

BREAKING BAD: EVEN BETTER
THAN THE GREAT BRITISH
BAKE-OFF. NO, REALLY



THE END IS NIGH

This month sees the final episode of *Breaking Bad* drop onto Netflix. It's the end of an era, and one that will be met by millions of viewers with equal measures of anticipation and sorrow. As it reaches its crescendo, Lizzie Pook asks if this is the greatest TV show of all time

Hop on the bus for the *Breaking Bad*-themed tour of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and you can buy a bag of 'meth' for \$1, explore the dens of Mexican drug lords and eat lunch at the fast-food chain that's hiding a billion-dollar methamphetamine empire.

Like the *Sex And The City* tour of Manhattan, this is the true mark of a cultural phenomenon. But, unlike *SATC*, the inspiration for this bizarre tourist attraction is not so mainstream. Its origin is in fact 'a little show about drugs', that slow-burned its way into becoming one of the most important events of 21st-century television.

If you have never seen *Breaking Bad*, I can only say this: watch it. Created by former *X-Files* writer Vince Gilligan, it tells the story of Walter White (played by Bryan Cranston), a small-town chemistry teacher who, upon being diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, teams up with one of his ex-students to produce and sell crystal meth. Airing originally on

cable network AMC in the US, incredibly it was mostly ignored by British broadcasters, save for apologetic nods by 5USA and FX.

But eventually it found its niche in the UK via Netflix, building up a fanbase now millions strong and generating an overwhelmingly positive critical response (its cult status was confirmed when *The Simpsons* paid homage to it in its opening titles, with Homer clad in a Heisenberg disguise). In the US, viewing figures peaked at six million while in the UK a recent episode was pirated more than 500,000 times in 12 hours – the morally dubious sign of a *really* good show.

I'll admit it, I have cancelled overdue catch-ups with friends to watch *Breaking Bad*. I have foregone hours of sleep and countless meaningful conversations to share my downtime with Walter White. He's become the third wheel in mine and my boyfriend's relationship; there's nothing better than a night in, just the three of us. And, while some might say *Breaking Bad* is up there

with *The Wire* and *The Sopranos* when it comes to magnificent telly, I'm going to go one step further: it's better. Here's why...

THE ULTIMATE ANTI-HERO

Reason one: Bryan Cranston. This is a man who once appeared in haemorrhoid cream adverts and got his 'big break' playing the dad from *Malcolm In The Middle*. At 57, he looks like the type of guy who would go to a gentlemen's swimming club on a Thursday evening but, thanks to Gilligan, who fought to cast Cranston in the lead role, he now has three Emmys and has proven himself to be one of the best leading actors of all time (rivalled only, some might argue, by *The Sopranos'* late James Gandolfini).

Cranston can say more with one facial expression – a wry smile, a dead-eyed sneer, a slow exhalation of breath – than the entire cast of *Downton Abbey* can muster in 60 minutes (even if he is standing in the middle of the desert in nothing but a pair of sensible shoes and some sagging off-white boxer shorts). He's the ultimate good guy gone bad; Gilligan wanted to create a story in which the protagonist became the antagonist, turning Walt "from Mr Chips into Scarface". It worked. Walt's desire to provide for his family once he's gone transforms him from an emasculated average Joe to a man who masterminds the simultaneous assassination of 10 people in prison, poisons children and dissolves bodies in barrels full of acid. Ultimately, we do not like him yet we are still gunning for him. It's impossible to imagine who else could have pulled off such a feat.

HOLLYWOOD-STYLE CINEMATOGRAPHY

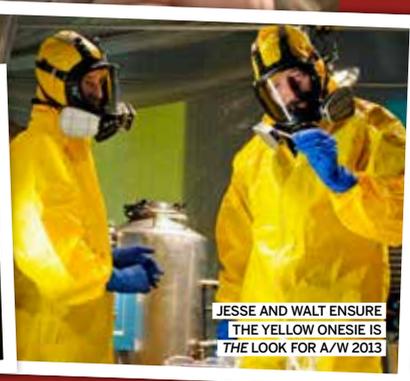
Gilligan lucked out with the show's setting of New Mexico. Its cornflower blue skies and fierce deserts look undeniably beautiful on TV. But it's not just a breathtaking landscape that makes this show look brilliant. Its production values are so high-end (it costs around \$3million to make each episode), it has spearheaded TV's current golden age, alongside similarly Hollywood-worthy shows such as French zombie drama *The Returned* and AMC's centrepiece, *Mad Men*. In *Breaking Bad*, there are desert sequences more stunning than the Coen Brothers'



WALT TRIES TO PERSUADE SKYLER THAT COOKING METH IS A BRILLIANT IDEA



SKYLER WITH HER AND WALT'S SON. THE IMAGINATIVELY-NAMED WALTER JR



JESSE AND WALT ENSURE THE YELLOW ONESIE IS THE LOOK FOR A/W 2013

"I HAVE CANCELLED NIGHTS OUT WITH FRIENDS AND FOREGONE HOURS OF SLEEP TO WATCH BREAKING BAD"

No Country For Old Men; recurring teddy bear motifs shot in black, white and pink pay homage to *Schindler's List*; and, in a stunning piece of camerawork, a scene where we see the detailed insides of a villain's bomb-ravaged face (no names mentioned...) with eye muscles still twitching in the sockets. Pure grisly genius.

A TWIST OF HUMOUR

Undeniably, *Breaking Bad* is dark. Outlandishly so. Severed heads are attached to the backs of desert tortoises, characters are crushed by falling ATM machines, henchmen's necks are ruthlessly slashed with box cutters. But this is what makes the show just so compulsive. We challenge Gilligan to give us something even more outrageous and he comes up with the goods. Every time.

But, what sets it apart from murky dramas such as *The Sopranos* and *The Wire* is that this darkness is tempered with some of the funniest moments in TV. Saul Goodman, Walt's ineptly corrupt lawyer (whose name, says Gilligan, was based on the phrase "S'all good man!"), provides prime comic relief alongside sci-fi-loving stoners Skinny Pete and Badger (a Saul spin-off has also just been confirmed). My favourite scene, however, is when Walt hurls what

is possibly Albuquerque's largest margherita pizza onto the roof of the family home in a fit of rage, only to be seen up a ladder scraping it off a few hours later. This blend of humour and absurdity with such an inherently dark subject matter is what makes *Breaking Bad*.

WEAK WOMEN

Like every show, *Breaking Bad* has its Achilles' heel. In this case, it is weak and unlikeable female characters. Skyler, Walt's beleaguered wife is annoying, moaning and, really, just a bit glib (at one point she also performs what has to be the cringiest Marilyn Monroe-esque rendition of *Happy Birthday* of all time). Other than that, we have Marie, Skyler's sister, a kleptomaniac who really only serves as an on-screen irritation, and a so-far forgettable Laura Fraser as Lydia, Walt's reluctant collaborator.

Ironically, though, many of the show's writers, directors and script editors are women, including Michelle MacLaren, Helen Caldwell and Moira Walley-Beckett. But you could argue that putting unsympathetic female characters centre stage is one of the bravest things a director can do. Women so often serve as the moral 'light relief' in TV; Gilligan is making

us work by denying us this. And who knows? Maybe Skyler will actually become Walt's saviour in the end...

"YEAH BITCH... MAGNETS!"

If you've ever noticed people around you prefixing their sentences with "Yo" and ending them with "Bitch", it could be because they are Jesse Pinkman superfans. Personally, I think Pinkman, Walter White's former student turned meth-dealing partner, played by Aaron Paul, is one of the most annoying people on TV (whiny, always shouting, too-big T-shirts) but, as much as I dislike him, Jesse is possibly the most important character in *Breaking Bad*. Gilligan has said that his original intention was to kill off Jesse at the end of series one, but he realised that would have been a huge mistake.

Jesse serves as our moral yardstick. At the show's inception, he is morally devoid, a waste-of-space "junkie". But as the show progresses, and his relationship with Walt starts to develop – from bromantic cookathons in retro SUVs, to putting their lives on the line for each other – Walter White and Jesse Pinkman eventually trade places. And as Walt spirals into moral depravity, propelled by his greed and ego, we see that Jesse is ultimately human, fragile and, in my opinion, the person best-placed to deliver Walt his comeuppance.

So it's with these parting thoughts that I, along with millions of others, pray for a closing scene that does not simply fade to black. We deserve more. *Breaking Bad* has changed the way we watch TV, drip-feeding us half-series and keeping us on tenterhooks for five years. That's half a decade waiting for closure (which we simultaneously never want to arrive). And it's now anyone's guess who is going to come out on top. Gilligan is confident, though, saying: "I would be very unprepared for people to hate the ending. That would throw me. I'd probably have to go into hiding or be hospitalised." We'll have to take his word for it.

The final episode of *Breaking Bad* will be available on Netflix on Monday 30 September