Retrospectively Reading *The Sopranos*

Rethinking Complex Television for New Cultural Contexts

Alexander H. Beare

Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Media
Faculty of Arts, Business, Law and Economics
University of Adelaide
October 2022

Contents

Abstract

In 2020, HBO series, *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), experienced an unexpected surge in popularity among young viewers. Outlets like *The Guardian* (Kambasha 2020) and *GQ* (Unterberger 2020) were quick to label it the 'hottest show lockdown.' New audience members were encountering the show for the first time in a very different mediascape to when it originally aired. It was surrounded by new paratexts (like memes, YouTube videos and journalistic think-pieces) and cultural contexts (such as the covid-19 pandemic and the #me Too movement). Viewers were also able to access the show on streaming platforms (like HBO Max and Netflix) that previously did not exist. Despite this, there has been little scholarship concerned with how audiences might experience a resurgent show like *The Sopranos* differently in such a new setting.

This research is interested in the unique experience of these viewers—does watching *The Sopranos* in the 2020s bring something different about the show into focus? To what extent can this change the meaning and cultural work of the show? To investigate this, I took a mixed-method approach that combines textual analysis with 11 semi-structed interviews of self-identified fans of the show. I term this approach a "retrospective reading"—it places emphasis on the new cultural and mediascape that surround the show and the potential it has to recalibrate audience expectations and interpretations. I argue that the participants used *The Sopranos* as a conduit for current culture and politics in ways that were often oppositional to the televisual logic of *The Sopranos* and at odds with conventional understandings of the show.

These findings have ramifications for how we approach resurgent television texts like *The Sopranos*. This interaction between cultural contexts and old programs amounts to somewhat of a 'new' text that must be understood in a distinct way. This goes double for 'complex TV' texts like *The Sopranos* that might already encourage multiple and individually varied

readings. Television is a public site where ideas are negotiated, recuperated, and reimagined. I conclude that we must recognise the possibility for resurgent television like *The Sopranos* to be interpreted differently and the possibility for them to do new forms of impactful cultural work.

Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

I give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Signed

Alexander H. Beare

18 October 2022

Acknowledgements

I would first like to acknowledge my supervisor Michelle Phillipov for her mentorship and support of this project. Michelle consistently provided timely and thoughtful feedback on my earlier drafts. Fortnightly supervisor meetings were always something I always looked forward to and the many discussions I had with Michelle greatly helped my development as a thinker.

I would also like to thank my co-supervisor, John Budarick. John always nudged me towards useful literature that helped shape the direction of this project. I appreciate his calm presence, helpful feedback and contribution to this project.

Special thanks go to my partner, Amy Brierley. As a researcher Amy, was a tremendous help in her willingness to conduct interviews with the feminine-identifying participants and copy edit this thesis (all while doing her own PhD!) As a partner, Amy was an invaluable source of support and reassurance throughout this whole process. Thanks for introducing me to *The Sopranos* and I look forward to watching (and discussing) much more TV with you in the future!

Thanks, also, to the postgraduates in the Department of Media at the University of Adelaide, especially Caitlin Adams and Robbie Boucaut. The camaraderie, coffees and dinners were always a great source of enjoyment. Thanks to my mates in "Austin's Chat" for the welcome distractions during workdays.

I would also like to express my gratitude towards my parents, Alison and Michael Beare as well as my Nan, Julie Beare, for their unwavering support and encouragement. Thanks to my brother, Sam Beare—I got a lot of useful thinking done during those squash games!

Research stemming from this project has been published as:

Beare, A.H 2019, 'Prosthetic Memories in *The Sopranos*', *M/C Journal*, vol. 22, no. 5.

List of figures

Chapter 1. Introduction

I first watched *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) in 2015, eight years after the infamous series finale "Made in America" (6.21) was aired. Much to my dismay, I soon found there was not much opportunity for 'water-cooler' conversation about the show. The only other person I knew who had watched the show was my partner, Amy. Once we had exhausted our 'Sopranos' conversation topics that was about it for my 'real life' discussion of the show. Most of my friends had vaguely heard about it but none of them had actually watched an episode. Any TV-related conversation usually involved speculation about then ongoing programs like *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). Of course, I still had the option to read about the show and participate in online discussion boards. But, at the time, most articles were a couple of years old and the online community was mostly dormant. In 2015—without new episodes to look forward to and online discussion about the final episode well and truly exhausted—*The Sopranos* prominence in popular culture had faded since it went off the air.

In 2020—five years later—I had started my postgraduate study and knew that I wanted to write about *The Sopranos* in some capacity. When the first wave of the covid-19 lockdowns hit Adelaide in April, I decided to re-watch the show. As it turns out, I was not the only one who did this. News articles about the show from outlets like *The New York Times*, *The Guardian, The Ringer* and *GQ* started popping up in my newsfeed. They would talk about the show's newfound popularity with 'young people' and declared it to be the "hottest show of lockdown" (Unterberger 2020). Initially, I was suspicious of this coverage—HBO is well known for leveraging positive press in its marketing efforts. It also just so happened that HBO were ramping up to launch their new streaming video on demand (SVOD) platform, HBO Max. As such, I initially dismissed this coverage of *The Sopranos* as just another promotional effort. However, as the year went on, I could not help but notice a Sopranos resurgence in my day-to-day life. At a dinner party I was asked about my research—when I

mentioned that it involved *The Sopranos* most of the other guests (all aged in their 20s) eagerly remarked that they were watching or had just watched the show. A few weeks later, Amy and I met our neighbours for the first time and they mentioned they had recently hosted a Sopranos themed birthday party for one of their friends. I also started to see images from the show popping up in my neighbourhood. The pizza shop near my house starting proudly started displaying signed *The Sopranos* merchandise (figure 1) and a pub in the city was promoting its Friday "kick-ons" with an edited image of Tony Soprano and Vito Jr (figure 2).

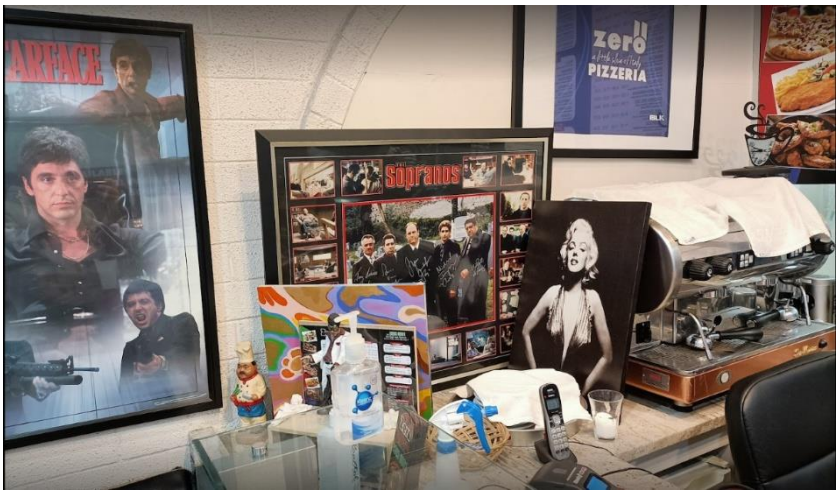

Figure 1: Tony Soprano Mural at Zero Pizzeria, Maylands

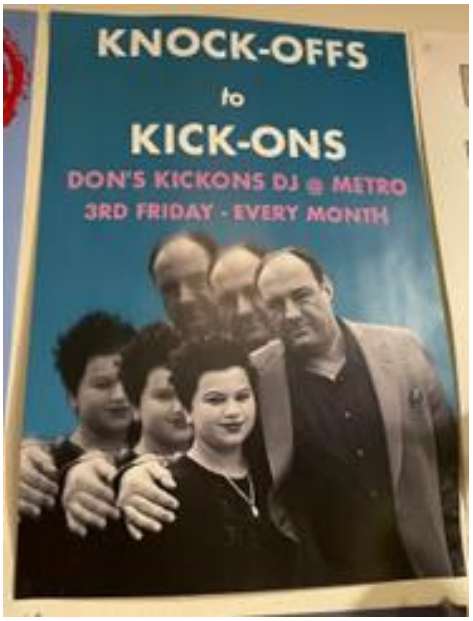

Figure 2: Tony and Vito "Kick Ons" Poster at Hotel Metro, Adelaide

What was most striking to me about this resurgence was how people were talking to me about the show. They were eager to show me semi-ironic Twitter memes or YouTube edits of Tony Soprano. They would discuss how quickly the show ripped through their friendship group, how quickly they "inhaled" the show and how relatable they found it during lockdown. These comments led me to reflect on just how *different* the 2020 experience of watching *The Sopranos* must have been to the original 2000s context. In 2020, one could stream the entire show in the space of weeks (or even days for the truly committed) as opposed to an eight-year broadcast. But perhaps more intriguing was the connection being made between *The Sopranos* and the covid-19 pandemic—something that *The Sopranos* predates by 13 years. These observations started to raise some questions for me: How do new audiences understand a complex text like *The Sopranos* in a different cultural, social and media landscape? Could old texts like *The Sopranos* perform new cultural work and take on a different emotional function for viewers watching during the pandemic?

To investigate this resurgent version of *The Sopranos* I developed two guiding research questions. These helped me to consider both the possibilities and implications that viewing old television texts in new contexts might have for audiences and scholars. The questions were:

- How do contemporary cultural contexts inform young audience's understanding of old programs like *The Sopranos*?
- Do specific textual elements of *the Sopranos* make it especially susceptible to a to being re-read in new contexts?

The Sopranos resurgence is an ideal case study to explore these questions. The program first aired from 1999-2007 and has been a crown jewel for HBO—the ultimate symbol of their self-branding as artistic and provocative (Akass & McCabe 2007; Jaramillo

2002). The show follows the life of New Jersey Mob boss Tony Soprano as he tries to navigate both his criminal and domestic 'families'. During its original run, it received near constant fawning coverage from respected outlets like *The New York Times* and was a perennial nominee for the primetime Emmy for outstanding drama (nominated seven times and winning twice). James Gandolfini, Edie Falco and Michael Imperioli also won Emmy's for outstanding lead actor, actress, and supporting actor, respectively. From a commercial perspective, *The Sopranos* helped drive up HBO's subscriber numbers (Zurwick & Kaltenbach 2000) and has generated over $152 million in DVD sales and syndication rights (The Numbers 2022). The program is also perhaps one of the most studied by television and media scholars in recent memory and has been understood as a culturally, aesthetically, and industrially significant work of television (Lavery 2002; Akass & McCabe 2007; Mittell 2015). It is an example of complex television, in the truest sense of Jason Mittell's (2015, p.17) understanding of the term. It is narratively complex, features a diverse cast of characters and is open to varied readings. Of course, *The Sopranos* is not the first television text to see a resurgence. There are many examples of comebacks, reboots and audiences rediscovering old shows on new platforms—take sitcoms like *Friends* (1994-2004)), *The Office (US)* (2005-2013) and *Seinfeld* (1989-1998) regularly being among the most streamed programs on Netflix. However, *The Sopranos*' resurgence stands out as particularly unusual. Unlike the aforementioned sitcoms, *The Sopranos* features dense episodes with long runtimes that require focused viewer attention. Perhaps most importantly, *The Sopranos*' rapid surge in viewership seems more directly linked to specific cultural events and contexts like the global pandemic. As such, the show presents a unique opportunity through which to investigate how contemporary cultural contexts can potentially transform the meanings of older texts for new viewers.

Consequently, this research is interested in the experience of young viewers who watched the show for the first time during this resurgence. Young audiences are now watching the show in a cultural landscape that features a global pandemic and a televisual environment in which traditional broadcast and cable television have been disrupted by SVOD platforms. While new episodes of *The Sopranos* are no longer being produced, new paratexts certainly are. New reviews, promotions, social media posts, and YouTube videos surround the show and have the potential to shape audience expectations and interpretations. This is not to mention the new viewing practises enabled by streaming platforms through which *The Sopranos* is predominantly accessed today.

This thesis seeks to approach these new contexts by investigating the unique experiences of viewers watching *The Sopranos* for the first time in the 2020s. It is interested in how different contexts of interpretation might change the meanings and cultural work of the show. Drawing from the work of David Bordwell (2008) and Jason Mittell (2015) I developed a lens of viewing *The Sopranos* that I have termed as "retrospective reading". It is an approach attentive to how new cultural contexts can reconstruct the show's meaning and create different audience expectations and interpretations. My retrospective readings were then 'tested out' against the interpretations of 11 self-identified fans in semi-structured research interviews. These interviews were used for their capacity to generate rich qualitative data about audiences' perceptions and experiences watching *The Sopranos.*

"The Hottest Show of Lockdown"—*The Sopranos* Resurgence

In order to set the context for the analysis that follows, it is important to consider the show's resurgent popularity—what are the contexts for new viewers encountering the show? Starting in May 2020, there were reports of the show seeing increased viewership. In the UK, NOW TV reported a 122% bump in views of the title, while in the USA HBO noted a 200% increase (Kambasha 2020). Of course, it is no coincidence that this happened during the early

stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. It has been widely reported that SVOD providers saw an increase in subscriptions and revenue in 2020, especially during the first few months of lockdowns (ABC News 2020; BBC News 2020; Munson 2021; Liedke 2021). However, such an increase in viewership of *The Sopranos* cannot just be attributed to a wider 'covid bump' in SVOD subscription numbers. According to *The Guardian,* Google searches for *The Sopranos* in 2020 "dwarfed" those of other "classic series" like *The Wire* (2002) or *Breaking Bad* (2008-2103) (Kambasha 2020). Michelle Kambasha (2020) speculates that the reason for this might be because of how easily the show can be adapted to new formats like podcasting and social media. Journalists have frequently attributed the show's newfound popularity to a rise in viewership among 'young' audiences (Staley 2021; Kambasha 2020). In a *New York Times Magazine* article, Willy Staley (2021) notes that there has been a "sea of youngish Sopranos fans" and that it feels as though "every young person in America is watching *The Sopranos*" at the moment. Michael Imperioli (an actor and writer on the show) also remarked that a "lot of the younger people have been watching the show during lockdown" (Kambasha 2020). It would also appear that these new 'young' fans of the show have been retrofitting it into the current mediascape. There was an uptick in popular Twitter accounts, YouTube channels and subreddits about the show that were run by young people. For example, twitter accounts like "the sopranos out of context" and "socialist sopranos memes" as well as the subreddit "r/sopranos" boast up to hundreds of thousands of followers.

Critics and journalists have speculated that the show's renewed popularity might be due to its resonance with the unfolding pandemic. Andrew Unterberger (2020) wrote that the show's themes of isolation, family and betrayal "may fit a little too well given the state of the world". In a similar vein, Kambasha reflected that:

> When watching *The Sopranos* certain lines such as 'they say everyday is a gift but why does it have to be a pair of socks?' have taken on a new, more biting meaning [during the pandemic]. (2020)

Of course, watching television during the pandemic brings with it a range of extra analytical considerations. Joke Hermes and Annette Hill (2020, p. 655-6) have explored the unique role that television played in "undoing social distancing" and providing a "vital resource for solace, daydreaming, social ritual, knowledge and storytelling" during lockdown. Moreover, they argue that the pandemic has led television to take on additional significance as covid-19 has "reconsolidated television as a master storytelling and as a platform for cultural citizenship" (Hermes & Hill 2020, p. 650). To contemplate a resurgence of *The Sopranos* in a pandemic setting is to consider it within this new televisual paradigm. There are already plenty of examples of popular journalism that have considered why *The Sopranos* has become so prominent in the present moment. Journalists from *The Ringer* and *Vice* suggest that *The Sopranos* can be a source of semi-ironic nostalgia for young people. They have tracked A.J. Soprano's collection of nu-metal t-shirts with headlines like "How Much is A.J. Sopranos Nu-Metal Wardrobe Worth Today?" (Rex 2020) and "A Mini Oral History of A.J. Soprano's Slipknot Windbreaker" (Ducker 2020). In his *New York Times Magazine* article, Staley (2021) argues that young people's interest in *The Sopranos* goes a little deeper than semi-ironic nostalgia. He has written that the show's "new audience is also seeing something different in it: a parable about a country in terminal decline" (2021). For Staley, it was not just covid-19 or 1990s nostalgia that was bringing young people back to the show but also the general state of American politics—specifically the 2020 US presidential election.

Perhaps a less exciting explanation for *The Sopranos*' resurgence could be that it was simply connected to the premiere of the long-awaited prequel movie, *The Many Saints of Newark* (2021). Similarly, the extensive press tours undertaken by the cast for the show's

twentieth anniversary in 2019 certainly increased its public profile. It is likely that there was not just one factor at work in contributing to the show's increased viewership in 2020—individual viewers were likely to be drawn to the show for different reasons. But this surge in popularity still raises analytically important questions about how new ways of encountering and engaging with the show can allow for unique viewer experiences.

Coming Soon: *The Sopranos*

The emergence of new entryway paratexts (Gray 2010) surrounding *The Sopranos* are critical to understanding the ways that viewers might decode the show differently in a new context. In 2022, there are a plethora of paratexts that could set distinct—and often contradictory—expectations for viewers watching *The Sopranos.* Depending on their social media usage, general viewing habits, and social group at the time, there exist a diverse range of ways to be introduced to the show. In Jonathan Gray's (2010, p. 47) understanding of the term, entryway paratexts work by framing and introducing the audience to a text and are critical to mediating audience engagement. In the 2020s, different paratexts (both fan-made and official) can be found scattered across the mediascape and there is no guarantee as to which ones the audience will engage with. In the following section I will outline a few of the different ways new viewers might have encountered the text. This helps contextualise the analysis that follows and makes clear the difference between watching *The Sopranos* during its original run compared to the 2020s.

It is highly likely that, before watching the show, new viewers had heard something along the lines of "*The Sopranos* is the greatest show of all time". The show has long enjoyed positive critical reception, which has also been the tentpole of how the show has been promoted by HBO. For example, a 2007 HBO commercial for season 6 opens with the line "one of the most respected drama series ever returns". This framing continued to be adopted long after the show stopped airing, particularly in the endless online articles that rank the 'top

television programs of all time'. *The Sopranos* has been placed first or second by outlets like *Rolling Stone* (Sheffield 2016; Sepinwall 2022), *The Guardian* (Abbot et al. 2019) and *IGN* (2017). Typically, these rankings include a brief justification for why a show was placed in its position. The impact that *The Sopranos* had on "television history" (Abbot et al. 2019) is often used as a justification for its high ranking. For example, after giving it the number one spot, *Rolling Stone* described it as the "crime saga that cut the history of TV in two, kicking off a golden age when suddenly anything seemed possible" (Sheffield 2016). For viewers watching the show for the first time, these types of paratexts work to frame the show in a specific way. Not only is the show presented as 'quality' but also as a historical landmark in television history. Such framing has the potential to set audience expectations of *The Sopranos* as a canonical text that viewers *need* to watch.

We can see HBO lean into and amplify this framing of *The Sopranos* in recent years. The current release of the Blu-Ray boxset prominently featured a quote from *The Washington Post* that describes *The Sopranos* as "a landmark in television history" (HBO 2014). Similarly, in 2020 when HBO launched its new SVOD platform, HBO MAX, *The Sopranos* was featured in several of its promotional videos. One of these videos proclaimed that the platform would feature "the most beloved TV" as it cut to a close-up shot of Tony Soprano (HBO 2020). On the homepage of HBO's official website, *The Sopranos* has been very much integrated into the 'HBO legacy'. As Seen in figure 3, under the heading "(re)discover HBO Classics" there are images and brief synopses of "classic" HBO shows, which include *The Sopranos* alongside other shows like *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) and *Veep* (2012-2019).

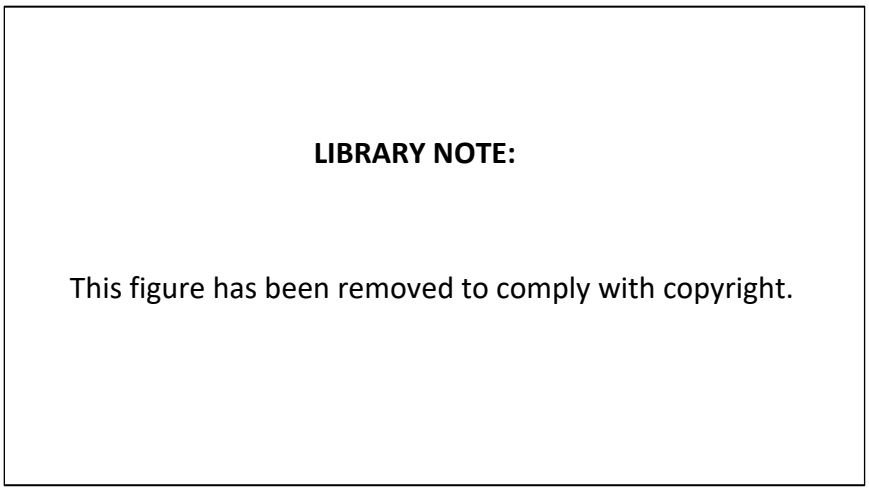

Figure 3: Screenshot of HBO Website "Classic Shows" Carousel

While *The Sopranos* is promoted far less prominently than it was during its original broadcast, the tendency to group the show with other HBO "classics" could encourage audiences to associate *The Sopranos* with the "prestige" and "transgressive" traits associated with the HBO brand (Akass & McCabe 2007).

The Sopranos on Social Media

Recently, fan made paratexts like memes and tweets have taken a prominent role in *The Sopranos*' resurgence. I first noticed this anecdotally—one of the most common questions I have been asked about my research is something along the lines of "what's with all the Tony Soprano memes I keep seeing on twitter?" These questions have come from people who have and have not seen the show. Online fan content like memes and tweets makes for a unique introduction to the show. Often, fan content will fuse the humour of the show with internet humour or current political issues. The most popular accounts like "socialist sopranos memes" (63.45k followers) or "the sopranos out of context" (125.6k followers) foster particular fan communities and emphasise reading the show from a specific vantage point. To 'get' all these memes that keep popping up in your feed you need to watch the show in a certain way.

In 2020, *The Sopranos* pandemic memes appeared. The format for these memes was simple—they would contain a screenshot from the show and alter the subtitles to apply it to

the pandemic. Take this meme (fig. 4) that imagines Tony and Christopher discussing the coronavirus which received 53k likes on Twitter.

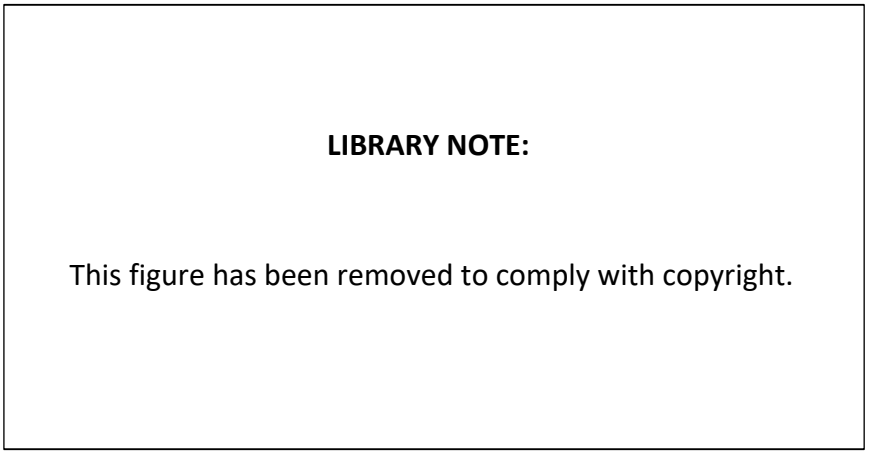

Figure 4: Sopranos Pandemic Meme Posted on Twitter

This type of fan content amplified the show's specific sense of humour. In a study of covid-19 and disaster memes Jose Flecha Ortiz (2021, p. 168) found that such memes were used as a general catharsis and as a coping mechanism for individuals experiencing the chaos and the uncertainty of the pandemic. We can see such a process at work in covid-themed *The Sopranos* memes. These memes frequently amplify a connection between the decaying world of the show and that of our own. As Nicole Galucci and Tim Marcin (2020) put it in a *Mashable.com* article, the show's humour that "wrings out a laugh" from otherwise "bleak" circumstances is amplified through fan-made memes that connect the world of *The Sopranos* with that of the pandemic. These pandemic memes have implications for how one might retrospectively read the show. They insert *The Sopranos* into the pandemic in a specific way and present the show as having the possibility to be a unique site of catharsis and relatability in a pandemic setting.

In similar vein, there have also been openly political subcurrents of fan made *The Sopranos* content. The Twitter account "socialist sopranos memes" frequently captions images of the show to critique right-wing positions. For example, in 2022 the account posted a meme that was in support of covid-19 vaccines (figure. 5):

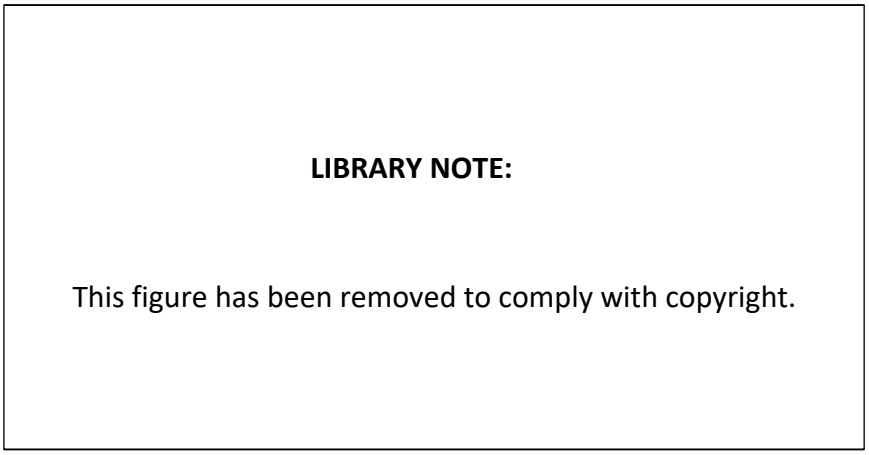

Figure 5: Sopranos Vaccine Meme Posted by Socialist Sopranos Memes

There has also been a crossover between *The Sopranos* and broader left-wing media. For example, there are a multitude of podcasts like *Gabagool & Roses* and *Pod Yourself a Gun* which both proclaim to be "leftist" sopranos podcasts. Moreover, general leftist podcasts like *Red Scare* and *Chapo Trap House* often reference the show and even sell sopranos inspired merchandise. For example, *Red Scare* sell a range of clothing items that have the podcast's name styled like the Bada-Bing logo from *The Sopranos* (fig 6).

LIBRARY NOTE:

This figure has been removed to comply with copyright.

Figure 6: Red Scare Sopranos-Inspired T-Shirt

Conversely, we can see a different subset of fan-made paratexts that manipulate the show to amplify right-wing messaging. Particularly on YouTube, short clips of *The Sopranos* are edited to actively encourage an oppositional, conservative reading of the show. Throughout the series, Tony goes on several rants (that the show problematises) about 'political correctness' and society being "feminised". Popular fan-made 'vids' have taken these clips out of context and repackaged them with a right-wing spin. There is a popular video titled "Tony Soprano Destroys Liberals and Shows us the Meaning of Hard-Working Italians" with 1.2 million views. Additionally, there is a video titled "SJW Cringe #1: Tony Soprano and his friends respond" that intercuts clips of Tony Soprano rants with what the poster think are examples of contemporary 'PC culture'. Here we can see how left-wing and right-wing fan sites each provide additional avenues through which new audiences can be introduced to the show and frameworks through which it can be read.

The Sopranos in Australia

This study was conducted in Adelaide, Australia with Adelaide-based research participants. *The Sopranos* was an American program and was written for an American audience. It was shot in New Jersey and mostly explores the social and cultural issues of the United States. Despite this, the show has proven popular in Australia. The show is prominent in the

promotion of local streaming platform Binge (the holder of exclusive HBO distribution rights in Australia). Additionally, when *In Conversation with The Sopranos* (a live Q&A style panel show that featured actors from the program) came to Australia it sold out in most major cities. As this study focuses on how new cultural and televisual contexts can transform our understanding of older texts, limiting this study to *just* Adelaide viewers ensures that the participants have had a more consistent experience with these contexts. As such, the findings of this thesis need to be qualified—they are not representative of a 'universal experience' but rather are a case study of the potential possibilities and implications of a retrospective reading.

In Australia, there are some specific entryway paratexts and contexts that new viewers might encounter. Up until recently, watching *The Sopranos* (or any other HBO program) legally in Australia has been a costly undertaking, as Foxtel—an Australian Pay TV service—has long held the exclusive rights to HBO content here. To access this programming viewers would have to pay anywhere between $25 and $75 per month. Alternatively, they could buy the DVD-boxset which retails for $74.98 or download the show from online stores like Google Play or iTunes for around $80. This cost barrier is often linked with Australia's disproportionately high rates of piracy compared to elsewhere in the world (Reynolds 2014). However, the high cost associated with watching HBO legally in Australia changed in 2020 when Foxtel launched their SVOD service, Binge. The platform featured all of Foxtel's HBO back catalogue and was competitively priced at $10 per month (which at the time was less than Australian Netflix). With Binge's launch came a prominent marketing campaign that leveraged their exclusive HBO distribution rights as a point of distinction from other local competitors like Stan and Netflix. Foxtel replicated discursive techniques characteristic of HBO marketing. Advertisements for the platform often proclaimed Binge had content from "the world's best producers" and would then cut to an image of the HBO logo. Often, *The*

Sopranos would be featured as part of a montage of shows in these ads. For example, one ad cut from text that says "nothing gets on your screen unless it's award worthy drama" to a close-up shot of Tony Soprano. There was a sizable launch campaign for Binge during 2020—during which it was common to see images of Tony Soprano flash up on video billboards in and around Adelaide. For new Australian viewers of the show, the 'prestige' of *The Sopranos* and HBO became accessible in ways that it was not before.

For new viewers coming to *The Sopranos* these new entryway paratexts offered a range of introductions to the show. In 2022, depending on their media habits, viewers could be forgiven for going into the first episodes of *The Sopranos* expecting it to be the combination of the 'greatest show of all time', a cathartic lockdown tool and a structuralist critique of America that is underpinned by either right- or left-wing political values. As Gray (2010, p. 221) argues, paratexts like this can be as "intrinsic a part of a text's DNA as the film and television programs that have usually been regarded as the entirety of the text." From just a brief survey of new entryways into *The Sopranos* we can see several ways that understandings of the show could interact with contemporary cultural contexts. As such, this thesis seeks to understand the potential possibilities and implications associated with watching an old show like *The Sopranos* in these new contexts.

Retrospectively Reading *The Sopranos*

To explain my approach to studying these 'retrospective readings' I will draw on the metaphor of anamorphosis. The anamorphosis is a type of optical illusion associated with visual art—usually it is a distorted projection that requires the viewer to occupy a specific vantage point. A famous example of this is the 1553 painting, *The Ambassadors*, by Hans Holbein (fig. 7).

Figure 7: The Ambassadors by Hans Holbein (Viewed Front On)

When viewed front on it depicts French envoys in a space containing various artefacts representing contemporary science and technology (Topper 2000, p. 115). From this angle, there is a diagonal blur that appears to be inscrutable. However, if the viewer takes a few steps to the right this blur comes into focus as a human skull (fig. 8).

Figure 8: The Ambassadors Viewed from an Upper Right Angle

Postmodern scholars (Latour 1987; Aslanov 2019; Joodaki & Jafari 2016) have used anamorphosis as a metaphor to explain the relativity of vision and the subjectivity of the human experience. In the context of my research, we can liken a 'front-on viewing' to

watching *The Sopranos* during its original broadcast—tuning in each week and viewing the show in its original cultural context. A retrospective reading is like moving around the room to see the skull—watching from a different time and in a different cultural and televisual context that might bring different elements of the show into focus. In my research on retrospective readings, I draw from David Topper's (2000) understanding of anamorphosis as a metaphor. He argues that in many anamorphic paintings it is possible to see both images at once (2000, p. 115). In this sense a certain image can be made more prominent by standing in a certain position, but the other image is still there, even if somewhat diminished (2000 p. 115). This project is concerned with how standing from a certain temporal and cultural position may illuminate certain elements of *The Sopranos*. But it still acknowledges that other elements of the show are not simply made invisible. Ultimately, I am concerned with the 'retrospective dimension' of the viewers experience—what about *The Sopranos* does the 2020s bring into focus for new viewers? To what extent does this change the meanings and cultural work performed by the show?

Structure of Thesis

Chapter 2 begins with a literature review that explores the different cultural and televisual factors that can frame watching *The Sopranos* in the 2000s and now. I first track the large body of *The Sopranos* literature that was published during (and immediately after) the show first aired. I contend that, due to the specific contexts of its broadcast the 2000s, scholars have largely understood *The Sopranos* as both feminist and as a quality TV 'urtext'. I then turn attention to how the circumstances of the 2020s might disrupt this. I place particular emphasis on the ramifications that post-#MeToo gender politics and the transformative developments of SVOD platforms have for how a show like *The Sopranos* fits into and is understood in a new media and cultural landscape. I argue that these shifting contexts are, in fact, critical to the new meanings that *The Sopranos* can generate. As such, the literature

review works to establish two distinct versions of *The Sopranos* that are to be considered throughout the rest of the thesis: the 2000s and the 2020s version.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach and protocols used in this research. This thesis combines my own textual analysis with semi-structured interviews (which also include a brief pre-interview questionnaire). This chapter explains how I conducted textual analysis (e.g. why I focus on individual episodes, narratives and characters) and the protocols I developed for conducting semi-structured research interviews. The latter considers factors such as selection criteria, interview questions, questionnaire questions, and broader methodological concerns such as my position as an 'insider' fan of the show.

Chapter 4 prefaces the analysis that follows and provides context to viewers' 'Sopranos experience' in the 2020s. I consider how the participants watched the show and what they knew about the show before watching it. As I am a fan in a similar age group to the participants and someone who also encountered the show after its initial broadcast, I provide a personal account of my own experiences retrospectively watching the show. I then draw from the questionnaire responses to discuss the various contexts that the participants identified as informing their viewing of the show. This preface emphasises how varied and individualised the experience of watching *The Sopranos* in the 2020s can be and, in turn, this helps to contextualise and qualify the later findings.

In the first analysis chapter (Chapter 5), I provided my own 'lockdown' reading of *The Sopranos* to demonstrate how the show can resonate with a new cultural position. I argue that *The Sopranos* cultivates what I term to be a 'social storyworld.' This intensifies a series long atmosphere of decline, anxiety and boredom. I explore how, in the context of the covid-19 pandemic, certain elements of the show can take on a more impactful double meaning. Specifically, the pandemic exaggerates the show's symbolic "slow apocalypse" (Cascio

2019). I show how watching *The Sopranos* during the pandemic can add another dimension to the show's meaning and allows it to do a different type of cultural work than in its original run. In this case, it can become a unique site of emotional catharsis for pandemic viewers. This chapter outlines how resurgent television, like *The Sopranos*, can help viewers work through contemporary cultural events, highlighting how the temporal position we watch from can transform our understanding of an 'old' television text.

In chapter 6, I examine the participant's interview responses to further explore possibilities for additional readings shaped by the particularities of the present time. I identify three specific textual components of *The Sopranos* that were particularly conducive to retrospective readings across my participants. These are the show's representation of domestic mundanity, nostalgia, and complex characters. I find that the participants' contemporary cultural environment was crucial in informing how they interpreted the meanings of the show. Despite varied responses, I show that there was often a transformative 'retrospective' dimension that influenced how participants understood the show and its characters. These understandings were often disruptive (and at times oppositional) to conventional scholarly and journalistic interpretations of the show. I conclude that this opens-up the possibilities for old shows to do distinctly new cultural work than in their original broadcast. In this case, *The Sopranos* was able to help viewers work through the specific stresses and anxieties associated with lockdown and the pandemic.

Chapter 7 then considers the analytical implications that arise from these transformative readings. To do this, I re-examine prominent feminist readings of the show in context of the present televisual landscape. My close reading of the character of Angie Bonpensiero illustrates the limits of *The Sopranos*' capacity to imagine alternate forms of female empowerment. This tempers the historical assertion that *The Sopranos* is a feminist "meta-text" (Lee 2004; Donatelli and Alward 2002). I argue that the context and assumptions

that underpinned the early scholarship of the show led scholars to focus on the progressive potentials of the text. But, under different contexts of interpretation the shows problematic and politically ambiguous elements are emphasised. Ultimately, this chapter emphasises the need for new scholarly understandings of the resurgent versions of texts like *The Sopranos* which are considerate of these new contexts of interpretation.

In the final analysis chapter (chapter 8), I return to my research interviews to consider how these new contexts of interpretation have diminished *The Sopranos* capacity to do the 'real life' feminist cultural work that scholars (Johnson 2007; Lee 2004) have often attributed to the show. I found that not only were participants suspicious of *The Sopranos* 'feminist credentials', but they were also hesitant to read the show through the prism of gender at all. Moreover, they did not understand the show's representation of masculinity as relatable to their real life. Ultimately, I conclude that the ability for complex TV dramas like *The Sopranos* to do specific cultural work is contextually contingent. As such, viewers' cultural and temporal positioning is critical to how they take meaning from a show.

The conclusion (chapter 9) outlines the ramifications of my analysis for how we approach resurgent television texts like *The Sopranos*. The interaction between distinct cultural contexts and old programs amounts to what can be considered a 'new' text that must be understood in a distinct way. This goes double for complex TV texts like *The Sopranos* that might already encourage individually varied readings. I argue that we must recognise the possibility for resurgent television like *The Sopranos* to be interpreted differently and the possibility for them to do *new* forms of cultural work that are specifically related to contemporary contexts.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

At the core of this thesis is the concept of a 'retrospective reading'. How do new audiences understand complex texts in different cultural, social and media landscapes? To answer this question, I am looking at how 'young' audiences have read *The Sopranos* during the 2020s. It has been well established that how we understand a media text is dependent on much more than just the 'text' itself. It is a mixture of paratexts like trailers, reviews, and fan edits, as well as shifting cultural contexts. These factors inform how we, as active audience members, take meaning from a given textual encounter. It then goes without saying that watching *The Sopranos* in the 2000s is a very different experience to watching it now. The concept of anamorphosis and *The Ambassadors* painting that I mentioned earlier is a useful tool to explain this. In a way, there are two different *The Ambassadors* 'texts'—one with a skull and one without. We can think about 'retrospectively' viewing *The Sopranos* in a similar way. In this case, the viewer is on a temporal axis with their position determining how they see the metaphorical skull. I contend that we can think about *The Sopranos* in a similar way. This 'skull' could be a range of different things in *The Sopranos*, like its exploration of gender or depression. For the purpose of this thesis there are two versions of *The Sopranos* as a text—the 2000s version and the 2020s version. This literature review will contextualise both versions of the text by outlining the various cultural and industrial contexts that likely shaped both scholarly and audience understandings of the show in the 2000s and 2020s.

To flesh out how audiences might be 'retrospectively' reading *The Sopranos* we need to first grasp how the show was originally understood by scholars and audiences. Therefore, the first section of the literature review investigates the contexts that informed early scholarship of the show. I argue that *The Sopranos* has traditionally been viewed through the lenses of 'quality', the gangster genre, feminism, and premium cable networks. The show's link with quality pertains to both generic value statements and the specific scholarly and

commercial connotations that come with the term 'quality television'. Scholars have also understood the show's critical engagement with feminist theory as a major disruption to the filmic gangster genre. I then turn my attention to how these framings of the show could be diminished or even contested in the 2020s. I examine the corresponding cultural and televisual environment in which *The Sopranos* is now being viewed in. From a cultural perspective, I contend that societal understandings of masculinity and feminism have changed since the show's first airing. Scholars have noted a recent surge in feminist quality television programs like *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-present), which have re-calibrated what we think of as a feminist TV show. From a technological perspective, there have been transformative developments like SVOD services. These have had a considerable impact on how audiences' access and decode programs. In response, TV scholars have devised new paradigms through which TV should be studied. Functionally, the purpose of this literature review is to flesh out the differences between watching *The Sopranos* during its original broadcast and now. Contrasting these different television eras helps contextualise the later findings of this thesis. It emphasises how the particularities of a given time can enable unique understandings of the show. Moreover, it is a way to identify the specific landscape shifts that could facilitate unique, retrospective understandings of the show that might disrupt historic interpretations.

"A Work of Art for The Ages": *The Sopranos* as Quality

Often, scholars have understood *The Sopranos* as quality—I mean this in two senses of the word. First and foremost, much like the journalistic work at the time, scholars understood the show as being 'good'. They were often full of praise for the show's artistic cinematography, acting and willingness to engage with complicated societal issues (Lavery 2002; Fahy 2008; De Stefano 2011; Johnson 2007). But, regardless of personal taste, it was common for this idea of 'quality' to frame scholarly investigations of the show. Secondly, scholars also understood *The Sopranos* via the various theorisations and discussions of the then-

contentious and emerging quality television 'genre.' Often, the show would be cited as the ultimate exemplar for this type of programming (Nelson 2006; Yacowar 2002; Akass & McCabe 2007). In the following section, I will show how 'quality' has been an important framing for both media and scholarly coverage of the show. I place particular emphasis on how this notion of quality has encouraged politically progressive readings of *The Sopranos* by scholars. The purpose of this is to demonstrate how these readings are contingent on a range of temporal and cultural factors.

From its debut in 1999, *The Sopranos* enjoyed favourable media coverage that helped cement its reputations as a critical favourite. Most notably, *The New York Times* gave consistent (often fawning) attention to the show over its eight-year run. Christopher Anderson (2008 p. 25) notes that "*The New York Times* alone has devoted so many column inches to *The Sopranos* that it sometimes reads like a virtual organ house for HBO". Often, the show was constructed by the outlet as something 'more' than television. For example, in his column "From the Humble-Miniseries Comes the Magnificent Mega Movie", Vincent Canby (1999) wrote that the show was "Dickensian" and said that he preferred to think of it as a "mega movie", a form he describes as being more akin to (highbrow) literature and cinema than (low brow) television. This understanding of *The Sopranos* as some new form of high art appears to have been consistent in *The New York Times* coverage of the show from 1999-2007. Among the standard reviews, episode recap and production news there were lots of 'think pieces'. Take headlines like: "Solving *The Sopranos*" (Nizza 2007), "Sopranos Grief" (Cavett 2007), "Aiming for Shakespeare (If not *The Sopranos*)" (Hinson 2003), "Philosophy Hitches a Ride with *The Sopranos* (Bernstein 2004), "Therapists reveal Their New Obsession, *The Sopranos*" (Stead 2001) and "Why America Loves *The Sopranos*" (Klinkenborg 2000). In these columns, the excellence of *The Sopranos* is somewhat of a given, with the emphasis placed on the subversive cultural work the show is doing. For example, Deborah Stead (2001)

wrote that "*The Sopranos* offers a refreshingly credible version of what happens in therapy." This coverage did not stop with just columns and articles though, in 2001 the paper released a full-length book in anticipation of the show's third season entitled *The New York Times on The Sopranos.* Other major American publications like *The Atlantic* (Douthat 2008) and *The Wallstreet Journal* (Varadarajan 2002) both ran similar stories. Even the Australian paper, *The Age*, published an article entitled "Ok Sopranos Fans, Analyse This" that discussed the use of psychology on the show (2002). Of course, there were notable scholars—who I will discuss later—that were cynical of the large volume of fawning coverage given to the show. But, for now I just want to establish how cultural value and quality were inexorably linked with how the show was covered by mainstream press.

Most early scholarship on *The Sopranos* would similarly comment on the show's quality, aesthetic merit, and cultural value as a prelude to analysis. There were a few different ways in which scholars engaged with journalistic and anecdotal praise that had been heaped onto the show. For some, it was a framing device to justify a close reading of the show. In other instances, scholars paid particular attention to these claims, advancing arguments about the aesthetic value of the show. In the following section I will track trends in early *The Sopranos* scholarship that engaged with and/or made value judgments about the show in order to emphasise how 'quality' is intertwined with such understandings of the show.

The quality and complexity of *The Sopranos* was regularly used as a framing device to justify or introduce a scholarly reading of the show. *This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos* (2002) is a collection of essays about the show that was edited by well-known television scholar, David Lavery. It was published in 2002, just before season four of the show premiered. At the time, *The Sopranos* had generated some controversy over its representation of Italian Americans and its frequent displays of violence and sex. Most notably, New Jersey congresswoman Marge Roukema (2002, p. xiii), the granddaughter of

Italian immigrants, asked for other legislators to sign a draft resolution "extolling the civic contributions made by Italian Americans and criticise the films and television shows that portray them as gangsters". Social critic Camile Paglia (2002, p. xiii) had described *The Sopranos* as a "modern minstrel show" that is "elitist, repugnant and condescending". In the prologue to *This Thing of Ours,* Lavery frames the ensuing essays as a refutation of such criticisms of the show. He writes:

> Why is it not the marvellous flashbacks, astonishing dream sequences, *Godfather*-quality montages, wicked profane, often very bleak sense of humour, stereotype-defying idiosyncratic major and minor characters, superb cinematography, memorable set-pieces, playful, argot laced language, real-as-it-gets dialogue, intertextual complexity and rich textual geography that they decide to notice in the series. (Lavery 2002, p.xiii)

He then goes on to discuss how uniquely complex *The Sopranos* is in relation to the current televisual landscape. For Lavery (2002 p. xiv), most cultural work is monological—that is, it proposes a "unitary final truth" to invite ideologically simplistic readings that denies the force for social change or interrogation. Lavery (2002 p. xiv) argues that the density and complexity of *The Sopranos* qualifies it as the opposite- dialogical: "Deciding whether *The Sopranos* is monological or dialogical would seem to be as easy as determining whether something is black or white…". It is this quality and complexity that, for Lavery, makes *The Sopranos* worthy of academic analysis. He concludes that the objective of his book is to provide "an understanding of the text in all its complexity. We have sought to investigate the whole elephant..." (2002, p. xv).

We can see this trend of framing *The Sopranos* worthy of analysis due to its 'quality' and 'complexity' in later publications about the show. In the introduction to the essay collection *Considering David Chase* (2008), editor Thomas Fahy comments on the quality of the show. The collection focuses on tracking and analysing David Chase's career through his

most notable works—*Rockford Files* (1974), *Northern Exposure* (1990) and *The Sopranos*. *The Sopranos* is very much positioned as the culmination of Chase's life's work. Fahy (2008 p. 5) notes that "in mapping the trajectory of his career we can get a better understanding of the professional and personal experiences that led up to and influenced *The Sopranos."* When introducing the book's essays on *The Sopranos*, Fahy (2008 p. 7) talks about the "epic scope of *The Sopranos* and its ability to resonate across cultures, nations and ethnicities". In his essay in the same book, Michael Calabrese (2008, p. 196) argues that this scope is emblematic of the show's "classical and literary illusions" that place it "in a larger epic tradition- from Dante's Inferno, Virgil's Aeneid and Homer's Odyssey to The Godfather tradition". We can see this trend continue in the foreword for *The Essential Sopranos Reader* (2011), where David Bianculli suggests that it is the quality of the show that demands scholarly analysis:

> *The Sopranos*, like a handful of other of TV's finest works, not only could be debated and analysed at length and in-depth; it must be, for all of us to understand and appreciate these shows at the high level at which they're conceived and realized. (Bianculli 2011, p. x)

In the later introduction to the same book, Lavery (2011 p. 1) stated that the point of the book was to "both mourn the passing of and celebrate the landmark HBO drama and to provide a definitive final assessment of one of the most important television series ever made."

Perhaps the clearest example of this framing of quality comes in Maurice Yacowar's 2002 book *The Sopranos on The Couch: Analysing Television's Greatest Series*. As demonstrated by the title, Yacowar is very forthright in his declaration that *The Sopranos* is the greatest series ever. He states that, "If television programming is normally considered a wasteland, then "*The Sopranos*" may be thought of as a jungle: richly coloured, teeming with life, dark with mystery" (2002 p. 1). He concludes by stating that "For all its broad popularity, *The Sopranos* is a work of art for the ages" (2002, p. 172). While the analysis and

overall approaches of these books differed significantly, we can still see the same type of framings being used here. Value judgements were often inseparable from scholarly analysis of the show—*The Sopranos* was frequently written about as if it were the pinnacle of television's creativity and paralleled with great works of art. In fact, the underlying logic of much the show's early scholarship seems to be that *The Sopranos* is so good it requires serious scholarly attention. This understanding of quality allowed for a unique tone in *The Sopranos* scholarship and saw it sometimes studied in a tone that prioritised the textual features of the show above all else.

Of course, I am not trying to dismiss this early scholarship and reduce it to quotes asserting the show's aesthetic value. This is far from the case and, as I will explore later, this work understood the show from a variety of important cultural and industrial perspectives. However, it was the case that notions of quality and aesthetic value were intertwined in a lot of early writings about *The Sopranos*. This was significant as it set the tone for how the show was treated and placed emphasise the importance of its textual features in scholarly analysis.

The Sopranos and quality TV

The Sopranos has often been written about in relation to the scholarly use of the term 'quality television.' In a contemporary sense, the term arose as a prominent framework for television scholars during the 1990s. Robert Thompson (1997, p. 12) used it to describe an emerging form of television that broke the established rules of television and emphasised aesthetics as well as large ensemble casts. Shows like *Sex and The City* (1998), *Six Feet Under* (2001) and *Oz* (1997) are often cited as examples of quality television. Of course, the term 'quality television' has always been contested in scholarly spaces (Akass and McCabe 2007; Mittell 2015; Cardwell 2007). The inherently evaluative connotations that come with it, as well as the implicit construction of 'regular television' as somehow *lacking* in quality, have led to

arguments that problematise the term (Cardwell 2007; Sayau 2007; Newman and Levine 2012). While the details of these wider debates are largely outside the scope of this literature review, the ways in which *The Sopranos* was understood by scholars during the 2000s through the prism of quality TV is important to consider here. In the following section, I will demonstrate how *The Sopranos* is inexorably linked with both scholarly and commercial uses of the term.

Beginning in the late 1990s, there was a surge in scholarship that sought to theorise the term quality television—both what it is and what allowed it to emerge. Mélanie Bourdaa (2011) argues that quality television is, in part, the result of the implementation of three significant changes to the televisual landscape in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These were: "the setting of new rules in television production, the apparition of cable channels and the evolution of the use of new technologies in cultural practises" (2011, p. 33). In essence, these changes and general deregulation of the industry "broke the rules of the omnipotent networks and made space for the launching of new innovative channels" (2011, p. 34). This new era marked the rise of cable television and narrowcasting. It is "symbolised by HBO and its slogan 'It's Not TV, It's HBO" (Bourdaa 2011, p. 33). Mark Rogers, Michael Epstein and Jimmy Reeves (1996 p. 22) call this the "TV III" era. For these authors, this was an era defined by the risks HBO took in television aesthetics and the emphasis that was placed on narrative complexity, which ultimately set the standard for what could be described as quality TV. The basic scholarly understanding of what a quality television show might look like has been distilled by Sarah Cardwell:

> Quality TV programmes tend to exhibit high production values, naturalistic performance style, recognised and esteemed actors, a sense of visual style created through careful, even innovative, camerawork and editing, and a sense of aural style created through the judicious use of appropriate, even original music… [T]here is a sense of stylistic integrity,

> in which themes and style are intertwined in an expressive and impressive way… [Quality programs] also tend to focus on the present, offering reflections on contemporary society, and crystallising these reflections within smaller examples and instances… They may be read symbolically, reflexively, or obliquely in order that broader truths about life or society might be found. (Cardwell 2007 p. 26)

As I mentioned previously, this term has always been contested. Robert Thompson (one of the first to theorise the term) acknowledges that there is a dynamic nature to it—what we mean by quality is always historically and geographically contingent (2007). In a similar vein, Akass and McCabe begin their book by explaining how difficult it is to get scholars to accept the term because it implies a certain subjectivity (2007). They argue that "even before a definition can be made, almost any discussion involving quality cannot escape the issue of value judgment and personal taste" (2007, p.2). Still, Kim Wilkins (2019)has helpfully outlined that there have been a few distinct ways the term has been used by scholars. The term is rarely used to make "normative claims about the superiority of one of the show's deemed Quality" (Wilkons 2019, p. 25). Rather, scholars such as Albrecht (2015), Feuer (2007) and Newman and Levine (2011) have used the term to descriptively identify a "collection of shows that emerge during a particular historical and cultural moment that share common themes" (Albrecht 2015, p. 15). It has also been used by other scholars like Cardwell (2007p. 19-35) as a generic classification in an attempt to use the term as purely descriptive and not evaluative. Regardless of how the term is used and any contestations surrounding it, *The Sopranos* is invariably mentioned in some capacity.

Scholarly works typically cite *The Sopranos* as an exemplar of quality TV. Given when the show premiered and its inexorable link with HBO's "it's not TV" marketing strategy, this is hardly surprising. *The Sopranos* is typically included in the subset of programs—usually HBO—that are talked about as the first grouping of quality TV programs.

For the most part, these are the shows that sparked scholarly curiosity and investigation into the 'genre' of quality TV. A call for papers for the 2005 conference "American Quality Television"—which would later lead to the book *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (2007)—offered a list of shows as potential texts for discussion. This list included programs like *Twin Peaks* (1990), *Sex and the City*, *Six Feet Under* (2001) and of course, *The Sopranos.* For Karen Fricker (2007 p. 52), these programs were the original "golden children" of a new "golden age" of Quality television. Of these "golden children", it is almost indisputable that *The Sopranos* was the favourite. Ashely Sayau writes that:

> It is true that the title 'quality' is not always equally distributed. Perhaps not here, but, even in my progressive, semi-intellectual circles, it is not easy to convince people that, say, *Sex and The City* is in the same class as *The Sopranos.* (Sayau 2007, p. 60)

Indeed, almost every early work on the topic referenced the program as being an exemplar of particular features of quality TV. For example, the book *Quality TV* (Akass & McCabe 2007) featured the work of a selection of some of the most prominent TV scholars at the time. For the most part, the book was dedicated to hashing out the term: what do we mean when we say quality? What are the industry implications? Can we reconcile with its evaluative connotations? Despite the considerable diversity in viewpoints from the scholars that features, it is *The Sopranos* that is by far referenced more than any other show throughout the book with 101 mentions (the next most frequently discussed show, *Six Feet Under*, by comparison has 80 mentions). David Bianculli (2007, p. 35) used the "brilliance" of *The Sopranos* to explain the "novelistic themes and scope" of quality television programming. Likewise, in their discussion of the qualities of drama in *TVIII*, Robin Nelson uses *The Sopranos* to explain how quality TV plays with genre:

> [in quality TV] generic hybridity has gone beyond a device to aggregate different target groups to build an audience to be used creatively, with one genre consciously played

> against another. *The Sopranos'* mix of gangster movie, soap opera and psychological drama, for example, plays self-consciously and intertextually with the various contributing discourses and plays them against each other to produce complex seeing. (2007, p. 38)

We can see that, in the context of quality television, genre is not used as a way to target audiences but rather as an artistic technique. Again, in their discussion of quality television, McCabe and Akass (2007 p. 62) discuss its connection to the explicit use of sex, violence and profanity. They begin their analysis with a description of perhaps one of the most confronting scenes in *The Sopranos*—Ralph's brutal beating and murder of his sex worker girlfriend, Tracee. For Akass and McCabe, this is emblematic of quality television's embrace of the profane (2007, p. 65). They argue that such an embrace was co-opted as a commercial strategy by HBO to differentiate their programming from so called 'regular' TV. Excessive violence and coarse language were a way to construct their programming as 'bold' and 'transgressive'. As a result, the profane was often talked about as somewhat of a feature of quality television. At times, it almost seemed as though *The Sopranos* was simply used as shorthand for quality television. For example, Thompson (2007) considered the existential questions quality television brought to broadcast television. He states simply that the industry was worried about "networks' futures in the face of *The Sopranos*" (2007, p. xvii). All this is to say that understandings of *The Sopranos* are very much intertwined with the notion of quality television and often served as a framework through which it was approached.

It is also worth pointing out that quality television emerged as a notably masculine space. Generally, this programming centred on men's experiences, marketed itself to male audiences and featured male auteurs. Unsurprisingly then, it was common for these programs to explore masculinity. This is significant because it signals a gendering in definitions of what constitutes quality. Amanda Lotz (2014 p. 1) has theorised a rather large subset of

'original' quality television programming as "male-centred serials" with reference to *The Sopranos*. These series encapsulate the entirety of the male's life—both in the personal and professional sphere (Lotz 2014, p. 57). They provide a considerable exploration of the protagonists underlying motivations, dilemmas and neuroses. Most importantly, the genre allows for a balance of identity-shaping components of life to bear upon the series protagonist. This enables male characters to do more than simply stand in for generic "dads" or "detectives" as they might in other series (Lotz 2014, p. 70). The stories of specific individuals combined with the seriality of long-term character development allow male-centred serials to create a unique, distinctive space for televised constructions of men and masculinities (Lotz 2014, p. 65). The emergence of these series coincided with the rise of cable television and the changing gender scripts of the 1990s. Of course, *The Sopranos* was often understood as at the forefront of this specific type of quality television. It is important to recognise, then, that *The Sopranos* was written about in relation to a specific, gendered and historically contingent understanding of quality.

As I have demonstrated 'quality', in multiple senses of the word, is linked with initial scholarly understandings of *The Sopranos.* For the most part, I think it is fair to say that a lot of scholars who first wrote about the show enjoyed it as audience members. Often, early scholarship about *The Sopranos* identified it as an object worthy of analysis because of its 'quality'. In the following sections, I turn my attention to how these this framing of quality became intertwined with generic and political readings of the show. Namely, how the show was understood in relation to the gangster genre and engagement with feminism. This further demonstrates how historic scholarly understandings of *The Sopranos* were framed by the particularities of their time.

Viewing Technology and *The Sopranos*

The specific technological and televisual developments in the late 1990s and early 2000s have also formed part of the historical contexts that informed early understandings of *The Sopranos*. The show is inescapably linked with the rise in premium subscription cable networks like HBO. These networks brought with them new ways of watching television that—for the time—were quite unique. They also fostered the narrowcasting of programs to niche audiences. Additionally, the early 2000s saw TV-on-DVD explode in popularity. In the following section, I will outline how *The Sopranos* has been discussed in relation to these specific developments. For the most part, scholars argue that they facilitated specific viewing experiences that were distinct from the conventional broadcast television at the time. This is significant for helping us understand the contexts of interpretation of historic research on *The Sopranos*.

It is important to note that the show is often framed through the television's transitionary period during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The vast expansion in the number of networks and channels during the 1990s, described by Lotz (2007, p. 34) as the multi-channel transition', brought about "television's transition from its network era-norms as a mass medium towards its post-network era function as an aggregator of a broad range of niche and on-demand viewing experiences". Lotz (2007 p. 34) notes that television had adopted multiple possible revenue streams, each of which created new and distinct relationships between economic models, programming and how these forms of television might function as cultural institutions. In the case of premium cable networks like HBO, there was a reliance on a subscriptions and direct pay economic models and not so much on traditional advertising. Anthony Smith argues this economic model allowed *The Sopranos* to take more artistic liberty:

> As a rule of thumb, it is safe to assert that a programme sans commercial interruptions is far more likely than a program built around them to incorporate such subtle and slow burn

> moments. This distinction is an important one, for it indicates one way in which *The Sopranos* writers, unshackled from networks' constraints were able to break convention. (Smith 2011, p. 37)

Additionally, Deborah Jaramillo (2002, p. 63) contends that "without the financial constraints under which networks function, HBO can target narrowly segmented niche markets, a concept essential to its branding." In the case of *The Sopranos,* Malin (2010) posits that this 'niche market' was very specific. HBO leveraged reviews that emphasised the show's authenticity and "realistic glimpse into the human condition" as a way of targeting "artists, critics and academics" the "educated hip elites from Godard to the Popular Cultural Association" (2010, p. 374). Eli Weidinger (2013) argues that the medium of premium-pay cable was intrinsic to how audiences read the show. He suggests that HBO's niche marketing and narrowcast content creates a spectatorial experience that appears to be privatised for each individual, even though millions of viewers tune in to see the show (2013, p. 18). In doing so, HBO makes each "individual spectator feel a special relationship with his or her programming in order to gain loyalty" (2013, p. 18). For Weidinger, this fostered a unique relationship between viewers and *The Soprano*—they felt much more of a sense of ownership over the show. As such, the unique televisual environment of the 2000s nurtured a specific relationship between viewers and *The Sopranos* when compared to conventional network television.

It's important to note that most original viewers of *The Sopranos* did not watch the show live on HBO. As far as television goes, premium cable networks were too expensive for many domestic consumers and not available for international audiences. Amanda Lotz (2007, p. 73) notes that "[in 2007] only 20 to 25 percent of U.S television households subscribe—and thus have access—to premium cable." This encouraged delayed full season viewing for large audiences that were unable to access shows like *The Sopranos* weekly.

During the broadcast of *The Sopranos*, the first opportunity non-subscribers had to view the show was through full season DVD releases. Matt Hills (2007, p. 41) argued that TV-on-DVD represented a bid for "television's cultural value" as it "recontextualised individual TV series as symbolically bounded art objects rather than as interruptible components within TV's ceaseless flow". Additionally, Derek Kompare (2006) has argued that, especially when compared to a film, purchasing TV-on-DVD was much more of an undertaking. A typical film DVD might cost $15 to $20 while a season box set of a show like *The Sopranos* was more like $60 to $100 USD (Kompare 2006, p. 351). Arguably, this mode of viewing facilitated an individualised viewing experience for audience members. Again, this was somewhat of a departure from the previous network era broadcast norms. TV-on-DVD was associated with more prestige and, in a similar way to premium cable, facilitated a more personal experience with a show like *The Sopranos.* Again, the ways in which *the Sopranos* was consumed was somewhat distinct to previous models of network television. Most viewers accessed the show outside of its normal, Sunday night broadcast. Watching the show on DVD, for example, fostered a *different* relationship between the viewer and the show. As such, we can see that there are distinctive technological contexts of interpretation surrounding the show during the 2000s.

A Don Doesn't Wear Shorts": *The Sopranos* and the Cinematic Gangster Genre

In *the Sopranos* episode "For All Debts Public and Private" (4.01) there is a scene where Tony meets with long-time New York mafia don, Carmine Lupertazzi. For the most part, this scene would not feel out of place in a classic gangster film. It bears the mise-en-scène of a typical mafia "sit down": pinstripe suits, the Manhattan skyline at night, and a haze of cigar smoke. But this illusion is shattered when the senior Carmine pulls Tony aside and reprimands him for wearing shorts at a family barbeque the week before—"A Don doesn't wear shorts" he says firmly. This scene perfectly encapsulates *The Sopranos*' relationship to

the cinematic gangster genre as it simultaneously engages with and undermines the typical pleasure of the genre. Unsurprisingly, early scholarship about *The Sopranos* has understood it through the prism of this genre. In the following section, I will track the trends in this subset of *The Sopranos* literature. I argue that the show has both been understood as an evolution and as a major disruption to this filmic genre. These comparisons have allowed *The Sopranos* politics to be understood as nominally progressive.

Broader works on the filmic gangster genre have often placed *The Sopranos* within a larger generic trajectory. This is quite interesting as, obviously, *The Sopranos* is not a film, but a television show. Often, this discrepancy is unacknowledged—the show's possession of 'cinematic qualities' is assumed to qualify it for these kinds of discussions. For example, in his book *Bullets Over Hollywood* (2004), John McCarthy tracks the gangster genre over its almost 100-year history. His analysis ranges from the 1912 silent film *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* to (then) more recent works like *The Godfather III* (1991), *Goodfellas* (1990) and *The Sopranos*. This work functions to establish the genre's tensions, character archetypes, plots, and relationships to other genres—essentially a theorisation of what the gangster film is. The inclusion of *The Sopranos* in this book is particularly interesting—it is the only TV program analysed in a book about a cinematic genre. McCarthy generally does not talk about the show in terms of medium or subversion. Rather, he works to naturalise its place as the latest in the longstanding tradition of the gangster film. He argues that Tony Soprano is an amalgamation of previous versions of the filmic mafia don:

> There are three gangland types- the murderously covetous Robinson gangster… the psychopathic gangster hooked on violence… the doomed loner inescapably trapped in his own skin… In his bravura turn as mob boss Tony Soprano in the dynamic teleseries *The Sopranos*, James Gandolfini cleverly manages to embody all three types- sometimes all at once. (McCarthy 2004, p. 125)

He also argues that *The Sopranos* is a natural continuation of the genre because it replicates its conventions and pleasures (2004 p. 126). McCarthy cites an interview with *The Sopranos* series creator David Chase in which he explains why he thinks the gangster genre is appealing: "It's wishful thinking on some level—people want to think they could be powerful enough and demand enough respect and fear that they could get what they want. That is fantasy" (p. 126). McCarthy uses this quote to explain not only the pleasure audiences get from *The Sopranos* but the genre as a whole—essentially firming up *The Sopranos* place in this generic space.

The Sopranos is treated in a similar way in Lee Grieveson's (2005) book *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film.* This book is an edited collection of essays about the history of the gangster genre by various film scholars. Again, we can see *The Sopranos,* a TV show, being placed into histories of a cinematic genre. The authors argued that previous histories of the genre had been "largely ahistorical and archetypal" (Grieveson 2005, p. 1). To combat this, they aimed to provide an analysis that "placed the cyclic production of gangster films from both within the broad social, political and cultural contexts (Grieveson 2005, p. 2). For Grieveson (2005, p. 2), the gangster was produced differently within "historical intersections of cultural identity and the shifting cultural functions of criminality". As such, the essays in this book track how different filmic iterations of the gangster responded to different cultural contexts. Much like other recent histories of the genre, *The Sopranos* is the only TV show given serious analytical consideration in the book. There are few references to the fact that *The Sopranos* is a television show—unlike the other 'Hollywood' gangster films the book analyses. Much like McCarthy, the authors argue that *The Sopranos* is the most recent iteration of the cinematic gangster. They account for *The Sopranos'* willingness to engage with issues like feminism, de-industrialisation and mental health—something 'new' for the genre—because of the unique political and cultural context

of the late 1990s and early 2000s (2005, p. 143). In this sense, *The Sopranos* is understood as another, albeit more progressive, iteration of the gangster genre. The lack of medium-based distinction in this book again helps naturalise *The Sopranos'* place in a cinematic genre, rather than understanding it as specifically televisual.

In her analysis of the gangster genre, Patricia Keeton (2002) argued that *The Sopranos* represented a major transformation of it. She suggests that prior to *The Sopranos,* the gangster genre had already undergone two major transformations (2002, p. 135). The first occurred in the 1930s and was in response to popular protests over films that sympathetically portrayed the gangster figure (Keeton 2003, p. 136). Keeton (2002, p. 136) writes that this necessitated that "the culturally threatening image of the gangster was replaced by the more positive figure of the cop or detective." The second transformation was brought on in the 1970s with the release of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1969) and *The Godfather I* (1972). Keeton (2002, p. 135) writes that these films were "such critical and commercial success[es] that they have shaped the reading of the genre ever since". This transformation initiated a demythologisation of the gangster hero. Keeton argues that this demythologisation was articulated in three ways:

> The increasing intrusion of domestic and family life into the narrative, (a) the increasing representation of gangster violence within the framework of the brutality of the American corporate empire, and (c) through both of the above, the characterization of [capitalist society] rather than the criminal as the source of violence and exploitation in society. (Keeton2002, p. 135)

Keeton understands Martin Scorsese's 90s mega-hit, *Goodfellas,* as the culmination of this demythologisation of the gangster. The film's narrative begins with "Henry Hill's childhood romanticization of gangster life and concludes with his complete disillusionment" (Keeton 2002, p. 136). By the end of the film, Hill is forced to betray his friends and enter the witness

protection program so the mob can't kill him. For Keeton, *Goodfellas* set the stage for *The Sopranos* and a third transformation of the genre:

> The masterful accomplishment of *The Sopranos* series is in its ability to take the gangster genre at the end of this demythologisation process in *Goodfellas*—in America's affluent suburban wasteland- as the very starting point for its next major transformation of the genre. (2002 p. 136)

The Sopranos draws on both familiar structural patterns of the traditional gangster genre to address contemporary crises in the 1990s—especially the crisis faced by the American family and its traditional male breadwinner. For Keeton, *The Sopranos* is an ideological renegotiation of the genre:

> While the narrative and conflict of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Godfather* series contain a social critique that points to structural factors as the causes of social inequalities, *The Sopranos* moves in a different direction that transforms the gangster myth into a new one only hinted at in *Goodfellas*: the dysfunctional family, not structural social inequalities, creates the alienation and insecurity that men like Tony Soprano feel. (2002, p. 136)

The Sopranos locates the motive for the gangster's actions in the traditional family, but Tony's behaviour is not motived by a desire to provide for his family—rather by the necessity to confront the trauma caused by his abusive mother, Livia. It is for these reasons Keeton argues that *The Sopranos* should be understood as the "third transformation of the gangster genre" (2002, p. 131). She concludes with the proclamation that "*The Sopranos* is a major reworking of the gangster genre, which both conceals and exposes capitalist contradictions in re-examining the cultural myths on which the genre is based" (2002, p. 131). Given the context of the gangster genre, Keeton suggests that the show is politically progressive.

Martha Nochimson (2002) advances an argument that *The Sopranos* unmasks the hidden potential of the gangster genre. In her reading of the series, she identifies *The Sopranos'* reliance on dense intertextual references to gangster films as symptomatic of the series' meditation on the gangster genre's engagement with gender and identity (2002, p. 2). She understands the gangster film as a "masculinised melodrama" (2002, p. 2). While emotions in these films are not expressed as directly or strongly as in a domestic melodrama, they are still there, hidden in subtext. Nochimson (2002, p. 4) writes that "the emotions of the situation are displaced in the violent crime story". She argues that deeper exploration of masculinity and emotional melodrama in gangster films has long been masked because of initial "production code restrictions and macho evasions" (2002 p. 4). *The Sopranos,* in contrast, is comfortable bringing this melodrama to the fore as the very premise of the show (a mobster seeking therapy) would suggest this. Nochimson (2002 p. 4) contends that *The Sopranos* makes the genre's previously subtextual displacement of emotional melodrama much more explicit. For her, the show's representation of the gangster figure as fragile and insecure is evidence of the show's politically progressive credentials. In essence, she argues that the show illustrates the continued utility of the gangster figure for registering profound progressive social, sexual and psychical meanings (2002, p. 6). Nochimson concludes that:

> *The Sopranos* brings to the surface the moral dilemmas and emotional melodrama of the screen mobster [..] [I]t provokes audiences to exchange their unquestioning delight in intense and spontaneous energy and immediate solutions for a mature form of ethics. (2002, p. 12)

Again, we can see the show's politics and "mature ethics" being understood in relation to the gangster genre. In Nochimson's essay, she constructs the show's "unmasking" of the gangster potential as more of an evolution than subversion. For her, the capacity for more "mature" emotional melodrama lay dormant within the genre—it was *The Sopranos* that ultimately

managed to bring it out and unmask the genre's capacity for progressive politics (2002, p. 13).

A Feminist Intervention to the Gangster Film?

Often, *The Sopranos* has been understood by scholars as more than a simple transformation of the gangster genre. It has instead been seen as subversive and even transgressive when compared to texts like *The Godfather.* As I will explore, numerous close readings of the show have positioned it as an outright rejection of some of the gendered and misogynistic tropes of associated with the cinematic gangster. *The Sopranos* has been understood as offering more progressive re-imaginings of the genres gender politics. In particular, scholars have cited the show's representation of gender and sexuality as emblematic of the show's feminist intervention in the gangster genre.

Cindy Donatelli and Sharon Alward have contextualised *The Sopranos* portrayal of women in relation to the modern gangster urtext, *The Godfather I*. They advance the argument that *The Sopranos* features female characters with more agency, narrative centrality and power than is typical for the genre. For them, this is critical to reading the show as politically progressive. They state that "the distance from Michael [Corleone] to Henry[Hill] to Tony [Soprano] can be plotted in terms of their relation to women" (2002 p. 61). Their discussion begins with an analysis of the central female characters in *the Godfather* trilogy—Kay and Connie. In these films, women are identified within the domestic sphere. They are usually seen child-rearing, preparing food or maintaining a "neat and attractive home" (Donatelli & Alward 2002, p. 62). They are largely invisible and purposefully turn a blind eye to their husband's criminal activity. In the case of the character of Kay, Donatelli and Alward write that:

> We see Kay as a kind of Stepford wife from the beginning as she vacantly and stupidly listens to these stories of brutality and murder, all the time looking at Michael romantically. Throughout *The Godfather* trilogy, [Kay] plays the role of the bored suburban housewife—she pretends that her husband's business is beneath her, that she has no knowledge of any of it, that the business is going legit (2002, p. 62).

At the core of *The Godfather* is a gendered separation between two families—the domestic family and the criminal 'family'. Donatelli and Alward highlight this in their analysis of the wedding scene:

> At the wedding, the deliberate camera shots back and forth establish that as the women are outside performing one "family", Don Corleone remains closeted in his study receiving another family made up exclusively of men. (2002, p. 62)

But this is not the case in *The Sopranos*—for Tony and his friends "the two families have collapsed, and the private and domestic sphere have interpenetrated" (Donatelli & Alward 2002, p. 63). Donatelli and Alward (2002, p. 64) point out that this allows women to play a much more pivotal role in *The Sopranos*, with the show offering them agency that is impossible in *The Godfather* films: "*The Sopranos* interrupts the non-stop flow of testosterone by throwing oestrogen in men's faces before they build up the head of steam that Michael and Henry enjoy during their career." The way in which Tony's mother, Livia, "totally defeats" him in season 1 is the ultimate example of this (Donatelli & Alward 2002, p. 64). Livia has "internalised the Mafia life of her husband and does not play the usual Italian woman with sagging bosoms, corsages and sympathy for all" (Donatelli & Alward 2002, p. 66). Rather, she manipulates her mafioso brother-in-law to try and have her only son killed. Additionally, Donatelli & Alward argue that *The Sopranos* largely rejects the one-sided gendered violence from *The Godfather*:

> In Francis Ford Coppola's saga, women are inevitably roadkill, sometimes literally… Connie is horribly beaten by Carlo when she is pregnant. Michael terrorises Kay psychologically with his shouting, pounding and slamming of doors in her face. (2002, p. 67)

Donatelli and Alward cite Janice's impulsive murder of her fiancé, Riche, after he hits her for the first time as evidence that:

> Women like Janice have their finger on the trigger in The Sopranos, and the stylised gun that forms the "r" of The Sopranos on the title screen is clearly unisex in that women and men, by virtue of their last names, know how to handle themselves in both families. (Donatelli & Alward 2002, p. 68)

This early scholarship promotes an understanding of *The Sopranos* that centres on the show's differences to early gangster films like *The Godfather*—it is contextualised as a rejection of the genre's often misogynistic and violent treatment. Most significantly though, we can see how the gangster genre was a prominent context of interpretation for early scholarship about the show.

In similar vein, scholars have written about how *The Sopranos*' exploration of homosexuality opened the genre to new progressive readings. George De Stefano (2011) has argued that *The Sopranos* representation of homosexuality was subversive as it "queered" the gangster genre. He analysed the character arc of Vito Spatafore—a mafia captain who, near the end of the fifth season, is revealed to be a closeted homosexual. With concessions to the strides the show made for women in the gangster genre, De Stefano (2011, p. 114) states that this is the series "boldest subversion in respect to gender and genre". He goes onto suggest that:

> In depicting a "Finook in the crew" and the repercussions of such a transgression, *The Sopranos* "queered" the mafia genre, decentring its typical construction of masculinity as

> incontrovertibly heterosexual. The Vito storyline made manifest the possibility of actual homosexuality within the homosocial milieu of organised crime groups. (2011, p. 114)

They argued that the storyline identified—and critiqued—the heterosexist mechanisms common to the mafia genre (De Stefano 2011, p. 124). For De Stefano (2011, p. 124), this was significant as it helped denaturalise the patriarchal ideology that was often uncritically endorsed in the genre and offered new progressive possibilities for how the genre could be understood. However, the importance of this went beyond just imagining the possibility of a gay gangster. De Stefano points out that the show leveraged the genre to make a broader critique of religion in American culture. He states that from the very first episode:

> *The Sopranos* presented Mafia life as a microcosm of contemporary American society. This enabled it to comment on such phenomena as class mobility, ethnicity, racism, political and corporate corruption, sex and gender and the Mafia narrative itself… With the Vito Spatafore storyline, *The Sopranos* once again made the organized crime genre do the heavy lifting in service of a larger critique: the convergence between moral agendas of right-wing, evangelical Protestants and conservative Roman Catholics. (2011, p. 124)

De Stefano (2011, p. 124) writes that the Vito storyline as a "gleeful" satirisation of the moral outrage of gangsters who were so livid over Vito dishonouring them and their 'upstanding' values. He argues this satirisation can be extend to the hypocrisy of Christian right-wingers in the American political landscape. As De Stefano concludes, *The Sopranos* transgressive exploration of sexuality allowed the show to do feminist cultural work once thought of as impossible for the genre.

Lynne Hibberd similarly understands Vito's storyline as a part of a meta-critique of the gangster genre. Much like De Stefano, Hibberd is quick to acknowledge the significance of a prominent gay gangster:

> Like many deviations from generic conventions in form and content, the recurrence of Vito's homosexuality as a narrative theme in season 6 increased the visibility of homosexuality in the gangster drama by about 100%. (2011, p. 174)

Hibberd argues that the simple act of "queering" the gangster genre opened thematic and storytelling avenues that were once considered to be off-limits for the genre. She suggests that:

> Vito's sexuality was presented in the formerly hypermasculine world of the gangster drama—displaced into a routine, domesticated setting that examined the politics of gender, sexuality and relationships more broadly than ever before (2011, p. 175).

Ultimately, she understands this storyline as a critique of the usual pleasures associated with the mafia genre. For Hibberd (2011, pp. 176), a key intervention of *The Sopranos* has been to encourage audiences to question how their viewing pleasure "squares up to political objections to the sexual ethic and violence of the series". Often, this questioning is encouraged through storytelling and cinematography that disconcerts and contradicts (Hibberd 2011, p. 175). In the case of Vito: "The second we see him 'giving head', we know that the transgression will end in his death, and there is something very unsettling about watching that and wanting to watch it" (Hibberd 2011, p. 179). Hibberd (2011, p. 179) argues that this feeling is compounded by the frequent use of malapropisms and double entendres in the dialogue it is almost as though *The Sopranos* is baiting the audience to laugh. Ultimately, this allows for a reflection on the pleasures audiences take from the homophobia that is typically rife in the gangster genre:

> These elements provoke pain and humour in equal measure and encourage the viewer to question the extent to which they are vicariously participating in the consumption of homophobia and misogyny integral to many mainstream texts (Hibberd 2011, p. 180).

In these ways, Hibberd understands *The Sopranos* as a progressive subversion of the gangster genre. Like De Stefano, she outlines how the show plays with traditional generic tropes in order to provide a critique of the gangster genre's gender politics.

Another trend in the scholarship has dissected how *The Sopranos* leverages intertextual references to famous gangster films (like *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas)* to provide critiques of contemporary gender politics. This is frequently cited as evidence of both the progressive cultural work being done by the show and its disruption of the gangster genre.

In a 2002 essay about *The Sopranos'* references to the gangster genre, David Pattie argues that a certain type of intertextuality had become typical of the "postmodern television" of the 1990s:

> *The Simpsons, Beavis and Butthead* (and MTV in general), *South Park, Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—these and many other programs operated on the assumption that their media-literate audiences were sufficiently sceptical of broadcasting norms to find self-referentiality and intertextuality inherently amusing. (2002, p. 146)

Pattie saw *The Sopranos* as being different. While the show obsessively referenced the gangster genre, he saw *The Sopranos* as doing so in a more meaningful way to the pop-culture references of the other shows (2002, p. 146). *The Sopranos'* intertextual references operated within the storyworld of the text and enhanced the show's thematic depth. Pattie (2002, p. 147) likened it to a more classic literary or filmic use of intertextuality and pays particular attention to how the show references *The Godfather I-II.* He argues that characters' constant references to these films identify them to the audience as a "symbolic framework" through which these characters understand themselves (2002, p. 149). The characters want to view themselves through the supposed "golden glow" that Ford Coppola represents the mafia with (2002, p. 149). Pattie suggests that Tony and his friends use these films to convince themselves they are living in the golden age of the mob. One represented in classic gangster

films that is defined by family, honour and loyalty. Of course, the dingy settings and decay that define *The Sopranos* storyworld make it clear that this obsession with *The Godfather* is a collective delusion. For Pattie, *The Sopranos* is much closer to the brutality and decline of Martin Scorsese's films: "In all three films (*Mean Streets, Goodfellas, Casino*) centres come apart. The gangs in Mean Streets and Goodfellas disintegrate when they turn on each other" (2002, p. 149). Unsurprisingly the characters in the show very rarely reference Scorsese's films. Pattie (2002, p. 149) argues Scorsese is the "dog that doesn't bark" but also what *The Sopranos* is most indebted to (2002, p. 110). Pattie (2002, p. 150) has identified how *The Sopranos* leverages intertextual references to the gangster genre in order to make a broader critique of the genre itself. Of course, this 'golden age' of the mob that *The Sopranos* deconstructs is unmistakably gendered as films like *The Godfather* are often read as venerating a heterosexist mould of masculinity. As Pattie (2011) alludes to, *The Sopranos* deconstruction of these gendered tropes is certainly part of its wider critique of the genre.

The Sopranos use of intertextuality has allowed scholars to read it is as more politically progressive than earlier sorts of gangster texts. Harry Brod (2006) argues that *The Sopranos* specifically leverages intertextual references to the gangster genre to critique masculinity. He explores how the generational status of characters in *The Sopranos* influences their performance of masculinity (2006). Brod notes that *The Godfather* films are a crucial lens by which the audience and the characters understand the mafia:

> [*The Sopranos*] relies heavily on a kind of double vision, in which even as we watch the unfolding of the present story, both we and the characters themselves have constantly before our and their mind's eyes images from the earlier series of *Godfather* films… *The Sopranos* moves within and depends upon the same frame of reference created by the earlier *Godfather* films. The core of their humour derives from our and their understanding

> of the lesser stature of these men and the core of its drama centres around whether these sons will be able to emerge from their father's shadow (2006, p. 1).

Brod uses this comparison to discuss the significance of *The Sopranos* image of a gangster in a psychiatrist's office. Tony Sopranos represents a transitional generation. He is far enough away from the "(God)fathers" to know that he is not successfully coping with the pressures of his life and to seek help from a therapist (Brod 2006, p. 3). However, Tony is still close enough to that generation to be unable to admit to others that he is seeking psychological help (Brod 2006, p. 3). However, Tony's desire for secrecy is not just personal paranoia. Brod asserts (2006, p. 4) that he is "correctly reading the constellations of power in which he is embedded. His authority will truly 'shrink' if word gets out he is seeing a 'shrink'". In the cultural codes that Tony has inherited from his father, leadership roles demand that he be the "strong silent type" (Brod 2006 p. 5). He must be independent, decisive, and most not flinch from making life and death decisions. This leadership style demands that Tony be closed off from others and his own feelings. Brod asserts that, for Tony, seeing a therapist violates these codes of masculinity because the "prerequisites of therapy demand a sensitivity and a talkativeness that is in direct conflict with these codes" (2006, p. 6). As such, the anxieties attached to the intergenerational shadows in *The Godfather* are crucial in defining how masculinity is represented in *The Sopranos.*

As such, we can see that the cinematic gangster genre was an important context of interpretation through which scholars understood *The Sopranos*. The show's gender politics have frequently been understood as nominally progressive in relation to older films like *The Godfather* or even *Goodfellas.* This has had significant implications for how scholars have understood and analysed the significance of the show. As I will outline in the following section, this is part of a larger constellation of interpretive contexts that have led scholars to read the show as progressive.

The "Crisis of Masculinity" as a Context of Interpretation for *The Sopranos*

The very premise of *The Sopranos*—a hyper-masculine mob boss seeking therapy for panic attacks—demonstrates the show's willingness to explore gender. Much of the critical attention the show received pondered something along the lines of 'what could Tony Soprano could teach us about masculinity?' The years that the show originally aired (1997-2010) were when "crisis of masculinity" discourse was at its peak (Nungresser 2010). Just as the gangster genre framed how scholars understood gender on *The Sopranos,* so too did this 'crisis' of masculinity. Mostly, this discourse lamented the "loss of the traditional patriarch" (Bly 1996) and worked to characterise men as victims of feminism. Best-selling books like *Iron John* asserted that men "resented being blamed for everything" and called for a return to a more "aggressive masculinity" (Bly 1990, p. 1). Advertisers capitalised on this discourse and made it truly unavoidable (Rogers 2008; Green & Van Oort 2013). In the 2000s, there were countless commercials that featured symbols of hypermasculinity and rallying cries that buying big trucks or eating gratuitously large hamburgers will reinstate one's 'lost' masculinity—Take the infamous "Man's Last Stand" Dodge truck commercial that aired during the Superbowl (Van Oort 2013). *The Sopranos* willingness to deconstruct 'traditional' masculinity was seen as subversive and led scholars to understand the text as feminist in relation to this type of crisis discourse. As I will outline in the following section, such a 'crisis' served as a key context of interpretation through which scholars understood the significance of the show.

The idea of a 'crisis of masculinity' emerged concurrently in feminist and conservative Christian spaces during the 1980s. One of the first uses of the term was in Leanne Payne's controversial 1985 book *The Healing of the Homosexual.* It defined the crisis as a "growing cultural malady…epidemic in proportion" that was the consequence of men being "split off from their masculine side" (Payne 1985, p. 9). While many feminist scholars did not

ideologically align with Payne, they did feel as though a gender crisis was brewing. The strides of civil rights, women's liberation and gay liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s were seemingly decentring the subjectivity of cisgendered, heterosexual, white men. This crisis was largely an expression of:

> The anxieties of men who fit into the category of hegemonic masculinity: straight white, middle-class men who until recently enjoyed the privilege of assuming their subjectivity, their sense of a clearly defined identity. (Nilsson 200, p. 56)

The central thesis of this 'crisis' can be then understood as the perceived decline of white, heteronormative masculinity. It did not take long for this discourse to penetrate the mainstream. In 1987, Michael Kimmel (p. 82) declared that believing 'masculinity was in crisis' had become cultural commonplace in North America. By the 1990s, there was an explosion in best-selling literature on the topic as seen through books like David Thomas' *Not Guilty: In Defence of the Modern Man* (1993). Kathryn Whittaker writes that "the crisis of masculinity flourished into a trans-Atlantic phenomenon" during the 1990s. Unsurprisingly, there is a core tension in crisis discourse. Namely, the wildly different ideological positions of feminist academics and conservative critics and authors. Its discursive function was very different depending on the position one took. Feminist academics often used it as a springboard for the deconstruction and critique of traditional masculinity (e.g. Carrigan, Connell & Lee 1985). Conversely, Christian writers weaponised it to justify the need for a return to regressive, patriarchal gender politics (e.g. Payne 1987). In the following section, I will unpack both strands of this 'crisis' to establish it as a context of interpretation which enabled *The Sopranos* representation of masculinity to be understood as progressive.

For some feminist academics, a 'crisis' in masculinity offered exciting new possibilities. It was a chink in the amour—a hint that heterosexist masculinities might be

faltering. It could be a springboard to bring feminist critique and the burgeoning field of masculinity studies into the mainstream. As Sally Robinson (200, p.1) pointed out, masculinity and whiteness had retained their "power as signifiers and social practises because they were opaque to analysis". This 'crisis' had brought "gender into the public discourse" and rendered masculinity open to critiques in new ways (Phelan 2003, p. 6). The first step scholars needed to take to properly theorise masculinity was to "attack the presupposition of traditional political and social theory" (Morgan 1992, p.232). As such, academic work turned to the tools of postmodernism to engage with this 'crisis' (Brah 2005, p. 199). Earlier philosophers like Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault had already started to unpick the naturalised connection between men and masculinity. For them, gender was a discursive phenomenon and sexuality was culturally and historically contingent. Their theories stripped men from their legitimating stories. David Gutterman has suggested this earlier scholarship was crucial for later work on the 'crisis' because:

> Postmodernism's focus on instability, multiplicity, and contingency, as well as its subsequent celebration of difference, proves an extraordinary basis for interrogating the cultural scripts of normative masculinity. (1994 p. 224)

The work of Judith Butler (1990) and Eve Sedgwick (1985) built on this to begin the process of deconstructing masculinity. In their influential book *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler put forward the argument that gender identity is not a manifestation of intrinsic essence. Rather, it is the product of actions and behaviours. Sedgwick (1985) made similar arguments that were more specifically applied to masculinity. They suggested that 'conventional' masculinity was always in a state of flux—constantly being mediated between men (1985, p. 7). This type of work signified a trend that brought the deconstruction of masculinity to the forefront. Elaine Aston (2003, p. 7) concludes that in the wake of Butler's *Gender Trouble* especially, ideas of gender and performativity came into widespread critical and theoretical

circulation. While not formulated in response to a 'crisis', these works became the theoretical tools that scholars would use to analyse masculinity in 'crisis.'

Later, there was an uptick in scholars who used the work of these theorists to discuss masculinity in relation to a supposed 'crisis.' Most notably, R.W Connell's 1987 book *Gender and Power* introduced the concept of hegemonic masculinity. It helped deconstruct the 'traditional' male subject that was central to so much crisis scholarship. This subject was usually white, middle-class, and heterosexual and was crucial to the facilitation of a "western system of patriarchal privilege over various subordinated masculinities as well as women" (Connell 1987 p. 112). Kimmel notes that the foundations of this masculinity are built on misogyny, racism, and homophobia (1997, p. 183). In his theorisation of masculinity, Robert Stoller (1994, p. 240) observes that, "the first order of being a man is don't be a woman." In reality, most men find it impossible to occupy hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Connell accounts for this in their argument, pointing out that:

> The cultural idea of masculinity need not correspond at all closely to the actual personalities of the majority of men. Indeed, the winning of hegemony often involved the creation of models of masculinity which are quite specifically fantasy figures, such as the film characters played by Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne and Sylvester Stallone. (1987, p. 187)

It is this tension that scholars have readily identified as the root cause of a 'crisis'—many men feel as though there is no alternative to hegemonic masculinity. Kimmel (1997 p. 37) writes that when they fail to embody its many contradictions they will: "Succumb to a crippling fear of emasculation, emotional nothingness, and a gendered rage/violence.". Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1995, p. 185) argued the 'crisis' highlighted the instability and unsustainability of heterosexist masculinity. For them, the only solution was obvious—a "major progressive reconstruction of masculinity", one that would come in "the form of

coalitions among feminists, gay men and progressive heterosexual men". As such, we can see academics engaging with a supposed 'crisis' as a springboard to advocate for more progressive, sustainable embodiments of masculinity.

Despite the exciting possibilities hinted at in the academic scholarship, the mainstream media narrative of the "crisis" became one of victimisation. Namely, there was a bad-faith characterisation of white, heterosexual men as being the victims of feminism and civil rights. In this narrative, there was a disruption in the natural gender politics that led to men being forced to "repress" their "natural" masculinity (Payne 1985, p. 4). This line of thinking stemmed from the writings of Christian authors like Leanne Payne and by the 1990s it had well and truly penetrated the mainstream. There were countless articles in 'reputable' publications like *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times* that spun a narrative of male victimisation (e.g. Rosin 2010; Morris 2013). Similarly, self-help books, commercials, and films (especially Hollywood comedies) reinforced the notion that men needed to 'reclaim their masculinity' (Nungesser 2010).

It was common for links between masculinity and poor mental health to be twisted into a narrative of victimisation. Popular authors such as Neil Lyndon (1992) and Warren Farrell (1993) actively worked to craft a narrative in which masculinity had been victimised by the nebulous idea of 'feminism'. In 1992, Lyndon cited statistics which suggested that there had been a 71% increase in male suicides over a 10-year period. He claimed that in comparison to women" men were three times more likely to commit suicide" (1992 p. 14). Horrocks argued these statistics were emblematic of men being in a socially compromised position because "suicide is one of the best indicators of powerlessness (1996, p. 14). Such a demise in mental health was symptomatic, in this view, of a collective male identity crisis. For Lyndon (1992), it was not the instability and contradictions of hegemonic masculinity but 'feminism'—the subtitle of his book, "the failures of feminism", makes this quite clear. Moreover, after

discussing the powerlessness of men, Lyndon (1992, p. 13) describes feminism as a "perverted ideology, poisoning relations between men and women." As such, we can see that the mainstream crisis of masculinity discourse often took on a pronounced anti-feminist tone.

Throughout the late 1990s and 2000s, this rhetoric perpetuated male backlash against feminism. Susan Faludi reflects that 'crisis' discourse facilitated a:

> Powerful counter-assault on women's right's…the backlash convinced the public that women's "liberation" was the source of an endless laundry list of personal, social and economic problems. (1991, p. 12)

Often, popular crisis narratives would characterise gender relations as a zero-sum game. Women could only improve their status at the expense of widespread "masculine doom" (Faludi 1991, p. 13). This rhetoric was widely present in the explosion of male-centric self-help books during the 1990s. Robert Bly's best-selling book *Iron John: A Book about Men*, epitomised this trend. On the matter of feminist activism, Bly wrote:

> In the nineties, I began to see a phenomenon that we might call the 'soft male'. Many of these men are not happy. They are life-preserving but not exactly life giving. The strong or life-giving women who graduated from the sixties played an important part in producing this man (1990, p.2).

Bly (1990, p. 56) blames feminism for "destroying the very masculine traits which in the past helped establish an effective masculine identity and a harmonious and productive society". Similarly, *Iron John* appears to hold women responsible for the perceived demonization of men. Bly laments that "more and more women in recent decades maintain that everything bad is male and everything good is female." Subsequent best-sellers like Lyndon's *No More Sex War: The Failures of Feminism* (1993), Thomas' *Not Guilty: In Defence of the Modern Man* (1993) and Farrell's *The Myth of Male Power* (1993) further amplified Bly's argument and platformed a backlash against feminism. Aston (2003 p.3) helpfully summarises these texts as

"key examples of men claiming victim status and blaming feminism for the oh-so-much-harder-lives men have compared to women". These books characterise feminism as an "evil incubus" and outline a grand conspiracy in which the "gay movement" and "the sisterhood" have allied to "strip masculinity of its power" (2003 p. 3). These books helped push a narrative of male victimisation into mainstream media.

If the 1990s diagnosed this 'crisis' then the 2000s prescribed a cure—consumerism. The decade was marked by the appropriation and exploitation of the 'men as victims' narrative by advertisers and Hollywood. A 'crisis' in masculinity had become, first and foremost, a tool of mass marketing. Kyle Green and Madison Van Oort (2013) advanced this argument in their analysis of the commercials during Super Bowl XLIV. Viewers were bombarded with feminized, ageing and powerless male bodies that had been stripped of the constitutive ingredients of hegemonic masculinity (2013, p. 695). Advertisements would plead with their male viewers to reclaim their manhood:

> "Take of that skirt" "Put on the pants!" "Man's last stand!" These were the rally cries of Superbowl 2010 (Green & Van Oort 2013, p. 695).

The anxieties and insecurities of men were brought to the fore so marketers could offer consumerism as a "way to restore this lost manhood" (Green & Van Oort 2013, p. 697). Of course, it was 'hypermasculine' products that were getting this treatment by advertisers. Richard Rogers (2008) notes that there was a strong 'crisis' undertone in how red-meat and fast food was promoted. In particular, the commercials from companies like *Taco Bell, Burger King* and *Jack in the Box* would position eating red meat to reclaim one's masculinity (Rogers 2008, p. 281). According to Rogers, the eating of red meat in these commercials is:

> Not simply a coded masculine activity, but rather is specifically coded as a way to restore hegemonic masculinity in the face of threats to its continued dominance. (2008, p. 282)

In these commercials, environmentalism and vegetarianism is linked to femininity and is therefore a threat to the masculinity of the male viewer. Meat-eating is the way to reclaim a primitive masculinity that can respond to these perceived threats (Rogers 2008, p. 283). This bombardment of 'crisis' advertisement made male victimisation culturally commonplace and somewhat unavoidable for anyone with any exposure to mass media. This was the wider climate in which *The Sopranos* first aired. While the actual broadcast of the show was uninterrupted by commercials, 'crisis' marketing would have been unavoidable for 2000s viewers of the show. Even more so, the show's viewership was largely white men aged 20 to 40—the archetypical subject of 'crisis of masculinity' discourse.

Finally, this narrative of male victimisation came to dominate Hollywood films in the late 1990s and 2000s. This trend was exemplified by mainstream comedies directed at male audiences. These films all followed a similar formula in which a man, often victimised by his work and the women around him, would go on a journey to reclaim his masculinity. For example, the film *Old School* (2003) begins with its lead character, Mitch, feeling overworked in a grey office setting. When he comes home, he catches his wife having an affair. This triggers Mitch to leave the relationship and reconnect with his old friends by starting a college fraternity for 'adults'. Lijah Barasz (2006) writes that these films often relied on a hefty amount of homophobic humour and ultimately functioned to reinstate hegemonic masculinity. These types of narratives also manifested in more serious Hollywood dramas. Nungesser (2010, p. 49) argues that academy award-winning films like *American Beauty* (1999), *Fight Club* (1999) and *Magnolia* (1999) address the 'crisis of the white heterosexual man'. By confronting viewers with rather drastic reactions to the supposed insecurity regarding masculinity, these films "contributed to the cultural discourse of wounded masculinity" (Nungesser 2010, p. 49). As such, both Hollywood comedies and prestige dramas amplified a cultural understanding of male victimisation.

The crisis of masculinity is a key context of interpretation for viewers watching *The Sopranos* in the 2000s. As noted by many, the show placed masculinity at the 'thematic forefront' (Brod 2005; Lee 2004). For any program engaging with masculinity during the 2000s, this discursively constructed 'crisis' was unavoidable. The creators were writing at a time when these discourses of crisis were circulating in popular culture. In the following section I will consider how this crisis context further framed scholars understanding of the show as progressive.

The Sopranos as a "Feminist Metatext"

When viewed through this 'crisis' paradigm, some scholars sought to frame *The Sopranos* explicitly as feminist. Typically, these accounts were based on the show's complex representation of female characters and its critique of patriarchal masculinity. To support a feminist understanding of the program, scholars have frequently applied the work of theorists like Judith Butler, Judith Gardiner, Raewyn Connell and Eve Sedgewick. It was quite common to see articles about *The Sopranos* published in feminist journals like, *Feminist Studies, Feminism and Psychology* and *The Scholar and Feminist Online* (see, for example, Johnson 2007; Gorton 2009; Lee 2004).

The Sopranos complex cast of female characters was frequently cited as evidence of the show's serious engagement with feminism. In particular, scholars were interested in the subversive way that female characters navigated patriarchy in the show. Kristyn Gorton's 2009 article "Why I Love Carmela Soprano" in the *Feminism and Psychology* journal provides a close analysis of the subtle strategies Carmela used to resist her husband through the show. Gorton (2009) cites a season 4 narrative arc in which Carmela becomes increasingly worried that she will be left destitute in the event of Tony's death. As Tony refuses to do any sort of meaningful financial planning Carmela grows frustrated. Eventually, she takes things into her own hands and takes money that Tony has hidden in the backyard to

invest herself. Carmela keeps Tony from retaliating by implying that she knows about his various infidelities. According to Gorton (2009, p. 129), this is a "snapshot" of the kind of empowerment offered in *The Sopranos*. Despite being "firmly rooted" in the domestic (and therefore limited) this type of agency is still important (2009, p. 130). She argues that:

> In the fantasy world of *The Sopranos,* Carmela provides some viewers with a sense that enough resourceful thinking and clever innuendos can get a woman with relatively little power whatever she wants. It gives these traditional sites of femininity new power and allows a viewer the fantasy that they can make a difference with limited resources. (2009, p. 130)

Susan Kahrs (2005 p. 43) provides a similar analysis of Tony's mother, Livia Soprano. She suggests that Livia manipulates the "extreme patriarchal conditions" to cultivate power. For example, she manipulates the 'reverence' afforded to mothers to "inflict pain on those close to her" (Kahrs 2005, p. 43). Akass and McCabe (2006, p. 55) also cited these complex female characters when they concluded that "*The Sopranos* offers feminist resistance that holds the promise of change". Gorton (2009, p. 131) argued that the show forces feminists to "think beyond purely theoretical responses" to patriarchal oppression. As such, we can see here that there is a trend in the scholarship that predicates a feminist understanding of the show on how it shows women navigating patriarchy.

Scholars have frequently understood *The Sopranos* willingness to critique patriarchal power structures as evidence of the show's feminist credentials. In the episode "Nobody Knows Anything" (1.11), Tony Soprano famously tells his daughter, Meadow, "You see out there it's the 1990s, but in this house its 1954!" A significant amount of scholarship has explored how such a repressive environment impacts women on the show. Akass and McCabe have analysed how the show represents the difficulties and contradictions women face in a patriarchal setting. For example, Carmela Soprano was raised as a Catholic in a

world where “feminist thinking has no place” (McCabe & Akass 2011, p. 93). For many, Catholicism and feminism are diametrically opposed belief systems (2011, p. 93). Carmela lives in devotion to the institution of marriage while also realizing that “the dominant narrative that promises American women a dashing prince, economic security and beautiful children” does not always work out (Akass & McCabe 2011, p. 95). Contrastingly, Valerie Palmer-Mehta (2006, p. 56) has examined how the character of Janice Soprano is able to shift between a “feminine masquerade” and masculine behaviour in order to obtain power in a patriarchal environment. Janice begrudgingly cooks and helps care for her mother but still “cultivates power in the same way the men around her do: through intimidation, manipulation and murder” (Palmer-Mehta 2006, p. 54). Donatelli and Alward (2002, p. 33) assert that Janice is able to “transgress in ways that Carmela wouldn’t even dream of because of her continuing commitment to her wifely duties”. While *The Sopranos* constructs a patriarchal environment, these scholars contend that the show leverages this in the service of a feminist critique.

Scholars have also applied feminist theory to illuminate the show’s critique of masculinity. For instance, Katherine Lee argues that:

> Feminism informs *The Sopranos* on a profound thematic level, namely through its depictions of the socially constructed-ness of femininity and masculinity and the conflicts, negotiations, performances and power imbalances these social constructs generate.(2004)

Drawing from Gardiner’s (2002) assertion that masculinity is always an unattainable and nostalgic formation, Lee (2004) discusses Tony Soprano’s famous “Gary Cooper rant” in which he cites cowboy actor Gary Cooper as the ultimate embodiment of masculinity. She suggests that this example demonstrates how *The Sopranos* problematises the perpetuation of impossible models of masculinity (2004). She also uses Sedgwick’s work on homosocial relationships to explore how Tony and his friends are constantly gauging, refining and

policing the boundaries of masculinity. For Lee (2004), *The Sopranos* demonstrates the dangerous dichotomy of heterosexist models of masculinity. This is because, while this model is very much shown to be unattainable and inherently contradictory, if anyone transgresses it there can be very real, and often deadly, consequences. Lee concludes that:

> This is what helps make *The Sopranos* a feminist metatext—its willingness to show the continual interplay of and disjuncture between reality and fantasy that inform the characters noting of who they are, to engage in the same interplay with us. (2004)

By identifying this critique of masculinity, Lee understands *The Sopranos* as doing feminist cultural work as it actively encourages the audience to critically consider gender performativity.

Similarly, Merri Lisa Johnson (2007) describes *The Sopranos* as "gangster feminism" in her article about the show's representation of gendered violence. For her, *The Sopranos* provides an intersectional dissection of gendered violence (2007 p. 269). Johnson (2007) provides a close reading of the episode "University" in which Ralph murders his girlfriend, Tracee. She claims that "Ralphie cannot be cast simplistically by feminist critics as a misogynistic killer because his character is not fully accounted for by the role of oppressor" (2007, p. 270). Johnson (2007) uses the work of bell hooks, who similarly rejects one-dimensional feminist analysis of masculine violence. hooks writes that since:

> male power within patriarchy is relative, men from poorer groups and men of colour are not able to reap the material and social rewards for their participation in patriarchy. In fact they often suffer from blindly and passively acting out a myth of masculinity that is life threatening (1990, p. 63).

Johnson (2007, p. 269) argues that Ralphie's violence must be situated at the intersection of gender, privilege and class bias in order to grasp his motivations. She states that Ralphie, in fact, risks his life due to his frantic hyper aggressive masculine behaviour (2007, p. 270).

Much of the "University" episode focuses on Ralphie's hysterical performance of masculinity as he overcompensates for his slow rise through the gangster ranks. Like Tracey, Ralphie longs to be accepted by a patriarchal father figure and welcomed into the Sopranos "Family" (2007, p. 271). Johnson (2007, p. 272) concludes that a myriad of complex factors led to Ralphie's murder of Tracy. Tracy's decision to engage in her profession, getting involved with a dangerous man and then "taunting him recklessly" were motivated by a variety of unique social circumstances (2007, p. 271). Similarly, Ralphie's hyper aggressive masculine violence is motivated by an equally complex web of factors. For Johnson, this is unique feminist cultural work and ultimate what qualifies it as a work of "gangster feminism" (2007, p. 269).

This review of *The Sopranos* literature reveals some of the most prominent lenses through which scholars understood the show during the time of its original broadcast. More than anything, the show was read as politically subversive in respect to its representation of gender. Both the gangster genre and the crisis of masculinity were key contexts of interpretation for understanding the show as feminist. The literature frequently identifies *The Sopranos* willingness to critique conventional masculinity, its inclusion of complicated female characters and willingness to disrupt the gendered norms of the gangster genre as evidence of its feminism. It is easy to see why the show's critique of masculinity and cast of female characters may have qualified it as progressive or even feminist in the contexts in which it was originally received. However, in the years since *The Sopranos* went off the air, there have been significant cultural and televisual developments that have potentially altered the ways in which the show is now decoded and understood. These will be considered in the following section.

The Sopranos Today

Since *The Sopranos* went off the air, viewers' contexts of interpretations have changed. For one, the gangster genre is far less prominent than what it was during the late 1990s. Additionally, 'crisis of masculinity' discourse has largely petered out, at least in the contexts of mainstream media and advertising. Due to public movements like #MeToo we have seen more critical discussions of masculinity enter the mainstream (Fileborn & Loney-Howes 2019). We can see this reflected in television scholarship, with academics like Julia Havas (2022) and Olive Brooks (2019) noting the recent rise in "female-centric Quality Television" over the last few years. As a result, the definition of what we might call a 'feminist television program' has changed significantly since the early days of *The Sopranos*. Additionally, television has undergone a technological overhaul. SVOD platforms have become one of the most popular ways to access televisual content. In response, there has been an expansion of TV scholarship dedicated to devising new theoretical frameworks through which to analyse contemporary television (Lotz 2021; Cox 2018). In the subsequent section, I argue these technological and cultural developments form new contexts that complicate earlier popular and scholarly readings of the show.

Watching *The Sopranos* in the 2020s places it in a substantially different context when it comes to how gender is talked about and represented on television. Crisis and victimisation have slid from being the dominant lens through which masculinity is understood in popular discourses. Instead, masculinity is more likely to be considered on the terms of public feminism and the global #MeToo movement. We can see this shift manifest in the surge in 'explicit feminism' in mainstream television (Havas 2022) with programs like *The Handmaid's Tale, Girls* (2012-2017) and *Broad city* being notable recent examples. In the following section, I will argue that we now see more explicit feminism on television than

during *The Sopranos* original run. This potentially changes our interpretation of texts, like *The Sopranos*, that were thought of as progressive for their time.

In the 2010s, mainstream societal perceptions of masculinity and the narratives surrounding its 'crisis' underwent significant transformations. The #MeToo movement reshaped societal conceptions of masculinity, undermined the narrative that men were being victimised by feminism, and altered the ways that masculinity was talked about in mainstream journalistic outlets (The Economist 2018; Graf 2018; Frye 2018). These changing discourses are perhaps most evident in the shifts to how 'traditional' masculinity is now often talked about—most notably the popularisation of the term "toxic masculinity" and the much more explicit acknowledgement of the link between masculinity and sexual violence (Fileborn & Loney-Howes 2019).

Triggered by the Weinstein scandal in 2017, the #MeToo movement quickly transcended social media and became a global phenomenon. According to Frye, its aim is to protect women's rights and end sexual harassment and assault against women in the workplace (Frye 2018). In a front-page op-ed of *The Economist*, it was suggested that #MeToo "is not about sex so much as about power—how power is distributed, and how people are held accountable when power is abused" (The Economist 2018). A 2018 study by the Pew Research Centre found that far more women had experienced sexual harassment than men:

> Some 44% of Americans say they have received unwanted sexual advanced or verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature. About six-in-ten women (59%) say they have experienced this and 27% of men say the same (Garf 2018).

According to Yuwei Ge (2018, p. 40), the #MeToo movement formed an alliance that sought to renegotiate women's roles and status today as well as giving a voice to women who have

been silenced by the threat or experience of sexual assault and harassment. The influence of the movement is demonstrated in several notable activist programs. For example, the #TimesUp project aims to address the "systemic inequality and injustice in the workplace that have kept underrepresented groups from reaching their full potential" by providing recourses and legal support to women experiencing workplace harassment (Fileborn 2019). Similarly, efforts have been established outside of the U.S. Examples include the NOW campaign in Australian and French efforts to pass legislation that addressed public sexual harassment and outlaws 'catcalling' (Fileborn 2019). As such, the overwhelming global scale of sexual assault and harassment being perpetuated by powerful men has seen conceptions of masculinity drastically altered and feminisms generally become more publicly visible.

There appears to be a consensus amongst scholars that feminism "has gained new luminosity" (Gill 2017, p. 611) and is, in effect, trending in mainstream media post #MeToo. In 2017, Nicola Rivers (2017 p. 2) wrote that "the idea that feminism is encountering renewed levels of interest is not particularly contentious". In contrast to the reputation of feminist politics that came with 'crisis of masculinity' discourse, there has been a reemphasis on gender inequality in mainstream media. According to Amy Boyle, feminist scholars have attributed an increase in more visible activism and:

> The way certain feminisms (along with social movements) are being incorporated into brand cultures, the uptick in celebrities and public figures adopting the feminist moniker as well as the proliferation of the internet and digital media (2020, p. 847).

From a TV perspective, there has been a visible surge in the production of original shows that are "explicitly feminist" (Boyle 2020, p. 848). She suggests that:

> Where in the past female and/or feminist consumers might have been resistant consumers who had to read "against the grain", the evolving mediascape has responded to commercial and political changes to cater to specific feminist niche audiences and interests. In the

> evolving television landscape, it has become good business to create women-centric, more explicitly feminist texts. (Boyle 2020, p. 848)

Jessica Ford (2018) argues that starting with *Girls*, there has been a surge in women-centric quality TV that reflects feminist sensibilities. In particular, she cites programs like *Transparent* (2014), *Broad City* (2014), *Insecure* (2014), *One Mississippi* (2015), *Catastrophe* (2015), *Divorce* (2016), *Better Things* (2016) and *SMILF* (2017) as examples of the range of different modes of feminist performance at work in today's televisual landscape (2018, p. 17). Moreover, Jodi Brooks (2019, p. 944) argues that in recent years there has been a" wave of female-led" quality TV. In her book *Woman-Up: Evoking Feminism in Quality Television*, Havas (2022) provides analysis of programs that can be categorised as feminist quality TV. She argues that the centrality of women and their experiences in these programs is a "rhetorical subversion of the masculine coded—quality television culture". Additionally, she argues that these programs merged the "aesthetic exceptionalism" once associated with male-centric shows like *The Sopranos* with a progressive feminist rhetoric (2022, p. 9). Moreover, Boyle (2020) argues that it is very possible for these programs to spill over to real-world feminist cultural work and activism. For example, in April 2017, *The Handmaid's Tale* inspired a series of cosplay protests against anti-abortion legislation in Texas. Boyle goes onto explain that these protests have:

> Continued transnationally, with the handmaid heralded as what BBC calls 'an international' protest symbol against heteropatriarchal oppression. (2020, p. 849)

As such, we can see that the state of feminism on television is very different to *The Sopranos* original 2000s context. What we mean by a 'feminist television show' has changed substantially since *The Sopranos'* original airing. As I will explore later, this calls into question whether the show would have been seen as equally progressive in this 2020s setting as it was when it first went on the air. I will now turn my attention to how another context of

interpretation—the gangster genre—that helped frame *The Sopranos* as feminist is also different in the 2020s.

The Gangster Genre in the 2020s

In 2020, the gangster film is a much less prominent context of interpretation for new viewers coming to *The Sopranos*. While there has been limited scholarship on the downturn in mafia film production, there has been some speculation made by journalists and cultural critics. In the wake of Martin Scorsese's swansong Mafia film, *The Irishmen* (2019) the BBC, Varsity and Vox all ran articles speculating as to why there had been a decline in mafia films (Newland 2019; Kaul 2021). Christina Newland (2019) notes that there have still been plenty of crime films made today but "the epic period-set organised crime drama is one type of film which may become increasingly rare, especially given the best of its creators are offering a swan song for it right in front of us". Similarly, Anika Kaul (2021) wrote that in the wake of *The Irishman*, "one glaringly obvious fact emerged: the Mafia film was finished… despite the filmic mastery of Scorsese's swansong, the genre had been exhausted, and the golden age of the gangster movie was officially over". Scorsese himself has hinted at the fact that he will not make another mafia movie. Interestingly, Kaul has cited what she identifies as the problematic elements of the genre:

> Gangster films have been criticised for their lack of diversity, their treatment of women and their extreme violence. All of these stem from the image of a machismo perpetuated by Mafia film, in which men exert authority, influence and power… meanwhile, there is a distinct lack of female agency. (2021)

Kaul (2021) tracks the gangster genre over the last 20 years and argues that from the 2000s, the gangster film has had "less potency and popularity than before." Of course, as I have outlined the gangster genre was a critical lens through which *The Sopranos* understood. The show itself requires a certain level of gangster film literacy—if new audiences are watching

the show in an environment in which they are far less possible it is possible this has implications for how they could read the show.

Technological Changes in Television

There has been a slew of technological developments since *The* Sopranos' final episode in 2007 that have altered how we watch and study television. Perhaps the most important—and most critical to constructing the show as a 2020s text—is the rapid proliferation of SVOD Platforms like Netflix, HBO Max and Disney+ which have transformed television watching norms. These developments have necessitated a rethinking of traditional approaches to television studies. For example, scholars have been forced to consider how algorithms and different economic models influence the production and reception of television (Lotz 2021; Cox 2018). As I previously mentioned, how we watch television can be integral to our interpretation of the text. For new viewers of the show, it is likely they will be watching on SVOD platforms which represents a change to earlier modes of viewing.

Recently, there have been calls for television scholars to consider the unique impacts SVOD can have on television production and reception. For Lotz (2021, p. 888), this does not mean that TV scholars should abandon their traditional "cultural studies" approach to TV (e.g. what role does television play in society? How does it shape and how is it shaped by culture?). Rather, they need to update their approach to consider the effect of new norms in televisual consumption (Lotz 2021, p. 888). Ramon Lobato (2018, p. 241) similarly suggests that we need to ask both new and old questions in television research. In the post-broadcast era, SVOD services allow for audiences to have vastly different, individualised experiences (Lobato 2018, p. 241). Lotz (2021) argues that streaming provides the opportunity for viewers to curate their own stories and consume at their own pace and on their own schedule. This has shifted the logic of television from one of scheduling to one of curation (Lotz 2021,

p. 890). In this regard, individual programs may only have a fraction of the cultural power compared to their broadcast era counterparts. Post-broadcast era ratings data is also much harder to come by. Companies like Netflix are generally reluctant to make any data available to researchers (or the public, except when it suits their PR purposes) (Wayne & Ana 2021). This has meant that it's harder to make assumptions about what people are watching than during the broadcast era. However, Lotz (887) is quick to point out that this does not mean that television programs do not yield cultural power anymore—quite the contrary. As noted by Castro and Cascajosa (2020), Steemers (2016) and Doyle (2017), SVOD allows for vastly different approaches to content production. Companies like Netflix are not compelled to prioritize series that will attract the largest audience. Rather, they can target niche demographics and simultaneously service many different sensibilities and aggregate viewers across national borders (Lotz 2021). Programs that target niche audiences on SVOD often wield more cultural power than programs with broader appeal. As Lotz argues, this is because:

> A series that is consumed by not many in particular, but small, taste cluster might have the cultural significance equivalent or greater than a title widely viewed by more people in general. (2021, p.890)

For example, the Netflix series, *Sense 8*, was praised for its non-binary representation of gender and sexuality; it appeared to be widely viewed amongst those who may identify as part of a queer embracing taste culture (Lotz 2021, p. 890). Conversely, while a viral Netflix movie like *Birdbox* was likely viewed by more subscribers overall, it may not have had the same subcultural significance as *Sense 8* (Lotz 2021, p. 891).

There is now a growing body of research on the new viewing behaviours that SVOD platforms encourage. There has been a particular interest in the practice of 'binge watching' (Jenner 2016; Halfmann & Reinecke 2021). Simply put, 'binge watching' is a practice in

which a viewer watches several episodes of a program in one uninterrupted sitting. Mittell (2015) has discussed how TV-on-DVD originally enabled this viewing habit. DVDs gave viewers unrestricted access to a program and removed their reliance on broadcast schedules. With the widespread adoption of SVOD, this practice became increasingly mainstream (Halfmann & Reinecke 2021). Subscribers can access a seemingly endless library of content at their own pace. Jenner (2016), Burroughs (2018), Frey (2021) and Varela and Kaun (2019) argue that SVOD platforms actively encourage this type of viewing. Starting with *Arrested Development* in 2013, Netflix established an approach to releasing original content that involved releasing every episode of a given season at once. As Jenner put it:

> Netflix argued at the time that this was a response to assumed viewer behaviour of so-called binge-watching, supposing that viewers would wish to watch more than one episode in one sitting or, at least, schedule their consumption as they pleased (2016, p. 258).

Such an approach to watching goes beyond the way that television programs are released to also include impacts on programming content. In the case of *Arrested Development*, it "seemingly responded more to the needs of self-scheduled, rather than scheduled television" (Jenner 2016, p. 258). This trend continued with most Netflix original programming being produced with 'binge watching' in mind. As SVOD platforms have become more sophisticated, they have implemented tools that seemingly make binge-watching the default mode of consumption. For example, most platforms will automatically play the next episode in a series unless the viewer actively stops it (Netflix; Disney+; Stan; Prime Video). While *The Sopranos* was not written with binge watching in mind, it is now mostly accessed through streaming platforms (Binge in Australia, HBO Max internationally). The show's mere presence on such platforms means that it is surrounded by features like 'auto-play' and recommendation algorithms that encourage viewers to binge watch and change the viewing environment for the audience.

Finally, it would be remiss to not mention the Covid-19 pandemic as an additional factor impacting viewing habits during the early 2020s. According to Liedke (2021) companies like Netflix saw a surge in subscribers and revenue during the pandemic. There has been an emerging field of scholarship that has tracked changes in how audiences – who were frequently trapped inside for long periods of time—used television and SVOD platforms. For example, Dixit et al. (2020) researched SVOD consumption during the first year of the pandemic. They found that 71% of their respondents noted an "increase" in their use of SVOD platforms (2020). The apparent psychological motivation found for binge-watching was to "pass time", "relieve stress" and "[alleviate] loneliness" (2020). This led the researchers to conclude that this might indicate that binge-watching was used as a 'coping mechanism' during the uncertainty of the pandemic. Moreover, Hermes and Hill (2020, p. 655) have argued that the events of the pandemic reconsolidated TV as a "master storyteller and as a platform for cultural citizenship". As will be considered in chapter 5 and 6, this may have an impact on how *The Sopranos* is being decoded by viewers at the present time, with the pandemic offering new motivations for, and experiences of, television viewing.

Two Different Sopranos?

Through a review of the relevant literature, I have contextualised *The Sopranos* in two different cultural settings. When looking at the program in the 2000s—its original historical context—we can see that it was understood by scholars through the lenses of quality, the gangster genre, feminism, and televisual technologies. For the most part, the show was seen as disruptive and progressive, and as uncovering the feminist possibilities of the gangster genre. It was also understood by some as representing the feminist possibilities of 'masculinity in crisis.

When looking at *The Sopranos* in the 2020s, however, we can see its reception and interpretation potentially shaped by a different set of televisual and cultural circumstances. In the years since the show's original broadcast, there has been a surge in public feminism, attributable in part to the #MeToo movement, that has manifested in a wave of quality, women-centred television programming. This has introduced to the televisual landscape of the 2020s an explicit feminism that wasn't really there during the 2000s. Additionally, how audiences watch television has been drastically, technologically transformed since 2007. SVOD platforms have brought with them significant implications relating to how television is now produced, accessed and understood. Throughout this thesis, I will contend that watching *The Sopranos* in these contemporary contexts has the capacity to significantly alter the ways in which the show can be decoded.

This is important, because scholarly interest in *The Sopranos* has not continued despite its recent popular resurgence. Understandings of the show remain firmly rooted in the original 2000s context. Of course, this makes sense—most research on *The Sopranos* was done decades ago. It is hardly fair to expect scholars to anticipate drastic technological and cultural changes. However, as the show has gained new audiences in the last couple of years, I argue that there is a need to revaluate this older scholarship if we want to understand the show in its current cultural and technological settings. There is a wealth of literature that considers how interpretations of a text can be altered based on the age, gender or ethnicity of the viewer (which will be discussed in the methodology chapter) but it is rare for scholars to consider *when* a text was viewed as having a significant impact on its meaning. In the next chapter I will outline the methodological approach I have taken to explore how new contexts of interpretation outlined here allow for what I am calling 'retrospective readings' of the show.

Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter will outline the mixed methods approach that I took to investigate the 'new ways' that audiences are engaging with *The Sopranos* in the 2020s. In this study, I used both textual analysis and semi-structured research interviews. I will first discuss my approach to the televisual textual analysis and define my unique approach which I term a 'retrospective reading.' I then outline how I conducted semi-structured research interviews with 11 self-identified fans about their perceptions and experiences watching *The Sopranos* in the present time.

This thesis incorporated my own close textual analysis of *The Sopranos*. The purpose of this was to provide an academic reading that sought to interpret the show in an updated cultural setting. To achieve this, I drew from the work of Bordwell (2008) and Mittell (2015) to develop an approach that I have termed as 'retrospective reading'. My approach is considerate of how new contexts of interpretations can alter a text's meaning. In undertaking my retrospective reading, I considered how new paratexts (such as reviews, popular blog posts and social media posts) and cultural contexts (such as the covid-19 pandemic and #meToo) have helped to 'reconstruct' the show's meanings and create different audience expectations and interpretations. This also included consideration of the new viewing practices enabled by the streaming platforms through which *The Sopranos* is now predominantly accessed.

My approach to textual analysis has been informed by Bordwell's work on poetics. In his book *Poetics on Cinema* (2008) Bordwell suggests that we should take external factors into account when analysing a text. This involves not only analysing the "form and style" of various films, it also means:

> Mount[ing] explanations of how films work, and why under certain circumstances they come to look the way they do. Those explanations [should] invoke a wide range of factors: artistic intentions, craft guidelines, institutional constraints, peer norms, social influences, and cross-cultural regularities and disparities of human conduct. (2008, p.1).

The core justification that Bordwell (2008, p. 22) gives for his theory is that the production of films is historically variable. He writes that, for example, the "music theory taught in Paris conservatories of the 1880s was very different from that taught to musicians in India" (2008, p.22). It is for this very reason that:

> We need historical poetics, one that recognizes art is made differently under different circumstances. A historical poetics, it seems to me, should be alert for commonalities among apparently diverse norms. Conventions shared across distinct art traditions can be as important as those of narrower provenance… A poetics can reveal both change and continuity among norms by reconstructing a historical context. (2008, p. 22)

Bordwell's analytical paradigm then posits two central questions that we should ask when analysing a film. Firstly, we must dissect the "analytical poetics"—what are the principles according to which films are constructed and through which they achieve effects? (Bordwell 2008, p. 23). Then, we can move into questioning "historical poetics"—How and why have these principles arisen and changed in particular circumstances? (Bordwell 2008, p. 23). Of course, Bordwell's work is specifically focused on film and film theory. Mittell (2015) has applied Bordwell's approach to television in his theorisation of complex TV. The term complex TV refers to the emergence of highly elaborate and complex forms of television throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Complex TV is defined as a "storytelling mode and set of associated production and reception practises that span a wide range of programs across genres" (Mittell 2015, p. 17). Using Bordwell's theory, Mittell placed the emergence of complex programs (like *The Sopranos*) into industry developments within specific contexts

of production, circulation and reception. In his approach to complex TV "innovations are not viewed as creative breakthroughs by visionary artists, but at the nexus of numerous historical forces that work to transform norms and possibilities" (Mittell 2015, p. 6). This thesis will use Bordwell (2008) and Mittell's (2015) work in a slightly different way that does not just focus on texts and production. Specifically, I am interested in how commercial and cultural factors may impact the *reception*—rather than the *production*—of *The Sopranos*. Such an approach will allow me to investigate how shifting cultural factors, audience expectations and technological advancements have the potential to alter dominant readings of older texts. This will, in turn, enable me to demonstrate how retrospectively watching the show can bring with it a set of new circumstances and contexts that transform the meaning and potential cultural work of the show. While these may have nothing to do with the production of the text, they certainly have the potential to influence how audiences understand and interpret these texts.

My retrospective reading of *The Sopranos* was careful to take new paratexts into consideration. Gray (2010) used the term to describe the vast array of materials that media consumers engage with in addition to the text itself. These include things like trailers, toys, reviews, and audience discussions. Gray (2010, p. 30) argues that these seemingly banal elements of media can play a role in setting narrative expectations and preparing the audience for the text to come. In relation to *The Sopranos*, relevant paratexts that potentially shape audience interpretations can include reviews, media articles, and social media pages. These types of paratexts are important because they have helped keep *The Sopranos* visible in contemporary discussions about television—particularly through the constant labelling of *The Sopranos* as "one of the greatest series of all time" (Sepinwall 2022; Sheffield 2016). As such, I propose they function as possible "entryway paratexts" (Gray 2010 p. 23) to *The Sopranos* and establish audience expectations in particular ways. After all, if *The Sopranos* is

represented as one of the 'greatest television programs' it is important to consider how that could affect expectations for new viewers of the program.

Using Complex TV as an Analytical Guide

I used Mittell's theorisation of complex TV as a framework to help me identify key analytical elements of *The Sopranos* text. Mittell's discussion of the various properties and contexts of complex TV is a useful starting point for understanding the nexus of technological, commercial and cultural factors that underpin the production and reception of television texts. This allowed me to consider what components of *The Sopranos*' context could change with time and how these could affect likely interpretations of the show going forward.

In the following section, I will outline the properties of complex television that have guided my analysis of *The Sopranos.* Broadly speaking, Mittell discusses the qualities of complex TV through nine broad categories—beginnings, authorship, character, comprehension, evaluation, serial melodrama, orienting paratexts, transmedia storytelling and ends (2015). Some of these categories are more useful than others in my analysis of *The Sopranos.* To this end, I will pay particular attention to the categories of authorship, characters, comprehensions, evaluation and orienting paratexts. Not only is the interplay between technological, cultural, commercial, and textual factors most pronounced here, but they are also the elements most susceptible to variability in interpretation over time.

In his discussion of authorship, Mittell (2015, p. 86) argues that complex TV programs helped popularise the notion of a "star showrunner." This mostly occurred through new technologically enabled paratexts like podcasts, documentaries, Twitter feeds, and blogs that allowed TV creators to speak directly to viewers. Mittell (2015, p. 86) argues that it was these paratexts which helped construct star showrunners like Joss Whedon (*Buffy The Vampire Slayer*), Dan Harmon (*Community*) and David Chase (*The Sopranos*). Of course,

television is an "intensely collaborative" production process and Mittell argues that it would be problematic to attribute the entire creative process to one person:

> Such notions of authorship, even in its managerial conception, oversimply the creative process and threaten to deny agency to the array of contributors who help make television." (2015, p. 95)

For Mittell, this model of authorship has clear benefits for television producers as it linked:

> Both the literary notion of the creative genius working in solitude to give birth to a finished work of art and to notions of authority that assure a work's interpretive frame and cultural validation. (2015, p. 96)

Therefore, he understands this model of authorship as a discursive production. Mittell (2015, p. 95) posits that viewers rely on this inferred author function to help make sense of complex television programs. Analysing the presence of this type of authorship in *The Sopranos* reveals possibilities for retrospective readings since public perceptions of showrunners change over time. Moreover, they will often publicly comment on ambiguous or controversial elements of their show years after it has gone off the air. Take the slew of recent interviews in which David Chase cryptically comments on Tony's fate in the last episode of the show (Fabiano 2021; Langmann 2021; Brockes 2019). Furthermore, just because the show is off the air does not mean a showrunner will stop engaging with audiences. There is the possibility for them to discuss the show in new cultural and political contexts that reshape how viewers watch the show. For example, David Chase, did a string of interviews in 2019 for the 20th anniversary of *The Sopranos* in which he claimed, "*The Sopranos* would never be made today" (Brockes 2019). Series actor and writer Michael Imperioli started his podcast *Talking Sopranos* in 2020 that was centred in him and co-host Steve Schirripa experience working on the show. On the show, the frequently talk about the show in relation to current

political events—famously discussing who Tony Soprano would vote for in the 2020 US election.

Mittell (2015, p. 164) also writes about how complex programs maintain and play with viewer comprehension. He places an emphasis on how different viewing practises (whether they are defined by weekly and seasonal instalments through broadcast schedules, or the more variable patterns afforded by DVD and time-shifting) influence the ways in which viewers comprehend a given program. Mittell (2015, p. 164) argues that programs can potentially trigger memories or exploit viewers' fading memories to create unusual surprises. He is interested in the ways that complex programs can leverage this in their approach to suspense, surprise, and anticipation. It is likely that the new audiences of *The Sopranos* are engaged in viewing practises not anticipated during the production of the show. As such, there is the potential for new modes of audience comprehension. It is worth considering how viewing practises, especially ones brought on by technological changes, impact audience comprehension of older television texts like *The Sopranos*.

I have also placed emphasis on the "orienting paratexts" that commonly surround complex TV texts. Often, these are paratexts that help viewers make sense of complex television's temporality, characters, plot and spatial orientation. Mittell (2015, p. 261) notes that these paratexts are usually fan made and are representative of how viewer practises have "adapted to the digital era." Fan wikis (like *Lost's* 'Lostpedia;), are perhaps the best examples of fan-made orienting paratexts. In the case of my retrospective analysis of *The Sopranos*, even though the show has been off the air, fans have not ceased producing paratexts. While the show's wiki was never as prolific as other more "drillable" (Mittell 2009) shows like *Lost* or *Game of Thrones*, there is a wide range of social media accounts and forums that may serve as orienting paratexts for some viewers. For example, there was a notable growth in

such forum discussion about the show during the pandemic. In this sense, there is the possibility for new orienting paratexts to influence how viewers understand the show.

Finally, the textual endings of complex TV programs were another point of emphasis in this study. Mittell (2015, p. 319) observes that, during the network era, commercial television privileged a narrative model in which a successful series never ends. In fact, a final episode was usually regarded as a sign of commercial failure. This is not so much the case with complex TV programs though. Mittell (2015, p. 320) notes that they will often feature planned conclusions that embrace "ambiguity, circularity, reflexivity and finality." While these endings can turn ongoing serials into bounded, completed works they can also trigger divergent critic and audience reactions (Mittell 2015, p.320). It is common to see shows retrospectively evaluated by critics and audiences based on their finale. Perhaps the most famous recent example of this being the ending of *Game of Thrones*. *The Sopranos* also features a infamously ambiguous and controversial ending. For new viewers coming to the show, it is possible that a vague awareness of this ending might frame how they watch the show. This represents the possibility for a different way that new audiences might be oriented to watch the show that is only made possible retrospectively.

Approaches to Textual Analysis

In my textual analysis of *The Sopranos,* I placed emphasis on the medium of television. Textual analysis as a method has long been linked to art and literary studies, where texts have been studied through in-depth, formal analysis (Lotz & Gray 2012, p.32). In the same way that a scholar might study how a poem's explicit meaning is made resonate by word choice, rhyme scheme or tempo, this project investigates how meaning is brought to the fore through the specific textual features of *The Sopranos*. I embraced the assumption that nothing comes into a program "by accident" and regarded "every sound, image, character, plot point, or choice" as worthy of analysis (Gray & Lotz 2012, p. 32). However, while certain elements of

textual analysis can be applied across mediums, it was important that I engaged with the specificities of television as its own medium. In 1978, John Fiske and John Hartley (p.5) argued that "the tools of literary and dramatic appreciation are by now very sophisticated. But those tools will not necessarily do it for television." They further spoke to this difference between television and other mediums, stating that:

> It is by no means natural for television to represent reality in the way that it does, just as it is by no means natural for language to do so. Both language and television mediate reality… An understanding of the way in which television structures and presents its picture of reality can go a long way to helping us understand the way in which our society works. (Fiske & Hartley 1978, p. 17)

Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch (1994) elaborated on this by theorising specific approaches to analysing television. They stressed the importance of considering television's ideological work as a process rather than as a static episode or series. They argue that "Television in its role as cultural medium presents a multiplicity of meanings, rather than a monolithic dominant point of view. (Newcomb and Hirsch 1994, p. 562). In large part, this was because there was no single 'author' of a television text in the way there is for a literary text. Television production is a highly collaborative process—both above and below the line. This is especially the case for *The Sopranos* as it ran for a long period of time and featured a changing roster of creative personal. The cultural contexts that surrounded the show also changed over its eight-year run (1999-2007). This TV specific approach to textual analysis allowed me to consider the series alongside evolving contexts and the specificities of how television is produced.

My analysis of *The Sopranos* was not limited to a particular season or set of episodes. Rather, I took the whole series into account. I drew out and analysed specific character and narrative arcs that spanned the entirety of the show's 8-year run. Analysing the show in this

way mirrored the participant's viewing experience. Since the show was broadcast years ago, viewers today are likely to experience the show in a more continuous way—there are no yearlong gaps between seasons. Often, the analysis in this thesis will reference scenes from specific episodes. Individual episodes will be indicated by noting the episode number and the season followed by the episode number in parentheses, for example (6.8) would be used for season 6 episode 8 of the show.

I have also added a retrospective dimension to this project's textual analysis of *The Sopranos*. This means considering the program through new lenses and with different contexts that exist beyond the text itself as well as outside its original contexts of production. While this is a new approach that has not been used in previous studies, there are some scholars whose work I used for guidance. In particular, I took cues from the work of Alexander Doty (2011, p. 473), who provided a reading of the life and work of Alfred Hitchcock through a "queer lens." He makes it clear that his reading isn't trying to insinuate that queer themes are inherent properties of Hitchcock, but that new lenses can be brought to bear on old texts and thereby change their original meaning:

> If we understand "queer" as a verb then it's about reading [Hitchcock's life] or his work form a certain cultural or theoretical position. One focus is upon how particular culturally—or theoretically—informed readers understand Hitchcock and his work in queer ways (Doty 2011, p. 473).

Doty's approach is particularly useful to how I conducted my reading of *The Sopranos* as well as for how I approached the participant responses in the research interviews. For example, there is a significant amount of online discussion hat is concerned with *The Sopranos* in reference to contemporary events. For example, the *GQ Magazine* (Unterberger 2020) article that I discussed in the introduction chapter, outlines how the "dark themes" of the show correspond with the anxieties and uncertainty surrounding covid and the US

political climate. While these events occurred well after the production of *The Sopranos*, they can still contribute to how new audiences might understand the show when watching in the present time. Taking an approach like Doty's can be used to reveal how older texts can take on new meanings in new contexts.

I also took some cues from Chinua Achebe's (1977) work on re-reading and revisiting older texts. Of course, many of the concepts that Achebe's work engages with were far beyond the scope of this research. But the theoretical tools he developed were still useful in illuminating the impact that old texts (especially those in the 'western canon') can have in a contemporary cultural setting. His work also helped me orient my reading in a way that could question dominant scholarly assumptions and televisual canons. In his re-reading of Joseph Conrad's novel, *The Heart of Darkness* (1899) Achebe (1977) challenged the (then) seemingly ubiquitous celebration of the book by western scholars and established place in university syllabuses. This was mostly achieved through a close reading of Conrad's work and life. Achebe (1977, p. 794) draws textual evidence to argue that *The Heart of Darkness* is an inherently racist text that contributed to the perpetuation of racist ideas about Africa. For example, he points to textual evidence to conclude that "Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist"; this is a "simple truth that is glossed over by criticisms of his work" (1997, p. 782). The element of Achebe's work that is most useful to my project was his discussion of how a text could be re-read in a later cultural setting. His essay begins with a description of a personal encounter in which Achebe witnessed the ideology of *The Heart of Darkness* manifesting in a student's attitudes towards African Studies. In the encounter, Achebe is asked what he teaches by a student. When Achebe tells him he is a professor of African literature the student responded by saying "I never thought of Africans as having that kind of stuff" (1997, p. 783). Achebe (1997, p. 783) very clearly demonstrates how, in this case, old texts that remain in a cultural canon can still inform contemporary notions of race. He also

outlines the problems with relying on homogenous scholarly readings of a text. In the case of retrospectively reading *The Sopranos* we can see some similar elements at play. For example, 2020s discourses about masculinity (a prominent theme in the show) has the potential to inform new discussions about the show. As I have discussed in the literature review, the common assertion in the scholarship that *The Sopranos* provides a "progressive" and "rich" critique of masculinity (Lee 2004; Johnson 2007; Donatelli and Alward 2002). This study places emphasise on how these understandings might be complicated by new cultural contexts that have reframed mainstream discourses about gender. The tools that Achebe developed in his reading of *Heart of Darkness* helped me to look back at the show with a critical eye and understand its cultural impact in a new setting.

Approaches to Audience Studies

Alongside my retrospective reading of *The Sopranos*, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with 11self-identified fans who watched the show for the first time between 2020-2021. The participants in this study were all 'young' (18-26 y/o) fans of *The Sopranos* who encountered the show for the first time more than a decade after it broadcast its final episode. I asked the participants about the contexts in which they watched *The Sopranos* and the meaning they took from the show. This was done in order to 'test out' my own retrospective readings—I aimed to identify the extent to which the participants were influenced by the same contexts of interpretations in their own retrospective readings of the show.

The study begins from the assumption that television audiences are active decoders of meaning. Audiences are diverse and there are potentially limitless ways in which they can decode the same text. I also accepted that the social and cultural circumstances of an audience member may play a significant role in shaping how they drew meaning from a text. In this, I am influenced by the work of scholars like Stuart Hall (1973) and Tamer Liebes and Elihu Katz (1994). The work of critical theorists like Hall (1973) makes room for alternate readings

of texts and acknowledges that an active audience may even read texts oppositionally. Moreover, Liebes and Katz have emphasised how the way we take meaning from a text can be contingent on our cultural contexts of interpretation (1994). This study was interested in identifying how a retrospective dimension might further contribute to multiple and shifting meanings associated with media texts.

I conducted semi-structured research interviews why my participants to understand their experience watching *The Sopranos* during the 2020s. I chose to use semi-structured interviews as they allowed for a more flexible and conversational interview tone. Semi-structured interview protocols often include a list of open-ended questions prepared by the research that are posed to all respondents. But crucially, the interviewer has the freedom and flexibility to add other question or vary the wording or order of the questions posed from the list, if the respondent's unique characteristics make it necessary or useful (Adams, 2015, p 494). For this study, semi-structured interviews were used for their capacity to generate rich qualitative data about audience perceptions and experiences. They gave me the freedom to follow up on interesting responses and angles in a way that wouldn't be possible if I used a rigid set of interview questions. They also allowed me to tap into what Patricia Leavy (2014, p. 277) describes as the "knowledge producing potential of dialogues". That is, the interviewer was afforded the capacity to guide the conversation and create a more casual, relaxed environment. Of course, still having some structure in the form of a set of questions allowed me to focus the conversation on issues that were relevant to the project and create points of comparison between participants. Additionally, semi-structured research interviews allowed the interviewer to elicit deeper, more personal responses about the subject matter. Ultimately, this style of interviewing provided the potential for the most detail and insight into how the participants might understand *The Sopranos* in contemporary contexts of interpretation.

There were two broad considerations that guided the development of my research interviews. Firstly, it was important that these interviews facilitated a 'natural', conversational setting that empowered participants to give their own perspectives. Secondly, I needed to consider my own role in the research—in particular my status as a self-identified fan of the show. It was important to leverage the potential benefits of my "insider" status while taking precautions to limit any disadvantages that come with it.

To facilitate a natural, conversational environment in the research interviews I borrowed elements of Katz and Liebes (1990) approach from their book *The Export of Meaning.* Their study investigated how individuals from different ethnic groups decoded meaning from the program *Dallas* (1978). Ultimately, they wanted to learn how audiences decode what they see and hear and how they talk about it. While I opted for semi-structured research interviews (unlike Katz and Liebes who used focus groups), aspects of their underlying logic were transferrable to the present study. Katz and Liebes (1990, p. 23) were interested in the role that conversation plays as a mediating process via which a program (such as *Dallas*) "enters into the culture". They aimed to facilitate organic conversations that could closely emulate this process. They were concerned with creating an environment as close to a "natural" conversational setting as possible (1990, p. 23). This study was interested in the processes of meaning making and reasoning behind participants' readings of *The Sopranos.* As such, the research interviews took on a casual tone—I probed responses from participants, asking them to explain their reasoning and logic. I found that often, this resulted in participants using me a sounding board and they often felt comfortable enough to think out loud. This 'natural' setting was important to the study as it gave audiences a space to recount their experiences in depth and ultimately yielded rich qualitative data.

Another key methodological consideration for the interview process was how I balanced my position as a researcher and self-identified fan of *The Sopranos.* While I did find

my position as an insider to be helpful—as it allowed me to develop a strong rapport with participants and create a relaxed interview environment—it also brought with it potential pitfalls and concerns. How could I ensure that I was not directing participants to forgone conclusions? How would my status as a fan influence my interactions with participants? I drew from the body of work on insider research and fan studies to help navigate these potential issues. Melanie Greene's (2014) work on the methodological pros and cons of insider research was particularly useful in helping me leverage this 'insider status'. She writes that it can be advantageous for insider researchers to lean into their knowledge about area:

> [Insider researchers] have the ability to ask more meaningful questions and read non-verbal cues as well as the ability to project a more truthful, authentic understanding of the culture understudy. (Greene 2014, p. 3)

In the context of these research interviews, this knowledge was beneficial in the way Greene described. My pre-existing status as a fan and knowledge of the show allowed me to ask more specific follow-up questions and to create more organic discussion. Even though it's a simple thing, my ability to 'get' all the participants' esoteric Sopranos references really helped to create a positive interviewer/interviewee rapport. Greene (2014, p. 4) has described how an insider status can help with interview/interview interaction. She writes that:

> [unlike the outsider researcher] interaction is more natural and they [the insider] is less likely to stereotype and pass judgment on the participants under study. [Participants] are usually happy to talk, often welcoming the opportunity to discuss issues with someone who understands. (Greene 2014, p. 3-4)

Again, being part of *The Sopranos* fandom—and being around the same age as the participants—made conversation less stilted and allowed me to get more interesting data. I found during the recruitment and interview process that participants were very excited to talk about the show with another fan. At the end of each interview, I would thank each participant

for their time, and a common response to this was "thanks for letting me talk about *The Sopranos* for an hour!" As such, my status as an insider facilitated a level of openness that allowed me to tap into a new vein of useful data.

Of course, there are also drawbacks associated with insider research that needed to be considered in the design of this study. John Aguiler (1981, p. 15) suggests that insider involvement is a "deterrent to objective perception and analysis… The perception of the insider researcher is narrowed, as too much is familiar, research at home limits the analysis of social and cultural structures and patterns." Likewise, Dydia DeLyser (2001, p. 441) notes that greater familiarity can lead to a loss of "objectivity" and there is thus a rise of a researcher "making assumptions based on prior knowledge and experience." To mitigate this as much as possible, I drew on some of the tactics developed by Chavez in her own insider research (2008). She argues that, while it can be difficult, it is imperative that the researcher keeps themselves at least somewhat distanced. Without this distance, there is the potential for casual, deferring responses from participants (such as "you know what I mean" or "we talked about that before"). Christina Chavez advises that researchers begin their research with a disclaimer:

> A way to indicate to participants that while they may have already discussed these issues in a more casual setting, it would be best if they could pretend as though they were talking about it for the first time. (2008, p. 494)

I used this technique in my research interviews. I encouraged participants to explain their responses, to talk through and explain their meaning, rather than assuming that I would automatically understand. This helped reduce some of the ambiguities that could arise from responses in a more casual interview like this.. Being an insider also brings with it unique considerations in relation to the researcher/participant power dynamic. Greene (2014, p. 5) writes that, especially when researching one's peer group, there is always the potential for a

power struggle. There are countless factors, like age, ethnicity and gender, that could contribute to a potential "power struggle" between interviewer/interviewee that I wanted to limit as much as possible (Greene 2014, p. 5). For example, I was conscious that being interviewed by someone who is both a fan and researcher of *The Sopranos* could be intimidating for a participant. There is the possibility that this could influence them to give answers that preserve their status or that they think will legitimate them in the eyes of the researcher or that they would consider me the 'expert' and hence defer to me (Chavez 2008). I wanted to do as much as I could to minimise this type of power dynamic entirely. Luckily, Greene has discussed ways to reduce power differentials. She writes that:

> An important factor to remember is that during fieldwork a researcher's power is negotiated, not given. Insider researchers may therefore choose to conceptualize or present themselves as co-investigators or advocates in an attempt to minimize the power differential between themselves and the research participant. (2014, p. 12)

I was careful to take this approach to my research, taking steps to create an environment in which the participant felt like a co-investigator. I emphasised that the purpose of the interview was to understand the participants own individual experience watching *The Sopranos*. I framed the interview questions as tools for both the interviewer and interviewee to prompt conversation and stressed that I was not to be considered the 'expert' in this interaction. As a result, I was able to minimise the potential negatives of insider research while still maintaining the benefits that come with it.

Study Design

The research interviews sought to understand the new ways that young audiences might read texts like *The Sopranos* and were designed to investigate the prevalence of retrospective readings of old programs amongst new viewers. I used these interviews to uncover how current cultural contexts influenced the ways in which the participants engaged with and

interpreted the program. The interview questions sought to understand how young audiences might read *The Sopranos* in the 2020s. I wanted to understand whether contemporary contexts of interpretations allowed for possibly subversive readings of the show. If so, were there particular features of the show that were most impacted by these readings?

My research interviews included two exclusion criteria. Firstly, I only recruited participants between the ages of 18-26. As this project was focused on how new audiences potentially create retrospective readings of older texts, I wanted to ensure that my participants could not have seen the show in its original run. The age limit of 26 ensured that participants would have most likely been too young to watch the program when it originally aired between 1999 and 2007 as they would have been under the age of 12 when the final episode aired. Secondly, participants needed to be self-identified 'fans' of *The Sopranos*. This is because participants needed to have a broader understanding of *The Sopranos* to effectively contribute to the discussion.

I also limited participation to people within Australia. Much of this research is about the way *The Sopranos* engages with contemporary cultural settings. These settings can vary significantly across national borders. For example, the experience of the covid-19 pandemic was very different in Australia compared to the USA. By limiting participation to those within Australia I was able to ensure participants were operating in more closely related cultural contexts.

I was mindful that the research interviews discussed potentially sensitive topics surrounding gender, feminism and personal experiences. To help make sure my participants felt comfortable discussing these topics I only undertook the interviews with the masculine-identifying participants. A feminine-identifying researcher undertook interviews with feminine-identifying participants.

Sample Size and Recruitment

This study included a total of 11 participants who each participated in individual 60-minute research interviews. To recruit participants, I used a combination of physical flyers and social media posts These prompted interested individuals to email me for further information. I kept recruitment open until I reached thematic saturation (Braun & Clark 2019), which occurred at 11 participants. There were 7 masculine identifying participants and 4 feminine identifying participants interviewed in this study.

The recruitment for this study primarily took place on The University of Adelaide's North Terrace campus. I contacted a number of student media, film and arts associations at Adelaide University and asked them to promote my study. I also contacted student organisations at other major South Australian universities, University of South Australia and Flinders University. The majority of this study was purposefully done on university campus to encourage university students to participate. The reasoning behind this was that universities feature large concentrations of people who are aged between 18-24 years old. Moreover, they are more likely to be comfortable communicating these ideas in an interview setting. However, I did not formally require participants to be university students to be included in the study. I did not exclude any participants who met the selection criteria but were not enrolled in university study. In the end, I recruited two participants who were not university students.

Research Pseudonyms

Each participant in this study was assigned a unique research pseudonym. There was the potential that the research interviews might touch on sensitive topics so it was important to make it clear to the participant's that their contributions to this study would be anonymous

and confidential. Below, I have listed the research pseudonyms used in this study in alphabetical order:

- Alannah
- Alma
- Brad
- Callum
- Darcy
- Jessica
- Harry
- Stephan
- Selina
- Stuart
- Tom

Research Procedure

As mentioned in the discussion of my approach to the research, interviews were semi structured to facilitate casual conversation. Everyone was asked the same broad set of questions and were asked to watch the same set of clips before the interview. This structure allowed me to pursue relevant tangents and for participants to direct the conversations in ways most relevant to them but also provided a shared set of clips from the show in order to serve as a stimulus that everyone could talk to. This project was approved by The University of Adelaide human research ethics committee (approval number H-2021-035). In compliance with this approval, each participant was required to sign a consent from prior to the commencement of the session. I also read out a brief introductory script that outlined the interview procedure and made them aware that some subjects could be potentially distressing and that they could choose to not answer a question or end the interview at any time.

1. ***The Sopranos*** **Clips**

Before the interview session, participants were emailed a YouTube playlist of 12 short clips from *The Sopranos.* They were instructed to watch these clips at their own pace before the interview. These clips were chosen to directly correspond to the aims of this study and the

areas where I thought retrospective readings were possible. The clips were organised into the following three thematic categories.

Nostalgia: *The Sopranos* frequently engages with and critiques the notion of nostalgia. Usually, the program frames this through Tony and his friend's mythologization of the "good old days" of the 1950s. Recent online discourse on culture and fan sites has identified *The Sopranos* itself as conduit for late 1990s and early 2000s nostalgia. In order to draw this out I selected clips where *The Sopranos* engages with nostalgia, with a particular focus on clips that might incite nostalgia for the early 2000s.

- Clip 1: (1.3). AJ and Tony play *Mario Kart* together.
- Clip 2: (5.10). A flashback sequence to an unspecified time in the 1990s—The O.J Simpson trail is featured on a television in the background of every shot.
- Clip 3: (6.15). Paulie is reminiscing and telling stories about "the old days." This aggravates Tony and leads to a verbal dispute, and he claims that "'remember when' is the lowest form of conversation".

Identificatory Figures: I also hoped to determine if new viewers identified with different characters from *The Sopranos.* The majority of academic scholarship about *The Sopranos* assumes that Tony is the primary identificatory figure as he is the main character (Lavery 2002; 2011). However, complex TV programs allow for multiple, nuanced and detailed characters (Mittell 2015). It could be possible that younger audiences were more likely to identify with the younger generation of *The Sopranos* characters. As such, I included the following clips that emphasised intergenerational conflict.

- Clip 5: (4.12) Carmela and Meadow argue over their interpretation of *Billy Bud* at a dinner party.

- Clip 6: (3.6). Tony and Meadow fight over her relationship with another college student.
- Clip 7: (2.9). Tony yells at A.J for being overweight and subsequently apologises.
- Clip 8: (3.13). Ralph tells Jackie Jr. about his father and Tony's card game heist.

Gender: The research aimed to understand how participants viewed *The Sopranos* representation of gender in 2021. Many of the other clips I chose also engage with these issues. However, I chose these extra ones because they explicitly dealt with understandings of gender.

- Clip 9: (6.8). Vito leaves his boyfriend, Johnny Cakes, to return to his life in the mafia.
- Clip 10 (6.8). Vito flirts with Johnny Cakes at a diner.
- Clip 11 (1.1). Tony rants about Gary Cooper and "being a man".
- Clip 12: "The rise and fall of Angie Bonpensiero." A YouTube compilation of clips from the show that demonstrate Angie's character arc.

2. Questionnaire

The first activity interviewees undertook during the research interview was a short questionnaire about their viewing habits. The responses that interviewees provided were useful for my later analysis of the interview data. They helped provide context for how the new televisual landscape may impact the way people are reading old programs. The questions related to how participants watched the show (streaming/DVD etc) and what they had heard about it before watching. I have included a list of survey questions in the appendices (C).

3. Interview

Following the survey, the interviewer component of the session began. These research interviews were semi-structured and designed to facilitate open and casual conversation among the interviewer and interviewee. As such the interviewer was given a list of 16 open

ended questions that were put into the following categories: nostalgia, identificatory figures, and gender. Interviewers were encouraged to ask to follow up questions to keep the conversation on topic, to clarify certain aspects of the questionnaire or to get more detail from a participant. The interviews lasted anywhere from 40 to 60 minutes and the study featured 7 masculine identifying participants and 4 feminine identifying participants.

Data Analysis

My data analysis adhered to a step-by-step coding process that has been outlined by Beard (2017) to help identify what relevant themes and findings emerged from the research interviews. This analysis began after I finished transcribing all 11 of the interview transcripts. The purpose of this coding process was to identify recurrent themes, responses, and ideas. This then enabled me to develop broader categories, which could then be subject to analysis. The process of coding went as follows:

Step 1: I coded the transcripts for recurrent themes, responses and ideas. This enabled me to develop broader analytical categories that were emergent from the data (Beard 2017). The categories I identified were (1) masculinity, (2) feminism, (3) figures of identification, (4) nostalgia, (5) *The Sopranos* in 2021 and (6) *The Sopranos* in real life.

Step 2: I then printed off multiple copies of each interview transcript and sorted them into 6 identical piles and assigned each pile to one of these categories. I then deepened the analysis of themes and patterns by re-reading each pile of transcripts to look for the specific theme. For example, I read pile 1 to look for interview responses or statements that related to masculinity. I then compiled noteworthy phrases or responses into a master word document where I could easily compare data. I was also writing down any observations and connections into an ongoing analysis journal.

My retrospective reading of *The Sopranos* and research interviews have been designed to complement each other. My analysis of *The Sopranos* illuminated specific areas that I could explore further in an audience study. But more so, I chose to take this mixed methods approach to emphasise the potential scope of a retrospective reading. This allowed me to explore how a retrospective reading has implications for how we approach resurgent texts as scholars as well as having a potentially transformative effect on how viewers read a given text.

Chapter 4. Analysis Preface: "*The Sopranos* Experience" in 2020

In his analysis of *The Sopranos,* Eli Weidinger (2013) describes "*The Sopranos* experience". He explains that watching the show during its original broadcast was a unique experience—viewer understandings of the show were intertwined with the "economics of pay-cable television" and the "historical conventions of the gangster genre" (2013 p. ii). But, as I have established in the literature review, the mediums and contexts surrounding *The Sopranos* have changed considerably since the show's original run. In essence, "*The Sopranos* experience" in the 2020s is very different. The purpose of this analysis preface is to establish the parameters of what exactly this experience was for the participants in this study.

It has been well established that distribution platforms can influence how audiences experience and appreciate a text. Take Kersten Fröber and Thomaschke Roland's (2019) work on the movie theatre in which they compared how participants responded to the same film in different settings. They observed that a movie theatre context often led to a "stronger emotional experience and more favourable judgments" of the film from audiences (2019, p. 528). Conversely, boredom was felt more strongly from participants watching the film in their own living room (Fröber & Roland 2019, p. 528). In a televisual context, Mittell (2015) has provided a similar discussion about how DVD boxsets allow for different viewing experiences than a weekly broadcast. In the case of complex comedy *Arrested Development* Mittell (2015, p. 43) notes that viewers could use the "freeze-frame power of DVDs" to catch split second visual gags and to pause the frantic pace to recover from laughter". More recently, Lotz (2021) and Cox (2018) have discussed how SVOD viewing adds a new dimension to watching television. Of course, there is an interplay at work between television producers and new mediums. Often, they can take new technologies into account when producing programming. For example, Mittell discussed how DVD allowed TV producers to assume that audiences had seen previous episodes for the first time. This allowed for the

development of more serialised, complex programming (Mittell 2015 p. 43). Similarly, Brooks (2019, p. 951) has analysed how series' can be written such a way that "nods to binge watching" on SVOD platforms. But what happens when we watch programs on platforms that producers could not consider because they didn't exist yet? Much like how new cultural contexts could affect a retrospective reading of *The Sopranos* so too could new distribution platforms.

New audience expectations, approaches, and reasons for watching *The Sopranos* in 2020 could similarly inform a retrospective reading. There are countless new entryway paratexts that could set unique expectations for new viewers of *The Sopranos.* As I discussed in the introduction, these range from official HBO promotion, popular Twitter accounts, memes, fan communities and writing in mainstream journalistic publications like *The New York Times* or *The Atlantic.* By virtue of being 'new' these paratexts implicitly set 'retrospective' expectations for viewers coming to the show. Depending on the paratexts, these expectations can be quite varied. For example, publications like *The New York Times* (Poniewozik 2019) frequently write in reverence of the show's cultural impact and "high visual and narrative ambitions". Meanwhile popular Twitter accounts like *sopranos out of context* (125k followers) emphasise the comedy and relatability of the show. Entryway paratexts can be critical in informing a viewer's decision to watch the show. As such, the expectations and approach that new audiences take into *The Sopranos* can serve as backdrops to their understanding and appreciation of the show.

Therefore, the purpose of the following section is to provide background to the proceeding analysis chapters and to consider the role that distribution platforms and audience approaches could play in a retrospective reading. First, I provide my own reflection on the different experience of watching *The Sopranos* on SVOD and DVD. I discuss why I was drawn to the show and how different distribution platforms led to varied viewing experiences.

In turn, this helps provide context for my own retrospective analysis of *The Sopranos* in chapters 5 and 7. I then turn my attention to the various contexts that informed the participants' viewing of the show. I drew from the questionnaire results which asked specific questions about how and why participants watched *The Sopranos.* It is not my intention in this section to argue that there is 'composite' way of retrospectively viewing *The Sopranos* across my participants. Quite the opposite, I am aiming to establish that the experience of watching *The Sopranos* in 2020 is not a homogenous one. Rather, it is varied, and it is this variability—in part facilitated by distribution platforms—that is a crucial component of understanding a retrospective reading.

How I watched *The Sopranos*

Prior to my PhD research, I had seen *The Sopranos* all the way through two times. I watched it for the first time in 2014, just after I had turned eighteen. I was motived to watch it largely out of curiosity—I wanted to know if all the articles I had read referring to the show as a 'classic' or even 'the best ever' were accurate. I binge watched the program on my laptop via download from the Google play store. The second time I watched it was on a DVD boxset. This viewing was far more spaced out and I viewed it in a more 'formal setting'—i.e., on a television in a living room rather than on a laptop in a bedroom. In this instance, inspired by reading fan discussion about the show, I wanted to watch the show to pick up on various subtleties and pay more attention to the various foreshadowing and subplots of the show.

The first serialised drama I properly watched from start to finish was *Breaking Bad.* When it aired its final episode in 2013, I was seventeen. While I hadn't been watching weekly from the start (I was too young) I managed to catch up on the first four seasons and watch the final eight episodes as they were broadcast . The lead up to the series finale was something new for me. There was an exhaustive amount of online coverage dedicated to unpacking the final few episodes. For me, watching *Breaking Bad* was not just watching the

episodes, it was keeping up to date with the coverage of the show and reading online discussion threads. I got as much pleasure from reading about and discussing the show with my friends as I did from the show itself. With this coverage of *Breaking Bad* came an inevitable 'debate'—what was the greatest television series of all time? In that moment, this 'debate' dominated coverage of the show. The last few episodes were discussed as if they contributed to an upcoming a referendum on whether *Breaking Bad* was, in fact, the best show of all time. Consequently, many articles about the show also made reference to *The Sopranos* and *The Wire.* Take this article published on Forbes.com (John 2013) recapping *Breaking Bad*'s second to last episode "Ozymandias". The first line states:

> Twenty-three minutes into Episode 514, entitled "Ozymandias" after a Shelley poem, *Breaking Bad* made television history. Except that most fans didn't notice (John 2013).

This history was, in fact, that *Breaking Bad* was "steaking its claim to the title of television's best show ever!" (John 2013). It was so common for articles about *Breaking Bad* to compare it to other shows that disclaimers like this were common for episode recaps: "Spoilers abound for *Breaking Bad* Episode 514 but also for *The Wire* and *The Sopranos"* (John 2013). I haven't re-watched *Breaking Bad* since this original run, but I remember this style of coverage more than the show itself. It was these types of references to *The Sopranos* that prompted me to watch it for the first time. While this debate about "the best show ever" is less prominent now (and rightfully so, it is boring and pointless), as a 17-year-old I was drawn in by it. It seems very naïve now, but I wanted to know for myself, could *The Sopranos* actually be better than *Breaking Bad*? Is it the best show ever? This was the original mindset that I took into watching *The Sopranos* as a teenager.

The first time I watched *The Sopranos* I downloaded the episodes online from the Google Play store. As such, I managed to watch the entire series in a very condensed time frame—it took me about a month or two to watch all 86 episodes. Usually, I would watch about 2-3 episodes per session, roughly with two sessions a day. All in all, I was watching a lot of *The Sopranos* in a very condensed time frame (between 4-6 episodes a day). Of course, the ease of having every episode on my computer was what truly facilitated this mode of watching. It allowed for a more casual mode of viewing—I could watch the show on public transport, between classes at university and even in bed. Furthermore, I could have it on as I did other things like talking to friends on social media or cooking. This mode of viewing was also frequently interrupted, maybe I would watch twenty minutes of an episode before a class and then watch the rest when I got home. Needless to say, this was a very different experience to the show's original weekly broadcast. The interrupted mode of viewing made distinctions between episodes feel somewhat meaningless. This injected a level of sameness into the series as episodes bled into each other and, at times, like one continuous experience. This way of watching was also quite intense—it felt as the show was reverberating in the real world. I was spending just as much time with the characters on *The Sopranos* as I was with my friends in real life. This was amplified by the story world of *The Sopranos* as the show forces you to become fluent in a new vernacular (known as soprano speak) and understand a fleshed out set of social values. In this first watch through, the show almost felt all consuming. For those first few months, *The Sopranos* became integrated into my life. I was even dreaming about the show—probably due to watching it late at night. This experience viewing *The Sopranos* also rearranged some of the show's pleasures for me. While I had avoided most spoilers, I had heard a great deal about the show's 'infamous' ending. Watching the series in what felt like a sprint meant that the series finale became *the* payoff. Even

though I was fatigued from the show by the final season, I pushed through—sometimes half watching—with this payoff in mind.

The second time I watched *The Sopranos* was a very different experience. As noted, my first experience watching the show was very intense. I watched the show in such a short timeframe partly because I desperately wanted to know what happened at the end—why exactly was there so much controversy around the final episode? This experience made it harder for me to pick up on some of the subtleties, nuance, and humour that the show is famous for. Not only was I watching with a 'goal', but I was also watching in casual settings in which I would multi-task. It was through reading and participating in online discussion that promoted me to go back and re-watch the show. As such, I decided that my second watch through would be much more spread out and thorough. For me, the DVD boxset was the perfect way to do this. It could not be casually put on in the background in the same way as a laptop or phone. Rather, it made watching *The Sopranos* a more of a formal event. I had to put the disc in the player and stay in the living room for the duration of each episode. This allowed for a much more focused experience that felt like the antithesis of my first binge watch. I only watched 1-2 episodes per day and stretched out the experience over 3-4 months. As a result, individual episodes and seasons felt far less blurred together and much more distinctive.

Questionnaire Results

At the beginning of each interview session, I gave each participant a questionnaire to complete. I used it to capture basic information about the participants' experience watching *The Sopranos*—how and why they watched the show. While there was some consistency in the distribution platforms used by participants—all but one had used SVOD platforms—there was still variance in how these platforms were used and why participants were drawn to the show.

Most participants reported hearing that *The Sopranos* was 'the greatest show of all time' before they watched it. For some participants, it was the provocative nature of these types of statements that drew them to watching the show. Alannah wrote that she heard "it was a classic show, the best show ever made" and started watching it because she "wanted to see what all the fuss was about". Callum reported that he "heard it was a must watch series" while Tom, Stephan, Darcy all had all been told it was the "best show ever". Interestingly though, the supposed quality of the show alone was not the sole motivating factor. For most of the participants there were other factors that led to them making the decision to watch. For Darcy and Alma part of this was social—they referenced their friends in their response to the question "why did you start to watch *The Sopranos*?" Alma wrote "I had been told to watch it by a lot of people and finally decided to see what it was about even though I rarely finishing watching TV shows." Darcy simply wrote that he started watching it because of "peer pressure". Interestingly, the show's reputation as being 'quality' meant that a few participants felt as though it was something they "should" or "needed" to watch. For example, Callum wrote that "it seemed like a piece of pop culture that I had to consume" while Brad reflected that "it had become very in vogue to watch it so I thought I would". Additionally, some of the participants' understanding of the show's place in television history contributed to a desire to watch it. For example, Stephan had heard that *The Sopranos* was "the first decent serial TV drama". Likewise, Callum reported that prior to watching he understood the show as a "precursor to the cinematic style TV series that took over streaming in the 2010s". In a similar vein, Stuart wrote that he "knew it was highly acclaimed and liked shows that it had influenced like *Breaking Bad, Mad Men* and *The Wire*". Alma went into more detail, stating that "I had heard about its significance as an early example of 'prestige tv'". Through these responses, we can see a notion of quality and historical importance being attributed to *The Sopranos* by most participants prior to their first viewing of the show.

The way that most participants watched *The Sopranos* was consistent with their broader television viewing habits. The questionnaire asked participants about how they access and interact with television. Mostly, participants reported that they used online platforms to watch televisual content. Most participants (76%) identified SVOD or online download as the primary way that they accessed television. The remaining participants (24%) reported mainly watching broadcast television. These results were somewhat consistent with how participants accessed *The Sopranos.* The bulk of the participants (80%) used online video players, whether that be the Australian SVOD platform BINGE or via download. I make this distinction between download and SVOD platforms because prior to mid-2020, *The Sopranos* was not readily available on Australian SVOD platforms. Up until Binge launched in June 2020, a subscription to the Australian pay-tv provider Foxtel or downloads were the most viable ways to watch the show online. The remaining two participants either watched the show on DVD or broadcasted re-reruns on Foxtel. The survey also found that every participant in the study regularly binge watched television programs. When asked if they binge watched *The Sopranos,* all but one participant said they did. For the purposes of this survey, much like Mathew Pittman and Kim Sheedan (2015), and David Schweidel and Wendy Moe (2016), I used the term "binge watch" as a way to loosely refer to watching multiple episodes in one sitting. Of course, 'binge' is still quite a broad term and it is likely there were discrepancies this experience across participants. But we can see here that the participants in this study had an experience of watching *The Sopranos* that was broadly consistent with their general viewing habits.

The almost ubiquitous experience of binge watching across the participants suggests that it might be a feature that could shape their individual interpretations of *The Sopranos*. Regarding this study, the ongoing covid-19 pandemic adds an extra dimension to how we might contextualise binge watching. Almost all the participants stated that they watched *The*

Sopranos in 2020/21 during the pandemic. Some participants even cited the pandemic as the reason they started watching the show in the first place. For example, Brad wrote that "covid + unemployment" were why he watched the show while Stuart simply wrote "April 2020" (the start of the lockdowns in Australia). Regardless of whether participants cited covid as an instigator to their watch through of *The Sopranos* they all participated in a pandemic viewing by virtue of watching the show in 2020/21. Research has connected binge watching to escapism. For example, Lesley Pena (2015, p.7) writes that while the effects of binge watching are contingent on the nature of the specific show, the results "revealed that binge watching better delivers an escape gratification for viewers than appointment viewing". In a similar vein, Scott Jones (2021, p. ii) argues that SVOD facilitates a type of binge-watching that allows for "escapism that is integrated a woven within consumers everyday lives, taking place in the mundane context we live in". Interestingly, Annabell Halfmann and Leonard Reinecke (2021) have suggested that viewers may engage with escapism on platforms like Netflix as a coping mechanism. They write that:

> It can be concluded that escapist entertainment use, such as binge watching, is not inherently or exclusively dysfunctional. Beneficial consequences, especially short-term effects, such as stress reduction and increased mastery, are likely if escapist coping meets the demands of a stressful situation. (2021, p.193)

Recently, there has been scholarship on 'pandemic television' that investigates the different roles TV might take on in this context. Diane Negra (2020) argues that "lockdown culture" has "re-cemented" and "re-made" our relationship with television. She suggests that time in lockdown reinforced many individuals' awareness of television's "prodigious output in the era of "peak TV" (Negra 2020). Caitlin Shaw has commented on how the vast collection of pre-pandemic programmes can be used by viewers to "facilitate nostalgic connections with ordinary life before the pandemic" (Shaw 2021, p. 287).

The purpose of this section is to give appropriate context for the ensuing analysis chapters and to emphasise just how varied the experience of watching *The Sopranos* in 2020/21 can be. While there might be some similarities, there is no such thing as an 'average' viewing for the participants in this study. In turn, this allows for me to contextualise and qualify any potential findings on retrospective readings. Even though I found that participants generally used the same platforms (SVOD/online download) and engaged in similar behaviours (binging) there is room for experiences that are differently informed by these same factors.

Chapter 5. *The Sopranos* as a Slow Apocalypse During the Covid-19 Pandemic

At the core of this thesis is the idea of context. How do new viewer contexts affect our understanding and appreciation of a given text? Scholars have provided important analysis on how factors like ethnicity, gender identity and class can contribute to different ways of reading television texts (Hall 1980; Katz & Liebes 1990; Ang 1985). In this research, I am interested in the viewer's temporal position and the role that new cultural contexts can play in a viewing experience. It is this interaction between cultural contexts and our understanding of older texts that I define as a 'retrospective reading'. For example, how does something like a global pandemic potentially impact on the viewing of a show produced before these events occurred? Building on this, I will also examine how specific features of complex television texts facilitate this interaction between new cultural contexts and understandings of older texts. In the following two chapters, I argue for the transformational possibilities of a retrospective reading. That is, how new contexts can inform unique understandings of a given program. In the following two chapters I will focus on how watching *The Sopranos* in 2020/21 can be transformative to how viewers are likely to understand it. I will couple my own scholarly retrospective reading (chapter 5) with an analysis of interview responses (chapter 6) to explore this possibility.

To demonstrate the transformation possibility of a 'retrospective reading' I will investigate how the ongoing covid-19 pandemic can interact with how we understand fundamental elements of *The Sopranos.* During 2020 and 2021, *The Sopranos* saw its biggest bump in viewership since it went off the air in 2007 (Kambasha 2020). Specifically, there was a surge in young, 'pandemic' viewers of the show (Staley 2021). This has been noted in journalistic pop-culture/entertainment discourse. As I mentioned in the introduction, outlets like Vox.com (Wilkinson 2021), GQ Magazine (Unterberger 2020), The Guardian

(Kambasha 2020) and The New York Times (Staley 2021) were quick to address this. While these were just speculations by journalists and critics, I also picked up on a thematic resonance between the show and the unfolding pandemic. I was inspired to conduct my on 'pandemic reading' to investigate what exactly it was about *The Sopranos* that resonated so well. The rationale I took to this reading resembled Alexander Doty's (2011) "queer reading" of Alfred Hitchcock. I am not trying to discover any inherent meaning of the text. Rather, I want to develop an understanding of how viewers from a certain cultural or theoretical position may understanding *The Sopranos* (Doty 2011, p. 473). I was also concerned with identifying what precise elements of the show could facilitate these new understandings. In the following chapter I will demonstrate one way we can read *The Sopranos* during a pandemic. To do so, I expand on Mittell (2015) and Maruie-Laure Ryan's (2014) separate understanding of the 'televisual storyworld' to re-orient *The Sopranos* as a 'slow apocalypse' narrative. This will demonstrate how the interaction between one's cultural position and their viewing of *The Sopranos* can transform the way they experience 'pleasure' or 'catharsis' when watching the show. Ultimately, I argue that this supports the notion that there are transformational possibilities—which in this case can fundamentally shift how we understand the show's storyworld and emotional function—associated with a retrospective reading.

The Social Storyworld of *The Sopranos*

Key to *The Sopranos* transformational possibilities is its dynamic social storyworld. The term "storyworld" can be used to describe the universe in which a narrative is set. For a text to project a storyworld it needs to be dynamic and evolving. Marie-Laure Ryan (2014, p.21) writes that storyworlds exist beyond just what is represented on screen. They exisit within the viewers minds—we are encouraged to "fill out" a storyworld with out imagination. Storyworlds are dynamic and—given various plots events—are likely to change in the viewers mind (Ryan 2014, p. 22). For the purposes of this thesis, I am specifically interested

in televisual storyworlds. Mittell (2015) argues that complex television programs are predisposed to facilitate engaging and comprehensive storyworlds. This is because of their tendency to embrace a "broader palette" of stylistic techniques and have complicated storytelling strategies (Mittell 2015, p. 22). There is a significant body of research that seeks to understand how audiences engage with storyworlds. Ryan (2014) and M. King Adkins (2018) both understand storyworlds as imaginative experiences for the audience. Viewers can expand the storyworld beyond what is simply represented in the text itself. According to Ryan they can experience a storyworld as a blend of 'objective knowledge' and 'make believe' (2014, p. 22). For Ryan, this is what should be referred to as the principal of minimal departure. Here, imagination can conceive fictional storyworlds on the model of the real world and import knowledge to fill out any incomplete descriptions (2014, p. 22). She argues that "when a text mentions an object that exists in reality, all the real-world properties of this object can be imported into the storyworld unless explicitly contradicted by the text" (2014, p. 79). For example, when a text refers to a location in the real world, all the real-world geography is implicitly part of the storyworld. This is certainly true of *The Sopranos*—it features real-world settings like New Jersey and New York. Ryan's (2014) principle provides an interesting possibility for retrospective readings. Each audience member will have a different understanding of the 'real world' things represented in a storyworld and will thus import their own unique knowledge. The way I (a resident of Adelaide, Australia) project the properties of New Jersey, for example, would be very different to a lifelong resident. This effect is further compounded for viewers watching the show in retrospect. There is the possibility that viewers might project their understanding of a certain time period (i.e., the 1990s/2000s) onto the show. Moreover, would they project a modern version of New Jersey onto the show? For my pandemic reading of *The Sopranos*, I wanted to extend Ryan's (2014) principle a little further to not just account for physical space but also feeling.

The atmosphere of a show's storyworld is dominated by feelings of decline, anxiety and boredom and, much like the perceptions of geography, this creates possibilities for new viewers to import their own understanding of these feelings into a storyworld. Watching the show through this lens will demonstrate how *The Sopranos* immersive storyworld—a common property of complex TV—can function to facilitate new readings of the program.

Compared to other programs known for their expansive storyworlds, (think *Battlestar Galactica* (2004), *Star Trek* and *Game of Thrones*) the storyworld of *The Sopranos* is somewhat anomalous in its prioritisation of feeling and atmosphere. Mittell (2015; 2009; 2013) has discussed at length the concept of 'drillability' in association with complex TV. 'Drilling' is a metaphor to describe viewer engagement with a given program. It is an act of 'forensic fandom' in which viewers probe deep beneath the surface of a storyworld to understand its complexity (2009). Often, programs with rich lore and deep mysteries that spread across a plethora of paratexts encourage this type of fandom. For example, *Lost* and *Game of Thrones* featured thriving fan communities dedicated to 'solving' their shows' various mysteries by 'drilling' the text and all its associated paratexts for lore and clues (2009). Unlike these programs, *The Sopranos* offers little in the way of mystery (excluding the debates surrounding the final episode) and lore for fans. Mittell said as much when he noted that the program did not feature nearly as active a wiki as other complex programs from around the same time (2015, p. 89). The show was deliberate and almost defiant in its lack of lore and serial plotting. Most episodes could be viewed as self-contained, and seasons were more organised by theme than plot. However, we can still think of *The Sopranos* as a drillable text. Instead of lore or mystery the show's 'depth' and "drillability" comes from how the character's social interactions cultivate certain feelings and atmospheres. I would use the term 'social storyworld' to describe this. I define a social storyworld as a storyworld that invites us to understand it through the emotional state of its characters. These worlds are still

'drillable' but instead of drilling for history or clues to a mystery, fans 'drill' the relationships and psychological states of characters to understand the world. The scale of a social storyworld is generally a lot smaller and more focused. Fans are not so much directed to the lore of a boundless world that exists outside of the scope of the program. Rather, the boundaries of the social storyworld begin and end with the characters. Since a social storyworld is defined by the collective (and subjective) emotions of its characters it cultivates a strong emotional atmosphere. *The Sopranos* opening credits sequence and its treatment of 9/11 best exemplifies its 'social storyworld'.

The opening credit sequence of *The Sopranos* orients us to understand its storyworld as both emotional and social. Adkins (2018 p. 32) notes that the opening credits of a television series helps to reintroduce us into its storyworld. Typically, it will establish both the 'mood' and physical setting of a show (Adkins 2018, p. 32). As such, opening credit sequences for complex TV dramas rarely feature any of their main characters. Even the intro for the intensely character-based drama, *Six Feet Under* does not show any of its characters, instead, opting to establish the show's backdrop of death. The *Six Feet Under* intro cuts between the process of a body being embalmed and various examples of 'death' iconography (i.e. ravens, tombstones, decaying flowers). *The Sopranos* opening sequence is different in this regard. Just as much as we are introduced to the physical space of the show (The New Jersey suburbs), we are equally introduced the personality of its lead character, Tony Soprano. The sequence tracks Tony's daily 'commute' from Manhattan to his home in New Jersey. The camera is placed in Tony's car, creating the sense that we are invisible passengers alongside him. There is a strong feeling of motion brought on by the closeup of the tunnel lights flickering, telling us we are heading somewhere (Adkins 2018, p. 63). These initial shots serve several important functions. Firstly, it establishes Tony himself as the centre of the story. As we move along the freeway there are several extreme closeups of Tony's face

and arms that establish a strong physical presence. The groove *of Alabama Three*'s "Woke up This Morning" sets a "swaggering tone" as does the cigar clenched tightly between Tony's teeth and the casual way, he grabs the toll booth ticket (Adkins 2018, p. 63). This way of positioning Tony transforms the 'real' New York into Tony Soprano's New York. At first, the sequences feature shots of the 'real' landmarks of New York like the city skyline and the statue of liberty in quick succession. As Tony's commute continues these 'real' landmarks begin to be replaced with Tony's various haunts and business establishments. He drives past Satriale's Pork Store, his mother's house, and the Barone Sanitation plant. The sequence ends when we arrive at the heart of this fictional universe, Tony's house. Adkins notes that "in the space of ninety seconds the whole world unfolds around us" (2018, p. 64). In this sense, the opening sequence of *The Sopranos* eases us into the storyworld by placing importance on the spaces that are significant to Tony. The viewer is invited to understand the world through Tony's eyes. In this sense, we are positioned to understand that *The Sopranos* is set in Tony's New Jersey, which is very different from the 'real' one. Even though we may recognise some real landmarks, the intro invites us to think about New York and New Jersey the way that Tony and his friends would—as home. In doing so, the opening sequence sets the expectation that *The Sopranos* storyworld is constructed through its characters.

The Sopranos treatment of the 9/11 terrorist attacks are similarly representative of what I am referring to as the show's 'social storyworld'. Season four (the first season that aired after the attacks), cultivated an atmosphere of anxiety and tension in ways that paralleled what was occurring in the 'real world' at the time. While there are a few direct references to the attacks in the show (i.e. the odd comment from a character or a quick shot of a newspaper headline), 9/11 was an unspoken presence. It manifests more through the show's intangibles like the general atmosphere and mood. All the characters are very short with each other and there is a considerable uncertainty about the future. This is true in both the mafia

and marital space for Tony. His crime family faces the possibility of total annihilation by the F.B.I and he is on the brink of divorce. In both these spheres the tension eventually reaches boiling point. Tony yells at and humiliates all his Capos and he and Carmela have an extended screaming match that ends in their separation. The September 11 attacks have been understood by scholars as a key context to interpreting later seasons of the show. For David Remnick (2007), it is no coincidence that, in the forty-seven episodes written after 9/11, "Chase's vision" grew "darker" to the point that things "only got worse" with the show descending into "a final death spiral". Likewise, Thomas Prasch (2003, p. 19) notes that in the later seasons references to 9/11 became "routinized" as a way to reinforce the "generalised peril for Tony and his crew" who cannot escape their dangerous life in the mafia. Gary Edgerton (2013, p. 68) has extended this to argue that 9/11 also intensified the "suburban angst that underlie the series' portrayal of middle-class America in crisis." In these understandings of *The Sopranos* we can see that the its exploration of 9/11 is tacit—it is the atmosphere and mood combined with the (then recent) real-life context of terrorism that invites us to understand the show through this lens. But how does this change in a different context? If textual interpretations can be shaped by events occurring at the time of broadcast, then there also exists the possibility that more recent events can equally shape interpretations for texts. More specifically, there is the possibility that new contexts like the ongoing covid-19 pandemic could interact with how new audiences understand the show. This is reminiscent of Ryan's (2014) principle of minimal departure in which the audience is encouraged to project their own 'real world' understandings onto the show. However, in this case we are not just limited to, as Ryan (2014) puts it, "objective knowledge" of "actual things" (Ryan 2014). The storyworld also encourages the importing of the audiences resonate emotions. In the following section I will discuss how a "slow apocalypse" could be projected onto the show by pandemic viewers.

The Slow Apocalypse and the Covid-19 Pandemic

In 2020 (like many others) I rewatched *The Sopranos* against the backdrop of the covid-19 pandemic. Relative to the rest of the world, I was able to experience the pandemic from a place of considerable privilege. South Australia had one of the lowest rates of transmission in the world and lockdown conditions were much less harsh here than they were in other parts of Australia and the world. However, the ongoing pandemic still had a considerable impact on how I was interpreting the show. I was compelled to group *The Sopranos* with some other texts and genres that I had not considered before. In particular, I noticed how the storyworld was cultivating a feeling of what Jamais Cascio (2019, p. 269) describes as a 'slow apocalypse'—an environment of decline in which we helplessly watch things slowly fall apart. For me, this bore some resemblance to the experience of the pandemic. In the following retrospective reading I will unpack the way a major global event can considerably reshape how we understand a show's social storyworld.

When I suggest that the covid-19 pandemic facilitated a reading of *The Sopranos* as a 'slow apocalypse' narrative, I mean this in a very specific sense. Apocalypse media has often been obsessed with imagining a very sudden "end of the world" (Cascio 2019, p. 270). Whether this is the alien invasion in *War of the Worlds* (2005), the zombie infection in *The Walking Dead* (2010) or the fatal virus in *Contagion* (2011)—humans are often subject to a quick and chaotic demise. Of course, there is strong narrative value in stories of abrupt change. They quickly push away the messy details of day-to-day existence and give writers a blank slate to work with. They can also focus the audience's attention on a particular problem and clarify the consequences of a failure to address it (Cascio 2019, p. 271). The apocalypse is often represented as the final moments of the old world and brings with it the potential onset of a new one. Cascio writes that "we tell stories of the end of the world for catharsis, for validation, or even as a promise of reward at the end of one's life" (2019, p. 272).

However, *The Sopranos* does not fit into the conventional type of apocalypse narrative. It does not offer the hope of renewal or the same type of catharsis as a conventional apocalypse story. Additionally, the show does not represent a sudden end, but rather a slow, agonising decline. As such, *The Sopranos* fits much better with Cascio's understanding of a 'slow moving apocalypse' (2019, p. 269). A slow-moving apocalypse is not 'sudden' or 'irreversible', but is:

> Perhaps a more horrible reality…few of the ways the world could end would be abrupt and final. Instead, most would be miserable, protracted collapses. The apocalypse isn't an event; it's an environment. (Cascio 2019, p. 270)

What is most useful for understanding the slow moving apocalypse is Cascio's (2019, p. 270) description of it as a decidedly human environment. It is the emergent result of bad decisions, ineffective institutions and an inability to think through long term consequences (Cascio 2019, p. 270). It is in these senses that *The Sopranos* symbolically embodies a 'slow apocalypse'. The show represents a society in a prolonged death-spiral that is cultivated by the actions of its participants. The show's social storyworld is an environment defined by ineffective leadership, short-sighted decision making, ambiguity and creeping ruin. This cultivates an atmosphere of anxiety, decline, and boredom. Characters are always on edge about getting "whacked" and there is an overwhelming feeling of domestic drudgery for Tony and his family. For new viewers of the show, this atmosphere can have significant implications for how they understand the program and the function it has for them.

There has been some application of the concept of a slow-moving apocalypse to covid-19 in humanities scholarship. It was broadly noted that feelings of boredom, anxiety and decline dominated the mood during the first year of lockdowns in the global north. For example, David Isaacs (2020) suggests that while covid-19 might not be a literal apocalypse, it can still be read as one due to the anxious environment that it cultivated. He suggests that

"the word [apocalypse] has a resonance for a pandemic which, by its very nature, involves an outbreak with an organism not previously known" (2020, p. 1169). Annette Markham made a similar link during their reflection of the specific 'mood' during the early months of lockdown:

> Some are calling it "the great pause" and this makes sense. But today's 'pause' is not a slowing down or a waiting. It's a slow death by inertia. This is certainly not aided by the repetition of the same day over and over and over, combined with endless scrolling to find something new. (2020, p. 914)

She then extends this to describe how this environment turns into a rhythm:

> It is the rhythm of a crisis in a slow apocalypse. Sometimes passive, sometimes active. Boredom is certainly part of it, but boredom feels in my body exactly the same as doom… Just another swell that passes like my chest it rises and falls with my breath. (2020, p. 918)

Markham does well to summarise this uneasy blend of anxiety, uncertainty and monotony that is characteristic of living in a slow moving apocalypse typified by lockdowns and pandemic malaise. Andrew McMurray's 1996 theorisation of a slow apocalypse is also useful to help understand the contemporary pandemic. As a slow apocalypse "moves at the pace of a tortoise", people simply "adapt well" to the changes it brings as they are "not sudden, swift and terrible" (McMurray 1996). For McMurray (1996) the process of a slow apocalypse can be likened to how "we come to terms with the incremental decay of our own bodies and faculties". In the following sections I will dissect how certain textual elements of *The Sopranos* cultivate feelings of decline, anxiety and boredom. I then argue that this offers the potential for viewers to retrospectively read *The Sopranos* as a slow apocalypse.

Decline

For Tony and his organised crime family things only get worse as the series progresses. Almost every character in the show experiences a slow decline from both a financial and

psychological perspective. For original viewers of the program, this took place over the span of almost ten years. However, when I binge watched the show during lockdown this decline felt much more pronounced as I experienced the story in a more condensed timeframe. At every turn, it felt as though there was a sense of creeping ruin that served as a reminder of what things 'used to be' like for the gangsters. *The Sopranos* was famous for its often-shocking character deaths. It featured 92 deaths over the course of its run (mostly murders) and by the final episode, Tony and Paulie were the only gangsters from the pilot episode who remained. While new characters were often introduced, we should still think of this as more of a rot than a renewal. This is because the show is presented largely from Tony's perspective and most of the characters killed have been his friends since childhood. When they die, they remain in Tony's subconscious—he will often linger on visual reminders of them or dream about them. For example, Sal (one of Tony's best friends) appears in almost every one of Tony's dreams after he is killed in season 2. Characters like Sal are part of the fabric of Tony's world and with their deaths, it feels as though parts of his world is being destroyed. The 'replacement' characters, in contrast, are usually younger, less loyal, or even antagonistic towards Tony—they feel much more 'alien' towards him in general. It is this feeling of incremental decline has the potential to take on new meaning for pandemic viewers. As I will argue, it is eerily resonant with the 'slow apocalypse' conditions of lockdown. In the show, this feeling of decline is cultivated through the use of intertextuality and place.

The gradual transformation of place in *The Sopranos* cultivates a strong feeling of decline. *The Sopranos* is famous for its frequent use of 'iconic' gangster sets. These include locations like Satriale's Pork Store, the Bada-Bing! strip club and Vesuvio's restaurant which are all littered with gangster iconography. The early seasons of the show would often feature busy wide shots of these locations filled with the gangster cast thriving in their natural setting. For example, the end of (2.11) "House Arrest" features a continuous long shot of

Tony and his friends sitting outside Satriale's. Tony is looking happy, taking a puff from his cigar and Paulie is sunning himself with a mirror while Christopher and Hesh play cards. Underscoring this is the nostalgic Johnny Thunders song "You can't put your arms around a memory". The store is a distinctly mafia space, it is the designated 'hang out' for Tony and his friends and we never see characters who are not gangsters (or gangster associates) there. As such, ensemble shots like this were common during the first few seasons of the show. Often, this location was associated with repeated, stylised visual tropes in terms of how characters are positioned in these shots. For example—as seen in figure 9 —Paulie would often tan himself, Christopher would sit on the right most table, Tony would often be talking with Sil, Sal or the visiting FBI agents. The predictability of this placement makes the characters feel as though they are an intrinsic *part* of the space.

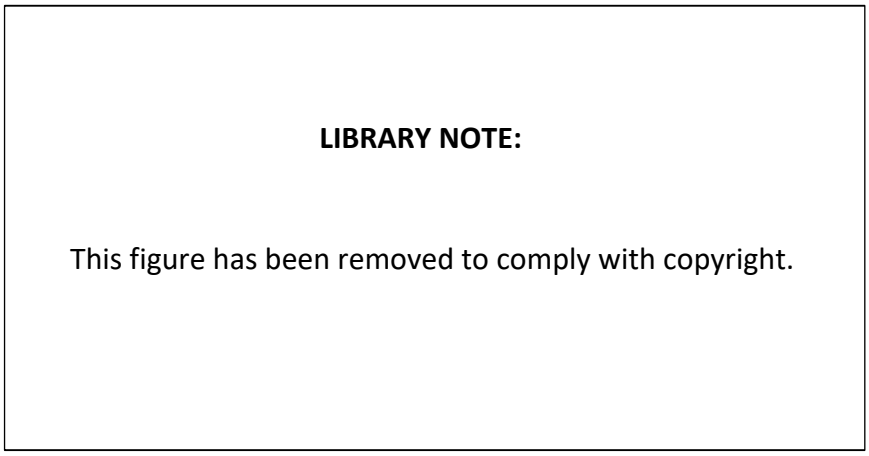

Figure 9 Tony and his friends sit outside Satriale's pork store

This means that when a character died their absence in wide shots would be visually pronounced through the empty space they left. There were many 'sit downs' (a meeting meant to resolve conflict between gangsters) that featured quick cuts, quicky angles and a bright colour scape. It is this context that makes the final scene shot a Satriale's serve as the ultimate marker of decline. The scene is centred around a conversation between Tony and

Paulie. As seen in figure 10, the way it is framed invites an implicit comparison between the beginning and end of the show through a doubling of usual Satriale's imagery.

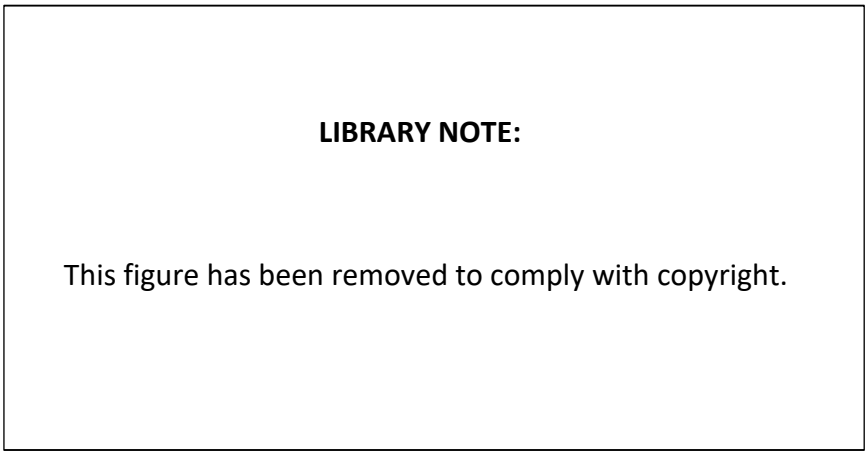

Figure 10 Tony and Paulie Sit Outside Satriale's Pork Store in series finale

The typical wide shot of the front of the store that was once filled with characters is now a vast empty space that dwarfs Paulie and Tony. The previously bright colour scheme is now a dulled blue and the usual upbeat music has been replaced by the droning sounds of traffic. The cars and trucks speeding by often interrupt the frame far more than usual. The effect of this is to suggest a visual and auditory erasure of the social storyworld of *The Sopranos.* Since it is constructed so strongly through its characters when one of them dies the viewer is invited to feel as though the fabric of the show is being torn. In this scene, the overwhelming empty space that frames Tony and Paulie serves as a strong visual representation of such destruction. It was a space previously filled with characters and allies that is now almost empty that emphasises Tony as an increasingly lonely figure. This final scene at Satriale's represents the quiet end of the slow apocalypse. There is no exciting final-shoot-out-all-guns-blazing 'Scarface' moment, but rather a slow fade into obscurity.

The Sopranos selective intertextual engagement with gangster films like *The Godfather* I-II and *Goodfellas* also helps cultivate an atmosphere of decline. As I discussed in the literature review, Pattie (2002 p. 134) has noted two ways of understanding self-referential and intertextual references in television texts:

> One in which readings of other media texts can be contained first of all within the film or program in which they occur; and a more overt type of referential work which relies almost exclusively on the audience's detailed, constantly updated cultural intelligence. (2002, p. 134)

There is certainly room to understand *The Sopranos* as the latter. For example, actor Michael Imperioli had parts in both *Goodfellas* and *The Sopranos*. His character, Spider, in *Goodfellas* is famously shot in the foot while serving drink to 'wise guys.' In *The Sopranos*, this is reversed when his character, Christopher, shoots a bakery worker in the foot. In this instance, a knowledge of *Goodfellas* will heighten the impact of the scene because of the implicit comparison between Spider and Christopher as seen in figure 11 and 12.

LIBRARY NOTE:

This figure has been removed to comply with copyright.

Figure 11 Spider moments before he is shot in Goodfellas

LIBRARY NOTE:

This figure has been removed to comply with copyright.

Figure 12 Christopher about to shoot bakery worker in the foot

Pattie (2002, p. 135) argues that references to gangster films in *The Sopranos* should not just be understand as examples of postmodern self-referentiality though. Rather, they are a 'symbolic framework' for the characters that can be understood within the actual text itself. The films give Tony and his friends meaning and purpose they can use to mediate and justify to their own 'crime family' (Pattie 2002 p. 137). Building on this interpretation of intertextuality we can see how it is used to cultivate a sense of decline in the show. It is commonly argued that a film like *The Godfather* can function to glorify the mafia (Anzalone 2013; Abhilash 2015; Larke-Walsh 2010). Peter Cowie suggests that it presents gangster families as a paradigm of honour, loyalty and justice:

> The film projects a certain idealized image about the mafia in the public consciousness. People love to read about an organization that's really going to take care of us. When the courts fail you and the whole American system fails you, you can go to Don Corleone and get justice (1997, p. 66).

Unsurprisingly, the first two *Godfather* films function almost like religious texts in the social storyworld of *The Sopranos.* Tony and his friends obsessively reference it and draw on it for guidance in difficult situations. For example, when deciding how to dispose of Emil Cohler's body, Christopher turns to the 'Luca Brasi' scene from *The Godfather* for guidance (Beare

2019). For them, it is what gives their life in organised crime meaning. They use the film to convince themselves that they are living in the golden age of the mob—one that is defined by family, honour and loyalty. However, the disparity between the world of *The Sopranos* and *The Godfather* makes it clear that such an obsession is a collective delusion. The show features an onslaught of depressing and grisly moments that stand in stark contrast with the grandeur of *The Godfather.* The romantic imagery of Italy and 1940s New York is replaced with glum drudgery of suburban New Jersey. The show's storyworld is far more reminiscent of Martin Scorsese's bleak representation of the mafia. Luara Ruberto (2014) has noted that to be a mobster in a Scorsese film is to live in a disintegrating world "In all three films (*Mean Streets, Goodfellas, Casino*) centres come apart. The gangs in *Mean Streets* and *Goodfellas* disintegrate when they turn on each other" (2014, p. 71). Unsurprisingly the characters in *The Sopranos* very rarely reference Scorsese's films. Pattie (2002, p. 110) argues Scorsese is the "dog that doesn't bark" but also what *The Sopranos* is most indebted to. *The Sopranos* is uncontrollably violent and, unlike *The Godfather*, there is no clear separation between family and business. In addition, Scorsese's ironic use of upbeat music as a counterpoint to onscreen action is often mimicked by *The* Sopranos. It is in these moments we see how far removed Tony's world is from the grandeur of *The Godfather* fantasy. In essence, *The Sopranos* is filled with men who think they are in *The Godfather* but are actually closer to *Goodfellas.* They want to believe that (like in *The Godfather)* the mafia plays a critical, romantic role in the community. But, in their reality it does not—like in *Goodfellas*, Tony and his friends are bullies and destructive to the community. Their involvement with organised crime, at its core, can only be understood as selfish. Through intertextuality, we can see an implicit comparison being made between *The Sopranos* ruinous storyworld and that of *The Godfather*. For the audience, this can truly highlight the state of decline that Tony's mafia is in.

As such, we can see that a slow decline is a fundamental part of *The Sopranos* social storyworld. This incurable rot is articulated through character—as the show progresses and Tony loses more and more of his family and friends we can feel his world start to disentegrate. As new characters come to replace them, they feel like more like punctuation to this decline. They do not have shared experience with Tony and instead highlight the absence of the character they replaced. The mafia in *The Sopranos* is an amalgmation of shared experience and pop culture. As each character dies, a part of the shared history that gives meaning to Tony's life is gone with them. In my pandemic viewing of *The Sopranos,* this all felt especially relateable. The atmosphere of decline it cultivated uniquely positioned to be a conduit for the frustrations and stresses associated with lockdown.

Anxiety

Another feature of *The Sopranos* storyworld that helps us reorient the show as a slow apocalypse narrative is the overwhelming feeling of anxiety. It is woven into the fabric of the show through the show's strategic use of language. Many scholars (Howard 2002; Scrapino 2010; Forlani 2006) have analysed the 'living' dialect of the show. In part, this language functions to mark the Italian American Mafia community of the North Ward as distinctive and insular (Howard 2002, p. 195). In the first season, the prominence and intensity of such a language served as a roadblock for some new viewers trying to keep up with the show. If viewers don't know what terms like "whack", "goomah" or "stugots" mean they are forced to rely on context clues to follow simple conversations. In 2020, HBO even went so far as to upload an official "Sopranos Dictionary" to YouTube as a way to help ease fans in. All this is to say that language is a very important part of the show's storyworld. When we unpack this language, we can see that it is also one of the primary propagators of anxiety in the show.

The ambiguity and violence associated with *The Sopranos* unique jargon—described by Cinzia Scarpino as Sopranos Speak (2010, p. 340)—contributes to this feeling of anxiety.

The jargon on *The Sopranos* can be understood as a "parasitical language" which enters another language to give its words new meanings (Forlani 2006, p. 21). This is certainly true of Mafia jargon as it has always served the purpose of being a red herring for the law. It covers up illegal business and is consequently full of vague euphemisms when it comes to working positions and activities. Much like Henry Hill from *Goodfellas* who introduced himself as "in construction", Tony Soprano tells outsiders he works as a "waste management consultant". However, especially in Scorsese films, these linguistic subtleties are frequently interrupted by characters' use of blunt, violent language. This contrast is also characteristic of *The Sopranos.* Scarpino argues that this parlance reflects the "grotesque and bloody mood" that permeates both works:

> [the show's] Surreal jargon made up of monosyllabic/onomatopoeic verbs ("whack," "hit", "clip", "wet", "pop") which evoke the neurosis of snapping into killing for nothing: for example, when Christopher Moltisanti opens fire on a pastry waiter who is guilty of not serving him ends up nearly "whacked" for a full tray of "sfugliadels, cannolis and napolis'. (Scapino 2010, p. 340)

In association with the random violence of the show, words like "whack", "hit", "clip", "wet", and "pop" help cultivate a constant feeling of anxiety. They reflect the fact that there is always the underlying threat that a character could snap at any moment. This atmosphere is further by the show's linguistic ambiguity and strategic use of silence. For example, Livia Soprano leverages this ambiguity to convince Junior to kill Tony (her son) while maintaining a plausible deniability. Her complaints about Tony being a terrible son and seeing a therapist are laden with subtext designed to incense Junior. When discussing the use of language in the show, series creator David Chase remarked "Network television is all about people saying *exactly* what is on their minds. This show is about people not saying what's on their minds and then acting in very passive aggressive ways" (Howard 2002, p. 86).

At times, “Sopranos speak” is too hard for even the characters in the show to follow. The constant use of euphemisms and double speak creates a great deal of ambiguity. Often, this leads to deadly miscommunications between characters. For example, in the (2.8) episode “Full Metal Jacket” Matt and Sean misinterpret Richie Aprille telling them “if there is ever anything you can do for me, let me know” as orders to kill Christopher. This sets of a chain of events that leads to a failed assassination of Christopher and the later deaths of Matt and Sean. Here we can see the show using language to cultivate heightened overall sense of anxiety. The audience is required to navigate the subtle linguistic nuance, innuendo, and silence to understand the conflicts between characters. At times, this dialogue can be so subtle that viewers can end up jumping at shadows—so many lines of dialogue can be read as either innocent or a deadly threat. For example, when Tony tells Paulie “I think I saw a whale out there, reminded me of Ginny Sac” the audience is left to wonder whether Tony is simply making an off-colour joke or indicating that he knows about Paulie’s possible defection to Ginny’s husband, John Sacrimoni’s crime family. In this sense, both the violence and ambiguity of language (as well as the *literal* anxiety presented by Tony’s poor mental health) in *The Sopranos* work in tandem to cultivate a strong atmosphere of anxiety in the show’s social storyworld.

Boredom

As outlined by Cascio (2019, p. 269), boredom is also a prominent feature of a slow apocalypse environment. Markham (2020) said as much in her discussion of living through the first year of the pandemic. For her the feeling of boredom and doom were synonymous. It is this mix of feelings that also comes to dominate the social storyworld of *The Sopranos*. Despite their action-packed lifestyle and constant threats against their lives, what Tony and his friends dread most is boredom. In (2.7) “D-Girl” Meadow neatly summarises this predicament by reciting Madame De Stael’s quote “one must choose in life between boredom

and suffering". This feeling is most pronounced through the characterisation of the show's male characters. In the 1.8 episode "The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti" Christopher, in so many words, articulates an association of boredom with depression:

> **Christopher:** I dunno Tony, It's like just the fucking regularness of life is too hard for me or something- I don't know.
>
> **Tony:** Look at you- I bet your sleeping all the time, right?
>
> **Christopher:** It's the only thing I still enjoy. You know what I think? Maybe I have cancer… Remember how Jackie got? Something fucking horrible is going on inside my body. There is a physical change or something.

While Christopher would never outright admit to being depressed, this conversation almost serves as a tacet acknowledgment of this feeling between himself and Tony. The audience is also likely to identify these symptoms as depression. They can assume that Christopher can only escape this boredom (or 'regularness' of life) with moments of drug use, action and sleep. This feeling is not specific to Christopher but is shared by almost the entire cast of male characters in the show. Tony and A.J respectively deal with bouts of depression that are accompanied by these moments of monotony. This 'regularness' of life is a constant visual presence throughout the series. For example, almost every episode features Tony sleeping in until the afternoon and slowly shuffling around the house in his dressing gown eating cold cuts. These extended sequences of boredom are often punctuated with the threat of doom. Often, characters will be killed doing totally mundane things. To list a few, Gino dies on the toilet, Ralph is strangled making breakfast, Mikey is shot on a jog and Phil is shot pumping gas into his car. Before a failed assassination attempt, Tony slips into a deep depression during season one he ventures out to buy donuts at which point he is shot at and almost killed. The show conditions us to associate these moments of monotony and boredom with bouts of frenetic violence. It is these constant boring, everyday activities that present a threat.

The moods of *The Sopranos* characters go a long way in shaping the feeling of the storyworld. This feeling of boredom seems to resonate with Markham's reflections during the first year of lockdown.

In her discussion of the routine during isolation she writes that everything "feels exactly the same" and that there is "no distinction" between activities— "Netflix is the same as rock collecting is the same as scrolling is the same a SMS with the family" (2020, p. #). For Markham, the pandemic had—to an extent—removed meaning from her day-to-day life. This is very much reminiscent of the 'regularness' of life that Christopher complains about. He too finds that daily life (i.e. driving Tony around, doing errands) has no meaning. Additionally, Markham also makes a similar connection between boredom and doom that is so common in *The Sopranos.* She writes that the constant threat of the pandemic means that "boredom feels in my body exactly the same as doom" (2020). It is this conflation between boredom and doom that helps viewers potentially understand *The Sopranos* as a slow apocalypse text.

Approaching Catharsis

To be clear, I am not claiming that a slow apocalypse is an inherent textual property of *The Sopranos*. The themes of decline, anxiety and boredom could just as easily relate to issues that were contemporary to the show, such as deindustrialisation or the war on terror. As Katz and Liebes (1994) point out, the textual properties of a work of art are not the only factors that contribute to how we decode it. Our own subjective experiences and identity have a considerable role to play too. As such, experiencing a text from a retrospective vantage point offers a range of new possibilities for how we may take meaning. By extending Ryan (2014), Mittell (2015) and Adkins (2018) understanding of the storyworld to account for feelings and atmospheres we can open up new possibilities for how new audiences might watch *The Sopranos*. For an audience viewing the program during the first year of the pandemic the

feelings of anxiety, decline and boredom in the show's storyworld can function as a more relatable slow apocalypse narrative that parallels the ongoing lockdowns. This is also a feature of the show that was often mentioned by interview participants (see chapter 6). So far, I have illustrated the possibility of reading a slow apocalypse through the social storyworld of *The Sopranos*. My pandemic reading of the show demonstrates a new way to interpret it from a retrospective vantage point. The atmosphere of anxiety, decline and boredom cultivated by *The Sopranos* storyworld creates the possibility of viewing it as a slow apocalypse in the context of covid-19. Viewers can understand this in a way that is transformative to how they might understand the show's use of certain imagery or representation of experiences like mental health. Christopher's rant or Tony shuffling around in his dressing gown take on a biting double meaning in a pandemic reading. This has implications for understanding the potential emotional function of *The Sopranos* for pandemic viewers. Specifically, it allows for the show to be transformed from a site of critique and fascination to one of catharsis.

In his discussion of apocalypse media, Cascio dissects why audiences enjoys them so much. He concludes that:

> We Tell stories of the end of the world for catharsis, for validation or even for the promise of a reward at the end of one's life. The apocalypse is the final moment of the old world, and potentially the onset of the new (Cascio 2019, p. 270).

For a slow apocalypse this is usually not the case. These narratives only seem to offer a depressing decline filled with anxiety and boredom. It is for this reason Cascio (2019, p. 271) concludes that the slow apocalypse presents "no catharsis, no validation, no promise of anything by sadness." But, as the example of *The Sopranos* shows, there is the possibility for these texts to function as sites catharsis. For viewers watching the program during the 'real life' slow apocalypse of covid-19, there is a potential for it to be cathartic. As *The Sopranos*

social storyworld slowly heads towards total ruin, we start to see the pressure slowly release. By the finale, "Made in America" (6.21), the process of total annihilation is complete for the North Ward—almost all of Tony's friends have been killed and the state of his world is unrecognizable when compared to the pilot episode.

However, with the end of this "world" comes the end of the boredom, anxiety and decline that was woven into the fabric of it. For me, watching *The Sopranos* during those early months of lockdown gave a moment of catharsis through the relief that it offered from the never-ending hopelessness it depicts. In her reflection of the first year of lockdown, Markham (2020) notes that it felt like the anxiety and boredom would never subside. When I was watching *The Sopranos* at the height of the pandemic, the show offered a chance to purge these familiar emotions. Of course, this is not to suggest that a television program like *The Sopranos* is a straightforward equivalent of a global pandemic—it represents more of a metaphorical apocalypse in which the emotional and material impacts differ greatly. *The Sopranos* is a fictional storyworld and it is very unlikely that the pandemic will lead to a similar type of annihilation. Additionally, I am not suggesting that total annihilation is the only escape from the pandemic. Rather, I contend that the eventual easing of tensions in *The Sopranos* can offer an allegorical, emotional pressure valve. One that gives a release to the built-up tensions that arise from the environment of a slow apocalypse. Of course, there is a retrospective dimension at play with this type of 'pandemic reading' of *The Sopranos*. As I previously argued, scholars originally understood the show's representations of these feelings through the prism of the war on terror. But, in the 2020s there is a new context—when we see these feelings our minds now potentially drift towards the immediate stresses associated with the pandemic and lockdown.

This chapter demonstrates the transformational possibility of a retrospective reading. If we return to the Anamorphosis metaphor from the introduction, we can think of *The*

Sopranos as a piece of visual art and the pandemic as a specific cultural position—where we are standing in the room as it were. As I have outlined, watching the Sopranos from this position can make certain themes like decline, anxiety and domestic drudgery take on new, historically contingent meanings. In this case, it allowed the show to take on a new emotional function for me. Of course, it is entirely possible that for viewers in a different cultural position that other themes of the how would be emphasised. Through an analysis of interviews, the next chapter (chapter 6) will explore the pandemic context shaped the participants interpretations of the show as well as the possibility for other readings also shaped by the particularities of the present time.

Chapter 6. "That's definitely what lockdown felt like": Pandemic, Nostalgia and *The Sopranos* without Tony

So far, I have argued for the transformational potential of a retrospective reading with my own 'pandemic reading' of *The Sopranos*. I have demonstrated how the specific temporal and cultural position of a viewer can interact with their viewing of a complex TV text—in this case how a pandemic viewing might emphasise specific elements of the show's storyworld. In this chapter, I will expand on this by exploring the way that the participants of this study also engaged with what I am calling 'retrospective readings' and used them to uncover new themes that were not considered to be part of the original text. First, I will continue my exploration of a pandemic reading—this time turning attention to how this context influenced participants' understandings of the show. I then consider how the participants' 2020 positioning gave the show's themes of nostalgia additional meaning. Finally, I reflect on how retrospectively watching the show encouraged participants to resist the internal televisual logic of *The Sopranos*. Often, these results were the product of specific features of complex television texts, with the show's complex characters and dynamic storyworld critical in facilitating participants' varied readings. This chapter emphasises the propensity that complex television has for retrospective readings and hence the importance of treating the resurgence of a complex TV text like *The Sopranos* differently to its original run.

Again, *The Ambassadors* painting can be a useful metaphor for exploring the themes illuminated by participants from a retrospective vantage point. From this perspective, *The Ambassadors* appears in full focus while the skull is blurred. In the context of *The Sopranos* this is kind of like an 'original viewing' (i.e., watching the original broadcast) and it is what the producers of the show generally anticipated and accounted for when writing and promoting the show. Much like viewing the painting from a slanted angle reveals a skull, however, a retrospective viewing of *The Sopranos* may illuminate different themes. Of

course, every participant took with them a unique set of contexts and experiences to the viewing of *The Sopranos* and this is reflected in their interpretations. Metaphorically speaking, each participant is standing in a slightly different spot in the room while looking at the 'painting'. While I did find common themes and experiences were present, I am not trying to suggest that retrospective readings are singular or shared by all viewers of the show. Rather that there is the potential for these common themes to inform individual readings differently. In the following chapter, I will analyse the variety of ways new viewers are connecting *The Sopranos* to their lived experience. In the case of my participants, this included using the show's social storyworld and characters to connect it to the ongoing pandemic, nostalgia, and to resist the show's own logic, each of which will be discussed in turn.

I drew from Caroline Bainbridge's (2019) understanding of television as a psychical object to help frame my analysis of the interview data. Her work emphasises how the immersive environments created by television programs allow participants to work through political issues in very personal ways. This approach let me consider the broader implications of the participants' retrospective readings of the show. As a preamble to my analysis, I will extend Bainbridge's work to understand *The Sopranos* as a psychical object and consider what this means in a retrospective context.

The complex ideological environment of shows like *The Sopranos* can be immersive for long term viewers. Drawing from both media and psychological theory, Bainbridge (2019) has speculated on how TV programs can cultivate empathy in viewers. According to Bainbridge (2019, p. 300), these complex storyworlds can be critical tools to help viewers to work through complicated political issues. In her analysis of the complex television program *Mad Men* she states that:

> We begin to understand how a television show like *Mad Men* can become a psychical object, available for use in terms of unconscious interrogations of one's sense of selfhood and one's immersion in a complex ideological environment. (Bainbridge, 2019, p. 300)

In the case of *Mad Men*, Bainbridge (2019, p. 300) advances the argument that there is potential for viewers to actively work to constitute an on-screen representation of feminism into their own lived experience. In essence, they "internalise drama as an object of the mind but also put it to work in everyday life" (Bainbridge 2019, p. 301). She cites a Reddit thread entitled "How *Mad Men* helped me understand the anger of my mother's feminism" as a real-world example of this. To help expand on this, Bainbridge draws from Christopher Bollas' 1979 explanation of psychical objects:

> When an individual feels a deep subjective rapport with an object—a painting, a poem, during an opera or symphony, before a landscape—the person experiences an uncanny fusion with the object, an event that recalls the kind of ego experience which constituted his earliest experiences…. Such aesthetic moments do not sponsor memories of a specific even if relationship, they evoke a total psychosomatic sense of fusion—an ego experience—that is the subject's recollection of the transformational object. (Bollas 1979, p. 98)

Understanding long-form television as this type of 'object' opens a range of possibilities for how it can be used by viewers to engage with contemporary culture and politics. In the case of *Mad Men*, the show's representation of second-wave feminism offered viewers a chance to "free themselves" from the shackles of contemporary 'post-feminist' ideology (Bainbridge 2019, p. 305). Using this logic, we can understand a similar potential that lies within *The Sopranos*. It could certainly be possible for *The Sopranos* to function in a similar way to *Mad Men* regarding other social issues. For example, it could have been a tool to navigate concerns surrounding mental health, terrorism and assimilation. However, it should be noted

that Bainbridge's argument is mostly concerned with how programs can be tools for navigating issues that were contemporary to them. Using my paradigm of illumination, I wish to take this logic one step further. That is to investigate how new audiences might be using certain, maybe once overlooked, aspects of the program to similarly navigate issues that are not contemporary to the show.

Lockdown

One of the most obvious 'new' ways participants have read *The Sopranos* was through the lens of the ongoing covid-19 pandemic. In the following section, I will outline how the participants have engaged with the boredom and anxiety cultivated by the show's social storyworld to generate new meaning.

Multiple participants not only related their experience with *The Sopranos* to the pandemic but also said that they used the show as a way to work through it as they watched the program during the extended lockdowns in Australia. Participants commonly connected the pandemic to the general "atmosphere" and "mood" of *The Sopranos*. For example, Stephan likened the social climate in *The Sopranos* to the "scary social climate" he was experiencing in real life:

> *Some of the paranoia, like themes of paranoia that are explored, especially with Tony, the way it sort of ramps up, that's like something that was kind of like 'oh yeah [This is exactly how I was feeling during the pandemic]*

When asked to expand on this in relation to the pandemic he stated:

> *When it very first started everyone was like "well I'm not going outside"—I lost my job and I had to move out of the place I was renting, and I moved back with mum. She lives in Victor Harbor, and I was quite isolated, so I was just at home writing my thesis, I don't think I left the house for like months…*

Stephan explicitly links his pandemic and *The Sopranos* experiences here. He was quick to connect the "ramping paranoia" of the later seasons to the world that was unfolding around him and suggested that shared feelings of prolonged "uncertainty" was what most strongly linked the two experiences. He later talked about how he and his mother became obsessed with watching the news, "I remember every conversation I was having with my mum was like 'put on the news!' we have to figure out what's going on—it was a long time, like months." This coupled with people "going nuts" and supermarket shelves being empty due to panic buying cultivated a general feeling of unease for Stephan. He cited Tony's storyline in season 6 as particularly relatable. In this storyline the long-standing tensions between Tony's vocation and long-term family planning intensify most dramatically. With the show coming to an end and almost all of Tony's friends being killed in a mob war, the threat of Tony being assassinated or arrested felt the most real it ever had been. For Stephan, this feeling of ramping paranoia in the show correlated with the uncertainty and anxiety he felt during the first few months of the pandemic. In this sense, some of the show's themes connected with the pandemic—an event that happened decades after the show first aired—and became much more relatable for Stephan. It was his lived experience during the pandemic that made these elements much more potent in the program.

This connection between covid-19 and *The Sopranos* was touched upon further by other participants who described using the show's themes as a sort of coping tool during the uncertainties of the pandemic. In a way that was reminiscent of Bainbridge's argument about *Mad Men,* a number of participants wove *The Sopranos* into their lived experience during the pandemic. For Darcy, understanding how the characters navigated the "fucked up, dark" situations were helpful as a way to navigate the pandemic:

> *It can be that sort of like introspective tool to see how characters dealt with those sorts of really fucked up, dark, complex situations. And like maybe you can relate to or pull some*

> *inspiration for how some of those characters dealt with that in regard to like what's going on now with covid and all those sorts of things.*

In this quote, Darcy has outlined the possibility for *The Sopranos* to help people living through the pandemic. His discussion of "pulling inspiration" from the show reflects a similar logic to Bainbridge's (2019, p. 301) observation about how viewers were "internalising" *Mad Men's* representation of second-wave feminism. But rather than using this internalisation to navigate a post-feminist context, as in Bainbridge's case, it appears that Darcy internalised *The Sopranos*' character's reaction to their "fucked up, dark and complex situations" as a means of navigating the pandemic. Later in the interview, he extended this reflection on the usefulness of *The Sopranos* during the pandemic. He suggested that the show could become:

> *Maybe a cathartic tool, like, I can relate, this is how life feels right now. Maybe a bit of relief and a sense of relatability, you know? It was always comforting when things are not good.*

A number of specific phrases stand out from this quote. Firstly, Darcy makes a clear connection between *The Sopranos* and the pandemic— "This is how life feels right now". When viewed within the context of a pandemic, the later seasons of the show—which have been otherwise described by scholars and critics as 'brutal', 'relentless' and 'depressing' (Stanley 2006; Pattie 2002; Jacobs 2011)—take on new meaning as a positive form of catharsis. For Darcy, the misery of the characters is a potential source of comfort for when things "aren't good" because it was relatable and could make him feel less alone. Darcy's experience of viewing the show during the pandemic hints that this cultural context could transform how he experienced the show. In this case, shifting the typical interpretation of the show as a bleak critique of American masculinity and consumerism to one of emotional identification and catharsis.

While Stephan and Darcy hinted at this cathartic reading of *The Sopranos,* Tom took it a step further to talk about how he found the domestic drudgery of *The Sopranos* relatable during lockdown. For him, *The Sopranos* perfectly encapsulated the "mood" of isolation. He said that it was not:

> *Like a paranoia film where you are constantly on edge—it's actually just that you are so comfortable at this point that you just kind of keep on trudging through.*

This quote is notable as it seemingly encapsulates the environment of a "slow moving apocalypse" that was discussed in the previous chapter (McMurray 1996; Markham 2020). In both the storyworld of *The Sopranos* and in the realities of the lockdown it feels as if there is no 'end.' Instead, as Markham (2020) described of the slow apocalypse of Covid lockdowns, there was only the numbness and meaningless of doing the same activities over and over each day. In a similar vein to some of Darcy's responses, Tom also alluded to the ways that *The Sopranos* offered a coping mechanism amid the monotony of lockdown:

> *I think one of the cool things about The Sopranos is a lot of the stuff is really banal and mundane… It's about drudgery more than anything, guys driving around in cars, having a conversation with a capo in a car, like you are driving somewhere, you are sitting outside a deli, and I think that's definitely what lockdown felt like—and it definitely is what a lot of daily life feels like…. I think that is what is really appealing about the show. It is those moments of opening up the fridge and just like eating 20 slices of gabagool cus you can't be fucked making something to eat.*

In this quote, Tom is talking about some of the recurrent imagery in the show that is used to highlight Tony's series long struggle with depression. Shots of Tony shuffling around in his dressing gown, eating too much and sleeping all day usually coincide with his 'low points'. Perhaps the best example of one of these bouts is in the season 1 episode "Isabella" (1.2). Following the disappearance of Tony's best friend, Sal, he sinks into a deep depression. To

convey this, there is an extended montage of Tony sleeping through the afternoon (periodically being woken up by Carmela) and shuffling around the kitchen in his white dressing gown, eating cold cuts. Underscoring this melancholic song "Tiny Tears" by the band *Tindersticks.* In a way, Tom highlighting the "drudgery" of everyday life connects Tony's depression and Tom's experience during lockdown. A lot of the domestic imagery associated with Tony is visually reminiscent of lockdown. This still (figure 13) of Tony eating/drinking in his kitchen wearing a dressing robe is a very common sight in *The Sopranos* and feels immediately relatable to Tom's experience during the covid lockdowns.

Figure 13 Tony in his kitchen wearing dressing gown

In fact, when interpreted from the present standpoint, it seems as though a lot of the characters in *The Sopranos* are in their own self-imposed "lockdown". In particular, the Soprano family (Tony, Carmela, Meadow and AJ) are usually shot in their house. Tony, Meadow, and AJ are often seen sleeping in, dressed in baggy clothes and are frequently shot at home in the middle of a workday in ways that are eerily similar to contemporary lockdowns. In the original context of the show, it is likely that we would understand Tony "eating 20 slices of gabagool" because he "can't be fucked" making anything else as a

manifestation of his depression. However, Tom's connection between these types of domestic activities and lockdown gives them a sort of double meaning—they are both signifiers of Tony's depression and of Tom's personal pandemic experience. In a pandemic context he describes them as "appealing". For Tom, it was these little moments in the show—the domestic drudgery—that seemed to be brought to the fore during covid. This type of recurrent imagery in the show reflected his own experience during this time—they were a site of relatability and catharsis. In the comments of Darcy, Tom and Stephan, we can see the interaction between the participants own cultural position and their viewing of the show in ways that allowed the show to offer them a viewing experience that reflected the specificities of the current moment. We can see the possibility for an older text (which had nothing to do with the pandemic) to be used allegorically by participants as means of working through the present experiences and anxieties associated with covid-19.

Re-reading Nostalgia

Much like the pandemic, the participants' retrospective vantage points seemed to transform how they understood the connection between nostalgia and *The Sopranos.* In a way that could not have been possible during an original viewing of the show, the (then contemporary) 2000s setting became illuminated in a new way. For many participants, it transformed into a site of mediated nostalgia for the pop-culture and fashion of the late 1990s/early 2000s. Of course, *The Sopranos* itself provides a strong critique of mediated nostalgia. But, for the participants in this study, this critique felt far less pronounced.

Nostalgia is one of the most prominent themes of *The Sopranos* and has been consistently referenced by scholars like Lee (2004) Kocela (2002) and Harris (2012). It is first explored in the pilot episode of the opening scene. During his first therapy session with Dr Melfi, in the pilot episode (1.1) Tony remarks that, " It's good to be in something from the ground floor. I came too late for that, and I know, but lately, I'm getting the feeling that I

came in at the end. The best is over." As I discussed in the literature review, many scholars have linked the show's exploration of nostalgia with masculinity. They have echoed the arguments of R.W Connell (1987; 2005) to suggest that masculinity itself is a nostalgic formation in *The Sopranos*. In the show, its ideal form is in the past and it's usually read by the characters through fictional figures such as Gary Cooper or Don Corleone (Lee 2004; Pattie 2002). Characters on *The Sopranos* understand this idealised version of masculinity as being in the days of their fathers (the 1950s and 1960s specifically). As Tony's opening monologue continues: "I think about my father, he never reached the heights like me, but in a lot of ways he had it better, he had his people, they had their standards, they had pride. Today what have we got?" At times, *The Sopranos* brought its exploration of nostalgia to the forefront through narratives that featured intergenerational conflict. The stereotypical "old school" values of the 50s and 60s were embodied by older characters like Junior Soprano, Phil Leotardo and Richie Aprille while Tony and his friends were had slightly more modern sensibilities. Anne Barretta (2000) has written about the complicated relationship Tony has with the past as he both reveres and loathes it. Of course, *The Sopranos* ran over 20 years ago and was produced during the late 1990s and early 2000s. During its resurgence in the last few years, what was the show's 'present' has now been transformed into a site of nostalgia for retrospective viewers. Popular social media accounts and websites like *TheRinger.com* (Ducker 2020) and *GQ* (Unterberger 2020) have seemingly amplified this trend. This is normally achieved through articles and posts that are focused on the kitschy, dated 2000s fashion and technology of the show. An example of this is the popular twitter account titled "A.J Sopranos Nu Metal Shirts" that, as seen in figure 14, is dedicated to posting images of AJ Soprano wearing various band shirts.

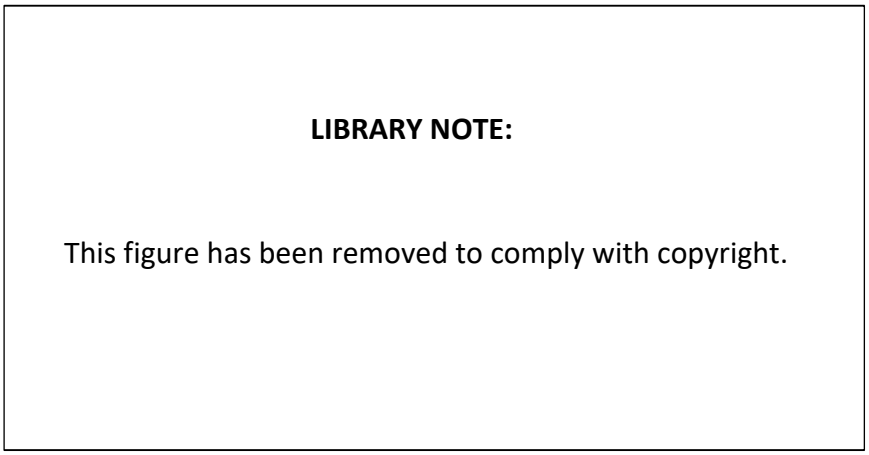

Figure 14 AJ Soprano Wearing Nu-Metal T-Shirt

As a music genre, nu-metal was very much a flash in the pan. It enjoyed a brief but intense popularity from the mid-1990s to early-2000s and as such is very much associated with the era. The account became so popular that multiple outlets like Vice.com (2020), Loudwire.com (2021) and TheRinger.com (2020) published articles tracking the phenomenon. In the following section I will draw from the scholarship on television and nostalgia to investigate how the participants in this study used the show as a site for mediated 2000s nostalgia.

There is a large body of scholarship that explores how watching television can evoke feelings of nostalgia. Göran Bolin (2014, p. 109) argues that media can function as a trigger for two types of nostalgic experience: media nostalgia and mediated nostalgia. Media nostalgia is directed towards specific media texts and formats themselves (2014, p. 110). As Bolin (2014, p. 110) puts it, this could manifest in a specific emotional attachment to the materiality of old media—"the rusty sounds when reading the newspaper," for example.

Mediated nostalgia is a slightly different practise in which media serves to mediate non-media related experiences (2014, p. 110). Most notably, using media texts as a way to construct our own understandings and memories of a given period in time. As Ekaterina Kalinina (2016, p. 226) notes, television can be a conduit for both types of nostalgia. In this research, I am most interested in mediated nostalgia and how the participants may use the show to mediate their understandings of the 2000s. Ryan Lizardi's (2014) analysis of mediated nostalgia in relation to the recent increase in revivals and resurgences of old media products provides a useful approach to understanding some of the implications of the show's resurgence. Lizardi (2014 p. 6) problematises Hollywood's obsession with remakes and reboots and argues that the form of nostalgia they facilitate can "construct us as uncritical citizens of our own culture". To illustrate this, Lizardi (2014, p. 24) makes a comparison between a scene from *Harry Potter* and the nostalgic audience. When Harry stands in front of the mirror of Erised he sees a vision of him and his deceased parents—a happy memory that never happened. In much the same way, Lizardi (2014, p. 24) suggests that we think of certain media texts as performing the same role of the mirror. He argues that:

> Historical media texts lead perpetual nostalgics to long for an idealized time period that never really existed and simply reaffirms the dominant ideologies of today. There is danger in a surface level past depleted of difference that diverts attention away from critical comparisons capable through radical history and creates a present couched in a past that advocate for the uncritical status quo. (Lizardi, 2014, p. 21)

In the context of a retrospective viewing of *The Sopranos,* this critique of mediated nostalgia speaks to a core tension. A prominent component of the show is its critique of this exact type of mediated nostalgia—Tony and his friends have this same type of uncritical obsession with 'how good things were' in the 1950s and 1960s. This appears through both the characters' obsessive (but selective) reference to gangster films and the show's the representation of

generation conflict. But, if new audiences use the show as a site for mediated 2000s nostalgia how does this transform how they decode the show's critique of this? Are contemporary audiences potentially replicating practises that the show otherwise critiques?

Most participants reported feelings of nostalgia for the late 1990s and early 2000s during their viewing of *The Sopranos.* All participants in this study were in their early to mid-20s, meaning that they were born between 1994 and 2000. As such, the participants were children during the time that *The Sopranos* originally aired. Many of the participants looked back at symbols of 2000s "youth culture" with a fondness. For the most part, this was their youth culture—something they experienced directly or perhaps via older siblings. When asked whether the show made them feel nostalgic, a few participants responded quite enthusiastically. For Stuart it was the "little things" – like the scene of AJ and Tony playing *Mario Kart* in figure 15 that evoked these feelings.

> *It's weird I guess, because I feel nostalgic for the 2000s but obviously back then I was very young, so the nostalgia is mostly for very little things, like when they played Mario Kart… You know, AJ is into those bands that people used to think were kind of cool.*

LIBRARY NOTE:

This figure has been removed to comply with copyright.

Figure 15 Tony and AJ playing Mario Kart

Several other participants experience of nostalgia were also tethered to specific pop culture artefacts that featured in the show. For example, they were drawn to AJ Soprano's taste in music. Stephan stated that AJ's (now iconic) wardrobe of nu-metal band t-shirts "100%" gave him a strong sense of nostalgia. Darcy went on to reflect that he "had the exact same *Metallica* tee" as A.J when he was a kid. Other participants described specific items of clothing in the show as having a similar effect. For Selina, there was a clear comparison to be made the 'look' of one of her favourite childhood popstars (figure 16) and *The Sopranos* character Adriana (figure 17):

> *Some of the fashion, you know, Adriana's very like—Adriana reminds me so much of Fergie—you know, a lot of the earrings and the mini-skirts and the shoes.*

LIBRARY NOTE:

These figures have been removed to comply with copyright.

Figure 16 2000s popstar, Fergie

Figure 17Adriana from The Sopranos

For Selina, *The Sopranos* was harking back to a time that she experienced and was a way to help access her broader childhood memories. As such, we can see *The Sopranos* being used as a site of childhood nostalgia—something that is particular to the personal contexts of my participants.

Overwhelmingly, the participants who experienced nostalgia upon watching *The Sopranos* framed it as a positive experience. Nostalgia was a source of viewing pleasure and an 'extra' thing they could 'get' from watching the show. Callum reflected on watching a scene were AJ and Tony play *Mario Kart* together:

> *So much of the stuff in AJ's room I was like oh! I had friends or like older brothers who had that stuff and it's a huge sense of nostalgia. The music as well and the fashion, so I think that is definitely an added bonus that has drawn me into the series—this sort of nostalgia and sort of remembering and just things they talk about.*

Callum goes onto note that this was a reason why he liked watching older shows as, "it is definitely something I like to do, go back to watching series that were maybe made in different eras just to enjoy that sort of time." Callum positively characterises this experience of nostalgia—it is an "added bonus" to his experience of watching the show. Tom fondly noted that the show's constant reference to gangster films made him feel nostalgic because:

> *My dad was super into gangster films, my cousin was super into mob films… I've got like this brutally encyclopaedic knowledge which I never asked anyone for, but I have anyway. So that kind of stuff—they're my favourite bits of the show… when they're like referring to stuff.*

For Tom, the show's gangster references helped facilitate warm childhood memories of watching these films with his family. It is the nostalgic connection that helps make these some of Tom's "favourite bits" of the show. Meanwhile, Alannah noted that the clothing and "general vibe" of the show made her feel nostalgic. Like some of the others, she enjoyed this nostalgic experience, stating that:

> *It makes me nostalgic for a time when things felt a little bit like simpler, even though they have complications. It just seemed like a good stage of history to be in, but maybe that's because I was born in 95' and I'm like, everything was better before the millennium.*

The way Alannah describes the 1990s/ early 200s as a "simpler time" (albeit still complicated) and as a "good stage of history" is of particular significance here. If we refer back to Lizardi's argument (2014) we can see the possibility for *The Sopranos* to perpetuate an idealised version of the late 1990s to retrospective viewers like Alannah. Her response goes beyond simply identifying pop-cultural artefacts from her childhood. Rather, she can be understood as engaging in a form mediated nostalgia in which the past is becoming idealised as a "good stage of history" in which "everything was better". Additionally, we can see a parallel between Tony's rose-tinted view of the 1950s and Alannah's longing for the "simpler times" of the 2000s.

These types of responses—that positively understand the nostalgic experience facilitated by *The Sopranos*—take on additional significance if we link them back to conventional understandings of the show. As I have argued elsewhere (Beare 2019) an indulgence in mediated nostalgia is what makes for dangerously the delusional 'gangster' identities represented in *The Sopranos*. Lee (2004) has made the similar argument that, in the show, nostalgia can cynically fuel toxic masculinity and violence. Many other scholars (Kocela 2002; Harris 2012; Ricci 2014) understand that a central theme of the show is this *critique* of nostalgia. In fact, the show's critique of this is very much reminiscent of Lizardi's (2014, p. 23) claim that "the desire [for an idealised past] transforms into something more problematic, fetishistic or obsessive" (2014, p. 23) Of course, viewers having nostalgia for a show set during their past is to be expected. The participants' age group means that it was originally being broadcast during their childhood and it is natural that they will likely they will feel something when they see pop-cultural artifacts from their past. But what stands out is the *enjoyment* they get from this and how—at times—it so closely resembles Tony's view of the past that is itself problematised by the show. Interestingly, the participants did not fully acknowledge this connection between their experience and Tony's. As such, we can see a

tension open up that is unique to these types of retrospective readings. For some participants, an extratextual experience of nostalgia is in opposition to the show's critique of nostalgia.

In this sense, we can understand there is the possibility for *The Sopranos* to facilitate a distinct type of nostalgia for 'new' viewers of the show. Participants would latch on to certain pop-cultural artefacts and places to reminisce about their childhood experiences in the 2000s. Of course, *The Sopranos* is conventionally understood as taking a cynical approach to nostalgia. It takes particular aim at Tony's mediated nostalgia for the 1950s and 1960s. But, from a retrospective vantage point this critique becomes a little more complicated. Younger audiences cannot be assumed to be as literate in 1950s and 1960s cultural references as the show's original audience. This was even stated explicitly by Stuart who said that while the 2000s made him feel nostalgic:

> *A lot of the other stuff is sort of—a lot of the stuff kind of goes over my head because I'm like 'I don't remember that'. Especially all of the nostalgia they have in the show—it's like "I don't know what it was like in the 60s".*

Both the age and position of a retrospective viewer can combine here to bring distinct transformational possibilities. It might simply be that this experience of mediated nostalgia could erode the show's exploration of mediated nostalgia. If participants are *enjoying* the past in the same way Tony is, there is the possibility for *The Sopranos* to perpetuate an idealised version of the past to retrospective viewers in ways that are oppositional to its own critique. As Pattie (2002) argues, *The Sopranos*' use of intertextuality is not references for the sake of references. They are deliberate and create distinct meaning—pop-culture is often leveraged to give us more insight into characters or to comment on the state of the world. If the audience don't 'get' these references, that meaning could be lost. Perhaps though, participants' experience of 2000s nostalgia could do the opposite and create a more involved, double layered understanding of nostalgia that was not previously possible. Either way, there exists

the possibility for a retrospective reading to considerably alter how viewers engage with the prominent themes of the show like nostalgia.

The Sopranos without Tony

Despite the tendency for complex television programs to feature a range of multifaceted characters there is still usually a televisual logic that pulls viewers to read the show through a certain 'main' character (Mittell 2015, p. 220). In the case of *The Sopranos*, this character is Tony Soprano. An example of this logic pulling audiences towards him is the access we are given to his internal life. The show became quite well known for its rendering of artistic dream sequences. Almost all of these sequences are from the perspective of Tony. Generally, they function to give us access to his interior state at any given moment. At times, they are connected to major narrative threads. In the episode "Fun House" (2.13) a dream triggers Tony's realisation that his friend Sal is an FBI informant. Of course, other characters in the show have dreams, but they are (with the exception of a few one-off exceptions) never shown. Instead, the characters merely tell us about them. When Christopher has a near death experience and finally wakes up from a coma, he tells Tony about his dream of hell:

> I crossed over to the other side… I saw a tunnel, I saw a white light, I saw my father in hell… and the bouncer said I'd be there when my time comes.

The dream has a profound impact on Christopher's outlook for the rest of the season. However, unlike with Tony, the audience is not shown the dream. Such conventions set up an identificatory logic that invites viewers to see the show from Tony's perspective. Since, on a textual level we are given far more access to his interior life and emotional state, it is hard to not understand *The Sopranos* as being 'about' Tony. As I argued in chapter 5, the opening credits similarly introduce the world as distinctly Tony's. In addition to this, the promotion and surrounding paratexts introduce the show as being 'about' Tony. For example, he is

always featured as the focal point of the ensemble cast (as seen in figure 18) or as a lone figure (figure 19) on the DVD covers.

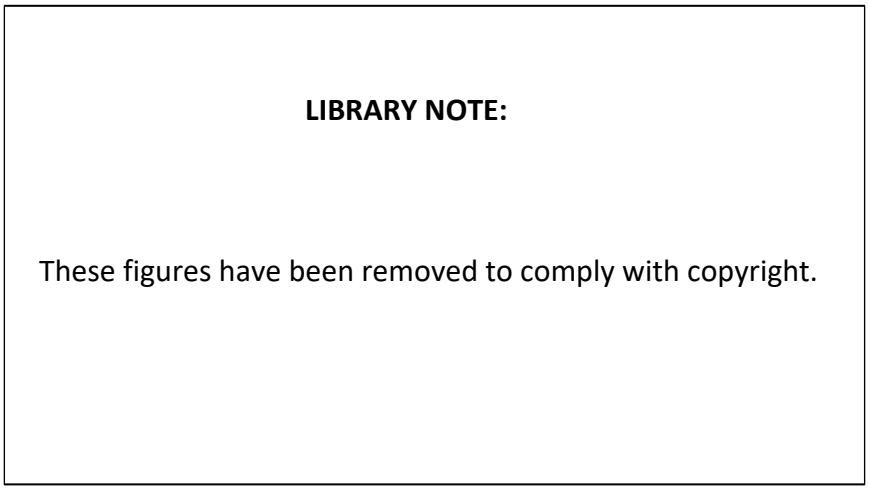

Figure 18 Season 6, Part 1 DVD cover

Figure 19 Season 6, part 2 DVD cover

Despite these televisual logics that invite the viewer to read the show through Tony, many of my participants claimed to resist this pull and refused to do so. Of course, they were aware of the televisual logic—they 'got' that Tony was meant to be the main character of the show. However, none of the participants identified him as their favourite character or the character that they found to be most relatable. Most participants acknowledged that, in their own experience of viewing the show, Tony was not the show's central character. Instead, they were more likely to understand the show's narrative through its younger cast members. On one level this is not surprising—the participants from this study were 'young' and it makes sense that they would identify with similarly aged characters. Indeed, studies of audience identification with fictional characters have generally found that individuals tend to identify with characters who were 'like them' in some regard (Cohen 2013; Tal-Or & Cohen 2010; Chichirillo & Chorey-Assad 2006). For example, Vincent Chichirillo and Rebecca Chorey-Assad (2006, p. 155) found individuals were far more inclined to relate to characters who shared the same gender identity as them. Which, as I will discuss later in this chapter, was also true for the participants in this study. Nurit Tal-Or and Jonathan Cohen (2010) found that audience members were drawn to similarly aged characters—again similar to the participants of this study. As a result, it would be nothing new for me to report that the participants in this study were drawn to younger cast members of the same gender identity. However, the results from this study included a number of key differences. For one, the *extent* to which participants read the show through these characters was more significant than I anticipated. The participants were almost using the characters as avatars to connect not only their own lived experience to the show but also with contemporary gender politics. In this sense, the show's diverse cast of characters facilitated a retrospective reading that actively resisted the show's internal identificatory logic and allowed for readings that were far more critical of the behaviour of the show's male characters.

While participants did acknowledge that Tony was presented as show's main point of identification, few were interested understanding the show through him. For example, Jessica was more concerned with how her favourite characters "handled" Tony than Tony himself:

> *I like Melfi because she is intelligent and sort of, I think she—I think the way she handles Tony is great. Cus he's a difficult person to be around and to have a conversation with and to be able to get someone like that to open up—you have to be very patient and yeah—So I like that.*

Later in the interview Jessica discussed how Melfi's handling of Tony was a point of identification for her:

> *Sometimes Tony does stuff and I'm just like "urgh". My dad is a depressed person, he's got really bad clinical depression so like I can see similarities and he just doesn't talk about it, and he finds it very hard.*

She expanded on this by saying:

> *I can definitely see a lot of similarities are there—even in that clip where Meadow's just like "Dad you're being racist" and he's like "what, I didn't say anything". I've had those moments with my Dad where I have had to call him out for things exactly like that—Because I work at the pub right, I get a lot of middle aged like I would say 40s to 50s or even older men, who will like hit on me basically or like flirt with me—they're just gross basically and it's shit—watching The Sopranos they [the men] seem like the kind of guy who would come into the pub and make some comment.*

In these ways, Jessica's lived experience informs how she read the show and resists some of its implicit logic. Instead of identifying with Tony, she identified most with characters who had to manage him. Shifting focus away from Tony's perspective considerably alters how she understands the events of the narrative. It becomes about how characters (in this case, characters who are women) are forced to navigate volatile and dominating masculine

personalities. While Jessica's interpretations were explicitly informed by her own lived experience (of working in a pub, of her interactions with her own father), it should also be noted that social mores have changed quite a bit since *The Sopranos* first aired. There is a lot less tolerance for men's poor behaviour towards women (this will be discussed further in chapter 7 and 8) and we can see this come through in Jessica's comments. Such factors can result in new emphasis on elements of the show that would have been less visible during its original 'broadcast' viewing.

Even masculine identifying participants, who might otherwise be inclined to identify with characters of the same gender, were reluctant to cite Tony Soprano as an identificatory figure. They were instead overwhelmingly drawn to the much younger Christopher with all but one of the male participants choosing him as their favourite character. Participants reported finding it easier to access the show through Christopher than through Tony. The male participants preferred the themes that were explored through his character. Brad remarked that:

> *I really liked Chris… because he was a bit younger than the others and he was probably the most confused. And there is a lot of depth of character there. I know a lot of other people who watched it and felt the same—whereas the older people that I'd meet, they really liked other characters like Pussy.*

Harry had similar thoughts about why he thought Christopher was the most interesting character:

> *I guess for me [my favourite character] is the one who is given more interesting things to do by the writers and I think Chris Moltisanti is one that definitely comes to mind in terms of like—I think he's the one where I first noticed he had a huge amount of character development. He's in a very different place in later seasons in terms of his role in the hierarchy and stuff.*

The themes of insecurity, identity and hierarchy are most noticeably explored through Christopher's character. As such, it stands out that Harry described the issues explored through Christopher as "the most interesting" and enjoyed his development throughout the series. This is not surprising given that Christopher's arc likely corresponds most closely to the experience of young men who have watched the show. The character of Christopher is a similar age in the show (mid-late 20s) and is in a transitionary stage of his life where he must gradually take on more responsibility. Stephan took this a step further and suggested that form, Chris was the "lens" through which he watched the show—"Chris Moltisanti—he's the like the lens, the one I relate to most." For Stephan, this identification with Christopher came in tandem with an explicit rejection of Tony:

> *I feel like Tony is a sort of like a caricature of—he's definitely relatable to some people I know, like in real life, but like, he's definitely like, he's a bit of a caricature of like some aspects of masculinity that are negative. [Chris] has a bit more of a sympathetic character. There are definitely moments when Tony is sympathetic as well. But yeah Chris, I related to him more.*

In this quote, Stephan suggests that sympathy is important for a character to be identificatory. It is Tony's embodiment of the "aspects of masculinity that are negative" that makes him unsympathetic and ultimately less of a focal point of identification for Stephan. By this measure of sympathy, we can also see a tendency across the participants to see Christopher as more complex than Tony. Accessing the show through Christopher allows Stephan to emphasise themes, like coming of age and identity, which are different to the typical the "crisis of masculinity" themes explored through Tony (Lee 2004, Ricci 2014). This facilitates a rejection of the show's identificatory focus on Tony. It also illuminated some changing ideas surrounding masculinity. Responses from participants suggest that the typical 2000s 'masculinity in crisis' character that Tony has come to represent is not as appealing to

contemporary viewers than it may have been at the time. Rather, for some, these traits render him to be somewhat of a "caricature." For Tony—and other 'crisis' characters from other complex shows like *Breaking Bad* or *The Walking Dead*—there is a certain level of buy-in to hegemonic masculinity. Such characters seek to belong to a gender hierarchy that offers them a specific type of meaning and power. When they do not get this, they almost feel as though they had the rug pulled out from under them. For many of the participants, this is not quite as relatable as it once might have been. I think it is fair to say that—while hegemonic masculinity is still widely prevalent and problematic—the participants did not seem to 'buy in' in the same way as Tony. Therefore, it makes sense why Christopher is more of an identificatory figure for these participants. He represents a different mould of masculinity and while he does buy-in to hegemonic formations, it is not nearly to the same extent as Tony. He often tries to find meaning and purpose in other ways like his series-long pursuit of writing. Of course, he is still an angry and violent, but as I will later explore, this anger is coming from a slightly different place (whether this be struggling to find his 'purpose', addiction or coming to grips with the 'meaninglessness of life') to Tony.

Other participants took this identification with Christopher even further than Stephan, Harry and Brad. They projected their own lived experience onto Christopher in a way that indicated quite different interpretations of the show's representations of masculinity compared to scholarly understandings of the show. When discussing why Christopher was his favourite character Tom said:

> *I think—this is probably the common answer—but I've always liked Chris, because Chris is the first character you kind of access the show through, I feel like because he really plays a bit of a role of an audience member, I think in a lot of it.*

The first part of this quote stands out—not only does Tom "access" the show through Chris, but he also assumes it is the "common" answer. Again, this is in opposition to the show's

internal logic that invites the viewer to read the show through Tony. Much like Stephan, he does not understand Tony Soprano as the "main character" and point of audience identification. The description of Christopher as "playing the role of an audience member" is also interesting as it implies that it is Chris—not Tony— who reacts to narrative events in a way that is the most understandable to audiences. They both seem to feel that the show is intentionally offering Chris as the main identificatory figure. More than Tony, Christopher is the gateway to the show's storyworld. As the interview went on, Tom gave more reasons as to why he identified with Christopher:

> *I find the episodes where he's like talking about writing really funny, really interesting as well—because I do that. I think Chris and why many find Christopher so relatable is because- I've obviously seen the show many years after it came out so for me like Christopher is kind of like, he's like me, born in the end of history type guy, born after the fall, so he doesn't even really know what came before and yet and is kind of like only knows what he knows through media consumption.*

Tom's identification with Christopher being "born after the fall" seems to be unique to a 'retrospective viewing'. Unlike Tony, Christopher was never able to experience the much-venerated 'golden years' of the 1950s and 1960s. As Brod (2006) and I (Beare 2019) have argued, Christopher can only understand them through *The Godfather* references which is much like Tom and the other participants themselves. Accessing the show in this way has considerable implications for how we understand the show's critique of masculinity. As I stated before, there is less of a personal investment in 'buying into' that type of outdated masculinity. Christopher is far more confused than Tony and for him masculinity is synonymous with aimlessness and detachment. In other words, Tony understands what version of masculinity he is trying to embody. His frustration and angst come from failing to

do so. Christopher on the other hand, doesn't even really understand what it is he's trying to embody. As Tom puts it:

> *I think about the feeling – I think it's kind of like a feeling of impotence—okay, being born in the end of history—so you know once upon a time maybe people felt like they had more agency over like big important things because there were big important debates that happened in the world and people kind of felt connected to those things and I think people maybe don't necessarily feel connected anymore—all the big historical events happened and now we're kind of sitting in the weird mess where we are just like "one last walk around the grounds before extinction" type moment.*

This response is particularly interesting as Tom's reference to impotence feels as though it is hinting at a general feeling of nihilism. For the character of Tony Soprano there is a general belief in a detailed social world in which he believes he must perform a specific role that is intertwined with his own masculinity. But for both Tom and the character of Chris, this is not the case—they are somewhat unsure of their role and how to fit in. Christopher, for example, always feels out of place in the Di Meo crime family and toys with the idea of leaving and becoming a screen writer. But, in the episode *"*D-Girl" (2.7) it becomes abundantly clear that he does not fit into the filmmaking world either. In essence, there is no social structure he can latch onto to give his life meaning and he even cites this emptiness as a reason for his series long drug addiction. This is somewhat reminiscent of Tom Harman's (2013) discussion of masculinity and late capitalism. For him, late capitalist masculinity is a response "an urban environment" that is an "urban, cynical indifferent chaotic hell that has to be resigned to as the only 'real' reality" (2013 p.2). He argues that:

> This model abandons any attachment to family, nation or community and affirms a resigned Individualism that merely maintains itself, unable to attach to or affect the world around it (Harman 2013, p. 2)

Tom's general resignation to "not feeling connected" to history or society in any other way than media is certainly reminiscent of this. If we reorient *The Sopranos* with Christopher as the main point of access, the show's exploration of masculinity and meaning takes on a decidedly different tone.

Contrastingly, a significant amount of feminine identifying participants cited Adriana as the central identificatory figure for them in the show. Adriana has perhaps one of the most tragic arcs of the program. For most of the series, she is known as Christopher's long term-girlfriend and eventual fiancé. Their relationship is tumultuous, and Adriana is frequently shown to be the victim of domestic violence. Adriana's character is both sincere and naïve. For Cathleen Kaveny (2007, p. 13) this is what makes her eventual downfall so "heartbreaking" as "in the end, it is Adriana's love for her family that proves to be her undoing". Adriana is forced by the FBI into life as a low-level mob informant. Eventually, Adriana is offered an opportunity to join the witness protection program but refuses to leave without Christopher. When she comes clean to him, Christopher ultimately betrays her. He gives her up to Tony and she is later killed by Tony's consigliere, Silvio. Adriana was the most popular character amongst the feminine identifying participants of this study. Participants were quick to remark that they liked her charisma, humour and loud clothing. More than anything though, they found parts of her experience relatable to their own experiences. Alannah stated that:

> *I especially relate to Adriana sometimes, like when I was watching it [The Sopranos] I was like I've been in a similar relationship to the relationship her and Christopher have. I always liked a lot of her decisions and stuff and a lot of her fear and her vulnerabilities but also like her naivety, I really relate to that, and I think it's a really nice juxtaposition considering her demeanour—she's always done up and she's always wearing like really*

> *strong animal prints and things like that but she's quite soft inside. And I think she kind of like wears it as a bit of a costume.*

Alannah highlights Adriana's 'naivety' and 'decision making' as points of relatability here. Unlike most of the other characters, she generally tries to do right by people. It is exceedingly rare for a character's decision making in *The Sopranos* to be guided by empathy rather than selfishness. Alannah is not saying that she likes Adriana's decision making because they are good decisions, but rather she finds the reasoning behind them relatable—especially for someone (like herself) who has been in "similar relationships". Jessica also expressed a fondness for Adriana:

> *I love Adriana! I find Adriana relatable in some respects… She seems to be a lot more innocent than what someone like Carmela or any of the other wives do. And she just seems like very young and naïve to me—she's kind of dragged into this—or, you know, she's grown up in this environment. And she happened to fall in love with this guy who treats her like shit! And you know, I can relate because I've fallen in love with guys who have treated me like shit. And I stuck around even though they're horrible people. So I can relate to that.*

Jessica highlights similar reasons to Alannah as to why she sees Adriana as an identificatory figure. Again, there is a level of relatability here—Alannah relates to Adriana's position in Adriana's toxic relationship with Christopher.

When retrospectively read through the lens of Adriana, the narrative and themes of *The Sopranos* take on a cautionary and much more tragic tone. Generally, *The Sopranos* avoids making any absolute moral judgments about its characters. According to creator David Chase, the core conceit of the show is that "American life had gotten so savage, selfish that even a mob guy couldn't take it anymore… He's in therapy because what he sees upsets him so much, what he sees everyday" (HBO 2001). As a result, the show is careful not to

completely condemn its main cast of mobsters—rather preferring to construct them as complicated, multifaceted individuals who are navigating a selfish society. But, as was alluded to in Chase's quote, Tony's experience is still very much foregrounded as the most important. It is his psychological problems and the *mob boss* being distressed by everyday life that matters the most here. Rather than—in the case of Adriana—a young woman who is subject to abuse. Reading the show through male characters like Tony and Christopher works to centre men's experiences. As previously mentioned in the literature review the way television represents gendered issues has changed significantly since *The Sopranos* first aired. There is far less false equivalency and less sympathy for men's bad behaviour towards women in today's television than there was during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The notion of male-victimisation that was so common to mainstream 'masculinity in crisis' discourse is now more frequently critiqued. But, if we use Adriana to access the show, our understanding of gender takes on a different tone compared to (following the show's televisual logic) understanding Tony as our main point of identification. From this perspective, the show comes across as much more critical in its exploration of abusive relationships—for participants like Jessica and Alannah, the show was much more about how a "naïve", "selfless", and "innocent" character like Adriana could navigate the "selfish" society alluded to by David Chase.

The Transformational Possibilities of a Retrospective Reading

Through this analysis of interview responses, I have demonstrated the transformative potentials of retrospective readings. Participants were quick to project their own lived experience onto *The Sopranos* and resist its televisual logic. For some, *The Sopranos* was transformed into a cathartic tool to help them cope with the ongoing pandemic and associated lockdowns. This demonstrated how an interaction between participant's own cultural position and viewing of the show allows an older text to be used allegorically to work

through present experiences. Watching *The Sopranos* from a retrospective vantage point also opened up unique avenues of nostalgia for some participants. The participants characterised this experience positively—the show allowed them to 'enjoy' the 2000s and reminisce over their childhood and the "simpler times" of that era. At times, this was eerily similar to Tony's on-screen experience with nostalgia, and we can see that this retrospective reading complicated the show's critique of nostalgia. Additionally, participants' resistance to the show's internal logic and tendency to identify with secondary characters instead of Tony Soprano also contributed to transforming the meanings of the show. These findings are significant because they highlight the distinct 'retrospective' dimension to how new viewers of *The Sopranos* might read it—beyond simply identifying with characters that are most 'like them'. The unique retrospective vantage point facilitates new understandings that are transformational to the show's meaning. This is evident in how the participant's used the show to allegorically work through present day anxieties. In the following chapters (7 and 8), I will go into more depth and consider the implications that arise from these types of new readings—in particular I will expand my discussion about how contemporary gender politics might inform retrospective readings of *The Sopranos*.

Chapter 7. Still A "Feminist Meta-text"?: Re-evaluating the Feminist Cultural Work of *The Sopranos*

In this chapter, I will continue my own scholarly 'retrospective reading' of *The Sopranos*. I will turn my attention away from transformational possibilities and towards the implications this has for how we, as scholars, understand resurgent television. If we read *The Sopranos* as a 2020s text, what does this mean for how we consider the original scholarship surrounding the show? Are the arguments still applicable to the experiences of viewers watching the show in a new setting? Key scholarship about *The Sopranos* during the 2000s often understood *The Sopranos* as a show about men. As such, it was quite common for *The Sopranos* to be understood as a "progressive critique of masculinity" or even as a "feminist text" (Lee 2004, Donatelli & Alward 2002; Johnson 2007). But how do these understandings sit for someone watching *The Sopranos* in the 2020s? Critical engagement with masculinity in serial scripted dramas has perhaps become more common since *The Sopranos* original run—think *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and *Dexter*. Scholars like Lotz (2014) and Brett Martin (2014) have published books that address a surge in "difficult men" and explorations of masculinity in 21st century television that occurred after the initial scholarship about *The Sopranos*. In what ways do more recent developments in television change how we think about 'feminist TV shows' in the 2020s? How comfortable are we to continue labelling *The Sopranos* as "feminist"? Just to be clear, I am not advocating for the dismissal of original scholarship about *The Sopranos.* It is still incredibly useful, especially for scholars studying the show in its original context. However, the argument I am making pertains specifically to how we consider a resurgent version of *The Sopranos—The Sopranos* as a 2020s text. Throughout this chapter, I advance the argument that doing a retrospective reading has implications for how we approach early scholarship about a text. To do so, I turn my attention to the common understanding of *The Sopranos* as a 'feminist text.' Through my

own ‘retrospective’ reading of hegemonic masculinity in the show, I contend that shifting cultural and televisual contexts serve to complicate this original understanding of the show. Drawing from the scholarship discussed in the literature review, I first identify the prominence of the gangster genre and feminism on television—which have now diminished and increased respectively—and argue that they have helped facilitate particular kinds of feminist readings of the show. I then demonstrate how that context has changed in recent years and might be different for a retrospective viewer of the show. Next, I provide my own analysis of the character of Angie Bonpensiero. I argue that—from a retrospective vantage point—we can understand Angie’s arc as a subtle endorsement of hegemonic masculinity that undercuts scholarly understandings of the show as ‘feminist’. Ultimately, this demonstrates the need for updated scholarship for older texts that have become resurgent like *The Sopranos.*

Much like how watching *The Sopranos* during a pandemic altered my interpretation of the show, so too did the cultural and televisual landscape of the 2020s. As I re-watched the show, it became clear that the ‘2020s’ version of *The Sopranos* did not square up as neatly with conventional scholarly understandings as it once did. It became harder to reconcile understandings of *The Sopranos* as ‘feminist’ after watching more recent programs like *The Handmaid’s Tale* or *Fleabag* (2016-2019) that actively work to centre women’s experiences.

As outlined in the literature review, earlier scholarship on *The Sopranos* often understood the show in relation to the cinematic gangster genre. Given this context of the late 1990s and early 2000s it is easy to understand why. *The Sopranos* premiered at the tail end of a decade of that saw a surge in these types of films. According to George Larke-Walsh (2010 p. 42), the gangster films of the 1990s should be understood as a distinct cycle. He argues that Martin Scorsese’s hit *Goodfellas* (1990) set the tone for the decade:

> *Goodfellas* appeared at the beginning of and has had a profound influence on a busy decade for gangster films. In short, the nineties saw an emphasis on violence and costume as crucial signifiers of the Mafia, alongside, but not necessarily concurrent with claims of factual authenticity. (Larke-Walshe 2010, p. 42)

The 1990s gangster represented a significant shift in tone for the genre. Directors like Martin Scorsese used scenes of excessive violence to remove the 'glamourous aura', or what Stephan Neale (2002, p. 37) calls the "Mafia Mystique" of *The Godfather* films. In the 1990s:

> The difference between lower-level gangsters and ordinary citizens is much less marked. In consequence, however extraordinary the activities they engage in may be, those activities take place, as Nicole Rafter points out, in a much more down-to-earth, much like controllable 'quotidian' environment. (Neale 2002, p. 37)

According to Karine Hildenbrand (2005, p. 23), films like *Casino* (1995) and *Donnie Brasco* (1997) stripped the gangster of the self-assured grandeur that had been afforded to them in previous decades. There is an emphasis on the mundane in these films—often gangsters are depicted in petty squabbles with their wives or other gangsters. Other gangster-comedies of the 1990s like *My Cousin Vinny* (1992) and *Analyse This* (1999) capitalised on the removal of this 'mystique' for the purposes of humour. All this is to say that when *The Sopranos* premiered it was at the end of a distinct, commercially successful, cycle of gangster films.

In anticipation of *The Sopranos* debut HBO promoted the show as a continuation of the 1990s gangster film. In particular, HBO took stylistic influence from the promotion of *Goodfellas.* The film is well known for its use of contrapuntal music to accompany scenes of excessive violence. For example, the calming song "Atlantis" plays over the brutal beating and murder of Billy Batts. A similar stylistic choice is made in *The Sopranos*' initial promotion. The trailer includes a montage of Tony and his friends beating and murdering other gangsters. This is underscored by Booker T and The MG's blues song "Green Onions".

Much like how Henry Hill narrates the *Goodfellas* trailer, Tony provides voice over for *The Sopranos* trailer. Other elements of this trailer also constructed *The Sopranos* specifically as a 1990s gangster text. For example, there is an emphasis on the domesticity of Tony's life that echoes Neale's (2002) arguments about the rejection of the mafia mystique. In the trailer, Tony is shown comically bickering with his wife and being exasperated by his elderly mother. Tony's placement in these settings is intercut with shots of him participating in stylised gangster violence. This helps erode the differences between the gangster and ordinary middle-class citizens in a way that was emblematic of the 90s gangster film. Although, in practice, the first season of *The Sopranos* features numerous narrative threads and themes that are disconnected from the gangster genre entirely, the promotion for season 1 was careful to position the gangster narrative as the primary narrative of the show. Tony's voice over details how "there is a power vacuum at the top" of the DiMeo crime family and the rest of the trailer focuses on the escalating violence between the two warring factions.

As I argued in the literature review, initial scholarship about *The Sopranos* often labelled the show as "progressive" or even "feminist" when considered in relation to the cinematic gangster genre. Notably, Donatelli and Alward (2002, p. 68) stated that *The Sopranos* disrupts the "non-stop flow of testosterone" and "throws oestrogen in men's faces." In comparison to films like *The Godfather*, women in *The Sopranos* have access to the same violence as men. Take the examples of Janice kill Richie or Livia ordering a "hit" on her son. Akass and McCabe (2002, p. 150) echoed this argument, stating that female characters in *The Sopranos* had an active influence on the narrative that was unprecedented for the genre. They state that this helped disrupt the masculine mafia codes that were so common to the gangster story (Akass & McCabe 2002, p. 150). Likewise, I have also touched on the work of De Stefano (2011) and Hibbered (2011) who commented on *The Sopranos* representation of sexuality that was subversive to the genre. They both cited the character of Vito Spatafore as

evidence of *The Sopranos* "queering" the mafia genre. Hibbered suggests Vito's arc is representative of how the show's feminist cultural work as helped viewers reflect on the homophobia that was rife throughout the gangster genre. Perhaps most notably Lee (2004) has claimed that "*The Sopranos* willingness to acknowledge the impact of feminism on popular culture" has led to a "seismic shift in the sexual landscape of the gangster narrative." For Lee (2004), what stood out was *The Sopranos'* interest in deconstructing gender role while showing that traditional masculinity is "anything but natural." It was preciecely this that led Lee (2004) to label *The Sopranos* a "feminist meta text." For her, *The Sopranos* forces us to "see ourselves" in the characters and critique the "consequences, costs and benefits" that heterosexist gender ideals have for men and women (2004). This early scholarship makes one thing clear—if we consider *The Sopranos* representation of gender in relation to the gangster genre, it can be understood as progressive and even feminist.

Hegemonic Masculinity and *The Sopranos*

This scholarship was useful to understanding how disruptive *The Sopranos* was in its original context. The show's willingness to critically engage with gender certainly stands out when compared to modern gangster urtexts like *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas*. In no way am I trying to challenge these readings of the show. What I am interested in is how this initial context and scholarship assisted in promoting a broader scholarly understanding of the show as 'feminist' that has been largely left unquestioned, even in more recent times. To what extent does this understanding square up with a 2020s retrospective reading of the show? To investigate this, I first need to identify in more detail how *The Sopranos* was understood as a feminist text by scholars. In the literature review, I referred to a general trend for *The Sopranos* scholars to apply feminist theory to the show. I argued that these theories were used to illuminate the show's various critiques of masculinity. I now will extend this argument a little further—specifically by suggesting that most of the critiques identified by this literature

are consistent with R.W Connell and James Messerschmidt's theory of hegemonic masculinity. I therefore contend that the understanding of *The Sopranos* as 'feminist' is contingent on a progressive critique of embodiments of hegemonic masculinity.

In the literature review, I referred to scholars who noted how *The Sopranos* critiqued the perpetuation of an unattainable model of masculinity to understand the show as feminist (Johnson 2007; Akass & McCabe 2006; Donatelli & Alward 2005; De Stefano 2011). This understanding of masculinity is also at the crux of Connell's theory. In the initial theorisation of hegemonic masculinity, Connell makes it clear that hegemonic masculinity is, for the most part, a fantasy. It is only properly embodied in fictional macho characters and hence out of reach of most 'regular' men:

> [Hegemonic masculinity] often involves the creation of models of masculinity which are specifically fantasy figures such as the film characters played by Humphry Bogart, John Wayne and Sylvester Stallone. Or real models may be publicized that are so remote from everyday achievement that they have the effect of being an unattainable ideal, like the Australian Rules Footballer Ron Barasi or the boxer Muhammad Ali. (Connell 1987, p. 185)

Lee (2004), Geraldine Harris (2012), and Senior (2017) have all echoed this observation in their analysis of *The Sopranos.* All three have discussed Tony's famous Gary Cooper rant in which he cites the cowboys played by the famous actor as the perfect embodiment of masculinity. Lee draws on Judith Gardiner's understanding that masculinity is as a "nostalgic formation" to argue that the show's embodiment of masculinity as both unattainable and rooted in the past. We can see that Connell's theory also fits in here too. At the crux of her concept is the idea that hegemonic masculinity is an almost impossible ideal that is very rarely, if ever, lived up to. Despite this, the men in *The Sopranos* still actively perpetuate and benefit from hegemonic models of masculinity. Harris (2012, p. 7) notes that,

like many powerful men, Tony does everything he can to "embody the public face of hegemonic masculinity". Again, this relates to another tentpole of Connell's theory. While hegemonic masculinity may not be "what men are" it is what sustains their power, "the notion of hegemony generally implies a large measure of consent. Few men are Bogarts or Stallones, but many collaborate in sustaining those images (Connell 1987, p. 184). Lee (2004) draws from Eve Sedgwick's (1985) work on homosocial relationships between men to unpack exactly how hegemonic masculinity is sustained in *The Sopranos*. She observes that Tony and his friends are constantly gauging, refining and policing the boundaries of masculinity (2004). While the model of masculinity in *The Sopranos* is an inherent contradiction, if anyone is seen to transgress it there are often very real (usually deadly) consequences. Notable examples of this include when Vito is killed for being gay in season 6 and when Tony is almost 'whacked' for seeing a therapist in season 1. Senior (2017) makes a similar observation in his analysis of Tony and his son's relationship. He cites the episode "Army of One" in which Tony tries to force AJ into a mould of masculinity that is totally incompatible with any expression of emotion. As previously mentioned in the literature review, Lee (2004), Senior (2017) and Harris (2012) cite this example to support their argument that the show is feminist (or in Lee's case, a "feminist meta text").While not all these scholars cited Connell specifically, this understanding of *The Sopranos* as feminist is still consistent with their theory in the sense that the show represents masculinity in much the same way.

Feminist understandings of *The Sopranos* have paid significant attention to the representation of psychological consequences associated with embodying masculinity. In particular, scholars have noted the panic attacks Tony suffers due to his volatile embodiment of masculinity (Ricci 2014). In *Gender and Power* (1987, p. 182) Connell asserts that masculinity and femininity should be understood as relational constructs. Hegemonic

masculinities are dependent on the "global subordination" of women: "masculinities require the maintenance of practises that institutionalise men's dominance over women. In this sense, hegemonic masculinity must embody a successful collective strategy in relation to women" (Connell 1987, p. 182). Kimmel (1993) argued that this strategy manifests itself through both sexism and homophobia. For him, the proscription of perceived feminine attributes are "the constituent elements of hegemonic masculinity, the stuff of construction are sexism, racism and homophobia" (Kimmel 1993, p. 30). He extends the assertion that, "to be masculine is not to be feminine or gay, or to be tainted with marks of inferiority. It is not a direct affirmation but rather a renunciation that defines hegemonic masculinity" (Kimmel 1993, p. 31). In his analysis of *The Sopranos,* Franco Ricci argues that we can see *The Sopranos* representation of masculinity in a similar way:

> [In *The Sopranos*] Real men don't cry, are not sensitive, they repress emotion and act macho. Manhood for these individuals is proved through confrontation. To be a man is to amputate one's heart and substitute them for an avatar of prolific virility and gender domination […] Their reality is role-playing, of being the tough guy, of climbing to the top of the heap […] It's constant self-denial along with continued abrogation of emotion. (2014, p. 130)

For Ricci, this characterisation of masculinity in *The Sopranos* echoes classic feminist criticism that the performance of masculinity is essentially "sadomasochistic" (2014, p. 89). Senior builds upon Ricci's work to argue that the core rejection of the "feminine other" in *The Sopranos* amounts to an unnatural mutilation of the self (2017, p 39). A central motif of *The Sopranos* is Tony's constant panic attacks. I previously mentioned in the literature review how feminist understandings of the show attributed these attacks to Tony having to deny his own emotions in order to embody masculinity. For both Senior (2017) and Ricci (2014), these attacks are what epitomise the show's critique of hegemonic masculinity.

Senior contends that panic attacks are what *The Sopranos* uses to communicate that hegemonic masculinity is "unstable and unsustainable" and are utilised to explain the "central contradictions of hegemonic masculinity" to audiences (2017, p. 39). It is a fear of the feminising effects of becoming vulnerable to these emotions that trigger Tony's attacks. Senior (2017, p. 44) argues that this places Tony in an "inescapable double bind" because "the performance of masculinity implicitly affirms the emotion that it seeks to deny". In this instance, scholars are identifying *The Sopranos* as doing feminist cultural work through its critiques of masculinity that problematise masculinity as unstable and unsustainable. Again, we can see how scholars' critical engagement with hegemonic masculinity is crucial to their understandings of *The Sopranos* as feminist.

As noted in the literature review, feminist scholars of *The Sopranos* often cite how the show dissects the relationship between masculinity and power. Much of the literature on *The Sopranos* has focused on how various male characters navigate the often-contradictory rules of masculinity. But scholars have also emphasised how the male characters in the show also benefit from this construction of masculinity. For example, in De Stefano's (2011) analysis of Vito Spatafore he notes that hegemonic masculinity is both a source of power and constraint for Vito. While he cannot "live authentically", hegemonic masculinity also makes him the man he is—a high earning mobster, indisputably masculine and powerful (De Stefano, p. 120). As De Stefano (2011, p. 120) concludes "acting like a man in Don Corleone's term, has its rewards for his fictive descendent Vito Spatafore". Again, De Stefano's analysis calls Connell's (2009, p. 442) concept of hegemonic masculinity to mind. In particular, it is her discussion of "patriarchal dividends" that resonates here. The term refers to the privilege that is afforded to men in societies with unequal gender orders. Even if most men cannot fully embody hegemonic masculinity there are still benefits to be derived from sustaining an unequal gender order. These various privileges associated with masculinity (i.e., access to

more status, power and recourses) are what Connell terms as the "patriarchal dividend" (2009, p. 142). In the case of Vito, this dividend proves to be to enticing as he chooses to try and regain his life as a masculine mobster in New Jersey over the urge to "live authentically" as a gay man in New Hampshire (De Stefano 2011, p. 120), De Stefano (2011, p. 124) notes that *The Sopranos* leverages this storyline to provide one of its most pronounced critiques of hegemonic masculinity: "a sad but apparently universal truth: the need to belong to a structure that provides meaning and purpose, as well as power and money, can be more powerful than the urge to live authentically". Johnson (2007) provided a similar analysis of how men leverage power in *The Sopranos*. Using an intersectional framework, she describes how men exert power over women and over other men through hierarchy and exclusion. Much of the time, the parameters of hegemonic masculinity are used as mechanisms for economic exclusion from the Sopranos' crime family. The economic structure of the family is hierarchical—if a character does not abide by the social norms of masculinity he is excluded from ascending. As such, we can see there is somewhat of a scholarly consensus that *The Sopranos* can be understood as a "feminist" text. Usually, it is the show's various revelations about the gendered structures of inequality that might otherwise have been naturalised that is cited as evidence of this (Johnson 2007; Lee 200; Ricci 2014; De Stefano 2011). *The Sopranos* does feminist cultural work by revealing these systems to be constructions that they are which helps unpick the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and power.

As a result, I argue that a feminist understanding of *The Sopranos* is generally contingent on two factors—the critique of hegemonic masculinity and deconstruction of unequal gender orders. However, what happens when we investigate the show's representations of gender in a new context? Much of *The Sopranos*' scholarship has talked about the show in reference to the gangster genre and the gender politics of the 2000s. But contexts have changed in the 2020s—the gangster genre is far less prominent and feminism

on television is now much more visible. In the following section, I will provide my own retrospective reading of feminism in *The Sopranos.* I investigate the six season long sub-plot of secondary character, Angie Bonpensiero, to demonstrate how an interpretation of the show as feminist can be problematised in when reading it in 2020. I contend that given new contexts of #MeToo and the decline of the gangster genre of the show's "feminist" elements have become somewhat obscured. Angie's arc exposes *The Sopranos* critique of masculinity as incomplete and potentially less radical than initially implied by early work on the show.

Analysing Angie's Arc: The Subtle Endorsement of Hegemonic Masculinity

In the final episode of *The Sopranos*' second season—"Fun House" (2.13)—Angie Bonpensiero's gangster husband Sal 'Big Pussy' Bonpensiero is murdered. This is the inciting incident for the character of Angie to undergo a significant transformation. For the most part, the audience is invited to view this positively and take pleasure in her slow rise to independence. However, her success is intertwined with an incremental appropriation of the same hegemonic masculinity that she despised in her late husband and which scholars have long told us the show itself critiques. But rather than problematising Angie's increasingly assertive and aggressive 'masculine' behaviour—as a critique of hegemonic masculinity would suggest—her character is rewarded for it in both her professional and personal life. In this particular instance, *The Sopranos* presents success and hegemonic traits as synonymous. Although the show has been typically understood to critique hegemonic masculinity when embodied by men, it celebrates Angie's adoption of hegemonically masculine traits in ways that can be seen to undermine the show's series long critique of masculinity. Just to be clear, I am not trying to argue that Angie's arc undoes all the 'feminist cultural work' done by *The Sopranos.* Rather, it is representative of the show's inability to imagine positive outcomes for female characters that do not involve the adoption of hegemonic traits. As such, it reveals the limits of the show's feminist cultural work. In recent years there have been revaluations of

gender on screen—there are generally more possibilities for women and less tolerance of traditional gendered scripts. Take Havas' (2022) discussion of the recent surge in feminist quality television during the 2010s that centred complicated female protagonists. Given these new cultural and televisual contexts, I argue that a 'feminist' understanding of *The Sopranos* has become more complicated.

In her initial theorisation of hegemonic masculinity, Connell (1987, p. 184) discusses the concept of "emphasised femininity". She suggests that it is centred around "compliance with subordination [to men] and is oriented to acknowledge the interest and desires of men" (Connell 1987, p. 184). This manifests in specific behaviours that are:

> Displays of sociability, rather than technical competence, fragility in mating scenes, compliance with men's desire for titillation and ego-stroking in office relationships, acceptance of marriage and childcare as a response to labour-market discrimination against women. (Connell 1987, p. 184)

Connell concludes that there is often a "kind of 'fit'" between emphasised femininity and hegemonic masculinity" (1987, p. 184). It is the dichotomy between them that allows for the continuation of an unchallenged gender ordered skewed towards male dominance. J. Halberstam (1998) suggest that there are alternative embodiments of femininity that, when adopted, can meaningfully disrupt this dichotomy. Most notably, in his quintessential book *Female Masculinity* (1998), Halberstam argues that female embodiments of masculinity can offer a distinct alternative to hegemonic masculinities. He is clear to state that these masculinities are not just "some bad imitation of virility, but a lively and dramatic staging of hybrid and minority gender identities" (1998, p. 7). I contend that—at least in the case of Angie—*The Sopranos* values women when they adopt an "imitation of virility" instead of offering a distinct alternative. Ultimately, this reinforces the hegemonic

masculinity/emphasised femininity binary and leaves traditional gendered hierarchies largely unchallenged.

From our first introduction to Angie in the episode "The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti" (1.8) it is made clear that the pursuit of emphasised femininity is something stressful and unattainable for her. In her early appearances, Angie is shown to be desperately craving acceptance from the other mob wives. While not entirely excluded from weekly lunches, Angie is always on the outer, disconnected from them. In the episode "Commendatori" (2.4) there is a scene in which Angie, Carmela and Rosalie are having lunch together at their regular spot—the restaurant *Nuovo Vesuvio*. The scene opens with a wide shot that reveals the square table the trio are seated at. Carmela is in the middle, while Angie and Rosalie sit opposite each other. The framing of this scenes makes the trio's dynamic clear. The scene cuts between tight framings of Carmela and Rosalie while Angie is mostly shot on her own with space around her. As seen in figure 20, there is a large bottle of wine placed between Angie and that serves as a barrier to punctuate this separation and visually marking her distance from the other mob wives.

Figure 20 Angie (left), Carmela (middle) and Rosalie (right) having lunch

To Angie, Carmela and Rosalie represent the perfect embodiment of femininity—they 'love' their husbands and appear to effortlessly play the 'happy wife'. This is something Angie desperately wants but could not be further from achieving. At this point in the show, she feels trapped in a miserable marriage with Sal but still feels tremendous pressure to keep up with the other wives and to maintain a veneer of 'happiness'. As the scene in the restaurant progresses, this charade becomes too much and Angie finally snaps. When the song "Time to Say Goodbye" by Andrea Bocelli starts playing on the resteraunt sound system the following exchange takes place:

Rosalie:	[tearing up] Sorry, this reminds me of Jack.
Carmela:	[referring to Andrea Bocelli] God, he's so handsome this guy too.
Angie:	[sobbing]
Carmela:	And he's blind you know…
Angie:	[in tears] Jesus Christ!
Rosalie:	Angie… Oh my god! I'm sure he's [Andrea Boceli] adjusted to it.
Angie:	Christ, you fucking idiot! I'm not happy Sal's back!

Angie's outuburst is triggered by Rosalie becoming emotional at the thought of her dead husband. Not only is this a reminder of the intense resentment she feels towards her husband, it is also a reminder that—by Angie's standards—she is a failure. Rosalie misses her husband while Angie wishes hers was dead. There is always an underlying performativity in the interactions between the mob wives in *The Sopranos.* They frequently measure their value against the success of each other's marriages. This attaches extra significance to Angie's outburst as it also functions as an acknowledgement of her inferiority to the other wives. In a

later scene, this knife is twisted further as Carmela, Rosalie, and Gabrialle revel in gossiping about Angie's admission during a three way phone call. This latter scene feels particularly cruel as our last image of Angie is of her crying in a state of vulnerability. Viewers are invited to sympathise wtih Angie here, and view Carmela as the other wives as cruel bullies. As I will show shortly, these early scenes help position Angie's later rejection of femininity and adoption of masculine forms of power as sources of audience satisfaction.

The negative influence feminine gender roles have on Angie's life is most pronounced when she considers divorcing Sal. After her breakdown, Angie privately tells Carmela that she has decided to divorce her husband. Carmela does not accept this and tries to convince Angie to stay with her husband. Throughout the exchange Carmela leverages the power afforded to her by being married to Tony who is the head of the DiMeo crime family and, by extension, Sal's boss. The power discrepency here has a considerable effect on the direction of the conversation. At first, Angie is resolute in her decision—she is *telling* Carmela, not asking for advice:

Carmela: So what did they lawyer say?

Angie: He said I had a good case, and we'll file on Tuesday.

Carmela: You're gonna take Monday to think… That's good.

Angie: [scowling] Monday is a Jewish holiday. I'm finished thinking! Hell, I thought myself into fucking non-existence.

Carmela: Well, you're not non-existent and Pussy (Sal) does not see you that way.

Angie: Fuck what he sees! Not anymore! It's what I see! God gave me more years Carmela…and I will use that gift!

As seen in figure 21 and 22, Carmela has a static facial expression that is unresponsive to Angie's display of emotion.

LIBRARY NOTE:

These figures have been removed to comply with copyright.

Figure 21 Angie

Figure 22 Carmela

This is because she's not really listening to Angie and is instead waiting for a gap in the conversation to show her disapproval. As the conversation progresses Carmela throws subtle barbs at Angie to guilt her into staying with Sal. She brings up Angie's adult daughter's

struggling marriage, asking “is this really the example you want to set when your daughter is struggling very hard to keep her marriage alive?” Little by little, these comments and insinuations create a mounting pressure for Angie to stay with Sal and conform to normative patriarchal gender relations. This is visually amplified in how the scene is blocked later. At the beginning of the scene, Angie and Carmela are positioned far apart on opposite couches. However, as Carmela starts to apply pressure, she starts following Angie around the room until the distance is completely closed. At the emotional climax of the scene, Carmela has Angie physically cornered by the bar and whispers in her ear: “I’m doing this because I am your friend… in the end I know you’re not going to leave him” (figure 23).

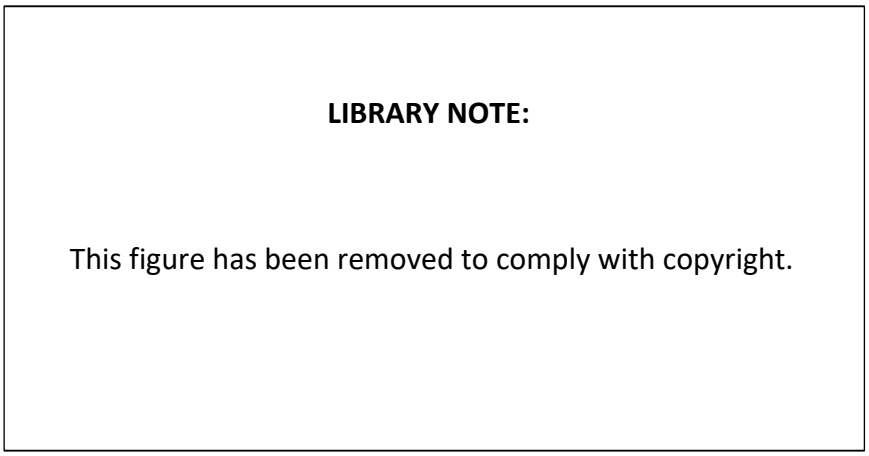

Figure 23 Angie and Carmela hug

In this scene, Carmela leverages her social power (afforded by her status as Tony’s wife) to act as a sort of ‘foot soldier’ of patriarchy and ensure other women remain within a patriarchal paradigm. It has been made abundantly clear that Angie has nothing but contempt for Sal, he is emotionally abusive and later goes on to be physically abusive. Angie’s eventual decision to stay is not out of love for him. Rather, she chooses to stay and overlook Sal’s bad treatment of her so as not be excluded by her friends and community. Through this,

The Sopranos provides a clear demonstration of how emphasised femininity is weaponised to perpetuate and support patriarchal forms of power. Carmela is the ultimate ambassador for this type of femininity and this scene invites us to see the cruelty of what she is saying to Angie. At this point, it has become clear that the strictures of emphasised femininity are toxic for Angie and result in her subordination to both Sal and to the other mob wives who more readily embody conventional gender scripts.

By establishing the pressures of patriarchal femininity as an overwhelmingly negative force in Angie's life, *The Sopranos* creates an arc that is ultimately satisfied by a rejection of this. This transformation is first articulated visually through Angie's changing sense of style. Fashion and costume design play an important role in 'prestige drama' productions (Warner 2014; Buckley and Ott 2009). It also plays a significant role in coding gender on television (Jobbling 2014; Sadkowska 2017; Woodard 2017). *The Sopranos* plays with this gendered coding in Angie's wardrobe. While she is married to Sal, Angie is usually presented in a very meek, frazzled, feminine style that underscores her powerlessness. Often her wardrobe will consist of muted colours with soft edges—traits that Forsythe argues are associated with passivity and weakness. In figure 24, we can see Angie's jacket has a softer cut and is in a muted, beige tone. In figure 24, her jacket is the same colour as the furnishings and her shirt the same as the colour as the tablecloths. This costuming blends her into the background, making her somewhat of a wallflower. Similarly, the wild fizziness of her hair and running mascara helps underscore her overall lack of control. Angie's numerous one on one scenes with Carmela also invite comparison between the two characters. When put next to Carmela's confident embodiment of the stereotypical 'New Jersey style' (figure 25)—which is loud and flamboyant—Angie's general lack of confidence is clear.

Figure 24 Angie outfit

Figure 25 Carmela Outfit

Angie's Embodiment of Hegemonic Masculinity

However, after Sal is killed in the episode "Funhouse" (2.13), we can see a notable change in Angie's wardrobe. As she experiences emotional freedom and independent financial success in the wake of her husband's death, Angie's clothing takes on a more masculine tone. She starts wearing clothes that are more practical and involve darker colours and sharper edges. In

figure 26, after reuniting with the other mob wives in season 6, Angie wears a black leather jacket, a large gold chain necklace and has straightened hair.

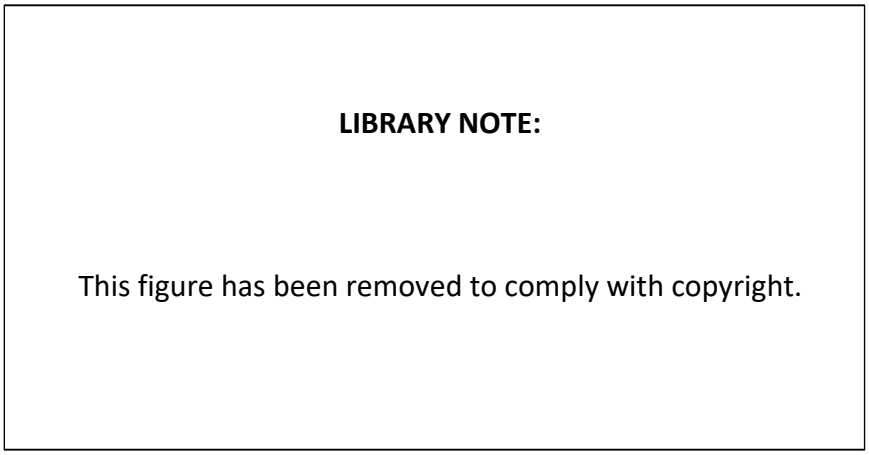

Figure 26 Angie in new outfit

There is obviously a long and varied association between leather jackets and masculinity. Leather has been associated with the military, protest masculinities (Connell 2009), hyper-masculinity (Childs 2016) and S&M (Taylor & Ussher 2001). Angie's change to leather jackets is a key sartorial signifier of her change. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) have argued that what constitutes hegemonic masculinity changes depending on the local setting. *The Sopranos* constructs its own specific form of hegemonic masculinity within its tight group of mobsters. For the men of the show, a leather jacket functions as something of a uniform. The sight of five or so men standing around weather leather jackets is exceedingly common in the show. This compounds the symbolic function of Angie wearing clothing such as this. It marks her as beginning to conform to the localised understanding of masculinity in *The Sopranos.* In other words, season 6 Angie is visually more 'mobster' than 'mob wife'.

Angie's change in style is also accompanied by a dramatic change in attitude. This becomes fully realised in the season 6 episode "Live Free or die" (6.6) when Angie is attending a charity meeting with Carmela, Rosalie, and Gabriella. The scene opens with Angie arriving late to the meeting. As she enters the scene, the group is already fully seated and Rosalie remarks "oh… Angie finally!" to which Angie dismissively says, "oh sorry, I had these sales reps in my office". This response signifies Angie's shift in personality and reveals a prioritisation of work at the body shop over her friends—something unthinkable for season 2 Angie. Additionally, the tone of this response is far less meek and deferential than it was previously. As the meeting progresses, Angie speaks with a far more aggressive tone and trivialises the activities of the group. She is no longer deferential to Carmela—as we can see in the following exchange, she actually challenges Carmela's 'alpha' status among the wives:

Carmela: We are just going over the list for the silent auction…we are already up to about $75,000.

Angie: [Loudly] A silent auction again?! Why not get a live auction?

Carmela: People enjoy the silent auction.

Angie: I thought the goal was to raise money. I say we get them liquored up… let them tear each other's throats out! [group laughter]. Anyhow put me down for $2000 worth of body work and paint.

Rosalie: $2000… Jesus Christ!

Angie's confidence is supported visually by her body language here. Throughout the entire exchange, she is moving her arms, reaching over the table and into Carmela's personal space all while she sips her wine. This use of violent language ("tear each other's throats out") also sticks out as particularly confronting to the group. In general, this behaviour reads as dismissive of the traditionally feminine labour (organising charity fundraising) Carmela and the other wives are engaging in. By swanning in with various solutions, Angie makes the

meeting feel silly and insignificant. If Angie—with her masculine persona—can solve the matter in seconds, it makes Carmela's meticulous planning sessions feel frivolous and like they were a waste of time. Additionally, there is the implication that Angie's (masculine) work in the body shop is 'real work' while the (feminine) fundraising is not. Similarly, her defiance carries extra significance due to Carmela's 'alpha' status among the wives. For Angie, this is a chance for her to assert her dominance and define herself through the denigration of Carmela. Later in the scene, when the group is contemplating what to order, Angie interrupts the process and orders for everyone, saying "I hate to be a pain, but I'm pinched for time, can we just let them cook?" This dominating type of behaviour is not only completely out of character for the Angie we met in season 2 but is also immediately identifiable as masculine in ways that are eerily like how the mobsters treat their wives—more specifically the bad way Sal treated Angie herself. This behaviour culminates in Angie's abrupt departure from the meeting. She receives a phone call and then cuts of Carmela mid-sentence stating "Oh sorry guys… I gotta take this… Hello? [turns to waiter] Can I just get this to go? I'm sorry guys… I gotta get back to the shop." Angie's reference to the other wives as "guys" stands out from the normal language used by the group. The other wives usually refer to each other as "girls or "ladies." Just as Angie finishes speaking the scene cuts to closeup of Carmela who is about to start talking when Angie loudly yells into the phone, "No! Quarter panel from the LeSabre I said! Jesus!" Through Angie's dialogue and actions, it has become clear that she has gained power over Carmela through the appropriation of masculine behaviour and active rejection of the femininity she once sought to embody.

This rejection of femininity is symbolically complete in Angie's final scene when Carmela comes to collect the coupons Angie offered for the silent auction. The scene opens with Angie sitting behind her big desk in a haze of cigar smoke—another masculine signifier

in *The Sopranos*. In front of her are Patsy and Little Paulie (two high ranking gangsters) intently listening to her give detailed orders. The positioning of the characters in front of Angie's desk serves to underscore her authority at the body shop. As seen in figures 27 and 28 the mise-en-scene draws visual parallels to the countless scenes of Tony giving instructions to his underlings from his desk at the Bada-Bing! Strip club.

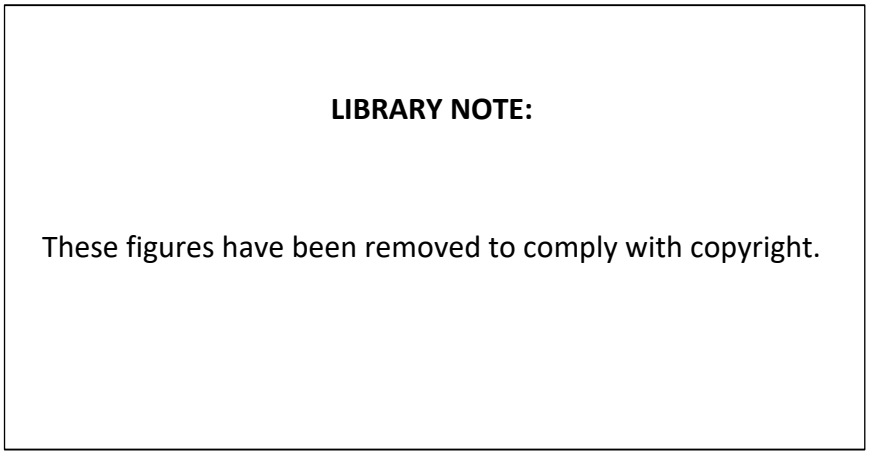

Figure 27 Tony giving instructions

Figure 28 Angie giving instructions

This is the point at which Angie is fully realised as a masculine mafioso. As Carmela enters the room, the scene quickly cuts to Angie's point view. Patsy and Paulie turn their heads away from the camera to look at Carmela. Angie and Carmela then have the following exchange:

Angie: [surprised] Carm… hi

Carmela: I'm sorry am I interrupting something? I'm here for the eh… free bodywork certificates for the auction.

Angie: Oh, that's right.

Carmela: But if you're busy…

Angie: [Cutting of Carmela] This will just take another sec [gestures Carmela to door]

This symbolically functions as Angie's complete embrace of hegemonic masculinity. Given the choice between Carmela or doing business with the men she quickly prioritises the latter. Her expressions and tone make it clear that she now views feminine activities like Carmela's charity auction as superfluous and silly. Importantly, this scene invites the audience to take pleasure in Angie's rise to power. Carmela's sense of superiority and toxic influence over Angie's life have made her the antagonist in this relationship. In scenes between the pair, we are oriented to sympathise with Angie—in many ways Angie is a foil to bring out some of the worst in Carmela. When Carmela is 'put in her place' by Angie the audience is offered a sense of satisfaction that encourages us to view this transformation in positive terms.

The embrace of hegemonic masculinity is problematic because—much like Connell (1987) describes—it comes at the expense and degradation of femininity. Scholars have frequently included *The Sopranos*' critique of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal paradigms in their understanding of it as a feminist text. But, in the case of Angie we can see

that when *The Sopranos* imagines female empowerment it does so in potentially problematic ways. Taking pleasure in Angie's success also invites us to dislike Carmela. The women being pit against each other obscures the fact that they share a common oppression at the hands of men. In the end, Angie embraces the same mafioso masculinity that she despised in her husband Sal.

The Implications of a Retrospective Reading

Ultimately, Angie's character arc does not disrupt, or even substantially challenge, the unequal relationship between masculinity and femininity. Rather, it simply makes hegemonic masculinity available to women as their only apparent route to empowerment. Of course, hegemonic masculinity must denigrate femininity to sustain itself—we can see this at play in Angie's arc through the denigration of Carmela. As such, we can see this storyline complicate the scholarly claim *The Sopranos* is feminist for its critique of hegemonic masculinity. Angie must emulate the same rejection of femininity that is shown to have devastating psychological effects on her male counterparts. Whereas in the case of male mobsters, hegemonic masculinity is presented as toxic and worthy of critique, Angie's adoption of the same behaviour is presented as positive and empowering. As such, *The Sopranos* overall critique of hegemonic masculinity is ultimately incomplete. Much of the program's critique of masculinity is predicated on problematising the rejection of femininity. However, this same rejection is celebrated through Angie's arc. As such, *The Sopranos*' limited capacity to imagine alternative forms of female empowerment leads to the ultimate veneration of the traits of hegemonic masculinity, even if in this case they are embodied by a woman.

As I noted in the literature review, how feminism is understood from both a cultural and televisual perspective has changed significantly in the years since *The Sopranos* went off the air. This is in part due to the visibility of the #MeToo movement and a surge in Quality Feminist television during the 2010s. As a result, what we now understand as a 'feminist'

program has changed considerably. When I first watched *The Sopranos* in the mid-2010s I did not think the premise of a mob boss in therapy was *that* strange. To me, it was an interesting narrative device that allowed viewers access to the interior state of Tony Soprano as well as maybe providing opportunities for 'fish-out-of-water' style humour. It wasn't until I started researching the show that I appreciated the true significance of this premise. Promotional material emphasised both the comedic potential but also how transgressive it was to have a hypermasculine figure like Tony in this space. Reflecting on my own experience, it appears that contemporary contexts of interpretation influenced the significance (or lack thereof) that I placed on a mobster in therapy. Of course, societal stigmas about men seeking therapy still exist but perhaps not to the same extent as they once did. I was more inclined to pay attention to the show's exploration of gender in different areas—namely how the show represented women.

The type of gendered critique that I have made in this chapter is not something that has only now become available to scholars. There are plenty of examples of scholars applying similar critiques to other complex TV texts. For example, there is a body of work that takes *Breaking Bad* to task for its sometimes-problematic gender politics (Joy 2017; Johnson 2016). Scholars were also quick to problematise *Game of Thrones*' exploration of gender and sexual violence (Ferreday 2015; Coopey 2022). There was nothing to prevent scholars making this type of reading at the time. But this reading still *did not* occur at the time—the context and assumptions that underpinned the early scholarship of the show led scholars to focus on the progressive potentials of the text—resulting in them overlooking some of its more problematic or politically ambiguous elements. This chapter demonstrates the potential that retrospective readings have to disrupt well-researched scholarly understandings of *The Sopranos*. This emphasises the importance of understanding *resurgent* versions of texts like *The Sopranos* as analytically distinct. In the next chapter, I will draw

from the interview data to expand on these arguments. Namely, I will consider how the participants understood *The Sopranos* exploration of gender with new contexts of interpretations.

Chapter 8. "It's like a *Fight Club* Situation": Participant Understandings of Feminism in *The Sopranos*

Throughout this thesis, I have contended that the culture surrounding the original broadcast of *The Sopranos* helped frame both scholarly and audience interpretations of the show. It allowed for an particular emphasis to be placed on the show's representations of gender. As I argued in the literature review, this can be partly attributed to the prominence of crisis of masculinity discourse during the show's first broadcast. There was a surge in media that took this 'crisis' quite seriously during the late 1990s and 2000s. Mainstream Hollywood films like *American Beauty* (1999), *Fight Club* (1999) and *Magnolia* (1999) all explored the need for men to 'reclaim' their masculinity. These films—which were critically and commercially celebrated at the time—were much less ambiguous than *The Sopranos* in their perpetuation of a narratives of male victimisation. As I have argued in the previous chapter, in this historic landscape, *The Sopranos*' willingness to *critique* this conception of masculinity was somewhat against the grain—it allowed the show to be understood as nominally feminist. In this context, it was common for both scholars and popular outlets to argue that *The Sopranos* could teach us something about "real-life masculinity" (Men's Health Forum UK 2014). For example, in a BBC culture article, Jennifer Armstrong (2019) discussed how the show was seen as a "treatise on modern masculinity". Likewise, Men's Health Forum (a notable UK charity focused on "improving the health of men") published an article with the headline "What Tony Soprano can teach us about therapy" in which they concluded that the character of Tony "makes the case for more gender-sensitive therapy models" (2014). These historic contexts of interpretation enabled *The Sopranos* to be understood as doing real-life feminist cultural work.

But these contexts of interpretations have changed significantly in the last 20 years. For one, the sensibilities of 'masculinity in crisis' discourse is much less pronounced in

mainstream society. Films like *American Beauty* and *Fight Club* are now often perceived to have aged quite poorly. For example, in 2019 (during the film's 20th anniversary) *American Beauty* received a surge in press coverage. The (almost ubiquitously) negative sentiment is perhaps best summed up in the opening line of Stephanie Zacherek's *Time Magazine* article on the film which reads, "In 2019, beating up on Sam Mendes' multi-award-winning *American Beaty,* released roughly 20 years ago this week, is so painfully easy it seems unfair" (2019). *Fight Club*—perhaps the ultimate exemplar of the 'crisis in masculinity' in filmic form—had similar critiques leveraged at it for its veneration of 'toxic masculinity'. In an *Esquire* article, Matt Miller (2019) describes the film as an "infatuation" for a generation of teenage boys that "most of us have matured out of". He writes that, "plenty has been written about *Fight Club* not holding up in a society where we are reckoning with how shitty white men bumble through the world, all dicks and aggression" (2019). As I discussed in chapter 1, post #MeToo gender politics have generally resulted in less tolerance of men's bad behaviour towards women. We can see this shift reflected in the new televisual offerings of what Havas (2022) describes as "feminist quality television". There were a range of shows in the 2010s that centred women's experiences and prompted us to recalibrate what might constitute 'feminist TV'. The 2020 version of *The Sopranos* is more likely to have its gender politics compared to shows like *The Handmaid's Tale* or *Fleabag* than earlier crisis texts like *Breaking Bad* or *The Walking Dead.* The crisis of masculinity subtext that was once the dominant lens through which the show was read is now far less obvious to contemporary viewers.

In this chapter, I return to my research interviews to consider how these new contexts of interpretation have diminished *The Sopranos*' capacity to do feminist cultural work. I will explore how—without the crisis context—the participants understand the show's representation of masculinity. I will first turn my attention to how the new televisual

landscape of the 2020s might disrupt earlier feminist understandings of the show. I argue that the participants' reading of the show's gender politics is tacitly informed by more recent understanding of feminist quality television. I then argue that while participants did mostly identify *The Sopranos* as critical of masculinity, they did not think this critique was relevant to their real life as they saw the show's critique as contained to individual characters and situations within the show. Finally, I consider the cultural baggage associated with other male-centric texts produced during the crisis of masculinity. I discuss how this made some participants hesitant to read the show through the prism of gender at all. Ultimately, this chapter argues that retrospective readings bring with them new interpretations and hence it cannot be assumed that resurgent TV shows still do the same type of cultural work as when watched in their original context.

Can a Show about Men be Feminist in 2022?

For all the participants, watching *The Sopranos* in the 2020s meant contextualising it in relation to a new range of contemporary programming. As noted by Lotz (2014), most television (and especially prestige television) during the late 1990s and early 2000s was male-centred. Therefore, a program's contribution to feminist critique (if any) was largely understood in these terms. Recently though, there has been a shift towards more female-centric television. According to Boyle (2020, p. 848), there has been a "surge in visible feminisms" that coincided with a shift from a broadcast to subscription market during the 2010s . Programs like *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017), *Veep* (2013-2019), *Fleabag*, *Broad City* (2014-2019), *The Goodwife* (2009-2016) and *I May Destroy You* (2020-present) are all examples female-centred, quality television that were produced after *The Sopranos*. As I will argue in the following section, this shift has tacitly informed how participants viewed gender in *The Sopranos*. This was revealed through the ways that participants were reluctant to label the show as feminist due to its focus on male characters. An emphasis on masculinity (even if

critical) was not seen as congruent with their more contemporary understandings of feminist quality television. In fact, for some participants, the male-centric nature of the show restricted their willingness to perform *any* gendered readings of the show.

When the feminine identifying participants of this study were asked if they considered *The Sopranos* to be a feminist text, they all said no. Their responses were usually brief and decisive. Their most commonly stated reason was that the show was too male-centric to properly understand in feminist terms. Jessica said that:

> *The main character is a man, it is mainly about his experience and yeah there are some strong female characters who I think are brilliant—[but] I wouldn't call it a feminist TV show. The one female boss character is in a couple of episodes—I feel like if it was a feminist show you would have Carmela leaving Tony because he sucks! Going off and taking the kids and getting the hell out of there or it would have Adriana not being killed off for existing.*

For Jessica, the focus on Tony and other men limited the show's ability to explore the unique issues that the women of the show face, and hence limited its ability for feminist critique. However, what stood out from Jessica's comments was the show's choice to have female characters suffer at the hands of men (Adriana's murder and Carmela's marriage being the most prominent examples). This was reminiscent of my argument in chapter 7 that *The Sopranos* often fails to imagine positive outcomes for women that are separate from those of men. More importantly though, it speaks to Jessica's understanding of what a feminist text *needs* to do. Her desire to have Carmela leave Tony or Adriana survive suggests that while female characters can face adversity, they need to be able to ultimately overcome it for the text to be considered feminist. Moreover, her comments also suggest that feminist TV shows need to focus on female characters. This understanding of a 'feminist text' is in line with the

contemporary televisual environment—one in which Havas (2022) and Boyle (2020) have identified mainstream prestige TV that has increasingly focused on female characters.

Selina also thought about *The Sopranos* in a similar way. She thought that the show's depictions of misogyny and violence against women disqualified it as a feminist text:

> *It is not a feminist show because… it's not! I mean it showcases extremely misogynistic behaviour, wives getting—women in general being subjected to violence, just blatant sexism, and complete inequality.*

Even though Selina later acknowledged that this use of gendered violence could serve as a way for audiences to unpack "why it happens", in general she found it to be too gratuitous to be considered successful in achieving this goal. Selina's response calls to mind recent cultural discourse about depictions of gendered violence and sexual assault on television. Particularly in regard to the later seasons of *Game of Thrones*, scholars and critics (Benson-Allot 2020; Cuklanz 2000; Yue 2019) have problematised the ways that writers rely on sexual assault and domestic violence in a story to "spice up a character's backstory" or "titillate viewers" (Benson-Allcott 2020, p. 101). While it was not suggested that *The Sopranos* explicitly endorses this behaviour, Selina's comments seemed to be in-line with this critique. For her, the constant misogynistic violence was at odds with the possibility that *The Sopranos* could be a feminist text. In a similar vein, Alannah felt that *The Sopranos* did not take a strong enough stance against heterosexist gender relations to be considered a work of feminism:

> *I just don't think it is overt enough to be leaning one way or the other. I think if it was targeted towards women or people who don't identify with traditional masculinity or those kind of gender roles, like people outside of male identifying people. I think it is too middle of the road to be considered feminist or anti-feminist.*

Again, this approach identifies the centricity of male characters in the show (in this case how they might put off non-male viewers) as limiting its feminist credentials. This focus on men

(as was typical in 2000s quality TV) limits its ability to target women and non-male identifying viewers. Again, this calls to mind Boyle's discussion of the current televisual landscape having enabled producers to target feminist audience niches in ways that were not previously possible. When considered in the context of the present time, *The Sopranos* specific targeting of male audience limits the extent to which it can be understood as 'feminist'. This played out in the responses of almost all the female participants—the show was not feminist because, unlike modern feminist texts, the show does not centre women's experiences, nor does it imagine positive outcomes for them.

While they were not as definitive, the masculine identifying participants were also hesitant to label *The Sopranos* as feminist. Much like the feminine identifying participants, their responses were tacitly informed by current? understandings of feminist television. For example, Darcy gave a lengthy reflection on whether the show's representation of women was 'feminist':

> *In a lot of ways, no, but in some ways yes—I think there's some very small story lines that are feminist in terms of like empowering women, in some very small ways! The Angie Story maybe? Meadow maybe? Carm becoming independent and separating from Tony and the relationship, or you know separating herself within the relationship, forming a sense of independence you know? Maybe some minor feminist rhetoric but not heaps...*

In comparison to the women of the study, Darcy gave more consideration to the possibility that *The Sopranos* could be feminist, reading possibilities for empowerment through some of the female characters. In contrast to Jessica, Selina, and Alannah, he placed more emphasis on some of the "minor moments" of empowerment that the female participants did not see as constituting feminism. Again though, in Darcy's response there is still the assumption that to be feminist, a show needs to be *about* women. The critique of men and masculinity alone

does not constitute a text as feminist. This understanding was mostly consistent across the participants. We can see these same criteria inform Harry's response:

> *I think Skyler in Breaking Bad—she became quite widely hated by I suppose the fan community or just not liked because she wasn't—she was just sort of a drag on what people felt the main story was—I feel like, and I don't really want to be going out and praising The Sopranos too much, but it does kind of avoid that, as I think Carmela, even though she is kept very separate from Tony's whole mob life and everything, she's still quite interesting to watch sort of deal with like the moral psychology of all the stuff Tony goes through. So, I guess the way it also focuses on like Meadow and stuff… I guess in that way the show struck me as being maybe a bit more feminist than say some of the other shows I mentioned.*

Again, this quote seems to imply that the inclusion of complex female characters is critical to a show being 'feminist'. For Harry, Carmela (unlike Skyler from *Breaking Bad)* takes a much more active role in the narrative and is more "interesting"—her presence qualifies the show as a "bit more feminist". He also understands Meadow and Carmela as a focus in the narrative as opposed to a "drag". Again, this response reflects the attitude that feminist television needs to feature female characters of significance—feminism cannot be achieved only through the prism of masculinity. We can see this trend continue in Callum's discussion of the show's prominent female characters:

> *Having Tony's therapist be a woman who's sort of this like voice of reason, throughout it all and who is sort of like explaining and demonstrating to Tony why what he does in his life and the way he acts is so detrimental to himself and society at large—but then there's instances where they sort of touch on like her being attracted to him as well. [That does] erode that lens—I dunno it [whether the show is feminist or not]is a very difficult question.*

Much like Harry and Darcy, this response is concerned with the inclusion of consequential female characters as a requirement for being considered a 'feminist text'. The first thing Callum mentions about Dr Melfi is her active contribution to the narrative. She "explains things" to Tony and helps him make important decisions. As such, we can see a thru-line in both the feminine and masculine identifying participants' responses. Both groups drew on a similar definition of what feminist television should be. The show needed to feature impactful female characters and a critique of masculinity alone did not cut it. Of course—in the context of 'prestige television'—this definition has only recently been made available. The televisual landscape of the 2000s was notoriously male-centric (Lotz 2014). It is the recent surge in mainstream female-centric television that has expanded understandings of what a feminist TV show might be. Today we are not limited to reading feminism on the terms of male-centric television. So, as demonstrated by the participants, we often do not. Ultimately, we can see that the participants' understanding of feminism in *The Sopranos* is tacitly informed by their retrospective vantage point.

At times, *The Sopranos*' lack of compatibility with more recent understandings of "feminist television" obscured *any* gendered reading of the show. For some participants, *The Sopranos*' representation of gender was viewed as inconsequential to the narrative and thematic messaging of the show. This stood out because it represented such a significant departure from dominant views about what constitute the show's key themes. Masculinity has been generally understood by scholars as at the thematic forefront of the show—to such an extent, in fact, that Brod (2006), Johnson (2007) and Lee (2004) argue that many of the show's other themes (like violence, ethnicity and power) should be understood through the prism of masculinity. But, for Brad and Alma this was not the case. They argued that placing the label of "feminist" onto the show was not relevant to its messaging. Brad stated that while

he did believe the show had some critique of gender roles, it was not its most important element:

> *It [gender relations] would make up like 10% to 20% of the power relations. I would say that at least half is about money because that decides pretty much everything, then you've the smaller aspects of identity that are deciding things. Like in real life.*

For Brad, gender was just a small component of how *The Sopranos* explored power relations. The show reflected his perception of "real life" and, unlike the mainstream understandings of the show, he did not consider gender to be the focal point of *The Sopranos*. Rather, gender was one of the "smaller aspects of identity" that was less important than other factors like "money" in shaping power relations. As such, Brad was hesitant to call the show 'feminist'. This was not because he disagreed with its gender politics, rather, he found that such a label was not representative of the other more 'important' aspects of the show. Alma gave a response that continued this line of thinking:

> *I don't think not being feminist is a bad thing. Because I think that's not necessarily what television or movies or whatever are for. And I think that just because something's not inherently like, explicitly feminist doesn't mean you can't think about—There are larger thematic points that it's trying to make. There is like themes explored… I think expecting things to be political all the time sort of compromises the product.*

At first glance, it appears as though Alma is making an argument for television to just be "entertainment". However, with a closer look we can see this is not the case as she allows the possibility for television shows to explore "other themes". She suggests it would be restrictive to view the show through the lens of "feminism" as doing so would ignore the "larger thematic" points it is trying to make. Interestingly, Brad and Alma were both reluctant to put forward a reading of the show that is meaningfully gendered (feminist or not). It appears that—for them—the show's engagement with gender is not so relevant. In a

retrospective context then, this calls into question *The Sopranos*' capacity to do the type of feminist cultural work that it has so often been praised for.

As I have previously argued, the male-centric landscape of 2000s prestige television provided an important context for why scholars and critics so often read *The Sopranos* as nominally feminist. In the context of the 2020s, however, it appears as though the opposite is true. The recent development of female-centred television has renegotiated the ways in which we read shows as feminist (or not). For the most part, the participants did not find *The Sopranos* compatible with more contemporary understandings of feminist TV. This represents a significant departure from original understandings of the show. As I will discuss in the next section, it also demonstrates the implications that a retrospective reading might have for how we understand the cultural work a resurgent text like *The Sopranos* can perform.

"Real-life" Masculinity and *The Sopranos*

As I have previously argued, scholars have largely understood *The Sopranos* as feminist due to its willingness to critique heterosexist models of masculinity, with scholars like Lee (2004), Ricci (2014), Johnson (2007) and De Stefano (2011) arguing that masculinity constitutes a source of suffering and oppression for the male gangsters of the show. These scholars have identified the psychological anguish male characters feel trying to embody heterosexist models of masculinity that are contradictory and ephemeral in nature (Lee 2004). I found that, for the most part, the participants read masculinity in the show in a similar way. As I will outline in the following section, they 'got' that masculinity was oppressive to men. But, unlike the scholarship, the participants viewed this critique of masculinity as something that was situational—that is, it was understood as *specific* to Tony Soprano and not broadly applicable to society in the 2020s. As I will argue, this somewhat tempers the capacity for *The Sopranos* to do broader feminist cultural work.

For the most part, the participants' identification of masculinity as performative and contradictory within the show was consistent with the broader *The Sopranos* scholarship. Tony Soprano's masculine bravado was not seen as reflective of his 'true self' but as an elaborate act designed to deflect from his insecurities and vulnerabilities. For example, Jack observed that men on the show were often caricatured: "they've got this kind of archetype of a mobster in their head and they're all acting the part". Stuart made a similar comment that also reflected on the consequences that come with this 'performance':

> *I feel like they're [men] kind of playing a part and you see a lot with like the more emotional scenes where they are just putting on a bit of an act. Like when Tony and Junior talk and he's like 'do you love me?' and you can really tell that there's like a kind of weird act going on where it's like you can't be too emotional or affectionate with anything.*

The statement that men are "acting the part" of a mobster call to mind Lee's (2004) analysis of homosocial bonding in *The Sopranos.* She argues that the men in the show "are ultimately and collectively defined by unattainable or contradictory heterosexist ideals that are ephemeral in nature" (2004). As she points out though, this cultural idea of masculinity in *The Sopranos* does not correspond with the personalities of actual men but is still a 'part' they are required to play. Darcy identified in depth the internal struggle that came from male characters trying to repress emotions to embody this performance of masculinity:

> *I find the Gary Cooper scene so interesting because I feel like he [Tony] even contradicts what he says towards the end of the scene a little bit. He talks about, you know, containing your emotions and getting shit done but then literally five seconds later he references and acknowledges that fact that he is sad. It's like "what happened to Gary Cooper, the strong silent type, get shit done doesn't show emotions! Yeah, I'm sad sometimes!" I find it really contradicting of what he's trying to express or what he's trying to project versus what he feels. Like he's both trying to project that sort of Gary Cooper-esque male but also*

> *acknowledging the fact that he has emotions and feels sad… He's almost in an internal battle with himself, he's like dealing with emotions versus how he sees himself as a mob boss.*

In this quote, Darcy acknowledges the inherent contradiction of Tony's conception of masculinity. The use of the word "battle" implies that Gary Cooperesque' masculinity is in violent opposition to emotional well-being. It is impossible for them to coexist—Darcy understands that for Tony to successfully embody masculinity, he must destroy any feeling of emotion. His reference to this as a "struggle" suggests that this conflict in of itself is a source of torment for men in *The Sopranos.* This calls to mind Ricci's (2014, p. 130) analysis of hegemonic masculinity in the show in which he describes it as "constant-self-denial with the continued abrogation of emotion…men [in *The Sopranos*] have to amputate one's heart and substitute them for an avatar of prolific virility". As I have discussed in previous chapters, scholars like Ricci (2014), Lee (2004) and Johnson (2007) have all talked masculinity as a source of suffering and emotional repression for characters in the show. As both Lee and Ricci have argued, when Tony is made to feel vulnerable or insecure his response will typically result in anger and/or violence. As such, we can see that the participants identified a pervasive model of masculinity within the show itself—there were certain 'rules' that one had to follow to be a man in *The Sopranos*. Moreover, they identified this version of masculinity as oppressive and linked it to male suffering in many of the same terms as the earlier scholarship on the show had.

However, just because the participants identified this critique it did not mean they found it relatable or relevant to their 'real life'. In fact, as I will soon demonstrate, their current contexts of interpretation have led them to understand this critique differently. Most of them understood the show's critique of masculinity as contained to the characters and situations presented in the show. This stands in contrast to historic understandings of *The*

Sopranos, which have often praised the show as a tool to help audiences navigate masculinity in real life. Take Lee's (2004) conclusion that *The Sopranos* is a reflective tool for the audience. She writes that it has an ability "to engage in [a gendered] interplay with us, and to comfort, terrify, and shock us with the realization that when we see ourselves in the characters, sometimes we are barely recognizable" (Lee 2004). De Stefano (201) makes a similar observation about *The Sopranos*' real-life applications. For him, *The Sopranos* "presented Mafia life as a microcosm of contemporary society" and therefore as a comment on real-life gender relations (De Stefano 2011, p. 114). Finally, Johnson (2007, p. 269) observed that "*The Sopranos*, persistently took up the feminist cultural work of examining the 'economic and social roots of violence', mirroring a key tactic in cutting-edge cultural studies". For much of the early scholarship about the show, it was assumed that audiences could use *The Sopranos* to reflect on their own real-life experiences. But, as I will argue, this assumption cannot be made in the 2020s. The participants consistently identified these critiques as contained to the individual characters and situations of the show. They did *not* find them relatable to their 'real life' which, as I will contend, ultimately diminishes the show's capacity to perform feminist cultural work.

When discussing "being a man" in the world of *The Sopranos* there was a trend amongst the feminine identifying participants not to connect male suffering to being a man, but rather to the specific experience of being in the mafia. They related the negative experiences of the male characters to the mafia and not to masculinity itself. Instead of seeing the show's characters as reflective of cultural anxieties associated with what it means to be a man, their responses focused on the individual situations and characters of the show. Jessica framed her response to the question "what do you think it's like to be a man in *The Sopranos*?" through the prism of the mafia, stating:

> *Shit… I don't understand gangs and all that stuff—like why they do what they do. It would just stress me out, like you can't do anything without people thinking like "you're a rat" like how many times is it that we think a person is a rat so we are going to kill them and it turns out they're not a rat but then later that actual person that is a rat… It's just so hectic! It sounds like a bloody nightmare!*

Jessica identifies the stress that male characters in *The Sopranos* endure but associate it almost entirely with the perils of being in the mafia. In this context, the use of the word "rat" is mafia jargon that references gangsters who have turned FBI informants. For Jessica, the anxiety of "being a man" in *The Sopranos* is clearly connected to the life and death stakes of organised crime and the uncertainty of whether you will be falsely identified or found out as an FBI informant. Unlike historic understandings of the show, she does not extrapolate these anxieties to 'real life' masculinity. Alannah similarly talked about masculinity primarily in reference to the mafia:

> *[to be a man] you just have to not have morals and you can never really get attached to people whether it's like friends or family members or whatever. And you sort of have to always be on guard. You have to be covering your tracks and covering yourself and never really trusting someone. Like you can't be vulnerable, and you can't let people in that way.*

Here, Alannah acknowledges that men are required to shrug off any emotion or morality. However, she talks about this specifically in the context of the mafia—men need to be on guard in *The Sopranos* because there is the threat that their friends could turn on them at any moment. They cannot be vulnerable, not because it's unacceptable for men to show emotion, but because the mafia environment punishes it with death. Selina also acknowledged that the expectations of being a man are inseparable from the mafia:

> *They still have to abide by the bosses ruling and whatever and they're caught in the trap of like well I can't leave… I'll be killed otherwise. Like the expectations, well the*

> *expectations is that they abide by the rules, that they obviously deliver for the boss—so there is a high expectation that they do the work.*

Selina notes that a failure to meet expectations can result in men being killed. The associated stresses of being a man, then, are understood as related to the hierarchical environment of the mafia and not specifically to masculinity itself. These responses seem to be informed by the *loss* of interpretive contexts. As I have discussed throughout the thesis, narratives of masculinity in crisis assumed male suffering stemmed from the difficulties men faced embodying masculinity. Moreover, during the show's original broadcast, these types of discussions were quite common in mainstream publications. Take this hyperbolic headline from *The Atlantic* (Rosin 2010) magazine that simply reads "The End of Men". The article discusses the apparent anxiety men were experiencing due to their supposedly diminished role in the workplace. But, without masculinity in crisis as a prominent context of interpretation, we can see that the understanding of "male suffering" is somewhat displaced. There is not the automatic assumption that *The Sopranos* is some kind of "microcosm" (De Stefano 2011, p. 110) for American masculinity. Therefore, the show's critique of masculinity is not understood to be as relevant as maybe it once was.

We can see the absence of 'crisis context' similarly frame the way other participants discuss masculinity on the show. Some of the male participants were careful to note that masculinity on the show was not especially relevant to real-life men. For example, Stephan discussed how he thought it would be "difficult" to be a man in *The Sopranos* because you're not allowed to "show any emotion". While he does acknowledge that "some groups are still like that" in "real life" the use of language here is noteworthy. Stephan only sees Tony Soprano's experience as linked with what he believes some men in "some groups" experience in real life. Critically though, he is not saying it is all men or all masculinities that face these stresses. Moreover, the use of the term "some groups" works to specifically distance Stephan

himself from this sort of masculinity. The struggles associated with Tony Soprano's masculinity is something that he sees as characteristic of others, but not himself. Callum gave a similar response, suggesting that masculinity on the show was quite specific:

> *It's a very narrow focus on what masculinity is—there is no room for any sense of like care about people's emotional wellbeing really—like you are not meant to be emotional or the only emotion that you can be is like you're happy or you're angry like rage is the only outlet for them… whether or not they realise it they are in fear of showing any sort of emotion or care and its sort of like even when that does happen, you can't tell anyone that it was like showing a bit of empathy to you.*

The language that Callum used here stands out as it does not equate Tony's masculinity with experiences of masculinity outside the text. For Callum, *The Sopranos* is representing (and critiquing) only one "narrow" understanding of what masculinity is. Again, this response talks about toxic masculinity as something specific to the characters on the show. The use of the word "narrow" seems to imply that *The Sopranos*' representation of masculinity is not reflective of the spectrum of masculinities in real life. Finally, Brad understood the show's representation of masculinity as specific to the characters of *The Sopranos* and not reflective of broader societal positions. He states that in the show:

> *Men choose to behave a certain way and women choose to behave in ways that are opposite to their own benefit as people. Everyone is restricted and that power imbalance isn't about males or females having more power, it's just about the fact that either of them were never able to decide and they never had any power in-of-themselves.*

In this quote, Brad suggests that restrictive gender roles are more so a problem for the individual characters on the show and not society. Characters individually struggle with gender roles to "act to their own benefit". Brad's discussion of "men" and "women" stands out here. In this quote he is clear to place them as equally powerless when it comes to gender

roles. Rather than a discussion about structural conditions Brad emphasises a self-actualisation discourse about the characters failing to be "who they truly are". Again, we can see this response stands in contrast to the typical "masculinity in crisis" discourse of the 2000s. As such, in a contemporary context, some male participants of this study did not see *The Sopranos*' representation of masculinity as broadly applicable to real life. If at all, it could only be applied to specific "groups of men" of which none of the participant's identified as belonging to. This stands in contrast with historical understandings of *The Sopranos* as a "microcosm" for everyday American life.

Just Another "Fantasy" for White Dudes?

From a retrospective vantage point, I found that *The Sopranos*' capacity to do feminist cultural work is further complicated by its implicit association with the other male-centric texts of the 2000s. During its original broadcast, the show's willingness to critically deconstruct masculinity was often seen as a point of distinction. Unlike *American Beauty, American Psycho* or *Fight Club, The Sopranos* was understood as much more open to feminist solutions to help ease possible male suffering. But it is still worth noting that the show shares aesthetic similarities with these types of texts. At the core of its narrative is a troubled, heterosexual, white middle-aged man. Moreover, Tony is frequently involved in grotesque displays of violence (over the course of the series Tony personally commits eight murders and is in countless fights). From a retrospective vantage point, the participants were wary that *The Sopranos* could easily be read as "white-male fantasy" in much the same way as films like *Fight Club* or *American Psycho* are. For them, the show's critique of gender was too vague and easy to be misread and therefore not congruent with their contemporary understandings of feminist television.

While some participants did identify a critique of gender roles in *The Sopranos*, they were hesitant to view this as straightforwardly progressive. This is because they were

concerned that the critique was too vague and be easily lost on what XX describes as "bad fans" (Nussbaum 2014). Specifically, there was a general worry that *The Sopranos* opened itself up to being read as an endorsement of a stereotypical 'male fantasy'. Alannah described *The Sopranos* critique of gender roles as:

> *Like a Fight Club situation where it depends on the audience, and it depends on like the way that you look at it… Because like Fight Club and American Psycho—Like white dudes will watch it and be like yeah, this is fucking sick—that's me man. And its like you don't want to be these people! You gotta look at it in a way—you gotta look at it through the lens of like cynicism and you have to criticise it yourself because [the critique] it is not overt in my opinion.*

The characterisation of potential bad fans as "white dudes" stands out here. It implies that when uncritically watched, *The Sopranos* can be understood as a specific white male fantasy. Again, this line of thinking is consistent with how films like *Fight Club* have been recently written about by pop-culture journalists. For instance, the article that I mentioned about *Fight Club* at the beginning of this chapter goes on to criticise the movie for "long stretches of a white dude moaning in self-pity punctuated by lengthy sequences of intense violence and abuse" (Miller 2019). Alannah identified that (in the same way as *Fight Club)* watching the show uncritically is an indulgence that is only afforded to certain audience demographics. Only "white dudes" can place themselves in the power fantasy of both *The Sopranos* and *Fight Club*. Alannah goes onto suggest that it is her specific position as a woman that enabled her to see some critique of traditional gender roles— "as a woman I can see how it does criticise [gender roles]". Stuart had similar observations about *The Sopranos*' ability to be a dangerous power fantasy. He mentioned that he was active on *The Sopranos* message boards and social media pages. He observed that there was a split in the fandom on how people read the politics of the show:

> *I think it provides a critique of [gender roles]—but I think the critique is—I don't know—I think some people see it and some people don't from my experience with online Sopranos content. Cus like there is this meme that's like "Tony Soprano badass fuck liberals" that is making fun of The Sopranos fans who see Tony Soprano as the ideal man and don't notice that the show is supposed to be critiquing parts of his behaviour.*

What stands out here is Stuart's general concern about the imagery and themes of the show. For him, it is concerning that they could be easily co-opted and edited by right-wing fans to convey a decidedly anti-progressive messaging. Critically though, Stuart doesn't think "not getting" subtext is the failing of individual fans. He claims that while sometimes the critique can be "pretty obvious" this is not always the case:

> *I feel like for a university educated, humanities educated audience or like people in general who have experience looking at subtext and stuff—even like a high school audience—but for people who aren't really into that I think the critique is maybe harder to see.*

Furthermore, he cited moments in the show that glamorised Tony's mafia lifestyle as being intoxicating to viewers (including himself): "You kind of get intoxicated by it and at times you're like this is really cool." For Stuart, it is the show that is somewhat to blame for the glamorisation of the mafia lifestyle and the perpetuation of a power fantasy for white men. This "intoxication" is what Stuart identifies as undercutting the show's critique of gender roles. It is what makes these critiques less available to certain audience members. Much like the contemporary criticisms that are made of crisis of masculinity texts, there was a general concern among participants that the show opened itself up to readings that were decidedly not feminist, as the textual features of the show made it amenable to the "power fantasies" of white men.

The feeling of being "seduced" by *The Sopranos*' representation of the mafia was a common concern that participants had about the show's capacity to undertake progressive

cultural work. For example, Darcy outlined the conflicted feelings he had towards to charismatic male mobsters of the show:

> *I definitely think the show makes it [the mafia] look cool. You know what I mean? Like you think Tony is cool. Even though he does these fucked up things. You think all these mobsters are cool even though—it's even like Ralphie, you hate Ralphie, but you love Ralphie! You know what I mean? Like you watch him kill Tracee—but even after all that there's still sections where you are like why do I still like this guy even though he does terrible horrible things?*

Even though Darcy was conscious of the problematic representations in the show, he still acknowledged that he would get sucked in by them. His discussion of Ralph's murder of Tracee (perhaps the most confronting murder in the show) is particularly noteworthy as, even though the participant was repulsed by Ralph's actions ("terrible, horrible"), he admitted to "liking the guy". For Darcy specifically, 'liking' characters did not equate to an endorsement of their behaviour. But there was the recognition that this might not be the case for everyone. This line of thinking was continued by Alma who gave an anecdote about the impact the show had on some of her male friends. She stated that after watching the show they got really into "the culture of wearing tracksuits" and talking about gold chains and the aesthetic style of the show. She stated that, "They're into, you know, pretend—like not pretending—but I don't know… sort of talking about it a lot and you can kind of see they're interested in that kind of culture." When Alma talks about the "culture" it seems as though she is referring to the mafia aesthetic of the show—gold chains and tracksuits. In this sense, her friends emulating this style was perceived as part of a valorisation of the mafia characters. Alma acknowledged that she saw a critique of gender roles in the show, but again, questioned whether it was something that would be perceived by all viewers:

> *I'm watching it, what like, 20 years after or something? So like, I'm gonna have a different reading of it to like someone watching, like, when it first came out on HBO was going to have… I don't know how inherently critical any of this stuff is. But I guess my attitudes sort of—I sort of read some stuff into it [the show's critique of gender].*

She questioned whether her position in 2021 gave her a different perspective on the show's representation of gender roles. As such, she suggested that a critique of gender roles may not be an inherent property of the show, but something that was opened by her specific position. Selina took this line of thinking even further and suggested that the show could only provide a critique of gender roles for audience members who were already literate in feminist concepts:

> *If you weren't aware of them [feminist ideas?], I don't think you would see it, like I think there's a lot for people out there who idealise Tony's lifestyle. Someone who is not aware of gender norms or perhaps, you know the idea of feminism even… I think the writers mean to showcase what it's actually like and you're meant to be like that's fucked, but I don't think it comes across extremely strongly for you to criticise, like I think I'm acutely aware of it because I think, you know a lot of my [professional] work is in that field.*

Again, Selina shared other participants' concerns about the vagueness of the show's critique of traditional masculinity. Much like Alma, she suggested that viewers needed to be already informed of feminist concepts to see the criticism. If they were not aware of "gender norms or feminism" it was more likely that they would take the show at face value and idealise Tony's life. She concludes that the show is not explicit enough to override the impulse of some viewers "idealising" Tony Soprano. Again, anxieties about male viewers taking the show at face value plays out in these responses. The participant's understanding of what constitutes feminist television does not leave much room for the political uncertainties of a program like *The Sopranos*. As outlined by Havas (2022), recent quality feminist television

has been much clearer about its gender politics. Moreover, the concerns about other white men "misunderstanding" the show as a "power fantasy" is reflective of contemporary anxieties—take the sustained reporting about how the film *Joker* (2019) could incite violence from white men (Hoffman 2019; Abad-Santos 2019 and Bundel 2019). As such, we can see that given contemporary contexts of interpretation, *The Sopranos* capacity to be understood in feminist terms is somewhat more limited.

Just Another Crisis text?

Through this analysis of interview responses, I have demonstrated how *The Sopranos*' capacity for feminist cultural work is complicated by the particularities of the present time. For the most part, the participants suggested that a "show about men" was incompatible with their understanding of feminist television. While earlier scholarship identified *The Sopranos* as progressive in relation to the male-centric programming of the 2000s, the opposite was true of my participants who had watched the show recently—they found it was *not* politically progressive when compared to female-centric television of the 2010s and 2020s. Moreover, the participants did not identify the show's critique of masculinity as relevant to their real life. If they saw this critique at all it was often contained to individual characters, situations and the show's broader representation of the mafia. Finally, the cultural baggage associated with other texts like *The Sopranos* made participants suspicious of the show's capacity to do real-life feminist work. Much like how we have seen with films like *Fight Club* and *The Joker*, the participants were wary that the textual features of *The Sopranos* could allow it to be read as somewhat of a male power fantasy.

Beyond the scholarly debate of how 'feminist' *The Sopranos* is, these findings have some significant implications. They highlight the different meanings retrospective readings can generate amongst new audience members. For many scholars, fans and critics watching *The Sopranos* during its original run it was first and foremost a show about masculinity in

crisis. The participants of this study demonstrated that in the 2020s, this apparently ubiquitous subtext is perceived as far less pronounced. They largely did not understand the show to be a feminist text and even found it incompatible with their contemporary understanding of feminist television. Some participants did not even see masculinity as an important theme on the show. This highlights the important impact that contemporary contexts have on how audiences read and understand texts. Without loud 'crisis of masculinity' discourse to illuminate it, *The Sopranos*' critique of masculinity is seen as being diminished. As I have demonstrated in this chapter, it should not be assumed that historic understandings are as likely or even possible within new contexts of reception and interpretation. Therefore, it is important we understand resurgent versions of texts like *The Sopranos* as distinct from its original broadcast and recognise how these differences can shape the type of cultural work a show like *The Sopranos* can perform.

Chapter 9. Conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis, I likened *The Sopranos* to the anamorphic painting *The Ambassadors*. I argued that a retrospective reading was much like moving around the room to see the image of a skull in *The Ambassadors*. Watching from a different time and in a different cultural and televisual context had the potential to bring different elements of the show into focus. Both the responses from the 11 participants I interviewed, and my own retrospective reading revealed that this was certainly the case. While there were similarities between them, each participant also occupied a slightly different position in the metaphoric room—they all took meaning from *The Sopranos* in a slightly different way. I found that the show offered new meanings and performed new cultural work as a result of the particularities of watching it in the present time. As I will discuss, these findings challenge the ways in which *The Sopranos* has been conventionally understood and have ramifications for how we approach resurgent examples of complex television.

This thesis set out to investigate the unique experience of watching *The Sopranos* in the present time. I was guided by two core research questions:

- How do contemporary cultural contexts interact with young audience's understanding of old shows like *The Sopranos*?
- Do specific textual elements of *The Sopranos* make it more susceptible to a retrospective reading?

To address these questions, I developed and demonstrated a new approach to studying resurgent television. I have termed this a 'retrospective reading'—it places emphasis on the new cultural and media landscapes that surround old TV shows and the potential they have to recalibrate audience expectations and interpretations.

I began this investigation in chapter 2 by establishing the different ways cultural and televisual factors might frame watching *The Sopranos* in the 2000s and the 2020s. I contended that scholars have largely understood the show as both feminist and as a quality TV 'urtext'. These readings, I argued, were facilitated by the specific contexts of the show's original run in the 2000s. As such, it made sense that the *new* contexts of the 2020s might facilitate different readings of the show. I placed particular emphasis on how post-#MeToo gender politics and new streaming technologies might alter previous readings of *The Sopranos*. This allowed me to separate the 2020s version of *The Sopranos* as a distinctive *new* text that became the object of my analysis.

In chapter 4, I contextualised the participants' 'Sopranos experience in 2020' by considering both *why* and *how* they started watching the show. Most participants reported that they were drawn to the show because of its reputation as one of the 'best ever' and/or due to the covid-19 lockdowns. I also found that the majority of participants binge watched the show on various online platforms. I argued that these contexts of interpretation framed the show for my participants in a way that was distinct from its original broadcast. These contexts emphasised just how varied and individualised the experience of watching *The Sopranos* in the 2020s can be.

In chapters 5 and 6 I considered how new contexts of interpretation could enable transformative understandings of *The Sopranos*. I demonstrated this by providing my own 'lockdown' reading of the show. I argued that the show's social storyworld cultivated an atmosphere of decline, anxiety and boredom that was eerily reminiscent of living through lockdown. This interaction between the pandemic and *The Sopranos* added another dimension to the show's meaning and allowed it to do a different type of cultural work. I contended that—in this case—it became a unique site of emotional catharsis for pandemic viewers like myself. In Chapter 6 I turned to the interview data to further explore the

possibilities for other readings that were shaped by the particularities of the present time. I argued that, despite varied responses, there was always a 'retrospective dimension' (like the global pandemic or different perceptions of gender politics) that influenced how participants understood the show. This dimension enabled disruptive or even oppositional readings of *The Sopranos* among participants. This was exemplified by some participants' refusal to interpret Tony Soprano as the primary identificatory figure and the use of the show as a site for mediated nostalgia. I concluded that our temporal positioning allows for readings that transform the meaning and cultural work *The Sopranos* performs.

Chapter 7 and 8 explored the analytical implications that arise from these transformational retrospective readings. I re-examined the prominent feminist readings of the show in the context of the present televisual landscape. It was my contention that the contexts and assumptions that underpinned the early scholarship of *The Sopranos* led researchers to focus on the progressive potentials of the text. I demonstrated—through my own close (re)reading of the character of Angie Bonpensiero—that contemporary contexts can reveal the show's more politically ambiguous elements. I found that that my participants—often making implicit references to contemporary feminist television—were hesitant to read the show through the prism of gender at all. Moreover, they were suspicious of the show's supposed 'feminist credentials'. I concluded that if we are to consider retrospective readings as contingent on temporary circumstances that we must do the same for original readings—we cannot assume that historic understandings are likely or even possible given new environments. Therefore, it is important that we understand resurgent versions of texts like *The Sopranos* as distinct from its original broadcast.

Based on the above findings, I argued that retrospective readings can transform the meanings of old texts. In this case, by taking on new meanings during the covid-19 pandemic or diminishing the capacity of the text to do feminist cultural work. These findings bring with

them significant ramifications for how we understand resurgent television texts like *The Sopranos*. In these new contexts, new avenues of meaning making are opened up. It is this interaction between new cultural contexts and old programs that produces such programs as somewhat of a 'new' text that *must* be understood in a distinct way. As the findings of this thesis have demonstrated, to properly grasp the significance of resurgent television, it is critical that we take contemporary contexts it to account. Moreover, we must be careful about extrapolating historic understandings of a program onto these new contexts of viewing. This thesis has recognised the unique possibility for old texts to contribute to society in new ways.

Retrospectively Reading Complex TV

In the case of a complex television text like *The Sopranos,* it is not just personal contexts of audiences that were crucial to producing new meanings but also the textual features of the show itself. Ensemble casts of fleshed out characters and multiple and complex narrative arcs are textual features typically associated with complex television (Mittell 2015, p. 14). In Mittell's discussion of viewer comprehension he suggests that such features of complex television have "increased the medium's [television] tolerance for viewers to be confused, encouraging them to pay attention and put the pieces together themselves to comprehend the narrative" (2015, p. 164). Shows like *The Sopranos* can leave "plot points, characters and relationships unsalted" (Mittell 2015, p. 164)—meaning that ultimately, it's up to the viewer to figure out what's going on. This is in opposition to most mainstream television storytelling which, as Mittell (2015, p. 164) puts it, makes "comprehension easy, invisible and automatic". As I will discuss in the following section it is the textual features associated with complex television that have helped make *The Sopranos* particularly amenable to a retrospective reading.

The show's emphasis on complex characters was crucial to the retrospective readings identified in this study. Perhaps one of the more surprising findings of this thesis was the way

the participants understood the character of Tony Soprano. Not only did none of them identify him as their favourite character, but there was also an overwhelming sentiment that he was not the show's main character or point of identification. Instead, they chose to view the narrative through characters that were more compatible with their contemporary sensibilities. Accessing the show through these characters fundamentally shifts our perspectives on the narrative. As I discussed in chapter 6, the participants who identified with Adriana understood the show as much more about how a "naïve", "selfless" and "innocent" character could navigate an imposing figure like Tony. Meanwhile, those who identified with Christopher found the show to be much more about "the end of history" and trying to find one's place in a decaying world. We can see that it is the show's textual features, including its large cast of fleshed-out characters, that help enable a connection between contemporary sensibilities and the text. In *The Sopranos,* we are often encouraged to delve into characters' motivations and interior lives. We are presented with each character's distinct perspective on a narrative tension. It is not always immediately clear who we 'should' align with in a given conflict. As such, the show's wide range of fleshed-out characters is precisely what enabled participants to resist only identifying with the 'main character' (Tony Soprano) and provide their own retrospective readings associated with other characters**.** They can resist reading the show through Tony precisely because of the range of characters that offer a genuinely alternative perspective. Therefore, we must understand how the show's emphasis on character helped facilitate interpretations of the show informed by contemporary sensibilities and individual contexts.

The Sopranos exemplification of narrative complexity also helped make it more conducive to retrospective readings. According to Mittell, at its core, narrative complexity is:

> a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration—not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance. Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode. (2015, p. 32)

One of the most notable findings of this thesis was *The Sopranos* ability to do cultural work specific to the global pandemic—an event it preceded by thirteen years. I argued that, for some, the show offered an allegorical emotional pressure valve or, as Darcy put it, a tool to "pull inspiration from" and to navigate the unique "dark and fucked up" situations presented by the pandemic. The show's cultivation of a social storyworld that carefully developed *feeling* and *symbolism* over 86 episodes allowed for a textual flexibility that is only possible in complex television. I found that—for both myself and my participants—the storyworld of the show could easily take on a double meaning in the present circumstance. The ability to slowly develop this social storyworld is an affordance of narrative complexity. *The Sopranos* was able to play with both serial and episodic forms to offer us access to the incremental decline of the characters' interior states and social relationships. It was precisely this dynamism that allowed for new retrospective readings to emerge.

The textual features of complex television already encourage individual and varied readings. Identifying with a character other than Tony, for example, is not just made possible by watching in 2020. But *The Sopranos*' capacity for varied readings is amplified when watching in a new temporal context. As I have demonstrated in this thesis—in addition to cultural, media and personal contexts—textual elements were critical in facilitating the retrospective readings of *The Sopranos*. There have been other examples of resurgent texts—*Friends* (1994-2004) and *The Office US* come to mind as perhaps the most notable—which have seen new viewers rediscovering older texts. But these shows don't lend themselves to the type of complex retrospective readings that I have suggested of *The Sopranos* since their characters and narratives are less ambiguous. As such, we should understand resurgent

complex television programs as being especially conducive to multiple readings. The findings of this thesis further indicate that we must view the polysemic nature of *The Sopranos* through the prism of complexity.

Of course, media texts have always been polysemic and audiences always active in their interpretations (Hall 1973; Katz and Liebes). As a case study, *The Sopranos* resurgence brings with it new ways to conceptualise the importance and varied nature of complex television texts. It allows us to place emphasis on the role that certain types of *textual* features can play in facilitating multiple meanings. As I will discuss in the following section, this has implications for the way that we study the resurgence of complex television texts in the future.

The unique properties of *The Sopranos*' resurgence open new ways to consider old TV in new contexts. Generally, studies have focused on how *external* contexts of interpretation (such as Katz & Liebes 1993; Ang 1985) allow for texts to take on multiple meanings. The findings of this thesis certainly echo these earlier contentions. As I have discussed, participants' subjective positions, cultural contexts and industrial factors were all critical in how the participants understood *The Sopranos*. But *The Sopranos* also reveals the *internal* elements that also contribute to participants' varied readings. It shows the important role that *textual* features play in retrospective understandings of TV shows, as the specific elements of complex television (exemplified by *The Sopranos*) actively encourage varied readings that allow new viewers to project their contemporary experiences onto an old show. Therefore, we should understand *The Sopranos*' resurgence as existing at the nexus of textual and temporal factors as well as in relation to audience, cultural and industrial factors.

Moreover, these findings have demonstrated that the textual features of complex television allow for a distinct type of televisual resurgence. *The Sopranos* is by no means the

first program to experience what Taylor Cole-Miller (2021, p. 3) describes as a "post-broadcast life". There have been many examples of comebacks, reboots and audiences discovering old shows on new platforms. This has been particularly common when it comes to (so-called) 'ever-green' sitcoms like *Friends*, *The Office* (US) and *Seinfeld*. The continued bidding wars among SVOD platforms for the licensing rights to these shows are evidence of their sustained popularity and profitability. Take, for example, Netflix paying $500 million for the global streaming rights to *Seinfeld* in late 2021 (Chow 2021). In fact, it is often sitcoms that we think of as enjoying the longest and most successful "post-broadcast lives" (Cole-Miller 2021). But *The Sopranos* resurgence should be thought of as both linked to and distinct from this. For one, its embodiment of a very different set of textual conventions means that audiences are likely to engage with its resurgence in a different way to these other texts. Traits typical of complex television (like narrative complexity or an emphasis on storyworld) *already* encourage individually varied readings in themselves. Moreover, *The Sopranos* resurgence has been dependent on the interaction between these textual features and a specific set of new cultural circumstances. The show rose to renewed prominence at a time when it resonated with the conditions of the global pandemic. Cultural settings like this are experienced differently by individuals—new viewers coming to the show during the pandemic, for example, are likely to project their individual experience of lockdown on to *The Sopranos*. As such, we should understand this type of resurgence—one spurred on by emergent cultural contexts—as distinct from the more conventional "post broadcast lives" (Cole-Miller 2021) of older network shows. These contexts are not permanent and such a resurgence—by its very nature—can mean different things to different people.

Looking forward, it is my contention that the ramifications of these findings will become even more pronounced. The notion of a complex TV show is hardly as unique as it was when Mittell introduced the concept of "narrative complexity" back in 2006. Especially

in the context of SVOD platforms, it is much more difficult make a clear distinction between complex TV and, what Mittell (2006) has referred to as "conventional TV". I have noticed this anecdotally—when teaching a module on complex television to first year students, I was surprised at how 'normal' the concept was to them. In fact, almost all the shows they were watching exemplified at least some of the textual traits Mittell attributes to complex TV. It appears there is no longer a binary between 'complex' and 'conventional' forms of television. There are plenty of examples of—what might be considered colloquially—as 'conventional television' (i.e., shows like *Riverdale* or *The Offer)* that exemplify some 'complex' traits but are not thought of as particularly unique or ground-breaking. In fact, I would contend that this is the case for the majority of new scripted drama that is being produced. Given this televisual landscape, it is likely that going forward, programs that experience a resurgence like *The Sopranos* will possess at least some qualities of complex television. Therefore, it is critical that we are mindful of both internal and external circumstances of if we are to consider the implications of resurgent television in the future.

Limitations

Of course, the findings of this study have a few limitations that should be considered. As I discussed in the methodology chapter, my own status as an insider researcher presented some unavoidable limitations as well as benefits. While I ran the risk of participants deferring to me as "the expert", I found that my "insider status" allowed me to quickly develop a positive rapport and ask specific follow up questions. It is also important to note that the findings of this thesis were the result of a single case study of young *The Sopranos* fans in Adelaide. This is to say that the specific contexts of interpretation experienced by the participants led to particular kinds of retrospective readings that might not be replicable in other contexts.

As a result, this thesis is not suggesting its findings reveal a universal 'Sopranos experience', rather, they are the result of *one* case study of the potential possibilities and

implications of retrospective readings. As I have argued, the particularities of the present moment have *enabled* new interpretations of *The Sopranos*. But this does not mean that they always enable the same interpretations for all viewers in all places. Factors like personal circumstance and viewers' local cultural and media contexts still play a critical role in how one might experience *The Sopranos* resurgence. The participants in this study were all aged in their early-twenties and were residents of Adelaide, South Australia. Broadly speaking, their experiences of the contexts (like lockdown or the media landscape) that shaped their interpretations of *The Sopranos* were consistent across the cohort. But, if I were to conduct this study in a different Australian city, the results would potentially be very different. For example, other places like Melbourne and Sydney experienced the pandemic in a *much* more severe way—there were higher case numbers, more deaths and extended lockdown conditions. Moreover, if we were to perform this study in an international city—like New Jersey where the show was set—there is the possibility an entirely different set of cultural and industrial factors that would enable significantly different retrospective readings. This thesis uses a specific case study to uncover the potential for retrospective readings dependent on differing contexts of interpretation. While this study's specific findings should not be extrapolated to different settings, it does offer the tools for future research to investigate the range of new readings that might emerge in other contexts.

I deliberately selected younger participants precisely because they had *not* seen the show in its original run. The original broadcast could not be a point of reference for their experience watching the show as they *only* knew the 2020s version of *The Sopranos*. We can see this play out in specific findings of this study. For example, the fact that participants were children during the 2000s enabled them to experience a unique kind of nostalgia when watching the show. The show's various pop-culture references – current at the time of the show's original run – took on new meanings as signifiers of participants' youth. But, had this

study included older participants who *did* watch the show in its original run there would have been the possibility for completely different findings. Their understanding of this resurgence would be more likely to be influenced by their original experience of watching the show. Retrospective readings are by their nature individually varied. Personal contexts are an important factor to how we decode texts, and it is important that this is remembered in any future study on retrospective readings.

While there are other examples of shows that have experienced a resurgence, *The Sopranos* stands out as unique. Shows like *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974), *Futurama* (1999-2003, 2008-2013) and *Family Guy* (1999-2002, 2005-present) only became truly commercially viable due to reruns and DVD syndications. But, as I have argued throughout the thesis, *The Sopranos* post-broadcast life is distinct from this—it has become popular due to specific cultural circumstances and with a young demographic. As such, it is important that the concept of a 'retrospective reading' is not broadly applied to *all* examples of post-broadcast television. Moreover, if another complex program were to experience a similar resurgence it must be noted that it would interact with different cultural contexts and (most likely) different demographics. This would bring with it new analytical considerations that would offer productive avenues for future research.

Suggestions for Future Research

This thesis has outlined a broad approach to studying the resurgence of older, complex TV shows like *The Sopranos*. One of the central conclusions of this thesis is that we *must* understand resurgent versions of complex TV shows as 'new' texts that perform unique forms of cultural work, distinct from that of their original run. To do so reveals the untapped meaning that resurgent texts might take on in new settings. This brings with it a range of possibilities for future studies.

While this study was about *The Sopranos*, other complex television programs are likely to experience a similar resurgence in the future—take for example the renewed interest in *Breaking Bad* after the finale of *Better Call Saul* (2015-2022). Future studies might focus on the particularities of how different shows engage with different contexts. It could also explore more fully *why* certain shows became resurgent within certain demographics. For instance, Lotz (2021) has noted SVOD platforms have allowed for an even more focused version of narrowcasting—shows can have a significant cultural impact within specific subcultures or taste communities. There is the potential that further examples of resurgent complex television could resonate in a similar way. There are already examples of old network-era sitcoms like *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992) or *Bewitched* (1964-1972) resonating in queer communities, for example. Future studies might explore this dynamic concerning complex television texts—what new considerations do the textual features of complex television texts add here? Other studies might look at the role that 'new' technologies and media platforms play in a show's resurgence. It would be worth investigating how online paratexts (like tweets and memes) sustain interest in a show or integrate it into an online parlance. In the case of *The Sopranos*, it is common to see certain quotes or stills from the show become meme templates used to comment on contemporary political issues. It would be interesting to investigate if these online formats can sustain the resurgence of *The Sopranos as a show* or if the memes persist beyond the show's initial resurgence.

Television is a public site where ideas get negotiated, recuperated, and reimaged. In the wake of the pandemic, it appears as though the medium's role in this regard has intensified. Understanding the specific potentials afforded by the textual features of complex television can allow us to illuminate the new meanings and cultural work of future examples of resurgent television.

The Sopranos Episode List

‘Army of One’, *The Sopranos* 2014, season 3, episode 13. Directed by John Patterson. Written by David Chase, Lawrence Konner. First Broadcast 20 May 2001 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘Cold Cuts’ 2014, *The Sopranos,* season 5, episode 10. Directed by Mike Figgis. Written by Mitchell Burgess, Robin Green. First Broadcast, 9 May 2004 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘Commendatori’ 2014, *The Sopranos*, season 2, episode 2. Directed by Tim Van Patten. Written by David Chase [DVD]. First Broadcast 6 February 2000 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘Denial, Anger, Acceptance’ 2014, *The Sopranos,* season 1, episode3. Directed by Nick Gomez. Written by Mark Saraceni. First Broadcast 24 January 1999 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘D-Girl’ 2014, *The Sopranos,* season 2, episode 7. Directed by Allen Coulter. Written by Todd Kessler. First Broadcast 27 February 2000 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘Eloise’ 2014, *The Sopranos,* season 4, episode 12. Directed by James Hayman. Written by Terence Winter. First Broadcast 1 December 2002 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘For All Debts Public and Private’ 2014, *The Sopranos*, season 4, episode 1. Directed by Allen Coulter. Written by David Chase. First Broadcast 15 September 2002 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘From Where to Eternity’ 2014, *The Sopranos,* season 2, episode 9. Directed by Henry Bronchtein. Written by Michael Imperioli. First Broadcast 12 March 2000 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘Full Metal Jacket’ 2014, *The Sopranos*, season 2, episode 8. Directed by Allen Coulter. Written by Mitchell Burgess, Robin Green. First Broadcast 5 March 2000 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘Fun House’ 2014, *The Sopranos,* season 2, episode 13. Directed John Patterson. Written David Chase, Todd Kessler. First Broadcast 9 April 2000 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘Isabella’ 2014, *The Sopranos,* season 1, episode 12. Directed by Allan Coulter. Written by Mitchell Burgess, Robin Green. First Broadcast 28 March 1999 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘Johnny Cakes’ 2014, *The Sopranos,* season 6, episode 8. Directed by Tim Van Patten. Written by Diane Frolov, Andrew Schneider. First Broadcast 30 April 2006 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘Live Free or Die’ 2014, *The Sopranos*, season 6, episode 6. Directed by Tim Van Patten. Written by David Chase, Terence Winter, Mitchell Burgess, Robin Green. First Broadcast 16 April 2006 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘Made in American’ 2014, *The Sopranos*, season 6, episode 21. Directed by David Chase. Written by David Chase. First Broadcast 10 June 2007 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘Nobody Knows Anything’ 2014, *The Sopranos*, season 1, episode 11. Directed by Henry Bronchtein. Written by Frank Renzulli. First Broadcast 21 March 1999 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘Pilot’ 2014, *The Sopranos*, season 1, episode 1. Directed by David Chase. Written by David Chase. First Broadcast 10 January 1999 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘Remember When’ 2014, *The Sopranos*, season 6, episode 15. Directed by Phil Abraham. Directed by Terence Winter. First Broadcast, 22 April 2007 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti’ 2014, *The Sopranos*, season 1, episode 8. Directed by Tim Van Patten. Written by David Chase, Frank Renzulli. First Broadcast 28 February 1999 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

‘University’ 2014, *The Sopranos*, season 3, episode 6. Directed by Allen Coulter. Written by David Chase, Terrence Winter, Mitchell Burgess, Todd Kessler, Salvatore Stabile, Robin Green. First Broadcast 1 April 2001 [DVD]. HBO Home Video.

Works Cited

A.J Soprano's nu-metal shirts, 2018 [Twitter] 18 December, viewed 1 June 2022, <https://twitter.com/ajsopranoshirts?lang=en>

Abad-Santos, A 2019, 'The fight over Joker and the new movie's dangerous message explained', *Vox*, 25 September, viewed 6 October 2022, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/9/18/20860890/joker-movie-controversy-incel-sjw>

Abbot, K, Davies, H, Mumford, G, Harrison, P, Seale, J 2019, "The 100 best TV shows of the 21st century", *The Guardian*, Sep 16, viewed 1 July 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/sep/16/100-best-tv-shows-of-the-21st-century>

ABC News 2020, 'Netflix adds 15 million subscribers amid coronavirus and Tiger King, but warns lockdown boom won't last', *ABC News*, 22 April, viewed 17 August 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-22/netflix-warns-record-users-will-not-last/12171800>

Abhilash, B 2015, 'Revenge, Masculinity and glorification of violence in The Godfather', *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 6-12.

Achebe, C 1977, 'An Image of Africa', *The Massachusetts Review*, vol 18, no. 4, pp. 782-794.

Adams, W 2015, 'Conducting Semi-Structured Interviews' in J Wholey, H Harty & K Newcomer (eds), *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*, Wiley, New York, pp. 492-505.

Adkins, M 2018, *Television Storyworlds as Virtual Space*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham.

Aguiler, J 1981, 'Insider research: An ethnography of a debate' in D Messerschmidt (ed), *Anthropologist at home in North America*, Cambridge University Press, New York, pp. 15-26.

Akass K, McCabe J 2011 'Blabbermouth Cunts or Speaking in Tongues: Narrative Crises for Women in The Sopranos and Feminist Dilemmas.' in D Lavery, D Howard, P Levinson (eds) *The Essential Sopranos Reader*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, pp. 93-104.

—— 2006, 'What has Carmela ever done for Feminism?: Carmela Soprano and the post-feminist dilemma' in D Lavery (ed) *Reading The Sopranos: Hit TV from HBO*, I.B. Tauris, London, pp. 39-55.

—— 2007, ‘Sex Swearing and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO’s Original Programming and Producing Quality TV’ in K Akass, J McCabe (eds) *Quality Television: Contemporary American Television and Beyond,* Bloomsbury, London, pp. 62- 76.

—— 2007, “Introduction: Debating Quality” in K Akass and J McCabe (eds) *Quality Television: Contemporary American Television and Beyond,* Bloomsbury, London, pp. 1 - 13.

—— 2007, *Quality Television: Contemporary American Television and Beyond,* Bloomsbury Publishing, London.

—— 2018, ‘HBO and the Aristocracy of Contemporary TV Culture: Affiliations and Legitimating Television Culture, Post-2007’, *Mise au point,* vol. 10, no. 1, viewed 21 May 2022, <https://journals.openedition.org/map/2472>

Albrecht, M 2015, *Masculinity in Contemporary Quality Television*, Routledge, Oxfordshire.

Anderson, C 2008, ‘Producing an Aristocracy of American Culture in American Television’, in G Edgerton & J Jones (eds), *The Essential HBO Reader*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, pp. 23-38.

Ang, I 1985, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, trans D Couling, Routledge, Oxfordshire.

Anzalone, G 2013, ‘Identity, therapy and womanhood: Humanity in the Mafia’, *Applied Psychology Opus,* vol. 7, no.1, viewed 1 July 2021, <https://wp.nyu.edu/steinhardt-appsych_opus/identity-therapy-and-womanhood-humanity-in-the-mafia/>

Armstrong, J 2019, ‘The Sopranos: A Revolutionary show we’ll talk about forever’, *BBC Culture,* 10 January, viewed 4 October 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20190108-the-sopranos-a-revolutionary-show-well-talk-about-forever>

Aston, E 2003, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre,* Routledge, Oxfordshire.

Bainbridge, C 2019, ‘Television as a psychical object: Mad Men and the value of psychoanalysis for television scholarship’, *Critical Studies in Television,* vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 289-306.

Barasz, L 2006, ‘You Know How I Know You’re Gay? : Masculinity and Homophobia in Mainstream Comedy’, MA Thesis, Colby College, Waterville.

Barretta, A 2000, 'Tony Soprano as postmodern gangster: controlling identities and managing self-disclosure', *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 211-220.

BBC News 2020, 'Netflix gets 16 million new sign-ups thanks to lockdown', *BBC News*, 22 April, viewed 17 August 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-52376022>

Beare, A 2019, 'Prosthetic Memories in The Sopranos', *M/C Journal*, vol. 22, no. 5, viewed 1 July 2021, <https://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/1586>

Benson-Allott, C, 'How I May Destroy You Reinvents Rape Television', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 74, no. 2, pp. 100-105.

Bernstein, D 2004, 'Philosophy hitches a Ride with '*The Sopranos*'', *The New York Times*, 13 April, viewed 4 April 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/13/books/philosophy-hitches-a-ride-with-the-sopranos.html>

Bianculli, D 2007, 'Quality TV: A US TV Critic's Perspective' in K Akass and J McCabe (eds) *Quality Television: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, Bloomsbury, London, pp. 35- 37.

Bianculli, D 2011, "Foreword" in D Lavery, D Howard, P Levinson (eds), *The Essential Sopranos Reader*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, pp. xi-xii.

Bly, R 1990, *Iron John: A Book About Men*, Addison-Wesley, Boston.

Bolin, G 2014, 'Media generations: Objective and subjective media landscapes and nostalgia among generations of media users', *Participants: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp.108-131.

Bollas, C 1979, 'The Transformational Object', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol.60, no. 1, pp. 97-107.

Bondanella, P 2005, *Hollywood Italians: Dagos, Palookas, Romeos, Wise Guys, And Sopranos*, Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, London.

Bordwell, D 2008, *Poetics of Cinema*, Routledge, Oxfordshire.

Borroughs, B 2018, 'House of Netflix: Streaming media and digital lore', *Popular Communication*, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 1-17.

Bouchier, D 1995, 'The Last Big Roundup for Real Men', The New York Times, 18 June, viewed 1 May 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/06/18/nyregion/out-of-order-the-last-big-roundup-for-real-men.html?searchResultPosition=12>

Bourdaa, M 2011, 'Quality Television: construction and de-construction of seriality', in M Perez-Gomez (ed), *Previously On: Interdisciplinary Studies on TV Series in the Third Golden Age of Television*, University of Seville Press, Seville, pp. 33- 45.

Boyle, A 2020, 'They Should Have Never Given Us Uniforms if They Didn't Want Us to Be an Army: The Handmaid's Tale as Transmedia Feminism', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 45, no. 4, pp. 845- 869.

Braun, V, Clark, V 2019, 'To saturate or not to saturate? Questioning data saturation as a useful concept for thematic analysis and sample-size rationales', *Qualitative Research in Sport Exercise and Health*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 210-216

Brinkmann, S 2014, 'Unstructured and Semi-structured Interviewing' in P Leavy (ed) *The Oxford Guide handbook of qualitative research*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 277-300.

Brockes, E 2019, 'David Chase on why he wrote The Sopranos: I needed therapy', *The Guardian*, 16 September, viewed 10 October 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/sep/16/david-chase-the-sopranos-best-tv-21st-century>

Brod, H 2006, 'The Sorry Sons of The Godfather: Intertextuality, Orality and Diminished Masculinities in The Sopranos', *Universitas*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 1-6.

Brooks, J 2019, 'Olive Kitteridge (Lisa Cholodenko, 2014), quality television and difficult women: female discontent in the age of binge-viewing', *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 19, no. 7, pp. 944-961.

Bundel, A 2019, 'Joker, starring Joaquin Phoenix, sparked an incel controversy because it's hopelessly hollow', *NBC News THINK*, 5 October, viewed 6 October 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/joker-starring-joaquin-phoenix-sparked-incel-controversy-because-it-s-ncna1062656>

Burkhead, C 2011, 'Fishes and Football Coaches: The Narrative Necessity of Dreams in The Sopranos' in D Lavery, D Howard, P Levinson *The Essential Sopranos Reader*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, pp. 149-156.

Butler, J 1990, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, Oxfordshire.

Calabrese, M 2008, "From Troy to 95 Lincoln Place, Irvington, N.J.: A Virgilian Reading of *The Sopranos* Underworld" in T Fahy (ed), *Considering David Chase: Essays on The*

Rockford Files, Northern Exposure and The Sopranos, McFarland & Company, London, pp. 196-213.

Canby, V 1999, 'From the Humble Mini-Series Comes the Magnificent Megamovie', *The New York Times,* 31 October, viewed 4 April 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/10/31/arts/from-the-humble-mini-series-comes-the-magnificent-megamovie.html>

Cardwell, S 2007, "Is Quality Television Any Good? Generic Distinctions, Evaluations and the Troubling Matter of Critical Judgment" in K Akass, J McCabe (eds) *Quality Television: Contemporary American Television and Beyond,* Bloomsbury Publishing, London, pp. 19-35.

Carrigan, T, Connell, R.W, Lee, J 1985, 'Towards a New Sociology of Masculinity', *Theory and Society,* vol. 14, no. 5, pp. 551-604.

Cascio, J 2019, 'The Apocalypse: It's not the end of the world', *Bulletin of the Atomic,* vol. 75, no. 6, pp. 269-272.

Castro, D, Cascajosa, C 2020, 'From Netflix to Movistar+: How Subscription Video-on-Demand Services have transformed Spanish TV production', *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies,* vol. 59, no. 3, pp. 154-160.

Cavett, D 2007, ''Sopranos' Grief', *The New York Times,* June 6, viewed 4 April 2022, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/06/06/sopranos-grief/>

Chavez, C 2008, 'Conceptualizing from the inside: Advantages, complications and demands on insider positionality', *The Qualitative Report,* vol. 13, no.3, pp. 474-494.

Childs, A 2016, 'Hyper of hypo-masculine? Re-Conceptualising 'hypermasculinity' through Seattle's gay, leather community', *Gender, Place & Culture,* vol. 23, no. 9, pp.1315-28

Chorey-Assad, R, Cicchirillo V, 2005, 'Empathy and affective orientation as predictors of identification with television characters', *Communication Research Reports,* vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 151-156.

Chow, A 2021, 'How Seinfeld became one of TV's Great Moneymakers', *Time,* 1 October, viewed 6 October 2022, <https://time.com/6103335/seinfeld-netflix-business/>

Clare, A 2000, *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis,* Vintage Books, New York.

Cohen, J 2013, *Audience Identification with Media Characters,* in J Bryant, P Vorderer *Psychology of Entertainment,* Routledge, Oxfordshire, pp. 201-216.

Connell, R.W 2009, *Gender*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.

—— 1987, *Gender and Power*, Wiley, New York.

Connell, R.W, Messerschmidt, J 2005, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender & Society*, vol. 19, no. 6, pp. 829-859.

Coopey, L 2022, 'Sexual Violence and Smallfolk: The Exploitation of the Sex Worker in Game of Thrones' in Stephanie Patrick, Mythili, Rajiva (eds) *The Forgotten Victims of Sexual Violence in Film, Television and New Media*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, pp. 47-62.

Cowie, P 1997, *The Godfather Book*, Avlon Publishing, New York.

Cox, C 2018, 'Programming-Flow in the convergence of digital media platforms and television.' *Critical Studies in Television*, vol. 13, no. 4, pp. 438-454.

Cuklanz, L 2000, *Rape on Prime Time: Television Masculinity and Sexual Violence*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

D'Acci, J 1994, *Defining Women: Television and the case of Cagney & Lacy*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.

De Stefano, G 2011, 'A 'Finook' in the Crew: Vito Spatafore, The Sopranos and the Queering of The Mafia Genre" in D Lavery, D Howard, P Levinson (eds) *The Essential Sopranos Reader*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, pp. 114-124.

DeLyser, D 2001, 'Do you really live here? Thoughts on Insider research', *Geographical Review*, vol 91, no. 1, pp. 441-453.

Dixit, A, Martheonis, M, Yasir Arafat, SM, Sharma, P, Kumar Kar, S 2020 'Binge Watching Behaviour during Covid-19 Pandemic: a cross-sectional, cross-national online survey', *Psychiatry Research*, vol. 290, no. 6, viewed 1 June 2022, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0165178120316723?via%3Dihub>

Donatelli C, Alward S, 2002 "I Dread you?: Married to the Mob in The Godfather, Goodfellas and The Sopranos' in D Lavery (ed) *This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos*, Wallflower Press, London, pp. 60-71.

Doty, A 2011, 'Queer Hitchcock' in T Leitch, L Poague (eds) *A Companion to Alfred Hitchcock*, Wiley, New York, pp. 473-489.

Douthat, R 2008, 'Rewatching *The Sopranos*', *The Atlantic*, 25 October, viewed 10 September 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/personal/archive/2008/10/rewatching-em-the-sopranos-em/55720/>

Doyle, J 2017, 'The Netflix deal is a very sweet deal for Netflix, not Canada,' *The Globe and Mail*, 28 September, viewed 4 June 2022, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/the-netflix-deal-is-a-very-sweet-deal-for-netflix-not-canada/article36421246/>

Ducker, E 2020, 'it's the Jacket: A mini oral history of A.J Soprano's Slipknot windbreaker, its online resurrection, and the style of The Sopranos', *The Ringer*, 14 October, viewed 1 July 2021, <https://www.theringer.com/tv/2020/10/14/21515476/aj-soprano-slipknot-windbreaker-sopranos-style>

Edgerton, G 2013, *The Sopranos*, *Wayne State University Press*, Detroit.

Fabiano, J 2021, 'Sopranos Creator David Chase Finally Confirms Tony's Fate', *Eonline*, 4 November, viewed 10 October 2022, <https://www.eonline.com/news/1308324/sopranos-creator-david-chase-finally-confirms-tonys-fate>

Fahy, T 2008, "Introduction" in T Fahy (ed), *Considering David Chase: Essays on the Rockford Files, Northern Exposure and The Sopranos*, McFarland & Company, London, pp. 1-11.

—— 2008, *Considering David Chase: Essays on the Rockford Files, Northern Exposure and The Sopranos*, McFarland & Company, London.

Faludi, S, 1992, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, Chatto and Windus, London.

Farrell, W 1993, *The Myth of Male Power*, Berkley Trade, New York.

Ferreday, D 2015, 'Game of Thrones, Rape Culture and Feminist Fandom', *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 30, no. 83, pp. 21-36.

Feuer, J 2007, "HBO and the Concept of Quality TV" in K Akass, J McCabe (eds) *Quality Television: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, Bloomsbury, London, pp. 145-158.

Fileborn, B, Loney-Howes, R 2019, *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Fiske, J, Hartley, J 1978, *Reading Television*, Routledge, Oxfordshire.

Flecha Ortiz, J. A, Santos Corrada, M, Lopez, E, Dones, V 2021, 'Analysis of the use of memes as an exponent of collective coping during COVID-19 in Puerto Rico', *Media International Australia*, vol. 178, no. 1, pp. 168-181.

Fontana, A Frey, JH 2000, 'The Interview: From structured questions to negotiated text.' In NK Denzin, YS Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn, Sage, Thousand Oaks, pp. 645-672.

Ford, J, 2018, 'Feminist Cinematic Television: Authorship, aesthetics and gender in Pamela Adlon's Better Things', *Fusion Journal*, vol. 5, no. 14, pp. 16-29.

Forlani, S 2006, 'Sopranos Speak: A Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Analysis', PhD thesis, University of Milan, Milan.

Foucault, M 1976, *The History of Sexuality* trans R Hurley, Editions Gallimard, Paris.

Frey, M 2021, *Netflix Recommends: Algorithms, Film Choice, and the History of Taste*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Fricker, K 2007, 'Quality TV on Show' in K Akass and J McCabe (eds) *Quality Television: Contemporary Television and Beyond*, Bloomsbury, London, pp. 13- 17.

Fröber, K, Roland, T 2019, 'In the dark cube: Movie theatre context enhances the valuation and aesthetic experience of watching films', *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts*, vol. 15, no.3, pp. 528-544.

Frye, J 2018, 'From Politics to Policy: Turning the Corner on Sexual Harassment', *The Centre for American Progress*, 31 January, viewed 1 May 2022, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/politics-policy-turning-corner-sexual-harassment/>

Gallucci, N, Marcin, T 2020, 'Sopranos memes are having a real moment in 2020', *Mashable*, September 18, viewed 4 October 2022, <https://mashable.com/article/best-sopranos-memes-2020>

Gardiner, J 2002, 'Introduction' in J Gardiner (ed) *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 1-29.

Ge, Y 2018, 'Marching Forward with #MeToo: The Representations of Women in American Political Television Series', *Gender Form: #MeToo and its Ambivalent Repercussions*, no. 70, pp. 40-47.

Gill, R 2017, "The Affective Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist sensibility 10 years on", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, no. 6, pp. 606-626.

Gorton, K 2009, 'Why I Love Carmela Soprano: Ambivalence, the Domestic and Televisual Therapy', *Feminism & Psychology*, vol 19, no. 1, pp. 128-131.

Graf, N 2018, 'Sexual Harassment at Work in the Era of #MeToo', *Pew Research Centre,* 4 April, viewed 9 May 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/04/04/sexual-harassment-at-work-in-the-era-of-metoo/>

Gray, J 2010, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, New York University Press, New York.

Gray, J, Lotz, A 2019, *Television Studies*, 2nd edn, Wiley, New York.

Green, K, Van Oort, M 2013, 'We Wear No Pants: Selling the Crisis of Masculinity in the 2010 Superbowl Commercials', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 695-719.

Greene, M 2014, 'On the inside looking in: Methodological insights and challenges in conducting qualitative insider research*', The Qualitive Report,* vol. 19, no. 29, pp. 1-13.

Greene, R, Vernezze, P 2004, "This Book of Ours" in Greene R, Vernezze P (eds), *The Sopranos and Philosophy: I Kill Therefore I Am*, Open Court Publishing, Peru, pp. 1-5.

—— 2004, *The Sopranos and Philosophy: I Kill Therefore I Am*, Open Court Publishing, Peru.

Grieveson, L, Sonnet, E, Stanfield, P 2005, *Hidden Histories of The American Gangster Film*, Berg Publishers, Oxford.

Gutterman, D 1994 'Postmodernism and the Interrogation of Masculinity' in H Brod and M Kaufman (eds) *Theorizing Masculinities: Research on Men and Masculinities*, SAGE Publications, New York, pp. 219-239.

Halberstam, J 1998, *Female Masculinity*, Duke University Press, Durham.

Halfmann, A, Reinecke, L 2021, 'Binge Watching as a case of escapist entertainment use' in P Vorderer, C Klimmt (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Entertainment Theory,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 181-203.

Hall, S 1980, 'Encoding/decoding' in S Hall, D Hobson, A Lowe & P Willis (eds), *Culture, Media, Language,* Unwin Hyman, London, pp. 51- 61.

—— 2007, 'The structured communication of events' in A Gray, J Campbell, M Erickson, S Hanson, H Wood (eds) *CCCS Selected Working Papers,* Routledge, Oxfordshire, pp. 381-401.

Harman, T 2013, *The Transformation of Masculinity in Late Capitalism: Narratives of Legitimation and Hollywood cinema*, PhD Thesis, Cardiff University, Cardiff.

Harris, G 2012, "A Return to Form? Postmasculinist television drama and tragic heroes in wake of *The Sopranos*", New Review of Film and Television Studies, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 443-463.

Havas, J 2022, *Woman Up: Evoking Feminism in Quality Television*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit.

Hermes, J, Hill, A 2020, 'Television's undoing of social distancing', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 23, no. 4, pp. 655-661.

Herzog-Massing, H 1987, 'Decoding Dallas: Comparing American and German Viewers' in A Berger (ed) *Television and Society*, Routledge, New York, pp. 95-104.

Hibberd, L 2011, 'Fucking Vito: Masculinity and Sexuality in The Sopranos', in K Ross (ed) *The Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Media*, Wiley, New York, pp. 174-188.

Hildenbrand, K 2018, "The 1990s Hollywood Gangster" in George Larke-Walsh (eds) *A Companion to the Gangster Film*, Wiley, New York, pp. 129-145.

Hills, M 2007, 'From the Box in the Corner to the Boxset on the Shelf: TVIII and the Cultural/Textual Valorisations of DVD', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 41-60.

Hinson, H 2003, 'Aiming for Shakespeare (if Not '*The Sopranos*')', *The New York Times*, 2 February, viewed 4 April 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/02/arts/television-radio-aiming-for-shakespeare-if-not-the-sopranos.html>

Hoffman, J 2019, 'Joker-the incels, the incitement, the ending: discuss with spoilers', *The Guardian*, 4 October, viewed 6 October 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/oct/04/joker-the-incels-the-incitement-the-ending-discuss-with-spoilers>

Holden, S 2000, *The New York Times on The Sopranos*, The New York Times Company, New York.

hooks, b 1990, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, South End Press, Boston.

—— 1996, *Reel to Real: Race Sex and Class at the Movies*, Routledge, New York.

Horrocks, R 1994, *Masculinity in Crisis: Myths, Fantasies and Realities*, St. Martin's Press, New York.

IGN 2017, 'Top 100 TV Shows of All Time', *IGN*, viewed 7 July 2022, <https://www.ign.com/lists/top-100-tv-shows/100>

Isaacs, D 2020, 'Apocalypse perhaps', *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, vol. 56, no. 8, pp. 1169-1170.

Jacobs, J 2011, 'Christopher, Osama, and A.J: Contemporary Narcissism and Terrorism in *The Sopranos*' in D Lavery, D Howard, P Levinson *The Essential Sopranos Reader*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, pp. 56-80.

Jaramillo, D 2002, 'The Family Racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, The Sopranos, and the Construction of a Quality Brand', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 59-75.

Jenner, M 2014, 'Is This TVIV? On Netflix, TVIII and binge-watching', *New Media and Society*, vol 18, no. 2, pp. 257-273.

Jhally, S 2015, 'Stuart Hall: The Last Interview', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 332-345.

John, A 2013, 'Why Breaking Bad is the Best Show Ever and Why That Matters', *Forbes*, 16 September, viewed 13 May, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/allenstjohn/2013/09/16/why-breaking-bad-is-the-best-show-ever-and-why-that-matters/?sh=5e03407f650e>

Johnson, M 2007, 'Gangster Feminism: The Feminist Cultural Work of HBOs The Sopranos', *Feminist Studies* vol. 33, no. 2, pp 269-296.

Johnson, P 2016, 'Walter White(ness) lashes out: *Breaking Bad* and male victimage', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 14-28.

Jones, S, 2021, 'Re-Contextualising Consumer Escapism: Binge-Watching and the Unexpected Effects of an Escape', PhD Thesis, Lancaster University, Lancaster.

Joy, S 2017, 'Sexual Violence in serial form: Breaking Bad habits on TV', *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 118-129.

Kahrs, S 2005, 'In This House it's 1954: Representations of Women in *The Sopranos*', MA Thesis, University of Georgia, Athens.

Kalinina, E 2014, 'Mediated post-Soviet Nostalgia', PhD Thesis, Sodertorn University, Huddinge.

Kambasha, M 2020, 'The Sopranos: From enduring TV hit to the hottest show of lockdown', *The Guardian*, 19 December, viewed 1 June 2022,

<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/dec/19/sopranos-hit-social-media-generation-mafia-series-emotional-struggles>

Kaul, A 2021, 'The Rise and Fall of the Mafia Movie', *Varsity*, 23 April, viewed 1 June 2022, <https://www.varsity.co.uk/film-and-tv/21220>

Kaveny, C 2007, 'Salvation and The Sopranos: Redemption in New Jersey', *Commonweal*, Feb 5, viewed 1 November 2021, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/salvation-%E2%80%98-sopranos>

Keeton, P 2002, *'The Sopranos* and Genre Transformation: Ideological Negotiation in the Gangster Film', *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 131-148.

Kimmel, M 1987, *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity*, Sage Publications, New York.

—— 1996, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, Free Press, New York.

Klinkenborg, V 2000, 'Why America loves 'The Sopranos'', *The New York Times*, 16 January, viewed 25 January 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/01/16/opinion/editorial-notebook-why-america-loves-the-sopranos.html>

Kocela, C 2002, "Unmade Men: *The Sopranos* after whiteness", *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 15, no. 2, viewed 1 July 2022, <http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.105/15.2kocela.html>

Kompare, D 2006, 'Publishing Flow: DVD Box Sets and the Reconception of Television', *Television & New Media*, vol. 7, no. 4, pp. 335-360.

Lacan, J 1982, 'The Meaning of the Phallus' trans. J Rose in J Mitchell, J Rose (eds) *Feminine Sexuality*, W.W. Norton & Co, New York, pp. 74.

Langmann, B 2021, 'The Sopranos creator David Chase finally explained Tony's fate', *Esquire*, 4 November, viewed 10 October 2022, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/tv/a38145579/sopranos-ending-tony-fate-explained-david-chase-interview/>

Larke-Walsh, G 2010, *Screening the Mafia: Masculinity, Ethnicity and mobsters from The Godfather to The Sopranos*, McFarland & co, Jefferson.

Lavery, D 2002, 'Coming Heavy: The Significance of The Sopranos' in D Lavery (ed), *This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos*, Wallflower Press, London, pp. xi-xviii.

—— 2002, *This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos*, Wallflower Press, London.

—— 2011, “Introduction” in D Lavery, D Howard , P Levinson (eds), *The Essential Sopranos Reader*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, pp. 1-4.

Lavery, D, Howard, D, Levinson, P 2011, *The Essential Sopranos Reader*, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington.

Lee, K 2004, ‘The Ghost of Gary Cooper: Masculinity Homosocial Bonding, and The Sopranos’, *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, vol. 3, no. 1, viewed 3 March 2022, <https://sfonline.barnard.edu/hbo/printkle.htm>

Liebes, T, Katz, E 1993, *The Export of Meaning: Cross Cultural Meanings of Dallas*, Wiley, New York.

Liedke, M, 2021, ‘Netflix's subscriber growth, stock zapped as pandemic eases’, *abc News*, April 22, viewed 15 August, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/wireStory/netflixs-subscriber-growth-stock-zapped-pandemic-eases-77196229>

Lizardi, R 2014, *Mediated Nostalgia: Individual Memory and Contemporary Mass Media*, Lexington Books, New York.

Lotz, A 2007, *The Television Will be Revolutionised*, New York University Press, New York.

—— 2014, *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century*, New York University Press, New York.

—— 2021, ‘Unpopularity and cultural power in the age of Netflix: New Questions for cultural studies approaches to television texts’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 887-900.

Lyndon, N 1992, *No More Sex War: The Failures of Feminism,* Sinclair-Stevenson, London.

Malin, B 2010, ‘Viral Manhood: Niche Marketing, Hard Boiled Detectives and the Economics of Masculinity’, *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 32, no. 3, pp. 373-389.

Markham, A 2020, ‘Pattern Recognition: Using Rocks, Wind, Water, Anxiety, and Doom: Scrolling a slow apocalypse (to learn more about methods for changing the world)’, *Qualitative Inquiry,* vol. 27, no. 7, pp. 914-927.

Martin, B 2014, *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From the Sopranos to The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad*, Penguin Books, London.

McCarthy, J 2004, *Bullets Over Hollywood: The American Gangster Picture From The Silents to The Sopranos*, Da Capo Press, Boston

McKee, A 2003, *Textual Analysis: A Beginner’s Guide*, Sage Publications, New York.

McMurry, A 1996, 'The slow apocalypse: a gradualistic theory of the world's demise', *Postmodern Culture,* vol. 6, no. 3, viewed 1 July 2021, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/27570?casa_token=6io9ypc9eZEAAAAA:2yzadaTgVCoELLePAKzvK7EFoc4Wt0i2WQBEj4KA2P7qPR0lpnTlM0_vEt5nrUVoXrf1-tSqf7tg>

Men's Health Forum 2014, 'What can Tony Soprano teach us about therapy?', *Men's Health Forum,* 14 July, viewed 4 October 2022, <https://www.menshealthforum.org.uk/what-can-tony-soprano-teach-men-about-therapy>

Miller, M 2019, 'Have we finally grown out of thinking Fight Club is a good movie?', *Esquire,* 15 October, viewed, 4 October 2022, <https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a29463962/fight-club-bad-20th-anniversary-analysis-essay/>

Miller, T 2021, 'Rewitched: Retextuality and the Queering of Bewitched', *Camera Obscura,* vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 1-31.

Mittell, J 2006, 'Narrative complexity in contemporary American television', *The Velvet Light Trap,* vol. 58, no. 1, pp. 29-40.

—— 2009, 'Sites of Participation: Wiki Fandom and the case of Lostpedia', *Transformative Works and Cultures,* vol. 3, no. 1, viewed 14 July 2022, <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/118/117>

—— 2013, 'Forensic Fandom and the Drillable Text', *Spreadable Media,* viewed 1 July 2019, <https://spreadablemedia.org/essays/mittell/index.html#.Yp7YiexBwQ8>

—— 2015, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*, New York University Press, New York.

Morgan, D 1992, *Discovering Men: Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities*, Routledge, Oxfordshire.

Morris, H 2013, 'Crisis of Masculinity? It's the economy, stupid', *The New York Times,* 16 May, viewed 10 October 2022, https://archive.nytimes.com/rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/16/crisis-of-masculinity-its-the-economy-stupid/?searchResultPosition=12

Munson, B 2021, 'SVOD Churn hit 20% in back half of 2020', *Fierce Video*, Jun 10, viewed 15 August, 2022, <https://www.fiercevideo.com/video/svod-churn-hit-20-back-half-2020-interpret>

Neale, S 2002, *Genre and contemporary Hollywood,* BFI Publishing, London.

Negra, D 2020, 'Pandemic Television', *Film Criticism,* vol. 44, no. 4, article 7, viewed 13 July 2022, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/f/fc/13761232.0044.407/--pandemic-television?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

Nelson, R 2007, 'Quality TV Drama: Estimations and Influences Through Time and Space' in K Akass and J McCabe (eds) *Quality Television: Contemporary American Television and Beyond,* Bloomsbury, London, pp. 38-52.

Newcomb, H, Hirsch, P 1983, 'Television as a Cultural Forum: Implications for Research', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video,* vol. 8, no. 5, pp. 45-55.

Newland, C 2019, 'Is The Irishman the end of the gangster movie as we know it?', *BBC Culture,* 9 November, viewed 1 June 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20191107-is-the-irishman-the-end-of-the-gangster-movie-as-we-know-it>

Newman, M, Levine, E 2012, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status.* Routledge, Oxfordshire.

Nilsson, J 2000, 'Take Me Back to the Ball Game: Nostalgia and Hegemonic Masculinity in Field of Dreams' *Canadian Review of American Studies,* vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 52-72.

Nizza, M 2007, 'Solving the Sopranos', *The New York Times*, 11 June, viewed 4 April 2022, <https://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/06/11/solving-the-sopranos/>

Nochimson, M 2002, 'Waddaya Lookin' At?: Re-reading the gangster genre through The Sopranos', *Film Quarterly,* vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 2-13.

—— 2005, 'Waddaya Lookin' At? Rereading the Gangster Film Through *The Sopranos*' in L Grieveson, E Sonnet, P Stanfield (eds), *Hidden Histories of The American Gangster Film,* Berg Publishers, Oxford.

Nungesser, V 2010, 'Ways of Reclaiming Masculinity: Reactions to the Crisis of the White Man in Paul Thomas Anderson's Magnolia, Sam Mendes American Beauty and David Fincher's Fight Club', in M Gymnich, K Ruhl and K Scheunemann (eds), *Gendered (Re) visions: Constructions of Gender in Audio-visual Media* Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Gottingen, pp. 49-58.

Nussbaum, E 2014, 'The Female Bad Fan', *The New Yorker*, 17 October, viewed 4 October 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/female-bad-fan>

Palmer-Mehta, V 2006, "Disciplining the masculine: The disruptive power of Janice Soprano' in D Lavery (ed) *Reading The Sopranos: Hit TV from HBO,* I.B Tauris, London, pp. 56-68.

Pattie, D 2002, 'Mobbed Up: The Sopranos and the Modern Gangster Film' in Lavery D (ed) *This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos,* Wallflower Press, London, pp. 146-161.

Payne, L 1984, *The Healing of the Homosexual,* Crossway Books, Wheaton.

Pena, L 2015, 'Breaking Binge: Exploring the Effects of Binge Watching on Television Viewer Reception', MA Thesis, Syracuse University, Syracuse.

Pittman, M, and Sheean, K 2015, 'Sprinting a media marathon: Uses and gratification of binge-watching television through Netflix', *First Monday,* vol 20, no. 10, viewed 13 July 2022, <https://firstmonday.org/article/view/6138/4999>

Poniewozik, J 2019, 'The 20 Best TV Dramas Since *The Sopranos*', *The New York Times,* 10 January, viewed 12 July 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/arts/television/best-drama-series.html>

Prasch, T 2003, 'An American Tragedy, An American Family: 9/11 References in *The Sopranos*', *The Ryder,* 3 March, pp. 18-24.

Proctor, W, Kies, B 2018, 'Editor's introduction: on toxic fan practises and the new culture wars', *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies,* vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 127-142.

Ragusin, N 2021, '10 Times The Sopranos Repped Metal', *Loudwire,* 18 August, viewed 1 June 2022, <https://loudwire.com/sopranos-metal-shirts/>

Reeves, J, Rodgers, M, Epstein, M 1996, "Rewriting Popularity: The Cult Files" in D Lavery, A Hague, M Cartwright (eds) *Deny All Knowledge: Reading the X-Files,* Syracuse University Press, New York, pp. 22-35.

Remnick, D 2007, 'Family Guy: The end of The Sopranos', *The New Yorker,* 4 June, viewed 14 July, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/06/04/family-guy>

Rex, H 2020, 'How Much is AJ Soprano's Nu-Metal Wardrobe Worth Today?', *Vice,* 23 September, viewed 1 July 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/889pnb/aj-soprano-nu-metal-t-shirts>

Ricci, F 2014, *The Sopranos: Born Under a Bad Sign*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.

Rivers, N 2017, *Postfeminism(s) and the arrival of the fourth wave*, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Robinson, S 2000, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Rogers, R 2008, 'Beasts, Burgers and Hummers: Meat and the Crisis of Masculinity in Contemporary Television Advertisements,' *Environmental Communication,* vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 281-301.

Rosin, H 2010, 'The End of Men', *The Atlantic,* August, viewed 10 October 2022, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/07/the-end-of-men/308135/

Ruberto, L 2014, 'The Imaginary Museum: Martin Scorsese's Film History Documentaries' in A Baker (ed) *A Companion to Martin Scorsese*, Wiley, New York, pp. 71-90.

Ryan, M 2014, 'Storyworlds Across Media: Tuning the instruments of a Media-Conscious Narratology' in M Ryan, T Thon (eds) *Storyworlds Across Media: Towards a Media-Conscious Narratology*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, pp. 22-31.

Ryan, M, Thon, T 2014, *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln.

Sayau, A 2007, 'As Seen on TV: Women's Rights and Quality Television' in K Akass and J McCabe (eds) *Quality Television: Contemporary American Television and Beyond,* Bloomsbury, London, pp. 52-62.

Scarpino, C 2010, 'Sopranos-Speak': Neapolitan Dialect, Mafia Jargon and Silence. Or, Feeling 'All Agita All the Time' in M Camboni, A Carosso, S di Loreto (eds) *Translating America: Importing, translating, misrepresenting, mythicizing*, University of Milan Press, Milan, pp. 340-349.

Schweidel, D, and Moe, W 2016, 'Binge Watching and Advertising', *Journal of Marketing*, vol. 80, no. 5, pp. 1-19.

Sedgewick, E 1985, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Columbia University Press, New York.

Shaw, C 2021, 'Introduction: Television and Nostalgia Now', *The Journal of Popular Television*, vol. 9, no.3, pp. 287-291.

Sheffield, R 2016, '100 Greatest TV Shows of All Time', *Rolling Stone,* Sep 21, viewed 1 July 2022, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-lists/100-greatest-tv-shows-of-all-time-105998/>

Smith, A 2011, "TV or not TV? The Sopranos and Contemporary Episode Architecture in US Network and Premium Cable Drama", *Critical Studies in Television,* vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 36-51.

Staley, W 2021, 'Why is every young person in America watching The Sopranos?', *The New York Times*, 27 October, viewed 1 June 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/29/magazine/sopranos.html>

Stanley, A 2006, 'Brutality and Betrayal, Back with a Vengeance', *New York Times*, 10 March, viewed 28 July 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/10/arts/television/10sopr.html>

Stead, D 2001, 'Therapists Reveal Their New Obsession: '*The Sopranos*', *The New York Times*, 29 May, viewed 4 April 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/05/29/health/therapists-reveal-their-new-obsession-the-sopranos.html>

Steemers, J 2016, 'International Sales of UK Television Content: Change and Continuity in the space in between production and consumption', *Television & New Media*, vol. 17, no. 8, pp. 734-753.

Tal-Or, N, Cohen, J 2010, 'Understanding audience involvement: Conceptualising and manipulating identification and transportation', *Poetics*, vol 38, no. 4, pp. 402-418.

Taylor, G, Ussher, J 2001, 'Making Sense of S&M: A Discourse Analytic Account', *Sexualities*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 293-314.

The Age 2002, 'OK, Sopranos fans, analyse this…', *The Age*, 12 October, viewed 4 April 2022, <https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/ok-sopranos-fans-analyse-this-20021012-gduoi7.html>

The Economist 2018, '#MeToo, one year on', *The Economist*, 27 September, viewed 7 April 2022, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2018/09/27/metoo-one-year-on>

The Numbers 2022, *The Sopranos (1998)*, The Numbers, viewed 7 July 2022, <https://www.the-numbers.com/tv-show/Sopranos-The#tab=summary>

Thomas, D 1993, *Not Guilty: In Defence of The Modern Man*, Trafalgar Square Publishing, London.

Thompson R, 1997, *Televisions Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER*, Syracuse University Press, New York.

—— 2007, "Preface" in K Akass, J McCabe (eds) *Quality Television: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, pp. xvi-xvii.

Topper, D 2000, 'On Anamorphosis: Setting Some Things Straight', *The MIT Press*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 115-124.

Unterberger, A 2020, 'The Sopranos is the Hottest Show of 2020', *GQ*, 8 May, viewed 1 June 2022, <https://www.gq.com/story/the-sopranos-is-the-hottest-show-of-2020>

Varadarajan, T 2002 'Why We Can't Fuhgeddabout 'The Sopranos'', *Wallstreet Journal*, 13 September, viewed 10 September 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1031875792791610195>

Varela, D, Kaun, A 2019, 'The Netflix Experience: A User Focused Approach to the Netflix Recommendation Algorithm' in T Plothe, A Buck (ed), *Netflix at the Nexus: Content Practise, and Production in the Age of Streaming Television*, Peter Lang Publishing Group, New York, pp. 197-211.

Wayne, M, Ana, C 2021, 'Netflix original series, global audiences and discourses of streaming success', *Critical Studies in Television*, vol. 0, no. 0, pp. 1-20.

Weidinger, E 2013, '*The Sopranos* Experience', MA thesis, University of South Florida, Tampa.

Whittaker, K 2009, 'Representing the 'Crisis in Masculinity: British and North American Playwrights, 1990-2005' PhD thesis, Lancaster University, Lancaster.

Wilkins, K 2019, 'These Violent Delights: Navigating *Westworld* as Quality Television' in A Goody, A Mackay (eds) *Reading Westworld*, Springer International Publishing, New York, pp. 23-41

Wilkinson, A 2019, 'Mobsters, Teamsters, history, guilt and salvation: Martin Scorsese's terrific The Irishmen', *Vox*, 27 November, viewed 2 June 2022. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/9/27/20887589/irishman-review-netflix-scorsese-deniro-pacino>

—— 2021, 'The Sopranos vs. the end of history', *Vox*, 2 October, viewed 1 June 2022, <https://www.vox.com/culture/22696316/sopranos-many-saints-newark-hbo-max-gandolfini>

Yacowar, M 2007, *The Sopranos on The Couch: Analysing Television's Greatest Series*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London.

Yue, Z, Wang, H, Singhal, A 2019, 'Using television as entertainment-education to tackle domestic violence in China', *The Journal of Development Communication*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 30-44.

Zacharek, S 2019, 'American Beauty was bad 20 years ago and its bad now. But it still has something to tell us', *Time*, 18 September, viewed 4 October 2022, < https://time.com/5679039/american-beauty-20th-anniversary/>

Zurawik, D, Kaltenbach, C 2000 ‘Sopranos drives HBO subscriber numbers up’, *The Baltimore Sun*, Jan 19, viewed 1 July 2022, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2000-01-19-0001190248-story.html>

Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

Appendix C: Participant Questionnaire

Appendix A: Participant Information Form

PROJECT TITLE: Retrospectively reading *The Sopranos* and Complex Television Texts
HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL NUMBER: H-2021-035
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Dr. Michelle Phillipov
STUDENT RESEARCHER: Alexander Beare
STUDENT'S DEGREE: Doctor of Philosophy

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in the research project described below.

What is the project about?

This project aims to understand how young audiences (age 18-24) are using contemporary cultural contexts to understand old TV shows. The project will specifically look at the new ways young audiences understand HBO's cult series *The Sopranos* and its representations of gender.

Who is undertaking the project?

This project is being conducted by Alexander Beare. This research will form the basis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Adelaide under the supervision of Dr. Michelle Phillipov and Dr. John Budarick.

Why am I being invited to participate?

You are being invited as you have responded to recruitment material and are:

- Between 18-24 years old
- Identify as a fan of *The Sopranos* or are familiar with the program.

What am I being invited to do?

You are being invited to participate in a gender segregated 90-minute focus group **OR** a 1-on-1 Interview.

If you are participating in the focus group you will:

- Fill out a brief questionnaire that includes basic information about your familiarity with *The Sopranos* and your television viewing habits.

- Participate in a 30-minute screening of an assortment of clips from *The Sopranos.*
- Participate in an approximately 50-minute group discussion. This will be led by a facilitator who will provide open-ended discussion questions regarding *The Sopranos'* representations of masculinity, gender and feminism.

If you are participating in the 1-on-1 Interview you will:

- Be asked to watch an assortment of clips in your own time ahead of the interview.
- Fill out a brief questionnaire that includes basic information about your familiarity with *The Sopranos* and your television viewing habits.

Both the focus groups and the interviews will take place on the University of Adelaide's North Terrace campus. The audio and visual of the focus group discussions will be recorded while only the audio of the interviews will be recorded. It will be made clear when recording of the focus group or interview is about to begin and when it is about to end. Participants will be given the choice to be identified by their first name or a research pseudonym in any research output. Participants will also be given the option to use a research pseudonym during the focus group.

How much time will my involvement in the project take?

Participants will only be required to attend one focus group or interview. The focus group will last for approx. 90 minutes. The interview will last for approx. 60-minutes. Focus groups will include complimentary light refreshments and participants will be invited to enjoy a pizza lunch after the session has ended.

Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?

This project includes some foreseeable risks for participants. The Australian Classification Board has classified *The Sopranos* as MA15+ due to its "Strong violence, coarse language, drug use, strong drug references, strong themes and strong sex themes." As such, *The Sopranos* has the potential to be mildly stressful to some individuals. In addition, the focus groups discussion will involve sensitive topics including, gender, masculinity and feminism that can be potentially sensitive. In order to try and best mitigate this stress, each focus group will only consist of either feminine- or masculine-identifying participants. Each group will have a respective feminine- or masculine-identifying group facilitator. Non- binary participants may nominate to participate in either focus group. 1-on-1 interviews will follow the same procedure. Participants who are masculine or feminine identifying will be interviewed by respective masculine or feminine identifying interviews. Non-binary participants will be may nominate either interviewer. Any participants who experience emotional distress are free to either permanently or temporarily leave the focus group.

Additionally, the ongoing global Covid-19 pandemic poses some risk to participants. In order to best mitigate this risk, the following precautions will be taken:

- Access to hand sanitizer upon entry to focus group/interview
- Participant sign in sheet with single use pens for any potential contact tracing.
- Enforced social distancing of 1.5 metres.

What are the potential benefits of the research project?

This research may result in the enhanced understanding of how younger audience respond to and transform the meanings of older television texts.

Can I withdraw from the project?

Participation in this project is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time. Any non-participation or withdrawal will not affect ongoing studies for students at the University of Adelaide.

What will happen to my information?

Confidentiality and Privacy: Participants in this study will have the option to be referred to by their first name or an assigned research pseudonym in any research output and the focus group itself. Utmost care will be taken to ensure that no personally identifying details will be revealed in any subsequent research output. However, it may not be possible to guarantee full anonymity given the nature of the study and/or small number of participants involved. If participants want access to interview transcripts they may request them by emailing Alexander Beare at Alexander.beare@adelaide.edu.au. They can also do this to receive copies of any research output (dissertations, publications etc).

Storage: All information and project records will be stored digitally on a password secured online box service for five years after the most recent publication that is directly related to this data. Alexander Beare, Dr. Michelle Phillipov and Dr. John Budarick will have access to project information and records.

Publishing: Project information and results will be reported in Alexander Beare's PhD thesis and may be published in resulting journal articles and other outputs. Participants will not be referred to by their real name in any research output. Instead, research pseudonyms will be used for all participants in all research output.

Sharing: Data may be used in future research projects by the same or other researchers whose research is closely related to the project under consideration and that if data is shared with other researchers, this data will only be shared in a de-identified manner.

Your information will only be used as described in this participant information sheet and it will only be disclosed according to the consent provided, except as required by law.

Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?

Please contact members of the research group via telephone or email:

Alexander Beare: Alexander.beare@adelaide.edu.au

Dr. Michelle Phillipov: Michelle.Phillipov@adelaide.edu.au; Ph: 8313 0513

Dr. John Budarick: John.Budarick@adelaide.edu.au; Ph: 831 34289

What if I have a complaint or any concerns?

The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Adelaide (approval number H-2021-035). This research project will be conducted according to the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (Updated 2018). If you have questions or problems associated with the practical aspects of your participation in the project, or wish to raise a concern or complaint about the project, then you should consult the Principal Investigator. If you wish to speak with an independent person regarding concerns or a complaint, the University's policy on research involving human participants, or your rights as a participant, please contact the Human Research Ethics Committee's Secretariat on:

Phone: +61 8 8313 6028

Email: hrec@adelaide.edu.au

Post: Level 4, Rundle Mall Plaza, 50 Rundle Mall, ADELAIDE SA 5000

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

If I want to participate, what do I do?

Please ensure that you have signed up to the relevant Eventbrite page for your nominated focus group. You are also required to read and sign the provided consent form (attached to email with this

information sheet). You may sign digitally or scan a printed copy of the form. Please return it digitally to Alexander.beare@adelaide.edu.au before the commencement of your nominated focus group. You will not be able to participate in the study if you have not completed a consent form.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Michelle Phillipov, Dr. John Budarick and Alexander Beare.

Appendix B: Interview Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

1. I have read the attached Information Sheet and agree to take part in the following research project:

Title:	**Retrospectively reading *The Sopranos***
Ethics Approval	**H-2021-035**

2. I have had the project, so far as it affects me, and the potential risks and burdens fully explained to my satisfaction by the research worker. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions I may have about the project and my participation. My consent is given freely.

3. Although I understand the purpose of the research project, it has also been explained that my involvement may not be of any benefit to me.

4. I agree to participate in the activities outlined in the participant information sheet.

5. I agree to be:

   Audio recorded ☐ Yes ☐ No

   Visually recorded ☐ Yes ☐ No (Only for focus group participants)

6. If I am a university student I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and that this will not affect my study at the University, now or in the future.

7. I have been informed that the information gained in the project may be published in a book/journal article/thesis/conference presentations.

8. I have been informed that while I will not be named in the published materials, it may not be possible to guarantee my anonymity given the nature of the study and/or small number of participants involved.
9. I agree to my information being used for future research purposes as follows:

   Research undertaken by these same researcher(s) Yes ☐ No ☐

   Research undertaken by any researcher(s) Yes ☐ No ☐

10. I hereby provide 'extended' consent for the use of my data or tissue in future research projects that are:

- (i) an extension of, or closely related to, the original project: Yes ☐ No ☐

- (ii) in the same general area of research (for example, genealogical, ethnographical, epidemiological, or chronic illness research): Yes ☐ No ☐

11. I understand my information will only be disclosed according to the consent provided, except where disclosure is required by law.

12. I am aware that I should keep a copy of this Consent Form, when completed, and the attached Information Sheet.

Participant to complete:

Name: _____ Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher/Witness to complete:

I have described the nature of the research to:

_____

(print name of participant)

and in my opinion she/he understood the explanation.

Signature: _____ Position:_____ Date:_____

Appendix C: Participant Questionnaire

This survey will be recorded anonymously. It will contain 8 general questions about your viewing habits and *The Sopranos.* If you would prefer not to answer any of the questions you may simply not answer.

Q1: Which ways do you primarily consume TV content (select all that apply)?

a) Streaming services (Netflix, Stan, Disney + Amazon Prime, Foxtel Go etc)
b) Free to air broadcast television.
c) Premium cable services
d) other

Q2: What had you heard about *The Sopranos* before you watched it?

Q3: Why did you start watching *The Sopranos*?

Q4: How did you watch *The Sopranos?*

a) Streaming service
b) DVD
c) Broadcasted re-runs.
d) other

Q5: Have you ever participated in online discussions about *The Sopranos*? (i.e message boards, social media sites).

Q6. Do you “binge watch” programs (i.e more than one episode of the same series in one session)?

Q7. Did you “binge watch” *The Sopranos*?

Q8. How much *The Sopranos* have you watched?

a) A handful of episodes
b) 1-4 entire seasons.
c) Almost every episode
d) Every episode.