***Breaking Bad* as a Modern Day Western:**
A Semantic / Syntactic Approach to the Television Series

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1. Introduction

> "We are able to conclude that something is of high quality based not on your own experience or critical judgment of it, but on our recognition of particular aesthetic features it contains. At this level, to label something 'quality television' is more like making a generic classification: It is comparable to agreeing that a certain film is a Western" (Cardwell, 2007, p. 20-21).

The debate of what television scholars mean by 'quality television' is always an ongoing issue, because the word 'quality' seems to contain a value judgment. With her statement, television scholar Sarah Cardwell points out the fact that quality television is not a value judgment; it is rather a genre that is connected in terms of aesthetic and narrative concerns. Following Cardwell's train of thought, television scholar Robert J. Thompson claims that the "'quality TV' had become a super genre, a formula unto itself" (Thompson, 2007, p. xix). Thompson uses the word super-genre because the television shows that fall under the category of quality television are not connected in any diegetic ground, but they are considered to belong in the same group. For example, there is no diegetic connection between *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan, 2008) and *Twin Peaks* (Frost & Lynch, 1990) whatsoever, but they are both mentioned as quality television. So, what do television scholars need to take into consideration in order to claim that a certain television show is quality or not? Thompson aims to formulize the characteristics of quality television by stating that:

> "The precise definition of 'quality TV' was elusive right from the start, though we knew it when we saw it. These shows were generic mongrels, often scrambling and recombining traditional TV formulas in unexpected ways; they had literary and cinematic ambitions beyond what we had been seen before (Thompson, 2007, p. xix – xx).

The notion of "we knew it when we saw it" is mostly applied to film genres by many film scholars like Rick Altman (Altman, 1984), Edward Buscombe (Buscombe, 1970) and Robert Langford (Langford, 2005) for a reason. We know that we are watching a Western or a horror film when we see it, because they share visual and narrative touchstones that are repeated throughout film history. With his statement, what Thompson actually does is to continue declaring that quality television is a genre. His formula allows us to label a television series as quality television as long as they have cinematic ambitions, which means that they take their visual and narrative choices from the conventions that are based in feature films. But then again, what is exactly connecting a large group of television series, which are not connected in terms of repeated visual or narrative elements that could be considered equal to a desert landscape shot for the Western genre?

Genre theoretician Rick Altman states that "once identified, the genre's first appearance on film is treated as a generic prototype" (Altman, 1999, p.30). So, in order to understand what started this debate of quality television in terms of aesthetic and narrative concerns, it is important to go back in history and see which

television shows were considered to be quality television in the first place. Thompson mentions a historical trivia by stating that:

> *"Television's Second Golden Age* documented the first phase of 'quality TV' on the American broadcast networks and, as it turned out, it was published just as a new phase was kicking in. That first phase stretched from the debut of *Hill Street Blues* in 1981 to the cancellation of *Twin Peaks* in 1991" (Thompson, 2007, p. xvii).

By taking Thompson's formula for defining quality television as a super-genre, both of these shows are considered to be quality television because they are "generic mongrels" and they have "cinematic ambitions". Starting with *Hill Street Blues* (Bochco & Kozoli, 1981), which is a generic mongrel because it is a police drama. Major examples of police dramas in cinema are *The French Connection* (Friedkin, 1971), *Chinatown* (Polanski, 1974), *Serpico* (Lumet, 1973), *In The Heat Of The Night* (Jewison, 1967) and so on. Nevertheless, this is not to say that *Hill Street* Blues is the first police drama on American television. Shows like *Baretta* (Cannell, 1975)*, The Blue Knight* (Wambaugh, 1975) and *Magnum P.I.* (Bellisario & Larson, 1980) were dominating American television long before *Hill Street Blues.* So, what makes *Hill Street Blues* different than any other police dramas on television before its time that caused the show to be considered one of the first examples of quality television?

According to many television scholars, the thing that makes *Hill Street Blues* stand out than other police dramas before is the aesthetic that the show employs. In his book titled *Televisuality: Style, Crisis and Authority in American Television* (Caldwell, 1995)*,* television scholar John Thornton Caldwell declared *Hill Street Blues* as a "stylistic breakthrough" (Caldwell, 1995, p. 64). Television academic Jonathan Bingell claims that the style of *Hill Street Blues* influenced another police drama by stating that "*Homicide: Life on the Street* took on the aesthetic of hand-held documentary filming that was used in *Hill Street Blues"* (Bingell, 2007, p. 167). In his book titled *State of Play: Contemporary "High-End" TV Drama* (Nelson, 2007), television scholar Robin Nelson explains what was different with the styles of *Hill Street Blues* and *Homicide: Life on the Street* (Attanasio, 1993) by stating that:

> "Using hand-held 8mm cameras, *Homicide* was filmed almost entirely on location in Baltimore, making the city environment more than a mere backdrop to the action. Thus the production team might be located in that strain of untypical American realism running from *Hill Street Blues* through *Homicide* to *Oz*" (Nelson, 2007, p. 153).

So, *Hill Street Blues* is considered to be a milestone in quality television history because of two reasons: The documentary aesthetic that is evident because of hand-held camera techniques and the fact that the television series is shot on actual locations. The notion of shooting on actual locations is important because television history is full of shows that are shot in studio sets. Robin Nelson states that:

> "In its very early days, television production was confined to the studio and shot live in a multicamera set-up. Studio sets, based on a theatre-scenery

> model, were often flimsy and unconvincing. Lighting, in the studio context, was general from overhead rather than specifically motivated for each shot" (Nelson, 2007, p. 181).

In his book titled *Television: Critical Methods and Applications* (Butler, 2002), television scholar Jeremy G. Butler gives us the historical background of television's early days by stating that:

> "Original 60-and 90-minute live dramas were weekly staples of television in the 1950s. Such TV plays as *Requiem for a Heavyweight, Twelve Angry Men,* and *Days of Wine and Roses,* which were later made into movies, were telecast live. They were broadcast in this format for reasons that were technological (videotape was not in use at the time), economic (to film the plays would have been prohibitively expensive), and aesthetic (many of the actors and crew members came from Broadway productions and brought to television some methods and goals of the New York theater)" (Butler, 2002, p. 191)

In terms of where the camera stands, these shows were shot with more than one cameras that are stabilized on the best seats in the theater. Therefore, the camera was not concerned to create any meaning or aesthetic, it was only there to capture a live performance. In this context, *Hill Street Blues* is in fact a "stylistic breakthrough" (Caldwell, 1995, p. 64) because the television series employed a new aesthetic in terms of using the camera. But it is not only the movement of the camera that makes the show quality television, it is also the fact that the camera is standing on actual locations instead of a studio set or a theater hall.

Caldwell points out that this style which is only concerned to capturing live performances continued even in 1970's sitcoms through taking *All in The Family* (Lear, 1971)*, Maude* (Lear, 1972) and *The Jeffersons* (Lear & Nicholl & Ross & West, 1975) as an example:

> "Scenes were played wide, with a dominance of two-and three-shots that emphasize conversation. If close-ups were used, they were typically reaction shots, underlining a character's internal point of view. There were no flourishes, canted camera angles, videographic ecstasies, or even bracketed montages. The sets were just that: spaces where quality actors could perform live" (Caldwell, 1995, p.56).

Caldwell explains this issue in a subchapter titled *Zero Degree Television* (Caldwell, 1995, p. 55 – 58). Zero degree style is a concept that was first introduced by literary theorist Roland Barthes with a book titled *Writing Degree Zero* (Barthes, 1953). In an academic article about *Breaking Bad* titled *Breaking the Waves* (Barette & Picard, 2014, p. 121 – 138), the notion of zero degree style is explained by using the works of Barthes, Caldwell and Butler in this way:

> “Roland Barthes (1977) concept zero-degree style of writing is not unfamiliar in television studies. John Thorton Caldwell (1955), for example, used it to shine light on the sitcom aesthetic. Elsewhere, Butler (2012) used the concept to cast into relief the aesthetic of the soap opera. These two scholars’ bodies of work complement each other like masks in the theatre. What is more, their ideas converge. Basically, their results show that, because they are recorded in studio, the two genres of American television fiction have in many respects a restricted visual style to the point that it could be argued that we are in the presence of a ‘non-style’” (Barette & Picard, 2014, p. 125).

Albeit both Butler and Caldwell uses the term zero degree style in order to analyze sitcoms and soap operas, there is a notion that separates Butler’s findings from Caldwell’s. In 2010, Butler published another book titled *Television Style* (Butler, 2010), which starts with a chapter titled *Television and Zero Degree Style* (Butler, 2010, p. 26 – 70). In the beginning of the chapter, Butler states the importance of soap operas amongst film and television scholars by stating that “at the time, the study of television soap opera lured scholars from cinema studies, myself included, to consider how melodrama might cross from one medium to another” (Butler, 2010, p. 26). Although soap operas and sitcoms were analyzed by Caldwell with a judgment of not having a style, Butler aims to examine Caldwell’s findings in a much more broader way by looking at the genre in a new light. More to the point, Butler tries to find a style in a genre that is considered to have no style through connecting it to a cinematic genre. Whereas Caldwell analyzes the soap operas and sitcoms like equal to talk shows and late night off air test patterns by declaring them as “television's bread-and- butter genres where stylistic excess is an exception” (Caldwell, 1995, p. 18), Butler examines the genre as a cross breed with its cinematic roots.

If we return back to the first prototypes of the quality television super-genre, the other show that is mentioned by Thompson besides *Hill Street Blues* is *Twin Peaks* (Thompson, 2007, p. xvii). Television academic Jason Mittell claims that there is a connection between soap operas and *Twin Peaks* by stating that “effectively a cross between a mystery, soap opera and art film, *Twin* Peaks offered television viewers and executives a glimpse into the narrative possibilities that the episodic series would mine in the future” (Mittell, 2006, p.33). In his book titled *David Lynch* (Chion, 1995), film scholar Michel Chion states that “according to the director, the mystery of who killed Laura Palmer was initially going to be in foreground, but would recede gradually as viewers got to know the other townsfolk and the problems they were having. Lynch and Frost wanted to mix a police investigation with a soap opera” (Chion, 1995, p.100).

With the art-house directing of David Lynch who is previously known for his art films such as *Blue Velvet* (Lynch, 1986), *Eraserhead* (Lynch, 1977) and *The Elephant Man* (Lynch, 1980), *Twin Peaks* becomes a good example to analyze the notion of genre mixing. Both *Hill Street Blues* and *Twin Peak*s are “generic mongrels” in Thompson’s terms, which means that they combine cinematic genres with the conventional episodic forms of the television series. Furthermore, *Twin Peaks* takes the soap

opera, which is "television's quintessential narrative form" (Caldwell, 1995, p. 226) and mixes it with cinematic ambitions that are coming from the art film. Whereas *Hill Street Blues* is a prototype for quality television because of groundbreaking camera techniques and shooting on actual locations, *Twin Peaks* is a prototype because it is a generic hybrid, which combines a genre that is claimed to have "zero degree style" with a genre that is mentioned as art.

Hill Street Blues was airing on NBC and *Twin Peaks* on ABC, which are broadcasting networks. Regardless the fact that in contemporary quality television cable networks are dominating the market, Thompson points out the fact that cable networks were still experimenting with 'non quality shows' in their early days by stating that:

> "It should be remembered, however, that cable followed broadcasting's lead, not the other way around. While the networks were ushering in the revolution of quality TV in the 1980's, cable was experimenting with TV series that could hardly be called 'quality'. As NBC was redefining the medium with shows like *Hill Street Blues,* HBO was still testing the series waters with such undistinguished programs as *1st & Ten* and *The Hitchhiker"* (Thompson, 2007, p. xviii).

Nevertheless, when HBO saw the potential of the quality television series, the cable network started to raise its bar with shows like *The Sopranos* (Chase, 1999) *, Sex and the City* (Star, 1998) *, The Wire* (Simon, 2002) *, Curb Your Enthusiasm* (David, 1999)*, Six Feet Under* (Ball, 2001) and *Deadwood* (Milch, 2004). Thompson states that these shows "went beyond anything imaginable in the old network era in terms of content, narrative complexity, language and lots more" (Thompson, 2007, p. xviii). It is interesting to note that HBO is still using the tagline "It's not TV, it's HBO", which underlines the fact that they are producing televisual texts that are going beyond the conventions of television. More to the point, what Thompson means by narrative complexity is in fact influenced by film genres. In 2006, Jason Mittell published an article titled *Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television* (Mittell, 2006) in order to investigate what this so called complexity stands for. In his article Mittell states that:

> "At its most basic level, narrative complexity is a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration – not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance. Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form, narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres" (Mittell, 2006, p.32)

Let us take *The Sopranos* (Chase, 1999) as an example to examine Mittell's findings about narrative complexity. Nelson states that "in form, *The Sopranos* is a generic hybrid of the mafia gangster movie genre with psychological drama and soap" (Nelson, 2007, p.27). Furthermore, Nelson also states that:

> "For one aspect of *Sopranos* does sustain all the elements of the mafia-gangster genre: male bonding; a sense of community; strong, but

> questionably reliable, loyalty amongst the crew; unpredictable violence, some of it arising from internecine feuds; sexually available women; a sense of style; family values in an Italian Catholic tradition; strong cinematic imagery" (Nelson, 2007, p.30).

Following Mittell's and Nelson's findings, it is the combination of multiple genres that makes *The Sopranos* narratively complex. Like *Twin Peaks*, *The Sopranos* combines the quintessential television form with a film genre, which is known with films like *The Big Heat* (Lang, 1953), *The Godfather* (Coppola, 1972), *Mean Streets* (Scorsese, 1973), *Scarface* (Palma, 1983), *Donnie Brasco* (Newell, 1997). *The Sopranos* falls under the category of quality television because of its cinematic ambitions in terms of content and narrative complexity.

Nevertheless, it was not only HBO that was airing quality television series with cinematic aspirations. Thompson states that:

> "By the turn of the century, quality was busting out all over the networks. As far as hour-long dramas were concerned, it was hard to find a show in the autumn of 2000 that wouldn't have fallen into the category of 'quality TV' as defined in the 1980s. *The Practice*, *Ally McBeal* and *Boston Public*; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel* and *The X- Files*; *Once and Again*, *Judging Amy* and *Providence*; *Law & Order*, *The West Wing* and *City of Angels*: the quality style was everywhere" (Thompson, 2007, p. xviii).

Nelson states that the cinematization of television is also an outcome of "established film directors are being drawn into television and bring a range of filmic vocabularies and grammars into play" (Nelson, 2007, p.11). Mittell exemplifies these established directors by stating that:

> "Many of the innovative television programs of the past twenty years have come from creators who launched their careers in film, a medium with more traditional cultural cachet: David Lynch (*Twin Peaks*) and Barry Levinson (*Homicide: Life on the Street* and *Oz*) as directors, Aaron Sorkin (*Sports Night* and *West Wing*), Joss Whedon (*Buffy, Angel* and *Firefly*), Alan Ball (*Six Feet Under*) and J.J. Abrams (*Alias* and *Lost*) as screenwriters" (Mittell, 2006, p.30-31).

Nevertheless, according to Mittell, the works of established film alumni and generic hybridity is not the only thing that makes these television shows narratively complex. Mittell examines several *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (Whedon, 1997) episodes in order to explain other characteristics that make the show narratively complex:

> "*Buffy* is probably the most accomplished show for narratively spectacular episodes, with individual episodes predicated on narrative devices like starkly limiting storytelling parameters (the silence of '*Hush*'), genre mixing (the musical episode '*Once More with Feeling'*), shifts in perspective (telling an

> adventure from the vantage point of habitual bystander Xander in '*The Zeppo*') or foregrounding an unusual narrator (Andrew's pseudo documentary in '*Storyteller*')" (Mittell, 2006, p.35 – 36).

In the case of *Breaking Bad,* I propose that all of these characteristics that are analyzed with *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* are present. The episode titled *Fly* (Johnson & Catlin & Beckett, 2010) limits the storytelling parameters because it only takes place in one location, which is the laboratory that Walt and Jesse are cooking. The episodes titled *Mas* (Renck & Beckett, 2010) and *Pilot* (Gilligan, 2008) functions together in order to create a shift in perspective. In the *Pilot* episode, Walt gives all of his savings to Jesse for him to buy a recreational vehicle that they can cook drugs with. In the episode, we never see what Jesse does with the money that Walt gave him. After an ellipsis, Jesse returns back with the vehicle that Walt asked him to buy. The episode titled *Mas,* which is an episode from the third season, starts with a teaser which functions as a flashback. In the teaser, Jesse and his friends getting drunk with Walt's money, which he gave Jesse in the *Pilot* for him to buy the vehicle. The opening teaser of *Mas* fills up an ellipsis that was made in the *Pilot* through creating a shift in perspective. Furthermore, the opening teaser of the episode titled *Kafkaesque* (Slovis & Gould & Mastras, 2010) foregrounds an unusual narrator. The episode titled *Kafkaesque* starts with a Los Pollos Hermanos commercial, which functions as a non-diegetic insert. The commercial talks about the quality of Los Pollos Hermanos products by using a male voice over that is not belonging to any character from the television series. Also, the sequence is shot with a style that is not visible in any given *Breaking Bad* episode. Considering that the pseudo-documentary style in *Storyteller* (Grabiak & Espenson, 2003) was also never used *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, both television series foregrounds an unusual narrator by changing the style that they employed before.

Let us examine *Breaking Bad* in terms of other characteristics of quality television super- genre. The prototypes of quality television were declared as 'quality' because they had cinematic ambitions and they were generic mongrels. In terms of cinematic ambitions, *Hill Street Blues* was cinematic because it was shot on location with cinema cameras instead of studio sets or theater halls. Nelson analyzes technical aspects of contemporary quality television by stating that:

> "Most "high-end" output today is shot on film or HDTV on location, with variations on the traditional processes of "cinematic" – as opposed to television studio or outside broadcast – approaches. Constructing and lighting individual shots, as distinct from two-to-three-minute studio takes, affords what is generally regarded as the higher-quality visual product" (Nelson, 2005, p.116).

Breaking Bad shares these characteristics that Nelson mentions above in order to create a cinematic and higher quality product. In an interview with Forbes magazine, Michael Slovis, the director of photography of *Breaking Bad* states that "when we started the name of the station was American Movie Classics. They considered themselves filmmakers. So they insisted that everything be shot on film" (Allen, 2013). Shot on 35mm film stock on location, the television series have a much more

cinematic look. Considering that in early days of television the camera was there to only capture live performances, this approach in contemporary television is allowing artists to address aesthetic concerns in terms of visual style.

More to the point, Vince Gilligan, the creator of *Breaking Bad*, started his career with two feature films titled *Wilder Napalm* (Caron, 1993) and *Home Fries* (Parisot, 1998) as a screenwriter. Later on, he joined the writing team of *The X Files* (Carter, 1993) and continued his career on television with shows like *Harsh Realm* (Carter, 1999), *The Lone Gunmen* (Carter & Gilligan & Shiban & Spotnitz, 2001), *Better Call Saul* (Gilligan & Gould, 2015) and *Battle Creek* (Gilligan & Shore, 2015). Following Nelson's and Mittell's train of thought, Gilligan is one of those writers and directors that turned the televisual narratives into much more cinematic ones by combining his experiences in feature films.

The other characteristic of the prototypes of quality television was genre mixing. Although I am aware that *Breaking Bad* features more than genre mixing in order to be considered narratively complex, in this thesis my aim is to focus on a single issue. In the case of genre mixing, *Breaking Bad* can be considered as a hybrid like many other shows that I mentioned above. In form, one can analyze *Breaking Bad* as a suburban drama, soap opera and gangster film besides the Western. However, my aim in this research is just to examine the narrative and visual choices that are influenced by the Western genre.

In order to analyze the television series, I will adopt genre theoretician Rick Altman's *Semantic / Syntactic Approach* (Altman, 1984), which is an aesthetic way of studying visual narratives. In the following chapter titled *The Semantics and The Syntax of the Western Genre*, I will get into the details of Altman's theory and how it functions in terms of analyzing any given genre, as well as other approaches in genre studies. By choosing an aesthetic approach to analyze *Breaking Bad*, the aim of this research will be the investigation of textual characteristics that are evident as visual references, stock narratives and stock characters which could be considered peculiar to the Western genre.

Starting with the visual references, the third chapter of this thesis titled *The Desert Landscape* will investigate the visualization of the desert in *Breaking Bad* and Western genre films. Caldwell mentions a historical trivia about the desert being an unique location for the Western by stating that:

> "Other telefilm genres, such as the half-hour westerns of the late 1950s, opened up the image in other ways. The westerns provided television with expansive landscapes, but these same images quickly became redundant as recognizable backlot settings through endless repetition. If, on shows like *Wanted: Dead or Alive*, Steve McQueen faced and fired at the viewer in stylized studio lighting, this dramatic motif was used merely as a punctuation point and framing device" (Caldwell, 1995, p.51).

The notion of repetition of the same images takes us back to the problem of shooting on actual locations. Although television history is full of Western genre

productions such as *Bonanza* (Dortort & Hamilton, 1959), *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp* (Landres & McDonald, 1955), *Little House on the Prairie* (Hanalis, 1974), *The Lone Ranger* (Trendle, 1949), *Maverick* (Huggins, 1957), *Tales of Wells Fargo* (Gruber & Brooks & Reynolds, 1957), *The Wild Wild West* (Garrison, 1965), *Cheyenne* (Huggins, 1955) and so on, these shows were not able to catch up to the quality of film Westerns production wise. As Caldwell states, the repetition of same backlot settings and the fact that these shows are shot in a studio set rather than actual locations departs them stylistically from the film Western. Caldwell explains the connection between the film and television Western by stating that:

> "The stylistic agenda of the half-hour western that followed it could be described as mindless: a blank but efficient replication of the classical Hollywood style, complete with generic establishing shots, shot-reverse shots, reaction shots, and cutaways. The importation of cinematic style did have an effect on television style in the 1950s, but it was impact of a very muted and constrained kind" (Caldwell, 1995, p.51).

Following Caldwell's statement, television Western should be seen as a visual and narrative replication of the film Western, rather than being an extension of it. In other words, television Western is constructed by using classical Western conventions. Therefore, in this thesis I will analyze the characteristics of the Western in *Breaking Bad* by using classical examples of Western film such as *The Searchers* (Ford, 1956), *Jesse James* (King, 1939), *Two Rode Together* (Ford, 1961), *Broken Arrow* (Daves, 1950), *Django* (Corbucci, 1966), *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (Eastwood, 1976), *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Leone, 1968), *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (Leone, 1966), *The Outlaw* (Hughes & Hawks, 1943), *The Wild Bunch* (Peckinpah, 1969), *Rio Bravo* (Hawks, 1959), *My Darling Clementine* (Ford, 1946), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Hill, 1969), *Red River* (Hawks & Rosson, 1948), *3:10 to Yuma* (Daves, 1957), *High Noon* (Zinnemann, 1952), *Ride the High Country* (Peckinpah, 1962) and so forth. Thus my aim will be to investigate the visual and narrative connections between *Breaking Bad* and a variety of Western films throughout the film history, without getting into any subgenres.

In the fourth chapter of this thesis titled *Border Narrative and the Frontier Myth,* I will move onto to a stock narrative of the Western genre through analyzing the desert landscape as the border between the wilderness and the civilization. Considering the fact that *Breaking Bad* actually takes place in a border town between Mexico and The United States, I will examine the various ways that the television series is constructed on border narratives by finding connections between *Breaking Bad* and Western films. More to the point, the fourth chapter will contain other stock narratives that are deriving from the border narrative such as captivity and revenge storylines.

At last, the fifth and the sixth chapters titled *The Outlaw Heroes* and *The Detective / Outlaw Narrative* are aiming to analyze two stock characters of the Western genre in *Breaking Bad.* Through applying the visual and narrative characteristics of the outlaw and the detective stock characters that can be found in a variety of Western films, these two chapters will examine Walter White and Jesse Pinkman as the outlaws and

Hank Schrader as the detective of a modern day Western.

2. The Semantics and The Syntax of the Western Genre

> "Albuquerque is just a beautiful part of the country, a very striking part of the country. It's got this sort of aridity and this beautiful, stark, desolate nature to it — especially once you get out of town a little ways. It makes me think of old Westerns. I watched hundreds of Westerns growing up, and I like to think of our show as a modern-day Western" (Neuman, 2008).

This thesis aims to explore Vince Gilligan's statement about *Breaking Bad* being a modern-day Western. Gilligan, refers to the presence of Albuquerque city for calling the show a Western, so he bases this claim according to the location. In fact, location is an important key element to define Western films. Genre theoretician Barry Langford claims that:

> "The Western is, of course, supremely a genre of exteriors. More accurately, it is a genre where definitive experiences and understanding are usually found out of doors, preferably in the unconfined spaces of praire, sierra or desert" (Langford, 2005, p.64).

The very first episode of *Breaking Bad* opens with several long shots of New Mexico desert, without any actors on-screen. Before introducing any given character, Gilligan decides to first turn the imagery of the desert into a character. But on the other hand, a straight up Western television series *Deadwood* does not depends on the repetitive use of long shots to show us the landscape. In his article titled *"Laws and Every Other Damn Thing": Auhority, Bad Faith and the Unlikely Success of Deadwood,* David Drysdale states that: "The cinematography in *Deadwood* is a departure from that of the Ford-style classical Western, which tended, of course, to favor grand, panoramic landscape shots, emphasizing the sheer size of the West"(Drysdale, 2006, p. 139). Even though desert landscapes are an important part of the genre, is it enough to label a narrative as a Western? More importantly, is it the only element that makes *Breaking Bad* a modern-day western?

Besides the statement of the shows creator, also film scholars referred to Western films in order to discuss *Breaking Bad*. In the introduction of the edited book titled *Breaking Bad: Critical Essays on the Contexts, Politics, Style and Reception of the Television Series,* David Pierson states that "the southwest region […] is an area rich in the myths and traditions of the Old West, especially those of the Western outlaw figure" (Pierson, 2014, p. 7). With this claim, Pierson points out the fact that it is not only the landscape that gives the show a "Western look", but it is also about the myths and stock characters that comes with the southwest region. The Western genre is full of famous outlaw figures, such as Jesse James, Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid. Also, it is not wrong to label Walter White as an outlaw since the whole television series can be seen as his transformation from a humble chemistry teacher to a vicious outlaw. This claim also brings a sub-genre into question, which is the "outlaw western". But, this is not the only sub-genre that film scholars mention while discussing the television series.

In the same edited book, Rossend Sanchez Baro claims that “in most cases, we can see extreme-close ups on individual objects with the open wide shots of the desert of New Mexico, another aesthetic brand of the show that seems to be an homeage to Sergio Leone’s spaghetti westerns” (Baro, 2014, p. 143). Also in another scholary work about *Breaking Bad*, which is an unpublished master’s thesis titled *Cinematizing the Bad-Land: Vince Gilligan’s Breaking Bad and the Visual Stylistic Eclecticism of Contemporary American Basic Cable Television Drama,* a same kind of approach is to be found. In his thesis, Ari Purnama states that:

> “Through importing the un-classical shot structure onto its shot-by-shot juxtapositions of different visual framings, *Breaking Bad* reveals another signal of cinematic aspiration that may arguably be influenced by the Western genre, more especially by the sub-genre of the spaghetti Western represented by the works of Sergio Leone” (Purnama, 2011, p.77).

It seems like whereas the “outlaw western” sub-genre shows itself through the myths of the Old West, “spaghetti western” derives from the aesthetic qualities of the show. But yet again, is it accurate to define a genre just because of its aesthetic qualities? Before going into the characteristics of the Western genre, first we have to define what is a genre in the first place.

The origins of the word “genre” comes from French, and it means literally “a kind” (“Genre”, 2014). As a noun, it means “a style, or category of art, music, or literature” (“Genre”, 2014). Despite the fact that there is no mention of “film genre” and it is only generalized as a “category of art”, by the definition one can assume two things about the definition of genre: (1) It is a category of films that are mentioning the same subjects or (2) it’s a repetitive style which eventually created a category around itself. If it is a category, then it has to come with a catalogue to look and choose from. In general, the fact that there are categories of films considered as “genre”, but labeling of these categories can be seen as making catalogues of different genres. Such as the catalogue of horror films, comedy films, Western films and so forth.

The scholary work around the subject of genre started because of the need for categorizing literary works. In his book *Film/Genre*, genre theoretician Rick Altman claims that “if all philosophy is a footnote to Plato, then all genre theory is little more than a footnote to Aristotle” (Altman, 1999, p.20). In his academic article titled *The Idea of Genre in the American Cinema*, Edward Buscombe gives details about Aristotle’s work about genre:

> “The notion that there are different kinds of literature, with different techniques and subjects, was first developed by Aristotle; in his *Poetics*, he tried to separate what he called poetry into a number of categories such as tragedy, epic, lyric and so forth. His purpose was to decide what were the particular qualities of each distinctive kind, and what each kind could be expected to do and not do. He then tried to establish their relative

> importance, and after much debate concluded that tragedy was the highest kind of poetry” (Buscombe, 1970, p.12).

Even though Aristotle’s aim was to find the highest kind of poetry, this is not the case when it comes to film genre studies. According to Jane Feuer, film genre theoreticians are divided into three different approaches:

> “*The aesthetic approach* includes all attempts to define genre in terms of a system of conventions that permits artistic expression, especially involving individual authorship. The aesthetic approach also includes attempts to assess whether an individual work fulfills or transcends its genre. *The ritual approach* sees genre as an exchange between industry and audience, an exchange through which a culture speaks to itself. *The ideological approach* views genre as an instrument of control. At the industrial level, genres assure the advertisers of an audience for their messages. At the textual level, genres are ideological insofar as they serve to reproduce the dominant ideology of the capitalist system” (Feuer, 1992, p. 109).

So, if we think about *Breaking Bad* according to these three different approaches, the focus of the research will differ. For example, if we look at it in terms of the ritual approach, the “Western-ness” is there in order to sell the product to a previously defined audience. To understand the choices of this previously defined audience, one has to go back to the broadcasting history of AMC (the television channel that produced and aired *Breaking Bad)* and look at the importance of the Western genre in the channel’s programming schedule. With a brief research, one can get the information that the first hour-long miniseries produced by AMC was in fact a Western titled *Broken Trail* (Hill, 2006). After that, in 2011 the broadcasting company produced another Western show titled *Hell on Wheels* (Gayton & Gayton, 2011 – present) which is currently in its fifth season. Therefore, in terms of ritual approach, the audience of AMC is already defined with their expectation of Western themed products. However, instead of seeing *Breaking Bad* mainly as a product, I propose to see it as a text, which brings us to the aesthetic approach. Whereas ritual approach looks at the relationship between the audience and the industry, aesthetic approach looks at the relationship between the audience and the text.

In his academic article titled *The Idea of Genre in American Cinema*, Edward Buscombe offers us a way to look at the aesthetics of a genre film by proposing that genre films have “outer” and “inner” forms (Buscombe, 1970, p.14). He, then, explains his idea about the outer form using the Western genre’s conventions:

> “Since we are dealing with a visual medium we ought surely to look for our

> defining criteria in what we actually see on the screen. It is immediately apparent that there before our eyes is a whole range of "outer forms." There is, first of all, the setting, the chief glory of many of the films. Often it is outdoors, in very particular kinds of country: deserts, mountains, plains, woods" (Buscombe, 1970, p.15).

So, what other scholars are discussing about *Breaking Bad* being a modern-day Western, is simply the show's "outer" form. Even though Buscombe never properly gets into what he means by "inner" form, Rick Altman extends Buscombe's way of looking at genre films by proposing a semantic/syntactic approach to film genre (Altman, 1984, p.27), which is the approach I choose in order to analyze *Breaking Bad*.

The definition of semantic and syntactic derives from linguistic studies. By definition, semantic means "relating to meaning in language or logic" ("Semantic", 2014). For example, letters or words by themselves relates to a meaning. But only a certain arrangement of words and phrases can create well formed sentences, which is the definition of syntax ("Syntax", 2014). So, a letter or a word is just a sign or a symbol, in other words, it is the semantics of a language. When the combination of these symbols manages to create a structure, it is now a syntax. But then, what is the equivalent of semantic and syntactic approach in film genre studies?

This approach is first proposed by Altman in 1984, with an article titled *A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre* (Altman, 1984, p.27). But then, he extended his view of this approach with a book fully dedicated to film genre. In his book, Altman states that:

> "The semantic/syntactic approach to genre is based on the recognition that generic labels are commonly attached to categories deriving their existence from two quite different sources. At times we invoke generic terminology because multiple texts share the same building blocks (these *semantic* elements might be common topics, shared plots, key scenes, character types, familiar objects or recognizable shots and sounds). At other times we recognize generic affiliation because a group of texts organizes those building blocks in a similar manner (as seen through such shared *syntactic* aspects as plot structure, character relationships or image and sound montage)" (Altman, 1999, p.89).

In this sense, the desert landscape or the outlaw stock character is just a building block, therefore a semantic element of the Western genre. But the syntax is hidden inside the structure that brings together all of these semantic elements. So what Buscombe proposes as "outer form" is the equivalent for the semantics and the

“inner form” is the equivalent for the syntax of a genre. In any case, in order to define the semantics or the syntax of any given genre, we first need a large number of texts. Which is defined as a “corpus of films” amongst genre theoreticians. Altman states that: “Genres are thought to reside in a particular topic and structure or in a corpus of films that share a specific topic and structure” (Altman, 1999, p. 23).

In order to share a specific topic and structure, genre films have to repeat the same things in order to be included in a corpus of films. Only if they are repeated in a corpus of films, then we as film scholars have a chance to talk about a certain genre. In the case of the Western, Edward Buscombe states that “the western seems to me the most important of the genres, the one in which the largest body of good work has been done” (Buscombe, 1970, p.19). As one can see, Buscombe champions the Western genre as the most important one not because of a value judgment, but because it has a large number of texts than any other genre for a film scholar to analyze. Because there are a great number of Westerns, it’s easier to define the repetitive semantics and the syntax of the genre. But this issue with repetitiveness is also causing other problems. Rick Altman states that:

> “The repetitive nature of genre films tends to diminish the importance of each film’s ending, along with the cause-and-effect sequence that leads to that conclusion. Instead, genre films depend on the *cumulative* effect of the film’s often repeated situations, themes and icons” (Altman, 1999, p.25).

In the case of *Breaking Bad*, if one watches the show as a Western, the ending is pretty predictable. It is the ending of almost all Western films, which is a climatic shoot-out (Gilligan, 2013). Altman claims that in genre films “[…] the same fundamental conflicts are resolved over and over again in similar fashion – the same shoot-out, the same sneak attack […]” (Altman, 1999, p.24-25**).** But then again, is it okay to define *Breaking* Bad as a Western just because it shares this ending structure with the Western films? What are these repeated elements that defines the Western genre? Or in Altman’s terms, what is the semantics and syntax of the Western genre?

I decide to start with the semantics of the Western genre, because –in linguistic terms- in order to understand a sentence, first we have to learn the letters and words. At this point, what we need is a prototype to work on. In his book *Film/Genre*, Rick Altman claims that “once identified, the genre’s first appearance on film is treated as a generic prototype” (Altman, 1999, p.30). In the same book, Altman shares a “widely shared” opinion (Altman, 1994, p.34) about the first Western film being Edwin S. Porter’s *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter, 1903) In fact, it seems like there’s a consensus on *The Great Train Robbery* being the first Western film. In his book dedicated only to Western genre, historian Richard Slotkin defines the film as the “foundation of the Western as a movie genre” (Slotkin, 1992, p.231). Now that the prototype is identified, it is time to look for the semantics of *The Great Train Robbery.* Using Altman’s theory, genre theoretician Barry Langford defines

some of the semantic elements of the film by stating that:

> “The Western's semantic constituents coalesced at a remarkably early stage in the history not only of the genre but of cinema itself. Edwin S. Porter's eight-minute *The Great Train Robbery*, a landmark in the history of narrative cinema and often claimed as 'the first Western', […] its principal elements would become instantly recognizable iconographic and narrative touchstones for the genre: the masked outlaws, […] the fight atop the moving train,[…], the climatic shoot-out” (Langford, 2005, p.56).

Eventually Langford gives us a list of semantics to work on. The first element is “the masked outlaw”. As I mentioned earlier, the figure of outlaw is a very important iconographic component of the Western genre. Before going into the importance of outlaws in Western genre, first I have to define what an outlaw is. In his book *Outlaw Heroes in Myth and History*, Graham Seal claims that “the archetypal outlaw hero is the mythical Robin Hood” (Seal, 2011, p.2) and goes further to explain the foundations of this myth:

> “At its most fundamental, the outlaw hero tradition is invoked when a criminal robs the rich and powerful, sharing the proceeds with the poor and oppressed who, in return, provide sympathy and active support” (Seal, 2011, p. 2-3).

Now, let us remember the fact that Walter White’s primary concern (at least at the beginning of the series) was to make money for his “poor” family before he dies from cancer. In order to do that, he creates a product, which gives him the ability to take money from the “rich”. In this case, the “rich” being the drug dealers and the owner of a massive fast-food franchise. Of course, it can be debatable to claim that Walter White gets sympathy and active support from his family, but the foundation that derives from the Robin Hood myth is still there. So, we have a very key element to define the character as an outlaw hero. Now, it is time to look at what the outlaw hero represents in the Western genre.

Richard Slotkin, defines the world of outlaw as “usually identified with the natural wilderness” (Slotkin, 1992, p.147). In another scholary work about the Western genre, Douglas Pye gives an example for this notion, referencing *The Searchers*:

> “One thread within the film is the idea of the solitary, invulnerable, wandering hero, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), for whom life within the settlements is impossible. He appears from the wilderness as the story

opens, and when his job is finished he returns to the desert again" (Pye, 1975, p.215**)**

Of course *The Searchers* is not the only example to give. In *Unforgiven* (Eastwood, 1992) the outlaw hero portrayed by Clint Eastwood, retrieves back to the wilderness after a final showdown. After a fade to black, we see him in the wilderness with an extreme long shot and the movie ends. An earlier example can be found in *Stagecoach* (Ford, 1939). The outlaw hero, again portrayed by John Wayne, returns back to the wilderness when he finishes his job. The last scene of the movie is John Wayne and his future wife, riding their horses into the desert. To give a recent example, in *The Lone Ranger* (Verbinski, 2013) the same thing happens. After a final showdown, the outlaw rejects the civilization even though they are ready to accept him. In the last scene, we see the outlaw and the Indian riding into the wilderness together. The outlaw character in *The Lone Ranger* is not an outlaw at the beginning of the film, in fact he is a lawman dedicated to the rules of civilization. But when he comes to terms with his outlawry, he rejects the opportunity to be a part of a civilized country. For that reason, he has to return back to the wilderness.

Another stock character comes to the scene with the outlaw figure, which is the detective. Since there is an outlaw, there has to be a detective or a sheriff to catch him. Richard Slotkin explains the characteristics of the detective by claiming that "the outlaw becomes a hero who resists the forces of order, […] the detective defends the […] social order, but does so in the style of an outlaw" (Slotkin, 1992, p.154). This notion of including the outlaw and the detective at the same time is explained by Rick Altman. He states that "genre films regularly depend on dual protagonists and *dualistic* structures" (Altman, 1999, p.24). This dualistic structure mentioned by Altman can be found in many Western films. For example, the whole narrative of *3:10 to Yuma* revolves around a hired detective trying to put an outlaw on a train. Another example is *The Outlaw*, which tells the story of a sheriff named Pat Garrett trying to catch the famous outlaws Billy The Kid and Doc Holliday. The film's narrative is structured in order to show the two sides of the story. Richard Slotkin proposes another characteristic for the detective stock character by stating that: "The detectives are unambiguously heroic […], whether they appear as protagonists or merely as pursuers of the outlaws, and they consistently assert the primacy of law in any civil society" (Slotkin, 1992, p.148). All of these characters that I mentioned above, defends the law by asserting violence. Whereas the outlaw acts unambiguously in order to corrupt the law, the detective acts in the same way, but to protect the law. So they protect the law in the style of an outlaw, as Slotkin would have it.

If we go back to the semantics of *The Great Train Robbery*, the second element proposed by Langford is "the fight atop the moving train" (Langford, 2005, p.56). Even though it is precisely defined as a fight, I propose to look at it as train robbery in general. Again, this semantic element can be found in a number of Western films. Perhaps the most iconic one is in *Jesse James*, which is Jesse's first act as a masked

outlaw. Other examples can be found in a variety of genre films, such as *The Wild Bunch*, *The Train Robbers* (Kennedy, 1973) and so forth.

The last semantic quality proposed by Langford is “the climatic shoot-out” (Langford, 2005, p.56). As I mentioned earlier in order to explain the repetitiveness of genre films, the “climatic shoot-out” was defined by Altman as a recurring scene in Western genre (Altman, 1999, p.24-25). Indeed, it is the most repeated scene one can find in any given Western film. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Ford, 1962), *Shane* (Stevens, 1953), *Ride the High Country*, *The Magnificent Seven* (Sturges, 1960), *My Darling Clementine* (Ford, 1946) and many other Western films present their climaxes in a final shoot-out. This shoot-out scenes, brings another semantic element in question, which is the notion of being a *gunfighter.* Richard Slotkin explains the figure of gunfighter by giving examples from two Western films:

> “The […] figure of the gunfighter similarly exaggerates a skill that had been merely one of the standard attributes of all cowboy heroes. Jesse James used his quickness with a gun to avenge his mother and to rob trains; Ford’s Wyatt Earp shot it out with the Clantons in *My Darling Clementine*.” (Slotkin, 1992, p. 380-381)

Robert Langford champions the figure of the gunfighter as a “key element” (Langford, 2005, p.67) in Western genre. Inevitably, this figure principally gives us another semantic element, which is the iconography of guns. Edward Buscombe gives us very specific details about the type of guns that are used in Western films:

> “There are the various tools of the trade, principally weapons, and of these, principally guns. They are usually specifically identified: Colt 45’s, Winchester and Springfield rifles, shotguns for certain situations (such as robbing banks or facing a numerically superior enemy)” (Buscombe, 1970, p.15).

For example, in the climatic shoot-out of *The Unforgiven*, Clint Eastwood first confronts his enemies with a shotgun. The reason for this is that his enemies are numerically superior to him. When he finishes most of them with the shotgun, he then switches back to a Colt 45 revolver. Another example occurs in *Jesse James.* Jesse kills his mother’s murderer with a Colt 45. In *The Great Train Robbery* all of the outlaws are using Colt 45 revolvers. In fact, the ending of *The Great Train Robbery* features an extra-diegetic shot of a cowboy shooting directly at the camera with a Colt 45. Barry Langford explains the importance of this shot by stating that:

> The film's status has undoubtedly been enhanced by the famous extra-diegetic shotI of the mustachioed outlaw shooting directly at the camera, an iconic image that resonates through the subsequent century of Hollywood's most popular and prolific genre (Sergio Leone echoes Porter's act of specular aggression when Henry Fonda fires at the camera in *Once Upon a Time in the West*) (Langford, 2005, p.56).

By using Barry Langford's proposals for the semantics of *The Great Train Robbery*, we arrived at six different elements. Four of them are stock characters, which are; The outlaw hero, the detective and the gunfighter. However, being a gunfighter is a general concept rather than one single stock character. The professionalism towards guns is a common element in the outlaws, detectives and the cavalry as well. This professionalism is not about being the best, but being paid for what you are doing. The other two elements are visual components, which are guns and train robberies (or trains in general). Also, at the beginning I argued that the landscape (particularly the desert) is an important semantic element too.

So far, we only talked about male characters but what about the women in the Western genre? One can argue that the Western is primarily a male dominant genre. In fact, Langford states that a great number of scholars analyzed "Western as an important discourse for mediating and refining American white male identity" (Langford, 2005, p.60). Rick Altman, comments on the difference between semantics of male and female characters by stating that:

> "In western texts, regular alternation between male and female characters creates expectation of the semantic elements implied by romance, while alternation between two males throughout a text has implied […] confrontation and the semantics of the duel" (Altman, 1984, p.39).

This implied romance presents women as an object rather than a character. The women in Western films are very much stereotyped and therefore predictable. In her academic article titled *Whores, Ladies and Calamity Jane: Gendered Roles and the Women of HBO's Deadwood*, Kathleen E. R. Smith explains the image of the Western woman by stating that:

> "Historians of the American West generally depicted the Westering woman as the "gentle tamer", a lady of some refinement who, though resigned to her harsh lot of monotonous drudgery, was determined to ensure her children a better life by imposing […] civilization on the American wilderness" (Smith, K. E. R., 2006, p.80).

From this generalization, one can say that the primary characteristic of the Western woman is being a good wife or a companion, therefore an object for the male character. Because of this refinement and the task of imposing the values of civilization, women are very much against all the crime and violence. Richard Slotkin, explains this notion by giving an example from *Jesse James*:

> "Zee accepts Jesse's initial step into outlawry as justified by his defense and then by his avenging of his mother. But she opposes his war on the railroad, believing the outlawry will get "in his blood" and make him "wild", like an animal" (Slotkin, 1992, p.299).

Of course, this attitude of the women is not only limited to the outlaw hero. The detectives, sheriffs or the marshals (or generally lawmen) are being treated in the same way too. For example *High Noon*'s (Zinnemann, 1952) narrative revolves around a marshal who receives the information that his arch enemy is coming to town with the noon train. An outlaw, whom he put in jail few years ago. The whole film is about his decision to stay in town and wait for the climatic shoot-out, while everybody in the town simply tells him to leave. His wife, Amy, always tries to stop him from facing all the violence that the outlaw can bring. When it is understood that his decision is to stay, his wife Amy threatens him that she is going to leave with the noon train, with or without him, hoping that he will finally change his mind. But in the end, during the climatic shoot-out, Amy jumps from the train and despite her hate of violence, she shoots one of the outlaws attacking her husband. Same kind of attitude can be seen in Slotkin's example *Jesse James* too. Even though Zee judges Jesse's choice to be an outlaw, eventually she helps him through in his outlaw career and accepts who he is. Therefore, this theme of women being redemptive meaning that they try to make things better or more acceptable is a very key semantic element in order to put them in a previously defined stereotype by genre conventions. But in the Wild West, "making things better" is usually identified with the religion.

This theme of trying to make things better, inevitably, implies that there is in fact something better to do, or, better to be than an outlaw. As Slotkin states in the previous quote about *Jesse James*, this brings out the justification of being an outlaw, therefore justification for all the violence (Slotkin, 1992, p.299). Jesse's initial step to outlawry is justified by his mother's killing (Slotkin, 1992, p.299). Another example can be given from *The Searchers*, after they kill an Indian brutally with a knife, they discover that the Indian wears Debbie's bracelet. This time, the killing is

justified because they discover that this is one of the Indians that probably kidnapped, raped or even murdered Debbie. With this act, audience is forced to making a choice about whether this violence is justified or not. In *Unforgiven,* Clint Eastwood draws a portrait of a retired outlaw. We are always aware that he did some bad things back in the day, but he is just not into that kind of violence right now. At the end of the movie, during the climatic shoot-out, he decides to turn back to his old days because the marshal tries to kill him. The whole reason of violence is our protagonist finds himself cornered and therefore the violence is the only way to survive. This notion of "who started the violence first" is visible in all these examples. Through identifying violence with a strong cause, these films are opening the debate for the audience to justify it, or not.

All of these semantic elements of the genre come together to create a bigger picture. In linguistic terms, so far I talked about the letters or words of the Western alphabet. But what is the meaning that they create when they come together? In order to understand this, one should turn back at the history and look into the main syntax of the genre, which is the *frontier myth*. Richard Slotkin wrote a trilogy about this subject and the last book of this series titled *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (Slotkin, 1992) which has its entire focus on the frontier myth's representation in the Western genre.

The meaning of the frontier is "a line or border separating two countries" ("Frontier", 2014). Slotkin explains the importance of the frontier by quoting the American historian who first analyzed it:

> "Frederick Jackson Turner had delivered his epoch-making address on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in which he asserted that the contemporary crisis of American development had arisen from the closing of the "old frontier" and the delay in finding a new one" (Slotkin, 1992, p.3).

The closing of the frontier, which means that United States reaches all the land that they can reach, so it is basically the when every single land is owned by the United States. In 1890, this is presented to the American nation with the thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner. Slotkin states that the "core scenario" of the frontier myth is the "savage war" and "in savage war one side or the other must perish, whether by limitless murder or by the degrading experience of subjugation and torture" (Slotkin, 1992, p.12). With this statement, Slotkin addresses the American movement from the East to the West. This constant movement starts in 1492 when Christopher Columbus discovered America and, as Richard Slotkin states, ends in 1890, "at the moment when the landed frontier of the United States was officially declared 'closed', the moment when 'Frontier' became primarily a term of ideological rather than geographical reference" (Slotkin, 1992, p.4).

Genre theoretician Barry Langford proposes another characteristic for the frontier by stating that: “in reality the frontier was always and by definition mobile, not a clear boundary but an uncertain and shifting; prospect alongside, or just ahead, of the leading edge of the White colonial advance across the North American continent” (Langford, 2005, p. 63). In fact, this constant movement from East to West is what makes it mobile because the expansion nearly continued for 400 years. But what is the underlying meaning that frontier myth brings to the Western genre? Richard Slotkin states that:

> “The moral landscape of the Frontier Myth is divided by significant borders, of which the wilderness/civilization, Indian/White border is the most basic. The American must cross the border into ‘Indian country’ and experience a ‘regression’ to a more primitive and natural condition of life so that the false values of the ‘metropolis’ can be purged and a new, purified social contract enacted**” (**Slotkin, 1992, p.14).

These borders inevitably create binary oppositions, which is at the core of any given genre. As previously stated by Rick Altman, genre films tend to have dualistic structures or dual protagonists (Altman, 1999, p.24). By having this structure, genres are showing both sides of these suggested borders or binary oppositions. For example, by making the outlaw and the detective protagonists, genre films show the distinction between civilization/wilderness. The detective symbolizes the law and the civilization that West should have. But on the other hand, the outlaw symbolizes the wilderness and the savagery that the West embodied within the myth. For example, in *High Noon* such an approach is visible. The character of the marshal is always shown us as a good man, a protector of the law. But on the other side, the outlaws that are coming to kill him is only expected to perform violent acts, just because the sheriff is in the town. Another approach to the subject is by creating the dualistic structure between Indian and white men. For example, in *The Searchers*, the whole narrative is telling the story of the search for Debbie, a young girl kidnapped by the Indians. In order to find her, the heroes have to pass to the other side of the border and experience the wilderness. In the narrative, Indians are always mentioned as savages and capable of giving people madness. In fact, Ethan Edwards (protagonist of the film, portrayed by John Wayne) is pretty determined to kill Debbie when they find her, because he thinks that Indians already made her “one of them”. These dualistic structures, opens the justification of violence to debate. By seeing every aspect and every binary opposition inside the story, the text leave the decision to the audience to decide “how much is too much”.

No matter which stock character or stock narrative the genre film embodies, this binary opposition of civilization/wilderness is always there. Rick Altman, explains this notion by quoting another genre theoretician John Cawelti:

> “John Cawelti attempts to systematize the western […]: the Western is

> always set on or near a frontier, where man encounters his uncivilized double. The Western thus take place on the border between two lands, between two eras, and with a hero who remains divided between two value systems (for he combines the town's morals with the outlaw skills)" (Altman, 1984, p.31 – 32).

Therefore, the border narrative is the core syntax of the genre. By showing the crossing of the border or structuring the story around the differences between borders, the Western aims to show both sides of the Wild West. The semantics of gunfighting and violence are structured around this syntax, or in other words, the bigger picture. Richard Slotkin states that the "violence is central to both the historical development of the Frontier and its mythic representation" (Slotkin, 1992, p.11).

But what are the characteristics of the heroes that are crossing these borders? Whether it is an outlaw or a detective who is determined to cross the border of wilderness/civilization, are there any common ground shared by these western heroes? Richard Slotkin, defines the Western hero by stating that:

> "The action of the narrative requires that these borders be crossed by a hero (or group) whose character is so mixed that he (or they) can operate effectively on both sides of the line. Through this transgression of the borders, through combat with the dark elements on the other side, the heroes reveal the meaning of the frontier line (that is, the distinctions of value it symbolizes) even as they break it down. In the process they evoke the elements in themselves (or in their society) that correspond to the 'dark' (Slotkin, 1992, p. 351-352).

So, then again, the definition of the hero is made, using the presence of the border narrative. In order to evoke the dark elements, the hero must cross the border, therefore witness the wilderness. This notion of the ability for acting effectively at both sides of the frontier is one of the main characteristics of the western hero, provided by the syntax of the frontier myth. Therefore, the violence that is practiced by the western hero is always justified anyhow, by presenting the hero in "wilderness", where every violent act is possible and open to debate about its justification. By showing the violence as an inevitable outcome of the wilderness, the western heroes are always expected to be present in violent acts. Richard Slotkin proposes another important characteristic of this kind of violence by claiming that:

> "As the "man who knows the Indians," the frontier hero stands between the opposed worlds of savagery and civilization, acting sometimes as mediator or interpreter between races and cultures but more often as civilization's most

> effective instrument against savagery – a man who knows to think and fight like an Indian, to turn their own methods against them" (Slotkin, 1992, p.16).

The notion of being the "man who knows the Indians" presented to the audience by creating the hero as a man who already spent time in wilderness. This characteristic of the hero brings out a previously mentioned subject in question; the hero appearing from the wilderness in the beginning of the story, and his return back to the wilderness in the end (Pye, 1975, p.215). By presenting the hero in the wilderness at the beginning of the film, he is represented as a man who knows these lands that everyone else fear to go into. But in the end, the hero has to return to the wilderness, because as a mediator between two worlds and an active user of violence, he does not have a place in the system of civilization. He embodies everything that the civilization fear from.

The characteristic of the frontier being mobile, brings out other races into question. For example, Richard Slotkin argues that Vietnam war films presents the new frontier, but keeps the structure of the Western by stating a fact from history:

> "Seven years after Kennedy's nomination, American troops would be describing Vietnam as 'Indian country' and search-and-destroy missions as a game of 'Cowboys and Indians'; and Kennedy's ambassador to Vietnam would justify 'Indians' away from the 'fort' so that the 'settlers' could plant 'corn' (Slotkin, 1992, p.3).

Following this historical fact, this notion of finding new frontiers can be applied to other races and countries as well. In the case of *Breaking Bad*, this border is presented as Mexico and the syntax of wilderness/civilization dichotomy comes from the Drug War of cartels, rather than the savage war. In his academic article titled *Not Your Average Mexican: Breaking Bad and the Destruction of Latino Stereotypes*, Andrew Howe addresses this issue by stating the historical background for this war:

> "The Mexican Drug War, which has raged since late 2006 through this book's delivery to press, tens of thousands of Mexicans have been killed as various cartels fight not only the Mexican military and police but also each other over trafficking corridors to the United States" (Howe, 2014, p. 95).

But the presence of Mexico border is also a very common element in Western genre, since it is an actual border that Western heroes have to deal with. For example, in *Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid* two outlaws aim to reach Mexico, because the law gets too close. Therefore Mexico is presented as being still a lawless community that an outlaw can live in. *The Outlaw's* setting is New Mexico, just like *Breaking Bad.*

Also in *The Wild Bunch* the Mexico border narrative is present. Genre theoretician Barry Langford explains the presence of different races by claiming that:

> "Unlike other genres, race was already explicitly a core element of the Western, since dramatizing the settling of the frontier necessitated depicting relations between White settlers or soldiers and the indigenous Native American population. Issues of miscegenation and interracial conflict were carried over wholesale from the Western's principal narrative sources, from eighteenth-century captivity narratives to dime novels and melodramas, typically focusing on White-Indian relations but with some treatment of Hispanic characters too" (Langford, 2005, p.73).

With this statement, Langford proposes another syntax for the genre, which is the captivity narrative as an other way to structure a Western film's story. As previously mentioned, *The Searchers*'s whole narrative is about Debbie's captivity amongst the Indians. Another example can be given from *3:10 to Yuma*, in which the figure of outlaw is under the captivity of the detective. In fact, his hands are tied for a very long time in the film. In *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (Leone, 1966) the character of Tuco (a crazy Mexican) is held by Blondie (an outlaw portrayed by Clint Eastwood) in the beginning of the film. This syntax of the captivity narrative, again presents us two sides of the core binary opposition of wilderness and civilization.

Inevitably, the presence of Mexico brings another sub-genre in question, which is the "Mexico Western". So far, I talked about two different sub-genres; outlaw western and Spaghetti Western. However, I propose to see the genre as a whole instead of dividing it into various categories. For example, not every Western film featuring an outlaw can be categorized as an "outlaw Western" because the figure of outlaw is a stock character rather than a sub-genre. In the same way, not every Western that at some point takes place in Mexico can be categorized as "Mexico Western". When it comes to "spaghetti Western", the situation is a little different because this time the division of sub-genre addresses the country that the film has been made, rather than a semantic element. In any case, my aim is to find the most common semantic elements in Western genre. In other words, what is it that makes the Western so easily recognizable without dividing into sub-genres. I think, when a spectator come across to a Western film, in television for example, there are certain elements that makes the spectator decide that he or she is watching a Western for sure. When such a situation happens, sub-genres are not the first thing that comes to a spectators mind. It is the easily recognizable semantics of the genre that makes the spectator immediately decide that he or she is watching a Western. Therefore, I propose that the relationship between the audience and the text can be analyzed without talking about certain sub-genres. Rick Altman addresses this issue by stating that: " […] a growing production of "Wild West films", "Western chase films", "Western comedies", "Western melodramas", "Western romances" and "Western epics", solidified into a genre called simply the "Western"" (Altman, 1999, p. 36).

But what about the other genres that presents these kind of moral borders by using the violence as a key motif, like say, gangster genre? For example, one can argue that *Breaking Bad* is a gangster narrative and tells the story of a gangster's life. This claim of genre hybridity makes me ask another question: Can genre be a pure notion? Or more importantly, can genres be mixed? Rick Altman claims that "genre mixing not only easy, but virtually obligatory" (Altman, 1999, p.132). Barry Langford explains this notion by giving the Western as an example: "Westerns are as prone to generic mixing as any other genre. Moreover, as we shall see, the genre's syntax (in Altman's terms) has not only varied in some important ways over time but has developed unevenly in different intra-generic strains in the same period" (Langford, 2005, p.55). But Richard Slotkin looks at the subject from a different approach and claim that in fact the Western and the gangster genres are connected somehow:

> "The continuity of theme and structure that links Westerns and gangster films is, I think, primarily the result of their common function as vehicles for a continuously developing mythology. The gangster genre absorbed a central element of the mythic charge of the Western and adapted its mythic material to the concerns and imagery of the Depression and the New Deal. The story of the good-badman had been the conventional device for exploring the meaning of the transition from Frontier to Civilization, from the regime of the wild male it had posed the civilization/savagery dichotomy in stark and racial terms; in its outlaw variant, it queried more specifically the difference between "natural" and instinctive codes of honor, justice, fair play, and revenge on the one hand and civilized law and order on the order. But although gangster film modernized the imagery and historical referents attached to the mythic story, it did not fundamentally transform the underlying structure of the myth itself; nor did it drastically depart from the narrative conventions of the Western genre" (Slotkin, 1992, p.265).

With this claim, Slotkin addresses the syntax of the two genres rather than the semantics, because he talks about the narrative conventions and previously defined binary opposition of wilderness/civilization. In this thesis, however I am aware of the fact that the show can be analyzed in terms of gangster genre, my main focus will be the Western. I propose that *Breaking Bad* may not be a straight up Western, but with the usage of the familiar semantics of the genre, *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan aims to address the syntax of the generic strain. So in linguistic terms, Gilligan uses symbols from the Western in order to bring out the wilderness/civilization dichotomy of the genre. Rick Altman states that "genre is located neither in a common semantic nor in a common syntax, in the combined power of a dual correspondence" (Altman, 1999, p.90). Therefore, my aim is to find the semantic and the syntax of the Western genre used in *Breaking Bad* that I defined in this theory chapter, in order to explore the "power of dual

correspondence" that Altman proposes with his theory.

3. The Desert Landscape

> "The history of a movie genre is the story of the conception, elaboration, and acceptance of a special kind of space: an imaged landscape which evokes authentic places and times, but which becomes, in the end, completely identified with the fictions created about it" (Slotkin, 1992, p.233).

When it comes to the Western genre, this "imaged landscape" that Slotkin talks about is clearly the desert landscape of the West. Many genre films such as *Shane*, *My Darling Clementine, The Searchers*, *The Outlaw*, *Ride the High Country, Red River* and *Lone Star* (Sayles, 1996) opens with long shots of the desert landscape. *Breaking Bad* shares this opening structure with the Western films. The first three images that we see contains the desert landscape and the rocky mountains of New Mexico desert. Barry Langford states that "it is after all not the rich loam of Missouri or Idaho but the red dust of Arizona and the austere peaks of the Rockies that supply the genre's most readily recognizable landscapes" (Langford, 2005, p.70). But of course, it is also important to investigate what is happening narratively inside these long shots as well.

After watching the desert landscape without any actors on screen, we see Walter White's trousers falling down from the sky to the desert. Walter passes over it with a speeding van. In terms of the Western genre conventions, what is actually happening is the introduction of the outlaw character, surrounded by the desert landscape. For example, in the opening sequence of *The Outlaw,* we see the film's outlaw Doc Holliday approaching the sheriff Pat Garrett's town with a speeding stagecoach. At first, we do not see the town but just a fast stagecoach riding in the desert landscape. Another example can be given from *The Searchers.* The film opens with the image of Ethan Edwards approaching a house from the desert landscape. The outlaw figure of the film is embodied with the desert landscape in audience's first glance.

Nevertheless, it is not obligatory for a Western film to open with the desert landscape shots. For example *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Little Big Man* (Penn, 1970) and *Dances with Wolves* (Costner, 1990) do not open with the desert landscape shots. But they all have scenes in the desert landscape. Rick Altman states that "whereas other films depends heavily on their referential qualities to establish ties to the real world, genre films typically depend on symbolic usage of key images, sounds and locations" (Altman, 1999, p.26). So, not every Western film has to open with the desert shots, but every Western film has to have a number of scenes that

takes place in the wilderness. This repetitive usage of the key location is one of the important elements surrounding the genre conventions.

Besides the iconographic usage, the desert landscape has a meaning on its own. Rick Altman claims that “actual location matter less for the Western’s incessant long shots of the landscape than the way the landscape is used to figure the simultaneous danger and potential that the West represents” (Altman, 1999, p.26). In the case of *Breaking Bad*’s opening sequence, this potential and danger is shown simultaneously. Whereas the speeding van that we see in the desert symbolizes the potential of Walter’s meth business, the approaching police sirens and the two dead drug dealers in the van symbolizes the danger. In fact, throughout season one the desert landscape is mostly used for cooking meth, in order to show this so called potential of Walt’s business. The episodes titled *Pilot*, *Gray Matter* (Brock & Lin, 2008) and *Crazy Handful of Nothing* (Hughes & Mastras, 2008) contains scenes of cooking meth in the desert landscape. This visualization functions to symbolize the danger and the potential of Walt’s drug empire by using a key semantic element of the Western genre.

But with the final episode of the season one titled *A No Rough Stuff Type Deal* (Hunter & Gould, 2008), the events that take place in the desert landscape changes. As Walter and Jesse gets deeper into the meth trade, they find a crazy Hispanic drug dealer named Tuco to control the distribution side. Walter arranges a meeting with Tuco in order to deliver the meth. The meeting takes place in a junkyard in the desert. After the deal, one of Tuco’s men tells Walt and Jesse to “remember who they are working for”. Tuco gets angry with the man for talking without his permission and beats him to death. The character himself seems like a homeage to *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly*’s Tuco, who is an unpredictable and mentally insane Hispanic outlaw as well.

After Tuco is gone with the dead man in his car, Walt and Jesse starts to walk towards the desert landscape and the season ends. With this scene, the danger that Rick Altman previously mentioned about the West comes to the surface. Besides the act of killing, the danger that will come out from these illegal business meetings is embodied with the desert landscape. As the narrative progresses, the landscape is used for meetings with Gus Fring as well. In Western films, this kind of approach is visible. For example, in *Jesse James*, after Jesse and Frank escapes from the town, they hide in a cave surrounded by the desert landscape. When Jesse’s lover Zee wants to meet him, she has to come to the wilderness. Another example can be given from *The Train Robbers*. At the beginning of the film, five men meets in the desert and they make a plan to go after a very large amount of stolen gold. In *The Searchers* the climatic meeting of film’s protagonists with the Indian chief Scar

happens in the desert. This key location of the Western films functions in the same way when it comes to *Breaking Bad,* which is the danger that it represents.

Before Walter and Jesse are hired by Gus Fring, they meet to share the earnings that they made from selling meth in the desert. In the fifth episode of the second season titled *Breakage* (Renck & Beckett, 2009), Walter and Jesse pulls their cars side by side and talk through the window. The image of two men sitting in their car and talking business embodied with the desert landscape is just like two men riding horses side by side. Of course, this connection is only possible if we look at the car as a mode of transportation, just like a horse. In the eighth episode of the second season titled *Better Call Saul* (McDonough & Gould, 2009), Walter and Jesse kidnaps their advocate Saul Goodman to the desert. Even though the plan was to just give him an ultimatum, they end up making a deal with Saul and he becomes their lawyer in the desert. Both of these examples function to visualize the desert landscape as the perfect spot to meet for illegal business arrangements, which are the dangerous events surrounding Walter's meth business.

After the introduction of Gus Fring, Walter and Jesse's active role as the distributors is no longer an issue. They are paid and -for a while - controlled by Gus so they do not meet for exchanging money or threating someone anymore. But Gus Fring's headquarters for his business meetings is situated right in the desert. The first time that we see this place is in the third episode of the third season titled *I.F.T.* (MacLaren & Mastras, 2010), when Gus meets Tuco's cousins and uncle Hector. Salamanca family wants Walter White dead because they think that he killed Tuco. Gus tries to prevent that from happening because Walter needs to cook for him more. In the sixth episode of the third season titled *Sunset* (Shiban, 2010), Gus gives Hank's name to cousins in the desert but not in his headquarters, saying that he was the one who killed Tuco. With this meeting, Gus sacrifices Hank's life in order to protect his meth empire. In the ninth episode of the third season titled *Kafkaesque*, Walter and Gus meets in the headquarters after Hank is shot by the cousins. In this meeting, Walter says that he knows Gus was the one who saved his life and also caused the shooting. But he is not sure what is going to happen after his contract ends with Gus. Gus clears the air by promising an open ended business relationship and fifteen million dollars a year. In the twelfth episode of the third season titled *Half Measures* (Bernstein & Catlin & Gould, 2010), another meeting is done in Gus's headquarters because Jesse goes out of control. Jesse hears that some of Gus's dealers in town are forcing children to sell drugs and he also learns that one of those children is responsible for the killing of Jesse's former business partner, Gonzo. While Jesse is simply driven by revenge, Gus has a big business to take care of, so he invites the dealers and Jesse to make peace. Gus settles down the situation with a deal that forbids the dealers to work with children. The visualization how Gus Fring

chooses to conduct his illegal business is functioning to place him as a man who is operating on the desert landscape.

Throughout the television series there are two other meetings besides the one with the cousins that I mentioned above in the desert landscape that Gus Fring is involved, but they are not taking place in his headquarters. The first one happens in the thirteenth episode of the third season titled *Full Measure* (Gilligan, 2010), after Jesse and Walt kills the dealers that work with children and therefore disobeying Gus's orders. Walt meets with Gus in the desert and says that he have two options; the first one is killing Walt and the second one is let him work without Jesse. The second meeting happens in the eleventh episode of the fourth season titled *Crawl Space* (Winant & Mastras & Catlin, 2011). Gus literally kidnaps Walt to the desert in order to fire him, since Jesse can cook his formula on his own and Walt is causing too much problems. Even though Gus's first intention was to kill Walt, Jesse says that he would not cook for Gus if he kills Walt. It is interesting to note that for three times Gus chooses the vast spaces of the desert landscape and it always about a death related issue regarding Walt's life or his family instead of just being relevant to Gus's business goals. As the man who operates on the desert landscape, Gus chooses to attempt murder in the desert as well.

After Gus Fring's death, the desert landscape is still used for illegal business related meetings, but this time they are about Walt's drug empire. In the first episode of the fifth season titled *Live Free or Die* (Slovis & Gilligan, 2012), there is a scene where Walt's and Mike's cars speeding towards each other in a long shot of the desert landscape. Just before they are about the crash, one of them turns the wheel. Once again, this scene can be imagined as they were speeding against each other with horses. Angry with Gus's killing, Mike gets off from the car with his gun pointed towards Walt. But Jesse, again, saves his life by saying that "if you want to kill Mr. White, you have to kill me too". The reason for this meeting is that Gus had video recordings of every one of them cooking drugs or committing illegal acts, so they have to destroy them somehow. These video recordings can be the only evidence that might get in the way with Walt's building a drug empire plans. In the sixth and the seventh episode of the fifth season titled *Buyout* (Bucksey & Hutchison, 2012) and *Say My Name* (Schnauz, 2012), another illegal business meeting takes place. When the police starts to investigate Mike's actions, he decides to take a buyout from Walter's meth business. Mike finds a buyer to sell his share of the methylamine for five million dollars. Hearing this offer, Jesse wants out too. Mike and Jesse meets this buyer in the desert and give a sample of the product to him. Because the buyer tells them that he also wants the blue meth off the market, which means that Walt has to sell his share as well. *Say My Name* opens with Walt's offer to the buyer as they go back to the same spot in the desert for a second deal, which is Jesse and

Mike selling their share of the methylamine and Walt continues to cook. But he wants the buyer to take of care of the distribution side of things.

Even though these business meetings that are happening in the desert are embodied with the dangers of the West, they are perhaps what we can call a pathway to the real danger. Besides the poisoned drug dealers in *Pilot* episode and the guy beaten up until he is dead by Tuco in *A No Rough Stuff Type Deal,* the act of killing is done with climatic shootouts. These shootout scenes may seem like previously defined narrative choice for other genres such as gangster films or police thrillers. Films like *The Godfather* (Coppola, 1972)*, Scarface* (Palma, 1983)*, Dirty Harry* (Siegel, 1971) and *The Heat* (Mann, 1995) depends heavily on climatic shootout scenes in order to have an explosive looking resolution for their storyline. But what is distinctive about these shootouts in Western films is that they are happening in the desert landscape. Genre films such as *The Magnificent Seven , 3:10 to Yuma, True Grit* (Heffron, 1978) and *The Outlaw Josey Wales* do not only end with climatic shootouts but also they contain gunfighting sequences in different parts of their narrative structures. For example, in *The Outlaw Josey Wales* four different shootout sequences are visible. First of all, the film's opening credits is just a bunch of gunfighting scenes dissolving into each other while the non diegetic texts are superimposed onto them. This choice for starting the narrative inevitably creates an expectation for several shootout scenes in the rest of the film.

In *Breaking Bad*, the first climatic shootout scene happens in the second episode of the second season titled *Grilled* (Haid & Mastras, 2009). After Walt's disappearance from town because he is kidnapped by Tuco to the desert, Hank starts an off the record investigation in order to find him. His little investigation leads him to Jesse and while he is tracking down Jesse's car, he ends up in the desert where Tuco had kidnapped Jesse and Walt. Hank arrives at the scene in the moment that Walt and Jesse already shot Tuco one time and managed to escape. With his last remaining power, Tuco opens fire to Hank with a machine gun. But when he has to reload his gun, Hank kills him and the episode ends. The location choice for the first shootout in the television series is the desert landscape, which functions to combine two semantic elements of the Western genre in one climatic event.

In the first episode of the third season titled *No Mas* (Cranston & Gilligan, 2010)*,* Tuco's cousins are crossing the border with a bunch of immigrants in an old truck. The cousins are coming to New Mexico because they are looking for revenge. While the truck passes through the desert, an immigrant recognizes the cousins as outlaws because they have silver skulls attached to their boots. The director cuts to a long shot of the truck and we hear consecutive gunshots as the vehicle stops. While the killing happens, the director chooses to not show it on screen. Instead, we see the

desert landscape with all of its glory and the gunshot sounds attached to it, as if the source of the violence related sounds are coming from the desert itself. This usage of the sound functions to connect the unique location of the Western genre to its meaning, which is the danger that the West represents.These truck shootings in the desert landscape happens two other times throughout the series. In the sixth episode of the fourth season titled *Cornered* (Slovis & Hutchison, 2011), a Los Pollos Hermanos truck which is carrying blue meth is attacked by three men from the Mexican Cartel in the desert. These three men are trying to send a message to Gus Fring by opening fire and killing the men inside the truck. Same kind of shooting happens in the fourth episode of fourth season titled *Bullet Points* (Bucksey & Beckett, 2011) as well, but this time Mike is guarding the truck. He somehow foresees the shooting and with a quick plan he manages to kill the shooters. The scenery of the desert landscape and even the truck looks the same. While Mike is getting off the truck, there is a shot that seems to be a homeage to *The Searchers* ending shot. Same kind of usage of this shot is also visible in the ninth episode of the fourth season titled *Bug* (McDonough & Beckett & Schnauz, 2011). In that episode, Gus Fring's headquarters in the desert is under attack by the cartel and there is a gunfighting sequence between Gus's men and the cartel. In the middle of the shootout, Gus exits from his headquarters and start walking towards the bullets in order to send a message that they can not kill him because they need him. While Gus is exiting his headquarters, this shot that is reminding *The Searchers* ending is the directors choice. As you can see in the images below, all of those shots contain an outlaw hero walking towards the desert and they are all framed behind a door. Even though in *The Searchers* ending there are no shootouts happening, Ethan Edwards decides to leave the comforts of a home and he walks towards the dangers embodied by the desert. Throughout the movie, we watch the characters in the film encounter those dangers during shootouts and other violent acts.

Image 3: The ending shot of *The Searchers*

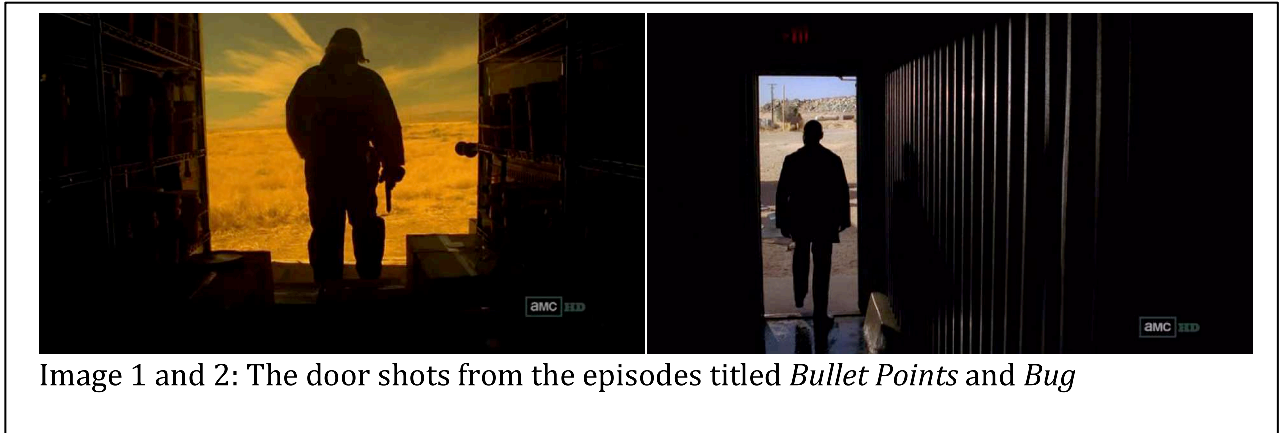

Image 1 and 2: The door shots from the episodes titled *Bullet Points* and *Bug*

Besides the truck shootings, another shootout in the desert landscape happens in the tenth episode of the fifth season titled *Buried* (MacLaren & Schnauz, 2013). After Walt is out of the meth business, Lydia makes arrangements with another manufacturer, but they are not keeping up to Walt's quality. Lydia goes to the desert where they are cooking in an underground bunker and ask them to raise the purity. While the head of the operation refuses Lydia's offer, they call him from upstairs saying there is a problem. The problem being Uncle Jack and his men hired by Lydia to kill the members of the new operation. During the shootout we only see Lydia on screen, hiding in the bunker while we hear consecutive gunshots from upstairs. After the shootout, Lydia exits the bunker and while she is walking in the desert to her car, we see a bunch of dead bodies lying in the desert. Once again, the desert functions as the danger that the West represents through combining the imagery of corpses with the desert landscape.

In the episodes titled *To'hajiilee* (MacLaren & Mastras, 2013) and *Ozymandias* (Johnson & Beckett, 2013), while Walt is cornered in the desert by Hank, Gomez and Jesse, he calls Uncle Jack and let them know where he is. After Walt gets arrested, Uncle Jack and his crew comes to the desert and draw their guns. Hank tells them that he is a police officer and they should not start shooting but they open fire anyway. This theme of Hank letting them know that he is a cop can be encountered in Western films as well. For example, at the end of *My Darling Clementine*, marshal Wyatt Earp goes into the desert in order to confront the outlaws who killed his brothers. Before the shooting starts, he lets them know that he is an officer of the law and it is in their best interest to not start shooting. But just like Uncle Jack and his crew, they start shooting anyway. The episode titled *To'hajiilee* ends in the middle of the shootout and the next episode *Ozymandias* starts with the gunshot sounds overlapped onto a long shot of the desert landscape. This repetitive usage of the extreme long shots of the desert landscape with gunshot sounds attached to brings out the same function that I mentioned in *No Mas.* The desert landscape is presented as the source for the killing related sounds.

Besides the climatic shootout scenes, another iconographic act happens in the desert landscape, which is the train robbery. The first Western film ever produced *The Great Train Robbery* serves as a prototype for this stock narrative. The train robbery in *Breaking Bad* happens in the fifth episode of the fifth season titled *Dead Freight* (Mastras, 2012). While they are planning the robbery, Jesse asks Mike and Walt: “Are we going to rob it? Like Jesse James?” In fact, the train robbery is the most important act of Jesse James’s outlawry, because it is the first one. This narrative is repeated in a variety of Jesse James films. For example in *Jesse James*, Jesse and his crew attack the train first trying not to be seen by anyone. But after they reach the conductor and threaten him to stop the train, they start to steal every valuable item on the train. In a recent remake of the story titled *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Dominik, 2007), Jesse and his crew never bother to get to the conductor first. In fact, Jesse stops the train by standing in front of it, so the conductors had to push the brakes. Although the train robbery narrative comes from the prototype of the genre, the reference to the Jesse James inside the text of the television series inevitably makes the scene function as a repeated semantic element that is coming from the Western films.

Even though the desert is associated with being dangerous, there are still people living or operating in it. In Western films, generally the desert is the home of the Indians. For example, in *The Searchers* the two protagonists of the film encounter Indian tribes during their journey into the wilderness. Even one of them accidently marry an Indian woman. More to the point, they are searching an Indian chief named Scar throughout the movie. The whole narrative of *Broken Arrow* revolves around a man trying to make peace between settlers and Indians. Another example can be given from *The Lone Ranger*. The film’s two protagonists is an American lawyer and an Indian outlaw. The character of the Indian is portrayed like he knows the wilderness land and he helps the American to find his way through the desert. The fact that also in *Breaking Bad* there are a variety of Indian characters, brings out another quality of the desert being a border between dangerous wilderness lands and civilized American towns. Which brings us to the border narratives and the frontier myth in the Western films.

4. Border Narrative and the Frontier Myth

> "The Indian wars provided the only historical case in which the connection between progress and violence could be acknowledged; and the Indian-war metaphor acquired new significance after 1960, when American engagement in the 'underdeveloped world' seemed to reproduce the basic elements of the frontier conflict" (Slotkin, 1992, p.492).

Even though a number of Western films take their origins from the Indian wars and the American expansion era, Slotkin addresses an important element surrounding the frontier myth. With his statement, Slotkin underlies the fact that at some point, the Indian wars became only a metaphor. Genre films like *The Searchers, Broken Arrow, Two Rode Together* and *Cheyenne Autumn* (Ford, 1964) are structured around Indian wars and they show the Indian lands with strict visual borders. For example, in *Two Rode Together,* two men are given a mission to cross the border, go to an Indian camp and rescue the Americans who are taken captive by them. Two protagonists of the film are working for the army and while they are communicating with the army, they are always in a town or some closed space. But when they start their journey to the Indian land, the setting turns into the wilderness landscape. Another example can be given from *The Searchers* which has a similar storyline. Ethan Edwards and his sidekick Martin Pawley are searching for Debbie, who is taken captive by the Indians. In order to do that, they have to leave their home and ride their horses into the wilderness. Both of these films show the border between Indian lands and the American soil with distinct visuals. Whereas *Two Rode Together* chooses the closed spaces of a town as civilization, *The Searchers* shows it simply as "home". In any case, when the journey starts we see that the Indian lands are embodied with the desert, which creates a contrast between the closed environments of the civilization. The frontier myth takes its core from the Indian/White border, but as Slotkin states, it turns into a metaphor over time. Slotkin addresses this issue by stating that:

> "Seven years after Kennedy's nomination, American troops would be describing Vietnam as 'Indian country' and search-and-destroy missions as a game of 'Cowboys and Indians'; and Kennedy's ambassador to Vietnam would justify 'Indians' away from the 'fort' so that the 'settlers' could plant 'corn'" (Slotkin, 1992, p.3).

This notion brings out the idea that when it comes to America, there is no strict frontiers. For example, when *Star Trek: The Original Series* (Roddenberry, 1966) aired for the first time in 1966, the opening credits of the show declared the space as the final frontier. The whole franchise is mainly about an American spaceship named Enterprise seeking out new life and new civilizations in space. This example may give a broader sense of the frontier being a constantly changing thing over time. Just like Americans seeking for new lands to build a civilization and finding Indians already

living in those lands, the members of the spaceship Enterprise will encounter other entities throughout their journey. Genre theoretician Barry Langford states that “in reality the frontier was always and by definition mobile, not a clear boundary but an uncertain and shifting; prospect alongside, or just ahead, of the leading edge of the White colonial advance across the North American continent” (Langford, 2005, p.63). This notion of the frontier being mobile, gives us an idea why the locations of the borders are always shifting in Western films.

The frontier might be symbolized as the vast emptiness of the space like in *Star Trek,* or actual borders that is dividing the culturally alien and the white men in Western films. No matter what it is called, this usage of the border narrative is founded by the Western genre is used in different forms and visualizations in contemporary cinema and television programming. A different approach to the border narrative can be encountered in the television series titled *Homeland* (Gordon & Gansa, 2011). The narrative of *Homeland* takes a female agent named Carrie Mathison, whose job is protecting the border. The television series takes place in different border towns like Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan that are turned into warzones by Americans. The premise of “war on terror” allowed America to open new frontiers and Carrie is the one who has the protect it by functioning effectively at both sides of the border. What Slotkin suggests by calling Vietnam as “indian land” in real world, turns into a modern day fiction through *Homeland*’s narrative.

In this chapter my aim is to focus on four different issues concerning the border narrative. In order to do that, I will first explore the Mexican border and the presence of Indian characters because these are also very important semantic elements when it comes to the Western genre. After that, I will move onto the relationship between Gus Fring and the Cartel, analyzing the Cartel as a symbolization for the Mexican border. Finally, I will talk about a much more abstract border issue, which is Walter’s own drug territory.

In *Breaking Bad*, the issue with the frontier shows itself in many aspects. First of all, the television series is set in New Mexico, near a border to Mexico. Considering that the Indian wars turned into a myth over time, many Westerns takes place in Mexico. Because it is the border that is set after the savage war and it is still an active border in our time. For example, *The Outlaw*’s setting is New Mexico, just like *Breaking Bad.* In *The Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid,* two outlaws decide to travel to Mexico, because all of the American lands are now civilized and they can’t operate as outlaws on their side of the border anymore. In the beginning of *The Wild Bunch*, a group of aged outlaws head to Mexico after narrowly escaping being caught during a robbery.The rest of the film takes place on the other side of the border. At the end of *My Darling Clementine,* Doc Holliday decides to leave for Mexico after the marshall Wyatt Earp suspects him for killing Earp’s brother. Wyatt Earp rides in the desert landscape and stops Doc Holliday while he is crossing the border. *Django* takes place in a border town near Mexico. At some point, Django and General Hugo decide to cross the border and steal gold from Mexican army. After the robbery, Mexican soldiers starts to follow them with guns while Django and General Hugo are escaping with a stagecoach. Suddenly soldiers stop chasing them and one of them states that they stopped because they reached the border. Since they are Mexican

army, they can not operate on the American side of the border. At the end of the film, when General Hugo is crossing the border again, we see the same soldiers waiting on the borderline. Even though there are no walls or any implication that it is the border, the presence of the soldiers creates a visual reference and they are functioning as the border itself.

Although the television series chooses its villains from Mexico, Indians are a part of it as well. Rather than being savage, they are shown as they are living in these border towns. For example, in the sixth episode of the third season titled *Sunset,* the cousins (as the Mexican villains) are killing an Indian cop at the beginning of the episode. The first image that we see is a card hanging in the cop's car, with the words "homeland security" written on it. When the card turns around because the car is speeding, wee see an old picture of four Indians with a caption that says "fighting terrorism since 1492". This picture alone is sending a strong reference to the core idea of the frontier myth. More to the point, the year 1492 marks the foundation of the United States by Christopher Columbus. Considering that the frontier myth started right at that point in history because Americans started expanding westward until they conquer the whole country, the picture of Indians and the exact year reference in *Sunset* is a strong homage to the Western genre.

Image 4: The hanging card in the Indian policeman's car in the episode titled *Sunset*

The fact that an Indian cop gets killed by Mexican outlaws underlines the idea of 'in this Western, the Indians are not the villains'. The first appearance of an Indian happens in the second episode of the first season titled *Cat's In The Bag* (Bernstein & Gilligan, 2008). The episode starts with Walt and Jesse paying a lot of money to an Indian for help because they are stuck with their old van in the desert. They instruct the Indian on what to do and how to clean up their mess. As the season opening visuals, this theme of trade between Indians and white men functions as a reference to the Western genre. Only with an help of an Indian, Walt and Jesse is able to return

back to the civilization. The indian is symbolized as a person who knows the vast lands of the desert and also a person who is used to this trade with the white men.

This theme of trade between Indians and the White men are also visible in Western films. In *The Searchers,* Martin and Ethan encounters an Indian tribe during their journey. Martin tries to trade a hat in order to buy a blanket. But what he ends up with a woman from the tribe. In other words, he exchanges a hat with a woman. Another example can be given from *Two Rode Together,* in which two American heroes are trying to trade guns for American captives in order to bring them back home. It is interesting to note that with his surname, Walter *White* can be considered as a metaphor for the white men when the trades are happening.

In the fourteenth episode of the fifth season titled *Ozymandias*, Walt encounters an Indian while he is walking through the desert with a barrel loaded with money. Walt sees that the Indian has a truck that can get him to the civilization and offers money for the truck. Yet again, Walt is able to return back to the civilization from the vast spaces of the desert with the help of an Indian. The house of the Indian is situated right in the middle of the desert and there is no other settlements visible around it. The Indian who is embodied with the desert is the one who functions as Walt's return ticket to his settlement. More to the point, once again Walter White functions as a metaphor for the white men with his surname.

Their role as the inhabitants of the desert is also evident at the end of *Cat's In The Bag*, during which two Indian children finds a gas mask that belongs to Walter and Jesse. In the sixth episode of the first season titled *Crazy Handful of Nothing,* Hank will define the place that they found the mask as "Indian land". Even though "Indians" are not the "savages" of *Breaking Bad*, the writers of the television series choose to keep them as a semantic element that is a reminder of the Western genre.

However, when it comes to the Hispanic characters, this is not the case. A variety of the villains such as Tuco, Hector, Gus Fring, The Cousins and the Cartel members are Hispanic. Barry Langford states the importance of the race issue by stating that:

> "Unlike other genres, race was already explicitly a core element of the Western, since dramatising the settling of the frontier necessitated depicting relations between White settlers or soldiers and the indigenous Native American population. Issues of miscegenation and interracial conflict were carried over wholesale from the Western's principal narrative sources […], typically focusing on White-Indian relations but with some treatment of Hispanic characters too" (Langford, 2005, p.73).

This issue with race is caused by Mexico being the chosen border for *Breaking Bad*'s narrative. The border of Mexico is visually crossed a number of times throughout the series. After Tuco's death, we see the cousins crossing the border in the first episode of the third season titled *No Mas.* At the end of the episode, they shoot all the

immigrants in the truck in which they were crossing the border. In the next episode titled *Caballo Sin Nombre* (Bernstein & Gould, 2010), while Hank investigates the shooting he asks why does the shooting happened in their side of the border. Through his words and with a detective character investigating the frontier issues, the importance of the border narrative strikes.

Besides the cousins, another component of the border narrative is the Mexican drug cartel. In the fifth episode of the second season titled *Breakage,* Hank gets transferred to El Paso, Texas. Which is another border town near Mexico. In fact, El Paso is used as a location in a variety of Western films. At the end of *Two Rode Together,* marshall McCabe and his Hispanic lover decide**s** to travel to El Paso and the movie ends while their stagecoach is riding towards there. Another example is *El Paso* (Foster, 1949), which is a Western film set in El Paso.

In the final episode of the *Breaking Bad,* a gunfighter ballad written by Marty Robbins titled *El Paso* is used as a soundtrack. At the beginning of the episode, Walt finds a car when he is hiding from the police. In the torpedo of the car, there is a cassette of Marty Robbins. When he starts the car, the song plays loudly. As Walt finally finds a way to return to the civilization, he is surrounded with a song that is functioning as a homage to a border town from the Western genre. With a song that is written after a frontier story, Walt begins his way back to the civilization.

In the seventh episode of the second season titled *Negro Y Azul* (Alcala & Shiban, 2009), Hank encounters a cartel related killing in the desert of El Paso. The cartel chop of one of their members head and put it on top of a tortoise in order to send a message. The Mexican co-workers of Hank mocks him by saying “Welcome to Mexico”, implying that this sort of thing always happens on the border.

After the death of the cousins, the border narrative is mainly structured around the relationship between Gus Fring and the Cartel. As Walter states during the episode titled *Kafkaesque*, Fring’s objective is to be able to control the meth trade at both sides of the border. After Hank manages to kill the Cousins and survive heavily injured, Walter assumes that Gus informed Hank just one minute before the shooting because he wanted a shootout instead of a silent assassination. Just because it happened like a shootout, now Gus has the power to set American and Mexican governments against the Cartel and cut off the meth traffic on the Mexican border. Because Gus has his own production team in American side, eventually he will gain the control of the Cartel’s territories as well.

Although Gus tries to slow down the Cartel with smart business moves, he is not able to reach his purpose. In the seventh episode of the fourth season titled *Problem Dog* (Gould, 2011), Gus makes a contract with the Cartel which obligates him to teach them how to cook blue meth. In the tenth episode titled *Salud* (MacLaren & Gould & Hutchison, 2011), Gus takes Jesse to Mexico and makes him cook a batch there. They cross the border with a plane and Gus encourages Jesse while they are crossing the border, saying that “you can do this”. Even though Gus is encouraging him because he is about to cook a batch of blue meth on his own, the fact that he is saying this on

the plane functions as crossing the border itself is something that needs encouragement

In the eighth episode of the fourth season titled *Hermanos* (Renck & Catlin & Mastras, 2011), we learn that the Cartel killed Gus's former business partner in a brutal way. So Gus's objective is not just about the business, it is personal as well. Gus takes his revenge in the tenth episode of the fourth season titled *Salud*, by poisoning all of the Cartel members in the same house that the Cartel killed his business partner. This revenge theme can be encountered in a variety of Western films, such as *The Outlaw Josey Wales, Jesse James, Once Upon a Time in the West* and so on. For example, Jesse James's reason for being an outlaw is to avenge his mother's killing. The government burn their house down at the beginning of the film and Jesse turns into an outlaw seeking for revenge. *The Outlaw Josey Wales*'s narrative starts when Josey's wife and son are murdered by American guerillas. Throughout the film, Josey Wales acts only to take his revenge. In fact, Slotkin goes further and states that there is a whole sub-genre to be talked about by claiming that "where the outlaw western sets the adventure amid strong and persistent visualizations of social life, the revenger Western gives us a landscape that mirrors the hero's introvert psychology" (Slotkin, 1992, p. 382). Even though going into certain sub-genres is not my priority for this research, it is interesting to note that this stock narrative of the Western genre motivates the character of Gus Fring. To the point of the flashback in *Hermanos,* Gus Fring is introduced as a harsh businessman, but with the flashback we get to get inside his introvert psychology and understand what actually motivates him to destroy the Cartel.

Besides Gus's drug empire, I think it is important to talk about Walt's blue meth empire in terms of the frontier issue as well. Even though Walt is not doing business with some big border operative like the Cartel, he still has his own territory to take care of. Before Walter and Jesse were hired by Gus Fring, they control their own meth distribution. After Tuco's death in the episode titled *Grilled,* Jesse says that he can create a network of dealers to control the distribution. In the fifth episode of the second season titled *Breakage,* two meth heads robs one of Jesse's guys. Walt goes over to Jesse's house and orders him to "handle it". What Walter actually asks by "handling it" is simply to act like Tuco and protect their territory with gun power. Jesse tries to threaten the two meth heads in the next episode titled *Peekaboo* (Medak & Gilligan & Roberts, 2009) but one of them ends up dead. In the seventh episode of the second season titled *Negro Y Azul*, Walter pulls out a map and show Jesse that they are only operating in a small territory. But now because of the killing of a meth head, every drug dealer in town fears Jesse, so Walter thinks that no one will say anything if they invade their territory. Although Walter's drug frontier is not a previously defined border like Mexico, he is still able to draw the line between the places they can or cannot operate. Just like Gus Fring has to kill all of the Cartel members in order to operate in Mexico, Walter has to deal with other drug kingpins if he wants to expand his territory domestically.

After Gus Fring hires Walter and Jesse, their territory map expands throughout the United States. While Hank is in the hospital because of the shootout with the

cousins, Gomez shows him Walter's new territory map. Since Gus is shipping their product everywhere but New Mexico, the territory is no longer just one area that Walter has to control. At its core, the idea of expanding a territory is exactly what American frontiersmen did during the savage wars. In those times, Americans started exploring the country and while they are exploring they took over any occupied land that they came across from the other colonies until they conquered all of the United States. We can apply the same logic for Walter's business. He starts from the point zero, working with mentally insane drug dealers like Tuco in order to just sell his product. After the killing of Tuco, he sees the opportunity of owning a territory since he worked with Tuco and he wants his own. Then he joins forces with a grand scale drug distributor disguised as a businessman, which eventually makes his product spread all over the country. After Gus Fring is dead, he is now completely able to both produce and distribute his product throughout the United States. In the eighth episode of the fifth season titled *Gliding Over All* (MacLaren & Beckett, 2012), Walter expands his territory even further by making a contract with Lydia that allows him to ship his product to Czech Republic. All of this will to 'progress and always move forward no matter what happens' underlies the basic logic under the idea of the frontier myth.

Image 5:Walter and Jesse's territory shown in the episode titled *Negro Y Azul*

Image 6: Walter and Jesse's territory map after they are hired by Gus Fring, in the episode titled *Kafkaesque*

All of these territory problems makes Gus and Walt some kind of a frontier hero in the Western genre terms. Richard Slotkin gives details about the frontier heroes by claiming that:

> "As the "man who knows the Indians," the frontier hero stands between the opposed worlds of savagery and civilization, acting sometimes as mediator or interpreter between races and cultures but more often as civilization's most effective instrument against savagery – a man who knows to think and fight like an Indian, to turn their own methods against them" (Slotkin, 1992, p. 16)."

This stock character quality of being the "man who knows the Indians" can be encountered in many Western films. For example, in *Two Rode Together*, the whole reason that the army decides to hire marshal Guthrie McCabe is because he spent time with the Indian tribe in the past, so he knows how to interact with them. In *The Searchers,* Ethan Edwards is famous for his knowledge about the Indians because he spent so much time in the wilderness. I argued that in *Breaking Bad,* Indians are not the villains, but as "the man who knows the Cartel", Gus uses their own methods against them in order to destroy them. Gus has his past experiences with them so he is acting like an interpreter between the two sides of the border. Once they are destroyed, the territory is now under his control.

Another border narrative can be encountered in the second episode of the second season titled *Grilled,* in which Tuco holds Walt and Jesse captive in a safe house situated in the desert. He is always saying that his cousins will come and take all of them to Mexico. The plan is Tuco will start a new meth operation in Mexico, because as soon as he crosses the border he is safe from American cops.

In fact, this theme of captivity is another key element in the Western genre. In her book fully dedicated to the captivity narratives in American film, Barbara Mortimer points out the importance of the frontier myth for the captivity narratives by stating that:

> "Captivity narratives are set on a frontier; in them, a white person becomes a victim of the fight over its terrain and is taken by force to the enemy's world. This world is culturally alien to the captive who must adapt to its unfamiliar norms and dictates or die" (Mortimer, 2000, p.3).

Mortimer dedicates three full chapters to the Western films in order to analyze *The Searchers, The Unforgiven, Two Rode Together, Comanche Station* (Boetticher, 1960)*, A Man Called Horse* (Silverstein, 1970) and *Little Big Man.* In her book, Mortimer is not only analyzing Western films but also Vietnam war films such as *The Deer Hunter* (Cimino, 1978)*, Rambo: First Blood Part II* (Cosmatos, 1985) *, Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979). as well. Although it is not a western exclusive narrative, the idea of the frontier is still visible in those genres that Mortimer takes as an example.

In Vietnam War film, the American frontier is no longer the Indian / White border, but the war is happening in order to expand the frontier anyway. At this point, Slotkin's quote about the Vietnam being called as an "Indian land" (Slotkin, 1992, p.3) should be mentioned again in order to underline the fact that the frontier is a mobile concept.

Although in Western films the captors are usually embodied with Indian characters, Barbara Mortimer states that the "indian" has become a metaphorical term by claiming that:

> "The opposing characters in captivity narratives are "Indians," a culturally alien, non-white population. The term "Indian" is appropriate to the study of the captivity narrative in that it is a telling misnomer, a generic word coined in a defining moment of misapprehension. The term connotes a problem with the white world's seeing; it therefore works well a reference to representations of indigenous peoples in American literature and film, as they are white people's culturally self-defining projections of an oppositional identity. In other words, the glaring wrongness of the term "Indian" makes it of ongoing value as a reminder that no correct term can ever be found" (Mortimer, 2000, p.3).

With her statement, Mortimer underlines the idea of calling the Mexicans as Indians because "no correct term can ever be found" (Mortimer, 2000,p.3). In this context, Tuco is symbolizing the culturally alien population, whom has kidnapped the white men. In fact, all of the other captivity narratives that are present in *Breaking Bad* are structured around a Hispanic character as the captor and the white men as the captives. Which is also underlining the fact that Walter White (or in Jesse's words Mr. White) should be considered as metaphor for all the white men. If we are to analyze the captivity narrative by taking the culturally alien as the captors, then we should be looking at Walter White as a captive who is symbolizing the culturally native.

For example, in the tenth episode of the fourth season titled *Salud,* Jesse is held captive by the Mexican Cartel because they want Jesse to cook blue meth for them. In this episode, Gus asks Jesse to teach the formula of blue meth to the Cartel. When Jesse manages to cook a pure batch of meth, the head of the laboratory says to him that "you belong to the Cartel now". Gus saves Jesse from being a captive through murdering all of the members of the Cartel.

Barbara Mortimer explains this theme of saving the captive with a violent but heroic act by claiming that "the captive provides the rationale and opportunity for the male protagonist to act heroically" (Mortimer, 2000, p.9). Gus acts heroically by taking down the most dangerous drug kingpins in Mexico and as one conclusion he saves Jesse doing it.

This theme is also visible *Felina,* in which Walt acts heroically by conducting a machine gun system that is capable of killing all of his enemies. In the end he saves

Jesse from being captors of those enemies through this heroic act. In the second episode of the second season titled *Grilled,* Walt and Jesse manages to escape from Tuco who is symbolized as a vicious outlaw. This act is heroic because in those episodes Walt and Jesse were still new at criminal acts and the fact that they were able to save themselves from this lethal captivity was heroic on it's own.

Another captivity narrative structure can be analyzed with all of these qualities in the final episode of the fourth season titled *Face Off* (Gilligan, 2011). In this episode, Jesse is cooking meth for Gus under the threat of a gun while Walt is plotting against Gus in order to kill him. Walt convinces Jesse that Gus poisoned Brock, so he will not continue to cook for Gus. Because Jesse does not go to work, Gus's men abducts him to the lab and forces him to cook for them. After Walt manages to murder Gus he comes to the laboratory and shoots the man who is holding Jesse captive. After that, they burn the laboratory and escape.

The theme of the captors being the members of another race is still continuing in this example. Gus Fring, as the Hispanic outlaw, has to be killed heroically, in order for Walt to be able to save Jesse. The hired gun that holds Jesse captive is a black man, who is working for Gus. After the scene that they burn down the lab, Walt and Jesse walk**s** towards the camera like they did something heroic, with a fast paced extra-diegetic music superimposed over them. This scene functions with all of the qualities that Barbara Mortimer stated about the captivity narratives and by doing so it addresses a way to structure a Western film.

In her book, Mortimer champions *The Searchers* in terms of the captivity narrative by stating that:

> "It was John Ford's 1956 Western *The Searchers* which revived the captivity narrative as a source of serious filmmaking after World War II. *The Searchers* revised the genre's conventions by acknowledging the captive's potential to resist the hero's rescue efforts" (Mortimer, 2000, p.2).

In fact, there is a connection between *The Searchers* and *Breaking Bad* according to the series creator. In an interview, Vince Gilligan said that *The Searchers* was a big influence on *Breaking Bad'*s ending by stating that:

> "A lot of astute viewers who know their film history are going to say, 'It's the ending to *The Searchers*.' And indeed it is. The wonderful western *The Searchers* has John Wayne looking for Natalie Wood for the entire three-hour length of the movie. She's been kidnapped by Indians and raised as one of their own, and throughout the whole movie, John Wayne says, 'I need to put her out of her misery. As soon as I find her, I'm going to kill her.' The whole movie Jeffrey Hunter is saying, 'No, we're not – she's my blood kin, we're saving her,' and he says, 'We're killing her.' And you're like, 'Oh my god, John Wayne is a monster and he's going to do it. You know for the whole movie that this is the major drama between these two characters looking for Natalie Wood. And then at the end of the movie, on impulse, you think he's riding

> toward her to shoot her, and instead he sweeps her up off her feet and he carries her away and he says, 'Let's go home.' It just gets me every time – the ending of that movie just chokes you up, it's wonderful. In the writers room, we said, 'Hey, what about *The Searchers* ending?' So, it's always a matter of stealing from the best" (Snierson, 2013)

In the final episode of *Breaking Bad* titled *Felina,* throughout the episode the expectation of Walt killing Jesse is present. Because Jesse has told everything about Walt's illegal business to Drug Enforcement Administration, it is acceptable to expect a revenge killing. In fact, in the twelfth episode of the fifth season titled *Rabid Dog* (Catlin, 2013)*,* Walt orders a hit on Jesse. At the end of the episode, Walt calls Todd (one of Uncle Jack's hired guns) and asks them to kill Jesse Pinkman. In the fourteenth episode of the fifth season titled *Ozymandias*, Walt wants Uncle Jack to find and kill Jesse again. After Hank and Gomez are murdered, Jesse is hiding under a car. When Walt spots him, he shows Jesse to Uncle Jack in order to execute him. This is the point that starts Jesse's captivity narrative because Uncle Jack and his men decide to take Jesse to their headquarters in order to find out how much he has told to the police. Considering that this is the last time Jesse and Walt see each other before the final episode, the final wish of Walt remains as seeing Jesse dead.

Because of all these narrative choices, the expectation of Walt killing Jesse is presented to the audience as a way to speculate the ending. In the final episode, Walt says to Uncle Jack that he promised to kill Jesse but instead he took him as a partner. Just like Ethan Edwards wants to kill the girl because he thinks that she's an Indian now, Walt wants to see Jesse killed because he thinks that now he's working for someone else. When Walt sees that Jesse is a captive rather than a partner and he's in a terrible condition, he decides to save him. Which is similar to Ethan Edward's not deciding to kill Debbie out of instinct, while the whole time he is thinking about killing her. Nevertheless, what Walt and Ethan are actually finding is different. Because Ethan finds Debbie enjoying her presence within the Indians, but Walt finds Jesse tortured by his captors. But it is similar in the way that both Ethan and Walt does not find what they are hoping for. This intertextual reference that the creator of *Breaking Bad* has chosen in order to end the series is not only a rerefence to a single film but it also functions as a strong bond with the narrative choices of the Western films.

5. The Outlaw Heroes

> "One thread within the film is the idea of the solitary, invulnerable, wandering hero, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), for whom life within the settlements is impossible. He appears from the wilderness as the story opens, and when his job is finished he returns to the desert again" (Pye, 1975, p. 215)

Genre theoretician Douglas Pye gives an example from *The Searchers* in order to explain this stock narrative choice of the Western films. In fact, many other genre films such as *Stagecoach, Unforgiven, The Outlaw, A Fistful of Dollars* (Leone, 1964), *The Train Robbers* and *Django* share this narrative choice with *The Searchers.* For example, the beginning shot of *A Fistful of Dollars* is Clint Eastwood approaching a settlement from the wilderness. Throughout the film, he confronts and destroys all of the evildoers in the settlement. But at the end of the film, he does not try to take and rule the settlement. The last shot of the film is Clint Eastwood riding his horse towards the wilderness, because a life within the settlements is impossible for him too.

In the first episode of *Breaking Bad*, Walter White appears from the wilderness with a gun in his hands and in the last episode he finishes all of his jobs and returns to the wilderness to die. In the border narrative chapter, I argued by quoting Richard Slotkin that the frontier heroes are mediators between two sides of the border. Because they are mediators, they have to act effectively both in the civilization and the wilderness. But in the end, their place is not the civilization, because they have done uncivilized things while they were in the wilderness. Richard Slotkin gives an example from *Jesse James,* in order to explain this notion:

> "Zee accepts Jesse's initial step into outlawry as justified by his defense and then by his avenging of his mother. But she opposes his war on the railroad, believing the outlawry will get "in his blood" and make him "wild", like an animal – so that he will undergo a kind of racial degeneration toward savagery" (Slotkin, 1992, p.299).

This theme of the outlawry getting in someone's blood is the reason why the outlaw cannot live in the settlements. Because once the outlaws commit crime, they are treated as there is no coming back from the outlawry. However, they can operate as a mediator between these suggested borders. For example, in the eighth episode of the third season titled *I See You* (Bucksley & Hutchison, 2010), Walter encounters Gus in the hospital while Hank is in surgery. Gus is there with his persona of a close friend of Drug Enforcement Administration. Walter is there because he is the brother-in-law of a drug enforcement agent. Because they are mediators between two worlds, they need to have a mask in order to operate effectively in civilization. Then, they start to talk their illegal business in the hospital, right in the middle of a

group of cops. Because Hank is a beloved agent, the hospital is full of cops from the agency. This scene functions as a bridge and shows us the two opposite sides of the border in one frame. The policemen that are an instrument of civilization and the outlaws talking their illegal businesses without no one ever suspecting them.

Even though the television series shares these narrative choices with the Western films, this is not the only shared element when it comes to stereotyping an outlaw. Barry Langford gives an important information about the outlaws in *The Great Train Robbery* by stating that:

> “The film's status has undoubtedly been enhanced by the famous extra-diegetic shot of the mustachioed outlaw shooting directly at the camera, an iconic image that resonates through the subsequent century of Hollywood's most popular and prolific genre (Sergio Leone echoes Porter's act of specular aggression when Henry Fonda fires at the camera in *Once Upon a Time in the West*)” (Langford, 2005, p.56).

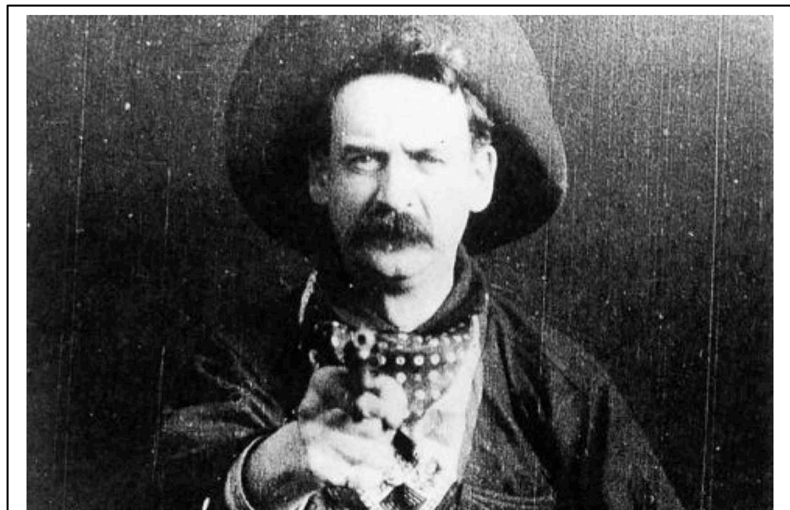

Image 7: The ending shot of *The Great Train Robbery*

In his book *Film/Genre*, Rick Altman states that “once identified, the genre’s first appearance on film is treated as a generic prototype” (Altman, 1999, p.30). Therefore, this iconic image that is used in the first Western film ever produced can function as a visual prototype to define the outlaw hero. At the end of the *Pilot* episode this shot is reproduced with Walter White. After Walt poisons two drug dealers in the desert, he crashes the van while trying to escape. When he exits the vehicle, Walt starts to hear police sirens coming to his way. As a response, Walt points his gun to the source of the sounds like he is planning to kill the police officers who are coming to get him. Through this image, Walter White functions as the “mustachioed outlaw shooting directly at the camera” (Langford, 2005, p.56) of the modern times.

More to the point, This shot is also recreated for Jesse Pinkman. In the third season finale titled *Full Measure*, Jesse goes to Gale's apartment to kill him. Meanwhile, Mike kidnaps Walt and he is about to die as well. Walter calls Jesse and orders him to kill Gale, because if Gale is dead, there is no one to cook Walt's formula except himself. The season ends as Jesse points his gun to Gale's face and fires it. The ending shot of the episode is Jesse shooting a gun directly at the camera as another outlaw of *Breaking Bad.*

Image 8: The mustachioed outlaw shooting directly at the camera in the *Pilot* episode

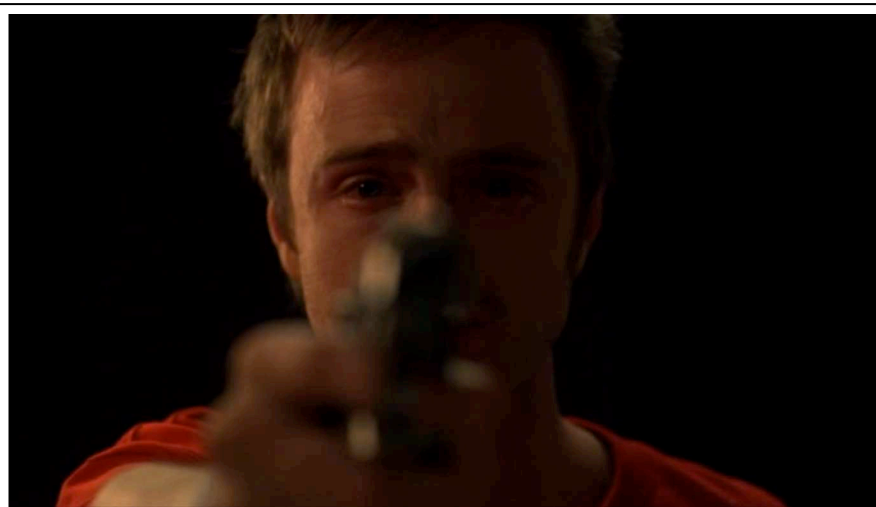

Image 9: Jesse shooting directly at the camera in *Full Measure*

Genre theoretician Barry Langford gives a list of what he calls "iconographic and narrative touchstones" (Langford, 2005, p.56) for the Western genre by taking *The*

Great Train Robbery as a prototype. Therefore, I will search for another element in that list in *Breaking Bad*, which are “the masked outlaws” (Langford, 2005, p. 56).

The iconographic touchstone of the masked outlaws is first used in the seventh episode of the first season titled *A No Rough Style Type Deal*. While Jesse and Walt are stealing a barrel of methylamine, they wear masks because there are cameras all over the place. In the eighth episode of the second season titled *Better Call Saul*, Jesse and Walt are wearing the same masks when they kidnap Saul to the desert. And finally, in the first episode of the fifth season titled *Live Free or Die,* Jesse and Walt are wearing masks while they are trying to destroy the evidence room of a police station. All of these scenes with the masks are happening while they are doing an illegal act. Like the outlaws in *The Great Train Robbery,* they are trying to hide their identities while they perform violence. The function and the usage of the masks are in the same context in all of these examples.

If we return back to the famous extra diegetic shot of the outlaw in *The Great Train Robbery,* another key semantic element for the genre is visible. The usage of guns, especially revolvers are very common in Western films. Genre theoretician Edward Buscombe gives specific details about the guns that are used in genre films by stating that “there are the various tools of the trade, principally weapons, and of these, principally guns. They are usually specifically identified: Colt 45’s, Winchester and Springfield rifles, shotguns for certain situations (such as robbing banks or facing a numerically superior enemy)” (Buscombe, 1970, p.15).

Colt 45’s are the chosen six shooters for many outlaws. For example, in Sergio Leone’s *Dollars Trilogy* (Leone, 1964, 1965, 1966), the outlaw named Blondie (portrayed by Clint Eastwood) always uses a revolver. He is better than anyone when it comes to gunfighting. In the first film of the trilogy titled *A Fistful of Dollars,* there is a shootout scene happening in the cemetery. Whereas other gunslingers in town are hardly shooting accurately, Blondie always hits his target on his first try. In *Jesse James,* Frank and Jesse’s choice of weapons are revolvers for their first criminal act. Another example can be given from *The Outlaw Josey Wales,* in which Josey draws an iconic image by being able to use two revolvers at the same time. Even in the film’s poster, we see Josey with his two revolvers shooting off-screen.

Even though in *Breaking Bad* the first gun we see is not a revolver, later in the series this semantic element is used repetitively. The most notable example can be given from season two episodes titled *Breakage, Peekabo* and *Negro y Azul.* In *Breakage,* Walter learns that some junkies have stolen meth from their crew. He goes over to Jesse’s house, hands him a revolver and says that he wants him to “handle it”. In *Peekabo,* Jesse goes over to the house of these junkies, and throughout the episode he threatens them with his revolver. Even though Jesse loses the revolver to these junkies and one of them gets killed in the end, Jesse manages to escape from the house. In *Negro Y Azul,* Walt comes to Jesse’s house again to check him if he is okay because he is not answering his phone. When Walt asks Jesse why he is not answering his phone, Jesse says that he was handling “business”. Walt asks what business he is talking about, and without saying anything else Jesse grabs the revolver from the kitchen drawer and shows it too Walt. While he is showing it, he

yells “this business”. The revolver itself is functioning as a symbol for the illegal act. While they are talking about what happened, the revolver is always visible in the frame. The violent act that is being performed by the two outlaws of the show is symbolized with a semantic element of the Western genre.

I choose the previous example in order to begin the subject because it is expanded in three consecutive episodes, in order for it to create a metonomic image. But the usage of the revolvers starts early in the television series. In the first episode of the second season titled *Seven Thirty Seven,* Jesse buys a revolver in order to protect himself from Tuco. In the same episode, while Jesse is talking about his plan to Walt about killing Tuco, they practice the plan with his revolver. Once again, the act of killing is visualized with this semantic element of the Western genre.

Same kind of approach can be encountered in the opening teaser of *Thirty Eight Snub,* in which Walt meets with a man who sells illegal guns in a hotel room. After trying several weapons, Walt chooses a six shooter will suit for him best. We see the same gun in the twelfth episode of the fourth season titled *End Times,* while Walt is waiting in his home afraid of Gus. While he is sitting in his house, waiting for a hitman to kill him, he is with his revolver.

Finally, in the thirteenth episode of the fifth season titled *To’hajiilee,* Walt grabs his revolver when Jesse sends him a picture of a barrel full of Walt’s money. While Jesse is threatening Walt to burn the money, he get in his car and starts to drive really fast from civilization to wilderness with a revolver in his right seat. When he comes to the desert where he buried all of his money, he starts to look around for Jesse with the revolver in his hands. At the end, when Hank comes to arrest him, Walt shows himself and raise his hands up for the arrest with the revolver. The usage of this key semantic element of the Western genre functions to help define Walter White as the outlaw hero.

So far I mainly mentioned the key semantic elements that the Western films choose to visualize the outlaw hero. But behind every outlaw hero, there is always a backstory that drives them into these violent acts. Richard Slotkin gives a detailed information about the outlaw being a lower-class citizen and chooses the lawless lifestyle because of that by claiming that:

> “The history of the outlaw […] indicates that the media of commercial mass culture have purveyed not only the mythologies of the cultural elite but mythologies of lower-class resistance including a legitimation of the use of force and violence” (Slotkin, 1992, p.151)

In the *Pilot* episode, the first reason that Walter White decides to be an outlaw is because he has cancer and he does not have any money to leave behind for his family. He is working in two jobs in order to take care of his family and he is not even capable to pay for his treatment with that low income. He has a son with cerebral palsy and a little baby on the way. The writers of the television series created all of these justifications for Walter, so when he decides to combine his chemistry skills

with outlawry and goes after the easy money, it will not seem like a bad idea. Richard Slotkin analyzes *Jesse James* in terms of these justifications by stating that: "King thus provides Jesse with a double justification for becoming an outlaw. The initial impulse is given by a confrontation with the railroad and the law it has corrupted. But the crucial shift from legal resistance to rebellion or guerilla warfare is motivated by the murder of the mother" (Slotkin, 1992, p.297). Whereas Jesse James's outlawry is justified because all of these corruption and violence, Walter's is justified because he is a lower-class citizen with so much potential, yet in the legal system there is no well paying jobs for him. So he has to find another way out of the system in order leave his family enough money to live when he is gone.

But then in the fifth episode of the first season titled *Gray Matter,* his former business partner Elliott and Gretchen offers him a job in their company. The job offer comes with a big salary and full insurance coverage for his cancer treatment. Walt refuses the offer and sees the money as some sort of charity. After this point, Walt's reason for becoming an outlaw turns out to be not obligatory. The refusal of the job offer is a reminder for us that from that point on, it is his choice to turn into an outlaw. All of these justifications that are caused by the lack of money before are not relevant. Walter takes his pick between earning his money with the lawful ways or the outlawed ones by saying no to Elliott.

In the sixth episode of the second season titled *Peekaboo,* we learn the background story about his former business partners. During a talk with Gretchen, Walt says that Gretchen and Elliott build their empire on his works, but leave him out of the business. We never learn that if the entire story is happened as Walt tells it, but in the end that is what he think has happened. This notion gives another layer for Walt's own justification for becoming an outlaw. He refuses Elliott and Gretchen's job offer out of personal honor and pride. In the sixth episode of the fifth season titled *Buyout,* Walt tells the story of how they build the company together and how he sold his share for five thousand dollars for a company that has billions of dollars market price. Then he says that he sold his potential and his kid's birthright for a few dollars rent.

Richard Slotkin addresses this issue of personal honor in Western films by claiming that "American frontiersmen have become outlaws because, like the Noble Red Man, they had been reared in a culture that places personal honor, proud "manhood", and intuitive code of "justice" above the rationalism and restrictions of civilized law (Slotkin, 1992, p.147). This theme of personal honor can be encountered in many Westerns such as *Once Upon a Time in the West, High Noon, The Unforgiven* and *Jesse James.* For example, in *High Noon* the narrative revolves around a marshal who is trying to recruit people in town because a bunch of outlaws coming to kill him with the noon train. Even though whole town asks him to leave because he is the reason that the outlaws are going to cause a shootout in the town, the marshal won't accept to go out of his personal honor and his dedication to make it right by the law. In the end, he confronts the outlaws alone because nobody in town agrees to help him. In *Jesse James,* Frank and Jesse decides to be outlaws because the government take their home away and kill their mother. This theme of

revenge is inevitably suggests that it is all about the personal honor and manhood. *Once Upon a Time in the West* ends with a flashback sequence that reveals this personal revenge narrative. During the duel between Frank and Harmonica, Frank asks who Harmonica is for the last time before he dies. With a flashback, we see a young Frank with his two outlaw friends. Frank and his friends are hanging a man and there is a younger man under him in order to prevent the man from dying. Frank puts a harmonica into the younger man's mouth and orders him to play. Only when it comes to this point we understand that Harmonica was plotting against Frank all along out of personal revenge. Although Frank does not remembers it, he is the one who killed Harmonica's brother right in front of his eyes.

Even though the outlaw stock character represents all of the violence and the soul of the wilderness, this is not the only thing that the Western films are about. In order to stage the lawful and civilized part of their narratives, genre films often depends on the stock characters of the marshal, the sheriff or the detective. No matter what they are called, they are always there to apply the law in order to protect the codes of civilization. In the next chapter, I will examine Hank Schrader as the detective stock character through analyzing a number of Western films with outlaw / detective narratives.

6. The Detective / Outlaw Narrative

> "The outlaw becomes a hero who resists the forces of order, but in a way that affirms the basic values of American society; the detective defends the […] social order, but does so in the style of an outlaw, always criticizing the costs of progress and often attacking the excesses of the privileged classes" (Slotkin, 1992, p.154)

Although not every pursuer of an outlaw is a detective, there is always a sheriff or a marshal who functions as this stock character in Western films. No matter what their title is, they are mainly concerned about bringing the law and civilization to the Wild West. But as Slotkin suggests, they are doing it "in the style of an outlaw" (Slotkin, 1992, p.154). For example, in *Unforgiven* the marshal Little Big Daggett does not allow firearms and outlaws in his town. Even though his actions are a clear definition that he does not want any lawless issue in his territory, he apply his laws like an outlaw. Whereas Will Munny draws a portrait of a retired outlaw throughout the film, Little Big Daggett looks more dangerous than him. The final shootout in the film happens because the marshal practically forces the outlaw to perform violent acts.

Another example can be given from *Two Rode Together*, in which James Stewart portrays a marshal who basically steals from his town's people. He is admitting that he is getting ten percent of the civilian's money illegally at the beginning of the film. The outlaw style of James Stewart's character continues as he becomes the "man who knows the Indians". Because he spent time in the wilderness, he knows how to think and act like the enemy.

Same kind of approach can be encountered in *My Darling Clementine,* in which an ex marshal named Wyatt Earp comes to a lawless town called Tombstone and tries to turn it into a civilized community. After Earp becomes marshal again, he encounters Doc Holliday who is an obscured character when it comes to the law. Even though in *My Darling Clementine* his outlaw skills are mentioned between the lines, Doc Holliday is portrayed as a notorious outlaw in another Western film titled *The Outlaw.* Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday became friends in *My Darling Clementine* even though their vision of a civilization is different. Because Earp spent time in the wilderness during his retirement times as a marshal, he can became friends with a person like Doc Holliday. Just like James Stewart "knows the Indians", Wyatt Earp knows the outlaw way of living. Because he knows it, it does not mean that he has to function as an outlaw, but it is a part of him.

Genre theoretician Douglas Pye gives an example from *Rio Bravo* (Hawks, 1959) in order to explain the stock characters of the Western genre by stating that:

> "The famous "silent" opening of *Rio Bravo* (Hawks, 1959), for instance, is in its way equally abstract, without invoking themes to do with westward expansion at all. The abstraction here is in the characters and action. The main characters are readily identifiable genre types characterized in largely

> conventional ways: the drunk, the smiling killer, the unbending sheriff" (Pye, 1975, p.213).

When it comes to *Breaking Bad* all of these stock characters proposed by Pye are present. Jesse functions as the drunk in this context, with his ongoing meth addiction. Walter White is the smiling killer, whom we watched his transformation from a humble chemistry teacher into a cold blooded murderer. Hank occupies the spot of the unbending sheriff, who is always there to protect the law, even when the outlaw turns out to be in his family. This theme of the sheriff being "unbending" is one of the essential key points that creates a similarity between the outlaw and the detective. The outlaw hero can also be mentioned as unbending, but in terms of breaking the law. The detective performs his duty in the same manner with the outlaw, but in a totally opposite context.

The detective Hank Schrader's outlaw skills become a part of the narrative after his time in El Paso. After witnessing Tortuga's murder and a bomb explosion in one day in the episode titled *Negro y Azul,* Hank starts to have panic attacks as a symptom of post trauma syndrome. These panic attacks become a dark part for Hank's life because his time spent in the wilderness. In the third episode of the third season titled *I.F.T.*, Hank experiences a panic attack after a talk about El Paso with his partner. Gomez and Hank are in a bar in order to follow a drug dealer who is selling at the bar while they are talking. Because the investigation is off the record, they decide to just watch him from a far. Hank asks permission to go to the toilet after Gomez asks about El Paso and we see him shaking in the next scene. After his return, he beats up the gang of drug dealers in the bar, even though it was illegal for a cop to perform these violent acts off the record.

In the sixth episode of the third season titled *Sunset,* Hank experiences another panic attack after Walt and Jesse trick him into thinking that Marie had a car accident. Because Hank follows Jesse to the van that they are cooking meth, Walt arranges a fake phone call that says Marie is in a hospital. After Hank discovers that it was a fake phone call, he starts shaking in the hospital. At the beginning of the next episode titled *One Minute* (Schnauz & MacLaren, 2010)*,* Hank forces himself into Jesse's apartment and starts to beat him roughly. Because of this illegal act, Hank is suspended from the law force at the end of the episode.

This repetitive theme of Hank performing illegal acts after his panic attacks is a reminder that this outlaw style is present in him because of his time spent in the wilderness. The fact that Hank starts to have these episodes after his trauma, connects every panic attack that Hank has to that event. Just like the marshal who knows the Indians in *Two Rode Together* is presented like he brought back a dark knowledge within him about the wilderness, Hank brings back a mental illness within him from El Paso. Richard Slotkin explains the flexible notion about the man who knows the Indians by stating that "in the "detective story" the 'man who knows Indians' is replaced by a "man who knows strikers"" (Slotkin, 1992, p.126). As the man who knows the strikers in El Paso, Hank discovers a dark element within him.

Richard Slotkin gives us another characteristic of the detective stock character by stating that "the detectives are unambiguously heroic [...] whether they appear as protagonists or merely as pursuers of the outlaws, and they consistently assert the primacy of law in any civil society" (Slotkin, 1992, p.148). This theme of the detectives, sheriffs or the marshals being unambiguously heroic can be encountered in Western films such as *My Darling Clementine, The Outlaw, Ride the High Country, High Noon* and many more. For example, in *My Darling Clementine*, Wyatt Earp is always mentioned in town like a hero, who brought civilization to a lawless community. The heroic nature of the detective is enhanced when he performs his duties as the protector of the law successfuly.

In *Breaking Bad,* same kind of approach can be encountered with Hank Schrader. In the seventh episode of the second season titled *Negro y Azul,* Skyler mentions Hank as a hero because he killed Tuco. After the shootout with the cousins, Hank is championed as a hero as well. In the ninth episode of the third season titled *Kafkaesque,* Marie refuses to pay for Hank's hospital bills because he was shot in a cartel related killing. She says that "he is a hero, you cannot make a hero pay". And for last, Saul mentions Hank as an "American hero" in the eleventh episode of the third season titled *Abiquiu* (Shiban & Schnauz & MacLaren, 2010). Just like Marie, Saul refers to him as a hero because he killed dangerous members of the cartel. Hank functions as an "American hero" because he fulfills his duty as the detective and helped bringing civilization to the town. So, Hank is a hero not just because he is a detective but he performs his duty more effectively than any other agent in the television series.

The duty that makes Hank an "American hero" is that he is willing to kill Mexicans (or the culturally alien) in order to protect the border. Although Hank is discovering dark elements within him while he is fulfilling this duty, he becomes a hero for the other characters in *Breaking Bad.* On the other hand, Walt is also killing the culturally alien just like Hank but their intentions are different. Walt is performing violent acts in order to protect his own border between him and the other drug dealers. Only Hank, as an instrument of the civilized law, can be mentioned as a hero for killing people because it is in fact his job.

It is also interesting to note that Walter White referred to as a hero just one time throughout the television series. In the thirteenth episode of the second season titled *ABQ* (Bernstein & Gilligan, 2009), Marie arranges a television interview in Walt's house because of the success of Walter Junior's donation website SaveWalterWhite.com. While the interview is happening, the television reporter asks to Walter Junior "would you say your father is your hero?". Without any hesisation, Walter Junior confirms that his father is a hero in his eyes. Whereas Hank is called a hero out of success in his job, Walter can be mentioned as a hero only in a reality television program and only for his crippled teenage son when prompted. Throughout the television series, Walter Junior is never mentioning his dad as a hero except this scene. In fact, he is the only character who completely rejects anything about him after learning that Walt is a drug manufacturer. Even though the other

characters do not give praises about Walt’s outlawry, they still want to act on what Walt did to the family. Walter Junior completely rejects him as the person who mentioned Walt as a hero once upon a time in the narrative.

This complete contrast about the two characters being a hero functions to put Hank above Walt when it comes to heroism. More to the point, it is not only the heroism but there is also a class difference that puts Hanks above Walt. Whereas Walter makes a very little amount of money as a teacher and he has to work a second job in a car wash, Hank is visualized as a wealthy man right from the start. In the *Pilot* episode, he comes to Walt’s birthday party with an expensive jeep and he always brags about his job. Hank’s house is a mansion on the hills and Walt’s house is in the suburbs. This class difference functions to show that in this world, teaching children is worthless compared to killing Mexicans. But when Walt decides to do that in order to gain money he becomes an outlaw because it is not his duty.

Perhaps the most notable example for the detective stock characters in the Western genre are the Pinkerton detectives. Founded in 1850, Pinkerton agency is one of the oldest detective services in the United States. The Pinkerton detectives are characters in a variety of Western productions such as *3:10 to Yuma (*Mangold, 2007), *The Legend of Zorro* (Campbell, 2005), *Copper* (Fontana & Rokos, 2012), *Bad Girls* (Kaplan, 1994), *Wild Wild West* (Sonnenfeld, 1999) and *Deadwood*.

In the Western television series *Copper*, two Pinkerton detectives are searching for a girl named Annie who went missing. During their search, they are presented with their outlaw skills. For example, they break the thighbone of a man whom they think is related to the missing girl in order to get information. In the feature film of *Wild Wild West*, Will Smith portrays a Pinkerton detective who saves the president from an assassination, whom always performs violent acts in order to save the symbol of civilization.

In the 2007 remake of *3:10 to Yuma*, Pinkerton detectives are searching for the outlaw portrayed by Russell Crowe. Whereas we are witnessing the outlaw performing violent acts in one side of the narrative, we see the Pinkertons getting close to him by following his steps. This notion of seeing the outlaw and the detective in the divided sides of the narrative creates a “dualistic structure” (Altman, 1999, p.24) in Rick Altman's terms. In his book *Film/Genre*, Altman states that genre films “regularly depend on dual protagonists and *dualistic* structures; in the archetypical Western scene, the sheriff confronts an outlaw in a shootout” (Altman, 1999, p.24).

The long time expected climatic shootout between the two sides of the narrative happens in the episodes titled *To’hajilee* and *Ozymandias.* When Hank finaly arrests Walt, Uncle Jack and his men come to the desert to save Walt. The shootout starts in the episode titled *To’hajilee* and continues in *Ozymandias.* Although every shootout in *Breaking Bad* ends in one episode, only this time it is divided into two parts. This functions as making the shoot-out even more climatic, because *To’hajilee* ends right

in the middle of the shooting. If one is watching the television series while it is airing, this means that there is a one-week gap to see the end of the shootout.

Even though the shootout scene is the part where the dualistic structures meet with a violent act, this is not the only time that we can mention this design. Seeing the detective's and the outlaw's actions in divided sides of the narrative is a common way to construct a genre film. For example, in *The Wild Bunch* the group of aged outlaws is not the only focus of the film because at times we see the lawmen chasing them and closing in to their actions. Same kind of approach is visible in *The Outlaw,* in which we watch two outlaws and the sheriff pursuing them in a divided structure. Although the dualistic structures meet in a shootout at the end, first we have to see the two sides of the narrative separately This is what makes the shootout climatic, because the expectation of a confrontation between two sides is built up throughout the film.

In *Breaking Bad*, Hank is pursuing Walt's actions right from the beginning but without knowing that Walt is involved in these acts. Because Hank is a Drug Enforcement Administration agent, he knows every case related to drugs in New Mexico. This narrative starts at the third episode of the first season titled *And The Bag's in the River* (Bernstein & Gilligan, 2008), when Hank and Gomez finds the car of the drug dealer that Walt killed in the desert. While they are looking into the car, another agent finds a gas mask that is used during cooking meth. In the first episode of the second season, Hank watches a video of two masked outlaws stealing a barrel of methylamine without knowing they are Walt and Jesse. At the end of the seventh episode of the fourth season titled *Problem Dog,* Hank gives a case to the Drug Enforcement Administration that is claiming Gus Fring as the biggest meth dealer in the north of the border. Although he does not knows that Gus is working with his brother-in-law, we as the audience are aware that these investigations are just getting him closer to Walt because we watched the two sides of the dualistic structure all along.

In the ninth episode of the fifth season titled *Blood Money* (Gould & Cranston, 2013), all of these events that I mentioned above comes together in a montage sequence. When Hank discovers that Walt is the outlaw he was looking for, he orders all of the files that are connected to the Heisenberg case to his home. While he is working with all the evidence, we watch him in a montage sequence, in which we see the video of Walt and Jesse stealing a barrel of methylamine and the photographs of the gas mask. This montage sequence functions as combining all of the elements that constructed the two opposite sides of the dualistic structure and it connects all of the things that the detective did in order to pursue the outlaw.

The notion of the outlaw and the detective being in the same family creates more space in the narrative for the dualistic structures to meet without a climatic shootout or an investigation scene. In some of these scenes, the binary opposition of the law versus outlaw strikes because of the dualistic structure. For example, in the seventh episode of the first season titled *A No Rough Style Type Deal,* Hank and Walt are having a conversation about what should be legal or illegal. The conversation

starts because Hank offers Walt an illegal cuban cigar. Walt as the outlaw questions Hank's action by stating that he thought these cigars were illegal. Then, Walt questions who draws the border of what should be legal or illegal. Hank concludes the talk by saying that some things, like meth, should stay illegal. This scene functions to address the core syntax of the Western genre, which is consisted of wilderness and civilization. At the end of the conversation, the detective as an instrument of civilization decides that "some things should stay illegal", whereas Walt as the outlaw is always questioning where we draw that line between the civilized and the wild actions.

7. Conclusion

In my analysis of *Breaking Bad,* I started with the investigation of the desert landscape because of two reasons. The first one is the desert being "the imaged landscape" (Slotkin, 1992, p.233) for the history of the Western films. The second reason is that the desert landscape is the only reason Vince Gilligan proposes to call his creation "a modern day Western" (Neuman, 2008). By combining this two statements about the genre, I reached to the conclusion that the main reason that an analysis of *Breaking Bad* as a Western is possible because of the repetitive usage of the desert landscape.

Rick Altman explains the distinction between genre films and other films by stating that "whereas other films depends heavily on their referential qualities to establish ties to the real world, genre films typically depend on symbolic usage of key images, sounds and locations" (Altman, 1999, p.26). Through applying this logic to *Breaking Bad,* I found out that the repetitive usage of a key location that has functioned as a core semantic element for the Western films throughout the history is what visually connects the television series to the genre conventions.

Of course, the desert landscape is not a visual without meaning. The desert landscape might be a shared visual between *Breaking Bad* and the Western films, but it is also important for both to address the same syntax. In his analysis of film genres, Rick Altman attributes a metaphorical meaning to the desert landscape by stating that "actual location matter less for the Western's incessant long shots of the landscape than the way the landscape is used to figure the simultaneous danger and potential that the West represents" (Altman, 1999, p.26). In Western films, the danger of the West is visualized by repetitive narrative choices like climatic shootouts and train robberies, which are violent acts that visualize the dangerous side of the desert landscape. Since the desert is not a civilized land, it allows the characters in Western films to perform violence without any rules and regulations. The rules of civilized American towns cannot be applied in a land that is not yet taken by the Americans. This notion brings out the core syntax of wilderness / civilization which seems to be coincide with Rick Altman's proposition of danger / potential binary opposition. Whereas the visualization of the wilderness is always made by using the desert landscape, the civilization is symbolized with the closed spaces of a town. This might be just a home like in *The Searchers,* or a small civilized town like in *Two Rode Together* or *Ride the High Country.* This distinct visualization allows us to differentiate the wilderness and the civilization by just looking at the location.

Although climatic shootouts and train robberies can be encountered in other genres like gangster films, police thrillers and adventure films, there is a distinct element when it comes to the Western genre. This distinction comes from the desert landscape, which is a key and unique location for the Western. Climatic shootouts and train robberies might be encountered in other genres, but only in Western films they are happening in the desert landscape.

When it comes to *Breaking Bad,* the television series chooses to address the same

syntax with the same semantic elements. The desert landscape symbolizes the danger by using the Western genre conventions like climatic shootouts and train robberies. Also, the danger is symbolized by making the desert as the perfect spot for illegal business meetings.

Like in Western films, *Breaking Bad* visualize the civilization by using the closed spaces of a town. For example, throughout the first season, Walter and Jesse goes to the desert in order to conduct their illegal meth business. But when they return to the civilization, they come back to a closed space, which are their homes. During the first two seasons, Walter lies to his wife Skyler about his time spent away from the civilization. Because for Walter, the desert landscape as the wilderness is a place where every illegal act is possible and Walter's wife – whom only seen civilization – cannot understand the dark values of the wilderness. This visual distinction functions in the same way both in the television series and the Western genre.

By taking the desert landscape as a key location and adding semantic genre conventions like climatic shootouts and train robberies, *Breaking Bad* visually addresses the Western genre. Although the storyline without the visuals can be seen as a gangster narrative, the distinction comes to the surface by the usage of the location. Besides being a semantic constitute of the Western film, the desert landscape also highlights the most exclusive stock narrative for the genre, which is the border narrative. Since the desert landscape allows us to divide the wilderness and civilization visually, it functions as a border between them.

This issue with the border narrative is based on the frontier myth when it comes to the Western films. I mostly used Slotkin's work because he dedicates three books to the frontier myth's importance in American history and the last book of the trilogy titled *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (Slotkin, 1992) is only structured around the symbolization of the myth in Western films. At its core, the frontier myth starts in 1492 with the foundation of the United States by Christopher Columbus and the myth tells the narrative of American expansion until they take over every land from the colonies.

Although this may seem like the frontier myth is fixed in history, Slotkin states that even Vietnam was mentioned "as 'Indian country' and search-and-destroy missions as a game of 'Cowboys and Indians'" (Slotkin, 1992, p.3). Genre theoretician Barry Langford states that "in reality the frontier was always and by definition mobile" (Langford, 2005, p.63). With these statements, Slotkin and Langford both are addressing the fact that the frontier myth can be applied to any given text that is structured around the border narrative. In my analysis, I used works from different genres like *Star Trek* and *Homeland* in order to show the different approaches to this stock narrative choice.

Because the frontier myth starts with the American expansion, a lot of Western films tell the narrative of the Indian wars. Genre films such as *The Searchers, Two Rode Together, Broken Arrow* and *Cheyenne Autumn* are structured around Indian wars. All of these films are showing the Indian lands as the wilderness and American towns as the civilization. This notion functions to visualize the different sides of the border

with the distinct visuals. Also, this notion makes the Indian characters another semantic element surrounding the Western genre.

In the case of *Breaking Bad,* I argued that the Indians are not the villains of the television series, but they are part of it as well. The Indians are presented as they are living in the wilderness, just like in Western films. But because *Breaking Bad* is a modern day Western, they are not a threat to the civilization anymore. They were a threat before the American expansion reaches its purpose, but in our times the border is set. Therefore, if *Breaking Bad* is a modern day Western, then it has to deal with a border that is still active in our times.

Breaking Bad is not only using the desert landscape and the Indians as key semantic element, it also takes place in Mexico, which is used as an actual border in a variety of Western films. Genre films such as *Django, My Darling Clementine, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, The Wild Bunch* and *The Outlaw* are visually using Mexico as a location and as a border between the civilization and the wilderness. So, it is not the vast emptiness of the space that addresses the border narrative like in *Star Trek*, but it is a key location that is used in a number of Western films. The usage of this genre specified location creates a connection between *Breaking Bad* and Western films. Since Mexico is a border that is set after the expansion of the Americans, the location itself is sending a reference to the frontier myth because the border is set right at the point the expansion has ended. So, *Breaking Bad* not only uses this stock narrative of the Western genre, but it also takes an actual location from genre conventions in order to construct the border narrative.

Nevertheless, the border narrative is not the only shared stock narrative between *Breaking Bad* and Western films. I argued that the captivity narrative is another way to structure a Western film. Although this stock narrative can be encountered in totally different genres like gangster, thriller, horror and alien abduction films, what makes it distinctive in Western genre that it is set on a border. In her analysis of this stock narrative in Western films, Barbara Mortimer states that "captivity narratives are set on a frontier; in them, a white person becomes a victim of the fight over its terrain and is taken by force to the enemy's world" (Mortimer, 2000, p.3). So, for the Western genre, captivity narrative tells the story of capturing the white men to the other side of the border, where he has to encounter the values of the culturally alien.

I argued that in *Breaking Bad* all of the captivity narratives are structured around a culturally alienated character (like Hispanics and Neo-Nazi's) as the captor and the white men as the captives. This stock narrative choice functions in the same way because the television series is set on a frontier and shares this character symbolizations with captivity narratives in Western films. This simultaneous functioning between the border and the captivity narrative inevitably rules out connections with other genres that are using this stock narrative.

In my analysis of the border narrative in *Breaking Bad,* I argued that throughout the third and the fourth season this stock narrative is revolving around Gus Fring and his relationship with the Cartel. Because the Cartel is situated in Mexico and Gus Fring

has his intentions to take over the Cartel's business, it creates a narrative that is telling the story of a businessman in America waging a war against Mexicans. Also, Gus Fring's headquarters for his illegal business meetings is situated in the desert landscape, which functions to visualize Gus as the man who is working literally on the border.

Nevertheless, it is not only the border narrative that is connecting Gus Fring to the Western genre. In the eighth episode of the fourth season titled *Hermanos*, we learn that Gus wants to destroy the Cartel not just because he wants to conquer both sides of the border. During the final scene of *Hermanos* which is a flashback*,* we watch Don Eladio (the head of the Cartel) murdering Gus's former business partner. So, Gus wants to destroy the Cartel because of a personal revenge narrative as well, which is another stock narrative that is being used in Western genre. Films like *The Outlaw Josey Wales, Jesse James* and *Once Upon a Time in the West* are structured around a revenge narrative. Although also this stock narrative can be encountered in totally different genres like gangster, horror or rape-revenge films, what is distinctive about the revenge narratives in Western films that they are set on a frontier.

Although *Breaking Bad* attributes two important stock narratives from the Western genre to Gus Fring and choose the visualize him as the man who is working on the border, he is not exactly looking like a Western hero. If we think about the famous Western heroes in film history such as John Wayne, Clint Eastwood and James Stewart, the casting of Gus Fring is far more different than them. First of all, he is not an "American hero" and he is not symbolizing the glory of the white men. He is an immigrant from Chile, who worked his way up to become a drug kingpin under the alias of a successful businessman who owns a fast-food franchise with fourteen restaurants.

At this point, the characteristic of *Breaking Bad* being a modern day Western comes to the surface. Considering that we have a character that is casted out of Western traditions but he is structured around genre specified stock narratives and visual references, this opposition creates a meaning through the frontier myth. At its core, the frontier myth is about the American expansion. Gus Fring is a man who owns a fast-food franchise, which is also an example of an "expansion". Because *Breaking Bad* is a modern day Western, Gus Fring functions to symbolize what expansion means in a modern society. In our times, businessmen who own fast food chains or shopping malls are the ones who are considered as "high society". But what they do to earn those big figures of money is simply expanding their business.

When it comes to Walter White and Jesse Pinkman, I argued that they are functioning as the outlaw heroes of *Breaking Bad'*s narrative. Slotkin states that the stock character of the outlaw is the "mythologies of lower class resistance" (Slotkin, 1992, p.151). Jesse turns into an outlaw before Walter's proposition of cooking together and the reason is presented to us because he is a "high school drop out". He is cast out of society, because he did not followed the norm and got a good education in order to earn money. But on the other hand, even though Walter followed the norm throughout his life, he ended up being an overqualified high school chemistry teacher, who has to work two jobs in order to feed his family. In

the end, Walter becomes an outlaw too, because if he dies before earning some money for his family, he is afraid that they will be cast out of this society too. Both of these characters turns into an outlaw because of a "lower class resistance" to the rules of society. They decide to take control of their earnings and therefore they reject the life that the modern society has to offer them with its limitations. By structuring Walter and Jesse's story around the fact that they are lower class citizens, the television series addresses the backstories of famous outlaws from the Western genre.

Semantically, the television series visualize Walter White as an outlaw in the opening scene of the first episode. By showing Walter in the desert landscape for starting the whole narrative is a choice that functions as a reference to the Western genre. A number of Western films such as *Stagecoach, Unforgiven, The Outlaw, A Fistful of Dollars, The Train Robbers* and *Django* starts their narrative with the visualization of the desert landscape and the appearance of the outlaw hero. In the first episode, this tradition of the Western films functions to define Walter White as the outlaw of this modern day Western, surrounded by a key semantic element of the genre.

In my analysis, I analyzed Hank Schrader as the stock character of the detective from the Western genre. Genre theoretician Rick Altman states that genre films "regularly depend on dual protagonists and dualistic structures; in the archetypical Western scene, the sheriff confronts an outlaw in a shoot-out" (Altman, 1999. p.24). Hank Schrader is not a sheriff because *Breaking Bad* is taking place in modern times. But he functions as a sheriff for many reasons. First of all, if we think in Rick Altman terms, the dualistic structure is created by the outlaw / detective narrative. The possibility of analyzing Hank as a detective comes from the fact that he is the pursuer of every outlaw in *Breaking Bad'*s narrative.

But it is not only that Hank is a part of a dualistic structure that makes him a modern day Western detective, because Hank shares characteristics with this stock character. His outlaw style of protecting the values of society because of the dark elements that he's brought within him from the wilderness is a characteristic that can be encountered in Western detectives. Films like *The Unforgiven, Two Rode Together, My Darling Clementine* and *The Outlaw* are functioning as examples for Hank's outlaw style because of his time spent in the wilderness. So, it is not only the fact that Hank is the pursuer of the outlaws takes makes him a Western detective, there are also narrative choices that defines him as a stock character of the genre.

The first episode of *Breaking Bad* references the first Western film in history titled *The Great Train Robbery.* Genre theoretician Robert Langford states that the image of the mustachioed outlaw shooting directly at the camera, an iconic image that resonates through the subsequent century of Hollywood's most popular and prolific genre" (Langford, 2005, p.56). At the end of the first episode, this image is recreated with Walter White, which functions as a homage to the first Western film ever produced in history. Considering that it is the first episode, *Breaking Bad* starts its narrative with two strong connections to the Western genre. Whereas the desert landscape functions as a semantic element to define *Breaking Bad* as a modern day Western, the image of the outlaw shooting directly at the camera works as an

intertextual reference to the genre's prototype.

The last episode of *Breaking Bad* titled *Felina* is sending a reference to a Western film as well. In an interview, Vince Gilligan states that "a lot of astute viewers who know their film history are going to say, 'it's the end of *The Searchers.'* And indeed it is" (Snierson, 2013). In my analysis, I argued that the captivity and revenge narratives that can be found in *The Searchers* ending is recreated in the final episode of *Breaking Bad.* Also, the television series ends with a climatic shootout scene, which is the ending of a great number of Western films such as *The Magnificent Seven, 3:10 to Yuma, True Grit, My Darling Clementine, The Outlaw Josey Wales* and so on.

Breaking Bad starts its narrative with a direct reference to the prototype of the Western genre and ends it with recreating a genre film's narrative choices, which is championed and analyzed by many genre theoreticians. If we think that all of the narrative starts like opening a parenthesis and ends with closing it, *Breaking Bad* opens and closes the parenthesis with the Western genre's conventions. Looking at it this way, *Breaking Bad* starts with a reference to a time that the Western genre conventions are established and ends with a reference to a classical Western that is analyzed by many film scholars. This notion functions as an intention to cover the Western genre conventions, which are set both at its inception and also at its peak point.

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Wayne, M. (Producer) & Kennedy, B. (Director). (1973). *The Train Robbers* [Motion picture]. United States: Batjac Productions

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