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The Sorry Sons of *The Godfather*: Intertextuality, Orality and Diminished Masculinities in *The Sopranos*

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When the enormously popular HBO TV series *The Sopranos* first premiered in 1999, it shared a core plot element with a film released about the same time, *Analyze This*, also successful and popular enough to later spawn a sequel, *Analyze That*.[1] They both revolve around the central image of a Mafia boss seeing a psychotherapist. This essay focuses on *The Sopranos*, and uses references to the contemporaneous *Analyze This* to bolster its case that a generational shift in images of masculinity is illustrated here. This essay draws exclusively on the first season of *The Sopranos* in order to isolate a specific moment in the evolution of the cultural zeitgeist.

The contents and meanings of these TV and film plots are not self-contained, but are crucially dependent on other mass media images. They rely heavily on a kind of double vision, in which even as we watch the unfolding of the present story both we (i.e. the audience) and the characters themselves have constantly before our and their minds' eyes images from the earlier series of *Godfather* films, especially Parts I and II, made in the 1970's.[2] Both *The Sopranos* and *Analyze This* move within and depend upon the same frame of reference created by the earlier *Godfather* films. The core of their humor derives from our and their understandings of the lesser stature of these men vis-à-vis the earlier *Godfather*s, and the core of their drama centers around whether these sons will be able to emerge from under their fathers' shadows. Both these sons of the *Godfather*s are very much diminished patriarchs, whose emasculated masculinity is at the core of their stories. This paper will probe what we can learn about intergenerational changes (and continuities) in certain modes of masculine identity and patriarchal authority from an examination of the representations of masculinities in these similarly themed works.

Analyze This accomplishes its essential "intertextual" reference to the earlier *Godfather* films in part by casting Robert De Niro in one of its two lead roles, that of Mafia boss Paul Vitti, since De Niro played the role of Vito Corleone in The *Godfather* II, and therefore powerfully calls back those images. (Even his character's last name "Vitti" invokes the original "Godfather's" first name "Vito"). *Analyze This* uses not only film history but the actual history of the Mafia as well to situate its story in the shadow of the *Godfather* films and their historical grounding in the mob's heyday in the 1950s by repeated references to such historical events as the infamous 1957 Apalachin meeting of the heads of the Mafia families. Indeed, one of its plot's points of suspense is whether the current generation of mob leaders has sufficiently learned the lessons their fathers did from that meeting in order to avoid being caught by the police.

The Sopranos tells the story of Tony Soprano's two dysfunctional families: his biological family and his Mafia family. The original print promotional ads for the series showed lead character Tony Soprano, played by James Gandolfini, facing out towards the viewer, with the background consisting of his Mafia family looking at us over one of his shoulders and his biological family looking at us over the other. The caption read: "If one family doesn't kill him, the other will." Every episode's opening sequence puts us in the passenger seat of Tony's car as he drives from

New York to his home in New Jersey. Just as the opening sequence serves to situate the show's setting in New Jersey squarely in the shadow of New York as we pointedly leave it behind, so the show's whole premise operates in the shadow of the Corleone Mafia family we've all come to know through the *Godfather* films. Tony Soprano's drive at the beginning of each episode of *The Sopranos* foregrounds how much the background in which we the audience place him, as well as in which he himself and the other characters in the series situate themselves, consists of the life and times of Don Corleone and his families.

Analyze This and *The Sopranos*' shared central image of a gangster in an analyst's office is so rich because these gangsters represent a transitional generation. They are far enough away from their (God)fathers to know that they are not successfully coping with the pressures of their lives, and to seek help for their problems from a therapist. But they are still close enough to that generation to be unable to admit to others that they are seeking such help. In both cases their needs for secrecy about their insecurities and vulnerabilities are not merely their personal paranoias. They are correctly reading the constellations of power in which they are embedded. Their authority truly will "shrink" if word gets out that they are seeing a "shrink."

In the cultural codes that they have inherited from their fathers, their leadership roles demand that they be the "strong silent type." They must be independent and decisive, and must not flinch from making sometimes cold-hearted life and death decisions. The leadership style they inherited from their fathers demands that they be closed off from others, and perhaps even from their own feelings, in a certain tight-lipped way: they keep their views to themselves, and their cards close to their vests. Seeing a therapist violates these codes of masculinity because the prerequisites of therapy demand a sensitivity and a talkativeness that are in direct conflict with these codes.

What they fear most about seeing a therapist is emasculation. The link between such feminization and heterosexism is made most explicit in *Analyze This*'s first meeting between boss De Niro and therapist Billy Crystal. Before agreeing to enter therapy, De Niro as Vitti warns Crystal as Ben in the following exchange:

Vitti: If I talk to you and it turns me into a fag, I'll kill you. You understand?

Ben: Could we define "fag," because some feelings may come up - -

Vitti: I go fag, you die. Got it?

Ben: Yes.

With that assurance, the movie is off and running.

When the Mafia side of Tony Soprano's biological family (i.e. his uncle and his mother Livia) discover that he is seeing a therapist, this sets in motion their plot to kill him. Livia's views about therapy are encapsulated in two propositions: 1) it's "Nothing but a racket for the Jews," and 2) they blame mothers for everything. They are worried about, among other things, how his spilling the beans to his shrink violates the code of silence that traditionally surrounds their business. These are people who are deadly serious about keeping one's mouth shut. When an informant "rats" to the police, he is later found dead with a dead rat stuffed in his mouth. Their concern about breaking "omerta," the traditional Mafia code of silence, reflects real changes in mob loyalties. In a brief article on how "the mob just isn't what it used to be" that ran shortly after the series premiere, Time magazine drew their "Then vs. Now" contrast this way: "Even after being shot twenty-two times in the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, Frank Gusenberg refused to implicate anyone" vs. "Salvatore Gravano testified against John Gotti and wrote a book about his life in the Mob."[3] In the omnipresent ongoing or always anticipated state of war that constitutes Mafia life, it remains true that "loose lips sink ships."

Loose lips and wagging tongues undermine the masculine authority of both generations of male Mafia bosses in the Soprano family. While Tony's lips are seen as "loose" in his conversations with his therapist, the problem with how his uncle Corrado Soprano uses his lips is more literal. His uncle's authority is undermined when it becomes known that he performs cunnilingus on his girlfriend. He tells his girlfriend that she must never tell that he performs oral sex on her, because others will think he is gay. She is understandably puzzled by this because, as she correctly notes, she is female, so she is baffled as to how their sexual practices could possibly indicate homosexuality on his part. He explains the operative male code of sexual prowess and power to her. "They figure," he tells her, "that if you'll put that in your mouth, you'll put anything in it." "Anything" here is, of course, that universal signifier, the penis/phallus.

The insight shown here into the real code of heterosexual masculinity operative in our culture is striking. The "official story" of our culture separates homosexuality from heterosexuality by what psychologists call "object choice." That is to say, if a male has sex with a female he is heterosexual, but if he has sex with another male he is homosexual. Underneath this official code, however, lies a more subtle and powerful code, one that draws the distinction not in terms of object choice but in terms of what psychologists call "sexual aim." That is to say, the issue is not with whom you are having sex, but which sex acts are being performed on and by whom.[4] The man conceptualized as "active," i.e. the one receiving sexual pleasure or the penetrator, can retain a sexual identity as straight even if oral sex is being performed on him by another man. But the man perceived as "passive," i. e. the one performing sex on another or the one being penetrated, is "gay." Hence a man who performs oral sex is seen as "gay," i. e. submissive, weak and effeminate, even if he is performing it on a woman. This is the real code by which men stigmatize and valorize other men. It was the rule that ruled in ancient Greece, it is the principle of power in men's prisons, and it is the code of many contemporary cultures around the world.[5]

Tony's uncle is especially vulnerable to charges that he is not entitled to be the head of the family because his hold on power is tenuous to begin with, based merely on his being the brother of the man who in his time had been the local Mafia boss, Tony's father, John. Everyone calls him "Junior," significant because it signals his inability to have ever emerged from under his own father's shadow. But Tony takes the diminutive "Junior" one step further. He calls him not "Junior," but "Uncle June." "June" is, of course, a female name, and hardly an appropriate name for a Mafia chief.

Tony eventually realizes that his uncle is plotting to have him killed, because his uncle believes he must defend himself against how Tony publicly "ribbed" him about performing oral sex and thereby undermined his authority, and because Tony's own claim to legitimate authority has been undermined because it has become known that he sees a therapist, a therapist who is female to boot. He then utters one of the most memorable lines ever uttered in a television series. Tony's verdict on this crucial turn of events in his life is: "Cunnilingus and psychotherapy brought us to this."

He is right, and thereby reveals how contemporary codes of masculinity are fraught with ambiguities and dangers because of their contradictory demands. He needs help, but must not be seen to, and his uncle satisfies his partner, but must also not be seen to. Therefore war.

For a long time I puzzled about the title "The Sopranos." At first the only relevant association with such a musical term that I could come up with was the gangster slang we've all learned from movies and TV about traitors ("stool pigeons") "singing" to the police. While this is indeed one of several plot lines in the series, it didn't seem central enough to warrant the title. Then I recalled the signally important symbolic role of music in the *Godfather* films, where

attendance at the opera, specifically Italian opera, symbolized the glories of the Italian culture at the foundation of their culture. Series creator and writer David Chase discussed his own Italian family in an interview in which he said that he had a "father who loved opera and named some of his daughters after his favorites, including Norma [his mother] and her sister Livia [the name of Tony's mother in the series]."[6] But the traditional glory of the Italian opera lies not in the soprano, but in the tenor voice. Then I had it. The fall from the glory of the deep, rich, masculine voices of the Italian tenors to the lighter, feminized voices of *The Sopranos* is precisely symbolic of the fall from the heights of masculine power that is the core theme of *The Sopranos*. In an age when the concerts of "The Three Tenors" (Luciano Pavarotti, Placido Domingo, and Jose Carreras) have come to define opera for so many listeners, who pays attention to the sopranos?

In a foreshadowing of the diminution by naming that I am arguing here is at the core of the series' naming practices, in the same interview Chase "says it was his paternal grandfather who changed the family name from DeCesare [i. e. "of the Caesar's"] to Chase, but he won't say why."[7] The technique of using a diminished musical reference to symbolize diminished stature appears not only in the show's title, but in the title of Tony Soprano's principal "legitimate" business as well. He is the proprietor of the "Bada Bing Club," a bar and "strip joint," as they refer to it. Understanding the significance of the title of Tony's club requires understanding the nightclub culture of the happier days of the 1950's, when the mob was at the height of its power, in which the pinnacle of success as well as the most admired and emulated male role models were the Italian leaders of the "Rat Pack," Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin, Sinatra especially also associated with the Mafia's rule in Las Vegas.

In that club culture, "Bada Bing" came to be the verbal equivalent of the drum sounds used to punctuate the jokes of the nightclub stand-up comics of the 1950s. Two quick shots of the drummer's sticks on the drum followed by a quick crash of the high-hat cymbals punched up the comic's punch line when the audience failed to respond. Of course, the need for the "Bada Bing" signaled the failure of the joke itself to produce a laugh. In time, the drummer's "Bada Bing" became such a cliché that it stopped having any positive effect on the comic's routine, if indeed it ever did. At that point, if a joke failed, instead of the drummer's "Bada Bing" the comic could just say the words "Bada Bing" himself, often accompanied by appropriate hand gestures. In this way he could regain his failed connection with the audience by signaling that he too knew that the joke was bad. To the extent that the comic's "Bada Bing" has its desired effect, it works by communicating a dual message from the comic to the audience: 1) I too know that the joke was bad, and 2) I decline to use the cliched drummer's "rescue" we all know is available to me. The intertextual reference the comic shares with the audience thereby allows him to rise above his bad material. Acknowledging the failure of the bad joke turns defeat into, if not precisely victory, at least a chance at another shot at success.

And this is precisely Tony Soprano's strategy for life. He knows that, compared to what the mob once was, his "thing," as they refer to their rackets, is a bad joke. But precisely by acknowledging this fact, and refusing to surrender to it, he rises above it, and gives himself a shot at success. Bada Bing.

In both stories the therapists are positioned as "other" to the manliness of the mobsters not only because of the kind of emotional sensitivity and loquaciousness they show as therapists, but also because of who they are as persons, in *The Sopranos* a woman, in *Analyze This* a Jew, therefore in neither case "real" men. When Tony Soprano finally tells his subordinates that he's been seeing a shrink, one of them seems surprisingly accepting, on the grounds that he too had once sought similar help for marital problems in the past. But he later confides to a confederate

that what Tony is doing still bothers him, because when he had consulted someone at least "It wasn't a woman!"

As is standard in mass media productions, religion is dealt with gingerly here. Though the allusions to the therapist's Jewishness in *Analyze This* are rare, coming primarily in his wedding officiated by a rabbi, one scene set in a church exploits the Jewish comic "shtick" Billy Crystal's persona brings to his role, from his Saturday Night Live days to his Mr. Saturday Night characterization, and begins to explore Jewish vs. Catholic intrafamilial guilt. One of *The Sopranos*' sub-plots involves Tony's wife Carmela calling their young priest on his flirtatious behavior with women. A number of his stereotypically attractive female parishioners prepare meals for the priest which he particularly relishes eating in their company. She tells him he has some kind of oral fixation (excessive orality is generally a fixation in the Freudian world of *The Sopranos*) in which he mixes up food and sex. The shots of her accepting the consecrated wafer from him at the next Communion are telling.

The success of the *Godfather* films depended in part on the audience being enthralled by the introduction of characters the likes of which they had not seen before. In contrast, the success of these works depends on the willingness of contemporary audiences to identity with these characters, to accept them as people "just like us." When the earlier *Godfather*s were defended by their attorneys before a Congressional committee of inquiry as being "just businessmen," the audience heard the statement as a lie. But in the mouths of these characters, today's audiences are much more prone to accept the characterization. What lies behind the difference is only in part a sense that at least the Italian Mafia may indeed have cleaned up its act a bit and toned down its level of violence, with today's Russian or Colombian versions of organized crime being feared more. Another factor more powerfully at work here is today's greater cynicism about the ethics of businessmen. Given all that we now know about the corrupt conduct of "legitimate" businessmen, it is no longer far-fetched to see Mafia bosses as not being that different. The lines between the "good" and "bad" guys have become very blurred today, in business, politics and television. Indeed, in both plot lines government agents violate their own purported ethics to trick or entrap their targets. And when Billy Crystal's father-in-law-to-be, known to everyone as "The Captain," pulls him aside for a little chat before the wedding, what we expect will be a heartwarming welcoming to the family turns out to be the kind of chilling threat one expects from the Mafia.

In a USA Today story on "a growing TV fashion: a coat of moral gray" in the new 2006-07 season, Bill Keveney writes of the CBS drama "Smith" that it "is the latest series to feature a lead character of questionable virtue, joining *The Sopranos*, *The Shield* and *Rescue Me*."[8] Note that *The Sopranos*' 1999 premier predates the other shows mentioned here by several years, *The Shield* having premiered in 2002 and *Rescue Me* in 2004. Its initiation of this trend is just one of the many reasons the show warrants study.

The *Godfather II* harked back to the original Sicilian Mafia, and the first *Godfather* film portrayed the heyday of the modern American Mafia. Today's characters inhabit the Mafia's third era, what we might call its postmodern phase. As the story of the original Mafia resonates in its American descendants, it follows the classic pattern of being retold the first time as tragedy, but the second time as farce.[9] This ludic postmodern phase is one without the grand narrative of the now nostalgized era of the modern *Godfather*, the grand epoch and epic of the Corleones. Its plot plays itself out on a very local stage, one very diminished in scale. We are able to enjoy the show because we share with its characters the knowledge that we are in an era when the personal

power of the classic patriarchs is very much diminished.[10] The long and successful run of *The Sopranos* continued to explore this theme.

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ENDNOTES

[1] *The Sopranos*, HBO, 1999; *Analyze This*, Warner Brothers, 1999, dir. Harold Ramis; *Analyze That*, Warner Brothers, 2002, dir. Harold Ramis.
[2] The *Godfather*, Parts 1, II, III, Paramount, 1972, 1974, 1990, dir. Francis Ford Coppola.
[3] "Family Affairs", Time, April 19, 1999, p. 16.
[4] See Tomás Almaguer, "Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behavior", Men's Lives, Fourth Edition, eds. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), pp. 473-486.
[5] On Greece see David M. Halperin, One Hundred Years of Homosexuality (New York: Routledge, 1990) and John J. Winkler, The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece (New York: Routledge, 1990). On the Latin American context see Stephen O. Murray, Latin American Male Homosexualities (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995).
[6] "The Son Who Created A Hit, '*The Sopranos*'", Alex Witchel, The New York Times, June 6, 1999, Section AR, p. 23.
[7] Ibid.
[8] "On TV, harder to tell good from bad," Bill Keveney, USA Today, August 17, 2006, Section D, p. 1.
[9] Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," The Marx-Engels Reader, Second Edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 594.
[10] This is not to say that patriarchy as institutionalized male power is diminished, but that its power is now exercised more through social structures than through the personal powers of the elder patriarchs.