

We “Other Victorians”? Novelistic Remains, Therapeutic Devices, Contemporary Televisual Dramas

Rey Chow & Austin Sarfan

*In reference to the work of Michel Foucault and to residual Victorian novelistic features, this essay explores the biopolitical dimension of contemporary televisual dramas, focusing on the popular crime genre as seen in *The Sopranos* (1999 – 2007), *Breaking Bad* (2008 – 2013), and *The Fall* (2013 – 2016). Emphasizing the confessional context of criminality and policing, we demonstrate how such shows rely on the conventions of modern psychological discourse in depicting criminals, thus foregrounding what Eva Illouz in *Saving the Modern Soul* (2008) has called the “therapeutic emotional style.” By updating aspects of D. A. Miller’s conception of the policing plot in *The Novel and the Police* (1988), we argue that confession in contemporary televisual dramas exemplifies a cultural transition from power as force to power as communication. The ascendance of communicative power pathologizes aspects of masculinity and introduces a new dramatic/narrative device: the therapeutic couplet.*

Near the end of the acclaimed TV serial drama *Breaking Bad*, Walter White, the chemistry-teacher-turned-methamphetamine-manufacturer, questioned by his wife as to why he has pursued such a self-destructive enterprise, memorably announces: “I did it for me. I liked it.”¹ This defiantly joyous response to what amounts to a demand for his confession – a demand that his wife makes throughout the series in the form of repeated questioning of his behavior – is significant in ways that go beyond this one popular show. The relation between a protagonist’s enigmatically transgressive acts and the demand – personal, familial, social, metaphysical – for his accounting for them constitutes a type of dramatic and narrative scene that furnishes a thought-provoking intermedial connection between the contemporary televisual serial drama and well-known elements of the canonized novel.

At one level, of course, such a connection between the older and newer forms can be quite easily established. Among the connective features is, first and foremost, the serial format, recalling the time in centuries past when some now-classic

novels, by authors such as Alexandre Dumas *père*, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and their contemporaries, began as periodic installments in newspapers or magazines. With that format comes the important feature of an episodic development of narrative plots and events. The considerable duration of such episodic development allows for a detailed embellishment of characters and the everyday trivia and social relations around them. (This is one reason the contemporary televisual dramas are not exactly formal successors to film, the brevity of which tends to dictate the modes of narrativization and dramatization peculiar to it.) Also noteworthy is the centrality of dialogue, indeed, of verbal exchange itself (including the regularity of subtitles on those shows involving multiple languages, so that audiences are, literally, reading words on the screen as they watch a story unfold). Not infrequently, in cultures with long-standing literary traditions, some televisual dramas are based on actual novels (such as *Bailuyuan*, *Wo de qianbansheng*, *Renmin de mingyi* and numerous other series in the People's Republic of China and *Call the Midwife* in the United Kingdom) and sometimes adopt the convention of a narrator in the form of a voiceover.

These obvious links to novels aside, televisual serial dramas are exemplary of an age when an immersed engagement with a fictive or illusory world is a matter of individual option, the times and manners of entry into and exit from that world typically dependent on the viewer's location, mobility, and other preferences. Just as printed materials can be carried around and read in solitude during travel, in public places, or at home, so can televisual dramas (once beyond their first runs) be streamed or downloaded on laptops, tablets, and smartphones, in addition to being watched as DVDs or through smart devices on television screens. Technological and commercial advancements, in other words, combine to turn the mere presentation of a story into a potentially endless viewing experience, through an endlessly generative process of choices. In this multiplicities-driven, transnational engagement with fiction, it is tempting to argue that televisual serial dramas are spectacular updates to novels. These dramas recycle and repurpose a cultural form that, for some, has become something of a relic (one whose rise corresponded in time with the rising hegemony of the bourgeoisie in the West, broadly defined).² In so doing, they bring to the fore "novelistic" attributes that might have escaped attention before and that are now noticeable in a newer, cross-medial ecology of fiction production and consumption.

Some of these televisual dramas are absorbing endeavors to represent specific historical periods. The first three seasons of *Babylon Berlin* (2017 – present), for instance, capture Weimar German society just a few years before 1934, the year that marked the rise of Adolf Hitler. *Xuanya/Cliff* (2012) portrays a variety of actors in the city of Harbin – including underground Chinese communist spies pretending to collaborate with the Japanese-controlled Manchukuo regime, exiles from the Soviet Union plotting to assassinate Stalin, and fascistic representatives of

the Chinese Republican police state – during the politically tense period of 1939–1945. Or we watch portrayals of clandestine communist activities and emotionally charged social relations in Villeneuve, a village near Paris, under the collaborationist Vichy French government, during the years 1941–1945 and decades beyond in *A French Village* (2009–2017). Alternatively, the sociopolitical events in England are presented by way of its imperial figureheads of governance as they travel around the British Commonwealth (*The Crown*, 2016–present), by way of religious and medical caretakers of lower-class English families (*Call the Midwife*, 2012–present), or by way of the blood-stained saga of an ethnically marked (gypsy) mafia family as it establishes its fortune and standing in Birmingham (*Peaky Blinders*, 2013–present). There are also the depictions of a charismatic woman prime minister and her coalition government in contemporary Denmark (*Borgen*, 2010–2013), and a charismatic woman secretary of state and her diplomatic maneuvers in the fraught relations between the contemporary United States and different countries around the world (*Madam Secretary*, 2014–2019).

The historic success of these shows requires a full-fledged study documenting the impact of their viewer ratings as well as the cultural nuances of their national and international receptions. (For instance, what do we make of the fact that many of the Chinese shows are freely available on YouTube and other platforms, while other shows are available only through paid portals such as Netflix and Amazon Prime?) While such a study is obviously beyond the scope of this essay, what we would like to undertake instead is a sketch of the thematic connections between televisual serial dramas and novels by way of a set of pronounced characteristics.

Owing to the necessity for captivating and prolonging audience attention across episodes, narratives of serial television find support through the indefinite development of characters, inscribing the form within a horizon of *biopolitics*.³ While there is an elective affinity between the relative brevity of film and narrative plots organized around the intensity of shocks typical of action and horror genres, the serial form in contemporary television has, in contrast, been notably successful through plots organized around the slower pacing of character development. As a means to keep alive interest in characters’ struggles for self-realization, *therapy* has emerged as a recurring motif. In fact, a surprising number of contemporary televisual dramas associated with the “Golden Age” of TV feature therapy as a key component, including *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), *Mad Men* (2007–2015), and *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013). This recurrence of the therapeutic also suggests an increasing deployment of the unconscious as a narrative agent, as in the many episodes depicting Tony Soprano’s dreams in *The Sopranos*, or the lengthy speculations on Paul Spector’s coma in *The Fall* (2013–2016).

This psychic approach to character leads to a paradox in contemporary television’s narrative form: specifically, a kind of double-bind regarding narrative closure. For how can a narrative form that consists in prolonging character develop-

ment also provide a satisfying dramatic resolution? On the one hand, a concrete resolution obviously violates the potential for further episodic development, and yet, on the other hand, a conclusion that gestures toward further development is abandoning the traditional function of an ending. This double-bind regarding narrative closure informs the dissatisfaction that contemporary audiences have been known to express when faced with the endings of many series. As Slavoj Žižek notes in an editorial about viewers' dissatisfaction with the conclusion to the HBO series *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), contemporary audiences desire from their serial plots endless continuity.⁴ Žižek writes, “In our epoch of series which in principle could go on indefinitely, the idea of narrative closure becomes intolerable.”⁵ At the very least, this raises an interesting question about the biopoliticality of form: in the era of online debate and fan fiction, could one not measure a series' success in terms of its ability to polarize and inflame sentiments, thus deepening, multiplying, and extending the life of narrative elements?

Often already banking on reboots or sequels, conclusions to televisual dramas can seem overburdened with the biopolitical conventions of televisual seriality. This is recognizable in endings that simply suggest the series' potential continuation. As Brett Martin writes in his history of the “television revolution”: “In the new world of television . . . there may be nothing more unnatural than an ending. In a perfect TV world, no door shuts forever, no show ever dies.”⁶ The famous last episode of *The Sopranos* confronts this formal requirement for continuity over ending directly: the series concludes by suspending any sense of resolution, as the final shot – an ordinary family evening at a diner – abruptly cuts to black, providing no information as to how or whether the lethal plot on Tony's life, in the works for seasons, might come to an end. Legend has it that many viewers wrongly interpreted this conclusion as a disruption of their cable service, misrecognizing the more immediate narrative possibility that Tony Soprano's struggles just might carry on without us.⁷ In this sense, the ending to *The Sopranos* also recalls *The Wire*'s handling of the double-bind of contemporary narrative closure, by dissolving each season's characters into a greater, subsequently networked story about Baltimore. Should we be surprised that, incidentally, *The Sopranos* itself is soon to become sequentialized postmortem in *Many Saints of Newark* (forthcoming 2021), or that *Breaking Bad* has found yet another sequence in the recent *El Camino: A Breaking Bad Movie* (2019)?

If these narratives specialize in the biopolitical extension of character development, tension can result when character development – aimed at keeping audience attention – intersects with the sensationalizing of violence that may be identified as another common feature of televisual dramas. According to Martin, in the Golden Age of American television (inaugurated, in his view, by *The Sopranos*), “It would no longer be safe to assume that everything on your favorite television show would turn out alright – or even that the worst wouldn't happen.”⁸

The sensationalized violence now common to plots of Golden Age television can be traced to the acclaimed “College” episode of *The Sopranos*, in which Tony garrotes a stalking hitman as his daughter Meadow, in classic fulfillment of the immigrant family’s class aspirations, interviews at a nearby college.⁹ Reportedly, the producers of the show originally resisted fully depicting the shocking murder on the grounds that doing so would be distasteful for viewers; but ultimately, they included it. In retrospect, the graphic scene of Tony’s killing of the hitman was not only acclaimed as a watershed in *The Sopranos*’ signature sensationalism, it also announced a shift in the televisual aesthetics of violence.¹⁰ Henceforth, even the worst of human behavior is subject to narration in complex serial plots that engage viewers by plausibly developing the lives of infamously transgressive characters.

Generally speaking, the serial format is conducive to representing – indeed, it virtually requires – narrative plots in which a dialogic relationship between the known and unknown obtains a pivotal role, as in the example of detective fiction. The suspense resulting from this relationship between known and unknown elements, which facilitates readers’ and viewers’ engagement across episodes, underwrites the indispensability of what could be called, after D. A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police*, a “policing plot,” whether in the case of the novel or in the case of televisual serial drama.¹¹ In the latter, such a plot combines themes from detective and romance fiction: both crime and desire can become objects of episodic investigation, but such an investigation is typically integrated in a complicated story of personal development, often fleshed out in a therapeutic process, as in Tony Soprano’s visits to his psychiatrist, Dr. Melfi, or in Walter White’s treatment for lung cancer in *Breaking Bad*. Therapy, insofar as it is a socially legitimate site for the verbalization of thinking, recurs frequently in televisual plots of self-development. As a milieu of talk, therapy in these shows effectively functions as a form of novelistic *self*-narration that would otherwise be difficult to capture on screen.

The policing plot centers on a protagonist’s practical and social control of his self-development by clinical means. *The conceptual question that follows is whether such policing leads to increased transparency or increased opacity – and for whom.* In the major examples mentioned thus far, a male protagonist’s need to monitor the process of his self-development leads the story line to revolve around his increasingly secretive relationship with stages in a clinical process that is supposed to help him feel better. In *The Sopranos*, Tony’s visits to Dr. Melfi’s office, where he is tasked with baring his all under the promise of therapist-client privilege (when for the most part this confession is encouraged by his wife, Carmela), are nonetheless considered by his associates to be damaging evidence of his emasculation, making him unsuitable for running a criminal mafia organization. In the end, it is Tony’s own interest in policing his self-development that makes him try to preserve the

secrecy of his visits to Dr. Melfi. In a comparable fashion, in *Breaking Bad*, Walt's secretiveness, manifesting in a disavowal of his cancer and an aversion to clinical treatment, takes the palpable form of a self-designed policing plot: motivated by his own sense of alchemical mastery, he succeeds in keeping his terminal illness secret from the criminal enterprise that employs him, thereby obscuring his own inability to maintain his monopoly and defend against competitors.

As evident in these examples, the policing plot renders crime as an allegorical test of masculinity; as this plot unravels, the therapeutic process becomes, in turn, symbolic of androgenization, if not effeminization, and hence a counterpoint to the macho criminal enterprise. For these reasons, the domestic space of the family often emerges as a charged, antagonistic arena in which masculine aggression (crime) and feminine risk management (care) are showcased and rationalized, yet rarely reconciled.¹² This said, the wives (Carmela in *The Sopranos* and Skyler in *Breaking Bad*) are actually integral to the activity of the policing circle: namely, those accomplices, witting or unwitting, for whom the crimes are, in Miller's words, an "open secret."¹³ As *The Sopranos* progresses, Carmela establishes herself as a role model of mafia-wife secrecy for Tony's young daughter, Meadow, and in *Breaking Bad*, Skyler mobilizes her accounting expertise to orchestrate Walt's monumental money laundering operation. In the British televisual series *The Fall*, set in Belfast, these relatively clear-cut positions of masculinity and femininity, of crime and care, are clouded by an alternative kind of pairing: Paul Spector, the Irish serial killer of attractive young professional women, is himself a bereavement counselor (and thus a care provider), while his nemesis, the authority figure charged with the responsibility of catching him, is Stella Gibson, a charismatic English female police superintendent. In this case, because the officially therapeutic – that is, feminized – position has been preempted by the male predator himself, Stella, while performing her task as the police, structurally doubles up as the unofficial *psychotherapist*, determined as she is to get to the bottom of Paul's repeated killings by tracking the mental designs behind them. The series is staged in such a way as to literally merge the policing plot and the therapeutic process: Stella "gets" what each of Paul's moves means both through her policing expertise with criminal behavior *and* her empathetic understanding of his psychic maneuvers. By contrast, Paul's wife, a neonatal nurse, is for a long time kept in the dark about his deeds. As she busies herself with her job and her young children, the wife may be regarded as an unwitting keeper of Paul's secret within the bounds of their domestic partnership.

In charting feminine care's struggle to reform the masculine criminal, the policing plots in these televisual dramas stage the rise of what Eva Illouz in her book *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, the Emotions and the Culture of Self-Help* calls the "therapeutic emotional style" of late modernity.¹⁴ Formalized and reproduced in psychological discourse, usually with an emphasis on ideas such as empathy and communication, the therapeutic emotional style has been instrumental to

the consolidation of the middle class in postindustrial Western society. As such, emotions are rationalized in terms of their value as capital, which is informed by the demand for efficient interpersonal labor in a service economy. According to Illouz, the therapeutic emotional style is organized principally around the concept of emotional *control*. As conceived by the psychology of management, emotional control simultaneously involves restraint and facilitates communication, with both motivated by an interest in efficiency. That is to say, emotional control requires tempering intense emotions (such as anger) that threaten to decompose interpersonal relationships. Such control also produces the very conditions for empathy, since restraint supposedly makes it possible to interact with others. The rise of this therapeutic emotional style means that criminal secrecy within the policing plot is now subject to new pressures: the confessing person at once risks incrimination and benefits, as it were, by displaying adaptation to the virtues of communication.

In its successful popularization of control, the therapeutic emotional style has, arguably, brought about a transformation of “the cultural definition of power.”¹⁵ Departing from the traditionally masculine conception of power as force – or, in Michel Foucault’s words, as the sovereign power to take life (represented by the sword) – the therapeutic emotional style correlates power instead with the ability to restrain oneself, to talk things through, and, most important, to empathize with others. This new cultural definition of power not only remakes “models of sociability” (as in the case of the emotionally controlled workplace) but also “re-draw[s] the cognitive and practical emotional boundaries regulating gender differences.”¹⁶ Specifically, the therapeutic model, in advocating control, redefines social interaction through the “feminization of emotional culture.”¹⁷ In Illouz’s words, “the ideal of self-control mark[s] a clear departure from traditional definitions of hegemonic masculinity, understood as a model prescribing men to be self-reliant, aggressive, competitive, oriented to mastery and dominance, emotionless, and, when necessary, ruthless.”¹⁸ By *pathologizing* the ideals of hegemonic masculinity against a new emotional style of cooperative communication, therapeutic discourse thus encourages the coming of a “new form of masculinity more compatible with ‘feminine’ models of selfhood . . . viewed by the reigning therapeutic ethos as the only healthy form of masculinity.”¹⁹ In the televisual dramas considered here, the conflict between pathological (hegemonic) masculinity, on the one hand, and healthy (feminized) masculinity, on the other, structures the male criminal’s eventual reconciliation with the family, whose interests are represented by the joint agencies of the wife, children, close relatives, police, and therapist.

To this extent, contemporary televisual dramas have incorporated the policing plot, and in particular the trope of secrecy, in what we propose as *a cultural form’s staging of the new therapeutic style*. In this staging, criminal secrecy signifies not

the integrity of a criminal enterprise but rather its failure. Hence, what marks the masculine criminal in these televisual dramas is his increasing obligation to negotiate with what Illouz calls the “only healthy form of masculinity,” as cited above. In *The Sopranos*, Tony must learn the reflexive art of self-control in his sessions with Dr. Melfi, and her lessons in the therapeutic style resonate in the background of the show’s final season, as escalating violence forces Tony to a “sit-down” during which he negotiates the terms of a truce between warring families. In *Breaking Bad*, Walt’s effeminate and even hyper-controlled manner provides the perfect, healthy cover for his enterprise, in sharp contrast to emotionally explosive criminals like Tuco Salamanca. It also signals his adaptability to the more powerful international corporation, Madrigal, whose criminal operations are spearheaded by the similarly poised mastermind Gus Fring. (In fact, the actor Giancarlo Esposito credits his regular yoga practice for generating Gus’s signature emotionally controlled style.)²⁰ In these examples, through the reiterated trope of the criminal-molded-by-the-therapeutic-style, televisual serial dramas capture in a fascinating manner the cultural transition from one model of social power to another.

Even as they use the television screen as their platform, these examples of contemporary televisual dramas also bear intimate linkage to classic instances of the modern novel. We think in particular of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, Vladimir Nabokov, Albert Camus, and John Fowles, among others, in whose works the ostensible manifestation of unspeakable crimes often goes hand in hand with another manifestation: namely, an endeavor to talk, to tell stories, to fabricate a collective or socially acceptable rationale to make sense of what happened. These twin manifestations are not a universal feature of televisual dramas about criminality: shows such as *The Practice* (1997–2004), *L.A. Law* (1986–1994), *NYPD Blue* (1993–2005), *Law and Order* (1990–2010), and *Oz* (1997–2003), while partaking of a similar orientation toward crime and punishment, do not narrate consciousness in a psychological fashion (as is the hallmark of the next wave of television serials beginning with *The Sopranos*) and rather come across as attempts to spotlight the penal investigative infrastructure of contemporary society. Because of their more straightforward emphasis on the policing actions of capture, investigation, and punishment, these shows tend to proceed through the repetition of a certain formula episode after episode, so that the audience knows more or less what to expect in terms of the structuring of events even while the contents of events vary. With shows such as *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The Fall*, on the other hand, the presence of at least one figure, typically female, designed with the function of empathetic reception, signals a different kind of narrative and dramatic loop, the playing-out

of which requires not only the solving of crime but also, more important, an interlocutor, respondent, and psychic accomplice to the criminal.

Insofar as the therapeutic process in these televisual dramas concerns the emotional reformation of subjects, especially the production of new masculinities, it is possible to align such shows’ use of confession with the novelistic convention of spirituality, in Foucault’s sense of “the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth.”²¹ The practice of spirituality, thus broadly defined, involves a process of *transformative retrospection* that accounts for the formal resemblance between televisual and novelistic narrative. In their emphasis on the change of subjects through therapeutic regimes of truth, televisual dramas refashion conventions from the “long tradition of self-analytic retrospection in the novel” in literary theorist Dorrit Cohn’s phrase.²² For Cohn, this tradition consists in attempts to narrate originally obscure forms of experience, such as the “lost time” of Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, or the “heart of darkness” of Conrad’s titular novel. As examples of self-analytic reflections, these narratives are organized around “the retrospective cognition of an inner life that cannot know itself at the instant of experience.”²³ In both modern novels and television serials, what is episodically dramatized is, we might say, the relationship between an “experiencing self” and a “narrating self,” as defined by their modes of cognition (or access to truth). Yet between the novel form and televisual serial form, the characterization of these two selves differs in fundamental ways. While the dynamic of retrospection in many novels tends to resemble autobiography in its focus on self-analysis (as in Jane’s account of her life in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* or Marcel’s remembrance of his past in Proust’s *Recherche*), in contemporary televisual dramas, retrospection tends to pass through the *external authority* of “narrating” experts (as in Tony’s dependence on his therapist for self-knowledge). In televisual dramas, moreover, the power of narration is often embodied by feminine experts of therapeutic care, who provide a diagnostic and explanatory language for masculine experience. We suggest that this splitting of narration and experience between two different individuals, masculine and feminine, may be seen as a reification – and a retrofitting – of Victorian conventions of gendering domesticity.

Frederick Karl’s description of spirituality in the modern novel provides some suggestive guidance at this juncture. Basing his discussion on an overview of spirituality in writings from different historical periods, Karl comments that modern spiritual novels deploy “the intensity of spiritual crises within the framework of realistic characters, real places, more or less sequential narratives.” This, he says, is in contrast to earlier versions of spiritual autobiography, which “tended to contain imaginary characters in imaginary locales: middle states of consciousness and behavior.” According to Karl, the presence of a realistic frame of reference in modern spiritual novels means that “the protagonists’ problems, whatever their

kind, do not exist solely as intense episodes or brief periods. They must now be integrated into his life as a whole.”²⁴ A consequence of the emergence of this paradigm of a *modernized, supposedly integrated* spirituality is that spiritual crises now tend to manifest through the middle-class domestic sphere, which becomes the predominant site for recurrent emotional breakdowns. This is perhaps one reason the protagonists in question tend to be family men: husbands and fathers. In fact, both the first episodes of *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* begin with a married guy fainting in the presence of family symbols (ducklings for Tony, an RV for Walt). As a catalyst for seeking therapy, such fainting directs attention to how the family is integrated within the horizon of spiritual development. As it occurs in contemporary televisual dramas, this process of spiritual development indeed differs, as Karl suggests, from chronologically earlier versions, such as are depicted by Athanasius in *The Life of St. Anthony*. In that work, spirituality for Anthony (unlike the cases of Tony and Walt) rests on a distancing from, rather than intimate entanglement with, the family. Thus, the first signs of the Devil’s attempt to derail Anthony from his progress toward self-knowledge include the lingering of loving thoughts for his former wealth (derived from his father) and for familial belonging: “First he [the Devil] attempted to lead him [Anthony] away from the discipline, suggesting memories of his possessions, the guardianship of his sister, the bonds of kinship.”²⁵ By contrast, in televisual dramas of the new therapeutic style, Victorian forms of gendered domestic partnership figure as a significant aspect of the characteristically modern intimacy between spiritual development and the family.

This point about the inextricability of the family in the modern spiritual paradigm illuminates Foucault’s description of the so-called *psy* disciplines (such as clinical psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and talk therapy) as they operate in modern family sexual politics.²⁶ In their vulgarization of aspects of these disciplines, policing plots in therapeutic televisual serials involve the family as a unit organized and mobilized by criminal secrecy. The therapeutic process demonstrates how the confession of a secret motivates the alliance of a family, through the Victorian trope of a gendered distribution of emotional abilities.

In Foucault’s words, “The confession is a ritual discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority.”²⁷ Reformulating the confessional schema, the authoritative women in the therapeutic serials in question who deal with criminal men – the guys who resist confession and who are virtually incapable of speaking about their past experience – usually proceed with a type of interpretative reasoning that highlights the family’s relevance for these men. In *The Sopranos*, Dr. Melfi imputes to Tony childhood injury by psychologically abusive parents; in *Breaking Bad*, Skyler imputes to Walt mari-

tal infidelity and indifference to their children’s welfare; and in *The Fall*, Stella imputes to the orphaned Paul the failure of foster care. By drawing on the significance of family relations for various kinds of psychic deficiency and deformity, the *psy* disciplines make their presence felt in these shows like a popular refrain, demonstrating what Foucault has observed about psychoanalysis: that it functions as “a mechanism for attaching sexuality to the system of alliance.”²⁸ Ultimately, this strategy of using authoritative women to impute confessions (and with them, secrets and truths) to men amounts to a *remodeling of the narrative form of retrospection*: departing from the reflexive terms of self-analysis in the novel, the narrative of the therapeutic process in televisual serials devolves into what can henceforth be viewed as a noticeably gendered analytic: the *therapeutic couplet*.

In these shows, then, analytic retrospection operates through a gendered pair that synchronically splits, between two subjects, the functions of narration (that is, rationalization) and experience. A female subject, who functions as the narrating or explaining self, supplies meaning to a male subject, who functions as the experiencing but inarticulate self. In concrete terms, the therapeutic scene consists in the female “narrating self” eliciting and interpreting information from a male “experiencing self,” with the intention of not only giving him the truth about his life but also reforming his conduct. This typical scene foregrounds a procedure by which feminine care, in the guise of psychiatric hermeneutics, seeks to ferret out meaning from compulsive violence, supposedly originating in hegemonic masculinity. Not surprisingly, the masculine position in this couplet often involves various lacunae in memory, literalizing the notion of meaningless experience and designating a zone of meaningful interaction, indeed of clarification, that must be supplied externally from the feminine position. One thinks, for example, of Walt’s fugue states, used as an alibi for his criminal enterprising in *Breaking Bad*; Paul’s brain injury, which causes him to forget his crimes in *The Fall*; and the repressed memories of Tony’s childhood in *The Sopranos* that preclude him from adequate self-knowledge.

Because the therapeutic couplet credits femininity with the cognitive privilege of the narrating or explaining self, hegemonic masculinity is, by default, presented in the therapeutic process in terms of a burden, a toxic experience that resists narrativity. The drama then takes the form of an impossible reconciliation effort, orbiting around a dialogue determined by the feminine imputation and masculine evasion of meaning. Consider, for example, the culmination of Tony’s complaints against therapy in his revolt against Dr. Melfi in the episode “Calling All Cars,” as he realizes that her psychiatric emphasis on emotional control is in conflict with his basic duty as the boss of a criminal “business”: to use violent force, sometimes without hesitation.²⁹ Tony’s skepticism regarding therapy in this case illustrates the gender differences that structure the failed reconciliation characteristic of the therapeutic couplet. Even as femininity is assigned the project of reforming he-

gemonic masculinity, the terms of the therapeutic couplet seem locked worlds apart in advance, following the effectively divorced functions of narration and experience distributed between gendered subjects. *Breaking Bad* provides another version of this impossible scenario. Beginning in season one, with increasing pressure, Skyler attempts to elicit confessions from Walter regarding his secretive behavior as he disappears in order to manufacture methamphetamine. Faced with his resistance to communication and his obvious lies, Skyler ultimately, with great success, designs Walt's confessions for him. In the season four episode "Bullet Points," for instance, after studying the language of gambling addicts in group therapy, Skyler makes Walt rehearse a lengthy confession that she has scripted in order to provide a cover-story for his illegal acquisition of wealth.³⁰ As Walt performs this confession at a family dinner with his in-laws, his hitherto baffling behavior becomes not only meaningful but also credible within the disciplinary frames of reference of Skyler's sister, Marie, and her husband, Hank, respectively a nurse and a DEA agent.

The pronounced gendering in contemporary television of the narrative structure of the therapeutic couplet points to an unanswered question regarding Foucault's arguments about confession: to what extent might confession be understood as serving the function of maintaining alliances for families, rather than producing sexualities for individuals?³¹

Obviously, of course, confession recalls what Foucault terms the "normalizing society" of biopolitics that emerges in the nineteenth century; accordingly, it is possible to consider feminine narration in the case of contemporary television as (performing) a kind of biopolitical interpellation of criminally perverted men (as a class of people). At the same time, though, the gendered therapeutic couplet does not so much require the normalization of masculine experience in the context of a *population* (as Foucault suggests) as it proposes the obedient subjection of masculine experience to feminine narration within the context of a *family*. This family-centered proposal inscribes the therapeutic couplet within a domestic project of discipline, with the intent of transforming hegemonic males into docile bodies. Furthermore, the specific pairing structure of the couplet, noticeably relying on essentialist (that is, heterosexual) notions of gender, recalls the basic terms of Foucault's model of pastoral power, which involves a relationship of obedience between a master and a disciple.³² This relationship is borne out in this case by a feminine or feminized master narrative of the therapeutic style that, nonetheless, continues to meet with resistance from the disciple who is supposedly guided toward spiritual rejuvenation through his reformed masculinity. In sum, as it is played out in contemporary television, the therapeutic couplet has moved away from the familiar *scientific* terms of biopolitics as described by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (terms that include *normalization* and *population*). Instead, the ther-

apeutic couplet reveals the narrative importance of pastoral power for the *ethical* formation of alliance. The form of this alliance is organized by the “cognitive and practical emotional boundaries regulating gender differences” in the therapeutic style, as discussed above in reference to Illouz’s work.

Importing a heterosexual arrangement of gender into the structure of hierarchical obedience that is integral to pastoral power, the therapeutic couplet seems to us a telltale reemergence of prevalent Victorian gender conventions in contemporary television. Comparison of the series *Breaking Bad* with its novelistic source material, James Hilton’s *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, for example, reveals the effective, if surprising survival of Victorian ideals within modern family narratives.³³ Indeed, Vince Gilligan, the creator of *Breaking Bad*, alludes to Hilton’s aforementioned novel in describing the series to television executives as “a story about a man who transforms himself from Mr. Chips into Scarface.”³⁴ This reference to the schoolteacher protagonist of Hilton’s novel sheds light on the residual Victorian novelistic elements that continue to inform views of gender and intimacy through the widely deployed trope of the therapeutic couplet. Both *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* and *Breaking Bad* depict the feminine as an emotional power supposed to succeed in the project of directing, reforming, and optimizing men’s development in a domestic context. In this originally Victorian framing, to recall Walter E. Houghton’s analysis in *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830 – 1870*, the emotions are distributed to men by women, whose superhuman emotional capacity enables them – as the so-called Angel in the House – to exercise control over the emotional progress of others.³⁵

Despite echoing these lingering Victorian features, however, the gender tropes in *Breaking Bad* are subject to the impossibility of reconciliation that characterizes the contemporary therapeutic couplet. The difficulties that attend the therapeutic process for families in shows such as *Breaking Bad*, which after all ends in Walt and Skyler’s separation, suggest that our contemporary fascination with the therapeutic style takes the form of what Lauren Berlant has called “cruel optimism.”³⁶ By staging – and thus soliciting – cultural attachment to a failed therapeutic process, *Breaking Bad* radicalizes an anxiety regarding the persistence of a transgressive masculinity that haunts contemporary narratives of crime. To that extent, *Breaking Bad* confronts the therapeutic style as an instance, to borrow Berlant’s words, of the neoliberal “retraction” of fantasies regarding the “good life” as promised by progressive social institutions such as therapy. (After all, it is the absence of affordable health care that forces Walt to manufacture methamphetamine.) As described by Gilligan’s formula of a transformation from “Mr. Chips to Scarface,” Walt’s criminal behavior and aggression triumph over and against the good life of the communicative family as envisioned by the therapeutic style. Meanwhile, Walt’s own adoption of the persona “Heisenberg” (drawing on Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle) subjects the purportedly clear distinction between Mr. Chips

and Scarface to an ultimate ambiguity. (Does Walt ever really become Scarface? And when exactly does Scarface replace Mr. Chips?) Such a moniker points to the arrested process of the therapeutic style in its attempts to negotiate, indeed to reset, cultural definitions of power and the profound irony that results when the therapeutic style becomes itself the face of criminality.

AUTHORS' NOTE

We are grateful to Chris Cullens for her responsive feedback on the first draft of this essay, and to Phyllis Bendell, Peter Walton, and Michael Wood for their studious editorial readings and helpful suggestions.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rey Chow, a Fellow of the American Academy since 2016, is Andrew W. Mellon Distinguished Professor of the Humanities at Duke University and Distinguished Visiting Professor in the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at the University of Hong Kong. She is the author, most recently, of *A Face Drawn in Sand: Humanistic Inquiry and Foucault in the Present* (forthcoming 2021).

Austin Sarfan is a Ph.D. candidate in the Program in Literature at the Trinity College of Arts and Sciences at Duke University. He is completing a dissertation on the postcolonial reception of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, with broad research interests in literary modernism, poststructuralism, and the cultural study of the emotions.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Breaking Bad*, "Felina," dir. Vince Gilligan, wri. Vince Gilligan, aired September 29, 2013, AMC.
- ² For a helpful study, see Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (New York and London: Verso, 2014).
- ³ For an interesting historical account of the marketing of attention in North America, see Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: The Epic Scramble to Get Inside Our Heads* (New York: Knopf, 2016); "Life's once inviolable precincts—the home, even the school and the restroom—were now fair game. The cumulative result was our present state of unprecedented distraction, a way of life in which the precious resource of our attention is under assault from commercial solicitation in virtually every waking moment, a mostly unremarked transaction woven seamlessly into the fabric of our existence" (from the dust jacket).
- ⁴ See Slavoj Žižek, "Game of Thrones Tapped into Fears of Revolution and Political Women—and Left Us No Better Off than Before," *The Independent*, May 21, 2019, <https://>

www.independent.co.uk/voices/game-thrones-season-8-finale-bran-daenerys-ersei-jon-snow-zizek-revolution-a8923371.html.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Brett Martin, *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution – From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 279.

⁷ Although critics continue to speculate that this conclusion signifies Tony’s death, David Chase has insisted on its more open-ended dimension. In a *New York Times* interview, for example, responding to the question, “Is there a correct answer to the question of whether Tony is alive or dead?” Chase says concisely, “I don’t think so.” Jeremy Egner, “David Chase on ‘The Sopranos,’ Trump and, Yes, That Ending,” *The New York Times*, January 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/07/arts/television/david-chase-sopranos-interview.html>.

⁸ Martin, *Difficult Men*, 6.

⁹ *The Sopranos*, “College,” dir. Allen Coulter, wri. James Manos Jr. and David Chase, aired February 7, 1999, HBO.

¹⁰ On this point, see Sean O’Sullivan, “Epic, Serial, Episode: *The Sopranos* and the Return Voyage of Television,” *Narrative Culture* 4 (1) (2017): 62.

¹¹ D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

¹² For an illuminating series of studies on these topics of gender and the emotions, see Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, the Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); and Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), among other works.

¹³ Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, 205–207.

¹⁴ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 15.

¹⁵ Ibid., 84. See also Earl Gammon, “The Psycho- and Sociogenesis of Neoliberalism,” *Critical Sociology* 39 (4) (2013): 521–523.

¹⁶ Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 82.

¹⁷ Ibid., 124.

¹⁸ Ibid., 80.

¹⁹ Ibid., 231.

²⁰ “In this particular case the possibility that Gus could be so . . . very placid, very relaxed, very polite, very thoughtful was interesting to me. And that’s something I had not cultivated to this extent before now. So it was a real challenge and exciting to sort of develop that and that came through my idea that he should be a very good listener. It came to me through my yoga class.” James Poniewozik, “Interview: Talking Gus Fring with Giancarlo Esposito,” *Time*, October 10, 2011, <http://entertainment.time.com/2011/10/10/interview-talking-gus-fring-with-giancarlo-esposito/>.

²¹ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 15.

²² Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), 152.

²³ Ibid., 146.

- ²⁴ Frederick Karl, *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist* (New York: Atheneum, 1988), 175.
- ²⁵ Athanasius, *The Life of St. Anthony*, trans. Robert C. Gregg (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1980), 33.
- ²⁶ We borrow the term *psy* from Nikolas Rose, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power and Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- ²⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 61.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.
- ²⁹ *The Sopranos*, “Calling All Cars,” dir. Tim Van Patten, wri. David Chase, Robin Green, Mitchell Burgess, and David Flebotte, aired November 24, 2002, HBO.
- ³⁰ *Breaking Bad*, “Bullet Points,” dir. Colin Buckse, wri. Moira Walley-Beckett, aired August 7, 2011, AMC.
- ³¹ On the distinction between the deployment of alliance and sexuality, see Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, 105–114.
- ³² See Michel Foucault, “‘*Omnès et Singulatis*’: A Critique of Political Reason,” in *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954–1984*, ed. James D. Faubion (London: Penguin, 2012).
- ³³ James Hilton, *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (New York: Open Road, 1935). As Eva Illouz writes, “Despite their many contrasts, the modern family entertains more affinities with its predecessor, the Victorian family, than meets the eye”; Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul*, 107. On the importance of Victorian ideals for modern American marriage, see Carol Zisowitz Stearns and Peter N. Stearns, *Anger: The Struggle for Emotional Control in America’s History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 68, 82.
- ³⁴ Paul MacInnes, “*Breaking Bad* Creator Vince Gilligan: The Man Who Turned Walter White from Mr. Chips into Scarface,” *The Guardian*, May 18, 2012.
- ³⁵ Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 341–353.
- ³⁶ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2012), 3.