

'The Sopranos on the Couch, Maurice Yacowa, Continuum Press, New York, 2002 8th version

Psychology of the Sopranos, Glen O. Gabbard, Basic Books, New York, 2002

These two books are psychological studies about a long running (six years) cable television show, THE SOPRANOS. It is a very popular show having 30-35 million weekly viewers but the reason it has attracted Psychoanalysts' attention is because it is the only show in the history of television to have a 'psychoanalyst, Dr. Melfi, as an important character. Not only is her own private life shown, soap opera style, but also the audience accompanies her into her office, showing them her 'psychotherapy.' This goes some way to explain the shows' interest to therapists. Another explanation for therapist's interest, reported by Dr. Gabbard, is patients coming in the following day to talk about the psychotherapy they have seen the previous evening or expressing their feelings about events and incidents that transpired. Dr. Gabbard's major point is that this show informed more people about what therapists do and how they do it than any other medium ever did. "For better or worse this show will be the basis for popular opinion about Psychoanalysis." The American Psychoanalytic Association collectively believed that the image of Psychoanalysis that the show presented was positive, complementary and laudatory. A special award and commendation was given to the show's writer(s), directors, and the actor, Lorraine Bracco, who played, Dr. Melfi, at the 2001 Mid winter meeting. Proving the popularity of the show, "Which, Psychotherapists have shown particular interest," there was a standing room only audience in the largest room available at the meeting which enthusiastically approved the award. For the record, not everyone in the psychoanalytic community thought THE SOPRANOS merited this official commendation. The New York Times and many other newspapers as well as the trade press prominently noted the award and said nothing about the dissention.

I assume that there are people who have not seen this series of films because there are only two ways to see it. Either you subscribe to Cable TV or you see it on DVD or VHS at the end of the season when all the shows become available at retail outlets and some Public Libraries. The SOPRANOS is in the middle of its sixth season but both of these books only discuss the first three seasons. These two books describe a show that has not changed in six years, Like other long running TV series (M.A.S.H., I LOVE LUCY, DALLAS) all shows are variations on a successful formula. Many of the original writers, directors and lead actors are still there and new ones know what is expected of them since the originator of the

show's concept, David Chase, remains in charge. The success of the series has invited much critical interest. I doubt that any television critic has not written a column about the show. Dr. Gabbard quotes Ellen Willis (The Nation), an astute critic of popular culture, and "The most compelling piece of television...of popular culture...that I've encountered in twenty years"

Viewers know that Dr. Melfi's patient is Tony Soprano, a boss of a northern New Jersey Mafia mob, headed by his Uncle, "Junior". He consults a psychiatrist because he gets panic attacks. In the course of the first consultation he reveals other symptoms. While Dr. Melfi can see that he is overweight, she does not immediately know what the audience knows, that he is a murderer and crime boss. What comes out is that he cheats on his wife with a series of mistresses, has rebellious, disobedient adolescent children, an angry mistress and a frazzled wife who is coming to the end of her tolerance. Enough family troubles to have the audience identify with his travails. Further, his is an upper-middle class lifestyle. He lives in an expensive house in the suburbs of New Jersey but not a mansion on an estate like Don Corlioni, THE GODFATHER. He drives a big Mercedes. All are icons of successful upper middle class life, further aids for identification from the audience that are presumed to want these status symbols. The audience sees that for Tony, an uneducated, ruthless, overweight, amoral, middle-aged thug and murderer, crime has paid well. In the first thirteen episodes the audience learns just how he runs his "organization" similarly to the way the audience he runs his psychotherapy sessions. They are flies on the wall in both instances. They are shown his "business" conferences, what the murders that he orders look like when 'executed' and watch him linger around the topless bar that is often his 'office'. The show attempts to 'normalize' crime as just another business, a pattern that began with THE GODFATHER. In my opinion the authors of both of these books insufficiently emphasizes Tony's sociopathology nor recognizes that his pathology has very deep roots and that expressions of it are more ubiquitous than just directed against his mother. His Father is portrayed as a warm, loving person but as he was a Mafia murderer also, what they leave out is that he has identified with his father. Both authors do recognize that Tony's panic attacks began when he saw his father, an enforcer, cut off a non paying (welcher) gambler's finger, Both authors go along with Tony as a Diamond in the rough character whose 'Cover' is "Consultant in Waste Management." Neither Dr. Gabbard nor Prof. Yacova excessively criticizes Tony's character, which parallels the audience's denial of the gross and horrendous nature of his behavior.

People who have lived in close proximity to criminals, Scorsese, Puzo and Coppola know that Mafioso have wives, children etc. and, like the famous Gilbert and Sullivan song from THE PIRATES OF PENZANCE, recognize, “When a felons not engaged in his employment, or matriculating his felonious little schemes, his capacity for innocent enjoyment is the same as that of any other man’s.” Which enables a series of programs which oscillates between exciting illegal and immoral activities like murder, adultery, prostitution, rape, beatings arson, loan sharking, arson, extortion, larceny, etc. and family soap operas about unhappy domesticity which allow the story to continue on for as long a time as desired.

Dr. Gabbard proclaims from his first page his enthusiastic partisanship for the show and some of his books constitute what I call an appreciation. Words such as, “Brilliant, refreshing version of reality, brilliantly illuminates what it means to be human, shows wit, resonates with existential dilemmas,” is in the first pages of the book. His appreciation of the series is such that he writes, “(THE SOPRANOS) has lifted the veil on the secret world of Psychoanalysis.” In my opinion the readers of neither book get anything like an accurate impression of Psychoanalysis and a misleading impression of Psychotherapy. I would characterize Dr. Melfi’s therapy as sometimes psychoanalytically informed psychotherapy. The mass audience does not differentiate distinctions between Psychoanalysis, psychiatrists and psychologists. Dr Gabbard discusses this, Prof. Yacowa does not.

Dr. Gabbard writes too charitably about Dr. Melfi’s boundary violations, which he notices but often excuses. For example, Dr. Melfi, in the course of her family’s dinner, “She has let slip (to the other guests) that she is treating a Mafia Don.” Dr. Gabbard says nothing about her major transgressions, which creates in me the anxiety that patients will wonder about their anonymity. A discussion of the therapist’s narcissistic boasting as well as striving to identify with an (infamous) patient and revealing unanalyzed defects in the therapist’s psychic apparatus would be appropriate. It struck me that this is an early instance of the countertransference, which will become a larger issue later on in the series. The viewers are going to recognize that Dr. Melfi is erotically attracted to Tony.

Neither author comments on the ramifications of “Cure,” which, in televisionland, cannot be Dr. Melfi’s goal because that would terminate the show’s format. It would then become another gangster picture with a sometimes-lovable murderer. The show would not last very long. Neither improvement nor

cure happens in this show because when the Tony leaves therapy his symptoms return and he is forced to resume his therapy with Dr. Melfi. It and she is an important plot device. Dr. Gabbard views the fictional Dr. Melfi inconsistently. For example, he refers to Dr, Melfi as a “Psychoanalytically trained psychiatrist” then a few pages later, as a “Psychoanalyst.”

Both authors have carefully studied the thirty-nine episodes of the series and their close observations reveal aspects that a one-time viewing misses. Each author’s focus is different. Prof. Yacowa focuses on the literary aspects, starting with references to past gangster film from PUBLIC ENEMY NUMBER ONE and LITTLE CEASAR to THE GODFATHER with an occasional ‘psychological’ insight, “Vin (the corrupt detective) embodies the weakness that Tony has suppressed.” “Isabella’s beauty is the sexualized and idealized beauty is the mother Tony never had,” omitting that it was a wish,” and he cites other evidence to convince us that Tony was dreaming the entire episode. Prof. Yacowa has not succeeded in his goal of putting the Sopranos on the couch because he is less astute about the psychological aspects of the film, an area at which Dr., Gabbard excels. My impression is the Prof. Yacowa has a theoretical knowledge of Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy but no clinical experience. He comments sensibly but not deeply or always knowledgeably on therapy. Noting (pp. 4) “Pussy’s bad back may denote (sic) a bad spine.” “Christopher...personifies Tony’s negative potentials.” He points out the relationship between Tony’s syncope episodes with his having witnessed his thug of a father chop off another man’s thumb but Dr. Yacowa doesn’t connect that to the theme of castration which permeates the series. A further failure is failure, considering his literary background is his failure to note Dr. Melfi’s relationship to F. Scot Fitzgerald’s Dick Diver in, TENDER IS THE NIGHT.

His field is film criticism but while he often recognizes Dr. Melfi’s boundary violations he not only does not recognize their source in her countertransference but also does not catch most of her technical errors. Still he gets an impressive number of things correct which I take to be an expression of just how much psychoanalytic theory has penetrated academic and popular culture.¹ He takes a moral stance toward Tony Soprano. He makes judgements about Tony’s racism and xenophobia both of which Dr. Gabbard ignores. But Prof. Yacowa does not analyze these facets of Tony’s character so as to form an integrated psychological profile.

Dr. Gabbard's appreciation for this show goes far afield and into the realm of intellectual pretentiousness when he compares it to Camus' *THE STRANGER*. "The will established a sense of authenticity and identity through an act of murder." Quoting Sartre, "The act is everything." Camus, (a member of the French resistance during World War II) murdered Germans and French Petonists, informers etc. The writers of this show have not. Their ideas about Mafia murders come from newspaper stories and other films about the Mafia. Dr. Gabbard says Camus' s characters feel 'inauthentic.' David Chases' characters have no moral consciousness, self-reflection, qualms or guilt. They are 'hit' men. The one murder that Tony personally commits, of an informer ('squealer') in the witness protection program, he feels justified about because the man broke the Mafia 'code'. Tony is in a small town in Maine with his daughter when he discovers and strangles the man. This gives the audience the idea that Tony can kill anyone without any consequences to him or his family.

Prof. Yacowa's, *THE SOPRANOS ON THE COUCH*, while having a catchy title is a misnomer. It takes years of psychoanalytic training to learn how to use the couch, training which Prof. Yacower does not have. He is therefore less insightful than Dr. Gabbard when it comes to understanding the characters psychoanalytically, I get the impression that he has a theoretical knowledge but no practical experience treating patients. His overview of three years shows," The series is a satiric representation of contemporary sex and folly." He comments sensibly on Dr. Melfi's therapy but he can not work exhaustively with material out side his field. His strength is that he has spent much time on a careful examination of the material, observing many small things that one-time viewers will miss. While he points out Dr. Melfi's boundary violations, he misses her technical errors, which Dr. Gabbard does not. I noted that Prof. Yacowa get a lot correct, which I take to be an expression of just how much Psychoanalytic theory has penetrated academic and popular culture, a fact first pointed out to me by Dr. Phyllis Greenacre in 1951. (2) He does have interesting things to say, "There is no uncontaminated virtue." "Dr. Melfi breaks down from trying to bridge the abyss between Tony's charm (sic) and his evil." He fails to recognize that as her countertransference. Only episodically does Prof. Yacowa transcend metaphor. His keen observations increase the audience's appreciation of the cleverness of the production but rarely from a psychoanalytic dimension.

¹ Which Phyllis Greenacre commented on in her 1951 paper, *An Appraisal of Psychoanalysis for the*

My guess is that Psychoanalysts are going to prefer Dr. Gabbard's book even though it is largely addressed to a non-professional audience. (It has no index) For example Prof. Yacower clearly sees that Tony Soprano's denial of his mother's hostility, which runs through the first thirteen episodes, is a good plot device but he does not mention that it is the audiences own unconscious Oedipal conflicts which underlie the tension of this melodrama. Prof. Yacower's lack of clinical experience limits his being able to see this film from Tony's perspective but he finds things that Dr. Gabbard misses, "Meadow leaves her parents the same illusion of authority that Tony's gangsters leave the cops." He also analyzes Tony's dreams in terms of how Luis Bunuel, the Spanish surrealist did in his films, not the way a Psychoanalyst would. "The dreams grow out of Tony's playful surrealism."

Both authors do lightly touch on the issue of a therapist treating a criminal. Yacower compares Dr. Melfi to the priest. He sees that both are equally deficient as therapists. While the priest is shown attempting to help Carmella Soprano, Tony's wife, he does this by talking religious doctrine at her, not recognizing her anguish or giving her the opportunity to talk beyond her, "Chief Complaint." If you don't allow the 'patient' to talk she won't be able to tell you what is on her mind. This prevents the priest from confronting her with her culpability in her husband's criminality.' Prof. Yacower does not recognize that the Priest evidences no mental conflict over this. In this he is fitting into the audience's wishes, they do not wish to have mental conflicts about these immoralities. Prof. Yacowa also does not seem to recognize that the priest evidences no mental conflict over sponging off the rich Sopranos. The Priest's goal is to be able to carry it off, to continue to take advantage of them. He, like Carmella, wants to have his cake and eat it too. On a superficial level it is one psychopath "ripping off" another psychopath. He is exploiting her because he perceives that she feels she is in a state of sin about which she feels guilt. Dr. Gabbard recognizes all of these things about "Father Phil "and goes into great detail about his psychology.

Neither author says that Dr. Melfi treats Tony because she is sexually attracted to him. This would have been an opportunity to get into an issue which many patients fear.

Prof. Yacower recognizes the background music is significant, which Dr Gabbard does not discuss. Had Dr. Gabbard done so, Analysts would be able to make further surmises about the characters. I don't listen to popular music so unless the words in the film are clear they are lost to analysis. While Dr.

Yacower names the songs he seldom cite the lyrics. In studying films it has been my experience that the lyrics convey meanings that the writer wants to send to the audience and they can be profitably explored. The underlying emotions of the characters are often revealed, future actions predicted and as well as comments on the characters or their actions. Prof. Yacowa does not appear to recognize this while Dr. Gabbard makes no mention of the entire subject.

Both books are well written, insightful and clear. Dr. Gabbard's has the advantage for readers of PROJECTIONS of extensive psychoanalytic experience and background. He has previously written books on Psychoanalysis and Cinema, Psychotherapy and Boundary Violations all immediately relevant to his latest book. In this book it is his avowed partisanship on behalf of The SOPRANOS that will give psychoanalysts pause. For example, "After (viewing) 400 American films featuring outrageous portrayals [of psychotherapy] we finally found a 'therapy' we can take seriously. It is arguably accurate and believable." Dr. Gabbard's enthusiasm for the film seems to have allowed him to be charitable when it comes to criticizing Dr. Melfi's technique, boundary violations, countertransference, and lack of self-insight. In the fourth season she is so enamored of Tony that she tries to seduce him back into therapy after one of his innumerable, "walk outs." She is back in psychotherapy, is considered to be an alcoholic by her therapist because she is drinking two shots of a very good brand of vodka (product placement) between patients and is "acting in". She enacts a parallel process, behaving toward her therapist as Tony acts toward her. A fine example of a soap opera. To Prof. Yacowa her interpretations sound like sarcastic attacks on her patient.

This enthusiasm and what I think of as his desire for completeness has gotten Dr. Gabbard to interviewed the writers, directors and actors so he has extensive information and background about aspects of the film that were not available to Prof. Yacower. For the non-analyst reader who wants to know more about psychoanalytic concepts as applied to films, they will find a Dr. Gabbard's book integrates both the film and analytic concepts. A knowledgeable author, who does not patronize his readers, clearly describes technical terms and most usefully goes into the psychology of the character's behavior. He takes sociology, anthropology and criminology into account, which gives his book more of a totality of explanation. He even goes into neurochemical theories, "Anxiety and depression are related, . . . they have similar chemical

abnormalities in the brain, and they respond to the same medications. Both (anxiety and Depression) can be a response to loss.

My own opinion is that THE SOPRANOS is, at the present time, the best that psychoanalyst's can expect from 'Pop' culture and the mass media. It is can becomes a question of perspective. Can I judge a book about a show without judging the show? I can't. I see the show as being high-grade corn. It seems a yet another vindication of Newton Minnow's indictment of television as, "A vast wasteland." from which this show stands out because there is intelligence behind it. So its high grade trash.

II

Why do people like/watch; /get fascinated by the Sopranos

Freud sometimes defined civilization as a burden from which people want to escape by breaking the 'repressive' rules. The latest manifestation of this that I have seen, this past Saturday, is a show or Scandinavian Art at the Apex Art Gallery, 201 Church Street. The five nations of Scandinavia have the highest standard, which is called Social Democracy and six artist pose questions: "What do we do with our longing for the metaphysical, for risk, for transgression in a super rational system designed to reduce the possibility of all this. The price of all this by the way is high taxes and many rules and it has not stopped or for all I know reduced the alcohol problems.

One artist's idea of dealing with this conflict: A five and a half minute videotape loop of a motorcyclist going 200 or more miles an hour through suburban superhighway traffic, "Thus tripling the speed limit in a Russian roulette activity that is becoming popular among motorcyclists outside Scandinavia. The police can never catch them. The only possible outcome is success-completing the video-or disastrous failure."

Few TV watchers are up to it. Better to watch others transgress and what is more transgressive then murder? However watching THE SOPRANOS allows the viewer through the psychic defense, compromise formation, identification with the aggressor, or his "Crew"-can vicariously express aggressive and sexual drives. The audience identifies with Tony Sopranos and his surrogates for his ability to do anything without being hemmed in by 'rules.' Even his conscience, the external representation of which is the police; FBI, Narc's, etc are powerless to stop the Mafia. Cable TV is not currently restrictable by the rules of the MPAA or the FCC though restrictive legislation has been proposed.

Analysts have seen Tony as an oedipal father. Psychoanalysts are not surprised that popular entertainment falls into stereotyped roles and a gang leader will take on an authoritarian role as well as bring the audiences' unconscious fantasies about Father to the drama.

In his 1974 book, *THE MIND OF WATERGATE*, Leo Rangel tried to understand why people voted for Richard Nixon knowing he was a sleazy criminal. Prior to the 1972 presidential election the Watergate scandal had been revealed and it was widely known that his prolonging the war made him responsible for the deaths of 30,000 Americans and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese and the wounding of uncounted multiples of those numbers. Rangel's theories stimulated me to try to psychoanalytically understand why thirty to thirty five million people would want to watch *THE SOPRANOS*. Very few of the characters in the series are people of taste and discernment whom you would want to invite home to dinner. I would rather invite Sheriden Whiteside-Alexander Wolcott to be *THE MAN WHO CAME TO DINNER*. The innocents seem obtuse or worse. I could see an interesting dinner with Dr. Melfi's supervisors. Like Dr. Krakower (Peter Bogdanovich) "A depressed criminal, prone to anger, serially unfaithful. Is that your definition of a good man." He is the moral antithesis of Dr. Melfi, a moment of rectitude whose advice Dr. Melfi has never followed. He also points out Carmella's culpability. His last word is, "I'm not charging you because I won't take blood money, You shouldn't either."

Lorraine Brocco is, in person, charming but as a Psychoanalyst, she is an embarrassment. As to the mob's opponents, the police I would be apprehensive. Whose side are they on? In the show many have been corrupted by the mob and the recent arrest of two New York high police officers for murder has made me wonder if in this respect life follows art or art follows life.

To further follow Dr. Rangel theorized "There is an ambivalent public attitude toward morality." "There is diffuse hatred arising from insecurity" "Nixon (Tony Soprano) has the power to provoke deep anxiety." "Tony (like Nixon) is made in our image." "There also has to be a selective amnesia for Nixon's (Tony's) crimes. Also, Tony is able to ward off criticism with charm and fear. The audience, like the victims, are afraid of Tony and in most episodes, someone is murdered or a murder is being dispassionately planned as well as beatings and threats.

The audience can abdicate moral judgements for the hour they enjoy the show, which is "Not used for documentary purposes, not as a study of news or social commentary but as a source of

entertainment.”² Indeed, a PBS documentary on the Italian Mafia showed the murders of the Chief Investigating Magistrate and the most Senior Police Officer in Sicily was not entertaining but it was informative.

An addendum: While both shows are aware of the role of “sexuality” which the show episodically serves up in a way that transcends Prof. Irwin Panofsky’s observations, neither author analyzes.

² Simon, David Tony Sopranos America, Westview Press, Boulder CO 2002