

## The Sopranos

When David Letterman spoke to his CBS boss Les on the phone during a segment on his show, they discussed a distributor, which dumped CBS's programming and then picked it up again after a few persuasive phone calls from his executives. Les joked 'yeah, you know, we called up some guys from New Jersey'. 'Oh terrific' says Dave, 'you broke some legs, I love that, I love that.'<sup>1</sup>

Cut to HBO's Original Programming about original gangsters, O.G.'s, and you have the TV show about those 'guys' from New Jersey called *The Sopranos*. Currently screening its fifth series in the U.S. with a sixth and final series in the wings, the show is the creation of New Jersey raised, former psychotherapy patient, Italian American, David Chase. The 'germ'<sup>2</sup> of the show is Tony Soprano's psychoanalytic treatment with his psychiatrist, Dr. Jennifer Melfi; the code of silence meets talk therapy.

Tony has two families. As 'acting boss of the DiMeo family, New Jersey's most powerful criminal organization', he's 'the motherfucking fucking one who calls the shots.'<sup>3</sup> Within his personal family, the power dynamics are different. When considering disciplinary action for their daughter Meadow, who trashes her grandmother Livia's house during a party, he tells his wife Carmela 'Let's not overplay our hand – if she figures out we're powerless, we're fucked.'<sup>4</sup>

Meadow reveals she 'can't talk to' her 'dad either. He's not a Nazi. He's a tough guy, an executive type. He runs his own business, he's good at giving orders, which scares people and makes him attractive for some'<sup>5</sup>. For her, 'family feels like an emotional teakettle about to explode, my gene pools got so much anger... how can I not be damaged, people from these unhappy family environments end up taking drugs and becoming sluts.'<sup>6</sup>

She's right, Tony's 3pm Tuesday sessions with Dr Melfi are usually punctuated by explosions of anger and or lust. As much as he 'admires the strong silent type of man like Gary Cooper', these masculine role models make it 'impossible' for him 'to talk to a psychiatrist' as desirable as Dr. Melfi. He 'resents' Dr. Melfi for making him 'feel like a victim.'<sup>7</sup> 'I got the world by the balls and I can't stop feeling like I'm a fucken loser! You ask how I'm feeling, I tell you how I'm feeling and now you're gonna torture me with it!' Tony simply isn't one of those 'clear-headed, happy wanderers'. Dr Melfi asks 'who made you feel like a loser, your mother? Your parents made it impossible for you to experience joy.'<sup>8</sup>

Initially, Tony sees Dr. Melfi for his anxiety attacks, which cause him to black out and lose control. It's a condition he has in common with his late father Johnny Boy and son Anthony Junior. Dr. Melfi's been prescribing Prozac and Lithium for Tony and alcohol for herself. She once had a dream, recollected during her own therapy session with Dr. Elliot Kupferberg,

where Tony was driving at night, while *The Wizard of Oz* song 'You're out of the woods, you're out of the woods' was playing, but he wasn't – he ended up out of his windshield after crashing into a truck. As her obsession with Tony grows, she realizes she's 'living in a moral never-never land' with her patient; 'I'm afraid of what he might tell me, but somehow I can't stop myself from wanting to hear it.' Dr. Kupferberg suggests that like the 'love' of 'roller coasters' and 'scary movies' Jennifer wants 'to experience the thrill of being terrified, without the consequences.' Realizing the consequences of saying nothing to Tony, she confronts him demanding 'how many more people have to die because of your personal growth?'<sup>9</sup>

Tony's ancestors like Dr. Melfi's, practically come from the same part of 'the boot' near Naples, they've inherited a matriarchal culture, Tony, thinks his mother would've been happy if they'd hooked up. After an attempt on his life, Tony meets a Federal Agent, who points out they also have 'shared heritage' since their 'ancestors, hail from the same sunny peninsula'. The 'Fed', plays him a taped conversation. Tony hears his uncle Corrado 'Junior' Soprano, enquire of Tony's mother Livia in her nursing home. 'He must have got under your collar?' Livia responds 'He's been seeing a psychiatrist!' As a result of breaking the code of silence, they agree that Corrado Junior must 'act',<sup>10</sup> or whack Tony. Dr. Melfi was right about Livia.

Despite his mother and uncle's misgivings about therapy, Tony informs his crew about it. His consigliere, Silvio feels that 'this thing of ours,' it's better if we could admit to each other that these are painful, stressful times, but it'll never happen.' Tony's doubts resurface at Dr. Melfi's office, 'self-knowledge where has it got me now. I'm sorry I don't wanna do this any more.' He goes in and out of therapy, telling Dr. Melfi 'what I really want is to direct my power and anger against the people who deserve it in my life.'<sup>11</sup>

While Tony may be unaware of the workings of his unconscious mind, he is conscious that in the gangland wars of the underworld when 'there's a power vacuum at the top', it leads to 'sadoomasochistic... jockeying... for power'<sup>12</sup>. For Christopher Moltisanti, one of Tony's crew, 'this is *Scarface*, final scene, say hello to my little friend.' Of course in Tony's eyes they're all 'soldiers wanting to preserve honour.' Even his late dad was 'a tough guy who ran his own crew.'<sup>13</sup> As for Uncle Junior, his 'ol' man was a major prick, he'd slap you just for looking funny.'<sup>14</sup>

When Anthony Junior visits his grandmother Livia, feeling that life has lost its meaning, her words to him are 'don't expect happiness, it's all a big nothing.' Carmela once told Livia to 'quit this victim role... I'm a mother you know the power you have!' However he wonders out loud to his parents 'death just shows the absurdity of life. Why were we born?' Carmela informs him 'it's because of Adam and Eve.' Tony later confides in Dr. Melfi 'that the kid may be onto



**Above:** Tony Soprano and gang. Season one *The Sopranos*. Image courtesy of www.HBO.com. **Bottom:** The Soprano family at a funeral. Season one *The Sopranos*. Image courtesy of www.HBO.com.

something,' but he blames his son's existentialist, adolescent angst on the 'fucken Internet.'<sup>15</sup>

According to Meadow, her 'mom' is 'surrounded by lots of expensive shit, afraid to admit that she's miserable because her husband cheats,' and he's 'about to go off like a volcano.'<sup>16</sup> Carmela though, sees marriage as a 'holy sacrament,' a 'duty to god.' At one point, she encourages Tony to 'start therapy' again because they 'haven't had sex' for a while.<sup>17</sup> However, after receiving a phone call from Tony's former goomah, or mistress, Carmela's blood boils, and she confronts him: 'Maybe you pass out because you're guilty over something. Maybe the fact you stick your dick in anything with a pulse!'<sup>18</sup>

Analysing the show on Slate's website, with his psychiatric colleagues, Glen O. Gabbard writes that, for Tony, 'Jennifer and Carmela represent the original *bête noire* of the female gender, i.e., Livia... Motivated by revenge... Tony must destroy the therapy in the same way that he must destroy the marriage,' if he is to be 'triumphant... against his internalized mother.'<sup>19</sup> In the words of the late Johnny Boy's goomah, 'There's no chemical solution to a spiritual problem.'<sup>20</sup>

Carmela separates from Tony, spurred on by her 'fantasizing' about Furio Giunta: 'He looks at me like I'm beautiful.'<sup>21</sup> Furio, who was briefly a member of Tony's crew, before his premature return to Naples, made her feel like she mattered.

Sitting alone in his kitchen at night, nursing a Machiavellian debate about whether it's 'better to be loved than feared,'<sup>22</sup> Tony sees Meadow at the fridge. 'Everything I do, I do for you and your brother,' he

asks 'do you know that I love you?'<sup>23</sup> 'Sometimes we're all hypocrites,' she replies. In her video journal for college, she confesses 'we all have a dark side and a light side... We all have demons and we all make terrible mistakes.'<sup>24</sup>

Like traditional food served up at Nuovo Vesuvio, Tony's favourite restaurant, run by his childhood friend Artie Bucco, *The Sopranos* serves up a 'tantalizing mixture'<sup>25</sup> of what Dr. Kupferberg would call 'our childhood fascination with danger,' and with a 'hint' of Coppola's *Godfather* and Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, 'this dish is to die for.'

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**Spiro Kalantzis, is an artist who loves a good film about the mob. He once caught himself watching *The Sopranos* in a white singlet and crucifix eating pasta, with an espresso. Madonn.'**

#### Notes

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