

***The Sopranos* (USA: HBO, 1999-2004)**

Production Details:

Writers: David Chase, Frank Renzulli, Robin Green,
Mitchell Burgess, Terence Winter, Todd A. Kessler,
Michael Imperioli, Lawrence Konner

Directors: Chase, John Patterson. Allen Coulter, Tim
Van Patten, Henry J. Bronchtein, Steve Buscemi

Producers: Chase, Ilene Landress, Brad Grey, Burgess,
Green, Renzulli

Cast:

Giacomo Jr. (Jackie Jr.) Aprile (Jason Cerbone)
Richie Aprile (David Proval)
Bobby Baccilieri, Jr. (Steven R. Schirripa)
Salvatore (Big Pussy) Bonpensiero (Vincent Pastore)
Artie Bucco (John Ventimiglia)
Ralph Cifaretto (Joe Pantoliano)
Adriana La Cerva (Drew De Meteo)
Dr. Jennifer Melfi (Lorraine Bracco)
Christopher Moltisanti (Michael Imperioli)
Johnny (Johnny Sack) Sacramoni (Vincent Curatola)
Anthony (AJ) Soprano, Jr. (Robert Iler)
Carmela Soprano (Edie Falco)
Carrado (Uncle Junior) Soprano (Dominic Chianese)
Janice (Parvati) Soprano (Aida Turturro)
Livia Soprano (Nancy Marchand)
Meadow Soprano (Jamie-Lynn Sigler)
Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini)
Paulie Walnuts (Tony Sirico)



Almost from the beginning—the series premiered on the American premium cable channel HBO in January of 1999—*Sopranos* critics have heaped upon it the highest praise. *The New York Times* famously deemed it the “most important work of American popular culture” of the last half century. When in 2002 the widely read

periodical *TV Guide* published its list of the fifty greatest shows of all time, *The Sopranos* only held fifth place but was the highest ranked dramatic series in television history. Ellen Willis deemed it “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.” The subtitle of Canadian Maurice Yacowar’s recent book—*The Sopranos on the Couch: Analyzing Television’s Greatest Series*—simply assumes its preeminence. TV critic Matt Roush proclaims the series the “greatest mob drama ever,” ranking it ahead of even Francis Ford Coppola’s *Godfather* Trilogy.

Of course the verdict was not unanimous. Prominent critics like Wolcott (who had originally praised the series) and Paglia loudly voiced their loathing of it. Italian-American groups denounced the show for what they believed to be its offensive, grossly stereotyped depiction of Italians as mobsters, mounting letter-writing campaigns, staging boycotts, harassing *Sopranos* cast and crew in their public appearances, and even seeking legislative action against the series. Some critics (Laufen, for example) were appalled by what they saw as misogynist tendencies in Season Three (the rape of Dr. Melfi, the brutal murder of a pregnant stripper, the near suicide-by-mobster of Tony’s mistress Gloria Trillo). When broadcast uncensored in Canada on CTV, the national Broadcast Standards Council, charged by law with preventing dissemination of “any abusive comment or abusive pictorial representation that, when taken in context, tends or is likely to expose an individual or group or class of individuals to hatred or contempt on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability” was asked to take action against the series and CTV. The Council’s review of *The Sopranos*, however, found the complaints without merit (see Johnson).

At the turn of the century, *The Sopranos* became a powerful cultural phenomenon, generating prolific water-cooler conversation, endless print and electronic media news stories, magazine covers, and commodity intertexts, including Allen Rucker’s official *The Sopranos Family History* and *The Sopranos Family Cookbook* and a selection of scripts from the first three seasons. At the time of this writing (Fall 2002) a line of *Sopranos* frozen food is about to hit the market.

In promotions for the series, HBO has used the tag lines “Family, redefined,” and “One family or the other will kill him [Tony Soprano].” The continuing narrative of *The Sopranos* moves back and forth between the suburban nouveau riche and mafia families of a New Jersey crime boss. On the home front, we find Carmela,

Tony's long-suffering, morally compromised, but very tough wife; Meadow, his daughter, now a student at Columbia University, who knows very well that her father is not really in the waste management business; Anthony Junior, his bad boy son; his New Age shlub of a sister, the scheming, but now born-again Christian Janice; Uncle "Junior," Corrado Soprano, an elderly, easily manipulated Mafioso; and his (now deceased) passive-aggressive monster of a mother, Livia, who coerces Uncle Junior into ordering a failed hit on Tony, retaliation for putting her in a luxurious retirement home. At the "office"—Tony and his crew use The Bada Bing, a local strip club, as their primary headquarters, although they also convene in the back of Satriale's Pork Store—the regulars include Silvio Dante, manager of the Bing and Tony's loyal captain; Paulie Walnuts, an anal-compulsive hit man; and Christopher Moltisanti, Tony's impulsive nephew, a young made-man who aspires to write mob dramas for Hollywood. Tony's worlds collide, however, in the office of Dr. Jennifer Melfi, where he seeks help for panic attacks. A mob boss in a psychiatrist's office was, in fact, the seed crystal for the series, and Melfi becomes an all-purpose ficelle, interpreting Tony's conscious and unconscious life.

In "46 Long," in what must be taken as a television auteur's signature, *Sopranos* creator David Chase has one a minor character quote the old Italian saying "*col tempo la foglia, di gelso divena seta*"/time and patience change the mulberry leaf to silk. A veteran of twenty seven years as a writer, producer, and occasional director of network television (he had previously contributed to such series as *The Rockford Files* [1976-80] and *Northern Exposure* [1993-95]), Chase has long been an outspoken critic of network television. As Lavery and Thompson have shown, that the silk of *The Sopranos* as we know it ever came to be produced was the result of an against-all odds fortuitous set of circumstances coupled with many adept artistic choices. If *The Sopranos* turns out to be as revolutionary a television series as it now appears to be, Chase may have succeeded in transforming a medium through his loathing of it.

Faced with the challenge of doing a mob story on television, Chase understood immediately (as he tells Bogdanovich) that he would have to redirect the genre "into the family." The series' mobsters are all fans of the gangster film genre—Silvio endlessly quotes Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) from *The Godfather* films, Christopher tries his hand at writing an (illiterate) gangster film screenplay, Tony cries while viewing *Public Enemy*, moved to tears by the film's loving mother, so different from his own—and *The Sopranos* is, not surprisingly, intertextual to the

core, playing off of predecessor texts in the genre. Indeed, it is possible to map most of the narrative according to the gangster film coordinates outlined by Robert Warshaw forty years ago (see Auster, Pattie, Remnick).

But *The Sopranos* operates on a new, smaller scale in a different medium. Creeber has argued that the series “implicitly critiques the ‘televisionization’ of the gangster genre—parodying its gradual development (Chase might say decline) from cinematic epic to standard video or television fare . . . its constant self-reflexive referencing to its own generic history reveal[ing] a television narrative desperately trying to re-invent and re-examine itself.” And Donatelli and Alward insist that it is possible to view *The Sopranos* as “a kind of feminist metatext” in which “Tony and his mob friends are ‘framed’ by rules of domestic television . . . all their actions . . . constantly subject to forms of irony and comedy that by now have become inevitably identified with serialized programming. While Tony and his friends may think they’re tough, everything that they do is undercut because they are cast in soap-opera episodes that deny them the dignity of a full-length Mafia movie, let alone a trilogy.”

The Sopranos has likewise departed from many of the conventions of television drama. Its casting, especially of the balding and overweight James Gandolfini as Tony, was a departure from television norms, as were the characters they portrayed, capable of extreme violence and despicable behavior. Nor did its narrative style conform to traditional multi-season dramas. Though fans expected some variation on the “Who shot J. R?” cliffhanger at the end of Season One, Chase and company offered none, nor has the series exhibited any sense of urgency about resolving some of its many arcs. Instead, Chase has repeatedly stated his desire to make self-contained one hour movies: “Sometimes I feel like we need to take a vacation from all that continuing stuff,” Chase explains in an interview, “It’s just so TV” (Handleman). In the introduction to the *Sopranos* scripts, he articulates his hope that his series is “similar to the foreign films I loved as a young adult for their ideas, their mystery, and their ambiguity—for not having the endings spelled out or telling the audience what to think or feel.” The series’ peerless use of music “as another character, the lyrics of songs functioning as a Greek chorus” (as Chase explains it) is likewise distinctive.

In order to produce his thirteen-episodes-a-year mini-movies, Chase has also demanded more and more time between seasons of *The Sopranos*—time devoted to fine-tuning the writing (each script goes through as many as ten drafts) and planning for the on-location (in New Jersey) cinematic-style filming. (*The Sopranos* has a rich

textual geography which, not surprisingly, has invited the attention of media ecologists [see Strate].) The hiatus between the third and fourth years lasted sixteenth months. Nor has Chase been willing to agree to an indefinite run for the series. Although *The Sopranos* is now committed to a five year run, Chase is absolutely determined to then pull the plug on his creation.

Although the major American television networks, all of which passed on the show, have attributed the tremendous success of *The Sopranos* to HBO's cable TV freedom to air nudity and profanity, Chase finds that explanation superficial. It is not bare breasts and obscenities that have set *The Sopranos* apart but, according to its creator, a variety of other factors: the narrative possibilities granted by the absence of commercial interruption, the freedom to allow characters to develop slowly over time, the series' insistence on treating its audience as highly intelligent. As Poniewozik observes, *The Sopranos* expects its viewers to remember details from three years back in an era in which the broadcast networks "increasingly believe it's highfalutin to air dramas like *24* that require viewers to remember what happened the week before."

The Sopranos also assumes that its audience shares its often wicked sense of humor. In several interviews Chase has proclaimed his credo that humor should accrue naturally out of the dramatic material and not be imposed upon it, a doctrine to which the series, full of pratfalls, scatology, puns, malapropisms, funny names, clever allusions (in *This Thing of Ours* Lavery provides a nineteen page partial catalog of *Sopranos* references) is not always faithful. *The Sopranos* is one of the funniest shows on television, however, because it partakes in the great tradition of comedy: its characters are consistently hilarious because they are often clueless, devoid of any insight into themselves, any wisdom about their predicaments.

The series is an excellent example of a Bakhtinian dialogical text, like a great novel (perhaps one by Bakhtin's much admired Dostoevsky—who puts in an appearance in *The Sopranos* when a psychiatrist suggests that Tony should read *Crime and Punishment* in his prison cell). It refuses to judge its characters or espouse a single point of view, a single authorial stance. As Chase insists, "we do not have signposts that tell the viewer how to feel. This is sad, this is good, this is scary, you should laugh at this" (Handelman).

Not governed by the same Nielsen ratings criteria as broadcast programming—for years, HBO's most famous tag line has proclaimed "It's not TV. It's HBO"—*The Sopranos* has nevertheless garnered the largest audiences in the history

of cable. Although only about a third of American homes even receive HBO, the premiere of the second season drew 11 million viewers. A product of TV III, a period in broadcast history, beginning in roughly 1995, dominated by cable television and the rise of digital programming, *The Sopranos* stands as a “nuts and bolts triumph of non-network TV” and as the show that established once and for all the HBO brand with the viewing public (Rodgers, Epstein, and Reeves; Levinson). While television executives in the United States are now in the process of rediscovering the Least Objectionable Programming theory and building their schedules on its foundation, *The Sopranos* has demonstrated (in the words of Poniewozik) something quite different: “Not only will ordinary folks watch a show that demands constant attention, resists easy closure, relies on subtext and is rich with metaphor—they will pay near usurious subscription fees for it.”

Questions to Consider:

- Why have Italian-American defamation groups found *The Sopranos* so offensive?
- How do women in the series differ from their counterparts in classic gangster films?
- What features of cable television have contributed to the economic success of *The Sopranos*?
- What features of cable television have contributed to its artistic success?
- *Buffy* is a series highly dependent upon cultural and pop cultural references in establishing its humor and its meanings. Can you give some examples?
- How does music function in *The Sopranos*?
- Psychoanalysis plays a prominent role in every episode. What contribution does it make to the series’ narrative?

Recommended Readings

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