

David W R Brown

Dreading the future: Narrative dread in BETTER CALL SAUL and contemporary television

2019

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/4175>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Brown, David W R: Dreading the future: Narrative dread in BETTER CALL SAUL and contemporary television. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 8 (2019), Nr. 1, S. 231–248. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/4175>.

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0/ Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons BY-NC-ND 4.0/ License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Dreading the future: Narrative dread in ‘Better Call Saul’ and contemporary television

David W R Brown

NECSUS 8 (1), Spring 2019: 231–248

URL <https://necsus-ejms.org/dreading-the-future-narrative-dread-in-better-call-saul-and-contemporary-television/>

Keywords: Better Call Saul, contemporary television, dread, Emotions, narrative emotions, paradox of aversion

Over the past 30 years, film theorists have increasingly taken seriously the role that emotions play in our engagement with narrative art. Much of this discussion has focused on, to borrow Noël Carroll’s term, ‘garden-variety’ emotions, that is, the sorts of emotional responses that are familiar to viewers from ordinary experience such as fear, happiness, sadness, disgust, and so forth.[1] Indeed, as Murray Smith notes, ‘discussion of *fear* in the movies alone is sufficient to fill at least one library shelf.’[2] Narrative art is of course also capable of eliciting a range of responses that are less commonly aroused in ordinary experience, or at least at nowhere near the frequency with which they are elicited by fictions. For instance, much has been said about what we may call ‘narrative emotions’.[3] These responses, by contrast, arise primarily from the particular design, organisation, and structure of narratives and narration. We could consider how the withholding of information about past events in a story might arouse *curiosity*, uncertainty over future events might generate *suspense*, or unexpected story developments might *surprise* viewers.[4]

Measured against this body of literature on film, much less has been said about the relationship between narrative and emotion in long-form fictional television series. As Alberto N. García diagnoses in his introduction to the recent edited collection *Emotions in Contemporary TV Series* (2016), ‘the study of emotions in TV is a largely unexplored field’.[5] There are good reasons to believe that emotions in television deserves study which is sensitive to the medium’s particular form, duration, and temporality. On average, television

series involve a significantly longer form of ongoing narration, experienced by viewers not over a duration of minutes and hours like film, but over months and even years. Given that many emotions are, at least in part, characterised by dimensions of temporality, duration, and knowledge, it is plausible that long-form television series may be capable of eliciting certain emotional responses differently and perhaps even more effectively than film.

To redress what appears to be a gap in this ‘unexplored field’, I will define and conceptualise here *narrative dread*. As will be developed, narrative dread differs from pre-existing responses (such as suspense, curiosity, anticipation, and fear) chiefly in terms of its duration, temporality, and in the level of knowledge regarding future outcomes. Ted Nannicelli has claimed that ‘temporal prolongation’ is the most salient feature that differentiates television from film. As a consequence of this temporal prolongation, he argues that television has the potential to sustain emotions over longer periods of time and with greater intensity than film.[6] Though I will not argue that narrative dread is necessarily *unique* to television, following Nannicelli, I propose that it is particularly effectively evoked by the long-form narration and reliance on serialised knowledge that has come to characterise contemporary television.

The account of narrative dread introduced here will be furnished with a discussion of *Better Call Saul* (2015–present), the prequel television series to *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013). Critics, fans, and the series’ creative personnel alike have remarked that *Better Call Saul* has over time become increasingly difficult or uncomfortable to watch; what started out as a comedy (albeit a dark one) has gradually morphed into a tragedy. The word ‘dread’ is mentioned with noteworthy frequency in discussions and analyses of the series. I suggest that such responses to the series can be accounted for by narrative dread. It will be argued that the prominence of this sense of dread in *Better Call Saul* is rooted, first, in the fact it is a prequel which presupposes knowledge of future story outcomes and, second, in its long-form narration. Inevitably, the most pressing objection at hand when introducing new concepts is whether such a concept is necessary and justifies its existence. For narrative dread, the most obvious alternative solution would be to simply call this suspense. I will thus also offer a defence of why suspense, as an inadequately fuzzy concept, may not sufficiently explain paradigmatic cases of narrative dread.

Common dreads

Imagine that you are at the doctor's. No need to panic, you are just having a general health check-up. At the end of your appointment, however, your doctor tells you some unpleasant news: you are going to need a routine but quite painful injection. She explains that there are two available timeslots for this procedure: you can either have it tomorrow morning or you can have it one week from today. Classical accounts of decision-making presuppose that individuals want to expedite pleasurable, hedonic, and positive experiences and delay or put off unpleasant, painful, and negative experiences.[7] Following this logic would suggest that you would likely choose to put off your injection until the following week, as opposed to choosing to have it first thing the next day. And yet, most people in response to this imagined scenario would instead choose to have the painful injection as soon as possible in order to 'get the pain out of the way'.[8] The fact that individuals often elect to expedite pain or negative experiences suggests that anticipating or waiting for something unpleasant or negative itself carries a cost. This cost has been conceptualised by some as 'dread'.

Dread is referred to quite frequently in ordinary experience: someone might say that they are dreading having to give a speech at work, one might dread growing old, or else we might dread an upcoming dental appointment. Despite this, in relation to its everyday usage at least, dread remains an emotion that is under-conceptualised. This is an understandable state of affairs given that there are other emotion terms that could be coherently substituted for dread in describing these scenarios. You could instead say that you are fearful, anxious, or apprehensive about that dental appointment next week and the meaning would largely remain similar and understandable. Certainly, dread may be understood as sharing a kinship to these other emotions. I wish to define dread here as an emotion that is distinct from these other responses. *Narrative* dread is contiguous with, albeit distinct from, this everyday emotion, so let us first turn to a characterisation of dread derived from ordinary experience.

On a basic level, dread can be understood as *the anticipation of negative outcomes and experiences*. As the examples thus far attest, dread prototypically takes as its object future events that appear to be certain to occur and are perceived as bad. The experience of dread is consequently also unpleasant. I propose that dread can be characterised in terms of four constituents:

Dread is directed towards a near-but-not-immediate-future outcome or experience;
the future outcome or experience is something bad;
there is perceived certainty of this outcome or experience occurring;
there is a degree of uncertainty in some aspect of this outcome or experience.

These characteristics may be similarly mapped onto narrative dread, so let us consider them in further detail. First, though it should be sufficiently clear what is meant by future appraisal, the duration of dread needs some explanation. There are many situations where the imminent possibility of negative outcomes or experiences may prompt emotional responses. If you are walking alone at night and start hearing strange noises behind you, this would likely elicit something resembling a fear response and the associated action readiness.[9] Dread, by contrast, requires the bad thing to be somewhat removed in time and is unlikely to elicit such an action readiness. Though I will not state a definite time, dread is likely to be directed at outcomes which will be neither imminent nor be so far into the future to be discountable.

For the second characteristic, what is bad will naturally involve a subjective appraisal. The most basic example of a negative outcome would be future pain. Individuals have different thresholds and attitudes towards the experience of physical pain; the prospect of that painful injection may fill one person with utter dread while barely registering with another. We find similar variability for other potentially dread-filled experiences. The prospect of giving a speech before a crowd would be enough to cripple some individuals with dread while others would take it comfortably. Gregory S. Berns et al. identified some participants in their study as ‘extreme dreaders’. These individuals dreaded experiencing a painful outcome to such an extent that, when presented with the choice, they elected to receive a more painful electric shock immediately rather than wait for a less painful one. This not only speaks to the variability in people’s experience of dread, but also how uncomfortable the mere anticipation of something negative or painful can be.

For the third characteristic, the dreaded outcome is likely to be seen as certain (or, at the very least, extremely probable). This is also a *perceived* probability to account for what might be considered ‘irrational’ responses of dread. Somebody may dread the prospect of going on a commercial flight under the belief that some ill fate will befall them, despite the immensely low

probability of this actually occurring. More ordinarily though, we make mistaken assessments of likelihood simply because we often do not have reliable access to the probability.

The fourth characteristic highlights the fact that dread is typically felt more intensely when there is some degree of uncertainty. This uncertainty might be a matter of not knowing precisely *when* the negative thing may occur, it might be a matter of not knowing just *how bad* it will be, or it may be due to the possibility that the outcome might not occur at all because there is unreliable access to the probability. Following Giles W. Story and colleagues' 'exponential dread' model, the time towards the negative outcome also modulates dread's felt intensity.[10] This model proposes that dread increases exponentially over time as the dreaded thing draws closer. If that painful injection were instead a month away, you may not feel much dread in the first week or two, but as it draws ever closer it would cause more and more distress.

A dreadful definition

Thus far, dread has been characterised as an emotion that, first, is ordinarily felt in response to anticipating negative future outcomes and experiences that have an apparent certainty of occurring and, second, is unpleasant or aversive to experience. My proposal is that we experience a *comparable* response to the unfolding of fictional narratives when they involve an anticipated experience of negative outcomes. To distinguish from this everyday usage, I propose labelling this 'narrative dread'.

The prototypical scenario for narrative dread is a viewer experiencing a narrative where it is known that specific negative outcomes will occur over its duration. We may not know with absolute precision when, or the exact form it takes, but we know that it is definitely going to happen. To have certainty in an outcome occurring within a narrative requires some level of foreknowledge. There are three common circumstances in which this occurs in fiction: it may be foreknowledge which is assumed by the work (this can be intertextual e.g. a prequel, or within a text e.g. flash-forwards), it may arise from viewers choosing to find out what happens beforehand (e.g. reading spoilers), or it may be because the fiction takes real events as the basis of its story. Though there is much to say about the other two scenarios, we will focus here on the first case.

Why label this response *narrative* dread? This is intended to reflect that the primary object of concern relates to the viewer's experience of the ongoing narrative and narration itself. In other words, it would be inaccurate to say that we dread only for characters. It must be stressed that this is not to denigrate the primacy of character to our engagement; we dread that the narrative *must* inexorably move to specific negative outcomes and construing such outcomes as negative is almost invariably rooted in our concern with the success, well-being, and morality of characters within a story. But it remains that the primary object of dread is the viewer's actual experience of the narrative and the events therein. If anything, fictions that elicit narrative dread may also be ones that create a distance between the viewer and characters. As narrative dread requires some level of foreknowledge of narrative outcomes, this, in turn, will likely entail some level of *epistemic* distance between viewers and characters (i.e., at any given time, we know more than the characters do). As a result, our engagement with characters may be kept in check. For instance, as in *Better Call Saul*, we may be reticent to take great pleasure from the coupling of two likeable and/or sympathetic characters if we have the foreknowledge that they will break up soon after. We might therefore regulate our engagement because we know that a failure to do this will probably result in greater emotional pain in the future.

Though there are certainly cases of films that court narrative dread, the formal aspects and structure of television's longer-form narration means that it can elicit dread more acutely. As mentioned, there are several ways dread can be heightened: first, when there is uncertainty in precisely when the bad outcome will happen; second, following the exponential dread model, dread will become increasingly heightened as the bad outcome appears to draw nearer and nearer; and third, when the wait and anticipation for the bad outcome is elongated or drawn out over time. Television series are better equipped than film to exploit these means of heightening dread. There are numerous examples of narrative films which would match the prototypical scenario of narrative dread, for instance, prequels, documentaries, and historical/biographical dramas. Consider the thriller *Valkyrie* (2008), which depicts a historical plot in 1944 by German army officers to assassinate Adolf Hitler. A basic knowledge of history would inform the first-time viewer of this film that the protagonists' goals are doomed to failure simply because we know that this is not when and how the Second World War ended. We would therefore anticipate the inevitable negative outcomes when watching this

film. Alternatively, consider the myriad documentaries, biopics, and historical dramas based upon the lives of well-known figures or real-world tragic events.

These film examples undoubtedly traffic in some form of dread. However, there are reasons to argue that the dread elicited by narrative films would be attenuated in comparison to the dread elicited by longer forms of narration. Individual narrative films are not sufficiently long enough to generate notable levels of dread. Just as the painful injection tomorrow morning will not elicit as much dread as the painful injection next week, the film that promises its negative outcomes within minutes is less likely to accrue as much narrative dread as the television series where the negative outcome is delayed and awaited over hours of screen time. For film, we also have confidence that the negative outcome towards which a narrative is moving will happen in the duration of the viewing experience.

The ongoing experience of long-form narration in television offers far less security. Though we may be certain that we will eventually arrive at the negative outcome, television's episodic form can obscure precisely when this will be experienced. Every episode poses the same questions afresh: will *this* be an episode where we arrive at the bad thing? Will, or will not, this be another step towards the bad thing? Of course, some extrinsic norms may guide our expectations.[11] After all, climactic and significant narrative moments are more likely to occur towards the end of a season or as the entire series nears its end. But it remains the case that we are uncertain about precisely *when* we are to experience the inevitable negative outcomes. Each episode that goes by increases the likelihood and feeling that we are nearing the negative outcomes at which the narrative is predetermined to arrive. Modelling dread exponentially tells us that this will intensify the felt experience of dread. This gradual-but-accelerating intensification of dread over time is something we can identify in *Better Call Saul*.

The account of narrative dread put forward here is, by design, significantly more mundane than the typical usage of dread as a concept in film theory, where it has largely been discussed in relation to horror films. Following a suggestion from Carroll's discussion of art-horror, Cynthia Freeland develops an account of 'art-dread'. [12] According to Freeland, 'for artworks to evoke and sustain an emotion of art-dread, they must depict an encounter with something terrible or unsettling that is also deep, obscure, and difficult to comprehend'. [13] Art-dread is still based on anticipation, but its object is

significantly less concrete; it is the prospect of an encounter with a ‘great yet vague evil, or with deep cosmic amorality’.[14]

The version of dread explored by Freeland is rooted in its usage in existentialist philosophy and Burke’s account of the sublime.[15] Against this, we can consider Hanich’s phenomenological account of ‘cinematic dread’ which, in his words, is more mundane, more concrete and strives towards an imminent telos.[16] In contrast to the other types of cinematic fear proposed by Hanich, cinematic dread is a meta-emotion; i.e., an emotion that takes as its object other emotions. The paradigm case for cinematic dread is a vulnerable character moving slowly through a dark, forsaken place that harbours a threat.[17] As we watch such scenes, we know, from both internal cues and genre convention, that they will likely end with a shock or moment of horror. We, therefore, dread our future emotional response. As the prototypical case indicates, it is typically, though not exclusively, a response to horror films.

We can identify some similarities with what has been discussed here thus far. Cinematic dread involves the strong expectation of *something*, but we do not know what will happen precisely. Hanich suggests we might therefore talk of an ‘unknowing knowingness’.[18] This unknowing knowingness approximates the combination of certainty and uncertainty stressed in my characterisation. Indeed, the account of narrative dread here shares the mundanity, concreteness, and teleology of Hanich’s cinematic dread. Equally, narrative dread too functions like a meta-emotion in that it takes as its object the future experience of a negative outcome. However, where cinematic dread is quite specific and localised (i.e., it is found within certain types of scenes and generally in horror films), the version of dread put forward here is more diffuse and expansive. As proposed, its character is such that it is best afforded by long-form narratives (such as television series) as opposed to individual scenes.

Given the sustained nature of the narrative dread response, one might suggest it is better categorised as a mood. Greg M. Smith has proposed a ‘mood-cue’ approach to emotion in film, wherein the ‘primary emotive effect of film is to create mood’.[19] For Smith, moods are low-level emotional states that tend to be more diffuse, less forceful, longer-lasting, and lacking in an object. A mood subsequently creates a certain predisposition or tendency for the viewer to feel a delimited range of emotions.[20] As Carl Plantinga notes, Smith’s articulation rests on an assumption that emotions cannot be long-term. Plantinga has instead suggested that many of the moods Smith proposes are better thought of as examples of ‘global emotions’.[21] Whereas

local emotions are brief, global emotions are long-lasting and span significant proportions of the film viewing experience. Plantinga suggests anticipation, suspense, curiosity, and fascination as examples. Global emotions, akin to Smith's mood-cue approach, are vital in priming the viewer's attention and generating expectations. Although Plantinga's focus is on film, narrative dread would fit well into the category of global emotions. Like other such emotions, narrative dread can be understood as underlying an entire narrative; at times, it may recede and other times it may come to the fore. Despite this diffusive quality though, it remains directed towards concrete and specific outcomes and questions. We have now a broad outline of narrative dread and may turn to what I take to be a prototypical example.

Narrative dread and *Better Call Saul*

The break-out character and fan favourite of *Breaking Bad* was the unscrupulous, sleazy, and amoral criminal lawyer Saul Goodman. The character's popularity as well as the runaway success of *Breaking Bad* prompted a spin-off: *Better Call Saul*. This series was pitched as a prequel that would follow Jimmy McGill (the real name of Saul) and his transformation into his character from *Breaking Bad*. Saul often served as comic relief in the dark and fatalistic world of *Breaking Bad*. *Better Call Saul* was thus originally conceived as a more comedic, quirkier, and somewhat lighter in tone lead-up to the events of *Breaking Bad*. Over time, though, this changed. In an interview during the filming of its fourth season, *Better Call Saul* showrunner Vince Gilligan explained how the series, somewhat inadvertently, developed from 'a tight little one season semi-comedy' into something more tragic:

[a]nd now we realise that we have a bit of a tragedy on our hands: this man inevitably must become Saul Goodman, *but we dread the day that it will happen*, because it may have a large hand in why we don't see Kim Wexler around any more. Maybe she won't like Saul Goodman that much, or maybe something terrible will happen to her. *We dread the future as much as the fans do*, but we have to pursue it nonetheless. [22]

Gilligan highlights what are arguably the series' two core tensions: first, the narrative must inevitably show us Jimmy's descent into Saul and, second, this must inevitably impact upon the character of Kim Wexler. Kim is a fellow lawyer, figurative partner-in-crime, and on-and-off romantic partner to Jimmy. We are aligned with Kim for notable portions of the series, and she is

afforded a similar level of complexity and development to Jimmy.[23] However, as Gilligan suggests, no reference is made to her in *Breaking Bad* or in the post-*Breaking Bad* flash-forward sequences of *Better Call Saul*. A search through both critical and fan responses to the series immediately shows that Gilligan's concern that the series must unavoidably end badly for Jimmy and Kim is widespread; the word dread is mentioned repeatedly.[24]

Why have the showrunner, critics, and fans alike used this term dread to describe engagement with *Better Call Saul*, and what exactly is meant by this? Mapping narrative dread onto the series can help make sense of this response. Where *Breaking Bad* offered smaller-scale experiments with vague, mysterious, and possibly dread-filled flash-forwards (most notably in season two), narrative dread globally underlies *Better Call Saul*. We are certain that the narrative will be one that shows us Jimmy's fall from grace into Saul, the very title of the series indicating that this is the core premise. Intrinsic norms established by both *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul* also provide viewers with expectations of how narrative and narration function in these series. More specifically, both series follow an almost deterministic narrative logic, wherein actions, big and small, are always met with reactions and consequences.

On the other hand, uncertainty is rendered through the fact that we do not know the nuances or specifics to the answers of many questions posed by *Better Call Saul*. We know that Jimmy must become Saul, but we do not know exactly *how* he becomes Saul. We are likewise uncertain about *when* the narrative will reveal this to us. For other characters (such as Kim and 'Nacho' Varga) whose fates remain more uncertain (because they do not feature in *Breaking Bad*), it becomes an increasingly reasonable hypothesis that bad things happen to these characters. This hypothesis is lent credence by the norms established by *Breaking Bad*, wherein the narration was largely unsentimental towards abusing and disposing of characters while it ended with many of the main cast dead.

I have proposed that television series' long-form narration allows it to exploit the exponential structure of dread. In other words, if we know a series is moving towards negative outcomes, then the longer it continues, the more dread-filled it becomes. There are several ways that the series has amplified this growing sense of dread. Two events in the third season are of particular significance. First, Kim's near-miss with death in a car accident and, second, the suicide of Chuck McGill, Jimmy's brother, at the climax of the season. Both of these events serve as potent reminders of the possible shelf-life of

these characters and make it a valid hypothesis that characters who feature in *Better Call Saul* but who are not in *Breaking Bad* are absent because they have died. The series thus amplifies the intensity of dread by leading viewers to make increasingly specific and increasingly negative hypotheses about the fate of its main characters. We have the growing sense that things may in fact end *very* badly for many of the characters. These dread-amplifying events occur in season three which correlates with the timing of Gilligan's claim that the series has become more tragic and infused with dread.

Some justification is required for why Jimmy's transformation may be appraised as a negative outcome. *Breaking Bad* and many other series invite us to enjoy the transgressions and immoral behaviour of an anti-heroic protagonist; if we take pleasure in such actions and characters, why would Jimmy becoming Saul necessarily be a bad thing? There is significantly less in *Better Call Saul* that invites us to consider Jimmy's transgression and transformation to be fully liberating or enjoyable. Through flashbacks, the series establishes Jimmy's past as a petty criminal and a 'loser', emphasising his decision to become a lawyer as an earnest attempt to 'do good' and earn the approval of his high-minded brother. Jimmy's eventual and pre-destined slip back into his past ways and his failure to change thus confirms the tragic arc of his character. Part of this is also no doubt due to the specific nature of Jimmy's criminality (he is a lawyer who becomes a more morally-questionable lawyer), but it is also the case that a sustained emphasis is placed on the impact of his actions on others. For instance, Chuck's suicide is arguably a direct consequence of Jimmy's actions. Although Chuck is far from the most likeable character, Kim, by comparison, has many likeable qualities and is in several ways preferable, morally and otherwise, to Jimmy. Increasingly, the series suggests that Jimmy's slip into Saul will come to impact gravely upon Kim.

Although I have stressed structural and narrative elicitors of dread, this is not to discount the impact of style in contributing to a global feeling of dread. *Better Call Saul*, for instance, heightens its dread through its glacially slow and deliberate pacing. This is emphasised through long takes, slow camera movements, and a lingering focus on unusual, stylised compositions. In addition, as inherited from *Breaking Bad*, there are frequently montage sequences that focus on the drawn-out execution of specific actions, both mundane and significant. Strictures of space preclude discussing these stylistic choices in detail. But it is worth stressing that although the requisite conditions for narrative dread are located within the narrative, we might consider style as another intensifier of dread.

Paradoxes of aversion; or, why watch *Better Call Saul*?

The account of narrative dread here suggests that, first, it is unpleasant to experience and, second, may partially create a distance between viewers and characters. Why then would a viewer choose to engage with a long-form narrative that prominently elicits this response? Questions of this nature have a long history in discussions of art and fiction. There are as many different articulations of this problem as there are proposed solutions; the paradox of tragedy, the paradox of horror, the paradox of negative emotion, and so forth all address the puzzle of why we are drawn to art that elicits uncomfortable affective responses. Carolyn Korsmeyer suggests instead labelling these as a class of paradoxes and proposes the umbrella term ‘paradox of aversion’.[25] I will not attempt to resolve such paradoxes in general here, but I will offer some thoughts on a more manageable question, namely, if watching *Better Call Saul* elicits something aversive, why would a viewer continue to watch it? It could be argued that we may dissolve the paradox altogether by stating that emotions that are ordinarily aversive are rendered pleasurable when experienced in response to fiction. Though I am happy to agree that this is partly true, I wish to defend the position that narrative dread in *Better Call Saul* maintains a somewhat unpleasant valence. This unpleasantness may itself be rewarding, but that is beyond the scope of the discussion here.

Although the moment-by-moment experience of narrative dread elicited by *Better Call Saul* is not pleasant, it is made tolerable by the future prospect of being removed from a state of incomplete knowledge to complete knowledge. We stick with this dread-eliciting series because we must do so in order to acquire exact knowledge of characters’ fates from the narrative. Gregory Currie’s distinction between ‘character desires’ and ‘narrative desires’ can offer some clarification. Using the example of *Casablanca* (1942), Currie suggests this is the difference between wanting Ilsa and Rick to stay together (character desire) and wanting *Casablanca* to be a narrative that has Rick and Ilsa staying together (narrative desire).[26] Though we want Ilsa and Rick to stay together, we would be dissatisfied if things actually turned out that way.[27] We can identify a similar paradigm in *Better Call Saul*. Even though we desire for Jimmy and Kim to stay together, we also desire that the narrative show us their eventual break-up and Jimmy’s transformation into Saul. This desire for knowledge from a narrative Currie suggests is a form of

narrative desire (as opposed to a character desire).[28] We must therefore tolerate dread, because that is the only way we can fulfill this desire for knowledge.[29]

Of course, to get the desired knowledge from a television series requires viewers to 'play along'. That is, there are undoubtedly viewers who would choose to read spoilers when faced by television narratives which traffic in narrative dread. Just as there are 'extreme dreaders' about real-life outcomes, there are also viewers who would find the dread elicited by a series like *Better Call Saul* intolerable. These viewers would either choose not to watch such a series or read spoilers about what happens so they can focus on its other aspects.

This leads us to another, similarly compensatory, way of approaching this issue; the series offers other significant qualities than the feeling of dread. It would perhaps be too torturous if the entire narrative was focused on characters for whom we are awaiting negative outcomes. One of the principal ways that the dread elicited by the series is diluted is through the interweaving of Mike Ehrmantraut's storylines. The viewer familiar with *Breaking Bad* has already come to terms with Mike's eventual fate and knows for sure that he will not meet his end or experience any significant trauma in the duration of *Better Call Saul*. Furthermore, Mike's character is remarkably similar and stable across the two series. In both, he is the consummate, infallible and diligent professional; things rarely go wrong for Mike's plans. The plotlines involving Mike thus typically focus on criminal activities that are underlined by planning, carrying out meticulous processes, or simply showcases for his no-nonsense approach. These storylines also often feature the aforementioned montages which were a stylistic trademark of *Breaking Bad*. These sequences often withhold information about Mike's intentions, thereby inviting us into a game of speculation about what he is planning before it is made clear by the narration. Viewers can therefore derive pleasure at the aesthetic qualities of these stylised sequences, the narrative mechanics at work and the ludic play of working out Mike's intentions.

The formal aspects of long-form television series are also relevant to rendering dread more tolerable. Jason Mittell claims that contemporary 'complex television' is defined by 'narrative complexity', a new narrational mode that blends both episodic and serial norms.[30] Individual episodes will therefore feature storylines that, though they may contribute to character and tone, are largely restricted in direct story consequences to that specific

episode. Series may have an overarching question or mystery which is serialised throughout, while episodic storylines offer distractions or detours from these bigger questions. For *Better Call Saul*, though dread underlies its serialised and macro questions, there are also episodic plotlines that offer diversion from this.[31]

There are possibly other ways that medium and form are relevant. Control theories respond to the paradox by arguing that aversive emotions elicited by art are less painful because of our control in experiencing them.[32] Of all forms of visual narrative media, television series perhaps offers viewers the greatest level of control; in our homes, we may pause, turn off, or quit watching a series entirely at any point. As it happens, this certainly seems to be what viewers are doing with *Better Call Saul*, which has seen viewership decline each series. There are of course myriad reasons for this, but I would speculate that it can partly be attributable to viewers' realisation that the series does not offer the same suspenseful thrills as *Breaking Bad* and is instead an exceptionally slow, dreadful march towards bad outcomes.

Objections and limitations

This leads us to some possible objections. In the interest of conceptual parsimony, it may be argued that the emotional response described here could be encompassed under a pre-existing term. The most obvious alternative would be to say that what has been described here is merely suspense. On most standard accounts, suspense is generated by the viewer's uptake of a narrative presenting more than one possible story outcome; we feel suspense when we fear a bad outcome, hope for a good outcome, and are uncertain about which outcome will occur.[33] Taking the standard theories as true makes it straightforward to differentiate narrative dread; it is distinct from suspense because we are already certain that it is the bad outcome which will occur. Yet, it becomes harder to disentangle dread from suspense when we consider the fact that we often still putatively feel suspense upon re-watching suspenseful narratives (known as the paradox of suspense or problem of anomalous suspense). Consequently, some theories attempt to resolve this problem by arguing that uncertainty is not necessary for suspense.

I will not delve into the various ways of approaching this problem (for such an undertaking would take an entire article itself). However, part of the issue here with separating suspense from dread is that, as Hanich points out,

suspense is such a fuzzy concept.[34] Moreover, theories of suspense often erroneously try to encompass *all* narrative art.[35] It has been suggested here that narrative emotions ought to be conceptualised with some sensitivity to medium and form. We should therefore not assume that we can unproblematically compare conceptualisations of film suspense to narrative dread, an emotion best afforded by long-form television.

The more fruitful avenue then might be to compare narrative dread to existing discussions of suspense in television. This too has its issues. Margrethe Bruun Vaage offers a detailed account of suspense in *Breaking Bad*, arguing the importance of suspense sequences in regularly pulling us back into empathetic engagement with Walter White.[36] On the other hand, Ted Nannicelli argues that television's temporal prolongation and serialisation means that a suspenseful television series like *Breaking Bad* can both sustain and intensify suspense better than film.[37] Both Vaage and Nannicelli discuss the very same emotion in the very same series, yet neither are talking about quite the same thing. Where Nannicelli focuses on suspense as a globally-sustained narrative response, Vaage chiefly focuses on the more local effect of suspense sequences. The fuzziness of the concept re-emerges. We may instead identify and compare what unifies these accounts, namely, that suspense is characterised as gripping, thrilling, and pleasurable, qualities which are emphasised by both the style and narrative structure of *Breaking Bad*. Arguably, an important function of suspense in television series is to draw viewers back for the next episode with the prospect of more suspenseful set pieces or showing what happens next. Suspense in *Breaking Bad* thus pulls us in; first and foremost, it is exciting. But narrative dread in *Better Call Saul* offers no such frisson. The fact that dread involves knowing a future story outcome with certainty and knowing it is bad means that it becomes more distancing, less exciting, and less pleasurable than suspense.

The way in which narrative dread has been formulated also entails that it is diminished upon re-watching a series like *Better Call Saul*. I am happy to accept that this is the case. Once we have more precise knowledge, some of its intensity will be dispelled. This is not to say entirely removed, though. I suggest that narrative dread still exists upon re-watching because we remain cognisant that the narrative *must* culminate in a negative outcome and we must re-experience that outcome, even though we have slightly more knowledge of this eventuality. I will also accept from my formulation that it is reasonably uncommon for it to be intentionally elicited. This is because,

first, it requires reasonably specific conditions and, second, it inhibits engaging with a fiction and its characters in straightforwardly pleasurable ways, something which most popular fictions aspire to avoid.

Dreading the future

I have defined and conceptualised narrative dread as a global emotional response that accounts for situations in which viewers anticipate negative outcomes that will occur over the duration of a narrative. The specific sense of unease that this creates is not fully captured by existing emotional terms that are used for discussing engagement with visual narratives. Furthermore, the temporality, duration, and long-form narration of contemporary television series makes it particularly well-equipped to elicit this response. Though I have focused here on introducing narrative dread and considering a case where it is a product of intended foreknowledge, there is plenty more to consider in greater detail, such as other possible cases, the emotion's general character, and its complex relationship with suspense.

Author

David W R Brown is an Assistant Lecturer and PhD candidate in Film Studies at the University of Kent. His doctoral thesis adopts a 'cognitive cultural' approach to analyse the representation of faces and facial expression in narrative cinema. Beyond this, he has research interests in character engagement, contemporary television, and emotion.

References

- Allen, R. 'Hitchcock and narrative suspense' in *Camera obscura, Camera lucida: Essays in honor of Annette Michelson*, edited by R. Allen and M. Turvey. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003: 163-182.
- Berns, G.S., Chappelow, J., Cekic, M., Zink, C.F., Pagnoni, G., and Martin-Skurski, M.E. 'Neurobiological Substrates of Dread', *Science*, Vol. 312, May 2006: 754-758.
- Bordwell, D. *Narration in the fiction film*. London: Methuen, 1985.
- Carroll, N. *Engaging the moving image*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.
- 'Narrative Closure', *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 135, No. 1, May 2007: 1-15.
- *The philosophy of horror, or, paradoxes of the heart*. London: Routledge, 1990.

- . *Theorizing the moving image*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Currie, G. 'Narrative desire' in *Passionate views: Film, cognition, and emotion*, edited by C. Plantinga and G.M. Smith. New York: John Hopkins University Press, 1999: 183-199.
- Frederick, S., Loewenstein, G., and O'Donoghue, T. 'Time Discounting and Time Preference: A Critical Review', *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol. 40, June 2002: 351-401.
- Freeland, C. 'Horror and art-dread' in *The horror film*. London: Rutgers University Press, 2004: 189-205.
- Frijda, N.H. *The emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- García, A.N. *Emotions in contemporary TV series*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016.
- Gilligan, V. 'Vince Gilligan on *Better Call Saul*: "We dread the future as much as the fans do"', *The Guardian*, 14 July 2017: www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/jul/14/vince-gilligan-on-better-call-saul-we-dread-the-future-as-much-as-the-fans-do (accessed 2 February 2019).
- Grubb, B. 'The Time Has Come To Worry About Kim Wexler On "Better Call Saul"', *Uproxx*, 6 March 2017: www.uproxx.com/tv/better-call-saul-kim-wexler (accessed 2 February 2019).
- Hanich, J. *Cinematic emotion in horror films and thrillers: The aesthetic paradox of pleasurable fear*. London: Routledge, 2010.
- . 'Judge Dread: What we are Afraid of When we are Scared at the Movies', *Projections*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Winter 2014: 26-49.
- Harrison, M. '*Better Call Saul*: What next for its characters?', *Den of Geek*, 8 November 2018: www.denofgeek.com/uk/tv/better-call-saul/61672/better-call-saul-what-next-for-its-characters (accessed 2 February 2019).
- Korsmeyer, C. *Savoring disgust: The foul and the fair in aesthetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Mittell, J. *Complex TV: The poetics of contemporary television storytelling*. New York: New York University Press, 2015.
- Nannicelli, T. *Appreciating the art of television: A philosophical perspective*. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Plantinga, C. *Moving viewers: American film and the spectator's experience*. London: University of California Press, 2009.
- Smith, G.M. 'Local emotions, global moods' in *Passionate views: Film, cognition, and emotion*, edited by C. Plantinga and G.M. Smith. New York: John Hopkins University Press, 1999: 103-126.
- Smith, M. *Engaging characters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- . *Film, art, and the third culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Smith, S. *Hitchcock: Suspense, humour and tone*. London: British Film Institute, 2000: 16-49.
- Smuts, A. 'Art and Negative Affect', *Philosophy Compass*, Vol. 4, No. 1, January 2009: 39-55.
- Story, G.W., Vlaev, I., Seymour, B., Winston, J.S., Darzi, A., and Dolan, R.J. 'Dread and the Disvalue of Future Pain', *PLOS Computational Biology*, Vol. 9, No. 11, November 2013: 1-18.
- Vaage, M.B. *The antihero in American television*. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Zoladz, L. 'Don't Kill Kim: In Praise of the Best Part About "Better Call Saul"', *The Ringer*, 6 August 2018: www.theringer.com/tv/2018/8/6/17654908/better-call-saul-kim-wexler-rhea-seehorn-amc-breaking-bad (accessed 2 February 2019).

Notes

- [1] Carroll 2003, p. 61.
- [2] Smith 2017, p. 198.
- [3] Plantinga 2009, p. 5.
- [4] See Bordwell 1985.
- [5] García 2016, p. 2.
- [6] Nannicelli 2016, p. 68.

- [7] See Frederick & Loewenstein & O'Donoghue 2002.
- [8] Story & Vlaev & Seymour & Winston & Darzi & Dolan 2013, p. 1.
- [9] Frijda 1986, pp. 69-72
- [10] Ibid., pp. 2-6.
- [11] The terms extrinsic and intrinsic norms are from Bordwell 1985, pp. 149-155.
- [12] Carroll 1990, p. 42.
- [13] Freeland 2004, p. 193
- [14] Ibid.
- [15] Ibid., p. 192.
- [16] Hanich 2014, p. 46.
- [17] Hanich 2010, pp. 155-201.
- [18] Ibid.
- [19] Smith 1999, p. 115.
- [20] Ibid., p. 113.
- [21] Plantinga 2009, pp. 71-72.
- [22] Gilligan 2017 (emphasis added).
- [23] I follow the definition of alignment from Smith 1995.
- [24] See Grubb 2017; Harrison 2018; Zoladz 2018.
- [25] Korsmeyer 2011, p. 113.
- [26] Currie 1999, p. 184.
- [27] Ibid., p. 188.
- [28] Ibid., p. 191.
- [29] Cf. Carroll 1990.
- [30] Mittell 2015, p. 17.
- [31] The term 'macro questions' is from Carroll 2007, p. 5.
- [32] Smuts 2009, p. 45.
- [33] See Carroll 1996; Smith 2000; Allen 2003.
- [34] Hanich 2010, p. 201.
- [35] Ibid., pp. 204-205.
- [36] Vaage 2016, pp. 64-89
- [37] Nannicelli 2016, pp. 73-77.