The Desert City Landscape and its Influence on *Breaking Bad*

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Abstract

In AMC’s critically-acclaimed television series *Breaking Bad*, the city of Albuquerque, New Mexico and its environs pose as the frequent backdrop to methamphetamine dealings, death threats, and other debaucheries. In these open desert settings, there is a sweeping arena for countless secret or illegal activities to transpire that would not be possible in other settings, such as ocean-side beaches, swampy marshes, or lush forests. The purpose of this paper is to examine the physical landscapes in and around Albuquerque and how they contribute to the progression of the Breaking Bad narrative in a unique way that other cities’ landscapes would not provide.The physical geography of this series’ setting is imperative to the story being told; it pushes forth storylines that would stagnate if natural landscapes were not available. Here, geographic studies and television/media studies culminate in a relatively unexplored discipline that explores how physical landscapes are used as a unique plot device to advance narratives.

**Introduction:**

AMC’s critically acclaimed television show *Breaking Bad* has produced as much fodder as it has accolades since its inception in 2008. The series chronicles the rise and fall of Walter White, an extremely overqualified high school chemistry teacher who is diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer. Faced with certain death and financial struggles, Walt’s diagnosis acts as a catalyst that pushes him to team up with a former student, Jesse Pinkman, to cook methamphetamines so that he can provide for his family upon his death. *Breaking Bad*’s intricate storytelling, cinematography, dark humor, and acting have cemented the series as one of the most highly praised in recent history. Because of the critical acclaim surrounding the show, fans and scholars have thoroughly analyzed many of its characters, themes, and plot devices. Here, the focus is on the physical geography in the setting of *Breaking Bad*, and how these desert city landscapes contribute to the series’ narrative.

Since the inception of film and television (henceforth referred to simply as “film”), scholars have studied the two mediums extensively. Film offers insight on how the world is perceived by filmmakers, actors, and audiences. Because audiences watch and engage in film, it is important to study them. In his “Mapping of Cinematic Places: Icons, Ideology, and the Power of (Mis)representation,” Jeff Hopkins (1994) clarifies: “The cinematic landscape is not… a neutral place of entertainment or an objective documentation or mirror of the "real," but an ideologically charged cultural creation whereby meanings or place and society are made, legitimized, contested, and obscured” (p. 47). Films are a reflection of reality that do not exist in an unbiased vacuum; they exist in the cultural and social conditions where they are created. Zimmerman and Lukinbeal (2006) reflect this sentiment again, defining film geography as “a new and growing interdisciplinary research arena that links the spatiality of cinema with the social and cultural geographies of everyday life” (p. 316). In the case of *Breaking Bad*, it is the representation and meanings of landscapes in the desert that we are interested in.

Scholarly literature on *Breaking Bad* as a film already exists in a myriad of ways. It has been studied in terms of psychology (Lewis, 2013), drug culture (McKenna, 2011), and even law (Erger, 2013). Much more literature on the show exists outside of academia, again reflecting on philosophy and psychology (Arp & Koepsell, 2012; Pierson, 2014), politics (Pierson, 2014), and its overall impact on popular culture (Olmstead, 2012). In addition to the published literature that exists on *Breaking Bad,* online message boards and forums offer more casual fans an arena in which to discuss and analyze the show thoroughly.

It is clear that there is no shortage in material to analyze in *Breaking Bad*. Despite the abundance of analyses that do currently exist for the show, there are still many gaps in its critical discourse, namely in terms of its setting. *Breaking Bad* takes place (and is filmed) in Albuquerque, New Mexico and its surrounding deserts, which is necessary to the progression of the narrative. While the series was not originally intended to take place in New Mexico, the production crew took advantage of the surrounding landscapes and transformed the show accordingly (Frenan & Gilligan, 2010). Vince Gilligan, the creator and executive producer of *Breaking Bad*, says that he considers Albuquerque a character in the show alongside Walt and Jesse (Gilligan, 2013). This admission by Gilligan reflects the idea of landscape as place—the notion that the background in a film acts as an active part of the narrative rather than acting simply as a space in which events occur (Aitken and Zonn, 1994; Lukinbeal, 2005). By defining the landscape as place, we are able to analyze and extract its meanings as an active part of film.

Studying the role of landscape in film is not uncommon. Themes that have been studied include the role of the city in film (Ford, 1994), as well as the role of the desert in film (Kennedy, 1994). Landscape has been studied in terms of nature-based programs on BBC (Wheatley, 2011), as well as in terms of its influence on tourism (Reijnders, 2009; Beeton, 2010). These types of study help the audience to reflect on the role of landscapes within films.

Considering the desert as a character in the show, we can look at its influence on the plot of *Breaking Bad*. Here, we define the concept of the “desert city,” which is defined as a major American Southwestern city surrounding by desert landscapes (Albuquerque, Tucson, Phoenix, etc.). The desert city is a unique locale that offers “big city” amenities, while also offering a great degree of privacy and anonymity in the surrounding deserts. The purpose of this paper is to examine the physical landscapes in and around Albuquerque and how this desert city contributes to the progression of the *Breaking Bad* narrative in a unique way that other cities’ landscapes would not provide.

**Methods:**

In order to ascertain the importance of the desert city on the *Breaking Bad* narrative, it is necessary to conduct a content analysis on the show. This content analysis is described by Deborah P. Dixon in *Research Methods in Geography* (2010) as “the manner in which the particular meanings expressed by an object such as a book or the body can be discerned according to the patter of signifiers (that is, words, images, or practices) perceived to be present” (p. 393). Here, *Breaking Bad* is essentially used as a text to be read, interpreted, and analyzed. Much like one would read a novel and utilize imagery to analyze meaning, one can do the same with a television show (possibly more so, as images are explicit and visual).

To completely analyze the content of *Breaking Bad*, the series must be watched in its entirety. Data for each desert scene, the particular focus of this study, was collected based on an outline describing who, what, when, where, and why each scene was occurring. In addition to this, environmental characteristics and references to the environment were noted. “Who” defines who is in each scene. “What” describes the major plot points that define each scene. “When” describes the time of day that each scene occurred (day or night). “Where” defines where each scene occurred, both in terms of physical location (New Mexico, Mexico, etc.) and the physical geography of that location (desert, river, etc.). “Why” describes the purpose of each scene in relation to the overall narrative of *Breaking Bad*, such as instances of foreshadowing, character building, or simple exposition. Environmental characteristics describe what the viewer sees in each natural landscape scene, which could include anything from small shrubs to mountains in the background to tall grass, etc. References to the environment describe both direct and indirect references to the environment. These components help to fully describe the content of each scene of *Breaking Bad* that occurs in the desert landscape, and how these scenes contribute to its overall narrative.

It is important to note that this content analysis takes place in the American context, where certain places and spaces (such as mountains and deserts) have specific cultural meanings and understandings. These meanings are oftentimes consistent *within* the American context, but may change drastically among other cultural contexts (for example, a snake might signify fear and death in American culture, whereas a snake might signify luck and good fortune in another culture). Meanings behind signifiers are *not* globally static, so this analysis is applicable specifically to American culture.

In addition to analyzing the content of each desert landscape scene, quantitative data was also collected for each episode, describing the duration of desert scenes throughout the show. While this quantitative data is not essential in analyzing the content of *Breaking Bad*, it is good supplemental material that displays how frequently desert scenes were utilized throughout the show.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Season** | **Episode** | **Episode Title** | **Number of Natural Scenes** | **Duration of Scenes** | **Total Episode Length** | **Portion of Natural vs. All** |
| 01 | 01 | Pilot | 3 | 16:51 | 58:04 | 29.02% |
| 01 | 02 | Cat’s in the Bag… | 2 | 05:36 | 48:05 | 11.65% |
| 01 | 03 | …And the Bag’s in the River | 1 | 01:50 | 48:04 | 3.81% |
| 01 | 04 | Cancer Man | 0 | 00:00 | 48:08 | 0.0% |
| 01 | 05 | Gray Matter | 3 | 04:41 | 48:04 | 9.74% |
| 01 | 06 | Crazy Handful of Nothin’ | 2 | 07:33 | 47:58 | 15.73% |
| 01 | 07 | A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal | 2 | 08:24 | 47:35 | 17.65% |
| **S1 TOTAL** |  |  | **13** | **80:55 (01:20:55)** | **345:58 (05:45:58)** | **23.39%** |
| 02 | 01 | Seven Thirty Seven | 3 | 12:21 | 47:12 | 26.17% |
| 02 | 02 | Grilled | 4 | 30:05 | 47:55 | 62.78% |
| 02 | 03 | Bit by a Dead Bee | 1 | 02:38 | 46:56 | 5.60% |
| 02 | 04 | Down | 0 | 00:00 | 47:21 | 0% |
| 02 | 05 | Breakage | 4 | 10:58 | 47:17 | 23.19% |
| 02 | 06 | Peekaboo | 0 | 00:00 | 47:18 | 0% |
| 02 | 07 | Negro y Azul | 2 | 07:10 | 47:19 | 15.15% |
| 02 | 08 | Better Call Saul | 1 | 04:21 | 47:19 | 9.2% |
| 02 | 09 | 4 Days Out | 1 | 28:04 | 47:19 | 59.32% |
| 02 | 10 | Over | 0 | 00:00 | 47:19 | 0% |
| 02 | 11 | Mandala | 0 | 00:00 | 47:18 | 0% |
| 02 | 12 | Phoenix | 0 | 00:00 | 47:21 | 0% |
| 02 | 13 | ABQ | 0 | 00:00 | 47:32 | 0% |
| **S2 TOTAL** |  |  | **16** | **95:37 (01:35:37)** | **615:26**  **(10:15:26)** | **15.54%** |
| 03 | 01 | No Mas | 3 | 10:30 | 47:11 | 22.25% |
| 03 | 02 | Caballo Sin Nombre | 1 | 04:14 | 47:10 | 9.0% |
| 03 | 03 | I.F.T. | 1 | 05:19 | 47:11 | 11.27% |
| 03 | 04 | Green Light | 0 | 00:00 | 47:11 | 0% |
| 03 | 05 | Mas | 0 | 00:00 | 47:12 | 0% |
| 03 | 06 | Sunset | 2 | 06:42 | 47:11 | 14.20% |
| 03 | 07 | One Minute | 1 | 03:01 | 47:11 | 6.39% |
| 03 | 08 | I See You | 0 | 00:00 | 47:13 | 0% |
| 03 | 09 | Kafkaesque | 1 | 01:36 | 47:11 | 3.4% |
| 03 | 10 | Fly | 0 | 00:00 | 47:11 | 0% |
| 03 | 11 | Abiquiu | 0 | 00:00 | 47:11 | 0% |
| 03 | 12 | Half Measures | 0 | 00:00 | 47:12 | 0% |
| 03 | 13 | Full Measure | 1 | 08:16 | 47:12 | 17.51% |
| **S3 TOTAL** |  |  | **10** | **39:28 (00:39:38)** | **613:15**  **(10:13:15)** | **6.44%** |

**Table 1**, Natural Landscape Scenes in *Breaking Bad*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Season** | **Episode** | **Episode Title** | **Number of Natural Scenes** | **Duration of Scenes** | **Total Episode Length** | **Portion of Natural vs. All** |
| 04 | 01 | Box Cutter | 0 | 00:00 | 47:09 | 0% |
| 04 | 02 | Thirty-Eight Snub | 0 | 00:00 | 45:54 | 0% |
| 04 | 03 | Open House | 0 | 00:00 | 46:11 | 0% |
| 04 | 04 | Bullet Points | 2 | 05:10 | 45:09 | 11.44% |
| 04 | 05 | Shotgun | 3 | 12:57 | 47:09 | 27.47% |
| 04 | 06 | Cornered | 2 | 05:26 | 47:11 | 11.52% |
| 04 | 07 | Problem Dog | 2 | 15:10 | 47:10 | 32.16% |
| 04 | 08 | Hermanos | 1 | 11:07 | 47:10 | 23.57% |
| 04 | 09 | Bug | 1 | 01:40 | 47:08 | 3.54% |
| 04 | 10 | Salud | 4 | 22:27 | 47:11 | 48.61% |
| 04 | 11 | Crawl Space | 3 | 12:16 | 46:53 | 26.16% |
| 04 | 12 | End Times | 1 | 01:53 | 45:56 | 4.1% |
| 04 | 13 | Face Off | 1 | 01:27 | 50:23 | 2.88% |
| **S4 TOTAL** |  |  | **20** | **89:33 (01:29:33)** | **610:34**  **(10:10:34)** | **14.67%** |
| 5 | 1 | Live Free or Die | 3 | 08:41 | 42:55 | 20.23% |
| 5 | 2 | Madrigal | 0 | 00:00 | 47:10 | 0% |
| 5 | 3 | Hazard Pay | 0 | 00:00 | 47:13 | 0% |
| 5 | 4 | Fifty-One | 0 | 00:00 | 47:19 | 0% |
| 5 | 5 | Dead Freight | 3 | 21:22 | 48:00 | 44.51% |
| 5 | 6 | Buyout | 1 | 02:55 | 47:25 | 6.2% |
| 5 | 7 | Say My Name | 4 | 15:10 | 47:14 | 32.11% |
| 5 | 8 | Gliding All Over | 0 | 00:00 | 47:18 | 0% |
| 5 | 9 | Blood Money | 0 | 00:00 | 47:08 | 0% |
| 5 | 10 | Buried | 3 | 10:09 | 47:08 | 21.53% |
| 5 | 11 | Confessions | 1 | 07:12 | 47:08 | 15.28% |
| 5 | 12 | Rabid Dog | 0 | 00:00 | 47:02 | 0% |
| 5 | 13 | To’hajiilee | 1 | 16:37 | 46:03 | 36.08% |
| 5 | 14 | Ozymandias | 1 | 23:02 | 46:59 | 49.02% |
| 5 | 15 | Granite State | 2 | 15:27 | 53:05 | 29.11% |
| 5 | 16 | Felina | 1 | 01:26 | 55:23 | 2.6% |
| **S5 TOTAL** |  |  | **20** | **122:01 (02:02:01)** | **764:57**  **(12:44:27)** | **15.95%** |
| **SERIES TOTAL** | **62** |  | **79** | **427:34 (07:07:34)** | **2950:10 (49:10:10)** | **14.49%** |

**Table 1 (continued),** Natural Landscape Scenes in Breaking Bad

The content analysis of Breaking Bad reveals how the landscape works within the show. Again, the series utilizes the landscape as a *character* within the show, and as a character, the desert evokes certain qualities or themes. Based on the existing literature of desert landscapes and watching the show itself, a number of themes presented themselves throughout the desert scenes of *Breaking Bad*: privacy, harsh physical elements, unchecked violence and lawlessness. These themes are in no way entirely inclusive of the characterization of the desert landscape, but they are the most common themes utilized throughout *Breaking Bad*.

**Analysis:**

While analyzing the desert city landscape and its role on the narrative of *Breaking Bad*, several themes continually emerge: privacy, harsh physical elements, unchecked violence and lawlessness. These themes are essential in pushing forth the story without significant impedance. The desert landscape offers a great deal of privacy; miles of vast, uninhabited desert surround the Albuquerque metro. The desert city also offers fluid mobility, as characters are quickly and easily able to move in and out of the desert landscape. It is also a place of physical duress if exposed to the harsh desert elements without the proper equipment. The desert city also presents the themes of unchecked violence and lawlessness, reminiscent of classic American Western film motifs. These themes are fluid and oftentimes bleed into one another—in many examples, it is a combination of these elements that pushes the characters of *Breaking Bad* out into the desert. While the themes are not solitary and static, this analysis is divided into the three main themes to better assess how they contribute to the show’s narrative.

Privacy:

The series’ first forays into the desert are necessitated by the need for utter privacy while cooking meth. The first episode of the series, “Pilot” sets up the central conflict of the first half of season: Walt and Jesse are pitted against Emilio and Krazy-8, all of whom are working in the business of manufacturing and selling methamphetamines. This first episode sets the framework for the importance of the desert landscape in the infancy of the series. Once Walt and Jesse decide that they will start cooking meth together, they decide that they must establish *where* this cooking will take place. Neither of their homes are viable options: Walt must keep his nefarious activities a secret from his family, and Jesse states that he does not “shit where he eat(s),” indicating that he is not willing to mix his illegal activities with his home life. Furthermore, Walt is especially resistant to being caught by cops or DEA agents because doing so would result in the loss of his monetary earnings, which is why he initially enters the meth business. Both of the characters require utter privacy. Walt suggests that they rent out a storage unit in which to cook meth, but Jesse (who is well-acquainted with the ins and outs of the meth business) informs him that the cops are aware of this tactic, so it is not safe. Jesse says that an RV is the best option—they could “drive way out in the boonies…be all evasive.” An RV allows Walt and Jesse to cook meth in desolate landscapes, far from the seeing eyes of their families, authority figures, or the general public.

In addition to escaping the eyes of other people, cooking meth in an RV in the desert also allows Jesse and Walt to escape the *noses* of other people. In “Pilot,” Walt removes his clothes prior to his first cook in the desert, informing Jesse that he “can’t go home smelling like a meth lab.” This statement is an indication that the production of meth emits a distinct and noticeable smell, which could attract unwanted attention. This problem of smell is repeated several times throughout the series, indicating that it is a common problem associated with the privacy (or lack thereof) of meth labs[[1]](#footnote-1).

At the beginning stages of the series, the privacy allotted by the desert city landscape is integral to the progression of the *Breaking Bad* narrative. As Walt and Jesse enter the meth business together, they must make every effort to be secretive. The desert is the perfect landscape to allow for these illegal activities. Walt and Jesse take their roaming meth lab out in the desert, far from any public or conspicuous locations (which is made evident through numerous widescreen shots, which show the lonely RV perched in solitude). They are far enough away from the city that neither sight nor smell is a problem for them. Obviously, the process of cooking meth is integral in the first season, as it is the major plot for the entire series. In this season, the desert is the main arena for cooking meth, which leads to all other activities in the show as Walt and Jesse climb their way up the ladder to the largest meth empire in the Southwest. Without the privacy that the desert landscape allots, it is unlikely that Walt and Jesse would have managed to keep their meth manufacturing a secret long enough to build a reputation and subsequently move to more stable (and profitable) cooking locations.

Season 3 sees a distinct decline in the amount of scenes that occur in the desert landscape after Walt briefly decides to leave the meth business. Because Walt and Jesse are not cooking meth in an RV in the desert, there is no need for the privacy that the desert allows. Walt, however, does not stay away from the meth business for long, as Gus Fring convinces him to manufacture meth for his well-established drug empire. Upon this switch to working for Gus, Walt is given an underground meth super-lab, which allows for him to cook meth in a private space without travelling great distances into the desert. The introduction of Gus Fring’s meth lab is significant because it allows for discretion and privacy without the need to travel far into the desert.

The super-lab, however, does not remain a centerpiece in the show for long; when Walt and Jesse break ties with Fring at the end of season 4, they burn down the lab to destroy any evidence tying them to the meth business. Now that Walt and Jesse are in charge of their own operations, they must find new facilities to cook meth. They resort to cooking meth in homes that are being “bug-bombed,” which provides privacy from homeowners, as well as an adequate excuse for the resultant stench.

While the show stresses the importance of *cooking* meth in the natural desert landscapes, it conversely stresses the public nature of *dealing* meth. In the final episode of the first season, “A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal,” Walt and Jesse make arrangements to meet with a local meth distributor, Tuco, in a junkyard far out in the desert. Walt, an inexperienced drug manufacturer/dealer, makes the arrangements and assumes that a private, secluded location would be ideal for such activities. Upon arrival to the desolate junkyard, Jesse starts ribbing Walt about his location choice, saying that it was a non-criminal’s idea of a criminal location. He suggests that they would have been better off making the deal at Taco Cabeza, as it is “nice and public, open twenty-four hours, nobody ever gets shot at Taco Cabeza.” He further suggests that they meet in a mall; Tuco cannot murder them psychotically in a public mall. When Tuco arrives, he reflects this sentiment, declaring, “And what are we doing way the hell out here? What? They close the mall or something?”

Both of the experienced drug dealers make it clear that public, rather than private and secluded, locations are desirable when making drug transactions. Jesse points out that there is significantly less threat to drug dealers when dealing publicly; as is shown later in the series, it is not uncommon for drug users to rob and/or threaten their dealers. The act of *dealing* drugs takes a matter of seconds and carries a great threat, and thus can easily and quickly be performed in the public sphere. Manufacturing drugs, on the other hand, requires a great deal of privacy for an extended period of time. So while it is important that the manufacture of drugs takes place in a private area, it is equally important that the dealing of drugs takes place in a public area (where threats are less likely, and where the customers are located).

The usefulness of the privacy that the desert allows is not limited to meth cooking sites; it also allows for the main characters to conduct a train heist in the episode “Dead Freight.” Walt, Jesse, and Mike (Gus Fring’s former partner who teams up with Walt and Jesse after Gus’ death) arrange a train heist to steal methylamine, a necessary component of meth, and enlist the newbie Todd to help. The heist is made possible because of the privacy of the desert landscape—the train carrying the supplies runs through a “dark territory” in which the train loses all outside communications. The dark territory is necessary for Walt and his crew to get the train stopped and siphon methylamine from it, while replacing the missing liquid with water. This is carried out discreetly because two large barrels—one empty to take in methylamine, one full of water to pump back into the shipping container—are buried just below the surface of the earth. These barrels are pertinent to the heist, cannot be visible, and must be in a location in which the characters can discreetly access. The desert landscape allows for these barrels to be buried discreetly because the unearthed dirt blends in well with the loose dirt that is naturally common in these landscapes—had they been buried under a grassy surface, it would be obvious that the ground had recently been unearthed. Similar to the discretion required when cooking meth, Walt and his crew need utter privacy so that they cannot be legally punished for stealing methylamine.

Burying also becomes an important facet of the privacy in the desert landscape. In addition to the barrels from the train heist being buried discreetly in the desert, other significant items are buried in the desert because of how private the landscape is. In the season 5 episode “Buried,” after Walt’s Drug Enforcement Agency brother-in-law Hank identifies him as Albuquerque’s highly sought-after meth kingpin, Walt must bury all of his illegally-earned money to hide it effectively. The money, originally housed in a storage unit within Albuquerque, is the only tangible evidence linking Walt to the drug business, so it is imperative that it be hidden without any chance of discovery—the desert is an obvious choice for complete discretion.

Money is not the only item that is buried in the privacy of the desert—the desert also serves as a discreet graveyard. After Walt unintentionally leads Hank, his partner Gomez, and Jesse to his money burial site, tensions flare and a violent shootout occurs, resulting in the deaths of Hank and Gomez. The instigators of the shootout, Walt’s neo-Nazi lackeys, know that Hank and Gomez are DEA agents, so hiding their bodies is of utmost importance. Because of the desert landscape, the neo-Nazis are able to bury the agents discreetly (and conveniently, as they have already unearthed and stolen Walt’s buried money, leaving a vacant grave site), thus successfully evading any consequences stemming from the murder of federal agents.

It is important to note that this specific desert landscape is utilized multiple times throughout the series. As Jesse points out in “To’hajiilee,” this is the site of Walt and Jesse’s first cook in the desert from the episode “Pilot.” It shows up again in “Buried” when Walt buries his drug money to hide it from Hank and also to preserve it for his family after he dies. Lastly, it is the site of the deadly shootout in which the Nazi gang murders Hank and Gomez in “To’hajiilee” and “Ozymandias[[2]](#footnote-2)”. The commonality that ties all of these events together is the need for utter privacy. This particular landscape is perfect to permit privacy—it is far out in the desert, which is already ideal, but high mesas and plateaus also surround it. These high rock formations create a bowl that protects the area both from sight and sound. They act as a buffer that allow for any activities, from cooking meth to machine gun shootouts, to occur without outside interference.

It is also important to note the temporal aspect of each of the scenes that occurs in the desert. The vast majority of the desert scenes portrayed in *Breaking Bad* occur midday. The implication here is that the natural landscape is so overwhelmingly concealed that it allows for secretive activities to occur in broad daylight. This allows for most of the characters to lead normal lives while concealing their illegal activities during the day. The “anything goes” mentality is prevalent in this case, as well. In popular culture, it is most often that nefarious and dangerous pursuits occur at night, when they are easily concealed. This is nearly completely disregarded in *Breaking Bad*, with the vast majority of desert occurring during the day.

This day versus night dichotomy is further applied to murders that occur throughout the show. While many murders in the show occur indoors, the interest here are murders that occur outdoors. Despite the fact that several people are murdered at night outdoors, every death that occurs in the desert happens in broad daylight . The isolation of the natural landscapes in these scenes allows for murders to occur uninhibited. When murders occur outdoors but are not in natural landscapes, however, measures *are* taken in order to be quiet and/or discreet. This is exemplified in the episodes “Half Measures” and “Granite State,” where two murders occur outdoors at night. In “Half Measures,” Walt runs over two rival gang members who are approaching Jesse; when one is still alive after the hit, Walt shoots him in the head, the loud gunshot reverberating through the urban landscape. In this scene, Jesse, who is approaching the gang members in order to shoot them, had his gun hidden in his pocket. He is wearing black clothing so that he will blend in with the dark surroundings. After Walt mauls the two gang members, he instructs Jesse to run, suggesting that it is important for him to flee quickly in order to avoid repercussions for his actions. In “Granite State,” Todd shoots Jesse’s former girlfriend Andrea on her front porch. Todd also utilizes dark clothing to blend into his surroundings. Todd also uses a silencer on his gun so that his gunshot will go unnoticed in the populated neighborhood. In both of these examples, the aggressors take measures to conceal their murders when they occur outdoors at night. Similar measures are not taken when murders occur in natural landscapes.

As previously stated, popular culture oftentimes depicts nighttime as an arena for mischievous and illegal activities, specifically referring to murders here. In the case of *Breaking Bad*, however, nighttime is not used as a veil to conceal murders/deaths in natural landscapes; in fact, the daylight appears to enhance these scenes. Whereas nighttime is used to conceal activities and make them indistinct, daytime is used in desert scenes to highlight the natural surroundings. In these desert scenes, it is as though the natural landscape is used in place of a brightly lit stage—nothing is going on in these scenes except for action. The natural landscapes are completely static, as opposed to bustling and ever-changing urban landscapes; they force the viewer to focus solely on the characters and their actions. The environment itself seems to push the momentum of these intense scenes forward—everything is bright and vibrant, and nothing can be hidden in the darkness. There is no need for hidden guns or dark clothing or gun silencers; everything that happens can happen in the open with little worry over quickly fleeing.

The desert landscape is imperative to the *Breaking Bad* narrative because it is the perfect site for the many nefarious activities that occur during the show. As the series begins, the desert is the primary location for Walt and Jesse’s cooking sites. As the series goes on, the desert becomes essential in other ways, such as allowing the main characters to execute a train heist and offering a private place in which to bury items that must stay hidden.

Physical Elements:

The desert is a physical landscape that can be brutally harsh or extremely comfortable depending on the location and season. Throughout *Breaking Bad*, the desert is portrayed both as a formidable obstacle and a reliable ally, which are both essential in directing the show’s plot. While these two sides of the desert are explored separately several times throughout the series, the season 2 episode “Grilled” shows both the positive and the negative aspects of the elements of the desert.

In “Grilled,” Walt and Jesse are kidnapped and held hostage by Tuco (a prominent drug dealer) upon Tuco’s false realization that someone in his crew is an undercover informant for the DEA. Tuco is able to exert control over Walt and Jesse without using physical restraints because of this desolate location; Tuco could easily kill and dispose of either of them without any interference from neighbors or passersby. If Walt or Jesse attempt to run, they will have nowhere *to* run, and will become an easy target for Tuco’s machine gun. It is because of the desolate position of the home in the desert that Walt and Jesse are able to move freely without being physically bound by Tuco. On the one hand, they are free to move about because of the desert, which ultimately leads to their escape. On the other hand, because the desert is flat and desolate, Jesse and Walt are unable to simply run away from Tuco.

The mobility that the desert landscape offers Walt and Jesse in this hostage situation is pertinent to the progression of the storyline. The two main characters previously decided that they were going to poison Tuco with ricin, which they are able to freely access due to their lack of physical restraints. While the attempt to poison their foe is unsuccessful, the planting of the ricin in Tuco’s food pushes the story forward, as his mute uncle alerts his nephew that something is amiss. This sense of something-gone-awry greatly agitates Tuco, which leads him to distrust Walt and Jesse and attempt to kill them. Walt and Jesse are able to retaliate and subdue Tuco long enough to attempt an escape before Hank, Walt’s Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agent brother-in-law, shows up, ultimately killing Tuco in a shootout.

The importance of the events in “Grilled” cannot be understated. Planting ricin in Tuco’s food unravels a chain of events that constitutes the main conflicts of seasons 2 and 3, and even trickles throughout the rest of the series. First, it pits Tuco’s already volatile family against Walt and Jesse, and subsequently Hank, which is central to the conflict of season 3. Second, it creates a power vacuum that Walt and Jesse decide to fill. With Tuco gone, there is room for a new kingpin in the meth business, and Walt and Jesse decide that they are best suited to fulfill this vacant role. This rise to the top of the meth business is central to the entirety of *Breaking Bad*. Third, as a result of Walt and Jesse’s foray into a developing meth empire, Jesse is able to meet Jane, which causes an unstoppable downward spiral. Jesse’s brief relationship with Jane results in her relapse, which ultimately causes catastrophic plane crash, killing 167 people. Each of these events occurs as a result of Tuco’s death, which was made possible because of the elements of the desert landscape. Furthermore, had Tuco taken Walt and Jesse to a more public setting, he would have had to physically restrain them to prevent them from attempting an escape; the privacy of the desert again becomes important. The desert landscape allows for an unrestrained kidnapping of Walt and Jesse, which allows them to access ricin, which ultimately unfolds the remaining events of the entire season.

“Grilled” does not show the only instance in which a character is trapped by the physical landscape of the desert. In the episode “To’Hajiilee,” Walt finds himself alone in the desert with Hank, Jesse, and Gomez quickly approaching to arrest him. Walt briefly hides behind the high rock formations in the desert, but resigns to defeat when he realizes that the desert simply will not allow him to escape the situation. He can only hide behind the formations briefly—the rest of the surrounding landscape is flat, so he would easily be caught if he tried to run. The desert forces Walt’s surrender.

The season 2 episode “4 Days Out” again makes note of the harshness of the desert landscape. Falsely believing his health condition is rapidly deteriorating, Walt decides that he must produce a mass quantity of meth in order to earn quick cash for his family. Again, the *private* desert landscape is again used as a tool to facilitate the manufacturing of meth. Walt and Jesse still do not have a stable lab, and are thus forced to cook a large batch in the middle of the desert, which allows them ample privacy for an extended period of time.

This cook, however, is wrought with problems. The battery of the RV in which the two men are cooking dies, so they are stuck in the desert with no access to anything except what they have brought with them. Assuming that their trip would be brief and without problems, Jesse only brought junk food and enough water for the weekend. The harsh desert elements make the weekend extremely brutal for the men. They cannot walk to civilization because they do not have an effective way to transport their cooler of water; furthermore, this water is wasted when a panicked Jesse puts out a small fire with it. The days are extremely hot, and the nights are frigid. The men are in extreme discomfort against the desert elements until they cleverly plot their return home.

While the desert can certainly be a foe, it is also conversely portrayed as being an idyllic location in which for Walt to live and conduct business. The penultimate episode of the series “Granite State” shows just why the desert landscape is so important in aiding Walt throughout the series. Evading the police, who think that he is responsible for Hank and Gomez’s deaths, Walt “disappears” to New Hampshire, where he must hole up in a cabin in the mountainous, show-covered landscape. The man assisting Walt in his escape states that this cabin is eight miles from the nearest town, providing privacy from the police and any suspecting neighbors.

This juxtaposition of the desert against snowy mountains shows how idyllic the desert landscape is to the activities performed in *Breaking Bad*. Temperate climates that are accustomed to snow can provide ideal desolate locations in theory, but in practice, they come with problems. First and foremost is tracking. Snow is not discreet—whether travelling by automobile or by foot, snow leaves tracks. Secondly, hunters frequent desolate forested areas. It would be easy for a hunter to innocently come upon illegal activities taking place in the mountains. Lastly, the cold is a major hindrance to outdoor desert scenes. Whether landscape scenes are used for cooking meth or simply threatening someone in a deserted location, the temperature plays a role in its accessibility. As the audience sees in “Granite State,” Walt’s deteriorating health is also negatively affected by the cold. While the deserts surrounding Albuquerque do experience cold, the clothing worn throughout the series dictates that they are much more moderate than the temperatures experienced in the American Northeast. Had the temperatures in the desert plummeted to the temperatures shown in “Granite State,” it is unlikely that Walt’s health would have allowed him to spend extended periods of time in the desert. Whether the desert is portrayed as a friend or a foe, its elements are always essential to the *Breaking Bad* plot.

Wild West, Unchecked Violence, and Lawlessness:

When considering the importance of the desert landscape in the progression of *Breaking Bad*, it is also important to acknowledge themes and motifs borrowed from classic Western films. Vince Gilligan has stated that he considers his show a “modern western” and is very forthcoming about the influence of the genre on *Breaking Bad* (Neuman & Gilligan, 2008). In this genre, the desert landscape is essential to plot progression. As Kateřina Mléčková states in her paper “Western Goes East: Limonádový Joe and Its Possible Interpretations,” the landscape is one of the key elements in western films: “The audience takes this feature for granted, but if it wasn’t there its absence would be noticed immediately” (12). She continues, describing the West as a harsh landscape in which only the strongest survive (15). The “Wild West” is a harsh place in which one has to fight to survive—a theme that is prevalent in *Breaking Bad* (Mléčková, 2006).

Mléčková goes on to describe other key characteristics in western films that are present in *Breaking Bad*. Walter White exemplifies the anti-hero trope, a character with both positive and negative qualities who eventually succumbs to the bad. Many characters (sometimes even Walt) fill the role of the villain. Mléčková defines villians as “the outlaws.” “Their place is on the dark side, on the side of evil, where law is ignored or totally absent… They took advantage of the lax legal system and anonymous milieu (in the Frontier)” (26). Their home field is the desert, which inherently possesses a degree of lawlessness. Other characteristics of the genre relevant to *Breaking Bad* area pension for violence, a lack of women[[3]](#footnote-3), proximity to the Mexican border, duels, and train heists (Mléčková, 2006). Each of these elements comes together in the series to promote a modern twist to the classic genre. Walt, his companions, and his enemies all meet under the hot New Mexican sun in order to execute the lawlessness and debauchery that is inherent to the western genre.

But what is more important than the anti-hero versus outlaws element of the Western genre is the unchecked violence and lawlessness that the desert landscape permits. While violence is plentiful in *Breaking Bad* regardless of the desert, the landscape provides for a more remote environment in which consequences for violent actions do not exist. The characters are relieved of the burden of concealment within the desert—they are free to do violent and grotesque acts without worry about being caught and being held accountable.

Examples of unchecked violence and lawlessness in the desert within *Breaking Bad* are abundant. The first example in the series is in “A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal,” in which the unpredictable drug dealer Tuco violently beats his henchman to death when he makes an innocuous remark to Walt. Tuco’s cousins, highlighted in season 3 of the series, are also shown to have a penchant for unchecked violence in the desert. In the first episode of the season, “No Mas,” the cousins kill a carload of undocumented immigrants and its driver as they are transported into Texas from Mexico. The cousins are able to do this easily because of the private nature of the expansive desert—they shoot multiple people and cause a truck to explode in flames because there is no one around to see or hear it. They are also quick to murder a cop who finds them holed up in a small house in the desert landscape. The cousins are portrayed as ruthless killers who facilitate their crimes by committing them in the private desert landscape[[4]](#footnote-4).

The instances of unchecked violence and lawlessness within the series are plentiful, but they all culminate in the final season episodes “To’Hajiilee” and “Ozymandias.” Walt, in an attempt to kill Jesse, calls his neo-Nazi henchmen to perform the execution. Realizing that Jesse was with Hank and Gomez, however, Walt calls the whole thing off, ordering the neo-Nazis to not come. They do come, of course, wreaking havoc in the desert. In a climactic shootout, the crew kills Hank and Gomez. The crime of murdering two federal agents in cold blood comes with stiff punishments, but because of the desert landscape, the gang is easily able to evade the investigation. There are no viable witnesses to the crime who are not an accessory to the murder, so the gang does not have to worry about being quiet or discreet. Furthermore, as previously stated, they are easily able to bury the deceased agents with little chance of them being found.

In addition to the explicit examples of lawlessness throughout the show, there are also a number of scenes in which the inherent threat of lawlessness that the desert implies is prominent. Throughout the show, the desert landscape is used as a formidable backdrop to violent threats against characters. Here, it is important that the natural landscape is seen as more than simply a private place. This privacy is indicative of much more—it implies a large degree of lawlessness. In the natural landscape, there is no authority, thus there are no rules. People can say and do what they want without worry of consequences. This applies to the actions previously discussed—cooking meth, kidnapping, killing, etc. It also applies to threats that occur in *Breaking Bad*. People can easily be threatened anywhere, public or private. In this show, however, private natural landscapes are often chosen as the location for threats because of the imminent threat of death that looms. Oftentimes, these threats do not lead to immediate action, but are effective regardless.

One of the first instances of these threats occurs in “Better Call Saul,” an episode in the second season of *Breaking Bad*. When trying to enlist the help of criminal lawyer Saul Goodman, Walt and Jesse kidnap Saul and threaten to kill him if he does not do what they say. In the season 4 episode “Crawl Space,” Gus and his crew take Walt out into the desert to fire him as lead meth cook. Gus explicitly tells Walt that he will kill his entire family if he goes to the laundry facility (with the underground meth lab) or if he goes near Jesse again. These scenes could easily have occurred in more public spaces, but closed physical locations offer a sense of comfort that is unwanted in these scenes. Public places, such as bars, restaurants, or homes, offer a chance for escape—if things go awry, victims can always attempt to flee. When threats and meetings take place in the desert, there is very little chance of escape. The open, vast landscape makes it difficult to hide, and the sun/heat require large quantities of water for human survival over an extended period of time. If an individual does escape from danger in the desert, they would have to be well equipped with supplies (or have access to a motor vehicle) to survive and go back to civilization.

Sometimes the threats made in natural landscapes are much less explicit, such as in the season 5 episode “Confessions.” In this episode, Walt tries to manipulate Jesse into leaving town so that he does not have to worry about him informing the cops. Jesse, finally aware of Walt’s manipulation, declares that he is aware of the threat that the natural landscape poses. He yells to Walt, “I mean, isn’t that what this is all about? Us meeting way the hell out here? In case I say no?” Here Jesse implies that Walt plans on killing him if he refuses to leave town willingly. While Walt did not explicitly threaten Jesse, he utilized the desert landscape as a threatening force. In each of these cases, the desert is used to instill fear. Again, the implication is that there are no rules in the desert. Anything goes. There is no one to see or hear any activities, and thus there is no possibility for outside intervention if trouble arises . Even if victims are able to call for help, they are so far from civilization that help will not arrive quickly enough in order to help. Being in the natural landscape gives the aggressor control without weapons.

Similarly, the desert is also used as a middle ground meeting space because of the sense of lawlessness. This is seen many times throughout the series, such as in the season 3 episode “One Minute,” when Gus informs Tuco’s cousins that they cannot kill Walt but they can kill Hank. In the final episode of the same season, the desert is used as a negotiation spot between Walt and Gus after Walt kills two rival drug dealers. In the season 5 episodes “Buyout” and “Say My Name,” the desert is again used as a negotiation spot between Walt’s crew and a Phoenix competitor’s crew. Again, while threats are not explicitly made during these scenes, the natural landscape provides for an “anything goes” atmosphere that dictates threat. These locations are used as a middle ground to prevent any one person from having the upper hand in any situation, but the tone of each of these scenes dictates that anything could happen because of the open, expansive, and private desert. Each of these middle ground scenes could occur in public places, private homes, or in discreet backrooms (as is oftentimes the case in dramas similar to *Breaking Bad*) but they instead occur in natural landscapes in order to instill the fear that rules do not apply.

These meetings in desert landscapes are neatly placed against meetings in more public urban areas, again reinforcing the idea that privacy is paramount. For example, in the season 5 episode “Confessions,” Walt and his wife meet with Hank and his wife in a crowded restaurant after Hank accuses Walt of being Heisenberg. This initial discovery caused a physical fight between Walt and Hank in “Blood Money;” in “Confessions,” the two make a conscious decision to meet in a public restaurant in order to quell any physical tension that might arise. Similarly, in the following episode (“Rabid Dog”), Jesse and Hank team up to try to trick Walt into confessing his crimes. Jesse, equipped with a wire to capture all talking on tape, plans to meet Walt in a public town square. Hank and Gomez make this locational decision to stifle any of Walt’s attempts to put Jesse in danger. A public, daytime setting allows for many witnesses to any potential crimes, and thus acts as a deterrent against such activities. The public setting acts as a safety net in this case.

The unchecked violence and lawlessness that exist in the desert scenes of *Breaking Bad* make the show what it is—a gritty drama in which there is no rules. More than anything else, the desert landscape forces the viewer to reflect on Western motifs and apply them to the series. Without the lawlessness of the desert, many of the pivotal moments of the show would not have taken place.

**Conclusion:**

The content analysis of *Breaking Bad* reveals the importance of the desert landscape in perpetuating the stories of the series. The desert landscapes provide the characters with a lawless and secret arena in which to commit nefarious activities. These activities, ranging from death threats to cooking meth to actual murders, must be shielded from the public view so that they can continue. This is the primary function of the desert landscape; it acts as a shield that protects aggressors from the punishment of the law. It is an arena where nothing is off limits—there are no rules in the desert. The desert is also a place of harsh physical elements that creates the perfect environment in which to cook meth, but also creates problems. These themes appear multiple times throughout the five seasons of *Breaking Bad*, cementing the importance of the desert landscape in the progression of the show.

This research situates itself within the field of geography of film, which has much room for growing literature. While many television series are set in large, highly recognizable cities, Breaking Bad is unique because it is actually filmed in the same city where it is set. Furthermore, writers and producers make the extra effort for the show to be true to its setting; rather than utilizing generic street names, products, and locations, the show lists things that are actually found in Albuquerque (Kmet, 2013). This offers fans and scholars a unique opportunity to analyze the show in a real life context that other shows do not. As films and television shows continue to utilize landscapes as characters, studies such as these can continue to flourish.

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1. In S01E07, “A No-Rough-Stuff-Type Deal,” Walt and Jesse are cooking meth in Jesse’s basement when a group of people come through his open house. One woman sniffs the air in disgust, referencing the meth smell. In S03E05, “Mas,” when Gus first introduces Walt to his new underground meth lab, he assures him that the lab has a state of the art filtration system that only emits odorless steam. In S05E03, “Hazard Pay,” Walt and Jesse’s lawyer Saul tries to find them a new place to cook meth; all of the locations are discrete in both sound and smell. Saul specifically states that one location “stinks already, you’ll blend right in.” In the same episode, Walt suggests that they cook in “bug-bombed” houses that are covered in tents and filled with noxious poisons to kill insects. He makes a point to say that no one would think twice about smell emanating from a tented home; no one would investigate them. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Ozymandias” is a reference to the famous Percy Bysshe Shelley poem of the same name, which directly addresses the desert landscape. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Lydia Rodarte-Quayle is the only woman shown in any desert scene. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The cousins are never caught for killing the immigrants or the cop in the desert. They are caught, however, when they attack Hank in a public parking lot within city limits. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)