

Illuminating the Complex Nature of the Human Condition: Some Thoughts on the End of "The Sopranos"

By David Shasha

Note: The conclusion of the show is divulged in the course of the following article.

Though it would be impossible to do justice to the many important cultural achievements of the television show "The Sopranos" in a short article, the recent conclusion of the show warrants a few remarks to put its place in our cultural history into some perspective.

In our contemporary culture a huge premium has been placed on cleverness over the difficult and thorny issues of expression and analysis. As a cultural artifact, "The Sopranos" was able to partake in both of these modalities. In the seemingly endless analyses of the show, reference has been made to the semiological aspect of the show as reflecting many signs and symbols of our inherited popular culture. As a show about gangsters "The Sopranos" drew from a rich history ranging from the Hollywood epics of the 1930s like "Public Enemy," "Scarface," and "Little Caesar" to the more contemporary tradition of "The Godfather," "Goodfellas," and "Raging Bull." In fact, "The Sopranos" drew many of its cast members from the ranks of the later gangster films.

But beyond its many semiotic references to other works of imaginative art, "The Sopranos" began to tell the story of human beings and delve into their lives in ways that was rare in American culture. The cleverness of pop culture references was balanced and made more profound by the nuanced ways in which the characters came to life as multi-dimensional human beings.

The character of Tony Soprano was one that rose above many of the standard cliches of the gangster genre and portrayed him as both a devoted father and deeply troubled man whose life encompassed physical violence and the immorality that came with it, but also showed a man in psychological torment whose dreams and fears frequently consumed him.

From the very beginning of the series, Tony Soprano was anchored in multiple realities: He was the leader of a criminal enterprise which earned money and accrued power by inflicting pain and injury on other human beings, some implicated in criminal activity and others completely innocent of wrongdoing; he was the son of a father who had brutalized him and who he in turn idolized; the son of a mother whose own personal faults created an environment where the young Tony felt unloved and vulnerable; the husband to a wife whose own personal conflicts made her veer from Madonna to Whore; and a father to children who often did not accept the conflicts their father's business presented them with.

Tony Soprano was both hero and anti-hero at the very same moment; he had the wealth, power and charisma that allowed him free reign to do anything he wanted, but left him at the end of the day desperate and hollow. Tony Soprano was a man who according to

society's conventions had it all - he could get any woman he wanted, kill anyone who came in his way, and inspired fear and respect from those around him.

But David Chase, the visionary artist who created the show and kept it going for close to a decade, saw in Tony Soprano an example of the vast complexity of the human condition and applied the lessons of life's difficulties to the character of the man. Tony was seen each episode at the office of his psychiatrist Jennifer Melfi where he would recount his personal history and present a carefully sculpted and censored version of his daily life which was articulated in order to shield the harsh realities of what he actually did, and reconfigure them in such a way that attempted to create a bourgeois character out of a man whose life was anything but. In a brilliant move in the next-to-last-episode of the series, Chase has Melfi come to terms with the fact that her therapy has done nothing to cleanse Soprano of his evil ways, but in many ways has lamentably aided him in his pathological existence.

Orbiting the world of Tony Soprano was a gallery of characters whose own humanity was implicated in this same confusing melange of contradictions. These were men who performed criminal acts for a living and whose own lives profited from the killing and stealing. Chase often played out these contradictions in ways that exposed the harshly paradoxical nature of power and wealth in American civilization. Yachts, trips to Las Vegas in private planes, mistresses, flashy cars and palatial estates were all central to the external trappings of such success as was afforded by the criminal aspect of gangsterism.

Two separate and often conflicting lifestyles were set out in the show: the dirty realities of Soprano life involved the most seedy and disgusting aspects of human existence. On a recent episode, a Soprano crew was illegally removing asbestos from a local New Jersey school and dumping it into a public waterway. The net result of this activity was ignored by the protagonists whose only concern was the generation of income. And this was the aspect of the show that was most tied to the current American experience: getting yours whatever the cost to someone else might be.

And over the course of its six seasons, the show not only displayed the allure of this criminal life, but the massive psychological toll that it took on the protagonists in their personal lives. The apparent love of husbands and wives, the stability of the family unit, the loyalty of an individual to their own sense of self and their integrity, were all things that the show put into question. These were characters who lived the high life, but who inside were tortured and confused.

Tony's nephew Christopher Moltisanti was a perpetual drug addict who watched as the love of his life was gunned down because she had been taken as a snitch by the cops. His girlfriend Adriana Le Cerva was a sweet and loving young woman who got caught up in the same rackets as Chris and in order to free herself from prosecution turned state's witness, a fact which she hid from the Soprano family and for which - when she was found out - inevitably led to her execution.

The Soprano-world was one where the only loyalty that one had was to the clan and its preservation. Restating what had been the ethical code of "The Godfather," there was nothing outside the family and all those who did things to compromise the family were eliminated with extreme brutality. But unlike Michael Corleone, Tony Soprano was presented in ways that showed his own weakness and perpetual sense of existential claustrophobia. He was haunted by his past as much as he was troubled by the things he had to do. He did these things willingly, but they took a huge toll on him.

Rather than presenting an amoral netherworld of gangsters, "The Sopranos" drew out its characters and brought them under an analytical microscope.

In one of the most notable character studies in the later part of the series, Soprano captain Vito Spatafore is spotted by Meadow Soprano's boyfriend giving oral sex to a male security guard on a construction site. In subsequent episodes we see Vito at a Gay leather bar where he is spotted by some low-ranking Soprano hoods who rat him out. Over the course of a number of memorable episodes Vito escapes Soprano-land and goes to scenic New England where he meets and falls in love with a short-order cook nicknamed Johnny Cakes. In this miniature presentation of what was spread out over the course of many episodes of the program, Vito is shown as having a complex inner life that has been crushed by the conventions of the Soprano family and its rigid rules. Being Gay is not a question for a Soprano family member and Vito's proclivities are tamped down. He is a married man with children and a mistress yet has to hide his homosexuality which he expresses furtively outside the bounds of family life. When he meets and moves in with Johnny Cakes his life changes. For the first time in his life he is allowed to become a normal human being.

And it is in these short and furtive glimpses of normalcy that "The Sopranos" deconstructed the rigid codes of the gangster genre. From time to time we would be afforded entry into the inner mind of Tony Soprano and get the same idea. In a startling motif that snaked its way through a couple of seasons, Tony's own personal predilections, his hopes for the life of a normal person, broke through the chains of the conventions. One night after a separation from his wife he drives out to the Plaza Hotel to get away, as he sometimes does, to blow off steam, and has a traumatic and indelibly haunting dream that betrays his own fears and insecurities. In the following season, after he is shot by his Uncle Junior, he lies in a coma in a hospital bed where he dreams again of another life, a life where he is a plain-spoken businessman whose life is the model of conventional efficiency. Rather than dreaming of a wife whose own material ambitions and pretenses are a match for his own malevolence, Tony in his dream is married to Charmaine Bucco, his high-school sweetheart, whose wholesome innocence represents for him a life outside the pressures and rigors of the violence and crime that he has become a slave to.

And it is in these moments that we discover one of the central themes of the program: the failure of decent, honest people to make a success of their lives. In each case, what is decent is destroyed by cruelty and malevolence. Vito Spatafore strangely decides to leave his New England idyll, a place where he could live as a normal Gay man who

would be respected and loved by others, to return to New Jersey, where the reality of who he is becomes something quite different. Within a few days of his return, Vito is found by a rival family led by his wife's cousin Phil Leotardo, and sodomized with a broom handle and killed.

Those who live decently on "The Sopranos" are treated unmercifully. Each time Carmela, Tony's wife, tries to pull away from the corruption of her husband's world, she is sucked back in. The immorality is caught up in a tangled vortex of the pleasures afforded by the money and power resulting from the crimes of the family. All this shows how the criminal life is mingled with the unbearable reality that there is a huge price that must be paid to get the money and the power. It is the Catch-22 of life in Soprano-land: one wants the best things in life, but the cost involved in getting those things often undermines the very civility afforded by the good life.

The character of Carmela is one that shows the spiritual and moral conflicts with great precision. A rocky marriage is shored up by the endless gifts that Tony lavishes on his wife; gifts that are ostentatiously displayed like talismans on the program. A Lexus SUV, a gaudy piece of jewelry, lavish home furnishings and all the rest of the symbols of the high life glut the screen to the point where one takes them for granted. But at the same time as the ostentatious display of ill-gotten wealth takes place, discussions of politics and current events permeate the conversations of the children and of the protagonists themselves: the constant worries of terrorism and security concerns dot the Soprano landscape. Real life and Soprano life often intersect in ways showing that money cannot buy happiness.

And yet it is money that makes the show's narrative engine function. It is money that brings Vito back to New Jersey after he sees that he can live a clean and happy life elsewhere. It is money that brings Carmela back to Tony when she finally understands that she can get her divorce but will, like Kay Corleone in "The Godfather," lose all of her wealth and comfort. It is money that forces Christopher to stand by helplessly when he realizes that his girlfriend must die in order to protect the integrity of the Soprano money machine.

The richness of "The Sopranos" lies in the ways in which Chase has forced a collision between the morality of a decent life and the allure of crime and the advantages that it brings to its perpetrators. The core values of the family are upheld and deconstructed simultaneously. The characters all struggle to become decent, but in the end are trapped in a world of their own making, a world where they cannot ever be free of corruption.

In this sense, "The Sopranos" harbors two mutually conflicting impulses: There is the glamour and the seduction of the "Bling" lifestyle that many people wish they had, and then there is the world of the gutter that many people are so fearful of. And Soprano-land is most certainly a world that simultaneously exists in the dregs of the gutter and the rarefied lights of the elite. It is a world that speaks precisely to the contemporary American condition, a world where the disgusting mores of the rich are mandated by their wealth and power.

On "The Sopranos" anyone who is decent is cut down. When Paulie "Walnuts" Galtieri learns that his birth mother is his "mother"'s sister, a woman who became a nun to hide the shame of her out-of-wedlock birth, he turns on the woman who raised him without mercy. His own personal sense of honor is violated and he throws away any chance of a peaceful resolution because he responds to the matter as he would in the context of a mob hit - in a violent and passionate manner that rejects rational morality. Paulie, like other "Sopranos" characters, is an irrational hot-head who acts from his gut rather than from his heart.

Over the course of many episodes, "The Sopranos" created many fascinating characters and situations - too many to recount here. Among these stories we got to see human beings living and acting in ways that are rarely seen in our commodified culture that all too often processes its stories in a convention-laden manner.

"The Sopranos" was able in most cases to discover the wonder and the passion inside its characters and in its stories which were told with the same sort of stylized fury of the 1930s classics. Stories were framed in harsh tones and brutal trappings. The viewer was spared none of the brutality and frankness of drug use, sexuality, vulgarity and intensity that was presented as a heightened form of realism. When a character was taking drugs we would see the needle penetrate the vein; when a character beat someone to death we saw the thing in all its disgusting bloody transparency; when a character had sexual relations we saw the thrusts and heard the moans. In this sense, "The Sopranos" hearkened back to the fairy-tale grit of Howard Hawks and Mervyn LeRoy as much as to the hyper-realism of Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola.

Over the course of its long run, the show began to show signs of fatigue. And as the last set of episodes came to an end, Chase was left artistically drained. He continued to display a penchant and skill for cleverness and effect, but lost the sense of intimacy and character-centeredness that had made for his best episodes.

In the final season, he had been left without Vito Spattafore and Johnny Sack, both of whose plotlines anchored the previous season, and was forced to consider how he was going to bring the show to an end. So characters started to get put into positions where they would be whacked - like Christopher - or eliminated - like Dr. Melfi, Tony's psychiatrist. Each episode of the final season would try to reconnect to major issues from the show's past - Uncle Junior's demise into dementia, Anthony Jr.'s increasing depression and its echoes of his father's weakness - which Chase felt he had to revisit before shutting the thing down. But this panoply of restoring the older motifs was unsuccessful - the show was at its best when it was proactively discovering new and uncharacteristic episodes and plotlines. The running-down of the show led to much nervous exhaustion which was transformed into needless tension rather than wondrous fascination.

This allowed Chase to maintain his cleverness as he piled reference upon obscure reference which enabled him to resurrect little-seen characters and locales which would

stir the fires of those who obsessed over the show's minutiae, but which served to disappoint those who loved the show for its psychological insights and its understanding of the human condition. But this, as I have said, was always the most jarring tension of "The Sopranos": the schizophrenic nature of the familiar - the show's seductive gangsterism - and the strange - the show's examination of offbeat characterizations and plot motifs.

In the end, Chase could not find a way out of the complex narrative labyrinths he had spun out over the course of the series. It seemed that everything was going to come to a crashing halt rather than be given the time that the classic plots of the show truly needed. A.J.'s suicide attempt was not given the space and the context necessary for us to understand what it all meant. The race to the finish line served to undermine the show's conclusion and when the show actually ended with an abrupt non-resolution it was due more to a failure of imagination than from any narrative necessity. In the end, despite all the accolades being given to the show's ending by cultural critics and commentators who valorize effect and cleverness over imagination and substance, "The Sopranos" was not ultimately able to rise to the grandeur of what it really represented in American culture.

At its best, "The Sopranos" presented miniature sketches of human life - of good and evil. It expertly sketched out a set of characters who became comfortingly familiar to the viewer and was thus even more effectively utilized to undermine the very expectations of the audience. The benignly conventional behaviors of a Tony Soprano restored the American dream which was then used by Chase and his writers, directors and actors as a platform to brutally deconstruct that very American dream.

The audience's disappointment with the purported triumph of Tony Soprano, a man who in the last frames of the show is shown at peace in the loving bosom of his family - even as there is danger on the horizon, rests in the fact that it undermined all that the show tried to teach us in its tenure: crime either pays or it does not.

In the final episode of the show - with a shocking plot device taken straight from "South Park," even as it plays around with its richly evocative musical soundtrack to inspire loyalty and credulousness - we see Tony best Phil and survive. Chase was here caught in an impossible situation that he was not brilliant enough to resolve: Would evil Tony win out over those he has harmed, or would he get his in the end? This is not a theoretical question for loyal viewers of the show - it is a question that cuts to the very heart of "The Sopranos" enterprise. The avoidance of the question in the show's final moments crushed many loyal viewers even as its moral ambiguity was applauded by the all-too-clever critics who were more careful to praise the pop-culture semiotics of the show rather than the ethical aspects of its themes and motifs.

The idea that the show would fade out into oblivion and not come to closure was something that showed that Chase was abrogating his own moral sense that had been built up over the many seasons of the show, and which was endemic to the Hollywood gangster tradition of "Scarface" and "Public Enemy" that Chase referenced constantly. In Tony Soprano do we have an heir to Tony Camonte of Hawks' "Scarface" and Tom

Powers of Wellman's "Public Enemy" or do we have the sort of morally ambiguous figure whose crime and immorality are levers for his entry into the civilized world?

In the classic Hollywood gangster film good triumphs over evil. Even as we see the sometimes desperate circumstances of the criminal, the criminal never triumphs and gets his in the end. It is a critical part of the tradition.

So when the last episode of "The Sopranos" was screened, the audience waited with baited breath - not for a further piling on of clever pop culture and insider references - but for the moral clarity that the show excelled in providing. Each time a decent person was maimed or killed there was always the promise that was held out that in the end those who were responsible would get their just desserts. But here as the last scenes of the show unfolded - and this could be intuited from the beginning of the final series of shows - it was becoming more and more clear that we were not going to get any definitive resolution. And psychologically this was deeply troubling to many viewers - they were waiting for a narrative payoff that they had been anticipating for close to a decade: the end of Tony Soprano.

But here considerations of a commercial nature disrupted the idyll of artistic concerns. It was the audience and its angry reactions to the final episode that strangely elevated the idea of art over the commercial - normally it is the other way around. But "The Sopranos" trained its viewers well and raised their aesthetic acumen. This demotion of the artistic demands of the narrative arc of the show was trumped in the end by the need to keep Tony Soprano alive for any possible sequels or movies in the future. Chase was able to overload the show with the sort of pop semiotics and insider details that the idiot elite critics revel in, but he was unable to reconnect with the moral center of his epic enterprise.

And such was a disappointment of equally epic proportion. The indignant feelings that the audience experienced at the time of Vito's death, and Adriana's death, and Ralph Ciferetto's death, all deaths that were caused by the malice and evil of the Soprano family, were now not to be felt at the very penultimate moment of the show. It was a failing of incalculable magnitude. To sacrifice the entire thematic of the show at the altar of commerce was, paradoxically, a move that was so Tony Soprano. To write off the whole thing to some cynical calculation akin to the moral anarchy of "South Park" where a crucial plot-line was resolved with the insertion of an episode of the "Terence and Philip Show" as a lark to make fun of the conventions of the cliffhanger and the epic, was to undermine the whole moral grandiosity of "The Sopranos."

"The Sopranos" is not "South Park." And while the irreverence of "South Park" is commendable for that show which is a satire and a spoof, using the same narrative device for "The Sopranos," a show whose moral focus was explicit and intense, was a cheat on the audience; a bad joke that perhaps may not ever be forgiven; a display of bad taste that pulled the rug out from under the entire moral center of the program.

One is not exactly sure how this is all to play out in years to come.

"The Sopranos" is perhaps the first episodic TV show which aspired to - and frequently achieved - the great heights of the classic Hollywood cinema. And by constantly having such films inserted into the program - the characters, particularly Tony, would be shown watching these classic moves on their home TVs - Chase was acknowledging both his debt to these classic works of art, but also his audacity in trying to have his own show rise to their level. The problem here is that a film is a self-contained unit that is often under two hours and can be easily consumed. But "The Sopranos" is a sprawling episodic TV show that is not self-contained. At this moment, in order to see the show one has to wait until it is rerun on HBO or purchase multi-disk DVD sets that are quite pricey. To see "Scarface" one can tune into one of the frequent showings on TCM or buy a DVD for \$20. The longevity of "The Sopranos" is, in contrast let's say with "Star Trek," a more dicey proposition because one cannot just watch a single episode on late night reruns, but must follow its six seasons with many episodes and many intertwined plotlines.

And with the show now come to an end, the artistic arc of the show has placed a good many of its thematic concerns into serious question. Recalling the last words of Sex Pistol Johnny Rotten at the final concert of the group at San Francisco's Winterland Theater, we might think back on the final episode of "The Sopranos" and say "Did you ever get the feeling you've been cheated?"

Looking back on what was certainly one of the most significant cultural events in American civilization over the past 50 years, "The Sopranos" laid out a set of indelible characters whose personal tragedies and triumphs placed the mirror back up at us as a civilization. It served to question the way we live our lives, what we believe, how we feel about one another and what we are prepared to do to generate our societies and our cultures.

The tortured soul of Tony Soprano, a man who was often analogized on the show to George W. Bush, another (un)fortunate son who has done wrong to his fellow human beings because of his own aggrandized sense of who he is and what he could do when equipped with the proper powers, was made hyper-realistic because rarely do we ever get to see the fractious nature of the powerful and the wealthy even though we sense that there is no way that they can live at peace with themselves over the guilt of the crimes they perpetrate to gain their unfair advantage over the rest of us who remain honest and devoted to our faith in integrity.

At the end of the final show, Tony Soprano gets away with it all even as Chase intimates that maybe he will not. There are no tears to be shed at the end of the series as there were at the death of Vito Spataffore and the others whose attempts to escape their fate were unsuccessful in the face of the brutality of the family. All we have at the end of the last show are the memories of a world where Tony and his cohorts committed their heinous actions and left us numb and bereft of all hope, hope that we once understood was going to be restored for us when the thing came to its conclusion.

Some will say that this is how real life is, and that "The Sopranos" was about real life. And yet this is the key to understanding the modern cultural divides that exist today: There are those who demand "reality" which is often tyrannical and unjust, and then there are those who by providing us with audacious acts of imagination can magically transform the ugliness of our reality into something more honest and more just - an ideal version of human existence that is what we should try to live up to in spite of the difficulties. All art is ultimately a heightened form of realism and is never an accurate, mimetic copy of life as it is really lived.

For all that the Hollywood masters like John Ford and Frank Capra are criticized today for their luminous optimism and belief in the essential goodness of humanity, it is their texts that we should rightly turn to, in an almost religious manner, to try and untangle the complexities of our lives. In Preston Sturges' "Sullivan's Travels" we have what is perhaps the most eloquent homage to this American humanist sensibility, where the downtrodden and the weakest among us, the poor and the prisoner, look to the joy and naive optimism of the Hollywood film as the only light in their lives. The degradation of this aesthetic leads to the emergence of an incipient nihilism that is reinforced when artists succumb to their own moral weakness and insist that life is bleak and of no value in the eternal battle between good and evil.

Over the course of many brilliant episodes, all filled with moral arguments and existential challenges where we are forced to struggle with who we are as human beings, "The Sopranos" stood as a shining beacon in a sea of unknowing and malevolence. By showing the inner workings of bad people and the ways in which they victimized others and profited by it, the show was arguing that these people were tortured and paid for their crimes in ways that might be invisible from public view, but which were quite real nevertheless. It delved into the minutiae of the human condition in ways that were startlingly fresh and iconoclastically innovative. It could valorize and make us comfortable with a Tony Soprano, but was ever vigilant to show the dark side of the character. The genius of the program was the way in which it skillfully integrated the surfaces of the brutal reality with the deep chasms that lay under those surfaces.

It is this vision of the great David Chase that we should remember and not the artistic weakness he displayed in the final moments of the series. And while the lack of proper closure can often serve to undermine the canonical status of a work of art, the sheer brilliance and grandeur of so much of the show has given us some of the most stirring and memorable viewing in an age of moral relativism and ethical ambiguity, that we should look to the great heights that "The Sopranos" was able to achieve rather than the inept manner in which it was brought to a close. The grandest of these heights stand right alongside the very greatest works of art in the history of human creativity and have given us as viewers a rare insight into the human condition. These insights will continue to inspire future viewing of the program and will add to our canonical repository of lasting artistic works.