

From *The Essential HBO Reader*, ed. Gary Edgerton and Jeff Jones.
Forthcoming, 2007, University of Kentucky Press

CHAPTER 3

The Sopranos

by David Thorburn

The signature program of the post-broadcast era, *The Sopranos* debuted on HBO in January 1999 and became the first cable series to achieve larger audience ratings than its broadcast competition. The series also received unprecedented critical acclaim in both popular and elite circles.

Even intellectuals who had previously disdained television hailed the show as a ground-breaking work of art. One 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 show's quality had been so widely acknowledged by the beginning of its sixth season that Nancy Franklin began her *New Yorker* review of another HBO series, *Big Love*, by expressing baffled sympathy for the makers of the new program, which had been scheduled to follow "What May Be The Greatest Television Show Ever."¹

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 was watched by an estimated 14 million viewers in 7.3 million TV homes during its third and fourth seasons, by far the largest continuing audience ever assembled by cable television. As Bill Carter put it in the *New York Times*: "HBO now has the first television megahit ever to be unavailable to the majority of viewers."²

The Sopranos marks a genuine watershed in American popular culture, though its full significance has been partly misunderstood owing to its very success and, I suspect, to the HBO advertising campaign proclaiming “It’s not television. It’s HBO.” The misunderstanding grows from the implication that traditional broadcast television is a totally different experience from HBO. In fact, as I’ll argue shortly, the program’s roots in traditional television are at least as deep and as nourishing as its filiations with the gangster movie.³

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 filmed 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 absurdly named Meadowlands, the state'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 lavish 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 very first scene of the first episode of *The Sopranos* clarifies and extends the antiheroic import of the title sequence, introducing the viewer to this contemporary godfather in his reluctant first visit to a psychiatrist. If the Godfather movies give us the mafia family for the decades before and after World War II and *Goodfellas* the same family in the cocaine-addled suburbs of the 1970 and 80s, the Sopranos are the crime family for our age of therapy and Prozac. “Things are trending downward,” Tony complains to his shrink, Dr. Jennifer Melfi (Lorraine Bracco), displaying one strand of the show’s comedy in his very diction. These days no one has the discipline for “the penal experience.”

The movie gangsters are not merely implicit references in the series but active presences. Tony's mob crew is fond of quoting *The Godfather* (1972) 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. “The eye was just how Francis framed the shot—for shock value,” says Tony’s lieutenant Paulie Walnuts (Tony Sirico) in the third episode, explicating a famous close-up in the montage of assassinations at the climax of Coppola’s film.

In a later episode 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.

“*Goodfellas* [1990] is my Koran,” David Chase tells his interviewer (the actor-director Peter Bognoyitch, who plays Dr. Melfi’s psychiatrist in the series) in the voice-over commentary on the DVD of the first season. And as even casual viewers know, *The Sopranos* is full of allusions and sometimes fawning references to Scorsese himself as well as his films.

The best known of these *homages* is often mentioned to me by *Sopranos*’ fans and has surely generated essays and mash-ups in the film schools. This is the scene in the eighth episode of the first season in which Tony’s henchman Christopher Moltisanti (Michael Imperioli) shoots a young bakery cashier in the foot, an eruption of violence as brutally narcissistic and gratuitous as its original in *Goodfellas* where a much younger Imperioli is the victim of the shooting.

The Sopranos takes full advantage of its freedom from the constraints of broadcast television. Both male and 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 apparently 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. One of the story's deepest revelations, repeated in astonishing variation in main plot and subplots, is that Tony's two families are really one, that the corruption, violence and hypocrisy that are the tools of his trade seep into and come to define his own family, as they did his father's before him.

These defining qualities of the series emerge 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 New England 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. Then in their final ride home in the car, Daddy driving, Meadow in the front seat beside

him, he lies fluently, with quick improvising intelligence about the lost watch, the bruises on his hand. She looks back at him warily. She's learning suspicion, and not to trust her father.

As this episode implies, *The Sopranos* does not, as many 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 Paulie Walnuts and young Christopher 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, troubled 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 five 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. The social and political reach of the story was enlarged in some of these secondary strands, as (for one example) when Christopher and his girl friend (Drea De Matteo), move the story into the world of contemporary Hip Hop and the racial politics of the music business.

The performances were always vivid and memorable—those of secondary figures as well as the principals', especially a frequently blubbery (and, in later seasons, overweight) Gandolfini and the superbly nuanced Edie Falco as his wife Carmella. Moreover, these performers had aged visibly before us, and our knowledge of their histories and their interconnections informed every later scene.

It is important to recognize that the movies cannot replicate this sort of accretive intimacy and understanding between characters and the audience. *The Sopranos* is not a film. It is a television series. It uses the strategies perfected over decades in daytime soaps and prime-time series. It draws on a tradition of visual mastery developed equally in the interior spaces and tight compelling close-ups of soaps, sitcoms and family melodramas *and* in the fluid editing and skill at framing action and exterior spaces for TV's small screen of the cop and private eye shows.

In its first five seasons, the damaged, unstable family order of the program became a compelling metaphor or distillation of the larger social order. In its enlarging power to explore personality as it evolves in time and in its stringent, ramifying stories of

crime, injustice, marriage, and family the series had become a twenty-first-century equivalent of the great English and European novels of the nineteenth century.

Then came the sixth season. The show had faltered before, but mostly in minor ways. At times, for example, its knowing winks to movie buffs felt gratuitous, as in one sequence where the great Scorsese (actually a look-alike actor) is shown waving to his adoring fans as he enters a dance club. And the production was on occasion simply careless, as when the elegant sedan in which Tony and his daughter drive on their tour of colleges morphs unexplained into Tony's monster SUV when they return home. A more serious form of inattentiveness, slightly undermining our understanding of Tony's character, also surfaced more than once in the early seasons. In one episode, for example, he condescendingly corrects a subordinate who confuses Nostradamus with the hunchback of Notre Dame, yet in a later episode Tony himself confuses Martin Luther King with Rodney King. Different writers, of course, episodes apart, and perhaps an inattentive executive producer, David Chase, who had been a reluctant servant of TV since the 1970s and, not so secretly, wanted out.⁴

But now, in its sixth season, the show began to repeat itself in certain ways and to pursue subsidiary plots involving minor characters that were not as richly linked, as those of earlier seasons had been, to the primary themes and characters. The season opens with Uncle Junior's addled accidental shooting of Tony and Tony's near-death adventure in a coma-dream that lasts through episodes two and three in counterpart with far more interesting "real" scenes in which his actual family confronts his possible death and his mafia family begins to disintegrate in rivalry and greed.

The core of this material is a pallid replay, lacking the familial ferocity and cunning that incited Junior's botched hit on Tony in the penultimate episode of the first season. In the earlier case, the attempted assassination grows from a tangle of links and connections going back to Tony's childhood, his mother's relations with him, with his father and with Uncle Junior. In the sixth season's replay, an old man with Alzheimer's shoots someone by mistake. (Although, to be fair, it is a mistake grounded in a generations-old murder-robbery, a criminal obsession and sense of having been cheated of money so tenacious it survives the decay of most of his other cognitive abilities. So the criminal life invades and contaminates the personal even in our dotage!)

But Tony's near-death experiences as dramatized now over two full episodes feel stagy and pretentious. Shot in a strangely lit, almost lunar environment of featureless modern hotels and bars, the scenes feel fake, especially compared to the grainy authentic realism of the show's usual location shots amid the traffic-thunder of Lodi or Kearney or Bloomfield Avenue in East Orange. It's as if we've stumbled into a play or film by an imitator of Beckett or Jean-Luc Godard, not the North Jersey Tony knows. And the "plot" of this coma-dream seems equally factitious, like a student's thesis or a preacher's lesson. Tony's is metamorphosed into his *doppelganger*, a businessman named Finnerty, and struggles like a Kafka character to get his identity back. Characters he's murdered appear as friendly guides and hosts, ushering him into some sort of Mansion of Eternity...when his daughter's voice, at his bed-stand in the hospital, recalls him to real life. Good-by Finnerty. Good riddance.

Even what many saw as the most notable subplot of this next-to-last season⁵ represents a falling away from the high standards set in the first five seasons. This is the

sequence many called the Brokeback story for its resemblance to *Brokeback Mountain*, the 2005 film sympathetically depicting gay cowboys. In our gangster version an obese pretty-faced capo (Joseph Gannascoli), Tony's top wage-earner, as we learn during this unfolding parable of mob homophobia, murders a friend to keep his gay identity secret, then flees for a gay idyll in Maine before meeting an end I leave undescribed.

It's tough to be a gay mobster, but even so, this worthy point feels belabored after several episodes and at best simple, compared to the multiple ways the major subplots from earlier years link organically to the central characters and extend the moral and political implications of the series as a whole.

But many great stories have broken or disappointing endings. One of these is *The Odyssey*. Damaged or weary endings are the norm for television series, even the greatest, such as *Gunsmoke* (CBS, 1955-75) or *All In Family* (CBS, 1971-83). Whatever the final verdict on its twilight episodes, *The Sopranos* has secured its landmark status in American cultural history. It is a brilliant hybrid culmination of film and television, and an originating text as well, among the first complex expressions of the digital future now impending. It is probably the first great work of American art of the twenty-first century.⁶

Notes

¹ “On Television: Triple Threat.” 17 March 2006, p. 78. *The Sopranos* almost surely received more critical praise across a range of publications than any program in TV history and also generated a lot of intelligent commentary. Among many thoughtful responses to the show, I found these especially helpful: Caryn James, "Sopranos': Blood, Bullets and Proust," *New York Times*, 2 March 2001, Section B (Weekend), pp. 1, 30; Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good For You: How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter*; David Lavery, ed., *This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos*. Columbia University Press, 2002; Elaine Showalter, "Mob Scene," *The American Prospect*, vol. 11, no. 8, 28 February, 2000; Alessandra Stanley, "Bullies, Bears And Bullets: Its Round 5," *New York Times*, 5 March 2004, Section B (Weekend), pp. 1, 28.

² Calibrating the Next Step for 'The Sopranos'," 7 October 2002, p. C1.

³ Horace Newcomb makes this argument as well. See "'This Is Not Al Dente': *The Sopranos* and the New Meaning of 'Television'," *Television, The Critical View* (Oxford University Press, 2006) pp. 561-588.

⁴ David Chase's ambivalent relation to his masterpiece will some day be the subject of dissertations. Let those students of the future get started with three articles—a *New Yorker* essay that incorporates comments from Chase, and two interviews, all three orchestrated by Chase, it would seem, in part to confer an *auteur's* aura on the expensive HBO enterprise and in part to let Chase make movies, finally. (But he does permit himself one tip of the cap to his TV past in an early episode when Big Pussy cries, "What

am I, Rockford?") See David Remnick, "Is This The End of Rico?" *The New Yorker*, 2 April 2001, 38-44; Virginia Heffernan, "The Real Boss of the 'Sopranos': Why David Chase Will Never Work in TV Again," *New York Times*, 29 February 2004, Arts & Leisure (section 2), pp. 1, 20; and Elizabeth Primamore, "This Thing of His" [illuminating on Chase's Italian-American childhood in northern N.J.], *New Jersey Monthly*, April 2002, pp. 84-87, 116-17.

⁵ As of this writing in August 2006, the stated plan is for a final, abbreviated seventh season of eight episodes, beginning in January 2007.

⁶ Thanks to Micky DuPree for ideas and research assistance and to Daniel Thorburn and Barbara Thorburn for acute criticism and help on this essay, which revises and enlarges my entry on "The Sopranos" in *The Television Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. Horace Newcomb (ed.), Fitzroy Dearborn: New York and London, 2004.