

Prologue

'Coming Heavy': The Significance of *The Sopranos*¹

Well, it would help me not to see anything more, for what's good, and what's bad. Because, you see, on this earth there is one thing which is terrible, and that is that everyone has their own reasons.

Octave in Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game*

(quoted by David Chase [Bogdanovich Interview])

In 'Meadowlands' (1004) in *The Sopranos* first season, Tony Soprano visits the Sit Tite Loungnette 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, Junior's right-hand man, on the street outside 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, a path-breaking television series, and a cultural phenomenon, *The Sopranos* itself 'comes heavy', if you will, in every episode, not just with weaponry but with significance. The cultures of the United States, Great Britain and Canada (see the essays in this volume by Johnston and Lacey), Australia, and even Italy (where it premiered in the spring of 2001) have come under its influence and contributed to the cultural conversation about it. Talk, discourse, about *The Sopranos* has migrated far beyond the water cooler.

Vanity Fair (December 1999) offers an Annie Leibovitz photograph of the cast of *The Sopranos* re-enacting DaVinci's *The Last Supper*, with James Gandolfini, of course, in the role of Christ (and Big Pussy as Judas).

On National Public Radio's *Car Talk*, Tom and Ray Magliozzi, discussing the new 'Eddie Bauer Edition Ford Expedition', propose other possible signature cars: first on their list is a 'Tony Soprano Suburban' (which should come complete with a baseball bat mounted in the rear window).²

¹ Parts of this introduction originally appeared in the online journal *PopPolitics.com* (<http://www.poppolitics.com/articles/2001-03-03-heavy.shtml>) and appear here with permission.

² In 'The Telltale Moozadell' (3009) *Car Talk* is playing on the radio in the Soprano kitchen during a breakfast scene.

A Nashville, Tennessee furniture store, promoting a 50% off sale on Italian leather upholstery, claims that they offer 'Italian leather savings without the Mob'. As an enticement to shoppers, they offer a prize draw for a gift card to Romano's Macaroni Grill, a vacation to Rome, and a 'Soprano's [sic] DVD collectors set'.

On ESPN's Sports Center a visiting player who has hit a home run over Fenway Park's Green Monster is said to have 'disrespected the Bing!' – just like Ralph Cifaretto did in 'University' (3006). (The catchphrase begins to appear everywhere.)

Congresswoman Marge Roukema (R-New Jersey) introduces a resolution to condemn HBO, David Chase, and *The Sopranos* for propagating offensive Italian stereotypes. (Interviewed by the press, she admits that she has never watched the show.)

An advertisement for Season Three of *The Sopranos* (running on HBO and other networks) advises us that 'Christmas will be a little late this year,'³ as a moving camera pans across the front of Satriale's Pork Store – one of the series' primary locations – and around to the side, where it discovers the body of a whacked Santa Claus, disposed of in a dumpster.

A May 2001 panel discussion (later broadcast on C-Span), sponsored by the National Italian-American Foundation and featuring cultural critics Camile Paglia and James Wolcott but not a single advocate, doesn't have a kind word to say about *The Sopranos*.

The real Donnie Brasco (former FBI agent Joseph Pistone – Mike Newell's 1997 film was based on his six years undercover with the mob) praises the authenticity of *The Sopranos* in *Time*.

Lexicographer Jesse Sheidlower predicts that the next *Oxford English Dictionary* will contain numerous *Sopranos* citations (DeCaro 2001: 22; 26).

A man loudly seeking a late night entry to James Gandolfini's apartment building, flees in terror when met at the door by none other than the 'real' Tony Soprano. 'Tony, man, I'm so sorry. I am so sorry!' (*People Weekly*, 25 Dec 2000: 72).

The Italian-American One Voice Committee gives its first 'Pasta-tute of the Year' award to *Sopranos*' creator David Chase for having sold out his Italian heritage. In the fall of 2001 the American Italian Defense Association's denunciations of

³ New *Sopranos* (aka Christmas) were late in coming because David Chase had asked HBO for more time to work on the scripts for the third season.

Dominic Chianese (Uncle Junior on *The Sopranos*) prevent the veteran actor and singer from touring to promote his new CD *Hits*.

Arch-conservative William F. Buckley overcomes his compunctions ('I swore I'd shoot myself if I didn't write about it, "it" being *The Sopranos*') and castigates the series in a brief review of 'University' (3006) in *National Review*. The most interesting thing about *The Sopranos*, he insists is 'its confirmation of the psychological depravity of the viewing audience.' 'The wonder,' Buckley opines, 'isn't that *The Sopranos* is so marvellously conceived and executed, but that it is so widely viewed and enjoyed without any hint of concern over the depravity it relies upon.' Tony Soprano is compared to Heinrich Himmler. (In a mere 700 words Buckley manages to make several glaring errors about what actually transpires in the episode.)⁴

George Anastasia, a *Philadelphia Inquirer* crime reporter who has covered the dysfunctional Philadelphia and South Jersey mob for 15 years, tells Terry Gross on WHYY's *Fresh Air* that he watches *The Sopranos* religiously and praises David Chase's third season decision to completely deglamorize the mob. (Any ethnic group, he comments, that can give the world Antonin Scalia and Camile Paglia need not fear that Tony Soprano will become its role model.)

While at work on a collection of academic essays on *The Sopranos* a college professor receives abusive e-mails and voice-mails demanding abandonment of the project long before the book is ever published. One e-mail, from a Pittsburgh physician, calls him a 'despicable human being' for doing such a book. The professor responds by asking whether the doctor routinely makes diagnoses before ever examining his patients.

'In certain kinds of writing, particularly in art criticism and literary criticism,' George Orwell observed half a century ago in 'Politics and the English Language', 'it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in

⁴ 1) He tells us that Noah 'beds' Meadow 'except that they don't bother to use a bed' (they are on a bed); 2) he speaks of the 'semi-explicit emplacement of a condom' (in fact all we see is the condom in its wrapper, and Noah removes it off-camera); and 3) he says that Tony 'is angered by his lieutenant and hits him hard enough to cause his wrist to swell' (it is Ralphie's wrist, not Tony's, which begins to swell after beating Tracee to death). Is there a connection between misreading a television show (or a movie, or a book), accusing the audience of psychological depravity, and simply misremembering it?

meaning ... When one critic writes, 'The outstanding feature of Mr X's work is its living quality,' while another writes, 'The immediately striking thing about Mr. X's work is its peculiar deadness,' the reader accepts this as a simple difference of opinion. If words like black and white were involved, instead of the jargon words dead and living, he would see at once that language was being used in an improper way. Many political words are similarly abused.'

As a recent incarnation of 'X', David Chase's *The Sopranos* has produced blatantly contradictory assessments that might make Orwell roll over in his grave. In the eyes of Ellen Willis (whose seminal essay in *The Nation* is reprinted in this volume), for example, the HBO series is 'The richest and most compelling piece of television – no, of popular culture – that I've encountered in the past twenty years ... a meditation on the nature of morality, the possibility of redemption, and the legacy of Freud.' For the always provocative Camille Paglia, however, *The Sopranos* is a contemptible 'ethnic minstrel show – Amos and Andy for a TV industry that can no longer get away with demeaning stereotypes of blacks and Jews' and a 'buffoonish caricature of my people' (Paglia: 'Feinstein').

I have yet to watch a single entire episode of that show, which I find vulgar and boring as well as rife with offensive clichés about Italian-Americans that would never be tolerated were they about Jews or blacks.

What I find especially repugnant about *The Sopranos* is its elitist condescension toward working-class life, which it distorts with formulas that are thirty years out of date. Manners and mores have subtly evolved in the ethnic world that *The Sopranos* purports to depict and that extends from South Philadelphia to central New Jersey and metropolitan New York. (Paglia 2001)⁵

Willis's and Paglia's black and white discrepancy tells us more, however, than Orwell's characteristic naïve realist view would have us believe. Might it not be that they disagree because *The Sopranos* as a text is like the body of the famous 'elephant in the dark' in the Sufi story, whose nature reveals itself in entirely different ways depending on which part of its complex being is currently being examined?

⁵ Elaine Showalter (2000) has observed that Paglia's condemnation of *The Sopranos* is the product of 'her current persona as a Giuliani-style Catholic populist'.

Allen Coulter, the most-often-utilized of the series' stable of directors, has called *The Sopranos*: 'David's poem to New Jersey. I do believe that New Jersey is to David Chase what a part of Italy was to Fellini' (quoted by DeCaro 2000: 24). In its richness Sopranoland reminds us not just of Fellini but of Faulkner, who wrote on a map of his own fictional universe, Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi, 'William Faulkner, Owner and Proprietor'. Owner and proprietor David Chase's teleuniverse is filled to overflowing with rich detail and wonderful imagination. When Paglia, or the Italian-American One Voice committee, or James Wolcott, (a *Vanity Fair* culture critic who first praised and then denounced the series), or L. Brent Bozell feel about the *Sopranos* elephant, discovering negative images of Italians, or excessive violence, or over-the-top profanity to be its defining features, are they blind to its thousand other moments of wit and brilliance? Why is it not the marvelous flashbacks, astonishing dream sequences, *Godfather*-quality montages, wicked, profane, often very black sense of humor, stereotype-defying idiosyncratic major and minor characters, superb cinematography, memorable set-pieces, playful, argot-laced language, real-as-it-gets dialogue, intertextual complexity,⁶ and rich textual geography that they decide to notice in the series?

Let us imagine a compilation tape presented in court at *The Sopranos*' public trial – an incomplete but representative video record of quality moments meant to show its accusers (especially those who have condemned it without even watching it) the elephant in all its complexity. We might see:

- ❑ Tony Soprano crying in Dr. Melfi's office when he realizes the meaning of his infatuation with the ducks visiting in his swimming pool ('The Sopranos' (1001)).
- ❑ Cut to Tony taking his Prozac while staring into the bathroom mirror as Grace Slick sings 'One pill makes you smaller/and one pill makes you tall/and the ones that mother gives you/don't do anything at all...' before his flashbacks to 1967 begin. ('Down Neck' (1007)).
- ❑ Cut to Tony spraying whipped cream down AJ's throat in a father-son late-night raid on the freezer ('Down Neck' (1007)).
- ❑ Cut to Christopher Moltisanti's grotesque recurring nightmare in which a waste management rival he had earlier whacked returns to torture him and feed

⁶ See Appendix C at the end of this book, which provides a catalogue of *Sopranos* intertextual moments and allusions.

sausage to his girlfriend Adriana – and then to Carmela ('The Legend of Tennessee Molisanti' (1008)).

- ❑ Cut to Tony using his Mafia power to force an ill-mannered young man to remove his hat in a restaurant ('Boca' (1009)).
- ❑ Cut to Paulie Walnuts admitting that he has seen a therapist because he lacked 'coping skills' ('I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano' (1013)).
- ❑ Cut to a young Asian man answering 'Here' when Christopher Moltisanti's name is called at a stockbroker's exam ('Guy Walks into a Psychiatrist's Office' (2001)).
- ❑ Cut to Junior Soprano's lament that 'The federal marshalls are so far up my ass I can taste Brylcream' ('Toodle-Fucking-oo' (2003)).
- ❑ Cut to Richie Aprile, a violent, loathsome gangster, doing the Downward Facing Dog in yoga class ('Toodle-Fucking-oo' (2003)).
- ❑ Cut to Dr. Melfi's bizarre dream, in which Tony dies in a horrible head-on collision with a huge truck to the tune of a munchkin song ('Out of the Woods' from *Wizard of Oz* (1939) ('Toodle-Fucking-oo' (2003)).
- ❑ Cut to a Soprano-commissioned car jacking by two young African Americans that arouses the victim's misplaced racism; 'Fucking niggers,' he exclaims, shocking his family ('Commendatori' (2004)).
- ❑ Cut to Tony, appalled by his son's newfound nihilism and atheism, rebuking him with perhaps the most blasphemous line every uttered on television: 'She [Carmela] knows that even if God is dead, you're still gonna kiss His ass' ('D-Girl' (2007)).
- ❑ Cut to Christopher Moltisanti explaining his Near Death Experience vision of hell as an Irish bar where it's always Saint Patrick's Day ('From Where to Eternity' (2009)).
- ❑ Cut to Tony teaching AJ how to pilot *The Stugots*, completely oblivious to the small boat they swamp in their wake ('Bust Out' (2010)).
- ❑ Cut to Tony's food-poison-induced dreams in which (1) he self-immolates at Asbury Park to pre-empt death from cancer, (2) drives off with Adriana, Chris, and Furio in a tiny clown car, and (3) listens to Pussy's confession of betrayal through the words of an on-ice talking fish ('Funhouse' (2013)).
- ❑ Cut to Patsy Parisi urinating in Tony's pool, payback for Tony having had his brother whacked and, later, Tony inviting Patsy and his son over for a swim ('Mr. Ruggerio's Neighborhood' (3001)).

- ❑ Cut to Dr. Melfi's vivid dream in which she is again attacked by her rapist Jesus Rossi while her hand is caught in a soft drink vending machine and saved by a savage Rottweiler, who she later realizes (in dialogue with Dr Kupferberg) represents Tony: 'big head, massive shoulders, direct descendent of the dog used by the Roman armies to guard their camps' ('Employee of the Month' (3004)).
- ❑ Cut to dying-from-lung cancer hit man Bobby Baccilieri, Sr. dispatching with great difficult Mustang Sally while coughing up blood ('Another Toothpick' (3005)).
- ❑ Cut to a blow-by-blow meeting of a 'tumor board' called to assess Junior Soprano's treatment for stomach cancer ('Second Opinion' (3007)).
- ❑ Cut to Carmela, deeply depressed, crying over a Pedigree dog food commercial ('Second Opinion' (3007)).
- ❑ Cut to Tony and 'Mr Williams' (Furio) paying a visit to Dr Kennedy on the golf course in order to persuade him to care for Uncle Junior – 'There are worse things than cancer,' Furio reminds the good doctor ('Second Opinion' (3007)).
- ❑ Cut to a born-again narcoleptic repeatedly inquiring 'Have you heard the good news?' ('The Telltale Moozadell' (3009)).
- ❑ Cut to a montage of Tony's malapropisms: 'Hannibal lecture' instead of Hannibal Lechter ('The Sopranos' (1001)), '*Prince Matchabelli*' instead of Machiavelli's *The Prince* ('University' (3006)), 'Goyim' instead of Goya ('Amour Fou' (3012)), 'cathode tube' instead of catheter ('House Arrest' (2011)).
- ❑ Cut to Tony nearly succumbing to an anxiety attack from his first encounter with 'Big Mouth Billy Bass', whose rendition of 'Take Me to the River' ('(drop me in the water') induces a flashback to murdering and dumping-at-sea his former friend Big Pussy ('Second Opinion' (3007)).⁷
- ❑ Cut to Tony crossing 'Janice's Russian' off his Christmas to-do list – he and Furio beat him senseless in payback for abusing his sister ('To Save Us All from Satan's Power' (3010)).
- ❑ Cut to a scrabble game between Meadow and Jackie Aprile, Jr., in which her last word is 'oblique' and his 'ass' ('Pine Barrens' (3011)).

⁷ Tony is not always inarticulate. When he seeks to explain to Melfi that he is a soldier and not, therefore, evil, the History Channel fan readily finds examples of the truly evil: Hitler and Pol Pot ('From Where to Eternity' (2009)).

- ❑ Cut to Paulie and Christopher voraciously consuming packets of ketchup, mayonnaise, and relish during their night lost in the Pine Barrens ('Pine Barrens' (3011)).
- ❑ Cut to Paulie reporting to Christopher his confused understanding – 'He killed sixteen Czechoslovakians. He was an interior decorator' – of Tony's cell phone-conveyed garbled information about their adversary Valery (Tony had told him that the Russian had been a commando, 'some kind of Green Beret', who had fought in Chechnya for the interior ministry). 'His house looked like shit,' Christopher responds in disbelief ('Pine Barrens' (3011)).

Such evidence – and a hundred more moments like these – brought into court, should prove overwhelmingly convincing except, perhaps, to those predisposed to condemn *The Sopranos*. As *The Sopranos'* lawyer, however, I would seek to remove the biased, intolerant, and narrow-minded with my pre-emptory challenges. How, otherwise, would a fair trial be possible? But my advocacy would not convince anyone that *The Sopranos* is not profane – for it is; or that it is not blasphemous – for it is; or that it is not scatological – for it is; or that it is not full of wicked humor – for it is; or that it is not deeply disturbing – for it is; or that it is not brutal – for it is; or that it is moralistic – for it is not; or that it is politically correct – for it is not; or that it is free of racism, homophobia, and sexism – for it is not; or that it is monological (in Mikhail Bakhtin's sense of the term) – for it is not.

It has long been a commonplace of Marxist and neo-Marxist theory that cultural texts tend to repress contradiction in order to impose, or at least invite, ideologically simplistic readings, to (in the words of John Fiske) 'propose a unitary, final 'truth' of the text work by resolving contradictions and thus deny the force for social change, or at least social interrogation, that is embedded in them' (88). In the terminology of the Russian theorist Bakhtin, cultural texts thus tend toward the monological (Bakhtin's favorite example is Tolstoy) not the dialogical (as exemplified by Dostoevsky).⁸ They tend to speak with one voice rather than many. Deciding whether *The Sopranos* is monological or dialogical would seem to be as easy as determining whether something is black or white . . .

⁸ Dostoevsky puts in an appearance in *The Sopranos*. In 'Second Opinion' (3007), Dr Krakower suggests to Carmela that Tony should read *Crime and Punishment* in prison while he repents his sins.

The Sopranos, not surprisingly, does not need protectors – it can take care of itself. In a famous episode of *The Simpsons* following President Bush’s attack on the show in the 1992 State of the Union Address (‘We need a nation closer to *The Waltons* than to *The Simpsons*’), Matt Groening and company responded by including Bush’s actual comments in the show itself and having Bart sarcastically comment that the characters of both shows had one thing in common: ‘Hey, we’re like the Waltons. We’re praying for the end of the depression, too’ (‘Stark Raving Dad’, Season Three). *The Sopranos*, too, has responded to its critics, staging on-screen debates, for example, about the charges of Italian-American groups that it demeans Italians,⁹ portraying Columbia University administrators in a less than favorable light after the school forbid *The Sopranos* to film on location, etc. As Ellen Willis notes, the ‘continual reflection of [*Sopranos*] characters in their media mirrors is also a running commentary on the show itself’.

Needless to say the editor of this volume and the authors who have contributed to it assume that the reader’s final judgment of its merits will be based on a careful reading of it. Like most academic critics, *This Thing of Ours*’ authors’ primary objective has not been summary judgment of *The Sopranos*, not the gesturing of thumbs up or down, but an understanding of the text in all its complexity. We have sought to investigate the whole elephant. To assume such a stance, we are convinced, is to view *The Sopranos* in much the same way that Chase and company view their characters and their world. We acknowledge the truth of the line from Renoir’s *Rules of the Game* which appears as an epigraph to this prologue (and which David Chase cites in the Bogdanovich interview as his own *raison d’être*): everyone has their own reasons.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The essays in this volume, with the exception of those by Willis and Auster, were all written expressly for this book.

This Thing of Ours is divided into five sections. Two essays by Ellen Willis and Albert Auster offer an INTRODUCTORY overview of the series.

⁹ In a supremely self-conscious moment in ‘The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti’, for example, Dr. Melfi’s father comments, in a discussion of Italian-defamation issues, gangster films, and westerns, that ‘You never saw the Scotch-Irish pissing and moaning about always being portrayed as rustlers and gunslingers.’

The second section, THE MEDIA CONTEXT, presents David Lavery and Robert J. Thompson on the creative achievement of David Chase; Paul Levinson on '*The Sopranos* as a Nuts-and-Bolts Triumph of Non-Network TV'; Dawn Elizabeth B. Johnston on the reception of *The Sopranos* in Canada; and Mark C. Rogers, Michael Epstein, and Jimmie Reeves on *The Sopranos*, HBO, and contemporary television.

The third section, MEN AND WOMEN, includes four essays: Cindy Donatelli and Sharon Alward on the great differences between *Sopranos* women and those in the great gangster films of the 1970s and 1980s; Avi Santo on male body image; Joanne Lacey on the way British men have responded to *The Sopranos*; and Joseph S. Walker on the clash of male and female in the first season of *The Sopranos*.

GENRE, NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE, AND INTERTEXTUALITY, the fourth section, gathers essays by Glen Creeber on 'Television, Tarantino, and the Intimate World of *The Sopranos*'; David Pattie on the modern gangster film and *The Sopranos*; Kim Akass and Janet McCabe on the role of women in the series' narrative structure; and Kevin Fellezs on the place of music in *The Sopranos*.

The final section, CULTURAL CONTEXTS, includes Lance Strate on *The Sopranos* and New Jersey; Douglas L. Howard on language in the series; Steven Hayward and Andrew Biro's Marxist reading; and Sara Lewis Dunne's meditation on the role of food in *The Sopranos*.

Four appendices – (A) A *Sopranos* Episode Guide, (B) *The Sopranos*' Cast of Characters, (C) Intertextual Moments and Allusions on *The Sopranos*, and (D) *The Sopranos: A Family History* – a comprehensive bibliography, and an index complete the volume.