

BREAKING TRAUMA'S EMPIRE: TRAUMA AND RESOLUTION

IN *BOARDWALK EMPIRE* AND *BREAKING BAD*

by

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Abstract

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The purpose of this research is to analyze the performance of trauma and its resolutions in television, generally, and in *Boardwalk Empire* and *Breaking Bad*, specifically. The first chapter of this project analyzes Jacques Lacan's theory of trauma and introduces his terminology. In addition, the first chapter connects trauma's atemporality with Kenneth Burke's dramatic pentad and explores Julia Kristeva's discussion of division and the abject. Subsequently, it analyzes the repetitiveness of trauma, its quilting point, and the emotion of abjection as the nature of trauma. It ends in a discussion of television's involvement with trauma, what television can achieve, perform, and manipulate, and how television can have it "both ways." The second chapter analyzes several performance of trauma and three resolutions to them in *Boardwalk Empire*. These resolutions are 1. the reinstatement of fantasy, 2. suicide, and 3. a lesson on the impossibility of exclusion. The third chapter examines the performance of trauma and one resolution in *Breaking Bad*: repression. The fourth chapter compares and contrasts the television series and their resolutions and discusses their disparate cinematographies. The paper ends with an analysis of the inherent violence in resolution and the connections between heroes, villains, trauma, and resolution.

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Preface

The purpose of this work is to explore trauma as described by Jacques Lacan through its performance in the two television dramas *Boardwalk Empire* and *Breaking Bad* and to identify the specific means by which that trauma is resolved; the value of this work lies in its specificity. The majority of previous scholarship surrounding trauma provides a very general Lacanian roadmap to its dissolution or to a more understandable reiteration of Lacan's solution to ease and drain the traumatic Real. In contrast to this reiterating of the theoretical, in the following pages, I identify the specific methods by which television models the alleviation of the traumatic Real. An in-depth analysis of the routes to resolve trauma is an important and valuable addition to present scholarship, and my use of television series as the medium for my analyses allows for a more accessible understanding of scholarship, as well as an external illustration, of my claims. In addition, even though such a crossover is not my purpose, there is the possibility for the specific resolutions I find in television to be useful for scholarship that deals with traumatic resolution outside of television.

Lacanian theory denies the possibility of having a perfect, all-encompassing cure to trauma and instead allows for only a temporary momentary reprieve from trauma and its affect through speech. What this means is that causes for trauma are infinite and myriad, for there is neither order nor end to that which cannot be accounted for—trauma; additionally, and more importantly, the resolutions to trauma can be just as creative, just as unending, in allowing the Subject to create a fresh, briefly ameliorative Symbolic (set of words or phrases) for resolution. If there is an unending potential for resolutions, then my work is useful in identifying some of those resolutions—in actually pinning several down. My thesis is specific enough to avoid a broad, theoretical reiteration of resolution

like other scholarship, as well as specific enough to narrow down, from the vast array of possible resolutions, several identifiable ones.

The combination of Lacan and television is appropriate for multiple reasons, one of which is that Lacan himself uses analogies, references to metaphor, metonymy, and art, as well as the gaze and anamorphism to explain his theories. It is not at all out of place to use psychoanalysis in connection with film, when Lacan has already allowed psychoanalysis to share characteristics with art. In their work, scholars such as Slavoj Žižek, Barbara Johnson, and Todd McGowan are among those who have utilized Lacanian psychoanalysis for the understanding of film and art (and, vice-versa, who have utilized film and art to understand Lacanian psychoanalysis); thus, the combination of Lacan and art is well-established in practice.

The transition from film to television in terms of analysis is not a simplistic one. While the two are visual brothers, television can accomplish things that film does not have the time, capacity, or viewer interaction to equal. The combination of television and Lacan is particularly appropriate in terms of trauma, because a television series' purpose, in contrast to a single movie, is to delay what is felt to be an inevitable conclusion. Television extends its plot by wrapping and rewrapping the same problems in new situations to delay their ultimate resolution. Though trauma may not have agency and may not actively choose to work in this specific way, it nevertheless has an identical method. Trauma presents the same problem: an inadequate Symbolic or Symbolics, wrapped and rewrapped—always approaching, but never reaching resolution.

Television is particularly apposite, as well, for it presents the problem of trauma in as many layers as film contains. *Mise-en-scènes*, lighting, cinematography, sound, and editing are all chosen with purpose. No one of these things in the performance of trauma are meaningless, and so—in contrast to literature—there is an endless array of items

apart from dialogue that can impart the discordance of the Real and Symbolic, trauma's repetition, or trauma's atemporality. The multitude of possibilities available with film makes the combination of trauma and television particularly appropriate.

Altogether, my methodology is to begin with Lacan's definition of trauma as a framework for analysis and subsequently to apply this framework to two television series: *Boardwalk Empire* and *Breaking Bad*. The resolutions are indicated by junctures in the series where there is a promise of or actual resolution to the trauma performed. All resolutions, however, in order to be appropriate, work within the Lacanian understanding and general resolution of trauma, as do all other theories I combine with Lacan.

In terms of texts that analyze my chosen television series, the scholarship is very thin. Not only are there very few articles about each of the series in general, but there are none that analyze trauma in them. There can be found, online in Google Search, blogs that discuss war trauma in *Boardwalk Empire* or Stockholm Syndrome in *Breaking Bad*, but there are no such scholarly articles dealing with this topic with these series. In addition, the articles that are published on *Boardwalk Empire* and *Breaking Bad* are only those that summarize the series, describe the creation of the series, or discuss the morality within the series. None discuss Lacan (that is, except for my own published article on *Boardwalk Empire*—"Driven by the Spirit: The Alcoholism of Man in *Boardwalk Empire*"—that I will be reshaping for use here), and none of them have anything to do with Lacanian trauma.

Fortunately, there is *one* article dealing with trauma in the sense that I wish to discuss it, and this article is Karen Randell's "Masking the Horror of Trauma: The Hysterical Body of Lon Chaney." Randell analyzes the visual disfigurement of war heroes in film as a surplus of trauma, representative of the war trauma not shown in the actual film (217). Randell's discussion of the mutilation of men's bodies is important for

my thesis, and I likewise will be analyzing the trauma of war as that which occurs after war events. The difference between my scholarship and Randell's is that I will be analyzing an entirely different series of television and will not venture through that analysis with Thomas Elsaesser's theory of recovered referentiality, which is the foundation for her argument. My own research is more diversified than the singular topic of war trauma in film.

There are other texts that, in general, analyze film in conjunction with Lacanian theory; these include Todd McGowan's *The Real Gaze* and *Lacan and Contemporary Film* and Slavoj Žižek's *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out*. All of these books, however, analyze movies, not television series. McGowan writes on the relationship between the spectator and film; that is, he analyzes how the Real can be used by film to have an effect on the spectator. Since I have no interest in speaking about movies or their effects on the audience, but rather am looking for structural resolutions to trauma within the television series and only within the series, my work departs greatly from McGowan. In terms of providing an artistic example for Lacanian theory, Žižek's authorship generally has the purpose to use film for elucidation (both in *Enjoy your Symptom!* and without). Although I will be using my two chosen television series as a performance of Lacanian theory, my purpose is actually to identify resolutions to Lacanian trauma within those series that fit the Lacanian framework. I will in no way be repeating what Žižek has already said.

The greatest amount of prior scholarship surrounding my topic of trauma and television is that which has to do with Lacan and/or trauma. Works include Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, Colette Soler's *What Lacan Said about Women*, Bruce Fink's *The Lacanian Subject*, Gilbert D. Chaitin's *Rhetoric & Culture in Lacan*, Barbara Johnson's *Persons and Things*, Slavoj Žižek's *Plague of Fantasies*, and Julia Kristeva's *Powers of*

Horror. As I have stated before, however, my work differs greatly from prior scholarship since, rather than providing a rewording of Lacanian theory for better understanding, I seek to include specific, identifiable resolutions to trauma performed in television—and not in just television generally, but specifically *Boardwalk Empire* and *Breaking Bad*. There are, however, other ways that my thesis differs from these prior studies.

Cathy Caruth states in her book *Unclaimed Experience* that history has a positive role to perform in relation to trauma. History, according to Caruth, has value in the present as a response to past trauma and is essentially a new Symbolic to sap the traumatic Real (3-5). She asserts literature is useful in the same way—of putting new words and phrases to the problems that escape articulation. Both history and literature are like an analyst aiding an analysand to create a new Symbolic and new Real. What I have written differs from her work in that I am not discussing literature or history or a Subject's relation to them.

My writing departs from Soler's *What Lacan Said About Women* and Fink's *The Lacanian Subject* in that it diverges from Soler's subject and expands on part of Fink's. I do not explore trauma in terms of Lacan's masculine and feminine economies (Soler's focus), nor do I connect the impasse of the sexual relationship to the impasse for unresolved trauma. Conversely, I take Fink's five-page section on trauma and expand it for the entirety of this work, relating almost every point discussed back to trauma.

The way that my scholarship deviates from Fink is similar to how my work diverges from Chaitin's *Rhetoric & Culture in Lacan*, Žižek's *Plague of Fantasies*, and Barbara Johnson's *Persons and Things*. Chaitin, like Fink, seeks to explain Lacanian theory, part of which is trauma, and his focus on trauma's resolutions is not nearly as specific or as investigative as what I intend. He primarily links Lacanian theory with poetry, which is not my focus. Žižek's focus in *Plague* is likewise not completely on

trauma—the book's focus is how fantasy operates as the basis for ideology, fantasy's relationship to *jouissance*, and fetishism—but he does mention trauma briefly at times, as well as the inability for cinema to present the Real; thus, what I provide, as with Fink's work, is an expounding on a sliver of what Žižek mentions. Lastly, although Barbara Johnson's text includes a fantastic chapter on Lacan and Narcissus, her work is not entirely focused on Lacan; I differ from her, as well, by combining the mirror stage and the idea of the traumatic Real by arguing that the blurring between human and object is traumatizing and causes abjection. Thus, unlike Johnson, I combine Johnson's work with Kristeva's.

Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* is a cornerstone of my thesis, for it is with this book that I tie together discussions of trauma, the abject, the repressed, and the failure of Symbolic divisions of the Real. The primary difference between my work and Kristeva's is that Kristeva's work is from a purely theoretical point of view, and I am combining theory with television. Rather than devoting my work to the understanding of the physical sensation that accompanies trauma (abjection), I am searching for ways in which this physical sensation is alleviated in the two series.

As I said before, the study of television and trauma are commensurate. Television is emerging ever more urgently as a far more attractive medium than film, for it has the capacity and time to accomplish more in performing trauma than one movie could ever hope. Not only this, but there is also the advantage in a television series of a rhythm, a repetition that, as I elucidate in the following sections, fits perfectly with the nature of trauma according to Lacan; however, it is not enough to simply note the workings of trauma with a vague notion that there *can be* resolution. Understanding the mechanics of resolving trauma should be just as lengthy as understanding the machine that renders trauma. Television is capable of putting a picture to that resolution; thus, just as television

calls for an analysis of trauma performed and resolved, writings on the resolution of trauma call for a visual and dialogic roadmap.

It is my goal to continue in the steps of recent research that combines Lacanian psychoanalysis with visual mediums, but also to take that research further. In this first chapter, I begin the closing of the pedagogical gap by analyzing the nature of trauma as according to Lacan and identifying what allows for its resolution. More importantly, for those unfamiliar with Lacan, I introduce Lacanian terminology and his understanding of trauma. This first chapter analyzes trauma's atemporality and connects this atemporality, this existence of trauma outside of the set, to Kenneth Burke's discussion of the effect of environment on agent and the circumference of scenes in *A Grammar of Motives* by using his terminology to describe the traumatic scene as the scene added to all scenes. Appended to this is an exploration of Kristeva's discussion of division and the abject. I also look at the repetitiveness of trauma, its quilting point, and the emotion of abjection as the nature of trauma—an emotion not necessarily associated with any real or physical threat or event.

I continue this first chapter by discussing television's involvement with trauma, what television can achieve, perform, and manipulate, and how television can have it "both ways." What I mean when I say, "both ways," is that television has the important ability to exhibit two opposing realities in impossible simultaneous existence. Lastly, I state that television proposes possible resolutions to the trauma it performs, and I subsequently affirm my purpose: the identification of these resolutions in *Boardwalk Empire* and *Breaking Bad*.

The next two chapters of my work are devoted to each television series and elucidate all of the theory in the first chapter. The second chapter explores *Boardwalk Empire* and revolves around the exorcising of alcohol from society, as well as the

breakdown of the barrier between person and object in terms of (1) alcohol and the human and (2) internally in the character Harrow. This chapter identifies alcohol as an abject cause of desire, other abjections, including the breakdown of the mother-son relationship between the characters Jimmy and Gillian, and finally, the repetition of and connection between all of these abjections in the series. The resolutions the series proposes are 1. the reinstatement of fantasy, 2. suicide, and 3. a lesson on the impossibility of exclusion—a lesson that explains why Symbolic division cannot destroy trauma, but only heighten its presence.

The third chapter, in which I discuss *Breaking Bad*, is an elucidation of guilt inherent in trauma, the breakdown between signifier and signified, the gap between the Symbolic and the Real, and the quilting point in trauma. Additionally, I connect trauma and the death drive. I claim that the resolution to trauma is the removal of the quilting point through the acknowledgement that everything is traumatic—thus, when everything is traumatic, trauma can be removed from the equation. The resolution to trauma in this series is repression—allowing the trauma to slip back under, into the unconscious.

The last chapter sums up the resolutions listed and compares and contrasts them. In addition, in this last chapter I further investigate and compare and contrast the cinematography of the two series and show how these contribute to entirely different dramas and different and/or similar resolutions to trauma. Lastly, I look at the connection of resolution with violence, as well as the connection between villains and the gap between the Symbolic and Real.

Chapter 1

This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things

I. Trauma

To begin to understand the nature of trauma, we will begin where trauma is born—with language. It is with language that mankind thinks, speaks, knows, and exists. It is with the law, the letter, the grammar, the math, the symbol, and the signifier that the world and its inhabitants operate. This, according to Lacan, is the Symbolic world (Écrits 495).

There is something outside of this world, of course. In contrast to words that are built to capture and express something's presence or lack, there exist truths and experiences that cannot be captured or expressed. That which is unfathomable, infinite, whole, and lacks nothing is the exact opposite of the material of the Symbolic. This substance, according to Lacan, is the Real, and the Real, no matter the actions of the Symbolic, remains viable and in its own place (Écrits 17, 18).

The abrasive relationship between the Symbolic and the Real is the foundation for a massive amount of Lacanian theory, and that is because the fabrics of these two worlds are disparate, their dealings always described as a war. "The letter kills," Lacan declares, and what it kills is the Real (Écrits 423). The division of unitary things via words, such as the division of a whole body into separate parts with separate names, is one such placement of the Symbolic onto the Real, and such a placement is always described as a carving, as a somewhat violent act.

Bruce Fink in *The Lacanian Subject* explains this function of the Symbolic to carve as well as detailing the disparate substances of the Real and Symbolic:

Lacan's real is without zones, subdivisions, localized highs and lows, or gaps and plenitudes: the real is a sort of unrent, undifferentiated fabric,

woven in such a way as to be full everywhere, there being no space between the threads that are its 'stuff.' It is a sort of smooth, seamless surface or space which applies as much to a child's body as to the whole universe. The division of the real into separate zones, distinct features, and contrasting structures is a result of the symbolic order, which, in a manner of speaking, cuts into the smooth facade of the real, creating divisions, gaps, and distinguishable entities and laying the real to rest, that is, drawing or sucking it into the symbols used to describe it, and thereby annihilating it. (24)

Fink elucidates the ability of the Symbolic to kill, and when one considers it, there really can be no other way, no other relationship between the Symbolic and Real. A body cannot be both a bundle of undifferentiated sensations and simultaneously an ordered set of divided ones. Either there is order, or there is unknowing. One cannot have it both ways. This is why Lacan says that the Symbolic kills, for it destroys the ability to exist within the Real and striates the very bare slate of the Real itself. The Real is absorbed into that which signifies it.

What of the scraps of the Real, though, that are not accounted for? These are the pieces of the Real that the Symbolic does not reach, the gaps of which Fink speaks. There are always gaps. The fabric of the Symbolic, unlike the Real, is never smooth, is never complete, and cannot blanket the Real. There is always a remainder. More importantly, trauma is always in that remainder.

Not all of the unaccounted Real is traumatic. It is not the purpose of a psychoanalyst to drain every drop of the Real into a word or set of words—if it were even possible to do so. A psychoanalyst's function is instead to locate the Real that is traumatic to an individual and to help the analysand alter those measurements or

definitions that are failing. The psychoanalyst may even help the analysand to create new ones (Fink 26).

It is important at this point to again consider the relationship between the Symbolic and the Real, but now in an entirely different way—a way that, while maintaining that their fabrics are disparate and in a sort of war, also sutures them together.

The fact an alteration can be made to the Real is why Bruce Fink—after considering the "second order" Real Lacan discusses in his postface to the "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'"—hypothesizes that Lacan's Real is actually comprised of two separate Reals—a $Real_1$ and $Real_2$ (27). There is evidence, Fink claims, of a prelinguistic $Real_1$, the Real that exists before the Symbolic divisions are made, and a postlinguistic $Real_2$, the Real that is in excess of those lines of the Symbolic and is unaccounted for. This is not at all unanticipated, of course. For instance, a fresh blanket of snow is not the same blanket once a footprint is placed in its center, nor is a piece of paper the same once ink has dyed the white; there will always be the original and altered, the pre and the post. The Symbolic's structure can affect the $Real_2$ in the same way that the $Real_2$ affects what is spoken.

The second thing to note in the fact that the Symbolic and the Real are sutured together, is that a definition is made via—not just what it includes—but what it excludes. This is not unlike a high school clique, a recipe, a human cell, a photograph, or a movie—all of which are created by what they include and, more importantly, what they refuse, exclude, and withhold. A definition is only as sturdy as the membrane—the lines that monitor and deter the outside, which always threatens to slip in. The jocks of a high school only exist as "jocks" by excluding those that don't obsessively play sports, just as the goths have a certain ritualistic style and dress that sets them apart from other

students. The relationship between the Real and the Symbolic is nearly the same. That which the Symbolic excludes (either unknowingly or intentionally) determines the makeup of the Real₂. Reality, therefore, is created via Symbolic exclusions as well as inclusions.

In *The Lacanian Subject*, Bruce Fink brilliantly introduces this idea of the excluded and the unconscious by referring to coin tosses. When one tosses a coin and records the results, according to Fink, those records can be grouped and named (16-18). In other words, the patterns that result from random coin flips can create a code with a grammar identical to any other kind of grammar, an order identical to any other kind of order. To better understand the unconscious and the excluded, it is important to take a detailed and in-depth look at Fink's coin flip example.

The coin flip is a real occurrence from which a Symbolic is created, as well as, from that Symbolic, an unconscious grammar. Fink bases his coin flip example off of chapters 15 and 16 of Lacan's Seminar II and "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter.'" To begin, Fink assigns these coin flips the same + and - designations that Lacan assigns them (if the coin lands on heads, it is recorded as a +, and if the coin lands on tails, the record shows a -) (16). Fink then elaborates that a chain of + and - can be created from a series of coin flips, and he creates such a chain (see table 1.1).

Table 1.1 - Toss Numbers and Heads/Tails Chain

Toss Numbers								
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
+	+	-	-	+	-	-	-	+
Heads/Tails Chain								

Source: Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995) 16. Print.

What soon becomes obvious is that there are four possible combinations of + and - when the results are taken in pairs: 1.) ++, 2.) --, 3.) +-, and 4.) -+ (17). Since +- and -+ are essentially the same, Fink combines them into one, and he labels these combinations with the same numbers that I have given them here (see table 1.2):

Table 1.2 - Possible Tossed Number Pairs

1	2	3
++	+-	--
	-+	

Source: Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995) 17. Print.

Thus, the above coin toss series can be paired in this way (see table 1.3):

Table 1.3 - Coin Toss Pairings

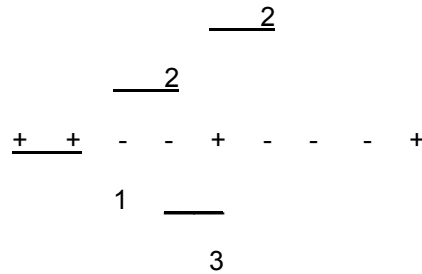
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<u>+</u>	<u>+</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>+</u>	<u>-</u>	-	<u>-</u>	<u>+</u>
1		3		2				2

Source: Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995) 17. Print.

This is not the only way to pair the numbers, however. The chain can be read and categorized in pairs as 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8, 9-?, but also in an overlapping way, where

the pairs can be 1-2, 2-3, 3-4, 4-5, 5-6, 6-7, 7-8, 8-9, 9-?. A better visual for this overlapping is below, and it is the same as Fink provides (see table 1.4).

Table 1.4 - Overlapping Toss Pairings



Source: Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995) 17. Print.

From this system of categorizing coin tosses (that is, putting a Symbolic system to a real event), a set of rules develops that creates a grammar of the labels 1, 2, and 3. As Fink states, "It is already clear at this point that a category 1 set of tosses (+ +) cannot be immediately followed in the lower line (i.e., the line representing category numbers) by a category 3 set, as the second throw in a category 1 is necessarily a plus, whereas the first throw in a category 3 has to be a minus" (17). Fink states that what is created is similar to the spelling rule *i* before *e* except after *c*; that is, in the same way that letters in words and words in sentences have rules that string them together, the same thing has developed here from simple coin tosses and three simple labels (18).

Fink goes on to point out another rule that results from the coin toss labeling: There must be an even number of category twos, (- +) and (+ -), for a category 1 to ever appear (18). More importantly, though, Fink points out that one could, if given the information for the category of the first and third pair (leaving a gap for the second one), determine the structure of the coin toss series (18). For instance, if the first pair is a

category one and the third pair is a category three, the coin toss chain could only be the following: + + - - (18).

What the coin toss example proves is that *certain laws only exist when the categories do*. There is no rule in the coin toss itself concerning the categories of 1, 2, and 3. It is only in the Symbolic framework that impossibilities and possibilities, rules and grammar, positives and negatives, exist. As Fink states, "The resulting possibilities and impossibilities can thus be seen to derive from the way in which the symbolic matrix is constructed, that is, the way it ciphers the event in question. It is not so much the fact of ciphering, in this particular instance, as the method of ciphering which gives rise to laws—syntactic laws—that were not 'already there'" (19). Most significantly, the rules work whether or not the recorder remembers them. The Subject, in fact, can forget about the rules altogether, but the rules never disappear simply because they are forgotten. Rather, they still govern. The *grammar* never forgets.

This code is not unlike computer programming, where specific combinations of 0s and 1s create the entire structure of programs and operations. This excluded grammar, only possible due to the included grammar of tosses, is that which is unknown, prelinguistic, passively alive in the Real. Fink calls this excess, passive grammar, this Real, the "*caput mortuum*," or worthless remains. He states,

The *caput mortuum* contains what the chain does not contain; it is in a sense the other of the chain. The chain is as unequivocally determined by what it excludes as by what it includes, by what is within it as by what is without. The chain never ceases to *not* write the numbers that constitute the *caput mortuum*... One could go so far as to say that what, of necessity, remains outside the chain causes what is inside; something

must, structurally speaking, be pushed outside for there to even be an inside. (27)

Fink's "worthless remains" are anything but worthless, his unknown knowledge not completely unknown. The residue remains, and it does so with a passive, but very real, logic. The Real, which is not put into words, symbols, measurements, or signifiers, governs the Symbolic *nevertheless* and, just like the letter that kills, has a potentially harmful and passive grammar.

There is no way around it, though. There must be exclusions. Words are imperfect, small, finite, and they can never capture that which is large and infinite, nor are they precise enough to indicate the very particular. There is always something excluded for a shape, a measurement, a definition to be formed, just like there is always a negative as the basis for a picture. The traumatic Real₂ is necessarily formed once one forces upon an unintelligible world intelligible definitions.

It is only in the Symbolic that one orders, understands, and recalls experiences; it is only the Symbolic that is signified, counted, and quantified. The Real is that which is outside of these things, and, being outside of them, it cannot be spoken. That which one cannot consciously know or symbolize is the unconscious knowledge—that which one does not realize one knows. Fink explains that "The unconscious is not something one knows, but rather something that is known. What is unconscious is known unbeknownst to the 'person' in question: it is not something one 'actively,' consciously grasps, but rather something which is 'passively' registered, inscribed, or counted" (23). In other words, the unconscious is the unprocessed order created when one processes an order; it is the un-ruminated excess. As an excess, however, it nevertheless lives and remains. It is the invisible and unconquerable remains.

The focus on the Real₁ and this *caput mortuum*, the Real₂, comprises the majority of my trauma analysis in the two television series. The focus will always remain on that which eludes symbolization—on elements in the plot for which the characters can find no words. This is, after all, when trauma occurs—when one clings to the body one believes is supposed-to-be, not the body that is; or, it is when one demands that one's Symbolic truths be the perfect, real truths, even as they collapse. Trauma lies in the perceived inability or refusal to explore new ways to symbolize the experiences that no prior symbolization can explain. Trauma is in the perceived inability or downright refusal to create new wordings, new definitions.

Resolutions to trauma, then, will be anything that counters the items above—anything that allows for the voicing of the unvoiced, the obscuring of the need to voice (that is, through fantasy, instigating the belief that everything is okay with the world), or the complete destruction of the system altogether (suicide).

In psychoanalysis, there is no end to the possible resolutions to trauma because there is no end to trauma. The abrasive relationship between the Real and the Symbolic is unavoidable—the fabrics are incompatible, forever. The Symbolic bleeds the Real, but never all of it, and as one progresses through life, one encounters again and again the pieces of the Real as of yet unaccounted for. One must continually find new ways of symbolizing that which is passively, unconsciously known and excluded. The process is repetitive. Trauma is continual. So are those things that resolve trauma.

II. The Wound

It is sometimes difficult to connect the idea of horror associated with war or murder or death with the disconnect between the Symbolic and Real. The concept seems

mere theory until one explains *starting* with the wound, and Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience* does just this. She begins her examination of trauma and history with the wound itself—specifically, the post-traumatic stress of war. Caruth's conclusions need recognition here as a useful tool for understanding how the theory connects to real experience.

Caruth begins her book by mentioning Freud's description of the repeated nightmares and reenactments of both battlefield survivors and those who have experienced other traumatic events, and she does so in order to seek an explanation for why the traumatic repeats. Her verdict is that the wound "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (4). She describes trauma as a "belated experience," a violence that "has not yet been fully known" (Caruth 6-7). What she illustrates is a disconnect between 1. action or experience and 2. understanding of that action. Trauma is after-the-fact, not within any experience itself. Rather, it is that which crops up, repeating the event in a silent plea for comprehension, for integration. Caruth's understanding of trauma links back to Fink, sounding almost identical to his description of the unconscious's grammar. Fink states in *The Lacanian Subject*: "The unconscious cannot forget, composed of 'letters' working, as they do, in an autonomous, automatic way; it preserves in the present what has affected it in the past, eternally holding onto each and every element, remaining forever marked by all of them" (20). That which is lodged in the unconscious, experienced too soon to be spoken, is a wound that repeats itself in the present, demanding recognition, until it can be understood and drained via speech.

The important thing here is that, although each event, like a battle, calls for recognition, it is not the cause of trauma. Rather, an event like war is the object cause of

trauma, or the object cause of abjection, in the words of Julia Kristeva (15). What causes trauma-after-the-fact is that war is experienced too soon for recognition, not that war is experienced. Put another way, if trauma (according to Lacan) is a lacking of the Symbolic to account for the Real, then trauma can arise due to any Symbolic and any Real, not to one specific event, like war. Trauma is experienced by a vast number of people and linked to a vast number of experiences; it is one kind of disturbance spurred by an infinite number of things. Trauma is not attached or caused by a specific experience; it, unlike these temporal events, is atemporal and is always experienced in the present. In addition, if trauma is not attached to a specific event, then the event itself does not necessarily have to exist. Just like one can be spurred to fear by imagining a future that never occurs, one can experience trauma by repeating a past that never existed.

In the fourth chapter of his book *Contingency, Immanence, and the Subject of Rhetoric*, Dr. Timothy Richardson, drawing from Lacan and Cathy Caruth, elucidates this atemporality of trauma in terms of history. History, in other words, is not truly about the past, but rather the present. It is about how the past serves to explain the present, in the same way that the object cause of trauma operates. Richardson states:

The point is that trauma qua cause is not the event itself, but that something that is missing for which the event comes to function as a placeholder. Thus, a person may develop a symptom many years after an event has taken place. History in such cases must be read as addressing the present, not the past. Put slightly differently, the event as *traumatic* becomes an object called into being for some current (condensing, displacing) function. (105)

Richardson draws connections between the analysis of history and therapy's attempt to create a cause after the fact, or after the effect—to operate on the Real with a Symbolic

that, though it may not perfectly access the cause, nevertheless has an effect. Again, the key to resolution is the analysis of History—speech—even if that History or speech isn't necessarily accessing an undeniable truth. Of course, this speech always operates in the present. Since trauma is not linked to a specific moment in time and does not have to be tied to any actual event, then its treatment is like that of any wound or emotion: It is treated in the present as a present condition. To come full circle, this is why Lacan's definition of trauma is the disjuncture of the Symbolic and the Real—for this disjuncture is a present thing. Thus, treatment of trauma will always be resolved through a draining of the Real—a present action with an effect on the present.

It may seem at first that to compare the travesties of war to an event that never happened (like alien abduction) is to defile sacred truths and events that took real men's lives. It may also seem that by treating trauma as a present emotion and claiming that past events did not cause that trauma that one downplays the truly disturbing events of that past. Neither of these, however, is true; in reality, this particular Lacanian definition of trauma gives *more* credence to wounds and trauma.

The point of claiming trauma as present is not to equate past events, nor to downplay alarming experiences, but rather to explain why, if something occurs (or is imagined to occur) in the past, it does not remain there. It is to explain how trauma, contrary to temporal events that end, is the wound that is ever-present, ever-bleeding. It is a wound of all wounds, a pure wound that in its purity doesn't appear to be a wound at all, for it is invisible, attached to an event that no one can see, alienating, and confusing.

The belief by the Subject that trauma is indeed caused/created by a specific event in the past is that which ends the sort of slippage in possible signifiers (ends the idea that there are any number of experiences capable of causing trauma) and is what Lacan would deem a quilting point. Lacan's quilting point, or the *point de capiton*, is a

point of illusive stability in which the letter overrides the Real as truth (Écrits 419, 681-82). Although these quilting points are useful as means of securing the letter so that it does not exist as blanket chaos (like the Real), the application of the quilting point is nevertheless an illusion. The belief that *war* caused trauma, or that *murder* caused trauma, or that *death* gave birth to trauma is a lie, a quilting point that draws the focus of the Subject away from the actual underlying cause of trauma: that the Symbolic has not accounted for all of the Real, and that this can apply to any Symbolic, to any Real. The quilting point of trauma should be viewed as an impossible puzzle the Subject is obsessed with solving. It is the experience the Subject associates her trauma with and which, the Subject believes, must be mended for the trauma to end. The quilting point carries with it intense emotions that are forever fixated upon a nostrum, an impossible cure, and those emotions persist as long as long as the Subject's incorrect focus endures.

What exactly is the emotion of trauma that must end? Julia Kristeva, in her book *Powers of Horror*, calls the emotion of trauma "abjection," and she states of all experiences that occur too soon for symbolization that "what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (2). That which occurs outside of symbolization occurs in the traumatic Real and demands notice in its web of chaos. Trauma is caused by what occurs before it can be vocalized.

The existence of this experience outside of symbolization is, more importantly, "a weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture" (Kristeva 2). Here, one recognizes that the emotion of abjection is the result of

items *intentionally* left outside of symbolization by society—pieces of reality rather left forgotten and which spark the feelings of abjection as one approaches them too closely. According to Kristeva, these items are excluded from society based on the fact that they allude to one's being object, rather than Subject. The recognition of oneself as Subject and not object is only possible if there is separation from the Mother—that is, rejection of being a piece of another's body and rejection of that which blurs the inside and outside definition. This same rejection is necessarily applied to menstrual blood, fecal matter, corpses, incest, to anything that might bespeak humans as objects (Kristeva 101). Society rejects and washes away these objectifying things; and, because of their exclusion from society, if one does continue to approach those excluded items, differences between that which is inside and outside breaks down, all definition breaks down, and annihilation of the world and the Subject occurs. Abjection, then, is a societal safeguard against the breach in the Symbolic that would cause the disappearing stability of all definitions and ideology.

In the third chapter of his book, *Contingency, Immanence, and the Subject of Rhetoric*, Richardson discusses Kristeva's definition of abjection at length in concern with Christianity. He states that "the object is recognized as that which is fundamentally different, as the disgusting remainder that must be expelled in order to ensure the harmony of the symbolic order (both personally and culturally)" (90). According to Richardson, the object is that which can be considered sin in Christianity. More importantly, though, the alleviation and manipulation of this abjection deals with *speaking* of this sin (confession), which places the Real in the Symbolic. In Christianity, Richardson continues, the point is to also place the Christian into the object category alongside the sin (92). Sin is a Christian's responsibility, and he is to commune with it; this communion is the basis of his spirituality. In doing so, the Christian commits self-expulsion and stands

outside of society, as well—is in this world, but not of this world. The Christian, then, becomes like Christ. They take the place of the abject, and this goes to prove that the abject isn't necessarily disgusting, but that which takes the place of the scapegoat—that which must be excluded so that society may continue to be cleansed of themselves (91).

Those things which lay outside the set, which are intentionally forgotten, include not only war, murder, filth, crime, poverty, sewage, the corpse, etc, but the scapegoat and sin. In addition, it is not that, for instance, the corpse itself causes abjection (we are not going to make the quilting point mistake here), but rather that the experience with a corpse, which is generally excluded from society, requires a symbolization not normally permitted. Bringing the corpse into symbolization unites it with the living in a way that breaks down, again, the inside and outside, the living and the dead, so that there is no longer a border. The problem with this is that the set cannot maintain its definition, its very livelihood, if the membrane between it and the outside is so permeable. That which is outside the set defines the set just as much as what is inside. What results in the breakdown of definitions and separation is chaos, and with that chaos, abjection.

There is, of course, a known obsession with the items above (war, death, filth, the corpse)—an extimate enjoyment of them—and it is here that the emotion of abjection becomes linked with gratification and is shown to act like desire. Kristeva states that within trauma there is "a *jouissance* in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant. One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims—if not its submissive and willing ones" (9). Within trauma is the access to existence in the Real that was long ago taken away, and because of this, there is an enjoyment of trauma. This enjoyment is not necessarily a completely pleasurable one, but it is nevertheless the focus of obsession—a quilting point with the promise of an impossible solution, a never-

arriving completeness, and a gratification in not being gratified. The magnetism towards chaos, towards the Real that is caused by trauma, is terrible but desirable—similar to Lacan's object cause of desire. It is an object cause of desire, an object *a*.

In short, the object *a* for Lacan is also atemporal. It is one's never-ending search to replace that which one believes one had, but never actually did have. Bruce Fink describes the object *a* perfectly when he says, "There never was such an object in the first place: the 'lost object' never was; it is only constituted as lost after the fact, in that the subject is unable to find it anywhere other than in fantasy or dream life. Using Freud's text as a springboard, the object can be viewed as always already lost" (94). Any desire, all desire, circles around this void of meaning, this void of actual existence, including the *jouissance* for chaos, the obsessive extimate enjoyment of the object. It is that which cannot be symbolized that draws one closest. It is the lack of Symbolic meaning in war that causes its repetition and demands to be noticed.

Anything has the potential to become an object *a*, because any positive experience is capable of being lost; and the sensation that one had a perfect and whole experience with the object *a* is only possible when that sensation is no longer there, no longer possible. Other experiences come close to matching the lost experience, the object *a*, but ultimately, they mark the object *a*'s absence further, motivating the Subject to continue pursuing a collection of those similar to the lost object. For instance, once one tastes a rich chocolate cake for the first time, and that experience ends, it is remembered as a perfect experience, a perfect chocolate cake. It is objectified. One searches for it ever after in other cakes, other chocolates that—though satiating—are never *it*, the perfect experience.

Though the object *a* is not a goal or point, it can nevertheless—like the object *a*—stand in for what is missing. Rather than dealing with what is believed to be a past,

perfect experience, however, it marks the lack of Symbolic explanation for traumatic experiences in the Real. It points to the absence of what can be spoken in terms of the traumatic. Desire and the object both revolve around their lost causes—the object *a* to regain the experience, the object *a* to explain and bury it; it is only when one stops the chaos of the Real, the lack in the Symbolic, with Lacan's letter that kills, that the revolution can potentially end.

III. The Scene Added to All Scenes

In defining trauma as atemporal and as an excess to the Symbolic—that which is outside of the set—one begins to wonder how art, and in particular television, is able to present this. Here, as one delves, one begins to recognize television as a useful means for performing trauma—far more useful, in fact, than film. I will begin that understanding of the use of television and art's performance of trauma with a necessary probing of Kenneth Burke's *A Grammar of Motives*.

Burke presents to us the dramatic pentad. It is comprised of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose (Burke xv). As Burke explains, these divisions in drama are not completely separate, and there is a fluid relationship between, for instance, scene and agent or scene and act. A good man is often accompanied with a good environment, a bad man with a bad environment. It is not that a man is ever completely separate from his surroundings, like a machine completely uninfluenced by a warehouse in which it is housed. Rather, an agent and the scene that surrounds him are interactive.

As Burke himself explains, the above explicates a man or woman's search for a better environment within which to create a better self. If scene and agent are interwoven, there is the hope that a better scene creates a better agent (85). At the same time, just

because an agent is in a bad or poor scene, that does not necessarily require that he or she must be equally bad or poor. Why is this? Because the circumference for an agent can always be wider than the immediate scene (82). Just because a person is stuck in a monstrous environment—like war—does not mean that he or she is equally monstrous. That is because there exists a world outside that monstrosity by which an agent can be influenced.

The question then arises, can there be one scene that is so revolutionary so as to be included in all future scenes—so as to be included in the circumference of all scenes? Or, better put, is there one scene that forever forces the agent to expand his present circumference so as to include that scene with all scenes? I do not mean to suggest that the past inserts itself into the present, of course, but rather that the present expands its circumference to include a scene outside of the immediate. This scene would somehow imprint on an agent so that he or she "chooses" to include it, repeatedly, with every scene thereafter. More importantly, as the scene added to all, it lies outside of the set—it is the special scene that defines all scenes, that which is outside to form what is inside. Trauma, I argue, is such a revolutionary scene.

In film or television, the scene that attempts to explain trauma must lie outside of the time order and must come at the end of the movie or episode or series. A good example of what I mean is the end of the movie *The Descent*, in which Sarah, the lone survivor of a group that has been killed off one at a time by zombies in an underground cave, finally surfaces, freed as if by a birth from the ground, finds her car, and flees. She stops on the highway some distance away, tries to catch her breath, and as she does, a semi blares its horn as it rushes past on the road and interrupts her sense of safety. Sarah then turns in the driver's seat, and what meets her eyes is the ghost of one of her dead friends in the passenger's seat. The very next scene, and the last of the movie, is a

sudden, abrupt, and inexplicable medium shot of Sarah back in the cave as if she has never escaped. Her dead daughter is there with her, and there is a birthday cake between them. The meaning of the end is obvious: even when one is out of the cave, one is never really out of the cave. Something as monstrous as one's friends being killed off one at a time by zombies gets added to the other monstrous things in one's life (like one's daughter dying), and all of those scenes live with a person forever.

Here we see the example of film and television's ability to perform trauma and present the scene added to all scenes, as an atemporal addition that does not quite fit into the rest of the plot, but nevertheless defines the entirety. Although *The Descent* does not offer this scene as explanation for any prior mysteries, many films and television series do offer one atemporal scene to explain the inexplicable in previous scenes. This sort of scene outside the set for the reason of explication, however, is very different than that which is in *The Descent*.

In such movies and series where an atemporal scene is added at the end as an explanation, what is added is an object *a* or an abject *a*—in other words, something that takes the guise of an explanation that can never really explain. This is, in fact, why the "explanation" must come at the end—if it arrived in chronological order, it would not work because both trauma and desire are characterized by what cannot be symbolized or by what is missing. Something must remain missing throughout the movie or television series for desire or trauma to occur or be performed, and the thing that must remain missing is how the desire or trauma began in the first place.

At the same time, no explanation actually works as an explanation—remember that war does not cause trauma, just like cake does not cause desire. For a movie or television series to *seem* like it is giving what has been withheld (the origin of the trauma or desire), the explaining, atemporal scene must be short and appended to the *end*, even

if this scene doesn't actually explain. This is why the movie *Memento* is brilliant *structurally*. Nothing about the plot is particularly remarkable; the movie only seems remarkable because, in reverse, it sets up a pattern of withholding and providing, withholding and providing, but never really provides all of the explanation, until the end; even then, one questions.

What television can do, and film cannot, is maintain the atemporal scene for an entire episode. This would be, in *Breaking Bad*, the episode "Fly." It is, in *Boardwalk Empire*, the "Blue Bell Boy." In the television show *Girls*, it would be "One Man's Trash." All three of these episodes are entirely outside of their individual sets and last from thirty minutes to an hour. They are allowed to, in the most creative ways, extend the atemporal scene that performs trauma. These episodes, in addition, have almost identical features: 1. the episode focuses on only two or three characters (intimate), 2. the setting is almost entirely in one space, and this space is often below ground (below conscious recognition—in the unconscious) 3. the episode is circular, such that the beginning and end are almost identical (traumatic repetition) 4. a death of some sort occurs that pretends to solve, but does not solve, the problem (object *a*). These episodes are the "This is why we can't have nice things" episodes, the episodes that hash out for an extended period of time just why things are as messed up as they are and cannot be mended. They can, unlike the relatively short explanatory endings of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* or *Citizen Kane*, give the explanation long enough and slow enough so that it doesn't quite work. They expose, in their lengthy and creative exploration, the very failure of their own explanation.

This is one difference between television and film. Television can present the object *a* and object *a* not as working explanations, but as failed ones. Again, it is the length of time spent on the explanation—the many minutes they allow for the audience to

not only *invest* and attach themselves to the characters, thus motivating and welcoming a more in-depth analysis, but also enough time for the audience to be dissatisfied with the series' explanation—that allows a television series the ability to do what film cannot. Stretch the explicating end of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* or *Citizen Kane* out for an hour and watch it fail just as surely as the movie *Hannibal Rising* did to explain the psychopathic Hannibal's origins. It is only when explanations are too brief to question that they work. In other words, sublimity is in brevity.

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard defines the sublime as a mixture of pleasure and pain that accompanies the attempt to present and further the unrepresentable in postmodern aesthetics (77). This sort of immanent sublimity is based on transcendence, on a sensation that all has fallen into place, on the idea that all is explained and all has been given. More importantly, and for our purposes here, this immanent sublimity is brief. Movies have such short, explanatory, atemporal scenes and provide the sublimity of conclusion. Television can have this, but it can do more—it can extend the sublime so that it loses the feeling of being conclusive, even as the episode pretends to conclude. Television exposes the object *a* and the subject *a* for what they are and consequently performs trauma accurately by showing that there is no explanation good enough.

Another way of wording the lack of any finite explanation for trauma is that the *scene* fails to support the weight of the trauma—and, likewise, so does the act and purpose of Burke's pentad. This is the realization made in every understanding of trauma and abjection—that when one traces back what is believed to be the underlying cause (that one has witnessed the travesties of war, for instance), each specific action, act, and scene cannot support the weight of being the single cause of the sensation of abjection.

Instead, the cause must be chosen and attributed *after-the-fact*. An explanation only exists in flashforward or flashback.

This existence of an explanation only after-the-fact is very similar to the inability for a person to have his or her last cigarette—one cigarette that is like all other cigarettes cannot support the immense meaning of being the last one. In Lyotard's lexicon, that last cigarette can only be "had" in the future anterior or the *what will have been* (81). Though Lyotard's use of the future anterior deals with the basis of postmodern art—that is, going against previous artistic rules to come up with something that creates rules for *what will have been done*—it as well applies to the flashforward and flashback of television and film. Explanations for trauma only occur in movies at the end, for that is the only time a character's past can be morphed and used for therapeutic alleviation.

In *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, Lacan as well relates the future anterior to the ability of the analysand to understand himself. Lacan states, "What is realised in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming" (*Language* 63). An analysand's understanding of himself and anticipation of what he will become, again, is only in flashforward and flashback—in the future anterior. A perfect example of this future anterior is in the television show *The Wire*.

In season four, episode one of *The Wire*, the young character of Randy Wagstaff is a striving entrepreneur who, one day while selling candy on the street, is asked by another young man, Little Kevin, to deliver a message to an older boy named Lex. This message is that Patrice wants to meet Lex behind the playground that night. Randy, thinking nothing of it, delivers the message. He finds out later that the boy he gave the message to, Lex, has been murdered, that the message he delivered was a lie, and that

he has—without his knowledge—been implicated in the murder of Lex. At the end of the episode, he sits quietly on the steps outside of his home. He, normally talkative, is struck silent.

The problem in the above episode is that Randy's action did not cause the murder, nor did his intention or purpose cause it (for he had no idea that Lex was going to be killed, nor would he have wanted it). In addition, the scene itself had nothing to do with the murder. None of these things, in fact, can support the weight of Lex's death. Nevertheless, Randy is implicated, and the murder was completed. Randy is, in Lacan's explanation of the future anterior, he who *will have been a murderer* (a flashforward in a flashback) (*The Language* 63). So, Randy must learn just how and in what way he is tied to Lex's murder. Ultimately, since the weight of meaning cannot fall on the scene, act, or intent, it must fall on the agent, on Randy himself, and this is where the inherent guilt in trauma comes into play.

In showing the absolute failure of the scene to provide any real support for trauma, television is capable of illustrating how the traumatic meaning then falls to the agent, and, thus, implicates him or her as responsible. Television illustrates the guilt inherently involved in trauma, and it has the time to revolve around the overcoming of this false guilt or, sometimes, to allow its very characters the realization that they should not be blaming themselves.

The move of blame (or cause of trauma) from scene to agent is a rewrapping of the abject *a*—yet another slipping of signifiers as empty objects of blame, the trading off of impossible and false causes of trauma. This repeated rewrapping is what television, not film, has the time to do—and thus, it is in television that one sees the bounce of blame from one area of Burke's dramatisitic pentad to the other. Simultaneously, this many rewappings of trauma is what television is forced to do in order to extend the

plotline. For television to continue, it must operate in the exact same way that trauma does. The discord between the Symbolic and Real is applied to many Symbolics and many Reals, disguised amongst the series as failings of the scenes and agents, when in reality, the scene and agent cannot support the immense weight of the discord.

The above is why the medium of television is an appropriate performer of trauma. It not only extends the atemporal scene and can wear out the object *a* as an explanation, but necessarily does so by reinstating object *a* after object *a* (letting go of the quilting point), the exact way that trauma operates in Lacanian theory. Finally, and more importantly, in necessarily causing trauma to flare-up repeatedly in order to continue the story, television must also have a stockpile of ways to drain that flare up in the Real—to replace useless definitions with new ones, to conceal the uselessness of those definitions, or to destroy the system altogether. It is this plethora of resolutions to trauma that I will explore in the following chapters—in *Boardwalk Empire* and *Breaking Bad*.

As I analyze these two series, one final useful aspect of television will be revealed. Television does not have to choose between one or the other, between fantasy and reality, between chosen and refused, true and false, the atemporal scene that exposes the object *a* and all other episodes that conceal it. In television, Dexter, for instance, need not only be a serial killer, but can be both a serial killer and husband, a serial killer and blood spatter analyst, a serial killer and a father. It is this ability to have it both ways that allows for so many resolutions to occur—for one need not resolve both as long as one resolves just one side of these things—the side of fantasy, of the object *a*, the side that conceals the fact a traumatic Real exists at all.

Of course, this is just one type of resolution, but one that television performs very well. All of the resolutions in the series that I analyze work to undermine one or more of the major points in the creation or causes of trauma: the Symbolic Order, the Symbolic's

ultimately futile divisions, the abjection felt at the failure of the Symbolic, the quilting point and the paradoxical guilt involved in the quilting point, and the atemporality of trauma. Consequently, any resolution to trauma will relate to one or more of the following categories in some way: 1. allowing the gap between the Symbolic and Real to be repressed again, 2. the complete destruction of the Subject, 3. a giving up on faith in the Subject's current Symbolic 4. a recognition that divisions, when made, should not be made with the expectations of unyielding rigidity, but rather with flexibility, 5. an understanding that ameliorating the trauma associated with one event will not ameliorate all trauma, for trauma is atemporal (a letting go of the quilting point), 6. an understanding that the Subject is not guilty for the workings of the Real (the scene) or the failure of the Symbolic.

It is in the above that resolutions reside. These are not cures, of course, for there is no cure for trauma. The discord between the Symbolic and Real will always exist, and thus, trauma will always flare. The purpose of this work is rather to locate performances that relieve abjection, that resolve trauma for a limited period of time; ultimately, temporal relief is, according to Lacan, the best that one can do.

Chapter 2

Boardwalk Empire

I. The Whole is More than the Sum of Its Parts

In my article "Driven by the Spirit: The Alcoholism of Man in *Boardwalk Empire*," I outlined the connections in the television series between corpses and alcohol, babies and alcohol, and atheism and alcohol. All of these items are webbed together, I argued, by the fact each was an object *a*—an object cause of desire. In addition, each of them—in one way or another—fits into the unconscious word "spirit," which floats around the series like a phantom. Alcohol, babies, atheism, and corpses are spirits in the show, pooled together in their lack of life. I would now like to amend this analysis by instead calling each of the items an object *a*—an object cause of trauma, within which there is a *jouissance* similar to that found in desire. This alteration is apt because alcohol, corpses, atheism, and dead babies are items on the outskirts of society, grouped together as matters forced outside the societal set, unwanted, and ignored. They are scapegoats or worthless remains.

Boardwalk Empire begins on the night of prohibition's birth and alcohol's death. That death and birth are depicted visually, for instance, by the parade's casket at the very beginning of the first episode that holds the "corpse" of a bottle of wine as well as by the baby stroller that is filled with wine bottles pushed by a man beside the said casket (*Boardwalk*).

Alcohol, as is shown in the series, is most alive on the night of its death, for it is now permitted as a means for illegal power. Not only this, but the very birth of the show *Boardwalk Empire* is only possible when alcohol is simultaneously murdered; that is, the televised story can only really begin with alcohol's death in the Symbolic so that it can reside in the gap between the Real and Symbolic—the area where trauma lives. As with

all television series, the opening up for trauma is the opening up for the beginning of the story.

In alcohol's death, its corpse is lumped together with corpses from all facets of life—the deaths of Nucky's and Margaret Schroeder's children, Van Alden's infamous and angry God (whom Van Alden believes has died off in Atlantic City), and the bodies of incubated children who were not supposed to have survived, but nevertheless did via the use of machinery, very similar to the machinery used for creating illegal alcohol. Of course, none of these items are forgotten; in fact, the more that the characters feel these items and people are lost, the more they seek to rescue and commemorate them. Nucky helps Margaret Schroeder in part because she lost her child, just like he lost his own baby boy. Van Alden turns to alcohol because it is the only spirit he can now perceive existing in Atlantic City. It seems, then, that the only way to ensure the survival of something is to exclude it from the society's set.

Alcohol, when it is placed outside the set, is enlivened because it becomes grouped with all other things outside the set, and all of these things (like a negative of an image) control the picture of society. Banishing alcohol to a place outside the law is not a true death, but a promise of its traumatic survival. Lacan speaks of this very thing on Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* in his second seminar:

As you know, [the father Karamazov's] son Ivan leads the latter into those audacious avenues taken by the thought of the cultivated man, and in particular, he says, if God doesn't exist...—If God doesn't exist, the father says, then everything is permitted. Quite evidently, a naive notion, for we analysts know full well that if God doesn't exist, then nothing at all is permitted any longer. Neurotics prove that to us every day. (*The Ego* 128)

What is excluded is what unconsciously controls, and that which is included is what one consciously controls. It is appropriate to say, then, that it is always best to draw the items outside the set into the Symbolic (allowing alcohol back into the regulations of law and society), rather than reversing this process such that the gaps between the Symbolic and Real and the likelihood of the traumatic Real increase.

The flare-ups in the Real that require resolution in the series are multitudinous and at the very least include: 1. the trauma from deaths caused by the illegal workings of the alcohol trade, 2. the deaths caused by poisonous alcohol forged with substances like formaldehyde (yet another connection to preserving the dead), 3. the replacement of a dead god with alcohol, and 4. the intensifying and revivifying of the weight of dead children by accompanying them with dead alcohol. The possible resolution to trauma overall in the *Boardwalk Empire* series is to never continue adding items to that which is beyond the Symbolic. The resolution to trauma in Lacanian psychoanalysis is to deplete the traumatic Real through the Symbolic, not to take items in the Symbolic and exclude them so that they are reabsorbed into the undefined and unorganized Real.

The resolution to trauma that the series promotes by its negative example and presentation of alcohol, corpses, and God as unspeakable and troubling, is that—since these items influence society unconsciously and traumatically when they are excluded—there is no point to excluding them. There is no point in making alcohol illegal, in concealing the death of one's child, or in placing a tyrannous and angry God in the same dead place as alcohol. Everything excluded, everything in the unconscious, and everything outside the Symbolic lives and demands to be noticed. It is only through the letter that they are killed. It is in their acknowledgement, their being defined, and their preservation in law that they no longer unconsciously control or cause traumatic flares. The traumatic resolution, though never shown, is created in the series by not being

shown. *Boardwalk Empire* presents that which one should not do: reverse the Lacanian method for alleviating trauma. Refusing to voice, write, measure, or define a monster is the exact opposite route to defeating it. Those monstrous things that are not voiced, written, measured, or defined congregate, adding to each other, and the whole of the traumatic Real becomes more than the sum of its parts.

II. The Man in the Mirror

Like the split in the Real and Symbolic, there is a similar split in the human Subject. According to Lacan, the Subject's being is similar to a Real that, once one enters into language, he or she loses. Speaking is not being, and being is not speaking, and one only exists when not in the speaking and unconscious world (Fink 44-45). Language drains the Real of the Subject as much as it drains the Real of all items, people, and experiences.

In *Persons and Things*, Barbara Johnson beautifully illustrates this split in being and speaking as a split between a person and object. It is through the mythological tale of Narcissus that she illustrates the transformation of animal to human and the entrance of the Subject into language. According to Johnson, Narcissus's obsession with his own image is the obsession with the ability to give himself a predicate; that is, to turn himself into an object (49). The reason for why he does so is a *desire* for the substance the image possesses that the Subject does not feel he possesses internally. States Johnson,

The subject jubilates because the image (which is now recognized to be the self) is *superior* to the little human who does the looking. The image seems to stand erect and to exemplify a wholeness that the little human,

feeling weak and fragmentary, does not experience. Part of the image's perfection, indeed, inheres in the fact that *it does not feel*. (55)

What follows the realization that the Subject as object is sturdier is a chasing of that image, of what is believed to be a sturdier self, and the Subject moves from a realm of simply existing into a realm of prescribing that existence. This process again is only possible in the Symbolic—for all definitions, all realizations, and all prescriptions are in language. This mirror stage, as it is known in Lacanian psychoanalysis, marks the split in the Subject between the part of her that exists outside of language and the part of her that is unconscious and drained into the Symbolic.

The swallowing up of the Subject by the Symbolic is not always something that people choose—there is, after all, always the possibility of psychosis, a complete withdrawal from language—but as a choice, it is a forced one. Lacan calls this forced disappearance of the Subject into the Symbolic (and thus the Other) the veil of alienation in which the Subject is alienated from himself (Fink 51). For the Subject to confront the Other, he must disappear. This is because in language, "he or she can be spoken of, talked about, and discoursed upon—yet remains beingless. Prior to the onset of alienation there was not the slightest question of being... afterwards his or her being is strictly potential" (Fink 52). Thus, just like the existence of trauma and desire are centered on a lack in the ability for the Symbolic to coat all of the Real, the existence of the Subject revolves around a lack in being, which alienation—the fleeing of being for existence in the Symbolic—has caused.

The character in *Boardwalk Empire* that visually captures this split in the Subject is Richard Harrow, the former WWI sniper and one of Jimmy's hitmen, whose face was disfigured in the war. Harrow's face is split exactly in two, his right side remaining normal and his left completely torn away by an unexplained occurrence in the war; as a result of

this disfigurement, Harrow wears a tin mask that is painted to resemble the left side of his face. Harrow is not just visually different, however, but acoustically different. His voice does not sound like a human voice, but rather gravelly, like grinding gears. Harrow is all too aware of this disfigurement throughout the series, and for the first two seasons, he remains quiet, hidden, and aided by Jimmy.

Before we get into the specific scenes in which Harrow's character performs and resolves trauma, it is important to recognize the ways in which Lacan's mirror stage is manipulated simply by Harrow's existence. He is a character that physically embodies the split subject. Half of his face is human, and the other is object. He fits perfectly into Johnson's analysis of the divide between being and object, for Harrow embodies the divide between the human and the "thing." Again, it is not simply that half of his face is literally an object—a mask—but that his voice is transformed into something mechanical-sounding. He is, almost literally, the tin soldier, and in the episode "The Emerald City," Mrs. Schroeder compares him to the powerful tin man from *The Wizard of Oz* for her children (*Boardwalk*). He is, comparatively, the man without the beating heart who is desperately seeking one. It is thus possible to say that Harrow is a character perpetually trapped in the mirror stage, not just because of the physical look of his face, but because nearly every scene in the first season of *Boardwalk* is of him realizing again and again that people see him differently than he sees himself—that his image does not meet his existence.

Harrow, however, seems to be a reverse of Lacan's mirror stage, in that he would like to be less object and more human. He does not want to see himself in the mirror; he does not want to be reminded of the split between being and object, because there is no solid image for him to chase after. Harrow is the tin man—the veritable robot (object)—who wants a heart (subject). This is perhaps why the show aptly has Harrow mention in

the episode "What Does the Bee Do?" that he has a twin sister, but that he has no ties to her anymore after the war (*Boardwalk*). He avoids seeing his mirror image (a relationship with his twin) because it can only remind him of what he is not, what he lacks. This is how Harrow is isolated from other people. Unlike Nucky and others who plan masquerades—who seek to don the mask—Harrow instead desires to remove the object side of himself. He is the man who has caught up to the object and become it, who has realized the devastation of chasing the solidity of something that is anything but solid.

In a completely separate way, Harrow reveals the weakness of images, of a devastation in entering the Symbolic. As an object, Harrow can—as Johnson puts it—"suffer all the distortions to which an image is susceptible, but it can be known only as an object, not a subject" (49). Harrow might, instead of being a reversal of the mirror stage, exemplify and intensify the tragedy of being forced to lose one's being for representation in the Symbolic. This is because the self in the Symbolic—like *anything* that exists in the Symbolic—cannot relieve all of the Real. A few pieces of Harrow have been left behind in his representation, and they are the most important pieces—his face and his voice. Here, then, one might recognize trauma as existing in the mirror stage itself. If the gap between the Symbolic and Real is responsible for trauma, and within the Subject is a similar gap between being and thinking, then this opens up the possibility for trauma to be in the forced choice of alienation. For Harrow, his existence revolves around that gap, and thus his existence revolves around his war wound, his trauma.

Lastly, and again in a completely separate sense, Harrow presents an inability to enter the mirror stage. Without half of his face, Harrow is unable to see a solid image of himself in the Symbolic that he can chase. All descriptions of him, all words that put him into the predicate, are unattractive, and so he avoids them. This is why in the episode "21," he is seen collecting photos from magazines and pasting them into his scrapbook,

which is a Bible. He cannot chase the object side of himself, but he can chase the object side of others. He must live through others and through their ability to be both subject and predicate. Harrow's mangled voice fits particularly well with this analysis, for his wavering existence in the Symbolic is matched by an equal wavering of the throat that can enunciate that Symbolic. What is odd about Harrow's reality is that an actual object—Harrow's mask—interferes with his ability to picture himself as an object worth pursuing. Human existence, then, is based around not actually fulfilling the objectification that one desires—and Harrow's existence proves that a dream realized becomes a nightmare. The point is always to approach, but never to claim.

One final notable analysis of Harrow and his mask concerns the fact that what caused Harrow's war wound was missing a threat. In other words, it was a wound experienced too soon for recognition—the basis for trauma. It was his eye's missing something that caused the missing of his eye, and subsequently his mask replaces his faulty eye—the faulty Real, fleshy eye of being—with a Symbolic eye that is *always* open. This Symbolic eye is an eye that always sees and always corrects Harrow's failure so that he will never miss anything again; in its correcting of Harrow's failure, it is an ever-present reminder of what cost Harrow his humanity. It is also, perhaps, a visual unconscious message—something unintentionally spoken by Harrow that is, essentially, "I should have seen. I won't miss anything anymore, ever." This is actually a perfect metaphoric message, for Harrow never misses a shot or enemy throughout *Boardwalk Empire*.

As for a final comment on Harrow's alienation from society due to his war wounds, what perhaps best defines the abjection associated with him is the breakdown between the inside of the body and the outside, again evidenced in Harrow's face. Harkening back to what was discussed in the previous chapter, according to Kristeva,

the breakdown in the Symbolic is seen in the breakdown of divisions. The most important of these divisions is the one that maintains the inside versus the outside of a body (53). On Harrow's face, the mask is a band-aid, a thin veil that covers over the inability to distinguish between the inside and outside and thus exposes for every person the inability for the Symbolic to account for the Real—the lack of perfect definitions to distinguish which parts of the body are which. It is because of this wound that Harrow is associated with abjection and excluded by all those in society who are not already excluded themselves.

In her article "Masking The Horror Of Trauma: The Hysterical Body Of Lon Chaney," Karen Randell states that deformity in films about the aftermath of war is a way of naming the unnameable trauma, of giving a presence to the effects of war without ever showing that war (217). Randell's research is relevant here, for in *Boardwalk Empire*, WWI is never shown, and the only reference to it is in the face of Richard Harrow. Harrow's mask would be the excessive presence that Randell states is necessary to allow a presence of the war never shown. In addition, just like in Lon Cheney's films, in *Boardwalk Empire*, "the film is not concerned with the trauma of war, but with the trauma of the effects of war that cannot be represented; the war is absent, but the effects are not" (221). Harrow is representative of what lives on and repeats, like an echo, the presence of the war; Harrow is the only evidence in the series that the war existed.

One of the last important points Randell makes in her article is that the visualizing of war trauma in film is a moving of trauma into a fantasy space, and this fantasy space is useful for viewers for two reasons. The first reason is that fantasy is used to fascinate and repulse the viewer; the second is that fantasy can explore through metaphor what cannot be discussed directly (Randell 218). I would like to add to Randell's argument, however, that trauma is not only expressed in cinematic fantasy, but

its only hope of resolution is in fantasy, as well. Just like the anxieties of the war-maimed cannot be expressed directly in film, the resolutions to those anxieties and abjections cannot be expressed directly. It is through fantasy that resolution to Harrow's trauma takes place. It must be through fantasy, for there is no other way for *Boardwalk Empire* to resolve his trauma, since the show cannot resolve war itself or the gap between the Symbolic and the Real that is always present and problematic.

The resolution to trauma for Harrow in the series is to re-institute Harrow's ability to enter the mirror stage and is an implementation of desire and fantasy that obscures the gap between the Symbolic and the Real. There are a few major instances in which the above items occur, and they involve quick, sublime resolutions that bring out the fantastical elements of film. To better understand these resolutions, let us first spend a brief second on the sublime.

To return to Burke and his dramatic pentad, I asked whether there was a scene so revolutionary as to be included in all future scenes, and I eventually suggested trauma as that scene. I will, conversely, ask the question whether there is a scene so revolutionary for the agent that it stands apart from trauma and is a place where the circumference is never widened, where the scene added to all scenes simply cannot follow. This hub, immune to trauma, I would define as the sublime scene.

Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* defines sublimity as that which escapes the symptom and abjection and keeps them harnessed from permeating the Subject.

Kristeva states,

When the starry sky, a vista of open seas or a stained glass window shedding purple beams fascinate me, there is a cluster of meaning, of colors of words, of caresses, there are light touches, scents, sighs, cadences that arise, shroud me, carry me away, and sweep me beyond

the things that I see, hear, or think... I then forget the point of departure and find myself removed to a secondary universe, set off from the one where 'I' am—delight and loss. Not at all short of but always with and through perception and words, the sublime is a something added that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both here, as dejects, and there, as others and sparkling. A divergence, an impossible bounding. Everything missed, joy—fascination. (12)

This idea of being both "here" and "there" bespeaks existing in a place or time not at all concerned with the abjection that plagues all other environments, while also acknowledging that that abjection nevertheless exists. These are the moments that *Boardwalk Empire* uses fruitfully for Harrow to circumvent his abjection and trauma, even if only for a short period of time and even though he knows he must eventually return to scenes not immune to trauma.

The first truly sublime scene that Harrow is graced with is in the fifth episode of the second season, "Gimcrack & Bunkum." In this episode, Harrow decides to go into the woods, eat his last meal, don his U.S. Army dog tags, and shoot himself. In order to do so, he removes the object part of himself—his mask—and sets it on the large rock he is laying on. He brings the gun to his mouth, but pauses in his suicide when he hears a noise beside him. He looks for the source of the noise and sees a dog, who takes his mask in its mouth and runs away. Harrow yells at the dog, "Stop! I need that mask!" and chases after the dog through the woods, until he is led to two hermits camping (*Boardwalk*).

This reference to the Frankenstein monster entering into the woods and happening upon a kindly hermit is not lost here, but when Harrow sits down with the two hermits, or tree-rat hunters, and they return his mask to him, they are anything but blind.

In fact, they are almost all-seeing, all-knowing, and they immediately understand why Harrow is even in those woods in the first place—to commit suicide. One of them says to him, "These woods is for living," and he asks Harrow if he understands (*Boardwalk*). Harrow acknowledges that he does, and the sublime meaning of the entire scene suddenly infuses him. He chooses not to commit suicide, but rather return to his work with Jimmy.

The particular collection of scenes works beautifully for two reasons. The first is that Harrow's chasing the dog and his mask is a reinstatement of the mirror stage—Harrow is finally, like all others who have entered the Symbolic, chasing the object part of himself, the metaphorical sturdy image and predicate that the mirror promises the Subject. The second is that the hermit's statement that "These woods is for living" is an acknowledgement that the woods are a place where abjection cannot follow—that Harrow has entered a sacred place and, like all environments, he is not completely apart from it. Referring to Burke's pentad, agent and scene are not completely separable. A change in scene requires a change in agent, and the change in Harrow that these living-woods cause is his abandoning of suicide and abjection. The woods, Harrow understands, are a sublime place where the symptom is not allowed to follow.

This coalescing of all into a bundle of meaning for Harrow is an instantiation of fantasy, an indirect addition of a scene that does not solve Harrow's problems, but only provides a short respite. In the scenes and series following, Harrow is really no happier than he was before, but sublimation nevertheless allowed a shorting of abjection's circuit. Like Kristeva said, the sublime helps manage abjection and trauma, and it is the sublime woods that kept the trauma from overcoming Harrow and causing him to commit suicide.

It is later, in season three, that Harrow's trauma as being inhuman and Other to all those around him is finally resolved for an extended period of time. In the sixth

episode of the third season, “Ging Gang Goolie,” Harrow meets Julia Sagorsky—the daughter of Paul Sagorsky, a veteran of the Philippine-American war whom Harrow encounters at an American Legion meeting. Julia picks her drunken father up from the American Legion meetings at night and takes care of him, and it is while doing this that she and Harrow meet. Shortly, they become very close and, for the first time, Harrow has someone he begins to love who begins to love him back. This is the point in which Harrow fully enters the mirror stage, and with it, alienation, the Symbolic, separation, desire, and fantasy.

Harrow's re-entering the mirror stage is done primarily visually. The first instance is with a perfectly timed and sublime photograph at a carnival, where Harrow, Julia, and Tommy (the almost completely orphaned child of Harrow's former best friends, Jimmy and Angela) are enjoying an afternoon. In just a split second, a photographer mistakes them for a family and captures the three disparate people in a group shot. As he takes the picture, Harrow coincidentally turns his head to the left so that his good side—the unmasked side—is the only half that the camera sees. There is no evidence in the photo itself that Harrow is a badly maimed veteran.

Harrow keeps this picture, remarking on it fondly, for it provides—much like a mirror that shows a far more solid, stable, and worthwhile self—an image of him as he desires with a family he wholeheartedly desires. Harrow adds this candid photo to his scrapbook of idyllic pictures he has clipped from newspapers and magazines, and it is obvious what the inclusion of this picture means. He can now be included in the set of others; he is no longer located in that which lies outside the set, in the land of trauma.

Though Gillian, Tommy's grandmother who has started trying to pass herself off as Tommy's mother in the wake of Angela's and Jimmy's deaths, insults Harrow's desires for a family and his scrapbook, Harrow nevertheless clings to them. He does not heed his

employer's cruelty, and, because he clings to his desires despite every test possible, he fully enters fantasy, moving from Lacanian alienation to separation. Harrow has entered language, but has yet to separate himself from Gillian as Other, to remove himself as a placeholder in Gillian's home. When he finally enters separation, he is no longer her bartender, but rather a person of his own choosing, of his own desire. He becomes Tommy's savior.

Harrow endures the necessary alienation and separation required for being to become a Subject in language according to Lacan. Alienation alone is the Subject's entrance into the Symbolic as a mere placeholder for the Other's desires, and it is not enough for the creation of a fully formed Subject (Fink 51). *Separation* is what allows the Subject to move beyond the placeholder via the instantiation of a gap between the Other's desires and Subject's desires that allows the Subject room to breathe so that he/she is not subsumed entirely by the Other (Fink 58). Separation is what allows the Subject's existence, what allows Harrow's existence apart from Gillian, apart from others who wish he would disappear, as well as the existence of his desire. Harrow's separation gains him much needed strength, self-confidence, and stimulus. Not only this, but it gains him his fantasy—that which covers over his trauma. By the last episode of the third season, he is fully engulfed in the fantastic element. Harrow is godlike.

In the last episode of the third season, Harrow summons all his resolve and, more importantly, his weapons to cleanse Gillian Darmody's mansion, The Artemis Club, of Gyp Rosetti and his men. Harrow's specific intention is to save Tommy from his captivity in the mansion and to deliver him to Julia and Paul Sagorsky as a kind of replacement for the son Paul lost. The scene where Harrow enters the mansion and slaughters Rosetti's men is seemingly divine ordinance.

Harrow's entering The Artemis Club luckily and coincidentally occurs at the same time Masseria has ordered Gyp and his men to leave Atlantic City; thus, it is fated that there are far fewer men in Gillian's mansion when Harrow arrives, and this gives the scene a hint of divine orchestration. Gyp's men are unaware of Harrow's presence, until Harrow's surprising first kill—a man Gyp is talking to—and following this, Harrow then kills twelve more people (that we actually see), never missing a shot, never wavering. Harrow himself is never shot or maimed and, when he finally arrives at the upstairs bedroom where Tommy is being held, his godlike abilities are kicked up one final notch. Harrow is able to accurately kill the man holding Tommy hostage with an impeccable hip shot, and he completes this shot with a rifle, not a shotgun. He shoots this last man through the left eye—the exact same area that Harrow is maimed.

What can be learned from the too-perfect and too-heroic fantasy scene with Harrow is that an act is defined as heroic when something inexplicable creates it; that is, just like a miracle lacks definitions or cause, so, too, do the actions of a hero. A hero or heroine is just as mystical as the origin of trauma, the ability behind his or her acts not seemingly human (not found in the Symbolic), but rather something beyond the Symbolic, in the Real. Second, it takes the exaggeratedly heroic to show just how far Harrow has been reduced. Much like it is easier to define something by stating what it is not, the extent of Harrow's trauma can only be understood in comparison with the enormity of his fantasy. The greater the trauma, the greater the fantasy allowed.

Harrow's desire to save Tommy and his desire to provide Paul and Julia with a replacement member of their family accompany his entering into the mirror stage and Symbolic to create fantasy—fantasy that is illustrated by sharpshooting abilities equal to the divine. This is Harrow's quintessential birth into the Symbolic. Though he did not have reason to live before, he does by the last episode of *Boardwalk Empire*. Harrow is given a

purpose, his character is turned inside out, and he no longer resides as the inactive, skulking, and quiet man. Instead, he is a savior, and his life has a specific path. A character that is normally deemed outside the set—representative of war trauma and survivors—suddenly no longer embodies the gap between the Real and the Symbolic. The fundamental impossibility of the Symbolic meeting the Real (of Harrow's face and voice accurately presenting to people who he is, or the inability to accurately convey the horror of war outside of the war itself) is covered over by the fantasy-scenario of Harrow completely obliterating Gyp Rosetti's men, saving Tommy, and completing the Sagorsky family.

Because there is no way to actually give Harrow his face back or undo the trauma of war, *Boardwalk Empire* resolves Harrow's trauma at the end of the third season with fantasy. Harrow's presentation of lack and the failings of the Symbolic are quickly dismissed with a short, sublime fantasy of the omnipotent hero—of a success that has nothing to do with correcting past experiences. It is only with this fantasy that Harrow has a point and moves beyond the tin man who wishes he had desire, or the tin soldier with no feelings. It is only in fantasy that Harrow is more than simply drive.

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek writes that, "beyond fantasy there is no yearning or some kindred sublime phenomenon, 'beyond fantasy' we find only drive, its pulsation around the *sinthome*" (124). This drive would be Harrow's characterization outside of the scenes with the hermits or The Artemis Club—he has a drive, but not a point, and he does not believe there is one. In the seventh episode of the first season, "Home," for instance, Harrow tells Jimmy he no longer reads the fiction his twin sister sends him because, "It occurred to me the basis of fiction is that people have some sort of connection with each other... mmm, but they don't" (*Boardwalk*). Of course, by the end of the third season, Harrow's opinion is no longer this—his own picture with Julia and

Tommy has entered his scrapbook (he is no longer outside the scrapbook's set/the Bible's set), and he desires to save Tommy's life. Harrow's actions are a shedding of the traumatic past that normally characterizes him, and he fits perfectly into Žižek's description of Lacanian fantasy: "Fantasy is a basic scenario filling out the empty space of a fundamental impossibility, a screen masking a void" (*Sublime* 126). Rather than continuing to traverse the fantasy, Harrow embeds himself in it, masking the lack of the Symbolic accounting for the Real by creating a higher meaning for his life (saving Tommy) that is more important to him than his own trauma. It is in this sense that *Boardwalk Empire* resolves trauma—the inability for the Symbolic to account for the Real—by creating fantasy—a veiling of the gap with a meaningful sublime that forgets all else but itself.

III. Red

Richard Harrow's best friend in *Boardwalk Empire* is Jimmy Darmody, and what binds these two veterans together is their unspoken experiences in WWI. The two characters did not know each other during the war, but they meet by chance in "Home" and, without too much discussion, become comrades. This is because of their mutual experience with trauma—whether that trauma is tied to the war or, in Jimmy's case, not.

To say the least, Jimmy is not affected by the war in the same way as Harrow. In fact, Jimmy's trauma has nothing to do with the war and instead hinges on his relationship with his mother, Gillian Darmody, and his wealthy father, Commodore Louis Kaestner. In contrast to Harrow, Jimmy's going to war was his choice, and why he chose it was to erase or replace his original trauma. This feat is, however, impossible.

To return to Lacanian theory for a moment, let us revisit the correlation between desire and trauma. What creates desire is a sensed loss of something that one must try with all her might to return to; there is no possibility of actually returning to it, just like there is no actual “it.” Just because someone believes that her first piece of chocolate cake—similar to a drug user’s first high—is incomparable to any other subsequent piece of chocolate cake, this does not actually mean that this first experience is any different from any other experience. It is only believed to be; and, most importantly, even if one were to have a piece of chocolate cake that was superior to that first piece, it would never be experienced that way. Trauma, for Jimmy, acts in the exact same way.

Jimmy’s first traumatic experience, as it is performed in the eleventh episode of the second season, “Under God’s Power She Flourishes,” is the incest he and his mother commit during his college days. This incest occurs on the same day he discovers his girlfriend, Angela, is pregnant with his future son, Tommy. Thus, in a strange and irrevocable way, sex with his mother becomes linked with the creation of his son. The day after his drunken night with Gillian, Jimmy quits college and enrolls in the army. His unspoken desire is to wash away his first trauma with war trauma, but—like a first high he can never get back to—war trauma does not seem to ever catch up to or outlive the traumatic experience of having sex with his mother. Unlike Harrow, whose WWI experiences and wounds must be relived (and are visually represented by his maiming of people in the same way his own face was maimed), Jimmy’s relived trauma always deals with his mother, his father, and his son, never the war. Just like with the enigmatic object *a* of desire—the first experience that causes the paling of all experiences thereafter—even if Jimmy’s experiences in the war were far worse than incest with his mother, he will always experience them as pale in comparison. Even though the incest was not the first time Jimmy had sex, it was the first time that he experienced the reverberations and

abjection of the traumatic. It was also the first time he experienced the *jouissance* that always accompanies the traumatic.

What is particularly interesting about Jimmy's trauma is that it is linked to his own mother's trauma as a sexual trauma and an inherited one. Gillian, at the age of thirteen, was raped by the Commodore, and for the first time, in the episode, "What Does the Bee Do?" she talks to the Commodore about the day he raped her. She does this only after the Commodore has a stroke and can no longer intimidate or control her. She says to him as he rests in bed:

Do you remember when we met? I'll never forget your smile. Jimmy sometimes, he has it. I look at him and I see you. That first night, how you plied me with wine... Why, I'd never felt such a sensation. We were downstairs. And I'd fallen asleep on the divan. You carried me to the bedroom, went to say good night to your guests. And I laid there in bed, dreaming of the waves. I'd been on the beach that day. Suddenly I felt a crushing feeling. I couldn't breathe. I opened my eyes to find you atop me. Your breath smelling of whiskey and tobacco. One hand covering my mouth and the other groping at me. Do you remember that? Still, sometimes when I sleep, it wakes me with a start. Do you remember that night? [Gillian slaps The Commodore] I asked you a question. [Gillian slaps him repeatedly] (*Boardwalk*)

The repetitive aspect of trauma that Lacan discusses is seen here in a multi-dimensional connection between Jimmy, his mother, and his father. The Commodore becomes the abject cause of trauma for Gillian, who repeats that trauma with Jimmy, with Jimmy reminding her of the Commodore. In the same way that Jimmy tries to wash away the incest with his mother with war, Gillian tries to wash away her rape and first sexual

experience with a man four times her age by having sex with her son. In doing so, she passes on her sexual trauma and commits the very action against her son that was committed to her by his father. In addition, having sex with her son can never wash away her original trauma, her lost cause of trauma, and this is why incest is never as traumatic for Gillian as it is for Jimmy. In fact, Gillian seems, throughout the show, more than willing to commit incest again with her son, and it is Jimmy's rejection of her that keeps it from recurring. Still, throughout the series, Gillian does what she can to replace—in all aspects, including political sway and power—the Commodore with Jimmy.

What eventually results from Gillian's meddling is that her son kills his father in a perfectly Oedipal fashion. In the episode, "Under God's Power She Flourishes," Jimmy's true intent is to kill his mother, but in the midst of strangling Gillian, the Commodore attacks him, and Jimmy stabs the Commodore. Realizing what he has done, he stands before the Commodore in horror, and Gillian (completely undisturbed by the fact that her son tried to kill her moments before), urges him to finish off the Commodore. (No matter what Jimmy does—even if he tries to kill Gillian—he will never be more monstrous to her than the Commodore). Jimmy does as she asks, and he kills his father. Subsequently, he blacks out from his own wound during the fight—symbolizing that, in much the same way, he has killed himself. He and his father are inextricably linked as lovers of his mother, and, in their unity, when one dies, seemingly so does the other. In addition, as Jimmy brings justice to Gillian by ridding her of her rapist, he kills himself, for he chooses to tie himself and his Mother further together.

For Julia Kristeva, the love of the mother's body and cannibalism and/or a killing of the father or brother are connected. It is only through rejecting the mother's body—recognizing it as something apart from itself—that a child comes to respect the other's body, such as that of his brother and father (79). In Jimmy's acceptance of his mother's

body, he accepts the unstable, the uncontrollable, generative power of the archaic mother, and the societal definitions of mother and son versus mother and lover break down. In such a breakdown, there is chaos, and in that chaos, son becomes lover. As a lover, he acts to replace his father. Instead of respect for the other, there is murder.

With Jimmy's character in the series, resolution does not occur with a veil of fantasy. Jimmy, rather, traverses the fantasy and realizes that, no matter what he does, whether it is going to war or battling Nucky, there is absolutely nothing that will fill in or overcome the traumatic gap caused by incest with his mother and the replacing of his wife with his mother. In recognizing there is no perfecting the Symbolic, and sticking with that recognition (rather than pursuing fantasy), he sees the Symbolic for what it is—a faulty script. In having Jimmy's character realize there is nothing to be said or done, *Boardwalk Empire* essentially creates a character who realizes that he is a character. There is no difference between a character who realizes the futility of future acts and words to correct the past—as well as that he or she has no control over those past events—and a character who realizes he or she is simply a character in a story. There is a drawing-out of Jimmy from his environment. There is a traversing of fantasy, a realization that there is no repairing the gap in the Symbolic, that everything he tries is futile, and for such a character, there is only one option. Jimmy commits suicide.

The way in which Jimmy commits suicide, however, is by allowing Nucky to kill him. Jimmy knows it is a trap, he knows what the future holds, and he pursues it. He allows himself to be killed. It is an essential suicide.

In Slavoj Žižek's book *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan: But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock*, he reminds the reader that, for a successful act to take place, it involves the suicide of the Subject; in fact, all successful acts, according to Lacan, are based on suicide (93). By suicide, Lacan means any act that severs ties to old

habits, acts, and thinking and that changes the Subject entirely, so that a new Subject blooms. My argument is that Jimmy's act of suicide is his successful act, and as a successful act, it resolves his trauma and causes him to break his ties to old habits, acts, and ways of being. Suicide is the tool *Boardwalk Empire* employs to resolve Jimmy's trauma.

What is extremely important to note is that, though Jimmy intelligently steps out of the script he recognizes he resides in, *Boardwalk Empire* brilliantly allows Jimmy's trauma to continue without him via the introduction of a character that replaces him and provides the series with the body it literally needs. In "Ging Gang Goolie," Gillian encounters Roger—a man remarkably similar-looking to her son, Jimmy—and she quickly beds him while simultaneously giving him the name, "James." In the disturbing sex scenes between Gillian and Roger, they are presented more like a mother soothing a child, rather than two people making love. With sex, Gillian marks this new "James" as her literal son, and she finally kills him. Procuring heroin, the same drug that Jimmy was using while overcoming his wife's death, Gillian injects the new "James" with it while he rests in a bathtub, and he dies.

The reason Gillian needs a new "James" is that the body of her son is missing. There are things she needs done that can only be done with the presence of his dead body (such as the willing of the mansion and assets over to her), and so she retrieves a body similar enough to replace James. It was, of course, unnecessary for her to sleep with the replacement or to form Roger into her son intimately, but she chooses to do so because she enjoys being the abject cause of trauma for her son. Gillian enjoys the status of being not just the person who gave Jimmy life, but simultaneously the person who took that life away. In more ways than perhaps Jimmy realized, he was correct. There was no filling in or veiling the gap between the Symbolic and the Real. There was

no correcting the trauma; for, even when he has totally and completely caused himself to disappear, the trauma continues. The only positive aspect is that he no longer has to experience his mother's being the abject cause of death and torment—his first, meaningful experience with trauma. In suicide, he chooses his own death at the hands of Nucky, a respite from his mother and the death she would have preferred and planned for him. He successfully escapes the script in which he was housed and consequently resolves the abjection he felt in trauma, even if that trauma continues without him.

IV. Fantasy and Suicide

The mix of fantasy and suicide as resolutions is telling in terms of character development. Jimmy is a character who begins with fantasy and ends in suicide. Harrow is a character who begins with suicide and ends in fantasy. They are mirror images. What this means is that the path to traumatic resolution in *Boardwalk Empire* is contrary to the characters' origins. A character's growth is determined by just how far s/he veers from the beginning basis of his or her character. For Jimmy, fantasy will not work as a resolution because his trauma is caused by fantasy—his and his mother's fantasy. There is the implication that he is not simply seduced by his mother, but complicit in their sexual act, and that complicity is what disturbs him so greatly. Not only this, but Jimmy has essentially been given everything a person could possibly want—wealth, health, family, and power. Fantasy seems pointless in comparison. Perhaps Jimmy cannot fantasize because of his blessings, or perhaps entering fantasy would require an admission that Jimmy desires his mother as a lover. To avoid that admission, Jimmy avoids fantasy, choosing suicide instead.

For Harrow, of course, the opposite is true. Harrow has no wealth, no children, poor health, and untapped potential. He lives in depression and constantly at the point of suicide. Committing suicide for Harrow would not be a resolution to his trauma, but rather a submitting to the traumatic Real. Because loathing himself and the world is the symptom of Harrow's trauma, a resolution to those symptoms would lie within fantasy of an ascendancy. Fantasy can cover over the gaps in Harrow's experiences—gaps that Jimmy's life does not have.

In an odd way, *Boardwalk Empire* shows that the wrong fantasy requires suicide, and the right suicide (meaning Lacanian suicide—an alteration of habits) allows for fantasy. In either case, though, *both* exist in the characters. The only question is, "Which comes first and which comes last?"

Fantasy and suicide do accomplish the same thing for these characters. They allow for a separation to occur between Subject and Other. As said before, Harrow enters the Symbolic through alienation and learns to separate his desires from the Other. Though he remained the tin soldier for Jimmy, Nucky, and Gillian—a placeholder, that is, for their desires—once he acted on his own desires, a separation occurred, and he as Subject emerged and entered his own fantasy. Harrow's fantasy allowed for a *temporary* draining of the traumatic Real such that becoming a savior to Tommy and helping Julia Sagorsky *momentarily* washed away any and all of his past troubles. There was the moment in Gyp Rosetti's house when Harrow was like a god, and there was only that moment. This is trauma's temporary resolution.

Suicide for Jimmy also allowed for separation from the Other. The Other of Jimmy's was Gillian and the unalterable script within which he realized he was housed. Though Jimmy's separation did not lead to his choosing fantasy to overcome the gaps between the Symbolic and the Real, it did allow him to forever escape them. When he

realized that he could not alter the Symbolic any longer to affect the Real, Jimmy chose to alter and destroy the Real—himself—instead. It worked for *him*. Of course, simply because Jimmy escaped his trauma does not mean that Roger—his replacement, chosen by Gillian—could escape it. Jimmy's trauma continued without him, latching onto the body it needed. In the most potent way, Roger's death illustrates that resolution is, again, only temporary.

Though Roger eventually experienced Jimmy's trauma, and though Harrow's past occasionally creeps back in to harass and traumatize him, for a momentary piece of time, both traumas were resolved. Fantasy and suicide allowed Harrow and Jimmy to escape the gaps between the Symbolic and the Real. For both men, there was necessary, fleeting peace.

Chapter 3

Breaking Bad

I. The Man in the Chemicals

Breaking Bad is a television show on AMC not dissimilar, at surface level, to *Boardwalk Empire*. *Breaking Bad* revolves around the creation and dispersal of an illegal drug—methamphetamine—by which all hell breaks loose. It is a show about prohibition, greed, and transformation. *Breaking Bad*, however, is a far darker show, relying on an intimacy that relates the breakdown in mental stability of Walter White. The colors of its imagery revolve around blacks, sickly greens, yellows, and reds. This is in contrast to *Boardwalk Empire*'s faded colors and pastels, its aged photograph appearance that implies a dreamier version of the past. These visual differences help to indicate that *Breaking Bad*'s presentation of trauma does not in any way deal with fantasy, and its solutions have nothing to do with covering the gap between the Symbolic and Real. There is no need for seagulls or classy costumes in *Breaking Bad*, because the show is about stripping away the unnecessary, of getting down to the basics of what matters in the face of death.

Walter White is, like Harrow, a split subject, though this split is not depicted visually. Walter is both dead and alive—dead because he is diagnosed with a late stage of lung cancer that will inevitably end his life, alive because he still has some time left to amass enough money for his family to survive when he dies. The split in Walter is almost identical to the split in Harrow, because Walter has been cut off from the mirror stage, from existence in the Symbolic, and from desire. In other words, like Harrow, Walter is all drive. The difference between these two characters is that Harrow enters the mirror stage and the Symbolic, whereas Walter throughout *Breaking Bad* is maintained as removed.

To better describe Walter's separation from the Symbolic, it is important to look at Lacan's death drive. The Lacanian death drive, as described by Žižek, results when a person or character exists between the two deaths that are possible for every being: the death in the Symbolic and the death in the Real. In other words, when one is dead in the Symbolic, but alive in the Real, he or she has entered the realm of simply the drive, or death drive. The same is true for any person who is dead in the Real and alive in the Symbolic ("Lacanian"). According to Žižek, the drive is frequently found in classic horror films, specifically when a living human being is found to reside in a dead mechanical doll. Such an object/being is between the two deaths (*Plague* 111). This manifestation of the death drive is exactly like a statue that sees and knows, but cannot move, or like a sentient ship or machine. The opposing manifestation of the drive is an individual who "appears to be just another person within the diegetic space, but is effectively a 'No-Man,'" and instead is "pure drive disguised as a normal individual" (*Plague* 112). All of these things, in one form or another, show a split within the object or individual — a split, that is, between the essentially dead symbolic order and the "non-symbolic Life-Substance of *jouissance*" (*Plague* 112). The last and most important aspect to remember about the death drive is that it is not a drive towards death. Rather, it is a drive towards an immortal, eternal, and undead annihilation (*Plague* 113). It is the Energizer Bunny — the quintessential ship that sails itself, desire-less, which, despite all odds, keeps going and going. Likewise, it is Harrow—the veritable tin man or mechanical soldier that still speaks. The only difference is that once Harrow finally finds his "heart"—that which he desires—he is no longer the tin man. He is no longer the death drive.

Žižek's particular example of what produces this death drive is the archetypal cartoon cat who walks off a cliff, held as firmly aloft by air as she was on ground, and only once she looks down begins to fall. This state of being halfway to her complete death, or

rather between one death (in the Symbolic) and the inevitable other (in the Real) is what this cartoon cat illustrates.

Walter White in *Breaking Bad* is such a cartoon cat. He is, in the very first episode of the first season, diagnosed with a late stage of lung cancer and given, at most, two years to live. He has been thrust off the edge of the cliff, held in mid-air, and permitted to look down—to experience his death in the Symbolic, while awaiting his death in the Real (which ends the series). The space between the two deaths of Walter—his death drive—is the entirety of the show; the point is for viewers to see just where this extended death in the Symbolic takes Walter. Or, perhaps better put, the point is for viewers to see where this extended death in the Symbolic *permits* Walter to go and what it excuses Walter for doing.

Walter, moved and motivated by his death in the Symbolic, chooses to use his skills as a chemist (which before only provided a meager high school teacher's wage) to become a methamphetamine producer—the very best in his area of town—and he does so to gain enough money for his family (his wife, his son who has cerebral palsy, and his newborn daughter) to live after he dies. Walter's attempt to provide for his family after his death is an attempt to live forever, to be provider forever, as though existing in the Symbolic (in the system of money), even after the Real of him is gone. Again, the propulsion of the death drive is toward an immortal annihilation—to keep going and going forever.

Evidence abounds both visually and dialogically in *Breaking Bad* of Walter as representing the death drive. Perhaps the most fantastic of these is that Walter's actions, from the very beginning, are related to the dead. That is, his character borrows from the dead constantly. In the first season, as the loser to a coin flip between Walter and Jesse, Walter holds the responsibility of killing Krazy-8 — the drug dealer who (through a series

of unfortunate circumstances) is chained alive to a pipe in the basement of Jesse's house (*Breaking*). Before killing this man, however, Walter attempts to befriend him to convince himself that murdering Krazy-8 is wrong; and, in befriendng him, Walter learns that Krazy-8 will not eat the crusts of his sandwiches. Subsequently, Walter begins cutting the crusts off for the man. Ultimately, Walter does kill him, but cutting the crusts off the sandwiches is a habit that Walter never abandons. Throughout the series, he is shown cutting his sandwiches like Krazy-8 wanted them. What Walter does is borrow from the dead: he takes on attributes of those who are no longer living.

The connection between Walter and attributes of the dead do not end there. Walter's locations connect him to the deceased by often placing him beneath the ground. Murdering Krazy-8, for instance, he must commit in the basement of Jesse's house. When working for Gus at the laundry company, he must work in a lab completely below ground level. When kicked out of his home, Walter must break back in by crawling under his house. He, in fact, must enter through a trap door, which opens into the water heater closet, in order to freely move in and out of his home (and this portrays him more like a monster, than like a man). Eventually, Walter hides bags of his money beneath the house as well; and, in episode eleven of the fourth season, when Walter discovers that his first frantic attempt to save the lives of himself and his family from Gus have failed, he is depicted through the trap door hysterically and insanely laughing. The way that the trap door frames him in this scene is much like a coffin frames a body for funeral viewing, with Walter as the laughing corpse. The entire scene is posed like a burial, with Skyler looking down upon him, crying, and he being completely still and lifeless at the end of the scene. In addition, there is a long period of time when the camera draws back as Walter is laughing, and as the camera is drawing itself out, it shakes at regular intervals (as though

itself the contraption for lowering a casket or body into the ground, and then shakily coming back up through the earth).

Just like Walter assumes the locations of the dead below ground, he steals and relinquishes the positions of drug dealers he murders on his way up the drug lord ladder. After killing Krazy-8, Walter attempts to take his place and negotiate with Tuco (an insane drug dealer). This business relationship ends in catastrophe, however, and even though Walter is able to borrow Krazy-8's place, he must relinquish it in its annihilation. Walter's relationship with Gus via Gale is the same. Though Walter is able to borrow the murdered Gale's position as Gus's lead cook (that is, borrow time to live, while Gus finds a replacement), ultimately the position itself, along with Gus, is destroyed. Every time, in fact, Walter gains a new position, he must relinquish it. What this means for Walter is that the positions he borrows from the dead he always loses in annihilation. Thus, despite his skills, getting ahead in the methamphetamine world is almost impossible, because none of the positions available for hire are stable. He and his ability to make money may materialize for a short time, but ultimately both dissipate into the nothingness from which they came. Heisenberg, the pseudonym for the underworld Walter, only materializes unpredictably, in locations impossible to guess and for amounts of time that no one can know. Then, Heisenberg disappears again. Walter's alter ego is a being who fades in and out of existence, between life and death, only occasionally registering as a blip on the drug trade radar — usually symbolized by the signature blue meth that he makes. All of this, as will now be shown, fits so very well with the Uncertainty Principle and quantum mechanics (an additional way of understanding the death drive).

According to Žižek, Heisenberg's theory of quantum mechanics provides grounding for the paradox of the aforementioned cat walking off the edge of the cliff and looking down—that is, for a being to actually exist in the paradox that is between two

deaths ("Troubles"). What the uncertainty principle says specifically is that it is impossible to know both the position and momentum of a particle, like an electron or proton (Gargiulo). One can know the speed of an electron or where it was, but never both simultaneously. Two details of this law are particularly important for illustrating theories of psychoanalysis, including the death drive: The first is that an electron only manifests itself as an actual particle (rather than a wave of energy) by the collapse of wave function caused by being observed (Gargiulo). The second is that in order for an electron to manifest itself as a particle (which is always for an extremely short period of time), it must cheat by borrowing energy from the future and paying for that energy with its own annihilation "before the system notices the borrowing" ("Troubles"). According to Žižek, this borrowing of energy and paying for it is a momentary forgetting of the real, a forgetting of the laws of the real, much like a cat walking off a cliff and not falling ("Troubles"). In other words, the sudden appearance of an electron as particle by borrowing from the future is exactly like the strange state of the death drive.

This borrowing and relinquishing and borrowing and relinquishing in order to come into a state of identifiable existence is exactly what Walter as Heisenberg must enact. As said before, not only does Walter borrow traits from the dead, and their locations, but he borrows their positions in the drug trade world as well. This is only for the short period, however, before he loses them, before he must relinquish them in their annihilation. That is because these positions are too unstable for anyone to take their places for long (much like the unstable state of an electron as particle). In an additional way, Walter lives in a state of borrowed time due to the fact that for most criminals, getting caught is inevitable; Walter is only able to escape detection, particularly from his FDA agent brother-in-law, Hank, for so long.

As split Subject, Walter mediates between the dead and the living, but this particular type of split causes his death drive that is outside of the Symbolic and desire. As far as how the death drive is inscribed in the individual, according to Lacan, it exists within a person exactly like the revolution around the object cause of desire; though, without desire and without the loss in the lost object (*Plague* 262). The object cause of desire, which motivates people to move, to search to replace something they believe they have lost (even though they never actually had it in the first place), is removed or lacking, and thus the desire that the object *a* channels is reduced to drive. In the death drive, one repetitiously moves and turns and searches but without any attempt to satisfy. This is the cartoon cat stuck in mid-air. This is Walter White.

II. When the Cartoon Cat Never Falls

The only time in which Walter experiences trauma is when he stumbles outside of this death drive and his Heisenberg persona—that is, when he has lived long past the point of his veritable expiration date and is forced by life itself back into the Symbolic. Trauma occurs when there is a success—when Walter is saved—because his belief that he will be dead soon (a prescription of the Symbolic) no longer fits the Real (he is still alive). For Walter, surviving is traumatic.

Two episodes in which Walter reflects upon his death are "Phoenix" and "Fly." What erupts in "Phoenix" is a result of the culmination of Jesse (Walter's assistant) and Jane's (Jesse's girlfriend) deleterious and drug-ridden relationship. Jane, who had been sober for months, chooses to begin shooting heroin again (mixed with meth), and she convinces Jesse, who has never used heroin, to begin using the drug with her. He does, and their relationship devolves into their using heroin and meth night and day.

Things go even more awry, however, when Jane learns that Walter owes Jesse three hundred grand for a drug deal. She forces/coerces Jesse to blackmail Walter into giving him the money immediately so that she and Jesse can leave and begin a brand new life together. The night that Walter reluctantly brings Jesse the money, he eventually returns to the duplex—and this is where one of the most important scenes to occur in *Breaking Bad* happens.

After dropping off Jesse's share of the money, Walter goes out to a bar and, of all the strange things to occur, runs into Jane's father (though, it is impossible for him to know it is Jane's father). He discusses many things with Donald Margolis, one of which is troubled family (in this scene, Walter refers to Jesse as his "nephew")—and Donald tells Walter that, no matter what, "You can't give up on them. Never. What else is there?" (*Breaking*). Donald's advice motivates Walter to go back to Jesse's duplex—where Jesse and Jane are passed out from drug use—to try to talk to Jesse and reason with him. In this scene, when Walter enters, Jesse and Jane are lying on their sides on the bed, and when Walter attempts to wake Jesse by shaking him, Jane naturally rolls over. This sudden movement in conjunction with the heroin use causes her to begin retching; still unconscious, she chokes on her own vomit. Walter moves slightly to help her, then seemingly doesn't, then tries and fails simultaneously. He is stricken still, and he watches her die as she lies beside the sleeping Jesse. Though it is not shown, Walter subsequently leaves. Jesse is left to find Jane dead beside him. Walter does not tell Jesse that he was there or what happened.

Walter's immobilization is the very thing that Žižek describes in *The Plague of Fantasies* when he states of Lacan's theories that "...the gaze not only mortifies its object, it stands itself for the frozen point of immobility in the field of the visible. Does not Medusa's head exemplify a gaze which was transfixed when it came too close to the

Thing and 'saw too much'?" (*Plague* 111). The Thing that Žižek refers to, of course, is Lacan's *das Ding*—"the lethal abyss which swallows the subject" (*Plague* 105). The Thing is the zone "in which the gap between the Symbolic and the Real is closed, i.e. in which, to put it somewhat bluntly, our desires are directly materialized" ("The Thing").

Walter engages The Thing in the dying Jane. He is implicated and immobilized. Walter in this moment, and only in this moment, desires. Jane's death, of course, would allow Jesse to live. In fact, if she does not die, Jesse himself is likely to overdose on heroin. Walter's materialized desire is beyond this, though. The scene with Jane is also a point at which Walter encounters directly what he has been desiring for himself for the entire series—death—and he attributes a particular traumatic meaning to this strange moment in "Fly."

"Fly" is shot almost entirely in Gus's lab, deep beneath the ground. The episode, for the majority of the time, deals with Walter's sudden and obsessive hunt for a singular fly. The episode begins with a close-up of a living, moving fly in a rack focus as the camera delivers a montage of the wings, the head, and then finally the entire body of the fly; in the background, there is the asynchronous and contrapuntal sound of Skyler softly singing "Hush Little Baby" (*Breaking*). In this contrapuntal sound, there is an intended discordance created for the viewer between the disgusting view of the fly and the soothing, sweet song; this mismatch between the Symbolic (Skyler singing) and the Real (the fly) is the veritable theme of this episode. What follows this are the opening credits, and then a close up of the red blinking light of Walter's smoke alarm. Walter himself lies in bed, looking at it, and is unable to sleep. After this medium shot is a view of Walter's clock showing that it is two in the morning, and then there is a jump cut to six in the morning, and the room is filled with light. The alarm is going off, beeping like the light over his head was blinking. In this jump from two to six, there is a gap of four hours

missing in the Symbolic of time, and so the theme of an incomplete Symbolic carries over from Skyler's voice to the clock skipping a beat. It also implies that Walter has not slept at all.

When Walter goes to work in Gus's lab in order to cook meth, he is seen cleaning the equipment with Jesse and afterwards attempting to account for that which cannot be accounted for: the quarter to half a pound missing in net weight from their production. That is, Walter's *Symbolic* math is unable to account for the *Real* amount of net weight missing. What follows is dialogue between Walter and Jesse about this missing product (*Breaking*). Jesse tries to guess what could be causing their product to be short, and Walter replies "no" to all of his guesses until Jesse says "vestiges"—that is, the vestiges that they just cleaned out of the equipment (*Breaking*). This, Walter considers, may be correct.

Two things are important here. The first is the connection made between the inability of the Symbolic to account for the Real and the unaccounted portion of the product missing. The second important thing is that this accounting for the percentage missing (.114% to be exact) points to a flashback in season one, episode three, of the discussion between Walter and Gretchen about the human body.

In that third episode of season one, there is crosscutting (alternating scenes) between Walter in the present cleaning up the remains of a chemically degraded body and Walter in the past having a conversation with Gretchen. In the conversation, Gretchen states all the percentages that make up the human body: the percentage of water, calcium, iron, phosphorous, etc.. As Walter and Gretchen discover, however, all of the elements of the body do not add up to one hundred percent (they are missing .111958%). Walter says to Gretchen, "I don't know. I don't know. There just seems like something's missing, doesn't it? There's got to be more to a human being than that"

(*Breaking*). The rest of the flashback is concluded at the end of the episode when Gretchen is shown suggesting a way to account for this lack. "What about the soul?" she says. There is a long pause, and then Walter replies, "There's nothing but chemistry here" (*Breaking*). In other words, the Symbolic should be able to account for everything, and since it cannot account for the soul, the soul does not exist.

This inability to account for what is missing (the lack of Symbolic numbers to account for the Real of the body, or of meth) is, of course, one of the correlations in these two episodes, but so is the death drive. Walter's reply, "There's nothing but chemistry here," negates the idea that there is a soul to be held accountable—at least in terms of what is missing. This idea of it being all chemistry—especially as an ending to an episode where Walter must choose to forgo the idea that murder is wrong so that he can kill Krazy-8 and dispose of his body—is to imply that right and wrong no longer matter for Walter. There is no right and wrong for Walter anymore, no desire for it, only what drives him forward, for he is (as will be seen) no longer in the Symbolic. It is remarkable that this scene should—through the unaccountable—correlate directly with the episode "Fly," which is the episode where the death drive is fully embodied in Walter to the point that he is essentially a zombie or walking corpse.

In "Fly," once Jesse leaves the lab for the day, Walter notices a fly buzzing around him, and this fly specifically lands on his paper concerning the calculations for the .114% lack in net weight—and in this moment, the unaccountable leaps from mathematical equations to the fly. The fly moves about the lab, and Walter attempts to kill it with his clipboard and shoe, until it lands on the ceiling. Walter throws his shoe at the fly and breaks an overhead light. The shoe never comes back down, but rather dangles from the broken light by its shoelace. Frustrated, Walter climbs up the stairway and tries to reach his shoe from the balcony with a broom to get it down. At this point in time, the fly

lands on the rail of the balcony above the lab, and as Walter attempts to hit it, he slips and plummets to the floor. The fly lands on him and cleans itself. All he can do is watch. No matter how hard Walter tries, he cannot kill (account for) the singular, pesky fly. Walter is unrelentingly driven to kill it (driven to somehow, someway, account for the Real), and he stays for another sleepless night at the lab.

The following day, Jesse arrives for work, and when he parks, he discovers a cigarette with pink lipstick on it left by Jane in the ashtray of his car. Here is the first semblance of what truly becomes the issue in the episode: what happened to Jane. After Jesse considers this leftover cigarette, he enters the lab. Both surprised and horrified, he discovers a Walter who is determined, no matter the destruction of all else, on catching the elusive fly. According to Walter, a fly—no matter how small—is evidence of a contamination. The problem of Walter's disturbing search for the fly becomes even more challenging when he refuses to continue cooking any meth until the fly has been dealt with. Reluctantly, but with no other choice, Jesse helps Walter search for it.

At the end of the episode, it soon becomes obvious that the fly is a stand-in (just like the mathematical calculations) for Walter's true problem: Jane's death and his own. After Jesse has made coffee for Walter (with sleeping pills dumped inside to drug him), Walter becomes sleepy and, in his sleepiness, speaks freely as he looks around for the fly. The truth finally comes out. "I missed it," Walter says. "There was some perfect moment, and it passed me right by. I had to have enough to leave them. That was the whole point. Otherwise, none of this makes any sense if I didn't have enough. It had to be before she found out—Skyler. It had to be before that" (*Breaking*). Jesse asks Walter what he means: "To what?" Jesse says. "Drop dead? Are you saying you want to die?" Walter responds:

I'm saying I've lived too long. You want them to actually miss you, you know? You want their memories of you to be... But she just won't, she just won't understand. I mean, no matter how well I explain it, these days, she just has this... I mean I truly believe there exists some combination of words. There must exist certain words in a certain specific order that would explain all of this, but with her I just can't ever seem to find them...

(Breaking)

Walter continues to guess for a few minutes about when the perfect time to die was.

Then, after just a few seconds of consideration, Walter figures it out. He says:

Ahhh. I know the moment. It was the night Jane died. You know, I was at home, and we needed diapers, and so I said I'd go. But it was just an excuse. Actually, that was the night I brought you your money, remember? But afterwards, I stopped at a bar. It was odd. I never do that—go into a bar alone. I just walked in and sat down... I never told you. I sit down, and this man, this stranger, engages me in a conversation. He's a complete stranger. But he turns out to be Jane's father, Donald Margolis. Of course, I didn't know it at the time... Think of the odds! Once, I tried to calculate them, but they're astronomical! I mean, think of the odds of me going in, sitting down, that night, in that bar, next to that man... The universe is random, it's not inevitable. It's utter chaos, it's subatomic particles in endless collision. What is this saying? What is it telling us when on the very night that this man's daughter dies, it's me who's having a drink with him? How can that be random? *(Breaking)*

Here, again, Walter speaks about the inability of the Symbolic to account for the Real—both in that he is unable to explain to Skyler why he must cook meth to help their family, as well as in the fact that the mathematical odds of an encounter with Jane's father the night before he kills her never denote the reason behind it: there are not enough words or math to reason or explain.

Walter in this episode then falls over, and Jesse attempts to help him. Walter says, "No, that was the moment. That night. I should never have left home. Never have gone to your house. Maybe things would have... If I had just lived up to that moment, and not one second more... That would have been perfect" (*Breaking*). Here, finally, the true core of Walter's worry over the unaccountable takes form: there is no accounting for himself in the Symbolic—he should be dead, and he should have been dead the night Jane died. This moment is, for Walter, realizing he has walked off the edge of a cliff and should be dead, but is not and has not been for a while. He is the cartoon cat that braces for the fall and never falls; it is almost as if he had never been close to death to begin with, never not living.

After Walter draws this conclusion, the fly suddenly appears, and then the camera is from the point of view of the fly. It looks at Walter and Jesse upside down, and then Walter collapses, sighing and saying, "He's not coming down. He's going to stay up there forever"—that is, that the Real can never be accounted for in the Symbolic, that things will never be as they should be.

Jesse, moved by Walter's monologue, and trying to help Walter's morale, decides he will kill the fly for Walter. He precariously places a ladder on the equipment and climbs it; and just as precariously, Walter begins to talk more about Jane—hinting to the audience that he *may* make the mistake of letting Jesse know Walter killed her. That is, Walter may try to place in the Symbolic the Real of Jane's dying; and just as Jesse is

on a ladder precariously placed, the topic of conversation as well becomes precarious—in that it may lead to Walter destroying his and Jesse's relationship and perhaps force Jesse to want to kill Walter.

Walter holds the ladder for Jesse, as Jesse reaches as high as he can to kill the fly, and Walter says, "Jesse, I'm sorry." "Sorry for what? Being a lunatic?" asks Jesse. Walter replies, "I'm sorry about Jane" (*Breaking*). Jesse replies that it's not something to worry over; that it wasn't Walter's fault, obviously, or Jesse's, or even Jane's. After a few moments of consideration—at the point where the metaphorical fever could break, and Walter could tell Jesse what truly happened the night Jane died—Walter ultimately asks Jesse to stop the search for the fly. In other words, he decides that the cure for bringing the Symbolic and Real together does not lay within telling Jesse the truth of what happened to Jane. "Jesse, come down," Walter says. Jesse looks at the fly and whispers, "I'm so close." "Let her go," says Walter—and there is a conflating of the fly and Jane (for the pronoun "her" is used to refer to the fly, rather than the "him" that was used previously). "We need to cook," says Walter. "What about the contamination?" asks Jesse. "It's all contaminated," Walter replies (*Breaking*). In other words, telling Jesse the truth will not bring the Symbolic and Real to terms—will not bring about perfection—because there is no bringing the Symbolic and Real together. So, Jesse climbs down; at this point—when neither of them are trying to kill the fly (that is, when the fly no longer represents the inability for the Symbolic to account for the Real), Jesse is able to finally kill it. Walter misses the fly's death, however, for he has fallen asleep.

At the end of the episode, when Walter is back in his apartment sleeping, he hears another fly buzzing. He opens his eyes and looks up at the blinking light of the smoke alarm. When he does, the fly lands on top of it, its body illuminated by pulses of the red light. The problem of the gap between the Symbolic and Real nevertheless

remains, even if the last fly stopped symbolizing it. The episode begins and ends the same, it is circular, and the message is clear: trauma is unending, it is repetitive. Walter is not blind to this fact.

III. There Is No Such Thing As Survival

Before I discuss the resolution to trauma as performed in "Fly," I would like to examine deeper many of the items in the previous section. The first I would like to consider is the connection between Jane's death and what Walter deems was his perfect time to die. The interesting facet of Jane's death is that the blame for it is not easily accounted for. The scene cannot support the weight of either Walter murdering her, Jane causing her own death, or even Jane's father inadvertently causing her death; it lies, rather, between these items, in an area where definitions cannot reach. More importantly still—if one considers the fact that she was about to 1. take Jesse away from Walter, 2. expose Walter as Heisenberg, and 3. cause Jesse's overdose and demise, then Jane's death happened at the perfect moment. Walter's meeting Jane's father, who inadvertently convinces Walter to go back and try to reason with Jesse, thus also inadvertently causing his own daughter's death, was perfect, for it allows Walter and Jesse to go on with their meth production without problem or blame, and no math can calculate this perfection. More importantly, no math can create this perfection.

Walter's own survival is equally unrepresentable, but it is—in contrast to meeting Jane's father and Jane's death—imperfect. There was a perfect time for Walt to die, he realizes, and that point was when he watched Jane die. Walter is the cartoon cat who realizes he has survived too long, been held in mid-air too long, and his definitions of

what life is and is not supposed to be begin to break down. The magnification bubble of the Symbolic has missed this little piece of Real, and it causes trauma.

It is only under this scrutiny that the trauma comes alive. Walter has, prior to and following this episode, been a machine of pure action, proficiently cooking and hacking his way through the drug arena. This sudden scrutiny could potentially be related to Lacan's stitching point—it is a sudden focus on one small part for which he blames trauma—but the interesting thing about this episode is that Walter does *not* blame his cancer, home life, childhood, or other troubles for his problems. He is intelligent enough to identify it in almost the exact words of Jacques Lacan—there are no words or mathematical equations in the world to account for everything. There is no way to explain himself, no way to account for himself, just like there is no way to account for Jane's death or meeting Jane's father in a bar just an hour before. These are "vestiges"—similar to the vestiges Jesse says are missing from the batch of meth, similar to the percentage missing from the human body, and, more importantly, similar to Fink's definition of the *caput mortuum*, the worthless, repressed remains that are anything but worthless. Walter may have originally placed the stitching point of trauma on the back of the fly, but he is intelligent enough to finally realize that, even if he kills that fly, the problem remains.

The series is, in addition, brilliant to use a fly—the smallest manifestation of a world with a mind of its own (of a piece of the uncatchable and un-killable Real). Of course, one fly can mean everything if one desires it to—and the beginning of the episode with the fly magnified in extreme and ugly proportions while Skyler sings "Hush Little Baby" presents this over-exaggeration of the fly's signification. Again, when one really looks at something—when one scrutinizes the smallest items, they can become ugly, and what was originally known about reality breaks down. Burke, in *A Grammar of Motives*, says of this type of scrutiny that "at the very best, we admit, each time you

scrutinize a concept of substance, it dissolves into thin air. But conversely, the moment you relax your gaze a bit, it re-forms again" (56). Trauma in *Breaking Bad* is presented similarly. When Walter truly scrutinizes the fly and its ability to contaminate a batch of methamphetamine, it is no longer simply a "fly." The flyness of that fly vanishes and is replaced with the displacement between the Symbolic and Real. It is only when Walter relaxes his gaze and falls asleep that the fly can become just a fly again, and Jesse is able to kill it.

Walter's resolution to his trauma he chooses for himself, and it revolves around the idea that, as he puts it, "It's all contaminated" (*Breaking*). This statement, of course, means more than what revolves around the little basement of cooking machinery, but it is nevertheless important to point out that, although Walter was striving for perfection, he was striving for perfection with a batch of *meth*. A fly can contaminate a batch of meth no more than it can contaminate an oil spill or landfill. What Walter is working with and where he is working is already so filled to the brim with contamination that a fly is utterly meaningless.

There is a larger meaning to Walter's words, however. Not only is it that "It's all contaminated," but Walter's essential meaning is that "It's all traumatic." It does not matter if he dies at the perfect time, if he can explain himself to Skyler, if there are vestiges his math cannot account for, because in every corner of every part of his world, from the human body to the meth to the math, there are leaks. It is pointless to focus on any one of these while the others remain.

Why this is an appropriate resolution for trauma in a Lacanian sense can be stated in multiple ways. Walter's acknowledgement that "It's all contaminated," or "It's all traumatic," allows an acknowledgement that the fly is not the sole contaminator in an otherwise perfect world. The entire world, rather, is contaminated—trauma lies

everywhere. In fact, as a common denominator, trauma becomes the item outside the set that defines the set, and, as the item outside the set, it can be returned to the unconscious.

Burke discusses this very idea of a common denominator when he states the uselessness of saying such-and-such happened because "God did it." According to Burke, when God is responsible for everything, there is no need to discuss his responsibility in everything, or even acknowledge his responsibility in everything. Burke states, "Or we could state the matter this way: 'God' can be omitted from our calculations since it is an invariant term, present as the ground of *all* motives" (98). If something is in everything, it can simultaneously be divided out of everything. For instance, if the fly is brought by God, and Walter is created by God, and the entire show or environment is under God's supervision, then as a common denominator, God can be divided out as an invariant term—as the item outside the set. Trauma, as such an invariant term, would be no different.

If Walter recognizes that it is not just that the fly is traumatic, but that the inability to die at the appropriate time or survive at the appropriate time is traumatic, and methamphetamine production and consumption is traumatic, and cancer is traumatic, etc., then trauma can be taken out of the equation. Trauma is still there, but it is not consciously acknowledged. Rather, trauma is allowed to rule, unnoticed. This does not delete trauma, but it ends the abjection for a short while until the trauma flares up again and the realization of the invariant term is once again needed and administered. Only Walter's acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of trauma, of allowing it to pervade his entire world, that it disappears from needing to be acknowledged.

Another way of looking at this is, what is allowed to repeat is what is allowed to be repressed. According to Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*, "We do not repeat

because we repress, we repress because we repeat" (105). If one does not allow repetition—if Walter had refused to allow trauma to pervade more than just the fly, or if Walter had refused to allow the fly to live (to let it go)—then repression could not have occurred. It is not the eradication and scrutiny of the traumatic that ends it; it is, rather, the relaxation of the gaze and the liberal permissiveness of its existence that allows it to sink back under the radar and reduces its flare.

In acknowledging the traumatic quality of all of his world and existence, Walter's sensation of abjection is reduced, but it is not necessarily equated with his being a better person, more understanding, or divine. What happens with Walter is in direct contrast to *Boardwalk Empire* with Harrow's transcendence to a godlike state. For Walter, he returns to the state of the death drive, to the persona of Heisenberg. As the cartoon cat, Walter had walked off the edge of the cliff, had looked down, and had begun to fall. After over 24 episodes, however, that fall never occurs, and as the cat, he begins to wonder when the fall is ever going to happen, when it should have happened, and discovers just how imperfect that fall is. He realizes that being *threatened* with the fall is the same as that which every other person faces in life—for all are threatened with potential death—and so for a moment Walter re-enters the mirror stage, the Symbolic, and desire, searching for the right words to describe his situation. When he suffers, he is most human. When trauma flares, he is, for once, more than just drive.

The dissipation of abjection through the idea that "It's all contaminated," however, causes Walter's return to pure drive and a machine-like existence. In trauma, he is human; without trauma he is the "No-man" that Žižek describes. Humanity resides in pain, and Walter chooses to lose his humanity, to end the pain.

The point of Walt's return to the death drive is inevitable (for the show must go on, and the villain must become more villainous), but it is also a comment on the part of

Breaking Bad that these characters are fully engrained in their environment. The circumference of their scenes are only allowed to extend so far. In contrast to *Boardwalk Empire*, in which Harrow's character experiences sublime moments and fantasy that extends beyond the present Real, Walter in *Breaking Bad* immerses himself more fully in that Real, drenching himself in it until he, not only traverses the fantasy, but leaves no possible room in himself for it ever returning. "Fly" is the flight of the last aspect of his humanity. He is Harrow in reverse, forever ascribing his character to the trauma that pervades his world. There is no such thing in *Breaking Bad* as a man reaching beyond his situation, of overcoming his environment. Walter, too, is contaminated. He and his immediate environment are one.

There is no doubt as to the unconscious repetition of the fly's appearance and trauma, as, again, the beginning and ending of "Fly" are synonymous, as if the episode exists in a loop. Though Jesse has killed the fly in the lab, by the end of the episode there is another fly in Walter's room, landing on the blinking light of the smoke alarm. More ingeniously, however, starting in the third episode of the fifth season, "Hazard Pay," Walter decides it is smarter and better to set up his meth making lab in fumigation tents of a pest control company—*Breaking Bad* highlights this unconscious move of Walter's by making his gas mask/suit combination appear fly-esque, meaning that he has perhaps joined in on the contamination, becoming the improved, unconquerable pest that survives the fumigation process in people's homes. In his repression, he dresses to look like a fly, while unconsciously merging his own operations with people whose sole job it is to kill flies. His murder of flies is desire-less, however, and the death drive in Walter is presented two-fold: there is no desire to kill those flies, for it is now simply a process, and there is no pain in being one of them. There is only the continuation into immortal annihilation.

Chapter 4

Final Remarks

I. Past and Present

I would now like to compare and contrast the various resolutions to trauma in *Boardwalk Empire* and *Breaking Bad*, and, in particular, how these resolutions relate to the presentation and assumptions of the past and present. For a drama based in the 1920s, fantasy is resolution, while acceptance of contamination and use of repression are the resolutions chosen for a drama based in the present. Variation in the types of resolutions means that there are different insinuations for the past and present, and—though this is not to say that fantasy *can't* be employed for a television series based in the present—there is a reason why these two successful series do not choose to emphasize the same type of resolution. Fantasy is not the choice for both; neither is repression.

Boardwalk Empire, through grisly at times, is a series steeped in nostalgia. The muted colors and lack of bright primaries make the show seem like a moving, faded photograph, and the constant connections between babies and alcohol as object, or abject, as connects the show to a lost childhood innocence. In addition, the use of dead children from the past as haunting the main characters means that their immediate surroundings and political troubles do not wholly define them. There is something from the *past* that haunts them, and these characters present to the audience their longings for a better, healthier, lost time—in other words, they enact what *Boardwalk Empire* attempts to enact—nostalgia. Fantasy is a necessary component for this nostalgia, because the object cause (that which strikes desire) is, as Žižek poignantly states, the "chimerical object of fantasy" (*Sublime* 65). It is fitting for Harrow to enter fantasy as a resolution to his trauma, and it is fitting for Jimmy's suicide to show that, with the right amount of

fantasy, his mother, Gillian, can go on with her life as though the suicide never happened. Gillian can resurrect and reenact her relationship with her lost son, even though he is gone, just like people in the present can feel nostalgia for a past in which they never existed. It is all available through fantasy, through desire—*Boardwalk Empire* teaches this.

In contrast to *Boardwalk Empire*, *Breaking Bad* does not have a muted palette, but rather a burned palette, in which the colors red and green abound. Michael Slovis—the cinematographer for *Breaking Bad* states,

So I shot this as if it was a movie in the 1960s or '70s, where all of the color was burned in. We did not do things that could be fixed later on, and we did not widen frames so they could be adjusted later on... And I was able to carry through all the way through to the coloring of the final shows. That's why, whether you like the look of the show or not, it has a feeling of continuity and organic-ness to it. (qtd. in Bunting)

It is almost as though, in the very first episode of *Breaking Bad*, when Walter sprays two different sets of chemicals into the fire for a classroom demonstration (the third one is left untouched), those same colors—red and green—become burned into the show, contaminating the photographic look. The only oasis away from these colors is the blue meth that Walter and Jesse make. As an object cause of desire, the meth is given its own surreal hue. More than that, though, Slovis states that he was able to use dark lighting and chiaroscuro to integrate with *Breaking Bad's* dark story (qtd. in Bunting). The tragedies and traumas soak into the hues. The contamination is rampant.

Breaking Bad differs from *Boardwalk Empire* additionally in that the characters are almost wholly defined by their circumstances. There is no nostalgia, there is no hearkening back to morals or a better past. If anything, Walt considers his past to be a

detriment (for he lost the love of his life and his multi-million-dollar project to a peer who gained both). Even the past is not safe from contamination. Nothing goes the way it is supposed to, and there is no correcting the tragedies that have already occurred. Repression—allowing this contamination and trauma to slip back into the unconscious—is the option to resolution, and the fact that this is the chosen option asserts something about the present: There is nothing available in the present to sustain fantasy. There is only corruption, and there is no hope. One's only option is to divide out the common denominator of trauma, to continue going, even if the desire to go is no longer there.

A different, but still accurate reading of the absence of fantasy from the present-based *Breaking Bad* is the following: fantasy is the enemy of the present. The only moments in which Walter is his most human, his safest, and his most trustworthy are the moments in which he *experiences* trauma. Without trauma, he becomes Heisenberg—a monstrous, mechanical, unfeeling being, capable of massive destruction. Thus, the problem isn't necessarily that contamination is present, but that one such as Walter is so willing to be part of the contamination to the extent that he can ignore it; in this sense, trauma is prized over repression, and the disease is better than the cure. Fantasy, yet another cure, would be no hero, for it would block the necessary trauma that humans must experience to gain their humanity. Fantasy has no place in the *Breaking Bad* narrative.

In comparison of the scenes and techniques employed to resolve trauma, the two series do have one important item in common: violence is what marks their traumatic resolution. Violence is employed not only in *Boardwalk Empire* and *Breaking Bad*, and not just in basic cable and satellite television channel of AMC, or the premium cable and satellite television network HBO. The need for violence to indicate that the traumatic Real is drained is true not just for television, but for film, novels, comics, for any story. This is

because violence can accurately address the multilayered and problematic aspects of trauma: (1) the stagnation caused by the gap between the Symbolic and the Real, (2) the need to indicate that the delayed reaction to trauma is finally registered—that it must be registered as something greater than its object cause, and (3) the inherent violence in forcing the Real to fit the Symbolic.

For explanation of resolving trauma's stagnation, consider again *Breaking Bad's* episode "Fly." In this episode, as long as the fly represents the gap between the Symbolic and the Real, Walter cannot kill it. The death of the fly is only possible when Walter no longer "makes an elephant out of a fly." It is only when Walter realizes that his problem is impossible to solve that Jesse can kill the fly and the scene can end. Of course, after that scene and at the end of the episode, we are reminded that there is always another fly (there is always the gap between the Symbolic and the Real), but for a moment in time, killing the fly is possible. Violence, or action, becomes possible again when the problem is unhooked from the unsolvable.

Up until the fly's death, the episode stagnates. This is why the "Fly" episode has divided viewers into two groups that either love or hate its divergence from the series' usual criminal bloodshed. Walter's moments of self-reflection and trauma are marked by the lack of denouement, production, and escape. No meth is made, no people are killed, and no plot development occurs. The fly itself could be read as pointing to that stagnation, like a mosquito over still water, or a bug hovering above an animal that is incapable of swatting. When Walter is finally capable of killing the fly, the stagnant waters of the plot are able to move again, the animal is capable of fighting back, and the fly—in a prolonged burst of violence—is finally exterminated. The message is simple: when the chaos of no one, true meaning ceases, action is possible. The lack of the Symbolic *must* be momentarily overcome or ignored.

The stagnation caused by Symbolic chaos occurs in *Boardwalk Empire* in Jimmy's character via a deadlock in terms of his marriage, his Fatherhood, his political power, and his inheritance. There is no improvement, and there is no besting Nucky. Walter's fly is Jimmy's boss—for Nucky represents the fact that for Jimmy there is no maturation. Jimmy is politically and criminally incapable of moving beyond where he was before he left for the Army, and for Jimmy this stagnation is unbearable because it means that life before and after the Army has not changed. In other words, the geographical residence of his original trauma is in mint condition. Jimmy remains the child tortured by his mother, not the mob boss who vanquishes his environment. It is only when Jimmy commits suicide—resolution proven via violence—that he can escape the unbearable narrative.

For Harrow in *Boardwalk Empire*, this plot paralysis emerges, not just in the metaphorical paralysis of one side of his face, but in his lack of connections with people and his inability to find a wife and have children. More importantly, the stagnation manifests itself in Harrow's complete lack of agency. All of his kills are done for other people (for Jimmy, for Nucky, etc.), and he refuses to attempt to have a family or even a relationship with another person until after Jimmy is dead because he does not believe that relationships are worth pursuing. The resolution of this particular traumatic repetition involves an explosion of Harrow's godlike abilities, and he annihilates Gyp Rosetti's men in a flash of brilliant bloodshed. When he no longer allows the Symbolic world of other people to control him, Harrow's effect on the Real is extreme. *Violence* is required to show that Harrow has become his own person and is acting on his own desires. There is a burst of plot development to signal that the narrative has resolved what had paused that plot denouement in the first place; and, more importantly, that violence is always more fantastic than the stagnation. The resolution must always be more awe-inspiring

and memorable than the object cause so that the audience *knows* that the resolution prevails.

Violence in these series bursts like sublimity. The all-seeing, all-understanding moment that Kristeva describes is similar to the violent moment that shrugs off the Symbolic's chaos. There is no one, true Symbolic, and the very fact of this—this underlying cause of flare-ups in the Real—means that there is no forever-solving or forever-mending of trauma; the lack of this solution in television is marked by a pause (after all, if nothing is capable of ever truly being known, then there is no point to action). In the place of solution, there is only temporary resolution, and that temporary resolution contains all the elements allowed in fantasy—a sublime forgetting of the unconquerable gap, an existence in the faulty narrative that forgets there is a narrative at all.

Violence doesn't ultimately solve anything, and it is, thus, a perfect candidate for resolution—for resolution is not solution, either. The usefulness and necessity for violence to mark resolution reaches beyond this, however, and hearkens back to the violence of the Symbolic imposed upon the Real in the first place. A body carved up by the Symbolic is a body *carved* by the Symbolic. There is inherently a violence of any Symbolic imposed upon the Real, and a violence in television's resolution bespeaks that original loss of being—a death to remark upon *the* death of being when the choice between being and speaking was imposed in the first place.

For the resolution to be recognized as resolution, the alteration of the Symbolic to better cut up the Real must be presented as a *literal* cutting up of the Real. If a person is familiar with mythology, and if we veer just for a moment from television, one can't help but think of the Greek Procrustes, and his hotel of horror between Corinth and Thebes. In that story, Procrustes strategically placed an abode between the two cities into which he coerced weary travelers for food and rest (Gopen 95). In addition,

Procrustes suffered from a murderous compulsion that all visitors should fit the length of his guestroom bed - precisely. Those who were too tall had their feet amputated or their legs shortened and died from loss of blood. Those who were too short were stretched on the rack and died from the resulting complications. Only occasionally were travelers just the right shape for the predetermined structure. Those lucky few escaped unharmed and thought all was right with the world. (Gopen 95)

Here, we have the most literal interpretation of the Real that is supposed to fit the Symbolic, of the body supposed to be—for Procrustes has a measurement by which he demands every person's body fit. Most importantly, however, the resolution to Procrustes's psychopathic actions—the trauma of the tale—must be considered. Theseus eventually arrives and places Procrustes in his own bed, and what follows this is Procrustes's death: a violent end to the violent tale. It was not the end of an improper Symbolic that solved the trauma, but the reinstatement of the Symbolic upon a different Real.

Though Harrow is the most literal interpretation of the violent Symbolic (for his body was mangled by the war, and he subsequently kills others in the same way that he was harmed—through the left eye), all resolutions in the two series address the inherent hostility of the Symbolic towards the Real and of the original carving up of the body by words, symbols, and calculations. This is not unlike a character's fall from grace alluding to the fall from paradise/the original fall. In a sense, after all, all of the falls are the same fall, and all of the violent impositions of the Symbolic on the Real are the same violence. Resolution, perhaps, is always a forced resolution, much in the same way that the Symbolic forces upon an infinite Real finite definitions. For characters in television,

resolution lies in a Real forced to fit the Symbolic, and this is only possible when the Real is repeatedly and appropriately carved up and chopped away.

II. Trauma and Character

In a narrative, trauma magnifies a character; it is the character's essence and balancing point. Without trauma, actions of any character would seem pointless, unfulfilling, and lacking in, well, lack. Without the absence, without the void, there is no reason for a character's existence; thus, for every character, whether he or she is a protagonist, antagonist, hero, or villain, actions in the "now" can only be important if they attempt to fill in a previously created emptiness, to recapture the enigmatic and mysterious object cause. Note, however, that the object cause of the trauma does not need to be given, only the knowledge that there *is* trauma. Essentially, trauma can be viewed as the sugar to help the pill go down—that is, what the characters are dipped in that allows the audience to accept them and their actions within the plot.

A perfect example of a character's need for trauma in general (but not necessarily in terms of the specific object cause) is in *The Dark Knight*. In *The Dark Knight*, Batman and the Joker face off, both driven by their own inherent traumas. The experience around which Batman's trauma coalesces is well known—the murder of his parents. The Joker's trauma—of which the leftover or remains are the scars on his face—is never actually stated, only hinted at. In one scene, the Joker blames an abusive father for his scars, yet in another scene, he blames a botched plastic surgery. The point, of course, is that it really doesn't matter how the Joker got those scars; the specific traumatic event doesn't really matter, only the knowledge that there *is* trauma.

What is interesting is that the makeup and creative development of villains and heroes differs in specific ways. Heroes are seen as those unfortunately trapped by or partially controlled through the scenes of their object causes of trauma (Batman's parents being killed in front of him forever motivates him to hunt murderers). Villains, on the other

hand, are those that have no right to blame the scenes in which they are placed for their acts/personalities. The Joker does not have a specific object cause because no matter the story (whether he had an abusive father or a botched plastic surgery) there is no object cause great enough to support the weight of his actions. In Burke's rhetorical terms, the hero's agency is more interactive with the environment than the villain's agency is. The villain exists on an entirely different plane than his surroundings, even if those surroundings were horrific and created an object cause for him.

In another sense—although I do not wish to delve too far into the definitions of the Lacanian pervert or obsessional—I would argue that the villain has more agency than the hero in that he or she *recognizes* the fact that trauma can be attached to any particular object cause and, thus, brings this choice into full being by attaching his or her trauma to a father's abuse or botched plastic surgery (Hyldgaard). As a pervert, the villain gets to *choose* his object cause of trauma. In contrast, the hero would be the obsessional: the one who is chosen by his object cause.

Yet another explanation for why the villain must be given a fluid set of object causes is that the villain presents to the audience the actual reason for trauma: the gap between the Symbolic and the Real. A villain with a specific object cause is not a true villain, because he or she *must* present that which cannot ever be mended, discussed, or solved: a villain must present what haunts all speaking beings in the Symbolic order—the holes in the Symbolic. To present those gaps, the character is created in such a way that no object cause is ever suitable. The presentation of a hero, in contrast to a villain, would never be loaded with this burden, for a hero acts to resolve trauma, not to create, perform, or present it.

One can now see a variety of ways to transition hero to villain or villain to hero, such that the lines between the two can be blurred. If a television show were to present a

person with an object cause, but slowly transition him or her towards actions that no object cause could explain, then the character could easily become a villain because he or she then presents the unsolvable fissures between the Real and the Symbolic. And, if one begins with a character with no suitable object cause and then surprises the audience with an object cause that fits, then a potential villain could move into the realm of becoming a hero. The important thing to remember, though, is this: just as every character needs the assumption of trauma to be accepted as a character, the villain is necessary for the acceptance of a hero. Trauma creates the lack for a character to fill in, and a villain creates the lack for the hero. Thus, trauma and the villain are intimately entwined.

III. Purity

In closing, I would like to warn against making a large mistake in the reading of television and trauma. Television is not produced to sell the affect of trauma; nor is it produced to be an object cause of trauma. Rather, its purpose is to be a fantastic display of—to pretend to wholly account for, though it never truly can—trauma's cause.

In the entirety of his book *Post Cinematic Affect*, Steven Shaviro explores film's ability to elicit affects in viewers, and he asserts there is a movement of affect production (the ability to sell emotions with physical products) from cinema towards advertising, commercials, video games, and television (47-48). Advertisers hook their products to a chosen emotion and, according to Shaviro, essentially appropriate what originally made cinema unique: its ability to sell people affect.

What is apparent at first glance is that, of all the emotions stolen from cinema to be bottled up and sold, abjection—the emotion associated with trauma—is not one of

them. After all, what is the use of a product if it elicits abjection? If abjection is not one of the emotions commercialized, then, in a sense, one could claim that abjection remains pure (this purity will soon have a double meaning).

It would be a mistake, however, to view the abjection extracted from an audience as the *point* of a film or television series. Yes, even movies such as *Hostel* or *The Exorcist*, which unleashed a multitude of 911 calls by people who had seen the film and claimed they were possessed, do not have it as their main point to traumatize, to become the abject cause of trauma for, their audiences. The point of these films, rather, is to fully account for trauma, to yell, "Here it is! We have finally captured it for you, and we can present it all, right here, right now!" This is exactly why *Hannibal Rising* was created and why the *Bates Motel* is currently running—to present the unrepresentable and account for the unaccountable, just like postmodern art.

Looking back on Shaviro's claim that the point of film and advertising is to elicit an affect from their audiences, I argue that this is not necessarily true; I claim, rather, that the point of advertising is always to account for desire (to "identify" *the* object cause of it—i.e. the product being sold). Why are people so happy? What fulfills all desires? Bounty paper towels, of course. Or is it Downy fabric softener? Or the Energizer battery?

Television operates in the same way that advertising does—it pretends to wholly account for the cause of an enigmatic emotion. It just so happens that television has the time and space to not only work with trauma, but to test its own account, reject its own account, and turn the decision back to the viewer. Nothing attests to television's determination to account for trauma (rather than elicit it) more than its performance of what Burke, in his *A Grammar of Motives*, calls the paradox of purity: that is, television can account for trauma without necessarily educing any emotion from the viewer, or even the characters.

Burke's paradox of purity is as follows: Anything in its purified or absolute state looks, feels, and seems nothing like what we are used to/recognize in its adulterated or diluted state. A pure item is unrecognizable to us as having anything to do with the normal definition of such an item. In one of his many examples of this paradox, Burke states,

We confront this paradox when deriving the nature of the human person from God as 'super-person,' as 'pure,' or 'absolute' person, since God as a super-person would be impersonal—and the impersonal would be synonymous with the negation of personality. Hence, Pure Personality would be the same as No Personality: and the derivation of the personal principle from God as pure person would amount to its derivation from an impersonal principle. (35)

Using this paradox of purity in accompaniment with trauma, we can now better understand Caruth's idea of trauma as a delayed reaction, after-the-fact—as a wound imposed *too soon* for recognition (91). I argue that there is a difference between diluted trauma (abjection) and pure trauma. Pure trauma is unrecognizable, invisible, and elicits no feeling. In pure trauma, there is no reaction, because there is no affect. It is only after-the-fact, in the diluted traumatic moment when the character's or analysand's reaction erupts. Even though trauma is never associated with the past event, but rather is an emotion only in the present, pure trauma is also in the present, as a lack, as a numbness. Diluted trauma exists when the trauma *can* be seen, located, and felt; I do think this correlates with theory surrounding trauma, for in *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth speaks of the paradox of trauma in almost the same way that Burke speaks of paradox of purity. Caruth states, "Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may

occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically may take the form of a belatedness" (91-92). This traumatic event of which Caruth speaks—as a paradox, a kind of paradox inherent in purity—I argue is too *pure* to at first comprehend or sense.

Television is capable of presenting pure trauma and the pure traumatic moment—the moment that elicits no identifiable or effable affect from the characters or audience. At the beginning of my thesis, I brought up one moment in the series *The Wire* where a murder has occurred, but there is no identifiable scene, act, or environment that can fully support the weight of the dire deed. This inability to point out or locate what caused the error, and the inability for Randy to decide how he feels amidst such a tragedy is the paradoxically pure traumatic moment, and television does attempt to perform this wholly.

Because television doesn't just perform the abjection of trauma, but rather presents the empty, silent, unidentifiable and affect-less paradoxically pure traumatic moment, it would be inappropriate to conclude that the intent of television is to bottle, sell, and deliver the affect of abjection. Television's intent is rather to reverse the process and collect, keep, and empty trauma and the traumatic moment onscreen. In this sense, television's performance of trauma is doubly pure—the performance of trauma is one item that, for lack of time and foreseeable profit, corporations cannot claim, steal, and market, and movies do not have the breadth or capacity to claim; more importantly, the paradoxically pure trauma has a place in television, which is forever working to account for that which is unaccountable, to present that which is unpresentable, to catch the elusive fly.

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