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## THE SOPRANOS

A defining program of the cable era, *The Sopranos* debuted on HBO in January 1999. The story of a New Jersey mafia boss and his nuclear and criminal families, it was the first cable series to achieve larger audience ratings than its broadcast competition. The series also received unprecedented critical acclaim. Even intellectuals who had previously disdained television hailed the show as a ground-breaking work of art. A measure of the program's unique status as a cultural icon was the screening of the entire run of its first two seasons at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the featured item in a retrospective of gangster movies chosen by David Chase, *The Sopranos'* creator and executive producer.

The popularity of *The Sopranos* was particularly demoralizing for the broadcast networks, in decline through the 1980s and 90s owing to competition from cable and satellite subscriber networks. The show's success in the ratings against "free" network programs was decisive evidence that the mass audiences and consensus programming of the broadcast era were now historical artifacts. Although HBO's subscribers were only one-third of the total TV audience, the series reached an estimated 14 million viewers, 7.3 million TV homes, during its third and fourth seasons, by far the largest continuing audience ever assembled by cable television. As one media business reporter put it: "HBO now has the first television megahit ever to be unavailable to the majority of viewers."

Probably the most complex narrative in the history of American television, *The Sopranos* marks a genuine watershed in our popular culture. The series is a culmination but also a deeply cynical and realistic revision of the mythology of the gangster and the culture of the mafia as depicted in classic movies from the 1930s, in Mario Puzo's novels and in the films of Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese.

Something of the show's revisionist, post-heroic realism is captured in its brilliant title sequence. Quick images of the roof and wall tiles of the Lincoln Tunnel as photographed through the windshield of Tony Soprano's speeding car yield to the tunnel's exit ramp, the New York skyline briefly visible across the Hudson River through the passenger-side window. (The twin towers of the World Trade Center were framed in a quick close shot of the car's side mirror during the first two seasons, but this image was removed after 9/11/2001.) Now images of North Jersey's ugliest industrial sprawl -- noxious Secaucus, polluted waterways, smokestacks -- rush past, followed by shots of highway exit signs, Tony steering, the grimy downtowns of the dwindled cities in which Tony grew up and in which much of the series' action takes place. This quick tour of the terrain of *The Sopranos* concludes with shots of modest working-class, then middle-class city homes, and finally the forested road leading to the driveway of Tony's pretentious suburban brick palace. The sequence is a social history of Italians in America and

specifically a chronicle of the protagonist's life and work, distilling essential elements of the saga of Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), his dual identity as a suburban husband and father and as angst-ridden godfather in meaner streets than those of the mythic city across the river.

The movie gangsters are not merely implicit references in the series but active presences. Tony's mob crew is fond of quoting *The Godfather* and other shaping ancestors, and such allusions often create complex ironies, suggesting how eagerly these "real" gangsters embrace the aggrandizing images of the movie culture. We see Tony tearfully watching *Public Enemy* (1931) on the day of his mother's funeral, and the famous Cagney melodrama about a gangster killer whose mother's love never wavers implicitly judges Tony's reptilian mother (Nancy Marchand in her last and greatest role) who terrorized him as a child and colluded with his Uncle Junior (Dominic Chianese) to have him killed because she blamed him for moving her to a nursing home.

*The Sopranos* takes full advantage of its freedom from the constraints of broadcast television. Even its female characters speak with the profane candor of real people; mayhem and murder are dramatized with pitiless, shocking directness; there is considerable (but not full frontal) nudity. But this license in what is seen and heard is never gratuitous or sensational, and the many eruptions of crippling or murderous violence have disturbing authority in part because they take place in such mundanely realistic spaces and are committed or endured by unpretty, ordinary characters the audience has come to know. The series breaks with broadcast conventions in other ways as well, notably in its readiness to dramatize its characters' dreams and fantasies, some of which achieve a macabre, disorienting intensity.

But its sense of the ordinary, the quotidian, the *not-mythic* is the real key to *The Sopranos*. Tony Soprano is a stone killer and mob boss, but he is also a middle-aged father with a discontented spouse and a son and daughter no more deranged than most privileged teenagers in our high-tech, motorized, image-saturated suburbs. The juxtaposition -- sometimes the intersection -- of these alternate worlds generates complexities undreamt of in most movies or earlier forms of television. The program mobilizes a sustained, ongoing experience of moral ambiguity, as Tony and some of his criminal cronies display a range of comic, sentimental, deeply ordinary traits in their dealings with aging parents, wives, children, mistresses, and then in other moments perform acts of sickening disloyalty, brutality and murder.

This defining quality of the series emerged decisively in the fifth episode of the first season in which Tony takes his daughter Meadow (Jamie-Lynn Sigler) on a tour of colleges in Maine and, in a stop at a gas station, recognizes an informer, once part of his crime family, now in hiding in the witness protection program. Scenes of intimate bonding between father and daughter are intercut with Tony's stalking of the informer, whom he ultimately attacks from behind and strangles with a wire. The murder is not quick, the victim struggles hard before he dies. Moments before, this killer had been a doting father, communing with his daughter in a common American parenting ritual.

As this episode implies, *The Sopranos* does not, as many commentators have claimed, repudiate or totally transcend traditional television. For all its cable-licensed profanity, sex and violence, the series embraces and deeply exploits TV's unique hospitality to serial narrative as well as the central subject of television drama of the broadcast era, its ideological core -- the American family.

The show has a specific ancestry in *The Rockford Files* (1974-80, NBC), whose staff David Chase joined in 1976 as writer and producer. That private-eye series starring James Garner was also a hybrid of comedy, crime and (sometimes) family drama, and it used the format of the weekly series to explore the ongoing, changing relations among its recurring characters. Several episodes of *Rockford* clearly anticipate *The Sopranos*. In one of these, a two-part story first broadcast in 1977, George Loros, who plays the mob capo Raymond Curto in the HBO series, portrays a mafia hit man undone by his city-boy's ignorance in the wilds of nature. This episode hints at the bleak murderous comedy of the memorable installment from the third season of *The Sopranos* in which Tony's henchmen Paulie Walnuts (Tony Sirico) and young Christopher Moltisanti (Michael Imperioli) are trapped together without food or transport in the wintry Pine Barrens of southern New Jersey.

The series format -- traditional television's essential feature -- is *The Sopranos'* fundamental resource as well, permitting the program to dramatize the unsteady maturation of Tony's children, for example, the ebb and flow of his cankered intimacy with his wife Carmella, the murderous shifting alliances and hostilities within his own crime family and among rival mobsters. As the series unfolded during its first four seasons, its account of the primary characters deepened, aspects of Tony's past emerged in fitful, accreting detail, the experiences and inner lives of many secondary characters were explored more fully. At the start of its fifth season -- as Chase signed a contract to supervise a sixth and final year of the show -- the 52 hour-long chapters of *The Sopranos* had achieved a density and texture unique in American movies or television. The damaged, unstable family order of the show could be read as a compelling metaphor or distillation of the larger social order. In its enlarging power to explore personality as it evolves over time and in its stringent, ramifying stories of crime, injustice, greed and ambition the series had become a twenty-first-century equivalent of the great English and European novels of the nineteenth century.

-- David Thorburn

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Further Reading

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See also, Detective programs, The Rockford Files.

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