Breaking Bad During a Time of Global Memento Mori

By Guido Mina di Sospiro (June 2020)

Pygmalion, Walter Kuhlman, 1966

"How many funerals pass our houses? Yet we do not think of death. How many untimely deaths?" Thus wrote Seneca two thousand years ago. Well before him, Plato, discussing Socrates's death in *Phaedo*, stated that "the true philosophers are always occupied in the practice of dying."

Death has been at the core of western philosophy, and of all religions and mythologies. We are all burdened with the *memento mori*, but most of us tend or try to forget it, until we are faced, directly or indirectly, with the inevitability of death. During a time of pandemic, the *memento mori*, having assumed the form of a virus, becomes acute, as we are all anxious about our wellbeing and that of our loved ones. Since the pandemic has also come with a lockdown, we have found ourselves with a lot of time on our hands. In addition to reading, writing, listening to music and cooking unusual recipes, I have been binging on a few TV series. *Breaking Bad*, which has won more awards than any other production ever, and which has been immensely popular, seemed like a good starting point. I can now argue that it can be viewed as a representation of western culture at the dawn of the 21st century.

Various are the themes in it that I find emblematic. The *memento mori* suddenly becomes very pressing in the mind of Walt, the high school chemistry teacher, as he is diagnosed with stage 3, inoperable lung cancer. About a hundred years before, Thomas Mann treated the problem of illness and impending death in *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*) in philosophical and metaphysical fashion, with each main character in the sanatorium impersonating a different philosophical strain. Early on in the 21st century, Vince Gilligan and the other creators of *Breaking Bad* handle the same theme of illness and impeding death with the resolve, on the side of Walt, of becoming a maker of methamphetamine.

American pragmatism—as the impecunious Walt intends to leave behind funds for his wife and two children—in lieu of ontological and eschatological reflections. To a lifelong student of comparative religion, mythology and philosophy,

such a choice seems astonishing. But then, is it fair to compare Thomas Mann to Vince Gillian and his associates? The milieu of post WWI Europe to that of the US in the early 21st century? Is it even fair to compare a literary *magnum opus* of immense breadth to a TV series? Judging from what critics have written about the latter, I suppose it is, as they took *Breaking Bad* very seriously. Presumably also because there are elements in it of what nowadays is understood as "literary fiction" (my views on this subject are delineated in the essay *The Decline and Fall of "Literary Fiction"*). The time dedicated to the methamphetamine motif—its production and distribution and all the unsavory yet colorful characters that such activities entail—is more or less equal to the time devoted to the dynamics of Walt's family: his wife, two children, brother-in-law and sister-in-law. And such dynamics are developed in the style of what nowadays passes for literary fiction: plenty of angst and complications that aspire to the universality of Shakespeare or Cervantes, but rest on very inadequate shoulders. Walt and Hank, his brother-in-law, are no Hamlet or Don Quixote. Ordinary people cannot deal with philosophical problems simply because, well, they are unaware that philosophy exists, as the vast majority of Americans.

But then, isn't philosophy intended just for an elite? Calderón de la Barca's play *La vida es sueño* (*Life is a dream*), was extremely popular when it premiered in 1635 and has remained in the theater repertoire ever since as a timeless classic. Its main motifs are distinctly philosophical: the religious theme prevalent in people's life at the time, which was free will versus predestination; and the concept of life as a dream, which can be found in Hinduism, Buddhism, Heraclitus, Plato and, closer to de la Barca's times, in Descartes's unsettling dream argument, i.e., if in the dream the world seems real to us and we realize that

it is unreal only when we wake up, how can we be sure that when we are awake we are really awake? Too high-flung for the ordinary spectator? Judging from the play's success, Spain's Golden Age must have produced some sophisticated audiences.

Back to Albuquerque and narco undertakings. *Breaking Bad* is larded with improbabilities from the beginning: Walt, as a young man, was a genius, but then turned out to be an underachiever for reasons that are not explained satisfyingly, or in fact at all; his brother-in-law is, conveniently for the plot's suspense, a DEA agent; Walter, Jr.—Walt's and his wife Skyler's teenage son—has cerebral palsy; Skyler gets pregnant in her forties, and although it is an unplanned pregnancy and both she and Walt are thoroughly irreligious, she does not get an abortion.

I confess to having been fascinated by Pablo Escobar, a sort of evil Don Quixote, and to have read my share of books about him, chiefly in Spanish, as the *gringos* seem uniformly unable to comprehend what he was about. Although what Escobar did in his life is proverbially stranger than fiction, and then some, at first there was nothing unusual about him or his family. Escobar was no promising Nobel Prize material, far from it; he came from a family of very modest means, was not starving; he was not burdened with an ill son or an unwanted pregnancy—which makes his pursuit of fabulous riches in the face of everything that stood in his way all the more inexplicable. In other words, compared to the real thing, *Breaking Bad* reeks of arbitrariness.

Skyler, the long-suffering wife, merits a separate mention. Countless viewers have seen in her the archetype of the whiner, the nag, the shrew. And whine she does! Mercifully,

the fast-forward feature has spared me most of her petulancies. But this is a common problem in graphic crime stories: they have little room for women, who either whine *ad nauseam*, or ape men, not very convincingly. Crime stories about narco-trafficking are distinctly male; they feature heroes and villains, the latter far more engaging, and a grey zone in between.

An extraterrestrial watching *Breaking Bad* would conclude that western culture in the early 21st century has become entirely atheistic. In five seasons, for a total of sixty-two episodes and a cumulative duration of sixty-two hours, i.e., two days and fourteen hours, there are *two* mentions of God or religion: after the collision between two planes over Albuquerque, a girl in Walt's high school asks, paraphrasing, How could God allow this to happen? And the principal cuts her short exhorting her and all other students to keep things secular; and two Mexican hitmen are shown slithering along with some peasants towards a hut in the desert that contains symbols of *Nuestra Señora de la Santa Muerte*, a female saint in Mexican folk Catholicism. Other than that, nothing. This sampling of humanity, the extraterrestrial would relate back to his peers, has no place for gods or religion, save for killers and peasants who hail from a more primitive society.

In a story whose *raison d'être* is the imminence of death and what Walt can do in response to it, there is no God, no praying, no religion. In a context ripe for ontological and eschatological probing, there is absolutely nothing of the sort. As an unwitting, belated appendage to existentialism, man is portrayed in his helplessness in a chaotic and meaningless universe. Descartes, the Enlightenment, Marx, Darwin, Wittgenstein and finally the Vienna Circle worked alacritously at the annihilation of metaphysics—with Rudolf

Carnap who formally rejected them as meaningless because metaphysical statements, he stated, could not be proved or disproved by experience—and succeeded triumphantly. While science, *inter alios* with Heisenberg—ironically, since that is Walt's *nom de guerre* in the series—who gave the world his uncertainty principle, has shown that things are not so fixed in nature and that there is much more than meets the eye (which, incidentally, the coronavirus has brought home very vividly with all our frantic handwashing), mainstream culture continues to hang on to secular if not outright atheistic principles based on arbitrary western constructs postulated by philosophers of an Aristotelian slant. To this day, in the western world a contradiction is perceived as a grave *faux pas* in just about any context. That is because of the law of non-contradiction, or the second traditional law, defined by Aristotle in his *Metaphysics* as, "One cannot say of something that it is and that it is not in the same respect and at the same time." While such an "axiom" is useful in a court of law and in many other such pedestrian implementations, it should never have been misconstrued for a law governing the universe. In fact, nature is full of contradictions, and the most relevant events in one's life are the anti-statistical ones.

I came away from *Breaking Bad* grateful to Apple TV for its fast-forward feature, and sensing that its authors are culturally underprovided and metaphysically bankrupt.

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