Waddaya Lookin' At?: Re-reading the Gangster Genre Through "The Sopranos"

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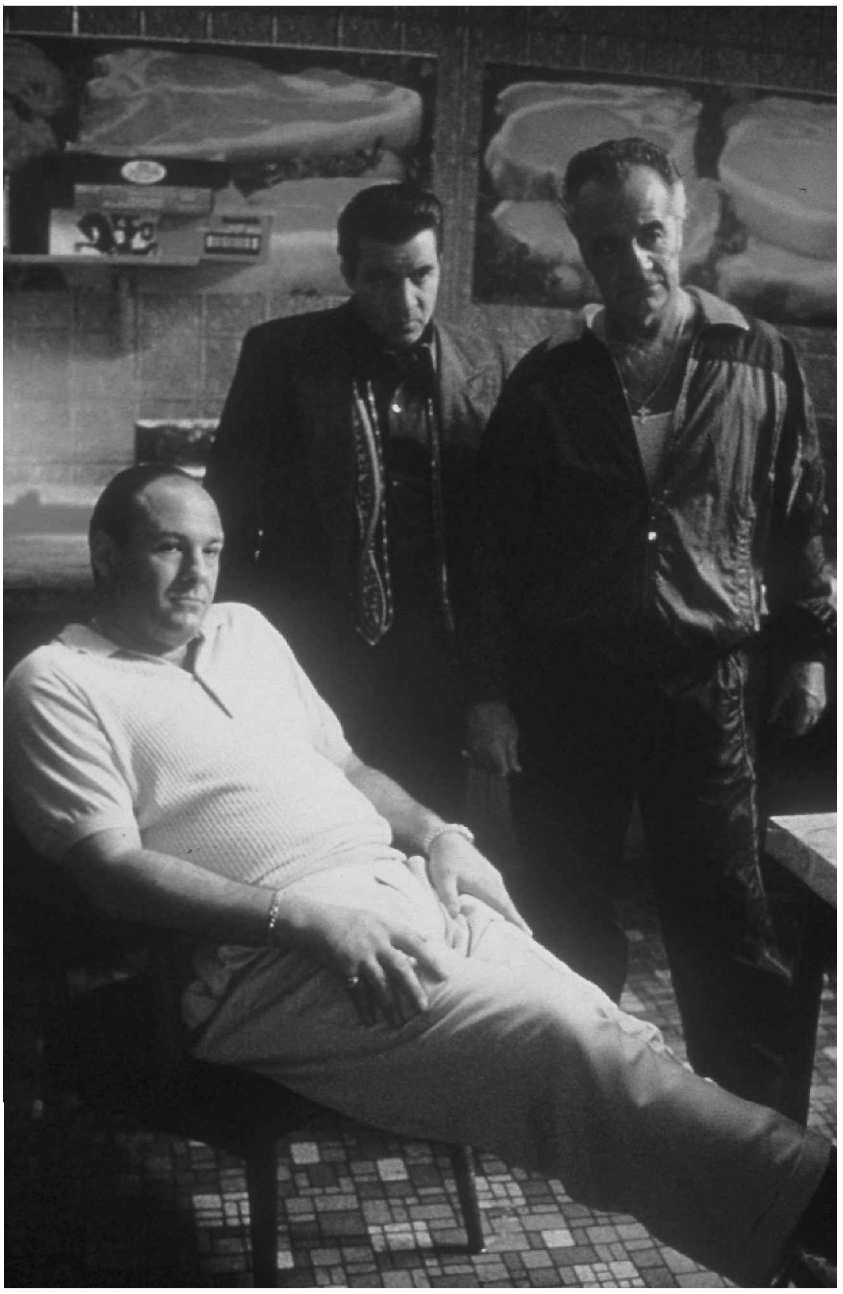

Anthony Nesta/HBO

James Gandolfini as mob boss Tony Soprano, with two of his "soldiers" (Steven van Zandt, Tony Sirico)

Martha P. Nochimson

Waddaya Lookin' At?

Re-reading the Gangster Genre Through "The Sopranos"

The beast in me is caged by frail
and fragile bands,
Restless by day and by night rants
and rages at the stars
God help the beast in me.

—Nick Lowe, "The Beast in Me"

Perceived as hypermasculine fare, the gangster picture is generally understood to be popular because of its explosive virility and its close connection to reality. Yet despite these entrenched truisms, hindsight and the progeny that have been spawned by the early masterpieces of the genre suggest that the situation is more complex. An extended narrative of the world of fin-de-siècle New Jersey mob boss Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini), "The Sopranos" reveals the media gangster as the core of a highly emotional mode of storytelling in which the pleasures of action and violence exist to speak not only about macho aggressiveness "ripped from today's headlines," but also about vulnerabilities that the display disguises and about troubling cultural conditions. "The Sopranos," David Chase's HBO series, is clearly an elegiac, self-conscious, tragicomic meditation on America's lost innocence, but less obviously it is also about the otherness of body and family to American corporate culture, and, above all, it is about the undying connections human beings have to one another despite a social system that maintains its hold through a divide-and-conquer strategy. In this, "The Sopranos" may seem to be an inversion of generic traditions, but, in fact, it

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Barry Wetcher/HBO

Lorraine Bracco as psychiatrist Dr. Jennifer Melfi

grows from elements in this species of media representation that have been simmering since its inception.

In order to explore "The Sopranos" as the unmasking of the heretofore thickly disguised emotional subtext of gangster stories, I will invoke a very precise, exclusive rather than inclusive definition of this category of entertainment. In so doing, I take a distinctly different approach from that of both casual public discourse and almost all serious scholarly discussion to date, which has conflated the gangster narrative with many other kinds of crime stories as part of one amorphous genre.

This discussion of the gangster project will read it as a subgenre of the media crime story set apart by three essential characteristics. First, in the gangster film the protagonists with whom we empathize reverse our usual patterns of identification by engaging us and our feelings with career criminals, often to the exclusion of empathy with law-abiding citizens. This can happen in other subgenres of crime entertainment, but not within a dense social context, which is the second essential trait of the gangster project. The gangster subgenre is epic in nature, highly social, and generally paints a panoramic picture of society and its values—all in all a departure from the usual emphasis in Hollywood on the purely personal and individualistic. Gangland protagonists are embedded in a well-articulated hierarchy of colleagues whose relationships may be turbulent but remain crucial to their well-being. For this reason, the final essential characteristic of the gangster subgenre is its unusually even matching of the opposing claims of the personal and the social, unusual in that Hollywood almost always weights the scale for the personal. Some major examples of this discrete subgenre are *Little Caesar* (1930), *Public Enemy* (1931), *Scarface* (1932), *White Heat* (1949), The "Godfather" trilogy (1972/74/90), *Prizzi's Honor* (1985), and *Goodfellas* (1994).

These defining characteristics leave for other discussions about other issues a wide range of other crime entertainment stories, including those in which ordinary people uncharacteristically commit a crime—Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* (1944); Frank Chambers in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946); Marion Crane in *Psycho* (1960)—and those that focus on lone wolves or outlaw couples with scarcely a shred of social connection—*Bonnie and Clyde* (1967); *Badlands* (1973). They also rule out films and television shows in which the gangsters are the antagonists and the police, reporters, detectives, or intended victims of the crime

organization are the protagonists—*Deadline-U.S.A.* (1952); the "Dirty Harry" series (1971/76/88); *Dick Tracy* (1990). Movies about lone bandits, crime couples on the run, and intrepid lawmen are informed more by romanticism than by epic, and are generally studies in individualism—both of the policeman and the criminal. They either mark crime as an individual pathology or the individual as a persecuted being. They promote a complicated means for the audience to form an ephemeral, symbiotic relationship with voluptuous, perhaps masturbatory, lonely transgressive pleasures bearing on the disconnect between the group and the self.

In contrast, one equally transgressive subgenre permits a unique audience catharsis that speaks of the violence that erupts specifically because we are and need to be connected to other people. The catharsis is unique because its nuanced depiction of human connections, particularly with family, allows a forbidden look at "sacred" ties, which, despite the saccharine pronouncements of radical right-wing politics and much popular domestic drama, not only tempt but also trouble us. In the gangster drama, as in our lives, a strong desire for filiation complicates autonomy and the drive to succeed in a competitive economic system.

The media gangster's dilemma strikes a chord in the law-abiding public, resonating against the secret knowledge of the ordinary moviegoer that in a competitive capitalist society the emotional claims of the family are in crucial ways "other" to materialist success. Thus it is no accident that crime families in the gangster subgenre are noticeably foreign, immigrant. Their foreignness serves as a vehicle for portrayal of the ancient, pre-American call of family ties, while modern success is conveyed by the clean-cut Americans on the police force and in the FBI, who, not uncoincidentally, are almost always presented without reference to their families or to any connections that are not official. At varying levels of consciousness, the gangster film draws the audience into a radical alliance with an inversion of the usual definitions of "like" and "other," making American audiences adhere to the foreign.

"I'm Not So Tough"

The audience's surprising compact with the foreign element of blood and family connection in the gangster story makes possible a number of alternative perspectives, one of the most important being identification with a masculinity that is at once intensely virile *and* other to the standard self-contained masculine image. The gangster protagonist is in the most profound way a family man who gives the audience a means of obliquely exploring family life, free from the stigma attached to emotions and "women's entertainment" (often erroneously identified as the whole of melodrama). What is ordinarily identified as family melodrama is feminized and openly emotional, while the domestic melodrama of the gangster subgenre is muscularized, displacing emotion onto the tumult associated with violence.

"The Sopranos," as the inheritor of a long line of texts which disguise familial tensions, brings this displacement to the surface. When Tony Soprano's mother Livia (Nancy Marchand) conspires with his uncle Corrado "Junior" Soprano (Dominic Chianese) to have him killed, they are operating (albeit confusedly) within the imperatives of a gangland struggle for rule of the Northern New Jersey mob. But each is also trenchantly expressing garden-variety familial anger: Livia a familiar generational rage, because Tony has put her in a nursing home, and Junior a familiar fury about rank in families, because the leadership of the mob has been given to his nephew instead of to him. What also distinguishes the gangster melodrama from the domestic melodrama is how directly and intensely emotions are expressed in the domestic melodrama, while here the emotions of the situation are displaced onto the violent crime story. In "The Sopranos," Junior and Livia give each other permission to rid themselves of Tony with such minimalism that the audience is not sure what has transpired between them until the plans to kill Tony are put into action. The violence in the scenes in which an attempt is made on Tony's life expresses their rage with such displacement that they are not even present. Certainly this is standard operating procedure for gangster films. But that is the point: it is representative of the tradition of emotional displacement in this genre. The aggressor is invisible as the rage is expressed, as opposed to domestic melodrama, which unabashedly shows the venting of anger. Displacement protects the virility of the genre and gives the (male) viewers access to emotional situations they need not see in directly emotional terms.

The thinly disguised familial drama in "The Sopranos" is not a new wrinkle; the drama is just more visible. In *Public Enemy,* when Tommy Powers (James Cagney) collapses in the rain murmuring, "I'm not so tough," the low emotion/high violence scene, as with the scene of Tony's near assassination, utilizes an action sequence to raise the issue of family conflicts. Tommy's collapse is the result of a gangland shootout,

Anthony Neste/HBO

Generational rage: Livia (Nancy Marchand) with son Tony

but its import is dramatized in relationship to his mother, as it sets the scene for her impending discovery of his final appearance as a mummified corpse, horrifically evocative of a swaddled infant. On one level, then, Tommy's crime agon is a shoot-'em-and-die blood circus. But any gangster entertainment that is purely that is doomed to oblivion.

The abiding importance of *Public Enemy* is its early use of the gangster milieu as a metaphor for the complex tensions between individuation and family. It is an early example of the self-image of a culture awash in pious pronouncements about the value of both individualism and family which allows no way to integrate the blood ties of family with the isolating drive necessary to individuals bound for success. Comparison with *Public Enemy* and other classic gangster films is encouraged by "The Sopranos," which contains numerous allusions to *Scarface,* the "Godfather" trilogy, and *Public Enemy*. In the second episode of the third season, Tony watches *Public Enemy* the day his mother dies, with specific emphasis on scenes between Tommy Powers and his mother. Indeed, after her funeral, Tony watches the "I'm not so tough" scene and the scenes with Tommy's mother that the collapse sets up. The series is fully aware that Tony Soprano's thwarted attempts at meshing family and individuation is part of a long tradition. What is new in current gangster entertainment is that blunt, reflexive awareness of the genre's dark secret. "The Sopranos" deals openly in representations that were suppressed in the earlier classics. The cat is out of the bag from the very first episode. In the first image of the series, gang boss Tony Soprano is in dialogue with familial confusions, specifically the maternal influence: he is sitting in the office of a female psychiatrist, completely framed by the legs of a female nude sculpture (recalling his origins in the birth canal and the power of the mother). His curious gaze upward at the nude sculpture is a radical reversal of the conventionally possessive male gaze.

Tony begins the series already having discovered that he's "not so tough," collapsing as he periodically does from panic attacks, a debilitating condition whose cause, we later discover, is his extremely troubled connection with his mother and father. Tommy Powers never got a chance to process that thought, but like all other great media gangsters, he was suffused with ambivalence about mothers, sisters, and wives in the context of a similar confusion about brothers and father figures, and about the sexual and territorial implications of that ambiguity. "The Sopranos" offers Tony the opportunity for therapy and with a woman doctor, thereby making almost explicit its displaced investigation of the American family.

Linda Williams' seminal essay "Melodrama Revised" explores the melodramatic infrastructure of Hollywood entertainment and suggests a way to pierce the layers of historical misperception of the gangster subgenre. Williams' theory lays the groundwork for my proposal that the gangster project is not a genre but a subgenre of a subgenre (crime entertainment) of melodrama. In her essay she explores a structuring tension between (realistic) action and (certain intensities of) melodrama as the inner dynamic of most Hollywood entertainment, giving us a vocabulary for speaking of the perennial (if veiled) importance of emotion, family, and women in the gangster classics.

Williams theorizes that the Hollywood action genres are really all varieties of melodramas played out within a variety of discrete action conventions that each stage a narrative of misprized innocence: "If emotional and moral registers are sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, if the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and action, then the operative mode is melodrama."[1]

Surprisingly, an extended discussion of the Hollywood gangster—Cagney, Robinson, Muni, Pacino—reveals that his drama *is* the staging of his innocence and his victimhood, though not in the tropes associated with domestic melodrama. The gangster's behavior is related to a social setting (and beginning with *White Heat,* a psychological circumstance) that has coerced a capable, forceful man into extortion and

Barry Wetcher/HBO

The unexpected sex symbol

murder. Misprized innocence, relative to the gangster, is more complex than it is in domestic melodrama, since, clearly, the gangster *is* guilty at the most literal level. But though the screen gangster is depicted as not only legally culpable but also essentially corrupt by nature in all other categories of crime entertainment (with the possible exception of the lone outlaw category), in the true gangster film there shine through the Hollywood mobster's villainous deeds the remnants of what his initial innocence might have been like.

There is a longing in the gangster subgenre for its protagonist's lost purity, staged on the level of the physical, for the Hollywood gangster typically has an "innocent," spontaneous relationship to his body and physicality in general.[2] Almost all the action is written onto the bodies of the gangsters in a subgenre that places great emphasis on physical touch in general, on drinking, and sometimes on food. The infamous grapefruit-in-the-face scene in *Public Enemy* is as much a deeply embedded evocation of loss for Tommy as it is an abuse of Kitty. Tommy assaults Kitty because she is concerned about his welfare; apparently he needs to summon up considerable energy to deny that kind of filiation with anyone but his mother. In "The Sopranos" an overt consciousness of the relevance of food and touch to this genre is everywhere; but this is not a simple awareness: kisses and shared meals are both powerful and ambiguous signs, perhaps of connection, perhaps of betrayal and rejection.

Tony Soprano's rich physicality is a particularly important part of his characterization, a primary vehicle for our experience of his intricately marbled guilt and innocence. We know that he has a history behind him that pushes him involuntarily into mob life, and we also share his pleasure in the body of the world, in both its perverse and its sweet aspects, which makes a powerful suggestion to the audience that Tony, given other historical circumstances, could have been a very different person. Moreover, this physicality contrasts favorably with the unsatisfying, sterile aphysicality of the law-abiding citizens, which makes us feel that Tony had (or perhaps has) the potential to be much better than they are. Tony touches and is touched, a source of his immense appeal.

Despite his potbelly and balding head, James Gandolfini has become an unexpected sex symbol because of his frank involvement with the sensual body. He has made touch an integral part of Tony's management technique: embracing, kissing, shaking, and smacking the men whom he leads. Tony's relationship to food is unashamedly enthusiastic: not only is much business conducted by him over meals, but he appealingly expresses affection with food in a way that also expresses his power, as in a good-night ritual with his son when he sprays whipped cream from a can into his own mouth as a bedtime treat and then sprays some into his son's. The paternal and even maternal warmth that he displays is the positive side of his gangster tendency to understand the world in purely physical terms. The emphasis on Tony's body is also a seminal mode of representing his problematic allure. While he lives a life shockingly contained by physical orientation in which murder is just another form of saying "that's the way it is," the warmth of his engagement in the touchable world points up a lack—a physical coldness—in the characters who occupy a variety of moral and ethical positions. With this troubling irony, Chase permits sophisticated viewers a new insight into a fundamental aspect of what has always been the enigmatic attractiveness of gangsters. Certainly Tommy Powers is much more physically alive than his wooden, good, older brother Michael. We find the same contrast in many of Tony's predecessors.[3]

Tony Soprano's guilt of murder—and more—is complicated by the fact that he was born (did not choose) to rule the Northern New Jersey mob and by his utterly spontaneous, child-like joy in physicality.

The series follows in the footsteps of not only the great gang classics but also many important classics of American literature which represent the moral double bind. "The Sopranos" is as complex as Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* in exploring the issues of innocence and crime; in contrast, the moralist critics of gangster film and television have shown themselves to be simplistic. Reductive criticism of the great media gangster classics has a venerable history, from the Production Code to Marge Roukema, though today's self-appointed censors fall short of the standards of yesteryear's. The critics of "The Sopranos" mainly raise their voices in horror at the violence and ethnic representation of Italian Americans, yet they fail to note critiques of so-called good citizens of all types that the old Production Code Administration would have been eager to condemn.[4]

"The Sopranos" portrays a broad spectrum of characters who are building lives as career criminals, and does so with explicit ethnic markings. This would have disturbed the PCA, but—and this might have been even more irritating to the old in-house censor—the series also depicts the sniveling hypocrisy of mainstream middle-class Caucasian professionals (clergy, teachers, lawyers, therapists, politicians, doctors), who are supposed to be guardians of the public sphere, but who are cowardly and morally derelict in varying ways. However, "The Sopranos" is not using the mob simply to make good citizens more thoughtful about their own compromised actions in the lawless climate of contemporary America. Rather, the series is trying for a much more profound interrogation of our blind spots relative to the pleasure we take in the infantile innocence of the gangster.

"Cunnilingus and Psychiatry Brought Us to This"

At the end of the first season, Tony Soprano tells wife Carmela, in the aftermath of the failed contract on his life, "Cunnilingus and psychiatry brought us to this"—a twentyfirst-century translation of "I'm not so tough." The "this" of this statement is the nub of the significance of this television series for the gangster tradition. For Tony, "this" expresses his exasperation with the strains modern life has placed on the gangster's macho code. However, for the viewer, "this" is the possibility inherent in modern life for a new understanding of the ambiguous charm of the gangster. Tony's mob issues are actually pretty standard, but they become new in "The Sopranos," which insightfully reconfigures the delicate balance between right, might, and delight that has historically made the gangster subgenre such a seething cauldron of unresolved drives. The series works episode by episode, season by season to establish a complex point of view that inevitably requires us to acknowledge, despite its power over us, the insufficiency of Tony's charm in the face of murder and other forms of social devastation.

Central to the series' revolutionary take on the appeal of the immediacy of the gangster is its revelation of a dark secret about family through a juxtaposition between the roles of Carmela and Dr. Melfi in Tony's life. Instead of comparing an innocent family with a guilty career, the series juxtaposes Tony's criminal activities with a family held together by his wife Carmela's unacknowledged, self-destructive attachment to the excitement and allure of Tony's violence, to which she is blinded by a reductive attitude toward religion that serves as a powerful form of denial rather than as a mode of fighting against evil. Only Melfi's psychiatry, with its ethical roots deeply anchored in a conscious connection with the beneficial aspects of the subconscious, can offer any hope of dealing with the attractions of the innocence (and power) of gangster spontaneity. In this, "The Sopranos" represents an impressive advance over both the rigid code of ethics and morals in the 1930s gangster film and the post-Code relativity instigated by Francis Ford Coppola, neither of which dealt honestly with its material.

The untenably simplistic nature of the Code rendered the "good people" one-dimensional and unintentionally made the gangsters seem more exciting and desirable. In post-studio Hollywood, post-Godfather gangster narratives tended to follow Coppola's simplistic lead in relativizing values, which ultimately disappeared into the maelstrom of Michael Corleone's id and ego, seemingly lost forever in the glamour of gang potency. In contrast, the old Hollywood definition of "good" people is severely challenged and the romanticizing of the gangster in the "Godfather" series is commented on in "The Sopranos," particularly in the second-season episode "Commeditori," when Tony and "the guys" go to Italy expecting the operatic glamour of Coppola's films, only to be disappointed by the putrefaction and emptiness under the pretty surfaces. The continuous thrust of "The Sopranos" is an examination of the way Americans (even gangsters themselves) are bedazzled by the same impulsive human desire that mesmerized Coppola. Chase deliberates the need to use our human capacity to mediate desire so as to allow for important longer-range needs and interests.

Tony's interlude with a family of wild ducks in the first episode, his pure delight in nature's gift to him, is the series' introduction of the problem of Tony's seductive "innocence." The ducks come to him literally out of the blue, bringing their natural bodies and their unsullied family behavior smack into the middle of his contradiction-ridden home and business life when they land in his backyard pool. The positioning of the ducks creates the maximum of complexity about Tony, coming as it does after a main title sequence that contains a mass of aggressively virile resonances: Tony Soprano returning home to New Jersey from New York, a huge cigar in his mouth, driving through a maze of evocations of masculine power in America—bridges, highways, electric wires, and industrial sites. The sequence is shot through the driver's POV, further emphasizing Tony's dominance as he negotiates the twists and turns. Aurally, the montage is scored by a guttural rendition of "Woke Up this Morning," a song with the refrain "Got yourself a gun."

These images immediately collide with Tony's position of subjective, child-like confusion in the psychiatrist's office and his discomfort as he meets Dr. Melfi for the first time. As he speaks with her, we see him suppressing the information about his violent operations and frolicking in his pool, like a delighted child, with a mother duck and her ducklings, clad only in an open robe and his boxer shorts. The entrance of the ducks into the analysis puts a strain on the already powerful imbalances of Tony's characterization.

These dissonances and contrasting fragments are bracketed by the linearity of Tony's conversation with Melfi. Unexpectedly, it is a curative rather than a repressive linearity that makes its first dent in Tony's macho defenses as he fulminates about the weakness involved in going to a psychiatrist. Melfi keeps him focused, finally thwarting his evasions as she insistently repeats the question, "Are you depressed?" He finally stops spinning his cover stories and answers reluctantly, "Yeah, since the ducks left." What to make of a protagonist who thrives on brutality and grieves for departed ducks? Ultimately, a great deal. For Tony's infantile obsession with the ducks is a distillation of his confusion about immediacy—a confusion shared by everyone in the show but his therapist—which he is able to sentimentalize and compartmentalize so that his worship of his own visceral responses blocks him from experiencing a mature sting of conscience about his life of crime.

Tony's retreat into Melfi's inner sanctum suggests that he can gain the needed insight, and this marks an enormous change in the life of the media gangster. Unlike Tommy Powers, Tony Soprano does not have to have his body destroyed in order to cut through his defenses. Unlike Henry Hill in *Goodfellas,* the gangster project Chase considers "the Bible" for his creation, Tony is not forever lost in the false glamour of the gangster life, in comparison with which ordinary life is a second-rate business that makes "schnooks" of all of us.[5] Tony has begun a quest that will slowly and with great pain, sorrow, and difficulty lead to other possibilities than the unthinking release of chaotic energy and false glamour that have locked previous gangsters into a doomed cycle of savagery. Not for one second does "The Sopranos" deny the moment-to-moment pleasure of the infantilized life that the American media gangster leads. But neither does the series fall into the moral confusion of the "Godfather" trilogy and its descendants, which are so enchanted by spontaneous pleasure that they have barely a shred of defense against the infantile, violent sprees of its protagonists. In a flash of insight, "The Sopranos" takes heed of that oddly seductive innocence in all its thrilling excitement and chilling myopia.

The characteristic myopia of Tony and his colleagues threads the series, continually provoking ambivalence about the gangster's spontaneity, one of the most revealing episodes being "Boca," the ninth of the first season. The episode weaves two stories, one about Uncle Junior's taste for cunnilingus and one about the sexual abuse of one of Meadow's (Tony's daughter) friends by Don Hauser, the coach of the girls' soccer team at Verbum Dei, Meadow's high school. "Boca," which means "mouth" in Italian, is also the nickname for Boca Raton, the upscale resort town in Florida to which Junior takes his main squeeze, Roberta "Bobbi" Sanfillipo, for some rest, recreation, and cunnilingus. The juxtaposition of Junior's time-out from the male world of the mob and the abuse story sets up a set of contrasts that suggest the problematic nature, not of Junior's particular and perfectly innocent sexual desire, but of its proscription by a male subculture that, ironically, enthusiastically endorses a wide variety of other instinctual drives that are dangerous and destructive. When Tony learns of Junior's sexual preferences, Junior has to terminate his relationship with Bobbi, and the reflection cast by the Hauser story pairs these events to imply that all aspects of the lives of the gangsters are occasions for male self-indulgence as long as they fit within the conventional macho image.

The soccer-coach thread begins as Tony and the other suburban gangster fathers and their satellites are beside themselves with joy at their daughters' triumph on the playing field. However, the thrill of victory fore-


Anthony Neste/HBO


Anthony Neste/HBO

The women in his life—Tony with his psychiatrist, Dr. Melfi, and (right) his wife, Carmela (Edie Falco)

grounds their male sense of dominance: they do not take their daughters out to celebrate; they take the coach for a drink at Bada Bing!, the topless bar where the Sopranos gang hangs out. Their infectious euphoria turns slightly unpalatable when it generates an equally spontaneous anger at the news that Hauser has negotiated a new and better contract and is leaving the school. Impulsive forms of intimidation to get him to stay escalate when the final shoe drops and it becomes clear that Hauser has sexually abused one of the girls on the team. Tony and his soldiers decide to kill him. This complicates audience relationships with the characters. The "good fellas" are suddenly not amusing, but frightening. Yet at the same time there is a nagging admiration for the gangsters: Who is not outraged by child molestation? Except that, cleverly, Chase makes us confront the problem of dealing with such rage spontaneously.

Tony is the fulcrum of this episode because only he, by virtue of the combination of his gangster power and his analysis with Melfi, can begin to mediate the huge energies in play. He finds himself unable to blithely indulge his instincts, to enjoy without reservation either the damage to Junior's reputation because of his pleasure in giving Bobbi pleasure or the plan to avenge the young girl by killing Hauser. The newly emerging Tony is no longer completely proof against doubt. He aborts the contract on Hauser primarily because Melfi asks him why he has to control everything after he heaps contempt on the solutions posed by what he sees as the ineffective legal and psychiatric communities: "Who's gonna stop him? You?" In the context established by the episode, it becomes clear to the audience and to Tony himself that he is motivated by some dubious needs of his own for control and domination in seeking to kill Hauser, and the enthusiastic endorsement of those needs by Tony's soldiers contrasts suspiciously with their proscription of Junior's sexuality. The physical spontaneity of cunnilingus is too openly emotional, too tender for the soldiers, sounding yet a further note of warning about the limitations of the lure of gangster immediacy. The warnings become ever more insistent, and awareness for both characters and audience grows as the series continues.

For Tony, there is a modicum of new insight because of Melfi's interventions. For the audience, though there is a certain attractiveness to Tony's take-charge position, since we know the problematic relationship

between legal justice and sex offenders, there is also a certain horror inherent in his propensity toward murder. When he finally cancels the hit, Tony feels neither liberated nor evolved, but rather radically out of control, and to commemorate the loss that ethical behavior inspires in him, he floods his system with alcohol and Prozac, babbling that he hasn't hurt anyone. Like Tony, the audience is and continues to be in a conflicted position in which it is difficult to reject either Melfi's moral stance with its long-range implications or the short-term immediacy of Tony's practical approach toward survival. Yet at the end of "Boca," Tony is at a tantalizingly different place from any gangster in the history of the subgenre, just because of psychiatry and cunnilingus.

This conflict is actively refracted in every transaction and relationship in the series, but particularly in the juxtaposition of Tony's wife and his therapist, by means of which the series makes its main contribution to the gangster project by breaking with both small-minded PCA moralism and the relativist "Godfather" phenomenon. Having profited from Coppola's infusion of a new vocabulary and a more overt portrayal of family and gangster vocation into the subgenre, Chase takes on the task of restoring values to mass-culture fiction about gangsters, but with an unprecedented complexity, and a new twist for the genre. The problematic nature of the joy associated with Tony's spontaneous virility is most uniquely confronted in the juxtaposition of Carmela's problematic, self-serving form of Catholicism and the painful integrity of Jennifer Melfi's commitment to our human relationship to the subconscious.

The old gangster tradition, in deference to the extremely conservative Catholicism of the men who governed the Production Code Administration, would ritually haul out a highly idealized, cardboard impersonation of a priest to pass harsh judgement on the infectious excitement of the gangster mayhem. Ironically, this worked nicely to liberate audiences from their ordinary limits by permitting them to enjoy the gangster while taking in the obligatory pieties at the same time. The "Godfather" series exploded this disguise not only by implicating the Church as a financial dependent of the Corleones, but also by cross-cutting between Michael's role in the baptism of his nephew and his "family's" role in the killing of the principal members of the rival mobs. As Michael is being asked, "Do you renounce Satan?" his will is being carried out by numerous assassins, a chilling evocation of the Church as the house of Satan in this world. With the Church unmasked as a fraud, and with no other source of values in *The Godfather,* the vitality of the gangster assumes an uncontested sovereignty in the film. In contrast, David Chase also envisions a corrupt Church financially beholden to the mob, but "The Sopranos," by placing Tony between Carmela and Dr. Melfi, raises to the surface from the depths of the gangster tradition the possibilities of human allegiance to ethics by taking heed of the energy of the subconscious.

The subconscious, along with the Catholic Church, has always played a role, albeit a shadowy one, in the gangster subgenre, but never before as a potential source of values. It has always lurked as the negative source from which gangsters draw nervous energy and the reason they are subject to fits. After World War II, the psychology of criminal behavior became more explicit, as in *White Heat,* which linked Cody Jarrett's (James Cagney) migraine headaches to his incestuous relationship with his mother, and ostensibly both to his propensity for violence. After *The Godfather,* interestingly, abnormal psychology was relegated to the lesser gangsters, Vito and Michael Corleone becoming the templates for the gangster as hero in a totally degenerate society. But the TV series casts a cold eye on Tony's belief that he is of the latter type, and suggests his lack of connection to subconscious energies.

The juxtaposition of Carmela and Dr. Melfi highlights the melodrama of Tony's choices, not a sexual choice—the cliché of sexual competition between women is present only if it is imposed by a clichéd reading of the series—but a choice of values: Carmela's travesty of morality that actually enables Tony to continue in a life of crime, or Melfi's honest confrontation of the subconscious that might aid him in coping with the infantile charms of criminal mayhem. That Carmela is married to the mob works on more than one level. She is, in many ways, an allegory for the confusion in the general American public about deviance. A devoted mother, with a sincere concern for other people and community as she understands it, she is nevertheless unaware that she is sexually excited by transgressive behavior, and especially by violence. Endlessly tinkering with her Catholicism to calm her conscience, her piety is explicitly revealed, in part, as self-deception by her sexuality. She becomes aroused with Tony only in response to his criminal behavior. When he brings home a stolen fur coat, she expresses her appreciation by initiating sex: fascinatingly, she is the partner on top. In an even more chilling sequence, utterly unprecedented in gangster lore, Carmela initiates unusually warm and tender sex when Tony, in an episode entitled "From Where to Eternity," returns

from murdering a 23-year-old boy. This is not a deed that Tony has explicitly mentioned to her, but the sequences before and after indicate that she knows the basics of his intent, a situation that patently horrifies and arouses her. It is noteworthy that her physical approach to Tony is linked to the infantilization that the worship of immediacy spawns; she caresses his face and body as a mother might caress a baby. In fact, Tony's relationship to his home stresses the infantile; he spends a disproportionate amount of time in his bed, like a baby in his crib (as Henry Bronchtein, the director of the episode, has noted).[6] Tony's home is not built in opposition to his gang life, but on a disguised attraction to the "bad boy" energy of the criminal.

The audience too would like to stay in its crib, fiercely fighting against what Chase reveals about Tony through the polarities inherent in Carmela and Melfi. Chat rooms buzz with audience desire to get lost in erotic fantasies about Tony with both women. But the series relentlessly chips away at those fantasies, revealing some hard home truths about sexual attraction/repulsion concerning Tony. Chase links Carmela's morality to an infantilized relationship with the Church through her psychosexual liaison with the parish priest, Father Philip Intintola. (It says much about this character that his name—if you say it quickly, which they all do—sounds like "Rin-Tin-Tin.") Father Phil spends cozy evenings with Carmela in front of the Home Entertainment Center. He even spends the night once, ostensibly for practical reasons, while Tony is away, and they have a close brush with sex. But, as Carmela realizes and tells Father Phil, he has made a life work of arousing needy women, and enjoying the whiff of sexuality without following through. Would that Carmela could turn her formidable insights on herself. Even in the third season, when she can no longer endure her own complicity with the poisoned wellsprings of her affluence, she escapes into rhapsodies about the innocence of the Baby Jesus in paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art—her version of Tony's fixation on the ducks. And when she consults a psychologist, who bluntly refuses to let her pay him with what he calls Tony's blood money and tells her that her only productive recourse is to leave her husband, Carmela decides that this Jewish doctor "can't understand" the Catholic attitude toward marriage. Chase contextualizes this attitude in a less than flattering light when Carmela accepts the counsel of a priest (not Father Intintola), who insists that she honor the sacrament of marriage by taking from the marriage only that which isn't tainted by Tony's criminal activities—a stunning exercise in sophistry that continues to lock Carmela into her painful dynamic with Tony and results in no more than a renunciation of some flashy jewelry.

Barry Wetcher/HBO

Carmela—devoted to family, and married to the mob

Chase also frustrates the fantasies that the audience wants to cultivate about Dr. Melfi. Although there is some subtextual sexual interest aroused in Jennifer Melfi by Tony Soprano, she, in contrast to Carmela, is prepared to deal with and fight it. Paying what must be one of the highest compliments ever accorded psychiatry on television, Chase suggests that beyond the clichés that associate permissiveness with therapeutic treatment—clichés Tony periodically hurls in Melfi's face—there exists a core in the psychiatric process that fosters an honesty about the attractions of the gangster way of life that may be our only hope, even if it cannot promise a complete solution to the problem.

From the moment Tony Soprano first enters Dr. Melfi's office, he continually attempts to ensnare her in the exercise of raw power that passes for sexuality and even love among the women with whom he deals. (It passes for love between Tony and the men too.) Often his displays toward her take an "adorable" child-like

form of impetuousness, impulsiveness, spontaneity, and socially immature gestures—putting his feet up on her coffee table and flapping them back and forth, for example. But Tony's attempts to create a crib away from home for himself are not successful. Melfi will not give in to any of his gangster erotics—sudden attempts to kiss her, attempts to extend the protection of his power to her—or to his belief that violence can change the truth. His declaration of love in the first season is met with her calm analytical approach to transference. When he learns that she needs repairs on her car, he "steals" it and takes it to his own mechanic, thinking this will be a romantic surprise. But Melfi confounds him by insisting that he will receive credit on his bill for the cost. She does let him get her and her date a table at a crowded restaurant to prevent a scene, but when he threatens her with extreme physical violence at her analytical suggestion that his mother is behind the attempt on his life, she leaves him to deal with the doubts she has encouraged, doubts that cannot just be pounded into submission.

When Tony's violent way of life reaches into Melfi's life, forcing her to go into hiding, she terminates her association with him on what she assures him is a permanent basis. There seems to be no temporizing on her part, as there is on Carmela's, until in the middle of the second season, plagued by dreams about abandoning him, she decides to resume his therapy despite the urgent pleas of her therapist ex-husband, Richard La Penna (Richard Romanus), and her control psychiatrist, Eliot Kupferberg (Peter Bogdanovich), to stay away from a person they deem a dangerous sociopath. Their doubts stand unanswered in the second season: Is Melfi in the process of giving in to her own adolescent longings about Tony?

In the third-season episode "Employee of the Month," we must come to the conclusion that Melfi has important, mature, professional—not personal and infantile—reasons for continuing to treat Tony. The show, primarily about the rape of Dr. Melfi by Jesus Rossi (employee of the month at the local fast-food restaurant that she patronizes), quashes the innocence of spontaneity within the violent context. While Carmela has permitted violence to be hidden and eroticized, the violence in Melfi's life is too available in all its ugliness to evoke anything but horror. Rossi's attack on Melfi is a motiveless hatred unleashed on her in a spur-of-the-moment urge, the worst aspect of spontaneity unmasked. Even for the audience, which (given the evidence of the chat rooms) was charmed by Tony and Carmela's post-murder bedroom scene, this is an act impossible to romanticize. Melfi's demeanor is utterly businesslike as she descends a metal staircase in a cinderblock stairwell, a surrounding devoid of any sensual ambience, when Rossi assaults her. Her response is an unambiguous struggle to escape him. For the audience, trained by decades of gangster lore, sentimentalization is displaced onto its yearning for this terrible moment to foster in Melfi a desire to turn toward Tony as her protector and avenger.

A selective interpretation of the episode can suggest that this is a desire encouraged by the show. The police have casually released Rossi because of procedural snafus, and there is no one but Tony who can give Melfi the immediate gratification of vengeance. Melfi feels the same childish impulses to avail herself of that solace: she finds herself yelling at Dr. Kupferberg with the same rage that Tony yelled at her when she suggested that Hauser be turned over to the police instead of dispatched by efficient mob execution, "That employee of the month cocksucker is back on the street, and who's gonna stop him, you?" But a more comprehensive understanding of events reveals that the show raises this desire in order to reject it. Despite her rage, Melfi's use of Tony to avenge her is restricted to the world of the imagination—the proper use for a gangster fantasy. It is important that Chase does not construct her as being above the desire to throw herself on Tony's mercy, for it reflects the audience's divided position. Indeed, Melfi is overtaken by a spasm of fear during a therapy session with Tony, which upsets him to the point that he intrudes on the distance between analyst and patient by walking over to comfort her. The moment is filled with unspoken feelings and ideas as Tony searches Melfi's bruised face for some clue to this unprecedented outburst, and Melfi wrestles silently with a decision that has hovered over this episode. "What? Do you want to say something?" asks Tony, genuinely concerned, expressing the tenderness that is embedded in his rich access to physical immediacy. The camera lingers on Melfi's now impassive swollen and bruised face. "No," she says, and the episode cuts abruptly, with finality, to black. Tony's momentarily naïve openness cannot be accepted because of its place in a much larger constellation of unacceptable behavior.

In raising our fantasies that Tony will be Melfi's hero, and then dramatizing her ethical rejection of that childish romanticism about gangsters, "The Sopranos" as a postmillennial gangster entertainment stakes out the highest ground yet claimed by any production in this subgenre, if complexity is a measure of ethical value. It refuses to make things easy for us. On an emotional level, all people in this series are equal. Tony

has many a genuine and profound emotional response. Even the most brutal and heedless of the gangsters might have one now and again. Yet if the human common denominator of intense feeling is a basis for occasional empathy and identity with characters, that empathy does not become a substitute for ethics in this series. A true melodrama, "The Sopranos" stages the innocence of its protagonist: Tony has a certain purity of heart. But that innocence is more troubling than in previous gangster melodramas.

"The Sopranos" proclaims, and loudly, that if the innocence of bodily immediacy is attractive, still that is not enough. Tony's disregard for ethics and law cannot be condoned because of his spontaneous, generous charm. Carmela represents that untenable attitude of the mass audience excited by the lies unspoken, while Melfi will not lose herself in them, although at times—to quote Sam Spade—everything in her wants to. This is no valentine, as Mario Puzo's novel is to Vito Corleone.[7] Nor is it an arch wink at the joke the gangster world has played on straitlaced America, as in Richard Condon's "Prizzi" series.[8] David Chase and his creative community are inviting us to be very adult in our consideration of the crime culture and very sophisticated about its role as a metaphor for the tangled desires of our daily lives.[9] We might even say that with "The Sopranos," mass culture comes of age as entertainment provides a truly popular examination of important popular realities. Would a public that could learn the lesson Tony offers continue voting for presidential candidates on the basis of a perceived warmth and spontaneity that annihilates known facts about the insufficiency of their administrative records and/or unacceptable ideological commitments?

Martha P. Nochimson's most recent book is *Screen Couple Chemistry: The Power of 2*. She is working on a study of gangster films in Hollywood and Hong Kong.

Notes

1. Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History,* ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 42.
2. In the gangster subgenre, the spontaneous body of the gangster protagonist is always rendered appealing; in other genres of crime entertainment, where the gangster is an antagonist, that spontaneity is generally rendered repulsive; indeed, it is often inscribed as a nauseating violation of cleanliness, proportion, and order. It is no accident that James Cagney, a dancer, was so effective in gangster films: the attractions of his lithe, feline, grace set him apart from the wooden, if morally correct, bodies of the good men and the slothful, obdurate bodies of lesser gangsters.
3. In non-gangster crime entertainment, the coolness of the policeman's body is often one of his central attractions; the heat of the gangster's body being associated with putrefaction and fetidity. Clint Eastwood's Dirty Harry is a prime example. Humphrey Bogart's physical coolness is also the center of his character when he fights crime, a hallmark that made him in many ways a more memorable lawman than he was a criminal. But in the gangster subgenre, the physical coolness of the lawmen is asexual, antiseptic rather than enticing. In "The Sopranos," the police and the FBI are much in evidence, and, for the most part, are of unquestionable integrity. Accordingly, they are clean-cut, if somewhat indistinguishable from each other. Their cool detachment from their job, in which there is no personal body, works similarly against audience empathy with their plans to get evidence on Tony, even if we know that it is the right thing to do.
4. Marge Roukema, a conservative Republican Congresswoman who admits to never having seen the show, is representative of a myopia about the show's ethical complexity.
5. An unrepentant Henry Hill, in the witness protection program at the end of *Goodfellas,* mourns the loss of "the good life": "We were treated like movie stars with muscle. We had it all just for the asking. . . . We ran everything. We paid off cops, we paid off judges. . . . Everything was for the taking. And now it's all over. And that's the hardest part. . . . I have to wait around like everyone else. . . . I'm an average nobody, get to live the rest of my life like a schnook." The film gives us no reason to second-guess Henry; it implies the existence of nothing that is as worthwhile in life as having "everything for the taking."
6. Henry J. Bronchtein, Commentary, "From Where to Eternity," Disc 3, *The Sopranos, The Complete Second Season,* DVD, HBO Home Video, 2001.
7. Mario Puzo, *The Godfather* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1969). Puzo's novel depends on a fantasy medieval, personal hierarchy, in which Vito rises to the top because his supremely warm, generous instincts and mental acuteness enable him to manage the affairs of human beings while the abstract legal system flounders. It is a profoundly relativistic book that idealizes men who "know how to use violence," the tone of which is perfectly translated to the screen by Francis Ford Coppola.
8. Richard Condon's "Prizzi" trilogy is an elaborate joke about the United States, proposing the gangster as the quintessential American: a person with absolutely portable ethics and identity, rooted in nothing but the exigencies required for success. The trenchant irony of the tale speaks of the blindness of American society from a perspective outside of American relativism that locates the trilogy as an ethical statement. *Prizzi's Honor* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1982); *Prizzi's Family* (New York: Putnam, 1986); *Prizzi's Glory* (New York: Dutton, 1988).
9. Although the "Sopranos" online chat rooms give no evidence of a broad spectrum of sophisticated viewers, they also give no indication that the fears of the would-be censors are justified. The enthusiastic participants do not express negative attitudes about ethnic groups, nor do they seem to lose respect for cultural institutions; in fact quite the reverse. By and large, the audience is intrigued by questions of loyalty to family and among "soldiers," although they are also swept up by sexual interest in the obvious objects of desire: Tony, Dr. Melfi, and Carmela.