

## **Gangster Angst: Tony Soprano, Dr. Melfi, and Mob family Values**

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Film is a social institution; it rests on psychic structure (psychoanalytically conceptualized); and it operates as a semiotic text arousing similar stimulation but diverse meaning in audiences. If we think of the performance of a film as applying to both the film and the witness(es) then each witness is in a dialogue with the performed film while undergoing a series of responses, judgments and interpretations that indicate the nature of their cathexis to the film. This assertion has different meaning for the creators of the film and for the audience

In this paper I will consider the cult-like success of the HBO series “The Sopranos,” the most popular depiction of the “Mob” yet, within the Gangster Film genre (Yacower, 2002) The central character, Godfather or “Boss”, (Tony Soprano) is both a folk hero and a social deviant. He is portrayed as a powerful, violent man ironically depicted as a victim of suburban life, suffering from anxiety, depression, and an internal psychic disorder that results in dissociative states. The ensuing angst propels him to the offices of psychiatrist Jennifer Melfi, introducing psychotherapy of sorts into the “Gangster” genre and aesthetic

While many psychoanalysts have pondered the treatment of “made men,” and some of us have treated their close relatives, none of us could have predicted the wide success and the vast overflow of response that this series generates, or the widespread fascination with this character who is capable of ordering a hit, forgetting his medication,

buying a present for his adolescent son, and bringing home Italian pastries, all in the same day.

As “The Sopranos” has achieved cult-like status, the depictions of Tony in his treatment have elicited an enormous amount of controversy within, if not misplaced honors from, the psychoanalytic community (Gabbard, 2002). The tremendous response to this show has oddly led the American Psychoanalytic Association to honor not only David Chase, the series’ creator, but also Lorraine Bracco, the actress portraying the, frequently inept, therapist, Dr. Melfi (Gabbard, 2002).

To understanding of this socially significant cinematic phenomenon it is helpful to first present a historical perspective of this genre before offering any in-depth explanation of “The Sopranos”. In this manner the media event, like a psychoanalytic event, does not stand by itself, but appears as part of a stream of interlocking events comprised not only by its serial form of presentation, but also by its place atop a stunning American Genre. “Film Genre” as a history of representations is conceived of as a “frame of reference” (Beres and Arlow, 1974), eliciting unconscious fantasies and expectations that are unique to each genre. By the conclusion of this essay, I hope to have demonstrated that the cumulative meaning of the current depiction, the “The Sopranos,” along with its predecessors—the films composing the Gangster genre—will prove to have greater power and depth, than any other singular cinematic occurrence.

I will offer an analytic perspective on the precedents to the current Soprano Gangster incarnation, not only to discern the cultural-psychological “values “of past genre films, but also to suggest how they influence, and are reprised in, the present depiction. In this case the gangster series title refers to one person, who is the

emotional fulcrum of the film, Tony Soprano. Mindful of Villella's summary of psychoanalytic approaches to film (1999), Tony Soprano will be treated as a mythopoetic phenomenon that rests on a fictive psychic structure. This approach will permit some interpretations—some literary, but mostly psychoanalytic—that have been lacking in the critical understanding of the series. I hope to avoid the case study method in which a fictional character is treated as a “real” person, rather than a fictional entity (Villella, 1999). I feel compelled to treat the Tony Soprano characterization, as an iconic representation that is not only heir to prior “Mob” films, but whose portrayal evokes and provokes intense psychological responses in the audience. Certain elements are of particular importance.

### The Gangster Image

Movie images have a stimulating effect on the nervous system, yet the recall of non-verbal imagery in general, and visual images in particular, has received scant attention in the psychoanalytic literature or in the applied areas of psychoanalysis.. Laboratory research indicates that we may “see” the same film while giving meaning to it idiosyncratically (Hasson, U. et al., 2004). From a visual perspective then while the same film is witnessed, there is a variable individual dialogue with the constant never changing film. One result of the dialogue is that certain cinematic images or scenes remain indelibly in the minds of film lovers, and form a metaphoric code of recognition and signification: the demented, sadistic smile on James Cagney's face in “The Public Enemy” as he walks down a rainy street into a restaurant to slaughter a rival gang; Cagney's dead body propped up and tottering on his mother's doorstep in the same film, or the irony in his suicidal mania in “White Heat” as he screams, "Made it, Ma, top

of the world," before being engulfed in a huge explosion; Edward G. Robinson as "Little Caesar," asking "Mother of Mercy, is this the end of Rico?" as he dies; Paul Muni's perverse jubilation as he fires his first Tommy gun; Al Pacino's stolid face as he hears the shot that kills his brother in "The Godfather Part II"; Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway's bodies bouncing grotesquely in slow motion as they are riddled with bullets in "Bonnie and Clyde"; Richard Widmark laughing demonically as he pushes an old lady in a wheel chair down a flight of stairs in "Kiss of Death." These images evoke the American Gangster film, a protean genre since the early sound era that retains significance today, unlike its close relative, the Western morphed into the police story.

American audiences have grown accustomed to a fictional "Mob." Mob stories have, however, changed substantially over the years, adapting to a variety of social changes, and a subsequent increased taste for violence. Marlon Brando's businessman, Don Vito Corleone in "The Godfather," is very different, indeed, from James Cagney's upwardly Mobile Tom Powers in "The Public Enemy," and the mythic projections of "Bonnie and Clyde" or "Al Capone," movies that created fictional representations of real people. It is a genre that both explores and honors a certain kind of masculinity—profoundly violent and sociopathic—and has seldom allotted much space for women, except for Scorsese's anti-operatic "Goodfellas" and "Bugsy."

Early precedents seemed to whet a public appetite for vicarious transient identification with media-enlarged Gangster images. D.W. Griffith's "Musketiers of Pig Alley" with Elmer Booth is a good example, as is Josef von Steinberg's late silent era film "Underworld" with George Bancroft, but the depression era trio of "Little Caesar," "Public Enemy," and "Scarface" **(1)** in the early 1930's, marked the real beginning of the

genre. Each “classic” film within this genre created a male star that was publicly emulated, respectively, Robinson, Cagney, and Muni, and simultaneously generated public debate about the ethics of glorifying criminals; two major public responses to this genre that continue to this day.

### The Gangster Film

The Gangster film is a genre largely associated with America and the Hollywood filmmaking industry. Originally “Gangster” was a rather loosely defined term, representing the potentially violent toughs on a street corner in a lower class neighborhood. The term has since evolved and become a synonym for blue-collar criminals and Mobsters, as well as the name of a current type of music. “Gangster Rap,” which often glamorizes the gang life style].

Filmmakers from other countries have produced individual and noteworthy Gangster films, but the dominant global image of the Gangster is American. Among the reasons for this American monopoly is the hegemony of the Hollywood film industry, along with a set of complex beliefs associated with American Capitalism, and widespread conceptions of the U.S. as a country with a strong imperative towards urban violence.

Any analysis of the basis for the appeal of this genre reveals a widespread fascination with the means by which certain individuals gain access to, and control over, other people and resources. Within this context of social power, the Gangster film as a genre can be viewed as a multifaceted text that reveals its conceptual basis indirectly. Many distinct parts contribute to the whole of the genre as a representation; anti-

establishment individualism, male sexual power, sadistic violence, and fear-based loyalty.

Many of the actors portraying Gangsters in film radiate an intense vitality, contributing considerably to the genre's role in creating important male stars. Meanwhile, almost ironically, many of the Gangster films resemble simple morality plays or tragedies, in which these powerful and frightening men tend to die violently, in part as a carry over from the days of film censorship; a time during which the appeal of the villain could not exceed the super-ego implications of both, his fate, and moral judgments of his behavior. Even now, free of censorship's constraints, American audiences and film makers frequently require punitive moral endings which re-establish (paternal) order and appease voyeuristic guilt.

#### The "Gangster" Success

The continued success of Gangster films raises important questions, and points to important social and psychological functions of their performance

, while the current success of the HBO series, "The Sopranos," amplifies these issues. Among these are: the appeal of the kind of masculinity glorified in these films; the American fascination with outlaws; the relation of screen Gangsters to their real-life counterparts; and the slow ascension of Gangsters into the (pop) culture of our time. In addition, the huge appeal of the genre points to its place in the American film industry, its relation to other masculine genres, particularly the Western and film noir, as well as its role in the creation of male stars who are frequently emulated in both dress and language. (Footnote: D. Remmick reported how

young toughs would replay the Godfather series, rehearsing the movie line and emulating the clothing, thereby creating reciprocity between the real and the imaginary.) It also raises questions regarding the vicarious identification (cathexis), among individuals and groups, with the “Gangster” as an image of maleness, in spite of his cinematic fate. Finally, exploring shifts in depictions over time in the Gangster film genre allows the construction of inferences regarding both, social and psychoanalytic beliefs, and values that govern human aspirations and destinies.

A wide-angle view of a number of actors and activities, rather than a single film, gives greater power to the interlocked and interlocking axis of representations of maleness, potency, and power cinematically accessible for identification. The fierce individualism of the Depression era Gangsters (as in *Murder, Inc.*, and *Public Enemy*) has been transformed into the more corporate mind set of some of the Gangsters in the post-war era (such as those portrayed in *The Asphalt Jungle* and *The Godfather*). An examination of the progression from the nostalgia-influenced films of the 1960's and 1970's (*Bonnie and Clyde*, *Dillinger*, *Once Upon a Time in America*) to the ruthless images of violence in the service of being the overlord (*Sopranos*, *King of New York*, *Scarface (2)*, *Godfather*, *Untouchables*) yields a complex yet surprisingly revealing trajectory.

Each film's development rests on the prior thematic structure of the genre: The theme of social upward mobility for outsiders was replaced by “Corporate American” values, which were, in turn, replaced by an excessive presentation and enjoyment of violence. David Chase's creation, with James Gandolfini's uncanny personification of Tony Soprano, is the current and composite heir to this series of Gangster images.

## Mob Violence

One possible solution to understanding the series success is try to understand the appeal of violent processes in the media, and their meaning, both within our culture, and for the individuals attracted to them. Almost all events in reality are overshadowed by the seemingly endless expression of male violence in the modern cinema. Mob violence is a direct challenge to the state's monopoly on the use of force and violence. For Americans this challenge is only dimly perceived. The psychological horror of cinematic violence seems to rest in the recognition that these crimes are committed by our "Doppelgangers", our doubles in the culture, induced by the mirroring device of television. This violence is seemingly committed in the name of enforcing Mob values, but must also be considered as the source of a divergent culture's pleasure and entertainment.

In Gangster films, murders, as frequent plot devices, are tolerated because personal violence is both nurtured by American fantasies, and acted out by our delegates in modern entertainment. Film, television in its various forms, professional sports and contemporary music all make the point repeatedly, that violence empowered by amoral values is personal, virulent and lethal. It must be considered that there is a potent psychic relationship between the cultural imagery of amoral violence and the appeal of these sociopathic tendencies that contributes to the creation of "The Sopranos" as a mythical icon within our culture. But looking deeper, and perhaps analytically, into this phenomenon, because for this popularity to occur, it takes a remarkable combination of social familiarity, historical amnesia and selective excitation

for “Mob Values” to be internalized as social fantasy, and a shared pleasurable viewing experience.

Given the pervasive use of violence in film it is undeniably attractive to audiences. It’s attraction and seductiveness in gangster films is likely genderized with males choosing violent films (Roth, 1997) Destructive violence ultimately has the allure of a god-like power that sanctions a license to kill violently or destroy with impunity. This power stands in contrast to and is most appealing to many in the audience with dead end jobs and powerful social inhibitions. Killing can be intoxicating and empowering. While many view violence with alarm gangsters (in film) seem to have either a naïve or smug belief in their own invulnerability and a constant wish to violate social taboos. I believe that the violence occurs because these (film) people are without awareness of their own psychic reality. In its place is a dependence on each other, the “Mob “ and the “ Boss.” This combination of internal emptiness and external reliance yields a complete confusion between private and secret. This intern permits a violent protection of the secret.

Within the narrative of film the control of violence rests with the boss who approves, condones and often selects the targets of the murderous violence. Although in the Soprano series impulsive violence occurs frequently. Often the act of murder is assigned to a particular individual who takes on the persona of the cold killer, the “Angel of Death”. Warshow (1959) takes the important perspective that violence is used to advance the” Ganster’s” greedy wishes and remove competition, while I believe that violence is also used to support the code of “ silence” so often appealed to in these films

as necessary for the gangsters survival that is the symbol of their dependency on the gang and on secrecy.

While increasing violence may have emerged with the early films, it was not until the operatic, cinematic saga “The Godfather” appeared, that the social meaning of the Gangster film took on the aura of a modern fable, which afforded the average male citizen the opportunity to create a symbolic illusion of Mob-family values. One can look at the earlier significant Gangster films, not only as presenting the scaffolding upon which “The Godfather” films depended, analogous to a family history, but one in which earlier verbal or visual elements are reprised in homage in the Sopranos series, perhaps in the same form that ancestors are remembered and honored.

Mob values, as derived from these films, are masterpieces of illusion based on a group culture that like adolescents makes up its own rules. An inventory of the roles and values of Gangsters in films must yield several relatively simple models embedded in the cinematic process that appear whole, but are a fragmented system of thought. These models can only be united on the level of fantasy by the audience. This emulative behavior is repeatedly reprised in the Sopranos series, with characters using well known Godfather phrases, or enforcing actual “Gangster” conventionalities, as in one comic scene where a character misquotes the well known ‘Lucca Brazzi’ phrase, only to be corrected by an older companion. D. Chase, the originator of “The Sopranos,” knowingly uses these, and other cryptographic historical texts, not only to tie this series to its historical precedents, but also to forge a contemporary model tied to the genre’s core symbolic systems. Reconstructing and psychoanalytically decoding “The Sopranos” cinematic symbolism through its first four years requires a reviewing of the

50 minute episodes. In a general manner, such an analysis reveals that sudden murderous violence, paranoia, and degradation of both, women and marital values, represent a seeming total devaluation of the individual within a system organized with all of the social partitioning of an iconic tribal society. It reveals an organization of males in which kinship and loyalty to the monarchic "Boss" are valued above everything else. Its familiar totalitarian pattern is revealed over time; total power derived from violence and menace, and total authority to dominate and direct lesser men who are possessed by anxiety and greed. This façade of order and violence, often an open secret, while not offering its viewers a solution to anxiety over one's position in society, does provide a structure, which offers instead the possibility of an end to personal dissonance, and the neutralization of any inherent personal or psychic struggle. In the world behind the façade of Gangster activities, the "Boss" or "Old Man" is presented as a derivative of the character the Wizard of Oz, residing in a paranoid world of manipulated symbols and antitypes. However, this Wizard is sadistic, meting out violent punishments for those who either break his code, or present a rival menace.

Cinematic Mob culture, existing within the socioeconomic framework of capitalistic societies, seemingly arose as a caricature of the society in which it was, and remains, embedded. Being a "Gangster" is, first and foremost, being a ruthless capitalist (Warshow, 1959), as is echoed in the oft-repeated phrase from "The Godfather," "It's only business." Tony Soprano lives by his own rules and morals in his own corporate kingdoms, embracing opportunistic capitalistic myths that are rooted in a belief in the eternal power of American capitalism and force; emulating an American capitalism instituted by its "Captains of Industry" who conform to psychoanalytic notions of the

exception. Such leaders leave the people of the middle class, and middle management, anxious about their roles and places on the stage of life. In seemingly Adlerian compensation, we are given, in Tony, the physical persona of an anti-corporate type; a man who thrives through acting upon his violent and sexual wishes that, within a normal shame/guilt punishing society, are contained by repression.

These constructions elaborate the existence of an underworld empire; one that emerges from a Renaissance fountain of myths whose aim is to simultaneously mystify the Boss's personal sources of power, and his power to corrupt. A new, second-generation immigrant superman has been crafted as the successor to his urban, foreign-born, upward-seeking, cinematic fore-bearer, with diverse features of protector, enabler, and menacer; a sexual, swaggering golem, through which, by transient identification with him, anxious and repressed men from the capitalistic society could find some relief for their failure and anxiety. This relief is generated not only by the imaginary Tony Soprano's\* personal ability to behave in ways that others can only imagine, but also by the way in which he shows the members of the middle class the soft underbelly of other cultural forces. Through his doing business with corrupt politicians, etc., he generates felt anxiety concerning all forms of social institutions—the jury, the police, the poverty programs, etc.—by indirectly attacking all of the safeguards constructed by middle class, white, non-ethnic America. His attacks are, paradoxically, against both possible social disorder and social order. The moral “justice” and “fairness” that the members of society project onto these institutions are seemingly nullified by his ability to corrupt: Tony's behavior is beyond repression and inhibition.

As the monied classes migrated to the suburbs to enjoy the fruits of their work, the movie Gangster icon, in his turn, moved from his cinematic primal haunt—the club or corner of the ghettoized ethnic city—to the spacious tree-scaped land of private homes and private schools, thereby creating a new minting of the myth of the suburban father to replace the earlier, and now disappearing, myth of the European immigrant father, while orchestrating a symbolic change in the cultural and psychological representations, of male sacrifice and subordination, to fit the new surroundings. Multi-car garages and suburban values replaced back alleyways, and the old values, which had excluded anything in contradiction of its form of narcissism. Suburbia, as the imagined rural American landscape, lacks the shady and darker elements that composed the comfortable landscape of film noir and the Gangster film, despite the cruel ironic representations of weak fathers found in “American Beauty. In its place are innovative character types and extreme characterizations of gang members which stand in contrast to the homogeneity of suburbia. The evidence for this is the substitution of Aesthetic sense and its replacement by fashion.

Just as the current sit-com characters are patterned on commercial advertising models looking beyond the viewer into some distant space, the Sopranos’ sets subliminally juxtapose the characters’ glowering and swaggering, not only alongside suburban highways, bridges to the ethnic city, but also into assisted living homes, suburban restaurants, New England college towns, and psychiatrists’ offices. Rather than embracing the traditional upward pathways to success, as defined by persisting middle class guide posts in post World War 11 America, Tony Soprano embodies shared fantasies whose autocracy is based upon his ability to “live out” his violence and

sadomasochistic eroticism, while seemingly maintaining the integration of his personality, his organizational family, and his married life. Yet, his integration of the various and competing elements in his personality make him prey not to psychic guilt or shame, but also to some hidden psychic disturbance. From this vantage point, Tony's behavior towards Dr. Melfi vacillates between seeking therapeutic help for his symptoms, and trying to assert and establish his value system in her office. He secretly fixes her car, kisses her, menaces her boyfriend, and has sexual encounters with another patient he met in her waiting room; these actions obviously understandable as a continuation of the process of corruption and attack on values—this time analytic values.

#### Tony's Disorder

Because of inherent liberal /psychological-psychoanalytical prejudices, we are led to think of aesthetic as existing predominately within the confines of privacy. Many aspects of culture support the view of art, morality and civil rights as a by-product of the ascension of the psychologically-minded middle classes. Such values have given us the literary genre of "biography," and an entire set of individually realized and related conceptualizations of the importance of the individual in art and society. In psychoanalysis this has led to the "case study." In cinema, the melodramatic equivalent, the recognition of the importance of the individual has been indicated by a character arriving in, and being recognized by, society, which involves a seemingly internal struggle between the conceptualizations of self, and the self's values and narcissistic concerns (Lasch, 1977). Our ascendant, educated, middle classes imbued the early war film with the cinematic conceptualizations and core beliefs of heroic sacrifice, from the

varieties of piety, security, and the battle of man against nature or external evil, to the struggles of secular loyalty, anti-mythic battles with internal demands, and quests for accumulation, progress, or power. Such American tropes are repeatedly expressed in the popular culture following the establishment of encroaching suburbs

What arose in the media of popular literature following the second world war and the end of “Romantic values” (i.e., westerns, war movies, Gangster films, epics and women’s films), and is now represented in even more popular films, is not simply a clashing of competing fantasy systems, which portray America as a fragmented country, unable to see itself as an organic whole, but a complex internal struggle with competing unconscious images of gender (identity), intimacy and success. A larger-than-life representation of maleness emerged which, rather than placing value on going into battle with a sword, rifle, war club or baseball bat, instead defined maleness in terms of such interests and activities as guarding the president, living in suburbia, or meeting the in-laws for dinner. In response to an ongoing softening (feminization) of the male iconic image, a new cinematic minting created an image of maleness increasingly intoxicated with itself and violence, and the reemergence of a cult of male stardom and egoistic self-celebration once reserved only for sport stars. Slowly, the epic hero, once found regretfully using violence in war and western films, was initially replaced or countered by the bohemian and outsider, and then by pluralistic multicultural reflections of the changes in society. Following World War II, the concept of democracy had seemingly been embraced by Hollywood, as social politics replaced the concepts of “fate,” “blood ties” and class succession as plot devices. And, while, on the surface, this appeared as opportunity for all, it also loosed a deeper-level anxiety having to do with intimacy and

identity in its myriad aspects and, for our purposes, severe Oedipal struggles in all possible levels and arenas.

These anxieties were seemingly recast in proper linear order by the operatic trilogy of “The Godfather,” in which maleness and royal succession of power is accomplished against the juxtaposed visual background of the “Mob’s” renaissance rival: the ethnic-religious rituals of piety, and the security of the ongoing presence of the Catholic Church. Even if the cost of succession is the necessary deaths of those who block the way, the perpetuation of Mob values, with its lack of ambiguity regarding violent punishment and the replacement of intimacy with the triviality of mutual seduction, raises, to an entirely new level, the amount of ego adaptation as an external carapace required to be able to submit to “The Boss.”

What followed “The Godfather” saga was not a creation of a seemingly new order of progress and plenty, but a deepening clash of competing fantasy systems within the genre, from “Bugsy” to “Goodfellas” and “The Sopranos.” This genre, closely examined, reveals underlying fantasy systems, and unconscious male images through which the thread of paranoid sensitivity to betrayal remains both central and intact; From Michael Corleone’s paternal protective concern when visiting his father in the hospital, to Tony Soprano’s anxiety dreams, one of which comically reprises the Godfather as a “Lucca Brazzi,” with an image of a fish talking in a dream. In many such instances, D. Chase directly makes his lineage clear, at least to most of us who recognize and quote lines of dialogue from, “The Godfather.”

As a cautious modern cinematic case study, the internal tensions of Tony Soprano emerge in various contemporary forms; from dreams of betrayal, and erotic

fantasies of imaginary liaisons, to the displacement of ubiquitous castration anxiety onto the visiting ducks. The writers' intent is to help saturate us with the notion that Tony's violent behavior is not characterologically syntonetic. He has, like many liberal psychoanalytic notions would have us believe, been made impulsive, appealing and dangerous (even to his therapist) by deeper archetypal and iconic threats against his masculinity. But, as we learn, not only was he a witness to his grinning father's removal of a finger from a recalcitrant butcher, and subjected to his uncle's relentless demands for hierarchically-based submission; but later he also had to cope with his cranky, spite-spitting, Italian mother's fervent attempts to have him "whacked." Considering the fertile and imaginative minds of the series' writers, had Nancy Marchand, the gifted actress who played Tony's mother "Livia," not been forced to leave the show due to cancer, exactly where Chase's innovative use of the cinematic *Bad-Mother-Dearest* would have led remains speculatively unknowable. In other public venues Chase openly admits to using his own mother as a "partial model" for Livia, putting her "cranky" phrases into Livia's dialogue. Creating a mother both dependent upon and seeking the murder of her own child further corrupts any image of basic security

A cumulative effect of creating such parents for Tony through frequent flash-back scenes creates a seeming psychological portrait of a child who received little narcissistic gratification or support for developing a generative masculine identity, and, perhaps, reveals the authors' ideas of a "substrata" of Tony's neurosis. These biographical notations in the story give a psychological complexity to the character, cumulatively offering a hope that Tony is treatable by psychological therapy, and importantly that his

violent behavior is caused by his neuroses, and therefore understandable, if not forgivable.

### The Boss Rules

In Soprano reality, Tony “rules,” and he does this, as all Mob bosses do, by persuading his inferiors to accept his rule by means of his greater intelligence, and his ability to induce paranoia in those around him, as is portrayed in social drama after social drama in the series. He is able to rule with a unique proficiency which echoes that of prior Mob leaders, binding his followers to him through their fear that his mandate comes from some invisible, historic, paternal source. He is, in calculated revelation, an agent of self-interest, convincing all that he needs to do what he does, and, by doing so is following some internal secret logic that escapes his audience, and does not bear close scrutiny. He seems able to tap into an anxiety of personal freedom in his soldiers, and of going it alone, with some folksy smiling strategy that compels his underlings to capitulate in front of him. We assume, according to genre rules, that his underlings must “work” for him, and be a part of an “earners all” economy. Tony’s leadership and exaggerated capitalistic notions of profit and success are reinforced by his implied threats of terror and actual acts of murderous violence. Even within this dictatorial structure there exists a constant inner threat of violent chaos; the chaos of a dependent group in a state of perennial struggle to remain alive with its “Boss,” and prevent his assassination by rivals, or imprisonment by agents of the government or moral authorities. Here are merged two equally important representations; Tony’s unquenchable ambition and his ability to avoid being killed.

Tony Soprano is clearly a creature of Chase's imagination. Through him we are able to see an archetypal "Boss," father and husband, subject to his spouse's common anxieties; a cruel businessman who must remain without true confidants. We view an Italianesque man whose prodigious appetites for food and women, and casually violent behavior reserved for people outside his home, reveal his orgiastic excesses which are part of the day-to-day life of a war lord or libertine. Rather than values that are degenerate, romantic, or noble, rather than spiritual values, Shakespearian, guilty, he is a new modern "Mob Boss" type; ruling at times as if following some folksy intuitive principle of social order, wondering where the next "rat" will emerge, or covertly seeking his own (greedy) ends while privately suffering from some vague neurotic anxiety and fainting spells. With his facade of family values finally perforated and fallen by plot device, we wait to see what lies beneath the debris of this fallen suburban family, his shielding outpost of seeming middle class, comforting, suburban values, and frequently morning-after home-life, which quietly protect against the symbolic/aesthetic residues of his personal violence and destructiveness.

Mob values, culled from the entire genre, sanction neither lasting culture, intimacy, nor good marriages. Absent are representations of values as aesthetic, symbolic or metaphoric. Mob values replace the skin of the social structures it attacks with debauchery and homicide, and bring into being the eroticization of both, authority and personal terror. The dual erotic stimulation serves to incite in-group fantasies of suicidal impulses, displaced into casual murderous aggression, while anesthetizing the group through a central exploitation of food and sex as commodity and relief. Sex isn't the only commodity; the constant visual reminder of the "girls" who work at his nightclub

(The Bing) as producers of (cash) money signifies both as a visible hyper-normal refuge for security.

Attempting to analyze Tony Soprano's behavior and evolution throughout the series is a complex task, as the award-winning writers have crafted a layered character over the course of the four years of his existence. However, given that he is a fictional character, we may make some inferences about his representation of character traits. He seemingly represents, despite the actor's (James Gandolfini) folksy, peasant appearance, neither a mere banality nor hyper-normalcy. There is a crafty juxtaposition between the way in which he behaves as any man in suburbia, and the way in which he moves quite easily from opening scenes of picking up the morning newspaper to inflicting varieties of gratuitous brutality, including killing a man with his own hands. A banal mind lacks both, the capacity to transform what is ordinary into the unusual, and the capacity to intuit solutions to social problems that gain the upper hand. Such ambitious outcomes as Tony achieves appear to be continually narcissistic within his own self-interested Mob culture in which subjective and narcissistic views are often confused. His behavior (as written and acted) leaves open the possibility of an inner world, if we can imagine a fictional character as having one, in which there is a partitioning of anxiety, thought, violence and sexuality. Yet, in many plot instances, when provoked, betrayed or in danger, the seeming partitions dissolve too easily, revealing an inexhaustible supply of menace and sadistic rage. To achieve this effect over the course of the series is both, a credit to Chase's writing skills, and the believable acting of the characters.

Some Psychoanalytic Thoughts

What remains to be understood, what is central to the continued psychological appeal of the Gangster genre in this country, are the underlying reasons that “The Sopranos” has resonated within our culture, and become one of the most followed series on TV (Yacowar, 2002). The series obviously emerged from the movie culture that produced the Gangster film; “The Godfather” trilogy in particular. It draws on the iconic combination of male violence, sexy music and male dominated clubs and groups. It rests upon the superficial theme and value of individualism that evokes an American myth of maleness, but a maleness that contains secrets that the forces of socialization (in these cinematic instances, women and the FBI) do not know. The audience, however, is privy to that special knowledge, as in most murder mysteries, allowing a dual transient identification with both, violent perpetrator and innocent female. Yet, paradoxically, while a kind of mythic maleness is emphasized, an implied threat of failure, represented by death, deportation, or succession, creates the tension that results from having knowledge of the possible violent outcomes. The result of all these forces is a seemingly unruly amalgam of drama, tragedy and comedy, in which the eruption of violence and crime is followed by the power of released emotions. Cleverly at times, the violence is underscored by the dramatic countering devices of matter-of-factness and guiltlessness, displayed by individuals whose inner sense of morality is seemingly untouched by either remorse or guilt.

Prior attempts by media writers and psychoanalysts to come to terms with the series and the genre have seemingly been devoid of understanding, and replete with descriptions such as folksy, ironic or comedic, borrowed theater terms, rather than capturing the series’ deeper psychological appeal. As a trope, the “Mob Boss,” as

spelled out earlier, has a long cinematic history. Film critics have easily found in “The Sopranos” series the earlier iconic salutes to these earlier figures. In particular, the plots of “The Godfather” trilogy and “Goodfellas” socialize the images of Gangsters by having them encounter both, family, complete with domestic conflicts, and the problems of succession. This is in contrast to the earlier films that portrayed the Gangster in some “psychologically disturbed” relationship to his mother. In this series, Tony Soprano’s mother is made even more monstrous and manipulative, capable of taking her place within the Mob structure. The ‘innocence’ of Tony’s wife serves as a continuous contrast to alternative images of Mob related mothers. Chase and his writers are creative in their construction of frequently-appearing juxtapositions or dualities, such as innocence and cruelty, or exploitation and nurturance. In this manner they establish a system of symbolic emotional nodal points that arouse tensions connected to the internal world of the audience. The writers effectively do this through the creation of emotionally-charged images and the actions of fictional “people” who have become familiar, with which the inner emotional experiences of the audience can resonate with the rapidly appearing images and action in the cinematic narrative. The characters’ actions, images, themes and artistic devices seemingly stimulate a fortuitous combination of personal autobiographical expression, and familiarity for the silent audience. This in turn creates a dramatic ambiguity, allowing the audience to project their own selves, and their wished-for outcomes and experiences, onto the characters.

A second juxtaposition, eliciting tension, is the balance between destructive and constructive forces, or, psychically speaking, between destructive aggression and libidinal expressions. For a successful outcome to take place, in which various forms of

identification are possible, a cinematic representation must present the clashing of the two powerful impulses—good and evil— to give shape and form to the audience's internal demonic forces and inchoate terrors, which exist alongside wishes to nourish, salve, create, and protect. One example is the juxtaposition of food and violence, first used in "Goodfellas," which helps to establish this balance.

A third duality starts with the freedom to create and share in an illusionary world in which one's appetites can be given full expression. The creation of an illusion of power, greed, and ambition, in the absence of consequences, in reality gratifies primitive wishes to enjoy a world or a fantasy in which it is possible to escape both, consequences and guilt. This wish is encouraged by the lack of a sense of specific date and time in the narrative—usually used to document an event in "reality"—and by the frequent scenes in which cast members are viewed while eating. Reality is conveyed by the suggestion that the forces of morality will intervene, or are at least watching. These processes are successful only to the extent that the audience is willing to accept the idea that the cinematic creation is not real, but possesses a symbolic mytho-poetic virtual existence achieved by the audience's willingness to treat it "as if" it were real (Schlockower). Such a suspension of reality testing, the so-called willing suspension of belief, from a psychic perspective, regressively returns the viewer to a still available temporary, primordial, internal sharing situation.

The interactive elements shared between the images and the audience also depend on individual willingness to be regressively open (without defenses) to the artistic communication, as the audience (aptly) tunes in to "the subject matter" by way of the familiar emotional resonating, and satisfying metaphorical images and actions.

Within this shared temporary internal illusionary reality, the created multiple linguistic, musical, and visual human forms of the presentation activate the emergence of “similar but not identical” wishes and fantasies in the audience participants. Either simultaneously, or in rapid succession, there is an internal fusion and linkage of the separate frames and scenes into a dramatic narrative whole. In this narrative fusion contradictions are reconciled; sensation and thought are fused so that internal linkages to imagery, sound and narrative are aroused, depending on individual “basic core” sensitivities. The audience members, while all seeing the same images, give meaning to the cinematic narrative according to an interaction between the familiar and satisfying metaphorical images and actions, and the individual unconscious wishes and fantasies (Siomopoulos, 1977).

Finally, there is the interplay between the individual and the movie; between the affectively saturated sensory images and the individual who must be given up, broken or relinquished. Such separateness allows a reacceptance of an internal “compromise” with reality in the vicarious observer. The temporarily united or umbilical-like relationship to the affectively charged units of imagery on the large screen is relinquished, and the sorting out of differentiation, inside and outside, is individuality re-attained. In such a manner, contact with one’s own self is maintained

### The Appeal of Tony Soprano

Having established a schematic frame of regression and identification in the series, I hope to now safely turn to a specific understanding of the mythic appeal of the character of Tony Soprano. American films are noteworthy for a fascination with the outsider, the “fish-out-of-water” character, and the sociopath. All these cinematic

characters either live outside of, or do not comprehend, the rules by which most people live their daily lives. The Gangster film, among others, fits squarely in this model; one in which the Mob leader seemingly has the skills to gain power (usually) through violence, and to exercise his fantasies any time he wishes, while suffering little in the way of personal consequences. Such characterizations in popular film are so numerous that, at this time, it may be possible to delve a little further into this phenomenon, and to offer some explanatory hypothesis as to the nature of identification with such a sociopathic character.

Allowing for the complexity of the identification processes evoked in the regressive atmosphere of experiencing movies, the transient identificatory processes may be understood along a dual continuum of complimentary and concordant, with one part of the continuum dominating at any given time. For example, from the complimentary part of the continuum, the identification with Tony is a masochistic one, and includes identifying with the victims of his violence and sexual exploitation. A person with a dominant concordant identificatory process will identify with Tony's "exceptional status," his rule breaking, and his physical domination and violence. The continuous characterization over time, created and amplified by the serial presentation of the images, allows for a deeper, or more complex, psychic audience identification; a kind of psychic recognition and identification with an imagined internal world in which aspects of Tony's parents dominate. While I believe this is possible in most identificatory experiences, in this case Tony's "parents" have been fictionally represented in the series in a variety of emotionally charged scenes that evoke the real and imagined stereotypes of both, the "bad and dangerous mother" and the

“philandering and violently castrating father.” Real and imaginary charged scenic repetitions in the series create the ongoing opportunity for deeper resonance with the imaginary character. Such regressive identificatory enjoyment may help account for some of the show’s success.

Another significant aspect in understanding the meaning of the main character is the relationship between the series and “tragedy” as a dramatic vehicle. While avoiding the psychoanalytic discourse on the theories of tragedy, it is clear that the characterization of Tony Soprano partially fits the description of the modern tragic hero. Following World War II, the classical definition of the tragic hero changed into a modern construct; one in which disillusionment with the limits of love and family, accompanied by sudden, dislocating outbursts of violence, came to embody tragedy (Almond, 1993). The central character of the modern tragedy also embodies and carries the tragic theme of there being no easy solution to the problems of human destructiveness. While classic tragedy is usually about what happens to morally good and just men who suffer tragic, unfair punishments, or are crushed by the forces they have sought to defy, Tony Soprano obviously does not fit that characterization. Rather, he is the lusty and powerful common man, sprung from “wicked parents,” who, although cleverly avoiding the punishment he “should” suffer for his wicked crimes, arouses tension in the audience by eliciting the hope that he will ultimately receive his judgment. The tension of waiting for punishment is a constant source of enjoyment for the audience (Brooks).

There is more to say about punishment beyond its sadomasochistic trope. Justice and punishment, in drama and Gangster films, is a shoddy device, derived from bourgeois tragedy and political correctness, in which truth (reality) can not be allowed to

emerge freely from the clash or fateful outcome of opposing forces. In drama punishment may best be understood as a moral compromise imposed from the outside, so that the final outcome is necessary to maintain a narrowly defined and partisan moral standard. As both a commoner and a Gangster, with prodigious appetites for sex and food, Tony appealingly stands opposed to that punitive reality, escaping not only the fate of good men, but avoiding the circumstances that would lead to his fall, with only a small symptom, his anxiety, as the moral price for his pleasure-seeking and greed.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I trace the history of Gangster films as an evolving genre, from its inception to its latest successful incarnation in the Soprano's series. In so doing, I have illuminated certain aspects of its historical text, appeal, and impact on audiences of this form of performance.; a performance in which there is a dialogue between film and witness, At the emotional center of the American gangster films narrative and visual gaze of the camera is the powerful personification of one person : of "the Boss" or "the Gangster". His iconic representation is based on exaggerated images of control over other person, masculinity and a variety of violent capitalistic know how in which he and his employees flaunt the social rules of competition and advancement to satisfy their own greedy ends. Despite the risk in his behavior he has become an American folk hero. Mob values are based on tribal submission to the chief demanding fearful loyalty in which the price of betrayal is extinction. The characterization of these values has become a significant part of American culture and imagery reflecting back to society both a distorted image of capitalism and of maleness

The Soprano series rest on a framework of earlier depictions of the mobster “heros while adding family and conflicts to the Boss’s every day life. In addition, in the series, Tony Soprano is depicted as having psychological problems both as a plot device to create the illusion that his symptoms and behavior are psychologically determined an to bring him into conflict with another middle class icon: psychotherapy . The possible vanes of various types of identification that take place in viewers of this complex Gangster series are discussed to amplify concordant and complimentary fantasies.

Certain elements of the series are of particular importance within the dialogue with its audience . Among them are the regularly appearing intimate violence that is a mark of gangster series. The cathartic value and manifest meaning of such personal violence creates the illusion of an “underworld” in which the usual social values of middle class life are held up for evaluation by the creation of its cinematic antagonist. The power of “the Boss” creates a totalitarian social structure that usurps the states rights either to use killing as a device to control behavior or share in the profits from businesses. In addition, such violence effects the perception of social values and the role of women within the family.

The performance of violent, sexual and other forms of excesses are representations that encourage transient complimentary and concordant identifications resulting in a form of attachment to the character , the series and the hoped for an outcome that permits the “boss” from receiving punishment.

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