

“I Watched Jane Die:” Theorizing *Breaking Bad*’s Aesthetic of Brutality
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Although it ended only recently, *Breaking Bad* would seem already to be in the conversation concerning which television series is “the best show ever.” If a quick Google search of the terms “*Breaking Bad*” and “best show ever” that produces “about 59,800 results” is indicative of broad cultural trends, and what could be more reflective of our times and interests than a lazy Google search, *Breaking Bad* is at the very least, in Terry Malloy’s famous term, a contender. Of course, it goes without saying that discussions about the best show ever are good for little more than garnering revenue-generating clicks and giving graduate students something to argue about at pubs. As such this essay is not interested in whether *Breaking Bad* is “the best show ever,” even if the author tends to think it might well be. Instead, I want to begin with a heuristic consideration of that conversation before I look a bit more closely at what I call the aesthetic of brutality in *Breaking Bad*: its character, its most obvious precedent, and its implications. First though, what kinds of series tend to be included in the sweepstakes of “best show ever” and why?

Despite the implicit oxymoron, we are—accurately I think—said to be in the midst of a new or second golden age of television.¹ And indeed there is a persuasive argument to be made that somewhere around the middle of the first decade after the turn of the millennium that series television has surpassed both the novel and the motion picture as the dominant form of narrative fiction. This new golden age is partly defined by the role of auteur-esque showrunners such as David Chase (*The Sopranos*), Jenji Kohan (*Weeds* and *Orange is the New Black*), Beau Willimon (*House of Cards*), David Simon (*The Wire* and *Treme*), Dan Harmon (*Community*), Mitchell Hurwitz (*Arrested Development*), David Benioff (*Game of Thrones*), Matthew Weiner (*Mad Men*), and of course Vince Gilligan of *Breaking Bad*. Although it is important to acknowledge

that the auteur theory has many problems both theoretical and practical, and that, as Michael Szalay reminds us, our present auteur showrunners like Weiner and Gilligan are “hardly the first to create, write for, and produce” their own series², it seems clear that the relative carte blanche given to showrunners in the post-*Sopranos* era of subscription networks like HBO and Showtime, “mature themes” (i.e. sex, violence, and profanity), and limited or no commercial interruption have something to do with this “new” golden age (111). But of course, simply presenting “adult themes” uninterrupted by commercials does not make for a good television series (see *Californication*, *Oz*, *Weeds*, and *Six Feet Under* to name only a few). So what does make for a good, even great, show in the eyes of viewers and critics?

Compelling plotlines, well-developed characters, strong acting, in some cases notable cinematography, assured filmmaking—all of these seem important, even if each is not necessarily crucial. But these factors must be insufficient for the simple reason that they are largely formal or technical. All of them then must be in service of a story, or stories, or even ideas that keep us watching. The shows should be about something. Perhaps the most illustrative examples of this credo, despite the fact that the two are very different series indeed, are *The Wire* and *Community*. While *The Wire* featured great storylines, indelible characters like Bubbles, Omar and Snoop, and thrilling action, what makes *The Wire* a candidate for “the best show ever” is clearly its central project—an almost Dickensian social realism that both reflects and critiques American “inner city” poverty, the so-called War on Drugs, and the structural racism that fuels both. It is in these senses that one can argue for *The Wire*’s candidacy as possibly the best artistic engagement with contemporary American social problems ever produced, and thus perhaps the best television series ever.³ Like *The Wire*, *Community*—despite not meriting mention in the “best ever” conversation—is about something. Both shows present the respective idiosyncratic

visions of their creators and both are “ideas” shows. One would have to stretch a bit to claim that the idea in *Community* has any social import. In fact, *Community* is about pop culture, and more particularly, like *Seinfeld*, it is about itself as a pop culture artifact. To say the show has no depth, only surfaces, is a misrepresentation of course. Instead, Harmon produces a heart on the sleeve parallel to Certeau’s consumer-actor model of culture in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. If one were unkind, one might say that *Community* is the perfect adequation of Generation X’s love of postmodern irony and popular culture fetishism with the deeply affective narcissism of so-called Millennials. Regardless, due to the fact that in being about itself *Community* can be said to be about something, to have the quality of aboutness at its core so to speak, it resembles *The Wire* and other prestige television series that are similarly centered on thematic matters—*Mad Men*, *Deadwood*, *House of Cards* to name only a few—although few are as single-mindedly about something as *The Wire* and *Community* are. It might appear then that having a solid thematic core, an aboutness as I have put it, should be added to the provisional list of criteria for “the best show ever” began above. There are two obvious exceptions to this criteria of aboutness though: the series that started the present golden age and the one that seems to have taken a common stylistic trait of the “great” shows, the antihero, to its extreme. I mean of course *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* respectively.

The shows share more than just an anti-hero as protagonist. In fact, they are similar in that both could be said predicated on a “pitch.” It’s clear enough from watching the first season of *The Sopranos* what Chase’s pitch was: “Suburban family-man/mob lieutenant and tough guy suffers from anxiety and depression due in part to his overbearing mother and starts going to a psychiatrist as a result. The show plays out the tensions and juxtapositions of contemporary American life through violence, psychoanalysis, comedy, and sex.” Of course since Francis Ford

Coppola's *Godfather* films, every film about organized crime is always already about capitalism, the American Dream, and family. So to say that *The Sopranos* is not about anything or that it developed entirely out of the two or three sentences of an imagined pitch is to vastly oversimplify. At the same time though, those thematic resonances are largely legitimacy-lending background material in *The Sopranos* rather than central issues. The greatness of the show comes down to its characters, its actors (especially Edie Falco as Carmella Soprano and the unfortunately deceased James Gandolfini as her husband Tony), and its near mastery of the dramatic tension produced by alternating between the figurative quietness of family life and the deafening loudness of violence and adulterous sex.

The pitch for *Breaking Bad* seems equally clear, perhaps even clearer: "Nice guy chemistry teacher is diagnosed with terminal cancer and ends up making meth with a loser former student in order to make enough money to take care of his family. Mayhem ensues." Gilligan's earlier work seems to reflect his debt to the logic of the pitch. Prior to becoming the showrunner of *Breaking Bad*, Gilligan worked extensively as a writer on *The X-Files* where he specialized in stand-alone episodes, often colloquially referred to as "Monster of the Week" (MOTW) episodes, that operated outside of the series' larger conspiracy theory burdened story arc. These standalone episodes generally operate more as discomfiting horror stories than do the conspiracy episodes, which often foreground paranoia and suspense instead of horrific situations. Indeed Gilligan wrote some of the standout MOTW episodes of *The X-Files*—season three's "The Pusher" (with future *Breaking Bad* star Bryan Cranston) and season four's disturbing "Unruhe" and "Paper Hearts," to name a few. Gilligan's *modus operandi* then can be said to be that of the pitch. That is, the MOTW episodes of *The X-Files* are largely exercises in horror that almost like a Poe story take a single conceit to sometimes gruesome and often unflinching

extremes. That single conceit, what would be a gimmick in lesser hands, is the heart of the pitch. And on the whole, Gilligan's pitches or conceits from his *X-Files* days are not particularly interested in larger thematic issues. If such themes do appear they are used, much as they are in *The Sopranos*, as background while the horrifying effect that really interests Gilligan is front and center. Understood a certain way then, and this is not at all a critique (precisely the opposite, in fact), *Breaking Bad* is not really "about" anything in the way that many of the other prestige programs mentioned above are. In fact if anything the show's later attempts to embrace prestige television appropriate themes (e.g. capitalism and its effect on the so-called nuclear family) seem tacked on and unconvincing. Thematic concerns and thematic aboutness then are ultimately window-dressing in *Breaking Bad*, window-dressing that rarely if ever gets in the way of the effect of show. Like the aborted storyline concerning Marie Schrader's (Betsy Brandt) penchant for shoplifting, the stabs at social commentary in *Breaking Bad* amount to filigree.

At this point I should clarify what I mean when I say that *Breaking Bad* isn't "about" anything. It might help to illustrate with a contrast. Famously, the seminal 1990s sitcom *Seinfeld* is by its own admission "a show about nothing." And although that familiar saw is inaccurate in one sense—certainly *Seinfeld* is about the absurdity of sitcoms—it is accurate in another. That is, at its best *Seinfeld* reduces the tropes of the situation comedy to almost pure formalism. The laughs are produced for better or worse almost mechanically, and this fact serves to highlight the fundamental emptiness of sitcom tropes. So in *Seinfeld*, deeply cynical show that it is, we laugh at the very meaninglessness of sitcom "situations." At the same time we laugh, subconsciously perhaps, at the very absurdity of our own laughter in the face of a maw of emptiness. This last laugh, if you will, is analogous to Samuel Beckett's serio-comedy—the same laughter about which Nietzsche writes in a fragment collected in *The Will to Power* "Perhaps I know best why

man is the only animal that laughs: he alone suffers so excruciatingly that he was *compelled* to invent laughter” (74). On this reading, *Seinfeld* is at least partially about what existential philosopher Martin Heidegger called, most famously in the lectures that comprise *Introduction to Metaphysics*, “the Nothing.” As he puts it, the traditionally overlooked question of the Nothing, the question of why there are “beings at all instead of nothing,” is central to any philosophy of being, any ontology. In order to understand what is, Heidegger tells us, we must first start to think what isn't. As a result of the question of the Nothing then, “[a]ll that is not Nothing comes into the question, and in the end [so does] even Nothing itself” (2). The point, ontological investigations and Heideggerian obscurity aside, is that *Seinfeld* is actually about “not nothing” precisely because it is about the Nothing(ness) of the sitcom.

Breaking Bad is not like *Seinfeld* in this way then. The latter is about nothing, while the former is not about anything even when it pretends to be. Let us take an example: the character Saul Goodman (nee James McGill) played by Bob Odenkirk. Upon first being introduced to Saul, the viewer cannot be blamed for thinking that he is meant not just as a type—the sleazy lawyer—but that perhaps he, like the inflatable Statue of Liberty proudly displayed above his office, is a none-too-subtle jab at the absurd notion that American justice is blind. Saul first appears in the series when he interrupts the police interrogation of small-time dealer and Jesse Pinkman (Aaron Paul) associate Brandon “Badger” Mayhew (Matt L. Jones) in episode eight of season two. Odenkirk plays Goodman as the ultimate ambulance chasing slickster, and the scene ends predictably with a humorous discussion of pecuniary matters; Saul is catholic as far as payment goes, but he does not take American Express.⁵ It is true enough that as time goes on Saul becomes a major character and his role becomes more and more clearly defined, moving him away from his almost allegorical flatness. But counterintuitively, Saul actually becomes less

compelling as his character develops and he becomes comic relief. Despite his centrality to the show, and despite Odenkirk's excellent and against type performance, the audience soon realizes that Saul isn't a satire of American justice, nor is he commentary on our increasingly litigious tendencies in the United States. Instead, like the conventional characters of the medieval mystery play, Saul serves a formal purpose and not a thematic one. Saul is, and this is metonymic for the logic of *Breaking Bad*, about effect—here both relief and heightening of tension—and not about meaning or content, satirical or otherwise.

Like Saul's character then, at its best *Breaking Bad* is not about nothing, rather it is not about anything; the latter being very different indeed from the former. To not be about anything though means to be lacking in a central way what I have infelicitously called aboutness. But even if the show isn't about anything, it's far from pointless. In fact its center is what Aristotle called in the *Poetics* a *dynamis*, a word S.H. Butcher and Lane Cooper translate with the phrase "essential quality."⁷ In the *Poetics* that *dynamis*, that essential quality, can be understood as what Andrzej Warminski terms poetry's "power, faculty, capacity, ability, to do something" (202). *Breaking Bad* wants to do something then, even at the very moment that it is not about anything, and it is this doing to which I will now turn. Think of the most indelible scenes in *Breaking Bad*: of Jesse and Walt attempting to dissolve the body of Emilio (John Koyama) and of Walt strangling Domingo Molina aka "Krazy-8" (Max Arciniega) early in season one. Think of Tuco's (Raymond Cruz) and Hank Schrader's (Dean Norris) respective beatings of Jesse Pinkman, of Walt's murder of Jesse's girlfriend Jane (Krysten Ritter), and maybe most of all think of the season five murders of Hank and of Brock's mother and Jesse's ex, Andrea Cantillo (Emily Rios), and of relative newcomer Todd Alquist's (Jesse Plemons) heartless execution of a little boy on a dirt bike.

These scenes and others like them indicate the core of *Breaking Bad*: watching it is, at the show's best, almost unbearably intense. This is because very much like the second scene in Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* in which another child is killed, rather than supplying relief to the viewer by resolving tense or possibly disastrous situations, *Breaking Bad* more often than not takes the audience to—and sometimes even just past—the limits of bearability. No doubt many viewers of *Breaking Bad* have had the same reactions that we had in my household—that of an taking a temporary viewing hiatus to take a break from the intensity and/or of vowing not to watch *Breaking Bad* before bed because of the dreams it caused! And in fact in the wake of the series' success *New Yorker* television critic Emily Nussbaum goes so far as to suggest that “good television” has with its focus on intensity and violence become like, quoting a tweet from *Time*'s James Poniewozik, “a chile pepper-eating contest.” This characterization points to the show's great strength and its essential quality or *dynamis*: its intensity, or more properly it is its ability to produce an experience of intensity in the audience. As I have argued, it is incorrect to say that the show is about intensity, of course. At the same time, it does exist primarily to produce an experience of emotional, even visceral, intensity in its audience—a goal at which it succeeds almost too well sometimes. In what follows then I am interested in that experience of intensity, in its character, how it works, and in what an analysis of it might have to say on theories of experience *per se*.

The word I have use so far to describe this essential quality, “intensity,” is insufficient, though, because it fails to fully account for the experience in question. The quality of intensity can be ascribed to any number of perceptions and qualities, from sweetness and ecstasy to pain and smell. Since my present goal is to be precise about the essential quality of Gilligan's show, we have need of another word. I propose then that the essential quality, the *dynamis*, of *Breaking*

Bad can be said to be the show's ability to produce the experience of an aesthetic response I will call brutality. Indeed, the essential quality of *Breaking Bad* is the production of the experience of brutality in the same way that Aristotle famously argues that the *dynamis* of Attic tragedy is the production of catharsis. And in fact we should be precise when we refer to catharsis in tragedy. It would be incoherent to say simply that the essential quality of tragedy is catharsis because catharsis is not inherent to the tragic play itself. Rather, catharsis comes about in the affective reaction a given tragic play produces in an audience. It is in this sense that we would be advised to speak of an experience of catharsis when we speak of the *dynamis* of tragedy, rather than simply catharsis. In a similar manner, when we speak of the *dynamis* of *Breaking Bad*, we must also speak of an experience of brutality, not simply of brutality. And this in turn means that the essential quality of the show, as is the case with tragedy, is aesthetic all the way down. This is for the simple reason that its production of experience necessitates an audience. And we when speak of an audience, as opposed to spectators for example, we imply just this kind of dialectical relation between the aesthetic object and the aesthetically attuned, receptive viewer. So while the term aesthetic is conventionally understood to involve sensuous perception and/or matters of taste, I mean it here in a broader, but simultaneously more restricted, sense. The aesthetic object by definition requires an audience precisely because it cannot perform its *dynamis* without one. So we can refer to an object as aesthetic in the present sense if it is composed and produced in order to achieve some effect or experience in an audience.⁸ We can in turn refer to an experience as aesthetic if it A) takes an aesthetic object as its focus and B) through interpretation or reaction from an aesthetically attuned audience produces an affective or intellectual response.

I have already argued the rather uncontroversial point that *Breaking Bad* operates on a logic of intensity, and as I have just noted that this logic is in an essential way an aesthetic one.

But our task here is to bring matters to a finer point, the point of brutality. In order to do so, it will benefit us to take a closer look more closely at this logic. One of *Breaking Bad*'s greatest tricks is its ability to top itself by relentlessly intensifying scenes and situations that were already cringe inducing. Some of this aptitude results from the show's willingness to portray intense and sudden acts of violence, of course. Those acts are sometimes so gruesome in their depiction, consequences, or execution (suggested or otherwise) that they produce in the audience a very literally visceral response. But it is not violence that makes the show. As we know, overreliance on violence, even sudden and gruesome violence, will have a numbing effect on the audience over time, a fatigue that *Breaking Bad* deftly avoids. And in fact some of the most intense scenarios in *Breaking Bad* are not at all gruesome: the murder of Andrea is not, in fact it is almost clinically clean. And who can forget the tableside guacamole scene from season five's "Confessions?" Intense yes, violent no. More importantly, perhaps the most discomfiting aspect of the entire show is Walt's sociopathic manipulation of the emotionally broken Jesse Pinkman over its course; a manipulation that is psychically but not usually physically violent. In fact, the "relationship" between Walt and Jesse serves as an illustrative analogy of how the show's intensity operates in that their relationship is a series-long red herring. Because Walt comes off at times as, if not sympathetic, at least masterful, and because unlike Walt, Jesse seems to have some kind of a moral compass, the audience persists in hoping that Walt has some true affection for Jesse. Until the very last, we hope against all hope that Walt will, if not feel regret for his horrific actions, at least gain some perspective on his mistreatment of Jesse.

The closing scene of the series finale puts that entirely foolish hope to bed once and for all of course. Because it seems to offer Walt self-justification as he smiles as on his deathbed, the finale essentially forces the audience into the uncomfortable position of being what Nussbaum

has called the “bad fan.”⁹ Like the generation of fans who see the title character of Brian De Palma’s *Scarface* as a hero, a reading that the film does somewhat ambiguously sanction, if the viewer of *Breaking Bad* has been even partly in Walt’s corner she must confront her own status as a bad fan, or at least a fan who is in bad faith. Animating this effect is a complex mix of generic expectations and canny filmmaking. Because the show, especially early on, stresses Walt’s family life, and because we expect against all evidence that the Walt/Jesse relationship will blossom into a standard television ersatz father/son relationship for the simple reason that this always happens in television series, we are able to largely suspend our moral judgments of Walt. The show’s depiction of the Whites’ white (no coincidence that), suburban, middle-class family life operates in the same manner; it lures us into thinking that perhaps everyone will live happily ever after. After all, families always live happily ever after on TV, unless there is social critique (*The Wire*), unrelenting miserablism (*House of Cards*), or nihilism (*House of Cards* again) in a given show’s DNA. This same effect is achieved by *Breaking Bad*’s tendency to flirt with outright, if never truly lighthearted, comedy. In fact, paradoxically the show’s erratic mood swings between the comedic—think of Saul Goodman again—and the awful do not serve so much to lighten the mood but as a form of contrast that makes the show’s darkness all the darker.

But, and this is a crucial distinction, even as the comedic aspects of the show highlight the intensity of its darkness *Breaking Bad* never completely alienates its audience with that darkness. Part of the reason for this is that *Breaking Bad* self-consciously rejects of the kind realism found in *The Wire*. With its evil fried chicken/drug kingpin, its twin assassins, its often-surreal cinematography, that is the world of *Breaking Bad* is very self-consciously that of a television program. And that world is only tangentially related to the audience’s experienced reality—at least outside of the show’s portrayal of the domestic sphere. And while much of the

show's drama springs from that sphere, it is precisely because the filmmakers do such a persuasive job of bracketing the rest of the show's world from "real life" that the audience accepts its grotesque extremes. The audience then is a willing, even active, partner to the show's grueling intensity. We are energized in a strange way by our anticipation of the next and likely even more horrific moment precisely because we are at a safe distance from our experienced reality, a fact that the show marks in its stylistic bombast.

I have already noted that one way that *Breaking Bad* is able to produce this experience of brutality is that it self-consciously distances its world from the real world through comedy, caricature, and a self-awareness concerning the tropes of American television and their audience effects. In short, because of this self-conscious distancing or bracketing—this aestheticizing—of the lived world, the audience is less likely to perceive the horrific moments of the show as purely sadistic cruelty. So the horrific moments in *Breaking Bad* retain their power to shock and even titillate, never becoming tiresome or more importantly unwatchable. And in fact they also become *de rigeur*, precisely that which keeps the audience watching. We know what it is coming, or we think we do, after watching a season or so of *Breaking Bad*: inevitably it is something terrible. Of course, when that something terrible doesn't come in a given episode, we can feel relieved. But whether or not we are willing to admit it, we are disappointed as well. We wanted that awfulness, perhaps even desperately. Indeed, we crave it. We look forward to the next shock; indeed this is why we watch. We know nothing good will happen and we are perversely reassured by this knowledge. We have broken bad along with Walter White. Because of this fact, whether or not we cheer for Walter—whether or not we become "bad fans"—is not an important. By simply watching the show, we are fully complicit in its gleeful nihilism.

The experience of watching *Breaking Bad* can be summed up then as looking forward to the ever upping ante of awfulness, an experience that only intensifies as we become further accustomed to the show's brutal logic. In short, to the extent that we buy into *Breaking Bad*, we become connoisseurs of the horrific, the brutal. And ultimately it is this ambivalent enjoyment of the horrific that defines the experience of brutality. Of course that experience is one of intensity, even almost unbearable intensity, but that intensity is predicated on a special, if not unique as I shall argue in a moment, two factors. The first is the almost unbearable awfulness, but the second is the position of safety occupied by the viewer in regards to that awfulness. It is aesthetic distance that allows for such safety of course. We are, as Kant famously said, interested but simultaneously disinterested. We are safe from moral claims because, after all, it's just a TV show. This point should come as no surprise. Visceral entertainment like roller coasters and horror films often allow us to experience something that under other circumstances would be traumatic. The psychological safety of the experience of brutality is not, then, a defining point. What is a defining point of this experience is that, in addition to giving the audience a thrill by presenting horrific acts and scenes in a safe manner, it trains us, in an important way, to savor those horrific moments—the very ones from which we initially turned away, literally or figuratively. Unlike a roller coaster ride though, in the experience of brutality the audience is not simply excited by a thrilling or even terrifying experience. Instead she derives pleasure from her complicity, willing or otherwise, in utterly morally reprehensible figured acts of cruelty and murder. That pleasure is no doubt in part produced by the viewer's own repressed cruelty. At the same time though, and more importantly, it is animated by a feeling of consequence-free moral transgression that results from the viewer's awareness of her complicity in the show's brutality.

Breaking Bad is unique in prestige television not only because of its relentless focus on the experience of brutality, a focus I have argued is its essential quality, but because it was incredibly successful critically and commercially by dint of that focus. If it is correct to say its *dynamis* is the production of that experience, *Breaking Bad*'s popular and critical success must be understood as a widespread initiation into the phenomenon of this experience. And this is unprecedented in mainstream entertainment. Certainly Gilligan's work on *The X Files* intermittently revels in its brutality, as do certain episodes of new golden age series, e.g. *Six Feet Under*'s infamous "That's My Dog" and "Kennedy and Heidi" in the final season of *The Sopranos*. These are isolated episodes though, and precisely because they are isolated they cannot be said to represent a wider engagement with an *ethos* of brutality. But is the focus on brutality in *Breaking Bad* completely *sui generis*? I argue no. In fact, prior to the success of *Breaking Bad* this experience of brutality can be found in another, significantly less mainstream, genre: death metal.

Death metal of course is a kind of rock music, and more specifically it is a species of the genre of rock music called heavy metal. Heavy metal is a relatively recent genre, having come into its own only in the mid-1970s. The term heavy metal, despite its somewhat mysterious origin, is particularly apt for this genre due to the so-called heaviness of the music itself, heaviness that manifests particularly in the use of distorted, sometimes detuned, guitars playing so-called power chords, chords that are often dissonant or unsettling. Thundering drums and screaming or guttural vocals contribute to this atmosphere of "heaviness." The roots of heavy metal can be found largely in British Invasion blues-rock and psychedelia turned up, as it were, to eleven. Commonly cited progenitors are the Jimi Hendrix Experience, the Jeff Beck Group, Blue Cheer, Vanilla Fudge, Iron Butterfly, and especially Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, and most

importantly Birmingham, England's Black Sabbath. While heavy, riff-based rock music existed well before Black Sabbath's 1970's eponymous debut album, that record—packed with tritones, piercing vocals, lumbering tempos, evocations of the occult and a truly Manichean worldview—codified heavy metal's darker aspect. The influence of Black Sabbath on heavy metal cannot be overstated. Indeed, many of the seemingly inexhaustible subgenres of heavy metal derive either direct or indirect inspiration from Black Sabbath. The most obvious example would be what is called "doom metal," a subgenre that takes the slow, heavy, mournful aspects of Black Sabbath's early work to the extreme. Doom metal is typically considered to be a kind of "extreme metal," a grouping of subgenres of heavy metal that encompasses its less mainstream, and less accessible, permutations. Sociologist Keith Kahn-Harris argues that the main genres of extreme metal can be understood to be doom metal, thrash metal, grindcore, black metal and, of course, death metal (4-5).¹⁰ As Kahn-Harris argues it, death metal springs from thrash metal in the mid 1980s.¹¹ This darkness, in lyrical content, in album art, and of course in the music itself, is Black Sabbath's most obvious legacy to death metal. That is, just as doom metal took Black Sabbath's sound to the extreme, death metal takes the band's fascination with evil and darkness to the extreme by simultaneously distancing the music itself from its roots in the blues and by introducing a very 1980s interest in "body horror," serial killers, and so-called slasher films. But because, as Kahn-Harris also notes, in death metal the vocals become almost indecipherable, the genre's fascination with all things horrific is conveyed not through lyrics as a medium of understanding but rather through song titles, album art, and the distorted "death grunt" (or growl) style of singing pioneered by Jeff Becerra of Possessed, Kam Lee and Chuck Schuldiner of Mantas/Death, and Tom G. Warrior of Hellhammer and later Celtic Frost. I note these identifying characteristics because one result of what appears to be the endless subcategorization

of heavy metal genres is that question of how to place a given group becomes a topic of much debate. And this question in turn comes down to the question of what makes something death metal? Certainly when a listener with some experience hears bands like Cannibal Corpse, Suffocation, Death, Morbid Angel, Nile, Cryptopsy, early Opeth, Entombed, and Carcass, or even sees their album covers, she can fairly easily identify them as death metal due to their heaviness and detuned guitars, their subject matter, and their vocals. But ultimately the essential quality of death metal, its *dynamis*, is the same of as that of *Breaking Bad*—the production of the experience of brutality.

This experience of brutality in death metal then should be able to be mapped onto *Breaking Bad*, and in fact it can. In death metal, brutality is not simply about violent imagery in lyrics or on album covers, just as *Breaking Bad* does not derive its aesthetic effect through graphic violence alone. In fact, both lyrics and album art are paratextual in death metal, which means that although they can certainly contribute to brutality they are not essential to it. By way of illustration, an Amy Grant record with a Cannibal Corpse cover is not brutal, nor is the melody to “When I’m Sixty Four” paired with the lyrics to Morbid Angel’s “Immortal Rites.” Brutality resides in the music itself, then. But it is not reducible to a certain formula of chords, notes, time signatures, instruments, a style of singing, or distorted amplification, even if it relies on each of those to a greater or lesser degree. For example, of the so-called Big Four of thrash metal, Metallica, Megadeth, Anthrax, Slayer, all of which use essentially the same sonic palette, only Slayer is brutal. So if brutality isn’t about imagery, or even about a specific sound, what is it about?

Brutality in death metal refers to an experience the initiate or fan has when listening. That experience is oppressive, gut wrenching, and exhausting. One is happy in a strange way when the

album, or even the song, is over. The listener has been through a difficult journey, she has been sonically abused, and there is palpable relief when it stops. So far this should sound familiar to us from our discussion of the experience of brutality in *Breaking Bad*. But if these things were sufficient to explain brutality in death metal, the genre would be little more than an exercise in masochism. While that may be partly the case, it would be difficult to imagine that a musical genre would prosper over roughly thirty years if all it had to offer were aural self-flagellation. The question then would be whether death metal like *Breaking Bad* offers the excitement of anticipation of the awfulness to come, a peculiar savoring of the horrifying, and a satisfaction, even pleasure, that results from depictions that would normally be considered nihilistic and immoral at best, and truly repugnant and evil at worst?

The short answer is yes, and this is in fact what indicates to us that death metal shares its essential quality with *Breaking Bad*. Indeed, the defining factor of death metal, the one thing death metal must have is brutality. And in fact when I use the term brutality to talk about *Breaking Bad* I am borrowing the term, which serves both a descriptive and normative purpose, from fan characterization of death metal. Death metal is by definition brutal in the ways that I have outlined so far. That brutality, which is a shorthand way of talking about the genre's central goal of producing the experience of brutality in the listener, results from a concatenation of themes, song titles, album art, and the music itself, but it cannot be reduced to these for the simple reason that they must be understood to be in service of the two goals I have already gestured at: first, the inaccessibility for the uninitiated and second, the peculiar blend of pain and pleasure that is the experience of brutality. To the experienced listener, to the fan, the best death metal is the most brutal death metal. And as we saw above with *Breaking Bad*, that brutality is fundamentally pleasurable for her.

But this is only true for the initiate, and here is where we can see a central difference between death metal and *Breaking Bad*. That is, for the uninitiated listener death metal played at loud enough volumes may produce physical pain and even disorientation. It will certainly not produce pleasure. A death metal aficionado though will have a much richer experience. She won't experience just the painful aspects, although she will experience them.¹² For the fan, the negativity brutality in death metal is tempered with a strange kind enjoyment. That enjoyment stems in part from familiarity, of course. A person who has never really listened to death metal will be likely be taken aback by it, while a familiarized listener will know what to expect by and large. But familiarity is not the only factor, and it is certainly the case that one can become familiar with death metal without ever coming to enjoy it. The unpleasantness may diminish over time, of course, but the non-fan will never have the full experience of brutality because he or she will miss out on this pleasure. Indeed, many partners of death metal fans have firsthand knowledge of this phenomenon.

One must be fully initiated in order to truly experience death metal's aesthetic of brutality and to be initiated is to overcome or bracket what we generally find pleasurable in popular music: melody, harmony, depictions of interpersonal relationships. And indeed, death metal prides itself on being inaccessible to the casual listener. And in fact the stylistic markers noted above—manic blast beat drumming, guttural and indecipherable vocals, oppressive heaviness, a fixation on violence and death—are in service of this inaccessibility. But as stylistic gatekeepers, they articulate an inclusivity that draws the line between initiate and non-initiate. More importantly, they also provide the grist for the pleasure, the deliciousness, of the experience brutality in death metal. Once she has learned the ins and outs of the genre, as it were, she becomes increasingly able to see past its alienating qualities, while still feeling their negative

effects, and becomes aware that those qualities themselves are constitutive of the pleasure generated by the music. That pleasure is a pleasure in ugliness, to be sure, a suffocating, discomfiting pleasure that can only be described at the same time as delicious. That deliciousness, so central to the experience of brutality, is derived less from the depiction of an individual's repressed tendencies toward violence and cruelty than from her ability to navigate depictions cruelty and violence safely and pleasurably through generic tropes. This kind of navigation can be illustrated with a quick glance at Jonathan Demme's acclaimed 1991 thriller *The Silence of the Lambs*. We are likely to be horrified watching the serial killer "Buffalo Bill" (Ted Levine) torment his victim, the abject Catherine Martin (Brooke Smith). As depictions of sheer sadism, these scenes will be deeply troubling to most viewers. On the other hand, we are fascinated by Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) who is also, of course, a serial killer. Lecter is different though because we do not perceive him as a true sadist. Lecter is instead a connoisseur of experience, a player of games, a person with what can only be called, despite the pun, taste. In fact this kind of taste, this finely tuned "aesthetic" would appear to mirror one of the essential aspects of the experience of brutality: the ability to take aesthetic pleasure in what appears at first to be entirely horrific.

Breaking Bad then brings to the masses an experience previously found in the marginal or underground genre of rock music called death metal. I won't go as far as to say that Gilligan's series takes inspiration directly from death metal, but I do want to argue that the best way to understand the essence of *Breaking Bad* and the irrelevance of questions regarding the show's aboutness is to see them in terms of the experience that death metal provides to its fans. There are of course some crucial differences between the two, the most of important of which is the very ability of *Breaking Bad* to appeal to a wide public, something death metal prides itself in

not doing. Precisely because *Breaking Bad* craftily uses and repurposes all too familiar tropes derived from decades of American television rather than organizing itself against the familiar as death metal does, because *Breaking Bad* appears to play by the rules that is, it attracts a wider audience rather than winnowing it down. *Breaking Bad*'s true uniqueness then can be understood as its ability to produce the experience of brutality found in death metal but to a general audience. *Breaking Bad* has no use for death metal's rigorous disciplinary policing, demonstrating instead that firstly, such policing is not an inherent part of the experience of brutality, and secondly that an aesthetic experience assumed to have only limited appeal, perhaps only to certain subcultural "sickos," is perfectly capable of enthralling the water-cooler crowd.

If what I have claimed so far about *Breaking Bad* is true, a fair response might be that even if at its center *Breaking Bad* seeks to reproduce the essential quality of death metal, that is the experience of brutality, isn't this just counting angels on the head of a pin? While I think it is useful to understand the three main related points I have addressed thus far—that *Breaking Bad* isn't about anything, that its *dynamis* is the production of the aesthetic experience of brutality, that this *dynamis* can also be found in death metal in more limited form—if only so that we may most accurately characterize the show, I want to push the matter just a bit further by addressing two final questions. Those questions are as follows: What does it mean to have an experience in the sense I have been discussing here? And what, if anything, can the experience of brutality tell us about experience as such?

Allow me then to close by looking at the other key term, experience—a task I undertake with the help of two major figures of twentieth century continental philosophy: the thinker, essayist, and cultural critic Walter Benjamin and the hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. Although both German and born only eight years apart, Benjamin and Gadamer have

roots in very different intellectual traditions. Benjamin's thought draws from many schools including both philosophical and cultural Marxism, sociology, literary theory, mystical Judaism, and psychoanalysis among others. Benjamin was a powerfully original thinker who had a complicated relation to Marxism, but it is not incorrect to note that his project lines up fairly well with the cornerstones of Frankfurt School Critical Theory—a dialectical and skeptical examination of culture and society that is defined by, as Martin Jay puts it in *The Dialectical Imagination*, its “aversion to closed philosophical systems” (41). Gadamer, on the other hand, although equally and essentially interested in culture and its interpretation, was a student of Heidegger's—a thinker who the Frankfurt School's de facto leader Theodor Adorno despised. Gadamer draws from the phenomenological tradition, from German *Existenz* philosophy, from Aristotle, and particularly from Hegel. Despite their many differences, differences that are far too numerous and complex to discuss here, both attend to what might glibly be called the uses and abuses of culture. In doing so both discuss experience as it relates to culture, which is to say aesthetic experience. The lens they use to do so is provided by nineteenth century German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey, one that results from the distinction implied in the two different German words for experience: *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*.¹³ Prior to Dilthey's work, the standard German word for experience was *Erfahrung*. Under the influence of the Kantian distinction between the world as such and our perception of the world as well as the romantic tendency to focus on experience, Dilthey argued, we ought to understand the phenomenon of lived experience as *Erlebnis*, with its etymological derivation from the German *leben*, to live, rather than *Erfahrung* which he argued had to do with perception and cognitive judgment and not with what we might call the actuality of lived experience. Put too simply, for Dilthey *Erlebnis* is a comprehensive understanding of experience that takes into account what later thinkers

influenced by him would call the *Lebenswelt* or “lifeworld.”¹⁴ Broadly speaking then for Dilthey experience as *Erlebnis* takes into account the lifeworld of a person, cultural and even individual, in a way that an empirical and perhaps even mechanistic *Erfahrung* does not.

This distinction between the attenuated notion of experience as *Erfahrung* and experience that exists within social and psychological context, i.e. *Erlebnis*, becomes an important one for both Walter Benjamin and Gadamer. Benjamin discusses *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* most directly in the long essay called “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” originally published in 1939. In that essay he questions the relevance of lyric poetry in modernity by writing that “[i]f conditions for a positive reception of lyric poetry have become less favorable, it is reasonable to assume that only in rare instances is lyric poetry in rapport with the experience of its readers. This may be due to a change in the structure of their experience” (156).¹⁵ If a long excerpt can be excused, Benjamin addresses the difference between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* in *Les Fleur du mal* in Section IV of that essay as follows

The greater the shock factor [*Anteil des Chockmoments*] in particular impressions, the more vigilant consciousness has to be in screening stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less these impressions enter long experience (*Erfahrung*) and the more they correspond to the concept of isolated experience (*Erlebnis*). Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense is the way it assigns an incident a precise point in time in consciousness, at the cost of the integrity of the incident’s contents. This would be a peak achievement of the intellect; it would turn the incident into an isolated experience.

Without reflection, there would be nothing but the sudden start. (163, emphasis added)

Here we can see that the usefulness of the distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* is that for Benjamin, *Erfahrung* (“long experience”) is the pre-modern, pre-urban understanding of

experience. In this way, Benjamin's view of *Erfahrung* differs from Dilthey's, even though they agree that the two are distinct types of experiences. For Benjamin, *Erfahrung* contains within it historicity and a certain kind of "content," a meaning that is if not objective at least not privatively subjective. Benjamin's *Erlebnis*, on the other hand, is exactly this—privatively subjective. A useful comparison might be Benjamin's well-known conception of the "aura" from "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." The argument made in that essay is that prior to modernity, the unique art object had an aura that inhered in it: a locus of history and tradition.¹⁶ In the age of mechanical reproduction, Benjamin argues that aura is lost and replaced by what he calls in the excerpt above "shock" (*Chock*). Shock is an ahistorical, privative, and purely subjective kind of experience. Ultimately, Benjamin argues that in *Les Fleurs du mal* Baudelaire "give[s] the weight of an experience (*Erfahrung*)" to "something lived through (*Erlebnis*)" (194). Like the aura of the work of art, Benjamin implies, in capitalist, urban modernity experience as *Erfahrung* has been replaced by experience understood as *Erlebnis*, as subjective, psychic, and ahistorical: experience (*Erlebnis*) as shock (*Chock*).

Gadamer too is concerned with Dilthey's distinction. In his 1960 magnum opus *Truth and Method*, Gadamer in essence concurs with Benjamin regarding *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. But while for Benjamin the loss of experience understood as *Erfahrung* in modernity has ambiguous normative repercussions, for Gadamer it is a symptom of a highly problematic subjectivism—a subjectivism that Gadamer, like his teacher Heidegger, vigorously critiques. Gadamer illustrates this in Part 1 of *Truth and Method*, called in English "The Question of Truth as it Emerges in the Experience of Art," and which contains a careful examination of art and its reception in modernity. In fact, a portion of this first part of *Truth and Method* is called "The Aesthetics of Genius and the Concept of Experience (*Erlebnis*)." Here Gadamer attacks neo-Kantian

aesthetics, writing that “Kant’s doctrine of the ‘heightening of the feeling of life’ (*Lebensgefühl*) in aesthetic pleasure helped the idea of ‘genius’ to develop into a comprehensive concept of life (*Leben*)... Hence, by trying to derive all objective validity from transcendental subjectivity, neo-Kantianism declared the concept of *Erlebnis* to be the very stuff of consciousness” (52). For Gadamer then, who proceeds to offer a philosophic etymology of the word *Erlebnis*, experience as *Erlebnis* can be said to be the experience of art that stems from modern post-Kantian subjectivity. It is therefore a degraded notion of experience; one that understands personal experience as “material to be shaped,” as “immediacy, which precedes all interpretation, reworking, and communication” (53). This understanding in turn produces an artificial “alienation” from “history,” just as we saw in Benjamin, (56) and in doing so also alienates us from tradition as well as what Gadamer calls “prejudice” (*Vorurteil*).¹⁷ All of this is of course in contrast to the pre-modern understanding of “historically effected consciousness” which has “the structure of *experience (Erfahrung)*” (341) and in which “the spiritual creations of the past, art and history” (56) were clearly articulated with history, tradition, and prejudice.

So in the distinction between modern *Erlebnis* and pre-modern *Erfahrung* borrowed in part from Dilthey, Benjamin, and Gadamer, *Erlebnis* is conceptualized as fundamentally alienated, even at odds with, tradition and history. A useful illustration of the difference might be found in a gloss of Gadamer’s take on Hegel’s famous pronouncement from his *Lectures on Aesthetics*: “art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past” (11). For Hegel, art has ended in the romantic (i.e. Christian) era precisely because in that era art becomes entirely the province of experience as *Erlebnis*. The experience of art under the regime of *Erlebnis* becomes aesthetic in the contemporary sense in that it loses what Benjamin called its content—content that was available to us in the regime of *Erfahrung*—and replaces it with

entirely personal, subjective, ahistorical, private and essentially incommunicable “experience.” According to Hegel—for whom art was merely a step along with religion to the supreme knowledge granted Absolute Idealist philosophy—and to Gadamer, it is this subjectivist understanding of art upon which we operate today. It is in contrast to what Hegel calls classical art, the art of the Greeks, which he considers to be the highest form of art because it retains “content” therefore allowing for *Erfahrung*. That is, the experience of art enjoyed, supposedly, by the Greeks was one in which art was not cleaved off from spirit, society, tradition, and history.¹⁸ One did not go to a museum, look at an artwork, and have an experience (*Erlebnis*). Instead, the experience of art was always already communal and, following Charles Taylor, we might say embedded in society, history, religion: in culture. So although Benjamin and Gadamer draw very different conclusions from the distinction between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* they inherit from Dilthey, they fundamentally agree both on the nature of the difference and on its relevance to the analysis of art and culture.¹⁹

I contend that the experience of brutality found in *Breaking Bad*, an experience that I consider to be singularly analogous to the initiate’s experience of death metal, demonstrates that the distinctions Gadamer and Benjamin see between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* is deceptive. What Benjamin calls the shock that disintegrates the aura of the artwork, and which is illustrative of the general character of the individual’s experience of modernity, can be understood to be the shock of the new.²⁰ In his analysis, and to a certain degree in Gadamer’s, that shock of the new isolates the individual’s experience (*Erlebnis*) from its previous historical and traditional cultural context (*Erfahrung*). What is fascinating about the experience of brutality is that it is one of “shock,” as I have noted above, but in a different way than the shock of the new. That is, the brutality *Breaking Bad* is—like that of death metal—shocking in a disruptive way, but only at

first. As the viewer is initiated into the logic of the program and this happens quickly for the reasons we have seen above, as she attunes herself to the show's tangential relation to the real world, as she becomes aware that nothing good will or even can come about in this particular fictional world, she comes to expect and even perversely anticipate the next terrible event or outcome. The viewer is not shocked by the new, but she is "shocked," and the scare quotes are vital here, by how events play out. She is likely to mutter to herself something to the effect of "My god, I can't believe he/she/they/the show did that!" but she does so in full awareness that although the specific resolution is not necessarily predictable except in its awfulness (say Jesse's murder of the hapless Gale in season three's finale "Full Measure" or Hank's death in "Ozymandius"), she does know that things will end poorly. And it is this fact that allows her to savor the deliciousness of the horrific even as the dread of it all oppresses her. As I have argued it, the complex interweaving of comforting dread and anticipated "shock" that simultaneously produces a strange connoisseurship of the dreadful anticipation itself and of the terrible event is the defining factor of the experience of brutality. That experience is at the heart of *Breaking Bad* and it is possible only through the viewer's familiarity with its inexorably brutal logic. But as seen above, she first must first be familiar with the generic conventions of prestige television, and of American television more broadly speaking. She has to know what to expect and how to process what comes. This generic knowledge, both of television in general and specifically of *Breaking Bad*, is nothing other than *Ehfarung*. That is, it is not a private, isolated moment of experience. Instead it is a shared awareness of the history and tradition, if you will, of American television and of *Breaking Bad*'s own internal logic of brutality. Without both, the essential quality of the show, its *dynamis*—the experience of brutality—cannot be produced.

In fact, it is only with this situated *Ehfarung* that the experience of *Erlebnis*, the “shock” that the show relies on, even becomes possible. The point then is that the depth of that aesthetic experience of “shock” simply cannot be exhausted by calling it *Erlebnis*, for it is simultaneously private and communally situated. It is private in the sense that the experience of brutality is fundamentally an aesthetic, and thus subjective, one very much in the neo-Kantian sense that Gadamer critiques. It is also crucially communal though in the sense that in order to have this experience at all, the viewer must take part in a particular aspect of the project of human culture whether she is aware of it or not. The apparent *Erlebnis* of viewer “shock” in *Breaking Bad* then is at the same time ahistorical and deeply historical. As *Erlebnis*, it is momentary; a passing inner state that gives us no real knowledge and that is un-situated, if not untimely. At the same time this “shock” is historical for the simple reason that it requires of the view an attunement to generic precedent, to the duration of genre if you will. In the case of the experience of brutality found in *Breaking Bad*, then, communal *Ehfarung* serves as the ground for subjective *Erlebnis*. This is true of death metal as well, but because of death metal’s intentional marginality, it remains essentially un-theorized. By taking this centrally aesthetic experience of brutality and making it accessible while at the same time maintaining its disruptive power, *Breaking Bad* allows us to think the aesthetic differently, to think the character of brutality in the present sense differently, and to think both death metal and Gilligan’s series more rigorously.

The experience of brutality as we have seen it would appear, on a Gadamerian analysis, at first blush to be the worst kind of subjective aestheticism. This is because it relies on personal sensation, the sensation of delicious “shock.” To Benjamin, perhaps, this “shock” can be a disruptive and destructive break from tradition, something like the Messianic power of his angel of history (“Theses on the Philosophy of History” IX). But the experience of brutality shows that

at least in some cases defining experience in terms of discrete *Ehfarung* or *Erlebnis* is problematic. While we can certainly experience the pure, private *Erlebnis* of Benjamin's shock, and while the communal hermeneutic tradition of *Ehfarung* persists in religion, law, and humanistic study, what Gadamer fails to see and what Benjamin says only occurs in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*—nothing less than a transubstantiation of *Erlebnis* into *Ehfarung*—is itself the *dynamis* of the experience of brutality. Thus to the extent that *Breaking Bad* is synonymous with the experience of brutality, it demonstrated that the circle of *Erlebnis* and *Ehfarung* can be squared, in both theory and practice. As the death metal of television, far more so than *Metalocalypse*, *Breaking Bad* illuminates the fairly radical notion that the subjectivist structure of modern aesthetic experience sometimes called *Erlebnis* in the Continental tradition is rooted—perhaps paradoxically—in what is understood as its precursor and opposite, communal *Ehfarung*. When we look closely at the experience of brutality then, something that the present analysis of *Breaking Bad* has allowed us to do, we find that it has important things to teach us about what literary critic Paul de Man considered the paradigmatic ideological construction, the aesthetic.

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¹ In fact an article at the influential popular arts and culture website *The A.V. Club* entitled “The golden age of TV is dead; long live the golden age of TV” features as its lead-in image a still of *Breaking Bad*'s Walter White.

² Szalay advises us to remember “Norman Lear, Aaron Spelling, Steven Bochco, Chris Carter, Aaron Sorkin, and many others” (111).

³ I have reservations about this position based in part on the tendency *The Wire* has to rely on realist tropes that serve to obscure the artifice of the series.

⁵ The scene also includes a veiled reference to a modern master of horror-suspense, and a clear influence on Gilligan, John Carpenter (*Assault on Precinct 13*, *Halloween*). Saul's shell corporation, to which Badger's payment is to be made, is called Ice Station Zebra. The name comes from the title of a 1968 film starring Rock Hudson that Carpenter is an avowed fan of (Lang), and that plays a small role in Carpenter's made for television biopic *Elvis* (Williams 121).

⁷ See Andrzej Warminski's "The Future Past of Literary Theory" for an in-depth discussion of *dynamis* in Aristotle's theory of tragedy.

⁸ Although in the present analysis we are concerned with Gilligan's intent regarding the aesthetic experience the series produces, we do not actually need an account of intent that goes beyond that of creating art for the present definition of "aesthetic" to function. The question of intent in art is a tricky one, of course, but I think in this case we are on solid ground when we note the intentionality in the specific case of *Breaking Bad*.

⁹ Nussbaum writes in "That Mind-Bending Phone Call on Last Night's '*Breaking Bad*'" that "if you ignore the dead kids, son, you are watching '*Breaking Bad*' wrong." This is an untenable position in light of the series finale.

¹⁰ As even the most cursory glance shows heavy metal—like its relative hardcore punk—is an almost absurdly variegated genre. The list of "extreme" subgenres provided here represents only a very small number of subgenres. And even death metal itself is subdivided into different types by style (melodic death metal [aka melo-death], technical death metal, brutal death metal) and by origin of location (Swedish death metal, Florida death metal, etc.). The reasons for this almost pathological subcategorization within heavy metal are too complex to address at present, but the phenomenon is fascinating indeed.

¹¹ "Thrash engendered a variety of ever more radical extreme metal genres.... [b]ands such as Death and Possessed created death metal out of thrash metal. Vocals became less and less intelligible, songwriting became more complex and guitar 'riffs'... sounded increasingly... dark" (Kahn-Harris *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge* 3).

¹² If our hypothetical fan experienced none of the oppressive and grueling aspects of death metal, she would have no reason to listen to it.

¹³ Philosopher David Vessey offers a useful discussion of the two words and their respective associations:

Erlebnis is constructed from *leben*, to live, and refers to subjective, first-hand experiences. (In English we have a way of talking that parallels the German; consider the sentence "To understand something you need to live it.") It is this subset of experiences that Husserl and Wilhelm Dilthey saw as a possible source for philosophical foundations. *Erfahrung* refers to that subset of experience that connects directly to judgment; it is often inferred, need not be first-person, and emphasizes cognitive insights. *Erfahrung* is constructed from *fahren*, to travel, as the realizations in the experiences move and transform one. It is the correlate for the English word empirical, as in the empirical sciences (*Erfahrungswissenschaft*) and being experienced (*erfahrend*). (3-4)

¹⁴ Dilthey's primary intellectual project was a theoretical account of the human sciences and perhaps his greatest contribution to such an account was arguably the notion that human life, i.e. lived experience, exists in a way that Heidegger would later call "always-already" within interpretive cultural and historical contexts.

¹⁵ "Das könnte sein, weil sich deren Erfahrung in ihrer Struktur verändert hat"

¹⁶ In that seminal essay Benjamin writes

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership.... The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated. This holds not only for the art work but also, for instance, for a landscape which passes in review before the spectator in a movie. In the case of the art object, a most sensitive nucleus – namely, its authenticity – is interfered with whereas no natural object is vulnerable on that score. The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object.

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura" and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. (220-221)

¹⁷ It is crucial to note that for Gadamer “prejudice” cannot and should not be avoided. In terms of what we have seen of Dilthey, we might say that Gadamer’s prejudice is a central part of the lifeworld.

¹⁸ Although Heidegger does not notably engage with the *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* distinction, his well-known discussion of the Greek temple in “The Origin of the Work of Art” is an excellent example of an analogous analysis.

¹⁹ Benjamin sees a certain radical, perhaps even violently disruptive, potential for liberation here when he writes of “the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock” (“Motifs” 194). In contrast, in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer advocates for a rejection of what can be called the ideology of *Erlebnis* in favor of an acknowledgement of the crucial meaning making of a hermeneutic approach that acknowledges tradition, history, and positive prejudice, i.e. *Erfahrung*.

²⁰ Benjamin’s analyses in *The Arcades Project*, and in various essays available elsewhere, of the collector, the *flâneur*, the experience of the Parisian Arcades, the storyteller and others echo this diagnosis if in distinct ways.

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