Nostalgic Tele-Visions: Male Nostalgia and Failure in Contemporary Quality TV

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Abstract

The first decade of the twenty-first century saw a proliferation of masculine-centred dramas within US television labelled under the discursive rhetoric of 'Quality TV'. This thesis takes four such series: *The Sopranos, Mad Men, Breaking Bad* and *Boardwalk Empire.* Through a study of nostalgia as an affective mood and a stylistic mode, this thesis posits that these four series all feature male nostalgia as a constitutive component. These four series all approach male nostalgia differently, both in its affective and stylistic dimensionalities but they ultimately demonstrate how male nostalgia poses a rupture to culturally normative ideals of white masculinities. I argue that nostalgia, most commonly conceived of as conservative and apolitical, here exposes the failure inherent within what Raewyn Connell terms 'hegemonic masculinity'. Male nostalgia emerges as a result of the repressive dictums of hegemonic masculinity, in particular, it is a rupture of the unemotional facade of masculinised affective display. Given that emotions are performative and are constitutive components of gendered subjectivity, the male nostalgic is thus a 'failed' masculine subject in relation to the discursive construction of white masculinities. While male nostalgia can be productive in exposing and unpacking this notion of failure, the Quality TV form largely legitimates its claim to 'quality' through perpetuating patriarchal taste cultures. In particular, melodrama is effaced for its feminising potential. The emotionality upon which male nostalgia is hinged becomes subsumed within masculinist discourses that promote 'prestige', which curtails the affectively disruptive potential of male nostalgia.

Declaration

I certify that:

1. The thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD
2. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used
3. The thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of bibliographies and appendices.

Grace Torcasio, 2019.

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Introduction

Over the past twenty years, 'quality' or 'prestige' TV has come to stand as an accepted and recognisable genre of televisual drama in the United States. Although using 'quality' as a signifier for a certain style of televisual dramatic production has a history that predates the scope of this thesis, this era of Quality TV came to prominence through association with pay cable network HBO but expanded to basic cable and more recently, the original programming units of video-on-demand services such as Netflix and Amazon. The term Quality TV encapsulates a number of things. It is a means of categorising 'serious' dramas with controversial adult themes that often deal with immorality and illegality It is also a means of discussing a specific approach to televisual style facilitated by high definition technologies and post-Fordist production models. It is simultaneously also a marker of artistry in the medium and a valorisation of certain forms of programming, a discursive term purportedly signifying the very best that it has to offer.

In my casual viewing of these incarnations of Quality TV, what strikes me is how the medium of television, long critiqued for an apparent focus on female-centric pleasures was in a process of legitimation whereby the separation of television as 'art' from mass programming was achieved through masculinisation. As television scholar Avi Santo writes:

> HBO's series seem remarkably preoccupied with exploring white, middle-class anxieties…It is possible that HBO's thematic emphasis deliberately situates it in opposition to the perceived feminisation of the networks through the habitual 're-marking' of the masculinity of its series. (34)

In particular, HBO and the other networks that have followed their production strategies following the success of *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), repeatedly featured male protagonists in highly masculinised narrative worlds. Not only has legitimation been sought through reference to masculinity, but in particular, an exploration of the tensions and shifting paradigms within hegemonic masculinity is evident. While television programs are foremost commodities and thus the focus on troubled men is explained most obviously as tactic to target desirable audiences—in this case, white middle-class men—this is an inadequate

explanation for the critical signification of the preponderance of this trope. In particular, what has struck me is not so much that these men are 'bad' or 'troubled' but the frequent recourse to nostalgia in their characterisation and the aesthetics within which they are portrayed. What my analysis demonstrates is that the incorporation of stylistic and narrative elements congruent with the current understanding of Quality TV means that these series dwell on nostalgia narratively, in characterisation and themes and aesthetically, through the invocation of the past as style. These centralise around a gendered ideal of nostalgia, which I describe as nostalgic masculinity. While individually these series indicate the potential for nostalgia to be used as a critical tool rather than the predominant assumption that it is an inherently conservative framework, in actuality the predominance of this trope as shorthand for televisual 'quality' not only is predicated on gendered hierarchies of taste, but frustrates any critical potentiality. The result of this is that these series actually work towards reinforcing gender hegemony rather than destabilising it.

While this thesis focuses on nostalgic masculinity in contemporary Quality TV, this is not to suggest that there is no history of this form of nostalgia on television or cinema, or that other similiar iterations do not exist alongside this current form. While not focusing on nostalgic masculinity, popular television drama series of the 2010s *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016-) and *The Marvellous Mrs Maisel* (Amazon Prime Video, 2017-) are two period dramas, set in the 1980s and 1950s respectively, that demonstrate a broader televisual landscape where nostalgia exists in a multitude of permeations. Similarly, an influx of 'reboots' of popular television series, such as soap operas *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-89; The CW, 2017-) and *Dallas* (CBS 1978-91; TNT 2012-14), the comedy-drama series *Gilmore Girls* (The WB, 2000-2006; The CW, 2007*)* styled as *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (Netflix 2016) and the sitcom *Will & Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006; 2017-) are a small selection of remakes within the past decade that do not focus on nostalgic masculinity but nevertheless exist in the same televisual landscape that the male nostalgia dramas occupy. The influx of these reboots is a byproduct of the post-Fordist strategies that initated the growth of the current incarnation of Quality TV—with more content needed to fill the increasing array of channels and streaming services, series with established fanbases are less of a financial risk than producing entirely new content. *Breaking Bad* itself has expanded the parameters of its universe with the prequel spin-off series *Better Call Saul* (AMC, 2015 -) and the epilogue film *El Camino: A* Breaking Bad *Movie* (Gilligan, 2019). Again, such strategies are certainly not

unique but do indicate that the male nostalgia dramas I analyse sit within a wider landscape of nostalgic TV.

This thesis is focused on men and masculinities. All of the examples I am analysing are cis-gendered men but I acknowledge that both masculinity and the category of 'men' are not contingent upon being assigned male at birth or reducible to a biological essence. Rather, gender is socially and discursively constructed and enacted through and onto bodies. It is both a product of discourse, norms and power, on the one hand and lived experience, bodies and emotions on the other. Kalle Berggren's formulation of 'sticky masculinity' following Sara Ahmed's use of 'sticky impressions' is insightful here:

> Bodies culturally read as "men" are oriented toward the culturally established signs of "masculinity", such as hardness or violence. The repeated sticking together of certain bodies and signs in this way is what creates masculine subjectivity. This is always a contested, variable and uncertain process, but one in which the repeated enactment of masculinity tends to be sticky and naturalized. (245)

Such an account of masculinity acknowledges that it is not essentialised or intrinsic to masculinised bodies and that it is simultaneously both a discursive and corporeal phenomenon.

Robert J. Thompson claims that the Quality drama of the 1990s "has become a genre in itself, complete with its own set of formulaic characteristics" (*Television's* 16). Following Thompson, I engage with Quality Television both discursively and as a descriptive term. It refers to a set of qualities that seek to define a form of television in opposition to standard television programming (that which we assume, perhaps erroneously, is not quality), but has now come to be an established means by which televisual storytelling takes place. The 'Quality Television' moniker therefore is always both intertwined with discourses of taste and judgement and also a commonly understood descriptive category used to refer to a set of formal characteristics that come to be considered as the culturally agreed upon benchmark for 'quality' in the medium at a given moment in time. Although such usage of the term must acknowledge that it is also used as a means for referring to a current cultural

benchmark of 'prestige' and 'quality', 'Quality Television' also refers to a specific form of television drama which, despite not being the predominant form of television drama, certainly has significant cultural cachet. The use of 'Quality TV' throughout this thesis primarily refers to contemporary (produced within the last twenty years), fictional dramatic programming that is serialised, has high production values and a concordant emphasis on visual style, complex narratives and is commonly centred on a male protagonist.

As Taylor Nyggard and Jorie Lagerwey argue, this signification of Quality TV, one taken up both in the popular and scholarly press, has seen a shift away from the feminist impetus of the discipline of television studies (107). As the authors write, "HBO aggressively distanced itself from TV's historically feminized and mass-oriented pleasures" in an attempt to legitimise and valorise their programming as televisual artistry so as to appeal to affluent audience-cum-subscribers (107). While the majority of programming on television is undoubtedly the type of mass-market entertainment that attracted television studies scholars to the medium in the first place, there has been a wealth of scholarly interest in the Quality TV era. The Quality TV canon, established both through the intense popular media interest in these televisual dramas as well as the concentration of scholarship on this form of programming, is one marked almost without exclusion, by the presence and focus upon middle-class white male protagonists.[1]

In her work in the 1980s on MTM 'quality television', Jane Feuer argued that "quality TV is liberal TV" ("The MTM Style" 356). These series engage with a liberal consciousness in order to establish their reputation as exemplars of televisual artistry, in line with the educated, urban, affluent demographic that networks seek to target. Liberalism is an established feature of distinction for both cinema and television and thus comes as no surprise that the contemporary iteration of Quality TV tends to incorporate liberal sensibilities into its representations and themes, while still remaining, for the large part, tenured in what we might consider an un-reconstructed, white, middle-class, masculine worldview.

It is this association between Quality TV, liberalism and the preponderance of (white, middle-class, heterosexual) male protagonists that was at the origin of this thesis. Within a form that decrees itself not only as 'prestige' but as adopting at least an exteriority of

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[1] Nygaard and Lagerway also point out that it is often male media critics writing in the popular press who perpetuate a masculine taste culture by highlighting and praising male-centered series as 'quality' or 'prestige' television and male showrunners as televisual 'auteurs' (107).

progressive politics, how can it be that there has been such a prevalence of the male nostalgic trope? With popular critics decreeing that we are experiencing a "golden age" of TV, perhaps it is unsurprising that nostalgia has been a common thematic of contemporary television.[2] Such a demarcation, even if associated with the present, prompts the kind of thinking associated with nostalgia.

In this thesis I examine the following four television series that span a period of fifteen years: *The Sopranos* (HBO 1999-2007); *Mad Men* (AMC 2007-2015); *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008-2014) and *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO 2010-2014).[3] All of these series have been discursively labelled as exemplars of the Quality TV genre within the popular press and all were either produced by pay cable network HBO, or basic cable network AMC. With two series (*Mad Men* and *Boardwalk Empire*) period dramas set in the 1960s and 1920s-30s respectively, the other two dramas are set in a contemporary present. All four series are sutured around the viewpoints of white, middle-class male protagonists.

These case studies were chosen from a wider pool of potential candidates which fit into the timeframe of this thesis. Series that were initially considered for inclusion included *Dexter* (FX 2006-2013), *The Wire* (HBO 2002-2008), *The Shield* (FX 2002-2008), *Sons of Anarchy* (Showtime 2008-2014), *Deadwood* (HBO 2004-2006) and *True Detective* (HBO 2013-). These series were all chosen for potential inclusion as they fufilled the criteria of Quality TV that I use in this thesis and were targets of popular and critical acclaim when I commenced this project in 2013. While there are numerous other Quality TV dramas that could have been considered, I was interested in examining male-centred series that focus on what Brett Martin has termed "difficult men", ambiguous morally conflicted protagonists associated primarily with HBO or 'HBO-style' television. The larger ensemble-based cast of *The Wire* and the anthology format of *True Detective* excluded these series from inclusion as they did not conform to the scope of the project, to examine long-form serial television series that feature singular protagonists. *The Sopranos, Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* were perhaps the most well known exemplars of this trope which was a primary consideration for inclusion

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[2] See, for example, Brett Martin's book *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Revolution* and Alan Sepinwall's *The Revolution Was Televised.*

[3] For example, British newspaper *The Guardian* listed *The Sopranos, Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* at 1, 3 and 5 respectively in their September 2019 article "The 100 Best TV Shows of the 21st Century". Similarly, *Rolling Stone* magazine listed *The Sopranos* at 1, *Breaking Bad* at 3 and *Mad Men* at 5 in their 2015 list of "100 Greatest TV Shows of All Time".

in this project and given that these series are produced by two networks, HBO and AMC, other potential choices were excluded to maintain consistency. The final case study text, *Boardwalk Empire*, was included for its relationship with the other texts—its similarity to *The Sopranos* in terms of both being HBO productions and numerous personnel working on both series and that similar to *Mad Men* it is a period piece. The decision to include two series set in contemporary periods and two period series was made so as to examine whether nostalgic masculinity is a trope present beyond period dramas. One would perhaps expect nostalgic masculinity to be more likely to be present in a period drama given that they use the past to comment on the present. As I argue that nostalgic masculinity does not need to be overt in that it does not need to be a direct theme of the narrative or characterisation there is value in studying it beyond the period drama to consider the similarities in its treatment between dramas set in the present and those set in the past.

In this thesis I analyse the recurring presence of male nostalgia. I use the terms 'nostalgic masculinity' and 'male nostalgia' interchangeably throughout to refer to a phenomenon in which these male characters display nostalgia linked either to a desire for, or their enactment of hegemonic masculinity. My thesis is formed around two interrelated research questions: a) how is the male nostalgic trope depicted? and b) how is nostalgia utilised in relation to hegemonic masculinities? This thesis demonstrates the way these series all meditate on the negotiations and tensions within hegemonic masculinities through recourse to nostalgia. This nostalgia contains within it an image of an idealised masculinity existing as a spectral image that haunts each of the protagonists. From the sustained comparative analysis that I provide it becomes evident that while each case study may appear to offer an example of a text that explores processes of fragmentation and uncertainty in relation to dominant masculinities, the progressive potentiality of male nostalgia is severely restricted when these series are studied together.

The argument of this thesis is that the nostalgic masculinity evident within these series is inextricably linked with hegemonic masculinity. The texts I examine all feature male protagonists in a position of hegemonic masculinity who are unable to sustain it by the conclusion of the series. I understand nostalgia in this thesis on two levels. One is nostalgia as an affective mode and the other as an aesthetic tone, the difference between what Paul Grainge theorises as nostalgia as a 'mood' and as a 'mode'. Nostalgia in its affective register is connected to emotionality, it is a display of gendered emotion for men for whom control

over their emotions is a key component of their assumed power. In all of the texts the protagonists valorise a lack of emotional expression in line with culturally sanctioned gendered displays of emotion, where stoicism is a key trait of hegemonic masculinity. De Boise and Hearn summarise the logic stemming behind this succinctly, writing:

> white, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied, men's (WHAMs') privileges stem from their adherence to forms of rationality based on a persistent 'control' or repression of emotions…linking WHAMs' personal perceptions of emotional 'control' to a Cartesian separation between mind, responsible for 'rational' action and body, responsible for 'irrational' action. (781)

As these authors contend, this repression of emotions is a product of socialisation (as are all gendered identities and behaviours) and work to support the maintenance of patriarchy. I acknowledge here that emotions are socially constructed in relation to gender and also that emotions themselves are subject to disciplinary regulation that preferences white heteropatriarchal capitalist culture. Following Sara Ahmed's argument that "attention to emotions allows us to address the question of how subjects become *invested* in particular structures such that their demise is felt as a kind of a living death", here nostalgia is used as a means of examining the nature of investment in hegemonic masculinity and the consequences of its failure (12, emphasis in original). My contention is, therefore, that nostalgia acts almost akin to a leakage—trying to suppress emotion leads it to overflow into a reverie for an imagined past. This past tells us important ideas about masculinity, both in terms of what the nostalgic covets and what inspires the nostalgia. Male nostalgia is nostalgic masculinity not just because it is a male who is nostalgic, but because nostalgia in all these texts is gendered, it is linked to the sacrifices and psychic consequences of hegemonic masculinity.

In this thesis I delineate between two modalities of male nostalgia. The first modality is found within series (*The Sopranos*; *Mad Men*) that explicitly engage with nostalgia as a structuring thematic, as something that directly informs the performance of masculinity for the series's protagonist. The second modality is more subtle, involving the evocation of

nostalgia through genre within the characterisation of the male nostalgic (*Breaking Bad*; *Boardwalk Empire*). These two modalities are found within the series I examine regardless of whether they are period dramas or set in a contemporary present. I also closely analyse, however, how the period drama constructs nostalgia as a potential spectatorial mode, as a viewing position through which we access the series. While this does not directly affect the male nostalgic figure per se, it does orient the spectator towards a position that makes the critical potential of nostalgia more evident.

Nostalgic masculinity throughout is conceived of as an affective response although it will be analysed using narrative and textual analysis. As my analysis demonstrates, nostalgic masculinity surfaces in differing forms throughout the various texts I examine. As I discussed above, in some texts nostalgia is a conscious theme and in others it is evoked or referenced without being part of the diegesis. Regardless of this, nostalgic masculinity surfaces as an affective response, it is a direct byproduct of feelings of failure in regards to emotional dictums of idealised masculinities. Nostalgic masculinity is a form of oblique emotion. It is built from a desire to repress emotion and at its non-discursive, affective level is a response to failure. Given that the emotional regime that these men follow preferences repression, the affective response is then channeled into nostalgia. This manifests through the actions and expressions of the protagonists of each text, relational to the narrative worlds in which they are situated. As such textual analysis offers a useful tool in order to examine both the expressions of nostalgic masculinity contained in each text and the situations that prompt it.

Given the relative lack of studies of masculinities within media studies comparative to those concerned with femininities, there is need for critical studies that examine the shifting depictions of masculinity in popular television. Although recent trends in televisual programming signal that perhaps the male nostalgic trope has been exhausted, it has been the dominant means of connoting quality and prestige in the medium for two decades and while there has been a wealth of discussions in popular media, there is still sparse academic literature that provides analysis of these series within a wider contextual framework. R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, devised in the early 1990s, still stands in masculinity studies as a dominant theoretical frame by which to explore the relationships between masculinity, normativity and power. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity as the culturally exalted form of masculinity at a given time, that which "embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (*Masculinities* 77). Fictional

characters from popular media texts can serve as important 'fantasy' figures for the maintenance of masculine hegemony. While each series varies in historical and cultural context, applying Connell's theory provides a means of examining nostalgia as a recuperative factor by which men attempt to negotiate, reclaim and build a sense of identity in a world of shifting gender scripts where patriarchal masculinities are constantly under challenge.

While I refer to 'male nostalgia' and 'nostalgic masculinity' throughout, it is important to specify that this is a *white* male nostalgia. All of the series I examine secure masculine hegemony through the supremacy of whiteness while still claiming a position of marginality through proximity to ethnic and/or racial minorities. For example, in *The Sopranos,* although Tony is a white American he is also ethnicised as an Italian American; in *Boardwalk Empire* Nucky is Irish American in the early twentieth century, not long after the absorption of the Irish into definitions of whiteness in the mid-nineteenth century.[4] *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* both present protagonists who exist alongside and in clear superiority over, African American and Latinx characters respectively. This proximity to 'otherness' paradoxically allows the male nostalgic subject to operate, as Richard Dyer states of whiteness more broadly, as "the norm, the ordinary, the standard" who are not explicitly racialised "*as* whites but as people who are variously gendered, sexualised and abled" (3, emphasis in original). The ethnicities of Don Draper and Walter White, as white Anglo Americans, is not explicated upon within their respective diegeses, rather operating as the invisible norm. While whiteness is key to the operation of masculine hegemony, claims to marginality through ethnicity or proximity to people of colour, even when this positionality clearly supports white supremacy, operates as a form of victimhood that further besieges the male nostalgic. As Casey Ryan Kelly writes, "white masculinity is maintained by laying claim to both hegemony and victimization, a delicate performance that would appear difficult to sustain where core contradictions are embodied in the same subject" (162-3).

Nostalgia has shifted over time from originally being a diagnostic term used in relation to soldiers experiencing symptoms associated with homesickness, to describe a sensibility, a means of thinking about the past. The term was coined in 1688 by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer combining the Greek words *nostos* meaning "return to the native land" and *algos* meaning suffering or grief (Atia and Davies 182). Atia and Davies write, "once a pressing

[4] Noel Ignatiev argues that the move towards whiteness was a means for Irish immigrants to gain social advantage, particularly over African Americans (3).

individual demand, nostalgia has increasingly come to indicate a condition of generalized longing, its indefinable and half-pleasant yearning a defining characteristic of the postmodern age" (182). The porosity of this understanding of nostalgia is of value to my research as it considers a wide encompassing set of attitudes, feelings and sentiments towards and about 'the past'. Kimberley Smith echoes this sentiment, writing that nostalgia is "a particular way of ordering and interpreting the various ideas, feeling and associations we experience when thinking of the past" (509). Throughout this thesis I use Svetlana Boym's work on nostalgia as articulated in her 2001 book *The Future of Nostalgia* as a primary framework to examine male nostalgia. Although Boym's work is primarily concerned with nostalgia in post-communist cities, her conceptualisation of nostalgia stresses its affective dimensions as a desire for coherency, a "longing for continuity in a fragmented world" (xiv). In particular, Boym stresses that nostalgia is a temporal phenomenon—"a yearning for a different time" (xv). I note this as a point of emphasis as time and temporality are crucial to television. As Paul Booth writes, "temporal complexity" is a prevalent feature of contemporary televisual dramas (371). The serial nature of the series that I examine means that they are embedded with a narrative memory, one that references and echoes past moments and thus the experience of watching these series is nostalgic, always premised on the longing of return.

As I have mentioned above, I examine nostalgia in this thesis both affectively and aesthetically, informed by Grainge's differentiation between nostalgia as a "mode" and "mood". As Grainge argues, the relationship between these two modalities is not absolute, a series that articulates nostalgia as a representational strategy does not necessarily affect how nostalgia manifests affectively, where it is largely concerned with notions of loss, absence and longing. Although my primary interest is in affective nostalgia, I consider both types of nostalgia throughout this thesis. This is as I recognise that gender is both corporeal and embodied as well as discursive. It is something that we do through and with our bodies but the process of making gender a material reality is also a product of discourse and signification. As such, I am interested not only in what the male nostalgic protagonists do and say as means of signifying gender but how the diegetic universes of their series construct realities that highlight certain nostalgic sensibilities (which, given that I am interested in nostalgic masculinity are always also gendered) and thus promote or curtail particular viewing positions.

In this thesis I write a great deal about emotions. Indeed, emotionality is the key paradigm around which male nostalgia centres. It is not my interest here to discuss what emotions are or how they come to be, thus I am eschewing psychological or sociological perspectives on the topic. I have instead turned to the work of affect theorists for the ability to consider the relations between power, subjectivity and emotion. As Athanasiou et al. summarise, "the notion of affect bears the connotations of bodily intensity and dynamism that energies the forces of sociality. It cannot be thought outside the complexities, reconfigurations and interarticulations of power" (6). In Sara Ahmed's work in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* she argues that emotions are cultural practices, not psychological states and that emotions are performative: emotions shape the surfaces of bodies through the repetitions of actions and through orientations towards and against others (4). Bodies are given value through emotions and form communities based around this emotional orientation which in the process marginalises others. Her work is also grounded in a reminder that the Cartesian split has seen emotion relegated to beneath the faculties of thought and reason: "To be emotional is to have one's judgement affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous" (Ahmed 3). This split works of course to subordinate the feminine and the bodily—emotions are associated with women who are seen as less able to transcend their bodies through rational thought.

As such emotions have a gendered-discursive 'value', that is, that the emotionality/rationality divide serves a role in the maintenance of power relations benefitting the masculine. I argue that male nostalgia emerges as a response to the demands of culturally idealised ways of doing masculinity, encapsulated in the term 'hegemonic masculinity'. This nostalgia represents the repressive elements of hegemonic masculinity through its excess of emotion. I acknowledge here that all individuals experience emotion. I am not trying to posit that masculine subjects experience emotions less than feminine subjects as such thinking would run risk of positing gender as an essentialised aspect of the self. Similarly, I am not trying to posit that some emotions are 'good' or 'bad', or that emotional display is particularly progressive or has the capacity to transform power relations. To cite Ahmed :

> *Hardness is not the absence of emotion, but a different emotional orientation towards others.* The hard white body is shaped by its

> reactions: the rage against others surfaces as a body that stands apart or keeps its distance from others. (4, emphasis in original)

My interest here therefore is not in arguing that the male nostalgic experiences emotions, that much is self-evident. Rather, my focus is on what these emotions *do* in relation to the cultural demands of white masculinities. If we take male nostalgia as an emotional experience and emotions are performative and constitutive of gendered subjectivity, I posit that the male nostalgic is a failed masculine subject. This failure serves as a rupture to the standards of normative masculinities, but given the structural power inherent in Connell's formulation, a rupture does not equate to a challenge in the gender order.

There is an evident contradiction which is central to my argument throughout this thesis. While I envision nostalgia as containing a critical potentiality and argue that it does not need necessarily to only be thought of as a regressive device, there is nonetheless a conservative agenda at play within the Quality TV dramas I examine. This contradiction allows for series that provide the exteriority of liberal politics. On a visual and aesthetic level these series may indeed evoke nostalgia in critical, reflexive ways that evoke the complexities of processes of memory, longing and loss. Yet their reliance on masculinist ideals of quality, even within the context of narratives that appear to contest or challenge such formulations, ultimately precludes and limits their progressive potentiality.

Chapter Outline

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter is a literature review, followed by four chapters, structured chronologically, which each examine a different case study. The final chapter focuses on the male nostalgic dramas as a whole and includes discussion of a number of the series already examined. The four case study chapters are divided into two sections: the first section focuses on affective nostalgia and the second on nostalgic form. The sections on affective nostalgia study personal nostalgic sentiments within characterisation and how these interplay with broader nostalgic themes and tendencies within the diegesis. The sections on nostalgic form examine elements which fall under a wide umbrella of 'formal qualities' of the respective texts including *mise en scène,* genre, intertextuality and setting. Although these elements all influence the narrative they have been

examined in a separate category in order to develop a comprehensive analysis of the aesthetics of the nostalgic Quality drama.

Chapter One discusses key theoretical texts that inform my thesis throughout multiple disciplines including gender studies, television studies and studies of nostalgia. Here I set out the framework within which I undertake my analysis of nostalgic masculinity. Firstly I outline some of the extant literature on Quality TV in order to situate my study within an established framework of television scholars. I provide an overview of Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity which, as I have mentioned above, is a predominant framework in critical studies on men and masculinities. Connell's work also provides a fruitful means of studying the relationship between gender dynamics and power by pluralising masculinities and focusing on the hierarchical structuring of the gender order. Connell's theory focuses on structural power, that is, power, status and prestige are accessed in accordance with one's ability to adhere to, resist, or reject hegemonic masculinity. The case studies I examine all feature men whom have access, at one point in their series, to this structural power, yet in their lived experiences of masculinity often do not feel empowered. Given that I argue that nostalgia is a product of hegemonic masculinity, I also discuss theoretical approaches on nostalgia, particularly focusing on Boym's modalities of 'reflexive' and 'restorative' nostalgia. This delineation of nostalgia as two different modalities is important for understanding what male nostalgia does in the series I examine. Boym's work on nostalgia provides a framework in which I can consider the concept as both a form of longing and loss for a lost past and a more conservative desire for restoration of the past.

Chapter Two introduces the first of the four case studies. *The Sopranos* (HBO 1999-2007) serves as something of a template for the Quality Television dramas, being the originator from which the conventions of the Quality Television drama have formed. This chapter provides an overview of the male nostalgic trope through an analysis of Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) as a paradigmatic exemplar. Tony's mourning of the loss of the "strong silent type" of masculinity of his father's generation places him in a clearly nostalgic relationship with the past. Tony's reverie for the past is shown to be a romanticised illusion through his constant inability to live up to this exalted form of masculinity. This chapter provides an outline of the male nostalgia in reference to Boym's work on nostalgia. As hegemony in gender identities is unstable and vulnerable to shifts in power dynamics, hegemonic masculinity turns to the (imagined) past to provide itself with a perceived ancestry

and lineage. The work of scholars such as Suzanne Cokal, Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, Cindy Donatelli and Sharon Alward, Martha Nochimson and Katherine Hyumni Lee, who have all argued for the show to be understood as a feminist intervention into the patriarchal tradition of the gangster genre, will be discussed in support of my argument and analysis.

I argue in this chapter that male nostalgia in *The Sopranos* is linked with the figure of Gary Cooper and with cultural ideals of mafia men espoused in Hollywood cinema. The series undercuts this affective nostalgia through its stylistic nostalgia which underscores the impossibility of Tony's longing by exposing the myths of the gangster genre. Key to this argument is a consideration of the series's use of postmodern devices, in particular its intertextuality and reworking of the myths of the gangster genre.

Chapter Three examines AMC's *Mad Men* (2007-2015). *Mad Men* is the first of two period dramas to be examined in this thesis. Set in a 1960s New York advertising agency, *Mad Men* follows creative director Don Draper (Jon Hamm) throughout the course of the decade. *Mad Men* provides a dually focused treatment of nostalgia—Don mourns his childhood and the sacrifices entailed in his reinvention as Don Draper, while at the same time by virtue of being set in the 1960s, the series constructs its aesthetic register to be read as nostalgic. This dual level of nostalgic play is examined most closely in relation to season one's episode "The Wheel". In this episode Don pitches a slide show called 'The Carousel' for Kodak, using a collection of images of his own family accompanied by a speech extolling the virtues of nostalgic longing.

In this chapter I argue that male nostalgia arises as an emotional response to the demands of hegemonic masculinity. Male nostalgia reveals the impossibility of culturally valorised modes of white masculinity as we watch Don come undone, yet the series always recuperates this back in to the dominant. Male nostalgia here is linked to failure but that failure can always be ameliorated. As a period drama, the work of Frederic Jameson on postmodern nostalgia in the "nostalgia film" is also used as he provides a comprehensive exploration of the politics at play in the visual representation of the past. Jameson's work is crucial as the leading theorist in these debates and here I argue that *Mad Men* does indeed create history as surface style, but this does not necessarily curtail its potentiality.

Chapter Four uses AMC's *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) as its case study, the first of two chapters which examine the modality of implicit nostalgic masculinity, looking at the narrative arc that sees protagonist Walter (Walt) White (Bryan Cranston) transition from a meek high

school chemistry teacher to a powerful and dangerous crystal methamphetamine producer. Walt's gradual shift over the course of the series is heavily gendered—his first foray into drug manufacturing is an attempt to financially provide for his family and rationalises his actions under recourse to a notion of patriarchal provision for the familial unit. Although not a series which outwardly espouses a nostalgic relationship with the past, I argue that *Breaking Bad* exhibits nostalgia in Walt's idolisation of a form of masculinity that informs his desire to 'break bad'. Thus whilst he may not explicitly label a past which he mourns, his behaviour fits the descriptors of nostalgic masculinity as I outline it in chapter two.

My approach to studying *Breaking Bad* is somewhat different to that of the other chapters. This is as the metonymic quality of the series demands that male nostalgia be placed into a sociocultural framework. From this perspective I argue that male nostalgia in the text is linked to broader discourses of 'masculinity in crisis'. Sally Robinson's work on white masculinity in 'crisis' is used for examining the thematic of crisis and uncertainty that is manifest in multiple ways throughout the series. Robinson's work is useful in providing a means to argue against accounts such as Jason Landrum and Brian Faucette who both articulate that the series is premised around a notion of 'reclaiming' masculinity. Instead, following Claire King's argument that hegemonic masculinity is vulnerable and abject and Kirkham and Thumim's assertion of masculinity as fragile and an "impossible ideal", I argue that *Breaking Bad* displays nostalgia for culturally venerated ideals of masculinity located in the Western film genre and notions of masculine 'breadwinning', economic provision for and control over, the family unit.

The second period drama, HBO's *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-2014), is the case study for Chapter Five. Set during the 1920s prohibition in Atlantic City, *Boardwalk* focuses on Nucky Thompson (Steve Buscemi), Atlantic City treasurer, profiteer and bootlegger. *Boardwalk* has faced many of the same criticisms levelled at *Mad Men,* that its creation of a vibrant and lush *mise en scène* and by virtue of its period setting, the series creates an aestheticisation of the historical past, where politics is hollowed out and replaced with endless style. In this chapter I argue that the series consciously creates a glimmer surface appeal, linked with the use of the Atlantic City boardwalk as a liminal site throughout the series, a transitory space between the glamorous facade of the city and the dark machinations that lie beneath. Alongside this conscious engagement with nostalgic period aesthetics, I examine the affective nostalgia of protagonist Nucky Thompson. As with most

of the male nostalgic protagonists, Nucky has a traumatic backstory and a complex relationship with his own father. Nucky displays a form of nostalgic longing similar to that of Don Draper, where he does not wish to actually return to the past but rather dwells in the pain of its memories. This culminates in the final season in flashbacks to Nucky's youth, these temporal incursions providing a fragmented structural form in which to examine the nostalgic logics of Quality Television. I argue that *Boardwalk* makes most evident the element of failure which is constitutive of male nostalgia. The relationship between failure, nostalgia and hegemonic masculinity becomes apparent through the flashback sequences of the final season, as we are taken back to see formative events that simultaneously secure structuralised power yet provide genesis for a nostalgic longing for a rewriting of the past.

This chapter furthers the discussion commenced in Chapter Three in relation to the nostalgia film (or television series) and the politics of nostalgic representation. I argue that *Boardwalk Empire* is both encapsulated by period verisimilitude and a simultaneous fantasy appropriation of the past that is deliberately nostalgic whilst being self-consciously unreal. Appropriating Martha Nochimson's usage of the term "carnival *mise-en-scène*" in her article on the series, I argue that *Boardwalk* creates a past that is very deliberately filtered through the logics of the present (*"Boardwalk"* 30). I draw on Janet McCabe's analysis of the formal features of the pilot episode in which she examines how the episode engages with the legacy of the gangster genre through contemporary high definition technologies. I use McCabe's analysis to expand upon Jason Jacobs' point that *Boardwalk* places in tension an emphasis on period detail with a contemporary sensibility. Jerome DeGroot's work on the "historical gaze" of period dramas is also employed here, as he argues that the excessiveness of visual representation in the period drama produces a past that is always fantastical despite the fastidiousness of attempts to historical verisimilitude.

Chapter Six examines the gendered implications of Quality TV. I argue that Quality TV establishes its prestige on a denunciation of the feminine and, in particular, through a distancing from melodrama. In order to demonstrate this point, I firstly provide a review of literature which connects television with femininity, drawing particularly on the work of Lynne Joyrich. Then, primarily using Linda Williams's work on melodrama, I consider how the male nostalgic dramas contain melodramatic emotional affectation. I also look at the role of serialisation as a fundamental feature of both the Quality TV drama and televisual melodrama. I examine how discourses of auteurship are used to distance Quality TV from

melodrama. The conscious distancing from melodrama as a form associated with emotionality places male nostalgia within the masculinised discourses of Quality TV and, as a result, reduces its disruptive effect.

Chapter One:
Understanding the male nostalgic of Quality TV: literature review and methodology

This chapter maps the theoretical landscape and analytic framework that paves the way for the subsequent case studies. Here I establish a working definition of the male nostalgic as a trope that is connected with power, visibility and privilege. At the core of its identity, however, is nostalgic longing, trauma and feelings of loss. These contradictory factors exhibit a noticeable tension between the structural advantages of patriarchy and its lived individual manifestations. The research in this chapter considers the cultural and industrial precedents that have shaped the emergence of the male nostalgic trope and what the preponderance of these nostalgic men on television illustrates about hegemonic masculinity. As I discuss later in the chapter, I am not suggesting that prior to *The Sopranos* there were no examples of morally conflicted male protagonists on American television, or that male nostalgia has only relevatively recently emerged as a trope. *The Sopranos,* however, heralded the reconstruction of Quality Television to one that is gendered, both predominantly focusing on the complex inner lives of men and as series that are made largely by male 'showrunner'-producers.

This chapter is split into sections which cover the three main components underpinning my thesis. Firstly I review the debates surrounding Quality TV within television studies. I provide a history of usage of the term and consider it both on a discursive level and as referring to a specific form of television production. Then I move to consider theories of masculinity, with particular focus on the concept of hegemonic masculinity and the discourse of 'masculinity in crisis', both of which are central to my formation of male nostalgia. Lastly, I consider work on nostalgia, both scholarship that posits nostalgia as a personal sentiment and arguments surrounding nostalgia in visual representations as a commodification of history.

American 'Quality TV'

This thesis argues that Quality TV is a specific form of television drama that has historical precedent but emerged in the formation specific to my research at the turn of the twenty-first century. While this thesis surveys drama series that mobilise a very specific understanding of Quality TV, this term has a lengthy history. As a medium and cultural form, television has

struggled to be accepted as a legitimate art-form. The term 'Quality TV' has come to stand as an important signifier of the possibility of televisual artistry, a means of legitimation from its status as a low cultural object. In order to be deemed 'worthy' of scholarly and popular attention and praise, the somewhat nebulous category of 'Quality TV' has come to stand as a signifier both of televisual artistry and perhaps more pertinently, as a marker of cultural capital. 'Quality TV' thus works to elevate some programming as worthy and in the process relegates other 'non-quality TV' back to a status of 'trash TV'.

Underpinning many of the arguments surrounding Quality TV as a signifier is Pierre Bourdieu's work on taste as a marker of distinction. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste,* Bourdieu posits that taste distinctions are markers of social class, whereby taste, in Bourdieu's famous quotation, "classifies and it classifies the classifier" (6). Bourdieu argues that capital exists in three forms: economic, cultural and social, with cultural capital including such forms as educational qualifications, bodily comportment and dispositions and taste and knowledge of art forms and cultural products (47). Taste works as a pernicious marker of class in which social identities are produced not just through economic or social circumstances but through aesthetic dispositions and preferences while appearing as naturalised markers of individual identities (Newman and Levine 7). Thus for Bourdieu, social groups maintain boundaries through mobilisation of taste. Applying Bourdieu's ideas to television, Newman and Levine argue that rather than television 'getting better' in recent times, it is the work of cultural elites (including academics) who have legitimated television through an increased investment in the medium, which by consequence separates those programs deemed worthy of praise, those of 'quality' (7-8).

Discussions of 'quality' are well-founded in British television studies, however usage differs from the current quality debates of American dramas. British 'quality' is related to series that engage with 'serious' content, reflective of the public-broadcasting origins of British television, as is clear in Charlotte Brunsdon's article "Problems with Quality". Linked to this, quality is also used as an evaluative criterion in debates around the establishment of a framework in television studies for speaking about "good" televisioln, as can be understood from the work of Brunsdon; Geraghty; Jacobs "Issues"; and Jacobs and Peacock. Comparatively, American 'quality' is connected to ideas of artistic originality and innovation, drawing from the commercial impetus of television within the United States and by

implication, often reinforces a cultural hierarchy that privileges cinema over television by espousing Quality Television as 'cinematic' (Jaramillo "Rescuing Television" 67).

The opposition between Quality TV and 'trash TV' dates back to the history of US television programming in the contrast between the live anthology drama, which was legitimated as quality through its proximity to theatre and the serial drama (Feuer "HBO" 145). In relation to drama series, quality has been associated with MTM Enterprises, responsible for such programs as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS 1970-1977) and *Hill Street Blues* (NBC 1981-1987). Jane Feuer discusses 'the MTM style' as incorporating creative freedom, a distinct corporate identity, innovative visual style evoking cinematic aesthetics, the use of film over video and actors with improvisational experience ("The MTM Style" 32-33). Feuer's usage of the term 'quality' in relation to MTM's programming output is both an evaluative assessment of these series and an acknowledgement of the cultural capital associated with MTM by both producers and audiences. 'Quality' here is both a product of the popular press and related to an industrial shift towards valuing specific demographics over sheer volumes of ratings, targeting affluent, educated and so-called 'quality' audience demographics (Feuer "MTM Enterprises" 3). Carrying Feuer's argument forward to more recent programming, the creation of formally innovative and narratively complex and challenging television is linked to market demographics, an attempt to lure audiences who are disillusioned with mainstream programming.

Robert J. Thompson theorises the 'Quality turn' of American dramas in the 1980s and 1990s as constituting television's second "golden age" in *Television's Second Golden Age*. He argues that series such as *Hill Street Blues* popularised innovative, challenging content and reworked dramatic conventions and narrative styles. Thompson provides a list of criteria for what constitutes a quality program: they are made by 'artist' auteur-directors who have worked in the "classier media" of film and therefore imbue their series with the connotations of artistry; attract well-educated, young urban spectators; are under-appreciated by financially motivated networks; have a large ensemble cast; have a 'memory' to their episodic structures; showcase generic hybridity; feature complex writing; are self-reflexive in acknowledging their status as television series through allusions to popular culture; engage with controversial subject matter; and aspire towards realism (*Television's* 14-15). Despite this list, Thompson acknowledges that the label is relational, stating, "quality TV is best defined by what it is not. It is not 'regular TV'" (*Television's* 13). Quality is thus

placed in opposition to the majority of programming, which is just 'regular' or not worthy of the quality label. Thompson provides a useful list of characteristics that help make sense of the term 'Quality Television' but his celebratory account of the period evokes a formal divide between what is and is not quality.

Sarah Cardwell argues that if we consider Quality Television as a genre it can be classified on the basis of high production values, naturalistic performance styles, recognised and esteemed actors, a meticulous visual style created through careful and innovative camerawork and editing and a sense of aural style through an emphasis on a series's soundtrack (26). Quality TV also imbues a sense of stylistic integrity and is likely to explore 'serious' themes that reflect contemporary society which are deployed by a writer-creator who adds "prestige and a sense of artistic integrity" (Cardwell 26). These elements combine to encourage a level of intense spectatorship and audience appreciation, with the Quality series's complex narrative structures, intricate themes, poetic language and fast-paced style facilitated through creative vision and technical skill reaffirming the necessity for dedicated and active viewing (Cardwell 27). Although, as Elliott Logan points out, while the term 'quality' can signify a relatively coherent grouping of programs as a formal category, it unavoidably involves making an evaluative claim at the same time (147). Quality Television then is both an evaluative and descriptive term, one that describes a set of formal and aesthetic qualities and a means by which to think through how certain programs have attained cultural cachet at a particular point in time (Logan 147). I use the term 'Quality Television' throughout this thesis while acknowledging the impossibility of defining 'quality' and with an awareness of the power relations inherent in the term. As argued by Jason Mittell in *Complex TV*, Quality Television is best understood as a discursive category where the 'quality' program is less a signifier of formal or thematic conventions but rather a marker of prestige catering to audiences that embrace the 'quality' moniker (n.pag.).

While Quality TV has a lengthy history, its current usage is closely linked to shifts in the production and distribution of television in the late 1990s alongside technological and industrial developments. In their chapter "*The Sopranos* as HBO Brand Equity", Rodgers, Epstein and Reeves map out shifts in terms of three eras: TVI (1948-1975), the network/ broadcast era that was mainly concerned with promoting the ethic of consumption; TVII (1975-1995), the cable era, ruled by the post-fordist logic of niche marketing; and TVIII (1991-present), the digital era, which focuses on customer satisfaction, innovation and where

channels are now brands that are marketed for consumers. Amanda Lotz produced a similar mapping of the historical landscape but divided her analysis into the "network era" (early 1950s-mid 1980s), the "multi-channel transition" (mid 1980s-mid 2000s) and the "post-network era" (mid 2000s-present) in *The Revolution Will Be Televised.* The latter era, which Lotz examines in the most detail, is characterised by convenience, mobility and theatricality. In "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television" Mittell characterises the era as one of "narrative complexity" in contrast to the conventional episodic and serial forms that have typified American television. Narrative complexity for Mittell signifies a distinct narrational mode widespread since the 1990s that has been enabled by the changing perception of the medium's legitimacy, where increasingly creators of 'complex' television have experience in film; a growing recognition of the value of reaching small "boutique" audiences that help to further a channel's prestige image; the breakdown of the network structure with the advent of cable and the resulting expansion of choice; and the increase in participatory fan forums with the expansion of the internet that have contributed to the popularity of the 'complex' dramas (30-32). In terms of the content, the narratively complex television drama has redefined the relationship between the episodic and serial forms with an increase in narrative experimentation and innovation (Mittell "Narrative Complexity"). The narratively complex era is defined by a shift away from episodic plot closure towards long-forming narration that denies short-term resolution in order to build dense and complex story worlds that sustain multiple seasons (Mittell "Narrative Complexity"). Building a 'poetics' of narrative complexity, Mittell defines this era of programming as characterised by elaborate storytelling techniques, temporal play, shifting perspectives, repetition, overt experimentation with genre and narrative conventions and narrative reflexivity ("Previously On" 78). I draw heavily on Mittell's work in support of my analysis of the form of Quality TV as he provides useful description of the aspects that define Quality TV as a specific form.

Building on Mittell's work, Paul Booth examines the "evolving temporal complexity" of narrative television, arguing that temporal displacement has become an increasingly prevalent feature in narratively complex television (371). Booth argues that narrative television provides the possibility to subvert traditional linear conceptions of time through its mediation on the rhythms of human temporal experience (371). He identifies an increase since the early 2000s in the number and type of television narratives that focus on the "spectacle of temporally complex narrative", using features such as flash-forwards, flashbacks, time travel

and changes in memory and recall to foreground temporal discontinuity (Booth 371-372). He sees this increased temporal play as resulting in temporally complex narratives that provide traces of different temporal registers within a singular narrative, extending upon the notion of narrative complexity with a focus on the structuring of time (Booth 373). For Booth this increased focus on the temporal dynamics of narrative television parallels a growing concern with the immateriality and timelessness of interactive online digital technologies, equating the experience of televisual temporal displacement to an affective reaction to Jameson's concept of postmodern schizophrenia, a term which refers to a postmodern temporal misalignment that erases a meaningful distinction between 'past' and 'future' into an instantaneous 'present' (373, 375).

Adding to these theories of how to account for an increased interest in explorations of time in narrative television is Melissa Ames's proposal of the characteristic of the "temporal tease". The tease is distinct to twenty-first century television, referring to temporal interventions into narrative progression, moments that disrupt narrative flow through time compression and disorientation (9). Although examples of temporal play have existed throughout television history, Ames argues that never before has narrative time played such an important role in mainstream narrative television, evident in the frequent use of formal devices such as flashbacks and deliberate temporal disorientation that simultaneously situates viewers both in past and present narrative threads, providing moments of formal experimentation that highlight the role of time in the presentation of narrative (9). This work on temporal play is of importance to my work for two reasons. Firstly, it is evident in all the series I examine. Moreover, understandings of time are crucial to nostalgia, a concept which involves a temporal orientation towards the past, a reordering of time from linear to circular. Time is also discursively gendered; discourses of linear time centralise qualities that correlate to discourses of masculinity and are rooted in Enlightenment thought-rationalisation, progress, transcendence (Odih 16).

Home Box Office (HBO) has been a crucial site in the development of "quality television" to the extent that Thompson has argued that the phrase "an HBO-style series" is now more pertinent than Quality TV as a description of artistic achievement in the medium ("Preface" xvii). As Michael Szalay outlines, the attribution of 'quality' to HBO is deliberate. Szalay quotes HBO CEO Richard Plepler who states that the network does not care for traditional quantitative metrics of viewership to determine success: "we're determining

success on the basis of quality and we believe the numbers will follow" (quoted in Szalay 815).Indicated here is that HBO aspires to eschew it commercial status, being seen as a bearer of aesthetic integrity, what Szalay describes as "not industrially managed entertainment but serious art" (815). The channel is synonymous with the Quality drama but the success of the formula has led to other channels adopting original programming strategies such as CBS's premium cable channel Showtime and the basic cable channels FX and AMC.[5] HBO's slogan "It's Not TV, It's HBO" was introduced in 1995 at a time where the channel deliberately sought the monikers of 'quality' and 'prestige' to establish itself as the home of 'serious' dramatic content. Scholarly work on HBO has examined its relationship with female audiences by authors such as Arthurs; Bell; McCabe and Akass ("What has HBO"). Others have analysed the development of original programming with regards to industrial and technological contexts, such as Edgerton "Introduction" and "The Sopranos", noted the innovative programming features that HBO has developed including Edgerton and Jones; Kelso; Lotz*;* McCabe and Akass ("It's not TV" ; "Sex, Swearing"); Nelson ("Quality TV Drama*"; State of Play)*; Smith ("TV or Not TV"); Thompson ("Preface") and analysed discourses of quality, aristocracy and art such as Anderson; Cardwell; and Sewell. Although scholarly discourses have overwhelmingly situated HBO as the site of 'Quality Television', others such as Bradshaw and Kessler have analysed Showtime and Jaramillo in "The Family Racket" and "AMC: Stumbling" has analysed AMC as bearers of quality content and in "Putting the Premium" Smith challenged the paradigm by arguing for the role of basic cable channels in the commissioning and development of drama series. Although not directly engaging in a political economic approach, I acknowledge the importance of discussing the industrial contexts that have fostered the increased production of original dramas. The case studies are texts that circulate meanings about masculinities but they are also products designed in the milieu of the contemporary US television industry and exist as commodities to make profit for the media conglomerates that create them.

Taylor Nygaard and Jorie Lagerway explore the exclusion of *The Good Wife* (CBS 2009-2016) from the Quality TV canon, arguing that discourses of quality are inherently

[5]A "premium" cable channel is one that runs on a subscription model, where spectators have to pay a monthly fee to access content in addition to paying for a cable package. Subscription channels do not rely on advertising revenue and are funded directly by the spectator-subscriber. This means they are also not subject to regulation by the Federal Communications Commission. Comparatively, the "basic" cable channels are part of a standard cable-television package and are funded by advertisers.

gendered (106). They write that quality discourses "articulate the best of the medium with the masculine over the feminine and the elite over the mass thus reinforcing cultural hierarchies that suggest women, their interests and their stories lack importance" (Nygaard and Jagerway 106). The Quality turn in television studies and its concomitant masculinisation is particularly alarming given the historically feminist inflection of television studies as a discipline. As Elke Weissman writes, the foundational work of television scholars was in legitimating the medium as an important object of study, but unlike Quality TV discourses, this was done by highlighting that the medium's cultural devaluation was linked to gendered hierarchies of taste, rather than reinforcing these through the often erroneous distinction between Quality TV and its other (366).

Michael Kackman contends that the current era of Quality Television must be understood in relation to the legacy of feminist television scholars that challenged the medium's low cultural status (n.pag.). Writing on *Lost* (ABC 2004-2010), Kackman expresses frustration about the tendency to discuss the series solely in terms of being a product of complex Quality Television without considering the relationship of its narrational mode to its gender politics (n.pag.). Noting that television scholarship has seemingly moved beyond its feminist roots, Kackman argues that this often is achieved by re-embracing the gendered hierarchies that made the medium an object of critical debate and in celebrating Quality Television as an industrial and aesthetic practice of difference, there is a risk of ignoring the political implications of this turn to 'legitimacy'. Kackman's brief article is valuable to my interrogation of quality and to the consideration of what is both gained and elided in studying the quality era. Kackman questions the equation of quality with complexity and with this draws implications for who defines the formalistic criteria of quality and what series are deemed worthy to carry the quality moniker.

In "Gender and Quality Television", Anikó Imre examines the gendered dynamics of Quality Television in a transcultural context. Building upon Kackman's argument that recent scholarly work on television has disavowed its feminist origin, Imre sees the Quality turn as foregrounding aesthetics at the expense of critical evaluation of ideology and content. She calls for a closer examination of the politics of quality within a gendered and transcultural framework, mapping gender politics in Quality Television series in the post-Soviet region. Informed by a desire to understand the impact of the Quality turn on feminist television

studies, Imre is skeptical of the use of the quality rubric, questioning who defines the criteria of quality and whom they are speaking on behalf of (393).

As argued by Sean Fuller and Catherine Driscoll, Quality Television is best defined as a combination of traits—it is both a means of valorisation, an attempt to market content to an affluent and educated demographic, a means of referring to a certain set of aesthetic dispositions and a form of television drama that explores contemporary social anxieties and concerns, seeking discomfort, both through its hybridisation of genres and by producing controversial and topical narratives (6).The authors continue by noting that the contemporary Quality Television landscape is one marked by the importance of masculinity, with the rise of the male nostalgic dramas sharing a historical and cultural space with discourses of 'masculinity in crisis' (6). Thus the attribution of Quality Television is integrally linked to an interrogation of mythic norms of masculinity, dramatising the tensions of the crisis in masculinity as male protagonists are constantly coming up against the limits of traditional hegemonic forms of masculinity (Fuller and Driscoll 6-7). Although this is as far as Fuller and Driscoll explore this linkage as the focus of their article is HBO's female-centred series *Girls* (2012-2017), their discussion of the Quality drama as a means of exploring 'masculinity in crisis' is a position in line with my own argument that these series have arisen both due to the particular industrial climate that has given space for high-budget dramas exploring current social anxieties to emerge and moreover that the definition of quality here is specifically gendered, with these series providing a means by which to think through the 'crisis' in normative masculinities.

Building on the recent wealth of literature on the Quality turn, in this thesis I use Quality TV to describe dramatic programming that conforms to the principles that Mittell describes of "narrative complexity" as discussed above. I refer to these programs as Quality TV, capitalised as a means of acknowledging it as a discursive construction rather than an evaluative term. Alongside Janet McCabe and Kim Akass's claim that "feminist television criticism has played a crucial role in setting the agenda for television studies", I am alarmed at usages of Quality TV as an evaluative term in ways that reinforce hierarchical divides between television programming by seeking to legitimate through gendered taste assumptions ("Feminist Television Criticism" 119). I acknowledge though that by studying these programs at the expense of others I am continuing to reinforce these implicit value judgements.

This thesis uses the tradition of close analysis of narrative, formal and stylistic elements common within television studies. The criteria that I use are drawn largely from Jason Mittell's comprehensive guide to television analysis in *Television and American Culture.* Mittell provides a detailed overview of the factors to consider in 'reading' a television text, largely drawn from film theory but inclusive of medium-specific factors such as seriality and episodic structure. To this list I add a focus on how gender is constructed in relation to nostalgia in terms of characterisation, narrative and aesthetic levels. A close reading of the case studies that this thesis draws upon is necessary to be able to form arguments that are centred in the text, rather than mapping pre-determined issues onto examples. Furthermore, this thesis aims to overcome a tendency in television studies to focus heavily on narrative at the expense of considering how identities and concerns are imbued through the formal conventions of television. Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock argue that television scholarship has been informed by approaches through which theory is mapped onto the television text, rather than using critical framework through which to think through the tensions and complexities of the text (2).

Critical masculinity studies and "masculinity in crisis"

Critical studies of men and masculinities emerged out of second-wave feminism with scholars seeing a need to study men in order to holistically account for the patriarchal structures of the gender order. Coming out of feminist scholarship that examined women's identities and social positioning, masculinity studies emerged as an academic discipline in the 1980s to examine the structures that ensured the continued regeneration of patriarchy both between and within genders. The institutionalisation of male privilege and the oppression of women had been examined by feminist scholars, however there was little exploration of how this affected men and how men themselves were subject to regimes of power (Dennis 111). The work of scholars in this field consists of both critical theory and empirical studies and while still relatively underdeveloped comparative to feminist scholarship on the effects of patriarchy on women and femininity, does provide important focus for how to consider the complexities of masculinities. In the following section I review theoretical perspectives that account for the relationship between power, hierarchy, difference and

dominance in thinking about men and masculinities. I concentrate on approaches that directly relate to the case studies I examine and the types of masculinities I address therein.

Critical masculinity studies consciously employs the term 'masculinities' over 'men', studying the social, historical and cultural character of masculinities rather than a biological or bodily account of men.[6] One of the foundational approaches of masculinity studies was to pluralise masculinity into masculinities, such as in Connell's *Gender & Power.* Acknowledging masculinities as multiple has enabled an understanding of the diversity of male identities, understood to be historically and culturally determined and intersectional to other identity categories such as race, age, sexuality, class and religious beliefs. As such, instead of speaking of masculinity as a homogenous experience, it is customary to specify how other identity factors intersect and influence gender identity.

The theory of 'hegemonic masculinity' first proposed by Australian sociologist R.W. Connell, is a foundational theory in the field which still has immense influence in critical studies of masculinities. *Masculinities,* considered the canonical text in masculinity studies, is an empirical study of power relationships amongst men, producing a hierarchy of masculinities to explain the continual reproduction of the patriarchal gender order. Connell incorporates both material practice and social structures, accounting for power and change both within and between genders. Masculinities are recognised as historically and culturally contingent, always open to change and only intelligible as part of a structure of gender relations (Connell "The History" 245). Connell's concept was first developed to explain the culturally dominant pattern of practice that ensured the reproduction of the gender order by legitimating not only women's subordination by men, but the dominance of some men over others.

Hegemonic masculinity describes the practices that support the dominant social position of men. Connell has theorised hegemonic masculinity to exist amongst subordinated masculinity (groups of men subject to control by hegemonic masculinity), complicit masculinity (men who realise the benefit from patriarchy and support it through complicity with hegemonic masculinity) and marginalised masculinity (men marginalised in relation to the authority of hegemonic masculinity) (*Masculinities* 76-84). Drawing upon Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, hegemonic masculinity thereby describes the

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[6] See, for example Chris Beasley,'s book *Gender & Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers.*

patterns and practices of masculinity that support and maintain cultural dominance in a social hierarchy over other men and the wholesale subordination of women. Hegemonic masculinity exists as a largely symbolic ideal that imposes meanings about identities and positioning within the gender order, it is, as Mike Donaldson writes, a "culturally idealized form" rather than necessarily what the majority of men *do* (645). This ideal emerges from the socio-cultural milieu and becomes reified as the benchmark against which masculinity is measured.

The importance of Connell's theory for my argument lies in its ability to provide an analysis of how different historically specific masculinities are situated. Connell's theory is valuable for its focus on the power hierarchies that support and sustain patriarchy both between genders and between men. Connell's theory is structural—it accounts for masculinities in their ability to access power and privilege in relation to broader social structures and discourses that shape gender relations. As such it has been critiqued for being too deterministic, lacking an account of agency and embodiment.[7] Beasley acknowledges that poststructualist accounts of power view it as decentralised:

> power is a matter of competing discourses which are not externally imposed upon subjects. Since subjects are not distinct from discourses but instead produced by them, power is constitutive and not merely prohibitive. Hence subjects do not break from/resist structures as autonomous agents who thereby enact social case, as is the case of modernist thinking. ("Problematizing" 756)

I acknowledge that Connell's reliance on structuralist understanding of gender relations *vis-a-vis* power in the form of patriarchy does not adequately account for the complexities of gendered subjectivities. Connell acknowledges that hegemony is not fixed yet the reliance on a typology of masculinities crystallises subjects into a structural hierarchy. The problem with Connell's theory (and structuralist theories in general) is that they conceptualise power as something outside of the individual and can run the risk of creating

[7] As an example of such critiques and debates see Beasley's article "Problematizing contemporary Men/ Masculinities theorizing: the contributions of Raewyn Connell and conceptual-terminological tensions today".

homogenous dichotomies between 'powerful' men and 'powerless' women, both essentialising gender difference and failing to account for the diversity and complexities within which power circulates and is enacted through certain bodies. Despite the fact that I am aware of its shortcomings, I am engaging with Connell's theory throughout as a key framework. This is partly due to its formative and ongoing influence on studies of men and masculinities. Moreover, the case studies I engage with are about the kind of structural power that Connell's theory accounts for. In *The Sopranos,* Tony holds a position as leader of an organised crime network which sustains its power through violence. In *Mad Men* Don is a creative director in an advertising agency, an immensely powerful figure in his workplace. In *Breaking Bad* Walt is a feared methamphetamine producer who gains notoriety through violence and in *Boardwalk Empire* Nucky is both a leader of organised crime and a city treasurer. These series focus on white, heterosexual men who are bearers of the sort of structural power that places them in the realm of 'hegemonic masculinity' yet their embodiments of masculinity are not conterminous to this, evident in their recourse to nostalgia. They reveal not only the problems with culturally valorised norms of masculinity, but problems with Connell's theory—that it does not adequately account for lived experience. I frequently refer to 'hegemonic masculinity' throughout as a means of articulating a cultural ideal. On this level, hegemonic masculinity is useful. It describes a fantasy ideal some men (and women) invest in as part of a desire for power.

Connell stresses that maintaining hegemony often involves the creation of models, 'fantasy figures', who act as an ideal not necessarily correlative to the practices of powerful men but sustain their power, acting as motivators for men to support certain masculinities (*Gender & Power* 184-185). These 'fantasy figures' may be fictional characters or real media icons who nonetheless have the effect of acting as an attainable ideal that serves as a motivator for men to invest in certain forms of masculinity (Connell *Gender & Power* 184-185). These figures serve as powerful motivators that inspire men to invest in certain behaviours that reify hegemonic masculinities. These behaviours also try to shore up hegemonic masculinity against vulnerability, the cultural visibility given to these iconic figures gives hegemonic masculinity potency and valiancy. Connell argues this point by stating, "the public face of hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily what powerful men are, but what sustains their power and what large numbers of men are motivated to support…Few men are Bogarts or Stallones, many collaborate in sustaining those images" (*Gender & Powe*r

185). This idea of hegemonic masculinity as a kind of fantasy idealised form is useful, even if problematic at the same time for not actually focusing on the lived practices of men. It is useful insofar as the texts I examine all pivot around these kinds of idealised notions of what masculinity is or ought to be—this is where the nostalgia comes from. These ideals loom over the lives of the male protagonists that I analyse in this thesis; I argue it is the failure to embody these ideals that leads to male nostalgia.

From this increased critical interrogation of masculinities and recognition of the importance of intersectionality, white middle-class heterosexual masculinity, the specific masculine cultural form that has enjoyed cultural invisibility as a politically gendered category due to its normativity, becomes exposed. As a result of this exposure, this form of masculinity has become increasingly vulnerable and self-aware of its own positioning and display. Concordantly, the discursive construction of masculinity as being in a state of 'crisis' has been a prevalent scholarly and popular point of contention during the past three decades. As Michael Kimmel writes in his 2010 book *Misframing Men*, there has been "current malaise and confusion over the meaning of manhood" both in popular and scholarly discourses, as there has been an erosion and contestation of the capacity for men to perform culturally valorised 'breadwinning' masculinity (17).

This discourse of masculinity in 'crisis' is mobilised both by men's rights activists and in critical studies of masculinities. Popularised in the early 1990s by the mythopoetic men's movement and the writings of Robert Bly, crisis rhetoric generally refers to perceived challenges to men's social status following the success of feminist movements and changing economic circumstances that have resulted in the loss of the 'breadwinner' ideal and the questioning of previously dominant modes of masculinity.[8]

What exactly constitutes a 'crisis' and for whom and how long this crisis has been experienced are highly divisive points of contention. Sociologists such as Shelley Day Sclater have argued that the 'feminisation' of society is a result of changes in family patterns that have accompanied the expansion of the female workforce, pointing to the increase of women as single parents and of men taking on tasks traditionally associated with the maternal role. Psychologists William Pollack and Anthony Clare have both argued that men

[8]Robert Bly's book *Iron John*, a best-seller in the USA, argued that changes in family structures has led to the absence of the traditional father in the household, resulting in adolescent boys raised by mothers who are then unable to reach emotional maturity.

are in crisis as they are trying to conform to outmoded codes of masculinity instead of adapting to contemporary circumstances. Lynne Segal and Michael Kimmel both have critiqued crisis rhetoric for placing the blame on feminism, instead of acknowledging that traditional roles for both women and men have shifted. Many masculinities scholars such as Adams and Savran; and Messner have argued that discourses of crisis are functions of the so-called 'men's movement' that attempt to shore up masculinity against challenges to its authority. Others such as Gardiner; Reeser; Robinson have argued that masculinity consistently represents itself in crisis, or that masculinity is always under threat and an impossible ideal (Kirkham and Thumim). Tim Edwards has questioned what crisis actually refers to, charting the different meanings that a 'crisis of masculinity' could have. He argues that crisis could refer to a crisis of representation, a crisis in the de-gendering of the workforce, a crisis in the institutional positioning of men, or, that masculinity is itself crisis-inducing (Edwards 8-17). Expanding on this last point, Edwards suggests that masculinity may not be in crisis but that it is an identity that in itself creates a sense of crisis (17). Scholars have also explored the reactive responses to crisis that have ensured white heteronormative masculinity has maintained power against threats to its legitimacy, claiming that appeals to injury have been incorporated into posthegemonic forms of white masculinist privilege (Carroll *Affirmative*; Kord and Krimmer).

Although crisis discourses are contentious, they can be used to examine the contradictions and anxieties within understandings of masculinities in recent histories. Within proclamations of crisis there is a tendency to speak of a homogenous 'masculinity' as though all men experience masculinity in the same manner, with little consideration of the influence of race, class and sexuality. From this however, we can analyse crisis rhetoric as a reactionary measure that is used by some men seeking to normalise their claims of disenfranchisement as a universal male experience. Although this thesis does not subscribe to the notion that masculinity is or ever has been in 'crisis', crisis discourse is used particularly within chapter four's study of *Breaking Bad* to study the perception of crisis. I take my understanding of 'masculinity in crisis' from Sally Robinson's *Marked Men*, who similarly argues that it is moot to contest whether or not masculinity actually can be said to be in 'crisis' and rather that value in the concept lies in analysing the cultural work that such a discourse provides. Robinson explores a dialectic between visibility and invisibility within normative identity markers; it is generally taken that invisibility is a necessary precursor to

maintain the normativity of white male dominance. This very naturalness evades analysis, yet paradoxically, those within this category maintain visibility by being the normative marker against which others are measured. Robinson locates the origin of crisis discourses in post-1960s identity politics, where the civil rights movement, women's liberation, gay liberation and the increasing visibility of ethnic and racial diversity, combined with economic shifts towards post-industrial economies have resulted in a shifting status for white men in America (2). David Savran writes that a new masculinity became hegemonic in the 1970s, that of the white male subject as victim, as an attempt to respond to social and economic challenges posed by the emergence of second wave feminist movements, civil rights movements, the rise of lesbian and gay movements, the Vietnam war, the end of the post-World War II economic boom and the resultant decline in the income of white working- and middle-class men (*Taking it* 5). Believing themselves to be the victims of the cultural pluralism that identity politics movements have fought for in terms of diversifying representations of masculine identities in the media, these men take on the place of the persecuted as a defensive posture, albeit forming a persecuted majority. This white male victim takes up a feminised position; no longer capable of performing the sole breadwinner function, the male subject inspires to enact what Savran terms a "hypermasculinized heroism" as a compensatory means of proving his masculinity ("The Sadomachinist" 129). Frequently conceptualised in the form of white male injury, this anxiety about the possibility of fulfilling traditional patriarchal roles implicitly sees contemporary masculinity as a form of failure, one in which men are insecure about their status as they struggle to perform the role of the breadwinner patriarch which previously ensured unrivalled masculine authority in a society in which this is increasingly hard to achieve.

Whereas white masculinity previously ensured its status through the very invisibility of its own identity formation, Robinson argues that white men have become "marked" as subjects in what she terms an "identity politics of the dominant" and through this process became subjects to surveillance, discipline and regulation (3). Robinson argues that the white male has entered representational identity politics through the figure of the wounded and emotionally traumatised white male victim, writing:

> by calling these wounds and the crises they herald, metaphorical or fantasised or manufactured, I do not mean to suggest that they are

> unreal; on the contrary, the persistent representation of white male wounds and of a white masculinity under siege offers ample evidence of what is felt to be the real condition of white masculinity in post-liberationist culture. (6)

Robinson thereby seeks to look past questions about the legitimacy of adopting a victimised status, or whether the white male victim is another ruse to cling onto the privileges enjoyed by white male patriarchy and instead uses crisis as a means for understanding the contemporary condition of white masculinity. Tania Modleski has argued that feminist critics who herald the advent of such a 'crisis' of the hegemonic construction of masculinity are somewhat short-sighted, given that uncertainty and redefinition does not constitute a dismantling of the institutional and hierarchical powers of patriarchy, writing:

> however much male subjectivity may currently be 'in crisis', as certain optimistic feminists are now declaring, we need to consider the extent to which male power is actually consolidated through cycles of crisis and resolution, whereby men ultimately deal with the threat of female power by incorporating it. (7)

Building on Modleski's assertion, Robinson states that crisis can function to reauthorise patriarchal power relations just as much as it can signify a rupture in white male power (9).

Crisis, although a contentious and problematic discourse, is vital to this thesis as there are obvious links between ideas of crisis and nostalgia. Nostalgia is a resource used in relation to a disorienting present by imagining and (re)inventing a stable past (Neimeyer 2). Following Svetlana Boym's assertion that nostalgia is a traditional companion to progress, Katharina Neimeyer argues that this progress accompanies different types of crises that affect economies and social structures and thus nostalgia can consequently dually present as a symptom of progress and of crisis (2). I argue that nostalgia is intimately linked with experiences of anxiety and fragmentation amongst the male protagonists of Quality Television as they attempt to traverse a landscape in which older forms of masculine subjectivities are increasing contested. Positing masculinity in crisis is only possible if it is

placed in comparison to a nostalgically memorialised past of stable identities. Martin Fradley makes this point in his book *Boys in Trouble?*, writing that a reactionary nostalgia frequently underpins representations of white masculinities in crisis, a longing for a period when national (American) identity centred unambiguously on white, heterosexual, middle-class men (13-14). While Fradley, however, envisions this as an assimilatory and homogenising disavowal of social, racial and sexual difference, I am hesitant to label crisis discourses as resolutely regressive and instead see nostalgically inflected notions of crisis in masculine subjectivities as a form of cultural work performed by white men in the negotiation of shifts and instabilities in experiences of privilege and power.

Masculinities on American cable TV

Until the recent 'Quality turn' in television and a concomitant increased scholarly interest in critical studies of television, there was a dearth of research focusing on masculinities in American television. The predominant trend is still to confine studies of gender and masculinities to individual series, which does not allow for the possibility of considering trends that span across multiple series. Rebecca Feasey's *Masculinity and Popular Television* is a rare book-length attempt at theorising masculinities in contemporary American television beyond examinations of singular series in the pre-Quality era. Feasey's book provides a crucial overview of changing representations of masculinity throughout history in both American and British television, grounded in textual analysis. Using the main theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity, Feasey undertakes analysis of several genres to articulate gender representations and politics and to note genre-specific changes in masculine identities.[9] Feasey's work, however, is concerned with breadth, studying masculinities across an expanse of genres, providing a general survey of masculinities on TV. Due to this she is unable to critique the representations of masculinity she identifies in depth. This attempt to broadly theorise masculinity on popular television reveals the necessity to refine studies to particular genres or historical moments.

In her study of representations of fatherhood in mainstream postfeminist US cinema, Hannah Hamad writes that postfeminist masculinity has been perceived as a shift away from

[9] Feasey's book includes chapters on the soap opera, situational comedy, animation, teen programming, science fiction and fantasy, hospital drama, police and crime drama, sports programming, reality television, lifestyle television and advertising.

hegemonic masculinity towards an embrace of plurality and difference. Hamad identities fatherhood as the "new" hegemonic masculinity, as a universalising discourse that enables commonality amongst a range of masculine identities. Valorised representations of fatherhood depict paternal figures as emotionally articulate, domestically capable and adept at negotiating a balance between private sphere fatherhood and public sphere paternalism (1-2). For Hamad, fatherhood has become a dominant trope in postfeminist popular Hollywood cinema, offering the appearance of a feminist-informed negotiation of masculinity but ultimately providing little challenge to preexisting gender norms (11). Hamad argues that postfeminist paternity constitutes "contemporary popular cinema's masculine identity paradigm par excellence" (17), a claim that has fertile potential to extend across to television, albeit with interesting connotations given the traditional association of domesticity with femininity within the medium. Particularly, Hamad argues that postfeminist fatherhood achieves its hegemonic position through a concomitant elision of motherhood by appropriating the tropes of melodrama commonly understood as a means by which to speak about female experience (17). While Hamad's interest here is obviously in Hollywood cinema, her work is useful for me given that she provides a detailed account of masculinities in recent mainstream US popular screen media texts. While I am not specifically focused on the role of fatherhood in the series I am examining (although all protagonists are fathers), her chapter on recent historical films is particularly useful given that two of my chapters study period dramas.

Brett Martin's *Difficult Men* and Alan Sepinwall's *The Revolution will be Televised* both provide comprehensive insights into the production of antihero narratives, taking the form of 'behind the scenes' reportage by journalists working within the television industry. These books detail the creation of these series from the perspectives of their creators and industry personnel and as such are valuable for enriching knowledge of the contexts that informed the development of the antihero dramas. Martin and Sepinwall both speak of the 'revolution' in television programming and their accounts tend to glorify the Quality drama as irrevocably different from previous television dramas.

Amanda Lotz's 2014 book *Cable Guys* builds upon this work to provide a book-length account of scripted television series that delve into the psyches an inner lives of their male protagonists (5). Lotz notes that these series, which almost exclusively appear on American cable networks, display narratives that examine the complexities of contemporary

masculinity in a "manner previously uncommon—if not entirely lacking" in the medium (5). Of particular interest for Lotz in *Cable Guys* is how early 2000s American original cable series reflect negotiations and contradictions of old patriarchal norms. Lotz deliberately eschews an engagement with 'Quality Television' and its discourses, instead spanning a much wider selection of series upon which to form her analysis. While acknowledging the confluence of industrial, sociocultural and textual circumstances that have led to the emergence of narratives of negotiated masculinities, Lotz positions second-wave feminism as key, with these series representing a "post-second-wave" contestation of patriarchal masculinities (24). Although providing a valuable conterminous analysis to my own, Lotz's rejection of Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity in favour of her own understanding of masculinities on US television on a continuum between 'patriarchal' and 'feminist' is problematic as I believe that this cannot accurately account for the ways in which masculinities are negotiated and experienced, both on television and in everyday practice (34-36). While televisual representations are inevitably somewhat simplistic comparative to how gender is negotiated and lived out on a daily basis, Lotz's polarities of patriarchal and feminist masculinities are reductive, not allowing for the ambiguities and complexities of how even fictional characters cannot simply be categorised as regressive or progressive, even while Lotz formulates this continuum as a direct desire to escape these two binary polarities of progressive or reactionary masculinities (36-37).

Michael Mario Albrecht's 2015 book *Masculinity in Contemporary Quality Television* provides a recent attempt to analyse and critically account for portrayals of masculinity in Quality Television. Albrecht argues that contemporary Quality Television dramas exist at a nexus between crisis and stasis, offering depictions on masculinity that are neither radically distinct from traditional patriarchal masculinities, nor regressive depictions that reaffirm traditional gender norms (2). Albrecht focuses on the ambiguities and ambivalences of a number of Quality Television dramas including *The League* (FX 2009-2015), *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad, Hung* (HBO 2009-2011), *Girls* (HBO 2012-2017) and *Louie* (HBO 2010-) to highlight the ambiguities and ambivalences that characterise the representations of masculinity both within these texts and by considering their critical and popular reception and discourses surrounding each series. Albrecht is specifically interested in the cultural anxieties that produce crisis discourses in the Obama era between 2007-2014, considering gender norms and representations as reflective of dominant cultural narratives about the

United States and its national identity (17-18). He goes into a detailed account of discourses that pronounce the "death" of men, an extension of crisis discourses, linking this to recent events such as 9/11, the Global Financial Crisis and the election of US president Barack Obama. He argues that these events all were perceived as linked to a feminisation of masculinity and the weakening of 'traditional' patriarchal norms (13-14). While my research does not attempt to link these series to broader political contexts, Albrecht's work is insightful for sharing a similar focus to my own, particularly in his study of nostalgia in relation to *Mad Men*.

In her article "A return to form?", Geraldine Harris categorises critical discourses around contemporary Quality Television as constituting a category of 'postmasculinist' television drama, a term she identifies as analogous to postfeminist, with these dramas containing an ambiguous and ambivalent relationship towards twentieth-century movements that were concerned with the denaturalisation of male subjectivity (443-444). Harris argues that rather than conceiving of these series as reflective of a crisis in masculinity, they in fact are more indicative of the recuperation of hegemonic masculinities (444). Touching on the tendency for Quality dramas to incorporate nostalgia as either a thematic or aesthetic approach, Harris argues that these dramas demonstrate a tension between nostalgically reminiscing on a cinematic 'golden age' of masculinity, while simultaneously exhibiting a postmodernist self-reflexive irony towards their own narrative desires (451). Thus nostalgia does not need to incorporate a literal appeal to a golden past but can be pivoted on an engagement with a "retro" claim to tragedy, which is crucial to these series' appeals to cultural capital (Harris 455). Concluding that the Quality dramas reaffirm the position of existential crisis for (white, North American) masculinity as a sign of cultural capital, Harris' work provides a valuable framework for which to think through the relationship between masculinity in crisis and Quality Television (459). She problematises the tendency to question hegemonic masculinity within a form, Quality TV, that valorises masculinity and denigrates femininity. On the one hand, they do offer complex depictions of masculinity coming undone, yet their cultural valency and appeals to nostalgia suggest that there is a conservative and reifying force also at hand that needs to be considered.

Jennifer Clark's article "Postfeminist Masculinity and the Complex Politics of Time" uses *Life on Mars* (BBC 2006-2007), *The Sopranos, Mad Men* and *Bored to Death* (HBO 2009-2011) as evidence of a recent trend in representations of masculinity in contemporary

popular media that purport to be progressive in terms of aesthetics and ideology, yet are invested in exploring the origins of "reconfigured" gender politics by depicting the contemporary effects of second-wave feminism on men (445). She argues that Quality Television often uses "time-travel", the manipulation of time, as a marker of creativity and artistry (446). This "time-travel" has more than aesthetic resonance, depicting the struggle for men to find their place in a world changing around them, visualising the disjuncture between bygone days and the present, while not categorically celebrating a time that predates second-wave feminism (446). Thus these series are anchored against a "pre-feminist" past, yet this time is not held up as an unproblematic site of gender (and racial) politics and as a result, Quality Television's male protagonists feel injured and victimised as they navigate cultural anxieties about the place of men in a postfeminist world (Clark 446). Clark argues that Quality Television includes men in the postfeminist televisual terrain, taking up postfeminism's contradictory nature to include representations of masculinity that are simultaneously feminist and anti-feminist (448). As such, the definition of postfeminist television, which has focused on women, has reoriented to focus on men, with Clark arguing that these iterations of postfeminist masculinity construct feminism as necessary and positive, while also restrictive and victimising for men (448).

The evocation of the past in these dramas also serves, according to Clark, as a signifier of 'non-televisual' mediums such as cinema and thus as reinforcing claims of cultural capital within Quality Television (449). Clark also discusses how Quality Television series can explicitly engage with notions of the past, such as *Mad Men*'s situation in a past era, or that provide "the presence of the past" in non-obvious ways, such as *The Sopranos.* (450). She argues that both series nonetheless focus on fantasies of men's escape from the oppressiveness of their modern lives. She continues, "whether an imagined past or a nostalgic present, these retreats rebuild a social order that offers men affirmation of conventional gender roles, safe expression for their desires and unquestioning acceptance from others" (451). Clark here highlights how the nostalgic content of Quality Television does not have to be an explicit engagement with the past but can be an implicit appeal (narratively or aesthetically) to a notion of pastness, a point that I take up in my analysis as I conceive of nostalgia not solely as an explicit longing for a home, but as an affective sentiment.

The male nostalgic dramas focus on white, middle-class men; these series are connected to the historical and cultural climate of their production, visualising the tensions

and ruptures of hegemonic norms at the turn of the millennium. As Avi Santo writes, “rather than marketing itself to a male demographic, HBO utilizes masculinity as a site for distinguishing its quality brand and promoting the exclusivity it offers its clientele” (34). The preponderance of narratives concerning white, middle-class, heterosexual male experiences is related to whom the cable networks deem to be ‘quality’ profitable demographics (men). It is also indicative of the way in which discourses of quality and artistry are gendered, both in a broader context and specifically as a response to the apparent feminising potential of television. Ironically, these narratives which explore the potential for masculinity to be in crisis work to reify the cultural dominance and prestige of masculinity at the same time. Santo articulates this point by arguing:

> If TV feminizes all who watch it and feminization is linked to a loss of power and status brought about through the act of consumption, then HBO’s brand offers to ‘re-mark’ subscribers as ‘masculine’, thus repositioning its audience as powerful bearers of cultural capital that is free from the commercialised trappings of regular television. (34)

Relying on masculinised notions of cultural esteem and value positions the Quality Television drama precariously. It both casts doubt on its ability to problematise hegemonic norms of masculinity and reveals Quality Television as a highly unstable term more reflective of attempts to brand certain forms of television as oppositional than reflective of any intrinsic features.

There are numerous articles, chapters and books dedicated to the study of the individual series I am examining which I discuss in the relevant chapters. This summary of literature indicates the breadth in focus and approach of some of the existing work on masculinities in US contemporary TV. These studies exist in a similar space of inquiry as to my own, seeking to account for masculinities through reference to notions of postfeminism, nostalgia and crisis. While I am indebted to the work of these scholars, my approach differs due to its focus on nostalgia in its affective register. This is central to my argument, that male nostalgia is an affective response related to cultural standards of masculinity (which I refer to

through engagement with 'hegemonic masculinity'), revealing the impossibility and trauma of such ideals.

Nostalgia

In this thesis I argue that the masculine protagonists of the Quality TV dramas I survey are united by a shared disposition towards nostalgic investments in the past. As an emotion linked with memory, nostalgia can be a means of critically reflecting on the deficiencies of the present, providing a temporal linkage between past and present. My approach to nostalgia is informed by contemporary scholarship that has revived the concept from being inherently conservative or regressive. I argue that nostalgia is not inherently politically conservative by showing how it can work to challenge normative notions of masculinity, revealing a latent desire for emotionality repressed by the standards dictated by masculine hegemony. Challenging obviously does not equate to wholesale social change, but it does indicate the fragility of seemingly impervious 'fantasy figures' of masculinity. Studying nostalgia on an aesthetic level, I look at how this 'sets the scene' for male nostalgia, how these aesthetics work to codify or provide discordance to male nostalgia, adding further dialogue into the arguments surrounding nostalgic aesthetics and historicity, particularly in chapters three and five when I examine the period dramas *Mad Men* and *Boardwalk Empire*. A recent interest in nostalgia and memory studies has been linked by Alison Landsberg to wider insecurities at the turn of the millennium, a timeframe conterminous to the series I examine. As Pickering and Keightley state, nostalgia has been used as a tool to critically interrogate how remnants of the past linger in the present (922). It is this usage of nostalgia as a critical device that I engage with throughout this thesis, studying the interrelationship of articulations of nostalgia on both a personal and aesthetic level.

Nostalgia was originally understood as, the physiological response to homesickness until the late nineteenth century. De-medicalised and de-pathologised in contemporary usage, nostalgia is commonly understood as a sentiment linked to feelings of loss and longing, a rebellion against a modern conception of time. Pickering and Keightley describe this shift as one from spatial dislocation to temporal, a sense of "feeling oneself a stranger in a new period that contrasted negatively with an earlier time in which one felt, or imagined, oneself at home" (922). Nostalgia has thus shifted from a physical manifestation of

homesickness to an existential feeling of being out of place and out of time, an affective yearning for an irretrievable past. Although nostalgia is linked to an idea of a home that the nostalgic subject is removed from, this home does not need to be a real geographical site, but rather an imaginative belief in a vision of home, where home represents an idealised set of values that are not attainable in the present. The object of nostalgic desire is not only unobtainable because it is located in the past, but because it is a desire for something unreal, located in the past which becomes a site of sanctuary.

Stuart Tannock describes nostalgia as a "general structure of feeling", following Raymond Williams's usage of the term, rearticulating nostalgia from its typical association with conservative politics to conceive of it as a way of approaching the past (454). Tannock writes that the nostalgic subject turns to the past for sources of identity, agency, or community that are felt to be lacking in the present (454). For Tannock, nostalgia involves a positive valorisation of the past in response to experiences of anxiety and existential malaise in the present (454). Conceiving of nostalgia as a periodising emotion, Tannock proposes a narrativised account of nostalgia that has three stages: firstly, a 'prelapsian' world which is valorised, secondly the 'lapse' and thirdly, the present postlapsarian world in which the nostalgic subject is experiencing discontinuity (456). Central to Tannock's views on nostalgia is that the notion of a discontinuity with the present and turning to the past for a retrieval of sources of identity and agency that are felt as unavailable in the present. Tannock suggests that nostalgia holds value as a critical framework for considering engagements with the past, for critically analysing the content, audience and author of a nostalgic narrative (456). Seeking to revive nostalgia from its dismissal as a reactionary phenomenon, Tannock provides an important discussion of how studying nostalgic desire without attributing its valorisations as good or bad can provide an educational function to illuminate what features are seen as lacking in the present and what periods are being held up in the glowing reverie of nostalgic desire.

Svetlana Boym's work in *The Future of Nostalgia* aims to revive nostalgia from its association as a passive and regressive emotion. Questioning the traditional concept of nostalgia as a simple longing for home, whether that be a real but now lost site or one that never existed, she instead conceives of nostalgia as a critical affect. For Boym, nostalgic experiences of longing and loss ultimately point to the unknowability of the past found within the connection between remembrance and fantasy. Boym writes, "the focus here is not on

recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the meditation on history and passage of time" (49). Nostalgia thus becomes a tool of critical self-reflection that allows us to explore the nature of longing and desire in relation to the construction of personal history.

Boym proposes two distinct forms of nostalgia—restorative and reflective. Restorative nostalgia evolves a literal desire to return to the past, whereas reflective nostalgia is more critical, realising the impossibility of returning to the past and dwelling on the fissures between past and present. Boym writes that reflective nostalgia thrives in "*algia*, the longing itself and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately", locating itself in the ambivalences of longing and belonging (xviii). Reflective nostalgia also performs a therapeutic role, with Boym writing that nostalgia is connected with mounting and loss, a loss that is never able to be fully realised (55). Nostalgia, however separates itself from mourning with what Boym terms a "romance with one's own fantasy"—the sense of pleasure that the nostalgic individual takes in their fantasy of a past in which they never truly took part (xiii). Dwelling in nostalgia is thereby always coupled with dual emotions—that of the pleasure of nostalgic reverie and the knowledge that such desires can never be realised, both due to the impossibilities of time travel and the awareness that the real lived past can never live up to the power of nostalgic imagination. Boym's work points to the critical potential of nostalgia. She considers the need to provide a nuanced account that considers it as more than a regressive attempt to retreat to a past, but as a recuperation of the trauma of historical change.

In contrast to Boym's recuperative account of nostalgia, analyses of nostalgia in media texts and popular culture predominantly engage with the term to refer to a dehistorication of culture in the postmodern era. As I have already mentioned, Paul Grainge usefully draws a distinction between nostalgic mood and mode. He argues that since the early 1970s, nostalgia has been taken up in US popular culture to refer to a sentimental and commodified past. This "culture of nostalgia" is linked to the social upheavals of the 1960s and to a commodification of memory within film, fashion, architectural design and the heritage industry. This growth of nostalgia as a representational style or mode stands in contrast to nostalgia as an affect, a yearning experienced as a response to forms of discontinuity by claiming a vision of stability in a prior 'golden age'. Whereas nostalgic mood is primarily concerned with loss and is strutted around a principle of absence and longing, nostalgic mode is not intrinsically related to loss or longing and is instead a commodified

style associated with postmodern theories of amines where time and space have been lost within a memory crisis. Grainge notes that these two modalities can overlap and are not clearly distinguishable, however they are also not automatically related. In contemporary popular culture nostalgia can be experienced as an aesthetic or retro sensibility without any correspondent association with loss.

Frederic Jameson's critique of a postmodern nostalgia culture in *Postmodernism* is key to such arguments that articulate nostalgia as indicating the impossibility of meaningfully engaging with the historical past, instead (re)producing empty styles of the past. Writing on what he terms the 'nostalgia film', Jameson argues that these films, for which *American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973) stands as the paradigmatic example, produce an effect of pastness as a purely aesthetic style (*Postmodernism* 19). This veneer of 'pastness' then comes to stand in as a replacement for history itself. For Jameson, the "depthlessness" inherent to postmodernism, as the "cultural logic" of late capitalism is exemplified in the nostalgia film. (*Postmodernism* 9). Jameson critiques historicism, writing that with the collapse of modernist ideologies, cultural producers instead can only invoke the past through the reproduction of "dead styles" (*Postmodernism* 17-18). The past for Jameson has been aestheticised and depoliticised, detached of any connection to a historical situation. Instead past styles just refer back to themselves, pointing at the inability to access history in any meaningful manner. Postmodern nostalgia therefore, according to Jameson, results in a loss of engagement with historical time, where past and present have been absorbed into a temporal presentism, a defining feature of an amnesiac culture where nostalgia's relationship with social collective memory is intrinsically negative. This loss of temporality has led to a preference for images and appearance as temporal depth is replaced by spatial surfaces. Genuine historical consciousness that enables distinctions between past and present are replaced by simulation. Jameson's critique, while focused on the breakdown of memory and historical time in the aestheticisation of daily life, has ramifications for an individual's experiences of temporality and nostalgic sentiments on a personal level. If personal nostalgia is based on a dialogue between present and past, this dialogue is rendered ineffectual in a world of perpetual presents. Nostalgia is therefore no longer conceived of affectively, as a yearning, but as a consumable style.

Rather than parody's critical force, Jameson writes that postmodern representations of the past are depicted through pastiche, a device suffused with nostalgia and ultimately unable to deliver critical commentary. He states:

> In this situation parody finds itself without a vocation; it has lived and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction…Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs. (*Postmodernism* 17)

Jameson's work itself, however, has been critiqued by Linda Hutcheon as nostalgic, with Hutcheon arguing that Jameson's repeated "yearning for 'genuine historicity'" is a nostalgic sentiment for a past of historical engagement that never existed (203). Hutcheon thus points to the limitations of Jameson's work, his argument suggesting that a media text cannot both pay attention to a visual register of pastness and engage with its historical setting critically. Also, as Pickering and Keightley state, Jameson's argument relies on a homogenised view of media audiences as passive and unable to actively participate in everyday historical consciousness (924).

In *Screening Nostalgia* Christine Sprengler points out that whilst Jameson's discussion of *American Graffiti* is commonly cited as the first cultural critique of the nostalgia film, it is in fact predated by Marc Le Sueur's account of the nostalgia film in 1977. Sprengler draws upon Le Sueur's notions of "deliberate archaism" and "surface realism" in her account of the use of nostalgic aesthetics and "populuxe props" in nostalgia films. Sprengler uses Le Sueur's terms to put forth a case for the value of the emphasis on the visual in the nostalgia film (90). She writes that the visual components of the nostalgia film, "can often be read critically and oppositionally in a way that draws on the kind of history Jameson and others have thought evacuated from these kinds of representations" (90). Recuperating nostalgic aesthetics, Sprengler questions Grainge's nostalgic mode/mood taxonomy for the extent to which it suggests that there is nothing affective about the visual strategies of such films (90).

As Sprengler's work indicates, aesthetics are not hollow means of creating an exteriority of the past, but rather can work to engender the criticality of nostalgic sentiment. Following Sprengler's advocation for taking nostalgic aesthetics seriously, while my focus is primarily on nostalgia in its affective register, it is vital to consider the strategies which mobilise this nostalgic sentiment, or that which contain the potential to create immersive identification with or through these texts.

While Jameson's work suggests that postmodern nostalgia is depthless and amnesiac, using Boym alongside Jameson in my analysis helps to recuperate the negative tendencies of his critique to instead recuperate the tools he describes as part of a critical nostalgic project. Tools such as intertextuality, a feature of *The Sopranos*' approach to nostalgic form and the allure of the period surface aesthetics of *Mad Men* and *Boardwalk Empire* are both examples of that a Jamesonian critique would suggest are redolent of depthless historicity and the commodification of the past into empty signifiers of style. When considered under Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia however these features point instead to attempts to instead access the past through means congruent with reflective nostalgia's desire to recreate an imagined past. As such these tools are both relying on stylised versions of a mediated past while simultaneously demonstrating how nostalgia provides a valuable emotive function that resonates within material artefacts, fashion, style and media texts.

When specifically considering male nostalgia as removed from the form in which it is portrayed, there is precedent for the linkage of an affective nostalgia with masculinity, seen as a means of consolidating patriarchal power. 'The past', under this line of thinking, can be a desire to ameliorate anxieties around the security of the structuring of the gender order and return to a prefeminist past. Although nostalgia is in itself not inherently gendered, it becomes associated with masculinity, for, as Gayle Greene argues, women have little to be nostalgic about and whatever nostalgic desires women do have are less likely to be indulged than men's (296). Greene, however, continues by relegating nostalgia as "uncritical" and separate from "more productive forms of memory", placing it in opposition to remembrance as a purely regressive form of forgetting (297-298). Doane and Hodges also see nostalgia as antifeminist, a response to the 'discontinuity' feminist movements have represented to patriarchal hegemony. These accounts see nostalgia as a rhetorical practice complicit with

patriarchal ideology, with narratives of decline and degeneracy used to solidify the status and legitimacy of extant power relations.

In her study of Renaissance literature, Juliana Schiesari argues that historically, melancholia has been provided as a diagnosis for men's feelings of loss, which are afforded a privileged cultural status in comparison to similar experiences for women (10). The melancholic man appropriates a suffering or loss more commonly associated with the feminine and then recuperates that loss as a means of reauthorising male power (13). Schiesari writes, "the 'grievous' suffering of the melancholic artist is a gendered one, an eroticized nostalgia that recuperates loss in the name of an imaginary unity and that also gives to the melancholic man (the *homo melancholicus*) a privileged position within literary, philosophical and artistic canons" (11, emphasis in original). The male melancholic is a figure for whom public expressions of grief and loss are culturally valorised and legitimated. Viewing melancholia as an expression of cultural malaise, Schiesari argues that it is not that women do not share the same experiences as men, but when they do, they are not spoken of using rhetorics of melancholia and are rather dismissed with what the author argues is the "banal and unprestigious term" depression (4). The male melancholic's display of a loss that is typically associated with femininity is granted cultural legitimacy through a patriarchal hierarchy that accounts cultural visibility and authority to male experiences. Accounting for the complex gender politics at play when discussing the male melancholic, Schiesari writes, "the melancholic thus stands both in reaction to and in complicity with patriarchy" (14). While appearing to explore an emotional response that is indicative of uncertainty and loss, the Quality Television protagonists nonetheless benefit from patriarchal privileges, their primacy in their respective texts and concomitant exclusion of female experiences works to afford them visibility and authority. Although I am arguing in my thesis for the figure of the male nostalgic rather than melancholic, Schiesari provides here a valuable lens through which we can examine the confluence of expressions of male nostalgia which present themselves under the rubric of Quality Television.

Mark Nicholls writes on the figure of the male melancholic in the films of Martin Scorsese. Interested in how male melancholic loss facilitates an empathic relationship with spectators by appropriating an emotional stance historically seen as feminine, Nicholls argues that the melancholic is able to retain his privileged position of power and authority (*Scorsese's* xv). Nicholls outlines five characteristics of the male melancholic: firstly, the

melancholic experiences a sense of separateness from a corrupt and conservative group; he undergoes the trauma of loss resulting in a fetishisation of that loss; he displays an ultimate desire for conformity with the group; and finally, he benefits from the consolidation of personal authority and power through the workings of melancholia (*Scorsese's* xv). Key to Nicholls' understanding of the male melancholic is a sense in which these characters are reacting against patriarchy while ultimately reinforcing male privilege through its appropriation of feminine suffering within a societal framework that privileges male affects. Nicholls writes that melancholia in itself is "both a painful wound and a treasured object", not performing the 'work' of mourning that allows the sufferer to free themselves from that loss, with the melancholic instead dwelling in the pleasures of loss (*Scorsese's* 7). In his monograph Nicholls analyses male melancholia in crime fiction narratives through a psychonanalytic framework. As such, while his work provides a valuable understanding of a cinematic precedent to the male nostalgic of contemporary Quality TV, this thesis is not using psychoanalytic film theory. Following Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia", melancholy is an unconcious pathological response to loss in which the melancholic is unable to separate themselves from the lost object and thus is unable to transcend this loss as it becomes internalised into the ego. While a sense of loss is shared amongst Nicholls' male melancholic and the male nostalgia I outline in this thesis, psychoanalysis locates it within subjectivity whereas one of the values of using nostalgia is its flexibility, it is both affective and cultural sentiment, both resonating within the individual while simultaneously also a way of doing masculinity. While melancholia is linked to discourses of loss and grief which the male nostalgic may also display, nostalgia does not necessarily share the negative affectations linked with melancholia. Nostalgic masculinity is not so much about refusing to let go of a desired object or past time but rather about the dislocation, simultaneously oriented towards an imagined past while inhabiting a present temporality.

Hannah Hamad uses the figure of the male melancholic in her exploration of postfeminist fatherhood, arguing that this trope takes place through the disingenuous veneer of an ameliorative masculinity that in fact enables the shoring up of white male hegemony (25). The melancholy postfeminist father is an "affectively charged and therefore disingenuously apolitical appeal for victim status to be ascribed to the (frequently white) masculinities that adhere to this cultural template" (26). The male melancholic, therefore, is a figure who garners sympathy for his espousal of loss and trauma, but ultimately this works to

rearticulate the experiences of masculine hegemonic power that caused the melancholia in the first place. Speaking specifically of contemporary Quality Television, Anikó Imre writes that these male-centred narratives use complex plots in order to downplay melodramatic elements typically associated with television's feminine pleasures (393). She continues, "this form of male melodrama flaunts 'quality' in order to reestablish the white, American, post-9/11 male hero as a defensive response to the increasing national insecurity of living under the conditions of global neoliberal capitalism" (Imre 393).

I locate male nostalgia as an emotional experience, as an orientation towards the past imbued with a resonant sentimental quality that effects the subject in the present. My study of male nostalgia in relation to what I term 'affective nostalgia' highlights the situation of this line of thinking within the 'affective turn'. Scholars working on the topic of affect contest the difference between affect and emotion. Lawrence Grossberg distinguishes between the two, writing, "unlike emotions, affective states are neither structured narratively nor organised in response to our interpretations of situations" (81). His view is echoed in Brian Massumi's distinction between the two, where he states that emotion is the "sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal" (28). As such, while affect is a priori to consciousness or recognition, emotion is "qualified intensity" into "semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativitizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning" (Massumi 28). Affect is therefore described as non-conscious or pre-personal in contrast to emotions, which are subjective and conscious.

While this distinction is helpful, I use affect and emotion interchangeably in this thesis. Following Sianne Ngai, who conceives of the difference between the two as "modal difference of intensity or degree, rather than formal difference of quality or kind", I am interested throughout in the way that male nostalgia affects its subject, but, given particularly that I locate nostalgia in tandem with gender, such processes cannot be entirely devoid of fixity or meaning (27). As Sara Ahmed argues, the objectivity and separation of the individual and the social is collapsed when considering the role of emotion, "emotions are crucial to the very constitution of the psychic and the social as objects, a process which suggests that the 'objectivity' of the psychic and social is an effect rather than a cause" (10).

Ahmed writes, "emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies" (4). They shape the surfaces of the masculine body, which, in this case, is ontologically oriented towards the past. As such nostalgic masculinity dwells within the body and affects the nostalgic's

dispositions and relations both to itself and to others. As affect circulates not only within but between bodies, it is not solely the masculine body that is shaped by nostalgic emotion but the wider body politic, in itself a masculine body, that is shaped by the forces of male nostalgia. As such, this thesis approaches the politics of gendered emotion by using male nostalgia as a means of examining the affective investment in gender as a social norm.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the various theoretical approaches that underpin this thesis by looking at several key areas of scholarship: Quality TV, masculinities and nostalgia. Understanding and mapping these areas is crucial to my task of critically analysing the male nostalgic figure within Quality TV.

Throughout this thesis, the terms Quality Television and Quality TV, are used interchangeably, referring to a specific genre of programming that has become popular in the United States over the last twenty years, also sometimes referred to in the press as 'prestige' TV. Aesthetic markers of this genre approximate a form of television often described as 'cinematic' featuring ensemble casts often featuring esteemed actors, high production values, long-form and often complex narrative arcs, a heavy focus on visuality aided by dense *mise en scène* and large budgets, 'serious' themes and a concentrated frequency of Booth's concept of 'temporal play'. While Quality TV is not solely confined to dramas about men, I confine my interest to these masculinised programs which have played important roles both in defining the current standard of Quality TV and in masculinising the genre. I undertake close textual analysis, increasingly popular within critical studies of television, in order to be able to examine nostalgia both in terms of characterisation and stylistically, to account for how the unique form of the Quality TV drama aids in the construction of nostalgic masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity remains the predominant theoretical framework for studies of masculinity. Connell's framework, part of her taxonomy of masculinities, is a valuable theory for placing a particular emphasis on the relationship between gender and power, which is of importance here given that gendered power, or a perceived lack thereof, is the primary motivator for the male nostalgic. I deploy this critical framework throughout, with the conceptual malleability of hegemonic masculinity valuable insofar as it can be applied to the

diverse narratives (in terms of temporal and societal setting) that constitute the series I am examining.

At the level of nostalgia, I have argued that the concept has shed its pathological origins to be currently postulated as an affective state. While there are many modalities of nostalgia, I use Boym's concepts of restorative and reflective nostalgia throughout this thesis. While originally used to theorise post-Soviet nostalgia, these two modalities are useful as Boym resists the tendency to ascribe nostalgia as an inherently conservative state. The multiple permutations of nostalgia that she identifies are useful for the task of considering how the male nostalgic trope exists both within period and contemporary dramas. Paul Grainge's distinction between nostalgic mode and mood is also of importance here. As this distinction usefully highlights, the nostalgic *mood* of the male nostalgic, what is termed 'affective nostalgia' throughout this thesis, only exists in relation to the *mode* of presentation, that being the Quality TV series as a text and commodity.

This thesis seeks to provide an intervention into gendered television studies. As I have outlined in this chapter, this thesis studies masculinities in contemporary North American Quality TV through the key trope of nostalgic masculinity. While scholars such as Amanda Lotz in *Cable Guys* and Michael Albrecht in *Masculinity in Contemporary Quality Television* have covered similiar terrain in their subject of analysis and frameworks of masculinity in crisis. Similiar to Albrecht and Lotz, this thesis posits the importance of feminist movements and politics as a key catalyst for the complexity and uncertainity of masculinities in Quality TV. Where this thesis seeks to offer a point of difference is in its focus on nostalgia as a means of examining the phenomena shared by these scholars that the masculinities within contemporary Quality TV dramas exhibit 'crisis' tendencies. Studying nostalgia as both an aesthetic and affective quality of the case study texts offers a means both to demonstrate the recuperative qualities of nostalgia as not an inherently regressive device while simulatenously providing a unifying framework that helps to make sense of the representations of masculinity in crisis that these series depict. Affective investment in ideals of masculinity

Chapter two:
The Sopranos, the ghost of Gary Cooper and the birth of nostalgic Quality TV.

In the pilot episode of *The Sopranos* (HBO 1999-2007), New Jersey mafia boss and protagonist Tony Soprano suffers a panic attack at his son's birthday party and subsequently starts psychiatric treatment. During his first session with psychiatrist Dr Jennifer Melfi, Tony, who is not convinced that depression is a legitimate psychiatric illness, vocalises his feelings of malaise and discontent through a gendered lens, articulating a sense of loss through a discussion of changes in normative standards in American masculinities. He laments to Dr. Melfi:

> Whatever happened to Gary Cooper, the strong silent type? That was an American. He wasn't in touch with his feelings. He just did what he had to do. See, what they didn't know was once they got Gary Cooper in touch with his feelings that they wouldn't be able to shut him up. And then it would be dysfunction this, dysfunction that and dysfunction vafancul! ("The Sopranos")

Although Cooper is of small overall significance to the narrative action of the series, the idea of Cooper is central to the examination of affective nostalgia in this chapter. This "strong silent type" is important not only as it provides a clear definition of what the male nostalgic yearns for, but also as Tony desires a fantasy lamentation of an actor, something that never was grounded in reality. Cooper represents an idea of a stoic, unemotional male patriarch and a national hero, desirable for Tony who envisions Cooper as a masculine icon of a bygone era. Gary Cooper becomes a spectral figure that lingers not only over *The Sopranos,* despite only being mentioned in less than a handful of episodes, but over all the series that I examine.

In this chapter I argue that Tony's particular evocation of male nostalgia is premised around a failure of hegemonic masculinity and that failure is symbolised through the idea of Gary Cooper. This failure is hinged on a tension. On the one hand, unemotional stoicism is inscribed in the particular codes of the mafia as a key signifier of gendered power and Tony's

investment in this is evident in his idolisation of Cooper. Yet he is unable to actually be silent and unemotional. The use of nostalgia as formal expression in the series makes clear the impossibility of this desire through challenging the myths of the gangster genre, consistently undermining and ironising the notion of the past in which both Tony and his mob world are mired.

The first part of the chapter focuses on the series' narrative engagement with nostalgia. In this section I analyse Tony's expressions of desire for nostalgic masculinity as encapsulated in his references to Gary Cooper. Firstly I discuss the importance of Tony's therapy sessions as a space in which he vocalises his anxieties and explicitly connects this to a nostalgic desire for a 'lost' masculinity. The 'gangster in therapy' trope is a large part of Tony's characterisation, with these scenes offering moments of explication; the cocooned space of Melfi's office serves as a site of narrative pause to the facilitation of character development, where Tony's anxiety and existential malaise are both illustrated through temporal and gendered dimensions. I then place this in contrast to the phallocentricity of Tony's mob, a homosocial space where appropriate masculine display is policed and governed by the communal rules of the organisation. Despite offering an appearance of internal consistency, this mob masculinity is actually result in insecurity and vulnerability, prompting Tony's nostalgic desire. I then conclude this part of the chapter by retuning to another scene where Tony discusses Cooper in season four's episode "Christopher". In this scene Tony's nostalgic desire is punctured by the interjection of other mob members who queer Tony's icon of heterosexual masculinity, trouble Tony's conflation of an actor and fictional characters and question the relevance of Cooper as a model of masculinity for an Italian American.

The second part of the chapter examines the ways in which style and form in the series contributes to the series's depiction of nostalgic masculinity. *The Sopranos* displays awareness of its lineage within the gangster genre, saturated with intertextual references to films such as Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974, 1990) and Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1974). These films provide reference points both extra-diegetically, for an audience who may have literacy of the tropes and characterisations within these films and within the series itself, as the characters are themselves fans of the films and possess this literacy. As David Pattie states in a chapter on the series and the post-Godfather gangster film, *The Godfather* is crucial for *The Sopranos*' characters as an "original myth", a

linkage between the diegetic world of the series and spectators who share in their familiarity with Coppola's films (140).

The Sopranos situates its gangster-protagonist within the televisual family melodrama, inverting its characters' perception of the certainty of tradition and hierarchy within Coppola's films to present a mob world that is internally incoherent. It makes clear the unattainability of the illusions of power espoused in Coppola's texts. Genre hybridity and revisionism through intertextuality undermine and critique the genre's history and representations. The series debunks cultural genre myths and through this challenges nostalgic desire for a mediatised gangster past. As a contemporary reworking of the patriarchal myths of the gangster genre, *The Sopranos* displays the critical potential of the male nostalgic trope in destabilising gendered genre traditions by exposing them as uncertain and fragile, where nostalgia is utilised as a means of drawing into question the assumed certainty of the past.

In this thesis I offer four different examples of how male nostalgia operates in four different series. *The Sopranos* demonstrates how male nostalgia is used to signify the prestige nature of Quality TV and how its formal inventiveness, its entanglement with what Grainge terms "nostalgic mode" can challenge the dominant narratives of nostalgia as a commodification or political debasement of the past. Drawing on Jameson's work on nostalgia, Grainge posits that 'nostalgic mode' exists in a relationship with postmodernism as a cultural style, but he rejects Jameson's assertion that this entails an amnesiac crisis in historicity (8). Instead, Grainge argues that an aestheticised 'nostalgic mode' can be produced which does meaningful cultural work (8). *The Sopranos* employs a stylistic nostalgia, primarily through intertextuality, genre revisionism and hybridity, to challenge the cultural myths of gangster narratives, a technique that relies upon its status as television, although critics keenly assert that *The Sopranos* is, as an HBO product, "not TV". These elements—the formal play with intertextuality as a postmodern device to contest nostalgic desire and the codification of nostalgia as a key element within the current understanding of Quality TV point to the capacity for the male nostalgia drama to engage with Boym's understanding of "reflective nostalgia".

Affective nostalgia: A desire for Gary Cooper and the 'ground floor"

Throughout *The Sopranos* Tony attempts to reconcile a nostalgic desire for a past where masculinity could seemingly be defined through a singular paradigmatic figure—Gary Cooper. In her analysis of masculinity in the series, Katherine Lee writes that Cooper is idolised by Tony as a figure of stoicism, autonomy and physicality, a heterosexual male icon whose disappearance from pop culture visibility is equated with a decline in national values (2). Masculinity is intrinsically linked with nostalgia within the series—the present is constantly placed for assessment against a romantic ideal of the past. This is evident in Tony's desire for Cooper and in the constant allusions to other mediated representations of the mafia in comparison with which Tony's crew situate themselves. The series's primary characters are all structured towards a pastness grounded within ideas of community and ethnicity, albeit refracted through a mediated lens of Hollywood representations of gangsters. Tony's Cooper-inspired affective nostalgia is evident through depression, malaise and longing. While within the diegesis this is a conservative desire to retreat to the past, a critical reading of Tony's nostalgia demonstrates that it also exposes the impossible standards of hegemonic masculinity. This nostalgia stems from Tony's failure to be the 'strong silent type': the demands of normative ideals of male emotional in-expression which are key to holding power in Tony's mob world are untenable.

Asked in his first therapy session to explore his feelings prior to his panic attack that led him to therapy, Tony remarks:

> It's good to be in a thing from the ground floor. I came too late for that, I know. But lately I'm getting the feeling I might be in at the end. That the best is over…Take my father. He never reached the heights like me. But in ways he had it better. He had his people – they had their standards. They had pride. Today what do we got? ("The Sopranos")

Tony's metaphor of the 'ground floor', in combination with the aforementioned 'Gary Cooper' speech which proceeds the one quoted here, directly introduces its protagonist's existential malaise and depression as constitutive themes of his character and of the series itself and

moreover, links this depression to a desire for nostalgic masculinity. It is the process of nostalgic feeling, a feeling of desire for the past, which through its existence reveals the impossibility of its realisation that marks Tony as a male nostalgic.

The Sopranos uses therapy scenes throughout the entirety of the series to directly address these gendered feelings of failure and lament. These therapy scenes work in a twofold manner—they offer the clearest and most direct articulations of Tony's nostalgic desires and this is achieved through the way in which gendered space is used. The incorporation of nostalgia as closely related with mental illness in *The Sopranos* works to make it a visible trait, not as a pathologisation but almost as a play on the original conceptualisation of nostalgia as a diagnostic illness for homesickness. In *The Sopranos* the very inability for Tony to travel to a 'home' that is both imagined and located within the past is what sustains his constant anxiety throughout the series.[10]

In a therapy session in the pilot episode after the Gary Cooper sequence, Melfi asks Tony directly if he is depressed. Tony concedes that he has been feeling down after a group of wild ducks he has been caring for flew away, however, upon Melfi's attempts to explore this further, Tony abruptly storms out of the consulting room. Threatened by Melfi's impositions and at the precipice of exposing his inability to live up to the "strong, silent type", Tony leaves the room, troubled by what he believes is the feminising effects of therapy, the direct challenge that the confessional space poses to his desired mode of masculinity. The camera moves from alternate close ups of Tony and Melfi to a long shot, with the camera placed behind Dr. Melfi as Tony arises from his seat and walks out the door, zooming out further to leave Melfi alone in the centre of frame, back to camera, in darkened shadow. She raises her arms above and behind her head and sighs in resignation, briefly mirroring the sculpture of the naked woman shown at the start of the episode (Fig. 2). Although the sculpture's posturing can be read as objectifying, it is attributed agency through the power of its gaze, described by Martha Nochimson in reference to the presence of maternal influence as a "radical reversal of the conventionally possessive male gaze" ("Waddaya" 5). The sculpture's gaze therefore can be read as one of knowing awareness, linking to Melfi's persistent denial of Tony's attempts to evade talking about his depression and her role

[10] As Jean Starobinski describes, the term nostalgia was first used by Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer in the seventeenth century to describe symptoms experienced by those who had endured a prolonged physical absence from 'home'; it was not until the late nineteenth century that nostalgia was reconfigured into a "vague psychiatric condition" (85; 100).

throughout the series as an interrogator of the myths and ideals that Tony uses. The therapeutic space is a recurrent site throughout the series to explicate and analyse Tony's nostalgia.

Fig. 1-2-The sculpture's posture, then echoed in Dr. Melfi (Lorraine Bracco) as Tony storms out of her office ("The Sopranos")

Melfi's office serves as a self-enclosed narrative space, a pause that provides an expanded reflection upon Tony's psyche. Tony links therapy to a culture inimical to the 'strong silent type'. These sessions are marked by a feminine logic distinct from the masculine world in which he operates through Melfi's refusal to hear incriminating details of Tony's criminal involvement and her ability to interpret and analyse Tony's motivations. Suzanne Cokal provides a close analysis of the composition of Melfi's office, arguing that the brain/womb-like structure of the room appears to cradle its occupants, marking it as a unique space for exploration of Tony's inner psyche and that furthermore, Melfi's office mirrors a reverse birth canal, leading Tony into his past as well as deeper into himself (114-115). Cokal's reading of the therapy scenes helps to draw attention to the feminised narrative space of Melfi's office. Building on Cokal's analysis, it is noteworthy that Melfi's office is marked by its own tonal register (the beiges and dark browns of Melfi's office are distinct in the series) and with a visual composition that emphasises the separateness of Melfi and Tony, who do not often appear within the same frame within these sequences. Within Melfi's office Tony often appears uncomfortable, sitting cross-legged and hunched into a chair that seems much too small to support his physical bulk, his awkwardness

contrasting to his control over narrative space in scenes in the masculine marked spaces of the Bada Bing! strip club that serves as the headquarters for his mafia operations.

Janet McCabe and Kim Akass write that the gangster genre typically "shows little regard for the narrative position" of its female characters who are used primarily as narrative devices to strengthen the primacy and authority of the (male) gangster ("Beyond" 147). *The Sopranos* seems to conform to this dynamic—frequent scenes at the Bada Bing! show the workers treated as sexualised objects; Tony engages in frequent affairs while trying to maintain paternal authority over daughter Meadow; Dr Melfi is brutally raped in the season three episode "Employee of the Month". Yet, as McCabe and Akass write, "women subtly shape this serial arc, using strategies associated with soap opera and family drama—listening and confession, gossip and silence, talking heads and interpersonal skills—to do so" ("Blabbermouth" 95). *The Sopranos* sets up a clash between Tony's desires for coherency operating within well-defined systems of meaning and authority, defined through the phallocentric structures of the mafia and the uncertainty and fragmentation that is marked feminine within the text. Joseph Walker writes that nearly all of Tony's business relationships are characterised by a "phallocentric, linear representation of self, a strictly hierarchal organization of power and aggressive, straightforward communication" (114). Melfi, by contrast, challenges Tony by disrupting his nostalgic investment in the past and in the image of Gary Cooper by suggesting that the coherent self is an impossibility, that Tony's power is not absolute. The encapsulating, womb-like shape and beige tones of Melfi's office act as a counter space in the series, working within a distinct spatial and temporal logic, providing a narrative pause that does not necessarily advance causal narrative but enriches the audience's understanding of Tony's nostalgic malaise, a neutral midway between the disorienting present and the romanticised past. Despite his fears of the repercussions, Tony enters the therapeutic space of Dr. Melfi's office and talks, the practice revealing the impossibility of Tony being the "strong silent type" and betraying his own distrust of mafia men who dishonour their code by talking.

Similarly, it is through domestic scenes within Carmela's kitchen that we learn more about Tony, his framing within the kitchen placing him as an object within televisual melodrama, a generic form that "give[s] nuance to the feminine voice" (McCabe and Akass "Beyond" 149). *The Sopranos* intermeshes characterisations and narrative tropes from a genre that conventionally privileges masculine perspectives, with televisual melodrama, a

genre of serialisation, delayed resolutions, heightened emotionality and, most importantly, a genre closely aligned with feminine pleasures. Nochimson actually suggests that the gangster genre is in itself a form of melodrama, however unlike the family melodrama, which is "feminized and emotional", the gangster genre displaces emotion onto violence ("Waddaya" 4). In *The Sopranos* this displacement is evident through scenes of violence, male homosociality and Tony's reluctance to articulate his emotions. Nochimson argues further that the affective function of this displacement is in allowing viewers access to emotional situations but through obscured terms ("Waddaya" 4). In *The Sopranos* these mechanisms are contrasted with those of the feminine melodrama. Not only are they contrasted, but repeatedly, these mechanisms appropriated from the gangster genre and in line with forms of patriarchal masculinity are constantly depicted as inadequate—Tony is still depressed, still in therapy and still fighting for domestic control with Carmela. Placing Tony as an object within feminised melodrama makes his nostalgia visible, not only an ineffective coping mechanism, but directly leading to Tony's malaise. Moreover, his nostalgia itself is melodramatic—it is an excess of emotion that destabilises his conception of linear temporality, a temporality in itself gendered masculine.

The scenes in Melfi's office disrupt classical causal narration, adopting a melodramatic narrative logic, producing an oppositional temporality to the linear causality of classical narration through a focus on exposition and emotions. The therapy sessions foreground a narrative style consistent with serial melodrama, focusing on open narrative deferment, character complexity and emotional expressiveness (Mittell *Complex TV* 251). In *The Sopranos*, melodramatic feminised spaces co-exist with the homosocial and patriarchal sites of the Bada Bing! and the traditionally masculine pleasures of violence. Indeed much of the series's conflict centres on this tension between the gendered modes of emotional expressiveness, between therapy and talking therapies (coded feminine in the series) and violence and aggression (coded masculine).

The Sopranos provides a contrast between the very visible, physical power enacted by the mafia and the constant subversion and disruption of this by a feminine logic that exposes the impossibility of Tony's calls for a 'ground floor', but does not propose these two distinct forces as diametrically opposed. Cindy Donatelli and Sharon Alward contend that the series depicts the "wholesale collapse of masculinity", revealing confused and fragmented masculinities in relation to complex depictions of women (71). I am wary about

overemphasising the destabilising role of the undermining of Tony's nostalgia. Tony is constantly depicted as reluctant or unable to change—despite being able to read his nostalgia on a critical level, this does not necessitate an adoption of the critiques this poses. While Tony's nostalgia is a conservative desire to retreat from the past and this nostalgia can be read as a destabilisation of cultural norms of masculinity, it is a utopic desire to suggest that undermining these norms may prompt change.

In contrast to the opening shots of Tony restricted and silent in Melfi's waiting room, in the mafia he is a dominant figure whose power is guaranteed by a network of patriarchal structures and homosocial sites. The mafia organisation in the series is structured around the principle of the "family" through which all social relationships are hierarchically defined: Tony is at the top as boss, followed by *consiglieres, caporegimes (capos),* soldiers and associates, who often are not 'made men'. This hierarchal organisation of power is governed by a patriarchal logic that ensures members are aware of their position within the structuring dynamic and show respect and concede power to those with a position of greater authority. Under this highly hierarchical and structured collective, Tony's masculinity exists within its relationship to others—his identity is governed by the codes of mafia belonging and although his position as leader automatically grants him respect and deference from those beneath him, this is not absolute but rather contingent upon Tony's ability to perform masculinity within the parameters acceptable to the mafia. George De Stefano describes the culture of the mafia as "patriarchal and authoritarian, strictly polic[ing] the unruly realms of gender and sexuality. Its protocols demand that men master, even repress their emotions. They must subordinate their own individual needs and desires to that of the collective, the mafia "family"" (116). These 'rules', the normative behavioural codes that shape mob masculinity, are constantly reinscribed through processes of ritualisation. They are linked to old Italian traditions that have no real bearing on the workings of the early twenty-first century New Jersey mob, yet work to sustain mob masculinity as everlasting by providing it with a foundational myth, an origin point around which the mafia derives its identity.

The hierarchical arrangement of the mob provides support and coherency for its masculinity, giving structure and meaning by providing its members with a guiding mythology that ensures replication of its power inequities. As a structuring dynamic, a communal organisation, the Mafia always contains the inverse ability to expose the fragility of masculine power. George Larke-Walsh writes that the mob hierarchy is never stable as it is only

meaningful through relational interactions between members, resulting in complex negotiations of masculinity that oscillate between power and courage, fear and subordination and resultantly, self-identity is always a constant negotiation between the individual and communal hierarchy (197). Instead of feeling security in his position at the top of this hierarchy, it is Tony's insecurity about maintaining leadership and effective control that leads to his sense of anxiety surrounding his gender identity, as he looks to his father and the past for guidance, yet the partiality and subjectivity of Tony's memory causes him to romanticise a past of unchallenged patriarchal dominance that he finds he can never live up to. The relationship between individual and collective is central to nostalgic configurations, concepts of home and absence implicating nostalgia in a relationship between personal and collective memory and change. Tony attempts to negotiate the dynamic between collective belonging and societal change as this plays out on a personal level, but is overwhelmed by his experiences of fragmentation and uses nostalgia as a means of trying to come to terms with this, all the while aware of the gap between identity and memorialisation.

For all its power as a patriarchal organisation of 'made men', the mob is also a site of vulnerability, a frantic male-only space that wards off threats of feminisation so as to strengthen the communal ties of patriarchal mob masculinity. It is the very instability of mob masculinity itself that prompts Tony's uncertainty. The anxiety that Tony articulates within the series is not only an individual's attempts to negotiate a changing terrain but a collective desire for assurance, a need to follow and uphold the 'rules' of mafia belonging to shore up the expressions of patriarchal masculinity they have valorised against perceived threats that could expose its artifice. Mob masculinity in *The Sopranos* is often a comical mixture of extreme macho aggression, violence, misogyny and anxious posturing about one's positioning within the mob hierarchy and the ontological nature of masculinity within the organisational parameters. Not only is Tony's masculinity unstable because of its temporal dislocation between past, present and future, but its very grounding is in a mythologised notion of what it means to be a man within the contexts of mafia traditions imported from Italy and transmitted to the members of Tony's crew through Hollywood cinema.

Despite holding forms of structural power and having control over other men Tony feels powerless due to his inability to control/repress his emotions. This demand for control over the self is imbedded into the homosocial codes of Tony's mafia and is key to the maintenance of his position. While hegemonic masculinity may describe the structural

conditions to ensure the reproduction of patriarchy, male nostalgia demonstrates that it does not adequately speak to the negotiations and experiences of power within the individual who may be a bearer of hegemonic masculinity. *The Sopranos* explores this through Tony's desire for the "strong silent type" despite him having an awareness of the romanticised nature of this longing. It is important to note though that personal failure or pain does not necessarily disrupt structural power. In his analysis of Scorsesean male melancholia, Nicholls writes that the melancholic "is able to adopt an emotional stance historically seen as feminine yet retain his privileged position of power and authority" (*Scorsese's* xv). While to some extent male nostalgia inhibits Tony, certainly, panic attacks are not good for business, it does not equate to an undermining of the structural forces that secure patriarchal power. While male nostalgia can indicate the problems within cultural demands of white masculinities, by no means does it equate to a challenging of the gender order.

In her chapter on gendered emotions, anthropologist Catherine Lutz writes, "to speak about controlling emotions is to replicate the view of emotions as natural, dangerous, irrational and physical" (154). The rhetoric of desire for emotional control espoused by Tony is rooted in this gendered discourse whereby emotionality is threatening for social status, power and for masculinity. In his article "Masculinities, Bodies and Emotional Life", Victor Seidler summarises the logic behind this stating, "through an identification of masculinity with "self-control" within diverse cultural settings, men learn to relate to particular emotions as signs of weakness and so as threats to their male identities" (9). The power that Tony holds is not devoid of emotion, but these emotions are in line with the source of his power. Emotions connected to violence and sexual desire are in abundance in the series and do not pose a threat to Tony even if they challenge the masculinity/self-control paradigm. Rather it is the fear of emasculation through therapy, symbolised quite literally through a castration dream in the pilot episode that poses a challenge to Tony's desire to live up to his idealised ways of doing masculinity, with male nostalgia then symbolising his yearning for a past time in which he invests the possibility to live out his fantasy of masculine embodiment. Yet I posit that male nostalgia is not (only) a regressive retreat—it is a site for exploring the tensions with the dictums and demands of hegemonic masculinity. While his nostalgia itself may be a retrogressive desire for an unfettered past where 'men could be men', a further analysis of this nostalgia shows that it is caused by the same ideals of masculinity that Tony covets.

In *The Queer Art of Failure* queer theorist Jack Halberstam speaks of the queer potentiality of failure as a means of being and knowing outside of conventional heteropatriarchal capitalist understandings of success (2). While I'm certainly not suggesting here that *The Sopranos* offers a queer critique of capitalist heteronormativity, Halberstam's ideation of the critical possibilities of failure as destabilising dominant narratives and ways of being does provide a useful lens through which to view Tony's male nostalgia. Diegetically this nostalgia is a conservative desire for a masculinised past. Yet what prompts this nostalgia and how it manifests in tandem with anxiety and depression has the means to challenge, albeit momentarily, the narratives that underpin hegemonic masculinity. While the series in itself is certainly within the parameters of normative gendered and capitalist modes of being, the failure of the male nostalgic subject is evident not only in relation to the maintenance of autonomous control over emotion but is imbricated within a wider locus of contestation of workplace authority and success. The demands for emotional in-expression serve to benefit a capitalist patriarchy and, as such, its failure has the capacity to expose the constitutive components that secure capitalism as a system of exploitation.

In their essay "Cinematic Symptoms of Masculinity in Transition: Memory, History and Mythology in Contemporary Film", Caroline Bainbridge and Candida Yates provide a psychoanalytic analysis of cinematic representations of traumatised white masculinities since the 1990s that they argue are conterminous with the rise of 'masculinity in crisis' discourse, which they place in relation to postmodernist scepticism towards hegemonic narratives. Bainbridge and Yates's account somewhat over-emphasises the role of postmodernist discourses in challenging and deconstructing hegemonic masculinity, their article can help to situate Tony's male nostalgia. In it they write that postmodern parodying of hegemonic masculinity "force[s] a kind of retrospective nostalgia for a fiction of masculinity that becomes overvalued as a result and it is this that traumatizes the postmodern masculine subject" (Bainbridge and Yates 303). The desire to deflect the experiences of trauma constitute a "hysterical defence against the losses of masculinity" which can provide the spectator with a glimpse of "the unspeakable losses of masculinity that lie beneath the excesses of the text" (Bainbridge and Yates 303; 304). *The Sopranos* offers such opportunity. The hypermasculine posturing of Tony's mob coupled with his anxious nostalgic desires to relocate to an idealised past work to challenge the mythic narratives contained

within hegemonic masculinity, even if on the surface it appears that his desire is a conservative quest to consolidate power.

Nostalgia in *The Sopranos* is multi-faceted and built upon many contradictory levels. While it serves as a revisionist device and has feminist critical potential, the backwards inflection of nostalgia as a search for a stable origin, as evidenced in the affective nostalgia exhibited by Tony Soprano, is also, as Stuart Tannock writes of nostalgia, a regressive move against the critical potential of feminist memory to confront and challenge the histories, voices and institutions of the past (453). In locating the 1950s as the site of Tony's nostalgic desire through his invocation of Cooper and his father, Tony explicitly aligns himself in an originary moment that sits before second-wave feminism. Tony reveres Gary Cooper as a lost object, who, as an image of the Western cowboy, is a bearer of the form of stoic masculinity Tony desires. He laments a culture whereby men are encouraged to share their feelings, the destruction of the cowboy as an unachievable male icon, hypothesising this as "the end" of masculinity ("The Sopranos"). While this undoubtedly seems a highly regressive nostalgia redolent of the sorts of ideas espoused by men's rights activists, I am hesitant, however, to posit Tony's nostalgic turn as purely a regressive retreat to a past. This nostalgia that Tony experiences is not a simplistic refusal to accept the present, or what Lisa Johnson terms as "nostalgic delusion" in the series (272). Tony's articulation of nostalgia for masculine values is contradictory. It is at once a form of 'artificial longing', seeking to return to a metaphorical 'home' in a time and space that never was. Yet it also can be read as a response to his failings in the impossible demands encapsulated by the ideals of hegemonic masculinity and is hinged on the knowledge of its unreality. Tony's nostalgia for his father's time is coupled with his awareness of his father's absence while his was alive and the trauma that his father caused him. It is therefore not a desire to actually return to a past time, but a desire that relates to Boym's idea of "reflective nostalgia", aware of the irrevocability of the past, "cherish[ing] shattered fragments of memory" (49). Boym conceives of reflective nostalgia as containing elements of both mourning and melancholia, as having "some connection to the loss of collective frameworks of memory" (55). This nostalgia bespeaks Tony's perceived failures as an effective mob leader, as someone unable to stay 'silent', as an exemplar of gendered control of emotion and manifests into this dialectical desire for a 'prefeminist' past where such qualities seemed easy and assured.

Gary Cooper returns in the season four episode “Christopher”. Tony, driving with associate Silvio and nephew Christopher, starts ranting about Silvio’s vendetta against Native American opposition to Columbus Day, which he believes to be an insult to his Italian-American heritage. Within this context of national identity and ethnicity, Tony poses the question, “Whatever the fuck happened to Gary Cooper, that’s what I’d like to know” (“Christopher”). Silvio responds bluntly that Gary Cooper died, which fuels Tony to repeat much of his speech to Dr Melfi in the pilot episode about Gary Cooper as an ideal American who “did what he had to do”. Tony specifically contrasts Cooper to a perceived culture of victimisation in contemporary society, noting that if Cooper were alive today he would probably join a victim support group, linking to the episode’s theme of minority group rights. Tony’s desire to romanticise Cooper is denied by Silvio, who points out that Tony is conflating the actor Cooper with the roles that he played and that he cannot stand as an icon for Tony and his crew due to ethnic difference, that Gary Cooper did not suffer from prejudice the same way that Italian-Americans do. Such a point is echoed by Katherine Hyunmi Lee in her article on the series, arguing that Tony’s conflation of Cooper with his fictional character Will Kane from the western *High Noon* (1952) points to Tony’s inability to ground his masculine identity in reality (2). Tony’s evocation of Cooper as his foundational myth is misunderstood by his crew—Silvio responds literally to Tony’s initial question, stating that Cooper died and Christopher, not listening closely to Tony and Silvio’s conversation, asks from the back seat, “He was gay, Gary Cooper?”, queering Tony’s heterosexual masculine icon (“Christopher”). Gary Cooper lingers as a ghostly presence of pastness in “Christopher”. He is used by Tony as a symbol of virtuous standards in relation to a victim mentality that Tony identifies in contemporary society. Silvio and Christopher’s responses question Tony’s ability to hold Cooper as a meaningful cultural icon by recognising that the Cooper he iconises is a pastiche of fictional characters and that holding Cooper as an emblematic male figure elides the realities of Tony’s ethnicity and the forms of masculinity available to him. Tony’s repeated mourning of the loss of Gary Cooper is a shorthand for all that he sees as wrong with contemporary American culture—particularly a perceived culture of victimisation which is linked for Tony with the demise of Cooper-esque stoicism and the acceptance of emotional expressivity for men.

Silvio refers to Cooper as a *medigon* (a non-Italian) forcing Tony to acknowledge the divide between himself and Cooper in ethnic terms. Although Tony thinks of himself as a

white American, he nonetheless spends much time separating himself from the "Wonderbread wops" around him and his identity as mob boss is very much secured by his Italian ancestry. Moreover, as in Tony's original mention of Cooper to Dr Melfi, he displays here an acknowledgement of the trauma linked to the "strong, silent" persona. In much the same way that he acknowledges that his mother emasculated his father before his death, Tony tells Silvio that if Gary Cooper were alive today he would probably have joined an "abused cowboys" victim support group ("Christopher").[11] Although presenting an argument against identity politics, implicit within this comment is an acknowledgement of trauma as a byproduct of the idea of masculinity that Cooper made famous. Echoing his comment in the pilot episode that "they wouldn't be able to shut [Gary Cooper] up", again Tony exhibits an awareness that stoicism is not a sustainable trait ("Christopher"). Indeed, Tony's evocation of Cooper as a male icon is predicated upon the fact that Tony himself falls short against his esteemed masculine archetype—this is what leads to his nostalgia.

In episode six of season two, "The Happy Wanderer", Tony tells Dr Melfi, "Remember the first time I came in here? I said the kind of man I admire is Gary Cooper, the strong, silent type. And how all Americans, all they're doing is crying and confessing and complaining—a bunch of fuckin' pussies. Fuck 'em! And now I'm one of 'em—a patient!". Tony's links being a 'patient' with the culture of victimisation he critiques in "Christopher", both of which he sees as inimical to the 'strong, silent type', indicative of a shift in masculinities to what Tony regards as a negative turn towards emotional expressivity at the expense of losing a sense of certainty and security. Gary Cooper then becomes not only a symbol of a nostalgic desire for the past but also of Tony's own feelings of weakness and inadequacy, a measure of the distance he feels between an ideal and his reality. Here, the nature of male nostalgia as an affective device is clear—Tony bemoans emotional expressivity yet he is emotional, he is in therapy to talk about his emotions, his nostalgia for the past displays the very depths of his emotions.

Gary Cooper lingers as a presence of pastness throughout the series. He lingers as a figure of absence, representing that which Tony feels is missing in the present comparative to the 1950s, even if at the same time he is aware of the unreality of his longing, aware that his

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[11] In a therapy session with Dr Melfi, Tony admits that his mother had worn his father down to a "squeaking little gerbil" before he died ("The Sopranos"). While Melfi responds that Tony's mother sounds like a "formidable maternal presence" Tony refuses to reply, unwilling to concede that his father was anything over than the ruling patriarch that Tony romanticises.

father was “worn down” by his mother before his death. Nostalgia provides Tony with a past that seems to offer safety and security, a recourse to the challenges he faces in the present, yet instead of working as an anchor, the past is a temporal disjuncture. Tony looks back to a past that never was and consequently finds the present disorienting. When Meadow attempts to discuss sex at the breakfast table Tony blocks her autonomy, telling her “Out there it may be the 1990s, but in this house, it’s 1954” (“Nobody Knows Anything”). Boym writes that contemporary nostalgia is more concerned with the “vanishing present”, an experience of the shrinking of time, than it is with the past (351). Tony articulates his experiences with this rhetoric of temporal disjuncture, in which contemporary society is for him often a confusing place where constant multifarious demands on him makes him wish for a past where he could experience something permanent, where he could come in at the beginning, rather than the end.

In *The Sopranos* men are “made”, constructed through acts, speech, style and behaviours, rather than being naturally born so. The ‘rules’ underpinning mob masculinity must be upheld at all costs for fear of being exposed, there is an always potential threat of destabilising the mob’s self-imaging as ‘made men’. Just as Tony’s grasp on power always seems precariously about to slip away from him, so too does the status of the ‘made man’ as an emblem of patriarchal masculinity seem always on the precipice of being exposed as artifice. This terminology in itself highlights gender as construction—men are ‘made’ through the successful learning of the codes of gangster belonging, not naturally occurring as such, proving themselves as worthy of the title through initiation rituals that serve to sustain mob masculinity as natural, linking to traditions derived from their ancestral homeland in Italy. Masculinity for the made man is composed of the various acts and tests that one must pass in order to prove themselves ‘made’, revealing mafia masculinity as gender performance. The effort that is put into being ‘made’ and the constant fear of feminisation and homoeroticisation that lingers over the mob questions the coherency of the patriarchal masculinity. Michael Kimmel writes, “what we call masculinity is often a hedge against being revealed as a fraud, an exaggerated set of activities that keep others from seeing through us and a frenzied effort to keep at bay those fears within ourselves” (“Masculinity as Homophobia” 63). From this it becomes clear why Tony invests in the ideation of the strong successful patriarch—despite its impossibility and capacity to undermine the illogical

demands of hegemonic masculinity, continually reinvesting in the idea that it is possible is necessary to allow the masculine subject to present a coherently gendered sense of self.

Nostalgic form: Intertextuality and the gangster genre

Tony's lament of the demise of Gary Cooper is both a nostalgic yearning for an imagined past and revealing of the extent to which mediated representations pervade the world of the series and inform both the character's own understandings of self and the spectator's expectations of these character. Tony and his mob display a self-referential understanding of their position as Mafiosi in relation to famous Hollywood Mafia narratives. These texts become benchmarks against which the mobsters assess their performances of Mafia masculinity and frequently find themselves falling short. Tony's lament for his father's era despite his simultaneous awareness of the illusionary nature of this desire is a yearning reinforced by the utopic power offered by Hollywood representations of mob masculinity.

The second level of nostalgia that I identify throughout the Quality TV dramas, that of stylistic or formal nostalgia, operates in *The Sopranos* primarily through the use of genre. Informing the series's thematic and narrative interests in nostalgia and the complexities between past and present through its frequent use and distortion of myths and modes of masculinity imbedded within the gangster genre. This form of nostalgia further crystallises the impossibility of Tony's nostalgia, thus reinforces my central argument in this chapter that *The Sopranos* simultaneously displays male nostalgia, linked with a failure to be the 'strong silent' type and the pressures of mafia homosociality, while showing that the nature of this longing is almost farcical in its impossibility.

In "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" Frederic Jameson describes the ideological function of mafia narratives. Focusing on *The Godfather,* he suggests that the film represents a utopian longing for an ethnicised patriarchal familial unity for white, middle-class audiences. He writes:

> Thus, at a time when the disintegration of the dominant communities is persistently "explained" in the (profoundly ideological) terms of a deterioration of the family, the growth of permissiveness and the loss of authority of the father, the ethnic group can seem to project an image of

> social reintegration by way of the patriarchal and authoritarian family of the past. (“Reification” 146-147)

Although Jameson discusses mafia narratives as utopian, the future-based temporal relation of nostalgia, he writes that mafia narratives offer an ethnicised nostalgic fantasy of family unity which appears as out of reach for the white, middle-class American mainstream. The “protective security of the (god-)father with his omnipresent authority” marks Coppola’s film and more recent mafia films more broadly, as offering nostalgic pleasures of the patriarchal family (Jameson “Reification” 147). Through Tony’s romanticisation of the patriarchal ideology of the mafia of old and the series’s self-reflexive referencing of past (cinematic) representations of the mafia, *The Sopranos* displays nostalgia for the mafia’s past through the constant reference to prior mafia narratives. While *The Sopranos* demythologises the genre by transporting its grand cinematic narratives into television, it treats these texts with nostalgic reverence at the same time.

Glen Creeber suggests that Tony’s nostalgia can be read as a desire not just for past forms of masculinity or communal bonds within the Mafia, but an unconscious and metatextual desire for a dramatic universe that is more in line with classic (ie. *The Godfather*) cinematic representations of gangster narratives (126). For Creeber *The Sopranos* is parodic and revisionist and also a longing reflection on a genre that has lost its moral stability and security (125). Aaron Toscano, building on Jameson’s argument in “Reification”, writes that mafia narratives themselves are intrinsically nostalgic, appealing to an illusion of utopic fantasy through their “strong patriarchal protagonists” (457). Toscano continues that audiences are assumed to be “enthralled” with this patriarchal leader who operates as a nostalgic vision, offering audiences a “leader they seem to miss” despite acknowledging that the “powerful patriarchal leader” is a cultural myth that may have never actually existed (457). Although Tony is still the “misogynist patriarch” that Toscano argues is a common trope of mafia narratives, the series also exposes his vulnerabilities through the therapy sessions with Dr. Melfi in a manner uncommon for the genre (458). What Toscano indicates here is congruent with my argument above. The interjection of the melodramatic logic of the therapeutical space poses a challenge to the exalted nature of masculinity with mafia narratives and uses nostalgia as a critical and destabilising tool by using it to reveal this

vision of strength and unity that the male nostalgic yearns for is ultimately a romanticised and mythic illusion.

Intertextuality is a key device that links *The Sopranos* to its gangster genre antecedents, contextually grounding characters and plots within a knowledge of other media texts. I understand intertextuality here as the use of methods such as allusion and quotation to other textual products, situating a singular text within a complex matrix of meaning ascribed through other texts and popular culture. The characters in the series display an awareness of the tradition that has come before them and this is used as a metacommentary on the characters themselves. Postmodern intextuality, which draws upon preexistent texts to ascribe and enrich meaning, can be seen in itself as a device conterminous to a nostalgic logic. The use of texts as rich sources of meaning and sites of allusion in postmodern nostalgia extracts value from artefacts of the past in a manner that mimics how nostalgia in itself mines the past for sources of meaning, the difference being postmodern intertexuality's committment to renewing the past as opposed to nostalgia's desire to recreate it. Unlike *The Godfather* trilogy, set primarily in the 1940s and 1950s and *GoodFellas* (Scorsese, 1990), which spanned the 1950s to 1980s, *The Sopranos* comments on a contemporary present (late 1990s-mid 2000s), the mob that exists after these films. Therefore, while *The Sopranos* is a television series about the contemporary gangster, it is inextricably linked to the past and equally its characters cannot help but look to the past to define their identities. *The Godfather* series romanticises Italian American culture, depicting it in opposition to the institutions of mid twentieth century United States, the ethnic other-ness of the Corelone family and their close familial bond both romanticised and fetishised. Although *The Sopranos* complicates the patriarchal omniscience of the holy Godfather by placing its protagonist in the vulnerable position of the therapist's chair, its indebtedness to *The Godfather* complicates its relationship to the gangster genre—on the one hand revisionist, suburbanising its mythic narratives, yet at the same time not resolutely anti-nostalgic, even the characters in the series seem to 'miss' the ease of masculine control in *The Godfather.*

The cinematic mafia past permeates *The Sopranos* in multiple ways. There are frequent allusions in the diegesis to the Hollywood Mafia film, for example, Paulie's car horn plays the theme song to *The Godfather.* In the episode "Isabella", Tony is shot at while buying a bottle of orange juice from a street vendor, alluding to a scene in the first *Godfather*

film where Vito Corleone is similarly shot at while purchasing oranges. Season two's episode "Commendatori" playfully questions the mythologies underpinning the Soprano (Mafia) family's Italian origins, when Tony, Paulie and Chris travel to Italy on a business trip, the first time any of these men have visited their homeland. The episode opens with the men gathered to watch a bootleg DVD of *The Godfather* in preparation for their trip—their understanding and expectations of Italian culture shaped by Coppola's films. The episode, however, frequently dispels their romanticised ideas of Italy, with Tony shocked to find a woman in charge of the local mob, Paulie craving macaroni and gravy instead of the squid ink spaghetti he receives and Chris spends the majority of the trip in his hotel room injecting heroin, entirely missing out on any sort of connection with Italy. The men find that Italy does not conform to their idealised expectations they have constructed through their consumption of mediatised narratives of mafiosi. One of the final scenes of the episode is the crew driving home, looking out the car window as they pass the familiar sites of their urban, industrial New Jersey home, as an acknowledgement that Italy exists here to remind the men that the Italy that they have constructed, that their whole identities are built upon, is not real and that it is the sights of Jersey that they call home.

Beyond these diegetic allusions and overt references to the films, a number of cast members in *The Sopranos* also starred in *GoodFellas,* functioning as a subtle reference point for a spectator who is assumed to have awareness of the film. Lorraine Bracco, who plays Dr Melfi, also played Karen Hill, wife of gangster turned FBI informant Henry Hill in *GoodFellas;* Michael Imperioli plays Christopher in *The Sopranos* and Spider in *GoodFellas.* These casting choices draw a connection between the two texts, placing *The Sopranos* in dialogue with Scorsese's film which depicts both the allure and subsequent demise of the mob. The incorporation of the stars of *GoodFellas* furthers the claim of Quality TV as 'cinematic' by here establishing a lineage not only through allusions but through the star function of its actors.

One of the opening scenes of the pilot episode "The Sopranos" is of Tony retrieving his newspaper from the front lawn. As Tony's voiceover laments that he has been feeling that he "came in at the end" the camera follows him in a tracking shot as he walks down his driveway. The scene, shot from the perspective of behind Tony's back, surveys the large houses of his neighbourhood and the manicured lawns of his property. Tony bends and the camera moves into a mid shot which pans around to Tony's face, finding him reading the

newspaper in a bathrobe that has come open, revealing his large, hairy chest, naked except for a St. Anthony medallion around his neck. The scene is an allusion to the closing scene of *GoodFellas*, where Henry Hill goes to get his morning newspaper in his bathrobe. In the scene, Hill, who has been resettled out of the gangster life into witness protection, describes how he is now an "average nobody…a schnook" who is now forced to live out the rest of his life in the suburbs. *GoodFellas* opens with Henry Hill's childhood glamourisation of mob life and ends with its complete demystification as he breaks the code of silence, helping prosecute his former buddies in order to save himself. As Patricia Keeton writes, this demythologisation of the gangster genre in *GoodFellas* is where *The Sopranos* takes as its starting point for a televisual transformation of the genre (135-6). By opening with the daily routines that make up Tony's life, *The Sopranos* indicates its desire to start where *GoodFellas* concluded and to extend *GoodFellas*' destabilisation of gangster mythology by showing Tony's contentment in his domestic life and that gangsters are not separate from suburban existence.

Fig. 3-4-Tony (James Gandolfini) picking up his newspaper in "The Sopranos", a visual reference to Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) at the end of *GoodFellas*

The gangster film often encourages a nostalgic view of the past in order to redeem the violent actions of its characters. For example, Larke-Walsh suggests that *Donnie Brasco* (Newell, 1997) encourages nostalgia for a lost masculine strength and power (216). Aggressive masculinity in the nostalgic past acts as a kind of fantasy, where the displacement of crime into history elides the negative consequences of violence into romanticised pastness. *The Sopranos*, however, simultaneously solicits nostalgia and evokes the past to destabilise myths contained in these narratives. Although Tony longs for the values of his father's era, of the so-called 'golden age' of the mafia, through flashbacks the

audience sees these values in action when Tony's father Johnny Boy slices off butcher Satriale's pinky for his inability to pay off debt, a crime witnessed by a young Tony that causes his first panic attack ("Fortunate Son").

Television screens pervade the interior spaces of *The Sopranos.* Many scenes open with a zoom out from the television screen to the characters watching, or incorporate programming as a plot device where the characters learn information from a television set within the diegetic space. This continual reflection on the characters and their situation within a mediasphere that is in repeated dialogue over the placement and role of the mafia in contemporary American society is a structuring commentary of the series. These media products that shape the life-worlds of the characters create a referential matrix in which every behaviour, gesture and act is constantly assessed, by both the character and spectator, against the wealth of knowledge provided by the media about what a gangster should be like. These metatextual discourses inform both the characters' and the spectators' expectations of masculinity within the series. From this referential web characters receive instructions, performative scripts to follow and models to esteem. The spectator, who is imagined to share this metatextual knowledge, uses prior understanding of masculinity within the gangster genre to then assess the identities on offer in the series. The frequent allusions and references to other media products from the gangster genre creates a process where spectators are expected to understand the meanings evoked through intertextual referencing and use this as a lens to contextually map characters, whilst simultaneously seeing the fictional characters on screen negotiating their identities against the same references. Harry Brod writes that the series creates a "kind of double vision", whereas the spectator watches the unfolding story both the spectator and the characters have before their mind's eye images from earlier gangster films in their minds, constantly assessing Tony and his crew against already established genre tropes and representations (1). Brod argues that the series sets up a deliberate comparison between gangster films such as *The Godfather* trilogy, *GoodFellas and The Sopranos* to showcase the generational shift in masculinity that the drama centres around (1). Tony acknowledges Gary Cooper as a model for his masculinity, Christopher parallels with *Scarface'*s (De Palma, 1983) Tony Montana and Ralph Cifaretto draws upon *Gladiator'*s Roman machismo. When Christopher says his friend Brendan's death, a bullet through the eye is a "Moe Greene special", which Big Pussy explains with a simple reference to "One", this knowledge is similarly assumed of the audience, who are

expected to understand this reference to the famous scene in *The Godfather* ("Meadowlands").

Tony's pop culture awareness has shaped his masculine identity as a constant longing for a wholeness that can never be achieved. Hayward and Biro articulate this through Tony's longing for the ground floor, writing,

> Not only is the ground floor closed, the ground itself has disappeared. Tony Soprano arrives in the world in much the same way as the television spectator arrives at the series itself: late, with a sense of himself as a kind of parodic repetition, of not being the real thing. He arrives after *The Godfather.* (207)

With his knowledge of what it means to be a mafia leader drawn from a composite of Hollywood films and idealised childhood recollections of his father, Tony has no reference point against which to map his performance of masculinity. He finds himself lamenting the loss of Hollywood portrayals of masculinity, wishing he came in at the 1950s, the setting of the first *Godfather* film, so that he himself could be part of the classical gangster mythologisation rather than coming in "at the end" in a parodic reworking of the genre. Glen Creeber argues, "*The Sopranos* implicitly critiques the 'televisionization' of the gangster genre—parodying its gradual development…from the cinematic epic to standard video or television fare" (125). Not only does Tony reveal a nostalgia for the Hollywood gangster film, but the series ultimately displays a similar nostalgia by critiquing him as unable to live up to the masculine ideal of the cinematic portrayal of the gangster.

The use of intertextuality and genre revisionism in *The Sopranos* works to both reproduce and challenge a nostalgia for prior representations of the mafia. The series relies on the spectator's assumed knowledge of canonical texts of the Italian American gangster, texts that have come before *The Sopranos* and are used as key reference points. *The Sopranos* places its characters in the same position as the imagined spectator, as fervent consumers of popular culture and as a result, Coppola and Scorsese's films are rich sources of fantasy that propel Tony's nostalgic masculinity. He is only able to look to the past and at previous canonical gangster texts for gender scripts that are inadequate for the

contemporary landscape, where the communal bonds of the mafia are breaking down through self-interest and the apparently unquestioned patriarchal rule of the mafia has come under attack by the increased voice given to women who refuse to occupy a background role. The importance of the television set within the series links the gangster, a symbol of hypermasculinity, with the domestic melodrama. While Tony laments the demise of the good old days of the mob, he indulges in the consumption of television, a medium stereotyped as pacifying and feminine due to its associations with the domestic sphere and passive consumption.

Nostalgic form enriches the series's commentary on affective nostalgia and importantly, it problematises the desire of the characters for the types of representations and mythic masculinities found in *The Godfather* series or *GoodFellas,* a desire that is assumed also in the spectator. By showing Tony and his gang's failure at performing the exalted forms of masculinity within these texts, the series reiterates that its contribution to the genre is its adaptation to television, bringing the gangster into a medium associated with the everyday, the domestic and the feminine.

Conclusion

The Sopranos presents an ideal masculinity as that which is always out of reach, embedded in nostalgia and a romanticised past that can never be eventuated. Judith Kegan Gardiner posits masculinity as a "nostalgic formation, always missing, lost, or about to be lost, its ideal form located in a past that advances with each generation in order to recede just beyond its grasp" (11). In *The Sopranos* masculinity is that which Gardiner articulates, a sense of loss, a constant struggle of becoming and an inevitable failure to live up to an ideal.

Mob masculinity in *The Sopranos* is informed by the inadequacy of myth, exposed as a frantic performance of macho aggression whereby men are "made" following in a tradition that attempts to alleviate anxiety surrounding gender positions. Tony, as leader of the patriarchal hierarchy of the mob, attempts to exert authority, establishing his masculinity as dominant in order to secure his rule. Within a world of performatively constructed 'made men' where masculinity is informed by fictional films, Tony Soprano inhabits a nostalgic longing for a past of coherent, unemotional male heroic icons, yet *The Sopranos* demonstrates that gender is always processual, imbedded within a nostalgic wish to return

to a previously stable time that is ultimately a mythic endeavour leading to anxiety and loss. That is, through recourse to male nostalgia, *The Sopranos* demonstrates, as is the core contention of this thesis, that the emotionally repressive requisite component of hegemonic masculinity (mirrored in this case by mob masculinity) is bound to fail and this failure manifests as a nostalgia that is steeped in emotional affectivity.

In the "The Happy Wanderer" Tony expands further on the 'strong silent type'. He tells Dr. Melfi, "Remember the first time I came here, I said the kinda man I admire is Gary Cooper, the strong silent type. And how all Americans, all they're doing is crying, confessing and complaining, a bunch of fuckin' pussies. Fuck 'em." Tony resents a culture that, in his eye, has made him a "victim" and a "patient", not able to realise that the sense of loss that he carries with him is itself a psychic consequence of trying to live up to the ideal of emotionless masculinities. The past lingers within the series as an idealised ghost, which, embodied through Gary Cooper, leaves Tony in a state of perpetual anxiety as he is unable to map his identity without any real reference to the past, leaving him constantly falling short.

In this chapter I have analysed the nature of affective nostalgia in *The Sopranos.* On the one hand, it is indeed a conservative desire for an idealised past. Tony desires an idealised form of masculinity that he locates in a prefeminist past through the figure of Gary Cooper. The past that he desires is a fantasy of the ease of masculine stoicism, yet this hinges on his realisation of the impossibility of this desire, that they "wouldn't be able to shut [Gary Cooper] up". Yet I argue that if we think critically about this desire we can see that male nostalgia arises in the series in a response to the impossible demands of hegemonic masculinity. It is born out of a necessity to be strong and silent, but manifests into an anxious nostalgia that sees Tony enter therapy, where, much to his dismay, he has to talk about his feelings. *The Sopranos* both portrays Tony's nostalgia as a conservative device while constantly ironising this desire, poking fun at the apparent surety that Tony clings onto in his vision of the past. While male nostalgia in *The Sopranos* contains the potential to challenge both the myths of the gangster genre and, moreover, the emotional repression upon which hegemonic masculinity is founded, its challenging potential lays on the level of the personal and does not erode the structural forms of power that ensure the ongoing perpetuation of patriarchy.

While I am not suggesting that prior to the debut of *The Sopranos* there were no televisual antecedents of the male nostalgic trope, *The Sopranos* combines affective

nostalgia and nostalgic form within the contemporary Quality TV form in a manner that has richly informed the series I discuss. Tony's nostalgia for the past is clearly articulated within the series and closely linked with masculinity. *The Sopranos* represents his nostalgic malaise most obviously through dialogue and characterisation, but also through dream sequences, flashbacks and surreality—features of temporal play that have been taken up as common formal delineators of contemporary Quality TV. This playing with the logics of televisual temporality furthers the implications of male nostalgia. If we conceive of masculinity as linked to linear time, then disruptionss to linear chronology serve as meditations that favour the non-sequential and non-significant. Temporal play then on the one hand seems complimentary to dramas that are concerned with issues of memory and personal chronology in relation to nostalgia, yet on the other expose the critical potential of nostalgia to reveal the fractures within hegemonic identities.

The Sopranos uses nostalgia as a key component of its characterisation and the identity of its protagonist and evokes it through use of intertextuality. Assessing their identities as *mafiosi* in relation to cinematic portrayals of gangster narratives, the characters of *The Sopranos* often find themselves coming up short in comparison. Through referencing these films that the spectator is assumed to be familiar with, the series presents a subtle form of nostalgia for the ideals of the mafia represented in past cinematic portrayals. The fictional nature of these films and their mythic portrayals of masculinity are exposed, leaving the male nostalgic in a vulnerable position, the mob boss in therapy whose vulnerability is made clear as the series concludes with a sudden cut-to-black, leaving the spectator uncertain of Tony's fate.

The Sopranos therefore provides clear evidence of the invocation of the male nostalgic protagonist as a subject whose experiences are rooted in a sense of uncertainty and anxiety, longing for a past of stable gender identities despite the falsity of such a time in actuality. This is combined with a critique vocalised by female characters of Tony's nostalgic malaise and desire for an imagined past of patriarchal security. Through this the series displays the contradictory logic at the heart of the male nostalgic trope—on the one hand exhibiting a critical, deconstructive potential for nostalgia, yet simultaneously reifying its support for male nostalgia.

As this chapter has demonstrated, *The Sopranos* provides a clear and obvious example of the male nostalgic trope. It is both due to the extent in which this is primary to

Tony's characterisation and the series's thematics and due to its chronological positioning that makes the series something of a template for subsequent series that ruminate on similar depictions of nostalgic masculinity. In this sense, *The Sopranos* offers a 'ground floor' in terms of the male nostalgic trope. It provides a clear articulation of Tony's personal nostalgia as something intrinsically linked to masculinity, as both an expression of feelings of inadequacy but moreover, of the usage of nostalgia as a means of negotiating (or the inability *to* negotiate) a contemporary sociocultural climate in which the forms of patriarchal privilege that Tony valorises are being contested and brought under question.

Chapter three:
"Around and around and back home again": *Mad Men* and male nostalgia in the period drama

In the season one finale of *Mad Men* (AMC 2007-2015), advertising executive Donald (Don) Draper is tasked with pitching a slide projector, 'The Wheel', to prospective clients Kodak ("The Wheel"). Don's brief is to "put the wheel of the future into something with some legs", instead he turns to the past, instilling nostalgia and memory into the projector which he renames 'The Carousel'.

In the pitch Don displays a series of family photographs depicting his own nostalgic memories. Coming at a moment in the series in which Don's marriage is disintegrating in comparison to the idyllic family life he portrays, The Carousel acts as a device that permits a utopic temporal break to an ongoing loop of happy memories. Don presents a speech in which he tells the clients that unlike most advertising which is premised around the wonderment of the new, he envisions a deeper bond capable with a product, that of nostalgia. He interweaves his own personal memories both into the slides and throughout the pitch, beginning the presentation by reflecting upon an old job at a fur company, where his former mentor Teddy schooled him on the secrets of advertising:

> Nostalgia—it's delicate, but potent. Teddy told me that in Greek 'nostalgia' literally means "the pain from an old wound". It's a twinge in your heart more powerful than memory alone. This device isn't a spaceship; it's a time machine. It goes backwards and forwards. It takes us to a place where we ache to go again. It's not called 'The Wheel', it's called 'The Carousel'. It lets us travel the way a child travels —around and around and back home again, to a place we know we are loved. ("The Wheel")

This scene demonstrates the series's multi-layered approach to nostalgia. Don's personal nostalgia for his childhood is evoked through the sentimentality of his pitch. His momentary regret at the current state of his marriage drives the scene through his usage of personal photos, presumably from a past time in which his family was happy. The series's

period setting is steeped in a nostalgic aesthetic evident in the visual construction of the scene. The romanticisation of the slide projector and the use of analogue photography creates a nostalgia for pre-digital technologies. The 1960s is depicted as a time of technological innocence compared to the digital present and this may encourage spectators with personal memories of using such devices to nostalgically reflect on their own family memories, in much the same way that the series as a whole may inspire nostalgic desire for the 1960s.

Mad Men centres on middle-tier agency Sterling Cooper (later Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce and then Sterling Cooper & Partners) where Don is the virtuosic creative director with authoritative influence over the direction of the agency. The series tracks its principal cast over the course of the 1960s against rapid social upheaval and change, these events depicted using archival footage where the past is remembered through television and then layered into the diegesis as historical fiction. This chapter looks at the series in its entirety but "The Wheel" is mentioned recurrently throughout the chapter as this episode highlights the many appeals to the concept of nostalgia within the series. The Carousel pitch exists within the diegesis as Don's crowning achievement. It has also come to serve the same function for the series, cited as the exemplar moment that justifies *Mad Men*'s claims to being Quality TV. This scene provides clear evidence of how nostalgia forms a constitutive component of Don's masculinity. Given that the scene occurs in the twelfth episode of a series spanning ninety-two episodes, it is also referenced by both the series itself and in publicity and promotions for the series's final season as an example of its mastery.

In this chapter I analyse these multivalent strands of nostalgia within the text. I argue that male nostalgia in *Mad Men* is an imaginative project, an example of Boym's 'reflective nostalgia' premised around a desire for childhood. I argue that that this nostalgia is linked to the demands of hegemonic masculinity insofar as it is a direct response to Don's backstory, to choices he made to secure the kind of structural power that hegemonic masculinity accounts for. Male nostalgia in *Mad Men* deconstructs the apparently stable masculine self into fragmentation and mourning.

In the first part of the chapter I undertake a close reading of The Carousel scene in "The Wheel" in order to discuss affective nostalgia. In *Mad Men* affective nostalgia is centred on Don's nostalgia for an imagined childhood and this is offset against the series's nostalgia for the 1960s. Don reflects upon a nostalgia for the lost past of his childhood, a desire to

rewrite the miserable neglect he suffered in his former life as Dick Whitman. It is revealed during season one that Don was actually born Dick Whitman. His mother died during childbirth and his father, a cruel rural farmer, married a sex worker resulting in Don growing up in a brothel. Enlisting for service in the Korean War, Don saw the opportunity for rebirth when an accident led to the death of the real Lieutenant Donald Draper. Swapping their identification tags, Don returned a war hero, moved to New York and was able to work his way up to his position as creative director where the series begins. His affective nostalgia nostalgia is not a wish to return to the childhood he actually experienced but to be able to recreate and reshape it, to provide a backstory more in line with his present identity. Through the juxtaposition of contemporary mores with early 1960s societal norms, the series constantly encourages spectators to be critical of their own potential nostalgia for the 1960s while Don himself is persistently unable to use nostalgia critically. As the series progresses Don becomes undone as his two marriages both end and his alcoholism threatens his successes at work. As a character constantly searching for cohesion between his traumatic childhood and former life as Dick Whitman, and his current successes as creative director Don Draper, he is unable to ultimately transcend the constant inertia caused by his mourning. While the series itself is very much based around the evolving styles and events of time, Don is stuck in a nostalgia loop positioned towards the past.

I argue that this nostalgia is gendered, an example of male nostalgia, as it is both directly related to and effects Don's status as a bearer of hegemonic masculinity. Don is positioned at the commencement of the series as, to quote Michael Kimmel's definition of hegemonic masculinity, "a man *in* power, a man *with* power and a man *of* power" ("Masculinity as Homophobia" 57, emphasis in original). As *Mad Men* is a workplace drama, this power is not linked to physical force or threats of violence, as is the case in *The Sopranos,* but to the workplace and the home. The popularity of Don as a masculine icon in contemporary popular culture suggests that his character is not just a relic of a bygone era of male power but connected to more current ways in which men maintain social power. In the first season he has what appears as the idealised nuclear family and even after his marriage to Betty breaks down, he still seems to have near irresistible sexual potency and charisma. Don is consistently depicted, particularly near the beginning of the series, in a privileged position amongst the hierarchy of corporate masculinities in his workplace. His title as creative director and his reputation as a virtuosic creative genius secure his authority in

the workplace. Therefore, while Don is not a physically powerful man, it is the interplay between masculinity and capitalism that ensures his success; as an advertiser Don plays a part in creating the mediatised representations that work to reflect and shape gender scripts and thereby secure hegemony.

This gendered power is not only individualised, but structural. Season one's rather heavy-handed approach to gender relations highlights the sexist and oppressive treatment of women, creating a narrative milieu in which spectators are constantly reminded of its patriarchal governance. It is apparent that the social world of the series (particularly the first three seasons) is one of unequal gender relations where men are the bearers of power, assured mobility and privacy in their offices, while the female employees, who constitute by large the secretarial pool, are on the floor, vulnerable and open to criticism and display. Despite this, Don is nostalgic and this nostalgia causes him to become undone, ending the series in a new-age spiritual retreat in California after multiple failed marriages and having absconded from his job. The series complicates an ability to derive meaning from Don's displays of mastery by unraveling his character as a traumatised subject engulfed in nostalgic longing. In *Mad Men* male nostalgia is "a pain from an old wound", wherein this wound is the psychic traumas of hegemonic masculinity itself. Encountering second-wave feminism, civil rights activism and social upheaval in a contemporaneous fashion, *Mad Men* contests the qualities initially used to establish Don's masculine authority, while always engaging in a process of representation that is both alluring and repellent. Even when Don is at his most insidious he still contains some attributes of masculinity that have facilitated audience engagement in the first place.

In *Mad Men,* nostalgia is used as an aesthetic register that constructs a critical dialogue with history. The series's *mise en scène* is steeped in a commitment to historical verisimilitude and the painstaking detail expended on historical accuracy results in a retro nostalgic mood to the series. In the second part of the chapter I examine how the series operates as the "time machine" that Don articulates in his speech, taking spectators back to 1960s New York to (re)experience a decade of turbulent social change. These events unfold for the spectator on dual levels—we watch as the characters experience events, but with a contemporary awareness and knowledge that these are major historical events with socio-political resonance. The series both invites spectators to take pleasure in the naivety of its characters, while at the same time avoiding being kitsch by constantly undermining the very

pleasures of its representations. In this section I discuss the ongoing postmodern nostalgia debates, making reference to Frederic Jameson's conception of the 'nostalgia film' in *Postmodernism.* While he argues that postmodern visual nostalgia is depthless, all surface sheen with nothing underneath, I posit that *Mad Men*'s focus on the visual image and its surface nostalgic style is actually a deliberate means of facilitating a critical nostalgic spectatorship.

It is also pertinent to note that the era *Mad Men* presents has important resonance extratextually. Opening in 1960, *Mad Men* takes spectators to the "ground floor", the passing of which Tony Soprano laments in *The Sopranos*. More than just being a series that tells us something about 'the past', *Mad Men'*s setting during a period where gender roles and societal structures were being popularly questioned and redefined is of direct relevance to the nostalgic masculinities that I am examining throughout this thesis. The mid-century period seems to offer something of a touchstone for idealised American masculinities due to its historical situation in the period just before second wave feminism.

Nostalgia is a common lens adopted in critical analyses of the series, however it is more commonly used to discuss the tension between verisimilitude and historical revisionism in depicting middle-class white America throughout the 1960s.[12] In his chapter on *Mad Men* and the politics of nostalgia, David Pierson outlines four different approaches to nostalgia in critical responses to the series. The first he labels "nostalgic imaginary", referring to the construction of the 1960s as, on the one hand fetishistic and alluring, yet also repellent in the sexism, homophobia and racism portrayed in such a visually desirable space ("AMC's" 139).[13] Pierson's second nostalgic mode is "televisual nostalgia", linked to how *Mad Men* as a television serial and mediator of cultural imagery evokes intense emotional loss and longing which are then 'healed' through its representations ("AMC's" 139).[14] The third form of nostalgia describes how the series uses nostalgia critically, producing a commentary on the

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[12] There are a large number of articles and chapters discussing *Mad Men* in relation to nostalgia. See, for example, Alex Bevan's article on nostalgia for pre-digital media; Prudence Black and Catherine Driscoll's article on the use of television footage as a nostalgic technique for portraying cultural decline; Heidi Brevik-Zender's chapter on fashion and nostalgia; Jeremy Butler's chapter on historicisation and visual style; Caroline Hamilton's chapter on vintage aesthetics; Ann Ciasullo's chapter which discusses the multitude of levels of nostalgia within the series; Lynn Spigel's article that looks at nostalgia in relation to postfeminism.

[13] See also Aviva Dove-Viebahn's article "Mourning Becomes the Mad Men: Notes on Nostalgia".

[14] See also Katharina Neimeyer and Daniela Wentz's chapter "Nostalgia Is Not What It Used to Be: Serial Nostalgia and Nostalgic Television Series".

1960s that troubles dominant mythologies of the era and opens a dialogue between the 1960s and contemporary culture ("AMC's" 140). Pierson's fourth form of nostalgia sees it used as a resource for present-day cultural critique, whereby the nostalgic desire to return to a past time can reveal critiques of the present condition from which the nostalgic individual wishes to retreat ("AMC's" 140).

Pierson's account of the multitudes of nostalgias within the series is useful for its clear outlining of the various intersecting levels at which nostalgia operates. He provides a useful critical account of the politics of nostalgia and what is at stake in the series's representations. A facet that he does not explore, which is pertinent to my work, is the series's depiction of Don Draper as a nostalgic subject. In addition to the way in which nostalgia is evoked as a mood by the series as a whole, it is important to consider how this operates in relation to the series's focus on nostalgic masculinity. *Mad Men*'s attention to creating a dense, luxurious period aesthetic is a facet unavoidable in a sustained critical analysis. This chapter draws out the links between this visual construction of the past (primarily 1960s Manhattan) with Don's mourning of his own past to further elucidate the nuances of nostalgia that are at play within Don's characterisation. *Mad Men* depicts Don's personal nostalgia in a narrative that has been critiqued for creating a romanticised (and thereby nostalgic) vision of the 1960s, thus evoking a potential nostalgia in the spectator for notions of postwar masculinity as memorialised in popular memory. As Ann Ciasullo writes, this is furthered by the media coverage of the series. While the series itself may not intentionally glamourise its period setting, narratives about the series do the opposite—they invite audiences to romanticise the retro glamour of the costume, props and sets (Ciasullo 15).

Affective nostalgia: Don Draper's Carousel

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, 'The Carousel' pitch in season one's finale "The Wheel" reveals the complex layers of nostalgia at work within *Mad Men*. A simple slide projector becomes imbued with meaning, an emotionally resonant moment causing Don's colleague Harry Crane to flee the room in tears. The Carousel becomes an articulation of Don's "ache" to travel to a child-like state, a representation of his own desires and fantasies, a surreal projection of Don's experiences of loss.

In this section I provide a close reading of the scene and use this as a starting point for considering the complexities of affective nostalgia within the series. Don transforms a

simple slide projector into a “time machine”, a device with its own distinct temporal dimensions. While focusing on a scene from an episode in the first season of a seven season series could be considered a myopic approach, this would be under-appreciating the significance of The Carousel to the series in terms of character and thematic development and as establishing *Mad Men* as Quality TV. The Carousel scene is pivotal for male nostalgia It demonstrates the extent of Don’s nostalgia for his childhood, encouraging spectators to link this to their knowledge of his backstory, to his deliberate reinvention of self to align with gendered forms of power. Thus male nostalgia is evident in the affective expressions of loss and mourning that Don enunciates in his pitch. This nostalgia is not caused by a desire for inexpression, The Carousel scene is certainly an emotive display by Don, but by a desire for enacting normative modes of masculinity in itself.

In the darkened presentation room Don projects a series of personal photos while presenting his pitch to a silent room of advertising executives. Moments where he pauses for dramatic signification reveal the silence of the room except for the intermittent burring of the slide projector as it changes slides, the spectator encouraged to align with the captivated clients, spellbound by Don’s performance. Our attention is drawn to Don not only as the only speaking character in the scene, but as he stands whilst the other characters sit, dominating the aural and spatial compositions of the scene. Emotive background music primes the spectator to recognise The Carousel as an important moment in the series. Upon the hum of the slide machine as Don switches it into motion, a slow-tempo orchestral score begins in the background, creating a haunting tone that reinforces the reverie of the scene. Approximately three minutes of screen time is devoted to this presentation, quite a luxurious amount considering the scene ultimately has minimal effect on overall narrative progression. Wafts of cigarette smoke permeate the bottom of the frame and the simple motion of The Carousel changing slides provides the scene with an ethereal poeticism, a scene demanding the spectator’s attention as *Mad Men*’s canonical moment.

The Carousel offers its user the ability to relocate back in time through its cycle of slides. It offers a counterbalance to a linear temporal desire for progress, offset against the series’s trajectory through the 1960s, this time-bending capability connects to the spectator’s own potential experiences watching *Mad Men*, wishing to be transported to a nostalgically realised 1960s. The Carousel envisions the bending of time and place— separate images become narrativised and images are refashioned into the nostalgic

temporal disjunction of Don's "time machine". The images transcend their form and in conjunction with Don's aural pitch they become poetic, imbued with symbolic resonance both within the diegetic space of the pitch, and for the aware spectator who can instil further signification to the scene through their knowledge of the troubled Draper marriage and the recent death of Don's brother Adam. The slide projector is transformed into a temporal device that goes "backwards and forwards" and "around and around". Don uses the circular logic of the device creatively, projecting a utopic narrative into the permutations of the slideshow, refashioning the relationship between past, present and future into the circularity of The Carousel, with its non-linear and fluid potential. The combination of these elements—the ability to create poetic narrative, the circularity of nostalgic time and the capacity for a slide projector to become a 'time machine' shows the affective power of nostalgia. In her analysis of the scene, Irene V. Small writes that the slides evoke the etymological roots of nostalgia—the *nostos* (homecoming) and the *algos* (pain and grief) (183). These aspects are evident in the details of the photographs on display—affective in their very ordinariness, they, as Small writes, *touch* the spectator and Don himself with their emotional resonance even while ultimately being exploited for the purpose of sales (183) The success of Don's pitch is assured by his harnessing of the emotional affectivity of nostalgia. It shows the emotional power of nostalgia, capable of temporarily making time circular, of instilling meaning and narrative into a set of photographs and ultimately of altering one's personal memories.

While The Carousel contributes minimally to the narrative outside of the episode's plot, the scene does contribute immensely in terms of character exposition and thematic exploration. Nostalgia is an already present lens through which the imagined spectator accesses the series by virtue of its period setting. With season one premised mainly around the reveal of Don's past identity as Dick Whitman, this coalesces in The Carousel scene as this is the first time spectators are shown a representation of Don's nostalgic longing. Don envisions The Carousel as a magical fantasy object in which he invests the power of temporal movement, the ability to return to a childlike state and to 'home' as a refuge space. He speaks of the device as facilitating a fluid mobility, conceptualising the slide projector as moving "the way a child travels" ("The Wheel"). The childhood metaphor is crucial here, as this is Don's original site of trauma; spectators are aware of his backstory, that he had an unhappy childhood and was deprived of the sort of affection that he draws upon in the pitch. This scene becomes a moment in which Don makes visible his desire to escape the present,

seeking the comforts of the false past he creates in the pitch. The inability for nostalgia to actually alleviate his trauma is played out in the subsequent scene, where Don attempts to rush home to meet his family before they depart for Thanksgiving, but ultimately arrives too late, as too long spent dwelling on the past does not translate to an ability to transform the present. Unlike Bob Batchelor's summation in his chapter "Spin the Carousel: *Mad Men*, Nostalgia and the American Dream" that the scene indicates nostalgia as pain (a physical "ache") but one with a happy ending by taking us to a "place we know we are loved", I argue that there is no euphoric possibility within The Carousel other than the pleasure of loss in itself. Conceptualised through metaphors of pain and suffering in the pitch, nostalgia is linked to loss, a very tangible longing for a state of wholeness, a return to a childlike state of naivety. Don's desire to rename the projector 'The Carousel' aligns it closer with fantasy. A carousel is a signifier of the idealised innocence of youth, yet it is a transitory ride, offering a brief respite to this place that we ache to go again, yet without the promise of the ongoing fluidity of the wheel. This experience depicts Don's desire for transcendence but actually encapsulates his inertia, instead trapped in a double-bind reminisicent of Lauren Berlant's idea of 'cruel optimism' as something desirable to which you form an optimistic attachment but that actively impedes the aim you are desiring (1).

From The Carousel scene we can see that Don's nostalgia is pivoted not around a desire to return to the past, but rather to ease the pain from the "old wound" that Dick Whitman has left behind. He does not attempt to recreate the past but rather dwells in the sense of longing and the pain of the trauma of this loss. Don's nostalgia is indicative of a reflective nostalgia, what Boym considers as a "longing for continuity in a fragmented world", a "defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals" (xiv). The Carousel literalises this process, where the slide projector is used to create an alternate temporality to the rhythms of daily life, the darkened presentation room creating a fantasy-like space to play out his desires. The play with temporality, using the cyclical logic of The Carousel as a means of evoking nostalgia both thematically and stylistically, aligns with Paul Booth's idea of temporal play, subverting linear time to focus on the "human temporal experience" while also highlighting the spectacle of the manipulation of time (371). Here the temporal play situates *Mad Men* as a Quality text—part of what makes the series Quality TV is how it plays with time. More importantly the rupturing of linearity mirrors the ruptures in the facade of Don's presentation of self. Given that subjectivity is always imbricated within

processes of gendering, this rupture is not just an existential crisis but a gendered 'crisis', in that male nostalgia here reveals the cracks in the assumed surety and coherency of the masculine subject.

As a scene in which Don, a character noteworthy for his stoicism and lack of affect, appears momentarily caught up in the romance of his own pitch, The Carousel offers an insight into the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and nostalgia. The Carousel sees Don for the first time publicly reflect upon his feelings of trauma and loss, yet it is also a moment heralded both within the series and extra-diegetically, as the symbol of his success and the pinnacle of his creative capabilities. On the one hand, Don reveals an intimate ache for a lost childhood and displays the impact this has had on his relationships, yet it also serves as a paradigmatic example of that which has created Don's success—the scene is ultimately also a display of masculinity and mastery, an extremely successful means by which to sell a product. The darkened presentation room lit with the glow of the slide projector, the wafts of cigarette smoke permeating the scene, the white noise of the slide projector accompanying Don's speech and the constant cuts between close up shots of Don's face while delivering the speech and the corresponding slides places the spectator in the room alongside the Kodak executives. We become romanced with the power of the Carousel pitch alongside them and when the lights turn on at the end of the pitch and the scene breaks, we too are not ready for this moment to end. It both reveals the emotive excess concealed within the demands of heteronormative emotionally repressive masculinities, yet is ultimately also reinscribed into the logics of heteropatriarchal capitalism, at once showing masculinity coming undone and the recuperative logics by which moments of rupture and failure come to be subsumed back into the dominant.

In the following scene Don returns home, seemingly prompted to action by the verbalisation of his own desires and we watch as Don gets home just in time to greet his family before they depart for Thanksgiving. Our own complicity to be romanced by Don's pitch is challenged when this scene plays over again, only this time Don returning to find the house empty, the final scene of the episode is a slow zoom out of Don sitting alone at the foot of the stairs in his darkened house. Don tries to overcome his feelings of nostalgic loss for family, belonging and identity, yet his yearning for a happy ending is denied through the acknowledgement that he cannot recreate the past, that a slideshow will not erase the gap between past and present or solve the problems in his personal relationships. Similarly, the

spellbinding carousel ride that Don creates in the scene, twirling around and around with its poeticism and sentimentality, does not offer spectators a happy ending, a warning against investing in the pleasures of nostalgia to overcome the harsh realities of the present.

In a similar manner to *The Sopranos, Mad Men* explicitly uses nostalgia as a constitutive component of its protagonist's sense of self, a nostalgia suffused with an idealised notion of youth and bygone eras, one that is resolutely gendered in nature. Like all of the characters that I examine in this thesis, Don presents as a character with power in both a structural and relational sense of the term at one point in the series, in this case, at the beginning, however, over the course of the series this power erodes. Male nostalgia in *Mad Men* is linked with emotionality, it is undeniably melodramatic and emotionally excessive. For much of the series Don is emotionally detached from both himself and others, using alcohol, sex and sales pitch as ameliorative strategies. In The Carousel pitch, however ambiguously genuine it may be, his nostalgic emotion seeps out into the slight tear in his eye and through the surface of the slides, charging the room with an energy marked by his sense of loss and desire. As such, what we witness here and why ultimately this scene is so pivotal, is a display of male nostalgic desire. Premised on a desire for idealised familial bliss in the slideshow, male nostalgia in *Mad Men* is linked to childhood and more pertinently to the sacrifices and labour concealed within Don's desire for a culturally valorised expression of masculinity. This is to say that what the nostalgic display in The Carousel is really about is the mourning of a past which encapsulates the sacrifices within his reinvention towards corporatised and gendered success. There are indeed repercussions for Don's nostalgia as his success unravels over the course of the series, but his emotional display is not policed, on the contrary it is a signifier of his success. Failure, however, is inherent within Don's nostalgia. It surfaces as he becomes increasingly detached; it is quite literal in the diegesis when his marriage to Megan breaks down and he is placed on forced indefinite leave at the end of season six. While emotional expression is not the catalyst for male nostalgia in this text, it is the way it is expressed. This nostalgia exposes Don's failure, even if, somewhat contradictorily, it is espoused in a moment that simultaneously signifies his success.

The Carousel, a moment in which nostalgia and affect are ultimately commodified to sell products, has transcended just being a poignant narrative moment. It has become almost customary for every academic analysis of the series to make reference to the scene and it has been memorialised in popular discourses as the apex of *Mad Men'*s achievements

as a series.[15] Promotional material for season seven part two, the series's final six episodes, featured the voiceover of Don's Carousel pitch overlaid against a montage of fan favourite moments from the series, encouraging the spectator's nostalgia for the series's conclusion through evocation of a moment that has stood as the peak of Don's mastery. At a moment in which Don's future appeared uncertain with only six episodes to resolve his fate, the series evoked a nostalgia for its own past. The Carousel was used to at once remind spectators of the affective potential of the series while also encouraging a sense of nostalgia for the (romanticised) screen pasts of the characters. A Facebook application, the '*Mad Men* Carousel', allowed users to place their own photos into the pitch, the app blurring the photos to create a technologically enhanced nostalgic aesthetic (Fig. 5). In her analysis of outdated imaging technologies in the series, Alex Bevan writes that The Carousel scene invites a critique of the 'glittering lure' of digitised technologies (552). In the same way that Don opens the pitch by denouncing the new, the 'glittering lure', Bevan writes that the series invites a similar critique of technological development while nevertheless maintaining a sense of skepticism around this nostalgia (553). Such a reading is certainly supported by the scene's fetishisation of the analogue slide machine alongside its glorification of idealised family values. The Facebook application furthers this through its digitised rendering of the user's images into a vintage aesthetic schematic even though it is obviously a product of digital technology, turning The Carousel scene into both a signifier of the series and a site of nostalgic desire in itself. These examples makes the scene's double entanglement clear—on the one hand it is an emotionally resonant example of the series's storytelling finesse, used as a means to affirm its status as Quality Television, yet this moment of apparent vulnerability is also one that is used as evidence of Don's mastery and skill delivered through a gendered performance.

While it is a moment which sparks a twinge of sadness in Don's eye, The Carousel is also a grand display of nothingness, a neatly-packaged assemblage of photographs that ultimately suggest nothing other than themselves outside of the fluidity of the slideshow. As discrete images the slides in The Carousel combine to create motion and become imbued with nostalgic meaning, yet removed from the slideshow's perpetually ongoing loop they are

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[15] There are far too many academic and journalistic sources that make reference to The Carousel to be able to list them here. Particularly noteworthy in the genre of *Mad Men* Carousel analyses is television critic Matt Zoller Seitz's 2015 publication Mad Men *Carousel: The Complete Critical Companion.*

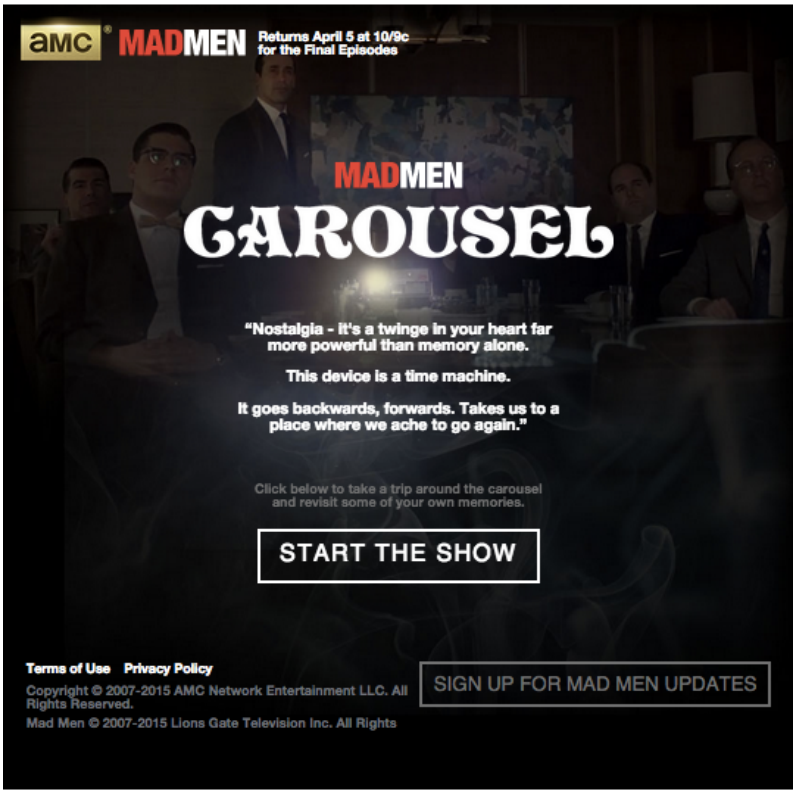

Fig. 5-An application on the *Mad Men* Facebook page that allowed users to insert their own pictures into Don's Carousel pitch.

just static photographs. For all its promise of its time travel possibilities, as being more than just a 'wheel', The Carousel cannot promise more than just an 'ache' in itself. As Jessica Campbell writes in her analysis of visual representations of utopia in the series, "control over photographs does not bring back—or change—the past" (97). Campbell writes that Don's voice trembles when he utters the words "time machine" which she argues is indicative of his own awareness that his presentation is fantastically idyllic and utopian (97). The slide presentation ends with a blank screen, an empty space of nothingness that invites spectators to project themselves onto the slideshow, creating their own narratives by imagining their nostalgic visions alongside Don's (Fig. 6). Whilst I have argued above that the scene showcases the powers of nostalgia, it also reveals the hollowness of this power. One can become momentarily entranced and suspend one's disbelief to invest in the ideas that Don espouses, as it appears that he too becomes momentarily caught up in nostalgia's power. As Sean O'Sullivan however writes, "when set up and activated, the nothings magically become somethings—the photographic images projected through the filled spaces…but after the final click, when the Carousel projects a space without a slide in it; the

Fig. 6-The blank screen at the end of The Carousel presentation (“The Wheel”).

screen simply shows a white square of light, or nothing” (123). The proceeding return to home sequence reveals that nostalgia cannot change the present, the denial of a happy resolution showing that for all the apparently transcendental power of The Carousel it actually imparts little beyond sentimental emotionality. The consequences of this for male nostalgia are complex—it is a moment of vulnerability, failure and simultaneously of masculine success. It is a challenge to the dictums of masculine display, a revealing of fragmentation of the gendered self, a moment that says a lot about male nostalgia and has a great bearing on the text in this sense, yet diegetically it suggests nothing other than being a great way to sell a product.

The Carousel works as an effective advertising strategy by effacing the relationship between product and commerce through highlighting the role of emotion. As Don makes clear in the opening of the pitch, nostalgia is a means of creating a deeper bond with a product, of instilling the commodity with meaning. In the pilot episode, Don tells client Rachel Menken that love does not exist, that “what you call love was invented by guys like me to sell nylons” (“Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”). As such he is acutely aware of the affective power of advertising, that it works to sell a feeling associated with a product, to orient desires towards the consumption of a commodity. David Pierson uses Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the “desiring machine” to describe how Sterling Cooper connects a commodity to a flow of desires (“Unleashing” 80). He argues that capitalist production functions to transfer human desire onto commodities in order to attempt to ameliorate a sense of loss fundamental to human subjectivity (Pierson “Unleashing” 82). He argues, “since the lack or loss can never

really be filled, fulfilment is constantly deferred", leading to a new flow of desire ("Unleashing" 82). In The Carousel scene, an "economy of desire" is established whereby this loss is explicitly addressed, The Carousel is offered as the remedy, yet it is unable to fulfil the loss, evidenced in the minimal effect that the scene has on Don's overall actions (Pierson "Unleashing" 82).

Don's ability to create poetic narrative out of a collection of photographs and use this to sell a slide projector indicates an inherent hollowness to the scene and to Don's yearning, his nostalgia refracted through the slide show but in a set of images that ultimately point to nothing and have no real impact on narrative events. Although Don rushes home after the pitch for a chance of making amends and enjoying a family thanksgiving, by season two's premiere Don's realisation of his longing is all but forgotten. The scene is forgotten about in the diegesis until season seven, when Ken Cosgrove makes an aside comment to Don about how a photograph of his children reminds him of the pitch ("Field Trip").[16] Furthermore, although this scene offers what appears to be a sincere reflection upon regret, trauma and longing, it cannot be divorced from the very context in which it exists. Don both articulates an ache for a lost and imagined past and a yearning for a sense of family connection yet at the same time is commodifying the family that he does have, using their private moments and memories to sell a product. The scene's reverential tone—evoked by its simplicity, the use of solemn background music and the stillness and silence of the other characters—encourages the spectator to efface the relationship between the scene and commodity capitalism yet it stands as a classic example of the signification of commodities with quasi-magical powers, a slide projector becoming capable of time travel and of resolving existential trauma. Yet in Mark Nicholls's reading of the series he writes Don displays awareness of the constructs of advertising and by extension capitalism at large, in the perpetuation of not only 'false needs' but of feelings and desires ("Don Draper" n.pag.). In The Carousel scene however, Nicholls argues, Don is mesmerised alongside both the spectator and the diegetic spectators of the pitch, displaying a rare moment of unmediated affectation ("Don Draper"

[16] The subsequent episode "The Monolith" ends with The Hollies' song "On A Carousel" playing over the final scene into the credits as Don sits at a typewriter to start writing, finally returning to work after a period of imposed leave of absence, making reference both to the circular nature of a carousel going around and around, similar to Don's patterns of success and failure and as a reminder of Don's creative potential and previous success through its reference to "The Wheel".

n.pag.) It is only in the manufacturing of feelings and desires that Don is able to feel and desire for himself.

Throughout its seven-season span, *Mad Men* can be somewhat simplistically described as a series that plots the downfall and internal breakdown of its protagonist. The opening credit animation features a silhouette bearing resemblance to Don Draper free-falling from an office building, only to, at the last moment, return securely to a position in his corner office. This sequence primes the spectator in the expectation that the protagonist, who is introduced at the commencement of the series as the exemplar of mid-century patriarchal masculinity, will over the course of the series find his position contested and negotiated. Even within the pilot the series signals this intention by situating the majority of the episode within Don's life in the city with his beatnik mistress Midge, only to end with him returning home to his wife and children in suburban Ossining, the spectator being called upon to question the identity of the protagonist they have come to know within the episode ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes"). With the spectator already primed to question the exterior display of Don's success, it comes as little surprise that over the course of the series Don's alcoholism and extra-marital affairs, initially serving as conduits to suggest his status as a powerful man, instead come to signify loneliness, uncertainty and an inability to achieve emotional intimacy. While his transformation from Dick Whitman to Donald Draper offers him the promise of regeneration and renewal, this move leaves Don experiencing an overwhelming sense of loss. It is nostalgic masculinity that allows us to see this; in this case it is a mechanism which explores vulnerabilities, that reminds us that gendered subjectivity and power are never absolute.

In Daniel Lair and Daniel Strasser's chapter on masculinity in the series, they situate Don as a masculine subject undergoing experiences of gender 'crisis' through an engagement with Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity. They argue that the series uses the 1960s as a vantage point from which to assess contemporary masculinities, portraying a world where masculine privilege remains relatively unquestioned, yet the spectator is constructed to have a historical awareness not available to the characters (84). Their argument here, while centring on contemporary discourses of 'masculinity in crisis' has an obvious usefulness for a discussion of male nostalgia. Whereas Lair and Strasser argue that Don appears to portray hegemonic masculinity but actually is more indicative of a 'masculinity in crisis', I argue that this division is arbitrary. Through male nostalgia we can see

that hegemonic masculinity may describe a position of structural power in relation to a wider gender order. Power is never absolute, however, and the demands to embody the ideals espoused in this configuration expose the inner fragmentation and 'crisis' of masculinities.

Season six's finale "in Care Of'" sees Don, who has spent most of the season drunk and increasingly detached from those around him, turn to The Carousel for inspiration for a pitch for Hershey's chocolates. He delivers a sentimental appeal to nostalgia by equating Hershey's chocolates with memories of childhood affection and belonging—he tells a story of an imagined childhood where his father would take him to the drugstore after he had mowed the lawn, offering him anything he liked, with Don always choosing Hershey's. Equating the chocolate with the love and affection that a father displays towards his son, Don delivers the tagline, "Hershey's is the currency of affection. It's the childhood symbol of love" ("In Care Of"). In this scene, Don deliberately appeals to an imagined nostalgic version of his youth, premised similar to The Carousel pitch on the promise of family and redemption. Unlike the transcendental power of The Carousel where he not only spellbinds the Kodak executives but allows himself to become caught up in the illusion of his own romantic musing, here the camera lingers on Don who looks down with uncertainty at his trembling hands, both a result of alcohol withdrawal and a physical manifestation of the toll that this fabrication of his childhood has on him. Don interjects business discussions to tell the real story of his childhood—that he was an orphan who grew up in a brothel dreaming of the love and affection promised in Milton Hershey's house for orphans as a place where he could feel a sense of belonging. He ends the meeting by telling the executives that Hershey's does not even need advertising because its promise is universal, in the process disavowing the very industry that has facilitated his self-transformation, suggesting that Hershey's holds the power of childhood innocence, the one virtue that Don has hesitancy in commodifying. The parallels with "The Wheel" continue in a subsequent scene where Don, instead of returning home to find he is too late to spend time with his family, takes his children to see the house where he grew up, a rare moment of acceptance of the real conditions of his past. Whatever utopic potentials both Don and the spectator might desire for the acknowledgement of the real aspects of his childhood are denied, Don's confession is met at best with indifference and at worst with a condemnation that sees him put on indefinite leave from his position.

This scene evokes a textual nostalgia with the series referring to its own serial memory. While a poignant stand-alone scene, it is more significant and meaningful if the

spectator makes the connection between the Hershey's pitch and The Carousel. This extra layer of signification thus relies upon the spectator's knowledge of the series, drawing on *Mad Men*'s own serial televisual memory by evoking a nostalgia for Don's performance of mastery in "The Wheel". The failure of the Hershey's pitch becomes more poignant for attentive spectators who can link it to The Carousel and as such the series seeks to engage the spectator who can appreciate the subtle thematic relevancies between the two scenes, particularly given the expanse of episodes that exist between these two moments. This reference to The Carousel reinforces its importance in the series and moreover, highlights the usage of serialisation that is a hallmark of Quality TV. This subtle inference to a narrative moment that occurred five seasons prior can be seen as an example of Ames's "temporal tease", playing with narrative progression by inviting the spectator to hold both past and present moments in their minds simultaneously (9).

"In Care Of" is cited here as diegetically it is antidote to the romanticisation of "The Wheel" yet still pivoted around a similar nostalgic yearning. This scene provides further evidence of the extent to which Don becomes 'undone' in the text. It is a significant moment diegetically: although colleagues do not necessarily care about Don's confession on a personal level, they do care about his conduct professionally and he spends most of season seven unemployed and adrift. While "The Wheel" ultimately absorbs the transgressive power of the presentation back into the logics of heteropatriarchal capitalism, the affective nostalgia that I posited as a rupture exhibited in The Carousel continues, coalescing in this later scene. If the polarity between rationality and emotionality rooted in Enlightenment thinking is a key signifier of gendered difference, and masculinities only become visible in opposition to femininities, then emotional expressivity must be repudiated for the continuation of male hegemony. Don's affective nostalgia, however, is not rejected, he carries it with him until it seeps out, his hands trembling with its force. Turning to Ahmed again, she writes, "emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies", these emotions are formed through contact with objects (4; 6). Here we can see this process take place. Through contact with the object, Hershey's, which in itself stands as a symbol of an idealised childhood, Don, the male nostalgic subject, experiences an emotion that is both visceral and corporeal. This emotion affects the surface of the body through its uncontrollable energy that moves it. Male nostalgia starts as a rupture and itself turns into an excess while simultaneously symbolising an excess of emotionality in itself. It shows the ongoing psychic toll of the maintenance of the power embodied within

hegemonic masculinity—in the process of attempting to maintain power, Don's power becomes undone. It is important to note however that while this makes for a disastrous client meeting and sees Don removed from the agency, seemingly lost within the ennui of nostalgia, the consequences of this are not insurmountable as eventually Don is welcomed back and is a cherished acquisition when the agency merges with McCann Erickson. Thus *Mad Men*'s relationship with affective nostalgia is always complex, it is constantly used to expose the failings in cultural ideals of masculinity while being reabsorbed into that ideal.

In this section I have posited that *Mad Men* displays affective nostalgia as the "pain from an old wound" that Don speaks of in the Carousel pitch. Through an extended analysis of this scene I identified that affective nostalgia in the series is linked to childhood, an imaginative form of nostalgia that desires to recreate the past. While this seems potentially neutral or ungendered, it is actually steeped in gendered significance as part of what Don mourns is the chasm between his upbringing and present self and this has immense gendered meaning given that the discord between these identities was a conscious reimagining of self in line with normative ideals of masculinised power, hegemonic masculinity. Male nostalgia in *Mad Men* is therefore not linked to the emotionally expressive demands of hegemonic masculinity but it is a form of emotional expression, it is a product of the demands of heteropatriarchal capitalist masculinity and forms of masculinised power. The desire to derive this power is marked with failure and consequence, this leads to nostalgia, yet this nostalgia is constantly reabsorbed back in to the dominant.

Nostalgic form: Period aesthetics and nostalgic style

As a series that uses the vantage point of the present to critically examine the past, *Mad Men* suffuses its portrayal of Don Draper as a nostalgic male protagonist with a complex layering of time between that of the spectator's viewing position in the contemporary present, the series's present (the 1960s), and the imagined past for which Don has nostalgia. While Don is a nostalgic character he also serves as exemplar of mid-century patriarchal masculinity to twenty-first century audiences, even soliciting a nostalgic response from a spectator who memorialises and mourns such an idea of masculinity in a present-day

climate.[17] Such a form of patriarchal masculinity may therefore in itself prompt nostalgic longing for the allure of its power even though the series reveals this archetype of masculinity as never secure, always vulnerable and subject to its own nostalgic desires. In her book on memory and nostalgia in cinema, Pam Cook argues that contemporary historical reconstructions can explore and interrogate the relationship between representation and history, using history to both reflect and critique contemporary concerns (2; 11). She argues that the sense of loss in nostalgia is amplified by the acknowledgement that the past is irretrievable, that the desire to overcome the gap between representations of the past and actual lived experiences results in a feeling of loss for the impossibility of this recovery (4). *Mad Men* (re)produces the historical specificity of the 1960s in order to comment on early twenty-first century anxieties, as the audience cannot help but filter the past through their present knowledge and as such the text is always openly engaged in a conversation between past and present. *Mad Men* consciously deploys nostalgia as a strategy to comment on issues of memory, history and identity, creating a nostalgic gaze that promotes a fetishistic enjoyment of the surface levels of 1960s style while questioning the relationship between past and present, posing the question of the possibility of cultural change through a dialectic between pastness and present.

In this section I review literature related to nostalgic aesthetics as a defacement of politics and history. This is where nostalgia is perhaps at its most conservative, turning the past into commodified style. I am particularly interested here in how this spectacle of style relates to the period's setting on the cusp of the second wave feminist movement.[18] The show's treatment of its period aesthetics is ambiguous as to the way that male nostalgia operates—it simultaneously solicits a nostalgic response while inviting spectators to be

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[17] This line of argument can be supported by the extensive amount of popular culture commentary based on emulating the series's protagonist. A non-exhaustive internet search reveals the following articles: "What Would Don Draper Say?" (Draper quotes for an array of everyday occurrences); "17 Things You Can Learn From Don Draper in *Mad Men* About Business"; "10 Ways to Get Don Draper's Swag"; 4 Steps to Become More Like *Mad Men*'s Don Draper"; "How to Enter a Room Like Don Draper"; "*Mad Men:* 10 Don Draper Quotes to Live By"; "10 Business Lessons We Learned from Don Draper" and "How to Steal Don Draper's Perfect Shave and Haircut from '*Mad Men*'". There is also a subgenre on YouTube of Don Draper-inspired self-help videos including the titles, "How To Be Confident (3 Steps to Don Draper Confidence)" and "7 Ways to Make Women Want You Like Don Draper".

[18] There are no explicit 'second wave feminist' plot lines in the series, by which I mean there are no references to the period of activism and scholarship of the era. One can argue though that the female characters do display a sense of being influenced by emergent social political events even if this is not directly addressed.

critical of this. I argue though that nostalgic form mirrors the way affective nostalgia works in the series in that they simultaneously distance and attract. Similar to how affective nostalgia makes visible the artifice within Don's masculinity, here nostalgic form both dwells in the surface allure of its glamorous depiction of the past while being self-conscious in its construction. Despite being critically acclaimed for its narrative *Mad Men* has garnered most public attention for the way in which the 1960s is fetishised as style, with the visual design of the series constituting a wide part of its impact on popular culture, with '*Mad Men* style' infiltrating art, design and fashion arenas.[19] As a series that pays close attention to period costuming, props and design and that uses archival footage of events such as the moon landing and Kennedy assassination to render its 1960s in verisimilitude, *Mad Men* is on the one hand pertaining to a sense of replicating a real, lived 1960s, yet this 1960s is also an otherworldly fantasy space that presents itself as a palimpsest to critique aspects of the present.

Mad Men both critiques an investment in nostalgia whilst replicating it, both in its solicitation of spectatorial nostalgia for the 1960s and as part of the nostalgic male narratives of contemporary Quality Television. *Mad Men*'s vision of the past is aesthetically alluring, offering a potentially pleasurable spectatorial experience in consuming the past as surface style facilitated by its high production values, meticulous research and commitment to ensuring accuracy and continuity with its staging, props and costumes. Such a point is similarly advanced by Linda Beail and Lilly J. Goren who argue that the series is simultaneously critical of and complicit with that which it depicts, both in its use of period nostalgia and in the series's critique of the false illusions of advertising while simultaneously facilitating the boom in '*Mad Men* style' (7). While it may solicit nostalgia visually, the series also repudiates this very desire. The injection of archival footage of historical events ruptures the memorialisation of the sixties as a period of utopian radical potency when we see characters struggle to respond, their reactions problematising the expectation of jubilance at the challenging of social mores. Prudence Black and Catherine Driscoll write that the use of

[19] There are far too many websites devoted to the sartorial styles and design choices of *Mad Men* to list. Of particular note in discussing *Mad Men*'s legacy on popular culture is the 2009 release of the '*Mad Men* Edition' suit by menswear brand Brooks Brothers, the 2011 release of the *Mad Men* collection by clothing company Banana Republic, which is still available for purchase at time of writing and the popularisation of the Old Fashioned cocktail, Don Draper's favourite, to the extent that there is a section of the AMC *Mad Men* website devoted to cocktail recipes ("Cocktail Guide"). The revival and continued popularity of Midcentury Modern furniture design from the mid 2000s onwards is also in-part linked to the series's popularity.

archival footage is a key historiographical strategy deployed by the series. They state that the series both portrays a sense of hopefulness while simultaneously displaying the anxiety of the era's destabilising events, with archival footage used as "moments of consuming the making of history" (190; 192). In her analysis of the use of archival footage of JFK's assassination in season three's episode "The Grown-Ups", Stella Bruzzi writes that the emotional resonance of the episode is based on the audience's extradiegetic awareness of the significance of the event. She argues that the audience brings their historical knowledge and awareness to their viewing of the series, as such the affective potential of the episode comes from seeing fictional characters reaching the audience's level of knowledge and understanding. This emotional potential is heightened as characters watch the same source materials as the public would have at the time (Bruzzi 242). Bruzzi argues that the power of archival footage in this episode is to generate an emotive intensity by revisiting the JFK assassination, an event that is ingrained within communal memory and is in itself deeply affective (243). She writes, "observing the characters in *Mad Men* responding to the CBS Bulletins is even more affecting because in our imaginations their reactions trigger an imaginative recollection of all the information and images that, over time, we have acquired but they are still ignorant of" (Bruzzi 243). Season seven's episode "Waterloo", in which a montage of various characters sitting together watching the Apollo 11 moon landing similarly generates this affective energy. The communal television watching experience is highlighted as a nostalgic contrast to the present day individualised screen experience. The affective energy in this episode is in the joy and promise offered by the characters response to the moon landing in contrast to the audience who may contextualise the event within the Cold War Space Race and decades of conspiracy theories that cast doubt on the veracity of the Apollo 11 landing. As such the archival footage in the series builds an emotive engagement with the audience, seeing key historical events re-presented using the same footage that has become iconic within communal memory. Yet our knowledge of how these events have circulated within public discourse in the decades since their occurrence, as well as seeing how these events destabilise the lives of the characters, complicate a simplistic desire for a straightforward reading of the decade.

As a series set in 'the past' (the 1960s), it is vital to understand its engagement with issues of historicity and aestheticised nostalgia as this informs its characterisations and narratives. Nostalgia is both central to *Mad Men'*s plot and to its popularity amongst its

audience in the 2000s and 2010s. In his article "California and Irony in *Mad Men*" Rodney Taveira writes, "the instance of the past on the present structures *Mad Men* and thus is compounded by the show being set in the past" (281). Taveira concisely summarises what is at play in the series. The series solicits nostalgia, specifically through the lavish visual storyworld and more broadly through its 1960s setting, an era at once both removed enough from its production era to appear as quaint and retro, yet also a decade held in reverie in the popular cultural imaginary as a time of radical politics and social change. Nostalgia forms as an important thematic in the narrative—in Don's nostalgia for an imagined childhood, in the constitution of male nostalgia and through the creation of a critical dialogue where spectators see characters transverse social events that, from our viewing position fifty years subsequent, we have come to know hold great historical and social significance. Thus it is within the very surface sheen of *Mad Men*'s retro-nostalgic world that there is a critical space for distance. The spectator is constructed to recognise the allure of nostalgia as a tool to oblique the lived realities of the past and to memorialise a certain form of masculinity while it is simultaneously depicted to entail uncertainty and feelings of loss.

Don's reminder in the pilot, "what you call love was invented by guys like me [advertising executives] to sell nylons" and the way in which he packages a set of snapshots in The Carousel to produce a simulacra of idealised family life all indicate that the series is highly critical of nostalgia as a tool of corporate capitalism ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes"). The series's final scenes sees Don appear to reach personal contentment at last, only for that to result in the commodification of the utopian desires of the counterculture when it is suggested by inference that a yoga session at a spiritual retreat in California during the final scene prompts Don to create the famous "I'd like to buy the world a Coke" advertisement for Coca Cola, one of the most potent brand-symbols of global capitalism ("Person to Person"). By finishing the series in this manner it effectively shatters the audience's desire for Don to receive spiritual contentment by showing that this an illusion in itself, and challenges a nostalgic reverie for the 1960s as a time of radical politics by acknowledging that such politics were ultimately commodified by and subsumed into capitalist logics. Nostalgia for the 1960s that may be experienced when watching the series is curtailed by the reminder that at the end of the 1960s countercultural energies and anti-capitalist impulses became recuperated into the logics of capitalism which offered the false utopia of the free market.

The evolving clothing, decors and music of the 1960s constitute in themselves an important part of *Mad Men*'s narrative and act as reference points to map character change and development amidst a transitional social period. Aided by high production values such as the vibrant colour saturation that intensifies the detail given to clothing, hair, makeup and interior design, the retro 1960s world of *Mad Men* is one constructed to be visually enjoyed in and of itself. Critics have argued that *Mad Men* cannot both revel in its nostalgic style and contain purposeful critical intent. I am primarily referring here to articles such as Mark Greif's review for *London Review of Books* and Daniel Mendelsohn's review for *New York Review of Books*. Both authors contend that *Mad Men* devotes itself to the pursuit of a detailed visual style at the expense of a critical engagement with the past it represents (Greif n.pag.; Mendelsohn n.pag.). The series provides a visually pleasurable and seductive past that is transparent in its role of soliciting enjoyment and pleasure from its surface style, while questioning what is at stake for this representation of the past in relation to issues of cultural memory and collective nostalgia. As with any period piece *Mad Men* creates a past that is infused with contemporary consciousness. For all of its attempts at historical accuracy, it cannot escape its era of production and thus is suffused with the double-knowledge of both present and past.

Mad Men creates a fluid past, at once anchored in elaborate recreations of 1960s architecture, design and clothing which authorises a reading of the series as historically 'accurate', yet in a manner that melds the incoherency and partiality of memory with this opposing desire for authenticity. The series produces a nostalgic mode that aligns with the cinematic concept of Frederic Jameson's 'nostalgia film', which he discusses in *Postmodernism,* through the time and effort spent on constructing its visual register as one of 'the past'. The nostalgia film for Jameson replaces history with aesthetics, styles and fashions of the past taking the place of historical accuracy as a form of pseudo-history (*Postmodernism* 19). Similar critiques have been levelled at *Mad Men,* accusing it of focusing on creating a glamorous and visually appealing aesthetic register that elides the social inequities of the era. This line of argument follows that spectators glorify the series's fashions and styles, detaching them from the larger political implications of the series's representations, reducing the complex history of the 1960s to a series of fashion choices.

Once again The Carousel pitch can be used to explicate what is at play here. That the scene has come to stand as such a definitive moment for the series speaks to the allure of

nostalgia. As I have argued above, the scene is at once emotive and affective yet simultaneously a display of nothingness, a fabrication of a narrative of Don's past, a story used by an advertiser to sell a product, albeit made more engaging by his willingness to commodify his family. The scene is designed to transfix the spectator with its alluring romance, Don's poetic narrative and the intimacy he establishes through displaying snapshots of his family. The subsequent scene of Don rushing home to catch his family before their departure is constructed to suspend spectatorial cynicism, believing even if only fleetingly, that Don will change and that this scene has sparked a meaningful accord with him. By the opening of season two, however, little has changed and the hope that The Carousel hinted at has diminished.

By not fulfilling the realisation of Don's desire for family unity, ending the season ultimately on the lingering shot of him alone in his house, the series invites us to question the allure and comfort of nostalgia. Becoming romanced in The Carousel pitch's surface sheen is comforting for the spectator as it not only offers a glimpse of Don's desires but suggests the potential for resolution and unity. In being romanced not only by the affective nostalgia on display here but also the use of the slide projector, a now antiquated apparatus that may conjure memories of the spectator's own use of such a device. While *Mad Men* certainly encourages affective engagement in this scene, there is also important critical work going on here. By denying the happy ending that the scene suggests and then spending a subsequent six seasons seeing Don never really move beyond trauma, nostalgia and loss, the series invites the spectator to question the comfort and ease of nostalgia, showing its allure as ultimately hollow and unsubstantial.

Jameson's arguments about postmodern nostalgic representation as pastiche, an aesthetic of 'pastness' that revels in surface style without providing a meaningful commentary on history is a crucial part of the debates surrounding period dramas such as *Mad Men* and *Boardwalk Empire*. These series, aided by large budgets and cinematic-style production values, create highly fetishistic storyworlds and these become sites in which to raise questions regarding collective memory and cultural nostalgia. Indeed, *Mad Men* does deliberately create history as aesthetic style, there is no understanding of history in the series devoid of a nostalgic investment in style. As a point of departure, however, unlike Jameson who argues that this aesthetisation of the past points to the inability of 'genuine' historicity, *Mad Men* presents its historical register in dialogue with anxieties of the present day—it is

self-reflexive about its use of nostalgic style. *Mad Men*'s rich aesthetic of nostalgic visual style is not an illumination of how the past can only be displayed through stylised imagery with "pseudohistorical depth", as Jameson posits, rather it indicates a more complex interaction between ideas of style and content (*Postmodernism* 20). The extent to which commentary surrounding the series has predominately focused on the visual look of the series points to a fascination with a nostalgic stylistic mode.

In her article on *Mad Men* and the vintage consumer, Caroline Hamilton provides a detailed outline of how the series's stylised (re)presentation of the past has effected consumer culture, referencing how popular lifestyle and fashion magazines such as *GQ, Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* not only focused on the stars of the series but also provided instructions for readers of how to replicate *Mad Men* style in their own lives (224). Hamilton uses such phenomena to dispel Grief and Mendelsohn's arguments cited above which posit that the series presents a hollow nostalgic fantasy which obfuscates an engagement with history. She argues that such a reading "impose[s] a false binary, implying that any element of style cannot have a substantiative impact on the meaning of a text" (Hamilton 226). For Hamilton, material culture is a vital site of spectatorial pleasure but this does not equate to a debasement of critical intent. Rather, she proposes the importance of considering *Mad Men*'s props, set design and costuming as more than just claims to historical authenticity or a commodified substitute for historical authenticity but as means in themselves of examining the past (Hamilton 233). Television is certainly a part of a capitalist cultural economy and can influence broad consumer trends, as *Mad Men* illustrates with its role in the popularity of goods from the Old Fashioned cocktail, a Don Draper favourite, to mid century modern furniture. As Hamilton illustrates though, it is through these commodities that we invest meaning, these objects have use values which become pertinent parts of our everyday lives. As such, Hamilton argues, they represent an "engagement with the past based on cultural mediation and textual reconfigurations in the present via particular representational and taste regimes" (238). While not considered in her analysis, there is particular importance in her argument for feminist analyses of the text. Given that consumption of consumer goods has been coded feminine in a traditional gendered division of labour, discourses that critique the critical relevance of material culture or that advance a dichotomous style/substance argument often contribute to upholding binary ideas of gendered value whereby feminised consumer culture is the inferior Other of politics or serious critique.

In her work on 'pretty' images in cinema, Rosalind Galt writes that cinematic discourse, both in journalism and theory, have denigrated the importance of the surface image as "false, shallow, feminine, or apolitical" (2). Describing the "pretty image", Galt suggests it is "colorful, carefully composed, balanced, richly textured, or ornamental" and includes qualities such as "deep colors, arabesque camera movement, detailed *mise-en-scène* and an emphasis on cinematographic surface" (11). As Galt argues, the surface of the image is denigrated as an insubstantial substitute for hard, scientifically rigorous, implicitly masculine knowledge. Her work demonstrates the significance of the decorative image in cinema and of particular significance here, its gendered quality. Extending her argument to television is pertinent not only for the means it provides to argue for *Mad Men*'s focus on the surface as something containing merit in itself. The feminised nature of the "pretty image" when brought into the feminised medium of television works to counter the inherent gendered implications within critical commentaries that malign the nostalgic text for its luxurious visual appeals. As Galt and Hamilton's work illustrates in their differing contexts, material culture and the surface image are important sites of inquiry for feminist scholars. To dismiss these as superficial and both debasing and displacing history onto the aesthetic speaks to the hierarchicalisation of certain forms of historical knowledge and correspondingly suggests the anxiety posed by *Mad Men*'s dual claims to be Quality Television whilst simultaneously courting a feminised visual appeal.

This anxiety is centred around the extent to which *Mad Men* must appeal to masculinised notions of taste to be ascribed the Quality TV label while its indulgence in the visual aligns it with the feminine. These anxieties circulate around the text—it is both Emmy award winning and critically praised, yet subject to fervent online gossip. The wealth of online gossip columns and commentaries devoted to actor Jon Hamm's alleged lack of underwear under his costuming while filming the series demonstrate this point. An unnamed source cited by *NY Daily News* suggested to the newspaper that Hamm was instructed by staffers to ensure he was wearing underwear during the filming of the sixth season (Garvey and Niemietz n.pag.). The story, with frequent full-body shots for the reader to assess the veracity of such claims has been discussed in a wide array of online sources, including *Men's Health* ("7 Underwear Options to Finally Contain Jon Hamm's Penis"), *Huffpost* ("Jon Hamm's Private Parts Allegedly Cause a Frenzy on '*Mad Men*' Set), *US Weekly* ("Jon Hamm Asked to Wear Underwear Due to "Tight" *Mad Men* Pants: Report"), *Jezebel* ("Attention Ladies: Jon

Hamm Isn't Wearing Any Underwear"), *Daily Beast* ("'*Mad Men'*: Jon Hamm's Penis to Too Big for Clothes, Needs Airbushing") and *Daily Caller* ("Jon Hamm Likes to Go Commando and it Became a Real Problem on the '*Mad Men'* Set"). The suggestion that Hamm was filming without underwear is titillating but certainly beyond the scope of my examination here. Rather, I cite this example to demonstrate how *Mad Men* consistently seems to occupy a liminal position between masculinised Quality and feminised pleasures. While I argue that the series contains all the metrics that qualify its association as Quality TV and that it furthers the agenda of the masculinisation of the television serial drama, it never quite fully distances itself from the feminine. Despite critical acclaim serving as a reminder that the series does contain depth, this sits alongside the corner of the internet scrutinising photographs for visible traces of Hamm's penis. *Jezebel*'s article makes its readership clear in its headline "Attention Ladies", positioning the female reader as one that should watch *Mad Men* entirely for its surface detail, including Hamm's allegedly unsupported bulge. While this point is a bit of a detour to the argument I am proposing here, it serves to consolidate both the feminised rendering of the surface image and the position *Mad Men* occupies, both trying to be a series of depth and surface, of masculinised seriousness and fetishistic images.

A particular idea of the 1960s is fetishised through costume, makeup, props and set design, taking a historical referent and appropriating it into something unreal, a simulacrum of the decade. This does not, however, displace the series's critique onto an imagined elsewhere or mute the critical function of the series by accessing the past through stylised imagery. Rather it is through the dedication to the evocation of a nostalgically glamorous 1960s Manhattan that the series can provide a metacommentary on the nature of remembering and nostalgia, questioning what the past may mean when it can only be accessed through the filter of the present.

Christine Sprengler writes that the 'nostalgia film' has often been maligned for falsifying history, yet envisions a critical potential conversely through its very ability to engage with history, creating nuanced layers of meaning that provide insight into cultural imaginaries and the processes of myth making. *Mad Men* produces the past aesthetically, capturing the 1960s as style, yet as with Sprengler's assessment of the nostalgia film, I argue that the series demonstrates the inadequacy of Jameson's account to consider the complexities of historical representation on offer. While the series is often maligned for preferencing surface style, such an account does not consider the complexities that arise from the connections

between the pleasure that can be derived from fetishising the visual construction of the past with the relationship between nostalgia and personal change that unfolds within the diegesis. The series invites spectators to be aware of the historical distancing between the 1960s and the moment of broadcast. Nostalgia is ultimately held critically, inviting us to question and problematise any pleasure we take from surface style. As Jerome DeGroot argues, "gradually…the beautifully put together image is revealed to be rotten and fake" ("Perpetually" 271). For example, in season two's episode "The Gold Violin", the Draper family enjoy an idyllic family picnic, playing checkers and lounging in the warm weather. As they pack up to leave, Don throws his empty beer can into the distance followed by Betty shaking all the rubbish off the picnic blanket, the framing staying wide to draw the spectator's awareness to the picnic remnants on the grass as the Drapers drive off. While the knowledge of the Draper's martial problems already complicates this seemingly blissful scene of familial content, for a spectator for whom 'green' politics has placed emphasis on the role of the consumer-citizen in environmental ethics, the callous discarding of rubbish stands as an affront of a basic principle of civic responsibility. As such the allure of the scene is dually debunked while simultaneously still maintaining its alluring facade. *Mad Men* invites spectators to do the critical work of challenging its nostalgic representations, in line with its status as Quality TV. While spectatorial response to a series is never universal and many may indeed take delight from the representation of the 1960s without further questioning, the series does offer a complication of its period setting, purposefully indulging in aesthetic surface stylisation as a means of producing a self-reflexive pastiche.

The relationship between affective nostalgia and nostalgic form is therefore related to the ambiguity and ambivalence of the series's treatment of its nostalgic aesthetic. The artificiality of its investment in the visual image, insomuch as the laborious and beautiful visual style of the series is in itself a hollow pleasure, is analogous to Don Draper and to nostalgic masculinity. The series does not necessarily proffer a straightforward reading of male nostalgia but the critical potential of the trope is very much linked to the treatment of its period setting. As I argued in the previous section, the series constantly shows that male nostalgia exists as a product of a desire for hegemonic masculinity yet this is always curtailed by moments in which Don's power is reinforced. As it stands within the text, the ability for male nostalgia to offer a critique of normative ideals of masculinity is predicated upon a recognition of the allure of the series's surface style. The hollowness of this style and the

constant interjection of archival footage to remind of the 'real' 1960s demonstrates that, similar to Don's character, there is more behind the facade.

In *Engaging the Past,* Alison Landsberg discusses how the series uses *mise en scène* as a distancing device, creating a beautifully orchestrated and alluring visual register but one that ultimately draws attention to itself by virtue of its distance from the contemporary styles of its production era (92). She writes, "the show, in other words, visually, aurally and even sensually evokes a distinct historical moment and in asking us to look critically at it even as we are seduced by it, it provokes a distinctly historical consciousness" (Landsberg *Engaging* 92). Landsberg here summarises the positions offered by the series, which uses aspects of televisual production to produce a spectacle of the past. It does not outwardly condemn nostalgic investment, rather subtly asking the audience itself to do this cultural work, providing a space for which we can consider the critical value of nostalgia. While the series provides the nostalgic pleasures of the characters' naivety in relation to contemporary knowledge, it provides a space for cultural reflection, situating the spectator in a dialogic relationship between the presentation of history and their own histories unfolding over time. Through the use of irony the series ruptures an idealisation of historical difference, indicating that although things are in many ways better now than in the past, there is nonetheless a disjuncture between the optimism of social upheaval and the realities experienced five decades later (Cromb 71). By utilising the past as a distancing device, the series meditates on the irony of the disjuncture between what was known then comparative to what we know now (Krouse 202). Maurice Yacowar argues that the ability to feel superiority from our awareness of subject matter depicted inconsequentially in the series is in itself a kind of trap, echoing the superiority that the ad men exhibit in the series, a kind of hollow humour (86). The very fact that we can laugh at the characters' smugness and feel like we know better is for Yacowar destabilising in itself, as it reminds us at the same time that our own smugness is not a certainty (87). This ties into the surface appeal of the series, allowing spectators to be transported to a visually pleasing aesthetic realm where troubling political and social mores are apparently glossed over by slick production values and attractive costuming. I believe, however, there is a pertinent critical function to this use of nostalgia, imbued in self-reflexivity, which invites a dialogue between temporal modes of past and present and rejects a stance of nostalgic smugness in relation to the politics of the past. We can watch the treatment of Peggy Olson in her first day at the office, surveilled and scrutinised for not

structuring her appearance to the benefit of a male gaze and find humour in the shocking display of gender politics, distancing ourselves from such events by locating them securely in a lost past. Yet the series constantly invites us to question this disparity between then and now, troubling the ease to which we can compartmentalise such actions to a nostalgic past by engaging in a dialogue with contemporary experiences and the processes of collective change.

By invoking seemingly retrograde 1960s gender norms and politics but never fully repudiating these through the pleasurable aesthetic form in which they are displayed, the series provides a dialogue that questions the expectation for gender norms to shift over time and critiques a desire to read contemporary gender relations as premised on a more equal relationship that those depicted. For example in season five's episode "The Other Woman", office manager Joan Holloway agrees to sleep with a member of Jaguar's selection committee, whom the agency are trying to court as a client, for a five percent partnership stake in the company and voting rights. The ability to distance such events as belonging to a prefeminist past and invest in a narrative of progress over time is contentious, particularly within a post #MeToo era which highlighted the very contemporary nature of gendered power within corporate structures.

The relationship of nostalgic form to affective nostalgia is crucial for male nostalgia in *Mad Men.* In this section I have argued that the two operate similarly. The series self-consciously revels in surface style yet indicates the hollowness of this, that there is more at play. *Mad Men* features this ongoing process of solicitation and repudiation, inviting spectators to be delighted by its stylish sets and costumes and the naivety of characters in relation to the knowledge of spectators decades removed. Yet it interjects this with the troubling realities of sexism and the series's characters encountering the events that cause the 60s to be held within collective memory as a time of radical potentiality with concern.

Conclusion

In The Carousel pitch Don speaks of the possibilities of travelling "around and around and back home again", a statement that in many ways represents the nostalgic appeal of *Mad Men.* When Don conceives of the device as a "time machine" that moves "backwards and forwards", it parallels the ways in which the series operates, taking spectators back in time

to the 1960s. This 1960s is suffused with a contemporary consciousness, with the historical events mediated in reference to anxieties of the present, producing a dialogic mode that encourages a critical spectatorship. *Mad Men*'s 1960s is constructed to be enjoyed as surface style, yet within this permeates a commentary on the nature of nostalgia and collective memory, troubling a desire for taking fetishistic pleasure from the series's representations.

Nostalgia operates within *Mad Men* in numerous ways. The series offers us a visually detailed and alluring diegetic world, at once facilitating nostalgia, yet repudiating a desire for a positively realised past of nascent radical politics with the interjection of the troubling realities of social upheaval and the complex processes of collective change and personal stasis. Historical events are displayed through the usage of archival footage but a desire to romanticise the sixties as a time of utopian, radical social change is brought into question when we see characters respond to these events with uncertainty and trepidation. The series's ultimate reaffirmation of capitalism with Don's quasi-spiritual awakening leading to the commodification of the counterculture in an advertisement for Coca Cola rejects the potency of the utopian energy of the sixties and troubles a nostalgic desire for this era.

Within the diegesis nostalgia is interwoven into the narrative through the primacy of Don's experiences of trauma, loss and mourning, which manifest into an imaginative nostalgia for a past that he never lived, a form of Boym's reflective nostalgia. In his rebirth as Don Draper from his upbringing as Dick Whitman, Don aligns himself with a history of reinvention, seemingly becoming the paradigmatic figure of the formative narrative of the American Dream, that of social mobility and individualism. Once again *Mad Men* brings into question nostalgic desire, this time repudiating a nostalgic desire for America's frontier past, challenging the validity of the American Dream mythology by showing the trauma that his reinvention entails. Perhaps ironically, it is nostalgia itself that is used as a means of critiquing a nostalgic investment for the totalising metanarrative of the American Dream, as Don's yearning for coherency, unity and family become increasingly more desperate as the series progresses.

In this chapter I have argued that male nostalgia in *Mad Men* is diegetically linked to childhood, but to extrapolate further, it is a nostalgia born out of the demands of culturally normative modes of masculine identity and presentation. Male nostalgia is a form of emotional expression for Don, not because he is afraid of the constant need to police his

own emotional display but because it surfaces as a destabilising rupture that seeps out. In the process, male nostalgia reveals the coherent hegemonic male self is fragmented and traumatised.

The connection between affective nostalgia and nostalgic form within *Mad Men* is that these two components function dialogically. The ambiguity of *Mad Men*'s critical treatment of its period setting, in that it seems polarising as to whether the series actually encourages a critical spectatorship or in fact promotes an amnesiac and romanticised engagement, has direct effect upon the functioning and visibility of its male nostalgia. This is as these two elements are so closely linked. Identifying Don as a nostalgic character is in itself not that ambiguous as it is directly commented upon within the narrative. Understanding this specifically as male nostalgia, however, is dependent upon seeing that it functions in a similar manner to the series's approach to nostalgic form—presenting something that seems conventional and conservative on the surface, encouraging spectators to do the work to unpeel the layers to discover the critique. This in itself is part of what makes *Mad Men* Quality TV; Mittell argues that a feature of narrative complexity is that spectators work as "amateur narratologist[s]" who piece together meanings and narrative possibilities ("Narrative Complexity" 38). Here *Mad Men* becomes Quality TV through the spectatorial pleasure of putting together the pieces, this pleasure constantly reaffirmed when seemingly inconsequential details become 'clues' for the spectator to try to piece together.

These layers of nostalgia are refracted once more, this time when we consider Don's position extra-diegetically, as a protagonist alongside peers in the era of male nostalgic programming. Here, Don's nostalgic masculinity actually works in an oppositional manner. Through the contestation of power and privilege, *Mad Men* at once shores up patriarchal masculinity through its very focus, yet reveals hegemonic masculinity as nostalgic, as always inherently referencing a lost past in order to sustain itself. Don is a nostalgic subject, caught in a loop of longing for a coherent past that never was, trying to weave meaning out of his fragmentary experiences whilst displaying an awareness that this past is imaginary.

Chapter Four:
‘Masculinity in crisis’ and male nostalgia in *Breaking Bad*

An average-build, middle-aged white man stands in a desert in white underwear next to a careened Winnebago, making a frantic confessional video to his family. A pair of khaki trousers falls down against a brilliant blue sky in slow motion and images of the New Mexico desert flash across the screen. These are the opening shots of *Breaking Bad* (Fig. 7-11).

The spectator is placed directly into the narrative action, with no establishing context in which to make sense of these images. These frantic actions of the almost-naked man, combined with their lack of context, throws the spectator directly into an atmosphere of vulnerability and panic, denying a proper introduction to the series’s protagonist.

Fig. 7-11-Shots from the opening scene of “Pilot”

In comparison the opening scene of an episode five seasons later, “Say My Name”, starts with the same man, now known as protagonist Walter (Walt) White, in a similar desert. Whereas in the pilot episode Walt is not in control of his circumstances, running the Winnebago off the road and then fumbling to record a confessional video with the sound of police sirens increasingly approaching, in comparison, in the later scene he commands the business associates he is meeting with to “say my name” as “you all know exactly who I am” (“Say My Name”). The high, wide shots of the pilot episode in which he appears small and isolated amongst the vast surrounding desert landscape (Fig. 12) contrast with the power afforded by the low angle shots of “Say My Name” (Fig. 13), a visual shorthand for summarising the changes in Walt’s characterisation and his relationship with power between the two scenes.

Fig.12-“Pilot”
Fig.13-“Say My Name”

These two scenes set five seasons apart provide a rough sketch of the character transformation that Walt undergoes throughout the series. *Breaking Bad* takes place in Albuquerque, New Mexico, focusing on Walt and his family—wife Skyler, teenage son Walt jnr who has cerebral palsy and daughter Holly who is born in season two. Upon receiving a diagnosis of terminal stage-three lung cancer on his 50th birthday, Walt, a dissatisfied and overqualified high-school chemistry teacher, dramatically reassesses his life. He enlists Jesse, a former student and small-time methamphetamine producer to start a partnership in methamphetamine production after accompanying his brother-in-law Hank, a DEA agent, on a drug bust and realising the lucrative financial potential of narcotics manufacturing, a line of work in which he excels given he has a PhD in chemistry and contributed to Nobel-prize winning scientific research. He is initially drawn to methamphetamine production as his

health insurance will not sufficiently cover his cancer treatment and he is worried about the financial viability of his family after his death. As the series progresses these justifications become erroneous—Walt's cancer enters remission, he surpasses his initial monetary goals, amassing more than enough money to ensure the financial viability of his family and as his participation in the drug industry deepens, the very family that Walt strives to protect is increasingly put in danger through his interactions. Adopting the moniker 'Heisenberg' for his drug-manufacturing alter-ego, Walt not only increasingly participates in criminal activities but his appearance and demeanour change as well with Walt becoming more aggressive, assertive and intimidating.

Using *Breaking Bad* as my case study, in this chapter I focus on how the rhetoric of 'masculinity in crisis' is used to mobilise male nostalgia. While all the protagonists I examine in this thesis are in some sort of existential 'crisis', *Breaking Bad*'s narrative trajectory is propelled by this masculine uncertainty. Unlike *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men, Breaking Bad*'s relationship to nostalgia is more oblique, with nostalgia not featuring as an explicit theme in the series. *Breaking Bad* is the first of two chapters which features a modality of male nostalgia in which nostalgia is implicit. The series still displays nostalgic masculinity; an explicit thematic discussion of nostalgia is not a requirement for nostalgic masculinity as it is premised around an enactment or performance of masculinity that connects with a romanticised and outdated ideal.

My approach in this chapter is somewhat different to the previous two. While still structured in the same manner, my reading of the series is more on a metonymic level. This is pivotal to understanding how male nostalgia is mobilised in the text. *Breaking Bad* offers the most obviously political manifestation of the male nostalgic trope, in that it is resolutely gendered and used for conservative ends. While still concerned with failure and emotionality, as is my central underlining argument, this chapter reveals how a turn to male nostalgia can simultaneously reveal the cracks within hegemonic masculinity while ultimately working to shore it up.

The first part of this chapter considers the narrative events and themes that prompt the series's engagement with nostalgic masculinity. Nostalgic masculinity in the series is informed heavily by ideas of the 'male provider' as an idealised masculine archetype. The series suggests that this provider archetype is out of time with the present day by linking it with the Western genre and venerated cultural mythology of the US frontier. This male

provider archetype links back to the gendered separation of spheres (public/private) in the Industrial Revolution and is a conservative and nostalgic idea linked to a rigid binary of heteronormative gender roles. The association of being a 'provider' with masculinity is equatable to the association between femininity with caregiving. These gendered associations continue to inform gender roles and place their restrictions on both genders. As decades of feminist work has made clear, this provider/caregiver, public/private split works in service of patriarchy, ensuring women are kept in their place (in the home and out of sight). Thus for Walt to desire to become a provider for his family carries more significance than the series's justificatory context that he feels belittled and fed up with the monotony of his life—it is an enactment of nostalgic masculinity that suggests a turning back of any progress made to dismantle the gendered division of labour.

In this section I analyse this transformation in Walt's characterisation as a specifically gendered change. I look at 'masculinity in crisis' discourse, particularly Sally Robinson's *Marked Men*, in order to examine how the perception of 'crisis' (whether or not such a phenomenon is actually occurring) can lead to nostalgia as a mechanism for instilling agency and security. *Breaking Bad* draws upon forms of masculinity valorised within the male nostalgic TV era, with Walt coveting a form of masculine privilege that is one out of time with his surroundings. Using various forms of 'crisis' as a catalyst for this process of 'breaking' and remaking Walt as a masculine subject in the image of a nostalgic hegemonic masculinity, *Breaking Bad* both critiques, yet ultimately perpetuates this discourse.

The second part of the chapter looks at nostalgic form, focusing particularly on *mise en scène*, setting, cinematography, character tropes and narrational strategies as they relate to genre. Nostalgic masculinity in *Breaking Bad* is posited around the mythic ideal of masculinity from the Western genre, which heavily informs Walt's transition into the ruthless and intimidating 'Heisenberg' over the course of the series. This thematic runs across both narrative and stylistic components: 'Heisenberg' shares characteristics with Hollywod Western protagonists, such as Ethan (John Wayne) in *The Searchers,* while the series alludes to the barren landscapes made famous in various classical and post-classical forms of the genre. The series's New Mexico setting incorporates frequent landscape desert vistas which connect the series to the exalted frontier spaces of the Western, an association further developed through narrative battles between justice and criminality and the series' heavy preoccupation with defining and exploring masculinity.

This section argues that the series's engagement with nostalgia is primarily on the level of Boym's notion of restorative nostalgia. The series establishes a connection to the Western genre primarily through its use of stylistic allusions. The Western also provides a source for understanding the nostalgic masculinity within the series. As this referentiality is neither directly addressed within the diegesis nor self-consciously engaged with it exists purely on the level of style—these references provide a framework that places the series within a genre tradition but this primarily exists on a surface level. Nostalgia can be used as a critical device for examining the fissures between past and present and for evaluating the reasons why a particular idea of a past time is held in reverence. When it is produced solely as a stylistic device that is not reflected upon within the narrative, nostalgic masculinity that does not comment upon its own portrayal cannot do more than (re)produce idealised and out of time forms of masculinity.

The majority of literature on the series focuses upon questions of morality, both in terms of Walt's decision to turn to criminality after living a law-abiding life and issues of audience engagement and sympathy for a morally complex protagonist. Four edited collections on the series have been published to date and although they cover a range of topics, there is a general tendency to focus on ethical dimensions of the text.[20] Cowlinshaw's 2015 anthology *Masculinity in Breaking Bad* does, as the title suggests, analyse masculinity within the series from a variety of critical standpoints. Due to the varying theoretical approaches taken within the collection, the book does not provide much of a substantive gendered character study of Walt and particularly for my interests, none of the authors consider frameworks of nostalgia in their approaches. To date, literature on masculinity within the series has looked at topics such as the emergence of a "liberated" masculinity as a crisis state between masculine subject positions (Landrum 94-108); located Walt within a framework of hegemonic masculinity as a man who seeks to regain control as key to responding to feelings of identity crisis (Faucette 73-86); surveyed patriarchal ideologies within the series (Poe 109-21); and studied connections between heroic mythologies and masculinity to consider how Walt's characterisation is shaped by and deviate from, heroic narratives (Weckerle 7-32). In an article on hegemonic masculinity in the series, Brian Faucette writes that the series has connected with cultural anxieties surrounding a perceived

[20]See Blevins and Wood; Cowlinshaw; Koepsell and Arp; Pierson.

crisis of masculinity (74). He writes that the Walt's transformative character arc can be read as a response to a perceived feeling of crisis relating to a lack of control and autonomy, with these attributes restored by embracing an older model of masculinity based on violence and intimidation (Faucette 74). This reading of the series as reactionary to socio-political circumstances is a common approach, with Walt's decision to 'break bad' read as a response to the restrictive opportunities available to him under neoliberal capitalism, particularly within a period of recession.

Affective nostalgia: Masculinity in 'crisis'

In season three's episode "Más", Walt laments that in attempting to provide for his family, he has effectively alienated himself from them. Attempting a return to a law-abiding existence, Walt talks with his employer, drug kingpin Gustavo (Gus) Fring about his decision. In an attempt to manipulate Walt into reconsidering his decision, Gus evokes an image of masculinity that is central to Walt's foray from dowdy, timid father to ruthless intimidator, that of providing for one's family as primary duty of the successful patriarch:

Walt: I have made a series of very bad decisions and I cannot make another one.

Gus: Why did you make these decisions?

Walt: For the good of my family.

Gus: Then they weren't bad decisions.

What does a man do Walter? A man provides for his family.

Walt: This cost me my family.

Gus: When you have children, you always have family. They will always be your priority, your responsibility. And a man, a man provides. And he does it even when he's not appreciated or respected or even loved. He simply bears up and does it. Because he's a man.

This definition of a man as one who prioritises providing for his family, who "bears up and does it" underpins nostalgic masculinity in the series. Here, 'breadwinning' masculinity, being the wage-earner of the family unit, is presented as a glorified alternative to a deficient present. Nostalgic masculinity in the series is tied to this idea of "a man [who] provides for his family", linking this financial and material provision both to the present, the series's production during the Global Financial Crisis and to the past, drawing upon mythic ideals and romanticised notions of men's role within a traditional capitalist gendered division of labour. Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker argue that the recessionary period of the mid 2000s worked to revitalise ideologies of class, race, consumerism, individualism, work and gender even whilst popular culture narratives evoked anxiety in the masculine and uncertainty in the masculine subject (10; 17). As they write, "recessionary culture thus seems to be both reenergizing and critiquing male breadwinner roles" (Negra and Tasker 17).

In this section I argue that nostalgic masculinity within *Breaking Bad* is centred around two ideals—that of the aforementioned 'breadwinner' and the gunslinger from the Western film genre. Although two seemingly discordant and incompatible ideals, these two culturally venerated modes of masculinity work to shore up and valorise white male power in response to the 'masculinity in crisis' discourse proffered by the series. By placing Walt within a series of gendered 'crises', the series authorises a conservative retreat to nostalgia. This nostalgic retreat is configured around notions of gendered labour, in which a romanticised return to a traditional gendered division of labour coupled with a hypermasculinity inspired by the Western film genre is posited as the solution to this crisis state.

'Crisis' is central to the narrative impetus of *Breaking Bad.* Early on, the series establishes a set of problems, or crises, affecting Walt and then his attempts to negotiate these crises and their consequences play out over the course of the series. The 'cold open' to Walt's frantic confession in the pilot episode establishes a sense of urgency, placing the spectator in the midst of an unexplained and potentially dangerous situation. As the episode loops back three weeks to the events that have led to this scene, we learn of a life of tedium and monotony, seemingly the very opposite of that depicted in the opening scene. Within this episode the series establishes its two main narrative catalysts: Walt's medical crisis upon news of his cancer diagnosis and his inability to afford medical treatment, a crisis in personal finances. Although not directly referenced in the series, the backdrop of the Global Financial Crisis and recession are important contextual factors which inform the White family's financial

situation. Walt's financial and health crises are linked to a brewing existential crisis, with Walt dissatisfied with his life and inability to ensure the financial longevity of his family. Turning to methamphetamine production as a quick way to generate surplus money for his family to live on after his death, the series also articulates a series of ongoing and increasingly menacing violent crises that Walt and Jesse both face and perpetuate as they become involved in a narcotics underworld.

The phenomenon of masculinity in crisis has been an ongoing and somewhat constitutive feature of the white male subject position in the contemporary United States. As Sally Robinson writes, crisis discourses have most commonly assumed that crisis states lead to a resurgence of old models of masculinity, constructing masculinity as a defensive, reactionary identity formation, always looking to 'remasculinise' itself in alignment with traditional notions of patriarchal power (10). Robinson points out that this reactionary conservatism is not inherent – crisis could just as likely lead to a progressive desire for change than a desire to return to the past (10). While 'male crisis' does not necessarily correlate to nostalgia or a reactionary valorisation of past ideals of masculinity, there is something inherently nostalgic about crisis discourses. Masculinity can only be in crisis in relation to an (imagined) past period of stasis. The ongoing prevalence of discourses of 'male crisis' indicates that crisis is a continual and constitutive feature of hegemonic masculinities, as by nature, hegemony maintains its power through adaptation and negotiation—these crises are actually a necessary part of how hegemony works. The regularity of periods of 'crisis' then serve as means to renegotiate hegemonic power, whereby normative ideas of masculinity are shored up, despite the ontological questioning implied by 'crisis' rhetoric. These discourses both suggest a history, a period 'pre-crisis' which aids with legitimation and 'crisis' periods prompt redefinition of what hegemonic masculinity is, absorbing critiques in order to maintain its status.

Given that 'masculinity in crisis' is a collection of critical discourses that are considered from a variety of viewpoints, there is little consensus over what the 'crisis' that men are experiencing may look like, within which timeframe it may have occurred and exactly who is undergoing crisis. Furthermore, crisis discourses reoccur over time in reaction to different sociopolitical contexts and as such it is hard to determine coherency or a definitive set of characteristics to the multiple applications of the term, apart from the commonality of a shared belief that culturally defined norms of masculinity are under revision.

Despite the often-contradictory application of the term, it can still serve as a fruitful means for articulating relationships between invisibility/visibility, power and normativity within masculine identities. The notion of 'crisis' indicates the fragility of masculinity, placing it under threat of collapse and while this may not be an actual verifiable phenomenon, it is nevertheless an interesting discursive space in which to examine men's feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty.

In his chapter on representations of masculinity in recession-era print fiction, Hamilton Carroll writes of a "post-financial collapse narrative of fractured domesticity in which men are no longer ably to rely on the family and the home as sites of security, stability and recuperation" present in the literary texts he examines ("'Struck'" 204). Carroll's analysis of print fiction texts displays linkage with the themes of *Breaking Bad* through the presentation of a male subject in a 'crisis' state amongst domestic uncertainty and financial insecurity. For example, in his analysis of the novels *The Financial Lives of the Poets* and *The Ask,* Carroll contends that in both cases the male protagonists must save their families as a key to personal success, "a feat that can be achieved only through the recuperation of the self and the restoration of the logic of men as primary breadwinners and the guarantors of domestic security" ("'Struck'" 204). Carroll argues that the post-recession era has seen the emergence of a nostalgic turn that has renewed the cultural resonance of "embattled masculinity" ("'Struck'" 211). Traditional forms of male sociality that have provided men with fulfilment are seen as being lost, leaving men in a state of fracture between a desire to claim the privileges of patriarchy and a retreat into prior modes of masculine behaviour ("'Struck'" 211). The masculinised crisis state in *Breaking Bad* is situated within the recessionary era in which white male subjectivity can only be restored through a recuperation of the logic of men as primary breadwinners and patriarchs. Indeed, in his analysis of the series, Michael Mario Albrecht explicitly states that Walt and Ray Drecker of HBO's *Hung* "stand in for the imagined white middleclass men who were most devastated by the recession. Their particular performances of masculinity are effects of recession-era discourses" (75). This echoes Amanda Lotz's argument that broader socioeconomic context is crucial when considering the series, that is cannot be detached from "cumulative, intertwined influences of economic crisis and residual gender scripts" (89). Paul Elliott Johnson argues that the series "metonymize[s] the financial crisis and the election of Obama as crimes against a white, male American body politic displacing the challenge those events posed for white

masculinity" (15). While socioeconomic circumstances loom as a motivator, they always exist in tandem with gendered insecurity. The Global Financial Crisis is not only important as an economic event with social implications but also for the threat it poses to the competence of white masculinities, with Wall Street and the world of financial capital a site of masculine productivity and acumen.

A brief shot reveals a plaque in Walt's bedroom commemorating his contribution to Nobel Prize winning research, yet we see Walt teaching chemistry to a classroom of disinterested students and then being manipulated at his after-school job at a car wash into washing cars when he is employed as a cashier. This is explicated upon further in the season one episode "Gray Matter", where Walt and Skyler attend the birthday party of Walt's former colleague Elliott Schwartz. The party scene consists of a series of humiliations and embarrassments for the couple – they are unsure of what to wear; the party is held at the Schwartz's huge, lavish house, starkly contrasting to the modest White household; Walt displays anxiety around the public unwrapping of a modest birthday gift with sentimental meaning in relation to the Schwartz's wealth; and is humiliated when asked in conversation why he left the company he founded with Elliott. While this sequence primarily showcases disparities in wealth, underpinning this is gendered anxiety around status, intellect and success. Here we can see the failure around which male nostalgia forms—it is a failure of external signifiers of masculinised success while maintaining the structural dominance around which hegemonic masculinity is premised.

Breaking Bad portrays its protagonist as experiencing a resolutely gendered sense of crisis, feeling inadequate and insufficient in his experiences and expressions of masculinity. Not only does the financial precariousness of the White household indicate Walt's inability to measure his masculinity in terms of financial capital or success in the paid labour market but is also depicted in the homosocial relationship between Walt and brother-in-law Hank in a scene in the pilot episode at Walt's 50th birthday party celebrations. The first vision we see of Hank is a close-up of his pistol, which he has drawn as he appears seated in both the centre of the room and the centre of the frame, commanding attention while Walt stands in the background. Loud, aggressive and physically bulky with a shaved head, Hank's appearance draws comparisons to Vic Mackey from *The Shield* (FX, 2002-2008), another policeman who specialised in masculine bravado. As Hank maintains the attention of the room, providing a loud and animated discussion of the dangers of his police duties, Walt stands awkwardly in

the background, looking uncomfortable at his own birthday party and without any parallel experiences to share. Not only is Walt lacking in requisite boastful tales of danger and bravado, he is out of place both as the host of the party and in his own domestic space, as Hank is both the centre of attention and is positioned and framed in the centre of the room, dominating the party and the frame, Walt receding into the background as the room gathers to watch a news report about a meth bust Hank commandeered. Not only does Walt fail to live up to external markers of masculine success in his inability to define his identity through financial success or career but also falls short in comparison to those around him.

In *Breaking Bad*, Walt is feminised through his passivity and physical frailty and uses this to (re)assert a masculine authority that sublimates the threats that incapacitated his body. Through the recurrent narrative trope of crisis and its bodily manifestation into disease Walt is placed within the position of victim, a positionality discursively constructed as feminine. In this moment he occupies a discursive site of femininity and this becomes the means through which he usurps the threat posed not only by the disease itself but through the correlative threat posed by this subject position. In *Illness as Metaphor,* Susan Sontag writes that cancer is regarded as a disease to which the repressed and psychically defeated are prone (5). Sontag argues that illness is not metaphorical and that there is little value in metaphorical thinking in regard to cancer by comparing discourses of cancer and tuberculosis, writing that cancer is characterised as a disease of invasion which deadens desire and cripples vitality (3-4; 13). Pertinently, she writes that mythologies of cancer associate it with a "steady repression of feeling", firstly seen as a repression of sexual desire, before a shift to a repression of violent feeling (22).This metaphorical association of cancer with a repression of feeling is supported in *Breaking Bad*'s treatment of Walt's diagnosis which seems to stem from passivity, timidity and a deficiency in enacting masculine agency. The perfunctory sex scene and inability to assert himself against his employer at the car wash in the pilot episode pre diagnosis attest to a climate of emotional repression which is ruptured upon news of his diseased status. While a repression of feeling might seem conterminous to that which leads to male nostalgia, the qualities of feeling that Sontag identifies—sexual desire and violence—are those in service to the maintenance of the kind of emotional repression that leads to nostalgia. Thus cancer becomes the manifestation of the repression of masculinised energies that support the maintenance of masculine hegemony even while the disease simultaneously connotes the death of its subject.

Within the contextual climate of neoliberal recession, individualism and self-responsibility, Walt's cancer provides further impetus for his decision to "break bad". He cannot rely on the state for treatment and is unwilling to accept the benevolence of others as this would draw attention to his financial circumstances, inadequate health insurance and suggest a failing in appropriate self-care. By extension this exposes his deficiencies as a white male subject, rupturing the assumed linkage between white masculinities, education and professional and financial acumen. As a neoliberal subject Walt's cancer diagnosis metaphorically represents his failure at self-preservation and adequate self-care, his diseased body, given the terminal status of his illness, rendering him incapacitated, passively awaiting death. Seemingly taking up Sontag's argument that cancer is conceptualised as a personal failing, Walt takes it upon himself to self-cure through the process of (re)gaining agency. *Breaking Bad* thus suggests that it is not cancer itself that renders Walt as a victim; it is his performance of masculinity, or, his failure to perform hegemonic masculinity, that has landed him in this position of precarity. Utilising the metaphor of Walt's weakened cancerous body as representative of broader feelings of white male victimisation, the series then displays the process of him recovering, rebuilding his body and gaining strength through the performance of violence, aggression and intimidation.

The use of cancer-as-metaphor here aligns with David Savran's discussion of the white male subject's "simultaneous embrace and disavowal of the role of victim" ("Sadomasochist" 128). Although published in 1996 and hence surveying films from the 1980s and early 1990s, Savran's argument of a white male subjectivity that "takes up a feminized positionality" while simultaneously and contradictorily aspiring towards "hypermasculinized heroism" has clear resonance with my arguments in relation to *Breaking Bad* ("Sadomasochist" 129). In *Breaking Bad* Walt not only feels under siege from external factors but from within. His cancer diagnosis, a catalyst for Walt's transformation, serves as a means of recuperation, the cancer itself not as important as the process of recovery.

In his analysis of white masculine victimhood, Casey Ryan Kelly writes of the "wounded white men" trope in Hollywood cinema (163). He writes that this trope associates a "perceived loss in status and entitlement with which [the character] cannot cope" with corporeal injury (163). Positing the wounded white male as a position of victimhood, Kelly argues that it works to conflate vulnerability with structural oppression (164). It is from the position of weakness from disease and invasive treatment that Walt can lay claim to feeling

wounded, both physically and psychically and from here work to transform, his body gaining strength and vitality as he starts to act more in accordance with a nostalgic ideal of a 'traditional' masculinity. By occupying and claiming a space of weakness and disenfranchisement, Walt is able to use this as a launching point to rebuild and recuperate. As Kelly argues, injury "serves as the grounds for a fantasy to mastery", here the illness is necessary in order to re-build both the body and to lay claim to power over others and the self (165). Yet, as Kelly states in the section quoted above, this process is never complete. Just as the male subject is always one in a state of flux, so too is illness in *Breaking Bad*, with Walt's cancer returning in the final season, presumably actually terminal this time unlike his previous similar diagnosis. As such the process of illness does act as a means of enacting nostalgic masculinity, yet the "fantasy" of this is crystallised with the return of his cancer.

This process of bodily injury and disease being used ultimately towards the recuperation of hegemony is articulated by Robinson in her work on white masculinity in crisis. She writes:

> …White masculinity can most fully and convincingly represent itself as victimized by inhabiting a wounded body and [that] such a move draws not only on the persuasive force of corporeal pain but also on an identity politics of the dominant. (20)

By drawing on the cultural conventions associated with disease and bodily injury, Walt, as a symbol of white masculinity, is able to appropriate the associated connotations of weakness, fragility and marginalisation. Hamilton Carroll argues a similar point, suggesting that "white masculinity…co-opt[s] the forms of representational meaning secured by women, gays and people of color" (*Affirmative* 8). This appropriation of marginalisation within the wounded and diseased white male body places Walt's lifestyle and inadequacies as the prevailing diagnosis; while chemotherapy is the literal means through which Walt rids himself from cancer, it is actually the undoing of the repression and oppression that Walt suffers (as framed within the narrative) that is key to his recovery. This works in tandem with *Breaking* Bad's perspective that the institutionalised power of patriarchal white masculinity has been

eroded, placing Walt as an individualised and pitiful victim. In short, cancer is used as subterfuge to assert that the real disease infecting Walt is masculine oppression and that in order to prevail he must embody a nostalgic form of masculinity that can overcome the vulnerabilities of the present. Walt's initial inadequacies are depicted as failings of masculinity —his family does not have financial stability; he has little agency over household decisions; and his body has proved itself weak and passive. This breakdown of the body is the tipping point of Walt's sense of being in 'crisis' with the solution being both to turn to narcotics manufacturing, and of more importance here, to ameliorate the experience of crisis by shoring up the power of white patriarchal masculinity. The cancerous male body within the series serves as a rhetorical force to suggest a loss of political, social, economic and cultural power and therefore the key to restoring the body is in conquering these domains. Crisis manifests into Walt's expressions of victimisation, frustration and resentment. In order to ameliorate such feelings and the ontological insecurity and vulnerability attached to ideas of crisis, nostalgic masculinity is a conservative enactment that offers an alluring alternative by connecting to ideas of tradition, offering the comforts of permanency when confronted with a chaotic present.

This process of 'breaking bad' is the means through which the series engages most clearly with nostalgic masculinity. Walt feels disempowered and unconsciously turns to forms of masculinity exalted in the past in order to alleviate this situation. The relationship with 'crisis' and nostalgia becomes clear—whether or not this crisis is real, it is from the perception of self in crisis that ideals of masculinity from the past become valorised and exalted. The series provides an image of a nostalgised form of masculinity that looms over the text as a symbolic impetus for Walt's actions. This nostalgic component is an amalgam of two-forms inspired by culturally valorised models of American masculinity: that of the 'breadwinner' and of the Western gunslinger hero.

The ideal of the male breadwinner has historical links to the separation of the private and public spheres in the Industrial Revolution. Michael Kimmel locates the development of the term to the 1810s, writing that a breadwinner denoted a "responsible family man" (*Manhood* 20). Tying masculinity into financial provision for the family unit, this ideal of masculinity has had strong ideological sway over the definition of hegemonic masculinity over time, despite the increased participation of women into the paid labour force since the post-war period. Kimmel speaks to the symbolic importance of the notion of the

‘breadwinner’, writing, "a man may be physically strong, or not. He may be intellectually or athletically gifted, or not. But the one thing that has been non-negotiable has been that a real man provides for his family. He is a breadwinner” (*Misframing* 17).

The cultural ideal of the male breadwinner has stood as a potent signifier of patriarchal masculinity in the American cultural imaginary, sustaining a mythic ideal of a male who is able to prove his masculinity through his wage-earning capacity in the public sphere and then use this to secure his position as head of household in the domestic sphere. While wage-earning is an almost universal constitutive feature of Western masculinities, its emphasis is particularly heightened in the recessionary-era United States. In a country whose founding doctrine is the dream of social mobility through individualistic success, a failure to achieve this is not only gendered but a failure in a key part of nationhood and in the recessionary climate this threat of failure extends beyond the working class to men across the class stratum, reflecting and perpetuating the fear that masculinity is in crisis. Gus’s proclamation in “Más" that “a man provides for his family” is a call for action—it connects the universality of this trope of masculine identity and success with both the diegetic and contextual circumstances that threaten the performance of this role. Drawing upon the threat of failure, this assertion endorses nostalgic masculinity as a remedy; if a man cannot provide for his family in the present and it is this feature that denotes a ‘man’, then one can turn to and covet ideas of masculinity from a past time when this trait was seemingly secure.

Breaking Bad evokes reference to this breadwinning trope, exploring its inviolability as a powerful motivator for men’s actions. Even when financial solvency long ceases to be a credible justification, Walt continuously draws reference to this notion of breadwinning in his proclamations that his continued methamphetamine production is something that he does for his family. I define the ideal of breadwinning masculinity in *Breaking Bad* as nostalgic for two reasons: firstly it refers to a mythic archetype born from the historical moment of the Industrial Revolution and secondly, it is temporally dislocated from present realities within a climate in which employment is insecure and precarious and where it is culturally normative for women to participate in the paid labour market (although still facing numerous gendered disparities within the workplace). Breadwinning masculinity, while it may still hold cultural cachet, is less of a necessity than an ideal linked to a sense of pride and the fulfilment of an antiquated notion of the role of the patriarch.

Walt initially decides to cook methamphetamine in “Pilot” out of financial concerns for the viability of his family given the likelihood of his death. In “Gray Matter” he rejects the Schwartz’s offer to pay for his cancer treatment, although this would have nullified his need to continue with drug manufacturing. In season two’s “Phoenix”, Walt is both dismissive of Skyler’s plan to return to work after the birth of their second child and demands Walt Jr. take down a fundraising site he created to raise money for Walt’s treatment—in both cases, Walt desires to assert a clear-cut division of labour in which he alone is responsible for the family’s finances. He continuously asserts that his entire Heisenberg persona and the crimes he has committed are in the service of his family, telling Skyler in “I.F.T.” that he has “done a terrible thing” but that he has “done it for a good reason. I did it for us”. It is not until the series finale, “Felina” that Walt admits to Skyler, “I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it”, a final moment of reprieve highlighting how this notion of breadwinning, rooted in providing for others, is actually a means for ensuring men’s dominance over the family unit.

The other form of nostalgic masculinity evoked in *Breaking Bad* is derived from the Western film genre. While these two archetypes may seem incompatible, they are both rooted in the American cultural imaginary as mythical notions of masculinity concerned with defining masculinity in relation to power (financial/intellectual versus physical), hardship and the protection of others. While Walt’s success in meth production is linked to his superior chemistry knowledge, a product of education, this middle-class acumen in itself is not entirely sufficient. Whereas the scientist occupies the sanitised laboratory while using the rational mind, a masculinised trait, the Western cowboy experiences masculinity in a more corporeal sense, he uses his body and works on the land. Here the working class Western cowboy is hollowed of class signification, instead appropriated by the PhD educated scientist—again, it is not just working class men who are under threat but by evoking the Western, a genre steeped in nationalist rhetoric, it is suggested by inference that the entire configuration of American masculinity is in crisis.

In her analysis of postfeminist paternity, Hannah Hamad discusses how twenty-first century Westerns in mainstream Hollywood cinema engage with the trope of postfeminist fatherhood. She writes that the twenty-first century Western is a vital site for the transmission of postfeminist fatherhood due to the legacy of the classic Western “as embodiments *par excellence* of the loner hero that previously constituted ideal masculinity in Hollywood” (40). Hamad argues that the contemporary revisionist Western reconciles two previously

dichotomous archetypes of the genre—the loner hero and the domesticated husband/father, with the postfeminist male protagonist embodying both modes of masculinity (40) In this formation, white male power is affirmed through fatherhood and proximity to the classic Western, while this is made palatable through offsetting and recuperating the outmoded masculinity of the Western hero through the embodiment of a postfeminist masculinity (Hamad 42).

While Hamad's analysis bespeaks the sublimation of the classical Western hero under the logic of postfeminist masculinity and paternity, *Breaking Bad* proffers an alternate and more conservative logic—rather than renegotiate the terrain of masculinity *vis-a-vis* fatherhood through reference to the iconicity of the Western, *Breaking Bad* posits a nostalgic turn *to* the classical Western as a means of ameliorating the demands of postfeminist masculinity and familial relations, even while simultaneously drawing this practice into question. Thus rather than the Western hero that is commensurate with an iteration of postfeminist fatherhood, it is the demands of domestication that leads Walt to nostalgic masculinity. It is his inability to successfully embody a postfeminist form of masculinity (attempting this precipitated the 'crisis' state of the narrative's commencement) that leads to nostalgia, even as this enactment of nostalgic masculinity further distances the gap from the familial contentment to which he initially aspires.

As a pastiche of different ideas of masculinity that are each mythical and romanticised ideals from different eras in US history, nostalgic masculinity in *Breaking Bad* is identifiable as something out of time with the present. The frequent use of the desert vistas as sites of masculine action, of 'cook scenes', business negotiations and murders, furthers this temporal dislocation by extending it into the spatial. Displacing acts when masculinity is tested, defined and proved onto the romanticised canvas of the desert pushes them further into the sublime and fantastical. Even while we see the consequences of these actions in the White household, the wide-angle shots of the vividly contrasting brilliant blue skies and arid landscapes absorbs these moments into containment from the wider narrative logic.

In the scene in season five's episode "Say My Name" cited at the beginning of the chapter, Walt arrives at a meeting with some rival methamphetamine producers whom he was going to sell methylamine, a vital ingredient in the drug's production and instead dictates an alternate business arrangement in which the producers instead become distributors of his own product. The scene, which opens the episode, starts with the camera placed behind

Walt's head as he drives in a car to the meeting with associates Jesse and Mike—Walt is framed in the centre of the frame in the middle of the car's back seat, instilling him with a sense of power denied in the earlier seasons. Walt both reneges on the deal while denigrating his opponents, critiquing the 75% purity of their product in comparison to his own 99.9% and in the process, establishing his authority and superiority, grounded in the very chemistry knowledge that previously was cause for humiliation in "Gray Matter". The scene visually references a Western standoff in a barren desert location, with the action centred around Walt and the rival meth producer while their respective backup stand behind them exchanging glances. At one point Walt reaches into his pocket, yet instead of drawing a gun, he throws a bag of methamphetamine onto the ground. Walt continues to espouse the superiority of his product, linking its higher purity to increased profit potential. Here, the two strands of nostalgic masculinity coalesce—references to the Western code Walt within its esteemed iconicity while instead of gunslinging or violence his chemistry knowledge is used as a weapon via the bag of illegal narcotics thrust at his opponents. When the rival producer incredulously asks Walt who he is to be demanding such terms, Walt replies, "I'm the cook. I'm the man who killed Gus Fring…Now say my name", upon which the rival producer softly says "Heisenberg" with Walt replying "You're goddamn right" in a close-up shot before the scene breaks for the title sequence. Proving himself in the eyes of other men by virtue of his esteemed intellect and business prowess yet made intimidating through reference to the conventions of the Western, here Walt, as 'Heisenberg' both embodies nostalgic masculinity while revealing its own artifice, an adopted persona.

Although the series displays the positive outcomes from Walt's nostalgic masculinity this is coupled with a concomitant de-romanticisation, at once inviting spectators to take enjoyment at Walt's transformation, his mastery over others and the ruthlessness of his actions, while simultaneously being distancing through Walt's obsession with paternalistic control and the negative effects on his family. While Walt may strive for hegemonic masculinity, he actually displays the destructive potential of this ideal through over-performance, an excess of masculine aggression: hypermasculinity. These overcompensatory actions—violence, crime and increasingly grandiose statements of aggression—are in themselves non-hegemonic but within the series's 'crisis' framework they become justifiable even if their negative consequences are simultaneously depicted. These are the sorts of actions more often associated with what Connell terms 'marginalised

masculinities', those resulting from the interplay of gender and other social structures such as class or race (*Masculinities* 80). Lacking other resources or access to institutionalised forms of power, such forms of masculinity may turn to crime or violence as means of asserting masculinity and to establish and maintain hierarchies while being excluded from hegemony. Yet *Breaking Bad*'s protagonist is not structurally marginalised—he is white, heterosexual and middle-aged, has a PhD in chemistry and was an award-winning research scientist. This is redolent of the other male nostalgia texts in which protagonists engage in crime and violence (with the exclusion of *Mad Men*) demonstrating the tandem link between crime, violence and male nostalgia, all used as mechanisms to respond from a position of perceived marginality.

Unlike *The Sopranos* or *Mad Men,* nostalgic masculinity in *Breaking Bad* is legitimised as a 'reclamation' or 'remasculinisation'. While the previous two series explicitly focus on nostalgia as a structuring thematic, *Breaking Bad* interweaves nostalgia through reference to the theme of crisis. It is this implicit form of male nostalgia that risks making male nostalgia appear more natural, without a clear discursive space for the spectator to recognise male nostalgia as such. This nostalgically idealised, masculinised past offers power, freedom, financial security and self-determination against a hostile and challenging present while being able to slip under the radar of being overtly nostalgic. As Janice Doane and Devon Hodge write, "so vivid does this constructed past become that the rhetorical strategies used to create it seem to disappear. Nostalgic writers are entrapped by the illusion that their opposition creates: the mythic past becomes real" (9). In *Breaking Bad* the rhetorical strategy used to obfuscate male nostalgia is the trope of crisis, making the present seem threatening and emasculating, devoid of opportunities and, at its most extreme, manifesting itself within the corporeal with Walt's cancer diagnosis.

In her article on abject hegemony and masculinity in the film *Fight Club,* Claire King writes, "despite assertions of its own (fictional) stability, hegemony is always marked by and dependent on ruptures and fissures: the hegemonic is, thus, open and closed, splintered and sutured, impossible and viable—in a word, abject" (370). While hegemonic masculinity is always permeable to change, always unstable and multiple in order to maintain its position, *Breaking Bad* offers a reactionary form of masculinity, that which is only available to Walt as a response to feelings of powerlessness and which is rooted in nostalgia. The fictional stability that King asserts here is key to understanding the nostalgic nature of hegemonic masculinity

– always premised upon its own internal security and stability, thus structured towards a nostalgic past that gives validity to its claims. As King articulates, this is "impossible", both as hegemony is dependent upon the flux of change and re-inscription and as it is premised in something illusionary itself—there never has been the uncontested past of male power, rather it lingers as a structuring myth that inspires and motivates men to strive to seek it. Kirkham and Thumim argue a similar point when they state that masculinity is "marked, time and again, as delicate, fragile, provisional: it is under threat, in danger of collapse: it is an impossible ideal" (11).

This implicit form of male nostalgia, however, helps to expose the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and nostalgia in the text. Nostalgia is used to mourn a masculine identity that looks to an idealised and often unreal past to provide tradition and permanency. This 'traditional' form of masculinity is important for the maintenance of gender hegemony as it upholds clear-cut gender divisions and patriarchal norms—this is why nostalgia is often used to ameliorate experiences of crisis, perceived ruptures in the gender order. In *Breaking Bad* we see Walt invest in nostalgic masculinity as a means of striving for hegemonic masculinity, yet, ultimately, he over-invests and idealises the past. While this should help to lay bare that hegemonic masculinity is unachievable and any enactment close to it unsustainable, as it is rooted in a nostalgically idealised form of masculine subjectivity, the series resists outright condemnation of its protagonist.

Breaking Bad provides a conservative notion of what masculine power can look like and by consequence, reasserts a patriarchal idea of what power is, something sustained by intimidation and violence, something solely the province of men. Yet it also shows us that hegemonic masculinity is intimately tied and reliant upon nostalgia and Walt's constant dissatisfaction bespeaks the impossibility of hegemonic masculinity; it is never fully achievable and thus marks the masculine subject as one always anxious, perpetually in 'crisis'.

Nostalgic form: The Western genre and restorative nostalgia

While set in a late 2000s present, *Breaking Bad* connects with a nostalgic ideal not only through narrative nostalgia but also through subtle references in framing and setting which align it with the Western. While in the previous section I outlined how the series's definition of

nostalgic masculinity is based upon the Western and the ideal of the masculine-provider, here I identify Western allusions in the series on the level of style. I argue that when one considers the series's combined treatment of nostalgia on stylistic and narrative levels, it is a form of what Boym terms 'restorative nostalgia' and it is for this reason that *Breaking Bad* lacks the critical dimension in its treatment of the male nostalgic trope as previously discussed within *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men.* In this section I refer only to to the use of the Western within *Breaking Bad* although as I identified in the section above, *Breaking Bad* relies on two different ideas of masculinity which are combined into an amalgam of glorified nationalistic patriarchal icons. The 'breadwinner' masculine-provider trope, however, does not have a stylistic component, it exists within narration and dialogue and thus this section on nostalgic form is informed by that trope insomuch as it itself bears on how the Western is used but explicitly only focuses on the Western.

A study of visual aesthetics in *Breaking Bad* is important not only as visuality is a key signifier of a Quality drama but as the series frequently uses the formal elements of television to enrich its storytelling, creating a richly defined setting that adds extra meaning through allusion to the Western. Brett Martin writes that *Breaking Bad* is "by far the most visually stylized show" of what he terms the "third golden age" of television. Jason Mittell echoes this by stating that the series "foregrounds a 'maximum degree style' through kinetic visuals, bold sounds and unpredictable storytelling form" ("The Qualities" n.pag.). Both authors are speaking to the hyper-stylised nature of *Breaking Bad*—highly saturated colours, stylised landscape shots, the frequent choice of disorienting close up shots that place the vantage point within a confined space or that focus on seemingly banal objects, the usage of an originally composed Mexican *narcocorrido* ballad and fragmented and atemporal sequencing all combine to create a hyperrealistic story world. Verisimilitude is not a primary concern of the series; rather, the series both narratively and aesthetically tracks the changes of its protagonist and the effects that this imparts on the world around him.

The series uses visual strategies to situate itself as a neo-Western from its opening scenes: a New Mexico desert landscape, erratic action clearly signifying crime and danger and Walt's posturing as he stands, pistol in hand, in the middle of a desert road as sirens approach. These key signifiers facilitate a mode of interpretation that works in tandem with the series's 'cold open'; before spectators learn who the protagonist is or the circumstances leading to this opening sequence a framework has already been established that codifies the

series into a Western lineage.[21] Given that this opening scene is an expedient means of establishing character and a central narrative dilemma, Walt's 'breaking bad' foray is framed from the series's premise as a neo-Western escape from the confines of civilisation. Walt's frantic actions, however, signal failure, a stark contrast to the masculinised control and discipline associated with the Western hero and rather than rejecting the demands of domesticity, he is phoning his wife and apologising. Framing the series's opening scene within visual similarities to the landscapes of the Western constructs the spectator with certain expectations and cues of masculine performance that are underscored by the actual action taking place, setting up a internal tension that will be developed throughout the series. The incapacity and vulnerability of Walt in the scene contrasts significantly with the hypermasculine certainty of the Western hero, yet Walt's posturing clearly references the gunslinger, alluding to his future adoption of the Heisenberg persona and investment in nostalgic masculinity. Notably the framing in this shot (Fig. 14) cuts Walt off mid-torso and as such, the bare legs and underwear that signified his vulnerability are replaced by a fully-clothed low angle shot, placing Walt within the desert landscape as a figure very much in control. In her examination of the revisionist Western *Unforgiven* (Eastwood 1993), Janet Thumim suggests that competency is a key trait in the Western, central to the genre's treatment of masculinity (342). By extension of this logic, this then suggests that like competency, masculinity is something to be proved, a quality that one can be measured in their success. This oscillation between expectations created through allusions to the Western and Walt's actual performance in the scene hints at the future narrative trajectory of the series, providing the spectator who picks up on these references in locality and framing to a specific framework of masculinity in which to measure Walt.

These visual allusions to the Western continue throughout the series. Its setting in Albuquerque, New Mexico features numerous desert vistas that serve as backdrop to the narrative. The desert is the location for Walt and Jesse's initial methamphetamine 'cook' scenes and subsequently act as a meeting place for often violent showdowns between Walt and his business associates and rivals. This helps to establish a stark contrast between civilisation, the domestic scenes taking place inside the interior of an often-dimly lit White

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[21] A 'cold open' is a staple feature of *Breaking Bad.* This is where the episode beings *in medias res*, in the midst of action, normally then circling back to the prior events that have led to this scene after the title sequence.

household and the vast scale of the wilderness, the New Mexican desert aligned with narcotics manufacturing, violence and scenes primarily occupied by men. Much of the series's imagery, based upon the contrast between the bright blue sky and vast deserts, shot in extreme long and wide-angle landscape shots, deliberately evokes a connection to the Western genre.

Fig. 14-Walt (Bryan Cranston) adopting the Western gunslinger posturing in "Pilot"

Visual design is used to recall the iconicity of the Western genre, thus inviting a reading of the series within the established genre traditions and themes with Walt as the quasi-Western outsider hero. These references to the Western rely on a nationalistic mythology that obfuscates the reality of colonial invasion, similar to Richard Slotkin's argument that Western mythology operates on "the myth of regeneration through violence" (10). The myth of the frontier, fundamental to the historiographic narrative of the United States, is underpinned by the subjugation of First Nations peoples, whereby the fortification of this myth has served to solidify national identity *vis-a-vis* territorial expansion and the maintenance of national borders.The frontier-border is both established and policed through violence but is flexible enough to allow for the possibility of future expansion. As Slotkin writes, violence and conflict are central both to the historical development of the frontier and to its mythic representation, as violent conflict was necessary for the usurping of the land, both in the appropriation of the natural environment and in the dispossession of Indigenous communities (11).

The series's setting in New Mexico foregrounds the historically contingent role of the frontier-border where territorial conflict over methamphetamine production and distribution

mirrors the ongoing controlling and policing of the United States/Mexico border. Walt sublimates the non-white Other through the apparent superiority of his product, the 99.9% purity of his methamphetamine is reiterated as a measure of Walt's expertise, this obsession with purity and concordant fear of contamination not only limited to narcotics but more broadly to the structuring of nostalgic masculinity within a context of white supremacy.[22] In much the same way that masculinity in the classical Western is defined in relation to a colonialist fantasy, conquering the land of the 'frontier' and in the process asserting masculinity through domination, *Breaking Bad* translates this to a metaphorical frontier of the methamphetamine industry that Walt takes over, similarly providing him with the means of defining masculinity through conquest. If *Breaking Bad*'s borderland conflict as frontier allegory was not clear enough, in season five's episode "Buyout" Walt explicitly tells Jesse that he is in "the empire business". The countless scenes in which he asserts his scientific expertise and his constant success over numerous Latinx opponents works as a means of aligning Walt's masculinity with a nostalgised and romanticised vision of the Western hero while simultaneously reinforcing white supremacy. Mark Bernhardt supports this view of Walt's chemistry knowledge being used as a means of asserting a racialised superiority, arguing, "the depiction of Walt's genius at chemistry highlights how scientific and technological advancements facilitated white conquest while simultaneously insinuating Hispanics' intellectual inferiority and superiority of white people" (1257). The series uses visual allusions to the Western that establish a certain framework within which to situate nostalgic masculinity—that of a Western hero as a valorised and idealised mode of masculinity built upon the continual reassertion of white supremacy. Mitchell writes that the 'West' of the Western genre is an "escapist fantasy" rather than an "authentic locale" (4). By this he means that the Western is not so much a verifiable topographical location but rather a "space removed from cultural coercion", offering itself as a site of renewal and self-transformation (Mitchell 4-5). This argument that 'the West' is more of an imagined space than a definable locale makes it a prime site for nostalgic masculinity similarly defined by an imagined ideal than lived reality. In this sense, Westerns are always nostalgic, built upon a

[22] The season three episode "Fly" takes place entirely within Walt and Jesse's meticulously clean, industrial-scale 'superlab', devoted to Walt's obsession over killing a fly that he fears could contaminate their processes. As this synopsis indicates, the episode highlights the ongoing theme of contamination within the series.

romanticised idea divorced from historical reality, continuously repeated and reinscribed to support a racialised hegemony that lends legitimacy to the nation.

The series establishes a connection with the Western both in its visual iconography and in its thematic engagements. Creator Vince Gilligan explained in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* that the series finale "Felina" was directly inspired by John Ford's 1956 Western *The Searchers,* with Walt's change of mind after seeming resolved to kill Jesse mirroring protagonist Ethan Edward's decision to take Debbie home, whom he has spent the entirety of the film searching for with plans to kill her (Snierson n.pag.). Indeed, *The Searchers* can be used to explore some of the tropes and concerns of the Western, made famous for both its striking visual imagery and cinematography, and its ambiguous treatment of Ethan Edwards, both highlighting the brutality and racist logics of his actions while simultaneously placing him in comparison with the Comanche leader Scar. In his analysis of the film Robert Pippin writes that there is "a direct confrontation with the fact that the origin of the territorial United States rests on a virulent racism and genocidal war against aboriginal peoples" (104). *The Searchers* displays the elements of the Western that *Breaking Bad* engages with: a contrast between the hostile and seemingly lawless wilderness and civilisation, the triumph of the lone white male outsider through questionable means which entails the subjugation of both nature and people of colour which are conflated into the same thing.

As I argued in the previous section of this chapter, nostalgic masculinity in *Breaking Bad* is inspired by an amalgam of two facets that hold key significance in nationalistic ideals of masculinity—the Western, the American film genre *par excellence and* the masculine-provider, a product of the gendered division of labour linked to the Industrial Revolution, a division that ensures the longevity of patriarchal capitalism. The second of these two influences on nostalgic masculinity heavily informs how masculinity is depicted in the series in relation to control, agency, dominance and provision. While, as I have pointed out above, the Western informs the themes of the series, the ability to derive such a reading is contingent upon how the Western is referenced visually, primarily through *mise en scéne,* cinematography and setting. Yet the Western is at the crux of what nostalgic masculinity does in *Breaking Bad;* by using the rhetorical device of a 'crisis' in both the nation-state and its ideals of masculinity, the series then prompts as remedy, even while simultaneously critiquing it, an approximation of valorised modes of masculinity from the past, shoring up

the besieged white masculinity of the present through celebration of key neoliberal values of entrepreneurship, self-reliance, rejection of state interference and individualistic competitiveness through a turn to glorified nationalistic images of the past.[23] Walt, whose normality is emphasised in such a negative light in the first season, becomes a metonym for white American masculinities who can heal the fractures of the present by turning to culturally valorised masculine myths of the past.

Whereas *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men* engage with Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia as series both deeply concerned with longing, loss and the irrevocability of the past, *Breaking Bad*'s oblique engagement with nostalgia, visible primarily on the level of form and aesthetics (*mise en scène*, framing, setting) means it more closely aligns with restorative nostalgia, the 'bad' sibling of the more critical and aware reflective nostalgia.

While in chapter three I critiqued Frederic Jameson's work on the 'nostalgia film', arguing that he is short-sighted in his outright rejection of any critical potential in nostalgia, *Breaking Bad* does provide something close to the "aesthetic colonization" that Jameson proposes of the nostalgia film (*Postmodernism* 19). While to reiterate again, *Breaking Bad* is not a period piece, nor does it outwardly allude to any specific historical period, I still propose that one can read it as a nostalgic text both for its engagement with nostalgic masculinity and for the aforementioned evocation of the Western that both emphasises the visual splendour of the genre and glorifies the masculine and racialised nationalist myths of the classical Western. By introducing nostalgia as an element that informs many of the series's aesthetic choices and informs the series's idealised definition of nostalgic masculinity, yet without calling attention to this as a form of nostalgia, *Breaking Bad* follows Boym's definition of restorative nostalgia as that which aims to "rebuild the *mythical* place called home" (49-50, emphasis added). While restorative nostalgia "attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home" (Boym xviii), the series never makes clear that this 'home', the veneered Western landscape, is one that never really existed outside of the nostalgic imagination.

Restorative nostalgia that focuses on "truth" and "tradition" thus enshrines its object as that which can be reconstructed and by consequence, affirms that the nostalgic object is one that can actually be recovered (Boym xviii). If *Breaking Bad*'s object of nostalgic longing

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[23] By crisis in the nation-state here I am referring to the recessionary context of the series and its effects on ideals of white masculinities.

is an idealised masculinity from the Western genre, it is refracted not only by the complications on cultural memory by the passage of time but also by its status as a mediated representation in the first place. This is the same as the argument I advanced in chapter two in relation to *The Sopranos* and Tony's idolisation of Gary Cooper—in both instances, it is a fictionalised ideal that is fetishised. Walt takes on this form of nostalgic masculinity built out of the series's restorative nostalgia. Televisual form—*mise en scène*, setting, framing—that references the Western collides with narrative and theme, as the visual elements help to suffuse the series's representation of idealised masculinity as one that is nostalgic and informed by the Western. By presenting this in the restorative mode, transfixed with "return[ing] to national symbols", there is no critical function to this nostalgia (Boym 41). Without this, *Breaking Bad* does not so much attempt a critical commentary on the Western or its legacy on idealised masculinities, as one may expect of a revisionist Western or as a product of 'Quality' or 'Prestige' television, rather it "attempts the transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home" by bringing the Western into the present without critiquing the ideological narration of the West as an ideal past or its correlative mythic visions of masculinity (Boym xviii).

Albrecht writes that Walt becomes a "hyper-breadwinner" who taps into a "primal" version of masculinity, only accessible beyond the normative trappings of suburban family life (78). Removing himself from the home and occupying the frontier space of the New Mexican landscape as a neo-Western space, Walt embodies a form of nostalgic masculinity that connects to the mythic ideals of the West, even as the series complicates these mythologies. Many Westerns focus on protecting and restoring the family unit through violence, a theme connecting to Gus's speech that a man "provides for his family" at all costs ("Más").[24] Unlike the traditional Western narrative structure, violence does not result in the restoration of the family, rather in *Breaking Bad,* it is Walt's participation in the frontier-space of methamphetamine production and his correlative investment in nostalgic masculinity that leads to the destruction of his family. Whilst this nostalgised vision of Western masculinity provides Walt with individual benefits, allowing him to connect with a romanticised ideal of masculinity based around being a provider for one's family, in actuality it is this very form of masculinity that separates Walt from the family he is ostensibly trying to protect. While in *The*

[24] For example, the theme of protecting the family unit can be found in *Stagecoach* (Ford, 1939), *The Searchers* (Ford, 1956), *High Noon* (Zinneman, 1952) and *True Grit* (Hathaway, 1969).

Searchers, the Western anti-hero can restore the family unit through violence, in *Breaking Bad* violence destroys the family and as such the only person for whom violence has a regenerative quality is Walt.

While this may suggest that *Breaking Bad* is a revisionist Western that critiques the glorification of the masculine protagonist, underscoring his actions by showing their repercussions, ultimately by confining allusions to the Western primarily to the level of style, the series does not do enough to constitute such a reading. This points to the difference between restorative and reflective nostalgias. While reflective nostalgia is focused on longing and loss, restorative nostalgia does not consider itself as nostalgia, rather it masquerades as historical 'truth' by not drawing attention to itself. The consciousness of reflective nostalgia plays a vital role in helping to challenge the ideological narrations of the past. Without this *Breaking Bad* revels in its nostalgic Western-inspired imagery without a sense of purpose. When coupled with the 'masculinity in crisis' narrative theme, the Western references help to proffer an alternative to a deficient and unstable present by looking to a past that offers solutions to the problem of the challenges to the dominance and legitimacy of masculinity. The fact that this nostalgic masculinity is actually fictional does not threaten its potency as an idealised exemplar, given the importance of the Western to defining white masculinities within the United States. Given that, as Connell writes, hegemonic masculinity solves the "problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy", it makes sense that in a moment of perceived crisis over the structuring of the gender order (such that white masculinity's position at the top of this order is perceived as being threatened), that fictional images, particularly those with strong mythic power in the national cultural imaginary, are evoked (*Masculinities* 76).

Conclusion

Breaking Bad uses a rhetoric of 'crisis' to explore Walt's experiences of masculinity, linking both to a wealth of Hollywood representations over the past two decades that have seen masculinity in crisis as a ubiquitous component and a wider cultural discourse both in academia and popular media that, particularly given the historical situation of the series in the late 2000s recessionary era, masculinity is undergoing a state of uncertainty. In this chapter I have engaged with masculinity in crisis discourses without seeking to affirm or deny the existence of such a crisis, rather perceiving such crises as a cyclical phenomenon—that

change is inherent to gender identities and as such, masculinities are always in a state of crisis and flux. *Breaking Bad* simultaneously mobilises numerous crises which propel into motion male nostalgia. In order to overcome the uncertainty bespeaking a period of 'crisis', a conservative ideal of masculinity that valorises financial provision and the iconicity and assumed masculine strength of the Western hero. As such, nostalgic masculinity in *Breaking Bad* is used as a means of trying to reap the benefits of hegemonic masculinity, yet, as a pastiche of cultural tropes of idealised masculinity, it exposes its own artifice. Walt cannot be the venerated frontiersman as such an identity is ultimately untenable, a fantasy figure from cinematic history, a nostalgic masculine ideal of which the negative aspects that were previously elided are now in full view.

While all the series that I examine use white, heterosexual nostalgic masculinities as symbolic of a wider body politic, as a means of exploring trauma and uncertainty individualised through a white male body which in itself comes to stand as a symbol of the nation, *Breaking Bad* makes most overt a metonymic reading of the male nostalgic trope. Here 'crisis' stands in for financial precarity given the turbulence of socioeconomic and politics institutions within the recessionary period of the late 2000s. The series thus allows us to see clearly the reason for nostalgic masculinity within a clear sociocultural and economic context.

Albrecht writes that Walt (and Ray Drecker from HBO's series *Hung*) "resurrect masculinities from the ghosts of frontier narratives and cowboy tales", as turning to hegemonic versions of masculinity from the past provides a more acceptable and easier means of accessing power and alleviating anxieties surrounding gender roles than rethinking possibilities of masculinity (78). Although not explicitly locating his argument within the framework of nostalgia, Albercht identifies the relationship between nostalgia and masculinity in contemporary Quality Television as a means of coming to terms with cycles of power and disempowerment, change and reconfigured possibilities for gender identities. This experience of uncertainty and anxiety is a constant feature of masculinities, related to the continual reappearance of notions of 'crisis' in male gender identities, with Walt presenting as something of a hyper-exaggerated example of a man attempting to negotiate a cultural terrain in which masculinity is presented as an experience of lack and of resentment for an idealised, nostalgic and ultimately unreal form of masculinity born out of venerated myths of the Western genre.

While providing what is perhaps akin to a critique of a nostalgia for patriarchal masculinity in its narrative arc by displaying Walt's character development and transformation as ultimately unsustainable and corrosive to his interpersonal relationships, the series actually works to shore up and reassert hegemonic masculinity. This is a common feature of masculinity in crisis narratives. Halberstam writes, "all too often, solutions for the crisis of white male masculinity are proffered in terms of the shoring up of that same form of manhood" (*In a Queer* 139). Without the critical inflection of reflective nostalgia, *Breaking Bad* is guilty of the sins of nostalgia—reproducing mythicised narratives without contesting their ideological nature and in the process, reasserting the Western as the genre *par excellence* for masculinities within the United States.

Through its engagement with nostalgic form—primarily in terms of *mise en scène,* framing and setting, this nostalgia informs the series's idealised masculinity, even if nostalgia is not an obvious concern of the series. While in terms of narrative nostalgia there are two key ideals that the series pivots around—the 'breadwinner' and the Western—nostalgic form concerns only the Western. Through this, *Breaking Bad* exhibits a form of restorative nostalgia, concerned with (re)capturing a 'lost' home, in this case, that of the Western. While the series may be self-conscious in its use of visual allusions to the genre, it is not interested in revising or undermining the idealised form of masculinity associated with the genre which is taken up by Walt as an archetype to strive for. The remedy to the crisis of the present is allayed by (re)turning to a mythic form of masculinity from the past.

The ultimate redemptive ending of the series, in which Walt, despite being estranged from his family, finally admits that his drug production was primarily for personal gain, is able to ensure a means of securing money for his children and ultimately dying a hero after fighting off a group of neo-Nazis, valorises the entire narrative trajectory of the series. In ultimately affirming the series's narrative, the ending supports hegemonic masculinity and nullifies any critique that the series purports to deliver. Whilst depicting Walt's attempts to actualise his nostalgic desire for patriarchal masculinity as leading to a greater sense of fragmentation as he instils value in empty performances of a hyper-realised hegemonic masculinity, the series in actuality thus works to do the opposite—re-ensuring the continuation of the male nostalgic trope.

Chapter Five:

"You can't be half a gangster": *Boardwalk Empire,* failure and digitised nostalgia.

The season two finale, "To The Lost", of *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO 2010-2014) ends in a dramatic showdown between protagonist Enoch "Nucky" Thompson and his protégé James "Jimmy" Darmody. After spending much of the season working against Nucky in an attempt to usurp his control over Atlantic City, Jimmy has conceded defeat. Desperately attempting to regain Nucky's trust, Jimmy spends much of the episode trying to appease Nucky, his employer and symbolic father figure. The pair meet on a stormy night at an under-construction war memorial, the location of symbolic importance given that Jimmy is himself a war veteran and is scarred by the trauma of his experiences. Although aware of his likely fate, Jimmy does not believe Nucky capable of firing the shots to kill him, both given the nature of their relationship and Nucky's reluctance to involve himself directly in the violence that is a requisite part of sustaining his power. Nucky stands with gun in hand pointed at Jimmy while Jimmy talks him through his first experience of killing someone, coaxing Nucky through the one act in which Jimmy is more experienced. Jimmy tells him, "Just try to make yourself calm…Breathe Nuck…You'll get through it. All you gotta worry about is when you run outta booze. And you run outta company. And the only person there to judge you is your….", before Nucky suddenly shoots him at point blank range, standing over him uttering, "You don't know me James, you never did. I am not seeking forgiveness", shooting him again in the face.

This scene marks an important turning point in the series. Jimmy's death concludes the end of the primary narrative focus of the first two seasons and is the first time within the series that Nucky, a character closely associated with the use of physical violence to both obtain and maintain power, directly perpetuates this violence, preferring to rule by intimidation and the fear of violence without having to involve himself in the acts that sustain his position. From this point forwards, Nucky becomes more directly involved in violence and the daily running of his bootlegging business, transitioning over the course of the series from a benevolent but corrupt politician to a hyperbolic gangster driven by insatiable greed and desire for power.

Set during the 1920s and early 1930s, *Boardwalk Empire* (*Boardwalk*) centres on Nucky, an influential politician as city treasurer and ardent Prohibition supporter, who is also,

(increasingly so over the series' span) a profiteer, bootlegger and gangster. Along with his brother Eli, the local sheriff, Nucky ensures that Prohibition is upheld as an official city policy. He simultaneously also ensures, however, that Prohibition is not only undermined but rendered ineffective, exploited by the city's political and criminal elite who seek to make substantial financial gains out of controlling the supply of alcohol given the distribution scarcity. As the series progresses over its five seasons, the complications of negotiating the tensions between his public and private selves, one of public virtue and the other of criminality, give way to an examination of a detached, violent and ruthless criminal. As the series progresses, Nucky moves from the suite at the Ritz to working out of the darkened interior of the nightclub Onyx; his casual strolls down the majestic boardwalk replaced with the confined interiors of the club. This shift in location works to symbolise the change both in Nucky's working conditions as he shifts further into criminal activities and moreover, highlights the change in persona as he increasingly becomes involved in violence, seemingly fuelled by the pain of his past. By season three Nucky's relationship with his second wife Margaret has broken down and by the end of the following season his butler and confidant Eddie Kessler has committed suicide, his brother Eli has turned against him and he is largely estranged from the boardwalk that he used to control. The series's tone shifts from caught up in the lavish world of the boardwalk, filled with debauched parties and a lush visual style marked by glamour and excess, to the more simplistic and melancholy visual palette of the later seasons. Instead of parties, indulgence and a vibrant and busy visual schema, the series largely focuses on darkened and empty interior spaces. Nucky's increased emotional isolation becomes manifest in his physical detachment.

My primary argument in this chapter is that *Boardwalk* crystallises the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and nostalgia that I have developed so far. It does this through its configuration of male nostalgia as implicit but linked to clearly identifiable negative emotions (longing, mourning, loss). As such nostalgia is affective and retains its critical potential. Using this critical potential I posit that the series makes clear that nostalgic masculinity is a response to the failure of hegemonic masculinity, the failure of performing it, of sustaining it and a constitutive element of hegemonic masculinities even if ease and comfort in one's masculinity are key signifiers of the formation.

The first part of this chapter focuses on affective nostalgia, looking at Nucky's characterisation throughout the series and locating his nostalgic expressions of loss and

longing as being connected to experiences from his childhood. Similar to *Breaking Bad*, *Boardwalk*'s nostalgia is implicit. Throughout the first season, Nucky begins to reveal details of a troubled childhood, in particular his resentment towards his father. This culminates in a scene in the season one episode "Home" where he deliberately burns down his childhood home in an attempt to erase the trauma of the memories that linger throughout its walls. Nucky's nostalgia, while not something overtly extrapolated upon within the narrative, shares many commonalities with that of *Mad Men'*s Don Draper. Nostalgia here is premised in childhood and adolescence but it is not a desire to return to the past, as nostalgia is more commonly understood, but rather an imaginative project to recreate it, to be able to rewrite the past more in line with the present.

By displaying loss and mourning associated with his childhood and in particular placing blame on his father for being abusive and belittling in his paternal role, *Boardwalk* depicts Nucky's nostalgia as related to his encounters with masculinity and its negative consequences at an early age. Nostalgia appears in tandem with hegemonic masculinity throughout the series. Whereas in *Breaking Bad* nostalgia was used as a means of trying to conform to and acquire masculine hegemony, here it is the opposite. The series opens with Nucky already in a position of power and status, a leader amongst men who rules with brute force (performed by others as he does not need to get involved in the minutiae of upholding his power), yet he is still nostalgic. At the commencement of the series he is indeed a 'fantasy figure' of masculinity, a role model for men, an embodiment of a cultural dominance seemingly impervious to the law. Yet as the series progresses he becomes vulnerable to the law and no longer occupies a place of cultural authority. The hollowness of his embodiment of hegemonic masculinity becomes apparent, fracturing into the almost dichotomous attributes of benevolence and cruelty.

The second section of this chapter considers nostalgic form by analysing *Boardwalk*'s approach to its period setting. Here I extend some of the arguments I proposed in chapter three in relation to *Mad Men* while arguing that *Boardwalk*'s engagement with the past is largely contingent upon the creation of visual spectacle facilitated through digital technology. Nucky's longing for return, an imaginative project of recreating a past, is mirrored by the series's creation of a period (1920s) *mise en scène*. In a similar manner to how Nucky tries to imaginatively recreate the past through nostalgia, so too does the series as a whole create a visual aesthetic of pastness that seeks not to (re)create a 'real' 1920s but rather a fantasy-

like narrative world built on nostalgic visions of past styles. *Boardwalk* self-consciously constructs a narrative universe that is interested in verisimilitude of its *mise en scène*, music and contextual details. The series, however, stages a twenty-first century idea of the 1920s, always suffused with a double consciousness. Therefore, while it is concerned with historically specific events, most notably the onset of Prohibition and its effects on the interconnections between organised crime and politics, it also is interested in using the past as a means of examining the concerns of the present. Through its sepia-toned palette, period music, elaborate costuming and SFX-aided sets, *Boardwalk* creates a visual spectacle, a lavish story world in which to set its narrative of corruption, politics and violence.

This focus on the creation of a fantasy world means that the past recedes as an actual referent – *Boardwalk*'s relationship to actual history is diminished insomuch as although it references historical events – Prohibition, the Volstead Act, World War I – the era is more constructed through aesthetics and style, creating a visual tone that can be read as nostalgic. Nostalgic form within the series is important to examine as it serves two functions. As mentioned above, periodicity in the series is handled in the same fashion as Nucky's desire for the past—nostalgic yet creative, an imagined past always conscious of its impossibility. As such, *Boardwalk* offers a form of reflective nostalgia. Boym foresees this modality of nostalgia as located within processes of longing and loss, "the imperfect process of remembering" (xvi). Boym's definition here has obvious correlations to Nucky's characterisation; he is haunted by his past while aware that he does not want to actually return to it. The focus on the spectacality of its time setting sets *Boardwalk* apart from *Mad Men*'s treatment of period aesthetics and importantly, it is through this spectacle that the narrative nostalgic elements become visible. It is within the lavishness and scale of the *mise en scène* that Nucky stands apart as a character engulfed in male nostalgia.

This dual treatment of reflective nostalgia both within the narrative construction of characterisation and through stylistic qualities such as *mise en scène* and the use of flashbacks provides two layers to consider nostalgic masculinity: both diegetically, through Nucky's narrative arc and through the use of genre and temporal setting, providing a period piece that travels back to the origins of the American 'mob', only to discover that the gangsters idolised by figures such as Tony Soprano are equally nostalgic and filled with feelings of loss.

Despite critical acclaim, high budgets and a prestige cast, *Boardwalk* did not receive the popular success of the previous series that I have examined and perhaps concordantly, there has not been much academic work published on the series.[25] Martha Nochimson and Janet McCabe's chapters on the series both focus on visual aesthetic and, as such, have been useful for my analysis of period aesthetics in the second part of this chapter. In terms of examinations of narrative or character, to date there has been minimal scholarly attention on the series. Ashley Donnelly's character study of Nucky in relation to politics and corruption is thus the only piece focusing solely on *Boardwalk* that examines issues of masculinity in relation to the series's protagonist. Given this scarcity of literature, there is obviously ample room for a study of Nucky's characterisation in relation to nostalgia and masculinity.

Affective Nostalgia: Nostalgia, failure and memories of home

In the final episode of season one, Nucky reflects to Margaret that he was terrified of harming his newborn son to the point where he buried himself in work to avoid him. Upon finally approaching his wife and son, he realised that his son had passed away, his wife cradling the deceased child and caring for it as if it were still alive, traumatised by the grief of the baby's death. These gradual moments of intimacy and sincerity work towards providing an illustration that is only fully revealed to spectators in the final season of Nucky's backstory: a childhood of neglect, the advancement of his career and status over the wellbeing of Gillian Darmody (Jimmy's mother), the death of his child and breakdown of his first marriage. Actor Steve Buscemi's portrayal of Nucky captures the trauma of these events in throwaway moments such as a look of regret in a moment of contemplation, or the oscillation between lavish philanthropist and cold expediency with which Nucky conducts himself. For example in season three's opening episode "Resolution", Nucky and Margaret host a lavish Egyptian themed New Years Eve party, complete with a chest filled with diamond jewellery that is offered as presents to their guests. Nucky takes part in the spectacle, dancing along with entertainers (Fig. 15), yet the scene cuts to a meeting in the kitchen where he tells his business associates of a change in arrangements, resulting in a hostile response from Gyp Rosetti. The opulence of the party is underscored both by a subsequent scene after the

[25] As an example of its critical acclaim, the series was awarded for twelve Primetime Emmy Awards, winning three of these, as well as numerous nominations and wins in the Creative Arts Emmy Awards for casting, cinematography, costuming and art direction.

party where the tension in Margaret and Nucky's relationship is apparent, after which he returns to his suite at the Ritz. In one of the final scenes of the episode, Nucky is alone in his darkened office, in a moment of deep contemplation which contrasts with the jovial atmosphere of the party (Fig. 16).

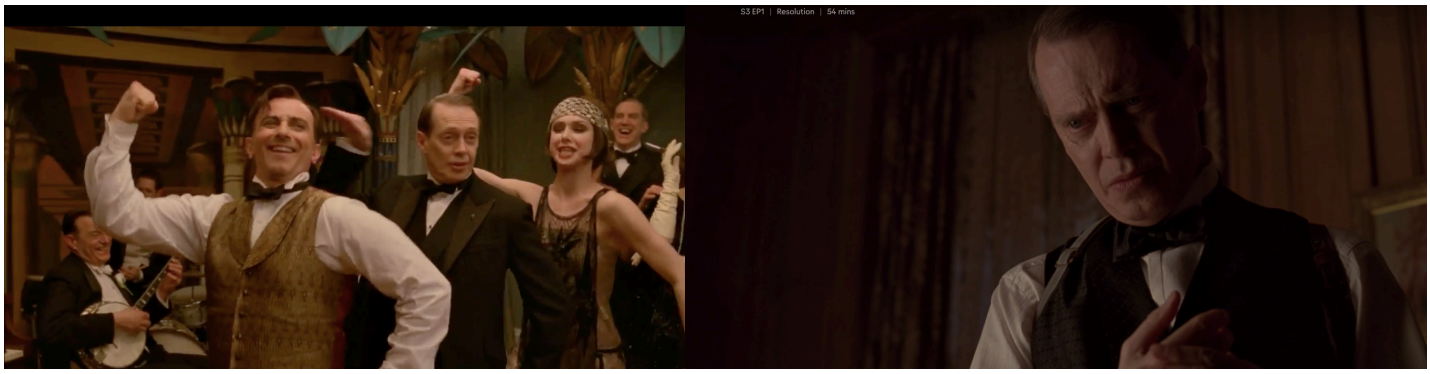

Fig. 15-16-"Resolution".

Nostalgic masculinity in *Boardwalk* is identifiable in these scenes of mourning and regret, a desire to re-create the past that manifests through palpable melancholic sadness interspersed with cold and calculated violence. The series tracks the inadequacies of using violence as a coping mechanism and in the process of doing so, highlights the uniquely gendered manifestations of nostalgia that the series presents. In a similar manner to Don Draper (*Mad Men*), the series opens with Nucky at the apex of power and control. Yet both of these characters are unable to sustain their positions, with *Boardwalk* offering a particularly condemnatory character arc for its protagonist. Although at the end of the series he is incredibly wealthy, he is estranged from all close personal relationships and, in the ultimate moment of condemnation, is murdered by Jimmy's son in the final moments of the series. Notably, both of these series are also period dramas—they take us to moments in time that act as points of inspiration for the protagonists of the other series I have examined. What becomes increasingly clear in *Boardwalk* is that not only does striving *for* hegemonic masculinity bring about discontent and pain, but even in achieving this quasi-mythical position, nostalgia and loss are ever-present components of masculinity. Similarly, not only is violence used as a means to thwart off the anxiety posed by not embodying hegemonic masculinity, it is also a requisite component of masculine hegemony itself, taken to the extreme by the male nostalgic whose disorientation towards an idealised past manifests in

an over-exaggeration of qualities such as violence while trying to come to terms with the excess of emotionality constitutive of nostalgia with the emotional detachment and laconicness symbolic of normative masculinities.

Boardwalk demonstrates that while hegemonic masculinity may be an ideal that ensures the legitimacy of patriarchy, those who may reap its rewards are internally fragmented. It does not ameliorate a sense of loss, an orientation towards the past as a site for the return of security or meaning, even if that past time is one of trauma. This is a similar argument to what I proposed in chapter two, the difference here being *Boardwalk*'s extended evidence of the conterminous process of acquiring power and trauma and the importance of the 1920s setting as foundational myth to the gangster genre. Here we can see a different 'crisis' in masculinity: rather than the crisis being prompted by socioeconomic contexts, here it is a crisis in the nature of masculinity itself.[26]

Boardwalk combines elements from across the range of texts I have already discussed—its engagement with the gangster genre places it in lineage with *The Sopranos,* it is a period piece similar to *Mad Men* and it uses the implicit nostalgic modality as with *Breaking Bad*. Beyond these superficial commonalities, all protagonists share a relationship between hegemonic masculinity and male nostalgia—in the case of *Boardwalk*, a desire for masculinised power exists in tandem with trauma which surfaces as nostalgia. In many ways *Boardwalk* is a fitting text as the final case study of this thesis as it draws together aspects from all of the three previous examples I have analysed. In line with Hannah Hamad's argument that recent Hollywood historical films "make space for the enactment and valorization of paternalist masculinities anachronistic to the postfeminist present, while efficaciously incorporating contemporary masculine ideals", so too does *Boardwalk* exist on an extra-diegetic level as a commentary between historical patriarchal ideas of white masculinity from the early twentieth century and the contemporary time of its production (29). This trope is not limited to a postfeminist climate, with the physically/psychically wounded man whose accrual of wealth/material success comes at the expense of relationships evident in films such as *Scarface* (DePalma, 1984), *The Godfather* triology (Copolla 1972; 1974; 1990) and *Raging Bull* (Scorsese, 1981). Although Nucky exists diegetically as a

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[26] While of course there were socioeconomic contexts of importance in this era, most noteably the Great Depression which features as a backdrop to the latter seasons of the series, financial necessity is not portrayed as a motivator for Nucky's behaviour.

nostalgic protagonist, marked by a sense of longing towards his past, the text also provides us with the opportunity for considering the turn to the past through its historical setting and how this both establishes, while simultaneously drawing into question, an origin story and history for hegemonic masculinities.

Nucky's nostalgia for the past correlates with Don Draper's sentiment of nostalgia as the "pain from an old wound" in *Mad Men* ("The Wheel"). It is a similarly imaginative project, not a desire to literally return to the past, more akin to Boym's reflective nostalgia, dwelling in the knowledge of the pain and trauma of the past but nonetheless a pain to which he is drawn (xvii). Nucky's nostalgia is not a desire to go back and relive former days of glory but a yearning for a sense of home and belonging that he is unable to experience in the present. Thus it is a desire premised on a sense of loss and longing to recreate the past while being aware of the impossibility of such a task, while the series itself does the same thing in its construction of a fantastical 1920s story world.

In the seventh episode of season one, "Home", Nucky agrees to give his childhood home, occupied by his elderly father who is now incapable of caring for himself, to an associate who is in need of accommodation for his family. While overseeing renovations to the property, Nucky confides in Margaret about the abuses he suffered at the hands of a cruel, negligent, alcoholic father. As they walk through his childhood home, his face is etched with a mixture of nostalgia and disgust at the memories of his father's abuse. Later, after viewing the renovated house, Nucky sets fire to the property, instead giving the associate who was to occupy the house a large wad of cash to "find a better place to live".

This scene brings to fruition the sense of mourning and loss that pervades Nucky's characterisation and locates it within his childhood and a desire for family unity. Nucky seeks to rewrite his past, firstly by renovating his childhood home in order to repurpose it into something more habitable and then, when his father still berates him at the unveiling of the renovated property, by setting it alight. In burning the house down, Nucky seeks to erase the memories that the space contains, making evident that he is not nostalgic for the actual conditions of his childhood, the trauma that he has not been able to overcome, but to recreate it. Nostalgia is of course pivoted around a sense of 'home'. One is not nostalgic if they feel 'at home' in the world. Nostalgic longing may not be for a specific place or time per se, but a feeling of intimacy with the world that evokes a sense of being at home. As Boym writes, "there is no place like home, but in some cases the home has been displaced and

deliberately reimagined" (258). Here in "Home" we see this process literalised: the house is burned down so that it can be reimagined.

As the past of nostalgic reverie is one that never existed in the first place, Nucky's past exists as both real event and emotional response. When Nucky burns down his childhood home, he seeks to replace the literal site of childhood 'home' with the power of his longing. For Boym nostalgic desire is marked by the fact that the home desired is known to be impossible to return to, or to have never existed as such in the first place (8). Aware that the actual conditions of his childhood were unpleasant but similarly unable to let go of the trauma contained in his past, Nucky instead turns to imaginative project: reflective nostalgia.

This reflective nostalgia is an attempt to narrativise his past, both to make it congruent with his present self and to address the trauma that the past contains. Reflective nostalgia is located "in *algia,* the longing itself and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately" (Boym xvii, emphasis in original). Through the act of burning his childhood home, Nucky quite literally delays a homecoming. In recounting these memories and through the extent to which his past continues to bear on him, Nucky's nostalgia emphasises the component of longing. Aware of the actual inability to change the past, Nucky's nostalgia, related to childhood, the deficiencies of his father and a series of actions that have facilitated his institutionalised power is intertwined with his masculinity; he takes on a paternalistic role in compensation for his own experiences. Nucky is a father-like figure to both Jimmy Darmody and his mother Gillian, upon marrying Margaret Schroeder he takes on a paternal role for her two children and in his role as city treasurer his acts of benevolence and generosity position him as a paternalistic fantasy, the exact inverse of the cruelty he endured. While benevolence and generosity are positive responses brought about by nostalgia, overwhelmingly, nostalgia reveals the impossibility of hegemonic masculinity. Nucky is unable to sustain his relationship with Jimmy, his position as treasurer, his marriage to Margaret, nor the public esteem that he once had. Nucky not only mourns his childhood but also the errors of his past behaviours, behaviours that were crucial to his position of success at the commencement of the series.

The display of nostalgia combined with the negative affects of grief and mourning in *Boardwalk* makes visible that male nostalgia, heavily linked to hegemonic masculinity, is also a symptom of its failings. While I have identified *Boardwalk* as an implicit nostalgia text, nonetheless its nostalgia is visible within scenes such as the one I cited above from "Home"

and is commingled in the emotional display of the protagonist. bell hooks writes that emotional regulation is a central tenant to the ongoing viability of patriarchy, stating, "the first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves" (6). Indeed, all of the case studies I have examined pivot on this tension: emotional control and stoicism are central to Western masculinities, yet nostalgia in its affective form is an excess of emotion. This indicates the impossibility of hegemonic masculinity and normative standards of masculinities, for, as Reeser and Gottzén write, "the cultural expectation on men to be unemotional end up making them *too* emotional" (147, emphasis in original). As such, hegemonic masculinity is a restrictive dictum and it is easy to locate nostalgic masculinity in this line of thought as the reaction to the repressive tendencies of what is normative.

In *Boardwalk and* with all of the other case studies I have examined, investment in male nostalgia is coded as 'bad' diegetically, insomuch as the protagonists do not avail themselves and it generally leads to negative outcomes. For example, *Breaking Bad* and *Boardwalk* both end with the death of their protagonists, *Mad Men* ends with a multi-episode journey of Don abandoning his life (although the ambiguity of the ending may suggest an eventual return) and *The Sopranos* ends with its infamous cut to black, forever leaving open the possibility that Tony Soprano is murdered. In chapter four I argued that the implicit nostalgia of *Breaking Bad* was retrogressive in that it hindered the critical potentiality of nostalgia by not labelling it as such. In *Boardwalk* nostalgia is affective insomuch as it resists the discursive articulation of emotion. Reeser and Gottzén, writing of masculinity and affect, state:

> the emotion he feels is already a putting into the language of something ineffable and visceral…Calling a reaction 'joy' or 'anger' or 'sadness' is a retroactive coding or stabilizing of a difficult-to-define, non-discursive intensity within him that assumes that the feeling is already knowable and definable and that it belongs to him. (149)

Retaining nostalgia to the pre-discursive in *Boardwalk* retains its potential, both as an affective potentiality and consequently although somewhat paradoxically, as a critical device that makes visible the consequences of normative gender regimes. This is what I mean by the critical potential of nostalgic masculinity: it can expose and make clear the problems with culturally normative demands of masculinity and proffers alternatives, however, those alternatives are problematically rooted in a longing for the past given the hold that a desire to maintain patriarchal privilege has on men.

Halberstam's work on failure is also prescient. He writes that failure:

> allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior…and while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life. (*The Queer Art* 3)

We can view Nucky's personification of nostalgic masculinity in *Boardwalk* in line with failure —a failure of appropriate emotional stoicism, a failure to maintain detached control…a failure in hegemonic masculinity. Of course, this failure is implicit within hegemonic masculinity: it is seldom achievable, constantly contested, policed and surveilled and thus must be constantly proved, reasserted and comes with an array of negative consequences. In *Boardwalk* this failure and its consequences are explicit—Nucky becomes estranged from others, he loses the luxuries he enjoys so much in the earlier seasons, he is detached from others and from himself and ultimately…he is murdered. While failure is evident in all of the case studies I have examined, the unique mix of implicit nostalgia plus explicit negative emotion means that it is crystallised in *Boardwalk.* A series about the power of men—physical violence, profiteering, structural and political advantage over women— becomes the site which most clearly reveals the failings of these culturally codified ideas of masculinity.

Hamad writes that recent Hollywood films set within the past "stage fantasies of recuperated fatherhood suggest[ing] dissatisfaction with elements of the present status quo and the cultural purchase of the past in negotiating hegemonic masculinity" (28). Yet in *Boardwalk* the past is not rendered as the conservative, pre-lapsian, prefeminist site of

patriarchal masculinities. While an almost resolutely masculine series and not advancing particularly progressive gender relations, the series can be used to reveal the nature of history of normative white masculinities. Nucky deviates from what one might expect as a iconised exemplar of historicised patriarchal masculinity. While clearly being a man of and in power, he deviates from commonly held cultural assumptions of what constitutes as hegemonic masculinity. This is importantly linked to the sense of loss and trauma that pervades him, that is, to male nostalgia. By evoking the past, *Boardwalk* does suggest problems with the present, yet it is more complex than in Hamad's account above. Rather than using the past "as a safe space in which to locate and idealize archaic formations of masculinity", here masculinity of the past is continuous with that of the present, insomuch as neither seems particularly preferable (Hamad 29). The past is not offered here as a straightforward 'solution' to the present even while aspects of it may be desirable. Unlike in *Breaking Bad* where male nostalgia is clearly evoked as a conservative device, where the past is a clear remedy to the present, here male nostalgia is a means through which to cope with the expectations of hegemonic masculinity. Staging the series in the past, almost one hundred years prior to the present, can then expose as mythic the ideals of masculinity coveted by other male nostalgic protagonists. Nucky experiences a form of male nostalgia, not linked to a particular cultural touchstone of masculinity per se but rather a personal affective state of mourning linked to the constitution of his position of gendered dominance. This shows that these revered past masculinities, when stripped of the rose-tinted myopia of nostalgia, are similarly fragmented, unhappy and under the constant demands of gendered expectations. Staging *Boardwalk* and *Mad Men* in the past does on the one hand provide a sense of the history of patriarchal masculinities, insofar as both series focus incredulously on the (mis)treatment of women in their respective eras which in turn suggests the power and uncontested dominance of masculinities, particularly within prefeminist eras. Yet at the same time, they also undermine this same history, which has structural advantage but leaves those in positions at the top of this hierarchical formation plagued by feelings of nostalgia and loss. Extending to the argument I advanced above, the period setting of *Boardwalk* thus allows us to see that the twentieth century history of white heterosexual masculinities in the United States is a history of failure.

Season five, *Boardwalk*'s final season, uses flashbacks interspersed throughout the season in order to extrapolate further upon Nucky's past, provide the spectator with

snapshots of Nucky's memories of traumatic events. Starting with the death of his sister and the abuse he and Eli suffered from his father, the flashbacks extend to Nucky starting work for the Commodore as a child to escape his father and him as a young adult looking forward to starting a family of his own with his wife Mabel. The episodes cut between flashback scenes and a diegetic present (in 1931, a seven-year time shift since the conclusion of season four) in which Nucky's empire is crumbling, using this temporal dislocation to tie together past and present. Maureen Turim theorises flashbacks as personal memory, as a way of bringing forth a memory trace that has been forgotten in the past (19). For Turim, flashback scenes render history as subjective experience, infusing multiple and often conflicting social and political histories through the lens of singular personal memory (2). Susannah Radstone also cites the flashback as a cinematic term that highlights memory's function to elide the dissolve between present and past, manipulating the nonlinearity of memory (326). Here, memory is seen as analogous to screen device, providing a link between cinema and television and personal and individual memory, demonstrating the capacity for visual media to represent and map memory formally, while also demonstrating how these media have been central to the development of social and public (Radstone 326) Disparate, inchoate experiences are ordered linear and given meaning through Nucky's relationship with his past, weaving these moments into an origin story that serves as a genesis for his present self and in the process delineating past from present. As we see these formative events in Nucky's past we are reminded of their resonance when we see Nucky in the present timeline, increasing isolated after the breakdown of another relationship and turbulent conditions affecting his business dealings. Here nostalgia culminates on both narrative and stylistic levels. As the series concludes we are taken back in time, with flashbacks serving as portals that rupture the temporality of the series, foregrounding the role of nostalgia, even a traumatic nostalgia for negative events, as a means of accessing the past.

The choice of events that are included in these flashback sequences make clear that Nucky's nostalgia is clearly gendered in its nature. These moments—Nucky witnessing his drunk father being abusive towards his mother, the death of Nucky's sister, Nucky starting work for the Commodore culminate in a final prolonged sequence of flashbacks in the series finale, of when Nucky abused Gillian Darmody's trust in order to get promoted to Sheriff. These events have had significant resonance in Nucky's life as they are all moments that

have taught Nucky about masculinity. Pivotal events both within public and private life, these flashback sequences share as similarity that they are all moments *about* masculinity, about its limitations and how masculine virtues of success and power entail the sacrificing not only of one's humanity, but in this case, have been directly achieved at the expense of women.

These flashbacks sequences, in which nostalgia is formalised as a structural device guiding the spectators through moments in Nucky's history, culminate to make clear the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and nostalgia. Nucky's inability to escape the past leads to his displacement from a position of power, showing that nostalgia coexists with hegemonic masculinity, leading to insecurity amongst men. The flashback sequences add a further dimension to the relationship by showing us the questionable activities that led to Nucky's ascendancy in the first place. We see that not only is hegemonic masculinity unsustainable, unstable and coupled with a constant sense of loss but that there never *was* a time of fixity and security for Nucky.

The flashback sequences in the finale culminate with a sequence that constantly interplays past with present. This sequence establishes the events that lead ultimately to Nucky's murder at the conclusion of the series; these events are also those that ultimately secured Nucky's power and status at the commencement of the series. Nucky knowingly sanctioned the paedophilic rape of Gillian Darmody as a means of furthering his own career, with the flashback sequences depicting him telling GIllian, "I'll always look after you" before directly leading her to meet with her rapist. While this scene serves within the narrative as a means of justifying Nucky's murder—Gillian's grandson has come to avenge the mistreatment of his grandmother and father—it also has more poignant relevance for the series' overarching interest in hegemonic masculinity.

The events that preceded and facilitated his rise to power shows that in order to achieve the status and power requisite for a leadership position amongst the masculinised realms of both organised crime and politics, a young woman is sacrificed, expendable to the purposes of strengthening relations amongst men. This fits within the wider logic of patriarchal gender relations—hegemonic masculinity is built on the wholesale marginalisation of women to men and hegemonic masculinity's hierarchical superiority over other variants of masculinity is achieved through the subordination of those lower within this hierarchy. Placed within a wider context, this event is the originary moment that justifies all of Nucky's acts of violence as means of establishing and maintaining status and power through the

subordination of those deemed to be expendable, yet these acts of violence to constantly reassure oneself and others of one's place within a masculine hierarchy suggests that rather than being insignificant and disposable, these subordinate beings actually pose a threat significant enough that they are the targets of violence in order to ensure their compliance within a normative gender regime.

Boardwalk offers a vision of masculinity that is structurally dominant but contradicts expectations of the gangster hero by offering a protagonist who goes against an expectation of physicality and bombastic intimidation by instead ruling through strategic planning learned from his political career. *Boardwalk* nevertheless places Nucky as a male figure in a social world in which women function largely either in terms of their maternal caregiving capacities or as sexualised objects of male pleasure and where politics, business and crime are exclusively male domains. Women's suffrage is an ongoing subplot of season one. In episode two, "The Ivory Tower", the Commodore purposefully humiliates his presumably uneducated African American female housekeeper by asking her to express her opinion to Nucky on The League of Nations, knowing that she will not be able to answer to prove his point that women do not possess the intellectual capacity to participate in the political system. He repeats the question again to Nucky's girlfriend Lucy in episode four ("Anastasia"). Margaret's celebrations over the passage of suffrage in episode ten, "The Emerald City", are cut short when Nucky persuades her to help rally new female voters into supporting his desired mayoral candidate. The success of the suffrage movement is brought under scrutiny by the reminder of the multiple structures of oppression faced by the African American domestic worker, the disparities of education that curtail women's ability to participate in civic life and the co-optation of feminism in service of the maintenance of a patriarchal status quo.

By opening *Boardwalk* in 1920 and with four out of five seasons occurring before the Great Depression began in 1929, *Boardwalk* does not evoke a socioeconomic 'crisis' as precursor to an investment in nostalgic masculinity. Nicole Rafter writes that classic gangster films of the 1930s (the period in which *Boardwalk*'s final season is set), "portray gangsters as desperate men in a desperate hour, victims of a society that stresses wealth and status while failing to provide working-class men with the means to achieve these ends" (27). While such a description is apt for the motivations of secondary characters within the series, in line with the argument I proposed in chapter four in relation to marginalised masculinities and crime,

my study here is contained to examining the series' protagonist, a character holding institutionalised power. *Boardwalk*'s subversion of the classical tropes of the gangster genre is to place the protagonist *within* the structures of institutionalised power rather than work as a force antagonistic to them. Furthermore, the 1930s gangster (both as a historical figure and cinematic trope) has been conceived as an explicitly modern figuration, a system of post-war disillusionment (Smyth 537-538). While I acknowledge that *Boardwalk* is a product of its production era and not its setting and that the series is self-conscious about this, placing Nucky within this historical framework is important insofar as it can speak to the contextual circumstances that may prompt nostalgic masculinity. The importance of this to nostalgic masculinity is twofold—firstly as a figure of modernity the gangster seems anti-nostalgic, it is closely related to the changing conditions of postwar life and was facilitated by events such as the Volstead Act, the prohibiting of the manufacture and sale of alcohol. Secondly, nostalgic masculinity is not mobilised here as a means of appealing to disenfranchised white masculinities. Rather, the setting in a nexus between criminal underworld/officiated politics provides a protagonist who becomes estranged from the structures that support masculine hegemony by male nostalgia, rather than the nostalgia being a product of this estrangement. As I posited above, this estrangement is almost inevitable given that failure is a constitutive component of hegemonic masculinity.

Robert Warshow's essay, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero" is also insightful here. In the piece Warshow posits the gangster film as a modern equivalent of a tragedy, with the gangster doomed by being a product of a society that defines happiness through the accrual of power and status; it is through an attempt to pursue these goals that the gangster lays the ground for their own demise. *Boardwalk* follows in the legacy of Warshow's theorisation, the linkages made clear early within the series of the parallels between State-supported political system and the deviant criminal enterprise all within the realms of capitalist endeavour. Extrapolating on Warshow's argument furthers my argument around hegemonic masculinity, nostalgia and failure: if these traits (power and status) can be read as not just markers of capitalist success but also part of what constitutes hegemonic masculinity, then a pursuit to realise and accumulate these leads in tragedy/failure via nostalgia as an affective form.

Boardwalk's setting in a period outside of the lived experience of spectators helps to further the argument proposed throughout this thesis that while socioeconomic and cultural contexts do indeed influence male nostalgia, it is the impetus placed on hegemonic

masculinity in itself that correlates with nostalgic masculinity. Whereas nostalgia is typically thought of as a coping mechanism to allay masculine fears and anxiety about the present and future, this is ruptured in *Boardwalk.* Nucky is not actually nostalgic for the real conditions of his past but he is nevertheless haunted by it and desires to rebuild it and this desire resonates into the present. The past is not remembered as a time of security and safety but as a sequence of events that demonstrate the destructive power of hegemonic masculinity through Nucky's memories of his father's neglect and abuse and then his own inability to fulfil the role of masculine patriarch (his infant child dies, leading his wife to a traumatic depression that ultimately results in her suicide) and his own acts of violence. Narrative nostalgia in *Boardwalk* demonstrates a central paradox within hegemonic masculinity that leads to its coupling with nostalgia—Nucky displays a complex relationship with the past, one that is both mournful and nostalgic, hindering the longterm viability of his performance of hegemonic masculinity, yet when the series travels to the past (via the season five flashbacks), spectators see that hegemonic masculinity is built upon violence, abuse of trust and a constant need to reassert oneself, that there never was a time of stability and security.

Nostalgic form: Digitised period nostalgia

It is through the surreal filter of liquor bottles, crystal glasses and fine silver that we see the world of *Boardwalk Empire*, a world of glittering surfaces and spectacle. Martha Nochimson writes of a "carnival mise-en-scene" in the series ("*Boardwalk Empire*" 30). The carnival-like atmosphere of the boardwalk indicates how the series meshes together a narrative with complex textuality with a focus on epic spectacle to emphasise the extravagant scale of its setting.[27] *Boardwalk*'s use of elaborate sets, its meticulous standards of design and costuming and its evocation of a sense of grandness within the carnivalesque spaces of the 1920s boardwalk funfair work towards a reading of the series as a kind of historical abstraction. Historical details are fastidiously accurate in order to anchor the series in a sense of realism necessary for its credibility, yet simultaneously self-consciously focusing upon the stylisation and nostalgic rendering of the past.

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[27] While Nochimson's original usage of the term is more literal in her discussion of the series's actual staging of a carnival-like atmosphere, nonetheless this term evokes a sense of grandness of scale and focus on spectacle which makes it appropriate to use as a broader explanatory term for *Boardwalk*'s aesthetics.

This section expands upon the discussion of period aesthetics and nostalgia that I undertook in chapter three in relation to *Mad Men.* There I discussed how *Mad Men* simultaneously replicated the 1960s while also using its historical setting as a fantasy space to critique the present. By creating a visually alluring representation of the past, *Mad Men* both offers the pleasures of nostalgia while also providing a critique of these very pleasures. *Boardwalk* works similarly yet is complicated by the distance from its setting to the period of production and consumption. While *Mad Men*'s nostalgia may be hinged upon the fact that spectators may have either directly experienced the 1960s or may be familiar with its historical events from mass media from the era, *Boardwalk* is further removed from its setting era and without the ubiquity of archival historical footage that *Mad Men* incorporates into its diegesis, *Boardwalk* tries to distance itself from the "loss of historicity" that Frederic Jameson asserts of the nostalgia film through research and accuracy with historical events and aspects of its *mise en scène.*

In this section I argue that *Boardwalk* abstracts its period aesthetics into fantasy. As the purveyor of Quality TV, HBO has ensured that *Boardwalk* is not a pastiche of periodicity through adherence to historical references and details. Yet this is highly contingent upon aspects of the contemporary, namely digital production devices and SFX. *Boardwalk*'s setting and aesthetic register focuses on spectacle and glamour, yet this is a conduit for exposing male nostalgia. It is through the excesses of the digitally enhanced period aesthetics of *Boardwalk* that male nostalgia is made visible for its contrast; the nostalgic period tone of the series is so opulent that Nucky's nostalgia, a mournful and solemn affect, becomes clear.

While *Boardwalk Empire* goes to great effort to create a visual tone that ensures it is read in terms of its commitment to period verisimilitude of its stylistic choices and visual style, which focuses on establishing a sense of time and place as much as the narrative itself, it nonetheless creates a 1920s landscape that is resolutely contemporary, steeped in the register of the present Quality Television moment. The focus on spectacularity and the decadence of its visual artefacts draw attention to visual pleasures, intensifying connection to the storyworld. Enrica Picarelli writes that this focus on experiential stimulation and aesthetics is a pertinent feature of contemporary televisual production and marketing (n. pag.). She writes:

> Selling themselves as suppliers of new experiences, television channels hope to lead a change in the phenomenology of media consumption, based on the multisensory appeal of spectacular presentations and interactive modes of storytelling. This is a significant departure from the marketing strategies that cinema and television have adopted for almost a century. (Picrarelli n.pag.)

Nancy Franklin, however, in a review for *The New Yorker* describes the series as "look[ing] authentic in a way that, paradoxically, seems lifeless. You're constantly aware that you're watching a period piece, albeit one with some vivid scenes and interesting details" (n.pag.). For Franklin, rather than attracting attention, the stylised set design, costuming and props actually work to produce an impenetrable surface that not only disengages her from the period setting but from the series itself.

While based on historical fact, the series a loose adaptation of Nelson Johnson's 2002 book *Boardwalk Empire: The Birth, High Times and Corruption of Atlantic City*, the series invites spectators into a staging of the past, one interested in accuracy of its *mise en scène* while also not declaring itself a reconstruction of a 'real' past world. Thus the series follows Nucky Thompson, a fictional gangster based loosely on the real-life Nucky Johnson but with an almost entirely fictionalised life story. Featured within the series are real-life historical gangsters such as Al Capone, Arnold Rothstein and Charlie "Lucky" Luciano. While the series adheres to historical events and timelines, it is clearly structured for a contemporary perspective. For example, a scene in the pilot episode sees Nucky walking along the boardwalk, stopping to peer into a window of an infantile incubator cum fun-park attraction (Fig. 17). For twenty-five cents, visitors can see premature babies being nursed to health, medical technology offered as a tourist attraction. Nucky peers through the window with a melancholy expression of longing as the nurse weighs a small baby before placing it back into the incubator. As Nucky walks away and lights a cigarette, the scene cuts to an extreme long shot (Fig. 18), placing Nucky within his surroundings. The scene focuses on the specificities of historical accuracy—the bemusement of the incubators as a boardwalk attraction for contemporary spectators and the assumed fidelity to period details in the advertisements that adorn the buildings behind Nucky. Yet when watching this scene, one is firmly aware that what they are watching is a reconstruction of the past, a modern-day

reimagining of the 1920s. The banal medical incubator is fetishised as a sideshow attraction and portrayed to spectators as an idiosyncratic exemplar of the naiveties of the past. Moreover, the scene is made possible through special effects technologies that render the boardwalk as a space that is both highly detailed and realistic, yet obviously created through digital technology.[28]

Fig. 17-18-"Boardwalk Empire'

Nucky's personal nostalgia for the past coexists entangled within the series's use of historical objects and iconography, televisual techniques and aesthetic choices that create a nostalgic register by virtue of their periodicity. The ethereal traces of the past portrayed through the specifically contemporary Quality Television conventions draws attention to the use of nostalgia as a televisual mode. Janet McCabe, writing on television aesthetics and the HBO quality brand in the *Boardwalk Empire* pilot writes:

> The Pilot [thus] puts into discourse the unique response of the series to history, deliberately echoing past visual forms, techniques and genres in and through how its cinematography, aesthetics choices and VFX technologies conserves but reinterprets, to create prestigious television, a HBO original. (187)

[28] The use of special effects to create spectacular constructions of diegetic reality has been predominately discussed in relation to cinema. Geoff King writes that Hollywood special effects both work towards rendering spectacle as 'real' in terms of creating detailed and textured diegetic worlds, while simultaneously the spectator can recognise and appreciate the virtuosity of special effects as technological enhancement (13).

McCabe indicates here the way in which the series's commitment to historical verisimilitude and fastidiousness works to place it alongside its contemporary counterparts, authenticating the series as part of HBO's canon of televisual creativity, furthered by Martin Scorsese's role as an executive producer and director of the pilot episode, its lavish costuming and sets and the grand scale of the series's cinematography with its long tracking shots, elaborate montage scenes and slow pans.

In an interview with journalist Patricia Thomson for *American Cinematographer*, *Boardwalk* cinematographer Stuart Dryburgh stated that the goal for the series's photography was "not to create a period look as such—we wanted to keep it modern" (n.pag.). Thus while the series focuses on material artefacts as signifiers of its period it does not imbue an analogue physicality through the surface of the image itself. Indeed, while the time period is created through props, costuming and music, the boardwalk itself, the showpiece of the series's set, is only made possible through technological innovation. Journalist Kevin Clapp writes, "computer-generated effects are responsible for everything from extending the Boardwalk in either direction to the Ferris wheel and giant Gillette sign towering above the boards" (n.pag.). The series's final episode, "Eldorado", flashes back and forth between scenes from Nucky's youth and the present. They culminate in a number of scenes that take place on the boardwalk to establish the circumstances behind Nucky's ascendancy to power and culminates in his death at the conclusion of the episode. The scene cuts between a slightly washed-out, sepia-toned undated past and a night-time exterior shot in the present, where Nucky, on the boardwalk, is confronted by his eventual killer. Two time periods are established, both made possible through the extensive use of digital special effects. The development of the boardwalk is used as a signifier of the diegetic present as we see how it has changed and developed since the flashback periods; the level of detail in which background details are depicted means it also becomes a signifier of the contemporary present of *Boardwalk*'s production as it showcases the detailed digital rendering of the landscape. As Nucky and his killer talk prior to his death the framing changes to a relatively shallow depth of field to draw attention to the action taking place, but this also works contradictorily to enhance the constructed nature of the background. The atmospheric vintageness aided by digital effects technology becomes more apparent in the shallow depth of field which makes the actor stand out from the background, drawing the attentive eye to the enhanced surroundings.

Fig. 19-23-Promotional posters for *Boardwalk*'s premiere by BLT and associates.

Fig. 24-A promotional image of season four of *Boardwalk Empire* from the HBO website featuring Chalky White (Michael K. Williams), Nucky Thompson (Steve Buscemi) and Eli Thompson (Shea Whigham).

Fig. 25-26-Images of a 1920s subway train on the New York subway system fitted out in promotion of the second season of *Boardwalk Empire.* Photographs by Scott Beale.

While the series itself created a digitally-enhanced vintage atmosphere, promotional material for the series instead appealed to a nostalgic fetishism for its period setting. Promotional posters for the premiere by agency BLT and associates (Fig. 19-23) were designed in the style of 1920s tourism posters for Atlantic City. A promotional image for season four (Fig. 24) features Chalky White, Nucky Thompson and Eli Thompson, the image rendered in a washed out sepia tone with a “deliberate archaism”, Sprengler’s term which describes “a form of pastiche that involves self-conscious simulations as well as reinterpretations of past visual styles” (140). A deliberately archaic effect weathers the image to make it appear as 1920s-style portrait photography. Similarly, promotions for the premiere of the second season involved a retrofitted 1920s-era subway train (Fig. 25-26) which was

run on the New York subway system on Saturdays for a month. The subway train promotion has no clear connection to the series; public transportation does not feature prominently in the series. Instead, the subway train transports participants to the past through antiquated transport technology. While these promotional materials are not contingent upon a digitised nostalgic aesthetic, they create a spectacle centred on a fantasy of the past that spectators are invited to participate in through the consumption of the series and its adjacent promotional material. These promotional materials can be read in line of a postmodern critique which would assert that they are commodifications of the past which reduce history to an empty signifier. This line of argument can be found in the novel spectacle of the subway train which has little relevance to the actual series and in the season four promotional image (Fig. 24) where the image has been digitally altered to create an effect of an aged portrait. This attempt to create imperfections to age the image, ironically achieved through a deliberate digital rendering, is perhaps the epitome of a capitalisation of the past where a 'vintage' filter is imbued onto the surface of the image. While these promotional materials however are indeed advertisements and as such in the service of a capitalistic agenda (to promote the program and ultimately, albeit simplistically increase HBO's revenue), they also point to *Boardwalk*'s approach to its setting. The focus on spectacle, playfulness and the grandness of scale creates a story world not bound to the limitations of historical specificity, rather using historical events, styles and apparatuses to create a pastiche of historicity filtered through a contemporary lens. While for Frederic Jameson in *Postmodernism* this signals the very depthlessness of representation, it is actually the selective use of history and periodicity as a palimpsest that makes *Boardwalk* an interesting text to examine. Rather than signalling the death of history, *Boardwalk*'s approach to its historical subject presents a site to study nostalgic masculinity, as it is through the fantastical stylisation of the past that the male nostalgic, Nucky Thompson, appears as out of place in his surrounding. His solemnity within a world of visual and consumptive excess marks Nucky as being not in sync with his surroundings, out of place, not at home. Nostalgia, as a yearning for home, is thus an adaptive response. Nucky attempts to fashion the world around him into congruence through violence, intimidation and business deals, the toolbox of masculine authority, yet ultimately dies alone on the boardwalk, a space no longer under his control. Instead of temporally relocating to the past, as is the desire of the nostalgic, the past which haunts him throughout the series catches up to him and results in his death.

From his position in the penthouse of the Ritz, Nucky masks his sense of loss through generosity, funding numerous parties and social events and ensuring that these events are constantly lubricated by the flow of illegal alcohol. *Boardwalk* focuses on a period of paradisiac prosperity, where despite the limitations of Prohibition most of the series is defined by an expanding economy and rampant consumption. Within this setting of alluring grandeur and pleasure Nucky exists as an absence, a character of empty affect for whom consumption and commodities stand as substitute for happiness. In a series built upon the formations of the modern US mafia and gangster masculinity and set within in a period of modernity that functions on the wonderment of the new and the denial of the traumas of the recent past of World War I, Nucky hides behind the surface sheen of alluring spectacle to mask his sense of nostalgic longing.

At the same time as the narrative unfolds, exploring Nucky's complicated relationship with the past, the imagined spectator experiences and engages with the series's construction of its 1920s narrative universe. *Boardwalk* emphasises the grandness of its storyworld, creating a decadent and immersive visual scape, a haptic and captivating vision of 1920s Atlantic City. The representation of 1920s Atlantic City is both rendered in temporal specificity and focused on the pleasures of style, a hyperreality that is purposely exaggerated whilst simultaneously fascinated with fastidious accuracy. Nostalgia is therefore both intertwined into characterisation and a mode of spectatorship, as spectators see Nucky undergoing his own nostalgic longings as the series itself produces complex relationships with the historical past through its *mise en scène*. *Boardwalk* evokes nostalgic form beyond just being set in 'the past'. The particularity of its setting in Atlantic City and its focus on a 1920s of decadence, fantasy and desire further encourage nostalgic spectatorship. This focus on the fantasy elements of the boardwalk, articulated through the amusements of the boardwalk, decadent party scenes at Babette's Supper Club, the opulence of Nucky's suite at the Ritz and the Commodore's lavish house, draw attention to the pleasures of visual style. The usage of vaudeville address from old Hollywood furthers this focus on spectacle, enhancing the affective qualities of nostalgia as devices of sensorial attraction and engagement. The credit sequence focuses on tropes of period authenticity – close up shots of costuming, props and location anchor the series in a period past, yet the use of modern rock music in the sequence creates a clash between the old and new, what Jerome De

Groot refers to as a "subtle anachronism" that structures the spectator's experiences of the series as that which turns to the past through a filter of the modern ("Afterword" 291).

Conversely, the series simultaneously uses cinematographic devices such as favouring natural lighting so as to enhance a sense of realism for a period before the widespread availability of electricity in homes. Deep focus cinematography and the sparse usage of close up shots bolsters a sense of reality by filling the frame with scenes of everyday life but given that *Boardwalk* is largely preoccupied with the political and societal elite, this frequently works to emphasise the luxuriousness of surroundings. Similarly, *Boardwalk* often uses period-appropriate music in order to enhance its claim to verisimilitude, yet the opening title sequence features the contemporary rock band The Brian Jonestown Massacre, highlighting *Boardwalk*'s tension between period reconstruction and the creation of a fantasy past.

De Groot, writing on the British historical period drama *Downton Abbey* (ITV, 2010-2015) states, "the way of knowing through the excessive representation that is on-screen presents a pastness dependent on materiality" (*Remaking* 157). The decadence and intricacies of visual artefacts on series such as *Downton* and *Boardwalk* self-consciously draw attention to their period settings as relics of a bygone era. For example, in *Boardwalk*'s second episode, "The Ivory Tower", Jimmy Darmody surprises his wife Angela with a vacuum cleaner, a gift that was difficult to obtain and represents a form of material luxury that the young couple have previously not been able to afford. The new technological device startles their young son Tommy, who, frightened by the sound of the vacuum cleaner, bursts into tears. While this scene has narrative function in showcasing the sudden wealth Jimmy has obtained through crime, it also draws attention to the newness of the vacuum cleaner, a common apparatus of contemporary everyday life, as a relic of a bygone era. The naivety of the characters in the way in which a mundane apparatus such as a vacuum cleaner is used as a status symbol establishes a framework to understand the series's time-setting, reliant upon the privileging of contemporary perspectives. De Groot labels this kind of appeal to the awareness of the privileges of the contemporary spectator the "historical gaze", one that comforts the spectators as they access the grim realities of the past from the safety of the present (*Remaking* 174). It is through this process of the historical gaze that the past becomes safe, something "to desire and enjoy", as it creates an awareness that the text is

there to be looked at, the pleasures of this sort of historicisation part of the appeal of the series from the outset (*Remaking* 174).

The injection of the fantastic and sensorial into the period drama is an important part of *Boardwalk*'s nostalgic function. The carefully constructed and considered sets, costumes, architecture and props allows for a nostalgic investment in the series, to take delight in a period removed from one's own. The fantasy elements, the heightened sense of spectacle and the way that contemporary cultural concerns are discussed through a historicised lens prompts reflection on the nature of nostalgic reverie for the past. Thus nostalgia in *Boardwalk* is not a simple desire to go back to the 1920s to enjoy the costuming and lavish parties but rather a meditation on the relationship between past and present, a means by which to consider the process of reconstructing the past. The importance of this is bifold: firstly, it recuperates the assumed dehistoricising and conservative nature of visual nostalgia by generating multiple layers of meaning. Secondly, following on from this, placing the male nostalgic in such an atmosphere heightens the impossibility of his longing. A current-day male nostalgic longing for a prefeminist past is understandable as a reactionary mechanism but a period piece set within a time in which men had greater structural power and control over women's lives (although patriarchy is by no means irrelevant in the present), in which male nostalgia still longs for a past as a means of either trying to acquire power or dealing with the power that he has becomes harder to justify. As such, *Boardwalk*'s fantastical 1920s helps illuminate the nature of nostalgic longing for the male nostalgic as something more related to the nature of masculinity in itself (always prompting anxiety and feelings of loss) than strictly related to a contextual sociohistorical event.

While *Boardwalk* creates a nostalgic mood in its use of period setting and historical objects, it also relies on genre memories and myths that add a further level of extraction—a story set in the birth of the modern mafia that is reliant on its audience's familiarity with gangster stories that take place subsequent to *Boardwalk*'s historical setting. *Boardwalk* has gone to great extents to link itself to a lineage of gangster films through its heavily publicised use of filmmaker Martin Scorsese as an executive producer and director of the pilot episode. Showrunner Terrence Winter, executive producer and regular episode director Tim Van Patten and lead actor Steve Buscemi are all also known for their previous work on *The Sopranos*. *Boardwalk* authenticates itself as both a period drama and as an HBO 'Quality'

production through evoking nostalgia for past cinematic representations and forms, weaving this into its serial memory.

Facilitated by HD technologies that draw emphasis to the quality of the visual image, McCabe argues that the series allows spectators to "look again with fresh eyes at the gangster genre and the role of its iconography in the formation of history, myth and cultural identity" (192). *Boardwalk* draws upon an assumed knowledge of and nostalgia for, cinematic gangster narratives, particularly with the pilot episode directed by Scorsese. These associations work to authenticate *Boardwalk* as 'cinematic' television, by connecting the series to the largely cinematic history of the gangster genre, in the process elevating the series to a work of televisual artistry. It also produces an engagement with the legacy of the genre, engaging with cinematic and popular cultural history of gangster narratives. McCabe writes that stylistic features evident in the pilot such as iris-in/out shots, jump cuts, dissolves, parallel editing and a period soundtrack both work to render it as the work of a cinematic auteur and is also a means of engaging with the historical past, using old popular cultural forms and technologies and reworking them in a process of remediation for the televisual screen (192-193).

Boardwalk Empire's setting in the midst of a time of first wave feminist movements acts as a constant reminder of women's subordination. Despite being set primarily within an upper-middle class echelon, class privilege does not inculcate women from sexism, as seen in the various struggles Margaret faces trying to open a women's health clinic despite her vast wealth and political influence as Nucky's wife. The recurrent subplot of the women's suffrage movement thus challenges the possibility of finding solace in *Boardwalk Empire'*s past. The ability to take pleasure in the representation of the 1920s flapper and the series's lavish costuming and parties is challenged by the constant interjection of sexism that aims to confront contemporary spectators, challenging the glamour and fun of the pre-feminist past. *Boardwalk'*s exploration of gender dynamics in a pre-feminist past has obvious correlations with *Mad Men'*s setting on the cusp of second-wave feminism. In a similar manner to *Mad Men, Boardwalk* makes the fight for women's rights an ongoing subplot of the series and similarly it uses the realities of sexism to complicate a straightforward fetishism of the styles of the past. That these two series are set in historical periods that have direct historical importance for the timeline of feminism in the United States is not coincidental. Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters argue that twenty-first century popular culture has repeatedly

looked to the past, exploring historical periods that slightly predate important ruptures in patriarchal gender dynamics (28). Although focusing on periods of transition and redefinition of gender norms may appear promising, it can also reinforce the validity of patriarchy and of hegemonic masculinity; challenges to male dominance articulated on-screen alleviate similar concerns in the present. Not only are these narratives set in eras where male hegemony has been questioned and redefined but both *Boardwalk* and *Mad Men* have received criticism for luxuriating in period detail to the extent that the structural inequalities faced by women may appear as appealing. It is however not so straightforward as to say that by situating these series in important periods for feminist politics within the United States and focusing on the appeal of visual style necessarily equates to a regressive nostalgia for a retro-sexist past. While Munford and Waters argue that postfeminist culture is characterised by a combination of "aesthetic nostalgia and political amnesia", in the case of *Boardwalk Empire* and *Mad Men* we see series that use aesthetic nostalgia in order to highlight the processes of collective memory, even if these series are ambivalent about their political stances (31).

Rather than glorifying retro-sexism, it is my contention that *Boardwalk* in fact does the opposite—that through its luxe period aesthetic and grandiose spectacality it exposes male nostalgia. This is evident in Nucky's characterisation as a character who appears alone and constantly dissatisfied and within the series' narrative that tracks his downfall. Moreover, rather than the period setting being used as a distanciation device, it brings into question the nature of hegemonic masculinity. Set in the 1920s on the cusp of first-wave feminism, a period in which masculine privilege would be assumed to be entirely safe and secure, instead we see the mechanisms that go in to ensuring this privilege and dominance. While this does not mean that patriarchal dominance or the subordination of women or non-hegemonic masculinities is any less insidious, it provides the means to contest the nostalgic reverie for the pre feminist past by showing that Nucky is nonetheless a character experiencing a sense of ontological 'crisis' in relation to his masculinity.

Conclusion

Boardwalk Empire uses its period setting to provide a dually focused exploration of nostalgia as both an aesthetic mode and a constitutive element in the masculine identity of its protagonist Nucky Thompson. Nostalgia is both a core element of how audiences interact with the series, given its setting in prohibition-era Atlantic City and as a narrative feature itself,

embedded into the series's temporal framework and characterisation of its protagonist as a man who is profoundly influenced by past traumas.

As an aesthetic mode, *Boardwalk Empire* engages with nostalgia in its creation of a dense and visually alluring 1920s storyworld. Through its attention to period-appropriate costuming, props, sets and the elaborate staging of the Atlantic City boardwalk, the series creates a richly constructed narrative universe. The series focuses on minor details such as historical objects, music and technologies, an almost obsessive emphasis on these features not directly pertinent to the construction and evolution of narrative progression but which aid in historical verisimilitude. This acute level of attention afforded to visual proponents is ironically made possible through the use of contemporary CGI technology and filmmaking processes, resulting in a series that evokes the past through contemporary techniques of re-imagining. This is furthered on a narrative level in the extent that the series, although very much centred in its historical context on the effects of the introduction of the Volstead Act on organised crime, is simultaneously also self-reflexively aware of its production context, creating a dialogue between its period setting and a contemporary consciousness that pervades the show's actions and events. *Boardwalk'*s characters are firmly rooted within the series's historical context, yet seem informed by the cultural politics of the its production, even though the characters themselves do not actually exhibit this awareness.

This contemporary consciousness is then rendered ironic when considering Nucky's own nostalgic tendencies, informed by the traumas of his past. While the series itself seems informed by contemporary politics, Nucky is haunted by his past actions, revealed over the course of the series as a sequence of events that ultimately depict his attempts to become a bearer of hegemonic power.

Creating its 1920s past as a fantasy space means that *Boardwalk* can provide a site through which to critically examine the very nature of male nostalgia, with the trope becoming more obvious as something of a fantasy creation of itself. Within the decadence and grandiosity of *Boardwalk*'s setting, Nucky's nature as a blank, somewhat empty character becomes evident as a manifestation of his personal nostalgic longing. This personal nostalgia relates to Nucky's inability to perform patriarchal masculinity, despite moving increasingly in the direction of masculinised power with increasingly frequent acts of macho aggression, intimidation and violence.

While not an explicitly nostalgic text, this actually allows *Boardwalk* to be the most acute depiction of male nostalgia. Confining nostalgia to the implicit leaves it to the realm of affect, yet it is coupled with palpable negative emotions. This relationship retains nostalgia's criticality in a 'pure' form and through that we can see that male nostalgia is related to the dictum of emotional unexpressiveness in hegemonic masculinity. Thus if male nostalgia is posited as a *failure*, as it is in *Boardwalk* given the negative consequences it entails, it shows that this failure and likewise nostalgia, are always already present features of hegemonic masculinity itself.

Ashley Donnelly writes that the gangster lifestyle in *Boardwalk* does not contain the romanticised, nostalgic idealisations common to the genre, stating that it is "ugly, brutal, treacherous and utterly devoid of any false notion of some kind of brotherhood" (102). With Nochimson stating, "Displacement [of emotionality] protects the virility of the [gangster] genre and gives the (male) viewers access to emotional situations they need not see in directly emotional terms" ("Waddaya" 4), the ability for this very displacement is ruptured in *Boardwalk,* instead revealing the gangster-protagonist as a male nostalgic, one without the support networks to simultaneously legitimise his position. As a result, what we are left with in *Boardwalk* is the ultimate revealing of the gangster protagonist as a nostalgic figure, engulfed by a sense of personal trauma and loss. There is therefore an interesting tension at play between Nucky as a character of empty affect and as redolent of a melodramatic excess, with his absence of emotion actually signifying the depth of his nostalgic engagement. *Boardwalk* takes spectators back in time to the beginning of organised crime in the United States. Yet, rather than offering security, stability, or fixity, Nucky is mournful and engulfed by feelings of loss. If *Boardwalk* is then to represent the originary moment from which other mob narratives are developments of (in terms of their settings throughout history), then the mafioso is always nostalgic for a sense of masculine permanency that never was.

Chapter Six:
The Male Nostalgic Drama, Quality and the (re)gendering of TV

So far in this thesis I have examined male nostalgia as it appears in four Quality TV dramas. My analyses have been focused on examining nostalgia in two variants—affective and formal. In this chapter I am shifting focus to consider the male nostalgic drama in relation to the discourses surrounding television. While male nostalgia is a means of depicting the failure and impossible standards within hegemonic masculinity, Quality TV has repurposed many of the meanings associated with the medium. Of particular interest here is the relationship between Quality TV and melodrama. As Newman and Levine write, US television's early cultural significance revolved around its status as a commercial mass medium experienced most commonly in domestic spaces (3). Discourses of legitimation have occurred since at least the 1970s and 80s as the fragmentation of audiences allowed for more diverse content specifically targeting highbrow tastes. These discourses have intensified since the turn of the twenty-first century in tandem with technological developments that have vastly improved image quality and freed the consumption of content from the television set (Newman and Levine 4). While quality discourses are not new to TV, the masculinisation of TV is still a relatively recent phenomenon, linked in part to patriarchal taste cultures which underscore notions of artistry and the strategic effort of television producers to challenge the representational norms associated with network broadcasting (Lotz 9). As part of this process, as Nygaard and Lagerway argue, these discourses of quality "have allowed for the soap opera structure and melodramatic tropes typical of 'women's genres' common on broadcast to be separated from feminine or feminist discourses and reimagined as narrative complexity in the service of stories about men" (108).

It is from this starting point that I centre my examination in this chapter. Herein I argue that the Quality dramas rely on a distancing from melodrama for their appeals to quality while simultaneously remaining indebted to a melodramatic form. I argue that the Quality TV dramas I discuss efface their relationship with melodrama due to its apparently feminising qualities; distancing Quality TV from femininity is vital in its attempts for cultural legitimation. Yet melodrama is pivotal to the male nostalgic dramas—not only is it a central component of these dramas despite their attempts to distance themselves from the term, but emotion, a constitutive feature of male nostalgia, is at the heart of melodrama. As a result of this, the

critical potential of male nostalgia is curtailed by an appeal to quality which simultaneously reinforces patriarchal taste cultures.

In order to demonstrate this argument I firstly provide a brief review of extant literature in order to justify my claim that television has been discursively associated with femininity, as this underpins my assertion that Quality TV is constructed to resignify the gender-discursive meanings associated with the medium. I then turn my focus to examining the Quality drama and its relationship with melodrama and seriality. The Quality drama is particularly renowned for revising the serial form, yet it achieves its quality status by distancing itself from television's staple serial, the soap opera. In this section I relate seriality to melodrama and use this to examine how the Quality dramas distance themselves from the feminising influence of melodrama. These series establish their cultural capital through a pejorative understanding of melodrama. This relationship with melodrama is important for male nostalgia. Nostalgia is a melodramatic affect concerned with a heightened emotionality of loss, longing and trauma. The potential emotional excess of nostalgic masculinity, however, is absorbed into a narrative of 'remasculinisation', affirming this nostalgia through association with hegemony, even while these series show that hegemonic masculinity is unachievable. While male nostalgia has the potential to expose the impossibility of emotionally restrictive norms of masculinity, the form in which it is depicted, Quality TV, curtails this by reaffirming that these series are not melodramatic.

Gender and Quality TV

The influence of the Quality TV dramas is not only evident in their formal and narrative inventiveness but also in their contribution to the gendered signification of the medium. Such a point is not without precedent. In 2008 Michael Kackman argued similarly, writing that for a generation of feminist television scholars interested in the medium's "low cultural value", "many of the medium's most compelling possibilities lay not in its aesthetic sophistication, but precisely in its low status" (n. pag.). Kackman goes on further to assert that recent television scholarship has tended to "re-embrac[e] the gendered hierarchies that made the medium an object of critical and popular scorn" (n. pag.). Following Kackman, in order to situate my claim that the critical potentiality of Quality TV is ruptured by its avowal of

melodrama, I will firstly provide a brief mapping of some of the extant literature concerning gender and Quality TV.

Feminist television criticism largely formed in the 1970s and 80s, with examinations of the role of television and its genres within the everyday, the home and the repetitive structure of time in both the housewife's daily routine and the television narratives aimed at her (Brunsdon and Spigel 1). Given this, it is not surprising that the soap opera was a pivotal site of feminist television criticism, both given its quotidian nature within the medium and its appeal to women (Brunsdon and Spigel 7). Joyrich elaborates on the television/melodrama/femininity relationship, writing, "television incorporates [melodrama] so as to bring the strands of passivity and domesticity associated with both melodrama and TV together in a simulated plentitude, thereby positioning all viewers as susceptible consumers" ("All" 131). As she continues, in televisual melodrama the feminine connotations traditionally attached to cinematic melodrama combine with discourses of consumerism and television spectatorship, both already feminised and are diffused onto a general audience (Joyrich "All" 131).

The discursive attribution of television and femininity and thus the desire of feminist television scholars to assert the value in television as an object of worthy study seems to stem out of two related factors. Firstly, television's association with the domestic and concomitantly its association with 'mass culture' within an 'art'/'mass culture' binary. As Andreas Huyssen influentially argues in his account of mass culture as feminised Other within modernism there has been a "persistent gendering of mass culture as feminine and inferior" (55). As Joyrich posits in *Re-Viewing Reception,* "gender affects the reception, not simply of particular programs, but of TV as a whole, defining not only viewer positioning but television's own cultural location (its popular and critical reception)" (10). She states that gender is not only a subject matter for television, it is a classificatory regime and a structuring system, but that television's address to gendered subjects is not unified or whole (*Re-Viewing* 17). Again interested in the art versus mass culture divide as key to her claims, Joyrich writes, "rather than the masculine spectator stimulated by the negativity inherent in modernist art, television creates an effeminate viewer, passive and gullible, in need of comfort and support" (*Re-Viewing* 26). Following this logic, she continues by arguing that the genre disparaged most by critics for its apparent feminising appeal and mass cultural status

is the soap opera, a genre deliberately targeting female consumers and thus making itself most visible to critique (Joyrich *Re-Viewing* 22).

While I have outlined here some of the core tenets of arguments surrounding the feminised status of television, it is crucial to point out that these foundational works were largely written in the 1980s and early 1990s. This critical discourses responds to a largely different televisual landscape in terms of institution, industry and practice than exists in the present. This is not to suggest that feminist television criticism has not produced vital work since these formative years rather that it is important to historicise these works appropriately. It is no longer necessary to justify television as an important object of scholarly critique and the object of focus of gendered critique has shifted from considering the delegitimation of television comparative to other media and art forms, to considering how gendered hierarchies of taste serve as means of legitimation within various genres.

As Lagerway et al. write, the sorts of Quality series that I survey in this thesis:

> anchor middle-class taste formations and cultural literacies, certain presumptions about art and about gender have been attached to them, including the one that particularly concerns us—the until recently relatively uncontroversial assumption that male perspectival centrality is one of the hallmarks of so-called QTV. (n. pag.)

The authors argue that the masculinised Quality association has broadened to include female-centred dramas, most noticeably since 2008 (Lagerway et al. n.pag.). Such female-centred Quality dramas include *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu 2017-), *Big Little Lies* (HBO 2017-), *Orange is the New Black* (Netlfix 2013-2019), *The Good Wife* (CBS 2009-2016) and *Veep* (HBO 2012-2019). Writing in 2016, Lagerway et al.'s article is demonstrative of how the Quality/gender relationship has not been without criticism and that the masculinity/Quality dynamic is not absolute. While I acknowledge that Quality TV does not necessitate masculinity and following Lagerway et al., the past decade has seen an expanse of female-centric Quality dramas, there is value here in considering the relationship between melodrama, Quality TV and gender, given that melodrama is central to a male nostalgic affect.

Male nostalgia and melodrama

So far in this chapter I have posited that television has historically been considered a feminised medium and contended that Quality TV has been constructed to resignify this through a complex relationship with melodrama. While being reliant upon aspects of melodramatic form and affect, the Quality dramas that I survey distance themselves from it in order to establish their prestige. This serves two functions—it both works to establish cultural capital for these series (what makes them 'quality') and for nostalgic masculinity it primes the spectator not to perceive of male nostalgia as a form of melodramatic emotionality.

In my discussion of *The Sopranos* in chapter two I argued that the series is symptomatic of how Quality TV repackages the domestic melodrama into masculinised prestige drama. The series questions and revises the mythic structures that underpin the gangster genre through the classic televisual domestic family melodrama. When considered in relation to the other programmes within the Quality TV era, however, *The Sopranos* can be used as evidence of how melodrama is simultaneously engaged with yet effaced. These series take up features of melodramatic form while at the same time distancing themselves from it in order to establish their 'prestige' positioning. This section expands upon the argument raised in chapter two however my focus here is more closely on seriality and melodrama.

In defining melodrama, Linda Williams argues against the tendency to oppose melodrama as a cinematic form to a 'classical' norm ("Mega" 526). She argues that the notion of "excess" that has traditionally defined the melodramatic form creates a false dichotomy between melodrama and 'classical' cinema which denies the pervasiveness of melodrama (Williams "Mega" 526-7). Rather, she writes, "I argue that this sensory and experiential horizon of cinema (and television) *constitutes* the mainstream: strong affect combined with moral legibility to create a felt good is what these popular moving pictures do" (Wiliams "Mega" 529, emphasis in original). In discussing the popularity of televisual serial melodramas, she continues:

> Those unending day-time melodramas, once aimed primarily at women, are now gradually dying off, but their DNA seems to have been passed on to melodramatic serial dramas, with the difference that the appeal is

> no longer primarily to women and that these stories can eventually come to an end. (Williams "Mega" 531)

As Williams articulates, these serial dramas share many of the same qualities as the traditional televisual melodrama, the soap opera without a feminised mode of address. They still share key qualities of melodrama—"emotion-laden, coincident-driven, loudly orchestrated narratives that endlessly prolong"—yet achieve this often through displacing their connections to melodrama (Williams "Mega" 553).

Television storytelling and structuring can roughly be divided into two basic forms: the episodic, where each episode generally features a stand-alone story that will be resolved within the parameters of the episode and the serial, in which stories can stretch out across multiple episodes and seasons, requiring consistent viewing to make sense of how each episode contributes to the wider overall accumulation of narrative. Radha O'Meara writes that serials are generally characterised by plots that exceed the expanse of a singular episode, with both characters and audiences remembering narrative developments. On the other hand, episodic television is typified by the opposite—stories which repeat a similar pattern in each episode and are resolved by its conclusion and, although O'Meara argues against this, stable characters whom do not seem to possess memory or refer to past events (191). One of the trademarks of the Quality TV drama is its serialisation; its ability to weave together engaging multi-strand narratives over several seasons, sustaining audience engagement through the slow unpacking of action across screen time. While the serial drama is nothing new, serialisation is a key marker of Quality TV. It is also, for Williams, a key marker of televisual melodrama. She writes of "temporal accumulation", that television has gone "frequently horizontal in its utilization of time", extending narrative flows over multiple seasons ("Mega" 531). As Newman and Levine write, since the 1980s, "long-form, novelistic storytelling" has been a central component of claims to televisual artistry and legitimacy, in part due to the proximity to mediums already established as sites of cultural capital (80). Mittell writes that contemporary serial storytelling produces "continuing story lines [that] travers[e] multiple episodes, with an ongoing diegesis that demands viewers to construct an overarching storyworld using information gathered from their full history of viewing" ("Film" 164). Similarly, Jeffrey Sconce argues that serialised television is increasingly popular due to

its ability to provide narrative worlds that "viewers gradually feel they inhabit along with the characters", the long-forming storylines over multiple seasons providing the screen time to richly develop characters, plots and relationships (111). Trisha Dunleavy cites *Hill Street Blues* as prophetic in the serialisation of what she terms 'AQD' (American quality drama), a process which involved "adapting the multiple interweaving storylines of daytime soap opera" to the features of the Quality drama (59). She argues that "complex serials" have become the most acclaimed and influential form of televisual drama and networks have invested in the form to stimulate an engaged spectatorship, to make their services more enticing for existing subscribers and to make their channels more attractive to cable system providers (100). Serialisation and world-building both enable the narrative complexity that is associated with Quality TV and are features of the industry landscape: a serialised narrative with slow-building plot-lines and a richly developed narrative universe is engaging enough to sustain spectatorial attention and unlike more episodically structured series, these series demand that spectators tune in to every episode so that they do not miss new developments to the multiple narrative threads.

Newman and Levine explore the gendered distinction of the contemporary serial in *Legitimating Television*, arguing that by the early 1990s discursive distinctions had been established to separate serialised dramas from soap operas, which legitimated the serial drama through the denigration of the feminine pleasures of the soap opera (89-90). They write that serialised dramas:

> must necessarily seek ways to manage or contain their seriality, to keep that seriality and its associations with feminized excess from overrunning the narrative. By managing or containing that feminized element, serialized dramas are able to achieve a kind of masculinized aesthetic and economic legitimacy. At the same time, they avoid being categorized with more mass appeal episodic dramas, even while they draw upon many of the same narrative techniques. (Newman and Levine 92)

The Quality dramas I survey achieve this masculinised aesthetic through their serialised complexity. Serialisation is not a prerequisite for melodrama but as Lynne Joyrich has argued, the US television serial drama is perhaps the paradigmatic melodramatic form ("All" 140). The ongoing nature of the televisual serial allows spectators to get close to the interior lives of characters—a seventy-episode series cannot sustain itself on action alone—and the long-forming nature of these storylines often lends to a melodramatic affective quality.

For example, The Carousel scene is striking in its appeal to melodrama. Time is extended both through the fairly lengthy nature of a scene with minimal overall impact and through the cyclicality of the slideshow pitch. This extended temporality of the pitch furthers the sense in which the scene is a fantasy depiction of Don's desire and longing. Don's nostalgia as a form of loss and suffering is spectacularised through the close up shots capturing the look of sadness on his face. The subsequent return to home sequence makes clear the impossibility of Don's desire, his loss amplified through the repeat structuring. Here we see quite a literal demonstration of Williams's point that a sad ending in melodrama mourns the need to locate a "space of innocence", a space of good which she argues is most often located in a distant childhood or an imagined past ("Mega" 525). The affective spectacle of the scene culminates in Harry Crane leaving the room in tears, a response potentially made contagious if the spectator is equally moved to tears by the resonance of the scene. Investment in the scene is orchestrated by these emotive qualities and enhanced through the serial narrative arc that has spent twelve episodes developing characters and context. These qualities are what makes the scene moving; the emotion of the scene is harnessed through the surface of its spectacle and made legible to the spectator through the focus on broad themes of family, nostalgia, home, childhood and the way in which Don visibly reacts towards these themes, the rare display of regret, sadness and longing shortens the distance between character and spectator, making his vulnerability all the more moving.

While this scene is briefly cited here as an example of an overtly and demonstrative melodramatic sequence, male nostalgia in itself is, as an emotionally charged sentiment, inherently melodramatic. Nostalgia, according to Boym, is "a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (xiii). This sentiment of loss and displacement is evident in Tony Soprano's therapy sessions, in The Carousel scene, in Walt's romance with his own fantasy nostalgic creation and in Nucky's expressions of longing and loss. Male nostalgia is an outpouring of emotion oriented towards the past, resulting as

a byproduct of restrictive regimes of dominant masculinities. While these characters may desire an emotionless facade, the inability to achieve this is evident through the depths of their nostalgic desire with the accumulative memories of these serial dramas providing an expanded temporality in which experiences of longing, loss and desire for a past emerge.

Male nostalgia is therefore a melodramatic excess of emotionality which bespeaks the inherent failure within hegemonic masculinity. This is supported by Amelia DeFalco's assertion, "concepts of nostalgia as pathological 'symptom' appear appropriate; nostalgia affects and *infects* the body, weakening proper intellectual response" (31, emphasis in original). Although nostalgia has moved beyond being a diagnostic term it is still ensconced within the same metaphorical discourses as a pathology, as something which invades the mind and renders it inimical to critical thinking. This is not to suggest that nostalgia does not contain critical value. Nostalgia is *perceived* as pathology; the pathological status and the perception of weakness in intellectual function are discursive effects of the process of nostalgia. Nostalgia orients its subject towards a usually imagined past and surfaces in a leakage of emotion that is desirable to conceal. This rupture into emotional affectation has obvious correlatives with melodrama's privileging of emotion, and the extremity of the emotional response, to the extent that is linked with a desiring of an imagined past, is paradigmatic of melodrama's 'excessive' approach to emotion. Joyrich writes, "melodrama…seems to disallow the achievement of a masculine ideal even as it reflects the loss of such mastery" insofar as cinematic melodramas tend to focus on the suffering of male protagonists (*Re-Viewing* 60). For the Quality dramas that I am interested in this suffering is often depicted alongside examples of male mastery, or, as with *Breaking Bad*, the element of suffering is often offset against a desire to highlight the force of masculinised power. Walt's decision to 'break bad', however, is driven by masculine anxiety, a heightened emotional state that leads to an investment in nostalgic masculinity. This heightened emotionality is thus coupled with violence and aggression as means, ironically, of trying to starve off the negative affects that have spurred the melodramatic state in the first place.

Martha Nochimson, writing on *The Sopranos,* states that the series:

> reveals the media gangster as the core of a highly emotional mode of storytelling in which the pleasures of action and violence speak not only about macho aggressiveness…. but also about vulnerabilities that the

> display disguises and about troubling cultural conditions….What is ordinarily identified as family melodrama is feminized and openly emotional, while the domestic melodrama of the gangster subgenre is muscularized, displacing emotion onto the tumult associated with violence. (“Waddaya” 2; 4)

While Nochimson is discussing the televisual gangster, the contradictory nature she espouses of the gangster as an emotional figure but whose emotion and vulnerability are displaced onto violence is similarly often found in the male nostalgic.The nostalgic expounds signifiers of masculinised power, particularly, frequent corporeal violence inflicted onto others, however these dramas simultaneously reveal the fragility of this masculinity as tenuous and in perpetual anxiety. Qualities of virility and aggression are metered as compensatory responses to male nostalgia. It is through this exteriority, however, that the depths of longing, loss and desire are made evident for the spectator.

The male nostalgic dramas rely on melodramatic tendencies for their affective appeal and sustained engagement. Seriality is a requisite component of these dramas; their construction as narratively ‘complex’ is contingent upon seriality for their stories to develop over time. The expanded temporality of the serial drama orients the spectator towards an intimate engagement, this intimacy in the case of the male nostalgic drama is mediated through the circulation of emotion between the male nostalgic and the spectator. Nostalgia is thus the conduit for an intimate engagement between spectator and series, a relationship reliant upon the expanded temporality and serial memory of the Quality TV drama.

The Quality displacement of melodrama

Tellingly, in her discussion of the revival of *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990-91; Showtime 2017) Dana Och argues that the original series, seasons one and two, are central to the construction of Quality TV as both masculine and auteurist through the discursive centrality afforded to David Lynch’s influence on the series (132). Och writes that *Twin Peaks* “Is currently used to emphasize and legitimate an imagined history to the masculine television form, even though reviewers and critics did not eschew its melodramatic mode upon initial release” (132). Implicit within Och’s argument here is that Quality must be established through a

denunciation of melodrama and in the case of *Twin Peaks,* that discourses surrounding the series have pedestalled auteurism as vital to the pedigree of the series. The association with melodrama, however, has shifted over time, from being a core lens through which the series was discussed, to absent from discourses surrounding the series (Och 132-133). Och continues by arguing that *Twin Peaks* is used to lend legitimacy, "specifically [to] masculine-associated series to establish boundaries to the quality genre", that is, that a revisionist melodrama-effacing idea of the series is cited in order to give credence to the notion that Quality TV is inherently masculine (133). This legitimation requires a correlative illegitimate 'bad' other, which Och argues is melodrama, or more specifically, an idea of melodrama which "functions as a set of assumptions that serve to demarcate boundaries of taste" (136). As Och articulates, the quality of Quality TV has been produced and maintained through the revisionist placement of *Twin Peaks* within a critical canon that sustains its status discursively through the promotion of auteurism and the absence of melodrama.

Whereas television was once where one could watch the triumphs of auteurist filmmaking, it is now equally likely to produce auteurist content. The nebulous 'showrunner' term reimagines the television creative process from being collective and largely anonymous to audiences to the unique vision of a singular creative entity, the auteur. McCabe and Akass draw on this point, writing, "the TV auteur at HBO is deemed as exceptionally gifted and, requiring protection for the artist's particular sensitivities, is positioned as operating in a magical sphere that remains untouched by mundane, commercial concerns of US television" ("HBO and the Artistocracy" n. pag.). The showrunner is a ripe strategy for differentiation and distanciation for Quality TV due to its proximity to the cinematic auteur. *Boardwalk* is the paradigmatic exemplar of this strategy. The series has its own showrunner-auteur, Terence Winter, who previously worked on *The Sopranos,* thereby legitimating *Boardwalk* through association. In the process HBO is granted esteem, seen as fostering creative expression by supporting the work of their alumni. The series also capitalises off association with Martin Scorsese, one of Hollywood's most canonical auteurs who directed the pilot episode and served as an executive producer of the series. The presence of Winter and Scorsese further the masculinist discourses of Quality TV by reinforcing notions of masculine creative genius and authority. In a similar manner to the *Twin Peaks* case cited above, the centrality of discourses of authority establish *Boardwalk* within a masculine lineage and the saturation of violence and organised crime displaces its emotional content through violence as discussed

with reference to Nochimson above. Online reviews in *Vulture*, *New York Magazine, The New York Times, The Guardian,* and *The Telegraph* all make reference to *The Sopranos* when discussing *Boardwalk;* the customary reference to HBO's prior gangster series clearly establishing *Boardwalk*'s place in the Quality canon (Collins n.pag.; Nussbaum n.pag.; Stanley n.pag.; Hughes n.pag; Chilton n.pag.). Here authorship and genre establish a legacy for *Boardwalk* to follow in, a legacy that signifies its placement within a masculine Quality framework. The trailer for the first season of *Boardwalk,* while not highlighting it as an auteur production, does work efficiently as a "entryway paratext" which "control[s] the viewer's entrance to the text" (Gray 23). Only male characters speak in the two minute trailer, perhaps apt given the gendered dynamics of the series. More tellingly though are the numerous scenes of characters holding guns, firing guns, getting punched, stabbed, threatened and hit on the head with liquor bottles, interspersed with tense shots of male-only business negotiations and liquor manufacturing. As promotional material the trailer works to frame *Boardwalk* within a masculine lens—a series about violence, gangsters and liquor, where not only do women exist on the periphery but any focus on intimate relationships and emotion is displaced by violence. Obviously *Boardwalk* is not purely action. On the contrary, the series is fairly slow paced and ruminative. While distance is established here from the ruminative, the quiet and the emotional, this not only is not accurate but contradictory to the demands of a serial drama which necessitates intimate engagement.

Boardwalk's status as Quality TV is pronounced in the trailer by it being an HBO production, by the lavish historical *mise en scène* and through the focus on men and homosocial relationships and violence. Returning to Joyrich's argument cited above, the tension between a feminising consumerist television culture and the masculinised detachment of modernism seems to directly inform the Quality drama's engagement with melodrama. Writing in the mid-nineties, Joyrich spoke of televisual action and crime dramas that "attempt to deny television's 'feminine' connotations in order to construct a masculine spectator and achieve the status of 'quality' television" (*Re-Viewing* 11). The status of quality television is assured, Joyrich argues, by creating "proper" spectator distance through mimicking cinematic conventions (so as to avoid the threat of feminisation from television), re-marking the masculinity of its thematics and producing texts that function under the name of an auteur (*Re-Viewing* 79). From these traits we can see obvious correlates with discourses surrounding Quality TV. *Boardwalk*, for example, mimics cinematic conventions

through its luxurious *mise en scène* and fastidious use of historical objects and props, it remarks the masculinity of its thematics by giving violent action centrality and functions through the authorship of both Winter and Scorsese as well as by proximity to *The Sopranos.*

In her work on HBO's series *The Wire,* Linda Williams writes:

> I am even willing to speculate that part of the reason for the masculine dominance of so many contemporary serials from *The Sopranos,* through *The Wire, Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men* is the desire to disassociate such work from the taint of the feminine family melodrama and their earlier soap-opera origins. (*On* 47)

This fear of the 'taint' of femininity is evident in the distancing from melodrama and is a central fear for the male nostalgic. The threat of the feminising impact of emotion is what precipitates the nostalgia, even though the qualities that mark this nostalgia, trauma, longing, loss, are endowed with melodramatic affect. Gendered emotions are thus at the central of the male nostalgic drama while simultaneously, this fear of the contagion and contamination of emotion is what drives the Quality drama to disassociate from melodrama. Amelia DeFalco writes, "emotionality is central to estimations of cultural worth, with 'serious' (read thoughtful, intellectual) opposed to 'emotionally charged' (read sentimental, popularist) furthering the Cartesian division of mind and body" (31). This emotion/intellect binary is central to the logic of male nostalgia and such divisions also underpin why the Quality TV dramas must repudiate melodrama, for fear of the low cultural value associated with cultural goods with explicit appeals to emotion.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have highlighted different attributes of the Quality drama to argue that both male nostalgia and the series which depict this are caught up in contradictory relationships to emotion and melodrama. Both are reliant on emotion yet try to maintain distance from it in order to assume the exteriority of masculine detachment and the concordant cultural legitimation associated with masculinity. While the male nostalgic dramas are a subgenre of Quality TV, they have been constitutive in defining Quality TV even if one

can have Quality TV without a focus on male nostalgia. This is partially due to the influence of *The Sopranos* in shaping the themes, characterisations and formal attributes that have come to stand as Quality. Moreover, Quality TV cannot escape implicit value judgements, it is intentionally aspirational in its attempts to shift the cultural hierarchy locating television as a commercialised mass medium with little artistic integrity. Given that those in the position to define taste have long been white men, it stands as no surprise that discourses of quality and 'high' art often come bound in masculinist terms. While the male nostalgia series offer glimpses of fragmentation of the masculine subject, whereby nostalgia can be used a means for examining the ruptures and internal discord within masculinities, as television series these series do the opposite, they perpetuate gendered hierarchies of taste by distancing themselves from the feminine and in the process resituating television as a medium of 'prestige'.

The relationship between the Quality dramas and melodrama is marked by a repudiation of the form despite an obvious engagement with elements of it. The Quality TV texts I examine in this thesis all owe debt to melodrama. They denunciate the gendered aspects of melodrama, however, with their focus on masculinised violence, even if this violence is a response to the tumult of emotionality which is prompted by male nostalgia. Michael Szalay is worth quoting here at length as he provides a succinct summary of the politics of Quality Television in his article which considers HBO's programming in relation to its industrial context:

> The network's hallmark "quality" tends to admix male pornographic fantasy with appropriately serious social themes. But as television critics have not failed to note, that "quality" springs from overarching narrative trajectories popularized by daytime soaps…HBO insisted that its offerings were not television at all, but film and that insistence went hand-in-hand with its ambition to transform the home into a box office. Men would be agents of that transformation: the macho leads who headlined shows like *Oz, The Sopranos, The Wire and Deadwood* would take serial television and the domestic sphere back from the women who had one defined it. (821-822)

As Szalay alludes to, Quality Television is inherently gendered in a number of ways. By aspiring to be "not TV", to be art and more specifically, to be considered akin to art cinema (a form dominated by the prominence of the male auteur), it not only distances itself from (non-quality) television but repurposes it. The domestic and feminised history of the medium gets eschewed, replaced by programming espousing its commitment to aesthetic integrity and serious social commentary, all the time repackaging the genres and forms of the very sorts of programming now being derided as non-quality. The renunciation of the feminised soap through its repurposing of seriality as a signifier of masculinised Quality TV, in tandem with heavily masculinised content, both reinforces that Quality TV is masculine TV and moreover, provides a masculine frame through which spectators access these series. Within this framework of masculinity, the potentially excessive emotionality of nostalgic masculinity (ironically premised around a desire for a *lack* of emotionality) is instead legitimated and nullified. This results in any of the excesses of nostalgia made oblique.

This use of masculinisation as legitimation as a discursive strategy for demarcating quality came at a time (early 2000s-mid 2010s) where television was undergoing a period of redefinition in terms of the untethering of content from the television set and with the emerging threat of online streaming services developing into the 2010s. While HBO's "It's Not TV' slogan was a means of differentiating itself as a Quality TV product, at the same time, the programs that I have analysed, all products of cable television, have had need to situate themselves as television in opposition to the ontological crisis prompted by the emergence of internet-based streaming services. As this chapter has demonstrated, this has been achieved through contradictory means. On the one hand, the trope of nostalgic masculinity has mirrored the redefinition of television insofar as both have experienced crises in their identity. The male nostalgic simultaneously demonstrates a defensive strategy against redefinition while on a more implicit level the trope acknowledges the failings of idealised masculinities and thus by consequence the need for redefinition. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, the dramas that I have analysed rely on distancing themselves from melodrama even while remaining indebted to it. Thus they exhibit a similiar paradoxical tension between distancing themselves from television to enunciate their prestige while simultaneously maintaining a closeness to classic televisual form in order to demonstrate the ongoing relevance of television against threats to its status in a digital era.

Conclusion

This thesis sought to analyse male nostalgia in four Quality Television dramas produced in the United States between 1999 and 2015: *The Sopranos, Mad Men, Breaking Bad* and *Boardwalk Empire.* This research sought to answer two main questions: a) how is the male nostalgic trope depicted and b) how is nostalgia used in relation to hegemonic masculinities.

My findings in this thesis indicate that the male nostalgic trope has been prevalent within the genre discursively labelled as Quality Television since the turn of the century and, due to popular and critical acclaim, has spread across the US televisual landscape from its original association with pay cable network HBO (Home Box Office). Given that these series have had large audience figures and have contributed to what popular critics have heralded as a 'new golden age' of television drama, this thesis makes a timely contribution to the field of television studies. Although studying televisual representations of masculinities is an emerging research area, likely due to the success of these series, the majority of pre-existing literature focuses on one individual series, rather than examining linkages between series.

Through the analysis of the four series discussed throughout, I have identified male nostalgia as a core component of each series. Male nostalgia is such not just because it is a man who is nostalgic, but because this nostalgia is inherently gendered. It is in particular linked to what Connell terms 'hegemonic masculinity', the "currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (*Masculinities* 77). I found that there were two main forms of male nostalgia. The first form is explicit: nostalgia is a clear and overt theme of the series and component of characterisation. This was evident in *The Sopranos* (chapter two) and *Mad Men* (chapter three). The second modality that I have identified is more oblique. Found in *Breaking Bad* (chapter four) and *Boardwalk Empire* (chapter five), these series evoke nostalgia but it is not a constitutive theme of the series. Regardless of whether male nostalgia is implicit or explicit, my analysis has indicated that male nostalgia emerges in these dramas as a response to culturally normative ideals of masculinities. Male nostalgia is inherently linked to hegemonic masculinity—it emerges as a means of coping with the failure that comes as a byproduct of trying to live up to the impossible nature of masculine hegemony.

I have argued throughout this thesis that male nostalgia is linked to emotionality. It emerges as an affective form which exposes the inability of these protagonists to live up to

the emotional inexpression which is a constitutive feature of hegemonic masculinity. While I recognise that all men are obviously emotional, the expression of emotion is linked to culturally constituted behavioural norms of gender. To be emotional is to be seen within this line of logic as non-rational, excessive, feminine. Thus I have argued that regardless of the diegetic circumstances in which this nostalgia occurs, a critical reading into what this nostalgia *does* demonstrates that it serves as a rupture to normative standards of white masculinities. It destabilises the male protagonists of these series, who all end their series either dead (*Boardwalk; Breaking Bad*) or in states of uncertainty about their future (*The Sopranos; Mad Men*). This thesis follows in line with recent scholarship that has sought to recuperate nostalgia from being solely regressive. Even while diegetically Tony's nostalgia in *The Sopranos* is indeed conservative, a desire for a prefeminist past, an analysis of this nostalgia reveals that this desire to escape the present is based on his inability to be the 'strong silent type' that is demanded of him and as such he invests in an illusionary past.

The destabilising effect of male nostalgia, however does not equate to a wholesale collapse of hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, its effects may be minimal. In *Mad Men* the troubling effects of Don's nostalgia are always curtailed and absorbed back in to the dominant. In *Breaking Bad* male nostalgia is mobilised under a rhetoric of 'masculinity in crisis' to serve as a conservative and dangerous means of recuperating masculine power by turning to idealised notions of masculinity.

Furthermore, as my analysis in chapter six demonstrated, Quality TV is steeped in masculinist discourses in which the 'quality' or 'prestige' nature of these series is affirmed through repudiation of the feminine. In particular, the attribution of 'quality' here is achieved through a distancing from melodrama. This is redolent of patriarchal taste cultures and the history of melodrama being assigned as a pejorative term. More pertinently for a study of male nostalgia, the elision of melodrama, despite these series all engaging with aspects of the melodramatic form, distances the spectator from viewing affective nostalgia as emotional. The disruptive potential of male nostalgia thus becomes nullified. As such there is a central paradox at play within these dramas. While they appear to offer examples of hegemonic masculinity becoming undone, that this is the dominant means by which to assert televisual quality, particularly through the distancing from melodrama, in actuality the opposite occurs; hegemony is shored up through the process of watching masculinity become undone.

Alongside studying the affective dimension of male nostalgia, my analyses of these series also considered what I termed 'nostalgic form'. Given that Quality TV is equally renowned for its stylistic and aesthetic features, I was interested in how nostalgia was imbedded into the non-narrative components of these series. My thesis therefore furthers discussion of screen nostalgia by considering its two dimensions: as both a personal subjective experience and as a stylistic feature of media texts. I found that nostalgic form helped to deconstruct male nostalgia, making it more visible and exposing the yearnings for the past as illusionary in line with Boym's formation of 'reflexive nostalgia'. In the case of *Breaking Bad*, which as I posited above, evokes male nostalgia as means of justifying a recuperative logic of 'remasculinisation', nostalgic form helps to affirm the Western as a site of glorification. My analysis of two period dramas *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* has challenged the predominant lens of media studies of nostalgia, which view it as dehistoricising by incorporating a discussion of the affective dimensionality of nostalgia in these texts. This has shown that period aesthetics in the Quality TV era are indeed alluring and a part of the attraction of these series but the luxuriousness of their visual style can in itself form a critique of the dangers of nostalgic longing.

My findings indicate that within the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century television sought to legitimise itself in a new way through engagement with the male nostalgic trope. By taking on a form described as 'cinematic' for its narrative complexity, detailed and lush *mise en scène*, virtuosic cinematography and complex intertextuality, this iteration of Quality Television has created a very distinctively televisual form, while simultaneously trying to eschew its relationship to the medium and its programming legacies. This has been achieved not strictly because of, but certainly conterminous to, engagement with the male nostalgic trope. Masculinity has provided legitimacy to these programs, warding off any threat of the contaminating effect of femininity that may remind spectators that what they are watching is television after all. While Quality Television is ensconced in liberal social themes as part of its commitment to its status of serious artistry, in this thesis I have found that the male nostalgic trope offers the promise of a critique of hegemonic masculinities but ultimately reinforces hegemony.

Given the constant release of new programming, it is impossible for this thesis to provide an all-encompassing account of male nostalgia. Particularly given my choice of close analysis, I was unable to take into consideration or survey other series that may either

conform to, or challenge the trope, such as *Deadwood* (HBO 2004-2006), *House of Cards* (Netflix 2013-2018), *True Detective* (HBO 2014-) and *The Shield* (FX 2002-2008). While I have justified the inclusion of the series I have studied in this thesis in my introduction, nonetheless there are countless other examples apart from the four series listed above that could have formed the focus of this thesis.

At the time I commenced this project at the beginning of 2013, streaming services such as Netflix and Amazon were not yet producing their own original programming and were not even accessible to me in Australia. The programs that I chose to analyse were all broadcast on US cable networks (although accessed by me in Australia). As this area has advanced substantially during this time through the advent of streaming video on demand (SVOD) services, there has been an increase in original dramatic programming with these streaming services also producing their own content and an increasing shift towards access content on portable devices. In this project I have not considered how the advent of streaming services effects the discourses around Quality TV, nor have I looked at whether drama series produced for SVOD services engage with male nostalgia. There is therefore a usefulness in considering the relationship between streaming services and Quality Television. While my research did not consider the effects of such representations on spectators, nonetheless mode of access is important to consider. As Szalay pertinently states, "even as phone and tablet screens shrink the television interface, their portability radically enhances the implicitly male viewer's separation not simply form the family, but from any particular viewing location at all" (817).

As I outlined in the introduction, these male nostalgic dramas are a small part of larger Quality TV landscape that has become increasingly diversified since the release of *The Sopranos* in 1999. The rise of Netflix as a content creator since the production of *House of Cards* in 2013 has been followed by a number of online streaming-on-demand media providers producing original drama series such as Apple TV+, Facebook Watch, HBO Max, Hulu and YouTube Premium. As Mareike Jenner states in her monograph *Netflix and the Re-Invention of Television,* the narrative structures and aesthetics of Netflix's original programming do not differ significantly from the Quality TV texts of the cable era, that which I have surveyed in this thesis, and Netflix draws on similiar strategies of legitimation to that which I have outlined (139). Chuck Tryon argues that Netflix has sought to build discourses that posit streaming services as the "solution" to the limitations of older forms of television,

with promotional strategies such as the slogan “TV Got Better” used to differentiate itself from its competition in a manner of legitimation echoing HBO’s “It’s Not TV” campaign, even while Netflix’s rhetorical strategy positions itself as the “better” replacement to cable TV (n.pag.). While the definition of Quality TV remains relatively stable, still derived from a construction while places it in opposition to the ‘non-quality’, as Jenner states further, Netflix’s emphasis on building a transnational, widely-popular and all-emcompassing brand means that original Quality programming such as *House of Cards, Orange is the New Black, The Crown* (2016-), *Mindhunter* (2017-), *Ozark* (2017-) and *Narcos* (2015-17) sit alongside content with less highbrow aspirations such as sitcom series *Fuller House* (2016-) and *One Day at a Time* (2017-20), teen dramas *13 Reasons Why* (2017-20), *Riverdale* (2017-) and the British series *Sex Education* (2019-) and reality TV such as the reboot of *Queer Eye* (2018-) and *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* (2019) (140). While Quality TV has always shared a televisual landscape with these other forms of programming, on Netflix they may potentially exist alongside each other on the user’s recommended lists based on the algorithmic logic that pushes content to users based on previous viewing. While this does not necessarily undermine the defintion of Quality TV, as I’ve noted above Netflix’s original dramatic programming largely coheres to the same structures and aesthetics as the HBO-Quality era, it does make the instability of Quality TV as a category more apparent. For example, *The Crown* and *Riverdale* may be presented side by side in an identical fashion, thus placing emphasis on the discursive and extra-textual marketing functions that ascribe programs as being Quality TV category to ensure this differentiation is maintained.

Netflix’s interactive library of content places contemporarily-produced content alongside older series the service has acquired, producing a function that Giulia Taurino describes as “nostalgia-by-indexing” in that the algorithmic-driven textual classification systems that Netflix relies on to both sort content and offer suggestions to users organises texts in a manner that prompts a nostalgic spectatorship (11). For example, texts may be categorised in a periodising manner (by decade of production) or era of setting (Ibid.). Taurino also identifies two other modalities of nostalgia in Netflix’s archival and production strategies, “nostalgia-by-proxy”, to describe programming such as *Stranger Things* that conjures emotive nostalgia for particular era(s) that may be outside of the lived experience of target audiences and “nostalgia-by-serialization” which encompasses reboots, remakes, sequels, prequels and spin-offs such as the *Gilmore Girls* reboot and *Breaking Bad* filmic

epilogue that I briefly discussed in the introduction (12). Mayka Castellano and Melina Meimaridis argue that Netflix "weaponizes" nostalgia, seeking to resurrect fandoms and desires through their strategy of reboots (169). When combined, these strategies, particularly that of rebooting already-successful programming, offer low financial risk to Netflix as these programs have already-established audiences and fanbases. These strategies are also to some extent reliant on Netflix's model of releasing entire seasons of episodes simultaneously, the binge viewing model mimicking a sense of liveness through the anticipation of a release and the collective experience of consumption which typically occurs around series on social media. Tryon argues that Netflix, often positioned as unable to sustain viewing communities based on shared experiences through their on-demand functions can instead be seen to be revitalising a shared sense of collectivity through combating the fragmentation of cable-era viewing with the instantaneity of its binge model (n.pag). This in itself is another nostalgic dimension, with Netflix constructing itself in opposition to the alienation offered by the proliferation of choice of the cable-era even while simultaneously prioritising control and choice as key rhetorical markers of its differentiation. This tapestry of nostalgic strategies have the potential to activate both personal and shared cultural memories for the spectator. They point to the complex web of nostalgia that I have drawn upon in the case study chapters, whereby nostalgia can exist for times outside of the lived experience of the individual and dwells in memories of and comprised by stylised media texts as cultural artefacts.

While original programming on Netflix, used here as the forerunner amongst the forray of streaming services producing content, builds nostalgia into its logics of distribution through the mechanisms noted above, this does not follow through with a correlative usage of nostalgic masculinity as a means of enunciating the prestige of its programming. While this is an area with considerable scope for future research, as Jenner points out, the transnational expansion of Netflix from 2015 onwards has seen a re-definition of its brand from a focus on Quality programming to emphasising diversity (171). While this diversity can be characterised in terms of the multitude of forms and genres of original content that Netflix produces, it can similarily be noted in terms of the casts and narratives of its original dramatic productions. Most notably, *Orange is the New Black* (2013-19), one of Netflix's earlier examples of original dramatic production, featured a largely-female ensemble cast and emphasised racial and ethnic diversity and queerness as central elements not only of

characterisation but integral to the narrative itself. As such Netflix simulatenously works within already-established aesthetic and structural definitions of Quality TV while marking its difference by its distance from the nostalgic masculinity dramas of the 2000s-mid 2010s. This in turn offers more space to revise the standardised history of what series are memorialised in the Quality TV canon to place emphasis on series such as *Six Feet Under* (HBO 2001-05), *Sex and the City*, the US version of *Queer as Folk* (Showtime 2000-05), *Nip/Tuck* (FX 2003-10), *Weeds* (Showtime 2005-12) and *Nurse Jackie* (Showtime 2009-15).

While my research has studied four dramas produced within the period of 1999-2015 in which male nostalgia was a dominant means of articulating 'quality', there has been a shift towards ensemble series in recent years that do not focus so singularly on one protagonist. HBO's successful fantasy-Quality series *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) and *Westworld* (2016-) and the critically acclaimed drama series *Succession* (2018-) are still predominantly masculine-focused but feature an ensemble main cast rather than a sole protagonist. There has also been a number of recent series that have been discussed with the discursive framework of Quality TV that feature female protagonists, are created by female showruners and have explicitly 'feminist' themes, such as *Girls* (HBO 2012-2017), *Orange is the New Black*, *Insecure* (HBO 2016-), *Big Little Lies* (HBO 2017-) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu 2017-).[29] While male nostalgia was a means of articulating quality, further study is needed to examine gender within the current Quality TV landscape. Particularly, studies of femininities within the current constitution of Quality TV, while certainly already in existence, can continue to provide valuable work in this area.

[29] *The Handmaid's Tale* was created by Bruce Miller and thus does not satisfy my criteria of having a female showrunner, however I have included it here as it is an adaptation of Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel and quite explicitly engages with 'feminist' themes. Similarly *Big Little Lies* was created by David E. Kelley, but based off Lianne Moriatry's novel of the same name.

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