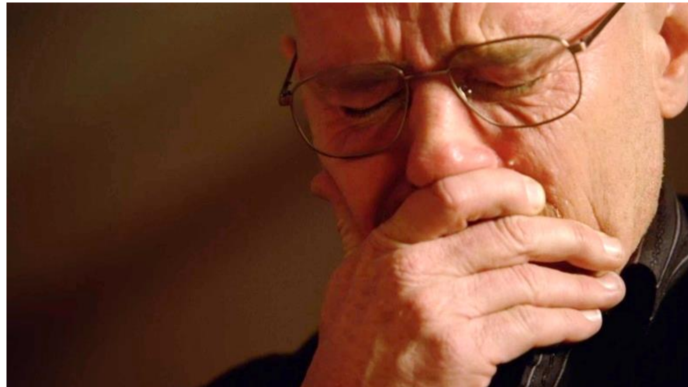
Figures 1-4: Queen Talisa's Death[160]

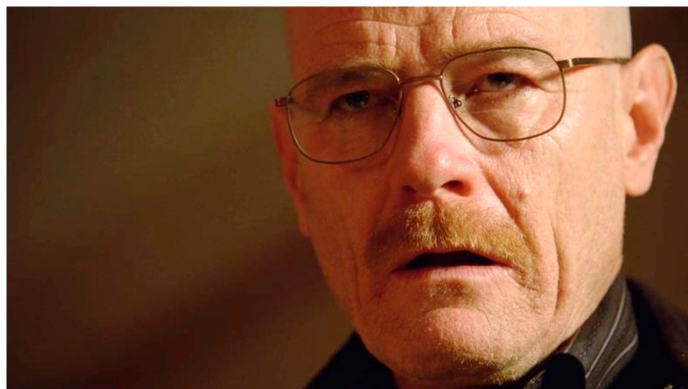
The force of this violence is felt in its suddenness. In just four seconds the scene becomes permanently storyworld-altering, projecting these consequences with graphic detail upon the viewer. Over the course of the next five minutes, the viewer must then also process the deaths of the other two protagonists. This briefness of this sudden violence betrays the weight of its narrative significance. *Game of Thrones* has a combined runtime[161] of approximately two days and fifteen hours, and yet this five-minute scene has narrative import that carries more weight than most individual episodes. Crucial to this narrative import is the degree to which a viewer discerns a payoff in its content: if a viewer is disgusted by watching this scene more than they are intrigued about how the story will address these events then, despite the attention that the scene commands, it may serve to dissuade their interest in the series in the future.

Similar scenes feature across all complex serial dramas, with varying degrees of intensity and differing approaches towards narrative significance. For example, in the second season of Vince Gilligan's AMC drama, *Breaking Bad*, in a sequence lasting less than ninety seconds, the primary protagonist Walter White (Bryan Cranston) allows Jane Margolis (Kristen Ritter) the girlfriend of his partner and fellow primary protagonist, Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul), to die of a drug overdose.[162] Walter enters their bedroom, where the couple lay unconscious after injecting heroin. He turns Jane over from her side on to her back, and then notices the used needles on their bedside table. He sits on the end of their bed, contemplative, when suddenly Jane begins to vomit and choke. Over the next seventy-eight seconds, Walter immediately gets up and moves to help her, gasping "no, no, no!" as he realises what is happening. As he reaches her, however, he pauses and reconsiders how her death might

[160] Captured from Episode 9, Season 3. 'The Rains of Castamere'. David Benioff & D. B. Weiss (writers, creators and showrunners). David Nutter (director). *Game of Thrones: The Complete Third Season*. DVD. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Release Date: June 14 2016. Timestamp: 00:44:16 – 00:44:20. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.
[161] Excluding season eight which as of February 2019 had not aired.
[162] Episode 12, Season 2. 'Phoenix'. Colin Bucksey (director). John Shiban (writer). *Breaking Bad*. Vince Gilligan (creator). AMC Networks. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 24 May 2009.

benefit him. He consigns himself to inaction, and then watches her die—first crying in response to her death, but then gathering himself and demonstrating a steelier resolve:





Figures 5-11: Walter Allows Jane to Die.[163]

This, like ‘the red wedding’, demonstrates a landmark shift in the series. Jane Margolis is dead but perhaps more importantly, Walter has crossed a moral line from which there is no return. The speed with which this situation devolves is key to its dramaturgical impact on the series.

In this chapter, I will draw on studies conducted in the social sciences to argue that this impact is defined by the enhanced ability for this violence to

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[163] Episode 12, Season 2. ‘Pheonix’. John Shiban (writer), Coling Bucksey (director). *Breaking Bad: The Complete Second Season*. DVD. Vince Gilligan (creator and showrunner). Sony Pictures. AMC Networks. New York City, New York. Original Release Date: 16 March 2010. Timestamps: 00:45:15, 00:45:21, 00:45:33, 00:45:40, 00:45:49, 00:46:10, 00:46:33. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

obtain viewer attention, influence the formation of memories, and increase the complexity of engagement. In section 2.2 I will use one more example of this violence, after more carefully defining this mode of understanding it in section 2.1. The demands of memory in complex serial drama have been addressed, most notably by Jason Mittell. He argues that narratively complex series use redundancies to retell information. This keeps the viewer's memory oriented with the most pertinent information.[164] These redundancies are performed through dialogue, flashback sequences, memory-refreshing recaps that air before episodes, and so on. Serialised storytelling requires engagement with memory on behalf of the viewer to comprehend the ongoing narrative. If events continually change the narrative, then a good memory of those events is required to make sense of the series. The ease with which viewers can access information through the Internet has also assisted this process. This means that narrative confusion can be alleviated through explanatory online resources.[165] Jason Mittell regards the use of 'retelling' as a mechanism for rekindling memory of previous narrative events. One of his examples of retelling is through dialogue:

> For a typical instance, early in *Lost*'s fourth-season episode "Cabin Fever," a scene shows the mercenary leader Keamy arriving via helicopter on a freighter with an injured man. The ship's doctor asks, "What did this to him?" Keamy replies, "A black pillar of smoke threw him 50 feet in the air, … ripped his guts out," retelling a spectacular event portrayed two episodes earlier in "The Shape of Things to Come."[166]

Mittell asserts that this retelling "reinforces what we have already previously seen."[167] However, Mittell does not explicitly address how the experience of violence in that previous scene impresses upon our memory, nor how recalling its imagery and sound might influence how we engage with this new scene. To this end, my argument is that violence in complex serial drama

[164] Mittell. *Complex TV*. Pp 180-194.
[165] Ibid, P 262.
[166] Ibid, Pp 181-182.
[167] Ibid, P 182.

holds unique dramaturgical properties that influence the viewer's ongoing textual comprehension through the impact of its experience.

Violence is a powerful narrative force in complex serial drama because it represents major, unpredictable, change, and because it is easy to remember. It is also powerful because it is narratively significant far beyond the limitations of its usually brief runtime—almost never longer than five minutes. The reference to such a violent scene also heightens the immediate viewing process: conjuring its memory brings with it the meaning and significance that the viewer has constructed through engaging with it. This meaning and significance is powerful by virtue of its association with such a consequential event, and can be highly influential upon subsequent narrative information. In this way, these particularly consequential violent sequences enhance the ease with which other related scenes are accessed and organised within the viewer's diegetic understanding of the narrative. Mittell writes:

> At this point in *Lost*'s original broadcast run, a dedicated viewer would have watched 79 episodes over the course of four years, creating a vast array of narrative information to retain and recall. Even the most attentive viewers could not possibly have all of that narrative information active in their operative working memory, which is able to hold around seven discrete thoughts at a time—most of the story information they have retained would be archived in long-term memory. [168]

My understanding of violence as a dramaturgical tool in complex serial drama complements Mittell's point. It serves to make this process of retaining and recalling this "vast array of narrative information" easier. Drawing on the powerful memories of violence requires less retelling to provoke its access. This ease of remembering helps the viewer to read meaning into the series through subsequent associations.

I will conduct my argument in this chapter by primarily drawing on qualitative studies within the social sciences and applying them to a humanities context. This chapter argues that the intense experience of these uniquely violent

[168] Ibid.

scenes is memorable in a way that requires less effort to remember subsequently. They are therefore dramaturgically useful for narrative communication. Section 2.1 outlines how they perform this function by providing a cognitively intense short-term experience that is highly likely to influence long-term memory. This argument hinges upon the work of Karyn Riddle's contributions to the study of television violence in the social sciences. Riddle's 2014 study, 'A Theory of Vivid Media Violence', analyses a body of pre-existing studies—both quantitative and qualitative—to assert her "theory of vivid media violence."[169] Riddle's work draws on studies that use content analysis[170] to demonstrate that 'graphic' violence has been an increasingly intense and prominent textual feature in U.S. media up until the 2010s.[171] Her theory re-contextualises 'graphic' violence as a form of 'vivid' information, drawing upon a body of qualitative scholarship that studies the psychological effects of vividness.[172] Riddle's identification of 'vividness' is ideal for a humanities understanding of the narrative impact that violence has in complex serial drama. Section 2.2 demonstrates this narrative impact through an example of vivid violence drawn from a sequence in AMC's complex serial drama *The Walking Dead*. Section 2.3 revisits Riddle's work with this narrative

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[169] Karyn Riddle. 'A Theory of Vivid Media Violence' in *Communication Theory*. Iss 24, No. 3. International Communication Association. 2014. Pp 291-310.

[170] As discussed in section 1.1 of chapter one, content analysis is the mode of studying television violence by quantitively recording its frequency and constitution in accordance to a defined rubric.

[171] To this end, Riddle draws particularly strong evidence from the following three studies:
Barbara J. Wilson, Stacy L. Smith, James Potter, Daniel Linz, Edward Donnerstein, Dale Kunkel, Eva Blumenthal, and Tim Gray. 'Content Analysis of Entertainment Television: The 1994-1995 Results' in *Television Violence and Public Policy* [ed. James T. Hamilton]. University of Michigan Press. Chicago, Michigan. 2000. Pp 105-148.
James D. Sargent, Todd. F. Heatherton, Bridget Ahrens, Madeline A. Dalton, Jennifer J. Tickle, Michael L. Beach. 'Adolescent Exposure to Extremely Violent Movies' in *Journal of Adolescent Health*. Iss 31. 2002. Pp 449-454.
Andrew J. Weaver & Barbara J. Wilson. 'The Role of Graphic and Sanitized Violence in the Enjoyment of Television Dramas' in *Human Communication Research*. Iss 35. 2009. Pp 442-463.

[172] Riddle most prominently draws upon the following four studies to this end:
R. E. Nisbett & L. Ross. *Human inference: Strategies and shortcomings of social judgment*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall. New Jersey. 1980.
S. E. Taylor & S. C. Thompson. 'Stalking the elusive "vividness" effect.' In *Psychological Review*. Iss 89. 1982. Pp 155-181.
J. Steuer. 'Defining virtual reality: Dimensions determining telepresence' in *Journal of Communication*. Iss 42. 1992. Pp 73-93.
R. E. Guadagno, K. V. Rhoads, & B. J. Sagarin. 'Figural vividness and persuasion: Capturing the "elusive" vividness effect.' In *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Iss 37. 2011. Pp 626-638.

example established to demonstrate the impact of vivid violence upon comprehension of the story. This impact is defined by an enhanced capacity for rumination over its content compared to more pallidly interpreted information. It also invokes a more vivid, and inferentially rich, memory of its representation within our memories. Finally, section 2.4 posits how vivid violence is used dramaturgically in complex serial drama. This is performed first by outlining the fundamental importance of the viewer's detection of a narrative within the violence. I then outline two sets of benefits that vivid violence presents to the dramaturgy of complex serial drama, with the crucial caveat that these benefits apply only to the viewer who perceives a compelling payoff in its experience. The first benefit pertains to its *short-term impact*. That is, that vivid violence draws more attention to its representation than any less-vivid narrative information, and this vividness enhances their enjoyment. In this way, the short-term benefit of vivid violence in complex serial drama is that viewers enjoy it more than less-vivid information. The second benefit pertains to its long-term impact. This is divided into two effects: 1) it enhances *long-term memories* by providing the viewer with stable, easy-to-remember, and influential information that they can continually draw on to assist narrative comprehension; and 2) this in turn renders information relating to it more interesting to think about, as its relationship with vivid violence increases its narrative significance. I will begin this argument by drawing out Karyn Riddle's theory of vivid media violence.

The argument presented in this chapter emphasises that theories of violence in television, introduced through studies such as Riddle's, should incorporate textual analysis. Textual analysis offers narrative context that provides greater insight into the viewing experience. In the example of complex serial drama, it demonstrates how the format of serialised storytelling provides a much more unique and intricate viewing experience than that of episodic drama. The repercussions that this has upon measurements of audience attention, emotion, and memory relating to these series is therefore fundamentally impacted.

2.1 Vivid Media Violence

The presence of extreme violence in complex serial drama creates stronger memories in viewers as a result of its portrayal. Violence can create easily remembered narrative landmarks in complex serial drama, wherein information and meaning pertaining to its persistent storyworld are logged and easily recalled. To argue this, I will first identify how differently violence had been portrayed in television drama before complex serial drama. I will then turn to the study of violence in complex serial drama. This is most significantly by examining the work of Riddle, whose work primarily pertains to the effects of media violence upon adults and children. Using Riddle's work, as well as that of associated scholars and psychologists, I will demonstrate how violence has become a crucial facet of serialised storytelling in many complex serial dramas. In this, it is essential to recognise that 'vividness', as defined by Rosanna E. Guadagno, et al., necessarily requires a certain type of response from the viewer, one that successfully persuades a viewer with its central message, whereas:

> Off-thesis vividness has the unintended and undercutting consequence of distracting recipients from the point of the communication.[173]

Even when the appropriate message has been "vivified", the viewer must find this message to be persuasive, summarising that a message is

> more persuasive if the central theme included vivid imagery that was congruent with the persuasive argument but was less successful if the vivid imagery argued against the central theme of the message.[174]

What constitutes a "persuasive argument" is the subject of Chapter Three.

Mortal violence in complex serial drama often depicts the sustained pain and suffering of its victims. This was a consequence usually sanitised in previous broadcast television dramas. As discussed in Chapter One, violence in

[173] Guadagno. Rhoads & Sagarin. 'Figural vividness and persuasion: Capturing the "elusive" vividness effect', P 626.
[174] Ibid.

broadcast drama previously existed only with the permission of network censors. These censors influenced the level of blood, gore, and the suffering of victims in accordance with their acceptability guidelines. To this end, in their quantitative study conducted between 1994 and 1995, Barbara Wilson and Stacy Smith et al., found that at least one act of violence occurred in 57 percent of all broadcast television programs.[175] However, 85 percent of this violence featured no blood or gore[176], and that in all incidents of violence:

> …44 percent depict *no* physical injury to the target. In an additional 3 percent of the violent interactions, the target is not even shown on screen (camera moves away or the scene changes abruptly). Thus, almost half of violent incidents (47 percent) on television contain no observable indications of harm to the victim.[177]

Furthermore, regarding the demonstration of pain and suffering in the victims of violence, Wilson et al found:

> In summary, most violent interactions on television contain no observable harm or pain cues to the victim. […] On the overall program level, about one-third of the programs do not portray any physical, emotional, psychological, or financial consequences of violence. When such consequences are shown, they are for the most part depicted as short-term in nature. Of all the channel types, premium cable is the most likely to portray the negative outcomes of violence.[178]

Four years after this study, complex serial drama emerged on cable television, epitomising the depiction of such "negative outcomes of violence". Soon these depictions would spread to cable, and even network television.

By the end of *The Sopranos'* six-season run it had detailed the deaths of ninety-two human characters, of which twenty-two were either primary or recurring. This approach to death provided a subsequent rubric for the

[175] Wilson, et al. 'Content Analysis of Entertainment Television: The 1994-1995 Results' P 109.
[176] Ibid, P 126.
[177] Ibid, P 133.
[178] Ibid, P 135.

persistent storyworlds of almost all complex serial dramas: people must die. The genuine threat of mortality is the status quo for storyworlds in these dramas. This violence demonstrates that the status quo is that there is no status quo, as violent upheaval threatens the storyworld at any given moment. Punctuating this threat of mortality is the graphic, un-sanitised depiction of violence. This violence is not always as graphically apparent. For example, AMC's *Mad Men* features very little graphic violence depicting death. However, it features the graphic depiction of violence against women, including rape and other forms of physical and emotional abuse. To this end, a basic understanding of the dramaturgy of violence in complex serial drama will be built by considering the nature of viewers' experience. This means that the significance of violence is determined by how it is presented to viewers, and how they respond to it. I will first introduce the work of Riddle and her theory of 'vivid media violence' to provide a framework within which to consider this.

Manipulating Memory with Vivid Media Violence

Complex serial drama demands a high level of cognitive energy from its viewers to remember the many hours of audio-visual information it communicates. To this end, complex serial drama attempts to manipulate the ideal viewer's immediate cognitive response to violence in a way that makes it easier to remember. This is due to, as Riddle writes, the 'vividness' of its experience, and the fact that "information presented and stored in vivid format is more accessible in memory over the long term than less vivid information."[179]

Riddle's theory of vivid media violence draws upon a wide array of psychological studies and scholarly analyses that pertains broadly to engagement with media violence.[180] Drawing upon this combination of psychological evidence and pre-existing inquiry, Riddle proposes a "theoretical framework for investigating the effects of exposure to graphic

[179] Riddle. 'A Theory of Vivid Media Violence'. P. 302.
[180] To give an idea of the breadth of her study, Riddle cites a total of seventy unique studies and pre-existing analysis throughout her fourteen-page article.

media violence"[181]. Riddle's theory pertains to a gap that the pre-existing work had opened but not addressed at that point, specifically regarding "the ways in which highly graphic media violence differs from sanitized violence in terms of effects."[182] Riddle rescinds the concept of "graphicness" in this context, and instead argues that the dialogue is better served with the term "vividness."[183] Vividness is understood as a "continuum" that spans five different dimensions: *Concreteness*, *Proximity of Information*, *Emotional Interest*, *Breadth of Detail*, and *Depth of Detail*.[184]

Concreteness of communicated information within media relates to how detailed and specific its capture is. Riddle describes it as "vivid stimuli tend to include crisp, detailed, concrete imagery."[185] The more detailed and specific the representation of violence that a television series communicates, the more concrete and therefore vivid it is. The greater the information about, for example, the consequence of a gunshot wound to the head, the more *concrete* its depiction. *Concreteness*, to an extent, asserts the believability of a depicted event. The greater the complexity of detail presented, the better the event is explained, and thus the easier it is to believe.

Proximity of Information or *Spatial Proximity* refers to two aspects of proximity. The first, and most obvious, is how close the viewer is spatially oriented to the violence. The closer to the event the camera places the viewer, the more vivid the experience. However, 'proximity' can also refer to the personal relevance of the violence. If it impacts a character with socio-cultural relevance for the viewer[186], or if that violence happens in the same country or city as a viewer, then it will be more vivid for them.[187]

Emotional Interest creates vividness in violence when other characters express emotional reactions to the act. Riddle writes, "two of the prior studies

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[181] Riddle. 'A Theory of Vivid Media Violence'. P 291.
[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid, P 294.
[184] Ibid, Pp 293-297.
[185] Ibid, P 294.
[186] Perhaps the viewer possesses a socio-cultural similarity to the character; or perhaps the character possesses traits that make the violence more impactful for socio-cultural reasons—i.e. violence against women may be more naturally vivid for some viewers than violence against men.
[187] Riddle. 'A Theory of Vivid Media Violence'. P 297.

that tested the effects of graphicness in violent media did so by manipulating characters' reaction to violence, such as moans and screams."[188]

Breadth of Detail relates to how many senses are being engaged through the representation of violence. According to Riddle. "violence on television (sight and sound) is more vivid that violence on radio (sound only)."[189]

Depth of Detail, related to its breadth, regards the technologically-generated quality of the information being conveyed. For example, a depiction of violence displayed on a twenty-inch cathode ray tube television set made in the 1990s is less vivid than if it were displayed on a seventy-inch organic light-emitting diode television made in 2018.

These five dimensions provide the variety of means by which violence can be represented vividly. Graphicness is commonly defined as "the amount of blood and gore in a violent scene, and the degree to which the violence is shown up close".[190] However, within Riddle's theory, these are just two of five aspects of vividness:

> Indeed, the two features of graphic violence have direct parallels to two of the five sub-components of vivid stimuli: the level of concreteness (amount of blood/gore) and spatial proximity (violence close or distant). Put another way, when media violence scholars study graphic media violence, they are essentially studying a specific case of vividness.[191]

Riddle concludes that 'vivid media violence' offers greater depth, as vividness is a well-researched topic in other fields that can aid in the study of graphic violence.

Important to Riddle's theory of vivid media violence is that each of these five dimensions of vividness are quite separate in their qualities, and "each can be manipulated while keeping the others constant."[192] For example, a shot depicting highly *concrete* details of a fresh axe-wound may create vividness.

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[188] Ibid, P 296.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Ibid, Pp. 291 - 292
[191] Ibid, P 294.
[192] Ibid, P 297.

However, the camera being situated at a significant distance from the depiction (*spatial proximity*), an emotionless expression on the faces of each participant (*emotional interest*), the absence of sound (*breadth of detail*), and a poor-quality camera-phone being used to film it (*depth of detail*), may impact how vivid the depiction is, regardless of its high-level of *concreteness*. To this end, the mise-èn-scene and cinematography that depict a violent event is what creates the potential for how vivid its representation can be. Next, I will detail such an example from a 2016 episode of the AMC network's complex serial drama, *The Walking Dead*. In section 2.3 I complete a more thorough analysis of how Riddle's theory of vivid media violence impacts the dramaturgy of complex serial drama.

2.2 Vivid Violence: Glenn Rhee's Death in *The Walking Dead*

The example I have chosen is from the first episode of *The Walking Dead*'s seventh season, 'The Day Will Come When You Won't Be'.[193] This example demonstrates the extent to which violence can be vivid in complex serial drama. I will first give an outline of the example, and then consider its *concreteness*, *proximity of information*, *emotional interest*, *breadth of detail*, and *depth of detail*.

This specific episode is rated TV-MA and aired in 2016 at the series regular 9pm timeslot on the AMC cable network, making it a primetime drama. As of February 2019, *The Walking Dead* is the most successful cable television drama of all time, as determined by its viewership calculated by Nielsen.[194] *The Walking Dead* follows an ever-changing group of protagonists as they attempt to negotiate the post-apocalyptic wasteland in the wake of a zombie epidemic. Protagonists die on a regular basis, frequently in violent, highly vivid ways. This violence is integral to the series' tonal emphasis upon brutality, despair, and loss. The series is a complex serial drama: despite being a post-apocalyptic zombie series, its narrative is not oriented by the institution of fighting the zombie epidemic. Instead, it is oriented by a persistent, cumulative, storyworld that is character-driven. The characters frequently demonstrate violent, morally transgressive, behaviour and worldviews, and the series uses extremely vivid violence on a regular basis, far more than would be permissible on a broadcast network. I have chosen the example because these *concrete* details illustrate its vividness. However, this level of *concreteness* is not necessary, or typical, for the rendering of vivid violence in other complex serial dramas. Vividness across all five aspects can make scenes and information memorable.

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[193] Season 7, Episode 1. 'The Day Will Come When You Won't Be'. Greg Nicotero (Director). Scott M. Gimple (Writer). *The Walking Dead*. Scott M. Gimple (Showrunner). AMC Networks. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 23 October 2016.

[194] Steve Baron. ''The Walking Dead' Season 5 Finale is Highest Rated Finale in Series History, Garnering 15.8 Million Viewers'. *TV By The Numbers*. < https://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/1/the-walking-dead-season-5-finale-is-highest-rated-finale-in-series-history-garnering-15-8-million-viewers/381342/> [First Accessed 25/06/2018].

The selected episode features the sudden and unexpected death of a longstanding primary protagonist of the series named Glenn Rhee (Steven Yeun). Glenn is murdered with a baseball bat wrapped in barbed wire in front of his pregnant wife, Maggie Rhee (Lauren Cohan), and his closest friends, after they are captured by a malevolent group led by a primary antagonist, Negan (Jeffrey Dean Morgan). This is Negan's first appearance in the series, his existence and identity having been shrouded in mystery for the previous eight episodes. Glenn's murder begins with a medium distance waist-level two-shot of Negan, facing the camera, standing in front of Glenn, who is sitting on his knees. Negan is threatening to punish the group, as moments earlier one of their members, not Glenn, broke free and attacked him. Suddenly, Negan turns and bashes Glenn on the top of his head with the bat. The scene cuts to a close-up reaction shot of Maggie, who is shocked and horrified, then to a similar shot of another protagonist, before returning to a medium-shot of Negan bashing Glenn, who is now slightly out of frame. Another cut finds similar reactions from two other protagonists, as Maggie can be heard off-screen screaming, before an eye-level shot slightly to the right of Glenn shows Maggie struggling to comprehend what she is seeing:

Figure 12: Maggie in Shock[195]

[195] Captured from Season 7, Episode 1. 'The Day Will Come When You Won't Be'. Greg Nicotero (director). Scott M. Gimple (writer). *The Walking Dead: Season 7*. Scott M. Gimple

This shot lasts for slightly more than two seconds, in which time Glenn can be heard moaning and gurgling off-screen, before a reverse-shot close-up shows his face, as depicted in Figure 13.

Figure 13: Glenn's Death 1[196]

Glenn's forehead has been caved in by the bat, his left eyeball bulges from its socket and blood covers his face. Glenn is slightly swaying on his knees, making strangled moans. This conveys that Glenn is badly brain damaged. There are three more cuts to reaction shots from other protagonists. Finally, there is an eye-level shot of Maggie (as per Figure 12) who is still watching in shock and horror. A close-up two-shot shows Negan bending down into Glenn's face, now beginning to taunt him:

> **Negan:** Buddy, are you still there? ... I just don't know, it seems like you're trying to speak! But you just took a hell of a hit! I just

(showrunner). DVD. Lionsgate. AMC Networks. New York City, New York. Release Date: 22 August 2017. Timestamp: 00:18:41. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

[196] Captured from Season 7, Episode 1. 'The Day Will Come When You Won't Be'. Greg Nicotero (director). Scott M. Gimple (writer). *The Walking Dead: Season 7*. Scott M. Gimple (showrunner). DVD. Lionsgate. AMC Networks. New York City, New York. Release Date: 22 August 2017. Timestamp: 00:18:42. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

popped your skull so hard, your eyeball just *popped* out! ... And it is gross as shit!

Figure 14: Glenn's Death 2[197]

At this point, a close-up shows Glenn recognise Maggie—Figure 14 depicts his attention directed towards her. He manages to slur out "Maggie I'll find you",[198] while continuing to gurgle and convulse. The scene cuts between Glenn and a reaction shot of Maggie. After Negan delivers a short monologue, a medium two-shot shows him bash Glenn in the side of his head, knocking him to the ground onto his stomach. As Figure 15 shows, a two-shot at a distance of a few metres shows Negan repeatedly bash Glenn's prone head with the bat, with Glenn's skull—partially lit up by the headlights in the background—visible caving with every strike. This shot lasts six seconds and depicts three consecutive strikes, with blood spurting up after each hit.

[197] Captured from Season 7, Episode 1. 'The Day Will Come When You Won't Be'. Greg Nicotero (director). Scott M. Gimple (writer). *The Walking Dead: Season 7*. Scott M. Gimple (showrunner). DVD. Lionsgate. AMC Networks. New York City, New York. Release Date: 22 August 2017. Timestamp: 00:19:09. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.
[198] This is a reference to a phrase that they have often used to each other in their relationship.

Figure 15: Glenn's Death 3[199]

As depicted in Figure 16, the scene then cuts to a final close-up of Glenn's skull, reduced to a scrambled mess of brain matter, hair, bone, blood, and an eyeball. His left hand is still twitching.

[199] Captured from Season 7, Episode 1. 'The Day Will Come When You Won't Be'. Greg Nicotero (director). Scott M. Gimple (writer). *The Walking Dead: Season 7*. Scott M. Gimple (showrunner). DVD. Lionsgate. AMC Networks. New York City, New York. Release Date: 22 August 2017. Timestamp: 00:20:22. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

Figure 16: Glenn's Death 4[200]

The elapsed time of the experience of Glenn's death, between the first strike with the bat and the final close-up shot of Glenn's remains as represented in Figure 16, is two minutes and seventeen seconds. The visual depiction of violence in Glenn's death—every visible strike and every moment the consequences of those strikes are visible—is approximately thirty-two seconds. Throughout this time, the depiction of violence rates highly in all five of the dimensions of vividness as outlined by Riddle.

In terms of *concreteness*, Figures 13 and 14 demonstrate the concrete visual details of Glenn's death. Close-ups are used to depict Glenn's head after he has been struck, with blood streaming down his face, his forehead caved in to the shape of the bat, and his eyeball forced from its socket. The long two-shot of Negan bashing Glenn's skull, as depicted in Figure 15, shows the force with which he is striking him, as the skull visibly caves with every strike, accompanied with a spurt of blood. The force of these strikes is re-emphasised by the final close-up of Glenn's remains, as depicted in Figure 16. This depiction of violence and its consequences are highly visible and detailed. This affords the scene a high level of concreteness and contributes

[200] Captured from Season 7, Episode 1. 'The Day Will Come When You Won't Be'. Greg Nicotero (director). Scott M. Gimple (writer). *The Walking Dead: Season 7*. Scott M. Gimple (showrunner). DVD. Lionsgate. AMC Networks. New York City, New York. Release Date: 22 August 2017. Timestamp: 00:20:34. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

significantly towards its vividness. The high degree of *spatial proximity* is demonstrated by the abundant close-ups used to depict these concrete details of Glenn's death for the viewer. The high degree of *emotional interest* is conveyed by the reaction shots of Glenn's wife Maggie and the other protagonists. Their emotional trauma demonstrated by their facial expressions, as well as the sounds of their screaming, gasping, and crying.

That Glenn is a protagonist who has been present in the series since its second episode also bolsters the degree of *emotional interest* for the viewer. This is because long-term viewers are, by this time, invested in his character. Glenn is a kind and loving character who fights for peace among the survivors in the apocalyptic wasteland, frequently espousing ideals of community building over threat elimination. In this way, the injustice of his brutal, arbitrary, death in front of the people he loves most is likely to create deep emotional interest in viewers. The consistent use of sound in Glenn's death assists significantly in the *breadth of detail* in the scene. The repeated sound of the baseball bat thwacking against Glenn's head, his subsequent gurgling and struggling, Negan's taunting, and the sound of panicked breathing and crying by the protagonists who helplessly watch, contributes towards the vividness of the scene. Finally, the high-definition quality of the scene's filming, contingent upon the quality of the screen on which it is watched, provide strong *depth of detail*. Across the spectrum, Glenn's death is highly vivid.

Attachment to Glenn's character is provided through six seasons of preceding textual information. However, this final, definitive, statement directly involving his character is only two minutes and seventeen seconds. It is not only how this violence looks, sounds, and feels that makes it noteworthy, but that, more so than any less vivid information conveyed in a similar amount of time, its experience will continue to be relevant for the viewer in the long-term. In such a short period of time, Glenn is killed, his wife Maggie is widowed, and Negan has established his character in a way that is highly unlikely to be forgotten for even the most disinterested viewer. The narrative facts contained within this information are so profound that its importance is raised above all other non-vivid sequences of similar length. This is the dramaturgical power of vivid

violence that, despite its brief length in comparison to the runtime of the series, elevates the impact and influence of its information above all other information of similar length, making it highly memorable.

2.3 Elaborating and Remembering Vivid Information

Viewer memories of meaning derived through their interpretation of dialogue, non-verbal communication, and other more-pallid forms of expression, will decay over time. As Mittell writes, narratively complex dramas practice "retelling" to combat this, utilising an array of diegetic and non-diegetic tools to remind the audience of relevant information conveyed earlier in the series.[201] However, as Riddle's work demonstrates, information contained within memories of vivid violence are less likely to decay as quickly, and are easier to remember, than more pallid information. Complex serial drama uses vivid media violence in such a way that it becomes a meaningful source of narrative information. As discussed previously, however, while cognitive attention and memory may be gripped by scenes of vivid violence, that does not ensure a positive viewing experience, nor an enhanced appreciation of the story or its characters. If feelings of disgust incurred by these scenes outweigh the perceived payoff that the series offers, then these features of vivid violence will serve as a detriment to the ongoing viewer experience. Having established the conceptual parameters of vivid media violence and providing a case study, I will now move on to these long-term dramaturgical effects that it can have in tandem with cumulative serialisation.

Riddle's theory of vivid media violence demonstrates that vivid materials have an enhanced capacity to grasp attention, develop immersion, elicit emotional reactions, encourage complex cogitation, and cultivate highly accessible memories and complex networks of interpretation.[202] These effects can empower vivid violence as a vehicle that encourages long-term memory of its information. I argue that it also enables advanced cognitive extrapolation upon that information that has ramifications for how viewers interpret series. In this way, the vivid experience of violence possesses the ability to provide narrative landmarks that (re)orient the viewer with existing information, as well as influence how they interpret and anticipate future information. In complex serial drama, this information pertains most prominently to its characters. The

[201] Mittell. *Complex TV*. Pp 180-194.
[202] Riddle. 'A Theory of Vivid Media Violence'. P 298.

dramaturgy of serialised storytelling, as Michael Z. Newman succinctly defines it, features “continuing stories [that] make characters more likely to undergo significant life events and changes”.[203] Vivid representations of violence in complex serial drama provide the perfect mode of communication for these “significant life events and changes”. This is because it is *concrete* in a way that broadcast television is unable to be, and memorable in a way that benefits cumulative serialised storytelling.

Riddle’s theory of vivid media violence demonstrates how scenes of violence are of dramaturgical significance in complex serial drama. Her theory hinges upon six, related, formal propositions, developed through psychological inquiry:

1) Short-term attention.[204]
2) Feelings of immersion.[205]
3) Emotional reactions.[206]
4) Engagement in “cognitive elaboration.”[207]
5) The “long-term accessibility of related thoughts in memory.”[208]
6) The “complexity of mental models that develop after exposure.”[209]

Of these propositions, the first three are the simplest to define and link to the vivid violence in complex serial drama. For example, the vividness of the violence against Glenn grasps attention. Within three seconds of the first strike upon his head, the first scream of shock is heard from Maggie, and within eight seconds the first close-up of Glenn (depicted in Figure two) is displayed. The degree to which this visual information is vivid to the viewer will dictate the intensity of an “involuntary, orienting response” that “results in automatic allocation of resources to stimuli.”[210] The burst of additional highly “involved” attention to this vivid information also increases the degree that a

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[203] Michael Z. Newman. ‘From Beats to Arcs: Towards a Poetics of Television Narrative’ in *The Velvet Light Trap*. No 58. University of Texas Press. 2006. P 17.P 23. *(*Square Brackets Mine)
[204] Riddle. ‘A Theory of Vivid Media Violence’. Pp 298-299.
[205] Ibid, P 299.
[206] Ibid, P 300.
[207] Ibid, P 301.
[208] Ibid, P 302.
[209] Ibid, P 303.
[210] Ibid, P 298.

viewer will subsequently engaged with it. Riddle cites this as “immersion.”[211] This increased involvement is likely to lead to the viewer cognitively elaborating on the information. This would involve the viewer identifying his caved-in forehead, his left eyeball bulging out of its socket, the blood pouring down his face, and the struggling sounds of exasperation that indicate brain damage. The emotional impact of this information is magnified by the character to whom it is happening, as Glenn is one of the most sympathetic characters in the series. He frequently demonstrates strong familial values. Much of his time in previous seasons dedicated to his developing relationship with Maggie, who he meets, marries, and is expecting a child with. Investment in Glenn’s character, along with the shock of this sudden burst of violence, heightens interest in what happens next. This then increases the likelihood that a viewer will feel more immersed in the text.[212]

The latter three propositions in Riddle’s theory of vivid media violence consider a more complex impact upon long-term viewer engagement. They address, respectively: the additional complexity with which viewers cogitate upon information encoded within vivid media violence; subsequently, how easily they are then able to retrieve that information from their long-term memory; and finally, how this combination of complexity and accessibility influences the viewer’s comprehension of related information. Through vivid representations of violence, complex serial drama can reliably create information that will be remembered with a high degree of specificity by the viewer. This means the use of vivid violence has risk: if the information encoded into vivid violence is unpalatable to the viewer, their interest and appreciation in the series may be diminished.

Cognitive Elaboration: Thoroughly Analysing Vivid Information

Proposition 4 of Riddle’s theory of media violence regards its impact upon ‘cognitive elaboration’. Cognitive elaboration is a psychological term used to refer to “how thoroughly people process information at the time of encoding, and the degree to which they link new information to cognitions already in

[211] Ibid, P 299.
[212] Ibid.

memory".[213] Vividly represented information encourages viewers to cogitate with greater complexity upon its content, and its referential content. Information presented through vivid media violence communicates a high degree of detail due to its vividness. This increases the degree to which viewers cognitively elaborate upon it.[214] The more significance a series places upon information, the greater that information's complexity in the viewer's mind, and thus the greater its influence upon a broader sense of significance. For example, after Glenn's death, the viewer's process of cognitive elaboration pertaining to any future narrative information involving his widow, Maggie, is highly likely to involve the scene of his death: e.g. how she is coping with it, how much she hates Negan, whether she will kill Negan in a similarly violent way, and so on. In this way, vivid media violence also creates complex points of reference for future cognitive elaboration to relate back to. However, viewers will only perform this high-level of cognitive elaboration if they are appropriately moved by the information encoded within the vivid representation of violence. This is if, as outlined in the Introduction to this thesis, the viewer perceives what Matthew Kieran terms an adequate 'pay off' for doing so.[215] As Rosanna E. Guadagno et al. write in their psychological study on the effects of vividness upon persuasion:

> When the arguments and illustrations in a communication are good enough to elicit supportive elaborations, vivid communications are successful to the extent that they constrain the elaboration process and foster topic-relevant elaborations."[216]

What this demonstrates is that this form of interweaving cognitive elaboration is invited by vivid violence only when its information provides the viewer with a persuasive focus for their attention. Vivid violence in complex serial drama is not innately beneficial as a dramaturgical influence. In fact, it can hinder the intended impact of the information.

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[213] Ibid, P 300.
[214] Ibid, P 301.
[215] Matthew Kieran. "Art, Morality and Ethics: On the (Im)Moral Character of Art Works and Inter-Relations to Artistic Value" in *Philosophy Compass* 1(2). 2006. P 137.
[216] Rosanna E. Guadagno, Kelton v. L. Rhoads, and Brad J. Sagarin. 'Figural Vividness and Persuasion: Capturing the "Elusive" Vividness Effect' in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Iss 35, No 5. The Society for Personality and Social Psychology. 2011. P 635.

For vividness to impact a narrative, the audience must be appropriately moved by a payoff to access the information involved. As an anecdotal example, the vividness of Glenn's death drew too much of my attention to its brutality, and its intensity repelled me from cognitively elaborating upon it as a source of narrative information. Instead, my response was stymied by my shock and emotional distress: as though the narrative had betrayed my investment in it by giving me too much of something that I did not want. That is, it did not provide me with an adequate payoff. This is not objective evidence that the scene failed, but it is an example of how a highly vivid representation of narrative information risks negatively impacting its audience if they find that information unpalatable. Thus, for some viewers, vividness may increase the obstructive properties of unpalatable information. Worse, it may decrease their overall investment in the series. As Guadagno et el. write:

> But vividness is multifaceted and can just as easily blunt the persuasive effect by focusing attention on poor or irrelevant arguments and features. When on-topic vivid illustrations reinforce poor rather than sound arguments, the likelihood that the target of a communication will counterargue and elaborate on unsupportive arguments is increased.[217]

In my example, the choice of Glenn's gruesome death constitutes a "poor rather than sound" argument for compelling me to think about its over-arching significance. For me, the scene stands out not for its narrative impact, but the way in which it depicts violence, and the feelings of disgust that depiction conjures in me. While my understanding of the scene is complex due to the analytical effort I have spent upon it, the significance I draw from it does not pertain to its narrative meaning. I do not feel compelled to cogitate upon the information in that way, because it is not palatable. For me, it is difficult to find Glenn being beaten to death in front of his pregnant wife interesting in a way that moves me to pore over its greater narrative meaning. In fact, I feel repelled to that end, and this negative impression is magnified by the vivid spectacle of its representation. For other viewers, the scene was more successful – this is a personal and subjective process for each viewer (the

[217] Ibid, P 635.

minutiae of this ‘personal and subjective process’ is returned to as a topic of Chapter Three). If a viewer cannot detect a sufficient payoff to counteract the innately negative experience of watching something bad happen to a character you care about, then the scene will fail (for them.) This is necessarily anecdotal, demonstrating the sort of risk that vivid violence possesses to viewer engagement. How these risks can impact a complex serial drama is returned to in Section 2.4. How complex serial drama negotiates the communication of its characters—upon which its narratives are focussed—to create a payoff for its use of vivid violence, and thus mitigate this risk, is the topic of Chapter Three.

Vivid violence, when successfully used to support cumulative narrative meaning in complex serial drama, compels viewers to cogitate upon related information. This creates additional complexity with which to reflect upon previous information, and an additional source of significance that can temper future information. For example, Glenn’s final words “Maggie, I will find you” has a multiplicity of meanings. The most obvious is the phrase’s emotional significance: it is used between the two both prior to and after they are separated for eight episodes in season four. The phrase is the topic of several interviews with the cast and producers of the series, as well as fan discussion, with different opinions as to its significance. Steven Yeun (the actor who plays Glenn) addresses these opinions by summarising his own, as he states in an interview with Entertainment Weekly:

> Part of it is that he’s just had his brain knocked in and is glitching. And maybe he’s going back to a time when he was looking for Maggie when they were separated. Maybe he’s trying to leave a lasting legacy of what it is to be Glenn in that moment and to be selfless and say, ‘Don’t worry, I will always be here,’ or ‘There’s nothing that can separate us,’ and that could definitely be it. But I think the beauty of this particular situation is the fact that it’s so layered, and you can draw whatever you want out of those words.[218]

[218] Dalton Ross quoting Steven Yeun. ‘The Walking Dead: Steven Yeun explains Glenn’s final words’ in *Entertainment Weekly*. Website. <https://ew.com/article/2016/10/29/walking-dead-steven-yeun-glenn-final-words/> 29 October 2016. [First Accessed 20/10/18].

Yeun's words reflect the degree to which Glenn's final words have successfully coerced him—and perhaps us—to pore over their significance. This is driven by the attention, immersion and emotional response driven by the vividness of the scene. Considered in this context, Glenn's final words can be taken to represent both the horrific consequences of violence, and significance of the love that he feels for his wife. The degree of analysis that these words encourage is, as Riddle asserts, due to the "richness in detail" that vivid violence provides viewers. [219] In turn, this detail increases the chance that the viewer will process information with a correspondingly high degree of detail, and then that they will allocate cognitive resources to elaborate upon its meaning:

> Indeed, when participants were exposed to a high quality persuasive message, they elaborated more upon the message's central argument when it was presented vividly than when it was presented abstractly.[220]

When successful, the cognitive elaboration elicited by vivid violence aids in the creation of complex long-term memories. This also increases the complexity of other, related, textual memories. In this instance, the use of the phrase "I will find you", despite its otherwise abstract meaning, is attached to a highly vivid scene. This increases its significance for the viewer. Any future use of that phrase in the series will be richly embedded with information from this scene, as it will if the viewer re-watches previous uses of the phrase. In this way, vivid violence in complex serial drama, when successful in creating support for persuasive narrative information, provides a source of meaning that viewers will pore over in the short-term. It will also cause viewers to remember with narratively inferential ramifications in the long-term. It is toward the study of the long-term effects of vivid violence that I will turn to now.

Remembering Violence: 'Accessibility' and 'Mental Models'

Riddle's final two propositions regard the long-term effects of vivid media violence. Each of these propositions assumes that an ideal viewer has been

[219] Riddle. 'A Theory of Vivid Media Violence'. P 301.
[220] Ibid.

successfully moved by the information codified within a vivid representation of violence, and that they have subsequently cognitively elaborated upon it, rendering it inferentially complex. When information from scenes of vivid violence are encoded into memory, those memories are easier to recall when associated information is presented in the future.[221] The ease with which memories can be recalled is referred to as their “accessibility”. Riddle asserts that even “a single, vivid violent media experience” can create highly-accessible memories that “last months or even years after exposure.”[222] Riddle writes:

> Perhaps it is the case that vivid stimuli are encoded in greater detail that less vivid stimuli, in part due to cognitive elaboration and a greater availability of associative pathways in memory at the time of exposure. In addition, the high emotionality of vivid stimuli (…) might also be responsible for their greater accessibility over time, given that emotional events tend to be more accessible in memory than less emotional events.[223]

Vivid violence is thus stored with greater “long-term accessibility” in memory, simultaneously raising the accessibility of information that is communicated through it. To this end, the viewer may not be able to control the occasion or frequency with which they recall the vivid experience of the violence within the text.

In complex serial drama, the readiness with which vivid information can be remembered means that it is more likely to influence a viewer’s pattern of understanding relating to associated information. These patterns of association are referred to as ‘mental models.’ A mental model is a psychological term that refers to the internal thought processes that explain how something functions. More specifically, as psychologists David Roskos-Ewoldsen et al. write:

> A mental model is a dynamic mental representation of a situation, event or object. We may use these mental models as a way to process, organize, and comprehend incoming information, make

[221] Ibid, P 302.
[222] Ibid, Pp 301-302.
[223] Ibid, P 302.

> social judgments, formulate predictions and inferences, or generate descriptions and explanations of how a system operates.[224]

In the context of television drama, mental models are the lingering inferential blueprints pertaining to a series (or an array of series that the viewer has linked) that are the product of previous cognitive elaboration. It is an understanding of how a series machinates and communicates its information and meaning, drawn from engagement with that information and cogitation upon what it means. Viewers draw upon a relevant mental model(s) simultaneously as they engage with new textual information. Riddle explains:

> For example, movie viewers may use cinematic features—editing techniques, costumes, music, dialogue, etc.—as cues to make predictions about future events or to make inferences about previous events.[225]

Mental models exist in this way as a moderately abstract understanding of related texts. I use the phrase 'moderately abstract', because a mental model involves concrete detail that is used to inform a more abstract conception. For example, a mental model of *The Walking Dead* would be non-linear, and would draw upon: geographically, a wide area of the South-Eastern United States, primarily its countryside; the personality-types of its most prominent protagonists and antagonists, and the gamut of their behaviour; comprehension of the apocalypse and what the 'rules' are regarding zombies; and an understanding of its organisational minutiae, such as its methods for creating suspense, shock, and other emotional states, as well as what sort of information it withholds, foreshadows, emphasises, and so on. This mental model is constituted (in part by) by the sum of the accessible memories created by watching the series. It produces inferences about the series' content. They are dynamic in that both external forces, such as new information, and internal forces, such as additional rumination, can alter a

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[224] David R Roskos-Ewoldsen, Beverly Roskos-Ewoldsen, Francesca R. Dillman-Carpentier. 'Meida Priming: An Updated Synthesis' in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*. [eds. J Bryant & MB Oliver]. Routledge. 2009. Pp 84-85.
[225] Ibid, P 86.

mental model at any time. A mental model of *The Walking Dead* would most likely cross-pollinate with a mental model of the zombie sub-genre.

Mental models contrast with 'situation models', which are not abstract, and instead represent the memory of organised spatio-temporal facts. Roskos-Ewoldsen et al. outline situation models as a "representation of a specific story or episode that has specific temporal and spatial constraints."[226] A viewer of *The Walking Dead* has as many situation models of the series as they have accessible memories of its specific content. Roskos-Ewoldsen et al. describe a working conception of the combination of situational and mental models as follows:

> as people comprehend media stories, they construct situation models of the specific stories—models that are contextualized. In addition, they construct mental models of the larger events. The resulting mental models are then used to understand future stories as well as to generate inferences about future events and the relationships between various elements of the mental model as well as guide people's understanding of elements of the larger world that are related to the mental model.[227]

Roskos-Ewoldsen et al. qualify that by situation models being "contextualized", they mean that they are rigidly "situated in time", i.e. that they are linear.[228] The construction of situation models and mental models are thus interrelated processes. A situation model reflects a viewer's understanding of what transpires in the series, and that informs their broader mental models.

Riddle asserts that media violence possessing a high degree of vividness increases the complexity of the mental models that it creates or influences.[229] Vivid media violence is likely to create or influence mental models in a way that is "more elaborate, detailed, and complex" than those featuring less vivid content. This owes to a combination of: high accessibility that promotes their "frequent activation"; the strong emotional elicitations of their associated

[226] Ibid, P 85.
[227] Ibid, P 86.
[228] Ibid.
[229] Riddle. 'A Theory of Vivid Media Violence'. Pp. 303-304.

content; and the high chance for cognitive elaboration upon their activation.[230] Mental models of characters, specifically, are pivotal to engaging with complex serial drama. This is because their characterisation forms the epicentre for the series plot and meaning. Creating complex mental models of characters that includes the nuance of their motivations, their moods, and their propensity to behave in certain ways, is critical to their comprehension. The remainder of this chapter will focus on the conceptual ways in which vivid violence in complex serial drama functions as a locus for accessible memories and complex mental models.

[230] Ibid, P 303.

2.4 The Dramaturgical Effects of Vivid Violence in Complex Serial Drama

Vivid violence is a dramaturgical feature that can be used to unique effect in complex serial drama. It assists viewers with their long-term comprehension of the complex serial drama's cumulatively serialised narrative structure. By eliciting complex cognitive elaboration, vivid violence provides viewers with stimulus that encourages them to pore over information. In this way, it also compels the viewer to draw inferences to other information that they perceive to be related. Vivid violence thus also enhances memory by elevating the significance of information perceived to be related to it. This can be beneficial for cumulatively serialised narratives, as the vivid scenes provide a form of locus that is complex, easy to recall, and inferentially rich. The greater the network of links that the vividly violent scene has within the series, the more holistically complex the scene functions as a point of reference. To this end, vivid violence in complex serial drama is beneficial to the narrative insofar as it provides information that contributes to a series' holistic narrative meaning.

As the narrative structure of complex serial drama is cumulatively serialised, its use of vividly violent scenes can build on the impact of information communicated through previous vividly violent scenes. For example, Glenn's death in *The Walking Dead* strongly pertains to a broader meaning regarding callous behaviour, mortal fragility, and the senselessness of death in the post-apocalyptic landscape which is almost always expressed through violence. Glenn's death is particularly vivid due to the emotional impact it provides viewers, despite it being no more concretely vivid than previous depictions of death in the series. This scene bolsters a repeated message in which good, innocent, people die unjustly: life in the state of nature is filled with savage, indifferent, cruelty. The heightened accessibility associated with these memories subsequently influences the viewer's related mental models of the series. The combination of information from vividly violent scenes across seasons can add complexity, helping to form narrative impressions that are the product of cumulatively gained information. Information communicated through vivid violence thus assists in developing the intricacy of related mental models pertaining to a series. Vivid violence and cumulative

serialisation function as a unique dramaturgical force within complex serial drama. To elaborate on this, I will contrast the risks of using vivid violence with the short-term benefits of its use when the viewer detects a payoff. I will then outline three, more complex, beneficial long-term narrative effects of its use.

Vivified Responses: The Importance of a Payoff

Glenn's death in *The Walking Dead* provides immediate vividness through an intense depiction of all five of the specifications for vividness.[231] It also promises to yield unknown, storyworld-altering, consequences into the future. However, this possesses a risk: Glenn's death is so vivid that the viewer may be unable to find a counterbalancing narrative payoff to justify it. If it were less vivid, then the unpalatable information it contains may not be magnified to the same degree. It is not that Glenn dies that matters, but the emotional impact of its brutality, in front of his terrified, pregnant, wife and friends. If a viewer *does* react negatively to this scene, they will cogitate upon it to a degree that runs counter to the creator's intent: it makes it harder to watch. This is always a risk with vivid violence in complex serial drama, and so the ability to balance its representation with a persuasive payoff is integral to its capacity for communicating meaning. Furthermore, if it does not provide a viewer with this balance, its influence upon the mental model pertaining to violence in the series is significant. With the example of Glenn's death, it establishes that good characters, who have been in the series since its beginning, can suffer this sort of violence, and it could be as vivid as this. The threat of a similar scene of vivid violence occurring again, without a payoff to justify it, could damage the investment of a viewer in the series. The 'accessibility' of vivid violence, as Riddle describes it, is something very difficult to control once it is established. After this episode, *The Walking Dead* executive producer, Gale Anne Hurd, said in a panel session at a National Association of Television Program Executives event:

> "We were able to look at the feedback on the level of violence (…) We did tone it down for a few episodes we were still filming for

[231] Concreteness, Spatial Proximity, Emotional Interest, Breadth of Detail, Depth of Detail.

> later on in the season. (…) This is not a show that is torture porn, (…) we don't cross that line."[232]

Hurd aims to manipulate the adverse reaction in the mental models of viewers. She attempts to do this by assuring them that the vividness of Glenn's death is not something that will be repeated. She also attempts to alleviate the product of viewers' cognitive elaboration which, she infers, had led some to consider the series' use of violence in Glenn's death as "torture porn". This is an example of how the risks of vivid violence within complex serial drama can be damaging to the brand of a series. This also touches upon the significance of viewer response to vivid violence from a commercial perspective.

The Short-Term Benefit of Vivid Violence: Enhancing the Payoff

When a complex serial drama can balance the negative effect of vivid violence with a compelling payoff, its positive impact upon viewer engagement can enhance their investment in a series. In turn, this increases the likelihood of emotional responses, complex cognitive elaboration, and highly accessible and complex situation models and associated mental models. Not every example of vivid violence features the same degree of concrete detail found in Glenn's death in *The Walking Dead* – the first of five specifications of vividness. In this respect, Glenn's death is not a good general example of vivid violence in complex serial drama, because it is difficult to assess without primarily considering its high level of concrete detail. The same can be said of the 'red wedding' example, outlined in the introduction to this chapter. A more apt illustration is the other example in the introduction, taken from the second season of *Breaking Bad*. In this sequence, protagonist Walter White demonstrates a tortured internal conflict as he makes the decision to allow Jane Margolis to die of a drug overdose for his personal gain.[233] This violence is also vivid, but its vividness hinges upon the demonstration of sudden and

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[232] Gale Anne Hurd quoted by Cynthia Littleton. ''The Walking Dead' Producers Toned Down Violence After Season Premiere Backlash'. *Variety*. Website. <https://variety.com/2017/tv/news/the-walking-dead-gale-anne-hurd-colman-domingo-josh-sapan-1201962566/> 18 January 2017. [First Accessed 17/11/2018].

[233] Episode 12, Season 2. 'Phoenix'. Colin Bucksey (director). John Shiban (writer). *Breaking Bad*. Vince Gilligan (creator). AMC Networks. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 24 May 2009.

permanent change to Walter's character, not just the death of Jane. The vividness of this scene is communicated with less concrete brutality. Instead, it evokes intense emotional responses by demonstrating Walter's decision to allow Jane to die. Seventy-eight seconds elapse in this time, during which time Walter initially rushes over to an unconscious Jane, who is coughing up vomit and choking on it. He moves down towards her to act, before hesitating, and then slowly moves away as he comes to the decision not to help her. He casts his eyes away at first, but then looks back at her with his mouth agape as she dies, her eyes half open. Walter puts his hand over his mouth and begins to cry as he realises the gravity of his decision, before composing himself with an expression of steely resolve. The episode then cuts to the end credits. This scene is certainly the most vivid provided by the series to this point, even though it is not the most vivid in terms of concrete detail. The reason it is so vivid is because it articulates a sudden, shocking, intensification of Walter's moral descent as he effectively supports the gruesome death of an innocent woman with whom he has a personal connection.

This scene, like the scene of Glenn's death in *The Walking Dead*, obtains its vividness by the intensity of its depiction. It is not Jane's death that is significant, but the vivid nature of her death. To this end, *Breaking Bad* exposes itself to a similar risk. However, the scene is also balanced with complex narrative information that raises questions regarding Walter's moral character and his motivations, what he might do in the future, and what the ramifications of this death will be more immediately. Considering these facets of character *is* the payoff in *Breaking Bad*—it constitutes the activity of exploring its narrative meaning. By embedding rich narrative information that is significant to the central activity of the series, this scene of vivid violence is defined by its strong association with the narrative's payoff. The payoff is within the response to this vividly violent scene, through the complex cognitive elaboration upon the ambiguity of Walter's motivations and the state of his moral character.[234]

[234] The use of character ambiguity is central to vivid violence in complex serial drama and is the subject of Chapter Three.

In the long-term, the complex processes of cognitive elaboration spurred by vivid media violence influences the accessibility and intricacy of both situation and mental models. Its use in complex serial drama offers two long-term benefits to its storytelling: 1) *Stability of Information*: The information communicated through vivid violence enhances memory and comprehension by providing stable, significant, and incontrovertible narrative facts. The definitive nature of these facts creates a highly-accessible reference point*;* and 2) *Extension of Narrative Influence*: The stability of vividly violent information is likely to enhance the degree to which related narrative information is pored over, as causal links and inferences are considered to make sense of why it happened. These effects demonstrate the long-term dramaturgical benefits of using vivid violence in conjunction with cumulative serialisation. It enhances the viewer's relationship with the narrative information that they remember.

1. Stability of Information

As complex serial dramas accumulate information, the inferences and meaning attached to every episode grow in density as they relate to increasingly complex mental models. If a primary character dies late in a series, the significance of their death is matched by the cumulated collection and complexity of their character information. For example, Glenn's death would not have been as vivid had it occurred in the first episode of the series. Its impact, in part, reflects the complexity of mental models relating to his character. This complexity is defined by the high degree to which his character is woven throughout most episodes of the series. For this reason, Glenn's death, and the deaths of any character for whom we have cumulated dozens of hours of information, are among the most visible sources of significance in a series. This is both in terms of our emotional response and our narrative comprehension. This strategy is reflected by an admission by *The Walking Dead*'s then-showrunner, Scott M. Gimple, to *The Hollywood*

Reporter that Glenn's death was aimed to "break the audience".[235] Integral to this experience of being 'broken' is not the short-term impact of the violence alone, but the long-term effects that are brokered by an audience who have highly developed, accessible, mental models pertaining to the series. For this reason, the ability for vivid violence to suddenly and irrevocably alter the significance of narrative information is a dominant feature of its dramaturgy, and at the core of this feature is stability.

The continuous acquisition of cumulatively serialised information in complex serial drama necessarily grows richer, as Jason Mittell describes, through "sustained engagement and consideration".[236] Vivid violence impacts this process by adding chaotic information that alters the status quo, but in such a way that is definitively stable and measurable due to the inarguable truth that it presents viewers: change has occurred. In this way, it simultaneously introduces both change and stability.

Vivid violence invites cognitive elaboration and high accessibility because at the core of its vividness is a basic and definitive statement. Glenn is brutally murdered in the *Walking Dead*, and that is a stable fact that invites cognitive energy to unravel. What needs to be unravelled is the significance and meaning of Glenn's death—something unable to be divorced from the stability of its vivid experience. For example, thirty-six episodes later, in episode five of season nine, Glenn's death is still being referenced within the narrative. In this episode, Maggie (Glenn's wife) confronts his now-incarcerated murderer, Negan, for the first time.[237] She visits him intending to kill him for what he did to Glenn. Their conversation revolves around these circumstances:

> **Maggie:** Get on your knees.

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[235] Lesley Goldberg. ''Walking Dead' Producers, Stars Explain Graphic Season 7 Deaths'. *The Hollywood Reporter*. Website. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/walking-dead-season-7-premiere-940740> 23 October 2016. [First Accessed 26/06/2018].

[236] Jason Mittell. 'The Qualities of Complexity: Vast Versus Dense Seriality in Contemporary Television' in *Television Aesthetics and Style*. [eds. Jason Jacobs & Steven Peacock] Bloomsbury. New York City, New York. 2013. P 46.

[237] Episode 5, Season 9. 'What Comes After'. Matthew Negrete (writer), Greg Nicotero (director). *The Walking Dead*. Angela Kang (showrunner). AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 4 November 2018.

> **Negan:** You know, I remember you screamin' in that clearing. I remember how much I broke *you* breakin' open your husband's head like I did.
>
> **Maggie:** Glenn. His name was Glenn.
>
> […]
>
> **Maggie:** I was always gonna settle this. What you did to my husband… Get on your knees.
>
> **Negan:** What I did to him? You mean how I cracked open his skull and popped out his goddamn eyeball? How I bashed his big, beautiful brains into the ground over and over, while you and his little friends watched? Is that what you mean? Oh, I used to say that I didn't enjoy killin'… That was a lie. Your old man—Christ, I forgot his name again—but he was different. Killin' him the way I did, ooh, now *that* was fun.

The meaning communicated by the narrative relating to Glenn's death, and whatever significance this holds for the viewer, relies upon a unanimous, unquestionable, understanding of its event: the raw information communicated by the series. The vividness of its remembered experience promotes and prioritises the stability of these agreed upon facts. This unifies all subsequent cognitive elaboration and accessibility to it. While meaning and significance can be different between viewers, and while it can change and become recontextualised through subsequent information and inference, these facts remain unchanged. Glenn was brutally murdered in *The Walking Dead*; in *Game of Thrones*, King Robb Stark, Queen Talisa Stark, and the King's mother Catelyn Stark were all killed; and in *Breaking Bad*, Walter White allowed Jane Margolis to die. Different responses to these events exist, as do different modes of organising narrative information to draw significance from them, but each relies upon the same vividly violent facts. Vivid violence impresses complex serial drama with a stable point of agreement in the information it communicates that is key to long-term narrative comprehension. While questions of motivation, moral character, and other inferences are uncertain, the facts that make this violence vivid, and elicit those questions, are not.

Integral to this stability is also its demarcation of a ‘before’ and ‘after’ the permanent change enacted through the vividly violent event. The ‘vividness’ of violence is contingent upon what it communicates as a narrative statement. In complex serial drama, this is drawn from the permanent change it introduces. The continuing influence of its stability, to this end, is in creating a clear point at which the narrative status quo changed. For example, Glenn is now dead, leaving Maggie widowed, and Negan is the person who killed him. It can also be used to galvanise viewer memory of basic information that it makes relevant, such as: names of new or previously peripheral characters; the revelation of fundamental emotional and psychological aspects of character; and new or reconfigured relationship structures that each of the characters involved have with one another. This helps viewers to prioritise their responses to the narrative and enhances their ability to remember its events and timeline. For example, after Glenn’s death the viewer is likely to prioritise responses to scenes featuring both Maggie and Negan highly. This prioritisation is drawn from an enhanced memory of their entwined personal history that creates interest in such scenes. This dramaturgical feature is explored in a different context by Trisha Dunleavy, who writes that linear “narrative progression” enforces a long-term process of “unavoidable change.”[238] Dunleavy writes that

> high-end serials accumulate a potentially detailed narrative memory, and on this basis their episodes need to be viewed in entirety and in the intended order.[239]

The stable demarcation of change brought about by vivid violence provides the viewer with a means of remembering the intended order of episodes. There are events that happened while Glenn was alive, and there are events that happened after he was killed. The significance of this timeline is entwined with the depth and intricacy of the ongoing change introduced through ever-cumulating narrative information.

[238] Dunleavy. *Complex Serial Drama and Multiplatform Television*. P 180.
[239] Ibid.

The permanent change that vivid violence introduces extends its encouragement of cognitive elaboration and accessibility to related narrative information that might otherwise be considered pallid. For example, in the previous section I detailed a conversation between Maggie and Negan in *The Walking Dead* that drew upon the vividly violent death of Maggie's husband Glenn at the hands of Negan. The residual impact of Glenn's death extends a degree of vividness to this scene. While it is a relatively quiet and darkly lit scene that is primarily conducted through conversation between two seated characters, the *emotional intensity* drawn from Glenn's death is likely to extend, for most viewers, to this scene. Watching how Maggie and Negan respond to one another becomes significant because of the gravity of Glenn's vividly violent death. This creates the high potential for complex cognitive elaboration over their interaction. While the inferential link is clear in this example, my point is that there is vast potential for similarly vivid links to be drawn in any subsequent scenes once the viewer has been exposed to vivid violence. If a viewer watched *The Walking Dead* for a second time, their interpretation of Glenn's character would likely be influenced by the memory of his vividly violent death. As another example, the impact of the 'red wedding' in *Game of Thrones*, as outlined in the introduction to this chapter, sustains a type of vivid violence that is first demonstrated in episode nine of the first season, when then-primary protagonist Ned Stark (Sean Bean) is executed.[240] These scenes establish a tradition in the series, communicating to the viewer that any character may die at any time, regardless of how integral they seem to the narrative. This increases the likelihood that viewers will pay close attention to every scene, searching for clues as to whose life is threatened, and attempting to anticipate who will die next. In this way, vivid violence not only introduces complex processes of cognitive elaboration and

[240] Episode 9, Season 1. 'Baelor'. David Benioff and D. B. Weiss (writers, creators, and showrunners), Alan Taylor (director). *Game of Thrones*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 12 June 2011.

accessibility, but also extends those processes to other scenes that the viewer deems related and significant by association.

This influence extends beyond each individual series, as the consequences of vivid violence holistically raise the anticipated dramatic stakes of all complex serial drama in comparison to other, less vivid, television series. For example, a cliché 1990s advertisement for an episodic broadcast drama such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*Buffy*) might attempt to garner interest by featuring a phrase like: "Will Buffy defeat Angelus, or will it be the end of the world?" Violence in these episodic dramas rarely leads to fundamental, series-altering, consequences—even in a series that features serialisation such as *Buffy.*[241] For this reason, viewers of episodic drama in the 90s, even those that had never seen an episode of *Buffy*, would possess mental models relating to similar series that would help them predict, with near-certainty, that yes, Buffy will defeat Angelus and save the world. However, mental models that pertain to complex serial dramas are likely to contain the knowledge that violence does, frequently, lead to permanent and unpredictable narrative change. Such examples of violence help to teach the viewer to anticipate such change in subsequent series that bear a resemblance. Riddle explains this point with regards to how *The Walking Dead* influences mental models relating to zombie series more broadly:

> For example, if an image related to a specific episode of *The Walking Dead* is highly accessible, the activation of that image should also activate the broader mental model for the zombie sub-genre.[242]

Similarly, if a viewer has seen *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Deadwood*, then they would likely possess a mental model pertaining to 'HBO drama'. The high-accessibility of vivid violence makes it highly likely to feature in this mental model, as its capacity for encouraging cognitive elaboration. In summary, experienced viewers of complex serial dramas are likely to include vivid violence in their related mental models. These mental models will also

[241] Characters do die in *Buffy*, but not with enough regularity to make every episode's inevitable 'fight to the death' scene legitimately spur the viewer to fear for the mortality of a primary character.
[242] Riddle. 'A Theory of Vivid Media Violence'. P 303.

associate the complex responses that they have had to that violence within their anticipation of information in subsequent complex serial dramas. In this way, the dramaturgy of vivid violence helps to fundamentally proliferate these responses to complex serial dramas.

2.5 Experiencing Complexity Through Vividness

Where Karyn Riddle's 'Theory of Vivid Media Violence' offers insight into how viewers engage with and respond to violent content, this chapter has aimed to demonstrate that this requires further narrative explanation. Through the implementation of textual analysis, this chapter argues that the long-term dramaturgical impact that vivid violence has upon complex serial drama is tied to its use of cumulative serialisation. There are three key cognitive features that viewers are likely to develop through exposure to vividly violent sequences: complex cognitive elaboration of its content; leading to complex mental models relating to that content; and long-term accessibility of memories developed. The depictions of *Game of Thrones* 'red wedding', Walter White's allowing Jane Margolis to die in *Breaking Bad*, and Glenn's brutal bludgeoning to death in *The Walking Dead*, illustrate the experience of vivid violence in complex serial drama. It is sudden and shocking, communicating long-term consequences in a comparatively brief amount of time. As Riddle outlines, the vividness of this violence is measured through five specifications: concreteness, spatial proximity, emotional interest, breadth of detail, and depth of detail. These sequences of violence act like focused bursts of intense information. They overwhelm the viewer through each of these specifications in a way that suddenly grasps their undiverted attention and draws upon their emotional reactions. The short length of these violent sequences means that the viewer can easily form accessible and vivid situation models,[243] while the enormity of their consequences is likely to elicit complex cognitive elaboration. By encouraging greater complexity in the process of cognitive elaboration, vivid violence influences related mental models in a way that develops their inferential richness. The enhanced influence of these mental models is complemented by their high accessibility. In this way, the short-term experience of vivid violence is integral to the scene's capacity for compelling long-term effects. This means that the small amount of information delivered in these scenes are highly likely to influence mental models relating to the whole series, as their brief length betrays their

[243] In this context a situation model is a recollection of the viewing experience.

inferential importance. If a viewer forgets this communicated information it would damage their understanding of the series more so than if they forgot almost any other five-minute window of information.

The experience of this violence provides intricately concrete detail that draws attention to its most shocking features. In *The Walking Dead*, this can be observed in Glenn's caved-in skull, his eyeball bulging from its socket, the blood spurting down his face, and his laboured exclamations inferring brain damage. This is exacerbated by the horrified depiction of his wife, Maggie, as she is made to watch his execution. On top of this, the quality of the film used allows it to depict the event in 4K resolution on a television screen in excess of ninety inches in size, while being listened to on sophisticated surround-sound technology. While violence is not always as concretely vivid as the example of Glenn's death—Jane Margolis' death in *Breaking Bad*, for example, is less vivid in this dimension—a high degree of concreteness, and/or spatial proximity, and/or emotional interest are near-ubiquitous staples of its expression. Due to the likelihood that a viewer will experience an intense cognitive reaction, scenes of vivid violence are memorable in a way that those with more pallid content are not. The dramaturgy of vivid violence in complex serial drama is therefore constituted by a combination of its immediate consequences, the various facets of its depiction,[244] and its narrative impact.

There is a risk that the information pertaining to the violence does not contain an adequate narrative payoff for the viewer, and its vividness will only enhance their distaste to this end. However, if a payoff is recognised and appreciated, the vividness will enhance its persuasiveness. The value sensed in the message it is communicating is likely to provide a greater source of enjoyment. Presuming that this payoff is present for the viewer, I proposed in this chapter that there are three beneficial effects that vivid violence provides the dramaturgy of complex serial drama: one short-term benefit, and two long-term benefits. The *short-term* benefit is that vivid violence becomes entwined with the payoff. It cognitively elaborates upon the circumstances of vivid violence enhances the payoff, because it is so inferentially rich and significant.

[244] E.g. mis en scène, acting, direction, makeup, special effects, etc.

This richness magnifies whatever payoff the viewer finds in engaging with the narrative content of complex serial drama. The first *long-term* benefit of vivid violence is that it provides the viewer with a stable source of meaning. This stability is within the simple, unchanging, facts of what takes place. Characters die, or are traumatised, or demonstrate a side of their moral values previously unseen. These facts can be responded to in numerous ways, but they assert a permanent source of context for those responses to take place. The second *long-term* benefit is that vivid violence extends the enhanced responses it elicits from viewers to other information that the viewer deems related. This not only extends to information within the same series, but beyond individual series and into a dramaturgical understanding of complex serial drama more generally. In this way, vivid violence encourages experienced viewers to engage in complex cognitive processes in anticipation of it. While there is clearly room for further study into how vivid violence dramaturgically impacts complex serial drama—and other television programming—these points regarding its use serve to be a simple and uncontroversial foray into how it can be considered.

Where this chapter explores the basic concept of vivid violence as an experience, Chapter Three considers the degree to which the narrative this violence belongs to is responsible for its vividness. I mean this not in terms of its creative choice, but in terms of how we understand what is happening: the narrative background that we draw on to recognise and comprehend it. While vivid violence is brief and transformative, its dramaturgical impact upon these stories is unique to their narratively complexity. For example, if Glenn's death in *The Walking Dead* were to have taken place in a series that was episodic in nature—wherein a stable narrative status quo both introduced and concluded each episode—then the scene would be experienced and discussed in markedly different ways. Instead, the meaning communicated through the scene is an event within the dynamic storyworld of *The Walking Dead*. What this demonstrates, and what I will explore in the next chapter, is that vivid violence in complex serial drama is not only an immediate experience, but a crucial element of prolonged narrative comprehension. Vivid violence is one of the primary reasons that narrative information becomes increasingly complex

in these series, as its depiction tracts greater attention from the viewer that permits its information to cumulate and evolve as we pore over its detail.

Chapter Three

The Force of Violence: Morally Transgressive Protagonists

People tell you who they are but we ignore it, because we want them to be who we want them to be.
~Don Draper (Jon Hamm), *Mad Men*.[245]

Objectively identifying how violence integrates with the character-driven narratives of complex serial drama requires us to, as Slavoj Žižek writes, "step back" and consider the "contours of the background" though which we understand violence.[246] Žižek's 2008 text, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, is a socio-political criticism of violence in its contemporary context: he explores ideas such as the "inner conviction" of "western leftists" who possess a "tragically misplaced ethical conviction" in "Soviet socialism" at the expense of their focus upon the "miserable reality" of life under the Stalinist Soviet Union.[247] While these ideas have little immediate relevance to my topic, his opening statements relating to the recognition of violence, and how it pertains to a "zero-level standard" against which violent acts are made visible, is invaluable.[248] Following on from this, we can recognise the violence in complex serial drama in two ways: by comprehending the narrative information it communicates (subjective); and by recognising the value structures erected by the narrative that makes that violence visible (objective).[249] Žižek introduces this notion of objective violence through a story about a worker who leaves a factory every day with a wheelbarrow:

> as he leaves the factory, the wheelbarrow he rolls in front of him is carefully inspected. The guards can find nothing. It is always

[245] Episode 8, Season 4. 'The Summer Man'. Lisa Albert, Janet Leahy, Matthew Weiner (writers), Phil Abraham (director). *Mad Men*. Matthew Weiner (creator and showrunner). AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 12 September 2010.
[246] Slavoj Žižek. *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*. Picador. New York City, New York. 2008. P 4.
[247] Ibid, Pp 51-52.
[248] Ibid, Pp 1-4.
[249] Ibid.

> empty. Finally, the penny drops: what the worker is stealing are the wheelbarrows themselves…[250]

To comprehend something as being violent in a subjective sense we must possess the correct imaginative state of mind to register it. This requires a "zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent."[251] In the network era of television drama, for example, the "zero-level standard" found in westerns and crime dramas is the peaceful state of lawfulness which its protagonists achieve after defeating the antagonists, with violence stemming from a short-lived conflict that upsets this standard. At the end of each episode the protagonists have quashed this violence, and the zero-level standard is resumed. However, the cumulatively serialised storyworlds of complex serial drama register characters and their situations within a dynamic state of development. This means a zero-level standard does not return at the episode's end. Objective violence in complex serial drama is itself an ongoing, dynamic feature of the story: we perceive something as vividly violent when it offends the current zero-level standard in a meaningful way. These standards can be predicted modes of behaviour: we might register something as vividly violent if a character behaves in an uncharacteristically malevolent way. The standards can also regard the health of the characters themselves. For example, as depicted in section 2.2 of Chapter Two, Glen Rhee's death in *The Walking Dead* is a vividly violent act because his character had been present since the series' beginning. This represented a monumental shift in the series' zero-level standard.

This chapter demonstrates how complex serial dramas blend the intricacy of their character-driven narratives with acts of violence to disrupt their storyworlds. The ongoing disruption of zero-level standards, to varying degrees of extremity, forces us to recognise them, to varying degrees, as vividly violent. Objective violence is responsible for guiding our attention towards certain characters in certain ways. This renders acts of violence involving them as vivid both in terms of its experience, and in terms of its disruptive influence upon how we comprehend the story. Complex serial

[250] Ibid, P 1.
[251] Ibid, P 2.

drama structures narrative information so that, for example, Glenn Rhee is made to be the focus of attention in the scene in which he dies. His wife Maggie's emotional trauma is also rendered a relevant source of meaning through the focus upon its depiction. I will return to this discussion of objective and subjective violence in the conclusion to this chapter, after developing an understanding of how this objective and subjective violence is depicted and made to be comprehended. Crucial to this is the study of how protagonists are explored in complex serial drama. As Trisha Dunleavy observes, these series ubiquitously feature the "psychological investigation of central characters", drawn from the

> transgressive tendencies of primary characters in complex serials, and from the integration between central character and overarching story[252]

Dunleavy notes several "key strategies" that complex serial drama uses to conduct this psychological investigation, such as:

> dream sequences, subjective camerawork or hostile landscapes as vehicles for 'psychological realism'; of extra-diegetic voiceovers to allow a character's thoughts and omniscient insights to be shared with the audience; and of embedded, non-linear flashbacks.[253]

The exploration of character drives these series to the extent that that, as Dunleavy phrases it, "psychological revelation" often constitutes the goal of narrative information more so than the progression of immediate plot.[254] Violence, similarly, is frequently demonstrative of psychological revelation regarding these protagonists because, as discussed in the previous paragraph, it frequently unveils a dark or malevolent aspect of their character that we did not expect. To begin to understand how violence mingles with character I will define the protagonists in complex serial drama with greater clarity, before moving on to the formal structures presented by the series that are responsible for how we engage with them. In this chapter, I will focus

[252] Dunleavy. *Complex Serial Drama*. P 118.
[253] Ibid, P 118.
[254] Ibid, P 118.

primarily on the AMC-produced complex serial drama, *Breaking Bad*, as a means of diversifying the examples given within the thesis.

3.1 Starting at the End: Character-Driven Violence

At the conclusion of Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad*, Walter White (Bryan Cranston) limps into a meth lab, dying of gunshot wounds. He spends his final moments lovingly looking over the equipment one last time.[255] The tone is nostalgic as he pores over the different tools and ingredients while the song 'Baby Blue' by Badfinger plays non-diegetically.[256] The sound of approaching police sirens, and the growing intensity of their flashing red and blue lights, fills the scene. Ignoring the police, Walter takes his time admiring the equipment, stopping as he recognises his blurred reflection on a large stainless-steel kettle. We linger in this moment for six seconds as the song reaches the words "Didn't know you'd think that I'd forget, or I'd regret…". At this point, Walter falls backwards and collapses on the floor. A close-up shot captures his face staring up at the ceiling. It dollies away from his prone body, twisting up beyond the ceiling and into the sky, as song leads into its first crescendo with the words "The special love I have for you, my Baby Blue!" The police encircle Walter, who is either dying or dead, and the closing credits for *Breaking Bad* roll for the final time. This scene beckons us to reflect upon Walter's journey throughout the series: the chronicle of a desperate man's decision to make and sell methamphetamines, ostensibly to provide for his family. The lyrics in this scene particularly evoke our reflection:

> Guess I got what I deserve;
> Kept you waiting there, too long my love;
> All that time, without a word;
> Didn't know you'd think, that I'd forget, or I'd regret;
> The special love I have for you, my Baby Blue.[257]

In this context, 'Baby Blue' is a reference to the unique colour of the methamphetamines that Walter makes, and which brought him immense criminal success at incredible cost. Walter becomes more successful by permitting increasingly immoral acts of violence in the name of his criminal

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[255] Episode 16, Season 5. 'Felina'. Vince Gilligan (writer, director, creator and showrunner). *Breaking Bad*. AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 29 September 2013.
[256] Badfinger. 'Baby Blue'. Pete Ham (songwriter), Todd Rundgren (producer). Apple Records. Originally Released: 6 March 1972.
[257] Ibid.

empire. This progressively distances him from the character we are introduced to in the pilot. The lyrics at the end of Walter's narratively complex journey prompt us with the final question: what *does* he deserve?

Violence entwines with character in these series to provide us with an emotional experience that we use to comprehend its meaning. It does not define characters as either criminals or heroes, but as humans who have a dark relationship with violence. We can see this when we think about the choice of music that *Breaking Bad* ends with. The series' music supervisor Thomas Golubić says of the choice of 'Baby Blue':

> This is a love-affair story of Walt and his love of science, and this was his greatest product – his greatest triumph as a chemist. It wasn't about Walter White as a criminal or a murderer or an awful person. It was him ending on his own terms. It felt creatively right.[258]

Golubić argues that the song refers to the journey that Walter has been on throughout *Breaking Bad* as a man who achieved success in his greatest passion. It is a celebration of the connection we have made with Walter, as it requires us to understand this passion and what it means to him. Similarly, *The Sopranos* creator David Chase speaks about his use of the band Journey's song 'Don't Stop Believin'' to end *The Sopranos* final episode:

> The biggest feeling I was going for, honestly, was don't stop believing. […] That's what I wanted people to believe. […] There are attachments we make in life, even though it's all going to come to an end, that are worth so much, and we're so lucky to have been able to experience them.[259] *(square brackets mine)*

Chase's point about valuing the human "attachments we make in life" similarly require us to reflect on those that Tony made and what they meant to him, to understand how important they are. Finally, *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner speaks about his decision to finish the series with the famous 1971 'Hilltop'

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[258] Thomas Golubić, interviewed by Steve Knopper. 'Why 'Breaking Bad' Chose Badfinger's 'Baby Blue''. *Rolling Stone*. Website. < https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-news/why-breaking-bad-chose-badfingers-baby-blue-191097/> October 1, 2013. [Originally Accessed 07/03/19].
[259] David Chase quoted by James Greenburg. 'This Magic Moment'. *Directors Guild of America Quarterly.* Website. Spring 2015. <http://www.dga.org/Craft/DGAQ/All-Articles/1502-Spring-2015/Shot-to-Remember-The-Sopranos.aspx> [Originally Accessed 14/03/2019].

Coca Cola television advertisement, featuring the song ‘I’d like to buy the world a Coke’:

> “I have never been clear, and I have always been able to live with ambiguities,” […] “In the abstract, I did think, why not end this show with the greatest commercial ever made? In terms of what it means to people and everything, I am not ambiguity for ambiguity’s sake. *[sic]* But it was nice to have your cake and eat it too, in terms of what is advertising, who is Don, and what is that thing?”[260] *(square brackets mine)*

Weiner’s choice of ‘I’d like to buy the world a Coke’ emblemises the ambiguous questions of identity, purpose, and value, all of which as defined by the connection that we have made with Don Draper and the people in his life. Each of these songs asks us to reflect on the journeys of their protagonists, and to reflect on what these journeys mean to us. Central to our ability to think about what these journeys mean to us, though, is a reflection on the relationship that these characters have with violence. This is central to our comprehension of their stories: understanding Walter’s passion for science involves the violence he commits to protect it. Valuing connections in *The Sopranos* speaks directly to the life-ending violence that its characters frequently use to end those connections. Attempting to understand *Mad Men*’s Don Draper requires us to reflect upon the violence visited upon him in the Korean war, which quite literally created his identity. At a fundamental level, our comprehension of these characters and the series they belong to is drawn from how we continue to respond to the violence that involves them.

Violent Character-Driven Drama

The cumulative mode of character-driven storytelling in complex serial drama enables a unique dramaturgical property in its vivid violence. While reading this chapter, the key components that should be remembered from the discussion of vivid violence from the previous chapter are those that explain how it encourages heightened levels of attention, cognitive elaboration, and

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[260] Matthew Weiner quoted by Joe Pugliese. ‘’Mad Men’ Creator Matthew Weiner Explains Series Finale, Character Surprises, and What’s Next’. *The Hollywood Reporter*. 20 March 2015. < https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/mad-men-series-finale-matthew-797302> [Originally Accessed 14/03/2019].

memory-formation. In this chapter I will demonstrate how experiencing vivid violence is a form of comprehension within these stories. For example, when Walter White watches Jane Margolis (Kristen Ritter) die in the second season of *Breaking Bad* (as outlined in the introduction to chapter two), the vividness of the scene communicates something emotionally specific about *why* he does it. We do not know the actual reason that Walter allows her to die; perhaps it is to protect his business interests, or perhaps he thinks that Jane's influence on Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul) will eventually lead him to an overdose. Perhaps it is a combination of these reasons, or perhaps it is another reason which I have not here considered. Regardless, the parameters of his response that is communicated with emotional certainty is that it is a decision that pains Walter, but also that he overcomes this pain with a steely resolve. In this way, our response to the vividness of Jane's death is connected to a broader web of narrative information. Dustin Freeley demonstrates the depth of the narrative information connected to this scene with his reading of it:

> I would suggest that her [Jane's] influence on Jesse threatened to impede their business together and Walt's overall view of his own potential success. […] It seems apparent that Walt could function without Jesse, though there always feels like an underlying desire for Jesse to be present. In part, this might be because Jesse functions as the doppelgänger-son of Heisenberg [Walter's criminal alias]. Walt Jr. is a sixteen-year-old with cerebral palsy who prefers to be called Flynn to elide any similarity to his father. Jesse is, however, essentially, without family and an empty vessel into which Walt-as-Heisenberg can impart knowledge that he's unable to pass to his biological son—not on account of intelligence, but because of its illicit nature.[261] (*Square brackets mine.)*

Through Freeley's response we can begin to understand the intricacy of the narrative connections this emotional information has. Freeley interprets

[261] Dustin Freeley. 'The Economy of Time and Multiple Existences in *Breaking Bad*' in *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays on the Contexts, Politics, Style, and Reception of the Television Series*. Edited by: David Pierson. Lexington Books. New York City, New York. P 47.

Walter's emotions as pain and then a suppression of that pain with a steely resolve. He locates these emotions within a statement about how Walter sees Jesse as his son, and how he feels about his real son. There is nothing explicitly communicated by the series to support this, but the vividness of the scene encourages these intricately layered inferences to be drawn from the material to comprehend it. This is made possible by the series' narrative complexity. What guides this comprehension, and what is crucial to our readings subsequently, are the emotions we imagine to be responsible for the violent behaviour.

The "Distorting Power of Emotion"[262]

When we watch Walter White make the decision to let Jane die, emotions become relevant in two ways: we imagine what Walter's motivating emotional experience is by inferring from our knowledge of his character; and we believe the emotions we feel in response to his decision to be correct. In this latter point, regarding our emotions being 'correct', I mean to say that if, for example, our emotional response is sadness, then we would take the emotion to be correct because we would interpret the scene as sad. If, however, we feel angry, then we would deem that emotion correct because it is a scene in which something aggravatingly unjust occurs. This is important because how we feel has a relationship with the information that we draw upon to imagine Walter's emotional experience. It is the difference between, for example, interpreting Walter as making a decision that is sad but necessary or making a selfish decision and deciding to live with it. An integral component of this is that we do not perform this task assuming that Walter is aware of his emotions, or how they are impacting his decision-making. For example, Freeley's argument explaining Walter's behaviour relates to a complex interpretation of his feelings about Jesse and his son, but it does not infer that Walter is consciously aware of these points. On the contrary, it is more likely that, if Freeley's argument is to be adopted, we understand Walter to be somewhat invisibly motivated by these feelings, unaware of how they are influencing him. This is because, as argued by philosopher Peter Goldie, we

[262] Peter Goldie. 'Imagination and the Distorting Power of Emotion' in *Journal of Consciousness Studies*. Iss 12, No 8. 2005. Pp 130-142.

are imagining emotions as observers of them from an external perspective, as opposed to imagining that *we* are experiencing those emotions:

> Experiential imagining is taken paradigmatically to be imagining 'from the inside', where you imagine yourself in some situation undergoing some experience, or when you imagine from the inside someone else undergoing that experience.[263]

Goldie's point is sensitive within the field of philosophy of mind, where there is significant debate regarding what it means to imagine experiences of other people. What exactly it means to be imagining someone else's experiences "from the inside" is a confusing sentiment. For example, does this mean that we are imagining this other person's experience by cognitively piecing together their personality and then running that personality through an imaginative simulation?[264] This is not a discussion that can be sustained within the scope of this thesis, but what *is* integral for these purposes is recognising that we are capable of two different ways of imagining emotions. Those are imaginatively observing their presence and their consequences, and imaginatively experiencing them ourselves. In the former, we can recognise how emotions can motivate behaviour and, in the latter, we can imaginatively process how the emotional experience would feel. These are not exclusive modes of imagination: it is likely that we could draw on how we imagine something to feel to explain how it would motivate behaviour, for example, but while we are imagining how something feels we are susceptible to

We observe Walter White as an external entity who has a unique, and exclusive, emotional personality to our own. The series asks us to observe and understand that personality within the context of his behaviour. In turn, we experience emotional responses to what we take his behaviour to say about his emotional personality, and what this means in a textual sense. This emotional response reinforces how we have read Walter's character, because

[263] Ibid, P 131.
[264] The sentiment of which is argued, with fundamentally important nuance, by simulation theorists. See: V Gallese. 'Mirror Neurons and the Simulation Theory of Mind-Reading' in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*. Vol 2, Iss12. 1998. Pp 493-501, Marco Iacoboni, et al. 'Grasping the Intentions of Others with One's Own Mirror Neuron System' in *PLoS Biology*. Vol 3, Iss 3. 2005. Pp 529-535.

we tacitly take our emotions to be evidence of truth. This is what Peter Goldie refers to as the “distorting power of emotion”, wherein our feelings influence our behaviour in a way that we may not even be able to detect:

> Real life emotion shares two features with real life perception. First, real life emotion, like real life perception, represents the world as being a certain way, and can thus be correct or incorrect. Secondly, these states, with representational content […] typically take the world to be the way the perception or the emotions represents it to be, unless we have reason to think otherwise; in other words, we typically take the states to be correct – we typically trust them.[265]

Goldie provides the example of a log, which we feel disgusted by (“its being covered in crawling white maggots say”). He argues that we do not only feel the emotion, but we also acknowledge something being ‘correct’ about it: we both feel and believe that the log is disgusting.[266] When it comes to emotions that we feel in response to imagined information, we also take them to correctly reflect a truth about that imagined world:

> So the same principles should be able to be read across to imagining an emotional experience, according to which it will be typical in imagination to take one’s emotion to be correct: to take it that the world – the imagined world here rather than the real world of course – is the way the imagined emotions represents it to be.[267]

Complex serial drama does more than just present us with a world that we can imaginatively engage with. It provides us with a text that we need to interpret. This means that it is not only our mind that is guiding our emotional imagination, but also the narrative pathways laid out by the text.

The complex narrative pathways enabled by the cumulative serialisation of complex serial drama offer our emotional imagination multiple ways of engaging with vivid violence. As discussed in section 2.1 of chapter two, vivid violence leads to an increase in the cognitive energy attending to its

[265] Goldie. ‘Imagination and the Distorting Power of Emotion’. P 135.
[266] Ibid.
[267] Ibid.

information. Crucially, this includes what Karyn Riddle describes as "Emotional Interest": we are more emotionally active when we respond to events that involve "people we know, or when they happen to people for whom we have strong feelings."[268] The combination of vivid violence and narrative complexity encourages a more sophisticated model of emotional interest beyond what it would be if the violence were, for example, only vivid because of its concrete details. Consider how we think about the violent behaviour of police officers towards criminals in *NYPD Blue*, or the violent behaviour of Buffy toward demons in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or the various doctors' behaviour in treating the injuries sustained through violence in *ER*. There is little to ponder about these behaviours because these protagonists obey their narrative conceit: police officers fight crime, vampire slayers kill monsters, and doctors save lives. The emotional activity that vivid violence contributes toward the cumulating storyworlds of complex serial drama fills the act of interpreting the behaviour involved with comprehensive importance. For this reason, the behaviour that connects these complex protagonists to violence defines their stories in both a rational and an emotional sense. The depth of our understanding of Walter's decision to let Jane die is tied to the kinds of emotional responses that we have to it. For this reason, it is fundamental to how we interpret *Breaking Bad* as a series.

Crucial to my argument is how we construe these protagonists. In the past, the term 'antihero' has been prevalent as a means of emphasising their moral flaws and behavioural failures. It is my contention that this emphasis constrains what truly enables emotionally complex narrative engagement with these characters: how their behaviour—their violent behaviour, particularly—connects to the complex interpretations of their motivations, emotional personalities, and personal histories. 'Antiheroes' are defined by a certain way of understanding their behaviour. This necessitates a component of our emotional imagination that confirms these protagonists as being paradigmatically linked to ideals of heroism. As I will argue, this is not a fundamental component of these characters.

[268] Riddle. 'The Theory of Vivid Media Violence'. P 294.

3.2: Morally Transgressive Protagonists

One of the hallmarks of complex serial drama is the depiction of frequently immoral, and often violent, behaviour committed by its protagonists. The regularity of this behaviour has led to their identification as 'antiheroes', a term that reflects the moral response we have to this behaviour. Jason Mittell defines them in the following way:

> an antihero is a character who is our primary point of ongoing narrative alignment but whose behaviour and beliefs provoke ambiguous, conflicted, or negative moral allegiance.[269]

Amanda Lotz disagrees with the accuracy of the term 'antihero'. She asserts that it mischaracterises the protagonists as lacking moral value:

> According to literary theory, "antihero" is actually a misnomer, or at least imprecise. Literary theory characterizes the antihero as lacking nobility and magnanimity, or as one who lacks the attributes of the traditional protagonist or hero, such as courage, honesty, or grace.[270]

For this reason, Lotz prefers the term "flawed protagonists", because these protagonists "certainly do not lack courage and nearly all believe their cause is noble". As stated, they consistently demonstrate relatable humanity.[271] However, Lotz asserts that their immoral behaviour is often so severe that it makes "their potential for redemption increasingly infeasible."[272] For this reason, the viewer is unlikely to approve of the protagonists behaviour, even though they continue to find their character relatable. Margrethe Bruun Vaage also pursues this line of thinking, though she endorses the term 'antihero':

> when I use the notion antihero, I take it to mean a clearly – or even, severely – morally flawed main character whom the spectator is nonetheless encouraged to feel with, like and root for. The moral complexity of the antihero series entails that the spectator is intended to like the antihero – but through a

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[269] Mittell. *Complex TV*. Pp. 142-143.
[270] Amanda Lotz. *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century*. New York University Press. New York City, New York. 2014. P 63.
[271] Ibid.
[272] Ibid, P 64.

> challenging narrative also come to dislike him. The antihero series typically encourages sympathy for the antihero initially, but increasingly also questions this positive orientation with the antihero. So the spectator is intended to feel conflicted about the antihero at the end of the antihero series.[273]

Vaage's identification of the antihero involves a presumption about our engagement. We must recognise and dislike the antihero for their flaws, while also feeling with them, liking them, and rooting for them. She accounts for these presumptions within her conception of the "intended spectator":

> the intended spectator in the trend of American antihero series is the spectator who is both willing to allow herself to enjoy the antihero's moral transgressions, but who also firmly adheres to the common norms in our society, by which the antihero is clearly morally bad.[274]

Vaage asserts that the reasons the intended spectator chooses to watch the immoral behaviour of these protagonists "cannot be answered without investigating what she wants not just from characters in stories, but also from a fictional story in its own right."[275] This consideration of the protagonist as an element of the "fictional story" is a point that I will return, but first it is necessary to discuss this notion of the antihero.

The issue with construing these protagonists as antiheroes or flawed protagonists (antiheroes henceforth) is that these terms are contingent upon specific emotional responses. They require a focussed judgment of the antihero as immoral because of their behaviour. However, if our emotional response is not adequately accounted for by this truth—if we do not feel that judging them in this way is 'correct'—then at some point there is a problem with comprehension, either on behalf of the term or in our emotional response. This is not an arbitrary or pedantic point. Identification and observation of personality in these characters is fundamental to the text. Vaage writes that her focus in these series is driven by "the desire to explore

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[273] Margrethe Bruun Vaage. *The Antihero in American Television.* Routledge. New York City, New York. 2016. P xvi.
[274] Ibid, P 91.
[275] Ibid.

the moral psychology of fiction". It is my contention that the depth and complexity of how we imagine their moral psychology is stymied by terms like antihero.[276] The proposals put forward by Mittell, Lotz, and Vaage each maintain that we condemn the behaviour of these characters when they behave immorally. This is because we recognise that their behaviour runs counter to, as Vaage puts it, the "common norms in our society." However, complex serial drama does not implicate nor explicate how we ought to *judge* this behaviour. Instead, it mounts dozens of hours of character information which we use to *explain* it. This information built into these series' premise: we can trace the reasons that Walter allows Jane to die back through the narrative information we have collected since the pilot, wherein we learn how and why Walter begins to become a violent criminal. The premise for all complex serial drama encourages us to understand these characters by identifying and observing their personalities to explain their behaviour, and it is only after we have developed this understanding that we are asked to judge them.

Emphasising the Human over the Immoral

The narratives of complex serial drama provide us with myriad ways to imagine why its protagonists commit immoral behaviour by providing us with character information that demonstrates why they might emotionally make these choices (as with Dustin Freeley's reading of Walter). The resulting connection we make by observing and identifying this behaviour is defined by the narrative promotion of character information relating to their backstory, their emotional personality, and what insight this provides about their behaviour.[277] By attempting to understand their behaviour through these backstories and by associating it with other emotional information, we not only reflect on the behaviour, but their connecting traumas from past struggles. *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White is driven to make methamphetamines as a direct response to his diagnosis of terminal cancer. In *Mad Men*, Don Draper's consistent mistreatment of those closest to him has a clear connection to his

[276] Ibid, P xiii.
[277] As Jason Mittell points out, this is often done through the extensive use of flashback sequences. *Complex TV*. P 25.

abusive upbringing in a brothel, and violent trauma suffered in the Korean War. *The Sopranos*' Tony Soprano was raised into the criminal profession by his father (witnessing him commit multiple violent crimes from a young age), and suffered under the parentage of his abusive mother. These series offer us pathways to understand *why* these characters commit immoral behaviour, contextualised by relatably human circumstances. To make this point, I will turn to the work of Bidish J. Sarma, a U.S. attorney specialising in the death penalty. In 2015, Sarma published an essay that asserts *Breaking Bad*'s narrative presents Walter White in much the same way as a defense attorney would: by emphasising his humanity to "mitigate" his crimes.[278]

Sarma asserts that the care the narrative of *Breaking Bad* takes in telling Walter's story is a powerful mitigator, demonstrating that he "did many terrible things and some of them by choice, but he should not be defined by those decisions alone."[279] Sarma argues this point by comparing the narrative of *Breaking Bad* to how an attorney would defend Walter White if he were on trial. According to Sarma, it seeks "to make him real", and aims to prevent us from losing our "capacity to see him as human."[280] Sarma outlines a faux-trial of Walter White. He uses the information communicated in *Breaking Bad* as the sole source of evidence for both the prosecution and defense, situating the viewer as the jury.[281] Sarma concludes that the narrative treatment of *Breaking Bad* successfully defends Walter through its careful and measured approach that prioritises understanding his character as human over condemning his character as evil. By this he does not mean that the narrative forgives or commends Walter for his actions, only that it succeeds in providing evidence that he believes would save him from the death penalty—the ultimate barometer for condemnation:

> Walter's gripping journey stirred within viewers a range of complex emotions, but even those revolted by his actions must concede that it is extraordinarily difficult to envision a random

[278] Bidish J. Sarma. 'Why We Would Spare Walter White: *Breaking Bad* and the True Power of Mitigation', in *New Mexico Law Review*. Vol. 45. 2015. Pp 429-475.
[279] Ibid, P 459.
[280] Ibid, P 454.
[281] Ibid.

> collection of twelve people unanimously agreeing that he deserves a state-sanctioned execution. Indeed, it seems that many of us actually rooted for Walter throughout the series, even when we struggled to understand why.[282]

This is crucial to how Walter is characterised in *Breaking Bad*, but also to how all protagonists are communicated in complex serial drama. What makes their stories interesting is that we learn *why* they behave the way that they do—*we* might judge them for their behaviour, but the story only explains it. As Sarma summarises: "While people have posited many reasons for the show's unintentional cultivation of a loyal Walter following, there is no question that viewers followed Walter because of the story that was told and because of how it was told."[283]

> *Breaking Bad*'s characters have connections, relationships, and personal histories. Similarly, capital defense teams must show that their clients have the same things: the goal is to place the defendant's life in a larger social context and, in the final analysis, to reach conclusions about how someone who has had certain life experiences, has been treated in particular ways, and experienced certain kinds of psychologically-important events has been shaped and influenced by them.[284]

Any response that we have to these protagonists must reflect on this narrative focus on humanity, and the causality of their behaviour. We are trying to make sense of the story that their behaviour tells about *who they are*. In this way, Sarma elucidates how complex serial drama presents us with a body of evidence, spanning dozens of hours, to emphasise the humanity of its protagonists. We decide what is important about them by poring over this evidence, and we determine how we ought to judge them based on the perspective this brings us.

Morally Transgressive Protagonists

[282] Ibid, P 429.
[283] Ibid, P 474.
[284] Ibid, P 475.

Judgements in a court room are binaries of ‘guilty’ or ‘not guilty’, but what makes our engagement with these protagonists interesting is not which side of this binary we deem them to be, but the guidelines with which we choose to judge them. It is not enough to say that we regard Walter White as guilty or not guilty, we must first outline the charges. It is how we conceive of the charges held against these protagonists that defines our engagement with them. Neither judgements of condemnation nor approval are required to understand them while we watch these series, only our ongoing assessment of their behaviour. The conceit of their behaviour from the outset is that they will sometimes engage in immoral behaviour to achieve their goals. *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White decides to pursue criminal enterprise after learning that he has terminal lung cancer.[285] We are introduced to *Mad Men*’s Don Draper while he desperately searches for an ad campaign that will make cigarettes more attractive, to counteract the newfound public awareness of their terminal health risks.[286] Despite establishing that Don is attempting to find success by convincing people to do something that will kill them, he does not demonstrate any qualms about doing it. And in the first episode of *The Sopranos*, Tony Soprano uses his car to run down and break the leg of a man who owes him a debt, proceeding to beat him in front of a crowd of people.[287] The capacity for immoral action is essential to these protagonists, but it is the exploration of character that surrounds their immoral behaviour that defines the terms on which we judge it. Once we understand that Walter White will be making methamphetamines, or that Don Draper is willing to do anything to manipulate people into buying what he advertises, or that Tony Soprano is willing to publicly cripple people indebted to him, these behaviours become less shocking. We recalibrate what to anticipate accordingly, and then we continue to engage with their other behaviours. For example: Walter White’s expression of passion as he practices chemistry, and the love he shows his

[285] Episode 1, Season 1. ‘Pilot’. Vince Gilligan (writer, director, creator and showrunner). *Breaking Bad*. AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 20 January 2008.
[286] Episode 1, Season 1. ‘Smoke Gets in Your Eyes’. Matthew Weiner (writer, creator and showrunner), Alan Taylor (director). *Mad Men*. AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 19 June 2007.
[287] Episode 1, Season 1. ‘The Sopranos’. David Chase (writer, director, creator and showrunner). *The Sopranos*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 10 January 1999.

family; Don Draper's desire to understand other people, expressed through the emotionally rich and vulnerable conversations he has; and Tony Soprano's love of animals, and the insightful advice he frequently gives people in his life. These behaviours reconfigure how we judge them, just as their immoral behaviour does.

Of course, this does not account for the depth of the complexity the information about these characters offers: it is not all either blatantly criminal or sentimental. *Breaking Bad* is approximately sixty-two hours long, *Mad Men* is approximately ninety-two hours long, and *The Sopranos* is approximately eighty-six hours long. To begin to outline the different configurations of these characters with which we might judge them is a complex task. For example, at points in their stories when they are experiencing emotional hardship, these protagonists can be more prone to immoral behaviour. In a season two episode of *Breaking Bad* Walter, having committed multiple violent crimes while anticipating his imminent demise, experiences emotional turmoil after discovering that his cancer is in remission. At a party celebrating his remission, he forcefully insists that his underage son drink multiple shots of tequila with him and his brother-in-law, making his son very sick and leading to a tense confrontation with his brother-in-law.[288] Similarly, in a season one episode of *Mad Men*, Don faces emotional turmoil when he is confronted by his brother—who, owing to Don's adopted identity, represents the trauma of his previous life when he was known as 'Dick Whitman'.[289] His brother tells him that he has no family left, and he pleads with Don to be a part of his life and to rekindle their brotherly relationship. Don refuses, despite his brother effectively begging him for acceptance and love, and instead attempts to give him five thousand dollars to leave him alone, telling him to never contact him again. His brother is devastated, and later in the episode he commits suicide. Finally, in a season one episode of *The Sopranos*, Tony's therapist asserts that his mother has Borderline Personality Disorder, and suggests that she

[288] Episode 10, Season 2. 'Over'. Moira Walley-Beckett (writer), Phil Abraham (director). *Breaking Bad*. Vince Gilligan (creator and showrunner). AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 10 May 2009.
[289] Episode 5, Season 1. '5G'. Matthew Weiner (writer, creator and showrunner). Lesli Linka Glatter (director). *Mad Men*. AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 16 August 2007.

has been plotting against Tony.[290] Tony's response is to turn over the glass coffee table between them, shattering it, before advancing on his therapist, standing over her and pressing his face in hers, threatening to break her "fuckin' face in fifty thousand pieces", before storming out of the room. In these circumstances, Walter's cancer, Don's traumatic past, and Tony's abusive upbringing, all offer compelling evidence for the terms under which we ought to consider their behaviour. Our judgements must factor all these pieces of narrative information that have been entered into the evidence for their characters.

For this reason, the term that I will define these characters with is 'morally transgressive protagonists.' By referencing 'moral transgression' I aim to communicate that explicit demonstrations of immoral behaviour are central to the explorations of character in these series. Crucially, the immoral depictions of these behaviours present evidence for how we ought to understand these characters that contrasts and conflicts with other behaviours that demonstrate moral virtue. For this reason, focusing on these characters as 'morally transgressive' excludes the behavioural paradigm of heroism from their definition. Crucially, though, this does not exclude heroism as a potential paradigm that we might apply to these characters. Instead, it only excludes it as something essential to their definition. As outlined, narrative complexity develops the identities of these protagonists, which we use to understand who they are. The most morally interesting behaviours in complex serial dramas to this end are those that have the most vivid consequences. In *Breaking Bad*, Walter White's behaviour provides this vividness frequently. Examples of this include his decision to allow Jane Margolis to choke to death instead of saving her;[291] poisoning the six-year-old child Brock Cantillo (Ian Posada) to manipulate Jesse Pinkman into helping him;[292] and turning over Jesse

[290] Episode 13, Season 1. 'I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano'. David Chase (writer, creator, and showrunner), John Patterson (director). *The Sopranos*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 4 April 1999.
[291] Episode 12, Season 2. 'Phoenix'. Colin Bucksey (director). John Shiban (writer). *Breaking Bad*. Vince Gilligan (creator and showrunner). AMC Networks. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 24 May,2009.
[292] Episode 13, Season 4. 'Face Off'. *Breaking Bad*. Vince Gilligan (writer, director, showrunner, and creator). AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 9 October 2011.

Pinkman to a neo-nazi gang, knowing that are likely to exploit and kill him.[293] These behaviours are significant to our engagement because their consequences are so intricately connected to their story. Their story is tied to the emotional response we have to them that reflects their vividness, as Jason Mittell writes of Walter White's decision to let Jane Margolis die:

> we watch him wordlessly rationalize this passive act of murder. […] this moment plunges us into Walt's interiority by triggering serialized memory: we reconstruct Walt's interior thought processes via our shared experiences of his life that we have witnessed over the previous two seasons.[294]

Mittell begins with emotional language ("we watch him wordlessly rationalize this passive act of murder") which betrays the influence of *his* emotional response to what he takes to be Walter's motivations. He then moves away from this reading of Walter, and into a more poetical approach to the scene, discussing how it requires us to "reconstruct Walt's interior thought processes". He then returns to a more emotional reading, arguing that

> We know his talent for rationalization and his need to prioritize his own well-being over that of others, as well as his paternal connection to Jesse, and thus can imagine his internal monologue as he stops himself from saving Jane's life and watches her die to protect himself and his surrogate son.[295]

Here Mittell returns to an emotional reading, wherein certain phrases betray his interpretive response to what Walter does: "talent for rationalization", "need to prioritize his own well-being over that of others", "paternal connection to Jesse", and that he allows Jane to die "to protect himself and his surrogate son". I am not arguing that Mittell's phrases are incorrect, only that they are not objectively true in the same way that his assertions about how we "reconstruct Walt's interior thought processes" are. In many television dramas these sorts of interpretive responses would not be controversial. For example, it is not controversial to write that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* provides explicit

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[293] Episode 14, Season 5. 'Ozymandias'. Moira Walley-Beckett (writer), Rian Johnson (director). *Breaking Bad*. Vince Gilligan (creator and showrunner). AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 15 September 2013.
[294] Mittell. *Complex TV*. Pp 157-158.
[295] Ibid.

motivations that explain Buffy's reasons for killing monsters, or that *ER* gives us explicit reasons to believe that Dr Green acts in the best interests of saving lives, or that *Hill Street Blues*' police officers believe in communitarian ideals of public safety and prosperity. The point is that in complex serial drama we cannot make such uncontroversial claims about protagonists. There is an ambiguity to their characters that undermines such objective recognition: it is not clear that Walter sees Jesse as a surrogate son, or that he behaves out of an egocentric self-preservation, and indeed there are obvious objections to these readings.[296]

The information that Mittell describes here is attached to a psychological and emotional understanding of character, not an objective observation of character. We are always connecting and responding to this information to understand who these characters are, and why they behave the way we do, and *this* is how we should think about the protagonists of complex serial drama. While at times we might stop to reflect on this information and decide that these characters are immoral, that is not something communicated by the narrative. Complex serial drama presents us with complex avenues of understanding evergreen personalities whose stories are interesting because they are criminal, but also because they are human. Conceiving of these characters in this way is also appropriate because it describes what it is about them that is cognitively rewarding: the activity of negotiating complex character information that leads to an understanding. It is towards this sense of enjoyment that I will turn to now.

To be clear, it is not my contention that we ought not think of these characters as immoral, but that what is interesting about them, and what defines them, is how their behaviour encourages us to think more deeply about them. The benefit of focusing on this aspect of these characters is that it defines what

[296] For example, Walter's constant exploitation of Jesse could be taken to demonstrate that he sees in Jesse a reliable tool that he can perpetually manipulate to his benefit, regarding him as a professional utility rather than with familial sentiment. To the notion that Walter acts out of egocentric self-preservation: there is evidence that his initial reason for entering a criminal lifestyle was born from the desire to benefit his family after his death, which demonstrates that he is capable of putting the needs of others ahead of his personal well-being. Chapter four more thoroughly outlines and explores how the presence of these conflicting readings of behaviour demonstrates ambiguity, with application to HBO's *The Sopranos*.

they narratively contribute to the story. This is how we can withstand their immoral behaviour and still enjoy engaging with them. Complex serial drama succeeds when we enjoy engaging with it enough to continue to watch it. We find this enjoyment, despite the violence and misery that frequently takes place in their stories, through the cognitive activity of trying to comprehend why it happens. Morally transgressive protagonists provide us with a challenging story that asks us to understand the humanity behind their immoral decisions. Fundamentally, *this* is what we enjoy about these characters in complex serial drama: their immoral and violent behaviour is a vividly engaging component of a complex story. This section has argued that we do this because it is enjoyable. There is a payoff within this engagement that counteracts the negative emotional experience that we might also feel in response to its violence. By considering the humanity that underpins these characters, we can understand how this activity so easily earns our invested opinions in disseminating their personalities. This has been a largely philosophical exploration of how *we* engage with these characters. In the next section I will discuss how the *narrative* encourages us to engage with its information in this way.

3.3 Engagement

Creating engaging morally transgressive protagonists requires a combination of an immediate cognitive response to their behaviour, and the subsequent rumination over that behaviour to make sense of the character. The ongoing product of this activity serves to inform our immediate responses and ruminations in the future, as is natural with the cumulatively serialised nature of the stories. To establish how these series facilitate this process, I will draw on Murray Smith’s seminal 1995 text regarding character engagement, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, for a basic conceptual starting point.[297] Smith’s text has been frequently cited as the work that opened the contemporary discussion of character in film and television. He relies on concepts that are lean in phenomenological scope but robust in their potential for application:

> Characters are treated as fictional analogues of human agents, basic constituents of representation embodied in a vast array of specific modes of characterization and purposes of representation. Characters constitute a major >entry point< into our engagement with narratives: we look for characters […]; we sort major from minor characters; we seek to establish the desires and goals of such characters; and we project and anticipate their destinies.[298] *(square brackets mine)*

Smith’s premise is not to define the specific *content* of a viewer’s response to a character—i.e. to state what emotions a viewer will feel, or what opinions they will form—but to contextualise them with the character information they are responding to.[299] Within this paradigm, the role of the viewer is that of an “imaginative agent”:

> [A]n agent who knowingly fulfils certain institutional roles; whose mental life is constrained by particular beliefs and values, but whose imaginative capacities allow for change in what is

[297] Murray Smith. *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. Oxford University Press. New York City, New York. 1995.
[298] Ibid, Pp 233-234.
[299] Ibid, P 41.

> assumed—automatized—and what is questioned; an agent for whom emotional response is part of a larger cycle of action, perception, and cognition, rather than an impediment to any of these.[300]

What Smith describes here echoes the concept of 'mental models' in chapter two. He identifies that viewers will develop patterns of association used to interpret and understand characters with relative consistency, but with scope for malleability. To this end, Jens Eder's 2010 essay, 'Understanding Characters', moves to update Smith's terminology to directly consider characters as pertaining to mental models.[301] For Eder, these are "closely connected with other mental models that the viewers have formed" relating to the text.[302] In accordance with the dynamic process involved with mental modelling, Smith's 'Structure of Sympathy' strikes a balance between freedom and constraint, stressing the "active, creative work" of our experience of character within its textual boundaries. The Structure of Sympathy is a three-tiered theory that regards how we come to engage with a character in a sympathetic and agreeable way. This is a result of the relationship between the character information provided by a text, our reception of that information, and the impression that it leaves upon our related mental models.[303] These three levels are: recognition, alignment, and allegiance. 'Recognition' regards the basic point of access through which we recognise characters. From here, Smith considers how our mental models develop through engagement with their representation, which he outlines through the concepts of 'alignment' and 'allegiance'. Alignment pertains to the extent that we can be driven to understand the perspective of a character. Allegiance considers how mental models can form that are reflect positive investment in that character's best interests, again, constrained by their place within the fiction.[304]

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[300] Ibid, P 63.
[301] Jens Eder. 'Understanding Characters' in *Projections*. Vol 4, Iss 1. Summer 2010. Berghahn Journals. P 17.
[302] Ibid, P 19.
[303] Smith. *Engaging Characters*. P 73.
[304] As I will return to in section 3.2, the ability to form such allegiance with morally transgressive protagonists involves the active recognition that they are fictional.

Recognition

Smith defines *Recognition* through the heuristic acknowledgement of characters as both representations of real people and formal 'artifacts' impressed into the narrative:

> While understanding that these characters are artifices, and are literally no more than collections of inert, textually described traits, we assume that these traits correspond to analogical ones we find in persons in the real world…[305]

The process of recognition is dynamic: it is an on-the-fly process of receiving character information using related mental models. If we recognise the character as, for example, the actor playing their role, then we are processing them as an *artifact* by focussing on their formal properties. These formal properties explain the objective truth of what is being represented: actors reading pre-written dialogue, and performing choreography in service of a story, and so on. To recognise the character within the act of communication, however, is to perceive them as a *fictional being*. This means that we activate and develop mental models to explain their behaviour as though they were real.[306] Smith writes that this constitutes a 'twofoldness' of character: "seeing them at once as (more or less realistic) representations of persons and as artifacts in their own right."[307] A result of this twofoldness is our appreciation for the fiction that these characters communicate, as Smith writes:

> We may want Mercutio to survive, but at the same time also want to experience *Romeo and Juliet* as it was written, which necessitates the death of Mercutio.[308]

We recognise that these characters are analogous to real people, but we also recognise that to comprehend the story of the television series we must accept their fate as pre-determined artifacts of the fiction.

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305 Smith. *Engaging Characters*. P 82.
306 Eder. 'Understanding Characters'. P 18.
307 Murray Smith. '*Engaging Characters*: Further Reflections' in *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film and Other Media*. (eds. Jens Eder, et al.). Walter de Gruyter & Co; Bilingual edition. 2010. P 237.
308 Ibid, P 238.

Smith contends that we recognise characters as fictional beings in accordance with our "mimetic hypothesis," a concept he cites from the work of Christopher Butler.[309] The premise of Butler's claim regarding character and mimesis is that we "must see the text, at least initially, as mimetic" of the real world, as our ability to infer meaning requires pre-existing mental models that provide a heuristic to engage with them.[310] This sense of seeing the text, Butler qualifies, is within the "shifting, culturally relative, and often metaphorical frameworks" by which we interpret the rest of the world around us. The text thus offers the "same basic categorical structure that we use for the external world". This means that the act of recognition will be harder to perform when faced with characters that are less relatable to our world experience.[311] Smith thus theorises that characters are written to possess traits that mimic those found in pre-existing mental models pertaining people in the real world. The mental models developed through this form of mimesis is how we begin to engage with character traits, "subject to modification":

> …fictional texts ask us to revise the assumptions, beliefs, and values that we bring to them in a myriad of ways: fictional worlds can propose alternative physical laws, histories, moral codes, and social rituals.[312]

This means that the way we recognise characters is an ever-developing process of presumption and correction. We might first recognise Walter White's role in *Breaking Bad* as creating a heroic story about a man facing adversity, but that will gradually and significantly change.

Eder elaborates on recognition with two additional heuristic modes: as *symbol*, and as *symptom*.[313] These are "umbrella terms" that account for a "wide range of phenomena."[314] Recognising a character as a *symbol* means to engage with the "indirect meanings" pertaining to a more holistic meaning of the text they are contained in.[315] Eder points out that media academics are

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[309] Ibid, Pp. 234-235.
[310] Christopher Butler. *Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology: An Introduction to Some Current Issues in Literary Theory*. Oxford University Press. New York. 1984. P 7.
[311] Butler, *Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology*. P 53.
[312] Murray Smith. *Engaging Characters*. P 54.
[313] Jens Eder. 'Understanding Characters'. P 21.
[314] Ibid, P 32.
[315] Ibid.

likely to spend a lot of time engaging with characters as symbols, because their work often pertains to the study of their narrative significance. The degree to which the formal constitution of a character's representation is recognised as a *symptom* reflects the "consequences or causal factors" embodied by that representation.[316] Recognising the symptom of a character, within Eder's concept of the term, is to appreciate factors external to the text—often involving the actor—that have directly influenced the character's portrayal. For example, between seasons two and three of *The Sopranos*, the actor who portrays Livia Soprano, Nancy Marchand, tragically passed away. In the second episode of the third season a final scene featuring Livia takes place, and a few scenes later it is revealed that she has passed away.[317] Livia's final scene is made using a combination of pre-existing footage and sound, and computer-generated information (CGI).[318] The amalgam of pre-existing footage and CGI that creates the depiction of her character in this episode can be recognised as *symptomatic* of Nancy Marchand's real life passing. In terms of academic engagement, Eder points out that "cultural criticism" often involves *symptomatic* assessment, because "it can elucidate cultural mentalities or the socio-cultural consequences" of a text.[319] For example, Amanda Lotz' text, *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century*, examines the near-ubiquity of male protagonists in complex serial drama as an "array" of symptomatic questions "about the construction of masculinity in these shows."[320] In this way the examination of characters-as-symptoms can be used to engage with what they communicate about the culture that created them. Eder argues recognition, with the four heuristic modes of *artifact*, *fictional being*, *symbol*, and *symptom*, provide the "general point of departure" used to understand the communication of character:

> one first examines the features of the fictional being, then its construction as an artifact and subsequently the relations between

[316] Ibid, P 21.
[317] Season 3, Episode 2. 'Proshai, Livushka'. David Chase (Writer and Showrunner). Tim Van Patten (Director). *The Sopranos*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 4 March, 2001.
[318] 'Late 'Sopranos' actress virtually returns to show'. (writer uncredited). *USA Today*. June 02, 2002. Website. < http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/tech/news/2001-02-28-sopranos.htm> [First Accessed 16/12/2018]
[319] Eder. 'Understanding Characters'. P 32.
[320] Lotz. *Cable Guys*. P 5.

> characters, actions and character constellations *[mental models relating to the relationships between characters].* One has thus prepared a good foundation for the investigation of characters as symbols and symptoms.[321] *(square-brackets mine)*

The insight required to recognise a character as *artifact*, *symbol*, and *symptom*, requires engagement of mental models that recognise that character as a *fictional being*. To elucidate upon their narrative significance, the viewer must possess an understanding of who they are to draw out a perspective on what their narrative significance is. To summarise, the interaction between pre-existing mental models and the related information posed within television series informs how we initiate engagement with characters. The more information that the viewer can infer about a character, the greater their related mental models grow in complexity. This allows for a more intricate understanding of their qualities as *artifacts*, *symbols*, and *symptoms*. Smith's next tier of the Structure of Sympathy regards how characters are presented to viewers, to help guide their recognition.

Alignment

While recognition regards how we initiate engagement with characters, Smith's concept of 'alignment' relates to how a character is presented to us. To this end, a character's "alignment structure" is the method of representation used to depict them on screen. Consistency in this representation allows a viewer to more easily recognise their developed traits.[322] Sometimes alignment structures can be created to facilitate certain moral attitudes from the viewer toward the protagonist, but this is dependent upon the narrative. Whatever the narrative communicates—both in the short-term and in the long-term—is performed using an alignment structure. In the short-term, this could involve a close-up shot upon a character's face as they make an expression to emphasise their feelings in that moment. In the long-term, it can involve, for example, a consistent approach to: mise en scène in familiar locations (e.g. the protagonist's home, or place of work); proximity of the camera to them; how much time is spent depicting the character; the

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[321] Eder. 'Understanding Characters'. P 23.
[322] Smith. *Engaging Characters*. P 83.

nature of the information communicated about the character, and so on.[323] Smith details an alignment structure as the product of two "interlocking functions": *spatio-temporal attachment* and *subjective access*.[324] How spatio-temporally attached a narrative is to a character refers to:

> the way in which the narration restricts itself to the actions of a single character, or moves more freely among the spatio-temporal paths of two or more characters.[325]

For example, Don Draper's depiction possesses a high degree of spatio-temporal attachment in *Mad Men*. This is because the series aligns to his actions more than any other character. In contrast, subjective access regards the amount of insight that viewers are permitted to a character's internal life: their "dispositions and occurrent states."[326] Typically, the most central characters to a narrative will possess the most fully-developed evidence of an internal life, as subjective access to their perspective will often constitute a key point of context for the narrative's information.[327] Succinctly, Smith contrasts spatio-temporal attachment with subjective access by considering them as relating "to the notions of agent and subject respectively":

> Attachment is that function of narration which renders characters as agents, entities that act and behave; subjective access is the function that represents characters as entities that desire, believe, feel, think, and so forth.[328]

Together, spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access control the method of distributing information about characters as both 'agents' and 'subjects'. It is this combination that Smith dubs their 'alignment structure.'

Alignment structures are responsible for the depiction of violence both in its immediate representation, and by helping us to develop values associated with morally transgressive protagonists through our long-term exposure to them. The depiction of protagonists through their alignment structures provides the information that we use to develop an understanding of their

[323] Ibid.
[324] Ibid.
[325] Ibid, P 142.
[326] Ibid, P 143.
[327] Ibid, P 150.
[328] Ibid, P 143.

behaviour and motivation. Their close spatio-temporal attachment and deep subjective access are likely to foster strong values, and drawing on these values is integral to the significance of violence. As Karyn Riddle writes:

> Events are more emotionally interesting—and thus, vivid—when they happen to people we know, or when they happen to people for whom we have strong feelings.[329]

For this reason, the consistency of long-term alignment structures depicting protagonists makes the sudden and permanent change found in violence more impactful. For example, the scenes of *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White that depict the life he shares with his family create a fundamental basis to develop mental models relating to his character. Consistently close spatio-temporal attachment and deep subjective access in these scenes provide us with a paradigm of his behaviour to create these mental models. It is the exposure to these alignment structures that make his decision to let Jane Margolis die so vividly violent, because they are so different: we have not yet been aligned with Walter when he makes such a fundamentally immoral decision. Alignment is responsible for presenting us with an ongoing case for the understanding and assessment of morally transgressive protagonists, developing and subverting the consistency of its structures for dramaturgical effect. It is through these alignment structures that Smith proposes the viewer is able to form allegiance to protagonists.

Allegiance

Smith writes that the alignment of character information relating to protagonists of a text are designed to foster our 'allegiance' to them.[330] Where alignment regards the narrative representation of character, allegiance details the attempt to positively influence our "moral evaluation" of a character.[331] Smith carefully articulates the exclusivity of alignment and allegiance by pointing out that a narrative has numerous potential ways of communicating a character's alignment structure. However, the difference between those structures could be purely aesthetic: we could morally evaluate the character

[329] Riddle. 'A Theory of Vivid Media Violence.' P 294.
[330] Smith. *Engaging Characters*. P 84.
[331] Ibid.

in the same way regardless.[332] Smith describes allegiance to a character as one that depends upon our recognising what we take to be:

> reliable access to the character's state of mind, on understanding the context of the character's actions, and having morally evaluated the character on the basis of that knowledge.[333]

To this end, alignment structures play a vital role in effectively guiding moral evaluation:

> On the basis of such evaluations, spectators construct moral structures, in which characters are organized and ranked in a system of preference.[334]

Smith argues that protagonists must present morally positive, "or at least preferable," character traits in comparison to other characters in the text—particularly antagonists—for them to rank high enough in a 'system of preference' to warrant allegiance.[335] If this occurs, then:

> the spectator adopts an attitude of sympathy (or, in the case of negative evaluation, antipathy) towards the character, and responds emotionally in an apposite way to situations in which the character is placed.[336]

The focus upon 'positive' and 'negative' moral evaluation as dictating 'preference' is problematic and is a topic that I will return to in the next sub-section. First, I will establish Smith's concept of a text's "system of values."[337]

The Co-Text

To ally ourselves with a morally transgressive protagonist we must be comfortable that the text is communicating an acceptable payoff. Smith explores this through a concept originally coined by Christopher Butler named the 'co-text', which is the "system of values" that a text inferentially communicates alongside its information.[338] Butler defines a work's co-text by contrasting it to its *context*: where the *context* of a work relates to its

[332] Ibid, P 188.
[333] Ibid, P 84.
[334] Ibid,
[335] Ibid, P 188.
[336] Ibid.
[337] Ibid, P 194.
[338] Ibid*,* Pp 194-197.

audio/visual representation, the co-text frames the moral texture of its system of values through the "coherent fictional situation" of a work.[339] For example, Amazon Video's *The Man in the High Castle* is set in an alternative timeline wherein the Axis won the Second World War, and so the *context* of the work is dominated by the system of values enforced by the Nazi party and their policies over the world at large. The *co-text* of the series, however, is one that promotes a system of values that opposes those of the Nazi party, promoting negative responses to characters who endorse Nazi ideology and positive responses to those who resist it. The co-text influences the moral orientation of our mental models relating to a series to this end. Smith refers to this as the "context within the text."[340] Sometimes, the co-text may not be deliberate, but a product of a prevailing culture that has influenced the author(s) of a work. For example, Dan Flory asserts that the predominant co-text of most "Western visual media like film" has been informed by "largely unconscious cultural assumptions concerning what it is to be white".[341] In this way, the co-text is often constituted, sometimes unknowingly, by relatable "real-world attitudes" in an attempt to positively influence viewer mental models pertaining to its characters.[342] The co-text requires synergy with the moral attitudes of the viewer to function as intended. For example, if a series aims to demonstrate the warmth and kindness of a character by portraying their love for animals, its co-text hinges on most viewers resonating with that behaviour appropriately. There are a range of reasons that a co-text can be rejected, for example the impact of shifting values over time. Ralph's threats of domestic violence to his wife Alice in CBS's 1950s sitcom *The Honeymooners* are more likely to be detrimental towards forming allegiance with him for contemporary audiences. For most of us, the co-text asserted in that series is one that legitimises domestic violence, and thus it is a co-text that we are likely to find morally repellent. For this reason, an appealing co-text is crucial for us to

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[339] Butler. *Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology*. Pp 4-6.
[340] Smith. *Engaging Characters.* P 194.
[341] Dan Flory. 'Spike Lee and the Sympathetic Racist' in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Vol 64, Iss 1. 2006. P 71.
[342] Smith. *Engaging Characters.* P 194.

discern a payoff in engaging with morally transgressive protagonists, and vividly violent content.

The component of 'moral evaluation' in developing allegiance with characters in complex serial drama benefits from the vividness of violence, so long as the co-text renders it palatable. The role of the co-text is thus vital in complex serial drama, as violence is frequently depicted to the unjust detriment of its victims, often at the hands of morally transgressive protagonists. The risk that this violence can present if we find no co-textual payoff is immense: the vividness of the content will magnify our negative response to it. For example, if we determine that the co-text is communicating a gratuitous appreciation of violence without any additional meaning then we might have a negative response to it. A 'negative response', to this end, would present a source of aversion to the morally transgressive protagonist because there appears to be insufficient justification for their immoral behaviour. However, the greater our appreciation of the co-text, the more we stand to appreciate the protagonist's violent behaviour as an interesting element of the story.

Co-Text Example: *Breaking Bad*

The co-text in complex serial drama is responsible for orienting our attention to the aspects of story information that pertain to how we can better understand character. This is particularly important in scenes of vivid violence. In these scenes, the co-text is responsible for providing us with an avenue for perceiving a payoff that mitigates the aversion we might have to the vividness of the violence. For example, in the third episode of *Breaking Bad*, Walter sits in a basement with Domingo 'Krazy-8' Molina (Maxmino Arciniega), whom he is holding prisoner and has promised Jesse that he will kill.[343] Having chained Krazy-8 by the neck to a pole with a bicycle 'u-lock', Walter experiences a crisis of character relating to what he ought to do. Krazy-8 previously held Walter and Jesse at gunpoint, before a desperate gambit by Walter almost

[343] Season 1, Episode 3. '…And the Bag's in the River'. Vince Gilligan (writer, creator, showrunner), Adam Berstein (director). *Breaking Bad*. AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 10 February 2008.

killed him, leading to their holding him prisoner.[344] Walter and Jesse decide that they need to kill Krazy-8, because he will certainly seek retribution if they allow him to live. Subsequently, a coin flip determines that Walter will be the one to kill him. Walter's moral quandary in this episode provides an opportunity to demonstrate his humanity. He writes up a list of competing reasons as to why he should either let him live or kill him. In the 'let him live' list, he writes:

- It's the moral thing to do
- Judeo/Christian principles
- You are <u>not</u> a murderer
- Sanctity of life
- He may listen to reason
- Post-Traumatic Stress
- Won't be able to live with yourself
- Murder is wrong!

However, the opposing 'kill him' list only has one entry:

- He'll kill your entire family if you let him go.

This information frames Walter's situation in clear moral terms: despite all his most fervent moral beliefs relating to murder, allowing Krazy-8 to live is simply too risky.

The co-text of *Breaking Bad* at this early stage uses alignment structures to demonstrate that Walter is first and foremost a morally sensitive, and sentimental, person—but that he also possesses an extraordinarily gifted intellect which renders him inevitably proficient in whatever he applies himself to. To this end, the co-text imparts value by providing depth to the story of Walter's desperate, underappreciated, genius as he discovers his powerful criminal proficiency. As *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan discusses of Walter White:

> I've learned the audience will go along with a character like Walt so long as he remains interesting and active, and is capable about his business. People like competency. What is it people like about

[344] Season 1, Episode 2. 'Cat's in the Bag…'. Vince Gilligan (writer, creator, and showrunner). Adam Bernstein (director). *Breaking Bad*. AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 27 January 2008.

Darth Vader? Is it that he's so evil, or that he's so good at his job? I think it might be the latter.[345]

A character who is 'interesting and active' is a rich source of intricate and enjoyable evaluation, regardless of how they behave morally. In this way, intuitively, we become interested in what Walter does because we expect that he will do it well—whatever it is that he chooses to do. In this scene, he recognises the fundamental threat that Krazy-8 presents to him and his family but, despite coming to this inevitably accurate conclusion, Walter does not commit to the decision to kill him. Instead, he brings Krazy-8 a sandwich, and the two talk:

> **Walter:** So that name, 'Krazy-8'… Do I really have to call you that? I mean, no offense, but don't you have a real name?
> **Krazy-8:** Domingo.
> **Walter:** That's 'Sunday', right? I'd rather call you that, if you don't mind.

Walter continues to humanise Krazy-8, who warns him: "you getting to know me is not gonna make it easier for you to kill me." Walter ignores that sentiment and continues to engage with Krazy-8 by speaking sentimentally, discussing Krazy-8's father who owns a furniture business. This spurs Walter to insist that he remembers the store, because he once bought a crib for his son from it. Walter and Krazy-8 then discuss Walter's cancer—a fact that he has revealed to nobody else, including his family—and that he is making methamphetamines to leave money for his family before he dies. After this conversation, Walter realises that he cannot kill Krazy-8, and he goes upstairs to get the key to release him. However, while upstairs he stops to examine the broken shards of a plate that he smashed in the basement earlier in the episode. He recognises that a long shard is missing, this perspicacity again demonstrating Walter's remarkable "competency". Walter panics, searching one final time for the missing shard. Upon realising that it is missing, he mutters "why are you doing this?" to himself. Walter then returns downstairs to

[345] Vince Gilligan, quoted by Rob Tannenbaum. 'Vince Gilligan: 'Walt is not Darth Vader''. *Rolling Stone*. Website. September 25, 2013. <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-news/vince-gilligan-walt-is-not-darth-vader-78709/> [Originally Accessed 31/12/2018]

speak with Krazy-8 one final time. As Walter walks down the stairs, Krazy-8 stands and greets him:

> **Krazy-8:** You're doing the right thing, Walter.

Walter motions Krazy-8 to move to the other side of the pole, which he does, now facing with his back to Walter so that Walter has access to the key-slot on the lock.

> **Walter:** So you're not angry?
>
> **Krazy-8:** How do you mean? Angry? No—live and let live, man.
>
> **Walter:** That's very understanding…
>
> **Krazy-8:** Whatever, man. I just want to go home.
>
> **Walter:** Me too.

There is a pause, and Krazy-8 turns his head slightly to capture Walter in his peripheral vision:

> **Krazy-8:** Unlock me, Walter.

Walter slowly reaches forward and gets a solid grip upon the u-lock. With tears streaming down his face, he notices Krazy-8 reach into his pocket and grip the shard:

> **Walter:** The moment I do, are you gonna stick me with that broken piece of plate?

As soon as Walter finishes his sentence Krazy-8 pulls out the shard and manically begins attempting to stab the space behind him. Walter pulls back on the u-lock as hard as he can, turning it into a makeshift garrotte. This continues for 38-seconds, with Walter putting his foot on to the pole to give himself better leverage for the garrotte, which provides Krazy-8 a target that he stabs repeatedly with the shard of plate. As Krazy-8 enters his death-rattle, an exhausted and emotionally distraught Walter cries and repeats "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry" as Krazy-8 slides down the pole, finally dying upon reaching the floor.

The co-text in *Breaking Bad* emphasises the significance of circumstance: Walter's decision to pursue crime is a response to his being diagnosed with cancer. At this early point in the series the co-text does not suggest that Walter is doing something good, but that his sudden criminal behaviour is a chaotic response to his diagnosis. In this way, the co-text to Walter's killing

Krazy-8 is that we should value the attempt to understand Walter when even he does not understand himself. For example, he admits to Krazy-8 that he has not told anyone he has cancer and he does not "know what to do". By demonstrating the long, confused, and agonising process Walter goes through before he kills Krazy-8, we know that he does not *want* to do it, but that he believes he has no choice. While we might point to the fact that Walter is the one who decided to get involved in the drug trade—which created his predicament with Krazy-8—the alignment structures of the episode emphasise a more different perspective. We see Walter desperately struggle to hide the truth of his cancer from his family, while facing the grim physical and economic realities of his cancer's impact upon his life *and* their lives. As Walter struggles emotionally, he also struggles physically with his cancer, suffering coughing fits and fainting spells. In short, Walter's decision to turn to crime is not carefully considered and calculated, but a desperate and confused reaction to his diagnosis. The co-text frames the developing story of *Breaking Bad* in these terms: Walter is in a bad situation, and he is responding in a way that is unclear—even to himself. These insights into Walter's character provide a co-textual justification for following his story. It tells us that his behaviour is interesting because of the complex and tumultuous circumstances that sustain it. While his behaviour becomes increasingly difficult to sympathise with, his story remains tied to this unravelling uncertainty about why he behaves and, therefore, who he is. The co-text of the story is also that Walter is a fundamentally interesting character: a borderline-impoverished man who makes a series of life-changing decisions that begin in response to being diagnosed with terminal cancer.

The co-texts of complex serial drama always focus on the interesting puzzle of their characters and unique circumstances. *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White turns to a life of crime in response to his cancer diagnosis. *Mad Men*'s Don Draper obtains a secret identity in the attempt to leave behind a traumatic life of abuse and poverty. *The Sopranos*' Tony Soprano is an Italian-American mob boss who seeks psychological help to deal with the emotional toll that his life of violent crime has had upon him. The co-texts of these series emphasise challenges for our moral scruples. Their morally transgressive protagonists

commit immoral behaviours, but they are also relatably human. Vivid violence deepens the complexity of this challenge, making it more interesting and exciting.

3.4 Allegiance Revisited: Response to Character

It is my contention that the relationship between serialised storytelling and vivid violence it is central to fostering allegiance between viewers and morally transgressive protagonists. As established in chapter two, vividly violent content is prevalent in complex serial drama, and its engagement is noteworthy for the unique responses it elicits, and the ongoing cognitive thought-processes it is likely to inspire. The focus on this component of viewer engagement contrasts with Murray Smith's arguments pertaining to allegiance which. as explored in section 3.3, identifies moral evaluation as fundamental to the process. In this section I will argue that character engagement leads to allegiance in complex serial drama by contrasting intuitively positive character traits with intuitively interesting vividly violent content. We are both attracted to the positive character traits of morally transgressive protagonists and intrigued by their behaviour.

Violence is used to demonstrate the most extreme behaviour that morally transgressive protagonists commit. We might judge these acts as immoral, but this is different than leading us to judge the protagonists as fundamentally immoral. Complex serial drama mitigates our potential moral distaste for immoral behaviour by providing intricate evidence for why these protagonists commit it. Jason Mittell describes seriality in these series as an:

> ongoing accumulation of narrative events—what occurs in one episode will have happened to the characters and storyworld as portrayed in future episodes.[346]

In this, Mittell describes the perpetual process of narrative events which render these characters psychologically nuanced and mysterious: we assess their behaviour within the context of the "ongoing accumulation of narrative events". Our ongoing process of assessment permits multiple readings of their behaviour that contributes to a complex portrait of who we think they are, and what their behaviour means, which we will sometimes deem morally favourable and at other times morally despicable. Crucial to these portrayals

[346] Mittell. *Complex TV*. Pp. 22-23.

are what we are made to *feel* when we recognise this humanity in them. While Murray Smith's notion of allegiance focuses on the cognitive act of evaluation as its determinant, this section will explore the nonrational, emotional, modes of evaluation that influence our ability to form allegiance with characters. The close and sustained alignment structures afforded to these protagonists mean that we can gather complex layers of character information about them. As this happens, our feelings toward them reflect our recognition of their humanity and become more familiar.

Some of the most subtle and nuanced narrative information available in complex serial drama relates to the motivations of morally transgressive protagonists. For example, I have noticed that in *Mad Men*, Don Draper stops smoking 'Lucky Strike' cigarettes after the company terminates their advertising contract with Don's firm. He then smokes 'Old Gold' cigarettes for the rest of the series. This is a small detail, but it demonstrates a richness to Don's character: he never talks about it, and the series never draws explicit attention to it, but it is information about his character all the same. The subtlety of this narratively complex character information provides us with emotional rewards for paying close attention while we evaluate character behaviour. The only way we could notice this information about Don is if we remember that he used to exclusively smoke Lucky Strike cigarettes, which makes his smoking Old Golds remarkable enough to notice. Jason Mittell points out that this level of detail is also beneficial to the formation of 'fan cultures' that discuss the series:

> This interaction between individual cognitive activity and broader cultural circulation is a crucial facet of any attempt to understand the process of narrative comprehension, especially for a serialized narrative whose gaps invite viewers to speculate, theorize, and converse about a program—while there may be broadly shared commonalities of cognitive engagement, the actual experience of consuming a serial narrative is a highly contextualized practice, and thus we must consider how such interpersonal discourses can help shape the comprehension process.[347]

[347] Ibid, P 173.

To this end, the intricacy and subtlety of this narrative information is crucial to creating cultures of fan engagement. It affords us depth to explore information both individually and collectively.

Jason Mittell develops a related notion of allegiance in which the activity of moral evaluation is peripheral to what he describes as the "*operational allegiance*" that we forge with morally transgressive protagonists.[348] Reflecting on *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White, Mittell defines operational allegiance as a process that is, first and foremost, fascinating:

> as viewers, we are engaged with the character's construction, attuned to how the performance is presented, fascinated by reading the mind of the inferred author, and rooting for Walt's triumph in storytelling, if not his actual triumph within the story.[349]

Mittell describes how complex serial drama invites our allegiance with characters like Walter White by creating a sense of fascination through the process of character engagement itself. He demonstrates how this works with reference to his engagement with Walter:

> Walt's complex characterization invites me to examine what makes him tick, how he is put together, and where he might be going, while at the same time emotionally sweeping me up into his life and string of questionable decisions.[350]

In this conception, allegiance is defined by the experience of being fascinated by a protagonist. I agree with Mittell's assertion that our fascination with these characters is central to our forging allegiance with them, but our fascination is only possible within our allegiance to characters if we find them palatable. Here, Murray Smith's prioritising of moral evaluation within allegiance seems apt. However, it is also clear that many viewers are likely to determine morally transgressive characters unfavourably if they rationally evaluate their behaviour. In this section, I will consider Margrethe Bruun Vaage and Carl Plantinga's alternative conception of how allegiance can be fostered: through our emotional responses. This conception regards these responses as intuitively influencing how we comprehend character behaviour. When our

[348] Mittell *Complex TV.* P 163.
[349] Ibid.
[350] Ibid.

emotional responses are favourable towards characters in a fundamental way, then our capacity to be fascinated by their behaviour in scenes of vivid violence improves.

Intuitive Responses

Intuitive responses to information begin before we process that information. For example, when we recognise a close friend walking toward us, we intuitively experience responses that are unique to our identification of them. These responses are most likely emotional—fondness, for example—and they influence our subsequent behaviour—we smile and say hello. These intuitive responses are automatic cognitive acts, to be differentiated from deliberative rational thoughts. As argued separately by both Carl Plantinga[351] and Margrethe Bruun Vaage[352], these responses are downplayed in Murray Smith's consideration of moral evaluation in allegiance. We are encouraged to ally with morally transgressive protagonists not only because we rationally appreciate what they communicate, but because we nonrationally experience the feeling of value first. Our intuitive responses to behaviour will always influence our judgement: we respond before we can assess, and we will only assess what we are responsive toward. In this sense, where rationally deliberative cognitive processes represent our capacity to be *evaluative*, intuitive responses demonstrate that our attention is irrepressibly *valuative*.

Moral Emotions and Fictional Relief

In the opening section of this chapter I discussed what Peter Goldie describes as the "distorting power of emotions" over our capacity to identify behaviour.[353] It is the ability for complex serial dramas to manipulate our emotions as a way of influencing our cognitive thought processes that the rest of this section will outline. In this context, I will draw on the discussion of how our emotional experiences can infer positive associations with morally transgressive protagonists, and the role these have in developing our

[351] Carl Plantinga. '"I Followed the Rules, and They All Loved You More": Moral Judgement and Attitudes toward Fictional Characters' in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXXIV. 2010.. Pp 34-51.
[352] Vaage. *The Antihero in American Television.*
[353] Goldie. 'Imagination and The Distorting Power of Emotion'.

allegiance. If our emotions infer allegiance with these protagonists even while we vividly experience acts of violence they commit, they will influence what we infer.

While complex serial drama emphasises morally complex situations to, as Margrethe Bruun Vaage writes, enhance "deliberate moral reasoning", our nonrational emotional interest is also crucial:

> there would not be much of a conflicted response to monitor consciously if it had not been for the fact that when we engage with fiction, we allow ourselves to rely most heavily on moral intuitions and emotions.[354]

Vaage refers to these "intuitions and emotions" as nonrational responses to character behaviour that precede and are exclusive to the rational sense of evaluation that we consciously use to analyse their behaviour.[355] In the opening section I also explored Goldie's work regarding how we believe the perspectives that these emotions infer to be 'correct': we feel that Don Draper is objectively interesting, we do not feel the subjective clause of that emotional experience as being exclusively ours. What these emotions infer becomes increasingly complex in unison with our narrative comprehension. This is reflected by how we observe character behaviour, as Arthur A. Raney writes:

> Emotional reactions to characters alone cannot elicit enjoyment; merely liking or disliking characters is not enough. Enjoyment is bound to what those characters actually do within the narratives: They encounter trials and tribulations, joy and pain, victory and defeat. As alluded to above, viewers feel for characters *in anticipation of the outcomes* they might experience. By definition, the feelings that viewers experience are *moral emotions*[356]

Raney refers to moral emotions as "those experienced in relation to social events not directly affecting the self."[357] The term is defined by the

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[354] Vaage. *The Antihero in American Television*. P 22.
[355] Ibid.
[356] Arthur A. Raney. 'The Role of Morality in Emotional Reactions to and Enjoyment of Media Entertainment' in *Journal of Media Psychology*. Vol. 23, No. 1. 2011. P 19.
[357] Ibid.

Encyclopedia of Human Behavior as “a key element of human moral experience” due to their influence over our subsequent behaviour:

> Emotions such as guilt or sympathy are based on an understanding of the other person’s circumstances and/or one’s own internalized moral standards and constitute the basic motive in situations calling for moral actions.[358]

We feel that these moral emotions are ‘correct’ because they infer truths about character and circumstance, which directs our thought-processes.

Moral emotions infer to us objective truths: if we are intrigued by Don Draper then our emotion state infers that he is objectively interesting. This is not the same as a rational conclusion that Don Draper is interesting, which requires us to outline an analysis of his character to make the argument. Where rational thought can be reproduced without losing fidelity, a moral emotion exists only for as long as it is being experienced. We rarely describe the *experience* of a moral emotion, because it cannot be generalised. The experience of a moral emotion is dependent upon feeling it, and therefore it can only be understood literally. This is what it means to assert that moral emotions are *nonrational*: they are experiences that we feel, not arguments we can share. For this reason, we usually describe moral emotions by generalising their *function* to understand them rationally, i.e. fear is the moral emotion that identifies something as scary. Similarly, while they are nonrational, moral emotions pre-empt rational thought. They are a context from which we can infer what sort of rational thought is required: i.e. if we feel that Don Draper’s past is interesting then it will be a focus of our attention. The inference of that *feeling* alone is enough to motivate us. Carl Plantinga writes that motivations inferred from emotional engagement are more likely to promote allegiance with characters, as opposed to a separate process of rational deliberation:

> It is not as though, during the viewing process, viewers consciously make a list of the moral qualities of a particular character and deliberately measure that list against a preferred

[358] T. Malti & B. Latzko. ‘Moral Emotions’ in *Encyclopedia of Human Behavior (2nd Edition)*. V.S. Ramachandran (ed). Academic Press. Elsevier. London. 2012. P 644.

> moral standard. […] our moral judgments of people and others tend to stem away from many factors that have little to do with moral character *per se*. It would seem to me to be surprising, given this element of human nature, that our allegiance for fictional characters would be strictly rooted in the moral criteria.[359]

Plantinga's point is that our ability to connect and ally with morally transgressive protagonists must contain a significant nonrational component: at the very least, an appropriate moral emotion must be felt before a rational justification for it can be found.

It is easier to feel positive moral emotions for morally transgressive protagonists than we would if they were real, because fiction unburdens us of real moral responsibilities. Margrethe Bruun Vaage accommodates this through her concept of 'fictional relief':

> The spectator allows herself not to fully consider what moral and political consequences a liked character's actions would have, and which consequences it would have for her to approve what this character does.[360]

Fictional relief regards how we eschew our regular moral responsibilities to emotionally engage with a story in a way that we enjoy. It is not a not a permanent state that excludes the possibility of rational evaluation, however, and is contingent on our willingness to engage fiction differently to how we engage reality. As Vaage summarises:

> Indeed, had we not been aware of the fictional nature of the programme, we would probably not have allowed ourselves to rely so heavily on low-level processing. A fictional relief is an attitude or mode we deliberately choose to enter, and that we can snap out of either willingly or because the story calls for more systematic, rational processing.[361]

In this way, moral emotions guide our cognitive attention towards the aspects of the story we enjoy, as Noël Carroll describes:

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[359] Plantinga. '"I Followed the Rules, and They All Loved You More". P 42.
[360] Vaage. *The Antihero in American Television*. P 23.
[361] Vaage. *The Antihero in American Television*. P 35.

> Emotions in daily life solve the frame problem; they organize the buzzing confusion in terms of our interests. Similarly, by engaging our moral emotions, moviemakers enable us to organize the incoming stimulus correctly, very often […] by stoking our sense of good and evil.[362]

Because our interests rely on enjoyment, fictional relief permits our engagement to be motivated by nonrational moral emotions more often than from rational moral thought. This is because the cognitive demands relating to fiction are not the same as those we place upon reality: entertainment is paramount. This will be true for as long as we detect a payoff and an acceptable co-text.

The function of emotional responses to complex serial drama is what is interesting within this context, as they infer what we care about and in what way. In terms of narrative comprehension, some of the quintessential moral emotions we must feel are those that allow us to develop allegiance with morally transgressive protagonists. Scenes of vivid violence are significant in that they are barometers of both our moral emotions and our rational thought processes. As established in section 2.1 of chapter two, scenes of vivid violence not only elicit significant emotional responses, but they are also likely to elicit our processes of cognitive elaboration to understand it better. For example, if our emotional response to seeing Walter White watch Jane Margolis die infers that what he did is wrong, that will direct the narrative interrogation that the vividness of the scene elicits. The moral emotion that functions to tell us that it is wrong is not rational, but we can justify it rationally. For example, we might like Jane, inferring that she is a good person, leading us to rationalise that it is wrong to allow a good person to die. We might also like Walter, inferring a rational argument about how this behaviour will permanently harm the decency of his moral character. Finally, we might like Jesse, inferring a rational hypothesis that the consequences of Jane's death will be devastating to Jesse's mental health. The scale of our emotional inference upon our rational thought is heightened by these scenes, their vivid

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[362] Noël Carroll. 'Movies, the Moral Emotions, and Sympathy' in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*. Vol 34, Iss 1. September, 2010. P 1.

information eliciting both rich emotional responses and intricate cognitive attention that leads us to a multifaceted comprehension of what has happened in the narrative. The role of moral emotion in forming allegiance of some kind is crucial in this regard, as we must infer avenues of rational thought that lead to narrative comprehension. For this reason, we must be made to value something significant about those protagonists.

Partiality

Margrethe Bruun Vaage argues the one of the things humans intuitively value is "knowing someone well".[363] Knowing someone well can influence our moral emotions by inferring what Vaage terms as "partiality" for them.[364] Complex serial drama encourages partiality for its protagonists, Vaage argues, by demonstrating something fundamentally relatable about them: the love and affection they feel for their family and friends, and their expression of enjoyment while spending time with them.[365] Regardless of immoral behaviour directed at *other* people, the characteristic of loving one's family and friends is something that we intuitively respond to:

> This dedication and loyalty to his family contributes to making the antihero appear to the spectator as morally preferable to any character who violates this norm – it is an intuitively attractive character trait to care about one's family.[366]

Connecting with this content is key to developing emotions that infer partiality, because we appreciate what we understand. Vaage ascribes our ability to be partial to these characters as an emotional connection to their fiction, the result of their intimate and sustained alignment structures.[367] Crucially, morally transgressive protagonists also demonstrate loyalty which, Vaage asserts, humans ubiquitously seem to value.[368] In turn, we are more willing to learn about that character's background, and find ourselves interested in understanding their behaviour instead of condemning it. Vaage asserts that being made to understand characters like this makes us more loyal to them:

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[363] Vaage. *The Antihero in American Television*. P 39.
[364] Ibid, P 40.
[365] Ibid, P 44.
[366] Ibid, P 42.
[367] Ibid, P 43.
[368] Ibid, P 39.

> Learning about someone's background and her reasons for doing whatever she does influences our moral evaluation of that person to a great extent. […] Personal relations make us biased and partial. We tend to show favouritism toward the ones we know well and love, and we feel morally warranted in doing so.[369]

The greater the complexity of our understanding, the closer and more loyal we feel. We are more likely to feel partial towards characters who demonstrate loyalty to their "in-group", and we are more likely to consider them part of our in-group when we feel like we know them well. Robert Blanchet and Margrethe Bruun Vaage argue that partiality of this kind constitutes a social "bond" with fictional characters that is similar to real friendship: 'Engagement in long-term narratives activates some of the same mental mechanisms as friendship does in real life.'[370]

Vaage argues that facilitating this bond is crucial to creating allegiance with morally transgressive protagonists, which is exacerbated by the frequency of our exposure to them, measured by our 'familiarity' with them.

Familiarity

The alignment structures of morally transgressive protagonists include recurring locations or situations, often with even the same mise en scène. This help us become familiar with them. In *Breaking Bad*, the space wherein Walter makes methamphetamines is one such location, as is his family home. In *Mad Men*, one example is the offices and meeting rooms of Don Draper's advertising firm, as are his various homes. In *The Sopranos* it is Tony Soprano's home, the *Bada Bing!* strip club, and perhaps most importantly his psychiatrist's office. Vaage and Robert Blanchet write that, in the long term, our responses to these protagonists are influenced by how familiar they are. We are inclined to be more receptive to what we are familiar with.[371] For example, Walter White regularly lies to his family to cover the truth of his criminal life. As we are repeatedly exposed to this behaviour our emotional responses to it develop as we recognise that it is a regular feature of his

[369] Ibid, P 41.
[370] Robert Blanchet & Margrethe Bruun Vaage. ''Don, Peggy, and Other Fictional Friends? Engaging with Characters in Television Series' in *Projections*. Vol 6, Iss 2. 2012. P 28.
[371] Ibid, P 22.

behaviour. The consistent recognition of behaviours like this, especially when it recurs in the same spaces and situations, helps to elicit this feeling of familiarity. Jonathan Haidt points out that familiarity with something conjures feelings before we remember why we have them. Haidt uses the example of meeting a forgotten acquaintance:

> we find ourselves liking or disliking something the instant we notice it, sometimes even before we know what it is. These flashes occur so rapidly that they precede all other thoughts about the thing we're looking at. […] You'll usually know within a second or two whether you liked or disliked the person, but it can take much longer to remember who the person is or how you know each other.[372]

When we are familiar with Walter's lying, the feeling that we have when he does it helps us to conjure the mental models we have pertaining to that behaviour. The connection between morally transgressive behaviour and a familiar context that enhances partiality is ubiquitous to complex serial drama. The explicit reason that Walter repeatedly lies to his family is because he wants to hide the truth from them. Becoming familiar with how he expresses this desire improves our bond with him, and these familiar connections occur in all complex serial dramas. For instance, we become familiar with Don Draper's alcoholism and Tony Soprano's inability to control his rage. Familiarity for morally transgressive protagonists is developed in these series by depicting their behaviour—both moral and immoral—with consistent regularity.

The Dual-Process Model of Emotions and Evaluations

The symbiotic relationship between moral emotions and cognitive deliberation is the result of what Margrethe Bruun Vaage dubs a "dual-process model of morality."[373] This, she explains, recognises the two-way connection between intuitive responses and cognitive evaluation. That is, our intuitive responses guide our evaluations, and the result of our evaluations will enrich our future

[372] Jonathan Haidt. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Vintage. London. 2012. P 55.
[373] Vaage. *The Antihero in American Television*. P 2.

responses.[374] However, Vaage points out that even in these circumstances intuitive responses are dependent on nonrational influences: ‘to say that the spectator’s reaction of disgust toward a character is intuitive does not mean that her reaction is, therefore, justified.’[375]

Even if we have evaluated a character as being either despicable or commendable, that does not mean that our subsequent responses will reflect the rational process used to reach those opinions. Our emotional responses are always nonrational but appealing to them is essential to guiding what we choose to pay rational attention to. Through the cultivation of partiality and familiarity to protagonists, alignment structures are likely to give us reasons to value exploring their meaning and significance. This then gives us an emotionally compelling reason to engage with their violent behaviour. The more we enjoy engaging with them, the greater our desire to demystify the motivations for their behaviour. Critically, this demonstrates that an enjoyable moral response requires a co-text that accords with our values. As Jonathan Haidt asserts ‘those emotions are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent.’[376] As such, an enjoyable response is contingent upon our satisfaction with what we deem to be the purpose of the information. It is not enough to possess mental models relating to Walter White; we must also take pleasure in accessing them, challenging them, and developing them. The heightened enjoyment found in responding to and evaluating this vividly violent information enhances the likelihood that a viewer will continue to invest their cognitive time and energy in a series.

An intense emotional response is a pre-requisite for violent content to be deemed vivid. As vivid violence encourages heightened cognitive deliberation, enhanced memory formation, and more complex mental models, the nature of the emotions that we feel when we experience it will have a significant influence over how we interpret, and enjoy, complex serial drama. For this reason, it is vital that the narratives of complex serial drama develop strong

[374] Ibid, P 1.
[375] Ibid, P 2.
[376] Jonathan Haidt. ‘The Moral Emotions’ in *Handbook of affective sciences*. Iss.11. 2003. Oxford University Press. P 853.

emotional and evaluative ties to their morally transgressive protagonists. To this end, alignment structures must present character information that appeals to our sense of partiality in a way that is consistent enough for us to grow to be familiar with it. If we are both emotionally and cognitively invested in the story of a series—if we have developed a satisfying ongoing payoff in engaging with their morally transgressive protagonists—then the intense moral emotions provoked by vivid violence are likely to guide the significant attention it creates toward these satisfying areas of narrative complexity. The ongoing combination of emotional response and cognitive attention will continue to increase the complexity and enjoyment of related mental models. Where this section has demonstrated the connection of intuitive response to rational evaluation, the next section will argue that vivid violence biases our interpretation of complex serial drama through the extra-ordinary impact of its information—relative to the information in the rest of the series.

(Non)Rational Allegiance

Allegiance is developed with morally transgressive protagonists when our emotional responses to those characters are palatable enough to enjoy unpacking their behaviour in vividly violent scenes. Murray Smith's focus on moral evaluation in allegiance neglects our emotional responses to this end, while Jason Mittell's understanding of fascination in operational allegiance simplifies the complexity of the emotional responses required to create it. Vaage and Plantinga's emphasis upon emotional biases such as partiality and familiarity in creating fondness provides the depth required to better understand this process. Our emotions impact our engagement with texts, influencing how and what we evaluate. However, we do not rationally control these feelings—while they might lead to rational thought, they are not rational. Our feelings of fondness toward a character involve a complicated and co-dependent mixture of nonrational emotions and rational deliberations. Developing allegiance with a morally transgressive protagonist requires us to experience emotional interest in them. This in turn encourages us to evaluate their behaviour to the end that it creates an enjoyable payoff. There are a multitude of conflicting moral behaviours expressed by these characters that can influence emotions and thoughts to this end. One such behaviour is

Walter's demonstration of love and appreciation for his family. This conflicts with his wilful neglect and mistreatment of them in others. What we enjoy about Walter is that he gives us something complex and interesting to respond to emotionally and think about rationally. Allegiance, in this sense, can be understood as the enjoyment that emotions and evaluations provide us with, regardless of their moral content.[377] This is why vivid violence is of such dramaturgical benefit to complex serial drama: it is the most emotionally and cognitively interesting source of character information. To put it bluntly, it is crucial that we recognise the dominant role that vivid violence has in making Walter White an interesting and enjoyable character to engage with.

[377] Though it is morally integral that we believe the co-text to be acceptable.

3.5: The Bias of Vivid Violence in Character Estimations

The experience of vivid content commands our attention, both intuitively in response to, and in a sustained sense as the subject of, our cognitive scrutiny. I argue that vivid violence is used in complex serial drama to emphasise interesting character information which becomes central to our ongoing narrative comprehension. We are more likely to be biased by what we feel and learn from it than we are from other information. For example, Walter White's most vividly violent behaviours are likely to be recognised as more significant than those that are presented more pallidly, such as cradling his infant daughter, or when he demonstrates his love of chemistry. However, these more pallid behaviours help to create the more subtle emotional biases that establish fondness for his character, as explored in section 3.4.. Take the comparison between Walter's 'allowing Jane Margolis to die' and his 'cradling his infant daughter Holly'. Jane's death is both narratively and morally significant in an ongoing way that is tied to the cumulating story relating to crime. It demonstrates an immoral behaviour that Walter is capable of that we did not know about before and makes us pore over the reasons why. When it comes to the internal characters of others we are perpetually, as Peter Goldie writes, attempting to "explain and predict their thoughts, feelings and actions."[378] In comparison, Walter's demonstration of love for his daughter is comparatively easy to explain, and predictably accounted for. We do not need to question why he does it, because, as discussed in the previous section, it is easy to intuitively understand that he loves his family—which is also an intuitively easy reason to appreciate him. These emotional biases make it more difficult to understand why he would allow Jane to die, but they also make such an attempt a more interesting proposition.

Complex serial drama biases how we interpret protagonists through scenes of vivid violence that thrust these questions upon us, relying upon emotional biases to convince us that they are questions worth answering. For us to resolve these relatable expressions of humanity with their violence we must

[378] Goldie. *On Personality*. P 61.

be able to interpret how one impacts the other. For example, in the penultimate episode of *Breaking Bad*'s third season, Walter White drives his car into two gunmen who are advancing on Jesse Pinkman with the intent to kill him.[379] After running them over, Walter gets out of his car and takes out a gun, shooting the lone surviving gunman to death at point blank range. This scene is followed shortly by a scene in which Walter cradles his infant daughter, tenderly feeding her a bottle. Vivid violence not only functions as a focal point for our cognitive attention and memory in the first scene, but also as the context in which we engage the tender and familial moment in the second scene. Alberto N. García writes that this serves to recalibrate our understanding of Walter within a joint paradigm of violence and love:

> We see Walter White in his living room, giving little Holly a bottle of milk. A close-up shows how the baby grabs at his glasses, and in this moment of paternal tenderness, the writers cunningly re-humanize a character who just executed two thugs […], as if to remind us that, at heart, 'he's really just a family man' forced by circumstances to take matters into his own hands.[380]

Interrogating the relationship between these types of scenes is essential, because the narrative pivots between each with such proximity. Walter's demonstration of paternalism is would not be noteworthy if it did not occur so soon after he killed two men. In this way, complex serial drama guides us with violence which, over time, informs an increasingly complex understanding of morally transgressive characters. Before I continue to discuss the bias of violent information, I will first outline a basic understanding of how our interpretations of character behaviour becomes more complex as we cumulate more information.

Simple Flat Characters and Complex Round Characters

Positive intuitive responses to Walter in the first season of *Breaking Bad* are integral to enjoy engaging with him. At this point, these responses are not

[379] Episode 12, Season 3. 'Half Measures'. Sam Catlin & Peter Gould (writers), Adam Bernstein (director). *Breaking Bad*. Vince Gilligan (creator and showrunner). AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 6 June 2010.
[380] Alberto N. García. 'Moral Emotions, Antiheroes and the Limits of Allegiance' in in *Emotions in Contemporary TV Series*. Alberto N. García (editor). Palgrave MacMillan. 2016. P 52.

informed by the complexity of our understanding of him that develops through the cumulation of his character information. In fact, these initial responses are formative of this complex understanding: how they are challenged and refined is what makes our understanding complex. Progressively, the information we gain through the guidance of these responses will be cognitively elaborated upon to inform more complex mental models relating to Walter's character. One historical approach to discussing personality and character in fiction in this way is the distinction between 'flat' and 'round' characters. This vernacular is coined in E. M. Forster's seminal 1927 text *Aspects of the Novel*.[381] Forster writes:

> Flat characters were called 'humours' in the seventeenth century, and are sometimes called types, and sometimes caricatures. In their purest form, they are constructed around a single idea or quality; when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round.[382]

When we initially respond to Walter's behaviour we might focus almost exclusively on, for example, something aesthetic such as his appearance, or his accent, or some other basic feature—a 'flat' response. At this point we understand Walter as using a flat "single idea or quality" understanding. For example, we could interpret his behaviour as simply that of a desperate man who has been given bad news. As we continue to engage with the narrative complexity of his story, however, we will develop a 'rounder' understanding that responds in accordance with this increasing complexity. The more round these responses become, the more they reference a growing nexus of character information that we possess pertaining uniquely to him. This terminology is limited in its ability to reflect the scope of how we initially recognise and respond to character, but it serves to demonstrate this basic point: our initial responses to protagonists in complex serial drama, even those that are intuitive and nonrational, become more sophisticated as we make connections within our increasingly intricate nexus of narrative information. This is true of all television characters, but the cumulatively

[381] E. M. Forster. Aspects of the Novel. Penguin Books. Harmondsworth, London. 1964.

[382] Ibid, P 75.

serialised mode of narrative information in complex serial drama distinguishes it as particularly relevant.

Anchoring and Robust Dispositions

We are likely to initially recognise Walter as an intelligent, talented, and kind man who lives in Albuquerque. This changes when we learn of his cancer diagnosis, and we subsequently attach special significance to this information: that Walter is dying of lung cancer is presented as the most important aspect of his motivation when attempting to discern his behaviour. This is an example of Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman's concept of the 'anchoring bias'.[383] Tversky and Kahneman's assert that sometimes, when we are faced with uncertain information—in this example, what is motivating a character to behave in a certain way—we attempt to understand that information using details about them that seem most likely to suggest an answer.[384] This 'anchoring' behaviour is not rationally arrived at, but an automatic response. It is our intuitive 'best guess' of how to understand the information. As we develop more intricate understanding of a character, the anchors we use to approximate their motivations undergo a process of "adjustment":

> In many situations, people make estimates by starting from an initial value that is adjusted to yield the final answer. The initial value, or starting point, may be suggested by the formulation of the problem, or it may be the result of a partial computation.[385]

For example, we adjust our understanding of Walter's motivation when he allows Jane to die by inferring information from the scene, such as the emotions he seems to be expressing with his face and through his body language. After the event, how he copes with what he has done, and how he treats the people who are affected, further adjusts what we anchor onto as an explanation. *Breaking Bad* suggests an anchoring point for Walter's character by introducing his cancer diagnosis within the 'formulation' of its narrative 'problem'. The question of what he will do, and who he will become in

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[383] Amos Tversky & Daniel Kahneman. 'Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases' in *Science*. Vol. 185, No. 4157. New York City, New York. 27 September 1974. Pp 1124-31 at 1128.

[384] Ibid.
[385] Ibid.

response to it, is the conceit of the series. At this early point we anchor on to this information to make sense of his behaviour, because the series infers that it is the "initial value, or starting point" of his character's story. We also appreciate how intense a terminal cancer diagnosis would be for someone, and so desperation and extreme behaviour is made more *plausible*—a point I will return to shortly.

In the long term, anchoring onto Walter's cancer diagnosis alone proves too simplistic to be accurate. This is because we see him commit violent crimes after he has gone into remission, with motivations that seem outside those that strictly concern his cancer diagnosis. Peter Goldie argues that the first things we learn about other people attach us to a conception of their character that is too "robust". This means that we use it to comprehend too much of their behaviour, to too encompassing an extent.[386] Goldie writes that we presume "consistency" and "stability" of these characteristics despite our limited exposure to their characters. He calls this "robust dispositionism."[387] For example, the sympathy we might feel for Walter after learning of his cancer might make us willing to interpret his immoral behaviour in a charitable way, and less likely to consider that he may be of worse moral character than our positive feelings for him indicate. Our anchoring biases make us more likely to pay attention to subsequent information that corroborates these feelings. For example, when we watch Walter kill Krazy-8 in the series' third episode, we might feel sympathetic toward that behaviour because of the anchoring bias provided by his cancer diagnosis—which the narrative promotes. To this end, Adrian Furnham and Hua Chau Boo, in a literature review of anchoring and adjustment, point to two studies on "confirmatory search"[388] and "selective accessibility"[389]. These studies respectively demonstrate that information perceived to correlate with an anchor is more

[386] Goldie. *On Personality*. P52.
[387] Ibid, P 55.
[388] Gretchen B. Chapman, Eric J. Johnson. 'Anchoring, Confirmatory Search, and the Construction of Values'. In *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. Vol. 79, No. 2. Pp. 115-153.
[389] Fritz Strack, Thomas Mussweiler. 'Explaining the Enigmatic Anchoring Effect: Mechanisms of Selective Accessibility'. In *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Vol 73 No 3. September 1997. Pp 437-446.

sought after, and are more visible to us, than information which does not.[390] This means that we are likely to pursue and recognise information that corroborates our robust dispositions toward characters, and likely to ignore or undervalue character information that does not—unless, of course, the evidence is too overwhelming to ignore, as it often is with vivid violence. In these circumstances, it is crucial that we believe this new information to be *plausible*.

Peter Goldie's claim that robust dispositions demand too much in the way of consistency and stability is precisely what benefits complex serial drama's ability to *initially* communicate character information. Where real people's behaviour can be erratic and confusing to us, the behaviour of morally transgressive protagonists must always pertain to a story, within which it makes sense. To an extent these series anticipate and accommodate our initial robust dispositions. However, as these stories cumulate complex meanings, robust dispositions become too simplistic to sustain the depth of our engagement alone. At this point, we stop ascribing character to individual behaviours and start explaining behaviours through our understanding of character. Violence is a key narrative mechanism that encourages us to increase the complexity of our understanding in this way. For example, the robust disposition of understanding Walter's character behaviour with relation to his cancer diagnosis is most overtly challenged when he allows Jane Margolis to die. This behaviour is too extreme to be accommodated by his cancer diagnosis alone: while it might factor into his decision-making, it cannot accommodate why he would be willing to do something so immoral. Just as the diagnosis of terminal lung cancer provides a significant anchor upon which to understand his internal state, the complex and memorable cognitive experiences provided by vivid violence subsequently offer us similar anchors: Walter's allowing Jane Margolis to die forces us to reconsider what his motivations are, as the strictly immoral act creates a new anchor for understanding his character. We must think about what we know about him to make sense of why he would choose to do this. We cannot simply fall back

[390] Adrian Furnham, Hua Chu Boo. 'A literature review of the anchoring effect." *The Journal of Socio-Economics*. Vol.40, Iss 1. 2011. P 37.

onto an understanding of his desperation as we could have when he kills Krazy-8 in the first season. As new anchors for understanding his character develop, our understanding becomes more complex.

Plausible Adjustment and Reason-Responsive Dispositions

Our ability to learn about protagonists is vital to our engagement with complex serial drama. It is therefore crucial that these series provide behavioural anchors that we perceive as plausible. We estimate characters with robust dispositions in the short term, regardless of the rational improbability of those estimations being accurate. This is because, to echo Peter Goldie, we are perpetually attempting to "explain and predict their thoughts, feelings and actions."[391] Complex serial drama provides us with increasingly complex storyworlds that encourage us to adjust how we perceive its anchors, doing so within the boundaries of consistency and plausibility. For example, over the course of *Breaking Bad* we discover that Walter is a high-school chemistry teacher who possesses an elite understanding of the subject[392]. We later find out that he was a member of a team that won a Nobel Prize for their research, and that we was a founding member of a now-successful and reputable chemistry technology company[393]. Walter sold his shares early, however, and says that he resents the people with whom he founded the company for profiting from *his* ideas.[394] This information is likely to adjust the intuitive biases we use to understand Walter's criminal pursuit of chemistry. We will be more likely to connect the bitterness he attaches to his history to his criminal behaviour and use these connections to understand his humanity. Walter's urge to create a successful criminal empire on the back of his scientific talents can easily be tied to the success he feels he was robbed of. In this way, cumulating narrative information introduces plausible adjustments to how we anchor motivation to the characters, increasingly referring our estimate to a

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[391] Goldie. *On Personality*. P 61.
[392] Episode 1, Season 1. 'Pilot'. Vince Gilligan (writer, director, creator and showrunner). *Breaking Bad*. AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 20 January 2008.
[393] Episode 6, Season 2. 'Peekaboo'. J. Roberts and Vince Gilligan (writers), Peter Medak (director). *Breaking Bad*. Vince Gilligan (creator and showrunner). AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 12 April 2009.
[394] Episode 6, Season 2. 'Peekaboo'. J. Roberts and Vince Gilligan (writers), Peter Medak (director). *Breaking Bad*. Vince Gilligan (creator and showrunner). AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 12 April 2009.

larger and more complex web of inference. As this happens and we feel ourselves start to understand characters better, Peter Goldie argues that we begin to disavow robust dispositions and increasingly become "reason-responsive" to their behaviour.[395] To be reason-responsive is to intuitively draw on a specific understanding of character that takes into account the uniqueness of their situation:

> We find someone's action intelligible or understandable by finding something about the action that he or she values or cares for. […] We find these actions and activities intelligible or rational […] because we find it intelligible that someone could have these values that explain their choices and actions, even if we don't ourselves share their values, and even if we ourselves consider them to be immoral or imprudent.[396]

We possess multiple anchors with which we can understand behaviour that are entrenched in various areas of a character's backstory, and we will draw on those that we feel most appropriately suit the narrative situation. The vividness of violence assists in this process by highlighting character information that we are likely to remember and think about. An example is Walter's killing Krazy-8 panders to the motivational anchor of his cancer diagnosis, creating a memorable reminder of what he is willing to do. Allowing Jane to die provides us a vividly emotional experience that complicates his motivational anchors, indicating that he might possess a different, more avaricious, motivation. We now have multiple ways of interpreting Walter's behaviour in different situations.

We find it easier to adjust the anchors we use to understand character motivation if the information that causes us to do so seems plausible through its consistency with previous information. Accordingly, complex serial drama always connects character behaviour to a larger body of narrative information. As Roberta Pearson discusses:

> the repetitive nature of the television series dictates a relative state of stability for its characters, whose failure to perform key

[395] Goldie. *On Personality*. Pp. 64-68.
[396] Ibid, P 65.

> narrative functions and to interact with other characters in pre-established fashion could seriously undermine a series' premise.[397]

In *Breaking Bad*, as Walter's behaviour becomes increasingly violent and immoral the series uses his cancer diagnosis to render plausible the extremes of this behaviour in a way that would not be plausible otherwise: the "relative state of stability" for his character is that he is suffering a terminal cancer diagnosis. As protagonists evolve through the winding narrative threads of the series, the "relative state of stability" for their behaviour becomes more complex. Walter's behaviour becomes plausible using motivations external to his cancer diagnosis. Following this, Jason Mittell writes that changes in the expression of character in complex serial drama are always diegetically flagged:

> Complex multifaceted characters must have their interior states confirmed by a number of different exterior markers, and typically overt actions speak louder than dialogue to indicate a character's true subjective state.[398]

We perceive vivid violence as the most "overt actions" within complex serial drama. As such, it can radically alter how we perceive character. The vividness of Walter's allowing Jane to die is one such example, demonstrating significant evidence for possible criminal motivations external to his cancer. Similarly, Tony Soprano's decision to kill Christopher Moltisanti gives us reasons to reconsider his emotional personality, as discussed in section 4.3 of Chapter Four. The vividness of Glenn Rhee's death offers a similar impact upon how we can consider his wife Maggie Rhee's character motivations subsequently, as discussed in section 2.2 of Chapter Two. Vivid violence is a crucial method of increasing the complexity of our understanding this way, improving our capacity to comprehend the morally transgressive protagonists of complex serial drama.

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[397] Roberta Pearson. "Anatomising Gilbert Grissom: The Structure and Function of the Televisual Character' in *Reading 'CSI': Television Under the Microscope*. (ed. Allen Michael). I.B. Taurus. New York City, New York. P 55.
[398] Mittell. *Complex Television*. Pp 134-135.

3.6 Violence Made Visible

The final argument that I will make in this chapter regards how developing emotional biases through character engagement gives rise to novelty within scenes of vivid violence in complex serial drama. In this I mean that the unique features of character, developed over the extensive runtimes of these series, creates an appreciation of a violent event that necessarily involves how we think and feel about the characters involved. With the example of Walter White killing Jane Margolis: it is not a man allowing a woman to die of a drug overdose that contextualises the scene, but the intricate information tied to each of those characters. In this way, what is made *visible* through these scenes of vivid violence is what renders them unique.

The narrative context and co-text within which violence is depicted in complex serial drama provides an objective "zero-level standard" which violence in the series disrupts to progress the narrative with dramatic impact.[399] How we perceive subjective violence in complex serial drama is the product of complex narrative information spanning dozens of hours. Due to its vividness, this violence is the most obvious narrative information in terms of sheer memorability. What is not obvious, though, is the "zero-level standard" that makes us think about these acts of violence in specific ways. This standard guides our comprehension toward certain characters in a manner befitting the co-text of the stories being told.[400] These standards are important and, as Slavoj Žižek convincingly argues, we should

> learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible "subjective" violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the background which generates such outbursts. A step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance.[401]

[399] Žižek. *Violence*. P 2.
[400] Ibid, P 1.
[401] Ibid.

Subjective violence in complex serial drama includes a gamut of horror ranging from sexual abuse and torture, to acts of desperation, to tragic accidents. These depictions find their objective contexts within storyworlds that pertain to a limited number of characters whom we come to understand through narrative focus.

Our emotional responses to violence in these series are guided by the "zero-level standard" presented within the narrative information offered to us. For this reason, the attempt to confront violence in both its objective and subjective forms is, as Žižek writes, "inherently mystifying" due to the "overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims".[402] The recognition of subjective violence features a "lure which prevents us from thinking", in terms of the emotional response required to possess such recognition.[403] Žižek asserts that a dispassionate analysis and holistic classification of violence "must by definition ignore its traumatic impact".[404] However, if we could do this then we would not be able to truly recognise the violence. As Žižek continues:

> Yet there is a sense in which a cold analysis of violence somehow reproduces and participates in its horror. A distinction needs to be made, as well, between (factual) truth and truthfulness: what renders a report of a raped woman (or any other narrative of a trauma) truthful is its very factual unreliability, its confusion, its inconsistency.[405]

For Žižek, the "truth" of violence requires that its information be codified with emotional bias. If the co-text present in a vividly violent scene depicting rape withheld any information that might elicit our sympathy or empathy, then "this very quality would make us suspicious of its truth."[406] Violence must be rich with information that elicits a visceral emotional response if it is to be believably realistic, because there is so much at stake. This is inherently relevant in complex serial drama, wherein we become allied to morally

[402] Ibid, P 4.
[403] Ibid.
[404] Ibid.
[405] Ibid.
[406] Ibid,

transgressive protagonists who are defined by the problematic emotions their behaviour elicits. Žižek argues that the attempt to creatively replicate the reality of violence must facilitate many potential perspectives within an emotionally rich depiction:

> This is not a description which locates its content in a historical space and time, but a description which creates, as the background of the phenomena it describes, an inexistent (virtual) space of its own, so that what appears in it is not an appearance sustained by the depth of reality behind it, but a decontextualized appearance, an appearance which fully coincides with real being. […] Rather, it extracts from the confused reality its own inner form…[407]

This "confused reality" relates to the uncertainty that we feel when we are inundated with complicated, important information such as vivid violence. The "inexistent (virtual) space" that we occupy allows us to respond and ruminate upon this information, wherein emotion influences perspective to create an understanding of the violence ("its own inner form"). For this reason, the subjective recognition of violence is open ended within the confines of the narratively complex storyworlds of these series.

The violence in *Breaking Bad* provides us with complex information to understand Walter's character. However, it does so at the expense of a simple answer to who he is, or how we should understand his story. In *Breaking Bad*'s final episodes, the devastating physical and emotional impact that Walter's decision to pursue criminal enterprise has caused his family is vividly depicted. In the third-to-last episode Walter's decisions inadvertently lead to his brother-in-law's death[408]. In the penultimate episode, he finds himself isolated from his family and friends, forced to pay the man who delivers his cancer treatment medication to socialise with him[409]. In the final

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[407] Ibid, Pp 5-6.
[408] Episode 14, Season 5. 'Ozymandias'. Moira Walley-Becket (writer), Rian Johnson (director). *Breaking Bad*. Vince Gilligan (creator and showrunner). AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 15 September 2013.
[409] Episode 15, Season 5. 'Granite State'. Peter Gould (writer and director). *Breaking Bad*. Vince Gilligan (creator and showrunner). AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 22 September 2013.

episode Walter dies, alone, surrounded only by equipment used to make methamphetamine.[410] Gilligan muses on whether Walter's death at the end of the series represents atonement for his violence, to which he replies:

> It's in the eye of the viewer. Dying is not necessarily paying for one's sins. I certainly hope it's not, because the nicest people that have ever lived are going to die eventually. So it could be argued instead that he did get away with it because he never got the cuffs put on him. [...] he's expired before the cops show up. They're rolling in with the sirens going and the lights flashing and he just doesn't give a damn. [...] He's with the thing he seems to love most in the world, which is his work and his meth lab and he just doesn't care about being caught because he knows he's on the way out. So it could be argued that he pays for his sins at the end, or it could just as easily be argued that he gets away with it.[411]

Taken together, Gilligan's statements allude to the complex web of inferences that the series finale of a complex serial drama negotiates: a graceful conclusion to questions that cannot truly be answered. When Gilligan says that there is victory in Walter managing to provide for his family, he speaks to the conceit of the story: to make money for his family after his death. However, Walter's 'success' has also permanently traumatised his family, both physically and emotionally. His brother-in-law is murdered in front of him, and his wife and son are both disgusted and terrified by him. Regardless of how we choose to understand Walter and the story of *Breaking Bad*, it involves a marriage of his complexity as a character with vivid violence. However, there is more to consider when we take an external perspective upon the structure of the narrative, to examine what is fundamental about the "zero-level standard" it promotes.

In this regard, the most important question that we can ask of the objective violence in complex serial drama is *why these characters*? To this end, there is no better text that explores the objective apparatus of violence in complex serial drama than Amanda Lotz' 2014 text *Cable Guys: Television and*

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[410] Episode 16, Season 5. 'Felina'. *Breaking Bad*. Vince Gilligan (writer, director, creator and showrunner). AMC. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 29 September 2013.
[411] Ibid.

Masculinities in the 21st Century.[412] While not specifically focussing on violence, Lotz' second chapter, 'Trying to Man Up: *Struggling with Contemporary Masculinities in Cable's Male-Centered Serials*', demonstrates that the standard disrupted to create violence in complex serial drama almost exclusively pertains to male power.[413] As Lotz writes of these "male-centered" serials:

> The "centeredness" in these shows is more extensive than simply including male characters, so that these series become essentially about the protagonist. This focus enables a particular type of narrative that allows for the telling of stories about the *entirety of men's lives*—both the personal and professional spheres. Male-centered serials divide narrative time between stories of the protagonists' work and home lives and provide considerable exploration of their motivations, dilemmas, and underlying neuroses.[414]

This is the objective standard that defines violence: the degree to which it either demonstrates something challenging about these men, or something that threatens them. Crucial to what constitutes this paradigm of the objective "zero-level standard" and the subjective violence that threatens it is the fact that, as Žižek writes, "it is difficult to be really violent, to perform an act that violently disturbs the basic parameters of social life."[415] While I do not aim to make broad assertions about our society, it would be cheap to explore this topic without considering how central masculine power is to many of these series, and to question the "basic parameters of social life" that they promote. As Jason Mittell observes:

> the long arc of Walter's perspective has inspired a large portion of *Breaking Bad*'s fans to dislike or even hate Skyler, treating her as the series's [sic] true villain—for one of many instances, a Facebook page called "Fuck Skyler White" has more than 31,000

[412] Lotz. *Cable Guys.*
[413] Ibid, Pp 52-80.
[414] Ibid, P 55.
[415] Žižek. *Violence*. P 207.

> fans, with posts and comments dripping with violent, misogynistic hatred.[416]

This is where the most troubling aspect of vivid violence is made clear: narratives hold power over how we interpret it and, while we are always responsible for our own behaviour, this kind of misogyny is demonstrative of a male-centred narrative that has successfully facilitated it. Characters like Skyler demonstrate what, for these viewers, the real disruption of the "basic parameters of social life" are: non-compliant female characters in prominent and visible roles. Worse than not being enamoured by the protagonists violence, these characters are vocally disgusted by it, largely because they are also victims of it. Mittell write, that this "unwavering" hate has led to "vitriolic comments in which they seem to be rooting for Walt to abuse Skyler or worse and even extending such violent fantasies to the actress Anna Gunn."[417] My capacity to pursue these arguments in relation to violence as deeply as they need requires a Social Studies approach to analysing viewer response, and is thus outside the scope of this thesis. Regardless, it is a necessary example of how the combination of complex narrative and vivid violence can lead to wildly different perceptions of the material, and why this is an important and fertile area of study.

Vivid violence in complex serial drama makes uniquely visible an understanding of character that is dependent upon how the viewer engages with the miasma of complex character information. How we understand characters like Don Draper, Walter White, and Tony Soprano is dependent upon how we engage with them. While there are always myriad avenues that we can pursue within engagement with content, what renders this process unique in complex serial drama is the depth afforded by narrative complexity. When we watch Walter White allow Jane Margolis to die, how we understand and engage with that information will be dependent upon how deeply we have engaged with the complex narrative information *Breaking Bad* provides. The emotional and cognitive biases which feature in our reception of this information, as well as the milieu of cultural considerations that impact all of

[416] Mittell. *Complex TV*. P 347.
[417] Ibid.

our engagement, will blend together within our comprehension. It is not enough to describe this scene as a man watching a woman die: what is made vividly *visible* to us through its violence is dependent upon which characters we are allied to and how we are allied to them, and as a result is fundamental to how we comprehend the series as a whole.

Chapter Four

The Storytelling of Violence: Ambiguity in *The Sopranos*

no man ever understands quite his own artful dodges to escape from the grim shadow of self-knowledge.
– Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*.[418]

My contention in this thesis is that experiencing the vivid depictions of television violence in complex serial drama is an integral component of narrative engagement. Chapter two explores the effects of vivid violence upon our viewing experience—primarily through Karyn Riddle's concept 'vivid media violence'—and chapter three asserts how those effects are infused within the character-oriented, cumulative storytelling central to complex serial drama, where they create and propagate structures of meaning. Chapter three explores how violence committed by morally transgressive protagonists is mitigated by alignment structures which serve to ally us to them, creating portraits of their character which are both challenging and entertaining. In this way, the violence that a series uses is as expressive of its meaning as the dialogue written and performed within it. We are therefore limited in how we can generalise subjective violence across different complex serial dramas, in the same way it is hard to generalise characters: when we draw comparisons between them we lose track of the more specific and complex meanings that we attach to them individually. While the dramaturgy of vivid violence engages with our cognitive faculties in a generalisable way (as explored in chapter two), its experience also uniquely extends into the stories in these dramas. Chapter three argues that violence is visible to us when we recognise *why it is violent*, and this is more than the recognition of harm: it requires a complex comprehension of the meaning that is being expressed through it.

In this chapter, I will use the example of *The Sopranos* to demonstrate how the experience of violence is central to understanding the story, and how the story is central to understanding the violence. The story contextualises its

[418] Joseph Conrad. *Lord Jim*. Penguin Books. London. 1990 [First Published 1900]. P 102.

violence in a way that would be incoherent without it. The chapter establishes how the dramaturgical role of vivid violence blends with the long-term storytelling in complex serial drama—which, in the case of *The Sopranos*, consists of approximately seventy-five hours of information—to create a mode of communicating stories on American television that is unique. This is not to suggest that *The Sopranos*' use of violence is identical to how violence is used on other complex serial dramas—quite the opposite. The point is that the way violence is used in these series is as integral to their identity as their characters and dialogue, and its experience is fundamental to how we engage with them. Similarly, while we may be able to trace similarities between the use of violence in each series, their entrenchment within their long-term stories gives each example of violence a unique identity that is inextricable from its narrative context. A crucial element of what makes this violence vivid for us as viewers is that it is not the same experience as it is for people who, for example, watch it in isolation on a streaming service such as YouTube: shorn from its long-term narrative context, what the violence *means* is fundamentally different, and simplified. Storytelling is an integral component of violence in these series, and to recognise it without also addressing what it means in narrative terms is to misunderstand its dramaturgy.

In section 4.1, I will introduce *The Sopranos* and its characterisation of morally transgressive protagonist, Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini). I will interrogate the multiple, conflicting, pathways offered to understanding his character, creating a fundamental ambiguity that cannot be solved, only imperfectly understood. Section 4.2 demonstrates how 'second-degree style' is used to communicate these multiple strains of narrative information at the same time, the most pertinent of which relate to expressions of character in scenes of violence. Section 4.3 explores how violence is used to characterise the 'monster antagonists' of *The Sopranos*, establishing the most pronounced immoral extremes of human behaviour: unforgivably malevolent violence, creating an act of injustice which requires a follow-up, either through retribution or impunity. Section 4.4 explores Tony's murder of his nephew, Christopher Moltisanti, and how *The Sopranos* uses ambiguity to strip character information about Tony from this event, preventing objective

certainty about why he does it and what it means. Finally, section 4.5 uses the example of two decisions made by Dr Jennifer Melfi (Lorraine Bracco), Tony's therapist, to demonstrate that while objective certainty may not be possible when we attempt to understand these characters, we must still make a choice regardless. While we are presented with all the facts of the story, they are not enough to yield answers as to who he is, or why. By engaging with Tony's character, and his relationship with violence, we are forced to make a choice about how we understand him.

4.1 Tony Soprano and Ambiguity

The narrative of HBO's pioneering complex serial crime drama, *The Sopranos*, centres on its protagonist, Italian-American mob boss Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), the character blueprint for many subsequent morally transgressive protagonists. Tony is in his early-40s and lives in New Jersey. He is, at times in title but always in effect, the head of his crime family—the 'DiMeo' family (named after its founder Domenico Ercoli DiMeo, an unseen character serving a life sentence in prison). The premise of the series finds Tony seeking therapy from a psychiatrist, Doctor Jennifer Melfi (Lorraine Bracco), to treat a series of panic attacks which he has suffered, compounded by ongoing depression. The series narrative is conducted through the juxtaposition of the plot relating to the DiMeo family's criminal activities, the domestic activities of his biological family, and Tony's therapy sessions, through which the viewer is given a high degree of subjective access to his candid thoughts and feelings.

Dana Polan writes that *The Sopranos* offers a "willful ambiguity" that frequently leads discussion of its content toward "simply repeating what the show has already said":

> the series traffics in recognizable concerns, but it doesn't necessarily say what it "thinks" about them.[419]

Polan argues that whatever the "concerns" raised by *The Sopranos*' story, its fundamental confrontation of those concerns is ambiguous. What is purely central to the narrative is how these concerns enrich the complexity of the storyworld.[420] The meaning that we are to take from them beyond this, as Polan argues, is constrained by the

> multiplicity of critical positions into the text so that it becomes unclear to what extent there is one overall moral or thematic attitude that governs the work.[421]

[419] Dana Polan. *The Sopranos*. Duke University Press. London. 2009. Pp 115-116.
[420] Ibid. P 118.
[421] Ibid. P 119.

In this sense, Polan identifies an ambiguity in *The Sopranos* that is defined by the abundance of meaning that can be inferred from its content. This renders the textual analysis of *The Sopranos*, as Polan argues, a frequently "redundant" exercise:

> *The Sopranos* wears its meanings on its sleeves, and often the academic critics seem to be simply repeating what the show has already said.[422]

What is ambiguous about *The Sopranos* is precisely what creates this redundancy: the meaning attached to this information is what is ambiguous, while the information itself is overt. Vivid violence is the most obvious example of this, in that it depicts information that is wholly overt, and yet what it meaningfully demonstrates about a series and its characters is ambiguous. In this section I will expound upon this idea of ambiguity in *The Sopranos*.

Similar to *Breaking Bad*, as discussed in chapter three, *The Sopranos* remonstrates with the allegiance that its alignment structures foster with Tony (through depictions of partiality and familiarity) by also demonstrating his capacity for immoral violence. The therapy sessions that we are privy to explore what motivates Tony, how his family and criminal history has shaped who he has become, the degree to which he is capable of recognising his own moral flaws, and the extent to which he holds himself accountable for his crimes. Tony's story demonstrates his fundamental ambiguity, making it impossible for us to know precisely how we ought to think of him: is he an uncaring psychopath who profits from the suffering of others, innately and irrecoverably incapable of empathy; or is he an empathetic and caring individual who is the victim of psychological trauma suffered in his childhood, habituating a toxic way of understanding the world, but from which he could make a degree of recovery? These perspectives are explored through vivid moments of violence that enrich this ambiguity, showing us how Tony sees himself, how he sees other people, how he responds to their behaviour, and how he lives with the crimes that he commits. This ambiguity relates to the limits of knowledge that can be possessed regarding Tony, as the narrative fosters multiple perspectives regarding his motivations and values. Without

[422] Ibid. P 115.

the narrative providing certainty, the responses we have to its information determines how we interpret the truths of Tony's story. This section will further introduce the series, as well as draw out this concept of ambiguity, which I take from moral philosopher Craig Taylor.

The experience of vivid violence resonates throughout the lives of the morally transgressive protagonists in complex serial drama. Whether they struggle with these experiences—as with Tony Soprano in *The Sopranos* and Donald Draper in *Mad Men*—or whether they become increasingly numb to them—as with Walter White in *Breaking Bad* and Dexter Morgan in *Dexter*—it is the vividness of these scenes of violence which grows to define their stories. Chapter two details how our response to vivid violence as narrative information is unique: we are highly likely to demonstrate an increase in cognitive attention, and to more easily recall the viewing experience with greater clarity, than we are with other information. This, coupled with the sheer volume of information we engage with, permits us a complex contextual understanding of violence in the lives of morally transgressive protagonists.

For example, in *The Sopranos*, Tony Soprano suffers panic attacks, depression, and a deeply embedded existential malaise, all of which relates to the violence in his life we bear witness to. How we understand the context of these symptoms, and Tony's mental state generally, in relation to this violence is through access to his internal state, which occupies the central conceit of the series: Tony is in therapy. We also understand the violence within this same context, and so the narrative gravity that the series affords Tony's response makes sense because our experience of the violence is vivid, and therefore also affecting *for us*. For example, in the third season Tony suffers mentally after one of his men, Ralph Cifaretto (Joe Pantoliano) brutally beats the 20-year-old stripper Tracee (Ariel Kiley)—who is pregnant with Ralph's child—to death with his bare hands.[423] Minutes later in the episode, Tony attempts to talk to his therapist, Doctor Jennifer Melfi (Lorraine Bracco) and his wife Carmela Soprano (Edie Falco) about it during a session, but due to

[423] Episode 6, Season 3. 'University'. David Chase, Terence Winter, Todd A. Kessler, Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess (story), Terence Winter, Salvatore J. Stabile (teleplay), Allen Coulter (director). *The Sopranos*. David Chase (creator and showrunner). HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate 1 April 2001.

the circumstances of the situation (his code of silence forbids him from telling them what actually happened) he is forced to speak in vague terms:

> **Tony:** A young man who… worked for us. Barone Sanitation. He… He died.
>
> **Carmela:** Who?
>
> **Tony:** Who? You don't know him. He died, that's all… Work-related death.

Carmela and Melfi both look at Tony, who looks despondently into the middle-distance:

> **Tony:** It's sad when they go so young.

While we are likely still processing the details of the brutal act of violence—one of the most vivid in the series—the narrative mirrors that response in Tony as he grapples with what has happened. The impact of the violence in *The Sopranos* always relates to Tony's life and the people in it, and his response becomes more emotionally significant as a result: in this instance, Tony's response is relatable, as we are also likely to be feeling drained and morose in the wake of the murder. In this way, vivid violence is not only a dramaturgical tool for complex serial drama to command our attention, it is an expressive means of communicating the lived experiences of its characters in a relatable way.

Humanising the Criminal through Ambiguity

An integral component of the series' exploration of Tony Soprano's humanity is explored through his relationship with the violence that he suffers, commits, and witnesses. At times Tony appears to be an apathetic sociopath, and at others a deeply concerned, emotionally sensitive man who is suffering. Through flashbacks, we learn that Tony's childhood and adolescence were littered with exposure to criminal violence committed by his father and uncle, and both emotional and domestic abuse at the hands of his mother. A key example of this, revealed through Tony's time in therapy, is that his panic attacks are linked to an event where he witnessed his father use a meat

cleaver to cut off the fingers of their indebted family butcher.[424] A flashback sequence depicts an 11-year-old Tony watching the event out of curiosity as to what his father was doing, despite his father telling him to wait in the car. Tony tells Doctor Melfi about the memory, playfully asking her "What, your father never cut off anybody's pinky?" Melfi responds by refocussing their conversation upon the significance of Tony's memory:

> **Melfi:** That's traumatic for anyone to witness, much less an 11-year-old.
>
> **Tony:** Actually, it wasn't… It was a rush, if you want to know the truth.

This leads to one of the primary unanswerable ambiguities of Tony's character: how is Tony emotionally affected by the violence in his life, and to what degree is he a sociopath, as Melfi frequently suspects, lacking the emotional capacity for empathy. This question is explored in two ways: though the demonstration of how Tony was pushed into his life of crime as a 'family business', and through Melfi's probing of Tony's emotions in response to the violence that he talks to her about.

Tony demonstrates that his criminal personality is not one that he feels he chose, but one that was thrust upon him by his family. After telling Melfi that watching his father commit the crime was a rush, Tony asks Melfi:

> **Tony:** You want me to delve?

Melfi tells him to go on, and the flashback into Tony's childhood resumes. He remembers talking to his father at home later that evening. His father applauds Tony for watching him cut off the butcher's fingers:

> **Tony's Father:** I gotta say, a lot of boys your age would've run like a little girl—but you stayed.

He explains to Tony that he did not want to hurt the butcher, but that he had to because it is his job:

> **Tony's Father:** I know you like Mr. Satriale—we all do, he's a lovely man… The man is a *gambler*. He got in over his head in debt. He owed me money and he refused to pay. He avoided me.

[424] Episode 3, Season 3. 'Fortunate Son'. Todd A. Kessler (writer), Henry J. Bronchtein (director). *The Sopranos*. David Chase (creator and showrunner). HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 11 March 2001.

[…] What was I supposed to do? That's my livelihood. It's how I put food on the table.

This sentiment—that the crime the mafia enacts on other people is nothing more than a necessary business activity—lingers with Tony in his adulthood. Like his father explained it to him, Tony considers his life in crime as just another business with its own unique risks and rewards. For example, in the second season, Tony takes a car from a childhood friend—who is also the father of one of Tony's daughter's school friends—as 'partial payment' for a gambling debt the man owes him. When Meadow refuses the car on moral grounds, his father's sentiment resonates in Tony's words:

> **Tony:** The guy owed me money and he did the right thing—he offered that car up as partial payment! […] A grown man made a wager, he lost, he made another one, he lost again—end of story.

Appalled, Meadow still refuses to accept the car, to which an enraged Tony tells her:

> **Tony:** Go ahead, you wanna act 'holier than thou'? You go right ahead, but I'm not giving it back—I'm gonna take that car and sell it to Pussy and I'm gonna buy clothes and food and shoes and CD players and all the rest of the shit that I've been buying since the day you were born! *Everything* this family has comes from the work I do! […] So take that high moral ground and go sleep in the fuckin' bus station if you want![425]

Again, how his father rationalised the vivid violence that Tony witnesses him commit resonates throughout his adulthood. Tony considers crime as simply a family business that he was born into, not the example of a malfunctioning moral character, as he explains to his daughter in an earlier episode:

> **Tony:** My father was in it. My uncle was in it. Maybe I was too lazy to think for myself—consider myself a rebel. Maybe being a

[425] Episode 3, Season 2. 'The Happy Wanderer'. Frank Renzulli (writer), John Patterson (director). *The Sopranos*. David Chase (creator and showrunner). HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 20 February 2000.

rebel in my family would have been sellin' patio furniture on route 22.[426]

The point is clear: Tony does not feel that a life of criminal enterprise was a choice, but a career that was preordained from birth.

While this is mitigating information about Tony that diminishes his culpability for becoming a criminal, it does not prove that he is not a sociopath. The "rush" that Tony says he felt when he watched his father cleave the fingers of the family butcher is ambiguous to this end. This is problematised by the fact that Tony's emotional intelligence is very low: he struggles to identify and discuss emotions, often leading him to anger, confusion, or panic attacks. In the flashback from his childhood, Tony remembers his family congregating in the kitchen for dinner, where his mother is rapt with the meat they have received from the mutilated butcher: "What a beautiful cut he sent!" she beams. As she admires the meat, Tony's father begins flirting with her, holding her from behind and dancing with her while singing. Tony's mother is enamoured, but then tells his father to stop, commanding him to carve the meat. As his father cuts into the roast, Tony becomes fixates upon it, suffering his first panic attack and fainting. Melfi considers the symbolism of the meat:

> **Melfi:** What you witnessed that day, where the meat came from, and your mother's great pleasure in it.
>
> **Tony:** It was the only time you could count on her being in a good mood, when the weekly meat delivery from Satriale's showed up at the house... Or Fusco, the vegetable man, maybe. Probably the only time the old man got laid.
>
> […] Pretty sick, huh? Getting turned on by free cold cuts.
>
> **Melfi:** Do you think that your mother questioned why the meat was free? The meat that was going into her children's mouths?
>
> **Tony:** I don't know... I don't want to know. I don't even want to fuckin' think about any of this shit.
>
> **Melfi:** I'm sure it was too much for you then, too. That's why you short-circuited. Puberty, witnessing not only your mother and

[426] Season 1, Episode 5. 'College'. Allen Coulter (Director). James Manor Jr. and David Chase (Writers). *The Sopranos*. David Chase (Creator). HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 7 February 1999.

father's sexuality, but also the violence and blood so closely connected to the food you were about to eat. And also the thought that someday you might be called up on to bring home the bacon like your father.

Melfi creates a portrait of Tony that regards the dysfunction his parents introduced into his life as demonstrative of a deep emotional trauma. To this end, she draws a parallel between Tony's panic attacks—which she theorises are spurred by meat, which is linked to the roast from that day—and Marcel Proust's 'madeleine':

> **Melfi:** Marcel Proust wrote a seven-volume classic, *Remembrance of Things Past*: he took a bite of a madeleine—a kind of tea cookie he used to have when he was a child—and that one bite unleashed a tide of memories of his childhood and ultimately of his entire life.

Tony's panic attacks demonstrate something fundamental about his character, and their link to the dysfunction in his upbringing is key, but what this means is not something the series can tell us: "This sounds very gay—I hope you're not sayin' *that*" he responds to Melfi's comment about Proust's madeleine. If Tony was traumatised by the event, he does not possess the emotional intelligence required to explore that trauma. Alternatively, if he *is* a sociopath, then perhaps he was not traumatised by the event, sincerely getting a 'rush' from watching his father do his violent job. Either way we have no way of knowing for certain, as Tony's panic attacks remain an unresolved narrative thread.

What these demonstrations of character lead us to understand about Tony is definitively uncertain—which, I argue, is essential to the series. We might be moved to forgive Tony's criminal personality on the grounds that he was born and raised into such a lifestyle, suffering abuse and neglect throughout his childhood; or we might condemn Tony as a successful criminal sociopath, incapable of empathising with the victims of his violence, and refusing to take responsibility for the crimes that create his success. There are myriad ways of answering these questions, but those answers are not what concerns the narrative: what concerns the narrative is that we care enough about these

characters to ask ourselves what *we* think. This is expressed by the series' creator, David Chase, who discusses the meaning of the series with reference to the final scene of the final episode. The final episode of *The Sopranos* ends *in media res* with a sudden cut to black during a close-up shot on Tony. This moment has famously drawn interpretations that it signifies Tony's sudden death, but Chase refutes this as missing the symbolic point:

> There are no esoteric clues in there. No *Da Vinci Code*. Everything that pertains to that episode was in that episode. And it was in the episode before that and the one before that and the seasons before this one and so on.[427]

Instead of ending the series with a definitive narrative statement, for Chase the sudden and irresolute ending is demonstrative of what he feels is important about the series, which are the human connections that weave between its characters:

> The ceiling I was going for at that point, the biggest feeling I was going for, honestly, was don't stop believing. It was very simple and much more on the nose than people think. That's what I wanted people to believe. That life ends and death comes, but don't stop believing. There are attachments we make in life, even though it's all going to come to an end, that are worth so much, and we're so lucky to have been able to experience them. Life is short. Either it ends here for Tony or some other time. But in spite of that, it's really worth it. So don't stop believing.[428]

As discussed in the opening section of chapter three, complex serial dramas are character explorations of their morally transgressive protagonists which emphasise their humanity despite how else we might judge their character. *The Sopranos* lingers on narrative strands that never resolve to provoke us to dissect what it is that we *do* know, to find the meaning within what we feel: the series does not categorically establish that Tony is a sociopath, but if we feel that his behaviour demonstrates a lack of empathy more than anything else—

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[427] David Chase quoted by Brett Martin. *The Sopranos: The Complete Book*. HBO. Headline Publishing Group. New York City, New York. 2007. P 182.
[428] David Chase quoted by James Greenburg. 'This Magic Moment'. *Directors Guild of America Quarterly.* Website. Spring 2015. <http://www.dga.org/Craft/DGAQ/All-Articles/1502-Spring-2015/Shot-to-Remember-The-Sopranos.aspx> [Last Accessed 14/03/2019]

as is Melfi's final decision about him in the penultimate episode of the series—then perhaps that is what we will conclude about his character.[429] However, as Chase's words imply, key to the constitution of the series is the imperfect story that these lives tell: *The Sopranos* is not a puzzle meant to be solved, but a series of ambiguous truths to accept. When it comes to the minds of these characters, we must appreciate that there are limits to how deeply they can be understood.

The concept of ambiguity as a form of meaning in and of itself is a concept I take from moral philosopher Craig Taylor, who argues that in applicable stories "meaning or meanings may remain ambiguous at the same time as they convey truths."[430] Unlike ambiguous meaning that relies upon temporarily withheld information, ambiguity of this kind communicates meaning by exploring what is permanently unknowable—even, as Taylor qualifies, for the writer.[431] Taylor observes this ambiguity in Joseph Conrad's 1900 novel *Lord Jim*, arguing that meaning-making in the novel is constituted by "what we make of our conflicting responses" to it.[432] In these circumstances, Taylor argues that

> our conflicting responses to such a work, far from obscuring its moral meaning for us, actually suggest it; that such understanding as we might gain from the work may be revealed through its ambiguity.[433]

Ambiguity of this kind requires us to reflect on our responses to it to determine the full constitution of its meaning: for example, the different ways we might respond to Tony Soprano's character provide us with different ways of answering the question of who he is (e.g. whether he is a sociopath). Taylor qualifies that this is not because the text refuses to communicate truth, or that it withholds facts from its narrative information, but that the meaning it

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[429] Episode 20, Season 6. 'The Blue Comet'. David Chase (writer, creator, showrunner), Matthew Weiner (writer), Alan Taylor (director). *The Sopranos*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 3 June 2007.
[430] Craig Taylor. 'Literature, Moral Reflection, and Ambiguity' in *Philosophy*. Iss 86, Vol 1. 2011. Pp 74-75.
[431] Ibid, P 79.
[432] Ibid.
[433] Ibid, P 76.

communicates necessitates a variety of conflicting responses.[434] In this sense, the ambiguity pertains not only to our difficulty in resolving facets of character and construing a moral understanding of events, but for the author's difficulty in doing this as well—despite their having "put all the truth they can" into their text.[435] The weight of this ambiguity places an emphasis upon how we respond to it: "for it is then up to us to exercise our own judgement in making sense for ourselves of our potentially conflicting responses to those characters and events."[436] To draw a moral understanding of Tony Soprano we must interrogate the different responses that we have to him—responses that are made pertinent through the type of psychological ambiguity that the series provides us through internal access to his psyche. To draw out this concept with more depth and clarity, I will turn to Taylor's argument directly as he uses it with Joseph Conrad's novel *Lord Jim*.

Lord Jim: The Ambiguity of Nature and Ideals

The exploration of culpability for one's immoral actions is at the centre of *Lord Jim*. The eponymous protagonist of Conrad's novel is an egocentric young man who considers himself an unproven hero. As chief mate on board a transport vessel named the 'Patna', Jim fantasises about the challenges through which he will one day prove his value:

> He saw himself saving people from sinking ships, cutting away masts in a hurricane, swimming through a surf with a line […] He confronted savages on tropical shores, quelled mutinies on the high seas, and in a small boat upon the ocean kept up the hearts of despairing men—always an example of devotion to duty, and as unflinching as a hero in a book.[437]

However, when faced with such a situation Jim fails to perform as he foresaw. During a journey in which the Patna is transporting 800 pilgrims, it becomes snagged on something beneath the surface of the water, breaching its hull and seemingly dooming the ship and its passengers to death.[438] In the heat of

[434] Ibid, Pp 79-80.
[435] Ibid, P 79.
[436] Ibid.
[437] Conrad. *Lord Jim*. P 47.
[438] Ibid, Pp 119-123.

the moment, Jim freezes into total despondency. Around him, his shipmates demonstrate outright cowardice as they scramble to abandon the ship and its passengers. The Captain approaches Jim and beseeches him to collaborate in their escape, telling him ignore the passengers:

> You silly fool! do you think you'll get the ghost of a show when all that lot of brutes is in the water? Why, they will batter your head for you from these boats.[439]

Jim does not acquiesce to the Captain, but his paralysis also ensures that he does not help the passengers. Then, as he recognises a lifeboat wading in the water, Jim suddenly springs to life. As he recounts later, he does this for reasons that "he knew no more than the uprooted tree knows of the wind that laid it low", finding himself leaping overboard onto the fleeing lifeboat.[440] However, the Patna does not sink and is eventually rescued, with word reaching the authorities of the crew's cowardly abandonment. Of those who fled only Jim willingly stands to answer for his crime, and the resulting decision made by the court ends his seafaring career. Here, Jim's actions are clear and face the moral scrutiny of the law, however what they say about his character is unclear—the exploration of which is the conceit of the text.

As with *The Sopranos*, ambiguity in *Lord Jim* is encapsulated within the text's psychological focus, communicating meaning through the exploration of what fundamentally motivates Jim, his capacity for accurate self-reflection, and his ability to change. While in *The Sopranos* this is conducted most explicitly through Tony's therapy sessions with Dr Melfi, in *Lord Jim* it is explored through the narration of a sea captain named Marlow, who is both a curious observer of Jim's behaviour, and his most ardent supporter. Marlow meets Jim while he is facing inquiry into the Patna incident, and becomes immediately drawn to his plight. Marlow takes it upon himself to understand Jim in the deepest way possible—much as Dr Melfi does with Tony Soprano. He tells us that he is propelled by his wish "to find something", some "profound and redeeming cause, some merciful explanation, some convincing shadow of an excuse" for Jim's conduct, something that would ameliorate "the

[439] Ibid, P 119.
[440] Ibid, P 123.

doubt of the sovereign power enthroned in a fixed standard of conduct."[441] It is this ability for "sovereign power" of the individual to remain attached to a "fixed standard of conduct" that concerns the narrative, and one that is explored in two ways: by considering whether Jim was simply weak-willed, or if his standard of conduct is fundamentally flawed.

Through Marlow, we are invited to consider the puzzle of Jim as a man who seems to possess laudable ideals while demonstrating that, for some reason, he does not live up to them:

> "I always believed in being prepared for the worst," he commented, staring anxiously in my face. I nodded my approval of the sound principle, averting my eyes before the subtle unsoundness of the man.[442]

Marlow's curiosity centres on his assertion that Jim is not simply defined either by his "sound principles", or by the "subtle unsoundness" of his character, but by a gentler consideration of his *weakness*:

> The commonest sort of fortitude prevents us from becoming criminals in the legal sense; it is from weakness unknown, but perhaps suspected, as in some parts of the world you suspect a deadly snake in every bush – from weakness that may lie hidden, watched or unwatched, prayed against or manfully scorned, repressed or maybe ignored more than half a lifetime, not one of us is safe.[443]

This is the unforeseeable weakness that any of us could suffer under the appropriate circumstances: either by facing circumstances that push us beyond our ability to live up to our ideals; or by possessing motivations that are invisible to our self-knowledge. Marlow notes that Jim "made so much of his disgrace while it is the guilt alone that matters"[444], bringing into question whether Jim is motivated by his ideals or whether he is, as Craig Taylor writes, motivated by "a supposed right to think of himself in a certain way."[445]

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[441] Ibid, P 80.
[442] Ibid, P 109.
[443] Ibid, P 74.
[444] Ibid, P 173.
[445] Taylor, 'Literature, Moral Reflection, and Ambiguity'. P 81.

Taylor argues the ambiguity of Jim's case is particularly relevant because as Marlow tells us, he is "one of us":

> I watched the youngster there. I liked his appearance; I knew his appearance; he came from the right place; he was one of us.[446]

Craig Taylor argues that this assertion is crucial to a holistic reading of *Lord Jim*, wherein Jim's being 'one of us', as is repeated throughout the novel, reflects how we choose to regard our own human weakness:

> To say that Jim is 'one of us' here is not to suggest that we understand him. On the contrary we don't really understand Jim at all, and that is my point. […] while we may want, perhaps led on by Marlow's repeated questioning, to understand the kind of man Jim is, to understand his character, what makes him act in the way that he does, there is an invitation in *Lord Jim* to question our motives for this.[447]

Taylor argues that the novel guides us toward a recognition of how our motives "may be concerned less with finding out the truth than with re-assuring ourselves, insulating ourselves from the 'hint of a destructive fate ready for us all' that Jim represents."[448] What Jim's character asks of us, then, is to what degree can we ever find an answer that might accurately discern Jim's flaws: the reason Jim fails is not because of an innate flaw or a moment of weakness, but because he is 'one of us'. None of us can know ourselves well enough see the full potential of our nature and our motivations unobscured. The kind of ambiguity that winds through the novel describes this unending potential for weakness, and the ultimate fecklessness of the task to account for it. It may be that our capacity for morally responsible action has limits, despite our moral fibre, or it may be that our true motivations are secretly shrouded against our self-reflection: how can we ever truly know?

Continuing his discussion of Jim's weakness as demonstrative of his being 'one of us', Marlow describes how the diffidence of humanity prevents us from locating where our faults lie. One of the key passages to this end is considerable in length, but articulates this idea well:

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[446] Conrad. *Lord Jim*. P 75.
[447] Taylor. 'Literature, Moral Reflection, and Ambiguity'. Pp 85-86.
[448] Ibid, P 86.

> He stood there for all the parentage of his kind, for men and women by no means clever or amusing, but whose very existence is based upon honest faith, and upon the instinct of courage. I don't mean military courage, or civil courage, or any special kind of courage. I mean just that inborn ability to look temptations straight in the face – a readiness unintellectual enough, goodness knows, but without pose – a power of resistance, don't you see, ungracious if you like, but priceless – an unthinking and blessed stiffness before the outward and inward terrors, before the might of nature and the seductive corruption of men – backed by a faith invulnerable to the strength of facts, to the contagion of example, to the solicitation of ideas. Hang ideas! They are tramps, vagabonds, knocking at the back-door of your mind, each taking a little of your substance, each carrying away some crumb of that belief in a few simple notions you must cling to if you want to live decently and would like to die easy![449]

As occurs in multiple points throughout the novel, it is unclear what 'ideas' are being condemned, or what our 'faith' and 'instinct of courage' relate to. Is the faith that Marlow describes a reference to our faith in our ideals, or our faith in our innate moral fibre? This is crucial, because whatever these ideas are is fundamental to our detriment, as they detract from the "belief in a few simple notions you must cling to if you want to live decently". If Marlow is referring to the faith in our ideals, then the 'ideas' that he condemns would represent the prodding doubt of ourselves, convincing us that we are not capable of being driven by our best ideals, thus "carrying them away" one "crumb" at a time. However, if it is faith in our individual capacity for good, then these 'ideas' would be the unrealistic scripture of ideals that, like false idols, steer us towards moral action grounded in motivations that remain invisible to us. If Jim were corrupted by circumstance upon the Patna, then the former would seem more likely, however if his moral ideals are in fact motivated by an inflated sense of grandeur, then the latter would be true. Marlow describes this faith as "unintellectual", "without pose", "ungracious", and "unthinking",

[449] Conrad. *Lord Jim*. Pp 74-75.

carefully reminding us that its constitution is not something we can be consciously definitive of, but something innately true nonetheless. This leaves us to ponder: is this faith innate as the moral candour of a worthy ideal that we should all aspire to, or innate as the general desire to be good that Jim possesses as 'one of us'?

This is explored again later in the novel, as the thoughtful and analytical character Stein muses on its dichotomy:

> A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns […] The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up.[450]

Stein refers to this as a dichotomy between being idealistic and being realistic, wherein falling "into a dream" is associated with the intangible nature of our ideals. Cedric Watts and Robert Hampson write in their 1985 edition of *Lord Jim* that this speech has been interpreted in two different ways: the first is to interpret it as meaning that to survive, "like the experienced swimmer", we must always be co-operating with what is realistic, acknowledging the limitations of ideals and thus avoiding their potential to 'drown' us; the second is to interpret it as meaning "every man who is born enters the realm of ambitions and ideals", and that if we attempt to "evade those dreams" then we sacrifice our ideal moral identity.[451] Each reading offers a mirror of the other, as Watts and Hampson summarise:

> The speech can be reduced to a contradiction: 'Be a realist, not an idealist; yet be an idealist, not a realist.'[452]

For Watts and Hampson, this contradiction "memorably co-ordinates and sums up, without really resolving, the central themes, tensions and problems of the whole novel."[453] In this way, what Stein's speech communicates is the tension within this ambiguity: is Jim's weakness his natural inability to fulfil moral ideals, or is it his inability to think beyond them?

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[450] Ibid, P 200.
[451] Conrad, per Cedric Watts and Robert Hampson. *Lord Jim.* P 360.
[452] Ibid.
[453] Ibid.

It is this same competition between ‘nature’ and ‘ideals’ that concerns Tony Soprano’s story in *The Sopranos*, and the inability to filter his character in one direction or the other that renders his ambiguity. While ambiguity of this sort concerns all morally transgressive protagonists in complex serial drama, the specific ways in which each narrative conducts this is unique and requires a similar exploration of narrative information: for example, is Walter White’s immoral alter-ego ‘Heisenberg’ born from desperation, or is Walter a fundamentally malevolent man? Similarly, characters such as Omar Little in *The Wire*, Dexter Morgan in *Dexter*, and Rick Grimes in *The Walking Dead*, explore this tension between agency and nature through their relationship with violence. It is the question of where this violent behaviour comes from, and what it means, that is the ambiguous point upon which the character studies of complex serial drama pivot. I will draw out this conception of Tony Soprano as ‘one of us’ further in section 4.4, but for the remainder of this section I will outline character information relating to Tony. Where Jim’s ambiguity in *Lord Jim* rests within a psychological analysis of his character in the wake of an immense failure, Tony’s ambiguity relates to his cumulating list of moral failures that mount throughout the series. We are invited to consider whether Tony’s violent behaviour is born from a maligned moral identity impressed by the trauma his parents visited upon his childhood, or if it is an ongoing, and uncaring, series of immoral decisions that reflect his sociopathic contempt for others.

Murdering Your Best Friends: “Tell me about it.”[454]

In the final episode of season two, Tony Soprano is forced to kill one of his oldest friends, Salvatore ‘Big Pussy’ Bonpensiero (Vincent Pastore).[455] Tony discovers that Pussy has been working with the FBI, feeding them incriminating information about Tony and the DiMeo family. It is long-established within the series (and in Italian-American mafia stories historically) that feeding criminal information to the government is the most severe intra-

[454] Episode 10, Season 3. ‘To Save Us All From Satan’s Power’. Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess (writers), Jack Bender (director). *The Sopranos*. David Chase (creator and showrunner). HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 29 April 2001.
[455] Jennifer Melfi to Tony Soprano. Episode 13, Season 2. ‘Funhouse’. David Chase, Todd A. Kessler (writers), John Patterson (director). *The Sopranos*. David Chase (creator and showrunner). HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 9 April 2000.

mafia crime that a member can commit, regarded as seriously as high treason. For this reason, there is no question for Tony, Pussy, or the viewer, that once the crime is discovered, killing Pussy is the only recourse for Tony. Ten episodes later, Tony has tortured thoughts and dreams about Pussy that revolve around a conflicting mix of his feeling betrayed, and the sadness he feels from the still-resonating friendship that he had with Pussy.[456] The intensity of these feelings cause Tony to suffer a panic attack, which he attempts to discuss this with his therapist, Dr Melfi:

> **Tony:** I started thinking about this thing that happened years ago. I haven't thought about it since it happened…
> **Melfi:** Tell me about it.
> **Tony:** I can't.
> **Melfi:** I see. […]
> **Tony:** Without going into specifics, I can tell you it was a friend of mine… I found out he was working for the federal government. Enough said?
> **Melfi:** I see.

The conversation ends without further insight. Melfi's office is the most consistent location in which earnest insight into Tony's character is revealed in the narrative, but on this occasion (and in many others) the scene only alludes to such insight without explicitly providing it. Later in the episode, Melfi attempts to return to this topic:

> **Melfi:** I was thinking about what we were talking about last time you were here—you know, your friend who was working for the federal government? Granted, I get most of my information from the movies and Bill Curtis, but I was thinking—

Tony cuts Melfi off by abruptly and angrily getting up from his seat and storming out of her office.

Conversations in *The Sopranos* frequently end abruptly in this way, with emotionally revelatory information explored precisely through its ongoing opacity: what Tony is unable to express is as important as what he does express. This is an example of what David Pattie refers to as *The Sopranos*

[456] Episode 10, Season 3. 'To Save Us All From Satan's Power'.

"anti-therapeutic" narrative, which subverts the expectation of therapeutic revelation and resolution:

> From its beginning, the narrative is impeded and cannot flow smoothly to resolution. It is in some ways frustratingly incomplete; the narrative is not predicated on moments of insight that transform the characters, but on blocked conversations, on story lines that meander rather than progress.[457]

We know that Tony has intense and unresolved feelings about killing Pussy, but the moment that provides us with the insight needed to truly understand those feelings *is* his inability to confront them. They are not available to us, because they are not available to him, and despite the series' focus upon therapy and psychological understanding—or indeed, perhaps *because* of it—the significance of this unknowability remains central to the story. As David Chase says:

> In life, you don't get an ending to every story, […] You can't tie a little ribbon on everything and say it's over. And yeah, I know…'*The Sopranos*' isn't life.' But it's *based* on it![458]

It is the frustration of finality that *The Sopranos* achieves through its ambiguity: finality permits us to move on, but this use of ambiguity forces us to consider what happens when we cannot move on, when the confrontation of the truth *is* that we will never know. In this way, *The Sopranos* does not communicate to us the sort of story that can be agreed or disagreed with as a philosophical statement about a criminal, but an imperfect connection with a character whom even the series itself does not entirely understand.

What is Ambiguous is Paradoxically What Creates Meaning

Like that which Craig Taylor explores through *Lord Jim*, ambiguity of this kind raises complex questions relating to our ideals and our ability and/or willingness to understand the lived experience of other people. It also raises questions about 'what ought to be considered', in the socio-political sense of

[457] David Pattie. '"Whatever Happened to Stop and Smell the Roses": *The Sopranos* as an Anti-therapeutic Narrative' in *The Essential Sopranos Reader* (eds David Lavery, Douglas L. Howard & Paul Levinson). The University Press of Kentucky. Kentucky. 2011. Pp 166-179.
[458] David Chase quoted by Brett Martin. *The Sopranos.* P 179.

‘what sort of conversations should we be having?’ For example, Kim Akass and Janet McCabe discuss how, for them, Carmela Soprano provokes

> complex emotions, pushing us to think in uncomfortable ways, in directions that both repel and surprise us; and she challenges our feminism, sometimes shaking it to its very core, as she forces us to the limits of how to speak about and understand such matters.[459]

Against this reading, they consider alternative readings of Carmela that “fail to understand why any feminist would bother writing about Carmela Soprano.”[460] “No one would ever claim Carmela for feminism”, Akass and McCabe write, “but at the same time, no one should dismiss her either.”[461] What Akass and McCabe argue is that the dialogue raised through the complex character arc of Carmela’s character in *The Sopranos* creates meaning in and of itself:

> Over the past eight years we have, through Carmela, studied a character that exposes the more troubling aspects of being female and feminine in our complex post-feminist age of troubled emancipation.[462]

Carmela’s character does not express a feminist viewpoint on behalf of her creators, but a blunt demonstration of the power structures, existing both internally to the narrative and extending beyond it, that serve to oppress her:

> Way past when a film or television text punished women for resisting generic rules, for rejecting the patriarch, and owning their own desire, this episodic drama series presents us with women cognizant of the collateral damage that will be sustained in the narrative turf war with the obstinate gangster and an intransient patriarchal law.[463]

When Carmela seeks a divorce from Tony in the fifth season, she is faced with this problem: there are rules that a character like Carmela is expected to

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[459] Kim Akass & Janet McCabe. ‘”Blabbermouth Cunts”; or, Speaking in Tongues: *Narrative Crises for Women in* The Sopranos *and feminist dilemmas*’ in *The Essential Sopranos Reader*. David Lavery, Douglas L. Howard, and Paul Levinson (editors.) The University Press of Kentucky. 2011. P 93.
[460] Ibid.
[461] Ibid,. P 94.
[462] Ibid, P 93.
[463] Ibid, P 100.

follow, and she occupies a tradition of storytelling that will punish women for disobeying those rules.[464] Either Carmela will be killed, or her character will struggle for narrative relevance in the series—a problem that Akass and McCabe identify in Dr Melfi after she is raped in the third season.[465] Carmela does not, because she finally decides to remain married to Tony, and so she retains her narrative relevance and power—but at the same time her agency is fundamentally undermined, and herein lies her ambiguity. As Akass and McCabe elaborate:

> Even while we understand that representations of women like Carmela emerge as ambiguous and ambivalent precisely because they are made visible in and managed through coded types of patriarchal discourse—institutions like family, marriage, and religion, as well as cause- and-effect narratives and strict generic rules—we nonetheless remain ensnared in those very fantasies that we are working so hard to deconstruct.[466]

The ambiguity that regards these characters as 'one of us' relates to this paradox of how we choose to understand them: they simultaneously elucidate and participate in the moral issues that surround them and so, by proxy, do we when we engage with them. The meaning that this sort of ambiguity yields in *The Sopranos* is one that is self-reflexive: it requires talking to each other to gain and develop perspectives; investigating the ways that we engage with the text, and why; and allowing interaction between our various and sometimes contradictory responses. This dynamic engagement with the text allows us, as Akass and McCabe write, to "make visible new ways of talking about the complexity of characters" that possess the self-reflexivity provided by ambiguity.[467]

The ambiguity that sits at the core of the characters of complex serial drama renders their impenetrability a primary source of meaning in and of itself. While we might voraciously argue for certain readings of these characters, a definitive conflict will always exist in their constitution. The next section will

[464] Ibid.
[465] Ibid,. P 96.
[466] Ibid,. P 101.
[467] Ibid, P 103.

explore an example from the text that demonstrates the technique used to communicate this ambiguity: ‘Second-Degree Style’.

4.2 Second-Degree Style

“No man, for any considerable period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude without finally getting bewildered as to which may be true.” ~ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*[468]

In this section I will demonstrate the visual style that complex serial drama utilises to influence the subjectivity of perspective, which is used to render characters ambiguous. To demonstrate this point I will draw upon one of the earliest examples of vivid violence in complex serial drama, from fifth episode of *The Sopranos*' first season, ‘College’.[469] Here, the concept of ‘plausibility’ is integral. As defined in section 3.3 of chapter three, plausibility relates to character behaviour that we take to be satisfactorily believable, based upon our understanding of a character’s previous behaviour. We believe behaviour to be plausible so long as it connects to a recognised behavioural anchor: for example, if Tony beats a man who owes him money we believe the behaviour to be plausible because it is anchored to the understanding that Tony beats people who owe him money, for the various reason elucidated in the previous section. However, in *The Sopranos*, second-degree style permits behaviour to be read in multiple ways, each of which connect to different, conflicting yet equally plausible, character anchors.

To begin, I will introduce Jeremy Butler’s definition of visual style in television. His dramaturgical analysis of the visual style of television regards it as a “spectrum” between the “stylistically utilitarian” and the “stylistically exhibitionistic”.[470] He succinctly defines each end of the spectrum:

> On one end of the spectrum is a play that is recorded from a single vantage point with no editing—the camera positioned at the “best seat in the house.” […] In this instance, the camera and microphone add little, or nothing, to the live event. On the other end of the spectrum is a wholly abstract animation or wholly

[468] Nathaniel Hawthorne. *The Scarlet Letter*. Wordsworth Classics. Wordsworth. Ware, Heretfordshire. 1999. (Originally Published 1851) P 162.
[469] Season 1, Episode 5. ‘College’.
[470] Jeremy Butler. *Television Style*. Routledge. New York City, New York. 2010. P 216.

> processed image, one that could not exist without the medium itself.[471]

Live anthology theatre is the closest that drama has had towards the "stylistically utilitarian"—also referred to as 'Zero-Degree Style'. This method of capturing narrative emphasises the objective: television captures and replays live performance.[472] The opposite end of the spectrum, the "stylistically exhibitionistic", Butler writes, allows "the medium itself to perform":

> In the televisual schema, style is aggressive, roughened, and opaque, not smooth and transparent. It carries meaning. It makes jokes. It might call attention to itself. It can even make familiar things seem strange, creating art as technique…[473]

With regards to narrative fiction, Butler asserts that the stylistically exhibitionistic is at its most extreme when it is an "animated program, particularly in segments that contain visuals impossible to generate with a camera and real actors."[474] Post-production becomes vital for series with filmed live-action that are more stylistically exhibitionistic, because the general conceit is that the difference between the utilitarian and the exhibitionistic is whether it is recorded or constructed—though it is here that Butler concedes that making distinctions is "a little bit fuzzy":

> is it a record of a pre-existing performance or does the television text construct the narrative through sound/image fragments? The distinction […] relies on a presumed event in a presumed "real world" […] but I contend that, in its most extreme forms, the distinction is evident in the texts themselves.[475]

At the heart of Butler's spectrum is this notion that on one end is the 'objective' representation of reality, with little or no stylistic intervention, and on the other is a 'subjective' abstraction, with no acknowledgement of our shared reality. To put this another way: objective representations are more likely to be recognisable and easy to engage with, because they pertain to a

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[471] Ibid.
[472] Ibid, P 197.
[473] Ibid.
[474] Ibid, P 216.
[475] Ibid, P 217.

ubiquitous notion of what reality looks like; subjective representations are more likely to be recognisable insofar as they pertain to specific creators and experiences. It is the difference between the NBC comedy *Friends*, and the Mark Frost and David Lynch surrealist drama *Twin Peaks*.

Second-Degree Style

Complex serial drama uses style to represent multiple subjective representations, alluding to the many perspectives within our shared objective reality. It creates this ambiguity by utilising what has been dubbed by Pierre Barrette and Yves Picard as "second-degree style".[476] As Trisha Dunleavy writes, second-degree style involves employing an "aesthetic complexity" that offers a "juxtaposition of opposing truths."[477] These truths are not offered at the expense of other, conflicting, truths, but as alternative perspectives that can be *recognised*—but not *occupied*—simultaneously. For example, we cannot believe that Tony is both sociopathic and empathetic at the same time, but second-degree style could make us believe the former in one scene and then the latter in the next scene. This creates ambiguity by giving us convincing evidence for both, but without their conflicting perspectives rendering that information preposterous. Second-degree style performs this through the subtle use of perspective that requires, as Pierre Barrette and Yves Picard describe, the "maximum level of effort" on behalf of the viewers to discern, creating a subjective "individual perspective" that "bends toward less orality or even silence".[478] To engage with second-degree style in this way

> the audience must go toward the work and evaluate the relative originality of its artistic expression. They must carry out a dual reading: identify how it differs from the norm and gauge its interest.[479]

[476] Pierre Barrette & Yves Picard. 'Breaking the Waves' in *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays on the Contexts, Politics, Style, and Reception of the Television Series* [ed. David P. Pierson]. Lexington Books. Lanham, Maryland. 2014. Pp 121-138.
[477] Dunleavy. *Complex Serial Drama*. P 165.
[478] Barrette & Picard. 'Breaking the Waves'. Pp 124-125.
[479] Ibid, P 125.

Second-degree style communicates a discourse that subverts, as Sue Thornham and Tony Purvis write, the “status of knowledge”.[480] For Thornham and Purvis, this approach does “not abandon the discourse of truth so much as demonstrate how truths are relative and contingent.”[481] To this end, it uses multiple, conflicting, perspectives upon the same piece of narrative information to demonstrate that truth *is* perspective. To this end, it problematises the pursuit of a single perspective, destabilising the capacity for it to yield a convincing understanding of the narrative as a whole.[482]

‘College’

An example of second-degree style is at work in *The Sopranos* fifth episode, ‘College’, in which Tony Soprano garrottes to death a former mobster-turned-FBI informant, Fabian “Febby” Petrulio (Tony Ray Rossi).[483] This scene is useful because it is also the prototypical example of the characterisation of morally transgressive protagonists in complex serial drama, with Tony Soprano being, for all intents and purposes, its progenitor. The premise of the episode is that Tony is taking his seventeen-year-old daughter, Meadow (Jamie-Lynn Sigler), to tour three potential colleges. The second scene of the episode takes place entirely in a car, as Tony and Meadow drive to the next college on their list. The car’s radio is playing music, but Meadow turns it off. Breaking the silence, she suddenly asks Tony: “Are you in the mafia?” Surprised and taken aback, Tony at first angrily denies Meadow’s question, but she insists that she knows he is in the mafia, regardless what he says. Tony, with reluctant concession, admits that Meadow is a “grown woman…*almost*”, implying that she is old enough to know the truth:

> **Tony:** Some of my money… Comes from illegal gambling and, and whatnot…

He pauses for a few seconds, and then asks earnestly, “How does that make you feel?” Meadow tells him that she appreciates him telling her the truth, and that the other students at her school “think it’s actually kind of neat” because

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[480] Thornham and Purvis do not use the term ‘second-degree style’ but mirror the concept in their text. Sue Thornham & Tony Purvis. *Television Drama: Theories and Identities*. Palgrave Macmillan. New York City, New York. 2005. P 155.
[481] Ibid.
[482] Dunleavy. *Complex Serial Drama*. P 166.
[483],Episode 5, Season 1. ‘College’.

they all like the film *Casino*. Tony cuts her off as she starts talking about the film, reasserting his question: “I’m not askin’ about those bums—I’m askin’ about *you*.” Meadow replies:

> **Meadow:** Sometimes I wish you were like other Dads… Then, like Mr. Scangarelo, for example, an advertising executive for big tobacco. Or lawyers? Ugh. So many Dads are full of shit.

Tony attempts to mitigate the role of crime in his life, assuring Meadow that part of his “income comes from legitimate businesses”, but she cuts him off: “Look, Dad, please, okay? Don’t start mealy-mouthing.” And with that, she turns the radio back on to the cut off the conversation and the scene ends. This alignment structure develops behavioural anchors to Tony’s familial sentiment: his dialogue emphasises concern for how Meadow feels about his criminal profession, engendering sincerity, honesty, and empathy. He also demonstrates trust in Meadow by admitting he is a criminal, and in response she communicates understanding and acceptance. That Tony is driving with Meadow to tour colleges also re-enforces the evidence that he is a doting father.

The next scene contrasts and creates conflict with this representation of Tony as familial with his emotional sentiments. The scene finds him isolated in a phone booth outside of a gas station. As figure 1 demonstrates, the mise-en-scène captures Tony inside the booth, facing away from Meadow, who is approaching the gas station:

Figure 1: Tony and Meadow at the Gas Station[484]

Meadow occupies the brightest area in the frame as she approaches the gas station in the background, contrasting with Tony who is foregrounded in the poorest-lit area. She walks away from Tony while looking back at him, acknowledging that she is aware of his activity, though excluded from it. The camera tracks in on Tony as he talks on the phone, and eventually the booth physically obscures Meadow altogether, the camera stopping its tracking motion with medium shot of Tony:

Figure 2: Tony in the phone booth[485]

Where in the previous scene Tony and Meadow share an intimate and attentive space that fostered sentiment, this mise-en-scène establishes the opposite: Meadow is now entirely detached from Tony, who is secluded away from her in a private space. In the first line of the scene Tony asks: "How's my sweetheart?" The scene cuts to Irina (Oksana Lada), his twenty-five-year-old Russian comáre (mistress), at home sitting on her bed, where she berates Tony for his lack of commitment to her. Second-degree style operates within the visual field of this scene by offering a conflicting perspective between

[484] Captured from Season 1, Episode 5. 'College'. DVD. Allen Coulter (Director). James Manor Jr. and David Chase (Writers). *The Sopranos: Season One*. David Chase (Creator). HBO Studios. New York City, New York. Release Date: 27 August, 2007. Timestamp: 00:05:39. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

[485] Captured from Season 1, Episode 5. 'College'. DVD. Allen Coulter (Director). James Manor Jr. and David Chase (Writers). *The Sopranos: Season One*. David Chase (Creator). HBO Studios. New York City, New York. Release Date: 27 August, 2007. Timestamp: 00:05:42. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

scenes: in the previous scene, Tony shares a small and enclosed space with Meadow wherein he reveals a sensitive aspect of his identity to her, and Meadow applauds him for not being "full of shit" like other Dads she knows. In this next scene, we abruptly find Meadow ejected from that small and enclosed space, Tony's back to her as she walks away while looking back toward him, until she is completely obscured. Before we even see who Tony is talking to, or what about, the visual style of this scene demonstrates that the open and sincere relationship that the two shared is now over, and we begin to see just how "full of shit" Tony really is. These contradictory parallels increase in intensity throughout the remainder of the episode.

Irina is angry that Tony has stable access to the love of his wife whenever he wants, but that Irina only has his attention when he permits it. Tony tries to deflect Irina's anger by telling her that it is too late to complain:

> **Tony:** You knew the deal: I got two kids high-school age—we talked about this.

Irina, anticipating this response, counters him:

> **Irina:** Yes, and a wife whenever you want—what do *I* have in *my* life?

Tony switches tack, saying sarcastically:

> **Tony:** Boy, am I glad I called!

Irina counters this response also by challenging him:

> **Irina:** Fuck you, then! Hang up!

Instead of escalating the conversation, Tony changes tack again, this time attempting to appease Irina by reminding her of the gifts he has bought her:

> **Tony:** How are the whirlpool jets? They get 'em in right?

Irina, more tired now, tries to appeal to Tony emotionally, though with a malapropism:

> **Irina:** Don't throw up in my face things you buy me, okay?

Irina laments how her recently married cousin has a doting husband, recounting how her cousin's "prosthetic leg fell off in a Gap store" and, with another malapropism, her husband "carries her out like a knight in white satin armour." Tony, bemused, is fed up and decides that he will end the conversation:

Tony: I gotta go, uh, my daughter's comin'.

With that lie he hangs up the phone. For the final time we cut to an isolated and exasperated Irina, who throws her phone and throws herself in frustration onto her bed. Back in the telephone booth, Tony mutters an irritated "Jesus" loudly to himself, and puts money into the telephone to make another call. This time he calls his wife Carmela (Edie Falco), who is sick at home. Carmela attempts to tell Tony about how quickly she is recovering, and attempts to ask him questions about the college tour so far. Tony's replies to her remarks three times, each of which are disinterestedly brief, almost ignoring what Carmela says to him. Tony suddenly tells Carmela that he has to go, and hangs up on her, because he has noticed the man he will eventually kill: Fabian 'Febby' Petrulio (Febby).

Trisha Dunleavy suggests that second-degree style can offer "alternative depictions of reality and truth" that may arise "from the divergence between the revelations of dialogue as opposed to those of mise-en-scène and/or camerawork, or between different (juxtaposed or contiguous) story strands."[486] Between these two scenes, despite employing a similar mise-en-scène of one-on-one conversations conducted in a small enclosed space, Tony's dialogue demonstrates fundamentally different characteristics. In the first scene, Tony is attentive, empathetic, and selfless in the conversation he has with his daughter; in the second, Tony is detached and unempathetic with both Irina and Carmela. The two scenes raise multiple alternative perspectives: while Tony demonstrates respect, love, and sincerity with Meadow by telling her that he is a criminal, the next scene demonstrates that there are many, non-criminal, secrets that Tony keeps. Meadow says that she appreciates Tony's honesty:

Meadow: So many Dads are full of shit.

Tony: And I'm not?

Meadow: You finally told the truth about this.

But in the following scene Tony immediately demonstrates a host of other ways in which he is "full of shit": he explicitly lies to Irina, and he is implicitly lying to Carmela by having an extramarital affair. Furthermore, where Tony

[486] Dunleavy. *Complex Serial Drama*. P 166.

actively sought to understand Meadow's feelings, he balks when Irina attempts to express hers, and then he altogether ignores Carmela. Finally, by showing Carmela at home sick, the scene also brings into question Tony's presence in Meadow's tour of colleges: presenting an alternative perspective where he is not taking her by choice, but simply because Carmela is unable. These alternative perspectives are subtle, but they become increasingly intense with the introduction of violence.

Having recognised Febby, Tony quickly finishes his phone call and gathers Meadow back into the car to follow him. Tony aggressively chases Febby, speeding and veering onto the wrong side of the road to overtake other cars, with the sound of screeching tyres and car horns adding to the chaos of the scene. Meadow is confused and nervous about Tony's behaviour:

> **Meadow:** Dad, slow down! Dad! Jesus, what's wrong with you?
> **Tony:** It's alright.
> **Passing Motorist:** Fucking maniac!
> **Meadow:** What's going on?!

Tony attempts to reassure Meadow, saying to her with a playful smile:

> **Tony:** Just foolin' around!

Eventually, by chance, they approach the motel that they are staying at and Tony reluctantly stops pursuing Febby and pulls into the motel's car park. Tony and Meadow have dinner together, at which time Tony asks Meadow how she is feeling about what he told her, and they continue to connect through sincere discussion. However, Febby has recognised Tony, and that evening he tracks him down to their motel. Waiting for them in the shadows, Febby is poised to shoot at both Tony and Meadow with a silenced pistol as they approach their room, but he refrains after a bystander couple arrive, complicating his attack.

These scenes further subvert the perspective we're given on Tony's relationship with Meadow, which they agree is an honest one. Again, Tony demonstrates that he is "full of shit" in multiple ways: his dogmatic pursuit of Febby demonstrates something more realistic, something truly sincere, about his criminality which he does not reveal to Meadow. Perhaps most importantly, his willingness to expose his daughter to his violent criminal

business brings his devotion to her wellbeing into question. 'College' uses second-degree style to inference these conflicting pieces of information without providing certainty—e.g. Tony's sincerity regarding his criminal identity is inferred during his conversations with Meadow, but the value of that sincerity is brought into question when he engages in criminal behaviour. These are plausible ways of interpreting the events that play out, but none of them are satisfactory alone: Tony *was* sincere with Meadow but, as the following two scenes demonstrate, there is an alternate perspective wherein what he continues to withhold renders that sincerity piecemeal and worthless. The significance of why we ought to care about whether Tony is honest and sincere with his daughter reaches a crescendo in the latter-half of this episode, in the vividly violent scene where Tony kills Febby. This reveals something more spiritually significant about Tony that he has not been honest with Meadow about: the enjoyment he can find in killing people.

The vivid violence of Tony killing Febby is not only realised through the visual experience of its depiction, but through its narrative backdrop. Second-degree style makes this murder sit in tension with the warm, empathetic humanity that Tony has demonstrated with his daughter—a tension that has been developing throughout the episode, but which is now impossible to avoid. In section 3.2 of chapter three, I discussed how partiality is a powerful behavioural anchor which allows us to emotionally ally to morally transgressive protagonists. Tony's relationship with Meadow in 'College' is an apt example of this partiality: he demonstrates familial warmth, compassion, and respect which garners our positive appreciation. It is not that Tony murders Febby that creates this tension, but the bitterness and vitriol he expresses while he does it, and the enjoyment he takes in it. The scene begins with a medium eye-level shot that captures Febby sitting at his desk. He hears a crack coming from outside, and he draws a pistol as he exits his office to investigate. A medium shot tracks Febby as he exits, following him as he walks down the steps of the office. Febby thinks that he has found the cause of the disturbance as he sees a deer in the nearby bushes, and he smiles in relief. Tony suddenly appears behind him from out-of-shot and begins to garrotte him with an electrical cord, as depicted in figures 3 and 4:

Figures 3 & 4: Tony Appears and Garrottes Febby[487]

A low-angle two-shot close-up focusses on Tony's face immediately behind Febby's, as depicted in figure 5. Tony snarls quietly and mockingly into Febby's ear:

> **Tony:** Good mornin', rat.
>
> **Febby:** Who are you? What is this?
>
> **Tony:** Don't make me laugh.

A two-shot close up focusses on Tony's face as he growls into Febby's ear:

> **Tony:** You pimp! You fuck!

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[487] Captured from Season 1, Episode 5. 'College'. DVD. Allen Coulter (Director). James Manor Jr. and David Chase (Writers). *The Sopranos: Season One*. David Chase (Creator). HBO Studios. New York City, New York. Release Date: 27 August 2007. Timestamp: 00:47:28 – 00:47:29. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

Figure 5: "You Pimp! You Fuck!"[488]

Febby pleads:

> **Febby:** Teddy there must be something we can do—
>
> **Tony:** *Tony*—it's Tony, you fuck.

Tony yanks back on the garrotte:

> **Tony:** You know how much trouble you're in now? You took an oath, and you broke it!

Febby tries to appeal to Tony's humanity:

> **Febby:** I could have killed you last night, outside the motel. Your daughter was drunk, remember? I was there in the parking lot. I had a gun, but I didn't do it. Because of her, I told myself—"It's just a coincidence!", "He's takin' his little girl to college!"

Febby begins to weep as Tony chuckles slightly in response, unmoved:

> **Tony:** One thing about us wiseguys? The hustle never ends—you shot me at that motel, your life would've been flushed down the piscia-do!

Febby attempts one final pitch:

> **Febby:** Please Tony, I'm beggin' you!—

[488] Captured from Season 1, Episode 5. 'College'. DVD. Allen Coulter (Director). James Manor Jr. and David Chase (Writers). *The Sopranos: Season One*. David Chase (Creator). HBO Studios. New York City, New York. Release Date: 27 August 2007. Timestamp: 00:47:37. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

Tony cuts him off by pulling back on the cord with all his strength, lifting him off the ground as he strangles him. Sweating and struggling from the exertion, Tony vitriolically spits his final words at Febby:

Tony: Jimmy says hello from hell, you fuck!

A ground level shot looks up at the conjoined men as they fall forward to the ground. In the same shot, Tony reasserts his position with his knee in Febby's back, giving him leverage as he pulls back on the choke with all his force:

Figure 6: Tony pulling back and Febby's bulging eyes[489]

The wide-angled lens distorts the proportions of the characters and renders the image more grotesque. Febby's eyes bulge as his face turns red and he chokes. A close-up on Tony's hands shows them bloody from the pressure of the cord, and the shot slowly tilts up to show his sweating, strained face as he grunts, growls, and involuntarily spits from the effort:

[489] Captured from Season 1, Episode 5. 'College'. DVD. Allen Coulter (Director). James Manor Jr. and David Chase (Writers). *The Sopranos: Season One*. David Chase (Creator). HBO Studios. New York City, New York. Release Date: 27 August 2007. Timestamp: 00:48:19. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

Figure 7-8: Tony's force.[490]

Febby sinks down as he dies, and Tony checks his pulse to confirm it. Tony hears ducks flying above and he looks up. Tony stands, looking down as he pulls the cord off his bloodied hands. Febby's office telephone ringing sounds alongside the sound of quacking ducks. Tony stops and looks up again, as a point-of-view shot shows a gaggle of ducks flying far above. The final shot of the scene is a high-angled long-shot looming high above Tony as he stares

[490] Captured from Season 1, Episode 5. 'College'. DVD. Allen Coulter (Director). James Manor Jr. and David Chase (Writers). *The Sopranos: Season One*. David Chase (Creator). HBO Studios. New York City, New York. Release Date: 27 August 2007. Timestamp: 00:48:25 – 00:48:27. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

up, drifting away from him in a cloud-like movement, revealing that he is standing on one side of a forking path:

Figure 9: Tony's Forking Path[491]

After murdering Febby, Tony picks up Meadow from another college, and the intimate mise-en-scène from their first conversation in the car returns. Tony is late, and he contrives a sequence of lies to explain what he has been doing. Meadow sees the bloody lacerations on Tony's hands, as well as scuffs on his shoes, and immediately suspects that he has been to see the man who he made them chase earlier. Tony again denies and deflects her questions, prompting her to ask him if he is being honest, and Tony assures her that he is. Meadow firmly reiterates that he told her that they "have that kind of relationship", and he agrees "that's right!" Meadow knows he is lying, but when she goes to question him again, she stops. "I love you" Meadow finally says, and Tony replies, defensive but conceding, "I love you too."

Second-degree style in 'College' illustrates the contradictions within Tony's character that we must negotiate as we attempt to understand him, and the most extreme contradictions contrast what Tony presents to Meadow and

[491] Captured from Season 1, Episode 5. 'College'. DVD. Allen Coulter (Director). James Manor Jr. and David Chase (Writers). *The Sopranos: Season One*. David Chase (Creator). HBO Studios. New York City, New York. Release Date: 27 August 2007. Timestamp: 00:49:25. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

what he presents to Febby. The scene of Febby's murder demonstrates the savage anger, bloodlust, and pleasure that Tony takes in killing. Tony laughs at Febby's desperate pleas for his life and relishes the opportunity to spit abuse into his ear as he kills him. He temporarily pauses when Febby reveals that he was poised to shoot at Tony and Meadow earlier in the episode, but this is never addressed again. Tony is also unmoved by Febby's own familial situation: earlier in the episode Tony stalks Febby at his home, watching him from the shadows to confirm his identity. When he does this, he sees Febby with his wife and young daughter at their home. This information does nothing to dissuade Tony from murdering Febby—even in the moment as he sees Febby's daughter he is unperturbed. Tony's callous willingness to kill Febby is, in part, demonstrative of the mafia code that Tony lives by—a 'rat' must be killed. As David Chase says of the murder:

> He's gotta uphold the code. If we're really gonna believe this guy is a credible mobster, he's gotta kill people. In real life, that's what these people do.[492]

This echoes a key element of Tony's character outlined in the previous section: Tony was born into this life of crime, raised by a father who he watched mete out justice of this kind, and who taught him why it must be done. However, this does not explain how much he *enjoys* his job, and the satisfaction he takes in the killing that comes with it. Tony is even given the opportunity earlier in the episode to have one of his men take care of the murder for him, but instead he goes out of his way to do it himself—putting his own daughter at considerable, and unnecessary, risk in the process. How much of this is a result of Tony's childhood and upbringing, how much of it is evidence of his being a sociopath—and, morally speaking, to what extent do these explanations matter? The episode offers one final insight to consider Tony's character, which reflects upon everything that has been revealed about Tony in the episode.

The peak of second-degree style in 'College' is reached in one of its final scenes, inferencing an existentially significant statement about Tony that

[492] Peter Biskind quoting David Chase. 'An American Family. *Vanity Fair*. Website. April, 2007. < https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2007/04/sopranos200704> [First Accessed: 15/11/2016]

seems responsive to the events of the episode. A medium-close-up depicts Tony, who sits in the hallway of the final college that he and Meadow visit, waiting for her to complete her interview. He notices something above him, and a low-angle shot reveals a quote by American novelist Nathanial Hawthorne emblazoned upon a large lintel above a doorway opposite him:

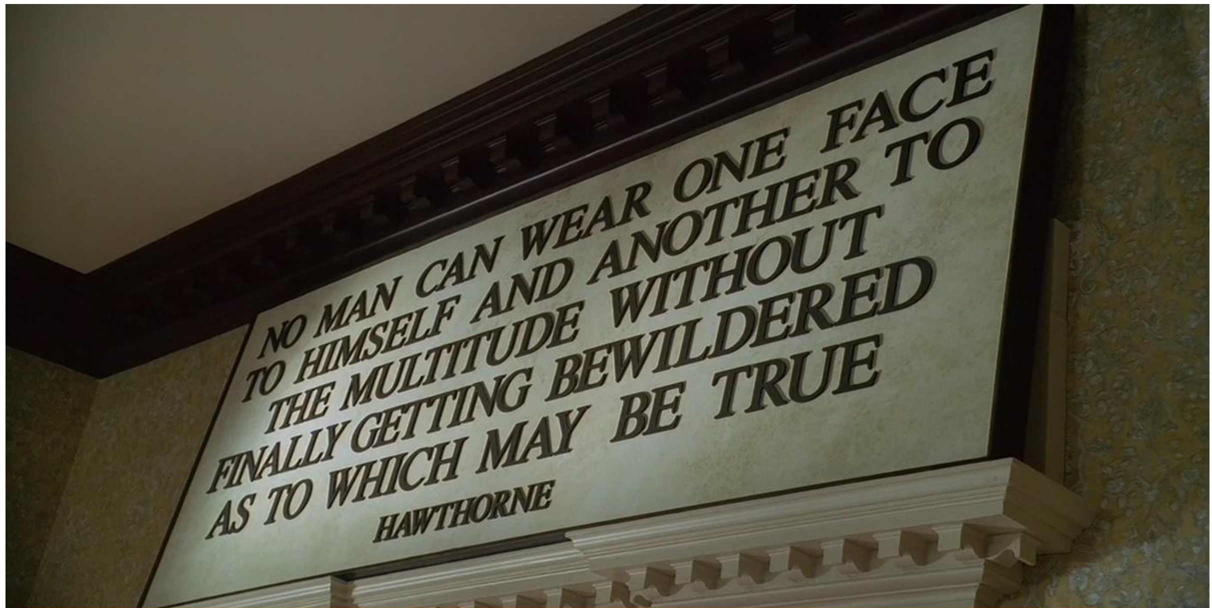

Figure 10: Hawthorne Quote[493]

The shot lingers for approximately two seconds, and then a close-up shot captures Tony's face as he examines the quote. A closer low-angle shot displays the quote again, this time for approximately five seconds, before returning to a medium shot of Tony in his chair, hands clasped thoughtfully upon his stomach:

[493] Captured from Season 1, Episode 5. 'College'. DVD. Allen Coulter (Director). James Manor Jr. and David Chase (Writers). *The Sopranos: Season One*. David Chase (Creator). HBO Studios. New York City, New York. Release Date: 27 August 2007. Timestamp: 00:52:37. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

Figures 11 and 12: Tony's Initial Response[494]

A student walks past, obscuring Tony briefly, saying out of frame "He's our most famous alumnus." A medium close-up of Tony's face captures his ongoing response:

[494] Captured from Season 1, Episode 5. 'College'. DVD. Allen Coulter (Director). James Manor Jr. and David Chase (Writers). *The Sopranos: Season One*. David Chase (Creator). HBO Studios. New York City, New York. Release Date: 27 August 2007. Timestamp: 00:52:43 – 00:52:44. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

Figures 13-15: Tony's Final Response[495]

Tony's initial expression upon reading the quote is contemplative. When the student tells him that the author of the quote (Hawthorne) is their "most famous alumnus" his attention returns to it, but this time his expression is inexpressive to the point of uncertainty. In an episode that has demonstrated Tony being a father to his daughter in a meaningful and sincere way, as well as demonstrating him as a violently ruthless criminal, the quote seems apt. It is difficult not to read into this quote's significance with relation to Tony in this episode, yet it confuses him. Our external ability to speculate upon Tony's emotional personality seems more comprehensive than his ability to self-reflect—as we can draw these parallels between the quote and his behaviour while, seemingly, he cannot—but Tony's responses confuses us as much as it does him: why is he confused? Is it because he does not understand the relevance of the quote, or is it another reason?

Imperfectly Analysing Non-Verbal Expression:

What Does Hawthorne's Quote Mean to Tony?

Second-degree style in this scene subverts certainty about Tony without withholding information from us. By raising the dialogue about Tony's two-facedness through the Hawthorne quote, the episode introduces an interpretation of Tony's character but, instead of pursuing this interpretation through additional insight, it leads to somewhat of a dead-end: Tony's response is a wordless, ambiguous, yet evocative expression. Close-up shots of his changing expression total approximately twenty seconds, forcing us to attempt to understand what his face and body language is telling us. As Pierre Barrette and Yves Picard write, the presence of second-degree style within a perspective such as this creates a "form of double meaning": it visually challenges the validity of dominant discourses within the text, imploring the viewer to "carry out a dual reading" of the text that privileges multiple, conflicting, perspectives over a single central certainty.[496] Tony's expression

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[495] Captured from Season 1, Episode 5. 'College'. DVD. Allen Coulter (Director). James Manor Jr. and David Chase (Writers). *The Sopranos: Season One*. David Chase (Creator). HBO Studios. New York City, New York. Release Date: 27 August 2007. Timestamp: 00:52:54 – 00:52:57. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.
[496] Barrette & Picard. 'Breaking the Waves'. Pp 124-125.

can be interpreted as, for example, confusion, apathy, or as disinterest: we have no way of knowing exactly. He has just killed a man, Febby, who was living with a fake identity in the witness protection program, so is Tony reflecting upon Febby's two-facedness? Or does he reflect upon what the quote might say about his own character? Does he reflect on both? He takes time to consider its meaning, but his response is ultimately nothing more than a wordless stare into the middle distance. As an example of second-degree style, Pierre Barrette and Yves Picard refer to this as "the image that bends towards less orality or even silence", forcing us to attempt to understand Tony's response, while subverting our ability to reach an understanding.[497] The quote is clearly meant to make us think about Tony's life, so we must reflect on his character outside of the scene to determine what his response means within it—which can lead us in many different, conflicting, directions.

Perhaps the most obvious way of interpreting the juxtaposition of the quote and Tony is to consider what it says about his life, and his ability to reflect upon his behaviour. Franco Ricci argues that Tony's response demonstrates his lack of self-knowledge, and his inability to comprehend the relevance that the quote has to his life:

> A conventional conclusion is that the words are an apt commentary upon Tony's actions in this particular episode. Yet, while Tony may read the words *[…]*, his dumbfounded stare *[…]* transmits to the viewer that he does not fully comprehend their meaning, at least not yet.[498] *(square brackets mine)*

Ricci argues that the words instead represent a "testimony" of

> Tony's *mal*-adaption and present lack of self-insight. The viewer has just witnessed him acting as both a devoted father to his daughter and as a savage avenger of the mobster turned informer Fabian "Febby" Petrullio.[499]

For Ricci, Tony's expression is a "dumbfounded" stare which reflects his inability to understand himself, and to accommodate the existential weight of

[497] Ibid, P 125.
[498] Franco Ricci. *The Sopranos: Born Under a Bad Sign*. University of Toronto Press. Toronto. 2014. P 170.
[499] Ibid.

the quote accordingly. There is a significant body of evidence to support this interpretation, as Tony seems to consistently struggle to understand the moral truth of his behaviour. For example, Dr Melfi asks him in the series' pilot:

> **Melfi:** Do you have any qualms about how you actually make a living?
>
> **Tony:** Yeah. I find I have to be the sad clown: laughing on the outside, crying on the inside.[500]

Tony reveals that he feels sad because other mobsters do not go to prison when they get caught for their crimes, and instead "turn government witness". He explains to Melfi that mobsters used to be able to trust each other to take their "prison jolt no matter what", but that "nowadays" they "have no room for the penal experience." Here, as with his response to Hawthorne's quote, Tony seems to miss the point: what is really being asked of him is to reflect on the misery he creates. In both instances, as Franco Ricci writes, "Tony does not fully comprehend their meaning".[501] However, if we reflect on what Tony has said throughout 'College', as well as at other points in the series, it is not clear that this is true.

As discussed, insight into Tony's upbringing is used to explore the idea that he is not entirely culpable for being a criminal: he was raised into the mafia through his traumatic childhood. As quoted in the previous paragraph, Tony says that he feels particularly sad about his lifestyle because of the treachery involved in it. That Tony has specifically spoken to Melfi about how he lingers upon the treachery of other members of the mafia, there is significant reason to think that he is reflecting upon the two-facedness of Febby: who presented one face to the mafia, and another to the FBI. In this context, it is not clear that Tony would reflect upon his own behaviour at all when he reads Hawthorne's quote. In fact, for Tony killing a 'rat' is a morally permissible, even commonplace, behaviour. In season two, Melfi asks Tony if he thinks he will go to hell, revisiting this moral question, and Tony replies:

> **Tony:** You been listenin' to me? No […]. We're soldiers: soldiers don't go to hell. Soldiers, they kill other soldiers. We're in a

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[500] Episode 1, Season 1. 'The Sopranos'. *The Sopranos.* David Chase (writer, director, creator and showrunner). HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 10 January 1999.
[501] Ricci. *The Sopranos*. P 170.

> situation where everybody involved knows the stakes, and if you're gonna accept those stakes you gotta do certain things. It's business, we're soldiers. We follow codes, orders.[502]

This presents a striking, and conflicting, alternative mode of interpreting how Tony reflects upon the Hawthorne quote: it is not that he does not understand it but, if we choose to project Hawthorne's statement upon him, it is *us* who do not understand *him*. Tony has taken an oath to be who he is, to overlook the health and well-being of other complicit people as a mutually agreed component of their industry. Hawthorne's quote is not revelatory to Tony because the kind of secrecy and criminal violence that he engages in are fundamental to his business and his culture—however, Febby's crimes are an abhorrence, to both that business and culture, which affects Tony both professionally and emotionally. When the passing student tells Tony that Hawthorne is the college's "most famous alumnus", the assertion is that the college—a prestigious bastion of civil knowledge—has determined that this particular quote, from its most famous alumnus, is significant enough to be emblazoned within its halls. But Tony is not from this world, his family "didn't stress college", as he tells Meadow earlier in the episode, "they were working class people."

'College' is an exemplary demonstration of how second-degree style does not withhold or obfuscate information, but creates ambiguity by fostering multiple plausible perspectives upon character behaviour. This is demonstrated through constant parallels in Tony's behaviour, such as expressions of love for his daughter and decisions that place her life at risk. We also see Tony explain that he is only a criminal because of his upbringing, and then we see him expertly trap a man and find pleasure in strangling him to death. All this information, combined with the maelstrom of information throughout the series, renders any face-value reading of Hawthorne's quote an over-simplification of who Tony is. 'College' uses second-degree style to layer ambiguity over fact—in this case, a relatively obvious and clichéd commentary regarding a criminal's dual life of crime and domesticity—and juxtapose it with

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[502] Episode 9, Season 2. 'From Where to Eternity'. Michael Imperioli (writer), Henry J. Bronchtein (director). *The Sopranos*. David Chase (creator and showrunner). HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 12 March 2000.

a wordless, and minimally expressive, response. Even the weight of Hawthorne's words, so certain in their didacticism regarding the importance of sincerity and the trap of falsehood, become ambiguous and therefore ripe for re-interpretation. As Pierre Barrette and Yves Picard write, this act of communication is "meta-discursive": it offers a perspective that "reflects its presence in the visual field by self-reflexive constructions".[503] While the vividness of Febby's murder ensures that it continues to be fresh in our mind after it happens, its reflection in this quote widens the schism we can perceive within Tony's character: it is a brief, but penetrating example of how extreme Tony's moral transgressions are, despite the pleasant things we know and like about him. Second-degree style in 'College' serves to raise multiple perspectives regarding Tony's character, complicating our ability to understand him through any single one of them.

[503] Barrette & Picard. 'Breaking the Waves'. P 125.

4.3 Monster Antagonists and Statements of Justice

The aggressors in vividly violent scenes in *The Sopranos* are often its most immoral antagonists. Many complex serial dramas feature antagonists of this sort: characters whose immoral behaviour outstrips the depravity of the series' morally transgressive protagonists. These antagonists are characterised by their malice towards family values, and the moral disgust that these attitudes elicit from us colours the vividness of their violent scenes—which are almost always against vulnerable characters who we are either allied with or feel deep sympathy for. In this way, the vivid audio/visual experience of violence at the hands of these antagonists is used to create and sustain an emotional reaction toward them. As this section will demonstrate, the behaviour of these antagonists instigates what Arthur A. Raney dubs "justice sequences", wherein we are left to anticipate the retributional response that will be meted out to them as a result of their horrific behaviour.[504] These behaviours are defined by their intensity and their injustice in relation to family values, including (but not limited to) rape, the murder of young and innocent women, murder and assault based upon prejudice, and extreme expressions of sadism. These antagonists become defined by their unjust intolerance of what we fundamentally care about, which bolsters our impressions of them as what Stanley Cavell describes as 'monsters', meaning characters who seem to possess no humanity which is relatable or agreeable.[505] Unlike Tony Soprano, who is at least in part defined by his love of family, these monster antagonists operate outside the realm of relatable human behaviour: we do not bear witness to their familial expressions of love and devotion, we see only what they hate. In this way, Cavell contrasts the exploration of immoral behaviour committed by humans with that of monsters:

> To understand Nazism, whatever that will mean, will be to understand it as a human possibility; monstrous, unforgiveable, but not therefore the conduct of monsters. Monsters are not

[504] Arthur A. Raney. 'The Role of Morality in Emotional Reactions to and Enjoyment of Media Entertainment' in *Journal of Media Psychology*. Vol 23, No 1. 2011. P 18.
[505] Stanley Cavell. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford University Press, USA, 1979. Pp 377-378.

> unforgiveable, and not forgiveable. We do not bear the right internal relation to them for forgiveness to apply.[506]

A human can be a Nazi and still be a human—such as the protagonist 'Danny Vinyard' (Edward Norton) in Tony Kaye and David McKenna's 1998 film *American History X*—but a monster Nazi is something altogether unrelatable—such as the monster antagonist Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz) in Quentin Tarantino's 2009 film *Inglourious Basterds*. Similarly, while the "human possibility" of Tony Soprano's violent behaviour is explored through his demonstrations of love and compassion, the violent behaviour of these monster antagonists is not about "human possibility" at all. Their violent behaviour is instead defined by an absence of compassion and love, insofar as they seem to exist only to threaten the characters we care about or sympathise with. As Tony Soprano says of monster antagonist Phil Leotardo (Frank Vincent) while musing on the phrase 'stop and smell the roses':

> **Tony:** Each day's a gift. […] Just that people like Phil… They're not on that page. Take those roses and stick 'em up your ass—thorns first. [507]

As well as directing their violence towards characters we care about, monster antagonists in *The Sopranos* are depicted as depraved through an additional layer of sexual deviance woven through their stories. Sexual deviance has frequently been a feature of monster antagonists in U.S. fiction—particularly detective fiction—in the post-war period, demonstrating a unique "disruption of human boundaries", as Frederick Whiting writes:

> He was a deviation so extreme that he precipitated an evaluation not merely of the obligations of citizenship but of the constitutive features of humanity that served as citizenship's *a priori*. In him anxieties about the disruption of society, in the form of criminal deviance, and the disruption of human boundaries, in the form of sexual deviance, coalesced.[508]

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[506] Ibid.

[507] Episode 18, Season 6. 'Kennedy and Heidi'. *The Sopranos*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: May 13 2007.

[508] Frederick Whiting. 'Bodies of Evidence: Post-War Detective Fiction and the Monstrous Origins of the Sexual Psychopath' in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*. Spring 2005. Vol 18, Iss 1. P 151.

Similarly, monster antagonists in *The Sopranos* threaten not only the characters we care about, but demonstrate a maligned violence within their sexual gratification: Richie Aprile (David Proval) needs to hold a gun to Janice Soprano's (Aida Turturro) head to "get off" while they have sex[509]; Ralph Cifaretto (Joe Pantoliano) is shown to enjoy have a vibrator inserted into his anus while hearing aggressive sexual talk[510], and is also shown to find vitriolic pleasure in sexually abusing a crying stripper with another man[511]; and finally, Phil Leotardo mingles sexual excitement with violence. A devout homophobe, Phil takes pleasure in the brutal murder of the homosexual mobster, Vito Spatafore (Joseph R. Gannascoli), at the hands of his men, excitedly massaging the bed he sits on as he watches.[512] Later, it is also revealed that he has left Vito's corpse with a pool cue inserted into his anus.[513] The combination of sadistic violence and sexual deviance helps to reinforce the monstrosity of these antagonists, demonstrating that the flagrance of compassion and love extends beyond physical damage, reaching into the psycho-sexual world of torture.

Key to Tony's ambiguity is our inability to discern just how much he empathises with and cares about other people, and what the immoral behaviour of monster antagonists provides us with is a sort of moral test: how will he respond, and what will that response tell us about his character? As a point of contrast, we know that Tony is demonstrably 'better' (in a moral sense) than these antagonists, because we watch Tony struggle with the weight of his violent acts, and we witness the emotional impact of those events upon his psyche (through his therapy and regular access to his dreams, as further discussed in section 4.3). We also watch him demonstrate that he is, to borrow the nomenclature of Chapter Three, protective of the

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[509] Season 2, Episode 10. 'Bust Out'. *The Sopranos*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 19 March 2000.
[510] Episode 3, Season 4. 'Christopher'. *The Sopranos*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 29 September 2002.
[511] Episode 6, Season 3. 'University'. Season 3, Episode 6. 'University'. David Chase (writer, creator and showrunner), Terence Winter, Todd A. Kessler, Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess (writers), Allen Coulter (director). The Sopranos. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 1 April 2001.
[512] Episode 11, Season 6. 'Cold Stones'. *The Sopranos*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 21 May 2006.
[513] Ibid.

"zero-level standard" of the series: he demonstrates loyalty and partiality toward his family and friends; his sexual appetite is significant, but it is not confronting in the sense of what he desires (vaginal and oral sex are the only acts we see him engage in); and he is regularly and sincerely nice to people. Noël Carroll argues that the unyielding immorality of these monster antagonists in *The Sopranos* gives us an extreme against which these more relatable qualities in Tony are exaggerated:

> Compared to the other mobsters, especially to the more maniacal ones […] Tony seems *relatively* less volatile and sadistic, and more judicious and prosocial.[514]

This relativity is developed by depicting behaviours that provide vividly immoral and unjust experiences at the hands of monster antagonists—as with the example drawn from *The Walking Dead* in section 2.2 of chapter two—in which they brutalise vulnerable characters in devastatingly pitiable circumstances. How we assign meaning to this information subsequently is tied to what retribution the monster antagonist receives: i.e. the degree to which they face repercussions for their behaviour, or the degree to which they 'get away with it'. In *The Sopranos*, key to Tony's characterisation is his role in meting out retribution against the vividly violent deeds of monster antagonists. How he pursues this role, both emotionally and in terms of retaliation, demonstrates how he feels about behaviour that, even to his criminal standards, is immoral and unjust. It mitigates how immoral his criminal standards are, to a degree, by using these characters to explore his decency and sense of justice. To continue to consider how these expressions of character behaviour are laid out for our engagement, I will turn to the concept of 'justice sequences' as used by Arthur A. Raney.

Justice Sequences

Our moral emotions are used, as Arthur A. Raney writes, when we think about the "plights (anticipatory emotions)" of characters, as well as "their ultimate outcomes (enjoyment and appreciation)."[515] As we come to understand the

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[514] Noël Carroll. 'Sympathy For Soprano' in *The Sopranos and Philosophy: I Kill Therefore I Am*. Open Court Publishing. Chicago, Illinois. 2004.Pp. 129-130.
[515] Raney. 'The Role of Morality'. P 18.

inhuman plights of monster antagonists—seemingly to inflict suffering upon characters whom we care about—our emotional response to them becomes coloured by anticipation of their behaviour. With reflection upon these plights, we consider what becomes of them—whether they live or how they die. Our understanding of their plights has a direct relationship with our understanding of their ultimate outcomes: for example, Phil Leotardo killed multiple characters we care about in *The Sopranos* including, as described in the previous section, the prejudice-motivated murder of homosexual gangster Vito Spatafore. Phil is ultimately shot down by Tony Soprano's men while he is getting out of his car at a gas station, and then his head is crushed by his own car as it rolls forward.[516] Phil's plight and his ultimate outcome forms what Raney describes as a "justice sequence", which is

> composed of one or more scenes in which an instigational and retributional action are portrayed; upon presentation of both actions, the justice sequence is completed and a statement concerning justice has been made.[517]

In the context of his past violent actions, Phil being shot down and his head crushed by his own car resolves the justice sequence, creating what Raney dubs a "statement of justice": Phil is punished with death and then humiliation for his litany of despicably unjust violent crimes.[518]

The Co-Text behind a Statement of Justice

As explored in section 3.1 of chapter three, when we engage our moral faculties with a complex serial drama we do so, in part, by recognising the 'co-text' of its information. Used similarly to the word 'context', the co-text of vivid violence in complex serial drama is the system of values we understand it to occupy. For example, we know that *The Sopranos* is not attempting to endorse the violent death of innocent people, despite the series frequently depicting innocent people being killed, because of the co-text of this violence. We may criticise it for its depiction of death to this end, but the text clearly

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[516] Episode 21, Season 6. 'Made in America'. David Chase (writer, director, creator and showrunner) *The Sopranos*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 10 June 2007.
[517] Arthur A. Raney. 'Moral Judgment and Crime Drama: An Integrated Theory of Enjoyment' in *Journal of Communication*. Iss 52, No 2. 2002. P 404.
[518] Ibid.

communicates an acknowledgement of the horror and unjustness within its violence. If we are to endure scenes of vivid violence committed by a monster antagonist in *The Sopranos* then we must perceive its co-text to be worthwhile: we must appreciate the meaning that violence communicates within the scheme of the narrative. For this reason, the co-text of vivid violence is crucial for us to comprehend the statements of justice that they are a part of: Phil Leotardo is established as a monster antagonist by the co-textual framing of his unjust behaviour, which excludes the possibility of sympathetic understanding or insight into his personality, which accordingly co-textualises his death as a just end. His violent behaviour creates the *instigational* component of this statement of justice and his demise forms its *retributional* component, as Raney explains:

> the initial activity in the justice sequence must be the injustice; the crime initiates the justice sequence. In contrast, actions that are directed toward righting the injustice created by the crime can be called the retributional action.[519]

The immoral intensity of monster antagonist behaviour renders Tony's response fundamental to how we emotionally engage with his character: we might like Tony more for opposing Phil Leotardo and ultimately being responsible for his death. However, second-degree style stymies our ability to definitively understand what motivates Tony: does he really care about what Phil did to Vito and if so, is it because of the same profoundly unjust prejudice that we care about? With reference to this question, Raney articulates how statements of justice require our long-term assessment of the narrative:

> To what extent does the resolution meet my expectations of fair treatment of liked characters? This evaluation is of ultimate importance: Enjoyment hangs in the balance. However, the evaluation involves comparing what is presented and what the viewer *expects* will be presented. The determination of what is fair, right, just, equitable, excessive, or insufficient is made by viewers, based upon expected outcomes and anticipatory emotions relative to the intensity of their affective dispositions

[519] Ibid, P 405.

> toward characters and to their individually held notions of justice.[520]

How Tony responds to the vividly violent unjust behaviour of monster protagonists is central to the statement of justice they create together, and it is one that I contend is defined by our ultimate inability to penetrate his ambiguity. To draw out an example of this, I will examine a case study of one of the most vividly violent examples of monster antagonist behaviour in the series.

Analysing the Justice Sequence of Monster Antagonist Ralph Cifaretto

In the third season of *The Sopranos* we are introduced to the monster antagonist Ralph Cifaretto, who serves as a soldier in one of Tony's crews. Ralph is a violent, misogynistic psychopath who delights in the suffering of others. While Tony also kills people, and arguably enjoys it, it is Ralph's monstrosity that detaches us from a relationship with his humanity, as Noël Carroll writes:

> Sinning, at least when Ralph does it, is not a way to our hearts. We are consistently supposed to regard him with disdain, distrust, and disapproval and we readily do so. Ralph is as clear-cut an image as Tony of the dark forces of the psyche. Nevertheless, no normal viewer has an inkling of sympathy for Ralph.[521]

Ralph's presence in the series contrasts his professional benefits for Tony as one of his 'best earners' with his capacity for sowing chaos through his unpredictable and violent behaviour, and this chaos colours his tension with Tony. He appears following the death of Richie Aprile, a monster antagonist who is introduced and killed in the second season, and quickly establishes himself as Richie's replacement.[522] Ralph does this both symbolically, as a replacement monster antagonist, and literally, as he is vying for the position of *capo* (captain of a sub-group within the larger family) which Richie vacates upon his death. Ralph and Tony develop tension almost immediately: Ralph is upset after Tony chooses to promote Gigi Cestone (John Fiore) to the position

[520] Raney. ''The Role of Morality'. P 19.
[521] Carroll. 'Sympathy For Soprano'. P 125.
[522] Episode 2, Season 3. 'Proshai, Livushka'. *The Sopranos*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 4 March 2001.

of capo instead of Ralph, and he in turn offends Tony by repeatedly disrespecting his authority.[523] This tension reaches boiling point after he commits his most monstrous act in the sixth episode of the third season, 'University', brutally bashing to death a twenty year old woman named Tracee (Ariel Kiley), who was pregnant with his child.[524]

Tracee works as a dancer at the 'Bada Bing' strip club owned by Tony's *consigliere* (chief advisor) Silvio Dante (Steven Van Zandt). She suffers from a history of abuse and is exploited and abused at the hands of the mobsters. Tracee's vulnerability leaves her desperately attempting to create a safe, stable life for herself and her family, and to this end she repeatedly attempts to earn Tony's favour. However, Tracee has a romantic connection with Ralph Cifaretto which seemingly puts Tony off her, as he rebukes her attempts to create a relationship with him. For example, Tracee attempts to ask Tony for advice, telling him that she is pregnant with Ralph's child. Tony is dismissive and attempts to repel her attention by sarcastically saying "congratulations." Tracee persists, and eventually Tony gives her more attentive advice—while keeping her at a distance:

> **Tony:** Look, you want my advice?
>
> **Tracee:** *(earnestly nods)*
>
> **Tony:** You already got one kid *(with a different father).* Problems with that, burning him with cigarettes, whatever the fuck you were doing.

While callous, Tony demonstrates that he remembers personal information about Tracee, and that they have spoken at least somewhat intimately previously—enough so that she revealed this personal information. Tony continues his advice:

> **Tony:** Your age, your situation… You need another kid like you need a fuckin' hole in the head… You're young, still got your figure, you're making money.
>
> **Tracee:** So, you think I should get an abortion?

[523] Episode 4, Season 3. 'Employee of the Month'. Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess (writers), John Patterson (director). *The Sopranos.* David Chase (creator and showrunner). HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 18 March,2001.
[524] Episode 6, Season 3. 'University'.

> **Tony:** Believe me, with Ralphie as the father, you'll be doing this kid and the next three generations a favour.

Tony's advice is somewhat callous, but it is also heartfelt: he means it when he says that it is in Tracee's best interest to avoid having another child—especially with Ralph as the father. While we may not agree with Tony's advice, that he eventually shows compassion for Tracee and speaks honestly with her contrasts starkly with how Ralph treats her.

One of the first scenes in which we see Ralph mistreat Tracee is in the 'V.I.P. room' at the Bada Bing, where the gangsters mingle with the strippers. Ralph Cifaretto is having sex with Tracee in a broom closet. The shot depicts Ralph from the waist up, moving away from him to reveal that he is penetrating a bent-over Tracee, who is crying. As Ralph thrusts into Tracee he sneers at her:

> **Ralph:** What are you crying? Keep it up… I'll give you something to cry about.

Ralph pushes her head down as the camera dollies out to reveal another man standing opposite Ralph, and we hear unzipping pants. A reverse-shot shows Tracee's hips, panning up her ribs and breasts as she performs fellatio on the other man, revealed to be a police officer, who has a grip on the left side of her head. The policeman winces:

> **Policeman:** Watch the braces, honey

Tracee sustaining this sort of sexual abuse at the hands of Ralph, who seems to enjoy her crying while he has sex with her, contrasts with Tony's problematic, but ultimately compassionate, treatment of her. These contrasting attitudes towards Tracee, which also reflect something more fundamental about their characters, develops into the backdrop of a justice sequence that begins toward the end of the episode, when Ralph savagely beats Tracee to death.

Ralph's beating of Tracee is not only physical, but it is first emotional, as he verbally abuses her with startling cruelty. After a scene in which Tracee abuses Ralph in front of the other gangsters in the V.I.P. room, she goes outside to smoke a cigarette, and Ralph follows her. Once outside, Ralph feigns heartfelt concern for her:

Ralph: What's the matter with you? What are you being like this for?

Tracee: Fuck you, three days you don't call even to see how I am!

Ralph: Baby I'm busy, I gotta work! How else am I gonna take care of you when you're nine months pregnant?

Tracee's expression changes as she looks at Ralph for a moment with uncertainty.

Tracee: You serious?

Ralph: *Of course* I'm serious.

Ralph moves in closer towards Tracee, tenderly gripping the front of her jacket with his hands.

Ralph: We'll get a little house, in a cul-de-sac—I know that guy who's a mortgage broker.

Tracee: Really?

Tracee is smiling at Ralph now, who returns her smile and nods sincerely.

Tracee: Ralphie, I love you.

Ralph: I love you too baby… Hey, if it's a boy, we'll name him after me…

Tracee's expression is beaming with happiness as Ralph holds her face in his hands while he speaks.

Ralph: …and if it's a girl, we'll name it Tracee after you.

Tracee giggles as Ralph says this, nodding her head happily.

Ralph: This way she can grow up to be a cock-sucking slob just like her mother.

Tracee looks shocked and moves a step away from Ralph, who lets his hands fall from her face.

Ralph: Are you out of your fucking mind?!

Tracee is enraged, screaming "Guinea mother-fucking piece of shit!" at Ralph, while attacking him with her fists. Ralph mocks her attacks condescendingly:

Ralph: That's right, that's right, get it all out, get it all out you little whore!

Ralph's tone changes however when Tracee manages to land a firm blow to Ralph's face. She immediately stops as she realises what she's done, and Ralph's expression becomes incensed as he puts his hand to his lip to check

for blood. He hits Tracee with the back of his hand so hard that she is sent flying backwards toward a traffic barrier. She puts her hand to her mouth and wipes away some blood, before retorting:

Tracee: Make y'feel good? Y'feel like a *man*?

Ralph ignores her and advances on her, his lips pursed in rage. He punches her in the face, and he punches her in the stomach twice which sends her to the ground. He then props her sitting body up against the traffic barrier and repeatedly punches her in the face. We hear Tracee crying, terrified, but also struggling to breathe, as Ralph knocks her to her side with a punch to the face, before dragging her body back upright against the traffic barrier again to continue punching her:

Figures 16-17: Ralph Punching Tracee[525]

Close-ups of Ralph's face are cut with medium-shots of him pulling her back up, as he begins to slam the back of her head against the traffic barrier:

Figures 18-19: Ralph killing Tracee[526]

[525] Captured from Episode 6, Season 3. 'University'. David Chase (writer, creator and showrunner), Terence Winter, Todd A. Kessler, Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess (writers), Allen Coulter (director). *The Sopranos: The Complete Third Season.* DVD. HBO Studios. New York City, New York. Original Release Date: 27 August 2007. Timestamp: 00:39:35 – 00:39:36. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

[526] Captured from Episode 6, Season 3. 'University'. David Chase (writer, creator and showrunner), Terence Winter, Todd A. Kessler, Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess (writers), Allen Coulter (director). *The Sopranos: The Complete Third Season.* DVD. HBO Studios. New York City, New York. Original Release Date: 27 August 2007. Timestamp: 00:39:44 – 00:39:45. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

Ralph finally pushes Tracee's body to the ground, as he gathers his breath. He pulls his suit jacket over his abdomen and buttons it up, looking down over her body and says finally "Look at you now."

Figure 20-21: Tracee's dead body.[527]

Ralph's brutal bashing of Tracee is the instigational event of a justice sequence that ends with a retributional event sixteen episodes later, when

[527] Captured from Episode 6, Season 3. 'University'. David Chase (writer, creator and showrunner), Terence Winter, Todd A. Kessler, Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess (writers), Allen Coulter (director). *The Sopranos: The Complete Third Season.* DVD. HBO Studios. New York City, New York. Original Release Date: 27 August 2007. Timestamp: 00:40:48 & 00:41:01. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

Tony beats Ralph to death.[528] The unjust and morally disgusting components of Ralph's violence against Tracee event are layered: it is the culmination of long-term abuse Tracee suffers from Ralph and, more disturbing still, it is partly defined by his knowledge that she is carrying his child when he beats her to death. This statement of justice is defined by what Ralph is willing to do to Tracee, and his own unborn child, and is striking in its opposition to the tenets of partiality discussed in section 3.2 of chapter three: we naturally appreciate behaviour that is demonstrative of familial love and respect, and we naturally condemn behaviour that betrays these sentiments. In turn, when Tony beats Ralph to death—by bashing his head against the floor of Ralph's kitchen in a way that is evocative of how Ralph bashed Tracee's head against the traffic barrier—a statement of justice is made.

As the primary focus of the series, Tony's role within this statement of justice is integral to its constitution. We are led to despise Ralph for his brutal flagrancy of family, love and compassion, and his refusal to acknowledge or appreciate the sentimentality that others express. To reiterate Tony's sentiment while discussing Phil Leotardo: "people like Phil… They're not on that page. Take those roses and stick 'em up your ass—thorns first."[529] Monster antagonists actively disrupt the fabric of society by seemingly opposing the most attractive moral and prosocial features of the narrative presented to us. In this instance, Ralph kills an innocent and kind young girl who is pregnant with his child, after mentally, physically, and sexually abusing her for as long as we see her in the series. Because of Tony's narrative prominence, and the threat that Ralph's monstrosity presents to what we care about in the series, Tony's response becomes somewhat seminal to his characterisation: what does he do to oppose the sort of morally maligned force that Ralph represents, and why? The experience of Ralph's vividly violent behaviour will stay with us long after the event, and once we see Tony become aware of it himself our anticipation of a response is primed. Most

[528] Episode 9, Season 4. 'Whoever Did This'. Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess (writers), Tim Van Patten (director). *The Sopranos*. David Chase (creator and showrunner) HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 10 November 2002.
[529] Episode 18, Season 6. 'Kennedy and Heidi'. Matthew Weiner, David Chase (writers), Alan Taylor (director). *The Sopranos*. David Chase (creator and showrunner). HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: May 13 2007.

likely, we will want him to act punitively against Ralph, to give us a satisfying and just conclusion to his crimes. Of course, this is not what we receive—at least, not entirely. Tony's immediate response when he sees Tracee's body is disgust, sadness, and then anger, which is expressed through a physical attack on Ralph. This creates controversy for reasons that Silvio Dante elucidates two episodes later, as Tony attempts to justify himself:

> **Tony:** He bashed that poor girl's brains in.
>
> **Silvio:** I hear you, I know, it was a tragedy… The fact is, though, she was not related to you by blood or marriage; she was not your comare. Ralphie's a made guy, Ton'. All things considered… he's got a legitimate beef![530]

Silvio gives Tony two options: "Make him disappear or make nice." As the passage of time cumulates, Tony's anger against Ralph softens, primarily because he is forced to admit that "Ralph's a good earner", though he also reiterates "I want to punch this fucking asshole".[531] Eventually, on account of how proficient an "earner" Ralph is, Tony promotes Ralph to the position of captain instead of having him killed, with this promotion serving instead of an apology. Tony's disgust with Ralph turns slowly toward indifference, as they become invested in a horse together, 'Pie-O-My'[532], and Ralph's capacity as a criminal continues to reap significant financial returns for Tony. Sixteen episodes later, when Tony does finally kill Ralph, it is in an act of seemingly unplanned rage, which ironically takes place after Tony demonstrates disregard for Ralph, who is coping with the life-threatening injury of one of his children.

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[530] Episode 8, Season 3. 'He is Risen'. Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess, Todd A. Kessler (writers), Allen Coulter (director). *The Sopranos*. David Chase (creator and showrunner). HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 15 April 2001.
[531] Episode 8, Season 3. 'He is Risen'.
[532] Episode 5, Season 4. 'Pie-O-My'. Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess (writers). Henry J. Bronchtein (director). *The Sopranos*. David Chase (creator and showrunner). HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 13 October 2002.

"He's a piece of shit—you know it, and I know it."

~ Paulie 'Walnuts' Gualtieri (Tony Sirico) on Ralph Cifaretto.[533]

What Tony expresses when he ultimately kills Ralph is subject again to the ambiguous constraints of second-degree style. The episode, 'Whoever Did This', finds Ralph in a narratively unique situation for his character: one of, potentially, pitiable sympathy. After an accident suffered while playing with a bow and arrow, Ralph's son Justin is hospitalised with life-threatening injuries from which he might never recover. Ralph is devastated, and the impact of this devastation seems to alter his character in a fundamental sense. For example, he visits a priest to discuss his son and lament his immoral past:

> **Ralph:** I've done things in my life that I shouldn't have done—he's [God] making my son pay for it. That's how he's punishing me. *(square brackets mine)*
>
> **Father Phil:** God is merciful—he doesn't punish people.
>
> **Ralph:** I would do anything if Justin could ever walk again…
>
> **Father Phil:** Justin's in God's hands now, and I assure you, God loves him very much. Your job is you to get yourself right with God, for yourself and for your son… Would you like to make a confession?

Ralph looks away and tells the priest that he needs "a little more time, you know, to do a good one." The priest then insists that they pray together, saying on their behalf:

> **Father Phil:** Have mercy on me, God, in your goodness. In your abundant compassion, blot out my offense. Wash away all my guilt. From my sin, cleanse me. For I know my offense. My sin is always before me.

Ralph breaks down in tears as the priest says these words, which are likely to evoke the vivid scene of Tracee's murder. In this face of this reckoning, Ralph begins to surprise the other characters with uncharacteristically altruistic behaviour, for example: he arranges and donates a twenty-thousand dollar per-year scholarship for Rutgers University, which he names after the

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[533] Episode 9, Season 4. 'Whoever Did This'.

deceased sons of his ex-girlfriend—whom he also asks to marry him (she declines). “I’m a different man”, Ralph tells Tony as he breaks down in tears while lamenting his immoral past. Ralph’s guilt and grief devastates him, and he breaks down multiple times in front of Tony throughout the episode while discussing his son’s weakening prognosis. For the first time, it appears that Ralph is demonstrating love and compassion, and that he is appreciating some sense of family values. Tony is somewhat conflicted, given his dislike of Ralph, but cannot help sympathising with and comforting him. Paulie Gualtieri, however, voices a different opinion:

> **Paulie:** Fuck him and his alligator tears.
>
> **Tony:** Paulie, his kid’s in the hospital—a little fuckin’ sympathy, huh?
>
> **Paulie:** That gives him a pass? I don’t care if he’s got a hundred kids in the ICU with arrows in their heads: He’s a piece of shit—you know it, and I know it.
>
> […]
>
> You forget the thousand incidents with that guy?

Paulie challenges any capacity for sympathy that Ralph has elicited in this episode by reminding us of his fundamental monstrosity. His assertion that Ralph is crying “alligator tears” also presents an interesting take on his grief: that it is staged. Tony does not seem moved by this though, and he insists that Paulie does not understand because “he’s never had kids.” Second-degree style operates here to offer us two conflicting portraits of Ralph: one the irreparably monstrous man who bashed to death a 20-year old pregnant woman, the other the repentant criminal who has been forced to confront his sins through the perspective that his son’s tragic accident has given him.

“It was a fuckin’ animal! […] My son’s in the hospital!”

~ Ralph responding to Tony’s accusations of killing Pie-O-My.[534]

Against this ambiguous backdrop regarding Ralph’s son, Tony is quite suddenly drawn into a rage so severe that he beats Ralph to death. How to interpret this event is ambiguous in terms of the statement of justice it closes

[534] Episode 9, Season 4. ‘Whoever Did This’.

regarding Tracee’s murder, and specifically as to what motivates Tony to do it. After deciding that he will pursue an extra-marital relationship with an ex-girlfriend of Ralph’s, Tony decides to break the news to him immediately after Ralph confides in him about Justin’s deteriorating condition. Ralph is at first taken aback by Tony’s statement—and presumably his timing—but then expresses understanding. This is interesting, because at the beginning of the episode Ralph demonstrates that he enjoys using underhanded tactics to attack people who slight him: after accurately deducing that Paulie leaked some incriminating information about him to another mobster, Ralph calls Paulie’s mother, impersonating a police officer. He tells her that Paulie has been caught “sucking a cub scouts dick”, and that emergency surgery had to be performed to remove a “small rodent” from his “rectal passage”. Second-degree style operates to suggest that this behaviour at the beginning of the episode might implicate Ralph’s subsequent behaviour, while also potentially countermanding that inference with Ralph’s arguable reflection upon his character spurred by his son’s injury. This is important, because shortly after Tony tells Ralph about this new relationship, Tony receives a phone call informing him that there has been a fire at the stables, and that Pie-O-MY—which both Ralph and Tony are invested in, but which only Tony is *emotionally* invested in—has been burnt to death. Tony is devastated and goes to the stables to see Pie-O-My’s body. As he surveys the wreckage of the fire—allegedly caused by a “blown-out light bulb”—Tony starts to suspect arson, and his anger visibly begins to mount.

Figures 22-25: Tony Begins To Suspect Arson.[535]

Tony visits Ralph to tell him the news, but Ralph is more interested in discussing his son, giving Tony his condolences but repeatedly drawing the conversation back to Justin's condition. Tony openly suggests that Ralph may have orchestrated the fire for the insurance money, and Ralph seems genuinely taken aback by the suggestion. Second-degree style here forces us

[535] Captured from Episode 9, Season 4. 'Whoever Did This'. Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess (writers), Tim Van Patten (director). *The Sopranos: The Complete Fourth Season*. David Chase (creator and showrunner). DVD. HBO Studios. New York City, New York. Original Release Date: 12 February 2008. Timestamps: 00:26:34 – 00:34:57. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

to consider Ralph in two opposing ways: the first is as the devastated father who has been led by tragedy to reflect upon his own immoral past; the second as the monster antagonist who is utterly incapable of empathy, and fully-committed to the misery of others. Tony keeps pushing the idea that Ralph had something to do with Pie-O-My's death, which eventually cracks Ralph:

> **Ralph:** You know… I don't understand you Anthony: we got lucky, that accidental fire was a bolt from beyond! The horse was no fuckin' good, with the fuckin' colic all the time? And the fuckin' bills?
>
> **Tony:** What are you saying? She bounced back!
>
> **Ralph:** This time! But each time it takes something out of them! It was all downhill from here. I know it's tragic to think this way, but you can't argue with the fuckin' logic!
>
> **Tony:** Jesus Christ—you did it, you cooked that fuckin' horse alive!
>
> **Ralph:** NO I did NOT! But SO WHAT?! It was a fuckin' animal! One hundred thousand dollars apiece! My kid's in the fuckin' hospital! I don't hear you complaining when I bring you a nice fat envelope—you don't give a shit where that comes from!

Tony looks at Ralph with an enraged stare.

> **Ralph:** Don't give me that look—it was a FUCKING HORSE! What are you, a vegetarian? You eat beef and sausage by the fucking carload!

With these words, Tony succumbs to rage and attacks Ralph. The two engage in a scrappy but deadly fight that lasts approximately ninety seconds. It ends with Tony choking Ralph, bashing his head against the kitchen floor, and repeatedly punching him in the face:

Figures 22-25: Ralph's Death[536]

As Tony finally kills Ralph in this position, he shouts:

> **Tony:** She was a beautiful, innocent creature! What did she ever do to you?! You fucking *killed her*! You fucking *killed her*!

[536] Captured from Episode 9, Season 4. 'Whoever Did This'. Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess (writers), Tim Van Patten (director). *The Sopranos: The Complete Fourth Season*. David Chase (creator and showrunner). DVD. HBO Studios. New York City, New York. Original Release Date: 12 February 2008. Timestamps: 00:34:34 – 00:34:57. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

Tony's words resonate with our own feelings about Tracee, and Ralph's death at the hands of Tony mirror Tracee's at the hands of Ralph: both are a savage, spontaneous, beating and bludgeoning to death.

"It's sad that you've lost something that you love… That being said – it is a horse."[537]

~ Melfi to Tony.

While the violence of this scene closes the statement of justice that began with Ralph's murder of Tracee, it does so under ambiguous terms. We are left uncertain as to what to make of Tony's role, and even Ralph's. While Tony is morally preferable to Ralph, in this episode it is arguably Ralph who demonstrates better moral behaviour than Tony: he allegedly donates a scholarship to a University as an act of altruism, but more importantly he potentially seems to acknowledge his past sins, doing so out of the familial love he has for his critically injured son. However, if we take the cues provided by the episode to mean that Ralph is crying "alligator tears" as Paulie says, and that he set the fire that killed the horse as Tony suspects, we must do so because we believe, as Maurice Yacowar writes, that "Ralphie is Ralphie"[538]:

> When Tony suspects arson, Ralphie asks "What sick fuck would do something like that on purpose?" […] Tony identifies the sickest fuck he knows.[539]

Indeed, it is difficult to believe that Ralph—the man who unflinchingly and remorselessly killed the woman who loved him, and who was carrying his unborn child—could change in any morally productive way. And yet, perhaps he does. Key to the injustice of Ralph's murder of Tracee is not only the impunity he faces, but the reward he reaps through his promotion. In contrast, the justice of Ralph's death, potentially in response to something he did not do, is ironic: *now* he faces punishment, for a murder he did not commit at a time when he demonstrates an unprecedented degree of introspection,

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[537] Episode 10, Season 4. 'The Strong, Silent Type'. David Chase (writer, showrunner, and creator), Alan Taylor (director). *The Sopranos*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 17 November 2002.
[538] Maurice Yacowar. *The Sopranos On The Couch: The Ultimate Guide*. Continuum. New York City, New York. 2007. P 201.
[539] Ibid, P 202.

remorse and humanity. While the vividness of his death is articulated by its bloody savagery, harkening back to the horrific scene of Tracee's murder, it is these nuanced ambiguities introduced through second-degree style that complicate our response. We might decide that Ralph deserved to die either way, but that does not help us determine whether he had finally found some redeeming sense of familial love and compassion. Regarding Tony, this scene extends the ambiguity that sits at his core in a similar way: is his sudden and explosive rage solely the result of his love for a horse, or was it a transposed act of vengeance on behalf of Tracee? His words, "She was a beautiful, innocent creature! What did she ever do to you?! You fucking *killed her*! You fucking *killed her*!", could be read in either of these directions. If Tracee is the "beautiful, innocent creature", then Tony is demonstrating that he still thinks about and feels for a woman with whom he had a limited relationship, long after her death. However, if he is only referencing Pie-O-My, then it means something altogether different: the death of a horse elicited a stronger reaction from Tony than the death of an innocent, twenty-year-old woman.

The monster antagonists of *The Sopranos* are defined by their relationships with justice, and our understanding to this end is explored through the vividness of the violence that they commit. For Ralph Cifaretto, this is most vivid in his murder of Tracee and then his death at the hands of Tony. The statement of justice that this communicates relates to the ambiguous line between monstrosity and humanity. This mirrored use of ambiguity in both Ralph and Tony's characters is an example of the unresolved question endemic to the narrative: are these men monsters or humans? The use of vivid violence within the characterisation of monster antagonist Ralph Cifaretto serves to articulate his most inhuman traits, but also to sever any potential he possessed to reclaim his humanity. As we watch him beat Tracee to death, we are informed of exactly how maliciously psychopathic he is. His apathy toward Tracee shows us that his desire to create misery is never latent, as does the enjoyment he finds in taunting her with false promises of love and security in the face of her pregnancy with his child. This violence serves as the instigational component of a statement of justice relating to Ralph, with his ultimate death at the hands of Tony its retributional closure.

However, the ambiguity sown by second-degree style serves to tarnish the sense of justice we might feel in this retribution, as Ralph is killed at the beginning of what might have been a new path of family-oriented humanity. We will never know if Ralph is capable of reconsidering and lamenting his past in this way, or whether this was simply illusory. This uncertainty also extends to Tony: as he bashes Ralph's head against the floor, shouting sentiments that mirror how we feel about Ralph's treatment of Tracee, we cannot help but wonder if Tony is avenging an innocent human who Ralph murdered, or whether his thoughts pertain only to his suspicion that Ralph killed an animal. The psychological layers of motivation, value, belief, and empathy swirl to obscure a scene that we may have wished to relish—who else could be as deserving of such an end than Ralph? But to think that perhaps Tony finally brought Ralph his grisly end because he suspected him of killing a horse for insurance money—for which there is no evidence beyond speculation—and not for abusing and then murdering the innocent twenty-year-old woman who loved him, complicates this sense of relish. It should be a death as uncomplicated for us as Tony's garrotting of Febby is for him—a murder bred from a sense of moral certainty: a rat is a rat. Instead, we are left with a statement of justice that is ambiguous. In both its instigational and retributional bookends of violence, the statement of justice relating to Ralph can only be definitively described as an exploration of immoral behaviour, with the finer psychological details—which, importantly, occupy the central conceit of the series—slipping into obscurity. And perhaps that is the point.

4.4 Morally Transgressive Protagonists are Ultimately Ambiguous

"Let me tell you something, I've murdered friends before, even relatives—my cousin Tony, my best friend Puss—but this…"
~Tony Soprano, on killing Christopher Moltisanti (Michael Imperioli).[540]

As the breadth of narrative information grows in complex serial drama, more significant statements about character can be made. In the final episodes of *The Sopranos*, some of the most emphatic statements of Tony's character take place, and yet these serve only to embolden the fundamental ambiguity of his character—culminating with its famous final scene, with a sudden, conclusive, cut to black taking place *in media res*. For series creator David Chase, this narrative uncertainty is demonstrative of a respect for his audience:

> We always operated as though people don't need to be spoon-fed every single thing—that their instincts and feelings and humanity will tell them what's going on.[541]

This ambiguity is necessarily unanswerable to retain this reliance upon the "instincts and feelings and humanity" of the individual viewer: the series prompts this kind of insight precisely by withholding narratively certain information. There is no more significant example of this than in the fourth-to-last episode of the series, when Tony kills his nephew and surrogate-son figure, Christopher Moltisanti (Michael Imperioli).[542] This act serves to underline the ambiguity of Tony's character in its most personal sense: it asks us if Tony is a psychopath who is prone to bouts of violent rage; or whether he an emotionally damaged person whose symptoms of trauma manifest through violent behaviour, and for which he painfully suffers ongoing confusion, guilt, and remorse. In this context, Tony's murder of Christopher stands in direct contrast to his murder of Ralph for one key reason: regardless of how we choose to understand Tony's behaviour when he kills Ralph, we know for certain that Tony despises him. Ralph presents a monstrously contemptible

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540 Episode 18, Season 6. 'Kennedy and Heidi'.
541 David Chase quoted by Brett Martin. *The Sopranos.* P 183.
542 Episode 18, Season 6. 'Kennedy and Heidi'.

obstacle for Tony, both morally, personally, and professionally, and there is no doubt that Tony has no love for him. However, Tony's decision to kill Christopher is problematised by the opposite certainty: if Tony loves anyone, he loves his nephew. Tony kills other characters who are close to him throughout the series: he is forced to kill one of his closest friends, Salvatore 'Big Pussy' Bonpensiero (Vincent Pastore), after he discovers that he is working with the FBI[543]; and in an act of mercy, he shoots to death his cousin and closest friend, Tony Blundetto (Steve Buscemi), after Blundetto becomes embroiled in a feud with the more-powerful Lupertazzi crime family, who tell Tony that they will torture him before they kill him.[544] In each of these circumstances, though, Tony's decision is mitigated by the inexorable demands of the situation. When he kills Christopher, there are no such overt pressures, and for this reason it is, arguably, the decision that is most definitive of his character in the series. This is not only because he kills a family member that he has demonstrated a deep affection for, but also because second-degree style makes it unclear as to *why* he does it.

Christopher is a drug and alcohol addict whose story in the series primarily concerns his battle with rehabilitation, and his problematic relationship with long-term girlfriend Adriana La Cerva (Drea de Matteo)—who reveals to him that she has been giving information to the FBI.[545] Christopher at first decides to go with Adriana into the FBI and go into the witness protection program, but loses his nerve after confronting the reality of how difficult his life would be without the mob. Adriana is killed by Silvio Dante, and Christopher moves on—eventually getting married and having a child with Kelli Lombardo (Cara Buono).[546] As is to be expected six-seasons into the series, Christopher's relationship with Tony is a complex and layered story, and second-degree

[543] Episode 13, Season 2. 'Funhouse'. David Chase (writer, creator and showrunner), Todd A. Kessler (writer), John Patterson (director). *The Sopranos*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 9 April 2001.
[544] Episode 13, Season 5. 'All Due Respect'. David Chase (writer, creator and showrunner), Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess (writers), John Patterson (director). *The Sopranos*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 6 June 2004.
[545] Episode 12, Season 5. 'Long Term Parking'. Terence Winter (writer), Tim Van Patten (director). *The Sopranos*. David Chase (creator and showrunner). HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 23 May 2004.
[546] Episode 9, Season 6. 'The Ride'. Terence Winter (writer), Alan Taylor (director). *The Sopranos*. David Chase (creator and showrunner). HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 7 May 2006.

style complicates this further. For example, in the nine episodes that precede Christopher's death at the hands of Tony, we see evidence of sentimental love and warmth within their relationship, but we also see evidence that demonstrates deep-seated resentment and loathing. There are many different aspects to this, but the most important concerns Adriana. Nine episodes previously, Christopher and Tony share a heartfelt discussion about their relationship.[547] Having bonded over a spontaneous crime together[548], the two men go to dinner. Christopher is gradually convinced, with encouragement from Tony, to drink wine (despite his substance abuse problems), and the two of them get drunk together. After dinner, they sit alongside each other on a wall out the front of the restaurant:

> **Tony:** We got a bond… It's very special.
> **Christopher:** You saved my life in a lot of ways.
> **Tony:** Well you been there for me too, you know? Don't think I don't know that.

Shortly after, they discuss what happened on the day that Christopher told Tony that Adriana had been giving information to the FBI. A flashback sequence depicts Christopher going to Tony's house and telling him in a desperate panic, begging Tony to help him, repeating "I can't do it… I can't do it…"—meaning killing Adriana. Tony comforts a devastated Christopher in embrace, tenderly telling him that it is "gonna be alright", and that "I'm gonna take care of it." This concludes the flashback sequence, and the scene returns to the two men sitting on the wall. Christopher is looking into the middle distance, before slowly casting his gaze downward and towards Tony, saying: "I love you, man." Tony reciprocates the sentiment: "I love you too."

There are many perspectives offered in this scene that prompt conflicting responses—specifically in that its heartfelt sentimentality relates to Christopher's gratefulness that Tony had his fiancé killed for him. Second-degree style offers an alternative perspective five episodes later, when

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[547] Episode 9, Season 6. 'The Ride'.
[548] They hijack an ongoing burglary, taking the goods for themselves, shooting one of the two burglars, and leaving them stranded at the scene of the crime.

Christopher premieres a movie he has made called 'Cleaver'.[549] After watching the movie, Carmela tells Tony that she is concerned about Christopher's depiction of Tony:

> **Carmela:** The Cleaver guy—the lead character. His entire motive for revenge.
>
> **Tony:** I don't know, you lost me Carm.
>
> **Carmela:** Sally Boy—the boss—he fucked the guy's fiancée.
>
> **Tony:** The thing with Adriana? I told you it never fuckin' happened!
>
> **Carmela:** Well apparently your nephew feels otherwise. […]
>
> **Tony:** It's a movie! It's fictional!
>
> **Carmela:** It's a *revenge fantasy*, Tony! Which ends with the boss's head split open by a *meat cleaver*!

Tony is forced to confront this unsettling idea—that Christopher blames him for what happened to Adriana. Later in the episode he talks to Melfi about it:

> **Tony:** All I am to him is some asshole bully.
>
> **Melfi:** You're hurt.
>
> **Tony:** His Dad Dickie was like my me to him.
>
> **Melfi:** A mentor.
>
> **Tony:** Yeah, but more than that—a friend. A fucking guy you could look up to. And the hope is that you pass that shit down, the respect and the love… All I did for this fucking kid and he fuckin' hates me so much.
>
> **Melfi:** I'm sure on some level he loves you, too.
>
> […]
>
> **Tony:** I think he fuckin' despises me. It's pretty obvious… Wants to see me dead.
>
> **Melfi:** Without invalidating your feelings, is it possible that on some level you're reading into all this?

With a patient but convinced sigh, Tony says:

[549] Episode 14, Season 6. 'Stage 5'. Terence Winter (writer), Alan Taylor (director). *The Sopranos*. David Chase (creator and showrunner). HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 15 April 2007.

Tony: I've been comin' here for years… I know too much about the subconscious now.

The scene ends here, and we are left with the same uncertainty that is peppered throughout so many of the relationships in the series: to what degree do the two men love one another, and to what degree do they secretly harbour resentment and loathing?

Tony kills Christopher four episodes later, after Christopher crashes the car that contains the two of them. The scene opens with Tony and Christopher driving away from a failed business meeting with Phil Leotardo (Frank Vincent), the head of the New York-based Lupertazzi crime family, and the primary antagonist at this point in the series. In the meeting, Phil attempts to intimidate Tony into paying the Lupertazzi family a tithe. Tony refuses and, in the car with Christopher, he says that he does not want to capitulate to Phil, saying "it would set a terrible precedent", to which Christopher replies:

Christopher: Regarding Phil, I gotta ask: what ever happened to "stop and smell the roses"?

Tony: *(conceding)* You're right *(nodding)* you're right—you can't fight every fuckin' battle, right?

Tony reflects on the pettiness of his conflict with Phil in the face of this sentiment, and muses: "Each day is a gift." Of significance is how the medium-distance shot captures his facial expression:

Figure 26: "Each day is a gift."[550]

Tony's smiles warmly and sincerely, silently reflecting on this sentiment for a few moments, before he remembers the biggest threat Phil poses: his monstrous disregard of sentiment:

> **Tony:** Just that people like Phil…. They're not on that page—take those roses and stick 'em up your ass.

Tony is pointing out that the danger with Phil is that if he detects what they are sentimental about he will use it to hurt them. Christopher complains that the car's sound system has "no balls", and presses the controls with a manic energy caused by heroin withdrawal. At this point, Tony notices Christopher's erratic behaviour:

Figure 27: Tony notices Christopher's erratic behaviour.[551]

There is silence over the course of the next thirty seconds, as Tony looks away, frustrated, and then looks back at Christopher more carefully and contemplatively:

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[550] Captured from Episode 18, Season 6. 'Kennedy and Heidi'. *The Sopranos: Season Six, Part 2*. DVD. HBO. New York City, New York. Release Date: 12 February 2018. Timestamp: 00:04:53. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

[551] Captured from Episode 18, Season 6. 'Kennedy and Heidi'. *The Sopranos: Season Six, Part 2*. DVD. HBO. New York City, New York. Release Date: 12 February 2018. Timestamp: 00:05:30. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

Figure 28-29: Tony more carefully considering Christopher.[552]

Tony breaks the silence by asking Christopher about his weekend, but as he does this Christopher veers into the oncoming lane, placing them into the path of an oncoming car. He swerves to avoid it but loses control, rolling the car down an embankment. The vivid sequence of the crash lasts for approximately twenty-two seconds, and features point-of-view shots from the

[552] Captured from Episode 18, Season 6. 'Kennedy and Heidi'. *The Sopranos: Season Six, Part 2*. DVD. HBO. New York City, New York. Release Date: 12 February 2018. Timestamp: 00:05:40 - 00:05:53. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

front of the car pointing forward, inside the car from the perspective of the driver, and medium-close-distance shots from the bottom of the hill that track the car as it rolls down, and where it finally comes to rest, upright. The scene cuts to the interior of the car that they almost collided with, which is being driven by two teenage girls. Kennedy, the female teenager who is in the passenger seat, asks her friend: “Maybe you should go back, Heidi?”, who in turn replies “Kennedy, I’m on my learner’s permit after dark!” They continue driving on, and the scene returns to the interior of Tony and Christopher’s car. What has been established is clear: had the girls turned around to check on them, or had any other car witnessed the accident and stopped to help, what transpires next would not have happened. It is the confluence of fate and opportunistic decision-making that brings Christopher’s death at the hands of Tony.

Back in Tony and Christopher’s car, Tony is struggling to free himself from his seat, as he looks over at Christopher, who is bloodied and motionless on the driver’s side:

Figure 30: Christopher prone after accident.[553]

[553] Captured from Episode 18, Season 6. ‘Kennedy and Heidi’. *The Sopranos: Season Six, Part 2*. DVD. HBO. New York City, New York. Release Date: 12 February,2018. Timestamp: 00:06:35. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

Christopher struggled to choke out his speech, brutalised by the accident, and asks Tony to get him out of the car. Christopher tells Tony that he is worried he will lose his license for driving under the influence of drugs if he is caught in driver's seat. Christopher's fear of losing his license mirrors the teenager Heidi's reason for not going back to check on them, and just as Heidi's fear assists Christopher's death, so too does Christopher's fear: his admission of drug use causes Tony to pause what he is doing to look at him with scrutiny, and then towards the back seat of the car:

Figures 31-32: Tony takes stock of his situation.[554]

A reverse-shot from Tony's point-of-view sees Christopher's daughter's child-seat, destroyed by a tree branch. Responding to this image, Tony scrutinises Christopher with increased significance:

[554] Captured from Episode 18, Season 6. 'Kennedy and Heidi'. *The Sopranos: Season Six, Part 2*. DVD. HBO. New York City, New York. Release Date: 12 February 2018. Timestamp: 00:06:57 – 00:06:59. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

Figures 33-34: Tony's Dissatisfaction.[555]

Tony gets of the car and limps around to the driver's side. As he does this, the sound of Christopher's struggled wheezing fills the silence, clearly demonstrating that he is suffering internal damage. Tony smashes Christopher's window and tries to open the door but fails. He looks down at Christopher, who is now clearly critically wounded, barely able to speak and openly bleeding from his mouth:

Figure 35: Christopher in trouble.[556]

"Never pass the drug test" Christopher repeats with a weak shake of his head, "call me a taxi" he adds. Christopher coughs up a mouthful of blood, which spills down his chin and chest. Tony looks at Christopher, and then down to his phone. A close-up on the fact of his phone shows him dialling '91', but then he pauses, and the medium shot of Tony returns. He looks at Christopher, and then licks his lip contemplatively as he looks back to the phone:

[555] Captured from Episode 18, Season 6. 'Kennedy and Heidi'. *The Sopranos: Season Six, Part 2*. DVD. HBO. New York City, New York. Release Date: 12 February 2018. Timestamp: 00:07:02 – 00:07:04. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

[556] Captured from Episode 18, Season 6. 'Kennedy and Heidi'. *The Sopranos: Season Six, Part 2*. DVD. HBO. New York City, New York. Release Date: 12 February 2018. Timestamp: 00:07:49. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

Figures 36-37: Tony Has Second Thoughts[557]

He closes the phone and puts it into his pocket, and a close shot depicts him looking into the middle-distance:

[557] Captured from Episode 18, Season 6. ‘Kennedy and Heidi’. *The Sopranos: Season Six, Part 2*. DVD. HBO. New York City, New York. Release Date: 12 February 2018. Timestamp: 00:08:01 – 00:08:04. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

Figure 38: Tony Looks into the Middle Distance[558]

He turns to face Christopher, and then moves forward to suffocate him:

Figure 39: Tony begins to kill Christopher.[559]

[558] Captured from Episode 18, Season 6. 'Kennedy and Heidi'. *The Sopranos: Season Six, Part 2*. DVD. HBO. New York City, New York. Release Date: 12 February 2018. Timestamp: 00:08:10. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.
[559] Captured from Episode 18, Season 6. 'Kennedy and Heidi'. *The Sopranos: Season Six, Part 2*. DVD. HBO. New York City, New York. Release Date: 12 February 2018. Timestamp: 00:08:16 – 00:08:17. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

Christopher looks at Tony almost immediately, but he shows no sign of struggling (as per figure 39). A reverse shot of Tony's face shows him as similarly expressionless, with the far-side of his face visible and the near-side obscured by darkness:

Figure 40: Tony's Expressionless Stare.[560]

Over the next thirty-two seconds there is silence except the sound of Christopher's suffocating gurgles as he chokes on his own blood. Throughout this process, the shot-reverse-shot remains fixed on close-ups of the two men, but without access to their internal states. As Christopher begins to choke more violently, Tony looks to the back seat again, and a point-of-view shot focuses on the mangled child-seat. The close-up of Tony returns, showing his same expressionless, partially obscured, face. As a car drives past Tony looks up at its lights with a dreamy-eyed gaze:

[560] Captured from Episode 18, Season 6. 'Kennedy and Heidi'. *The Sopranos: Season Six, Part 2*. DVD. HBO. New York City, New York. Release Date: 12 February 2018. Timestamp: 00:08:20. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

Figure 41: Tony's dreamy-eyed gaze.[561]

The car passes and he looks back down at Christopher, whose gurgling wears down as he finally dies.

How We Respond to Tony Murdering His Nephew

There are multiple ways of interpreting Tony's violent motivations: Franco Ricci speculates that the act is an example of Tony's volatility, an aspect of his "prime schizophrenia".[562] This estimation of Tony anchors his character on the behaviours he demonstrates relating to mental illness, as Ricci describes:

> Violently ruthless, wilfully delusional, suffering from bipolar depression, his meteoric rise in the underworld could well mirror an eventual precipitous demonic fall.[563]

To this end, Ricci explains that Tony's motivation to kill Christopher in this moment is drawn from this volatility, expressed through his "explosive fury"[564]:

> Calm reasoning and unattached concern often morphs into violent action and conflict with the slightest provocation.[565]

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[561] Captured from Episode 18, Season 6. 'Kennedy and Heidi'. *The Sopranos: Season Six, Part 2*. DVD. HBO. New York City, New York. Release Date: 12 February 2018. Timestamp: 00:08:52. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.
[562] Ricci. *The Sopranos*. P 168.
[563] Ibid, P 165.
[564] Ibid, P 161.
[565] Ibid, P 168.

Ricci's reading of Tony in this scene is evidence for a broader character estimation that Ricci persuasively details. He considers this scene within a holistic image of Tony's character, and what he communicates, by conducting a deep psychoanalytical assessment of Tony's role as a mentally-ill sociopath. In contrast, for Christopher J. Vincent, Tony's decision was not "spur-of-the-moment but the sum of chronic disappointment."[566] Vincent argues that "Tony subconsciously knows what he must do long before he and Chris take their fatal drive," and that he was motivated by "the belief that it was for the greater good, for the many to whom Chris was a liability."[567] This reading sees Tony's actions as measured and merciful, with the choice reflecting a calculated moral decision, as Vincent describes:

> Tony put Chris out of his misery like a horse with a broken leg.[568]

Vincent's greater argument relates to Christopher's significance in the series, pivoting between readings of his abandonment issues, drug addiction, and the liability he presents to both his criminal family and his domestic family. In contrast, Franco Ricci's argument pertains to a broader reading of Tony's significance, and it is interesting to note how the focus of the reading is accompanied by quite a different interpretation of the behaviour involved. For Ricci, Tony's behaviour is demonstrative of how volatile he can be, and how powerful a motivator his delusions, depression, and his "prime schizophrenia" is, and Christopher's murder fits quite neatly within this reading. Meanwhile, for Vincent, Tony's behaviour is an act of mercy, defined by his recognition that Christopher would only continue to hurt himself and his family through his endless battle with substance abuse and subsequent bad decision-making.

While both Ricci and Vincent's perspectives have evidence that corroborates their estimation, they also express conflicting understandings of Tony's behaviour: Ricci regards it as indicative of Tony's volatile schizophrenia; while Vincent regards it as a rational and empathetic response to Christopher's "long, drawn-out subconscious suicide."[569] Vincent suggests that

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[566] Christopher J. Vincent. *Paying Respects to The Sopranos: A Psychosocial Analysis*. McFarland & Company, Inc. North Carolina. 2008. P 103.
[567] Ibid, Pp 103-105.
[568] Ibid, P 105.
[569] Ibid.

Christopher's illness, his battle with addiction and depression, led him to subconsciously desire death. In this estimation, the idea that Tony is demonstrating sociopathic volatility is misplaced: at the very least, Tony's behaviour, however immoral and misguided, is demonstrative of empathy. With regard to the 'truth', Tony's expressionless face as he suffocates Christopher remains a crucial, yet impenetrable, source of information: it could imply a lack of feeling that corroborates Ricci's assessment; or it could imply emotional numbness as he performs what he believes is a painful, but necessary, task. It is worth noting that on previous occasions in the series—for example, as he kills Ralph—when Tony's volatile temperament has been driven to rage his expression is loud, aggressive, and chaotic, whereas in this scene he remains quiet, composed, and deliberative. More confusing is that immediately prior to the moment of Christopher's death, Tony has been consistently expressive: his smile as he echoes Christopher's sentiment, saying "every day is a gift"; his staring at Christopher's tweaking behaviour juxtaposed with exasperation as he looks away; and, after the accident, when he pauses to stare at Christopher significantly after Christopher's admission of drug use. Each of these moments offer a clear impression of Tony's emotions, and yet in the moment that his emotions reach a crescendo—as Franco Ricci argues—his expression becomes blank and impenetrable. Ricci argues that Tony's "calm reasoning and unattached concern often leads into violent action and conflict", and then cites examples of Tony's rage—but key to Ricci's other examples is his emotional expressiveness.[570] Tony is a highly-emotional character, persistently revealing the emotional intensity of his internal state. So, it is odd that when he kills Christopher his face should become blank and impenetrable, his body barely moving at all except to retain pressure on Christopher's nose, and to languorously look up towards the lights of the passing car.

Tony's blank expression either transparently anchors his absence of feeling, or it symbolically anchors the unknowability of what he is feeling—and the rest of the episode accommodates subsequent behavioural anchors for both readings. For example, in a dream Tony discusses his feelings with Melfi:

[570] Ricci. *The Sopranos*. Pp 168-169.

Tony: This is difficult…This is pain like I'm not used to.

Melfi: We've said before he was like a son in some ways.

Tony: To see him die like that—practically in my arms.

Melfi: He was just starting his life.

Tony: Yeah…

A few moments pass, as close shot-reverse-shots cut back and forth between the two of them:

Tony: You know what? – This is bullshit.

Melfi: *(inquisitively)* What?

Tony: I haven't been able to tell anybody this, but I'm fuckin' relieved.

Melfi: *(matter-of-factly)* Really?

Tony: He was a tremendous drag on my emotions, on my thoughts about the future. To begin with, every morning I wake up thinking, "Is today the day that one of my best friends is gonna dime me to the FBI?" And a weak, fucking snivelling, lying, drug addict? That's the worst kind of bet. The worst blunder of my career is now gone, and I don't have to be confronted by that fact *no more*. And as a relative, a friend, someone you can count on.

Melfi: I see.

Tony hesitates for a moment, but then decides to speak:

Tony: Let me tell you something: I've murdered friends before, even relatives—my cousin Tony, my best friend Puss, but this?—

Tony suddenly wakes up, never finishing his sentiment. This dream indicates that Tony is thinking about what happened, but just as he begins to articulate what the difference between these other deaths and Christopher's is, he wakes up. At the beginning of the dream, he expresses pain, but then he says that what he is really feeling is relief—but in the context of his dream, is Tony saying that to Melfi or is he trying to convince himself? The significance of this is exacerbated by the fact that this takes place in his dreams, demonstrating direct access to his subjective unconscious: whatever he is trying to express is, unequivocally, deeply important to him. Yet continuously what he expresses amounts to a disavowal of the personal significance of Christopher's death. Tony's behaviour throughout the rest of the episode

demonstrates a similar oscillation between these two states: one indicates familial sentiment—that he is in denial about his true feelings; and the other indicates criminal disregard of sentiment—that he is sincerely relieved by it. Tony is confronted multiple times with the idea that he is hiding his true feelings from himself—his grief—but Tony denies this each time. If he is in denial, what exactly is it he is denying?

Ambiguity in the episode reaches its zenith at its conclusion when Tony takes peyote with an ex-lover of Christopher's in the Nevada desert. Tony visits Las Vegas to escape the atmosphere surrounding Christopher's death in New Jersey, and he begins sleeping with an ex-lover of Christopher's, Sonya Aragon (Sarah Shahi). Sonya repeatedly draws similarities between Tony and Christopher:

> **Sonya:** You just remind me of him, obviously.
>
> […]
>
> **Sonya:** Actually, you're a surprise. Chris sometimes talked about some sad shit, but you seem, I don't know… *Actually* sad.
>
> **Tony:** Not right now I'm not.

Again, as Sonya recognises something existentially sad within Tony, he denies it. Whatever it is that she is recognising, Tony cannot confront it directly. After he asks Sonya if the two can try peyote, they have a sentimentally-laced drug experience—as is often associated with the drug. This visual style of the following sequence draws us closer to Tony's internal state, as it did with his dream, inferring a raw proximity to his subjective unconscious. For example, as they walk through a casino Tony's attention is caught by a colourful picture of a devil on a slot machine. A close-up shot of the devil stylistically infers that it is relevant to whatever it is that Tony is experiencing. They pass the machine and approach a roulette table. Tony begins to make increasingly large and arbitrary bets—repeatedly winning them. "He's dead" Tony reflectively says to himself as if in realisation, and then he begins to laugh manically. He falls backwards onto the ground in hysterics. The final scene of the episode finds Tony and Sonya in the desert at dawn, overlooking a vista. As the sun rises Tony suddenly stands up and, with his arms outstretched, tearfully shouts in proclamation "I get it!" It is not

certain what does Tony 'gets' in this emotional moment of epiphany, or what he feels after he tells himself "He's dead" in the casino, or even what exactly he was escaping when he left New Jersey in the first place. As David Chase says, "not everything gets answered in life", and so it is with Tony Soprano.

Violent Ambiguity: The Hallmark of Morally Transgressive Protagonists

That violence is the focal point of Tony's character in *The Sopranos* is fundamental to the story the series tells. While there are many other aspects to Tony's persona that are not violent, it is difficult to be as emotionally invested or interested in those aspects as we are with the frequently fatal violence that surrounds him. That this violence is sown with ambiguity relating to his character is a crucial feature of the morally transgressive protagonists in complex serial drama. Amanda Lotz writes:

> Throughout these stories the viewer is no more certain of who these men should be than the characters are, and although the audience may be able to identify when the character goes wrong, viewers are also made to understand the confusion and uncertainty that leads to wrong action.[571]

While 'wrong action' is not specified as violence in the way that I have outlined it, I argue that it is the implied behaviour that Lotz is referencing. Tony killing Christopher is unquestionably wrong, but the reason why he commits the behaviour reveals something less clear about his character, because *something* motivated him at that moment, but what it was is uncertain—even to himself. Lotz identifies this perpetual uncertainty as a hallmark of 'male-centered serials':

> The men in male-centered serials seem legitimately bewildered at times by how to act or respond to the events of their lives. […] Throughout these stories the viewer is no more certain of who these men should be than the characters are, and although the audience may be able to identify when the character goes wrong,

[571] Lotz. *Cable Guys*. P 79.

> viewers are also made to understand the confusion and uncertainty that leads to wrong action.[572]

Morally transgressive protagonists wrestle with this internalised indeterminacy in all complex serial dramas, in a way that demonstrates their fallibility. Suspending the trustworthiness of subjective access during these particularly vivid scenes of violence renders this information even less certain, and therefore even more inferentially rich. As discussed in section 3.3 of chapter three, the response to information communicated through vivid violence biases our perception that it is extra-ordinarily significant. This makes ambiguity in these scenes of violence even more significant, as the deeper the uncertainty, the greater we understand the potential for misunderstanding. For example, while estimations of Tony Soprano's character are responsive to the anchors that his character information provides, those anchors depicted when he kills Christopher are particularly ambiguous *because* they are so uncertain. We struggle to understand which aspects of the cumulated character information pertaining to Tony they relate to, and this confusion makes the violence more vivid as it provides potentially limitless information to cognitively pore over. Ultimately, the response drawn from our, as David Chase phrases it, "instincts and feelings and humanity" will repeatedly lead us to the same ephemeral understandings: if we continue to grieve Christopher because we like him so much, then these feelings will frequently anchor our estimate of Tony's behaviour. However, if we more often find ourselves disliking Christopher, agreeing with Tony's assertion that he was a drug addict doomed to destruction by his inability to reform, then instead *these* feelings will frequently anchor our estimate of Tony's behaviour. By withholding objective truth, and instead intensifying the speculative power of inference, this violence actively fosters multiple plausible perspectives upon our estimations of morally transgressive protagonists, forcing us to make emotional choices instead of rational observations.

[572] Ibid.

4.5 Making Choices about Morally Transgressive Protagonists

Just a small town girl;
Livin' in a lonely world;
She took the midnight train goin' anywhere.
Just a city boy;
Born and raised in south Detroit;
He took the midnight train goin' anywhere.

~'Don't Stop Believin'' by Journey (played in the final scene of *The Sopranos*.)[573]

In this concluding section I will return to the idea at the heart of Tony Soprano's story: despite his penchant for violence, his character possesses something that we all share. This idea is drawn from Joseph Conrad's novel *Lord Jim*, wherein his eponymous protagonist is frequently referred to as 'one of us'.[574] This is demonstrable in two different ways, and both are native to the violent stories of morally transgressive protagonists. The first is their demonstration of an attractive and family-oriented humanity: Tony Soprano is funny, charming, and he frequently demonstrates that he loves and cherishes his family. To this end, Murray Smith draws a parallel between Tony's character and the "protagonist of a tragedy", referencing the work of G.E. Lessing:

> Lessing argues that it is essential that the protagonist of a tragedy is "'one of ourselves'—that is, recognizable as a human being, a mix of virtue and vice, rather than 'an incarnate devil.'" […] Now, my point in mentioning Lessing's analysis of tragedy is not to suggest that *The Sopranos* takes the precise form of classical tragedy, but to stress that Soprano is rather more like the protagonist of a tragedy—"neither a wholly virtuous nor a wholly

[573] Journey. 'Don't Stop Believin''. Steve Perry, Jonathan Cain, Neal Schon (writers), Kevin Elson, Mike Stone (producers). Columbia Records. Originally Released: 3 June 1981.
[574] Conrad. *Lord Jim*.

> vicious man" […] Soprano is sufficiently ordinary that we may, in Lessing's terms, recognize him as "one of ourselves."[575]

For Smith, what is "crucial" about how we engage with Tony is this idea that he is "one of ourselves", because

> however we might assess Soprano in moral terms, he certainly has a moral code, and the idea of family is central to that moral code.[576]

Tony's familial sense of morality helps to create partiality—a concept outlined in section 3.2 of chapter three—and it is part of why, despite his status as the boss of a criminal outfit, we can recognise something morally familiar and decent about him. Aaron A. Toscano also argues that Tony's is made an "everyman" by being a member of the "American middle class":[577]

> Tony is the family man, living in the suburbs, trying to cope with the stress of providing for a family in the new twenty-first-century economy, an economy where workers' skills become obsolete, creeping credentialism makes workers unemployable, and the costs of raising a family continue to rise.[578]

Toscano asserts that while Tony is not an "*average*" middle-class American, he still experiences the "*common* anxieties of middle-class Americans".[579] In this way, it is the blend of family-driven motivations in a contemporary middle-class struggle that makes Tony 'one of us.'

As the exploration of these series continues to demonstrate, violence in complex serial dramas are made vivid by the family of characters we place an emotional investment in. If we do not care about Tony Soprano, or any member of his family, then we cannot appreciate the series in a fundamental way, and this would reduce its violence to a gratuitous experience of blood and gore. While every morally transgressive protagonist is as different as the

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[575] Murray Smith. 'Just what is it that makes Tony Soprano such an appealing, attractive murderer?' in *Ethics at the Cinema*. Ward E. Jones, Samantha Vice (editors). Oxford University Press. 2011. P 74.
[576] Ibid.
[577] Aaron A. Toscano. 'Tony Soprano as the American Everyman and Scoundrel: How *The Sopranos* (re)Presents Contemporary Middle-Class Anxieties' in *The Journal of Popular Culture*. Vol 47, No 3. 2014. P 463.
[578] Ibid.
[579] Ibid.

series they belong to, this fundamentally common plight of partiality is native to all of them. *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White is a struggling middle-class man who is motivated by the desperate need to provide for his family. *The Walking Dead* follows a group of people who struggle to protect their families, and their family-oriented humanity, from the undead who possess no humanity and, worse, from other humans who actively attack this sort of humanity. *Game of Thrones* is about the struggle of power that occurs between groups of people who are either defined by their families or the families they support. *Six Feet Under* explores the lives of a middle-class family whose patriarch has suddenly been killed in a car accident, exhibiting their struggle to support one another while retaining their independence. The conceit of *The Handmaid's Tale* regards a society that has pursued an oppressive regime which reduces the role of fertile women to child-bearing slaves. *Deadwood* tells the story of an emerging community in 1870s America as it grows from a makeshift gold-mining camp into an established town with its own unique identity. Exhaustively, these series focus in various ways upon conceptions of familial love and support, and through this they render their protagonists relatably human, above all else. Regardless of whether Tony Soprano is a sociopath or an empathetic man suffering from emotional trauma, he is the member of a family, and the series shows the story of how his life unfurls within that family. For this reason, the violence that takes place within these series is contextualised by the families that surround protagonists, expanding and altering their stories in a variety of ways that are as defined by our emotional experiences as they are by their physical descriptions. It is not enough to write a physical description of how Tony Soprano kills Christopher Moltisanti to understand the dramaturgy of that violence, because what is communicated in that approximately five-minute scene can only be made visible by the impression that their familial bond has established over the eighty-two episodes previous.

This brings me to the second, more existential, sense that makes Tony Soprano 'one of us' despite his violence: his inability to understand himself. As Craig Taylor writes of *Lord Jim*, and which I wish to transpose to the

context of Tony Soprano and morally transgressive protagonists more generally:

> The kind of self-awareness I am suggesting we might gain from *Lord Jim* depends on the recognition that Jim 'is one of us'. But if we ask now what it is to recognise *that*, the answer is, I have argued, that we see the substance of it by attending to our potentially conflicting responses to Jim. On the one hand we, like Marlow, may look for a 'shadow of an excuse' (41) for Jim's behaviour; and on the other hand, in our moral condemnation of Jim as simply a young man with a particular and fatal flaw, we may seek to dismiss Jim, again like Marlow at times, to be done with him.[580]

It is the ambiguous, multi-faceted exploration of the human within morally transgressive protagonists that second-degree style facilitates in complex serial drama, lending them a degree of complexity that makes them familiar, but also distinct and somewhat puzzling. As we attempt to draw certainty from their ambiguity, Taylor writes, we must also ask ourselves whether this attempt is drawn from

> the desire for the truth or an attempt to evade it, to avoid seeing who Jim really is?: that he is – stands for – us.[581]

For Taylor, the ambiguity that Conrad demonstrates through his protagonist in *Lord Jim* as 'one of us' articulates a ubiquitous component of our humanity: that we cannot know what might motivate us, nor what behaviours those motivations might spur. We cannot contrive an objective sense of certainty, because we do not know what might motivate us, or what that might lead us to do. Taylor suggests that this unsettling truth is what Conrad beckons us to consider in *Lord Jim*.

As we recognise Tony's familial partiality with the same sense that we recognise our own, the mode by which we consider what is wrong with him, and his potential for salvation, coincides with our desire for such an understanding to exist for ourselves. This means that reflecting upon the

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[580] Taylor. ;Literature, Moral Reflection, and Ambiguity'. P 93.
[581] Ibid.

many pathways for moral behaviour is not only something we do in attempting to understand Tony Soprano's character, but the innate forces of motivation and behaviour come from, whether they can be quantified, and what we can do to control them. Allison Eden et al. pursue a similar concept relating specifically to *The Sopranos* in their study of how "morally conflicted content" (which they associate with the "moral ambiguity of the storyline") causes "moral rumination" in viewers:

> viewers are not passive viewers of a static text. Instead, viewers shape the meaning of what they see on the screen based on personal frameworks of knowledge and meaning, thus allowing for multiple interpretations of the same act featured on screen. This process of sensemaking invites the viewer to be an active participant in the text based on their own daily life and experiences. Furthermore, we interpret media based on our own moral norms and perceptions of moral virtue; however, when resolution is lacking in the (complex) narrative, we are (actively) forced to consider what we think is right and even what we would have done. As such, this type of media content may actually play an important role by presenting viewers with complex moral situations that require complex deliberation or moral rumination. This moral rumination may act, in turn, to promote moral education via a reflection on the viewers' own morality and moral choices.[582]

This is specifically tied by Eden et al. to "the study of violent mediated content", and they identify that the proposition of "what constitutes acceptable behaviour" spurred by violence on series like *The Sopranos* provides an apt opportunity for moral rumination.[583] My addition to their point, then, is that moral rumination concerning "what constitutes acceptable behaviour" is tied to the obscurity of motivation and subsequent action: it is not only that we ruminate over what behaviour is acceptable, but where motivations that lead

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[582] Allison Eden, Serena Daalmans, Merel Van Ommen, and Addy Weljers. 'Melfi's Choice: Morally Conflicted Content Leads to Moral Rumination in Viewers' in *Journal of Media Ethics*. Vol 32, No 3. 2017. Pp 142-143.
[583] Ibid, P 143.

to unacceptable behaviour come from, and what can be done about it. These series ask us to consider these questions of their morally transgressive protagonists, and by muddying our capacity for answering them they diminish the sanctity of such answers. Instead, their exhaustive uncertainty increases the significance of the *thought-processes* that are involved in considering each avenue of understanding.

These questions are not only asked of the characters who commit violence, but of us as viewers as well: for example, 'did you enjoy the story that involved Tracee being brutally murdered?', 'What did you enjoy about it?', and 'Is it a morally acceptable story to tell?' There are a bevy of ways we can ponder these questions in complex serial drama: we might recognise our power fantasy played out as *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White lives his; or identify with *Dexter*'s Dexter Morgan as he finds himself unable to suppress his nature; or empathise with the desperate compromises that *The Handmaid's Tale*'s June Osborne makes as she attempts to survive the misogyny of the fictional country Gilead. What makes these characters morally transgressive, and not heroes or antiheroes, is that how we understand them is dependent upon what it is we resonate with. There is no 'truth' to latch on to, and upon which the prerequisites of heroism might be neatly applied or countermanded. Instead, when it comes to understanding these characters, we must rely on how we have experienced them, and which perspectives are the most compelling. From here, we make personal, changeable, and endlessly debatable choices as to who they are, and what their stories mean. This is a point that is interestingly demonstrated by Dr Jennifer Melfi in *The Sopranos* in two different ways, and on two separate occasions, which I will turn to now.

Dr Jennifer Melfi's First Choice: What Constitutes Acceptable Behaviour

How we understand acceptable behaviour, and in what way, is moulded by what motivates us to think: we do not condone murder, and yet in the moment that Ralph kills Tracee we might discover that we would relish a slow and painful death for him in retribution. The line between motivation and action is the realm of choice, and this is demonstrated in *The Sopranos* through two decisions made by the character of Dr Jennifer Melfi. Melfi is Tony's therapist,

who gains insight into Tony's character at the same approximate pace as we do: their time together begins in the series pilot and ends in its penultimate episode. There are two occasions in the series that we see Melfi make choices based upon her experiences that I will consider here. Her first choice reflects what she is willing to accept with regards to legality and violence in the wake of a violent sex crime that she suffers. In the third season, Melfi is brutally raped in the stairwell that joins her offices to her underground carpark.[584] The scene lasts approximately seventy seconds, in which time a man accosts Melfi, punches her, and drags her into the building's stairwell from her car, and then pushes her against the stairs and rapes her:

[584] Episode 4, Season 3. 'Employee of the Month'. Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess (writers), John Patterson (director). *The Sopranos*. HBO. New York City, New York. Original Airdate: 18 March 2001.

Figures 42-47: The Rape of Jennifer Melfi[585]

The vividness of the rape is exacerbated by Melfi's screaming, her begging for her abuser to stop, and finally her tortured crying in the wake of the crime. The scene is one of the most vividly violent in the series, occurring only two episodes before 'University'—the episode in which the other most vividly violent scene, wherein Ralph beats Tracee to death (as explored in section 4.2), takes place. We soon learn that Melfi's rapist has been caught, but it is later revealed that, due to a procedural error in the chain of custody, the police have released the man without charge. The title of the episode is in reference to a scene which takes place shortly after, as Melfi is getting herself lunch at a local sandwich shop. As she takes her drink and goes to wait for her sandwich to be made, she is shocked to see an 'Employee of the Month' placard upon the wall featuring her rapist—causing her to drop her drink and leave the shop immediately.

The justice sequence that Melfi's rape initiates is exacerbated in each of these ways, but the action that concludes the statement of justice is not one of physical retribution nor legal justice. As Melfi struggles to come to terms with

[585] Captured from Episode 4, Season 3. 'Employee of the Month'. Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess (writers), John Patterson (director). *The Sopranos: The Complete Third Season.* David Chase (creator and showrunner). DVD. HBO Studios. New York City, New York. Original Release Date: 27 August 2007. Timestamps: 00:18:48, 00:18:51, 00:18:57, 00:19:03, 00:19:07, 00:19:29. Reused under Fair Dealing for Criticism or Review.

what has happened, and the injustice of both the police mistake and the 'Employee of the Month' award, she has a dream wherein she faces her rapist. In the dream, Melfi's arm is caught in a vending machine, which she later describes herself as "digging" through. While trying to pull her arm free of the machine she is confronted by a barking and snarling rottweiler. Then, her rapist suddenly appears and menacingly paces toward her, as she desperately mouths the word "no". He grabs her by the thigh, but before anything happens the rottweiler lunges at him, taking him to the ground and savaging him. This dream offers us the most direct insight into Melfi's subjective unconscious. Melfi demonstrates the significance of her dream when she discusses the meaning of the dog with her therapist:

> **Melfi:** …at first, I thought he was after me.
>
> […]
>
> **Melfi:** Oh my God, the dog… […] Big head, massive shoulders—direct descendants of the dog used by the roman armies to guard their camps. […] And digging? Who do I dig with and who's dangerous? Who could I sic on that son-of-a-bitch to tear him to shreds?
>
> […]
>
> **Melfi:** Lemme tell you something: no feeling has ever been so sweet as to see that pig beg and plead and scream for his life. Because the justice system is fucked up, Elliot *[her therapist]*. Richard's *[her ex-husband]* got his attorney looking into this at three-hundred dollars an hour, but meanwhile that employee-of-the-month cocksucker is back on the street and who's gonna stop him—you?

Melfi assures her therapist that she would not "break the social contract" and act in this way, but she asserts that "there's not a certain satisfaction in knowing that I could have that asshole squashed like a bug if I wanted."

It is almost a certainty, given what we know and anticipate from the series, that we would relish any form of justice upon Melfi's rapist—and maybe 'mob justice' is what we would relish most. It is against this feeling that Melfi's first choice is made, wherein she decides not to tell Tony about her sexual assault,

and with that decision to stop pursuing any attempt to bring justice to her assailant—at least that we bear witness to. At the end of the episode, Tony and Melfi have a session. Tony immediately notices Melfi's limp, and he comments re-assuredly that at least she does not need a walking cane anymore. He tells Melfi that he has been considering a suggestion she made that he ought to seek "behavioural therapy" from a source outside of her. "No" she responds quietly. Tony asks her:

> **Tony:** You sure about that? Because the last couple of times I've been getting the distinct feeling that you were giving me the boot?

Melfi breaks down in tears, shocking herself with her emotional response. Tony immediately gets up and attempts to comfort her, softly asking her:

> **Tony:** What, what'd I do? What's the matter? Tell me, what's the matter?

Melfi peers up at Tony, and after a moment tells him to go and sit down. Tony hesitates, with concern on his face, but Melfi insists, reassuring him "it's just my knee." Tony finally acquiesces, but he looks very confused, and recognises that something is the matter. After a few moments, he implores her, desperate to coax out whatever she is hiding:

> **Tony:** What?... I mean, y-you want to say something?

A few seconds pass as Melfi looks at Tony, and a shot-reverse-shot captures the significance of the moment—this is Melfi's only chance to hold her abuser in any way accountable for what he did to her. Melfi's says finally, with strength and conviction, "no". And with that word the episode immediately cuts to its end credits.

Melfi's decision is not something that we are necessarily content with because, in a series that regularly depicts innocent people face criminal violence, we might fairly wish that for once the bearer of that violence be someone as vile as her rapist. The injustice of his walking free, enjoying the applause in his workplace for a job well done no less, is palpable. For David Chase, the significance of Melfi's decision deliberately contrasts with these desires and expectations for retribution that we might have as viewers:

> "If you're raised on a steady diet of Hollywood movies and network television you start to think, *Obviously there's going to be*

> *some moral accounting here,*" […] "That's not the way the world works. It all comes down to why you're watching. If all you want is to see big Tony Soprano take that guy's head and bang it against the wall like a cantaloupe…The point is—Melfi, despite pain and suffering, made her moral, ethical choice and we should applaud her for it. *That's* the story!"[586]

Choices like these propel the story—it is a series of "moral, ethical choices" that create and resolve most of the violent conflicts within the series—but it is also Melfi's choice to remonstrate against this violence in her role as a psychological critic of Tony's character that demonstrates the *meaning* of the series. These stories centre on characters who make violent choices and what that makes of their lives and the people in them, so when a central character refuses to make such a decision—despite having more reason to pursue violence than most of the characters who do—the role of choice is emphatically underlined. With this action Melfi defines her moral guidelines as vividly as Tony has defined his, but in the ephemeral process leading up to this choice we see something more similar about the two characters: Melfi *wants* to see her abuser "beg and plead and scream for his life" while she gets Tony to "tear him to shreds", and she is also well aware of the danger of her abuser being "back on the street". As viewers, we have watched her raped in one of the most vivid scenes of violence in the series, and we have also seen her attacker go free to enjoy accolades from his place of work. We must yearn for justice, especially when both the criminal justice system and seemingly society at large fail to punish her rapist, and in this moment we are offered to consider what Tony would do, or have done, to him. As we watch Melfi in her office, with Tony in front of her asking her to tell him what is wrong—the promise of some sense of justice to be realised, and potential future victims saved from the rapist's crimes—we must ask ourselves: what choice do we *want* Melfi to make? Melfi's emphatic "No." cuts off any potential fantasy we might have, forcing the justice sequence to bloodless closure and, perhaps more importantly, leaving us to reflect upon something about

[586] David Chase quoted by Brett Martin. *The Sopranos.* P 179.

ourselves: were we hoping that we would see Melfi's abuser violently savaged and killed?

Dr Jennifer Melfi's Second Choice: Understanding Tony

This leads me to the second choice of Melfi's, and the final point surrounding the use of violence in this chapter: should we applaud or reject characters like Tony, and the violent stories they tell? To this end, it is interesting to note that the first "No." that Melfi delivers to Tony after her assault is to Tony suggesting that he leave her care—despite having been the one who suggested it in an earlier session. In this way, Melfi both chooses to keep Tony close, while also choosing to push him away. In the penultimate episode of *The Sopranos*, Dr Melfi decides that she knows enough about Tony to push him away completely: he is a criminal sociopath, and the only benefits he receives from therapy are those that aid his crimes.[587] Melfi's decision resonates as a critique of Tony's character, and the story at the centre of *The Sopranos* as a series. She begins to come to her decision when, at a dinner party with other psychiatrists including her friend and personal therapist Dr Elliot Kupferberg (Peter Bogdanovich), the discussion turns to criminals in therapy:

> **Dinner Party Guest #1:** I Googled any new stuff on sociopathic personalities: apparently, the talking cure actually *helps* them become better criminals. It was fascinating! The study was by Yochelson and Samenow.
> **Melfi:** Studies turn around every few years.
> **Dinner Party Guest #1:** This other, I think it was Robert Hare, suggested that sociopaths actually quite glibly engage on key issues—like mother, family.
> **Dinner Party Guest #2:** I seem to remember that from residency.
> **Melfi:** Me too, and I've read Hare, but uh, who's a true sociopath?
> **Dinner Party Guest #2:** I had a guy at the state asylum—slow poisoner. They even *mimic empathy*! They blubber and cry!

[587] Episode 20, Season Six. 'The Blue Comet'.

At this point, Melfi suspects that Elliot has told them about her patient, Tony Soprano, and that he's arranged for this conversation to happen, and after they begin to bicker and Melfi becomes somewhat incensed, the conversation is headed off. Shortly after, however, Melfi—now at home and in bed—reads the Yochelson and Samenow piece that the dinner party guest had brought up. A series of close-ups on the text shows her reading these passages in particular:

> The criminal's sentimentality reveals itself in compassion for babies and pets.
> The criminal uses insight to justify heinous acts.
> Therapy has potential for noncriminals; for criminals it becomes one more criminal operation.

As Melfi reads these words, the point they communicate is clear: by giving someone like Tony an avenue to talk through his criminal personality, the immoral power at its centre only strengthens and stabilises. For the length of the series we have been coming to understand Tony, attempting to reconcile his past with his present, and his nature within his behaviour. We have been guided through this process under the probing mind of Melfi's therapy, and now we are faced with her proposal in summary: telling this story only reinforces what makes it immoral. Two scenes later, Melfi and Tony have their final session where, seemingly based on these points, she ends their professional relationship.

In their final session, Melfi finds herself passive-aggressively withholding what she really wants to say to Tony before dismissing him from her care. This is ironic, because Tony was the one who traditionally has been unable or unwilling to share himself honestly but is now capably and openly telling her his sincere thoughts and feelings. Melfi is cold and unresponsive toward Tony, for example as he attempts to discuss his daughter:

> **Tony:** Meadow—well, I told you she's taking pre-med classes—well, she's not gonna be a doctor… She told us. It's kind of sad, isn't it?
> **Melfi:** Depends.
> **Tony:** It's just a nice thing to be, helping sick babies.

Melfi: Her change of heart bothers you?

Melfi deflects Tony's attempts to discuss what he and his wife want for their daughter, taking a more adversarial stance against his sentiments. Tony attempts to explain why he is disappointed that his daughter is not going to be a doctor by appealing to the reason that Melfi has chosen the medical profession:

> **Tony:** Your parents must have been very proud.
>
> **Melfi:** I think so.
>
> **Tony:** Look at all the people like me you've helped. With all the human suffering in this world, you've done something important… Like those people who are trying to help my son, God bless 'em.

Tony's son has recently attempted suicide and spent time in an emergency psychiatric facility. Their conversation breaks down, though, after Melfi interprets what Tony says as the words of a sociopath—asserting that Tony's opinion of his son is as "the boy who never cared about anything now cares too much", and that his daughter, "like all females, ultimately disappoints." Tony attempts to fight back against Melfi, but eventually Melfi heads off their conflict by asserting to him that "I don't think I can help you", telling him "there's a doctor in Bloomfield you could see." She asserts that this is her considered medical opinion, and she walks to the door and holds it open for Tony, who confusedly asks her:

> **Tony:** So wait a minute. You're telling me, after all this time, after everything we shared in here, you're cutting me loose just as my son got out of the hospital for trying to kill himself?

Melfi, with her arms crossed, looks uncertain and as though she is second-guessing herself, before she gathers her resolve and calmly stonewalls him:

> **Melfi:** Since you are in crisis, I don't want to waste your time.

Tony is upset, and as he walks toward the door he tells Melfi:

> **Tony:** I'm gonna be fuckin' honest: as a doctor, I think what you're doing is immoral.

A chest-high long-shot of Melfi captures her closing the door to her office—the final time Melfi is seen or spoken of in the series.

The ambiguity that presides over this second choice is demonstrative of the fundamental quandary of Tony's character: is he, and his story, worthy of our time and attention? In this, the eighty-fifth episode of the series, Melfi decides that he is not, and that Tony's story only empowers him as an immoral, violent, criminal. As Gary Edgerton writes, this amounts to something of a "death sentence":

> Considering the centrality of therapy to the entire eighty-six-hour narrative flow of *The Sopranos*, Dr. Melfi closing her office door in Tony's face in the penultimate episode is a kind of psychological and spiritual death sentence for him since in essence she is writing him off for good as incurable and irredeemable.[588]

That she does this at a point wherein Tony is at arguably his most sympathetic—with his son having just attempted suicide—articulates a sense of impropriety. Melfi's choice not only articulates that she believes he is "incurable and irredeemable" as a criminal sociopath, but that she is giving up on him altogether: even his valid emotional problems are not worthy of her time.[589] Here, Tony's life becomes valuable only insofar as he is a criminal, with his valid emotional and psychological plights relating to his family relegated to insignificance in its shadow. We must ask: how does Tony's criminal mind benefit by talking about the plights of his children? However, Franco Ricci takes Melfi's decision as evidence for his reading of Tony (elucidated in section 4.3):

> Reading these words changes her (and the viewer's) perception of Tony. Rather than threatening her identity, the article reconstitutes her authority by reconstructing not only what has happened throughout the series but also how it felt, how it appeared, and how it was experienced. […] As Dr. Melfi replaces her trust in the canonical authority of the text, we, too, as readers, diminish the distance between our own possible repulsion towards

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[588] Gary R. Edgerton. *The Sopranos*. Wayne State University Press. Detroit, Michigan. 2013. P 86.

[589] There are interesting inferences to explore here relating to the endpoint of Ralph Ciferetto's character arc: Tony kills Ralph in the same episode that Ralph potentially elicits sympathy for the first time, seeming to lament his immoral past after his son is hospitalised in a coma. Tony also chooses to ignore the idea that Ralph is capable of change.

> Tony and any potential remnant of emotional attraction the viewer may still harbour.[590]

Read in this way, Melfi's decision reflects a rational way of thinking that is divorced from the positive emotions we feel for Tony—which, as discussed, are largely based on his charm and his familial partiality. Yes, Tony loves his family, but his love for them is not what matters. His criminal personality that is empowered through his therapy (and his story) is what matters. It is not clear that this is how the viewer feels about Melfi's decision, as it also seems possible that the viewer, like Tony, may feel that her decision is wrong, or even "immoral". Regardless, Ricci argues that the sanctity of the written word provides the more rational "left side of the brain" with a sense of violent power, arming both Melfi and the viewer with words that possess "the same unilateral force and purposeful direction as throwing a lance or firing a gun".[591] Just as Tony has people killed with the orders delivered through his spoken word, Ricci writes, the words that Melfi reads "kills" their relationship.[592]

Whether we agree or disagree with Melfi's choice will not only resonate with how we understand Tony, and the degree to which we accept him despite his violence, but it also pivots to something much more fundamental about the story of *The Sopranos*. As a story that is filled with layers of ambiguous information, the choices that we make when we read all of its events lead us to a more holistic portrait of what we think of the story—Tony's upbringing and his resultant understanding of the world; Tony's murder of Febby; Ralph's murder of Tracee and Tony's response; the moment when Tony decides to kill Christopher; and Melfi's choice to avoid violence at the expense of a sense of justice, and then to disavow Tony's potential to be a noncriminal human. More than empowering us as viewers to agree with Melfi's final choice, as Ricci argues, I would instead argue that Melfi's choice reinforces the same ambiguous, unanswerable, questions that *The Sopranos*, and complex serial drama more generally, ask us. In this instance, at the conclusion of the series,

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[590] Ricci. *The Sopranos*. P 191.
[591] Ibid, Pp 191-192.
[592] Ibid, P 192.

Melfi's choice becomes another of these questions: *what about this violence is morally acceptable*?

The Choices That *We* Make: Understanding the Story

How we understand what is fundamentally ambiguous in complex serial drama is inexorably tied to the vividness we experience when we watch its violence, and this is something we do as a community. Determining what it means when Ralph beats Tracee to death (as discussed in section 4.2) within the context of the story requires us to reflect upon the perspectives we find most compelling. While so far I have discussed the variety of perspectives offered within the text, it is important to recognise that extratextual perspectives are vital to how we engage with these stories *after* we have watched them: our choices at this point do more than reflect what we see, they reinforce *why* we see what we see. Consider Janet McCabe and Kim Akass's reading of Tracee's death:

> Two body blows to the abdomen fix the pregnancy. A fist slammed into her youthful innocence, overpowering her fragility. His sadism climaxes into a violent orgy of punches, smashing her head repeatedly into the crash barrier. 'Look at you now," he sneers, leaving her brutalised corpse like trash, discarded, dispensable, violated.[593]

McCabe and Akass read the vivid scene within a non-textual perspective of how the "interpretative community" legitimises this violence by making it "widely discussed and its bloodshed explained".[594] They write that what is intriguing about this is how this community takes "charge of that meaning" and makes it "acceptable".[595] McCabe and Akass choose to engage with this violence by asking why it was created, and why vivid violence like it is so favoured among aficionados of 'quality television':

> HBO takes great pains to relate in endless detail how it purposefully uses the illicit is essential to compelling story-telling,

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[593] Janet McCabe & Kim Akass. 'Sex, Swearing and Respectability' in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*. Janet McCabe & Kim Akass (editors). I.B. Tauris. New York City, New York. 2007. P 62.
[594] Ibid, P 72.
[595] Ibid.

> key to creating complex and morally ambivalent protagonists, vital to dramatic verisimilitude and elevating broadcasting standards. […] But their constant need to account for the illicit, to incessantly rationalise its use and to enfold subversion in respectability, betrays unease with articulating precisely what that might mean for defining originality. It finds HBO continually speculating about itself and seeking to rationalise what it does. […] Reasoning itself as a place of intellectual, industrial and creative tolerance, HBO sanctions the obscene and coarse in language and deed, but only in and through circumscribed discourses that evoke 'quality' and respectability, as if such validation is necessary before what it does can be accepted and understood.[596]

This perspective unveils something more interesting about the dramaturgy of this violence than how it portends to story, by instead considering just what it is that *we* are choosing when we experience it and process it. To quote Allison Eden et al, the question of "what constitutes acceptable behaviour" is demonstrative of not only how we think about these characters and their stories, but ourselves. When we state how we feel about Tony Soprano when he kills Christopher, or about Tracee, Ralph, Melfi, or any of the other characters, we make the seemingly insipid choice of what we pay attention to: but, of course, the vividness of violence means it is almost a certainty that what we find most important about these characters is their relationship with it. By watching these series, we permit ourselves to reduce characters like Tracee, for example, to the violence that ends her life. More generally, we choose to watch this story, and to be moved by it, because of violence so vivid that it stays in our minds long after we finish watching. Its dramaturgy is too central, and its experience too cognitively demanding, for it to be something of a peripheral component of the series.

While McCabe and Akass's comments are penetrating, they also rely upon that very violence to be insightful, in a way that resembles their comments elsewhere regarding Carmela Soprano as a feminist symbol (as discussed in the introduction to this chapter):

[596] Ibid, Pp 75-76.

> No one would ever claim Carmela for feminism; but at the same time, no one should dismiss her either.[597] […]

Just as Carmela problematically raises probing dialogues while also appropriating the flaws of those dialogues, the vivid experience of violence within the ambiguous storyworlds of complex serial drama exists as a richly problematic dialogue. As Akass and McCabe state later:

> Even while we understand that representations of women like Carmela emerge as ambiguous and ambivalent precisely because they are made visible in and managed through coded types of patriarchal discourse—institutions like family, marriage, and religion, as well as cause- and-effect narratives and strict generic rules—we nonetheless remain ensnared in those very fantasies that we are working so hard to deconstruct.[598]

This is the catch-22 of the violently-told stories that complex serial drama promotes: we are not in favour of violence—*especially* that which exists as an example of the systemic abuse of vulnerable and marginalised people—and yet the dramaturgical role that it plays in telling these stories is an incalculable source of their value when we talk about them in this way. More importantly, perhaps what is truly confronting about this violence is how *other people* might choose to engage with it. For example, what we might find concerning about Tracee's death is not our response *per se*, but the variety of ways in which other people might choose to respond to it. This is problematic in complex serial drama, because the ambiguity of these stories means that we cannot point to a clear message underlying them that declare them to be worthwhile or justified, because there is no clear message. Furthermore, we cannot say that the aim is to expose these elements of our society for what they are, because it is not clear what they are even within their storyworlds: while she is an innocent victim, Tracee is also revealed earlier in the episode to have been abusive toward her son, burning him with cigarettes in what she claims was caused by "repressed anger".[599] Her murder then, in the face of this and compounded by the fact that she is a stripper, provides pause for

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[597] Akass & McCabe. '"Blabbermouth Cunts"'. P 94.
[598] Ibid, P 101.
[599] Episode 6, Season 3. 'University'.

concern when one considers the vehement sexism that is publicly expressed in contemporary society. That is what is both fascinating and concerning about vivid violence in complex serial drama: we can only make a choice as to how we wish to engage with this content and these stories.

Conclusion

Identifying with Violence in Complex Serial Drama

The depictions of violence that are woven throughout the complex serial dramas of the twenty-first century provide a unique dramaturgy that can only be understood through its vivid experience. This thesis has provided multiple examples of vivid violence: the introduction of chapter two outlined the violent ‘red wedding’ scene in *Game of Thrones*, wherein a pregnant female protagonist is murdered by having her belly stabbed repeatedly; that introduction also outlined a scene in *Breaking Bad* wherein protagonist Walter White allows Jane Margolis to die of a drug overdose[600]; section 2.2 of chapter two outlined the brutal bludgeoning to death of of Glenn Rhee in *The Walking Dead*; and chapter four outlined four scenes of vivid violence in *The Sopranos*. What drew me to study this violence was the shock and emotional discomfort that these scenes make me feel, and a desire to understand what these scenes do other than create these feelings. This thesis has demonstrated that how we experience the vivid depictions of violence in each of these scenes has an affective relationship with how we comprehend their meaning. This relationship is constituted by the intense emotional responses and cognitive processes that are elicited as we experience these depictions. Our attention towards this content is increased, our capacity for remembering its details is enhanced, and we are more likely to think back to it in our ongoing narrative comprehension. These concepts provide insight into how we process this information, but they do not offer us an emotional context for how we experience it. The feelings that we have when we watch characters either perform or suffer violence is defined by the product of our engagement with them. This is contextualised by the emotional connections to them that we feel, and the rational comprehension of their motivations that we use to understand their behaviour. When we watch these protagonists engage with violence, the vivid experience that follows offers us something additional about them to care about. It is the combination of cognitive processes applied

[600] This scene was also examined throughout chapter three.

to narrative context that defines the unique affective relationship vivid violence has upon the viewing experience of complex serial drama.

This thesis has demonstrated that how we experience depictions of vivid violence has an affective role in our engagement with complex serial drama. There were three components considered within this relationship: the influence of violent experiences upon short-term engagement and long-term comprehension; the interpretive feedback loop between depictions of violence and expressions of character; and the use of visual style to communicate multiple perspectives regarding narrative truth. The significance of this thesis is in its identification of how vivid experiences of violence can be used to increase the cognitive energy a viewer dedicates to narrative engagement.

The first chapter outlined how research into television violence in the twentieth century reflected the narrative simplicity of its content. It demonstrated that the stories of complex serial drama render the narrative context of its violence more significant than in those examples. It identified that the most profitable area of study into television violence are qualitative studies that ask participants about their narrative understanding of it. The chapter argued that textual analysis of violence allows us to arrive at a more appropriate conception of its experience than we could ascertain without it. This provided the context for the argument in chapter two, which explored qualitative accounts of experiences of violence to identify the qualities of those experiences which feature in narrative comprehension.

Chapter two used textual analysis to examine an example of violence from *The Walking Dead*, demonstrating how its experience is best understood using Karyn Riddle's concept of 'vivid media violence'. The chapter demonstrated how the vividness of violent experiences in complex serial encourage greater cognitive attention, narrative scrutiny, and detailed memories than other, less vivid, experiences. It argued that we are also likely to draw on these memories within future processes of narrative comprehension. For our narrative engagement with complex serial drama to be benefitted by the dramaturgy of vivid violence we must perceive a compelling payoff. If a persuasive payoff is not forthcoming, then vividness will

significantly exacerbate our distaste for the experience and damage our interest in narrative comprehension. Chapter two argued that the engagement with serialised narrative information through vivid experiences of violence constitutes a dramaturgy that is unique to complex serial drama.

Chapter three performed an examination of the morally transgressive protagonists to explore the narrative feedback loop between interpreting complex character information and experiencing vivid depictions of violence. It showed that complex serial dramas encourage us to assess and understand their behaviour within the background information about their character that is constantly cumulating. These series provide a variety of intuitive emotional cues which encourage us to ally with these protagonists, such as the demonstration of love and friendship, and the growing sense of familiarity that we have with them. Chapter three argued that as we are exposed to the increasingly intricate information about protagonists that we are allied with, we become better at comprehending their behaviour through an understanding of what motivates them and what they value. The most significant expressions of character behaviour in these series are those depicted through vivid violence. Chapter three concluded that complex serial drama characterises violence within a paradigm of its protagonists' humanity, influencing both how we perceive behaviour and what we perceive to be violent.

The fourth chapter performed a close textual analysis of *The Sopranos* to demonstrate how vivid violence is used to promote an imperfect understanding of its protagonist Tony Soprano. It outlined how multiple ambiguously depicted truths about Tony's humanity, and those of characters peripheral to him, serve to improve the depth of our understanding, while encouraging a multifaceted understanding that is definitively imperfect. Engaging with violence is integral to the narrative complexity of these series, as we must factor how we interpret the character behaviour portrayed into our ongoing comprehension. We cannot understand Tony Soprano without attempting to comprehend why he kills his cousin Christopher Moltisanti, or what motivates the relish he feels when he garrottes Febby Petrulio. The questions about character that vivid violence promote are fundamental to perceiving narrative meaning. Chapter four argues that our rational capacity

for understanding character behaviour is subverted by the variety of ambiguous truths about those characters that it offers. Rationally, we can only imperfectly understand these characters, which elevates the role of our emotional response to their behaviour in how we choose to understand them.

This thesis has outlined violence as a basis for broadening our understanding of the affective relationship between complex serial drama and its viewers. This limitations of the research in this thesis is defined by its restriction to complex serial dramas that focus upon transgressive male protagonists in positions of power. While this thesis considers how vivid violence provides an encouraging context for understanding challenging characters, the demographic of these protagonists is already favoured within the landscape of television storytelling. This research does not identify, for example, the storytelling strategies that are used to promote allegiance toward characters who enjoy less representation in television and film, and how vivid violence is used to promote engagement with their perspective—questions that would yield a strikingly different approach to this study. I began this thesis in 2014, but if I began it again now I would adopt a larger range of narrative perspectives that include more variety of representation.[601] Further study that continues to build upon the textual analysis of this affective relationship should focus upon complex serial dramas that favour a wider variety of perspectives.

[601601] Series such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-present), *The Chi* (2017-present), and *Big Little Lies* (2018-present) are all good examples of critically and commercially successful complex serial dramas to this end.

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