

## **"Gonna Break Bad?" – On *Implicit Dramaturgy* in *Breaking Bad***

by Christine Lang

The series *Breaking Bad* (USA, 2008, developed by Vince Gilligan) is one of the most successful examples of the new 'author's television' and is characterized by exceptionally tight and well-written scripts. Actions and events in this show never happen 'for just any reason'. They always have reasons and consequences, often becoming clear only several episodes or even entire seasons later. The wealth of narrative detail, the references, the metaphorical language of film, and the many symbolic activations of film-aesthetic design techniques unite the explicit action with deeper levels of meaning. They create subtexts that might elude perception on the first or only viewing of the show. They reward active 'aesthetic seeing' and repeated viewing of the series with ever new discoveries.

This essay considers the importance of *implicit dramaturgy* for the success of contemporary television film narratives – in interaction with the *explicit dramaturgy* of pure action events. It will be shown, in an exemplary way, how knowledge of the world and other special knowledge that is included and reflected in this TV series (and in other author's series) help to constitute the high quality of the series and thereby build a high narrative credibility.

### **Implicit Dramaturgy in *Breaking Bad***

In the pilot episode of *Breaking Bad*, the basic situation of the series is communicated in an elegant way: in an apparently unremarkable sequence, the viewers learn the most important things about the life of the main character. At the level of the explicit narrative, the backstory of the hero is told: his life has unfolded differently than he had expected, he will soon become a father, he was once a contender for the Nobel Prize, and his health is no longer quite up to par. In addition, his wife Skyler is introduced and characterized by the color patterns which are carefully hung on the wall. Although this is important information for the explicit action, at the same time – largely through the color pattern – something else is being implicitly conveyed. Here is hidden an agreement with the viewers, a kind of guide to the reading of the series: In this series, a lot will be told with, about and through style. The viewers are asked to adjust to this and to pay attention to it. In this way, not only is general knowledge of life in the Western world a prerequisite for understanding *Breaking Bad* in all the dimensions of its narrative, but a solid knowledge of style is also demanded. Genre knowledge and the skill to

read different styles – such as interior decoration of apartments, car brands, and clothing – all play an important role.



Figure 1

In a later key scene of the pilot episode (Figure 1), Walter hands over his life savings to his new business partner Jesse while standing in a parking lot, so that Jesse can set up a meth lab:

JESSE: Tell me why you're doing this. Seriously.  
WALT: Why do you do it?  
JESSE: Money, mainly.  
WALT: There you go.  
JESSE: Nah. Come on, man! Some straight like you, giant stick up his ass ... all of a sudden at age, what, sixty – he's just gonna break bad?  
WALT: I'm fifty.  
JESSE: It's weird, is all, okay? It doesn't compute. Listen, if you're gone crazy or something. I mean, if you've gone crazy, or depressed – I'm just saying – that's something I need to know about. Okay? That affects me.  
WALT: I am ... awake.  
JESSE: What?  
WALT: Buy the RV. We start tomorrow.

That there are essentially two dimensions of storytelling in *Breaking Bad* – the explicit and the implicit levels – is pointed to in this scene, even by the question that Jesse asks that provides the series with its title. On the explicit level, his query "Some straight like you ... he's just gonna break bad?" refers to the question of whether Walter will now become 'evil'. Jesse's youth culture language serves as the key characterization of Jesse, who is the contrasting figure to Walter White. On the other hand – and implicitly – an encoding is hidden in the phrase that gives the viewer a hint of an important implication of the entire series: "Breaking bad" carries in this youth language the connotation of 'being cool'. The implicit dramaturgy addresses itself in this scene to a culturally imprinted everyday knowledge and to the knowledge of a specific target group, especially to pop culture-influenced special knowledge – for example, to the distinction between 'cool' and 'not cool'.

## Implicit Dramaturgy

Implicit dramaturgy is a term that can be used productively for the interpretation of specific aspects of the analysis – for example, concepts such as *style* and *excess* which have been brought into play by David Bordwell – of certain aggregated components of cinematic storytelling.<sup>1</sup> Dramaturgy, both as a practical activity and as a praxis-oriented science, is always to be understood as that media which steers the process of the reception aesthetics of a work, and through which hidden meanings of a filmic narrative can be decrypted. Implicit dramaturgy is not just one, but perhaps *the* determining factor in contemporary cinematic stories. Through it, deep dimensions of cinematic narration are shaped and communicated. Implicit dramaturgy does not limit itself in its world references to substantive allusions and quotes, as in post-modern cinema, but rather it organizes the use of all cinematic design elements. It guides all aesthetic decisions regarding material, color, camera, editing, *mise-en-scène* – from performance to scenography – and, last but not least, all auditory elements. In film language, all filmic aesthetic elements have, if not an explicit, then an implicit dramatic function.

The term *implicit dramaturgy* comes from theoretical theater dramaturgy, in which there is a tradition of dealing with implicit, i.e., hidden dramaturgy. Both for the deeper understanding of a dramatic cinematic narrative as well as for film analysis and cinematic practice, the terms *explicit* and *implicit dramaturgy* are extremely helpful. *Explicit dramaturgy* refers to the basic level of the film narrative, to the concrete action that is happening, somewhat analogous to the adoption by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson of the Russian formalist concepts *fabula* and *syuzhet* taken together. *Fabula* refers to the story that is being told, which exists independently of the narrative medium, while *syuzhet* refers to the media-dependent organization and communication of this action. In contrast to explicit dramaturgy, implicit dramaturgy refers to the dramaturgy hidden within the explicit narrative. It refers to those elements of the story that allude to the knowledge of the world of the viewer, and are thus responsible for the extended radius of impact of a work – something that the concept *style* can only inadequately describe. In contrast to the semiotic terms *denotation* and *connotation* (e.g., Metz, Barthes), with the argued four levels of meaning (referential and explicit as well as implicit and symptomatic<sup>2</sup>) of neoformalism, the concept of implicit dramaturgy aims, as a

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<sup>1</sup> On the concepts of *fabula*, *syuzhet* and *style*: David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison 1985).

<sup>2</sup> See: Kristin Thompson, "Neoformalistische Filmanalyse". In: *Montage AV*, Volume 4.1.1995; [www.montage-av.de](http://www.montage-av.de) (accessed on 16.8.2013) p.32.

supplement to explicit dramaturgy, not only at the contexts of meaning in the world outside the film/image to which it refers, but rather asks especially, similar to reception aesthetics, about function, meaning, and interactions within the narrative itself. Explicit and implicit dramaturgy are relative terms that refer to the meaning contexts of individual elements within cinematic narrative. The film-aesthetic elements are usually in the service of both – explicit dramaturgy and implicit dramaturgy – but the more open and in more of a 'poetic' manner a film is told, the more the emphasis is on the implicit dramaturgy as a key to the deciphering of the presented narration. In this way, implicit dramaturgy is largely responsible for the realism effect and the authenticity of the narrative. Style and humor are always time- and context-dependent phenomena, and if metaphors and references to knowledge of the world and everyday knowledge of the media-experienced viewer are not correct, then a film or a TV show can quickly appear to be clueless or naive.<sup>3</sup>

Implicit dramaturgy unfolds in cooperation with the explicit dramaturgy and “is realized functionally first in the appropriation, production and mediation process.”<sup>4</sup> Viewers compare films continuously with their experiences, with their knowledge of the world, and bring the film narrative into relationship with their own experiences of the world. The more knowledge of the world is present on the part of authors and viewers, the greater is the importance of implicit dramaturgy. It is the means by which the film author and the work address extensive knowledge of the world – on all levels and with all film aesthetic means. Implicit dramaturgies are above all not associated with purely artwork-specific historical, sociological and cultural factors.<sup>5</sup> Implications within a work can be brought into the work from the philosophical, cultural-historical, or even from the biographical context of the author and all artists participating in the work. Not only intentional artistic purposes play a role, but, for example, the filmographies of actors appearing in a film influence its reception. Implicit dramaturgies relate, in this way, not only to the textual, linguistic level of a work, but also to its formal aesthetic structure, for example, the meter and rhythm of a cinematic work. Although certain implicit dramaturgies can sometimes be located within the internal structure of a film, such as when the reason for the organization of the aesthetic means is itself created in the work, they are associated with the aesthetic discourse historically surrounding a film-work, with technical

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<sup>3</sup> If a film does not connect to popular aesthetic discourses and codes, then its reception seems to be difficult or even impossible. This applies to both commercial entertainment films and to art videos. The term ‘poetic imagery’ does not take into consideration which canon of taste this ‘poetry’ refers to. The dramaturgical, aesthetic and stylistic issues of televisual narratives are not yet being sufficiently researched. In television research, socio-cultural and media-theoretical approaches still dominate.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Reichel (ed.): *Studien zur Dramaturgie: Kontexte – Implikationen – Berufspraxis*. (Tübingen 2000); p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Reichel (2000), p. 21 (see Note 5).

innovations, and with socio-political circumstances. That this also applies to rhythm and meter can also be seen in the differences between the ‘well-made’ American entertainment film and the tradition of artistic realism of the European ‘author’s film’. Both have aesthetic implications coming from completely different musical historical traditions – on the one hand, a culture permeated by the African American sub-cultural experience, and, on the other hand, white, European avant-garde culture.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Breaking Bad***

*Breaking Bad* is, for a television series, at an above average level of being cinematic, and narrated with a view to a specific visual style. Thus the aesthetics, in other words, the ‘how’, become a major vehicle of the narration. A special quality of *Breaking Bad* is the ways in which the film-aesthetic possibilities are exhausted and placed at the service of the narrative. The series is linear-causal, in other words, it narrates via the *dramaturgy of the closed form*. But there also exist forays into the *open form* and into post-modern structures.<sup>7</sup> A special feature of the series consists especially in how implicit elements are tightly linked to the causal narrative and contribute to its progress. The implicit dramaturgical parts have a particularly strong meaning for the organization of the action. Even the subject-matter of the series and the starting point for the dramatic narrative – which serve on the explicit narrative level to place a character in a situation that forces him or her to act, refer implicitly to the social reality of the inadequate health insurance system in the United States. (In Germany, such a starting point for a story would not be very credible.)

The middle class chemistry teacher Walter White needs money due to his cancer. He wants to make his medical treatment possible, and to ensure (first) that his family is taken care of after his foreseeable demise. Due to certain circumstances, he hits upon the idea of going into the drug business, specifically into the manufacture of methamphetamine (crystal meth). Through the cancer of the main character, a plot is set in motion that spans the largest dramaturgical arc of the series. Walter White becomes a criminal, and the question is posed of whether he will be discovered and punished or not. Many smaller dramaturgical arcs are subsumed in this larger arc, told sometimes in one episode, sometimes over the course of a few

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<sup>6</sup> On this subject, see: Annegret Gertz; Rolf Rohmer: “Hidden dramaturgy in the American Stage Entertainment.” In: Reichel, Peter (ed.): *Studies on Dramaturgy: Contexts – Implications – Professional Practice*. Tübingen 2000, pp. 81-133.

<sup>7</sup> For details see: Kerstin Stutterheim, Silke Kaiser: *Handbook of Film Dramaturgy. The Gut and its Causes*. Frankfurt 2011 (2nd edition) and Kerstin Stutterheim; Christine Lang: *Come and Play With Us. Aesthetics and Dramaturgy in the Postmodern Cinema*. Marburg 2014.

episodes, or over the course of an entire season. A feature of this and other similar high-quality author's series is that greater weight is attached to the horizontal dramaturgy than to the vertical one, which makes this series very different from traditional television series.<sup>8</sup> These new series, which are therefore repeatedly called 'film novels', are determined by different, unpredictable long story arcs that are indeed intertwined in the sense of the dramaturgy of classic concurrent story threads of episodic storytelling<sup>9</sup>, but stand in relation to each other in a new way. The arcs may have completely different lengths and weights. They can extend over one, two or several episodes, or over one or all seasons. In the English-speaking world, the term *flexi-narrative* exists for this kind of dramaturgy, and the distinction is also made between *series* and *serials*. Series are traditional serial formats in which the main story arc is resolved within one episode, whereas in the *serial*, narrative arcs extend over several episodes or entire seasons.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 2 Flexi-Narrative / Concurrent Story Threads Dramaturgy (*Zopf*dramaturgie)  
(Graphic by Yvy Heußler)

In the aforementioned parking lot scene, a lot of the characterization of the characters is made through the dress code and the respective cars of the two protagonists Walter White and Jesse Pinkman. In this scene, it becomes clear just how productive is the relationship of exchange between explicit and implicit dramaturgies, and how they correspond to each other: on the dramaturgically explicit level of the pilot episode, the scene sets in motion the 'envelope of the plot' (the *peripetia*) announcing that the criminal career of Walter White can begin. On the dramaturgically implicit level, the contrasts of the two characters – on all stylistic levels – are played against each other. Walter and Jesse obviously are not compatible with each other. They move in completely different social and linguistic spheres. Walter White is just about the

<sup>8</sup> *Vertical dramaturgy* refers to the dramaturgical patterns which are repeated in every episode, such as in a classic detective series where, in each episode, a new murder case is to be solved by the same police inspector. *Horizontal dramaturgy* refer to arcs that extend over the length of a single episode, over several episodes, or over the length of an entire series; this is true, for example, for the narrative of the life of the police inspector.

<sup>9</sup> German: *Zopf*dramaturgie. A concept of the dramaturgy of series where several parallel storylines are interweaved. For more detail on this, see: Stutterheim, Kaiser (2011), p. 372 (see note 8).

<sup>10</sup> Compare Robin Nelson: *TV Drama in Transition. Forms, Values and Cultural Change*. London 1997, p.30ff.

most ‘uncool’ person whom Jesse and the authors of the series could possibly imagine: He wears (as a ‘colorless type’) only the color beige – which in the context of the surrounding sand-colored landscape and architecture (in this scene, the bank) can be interpreted as an expression of his social conformism. He drives a tan-colored Pontiac Aztek – which has been named in the UK's *Daily Telegraph* as one of the hundred ugliest cars of all time – whereas Jesse Pinkman, by contrast, wears oversized large-printed hip hop clothing and drives an affordable yet glamorously red 1970s automobile. For the purposes of explicit dramaturgy, these design aspects serve to develop the characterizations of the characters within the film-work. At the level of the implicit dramaturgy, the design aspects carry coherent world references in themselves, are responsible for the authentic ring of truth of the characters, and are part of the immanent visual dramaturgy: the color red – as the color of the legally and morally, at the same time tempting, forbidden – is used throughout the series as the color of the drug scene and factors related to it.<sup>11</sup> This includes Jesse's red-colored car, the red sports car later acquired with drug money for son, Walter Jr., and the increasingly red components of Walter's clothes.<sup>12</sup>

In the parking lot scene is also hidden an additional significant formal style principle of the implicit dramaturgy that drives the series: It is an aesthetic of popular culture, one of opposition, of not being compatible with each other, which distinguishes the deep dramaturgical structure of the series. *Breaking Bad* lives from playing different genres brilliantly against each other: crime drama against comedy, psychological realism against post-modern comedy aesthetics, technical perfection against trash. These pop-cultural implications, its aesthetic principles – in which comparable methods of absurd or surreal confrontations, the destruction of conventional myths, and black humor are to be found – comprise the organizing principle of the narrative. This contrasting procedure creates the musical rhythm of the series, which in turn represents an aesthetic analogy to the formal language of pop cultural entertainment television. *Breaking Bad* is an ideal television series in that it uses the medium of television in the best way as an artistic medium. In the series, the same formal languages are displayed as in ‘neo-television’, in which an entire TV-specific design language has evolved which, overall, is “based more on music than on language.”<sup>13</sup> It is “above all interested in visual

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<sup>11</sup> Colors have different meanings in different cultures, which are dependent on their respective application contexts. The color red is, however, often used as a medium through which someone is able to do something. For more details see: Anna Schmid, Alexander Brust (ed.): *Rot. Wenn Farbe zur Täterin wird*. Basel 2007, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Blue is presented in *Breaking Bad* as an antagonistic color to red. Rather, blue is assigned to the elements of the storyline around the character Skyler who, initially alongside other bright colors, often wears blue. Later she, in a way analogous to the overall darker film images of later episodes, increasingly wears black.

<sup>13</sup> See: Lorenz Engell: “TV Pop.“ In: Walter Grasskamp; Michaela Krützen; Stephan Schmitt (Eds.): *Was ist Pop? Zehn*

surfaces, in the diversity of forms, and in movement." According to Engell, in historical phases of change (such as digitalization), the principles of pop as the dominant foundation of television discourse and viewer practices prevail. One of these is that television aesthetics reflects "the mediality of the media and its fundamental properties."

The referencing of pop in the implicit dramaturgy of *Breaking Bad* becomes visible in condensed form in the music video-like sequences, in the 'eye-candy aesthetics', and in the camera work in which perspectives are taken that do not have any identification with a human gaze, but it is rather the surfaces of things that self-referentially set up the scene, and which, in 'high culture film art', would be considered as ornamental and would be 'banned'. In *Breaking Bad*, these settings can be interpreted as moments of self-reflexivity, since with them the attention of the viewers is consciously directed to the artificiality and the construction of the film's narrative.



Figure 3

There are two scenes in the first four seasons of *Breaking Bad* which are staged as authentic contraband music videos. Thus the implicit elements referring to pop culture are never an end in themselves, but always also serve the explicit dramaturgy. Especially in the video *Negro y Azul*, the lyrics of which were co-written by *Breaking Bad* creator Vince Gilligan (for the 7th episode of Season 2 / Figure 3), the band *Los Cuates de Sinaloa* brings implicit and explicit dramaturgies seamlessly together: On the implicit level, the *Negro y Azul* clip operates as a post-modern yet authentic reference-joke.<sup>14</sup> Here a specific segment of Mexican pop culture is cited, the so-called Narcocorridos in which bands who specialize in this sing hymns

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*Versuche*. Frankfurt 2004, p. 195 ff. Engell refers to the term "neo-television" in Umberto Eco and Roger Odin Casetti. Neo-television designates the second historical and transitional phase of television (1985 to the present). It is, among other things, a product of enormous channel propagation.

<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the actor Danny Trejo, who plays the lead character in Robert Rodriguez's post-modern film *Machete* (USA, 2010) appears briefly in the clip as a drug baron. In *Breaking Bad*, Trejo has a small but spectacular supporting role.



of praise to the drug lords. The video represents the commonly employed popular culture medium of pastiche which, as opposed to parody, carries within itself recognition of and admiration for the original. This demonstrates, on the one hand, a very competent handling by the producer of special kinds of knowledge, but, on the other hand, is not sufficient: Within the action events, in the service of explicit dramaturgy, *suspense* is generated by this video: One learns in a unique way that the life of Walter White, a.k.a. Heisenberg, is in serious danger, because now new adversaries threaten the plan. The clip explains how successful the blue crystal meth is on the market and that Walter White, a.k.a. Heisenberg, has become a legend. Through the lyrics, the viewers are *en passant* informed that the new adversaries are not to be trifled with: "The cartel is about respect, and they don't forgive, that homie dead already, it's just ... nobody's told him."<sup>15</sup>

*Breaking Bad* shows how important a consistently thought out and implemented implicit dramaturgy is, and how this contributes to the success of a film story when it is closely related to the explicit dramaturgy. Cinematic storytelling is always the sum total of explicit and implicit dramaturgy, and the more knowledgeably the implicit drama is handled, the more successful the subject unfolds in its reception through the filmic narration. Cinematic storytelling, no matter in which media – whether film or television – it takes place, always ignites dialectical-dialogical processes between author, work, and viewer, and in the special realization of this dialogue resides the decisive potential.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, implicit dramaturgy also plays a role in the deep structures of a film and a TV series. Assuming that the medium of television finds itself in a transitional phase, challenged as it is in its legitimacy as the 'leading medium' by the successor media Internet and computer games, it makes sense to research the conditions and aesthetic possibilities of television.<sup>17</sup> It would seem that the author's series which have appeared since the mid-1990s, of which *Breaking Bad* is one important example, have been created partly as a response to the advancement of other media, and that, with these series, television is activating its genuine

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<sup>15</sup> The English text appears as sub-titles. The original is in Spanish: "A la furia del cartel, nadie jamás a escapado, ese compa ya esta muerto, nomas no le han avisado."

<sup>16</sup> In cognitive-(neo-) formalist film and narration theory (Bordwell, Thompson and others), the relationship between viewers and film is extensively theorized. Another approach is based on the literary theoretical works of Mikhail Bakhtin. A useful introduction to the various approaches to film theory is: Thomas Elsaesser, Malte Hagen, *Introduction to Film Theory*. Hamburg, 2007, pp. 62ff.

<sup>17</sup> On the concept of television as the 'leading medium' and the challenge to its lofty position coming from the Internet, see: Klaus Kreimeier, "TV." In: Hans-Otto Hill: *Handbook of popular culture*. Stuttgart 2003. Online at: [www.kreimeier-online.de/Fernsehen.html](http://www.kreimeier-online.de/Fernsehen.html) (accessed: 30/06/2012).

aesthetic means.<sup>18</sup> Rather than imitating the possibilities of interactive media, for example, through hypothetically creating multiple-choice formats, television is reinventing itself on a high level through the configuration of the dialogic relationship of reception, inviting viewers to an active reception, and also reflecting the aesthetic organizational principles of the pop culture medium in the work itself. *Breaking Bad* would be, along with other complexly narrated author's series, unthinkable in any other media. How successful this approach is, and how well television through it connects to the present, is demonstrated not least by the existence of a virulent fan community on the Internet, in which perhaps the true potential of interactive television can be read today.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> On the concept of the *author's series* (*Autorenserie* in German), see: Christoph Dreher (Ed.): *Autorenserien. Die Neuerfindung des Fernsehens*. Stuttgart 2010; Lavery 2010.

<sup>19</sup> To name just two examples of the active fan culture and reception on the Internet: A remix of the Flies episode and a montage of the POV shots. Thanks to Harry Delgado for the links: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hj2kAdcMDTo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hj2kAdcMDTo) (Accessed: 16.8.2013) <http://vimeo.com/34773713> (Accessed: 16.8.2013)

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