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DEPTH

Coming Heavy

To really "make" it as a *Sopranos* watcher, come with your full breadth of cultural references or don't come at all

by [1] [David Lavery](#)

At this point in our cultural history, mob movies are classic American cinema, like westerns.

- Jason Le Penna ("The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti," Season One)

As the orchestrator of *The Sopranos*' sustained aria of life, death, nursing-home limbo, suburban-neighborhood hell, and strip-club heaven, Chase has used television in an unprecedented manner. Part of the immense pleasure of *The Sopranos*' debut season was watching the work of a man who'd mastered a new form: Chase spent 13 weeks crossing the miniseries with the soap opera, draining his fresh synthesis of those old genres' hokey melodrama, and then flooding it with vibrant humor, rage, psychoanalytic insight, and a good red wine to wash down all the pasta everyone is always eating.

- Ken Tucker, *Entertainment Weekly*



The Sopranos - HBO

In "Meadowlands," a first season episode of HBO's hit dramatic series and cultural phenomenon [2] [The Sopranos](#), Tony Soprano visits the Sit Tite diner to make his displeasure known to his uncle, Carrado "Junior" Soprano, concerning a recent mock-hit on Christopher Moltisanti, one of Tony's soldiers. Having just attacked Mikey Palmice on the street with a staple gun (stolen during a visit to the hospital), Tony is in no mood for conciliation, but neither is Junior, who warns his nephew not to return again unless he is armed: "Come heavy," he insists, "or not at all."

As a work of popular culture - the most important work of popular culture of the second half of the 20th century, *The New York Times* effused - *The Sopranos* "comes heavy," if you will, in every episode, not just with weaponry but with intertextuality and with genre accoutrements.

"Any text that has slept with another text" has necessarily slept with all the texts the other text has slept with," notes Robert Stam, author of *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Blackwell, 2000), extending a central premise of STD prevention into the study of literature and film. Our times, by this logic, are clearly promiscuous. It is quite apparent that many of television's most ingenious series - rife as they are with intertextual references, often humorous, to movies, to culture in general, to literature, to (self-referentially) themselves - come heavy as well. The predominance of the "already said," as Umberto Eco once observed, is, after all, one of postmodernism's signatures.

Often, the [3] [intertextuality](#) of such shows contributes mightily to keeping a certain segment of the audience - flattered by "inclusion-by-allusion," able to feel pride in the ability to get the references - still hooked, still watching. It was possible to follow [4] [Twin Peaks](#) and not ever realize, for example, that a minor character, an insurance agent, had the same name as the Fred MacMurray character (also an insurance agent) in [5] [Double Indemnity](#).

[6] [Northern Exposure](#) entertained us even if we did not appreciate the full ramifications of Franz Kafka's visit (in "Ciceley") to an early 20th Century Alaska where his writer's block is cured and idea for "Metamorphosis" receives a new inspiration. Certainly [7] [The Simpsons](#) is still funny even if we do not recognize that Principal Skinner's "mother" lives in Norman Bates' house from [8] [Psycho](#), or that virtually an entire episode replicates, in some cases shot-for-shot, Martin Scorsese's remake of [9] [Cape Fear](#), with Sideshow Bob standing in for Max Cady.

An exchange like the following, from the premiere of the fifth season of [10] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* - an episode in which the legendary Dracula himself comes to Sunnydale - is still witty even if we have never seen a Dracula movie or watched *Sesame Street*:

Willow: Hi.

Xander: Nice. Look who's got a bad case of dark prince envy. (Behind him we see Buffy holding her stake, looking concerned)

Dracula: I have no interest in you. Leave us.

Xander: No, we're not going to (in Dracula's accent) "leave you." And where'd you get that accent, Sesame Street? (As the Count on Sesame Street) Vun, two, three - three victims. Mwa ha ha!

Intertextuality in these complex televisual texts constitutes much more than mere icing on the cake. It is central to their often cult appeal. And it is central as well to (and perhaps inseparable from) the question of genre.

The Sopranos comes heavier than most. A continuing gangster series - fully, self-consciously, even hyper-consciously, mobbed-up - hybridized in the age of recombinant TV with a family drama ("Family - redefined" as HBO has it in one ad; "Either one family or the other will kill him," as another puts it), its intertextuality reveals much about its genre. A partial catalogue of such moments would include, in no particular order:

Martin Scorsese is spotted at a movie theatre and hailed with praise for an ignored movie: "*Kundun*," Christopher calls out, "I liked it" ("46 Long," Season One).

A federal marshal named "McLuhan" puts in an appearance ("House Arrest," Season Two).

AJ (Anthony Junior) becomes deeply depressed after reading the existentialists at school (Sartre, Kierkegaard, Camus, Heidegger are evoked, and of course the German philosopher "Niche," and an English teacher, of course, is blamed - along with the Internet) and learning that life is meaningless ("Death just shows the ultimate absurdity of life," AJ remarks) ("D-Girl," Season Two).

Tony is compared to the Golem and then to Frankenstein ("Denial, Anger, Acceptance," Season One).

As Meadow Soprano watches a rerun of *The Howling* on TV while making out with a Puerto Rican boyfriend, a horrid metamorphosis taking place on screen reminds her, as she announces, of "Georgia O'Keefe!" ("I Dream of Jeanne Cusamano," Season One).

Ren'e Zellweger is discussed, unfavorably ("College," Season One).

A popular Broadway musical is evaluated post-show by theatre critic Christopher Moltisanti: "*Rent*. Fucking Broadway musicals. I mean we're supposed to get all fuckin' weepy-eyed cause they turned off the heat in some guy's loft" ("A Hit is a Hit," Season One).

"Juan Valdez has been separated from his donkey," Paulie Walnuts announces in a phone call to Tony - code for a successful robbery of some Columbian drug dealers ("A Hit is a Hit," Season One).

The suicides of Kurt Cobain ("Boca," Season One) and Ernest Hemingway ("The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti," Season One) are evoked.

Christopher's pitifully illiterate attempts at writing a screenplay make him, in the eyes of his girl friend, "a regular Tennessee Williams." His writing efforts, however, bring him to doubt the validity of his own life-plot. "Where's my arc?" he begs to know from all who will listen, evoking the character arcs of Richard Kimble (*The Fugitive*) and the Keannu Reeves character Kevin Lomax in *The Devil's Advocate* ("The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti").

Later, taking an "Acting for Writers' class, Christopher becomes James Dean in a scene from *Rebel Without a Cause* ("Big Girls Don't Cry," Season Two). And he gives Janeane Garofalo and Sandra Bernhard obscene Italian dialogue advice ("D-Girl," Season Two).

Viewing a DVD of *Remains of the Day* induces a paroxysm of guilt in Carmela Soprano over her acceptance of her husband's involvement in the Mafia, and helps to prevent a priest's attempted seduction of her ("College," Season One).

Masada is evoked by a Hasidic Jew whose bris is about to be finished by Tony's gang in order to ensure his cooperation ("Denial, Anger, Acceptance," Season One).

In a bizarre dream of Dr. Melfi's, Tony dies in a horrible head-on collision with a semi to the tune of a munchkin song ("Out of the Woods") from *Wizard of Oz* ("Toodle-Fucking-oo," Season Two).

A hospital orderly seeking to prevent Tony's verbal assault on his supposedly stroke-affected mother is called "George Clooney" and told to mind his own business ("I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano," Season One).

Carlos Castaneda, quoted by Dr. Melfi, is mistaken for a boxer by Tony ("The Happy Wanderer," Season Two).

Christopher, unhappy with slow service amid a mostly African American crowd in a restaurant, wonders aloud, "What am I, Mark Fuhrman?" ("A Hit is a Hit," Season One).

After failing to whack Tony Soprano, two young African American hitmen are referred to as (1) 'the Jamaican bobsled team' and (2) Boyz II Men ("Isabella," Season One).

As Big Pussy tries to locate AJ's biology teacher's missing Saturn, he laments that he feels "like Rockford here" - evoking a show that *Sopranos* creator David Chase wrote for ("46 Long," Season One).

Sopranos intertextuality also includes the presence of numerous other 'texts': Tony's Russian goomah, Irina, reads [11] [Chicken Soup for the Soul](#); when sent to convince Irina that she should forget about her sugar daddy, Sylvio cites Gail Sheehy's *Passages* to buttress his argument; and Carmela is seen on several occasions reading Arthur L. Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (no doubt preparing for a future meeting of her book club - at one of their meetings she and her fellow mob wives discuss Frank McCourt's *Tis: A Memoir*).

In its most brilliant intertextual flourish, *The Sopranos* as a commercial enterprise has spun off a "commodity intertext" (as such is now sometimes called) entitled *The Sopranos: A Family History*. The coffee-table guidebook claims to be the byproduct of the exhaustive research of organized crime expert Jeffrey Warwick - an actual character on the show who is seen discussing the mob on the local news in "The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti."

"As the Bible is to Western thought," David Chase, the real Jeffrey Warwick, proclaims on the [12] [HBO Web site](#) with playful blasphemy, 'so is *The Sopranos: A Family History* to the field of companion books!" (So far the book itself has not joined *Memoirs of a Geisha* as an on-screen presence, but it well might. After all, Chase himself has appeared, Hitchcock-like, on-screen, sitting at an adjoining table in an outdoor cafe in Naples in "Commendatori" [Season Two].)

Not surprisingly, references to gangster films abound:

When (in "The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti," Season One) the counter boy at a bakery shows Christopher (Michael Imperioli) no respect, Christopher shoots him in the foot-revenge no doubt for what Tommy DeVito (Joe Pesci) did to Spider (also played by Imperioli) in *GoodFellas* (Tommy would, of course, later kill Spider). In similar fashion, Lorraine Bracco whose portrayal of Karen Hill in *GoodFellas* brought her fame, plays Dr. Melfi in *The Sopranos*.

A member of the posse of gangster rapper Massive Genius calls out to Christopher, "Yo, Donnie Brasco" ("A Hit is a Hit," Season One).

Paulie, recalling Edward G. Robinson's last words from *Little Caesar*, proclaims mock-dramatically, "Could this be the end of Ricco?" ("A Hit is a Hit," Season One); and while snorting coke in the brilliant opening montage of Season Two, Christopher, anxious to write a gangster film himself, watches the same movie on TV ("Guys Walks Into a Psychiatrist's Office").

After being told that Hollywood is always looking for mob stories, bad first weekend numbers for *Mickey Blue Eyes* result in sudden disinterest in the genre ("D-Girl," Season Two).

It doesn't take a rocket scientist, however, or Harold Bloom, to recognize that the central ancestor texts of *The Sopranos* are, of course, [13] [The Godfather](#) films. Paulie drives a car with a horn that chimes the theme from *The Godfather* ("Nobody Knows Anything," Season One). When Tony's crew travels to Italy to negotiate European distribution of carjacked merchandise from Jersey ("Commendatori," Season Two), they bring with them images of the old country largely based on Michael Corleone's idyll there in *The Godfather* after his hit on Sollozzo and Captain McCluskey. A tour of Jersey includes the restaurant where a mobster convinced Tommy Dorsey (with a gun down the throat) to release Frank Sinatra from his contract - a scene evoked in *The Godfather* ("D-Girl," Season Two). Junior's Livia-inspired attempted whack of Tony comes down, just like the hit on Don Corleone in *The Godfather*, while the respective mob bosses are making a purchase in a street-side market ("Isabella," Season One).

Tony's crew knows *The Godfather* films all too well. After Brendan Fillone is whacked on Junior's orders, Big Pussy sees the explanation in *Godfather I*, and it leads to gangster semiotics and mise-en-sc'ne analysis.

Christopher: Brendan's dead. . . . Brendan's brains are floating in his bathtub. Message job through the eye. Mo Green special.

Paulie: What you talking about, Mo Green?

Big Pussy: In One: Mo Green's eyes got too big for his stomach so they put a small caliber in his eye.

Christopher: Fucking Mikey Palmice does their hits. . . .

Paulie: In his glasses, you mean.

Big Pussy: Glasses, eyes, why you quibbling with me? . . .

Paulie: The eye is just how Francis framed the shot. For the shock value. ("Meadowlands," Season One)

When Big Pussy returns after a mysterious disappearance, he craves a taste of Sylvio-does-Pacino (and Keaton).

Big Pussy: Hey, Sil?

Sylvio: What? "What."

Big Pussy: I've been gone a long time, let me hear it.

Sylvio: "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in." "All right, just this one time. I'll let you ask me about my affairs." "Is it true, Michael?" "No." "You fuck!" "Our true enemy has yet to reveal himself."

Tony: He's on a roll! I gotta get the fuck out of here. ("Guy Walks Into A Psychiatrist's Office," Season Two)

And when, at the end of the second season, Big Pussy's betrayal of Tony is revealed in a remarkable dream sequence, his destiny to 'sleep with the fishes' is announced, of course, by a fish:

Talking Fish (Big Pussy's voice): Hey, Ton'. How's it going?

Tony: You didn't get sick?

Talking Fish: Nah.

Tony: How much you weigh?

Talking Fish: Eight pounds. Lost a lot of weight. Swimming. The best exercise. Works every muscle group.

Tony: Get the fuck out of here. You never exercised once in your life.

Talking Fish: Anyway, four dollars a pound. You know I've been working with the government right, Ton'?

Tony: Don't say it.

Talking Fish: C'mon, Ton'. Sooner or later you gotta face facts.

Tony: I don't want to hear it.

Talking Fish: Well, you're gonna hear it. Fuck. You passed me over for promotion, Ton', you knew.

Tony: How much shit you give them?

Talking Fish: A lot.

Tony: Jesus, Puss.

Talking Fish: Fuck of a way for it all to end, huh?

Tony: Yeah. Yeah.

Talking Fish: These guys, on either side of me, they're asleep.

Tony: Don't say that. It's not fucking funny. I don't want to see you floppin' around down there! ("Funhouse," Season Two)

In a piece on [14] [pop culture references](#) within *The Sopranos*, Mike Antonucci suggests that the net effect of the series' many allusions is to complicate its central question: "Is this a show about them being like us, or us being like them?" Similarly, Ken Tucker has observed [15] [in Entertainment Weekly](#) that *Sopranos* intertextuality has troubling genre implications: "One of the myriad greatneses of *The Sopranos*," Tucker writes, "is that, to paraphrase the *Godfather* paraphrase that Steven Van Zandt's Silvio frequently quotes, it keeps pulling you back in - back in on

yourself, appealing to your basest instincts, to your fundamental urge to hear a bloody story well told.” The gangster genre has always been about ambivalence, about our guilty identification with its characters and action, and in *The Sopranos*, as in the finest examples of the genre, narrative wins out over morality or political correctness.

As Thomas Schatz shows in *Hollywood Genres* (Random House, 1981), genres have a life course, evolving through four distinct stages:

an experimental stage, during which its conventions are isolated and established, **a classic stage**, in which the conventions reach their “equilibrium” and are mutually understood by artist and audience, **an age of refinement**, during which certain formal and stylistic details embellish the form, and finally **a baroque (or ‘mannerist,’ or ‘self-reflexive’) stage**, when the form and its establishments are accented to the point where they ‘themselves become the ‘substance’ or ‘content’ of the work.

Understood in these terms, movies like [16] [Little Caesar](#) (Mervyn Leroy, 1930) and [17] [Public Enemy](#) (William Wellman, 1931) represent the gangster film in its experimental stage; [18] [Godfather I](#) and [19] [II](#) (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972 and 1974) are classic examples of the classic stage; and [20] [Miller’s Crossing](#) (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1990) represents wonderfully the age of refinement. *The Sopranos* is clearly baroque, and yet ...

Have a look at Robert Warshow’s classic comparison of the gangster film and the western, from his essay “Movie Chronicle: The Westerner” published in *Film Theory and Criticism* (Oxford, 1992) and summarized in the following table:

The Gangster Film	The Western
A ‘story of enterprise and success ending in precipitate failure” (453).	A story of a man’s struggle to retain his honor, even in defeat
A romantic tragedy about a man “whose defeat springs with almost mechanical inevitability from the outrageous presumption of his demands: the gangster is bound to go on until he is killed” (458).	A classical tragedy based on a hero of virtue always prepared for defeat; need not end in the death of the hero.
A tale of the city.	A tale of the frontier.
The gangster is “without culture, without manners, without leisure” (453).	The Western hero is a figure of repose.
The gangster is “lonely and melancholy.”	The Western hero is also lonely and melancholy, but out of a profound worldly wisdom,” the ‘simple’ recognition that life is unavoidably serious.”
The gangster is “expansive and noisy,” not introspective.	The Western hero is “organically” introspective; he has to do what he has to do (457).
The gangster is violent in both his attractions and repulsions; he may lose control at any time.	The Western hero avoids violence at all cost; he is always in control.
The gangster is never satisfied; complacency is fatal to him.	The Western hero is complete within himself, self-contained.
The gangster is always trying to get ahead; always wanting to own something more, conquer some new territory.	The Western hero has no desire to get anywhere.

"Everyone wants to kill him and eventually someone will" (454).	The Western hero is also under customarily "under fire" but would avoid it if he could.
The gangster does not seem to need love in any traditional sense.	The Western hero does not seek love, is "prepared to accept it, but . . . never asks of it more than it can give"; love seems "at best an irrelevance"; the woman the Western hero loves (usually from the East) does not understand what he does and he is incapable of explaining it to her.
The gangster associates with prostitutes and "loose" women because of their "passive availability" and their "costliness."	The Western hero associates with prostitutes (like Miss Kitty) because they understand him.
The gangster's possessions are central to his being; he owns things in a gaudy, exhibitionistic way.	The Western hero owns nothing, or seems not to; money, possessions, a house, a regular place to sleep, all seem alien to him.
The gangster's death reveals his whole life to have been a mistake.	Even in death, the Western hero retains his honor.
A modern genre which "confronts industrial society on its own ground" (465).	Essentially "archaic" (466).

For the most part, *The Sopranos*, a story still in progress with an arc still not clearly discernible, enacts the basic motifs Warshow delineates. Tony is "without culture, without manners, without leisure" (though he does watch The History Channel). He is "lonely and melancholy" (even on Prozac). He is violent in both his attractions and repulsions and, despite his announced desire to Dr. Melfi to be in "total control," loses control at any time, both from anxiety attacks and in fits of rage. He is insatiable; everyone wants to kill him - including his uncle, his mother and the late Richie Aprile. He associates with prostitutes and "loose" (and kept) women. He owns and possesses in garish, exorbitant fashion.

Writing in the 1950s, Warshow had recognized that the gangster film in its pure form had already begun to morph, so it should not surprise us that *The Sopranos* - a cable-television continuing, multi-season series - should deviate from the norm. Its divergences are, however, revealing. For instance, as in the classic gangster tale, *The Sopranos* is a tale of the city, but as its opening credit sequence - Tony's drive from New York, through urban north Jersey, to his wealthy subdivision - reminds us in each episode, it is a tale of suburbia as well.

Tony Soprano is "expansive and noisy" AND introspective. In one of his noisiest moments, at the end of "Boca" (Season One), Tony is under the influence of a dangerous combination of alcohol and Dr. Melfi-prescribed chemicals. He stumbles around his own living room ruminating on his decision not to whack the Verbum Dei girls' soccer coach and statutory rapist. "I didn't hurt anyone!" he proclaims in celebration to a confused Carmela. It is safe to say that no other gangster in the history of the genre could have managed this degree of introspective pride in non-violence.

And unlike the classic gangster, Tony does seem to need love - the love of his wife and children and the love he never received from his own deeply dysfunctional mother. Perhaps most significantly, we do not yet know whether Tony will die a typical gangster's death - a fate that will confirm the great mistake of his life. Is it possible that Tony can survive the "mechanical inevitability" that springs "from the outrageous presumption of his demands"? Will *The Sopranos*' story of enterprise and success end "in precipitate failure"? Perhaps Season Three, now about to begin, will answer such questions, or at least take us closer to the answers.

A psychiatrist who momentarily replaces Dr. Melfi in the first episode of Season Two rejects Tony as a patient on the grounds that he saw [21] [Analyze This](#) and fears similar repercussions. "But that was a comedy," Tony responds, becoming a genre critic. We do not yet know whether *The Sopranos* might turn out to be one as well, not just as one of the most wickedly funny on television - which it is already - but in the classical sense: as a drama which has a happy ending.

[22]

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Related Sites

For more on the history and theories of intertextuality, visit [3] [Daniel Chandlers page](#) on semiotics for beginners.

Need more of *The Sopranos*? The HBO store sells [26] [t-shirts](#), [27] [shot glasses](#), and the definitive book, [28] [The Sopranos: A Family History](#). A comprehensive site for *Sopranos* fans, [29] [Sopranoland](#), features transcripts of each episode. [13] [The Godfather Trilogy](#) bills itself as "the site you can't refuse."

Caryn James of **The New York Times** writes in her [30] [preview of the new season](#) that the new episodes "suggest why *The Sopranos* has such wide appeal: it lives at the juncture where pop culture and high art meet."

[31] [New Jersey Online](#) is promoting its *Sopranos* connections, plus extras like listening to NJ police scanners.

Posted March 3, 2001 @ 12:00 am on PopPolitics.com

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- [1] David Lavery: [#lavery](#)
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- [4] Twin Peaks: <http://www.cenedra.com/twinpeaksmain.htm>
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- [6] Northern Exposure: <http://www.aande.com/NorthernExposure/>
- [7] The Simpsons: <http://www.thesimpsons.com>
- [8] Psycho: <http://us.imdb.com/Title?0054215>
- [9] Cape Fear: <http://us.imdb.com/Title?0101540>
- [10] Buffy the Vampire Slayer: <http://www.buffy.com>
- [11] Chicken Soup for the Soul: <http://www.chickensoup.com/>
- [12] HBO Web site: <http://www.hbo.com/sopranos/>
- [13] The Godfather: <http://www.jgeoff.com/godfather.html>
- [14] pop culture references: <http://www.ksc-equinox.com/52-21/lifestyles/Numerous%20pop-culture%20references%20help%20give%20>
- [15] in *Entertainment Weekly*: <http://www.ew.com/ew/archive/0,1798,1|27526|0|family+reunion,00.html>
- [16] Little Caesar: <http://us.imdb.com/Title?0021079>
- [17] Public Enemy: <http://us.imdb.com/Title?0022286>
- [18] Godfather I: <http://us.imdb.com/Title?0068646>
- [19] II: <http://us.imdb.com/Title?0071562>
- [20] Miller's Crossing: <http://us.imdb.com/Title?0100150>
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[29] Sopranoland: <http://www.sopranoland.com/>

[30] preview of the new season: <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/03/02/arts/02TVWK.html?searchpv=site01>

[31] New Jersey Online: <http://www.nj.com/sopranos/>