"IN THIS HOUSE IT'S 1954: THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN *THE SOPRANOS*

by

SUSAN ALEXANDRA KAHRS

(Under the Direction of Peggy J. Kreshel)

ABSTRACT

The Sopranos, an HBO Original Series, is one of the most popular programs on television. This thesis will examine the representations of women in *The Sopranos*. Grounded in cultural studies, feminist theory, and feminist media studies, this research was based on a number of assumptions. First among these is the belief that meaning is socially constructed and never fixed, but constantly produced and reproduced. Second, culture can only be understood in relation to issues of power. Third, popular culture is a site of struggle, and fourth, that it is essential to understand how media help shape the values, norms, and beliefs that reinforce gender inequities. Finally, research is a political act. A textual analysis of seasons 1 and 4 uncovered how patriarchy is the dominant ideology on the show. *The Sopranos* presents a rigid, regressive form of patriarchy where traditional roles, including the mother figure, were fractured and dysfunctional.

INDEX WORDS: Patriarchy, Gender roles, Cultural studies, Feminism, Feminist theory, Circuit of Culture.

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DEDICATION

To Anne and Mildred Richter, I couldn't have accomplished this without you.

In memory of my Godmother, Betty Nagle.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

My grandmother lived in Bay Ridge, a neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, and when my family visited, she would point out the homes of alleged mobsters in the neighborhood. She identified the Italian-American homes based on the garish décor, barred windows, and statues of the Virgin Mary prominent in the front yards and bay windows. She told stories of businesses in the area that burned to the ground because the owners wouldn't pay 'protection fees' to the Mob. My grandfather, a lawyer, told stories of encountering judges with Mob ties who could be paid off to settle cases before they went to court.

While I had a marginal interest in organized crime, it was the people, especially the women, and the Italian culture that fascinated me. I, like many others, equated Italian-Americans with organized crime – an association that has angered millions of Italian-Americans. I wondered what Italian-American families were really like. How did the wives of criminals feel about supporting their families with money that came from illegal, and sometimes violent activities? I thought too, about the religious hypocrisy of these people given the way they chose to live.

As a Catholic, the portrayal of religion was especially interesting to me. Older members of the Soprano family, including Livia, have religious artifacts in the home, and frequently reference religion. Carmela is a devout Catholic, and spends a great deal of time at the church volunteering, and going to mass and confession. I noted Carmela's struggle to reconcile her beliefs with her love for Tony, a lapsed Catholic who, in Carmela's words, is going to hell when he dies (*The Sopranos*). In a conversation with her priest Carmela recognizes in herself, the religious hypocrisy about which I had been so curious:

> I have forsaken what is right for what is easy. Allowing what I
> know is evil in my house. Allowing my children, oh my God, my
> sweet children to be a part of it. Because I wanted things for them.

> Wanted a better life. Good schools. I wanted this house. I wanted
> money in my hands, money to buy anything I ever wanted. I'm so
> ashamed. My husband…I think he has committed horrible acts. I
> think he has…well, you know all about him, Father Phil. I'm the
> same, I've said nothing, I've done nothing about it. I got a bad
> feeling. It's just a matter of time before God compensates me with
> outrage for my sins. (*College*)

The Sopranos, a drama focusing on Tony Soprano's domestic family and the mob family of which he is boss, captured my interest in a way that no television program had before. The show is set in suburban New Jersey not far from where I grew up. In the opening credits, there are sights I saw on the way to my grandmother's house: the New Jersey turnpike, and the New York City skyline. The characters resemble my neighbors on Long Island with teased hair and long nails, and when the characters spoke, the very distinctive accent was also familiar.

As I watched the program, I realized that Italian-American culture, as represented on the show, appeared to be very similar to my own Irish-American background. In a country constructed in the imaginations of some as a 'melting pot', where ethnic cultures assimilate making cultural differences less distinctive, Italian-American immigrants seem to fit better with the metaphor of a 'salad bowl'. They integrate into "American culture," yet hold tightly to the traditions of their culture. Tony Soprano often spoke to his children about the importance of their Italian heritage just as I grew up learning about Ireland. I took Irish step dancing as a child and knew the counties in Ireland from which both sides of the family originated.

While I enjoyed watching *The Sopranos* for the entertainment value, I began to notice, in particular, the female characters on the show. While I found some to be fairly one-dimensional, most of the female characters were complex and their actions didn't always reflect what they professed to believe. I identified with Tony's daughter Meadow who, like me, played soccer and was a typical high school student with worries about scoring well on the SAT and getting into college. She had a little brother, as I do, and parents who wanted everything for her. I saw Carmela Soprano, Tony's wife and mother of Meadow and Anthony, Jr. as a prisoner of the material things she wanted for herself and her family. Even before I began thinking about this research, I made note of several scenes in which the representations of women were especially

startling. In one, Carmela and her sister-in-law, Janice, discuss Janice's boyfriend.

> CARMELA: You let him hold a gun to your head during sex?
> I thought you were a feminist.
>
> JANICE: Yeah, well usually he takes the clip out.

In another, Carmela and her husband argue about Tony's infidelities.

> TONY: (GOING INTO MRI) You think I got a brain tumor?
> CARMELA: Well, we're gonna find out.
> TONY: What a bedside manner. Very encouraging.
> CARMELA: What, are you gonna not know?
> TONY: We had some good times. Had some good years.
> CARMELA: Here he goes now with the nostalgia.
> TONY: Hey, all I'm sayin' is no marriage is perfect.
> CARMELA: Well havin' that goomar on the side helps.
> TONY: I told you, I'm not seein' her anymore. How do you think I
> feel havin' that priest around all the time?
> CARMELA: Don't even go there, all right? Father is a spiritual mentor.
> He's helpin' me to be a better Catholic!
> TONY: Yeah, we all got different needs.
> CARMELA: What's different between you and me is you're goin' to
> hell when you die!

The Sopranos approached issues of sexualized violence, infidelity, spirituality, and even feminism. In doing so, what did they 'say' about women, about gender roles and gender identity, about power and the social order? These were the questions that brought me to this research.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction
The Sopranos rules. In fact, it could be the best TV series ever made.
(Yacowar, 2002, p. 9)

The Sopranos

The HBO hit series *The Sopranos* is a drama about an Italian-American family living in northern New Jersey. The show first aired in 1999, and is currently in its 6th season of production. The show focuses on Tony Soprano and his two families: his domestic family and the crime family of which he is boss. Tony, his wife Carmela, and their two children, Meadow and Anthony Jr., live in an affluent neighborhood in northern New Jersey. Tony's legitimate business is waste management, but he is also the part owner of a strip club, The Bada Bing!, and a majority of his income comes from gambling, loan-sharking, and other illegal activities associated with the Mafia.

Three story lines have been dominant throughout the series. Tony sees his therapist, Dr. Jennifer Melfi, every week; their relationship and his progress through therapy has been a constant on the show. Tony's business activities and his Mafia 'Family' also drive the narrative. Relationships between Tony and his associates are based on order and rank[1] within the family as well as the heartfelt friendships they have with one another. Tony's closest advisor, or 'consigliere,' is Silvio Dante. Sil is a calming presence for the volatile Tony; they have known each other since childhood. Tony's closest and highest-ranking men include Paulie 'Walnuts' Galtieri, Sal 'Big Pussy' Bonpensiero, Christopher Moltisanti, and Ralph Cifaretto. Tony is the boss of the family and all activities must meet with his approval. Tony's Uncle Junior, his

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[1] The Mafia 'Family' is organized like the military with 'soldiers,' 'captains,' etc.

late fathers' brother, is the figurehead of the family, and is often consulted on business matters. Tony makes Junior feel important, but Tony gives all the orders. During the course of the series, Uncle Junior is on trial and then under house arrest. He also appears to suffer from dementia and therefore, is not fit to be in charge of business matters. The third dominant story line revolves around Tony's immediate family: Carmela, Meadow, and Anthony Jr. Despite frequent disputes about finances and Tony's infidelities, Tony and Carmela are committed parents. Meadow is an honor student who has transitioned from high school to college at Columbia University through the series. Anthony Jr. is a typical adolescent, spoiled with too many toys and uninspired by schoolwork or household chores. Aside from Mob activities, the Soprano family faces problems similar to any other family in America.

Americans seem to be invested in the mythology of mob culture. Some suggest, however that it is not this fascination, but rather the "ordinariness" of the domestic family that draws viewers back each week. "It is not the crime family but the struggle for intimacy, affection, humor, and success on the part of the extended domestic family that keeps the series at the forefront of contemporary popular culture" (Barreca, 2002, p. 3). Further, "the show has captured our collective imagination because while it is certainly set in an Italian American world, it is not simply or even mostly about issues understood or experienced only by Italian Americans" (p. 2). The show is about issues that everyone in America faces and can relate to including culture, spirituality, marriage and divorce, power, and relationships.

<u>Critically Acclaimed</u>

The Sopranos has won five Golden Globe Awards, back-to-back George Foster Peabody Awards, a Screen Actors Guild award (Edie Falco as Carmela Soprano), a Writers Guild Award, an Entertainment Industries Council Prism Award, the Drama Series of the Year award from the American Film Institute, and was nominated for twenty-two Emmy awards in the fourth season alone. *The Sopranos* has won Emmy Awards for Outstanding Writing in a Drama Series,

Outstanding Supporting Actress (Edie Falco as Carmela Soprano) and Outstanding Lead Actor (James Gandolfini as Tony Soprano). Most recently the show won the coveted Emmy Award for Best Drama in 2004 (Home Box Office, 2004).

A Cultural Phenomenon

The Sopranos has found its way into everyday vernacular; John Kerry, in a 2004 presidential debate, noted that, "being lectured by the president on fiscal responsibility is a little bit like Tony Soprano talking to me about law and order in this country" (Debate Transcript, 2004). Macaroni Grill, an Italian restaurant chain, serves both Carmela's Rigatoni,' and Carmela's white wine sauce' (Macaroni Grill Menu, 2005). HBO contributes to *The Sopranos* cultural presence with a substantial marketing effort. The website features an episode guide, bios of the actors and characters, and a chat room where viewers can discuss the show. Ads for the program run even when the show is not on the air, and before an upcoming season, ads run on HBO as well as in national magazines. *Sopranos* products on the market include t-shirts, hats, posters, ring-tones for cell phones, and several books. It is even possible to buy the plans to the Soprano home and build a replica (Quinn, 2004, p. 168).

The Sopranos is a popular culture phenomenon, worthy of study because the media as ideological tools, "contribute to educating us how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear and desire – and what not to" (Kellner, 2003, p. 9). Media images "push their way into the fabric of our social lives. They enter into how we look, what we earn, and they are still with us when we worry about bills, housing, and bringing up children. They compete for attention through shock tactics, reassurance, sex, mystery and by inviting viewers to participate in series of visual puzzles" (McRobbie, 2000, p. 389). Yet, despite the ideological and pedagogical power of the media, Stuart Hall reminds us that popular culture is not simply a tool by which the dominant impose their will or a tool by which the subordinate resist domination. "Instead, Hall (1981) defines popular culture as a site of struggle, a place where conflicts between dominant groups and subordinate groups are played out, and distinctions between the cultures of these groups are continually constructed and reconstructed" (Hallows, 2000, p. 27).

The Sopranos is one of only a few shows to portray Italian-American life[2]. Whether the portrayal is truthful or not, to viewers *The Sopranos* is Italian-American culture. The "study of *The Sopranos* has become the study of contemporary culture's vision of Italian Americans" (Barreca, 2002 p. 2). Those who criticize *The Sopranos* recognize its ideological power, and argue that it has constructed a single image of Italian-Americans. "Some Italian American groups have declared the program ruinous to the image of Americans of Italian descent, an insulting and viciously misrepresentative depiction of an aberrant world with which the overwhelming majority of Italian Americans have no experience" (p. 5). If we believe what we see on *The Sopranos*, a majority of Italian-Americans are associated with organized crime.

The bulk of criticism of *The Sopranos* has come from organizations such as the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA). The OSIA criticized the program for its portrayal of Italian-Americans as gangsters, the treatment of female characters, and the violence and profanity on the show. Robert Messa, president of the OSIA said, "by no stretch of the imagination does this violent television series, with its amoral characters, profanity and skewed values of right and wrong contribute to our culture." In 2002, The OSIA organized a national campaign against Mayor Michael Bloomberg after he extended an invitation to the cast of *The Sopranos* to march in the Columbus Day Parade. Former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani also came under attack by the OSIA for giving the cast of *The Sopranos* keys to the city of New York. The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) sponsored a one-week program highlighting *The Sopranos* and its Italian-American creator David Chase, and was widely criticized for this support of the show.

In light of the criticism, this research could easily have focused on ethnicity. As the literature review will show, most of the research about *The Sopranos* has been done by Italian-American writers. While the influence of culture and ethnicity on the show is important,

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[2] Other well-known representations include *The Godfather* movies and *Goodfellas*. A more recent example is *Growing Up Gotti*, a reality show that follows the late John Gotti's children. A more innocent portrayal is *Everybody Loves Raymond*.

this research will focus on the representations of women. The question of representation has emerged as a central issue in cultural analysis and a "site of struggle for feminism" (Acosta-Alzuru & Kreshel, 2002, p. 141). In general, the struggle has been about equality, but within feminist communication scholarship, the concern is with how women have been constructed and represented in the mass media. Kellner (2003) asserts that "products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities; our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality; and of "us" and "them" (p. 9). Because media images are influential in the construction of self, the study of those images is important. This research will contribute to the literature on media representation and particularly on media representations of women. Because the show has captured limited scholarly interest, despite its popularity and critical acclaim, and the controversy which surrounds it, this study of the representations of women on the show is timely and relevant.

Research Question

The overarching question guiding the study is how the female characters of *The Sopranos* are represented. To this end the thesis will begin with a look at cultural studies and feminist theory. Feminist theory, the influence of feminism, and feminist television criticism will be explored. The methods chapter will detail textual analysis as a particular approach to the study of cultural texts. In the analysis chapter, I present the findings of my research, discussing how women of *The Sopranos* have been represented in seasons 1 and 4. Finally, in the conclusion, I will relate my findings to the theoretical underpinnings of the study and pose questions for further research.

CHAPTER 2

Theory

This study on *The Sopranos* is theoretically grounded in British cultural studies, feminist theory, and more specifically feminist media studies. As this discussion will illustrate, cultural studies and feminism are difficult to define; both embrace a wide range of disciplines and methodological approaches, and both have internal contradictions and complexities that result in theoretical tensions. Although cultural studies and feminism haven't always shared a space, they share many assumptions. Both cultural studies and feminism recognize a "necessary link between studying culture and theorizing power" (Couldry, 2000 p.2). Further, both acknowledge the ideological nature of the media. That is, the belief that media help to shape values and beliefs that support and reproduce structural inequalities. Popular culture, to use Hall's phrase, is a site of struggle over meaning where ideological work is negotiated (Hall,1981). Finally, both cultural studies scholars and feminist scholars view research as a *political* project. This chapter will proceed with a discussion of cultural studies, the circuit of culture, and feminist theory. The next chapter will review the relevant literature, highlighting feminist media studies focusing on the representations of women and feminist television criticism and concluding with a review of published research on *The Sopranos*.

Cultural Studies

> For me, cultural studies is about the historical forms of
> consciousness or subjectivity, or the subjective forms we live
> by, or in a rather perilous compression, perhaps a reduction, the
> subjective side of social relations…our project is to abstract,
> describe and reconstitute in concrete studies the social forms
> through which human beings "live," become conscious, sustain
> themselves subjectively (Johnson, 1986-87, p. 80).

> Cultural studies has multiple discourses; it has a number of different histories. It is a whole set of formations; it has its own different conjunctures and moments in the past. It included many different kinds of work. I want to insist on that! It always was a set of unstable formations. It was 'centred' only in quotation marks, in a particular kind of way… It had many trajectories; many people had and have different trajectories through it; it was constructed by a number of different methodologies and theoretical positions, all of them in contention. (Hall, 1992, p. 263)

> Cultural studies scholars define culture as the process through which we circulate and struggle over the meanings of our social experience, social relations, and therefore our *selves*. (Byars and Dell, 1992, p. 191)

As the quotes above indicate, it is difficult to offer a single, precise definition of cultural studies. This definitional complexity arises because cultural studies embraces a wide variety of intellectual and theoretical starting points including Marxism, postmodernism, semiotics, sociology, and feminist theory. It is methodologically diverse, and encourages "new questions, new models, and new ways of study" (Hall, 1989, p. 337). Its expansiveness has weakened the boundaries of traditional disciplines (p. 337) and raised questions of its own disciplinary status. Even the central concept of cultural studies, *culture*, has been the subject of definitional debate. Fiske says that the 'culture' in cultural studies "is neither aesthetic nor humanist in emphasis, but political" (Fiske, 1987, p. 115). Raymond Williams defines culture as "a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group" (Williams, 1976, p. 90).

> It is not that cultural studies has no identity, but rather that its identity is always contested, always multiple, always changing; cultural studies is an historically articulated 'unity-in-difference'… .(which involves an) ongoing attempt to measure old theories against the emergence of new historical articulations, new cultural events, changes in the tempo and texture of social life, new structures of social relationships and new subjectivities. (Grossberg, 1992, p. 179)

A thorough overview of cultural studies is beyond the scope of this discussion, if not impossible, but it is important to acknowledge the richness and diversity of the perspective. The following section will discuss the theoretical origins of cultural studies, the central concepts of ideology and hegemony, the focus on communication and popular culture and the political nature of cultural studies.

Despite its definitional complexity, most locate the foundations of cultural studies in the work of Stuart Hall, Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) formed at the University of Birmingham in 1964. In "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," a somewhat autobiographical essay, Hall (1992), seemingly somewhat amused, writes:

> …where cultural studies is concerned, I sometimes feel like a *tableau vivant*, a spirit of the past resurrected, laying claim to the authority of an origin. After all, didn't cultural studies emerge at that moment when I first met Raymond Williams or in the glance I exchanged with Richard Hoggart? In that moment, cultural studies was born; it emerged full grown from the head! (p. 262)

Instead, Hall notes cultural studies "has no simple origins…(and) much of the work out of which it grew…was already present in the work of other people" (p. 263). While I recognize the 'danger' in relying on Hall's personal account of the origins of cultural studies, particularly given the tensions within cultural studies which continue even today, Hall disavows any intention to "police" the field or to be "keeper of the conscience of cultural studies" (p. 262). Rather, as the title suggests, he discusses the theoretical foundations upon which cultural studies was built. Certainly some may have alternative interpretations of particular details of the "theoretical moments" he discusses (see e.g. Brunsdon, 1996 on feminism and CCCS), most scholars can agree on the central issues he raises – Marxism, ideology, hegemony, power, the legitimacy of popular culture as a point of entry into the study of culture, and research as a political act. As such, I rely heavily on Hall's (1992) account in framing this discussion.

Cultural Studies and Marxism

> Marx (suggests) that the way a society organizes the means of its economic production will have a determining effect on the type of culture that society produces, makes possible. The cultural products of this so-called base/superstructure relationship are deemed ideological to the extent that, as a result of this relationship, they implicitly or explicitly support the interests of the dominant groups, who, socially, politically, economically and culturally, benefit from the economic organization of society. (Storey, 2001, p.3)

Cultural studies and Marxism were not a perfect theoretical fit, yet, cultural studies was greatly influenced by the issues Marxism brought to the table, most notably: power, and the complexities of power relationships; class; and the notion of "critical knowledge itself and the production of critical knowledge as a practice" (Hall, 1992, p. 265). Concerned with the economic reductionism of Marxism, cultural studies scholars believed that Marxism failed to recognize the complexities of culture. In Hall's (1992) words, "the things that Marx did not talk about or seem to understand…were our privileged object of study: culture, ideology, language, the symbolic" (p. 265).

Gramsci's concept of hegemony gave Hall and others a way to address issues that were inaccessible under Marxism. Hall used hegemony to explain ideological struggle in culture, arguing that "cultural texts and practices are not inscribed with meaning, guaranteed once and for all by the intentions of production" (Storey, 1996, p. 4) but that meaning is a social production. Further, texts are not the source of meaning, but are a place where meaning can be produced. In this way, cultural studies places communication at the center of culture and uncovers how meaning circulates in culture through the study of cultural products or 'artifacts' (Kellner, 2003, p. 11). Cultural studies' 'terrain' is "describing and intervening in the ways 'texts' and 'discourses' (i.e. cultural practices) are produced within, inserted into, and operate in everyday life of human beings and social formations, so as to reproduce, struggle against, and perhaps transform the existing structures of power" (Grossberg, 1992, p. 180).

The concept of hegemony undergirds cultural studies' notion of "popular culture as a crucial site of ideological conflict in which power relations of gender, ethnicity, class and identity are struggled over" (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003, p. 270) and as a legitimate site of cultural research. Popular culture is seen as a site of struggle over meaning, "a site where the construction of everyday life may be examined. The point of doing this is not only academic – that is, as an attempt to understand a process or practice – it is also political, to examine the power relations that constitute this form of everyday life and thus reveal the configurations of interests its construction serves" (Turner, 1996, p. 6). In this context, cultural studies emerged, among other things, as a critique of the way scholars viewed culture and communication.

<u>"There is something at stake in cultural studies"</u>

>…does it follow that cultural studies is not a policed disciplinary
>area? That it is whatever people do, if they choose to call or locate
>themselves within the project and practice of cultural studies? I am
>not happy with that formulation either. Although cultural studies
>as a project is open-ended it can't be simply pluralist in that way.
>Yes, it refuses to be a master discourse or a meta-discourse of any
>kind. Yes, it is a project that is always open to that which it doesn't
>yet know, to that which it can't yet name. But it does have some
>will to connect; it does have some stake in the choices it makes. It
>does matter whether cultural studies is this or that. It can't be just
>any old thing which chooses to march under a particular banner. It
>is a serious enterprise, or project, and that is inscribed in what is
>sometimes called the 'political' aspect of cultural studies. Not that
>there's one politics already inscribed in it. But there is something *at
>stake* in cultural studies. (Hall, 1992, p. 263)

The work of cultural studies is political. Drawing again upon Gramsci, Hall discusses the *organic intellectual*, noting that this individual must work, simultaneously, on two fronts. "It is the job of the organic intellectuals," he wrote, "to know more than traditional intellectuals do." Equally critical,"…the organic intellectual cannot absolve himself or herself from the responsibility of transmitting those ideas, that knowledge, through the intellectual function, to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class" (Hall, 1992, p. 269). Only

then, could cultural studies achieve theoretical advancement and engagement in the "intellectual practice as a politics" (p. 272).

As noted earlier, this research is grounded in British cultural studies. Its American counterpart developed in response to the effects tradition, or what Gitlin (1978) has identified as "the dominant paradigm". In "A Cultural Approach to Communication" Carey (1975) suggested that the way we view communication influenced the nature of the questions asked as well as methodological approaches used to find the answer to those questions. He labeled the model which undergirded the "effects tradition," Gitlin's "dominant paradigm," as the transmission view of communication. The transmission view is a simple, linear model which implies that information is disseminated for the purpose of control: who says what, to whom, through what medium, with what effect?

Carey (1975) described the ritual view of communication as the "representation of shared beliefs" (p.6). He wrote about a sense of "sharing, participation, association, fellowship, and the possession of a common faith" and saw "communication (as) a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed" (p. 10). The American cultural studies tradition has often been criticized for ignoring issues of power. Hall (1992) feared that the "rapid institutionalization" of cultural studies in the United States would "formalize out of existence the critical questions of power, history, and politics" (p. 273-4).

Circuit of Culture

Given the complexity and methodological expansiveness of cultural studies, a model was needed to serve as "a guide to the desirable directions of future approaches (to the study of culture), or the way in which they might be modified or combined" (Johnson, 1986-87, p. 83). In an article titled "What is Cultural Studies Anyway?" Johnson proposed the 'circuit of culture' not as a theory, but as a heuristic tool for studying how meaning circulates in culture. Johnson's model incorporated four "moments" including production, circulation, consumption of cultural products, and lived cultures (p. 83). More recently, du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus (1997) adapted the circuit to include five moments: representation, identity, production, consumption,

and regulation. They described the circuit as a model "through which any analysis of a cultural text or cultural product must pass if it is to be adequately studied" (p. 3). No moment is privileged above another "in explaining the meaning that an artefact comes to possess" but rather it is the "combination of processes – in their articulation – that the beginnings of an explanation can be found" (p. 3) Further, "it does not matter where in the circuit you start, as you have to go the whole way round before your study is complete (and)…each part of the circuit is taken up and reappears in the next part" (p. 4).
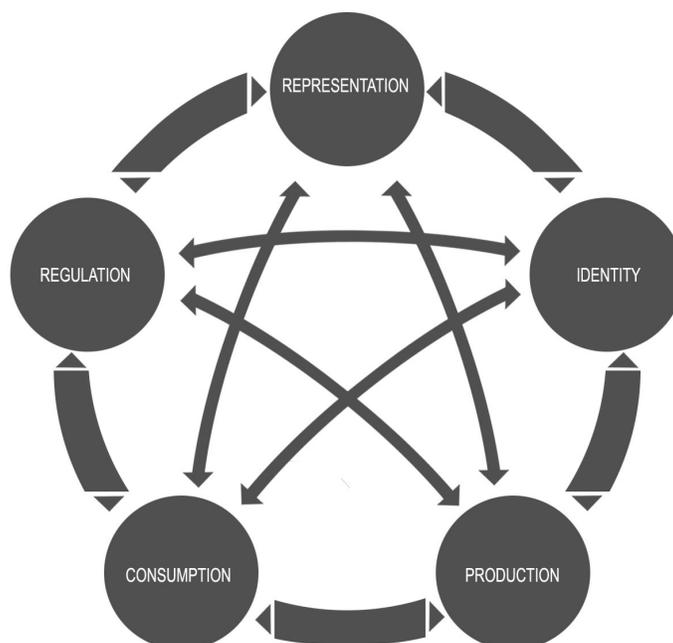
Figure 1: The Circuit of Culture

The circuit is a framework for understanding how meaning circulates in culture. An object such as a television show becomes 'cultural' when it *means* something in culture. Meaning does not come from the object itself, but is achieved through representation, and the medium through which meaning is constructed is language. In other words "we give things meaning by the way we *represent* them, and the principal means of representation in culture is *language*" (du Gay, et al, 1997, p.13). 'Language' refers to the spoken word, as well as pictures, symbols, and any other set of what du Gay, et al call signifying systems used to "represent things and exchange meaning about them" (p. 4). Identity focuses on how viewers identify or associate

with meanings in media texts. van Zoonen (1994) notes: "identity is always in process, never finished, stable, or true" (p. 123) and is constantly negotiated and re-negotiated. <u>Production</u> focuses on meanings made in the encoding process while <u>consumption</u> examines how audiences negotiate these meanings in their everyday lives. <u>Regulation</u> refers to how meanings made from the text "organize and regulate cultural practice" (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003, p. 274). While this study focuses only on the text, it is important to recognize that in the circuit each moment is distinct, but not discrete, and an ideal study would include a focus not only on representation, but identity, production, consumption, and regulation as well.

<u>Feminist Theory</u>

> Instead of a unified perspective that can be called "feminist theory," many feminist theories share common elements. Each emphasizes different aspects of social relations between women and men, attention to the status of women in society, and the nature of gender. Nearly all feminist theory, no matter how abstract, is grounded in a concern about, and desire to effect change in, the subjugated status of women. Nearly all forms of feminist analysis also attempt to explain, explicitly or implicitly, the sources of women's oppression. Finally, most feminist analysis makes assumptions about the sources of differences between women and men. (Cirksena and Cuklanz,1992, p.18)

'Feminist theory' is, in fact, many different theories which share common elements, as noted by Cirksena and Cuklanz. It includes different starting points, methodologies, and competing explanations for the oppression of women, and how various forms of oppression might be overcome. Flax (1979), in an article, "Women do Theory," expressed the purpose of theory in a general sense before focusing on the question of feminist theory:

> The most important characteristic of theory is that it is a *systematic*, *analytic* approach to everyday experience. This everybody does unconsciously. To theorize, then, is to bring this unconscious process to a conscious level so it can be developed and refined. All of us operate on theories, though most of them are implicit. We screen out certain things; we allow others to affect us; we make

> choices and we don't always understand why. Theory, in other
> words, makes those choices conscious, and enables us to use them
> more efficiently. (p. 9)

Regarding feminist theory, Flax outlines the assumptions that undergird feminist thought including that "men and women have different experiences; that the world is not the same for men and women;" that "women's oppression is a unique constellation of social problems and has to be understood in itself, and not as a subset of class or any other structure;" and, that "feminist theory assumes that the oppression of women is part of the way the structure of the world is organized, and that one task of feminist theory is to explain how and why this structure evolved " (p. 10). Feminist theory names this structure 'patriarchy,' which Flax defines as the "system in which men have more power than women, and have more access to whatever society esteems" (p. 10). The goals of feminist theory, then, are to understand power relationships between men and women and how these relationships affect other power relations, to understand the oppression of women, and how to overcome various forms of oppression.

There are many feminist theories, including "liberal," "radical (libertarian or cultural)," "Marxist-socialist," "psychoanalytic," "existentialist," "postmodern," "multicultural and global," and "ecological" (Tong, 1998, p.1). While labels might be limiting because they are seen in relation, or reaction, to what men have theorized, they draw attention to the fact that "feminism is not a monolithic ideology, that all feminists do not think alike, and that, like all other time-honored modes of thinking, feminist thought has a past as well as a present and future" (p.1). The range of labels suggests that feminism, in addition to having a variety of starting points, is constantly evolving; the historical context has dictated how different strands of feminist thought were labeled.

<u>Feminist Theory and Cultural Studies</u>

Early feminist scholars and 'liberal' feminists relied upon biological differences to distinguish men from women. In the 1970s, however, a distinction was made between sex and gender. Carter and Steiner (2004) note the impact this distinction had on research. "Gender…is

a social construction rather than a 'natural' fact…(it) cannot be reductively 'read off' from sexual difference (male/female), nor can it be assumed that there are universal and homogenous definitions of gender that apply to all cultures across time (p. 3). This distinction lead to an "explosion" in academic research, and coincided with what Hall (1992) has discussed as a decentering interruption in the formation of cultural studies.

At the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies "the intervention of feminism was specific and decisive. It was ruptural. It reorganized the field in quite concrete ways" (Hall, 1992, p. 269). While scholars at the CCCS saw feminism as an intrusion, they recognized the importance of feminist work. Hall noted, "many of us in the Centre – mainly, of course, men – thought it was time there was good feminist work in cultural studies" (p. 269). The theoretical fit between feminism and cultural studies was not a perfect one. Brunsdon (1993) recognized the confusion on the part of early feminist researchers at the Centre:

> Did women "have to engage with the CCCS dominant Althusserian, then Gramscian, interpretation of Marxism? Did we have to justify attention to women through a theorization of domestic labour and the reproduction of the social relations of production? At what level of theory could one defend a concept like 'women's oppression'? What order of concept was 'patriarchy'? And did we have to do it all ourselves – a double shift of intellectual work – while the boys carried on with the state, the conscious and the public? Were there going to be two spheres of cultural studies – 'ordinary' (as before, uninterrupted) and a feminine/ feminist sphere? (p. 280)

Despite their differences, feminism and cultural studies shared some essential assumptions. bell hooks (1990) notes that "the engagement with culture enables feminists to do intellectual work that connects with habits of being, forms of artistic expression, and aesthetics that inform the daily life of writers and scholars as well as a mass population" (p. 31). Both sought a connection between personal experience and theoretical questions. Both believed that research was political, that there was something "at stake" (Hall, 1992, p. 263). Flax (1979) noted, in talking about feminist theory, that "it is senseless to study the situation of women

without a concomitant commitment to do something about it" (p. 11), echoing cultural studies scholars who believed that intellectuals needed to make "real effects in the world" (Hall,1992, p. 272). Both feminism and cultural studies address issues that *matter* to intellectuals but to the general population alike, such as the oppression of women and the AIDS epidemic.

CHAPTER 3

Literature

<u>Feminist Media Studies</u>

As seen earlier, feminism and cultural studies have theoretically informed this research. It is important to note how the two disciplines are integrated in feminist media studies. Feminism emphasizes analyzing gender and power structures, while the cultural studies framework encourages the study of representations, identities, ideology, culture, gender, and power and recognizes popular culture as a site of struggle. Both feminism and cultural studies are political, and "the uneasy connection between the pleasures of popular culture and the political aims of feminism…has become a classic issue in feminist media theory, emerging from the particular conjunction between cultural and feminist studies" (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 7). Feminist media scholars working within a cultural studies framework have addressed issues such as "pornography, advertising, the male and the female gaze, effects of media on gender identities, the relation between feminist media critic and female audiences" and more (p. 7).

Feminist media studies experienced significant growth in the wake of Friedan's *The Feminist Mystique* (1963) – a book focusing on how "magazine content naturalized the idea that women's 'normal' sphere of operation and influence is not only completely separate from that of men, but also less socially valued" (Carter and Steiner, 2004, p. 1). Since then, feminist studies on the representation of women in newspapers, film, television, and other forms of media were undertaken out of concern that the sexist images portrayed would be seen as normal and acceptable.

In the 1970's feminist scholars focused on "the ways in which media representations supported the interests of two interlocking systems: patriarchy and capitalism" (Carter and Steiner, 2004, p. 2). Informed by Gramsci's notion of hegemony, (belief that the dominant classes

maintain power through public consent rather than coercion), images projected by the media were seen as real and normal. These 'realities' had to be constantly renegotiated and restructured in order to maintain a position of power over oppositional readings. In this view, the text was 'closed' and there was only one possible 'reading', the dominant reading.

> The media are instrumental in the process of gaining public consent. Media texts never simply mirror or reflect 'reality', but instead construct hegemonic definitions of what should be accepted as 'reality'. These definitions appear to be inevitable, 'real' and commonsensical. Thus, media images dissemble the extent to which they are aligned with the interests of powerful groups in society. (Carter and Steiner, 2004, p.2)

Another development in the 1970's concerned the distinction made between sex and gender. Gender was seen as a "mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds" (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 3) and as a "social construction" (Carter and Steiner, 2004, p. 3) rather than a biological distinction. This distinction led to an increase in research on gender issues (though largely ignoring masculinity) resulting, in part, from more women working in media and communications.

Carter and Steiner noted that simply having more or 'more positive' representations of women in media will not solve the issue of sexism. As a result of inequalities across the board (in wages, political positions, and more), feminists saw a "need to engage with the ways in which the media help to shape the norms, values and beliefs that underpin these gender inequalities" (Carter and Steiner, 2004, p. 5). Tuchman (1978) coined the term 'symbolic annihilation' to label the claim that "powerful groups in society suppress the less powerful by marginalizing them to such an extent that they are rendered virtually invisible as a representable group" (p. 13). She argued that the media functioned by ignoring the presence of women, defining them by a single, feminine characteristic (p. 13) and treating them as less than human. Early studies used content analysis to determine the number of women versus the number of men appearing in media texts.

More recent studies acknowledge that women are 'active' receivers of media messages, and that texts are no longer 'transmitted' to receivers intact (Carter and Steiner, 2004, p. 7). Instead, meaning is socially constructed, never fixed. Fiske (1987) notes:

> Textual studies of television now have to stop treating it as a closed text, that is, as one where the dominant ideology exerts considerable, if not total, influence over its ideological structure and therefore over its reader. Analysis has to pay less attention to the textual strategies of preference or closure and more to the gaps and spaces that open television up to meanings not preferred by the textual structure but that result from the social experience of the reader. (p. 64)

'Readings' of a text are not make in isolation, rather the 'social experience' of the individual must be taken into account. This reinforces the polysemic nature of texts, the belief that audiences can decode texts in different ways. In order to understand how audiences decode texts, Hall's (1980) 'encoding/decoding' model "underscored how audiences might accept hegemonic definitions of 'reality' although they might also partially resist them, or…read messages oppositionally" (Carter and Steiner, 2004, p. 21). For feminists, the way in which audiences decoded gender or gender differences was of critical importance.

Before a discussion of television studies, I will highlight a few studies which particularly have influenced the feminist media studies project. Angela McRobbie (1977) did a semiotic analysis of the weekly magazine, *Jackie,* which targeted teenage girls in Britain. The object was to "mount a systematic critique of *Jackie* as a system of messages, a signifying system and a bearer of a certain ideology, an ideology which deals with the construction of teenage femininity" (McRobbie, 2000, p. 67). While few studies had been done on teen magazines, McRobbie recognized that the content had the power to influence the audience. She found that *Jackie* focused on the commonalities that all women share, meaning that "all girls want to know how to catch a boy, lose weight, look their best and be able to cook" (McRobbie, 2000, p.69). In addition she found that the agenda of the magazine was for girls to focus on outward appearance especially as it relates to relationships, and to downplay the importance of female relationships.

The magazine was anti-intellectual and emphasized pursuing relationships with men. McRobbie (1991) later acknowledged this problematic assumption, writing that her analysis "created an image of *Jackie* as a massive ideological block in which readers were implicitly imprisoned" (p. 141). The original study, then, assumed the media, in this case, *Jackie*, had substantial ideological power, and that a passive audience accepted the message as "reality." The meaning was seen to reside in the text, and not in the reading of the text.

 Myra Macdonald (1995) examined what she called the myths of feminism and the representation of women in media. Focusing on magazines she looked at "groundbreaking" magazines like *She* and *Cosmopolitan* which were the first to discuss sex and "novel objects of consumption" (p. 171) but avoided issues and questions about female desire. Macdonald suggested that *Cosmo* and other magazines for women address feminism not as the hatred of men, but as "relevant, positive, powerful, sexy,..(and) strong" (p. 172). She also found that magazines such as *Ms*. increasingly provide the opportunity to express feminist ideals, but are not enough to distract women from the more fun-loving, less-serious magazines like *Cosmo*.

In what has become a groundbreaking study, Radway (1984) focused on how women negotiated meaning from representations in popular culture. Her ethnographic study of female romance novel readers paved the way for other reception studies and a focus on the female audience. Radway used in-depth interviews, surveys, and group interviews to analyze what romance reading meant to female readers. Radway suggested that the women used romance novel reading to take personal time that they otherwise wouldn't have. Radway also found that readers identified with the heroines in the romance novels. Patriarchal roles were reinforced within the text itself, though reading gave the women a sense of independence. Press (1991) commented on Radway's work noting that the readers with whom Radway spoke were middle class, and the results would probably have been different if a different socio-economic class had been examined.

Feminist Television Research

Feminist television criticism in the United States emerged in the 1980's. Prior to that, Kaplan (1987) suggests, the lack of research was due to attention focused on Hollywood cinema. "American scholars who were both female and feminist tended to work in the humanities rather than the social sciences" (p. 248). She also noted that a significant amount of work was being done in male-dominated arenas such as production.

Attention to television research, then, began when scholars who had been studying film turned the approaches developed in film study to television. In 1977, Stephen Heath and Gillian Skirrow published an article in *Screen,* and were among the first to apply British theoretical approaches used to study "classic Hollywood film" (p. 247) to television. Feminist television research was directed at the medium itself, as well as a critique of the existing research on television. "Initial feminist dealings with television…(grew out of a) deep conviction that women's oppression was very much related to mass media representations and that change was not only urgent, but possible" (Brunsdon, et al, 1997, p. 2). Additionally, "feminists took issue with the existing critical work on television that disregarded femininity, gender, and sexuality" (p. 5). Soap operas and daytime programming were among the first topics to be addressed (Brunsdon, 1981, 1984, 1987; Hobson, 1982; Kaplan, 1983). Brunsdon, D'Acci, and Spigel (1997) write that studies on soap operas indicated the wide range of methodological pursuits used to study television. Textual analyses were used to perform a closer reading of the text, and there was a "desire to relate programmes to their discursive, social and institutional contexts" (p. 7). A third area of research looked at "the gendered audience and the sexual politics of family viewing" (p. 7).

In theoretical terms, feminist television criticism (Spigel,1992; Morley, 1980; Press, 1991) has extended beyond the scope of reflection theories "that posit a fit between representation and 'real' women or even 'real' women's pleasure" towards a "critique of television's constructions of all social categories, including gender, sexual identity, race, nation, and everyday life itself" (Brunsdon, et. al, 1997, p.8). Studies have also extended beyond

soap operas to examine sitcoms, dramas, and detective programs, while still interested in representation and interpretation (D'Acci,1994; Dow,1990, 1996; Haralovich, 1989).

Kaplan (1987) in *Feminist Criticism and Television* identified four main types of feminist television research which emerged based on philosophical differences under the broad category of feminism. The first type "demands equal access to the (patriarchal) symbolic order" (p. 254) based in the desire for equality. This "liberal feminism" resulted in studies largely based in content analysis, including Diana Meehan's (1983) *Ladies of the Evening: Women Characters of Prime –Time Television* which provided "specific and accurate descriptions of television characters and behaviors and some index of change over time" (p. vii) and characterized women according to 10 profiles (the imp, the goodwife, the harpy, the bitch, the victim, the decoy, the siren, the courtsan, the witch and the matriarch). She combined quantitative and qualitative approaches by counting acts of violence against women but also addressing "questions about women characters' power and powerlessness, vulnerability and strength" (p. viii). Meehan concluded that "the composite impression of the good-bad images was a forceful endorsement of a secondary position for women, a place in the world as selfless, devoted adjuncts to men" (p. 113) and that women needed equal representation in the public, masculine sphere.

A second kind of feminist television research, according to Kaplan (1987), was based on "Althusserian Marxist feminism" which examined how television as a capitalist institution determined how women were portrayed on television. Images of women were based on what was needed in society from an economic standpoint. These studies were largely based in content analysis, including Lillian Robinson's (1976) article titled "What's My Line? Telefiction and Women's Work."

A third type of feminist television research, according to Kaplan, was based on radical feminism which rejects the male symbolic order and argues that femininity is both different and better than masculinity. "This approach focuses on women-identified women and on striving for autonomy and wholeness through communities of women, or at least through intense

relationships with other women" (p. 259). An example of this type of research was Carol Aschur's (1976) "Daytime Television: You'll Never Want to Leave Home."

The fourth type of feminist television research, post-structuralist, is informed by Lacan and Foucault. Masculine and feminine constructions as more than biological distinctions. Scholars look at media to understand how 'women' and 'men' are culturally and socially constructed. Feminist media studies, particularly feminist television criticism, has been heavily influenced by this approach.

Two studies particularly relevant to this research include *Fraught with contradictions: The production, depiction, and consumption of women in a Venezuelan telenovela* (2002), and "*I'm not a feminist…I only defend women as human beings*:" *The production, representation, and consumption of feminism in a telenovela* (2003). Both focus on a popular Venezuelan telenovela, *El Pais de las Mujeres* (The Country of Women). "*Fraught with contradictions…*" examines the moment of representation, while "*I'm not a feminist…*" focuses on production, consumption, and representation. Acosta-Alzuru draws on cultural studies and feminist media studies, and draws upon the circuit of culture as a framework to examine how meaning is produced and reproduced in culture. This research is especially relevant because of the similarities between *El Pais de las Mujeres* and *The Sopranos*. Both have strong cultural overtones, which are an integral part of the analysis. Both Venezuelan and Italian cultures are based on patriarchy. And, as Acosta-Alzuru points out, in Venezuelan culture "there is a significant incidence of male infidelity and a sociocultural legitimization of this behavior" (p. 8), which is also true of Italian culture. Finally, a telenovela is similar to a soap opera, and *The Sopranos* has been considered "so much like soap opera" (Quinn, 2004, p. 169) because of the serialized format.

A text that has been particularly helpful in illustrating principles of television theory as well as representation in television is Liebman's (1995) *Living Room Lectures: The fifties family in film and television.* Liebman uses programs such as *Leave it to Beaver, The Donna Reed Show,* and *Father Knows Best* to illustrate how patriarchy effects the family, gender representations, the power struggle between husbands and wives, and family organization. Ironically, in season 1 of

The Sopranos when Tony's daughter Meadow brings up the subject of sex, Tony says that while "it may be the 90's out there, in this house its 1954."

In *Living Room Lectures* Liebman describes the exaggeration of patriarchal hegemony in 1950's sitcoms. She uses the following paradigm established by Leonard Benson as a model of the "dynamics of power in familial representation" (p. 117).

> Organization within the family revolves around two axes: age, upon which an authority structure is established, and sex, according to which responsibilities are divided. Authority automatically falls to the older members of the household as long as they can remain active, and responsibilities are always divided between the sexes. In the overwhelming majority of societies for which there are adequate data, the roles of father and mother are functionally different; father is primarily responsible for instrumental and executive tasks that relate the family to its larger social environment, while women specialize in meeting expressive needs and routine tasks within the family. (p. 117)

The strength of Liebman's analysis is that she assesses the power struggle based not only on representation but also in the context of sitcoms and the 1950's. Liebman discusses the ways in which structural hierarchies in the home are constructed. In *My Three Sons*, for example, the hierarchy is based on age instead of gender, while on *The Donna Reed Show,* power and authority are divided between male and female characters based on physical space in the household as well as traditional gender roles. For example, Donna's husband Alex is represented as being in a position of authority when in his downstairs medical office or in his study, while Donna is the authority figure in the kitchen. In terms of narrative, questions about 'hard' issues such as the sciences, money, math, and history are addressed to Alex, while issues about clothes and social events are directed towards Donna.

Prime-time Feminism (Dow, 1996) focuses on television as a rhetorical medium and highlights five television series including *The Mary Tyler Moore Show, One Day at a Time, Designing Women, Murphy Brown,* and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman.* Dow suggests that each show was groundbreaking in its own right. For example, *Mary Tyler Moore* featured a "young,

single, white, attractive, middle-class working female" and is acknowledged as the "first popular and long-running television series clearly to feature the influence of feminism" (p. 24). *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* attracted a younger generation of viewers and demonstrated that "work was not just a prelude to marriage…but could form the center of a satisfying life for a woman" (p. 24). Dow offers a comprehensive view of feminist television criticism, while television criticism in general is also taken into account.

This discussion of the feminist media studies and feminist television criticism is necessarily abbreviated. What is important to recognize is the theoretical underpinnings of the research as well as the variety of methodological approaches used to study television.

Sopranos Literature

Reflecting *The Sopranos'* popularity with audiences, its industry accolades alongside severe criticism, its status as one of the only programs to depict Italian-American culture, and an increasingly active scholarly community focused on television criticism, there has been a substantial body of work surrounding the program. Still, most of that writing has targeted a general, rather than a scholarly audience; studies of female representations have been limited. While recognizing the role "popular" writings play in creating a context in which the program is understood and viewed, a thorough review of that literature is beyond the scope of this project.[3] Instead, I will discuss three books which are particularly relevant to my study.

The first of these is *The Sopranos: A Family History*, produced by HBO. The author of this book, Allen Rucker, claims to be an authority on *The Sopranos*, and has created a "real life" background on the show and its characters. Explaining the show's popularity, he notes that "aside from their line of work, the Sopranos are not a whole heck of a lot different than you and me. They're a family with a secret, a big secret – Dad is a career criminal. So was Grandad. So is

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[3] Examples include "Mirrors Here, Mauve There: A 'Sopranos' Worthy House" (Dewan, 2001), *The Psychology of The Sopranos: Love, Death, Desire and Betrayal in America's Favorite Gangster Family* (Gabbard, 2002), and *The Tao of Bada Bing!: Words of Wisdom from The Sopranos* (Weber & Kim, 2003).

Uncle Junior. Doesn't your family have its own deep, dark, disgraceful secret? Maybe Mom is a three-bottle-a-day gin drinker or talks to the bathroom wall. Or Dad doesn't realize that Visa cards aren't free money…" (Rucker, 2003, p. 4) He summarizes each episode from the first four seasons and provides the Soprano family history. The book is illustrated with pictures of the family, and recounts events not written into the show that helped to shape the characters lives and personalities. Meadow's instant messenger chats with friends, letters from Tony to Carmela, FBI records on the family, and characters account of Tony's therapy sessions and his leadership qualities are included. This book, then, is not an analysis, but rather a summary of the show with 'extras' for loyal viewers. It is a text which, in essence, provides an additional element of character development beyond that written in the script of the program.

In *The Sopranos on the Couch: Analyzing Television's Greatest Series* (2002) Maurice Yacowar, a Canadian viewer and critic, says *The Sopranos* "could be the best TV series ever made" (p. 9). He provides a broad 'read' of each episode from seasons 1 through 3, looking at nothing in particular, but instead analyzing the characters' actions. Perhaps Yacowar's greatest contribution is the insight he provides on the 'production' moment. He discusses creator David Chase's influence as director and recognizes early gangster films such as *The Godfather* trilogy as a precursor to *The Sopranos*. That is, he reflects on the construction of the mythology of mob in American media. He concludes that *The Sopranos* is based upon several themes including religion, stereotyping, and humanizing the 'Other'. The "show's refusal to demonize its villains may perhaps be its moral benchmark" (p. 174), he writes, asserting that despite the focus on violence and organized crime, the show itself is not amoral. He describes the women on the show as 'strong,' but stops short of a thorough analysis.

Glen Gabbard, MD analyzed the portrayal of psychotherapy on *The Sopranos* (Gabbard, 2002). As will be discussed in the analysis, one of the on-going narratives in the show is that of Tony Sopranos' visit to his therapist, Dr. Melfi. He notes "the degree of psychiatric realism in *The Sopranos* is unprecedented-once one accepts the conceit of mobster-as-patient. In fact, I

fear Chase and his colleagues have blown our cover. They've lifted the veil on the secret world of psychotherapy, and happily, viewers love what they see" (p. xii). Gabbard describes 'real' therapists relative to the portrayal of Dr. Jennifer Melfi and analyzes the panic attacks, anti-social behavior and depression Tony experienced. He even goes so far as to comment on whether or not Tony was treatable.

Gabbard discusses the 'two sides of Tony' – the family man versus the violent gangster, and analyzed Tony's attraction to Dr. Melfi in terms of the ethical boundaries of relationships between therapist and patient. He reviews a long history of films with the trend of patients falling for their therapists: "This trend runs throughout film history, completely untouched by feminism…and decades of these portrayals have set up the audience to expect the same thing to happen on The Sopranos" (p. 60). Gabbard goes on to speculate, rather authoritatively, and without the benefit of data on audiences, that "audiences could care less about ethics codes" and want to see the sexual tension between Tony and Dr. Melfi explored. "They want to see traditional gender roles restored – Tony as Tarzan and Jennifer as Jane" (p. 60).

Scholarly writing on *The Sopranos* is difficult to characterize, both because of the breadth of topics addressed, and because the work sometimes seems to be written more for the purpose of entertainment, largely atheoretical in its development.[4] Two volumes edited by scholars are illustrative.

The first, *A sitdown with The Sopranos: Watching Italian-American culture on TV's most talked-about series*, is edited by a professor of English and feminist theorist (Barreca, 2002). It is a collection of eight essays, written by Italian-Americans (five of the essays are written by scholars), on topics including Catholicism, ethics, psychotherapy, Italian-American culture, and Italian women. In her own essay, "Why I like the women of *The Sopranos* Even Though

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[4] This, of course, is a generalization; clear exceptions exist, among them, 'The Sopranos Syndrome" (Di Stasi, 2001), "From the Fonz to 'The Sopranos' Not Much Evolution" (Laurino, 2000), and "Tony Soprano's America: The Criminal Side of the American Dream" (Simon & Love, 2002).

I'm Not Supposed To," Barreca notes that "Italian-American women are in particular need of representation because there have been so few distinctly individual, high-voltage versions of Italian-American women presented….on television" (p.32). She analyzed the female characters of *The Sopranos* including Tony's mother, Livia, in relation to other Italian-American characters on television such as the mother in *Everybody Loves Raymond.* Barreca concludes that she likes the women of *The Sopranos* because they are both familiar and unpredictable. Livia, whom Barreca says reminds her of a favorite aunt, and who we assume will be the doting grandmother, arranges to have her own son killed.

In *This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos* (2002) editor David Lavery, English Professor, also assembled a series of essays on *The Sopranos*. It is one of the few commentaries on *The Sopranos* to include both Italian and non-Italian authors. Like Barreca's collection, the topics in Lavery's book are wide-ranging.[5] Of most relevance to this research are two chapters that focus directly on the women in *The Sopranos*.

Cindy Donatelli and Sharon Alward analyze the women of *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas*, and *The Sopranos* in "I Dread You" ?: Married to the Mob in The Godfather, Goodfellas, and The Sopranos" (Donatelli and Alward, 2002). They view the women of *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* as pasta-making, baby-toting servants for men, but assert that the women of *The Sopranos* are powerful because they are sexually liberated and use foul language. The women of *The Sopranos*, they write, are "constructed from bits and pieces of Madonna's material girl, Jennifer Lopez's in-your-face attitude, and Andrea Dworkin's post-male feminism" (p. 60). They ignore the fact that the women of *The Sopranos* are oppressed, under virtually complete male control, instead asserting that because the women are able to take the abuse handed out by the male characters they are more powerful than the Italian women portrayed in earlier gangster films.

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[5] The topics covered include an introduction to the show from two different perspectives, the media context, men and women, genre and narrative technique, and the cultural context of the show.

Kim Akass and Janet Macabe looked at how women are able to exert control through conversation in "Beyond the Bada Bing!: Negotiating Female Narrative Authority in *The Sopranos*" (Akass and Macabe, 2002). They identified the show as a "predominantly male narrative context" (p. 147) but asserted that the women "come to guide, reshape, and reorder, for better or worse, the complicated narrative world of Tony Soprano brought to television" (p. 148). One way in which this was accomplished was by Carmela and Dr. Melfi controlling and distributing knowledge through gossip, a predominantly female form of conversation, and treatment, which was seen as feminine and nurturing. Carmela and Dr. Melfi also controlled Tony by curtailing his narrative of events. For example, Dr. Melfi often interrupted Tony mid-story to remind him that he shouldn't tell her anything that she would need to tell the police, thus he was forced to censor his stories so that they were 'feminine'; this was a form of narrative authority. Carmela exerted control over Tony through heavy silences at the dinner table, which suggested she was upset by their rocky marriage. Though Akass and Macabe made an argument for the women of *The Sopranos* having narrative authority they ignore the physical and emotional abuse and the economic control that overshadowed what little narrative power the women were able to exert.

Finally, in an insightful article in *The Journal of American Culture*, "Mothers, Molls, and Misogynists: Resisting Italian American Womanhood in The Sopranos," herself an Italian-American, Quinn (2004) addresses the popularity of the show, and specifically explores how the female spectator can resist the representations of female characters, and the struggle Italian-Americans endure trying to combat the images projected in *The Sopranos*. Quinn writes:

> Most often, beliefs about who and what Italian-descended women are have been created and interpreted by others. Consequently the level of ignorance, erasure, and misrepresentation has been pervasive, especially in terms of the multidimensionality of Italian American women's heritage, lives, and art. If we didn't cook it, how can it be so? It is no wonder that watching *The Sopranos*

is a seductive enterprise for the fed-up female spectator almost desperate for a more fully embodied representation of Italian American womanhood, especially when the actors…are themselves Italian American. (p. 169)

CHAPTER 4

Method

The products of media culture require multidimensional close textual readings
 to analyze their various forms of discourses, ideological positions, narrative
strategies, image construction, and effects. (Kellner, 2003, p.14)

Theoretical assumptions influence the selection of research questions and so too, the

methodological approaches taken to answer those questions. As noted in chapter 2, this project

is theoretically grounded in cultural studies and feminist theory; the following assumptions

undergirded my selection of textual analysis as the method most able to answer the question

posed: how are women represented in *The Sopranos*. Texts are polysemic, meaning there is

the "capacity to invite different meanings from different viewers" and audience members are

not simply "passive receivers" of the dominant ideology presented in a text (Dow, 1996, p.

10). Issues of power are of critical importance, and patriarchy and other power structures such

as religion are used to oppress. Gender has become a critical analytic research component;

masculinity and femininity are social rather than biological constructions. Finally, for both

cultural studies and feminist scholars there is something *at stake*. Research is a political project

taken on by intellectuals, but address issues that affect everyone.

Early feminist researchers influenced by the "dominant paradigm" of "effects"

communication research used quantitative content analysis to study texts. These researchers

wanted to show that women did not get equal representation in the mass media. Concentrating on

"*what* the media showed to *how* they produced meaning" (Macdonald, 1995, p. 15) these "image

studies" achieved little more than "head-counting" (Walters, 1995, p. 36) and were limited to

studying the manifest content of texts. In contrast, textual analysis reveals the latent meanings

within a text. Further, "the object of analysis is not the meanings of the text, but rather the

construction of those meanings through the text; more concretely the text itself" (Acosta-Alzuru and Roushanzamir, 2000, p.315).

> The historical conditions of production and of consumption of the text must be considered in every textual analysis. The text is not the end in textual analysis, it is the means by which we study a signification process, a representation of reality. This process of "decentering" the text (Johnson, 1986/1987) – of studying the text as a process - is what distinguishes textual analysis from qualitative content analysis, in which the text remains at the center of the analysis. In qualitative content analysis, content is classified through open coding categories. Meaning is found solely in the text itself and not in the processes of its production and consumption. In other words, the conditions surrounding the text- other texts, historical, political, economic and cultural circumstances – are simply the context for qualitative content analysis. While in textual analysis they provide the ideological and mythic structure used to create the dominant reading. (Acosta-Alzuru, 1999, p.65)

Cultural studies and feminist theorists have used this method to study media texts. Textual analysis has been used in film and television (e.g. Fiske & Hartley, 1978; D'Acci, 1992, Acosta-Alzuru, 2002), newspapers, and other forms of print media (Acosta-Alzuru, 1996, Hall, 1975; Lule, 1989, 1993, 1995; Lester, 1992), and more recently, advertising (Frith, 2005; Golombisky, 2005).

<u>The Text</u>

I chose to perform a textual analysis on *The Sopranos* to see how meanings were constructed within the text. *The Sopranos* first aired in 1999, and the program will conclude with a 6th season in 2006-2007. The particular text in this study is comprised of seasons 1 and 4 of *The Sopranos*; each season has 13 episodes. Season 1 includes situational and character development, and provides a solid introduction to the characters and premise of the show. Episode 1 of season 1, titled "The Sopranos," begins with Tony Soprano in the office of his therapist, Dr. Melfi. Tony's line of work and his socio-economic status are revealed, and we are introduced to his

immediate family and the crime family of which he is boss. By season 4, the characters' roles are firmly established, and the main storylines including Tony's weekly sessions with Dr. Melfi, and the lives of his two families continue to develop. Two main characters from season 1 are missing when season 4 begins: Tony's mother Livia dies in the course of season 3, and Tony's friend 'Big Pussy' Bonpensiero is 'whacked' for becoming an FBI informant. The series as a whole focuses on Italian-American culture, patriarchy, Catholicism, and the Mafia. How women relate to these various power structures is of interest to me. Women are a focal point in at least part of every episode in seasons 1 and 4.

The Process of Analysis

I used Stuart Hall's (1975) introduction to *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change* as a guide for performing a textual analysis. According to Hall, textual analysis is a multistage process. During the first stage, the "preliminary soak" I prepared for the analysis by watching each episode from seasons 1 and 4 with no attempts to analyze, but simply to enjoy the episodes and understand what the series was about. I had seen each episode when it originally aired, but it had been several years since the early episodes of season 1. I researched the Mafia, Italian-American culture, Catholicism, and patriarchy to understand the power structures and ideologies represented on the show. I also read what had been, and was being published about *The Sopranos* to learn what fans and critics were saying. Following the initial viewing, I watched each 50-minute episode again, this time taking notes and frequently reviewing to note relevant dialogue, storylines, and recurring themes. I repeated this process for season 4. Thus, I viewed each episode at least twice before beginning the second stage of the analysis.

Several themes that emerged during the preliminary soak served as a starting point for the next stage of the analysis. These themes related particularly to how patriarchy was reinforced on the show. I saw that men and women were presented differently. I recognized that women were objectified, appearances such as clothing and hairstyles were important to the characters, characters viewed feminism negatively, and 'appropriate' gender roles included women in the

home and men as 'breadwinners'. I paid particular attention to the power dynamics played out between male and female characters.

The second step in the analysis involved a much more focused 'reading' of the text. I noted how the themes identified in the preliminary analysis were represented both verbally and non-verbally on the show. Verbal examples came from conversations between men and women, between women, and between men; jokes about women; and derogatory name-calling. Non-verbal examples included the treatment of women by men, how patriarchy was established as the dominant ideology, degrading actions toward female characters (such as episodes of violence), and patterns indicating other forms of abuse. I also noted the 'consequences' that resulted when female characters broke from traditional roles. I paid attention to dialogue, characters, scenarios, and patterns to see how women were represented. The women's relationships with men, female relationships, work outside of the home or lack thereof, and issues of sexuality and reproduction were also noted. As I re-examined the texts, further linkages emerged which will be discussed in the analysis.

As noted earlier, texts are polysemic, meaning there is the "capacity to invite different meanings from different viewers" (Dow, 1996, p. 10). The analysis that follows, then, is only one 'reading' of *The Sopranos*. What the audience member brings to the text (family history, cultural understandings, religion) influences her/his interpretation. Being from Long Island I have an understanding of the New Jersey area seen on the show, and being Catholic I identify with the character's religion. Thus, as meaning is created in the production of the text, it is again created in consumption. Given the polysemic nature of texts, what, one might ask, is the value of textual analysis? For an answer to that question I turn to Dow, a rhetorical critic. In her book, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970,* she writes:

> The power of the arguments I make depends upon how well they interpret the text, the strength of their evidence and theoretical underpinnings…and ultimately, their heuristic value. The heuristic value of criticism, in my view, is both theoretical and political. In

theoretical terms, it means that the argument should, in addition to
revealing something interesting and useful about the text itself,
reveal something interesting and useful about the *kind* of symbolic
activity that the text represents, whether it be music, literature, or
television programming…politically, the heuristic
value of criticism…is its capacity to engage our thinking about
the political implications of discursive practice. To the extent that
criticism teaches us something about television and how it works, it
tells us something about the world and how it works.
(Dow, 1996, p. 5).

CHAPTER 5

Analysis

We never see the women in these stories. They're always just like stirring the pot, or pasta, or crying at funerals and weddings. I began to think what it would be like to flesh out these characters. - David Chase, Creator of *The Sopranos* (Donatelli & Alward, 2002, p.70)

(Media are) technologies of gender, accommodating, modifying, reconstructing and producing, disciplining and contradictory renditions of sexual difference. (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 41)

In my viewing of *The Sopranos,* several themes emerged about the representations of female characters, the definition of "the feminine." Before discussing these themes, however, it is important to recognize that the dominant ideology of Italian culture and the Soprano family is patriarchy. Patriarchy is defined by Macdonald (1995) as "technically 'rule by the father or head of household' but (is) now widely used to signify systematic male domination" (p. 226). Dow (1996) says the term 'patriarchal,' on the most basic level, refers to a "descriptor of gender hierarchy and power relations that, while they may be modeled on the family, are replicated throughout society on a number of levels" (p. 39). Dow acknowledges Adrienne Rich's (1979) definition of patriarchy as "any kind of group organization in which males hold dominant power and determine what part females shall and shall not play, and in which capabilities assigned to women are relegated generally to the mystical and aesthetic and excluded from the practical and political realms" (p. 39). Walby (1990) defines patriarchy as a "system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (p. 20). She argues that there are six structures that make up the system of patriarchy including paid work, housework, sexuality, culture, violence and the state. Two main locations of patriarchy include the public and the private with the public encompassing employment and the state, while the private focuses on the household as the main site of oppression.

Italian culture dictates that patriarchy is the dominant ideology in the home. Additionally, two institutions in which Soprano family values are placed, the Mafia and Catholicism, are also steeped in patriarchy. In the Mafia, the boss is the 'father' to whom everyone must report. In Catholicism church doctrine dictates that men hold positions of power, and that women cannot be priests or 'fathers'. Catholicism is implicit throughout the show. Most of the main characters are Catholic, but their levels of commitment to the faith are variable. Carmela is devout throughout the series while Adriana renews her faith when Christopher is near death and she prays for his recovery. Paulie Walnuts adds up his sins and guesses how many years he will spend in purgatory, while Anthony Jr. questions the existence of God. The constant presence of Father Phil in the lives of the female characters creates an undercurrent of Catholicism. Father Phil visits the women and accepts gifts of food and wine. While Tony assumes Father Phil is a homosexual, Carmela recognizes his attraction to her and accuses him of feeding on spiritually starved women like herself.

Patriarchy and the Television Family

Gender is seen as a unifying principle in all of feminist thought and is a "mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them" (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 3). "According to feminists, the media-created woman is (1) wife, mother and housekeeper for men, (2) a sex object used to sell products to men, (3) a person trying to be beautiful for men" (Hole and Levine, 1971, p. 249). In terms of television, Franzwa (1978) wrote:

> Televised images of women in large measure are false, portraying them less as they really are, more as some might want them to be….
> .Television women are predominantly in their twenties….portrayed primarily as housewives…restricted primarily to stereotyped positions such as nurses and secretaries…portrayed as weak, vulnerable, dependent, submissive and frequently, as sex objects.
> (p. 273-4)

It is perhaps not surprising that patriarchy, until recently, has dominated television culture. Feminist scholar Elayne Rapping (1999), writing twenty years later, comments upon the longevity of the "master narrative" in patriarchy:

> the master narratives of family, gender, and generation – the sitcoms, soap operas, and drama series that television offers as staples of cultural hegemony – have been the myths and rituals by which we all have come to relate – as men, women, and children – to our common, if ever-changing environment. From *Leave it to Beaver* to the *Cosby Show*, television has, in its dominant, most-often-seen genres, pushed an ideal of family life in which dad worked, mom – whatever else she did - did most of the nurturing and caretaking, and the kids pretty much followed their rules and planned to follow in their parents footsteps. (p. 272)

In what Rapping calls the postmodern television era, however, there are many portrayals of a "fractured" family life: *Will and Grace*, *Friends*, and *Sex and the City*, to name a few. "Fractured" is the absence of the traditional family structure of mom and dad, still married, and children living together in the same home. Instead, we see homosexual couples, single friends sharing apartments, promiscuous women living with their boyfriends, and in general "a postmodern world view in which individuals (have been) set free…from traditional structures, identities, and assumptions" (p. 275). Shows that depict the traditional family structure, strange as it may sound, include *The Simpsons*, *The Osbournes*, and *The Sopranos*. Though *The Sopranos* is harsh in its tone and extreme, in countless ways, it is never far from the norms, assumptions, and roles of traditional family life. A closer look, however, reveals that the Soprano family is an excessively rigid, severely fractured version of the traditional patriarchal family, and the gender roles within that family.

The home depicted in the suburban middle-class family sit-com of the 1950's and 60's was at once seen as restricting and liberating – restrictive in the sense that women were excluded from the business world, but liberating in that the women were in charge of domestic life. They were emotionally and financially secure Further, the women in 1950's sitcoms appear to be *happy* in their circumscribed roles, while the women of *The Sopranos* constantly resist

these roles. On *The Sopranos,* the home resembles a prison instead of a haven; women have little or no control over the domestic life of the family. Tony provides the money for household goods, giving it to Carmela in the form of an allowance; Carmela is treated like a child rather than a wife. She does the cooking, plans social activities, and is in charge of decorating the home, which, Tony reminds her, is in his name, and therefore belongs to him. The women are dominated even in what is "supposed to be" their sphere. Tony interferes in Carmela's attempts to 'mother.' As a result of years of emotional abuse Carmela is beaten down, roughed up, and has lost the traditional identity of 'mother'. Tony strips her of what little power the domestic space could offer. The home is neither an economic or emotional haven. The notion of economic support is twisted into economic domination by men, and 'family' becomes a site of domination instead of a site of love and support.

Women's efforts to resist traditional gender roles and Tony's discomfort with those efforts are a subtext throughout the show. The subtext is amplified by the extreme violence, language, and overall intensity that accompanies the drama of the Mafia setting. In Tony's world, the late 1990's (season 1 aired in 1999) patriarchy is under attack; gender roles are in a state of flux. Meadow, Tony's daughter, wants to go to college, and Carmela wants a real estate license. While Tony encourages Meadow, he interrupts and trivializes Carmela's attempts to earn a real estate license in overt and subtle ways. As Carmela studies at the kitchen table, Tony demands meals and attention. Carmela's duties are first as his wife. He articulates his view, saying "I'm supposed to make the money, she takes care of the house. That's the way it should be." Tony sees his role as breadwinner while recognizing that the cultural definitions of gender roles are changing. He wants to maintain the role of the patriarch in the realm he can control – his home. "Out there it's the 1990's; in this house it's 1954, " he tells Meadow (*Nobody Knows Anything)*.

Tony has two families; his domestic family and the crime family of which he is boss; he is the 'father' figure in both. He reminisces about his father's time and reign in the family business as the heyday. He tells Dr. Melfi "Lately, I get the feeling I came in at the end" (*The Sopranos*). He is referring, perhaps, both to the end of the Mafia's reign and the end of

patriarchy. In the 1950's when Tony's father was the boss, patriarchy was the dominant ideology in the home; gender roles were clearly defined.

Revisiting Franzwa's notion of is a generalized view of television images, written nearly three decades ago, it is remarkably descriptive (with the exception of women being in their twenties) of Soprano women. The women are in the home, taking care of the children and doing domestic chores; the men 'do business' and enjoy the products of domesticity including home-cooked meals, and wives who wait on them. Professional women like Dr. Melfi are not excluded from this portrayal. The difference is that Melfi is seen as *both* a mother and a professional. Her divorce indicates that she has failed in her role as a wife; she is, therefore, first a professional and then a mother.

Nowhere is the fracturing of the traditional patriarchal family structure more apparent than in the complex and contradictory representations of motherhood. "In your family," Dr. Melfi tells Tony, "even motherhood is up for debate."

<u>"Even motherhood is up for debate"</u>

Macdonald (1995) notes that the "central icon of the caring person within western culture is the figure of the mother" (p. 133). The stereotypical mother, and indeed a stereotype amplified in Italian culture, is a nurturer, she takes care of others and rules the domestic sphere. Carmela *wants*, and perhaps Livia once sought, to be the pasta-serving, baby-toting Italian mother, but what little domestic power possessed has been taken away, leaving them angry, bitter, and vengeful. The traditional role of "mother" is in jeopardy in the Soprano family. The role of maternity, the "social role that ultimately keeps women subject to men" is "out of control" (Donatelli and Alward, 2002, p. 66) on *The Sopranos*. The effects of living within an extreme form of patriarchy are evident in Livia Soprano.

Livia , in some sense, the Soprano family matriarch, is not the loving, nurturing mother, but is cold, vengeful, and calculating. Livia doesn't "play the usual elderly Italian woman with curled hair, sagging bosom, corsages, and lots of sympathy and pasta for all" (Donatelli and Alward, 2002, p. 66). Dr. Melfi describes her as "powerful," a "formidable maternal presence"

(*The Sopranos*). Television critics call her a "monstrous Medea" (Willis, 2003, p. 7). This latter description is perhaps more accurate than that of Dr. Melfi.

Livia suffers from borderline personality disorder. She recognizes her ability to contribute to Tony's depression, which plagues him throughout the series, and she takes advantage of that ability. Nor is Livia the stereotypical mafia mother; she has moved beyond the domestic boundaries and possesses a certain knowledge of business affairs. With this knowledge comes a bit of power. She is close to her brother-in-law, Junior, the figurehead of the Di Meo crime family, and is able to give recommendations on business affairs. Livia is also an atypical grandmother. She tells grandson AJ, who is struggling with philosophy as a school subject: "You want my advice, Anthony, don't expect happiness. You won't get it. People let you down. I won't mention any names. But, in the end, you die in your own arms…It's all a big nothing. What makes you think you're so special?" This is hardly grandmotherly advice.

Livia uses her limited power to inflict pain on those close to her, and rejoices in her children's' failures. She rejects Tony and Carmela's attempts to care for her and in Tony's words she acts like an Eskimo being pushed out to sea. In fact, Tony places her in a respected nursing home in the area, and worries about her constantly. Livia responds to his caring nature with "daughters are better at taking care of their mothers than sons." Livia continually tells Tony she wishes she were dead, and that life has no meaning. She plays on his insecurities by telling everyone he is seeing a therapist, a sign of weakness in Mafia culture. She is embarrassed that her son is mentally weak and recommends to Uncle Junior that Tony be killed. Livia's form of control is manipulative, vengeful, and mean, and she is a bitter, depressed woman. Livia may be more evil than Tony, even considering his violent nature. She has lived for decades in the extreme patriarchy of the family, the Mafia, and the Catholic church. One cannot help but wonder if Livia is a vision of what Carmela, Adriana, and Janice will one day become.

Carmela in contrast, more closely fits the stereotypical mother role. She lovingly dotes on Meadow and Anthony Jr., preparing meals and helping with homework. She wants to protect them from knowing about Tony's illegal business practices, and wants to make sure they

don't follow in his footsteps. She is rendered powerless in her relationship with her children

because Tony assumes the role of disciplinarian, has final say on the children's education, and

of course, provides the economic foundation of the family. Carmela uses her husband's power

for her children's benefit. When Meadow needs a recommendation letter to be considered at

Georgetown, Carmela brings a reluctant alumnus a ricotta pie and tells her what she expects:

> CARMELA: I don't think you understand. I want you to write that letter
> JOAN: Excuse me?
> CARMELA: I said I want you to write the letter.
> JOAN: Are you threatening me?
> CARMELA: Threat? What threatening? I brought you a ricotta pie, and a high school transcript so you could write a letter of recommendation for my little daughter to Georgetown.
> JOAN: I'm an officer of the court.
> CARMELA: A lawyer. (LAUGHS) Don't make me beg here.
> JOAN: I've already written my last letter of support for this academic year.
> CARMELA: Well, how about this. I thought you could write a letter to Georgetown, tell them you've discovered that Georgetown was not that person's first choice…and that in fact he was using Georgetown as a backup. I'm not gonna tell you what to write. (SETS AN ENVELOPE ON JOAN'S DESK) Thanks for this.

> > Macdonald (1995) writes that "within Roman Catholicism, the dominant image of holy mother and child…invites our admiration for what she symbolizes…she teaches us that nurturing is a spiritual experience untouched by either the complications of physical passion or our own desires." (p. 133)

Indeed, motherhood is spoken of with reverence. In the company of men, men defend or

honor their wives by referring to them as "the mother of my children." Men assure their wives of

their importance as "the mother of my children." It sounds like a place of honor, but it frequently

rings hallow. Men disrespect, cheat on, and are physically abusive to the "mother" of their

children. On occasion, motherhood is seemingly viewed as little more than a reproductive ability.

Christopher views Adriana primarily as a means to have a son. Before Adriana met Christopher

she has an abortion that was improperly done and her gynecologist tells her she may not be able

to have children. When she tells Christopher he asks: "why didn't you tell me you were damaged goods?" Calling Adriana 'damaged goods' infers that she is an object or piece of property instead of a person. This reinforces the belief that women are a commodity without human properties, or unique qualities and characteristics. There is little sense of loyalty to spouses and the domestic family. Instead, loyalty to the 'Family' is considered more important.

In Tony's other family, the mob, he is the boss and father figure. When Tony's nephew Christopher becomes a 'made man,' Tony reminds him that "this Family comes before anything else" including one's biological family. In Tony's 'other' family, all problems and concerns are brought to him. When Christopher beats up his girlfriend Adriana, she goes to Tony instead of the police. The Mafia family is its own community which solves problems internally with no interference from the outside world. Friendships with those outside the 'family' are discouraged, as are dating relationships. It is, in essence, an insular, domestic sphere of its own, and an extremely violent one at that.

Power: The structure of relationships in *The Sopranos*

In regard to power, the "issue for feminism…is not who is 'in power' and who is not…rather, the challenge is to 'theorize the multiplicity of relations of subordination" (Mouffe, 1992, p. 372). The male characters on *The Sopranos* unquestionably are in power. They control their relationships with women through a combination of physical, economic, and emotional pressures.

Physical domination has a number of dimensions including physical size, overt acts of violence, and women's fear of violence, all of which operate to oppress women. Male-on-female violence permeates the show. Male characters readily resort to physical violence whenever women challenge them emotionally, or when they are unhappy with something that has occurred. Tony is sensitive to issues surrounding his mother. When Dr. Melfi suggests to Tony that Livia wanted him 'whacked,' he moves within inches of her face and growls "you're lucky I don't break your face in 500,000 pieces." Tony physically is much larger than Dr. Melfi, he violates her personal space, he is intimidating. The *threat* of physical violence makes Dr. Melfi recoil

in fear. She grabs a large pair of scissors and hides them in her sleeve before one of Tony's appointments, and even threatens to call the police when he advances toward her in a threatening manner. There are several other instances when Tony physically dominates Dr. Melfi. She refuses to disclose information about another patient with whom Tony had been romantically involved, and in response, he upends her coffee table and throws her tissue holder at the wall. When Tony wants a romantic relationship with Dr. Melfi and is rebuffed, he grabs her by the head and kisses her. And yet, Dr. Melfi's professional belief that she can help Tony, and her desire to do so overrides her self-protective instincts. She continues to treat him in her office where she is vulnerable to another attack. She has the intellectual edge on Tony, she is 'treating' him. Yet he is able to control the relationship because she is physically afraid of him.

Tony physically fights with Irina, his Russian girlfriend, pinning her to the bed, throwing her to the floor and slamming her against the wall. Though Irina fears Tony, she remains devoted to him. She is needy, physically weak, and mentally unstable. Tony treats all women, including Carmela, in much the same way, and yet women endure this treatment in exchange for the perceived benefits of being associated with Tony, be they dining in fine restaurants, fur coats, vacations, large sums of money, generous gifts, or the promise that "you'll be taken care of."

Tony exerts physical control over Carmela to show that he is in a position of power in their relationship. In the course of an argument in which Carmela tells Tony she is leaving him he grabs her by the shoulders, slams her against the wall, and grabs her by the hair. He stops short of punching her in the face and punches the wall instead. Carmela is vulnerable to Tony's physical domination, as is Dr. Melfi. Neither are physically able to defend themselves; they endure repeated physical domination. I found it interesting that I never thought of Carmela or Dr. Melfi as 'victims', perhaps because I believed both could end their relationships with Tony. An alternate reading would suggest that the women are self-protective. They are in danger, even in their own homes. Dr. Melfi continues to treat Tony out of fear of what will happen if she doesn't treat him. Either way, physical violence is apparently not grounds for the end of a relationship.

Indeed, for some, physical violence must be reserved for the home. Tony's nephew frequently physically abuses his girlfriend, Adriana. Adriana's uncle, Ritchie Aprile tells him: "you want to raise your hand, you give her your last name. Then it's none of my fucking business" (*Toodle-Fucking-oo*). Among other drugs, Christopher is addicted to heroin. When Adriana hands him a pamphlet for drug rehab. he says "you put me on a mailing list for junkies? Where do you get your balls" (*Whoever Did This)* and punches her in the face. From Christopher's perspective it was inappropriate for Adriana to question his drug use, and she paid the physical price. Yet, Adriana keeps it 'in the family.' Instead of going to the police, she asks Tony to counsel Christopher. Tony first asks her why Christopher hit her, suggesting that physical violence is apparently acceptable in some instances.

While women's acceptance of physical violence in the show is almost universal there is one notable exception: when Tony's sister Janice is beaten by her then boyfriend, Ritchie Aprile, she reacts by shooting him to death. But this is the exception, and Janice is also an exception in relation to the other women. She is a free spirit, changing religions as quickly as she changes clothes, and is almost as evil and vengeful as her mother.

Physical domination through violence is not limited to relationships between men and women. Tony and his friends use physical intimidation to get desired results in business matters and to send 'messages' to competing groups. Tony is the head of the New Jersey Di Meo crime family, which is in competition with the New York family. If Tony is unhappy with business relations, he will have a member of the New York family beaten or killed. If one of his own associates displeases him he will have the man beaten. He even kills one of his highest earners, Ralph Cifaretto, when he and Ralph disagree on business matters.

Male characters not only dominate female characters physically, they also oppress them through economic power. Carmela only has a high school education; she dropped out of school to marry, as have the wives of Tony's friends. As a result of these choices, women have limited skills and limited earning potential. Still, they have become accustomed to a 'life of luxury.' They get manicures and visit the hair stylist regularly, buy new clothes and home furnishings

when they want, and generally "live well." Materially, the women are given an allowance, but men control their wives by limiting that allowance and excluding them from financial decisions. Because they don't work outside the home, women are completely dependent on their husbands for money to continue to live the lifestyle to which they are accustomed. In a conversation between Carmela and her friend Rosalie we get a sense of what apparently was Rosalie's economic submission to her husband, Jackie, and of Carmela's frustration:

> Rosalie: I didn't know how to pay the phone bill when Jackie died – he always did everything.
>
> Carmela: I get resistance when I try to find out how much money is available. Doesn't anything change? Women are supposed to be partners now a days.

Carmela has no idea how much money she and Tony have. She is worried about the family's financial security. She asks Tony "who is gonna support your children, me, if something happens to you?" (*All Debts Public and Private*). Carmela tries to convince Tony to hire a financial planner. Tony only says "you will be taken care of" and will not elaborate on how much money he makes. He says its because he doesn't want her to be an accomplice in his illegal activities, but in reality he doesn't want to take advice from a woman. He agrees to meet with Carmela's cousin, who is a financial planner.

> Carmela: Maybe you don't care about our future, Tony, but I do.
>
> Tony: Where do you get that I don't care? I met with your cousin.
>
> Carmela: Yeah, you sat there eating cake and making wisecracks.
>
> Tony: I was bored. What, you gonna cry now?
> Carmela: When you ignore me Tony and you trivialize things that are important to me like this family's financial security. It makes me feel unloved.

Just as fear of physical violence is as oppressive as actual violence, the fear of material loss and having no knowledge of the family's financial future are just as debilitating. Carmela

wants security, both financial and emotional, and partnership – a chance to be involved and important to Tony. Tony knows Carmela constantly worries about money, and yet he does nothing to allay her fears; thus he exerts control emotionally as well as financially. He gives her only as much money as she needs to run the household on a week-by-week basis. He ignores her advice about investing, which she learned about through her cousin, and tells one of his friends: "Carmela's a smart woman – start winning in the market it's gonna be Intel this, Coca-cola that – it will never end." In addition to not allowing Carmela a voice in financial decision-making he doesn't want her to work outside the home, for fear she would gain some independence; he dissuades her from earning the real estate license. Her place, in Tony's eyes, is in the home.

Carmela never completes the necessary courses for the real estate license. But, because she recognizes that she could never maintain her current lifestyle if she were on her own, she resorts to taking cash from Tony's stashes around the house to invest herself. She is represented as both resourceful and child-like. Resourceful in the sense that she is so determined to secure financial stability she will resort to any means necessary, and child-like in the way she appears to be stealing from a parent.

Tony also uses economic means to control, rather than support, his daughter, Meadow, and sister, Janice. Meadow depends on Tony. She never has a job, aside from a volunteer position, and makes no effort to help pay for college because she knows Tony will take care of all her bills. In 'exchange' for his economic support, Meadow does what her father wants her to do. If she does something Tony doesn't approve of, he threatens to cut off financial support. During her freshman year at Columbia she is dating Noah, who is African-American. Tony is, among other things, racist, and insists that Meadow break up with the offending boyfriend, which she eventually does. She is economically dependent and easily manipulated for material gratification.

Meadow had been dating Jackie Aprile, Jr., the son of Tony's friend and business partner Jackie Aprile. When Tony found out that Jackie Jr. held up a high-stakes Mafia card game he has him killed, despite the fact that he knew Meadow was in love with Jackie Jr. Tony wants to control Meadow's future, not just her financial status. Dr. Melfi tells Tony that he is the "template

for all future lovers" for Meadow (*No Show*), implying that Tony will have power over Meadow long after she has become financially independent of him. Meadow will pick a partner based on what she has seen in her father. Meadow is represented as being controlled in all aspects of her life. Meadow is smart, attractive, and could easily excel in the career of her choice. However, she allows her father to take care of her financial needs because she would rather be pampered and live well than have to work for a living.

Similarly, Janice relies on Tony for economic support. Like Carmela, she has no college education, no job, and makes no effort to earn her own money. Tony pays for her housing, car repairs, therapy, and other living expenses. In exchange, he uses her to get information about his friends and men in his 'crew' whom Janice has dated. She is lazy, reliant on Tony and other men for economic support, and is easily manipulated by economic reward.

In addition to physical and economical domination, and the ensuing emotional stress that accompanies that domination, the male characters are overtly manipulative, using emotional means to control the relationships with women in their lives: lying, cheating ,and trivializing what is important to women are common practices. Tony recognizes Carmela's emotional vulnerability. She often mentions her low self-esteem and expresses anger at his infidelities. Carmela says: "If I had an ounce of self-respect I would cut your dick off" (*Isabella*). In response, he manipulates her emotions. He tells her that she is the only woman in his life: "Carmela you are my life – the mother of my children - there are no other women" (*Pax Soprana*). And, "Carmela, you aren't just in my life, you *are* my life" (*Pax Soprana*). Yet, she finds a broken fingernail in his clothes. She realizes he has cheated again. Carmela says that she expected there would be women on the side when she married Tony, and though she is distraught and depressed because of Tony's infidelities, she is unwilling to divorce him. The money she enjoys and the respect she garners from being the boss's wife would be gone. Carmela is materialistic, abused, emotionally drained and weak. Her self-esteem is so reduced by Tony she says that "sleep is her number one joy in life" (*College*).

Tony exerts emotional control over Dr. Melfi from the moment they meet. At their first session he says:

Tony: Melfi. What part of the boot you from, hon?
Melfi: *Dr*. Melfi. My fathers' people were from Caserta.
Tony: (points to himself) Avaleno. My mother woulda loved it if you and I got together.

Addressing Dr. Melfi as 'hon' indicates a lack of respect for her medical degree and a desire to 'demote' her, to place them on the same level. 'Hon' is the name he uses for the strippers at the Bada Bing! Tony infers that he and Dr. Melfi might have had a romantic relationship. Tony is a Seton Hall dropout, while Dr. Melfi earned a medical degree from Tufts University. When Melfi rejects his romantic advances Tony says it's okay because: "I already got a girlfriend – she's Russian – 24- how old are you" (*Down Neck*)? Insulting Dr. Melfi and insinuating that she is older than his Russian girlfriend, Tony's intention is to let her know that he can have any girl he wants. In truth, the very woman he wants (Dr. Melfi) is not interested in him. Tony calls Dr. Melfi a call girl and a whore. There is no sign that she is hurt by Tony's comments; she continues to see him as a patient.

Dimensions of Objectification

Early image studies, particularly those focused on advertising, repeatedly found women to be objectified. That is, they were portrayed as sexual objects; their bodies were dismembered, so it was not unusual to see headless torsos or torso-less derrieres and legs; or they were transformed into objects, usually for the purpose of selling other objects. Certainly, these are examples of objectification. But focusing only upon images camouflages other dimensions of objectification evident in relationships between people in this sense. Objectification is a form of marginalization, which suggests that the worth of a person is determined by their value to others. Work in feminist cultural analysis has centered on what Walters (1995) calls 'gender and looking.' In a patriarchal culture women are often viewed as something to be taken in, an object, something on display for men to see. Critic John Berger wrote, "patriarchal society entails that a woman be constructed as an object for the 'look' of the male spectator, or the male voyeur"

(Berger, 1972, p. 46). According to Berger, women begin to believe they are objects to be looked at:

> She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of critical importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life….*men act* and women *appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object of vision: a sight. (p. 46)

There are both blatant and subtle examples of women's objectification in the traditional sense in which that term is used. In the first scene of the first episode we see a statue of a naked women in the waiting room of Dr. Melfi's office. Tony stares at the statue, not with an expression of lust, but an expression of bewilderment, as if women were the cause of his problems. In Satriale's, the butcher shop that Tony and his friends frequent, posters of naked women including Marilyn Monroe, cover the walls. Throughout the series, in the most blatant representations, there are the strippers at the Bada-Bing! In every scene at the Bada Bing! the strippers go nameless and half-heartedly march around poles on a stage that is surrounded by a bar. They are always visible at the Bada-Bing!; they are like pieces of furniture, to be looked at and used, but are excluded from the discourse. In the first episode of season 1 (*The Sopranos*) one of the strippers has to be told that Tony doesn't pay for his drinks. If she had been included in general conversation at the Bada Bing! she would know that Tony receives special treatment. The strippers, then, are essentially in Berger's term, "objects of vision," but so too are objectified as sexual currency.

In some instances they are offered as gifts to men that come in the bar. When Meadow's soccer team wins a big game the coach is invited to the club for drinks and offered a stripper as a reward for the win. Tony and his friends often hire strippers and prostitutes as a form of entertainment. Though the strippers and prostitutes are never mentioned by name, each of the men has his favorites. 'Goomars', or girlfriends, are also objectified. All the men have at least

one who they treat as objects to be used, traded, or discarded. Ralph Cifaretto is dating Valencia, who he describes as "gorgeous" and "sweet as sugar." She is an art dealer and Tony takes an immediate interest in her even though he knows she is dating Ralph. He takes her to lunch and then to a hotel. To Tony she is someone with whom to have sex, not a relationship. He is also pleased that his involvement will end the relationship between Ralph and Valencia. When he is 'done' with Valencia, and has discarded her like trash, he sends her a diamond brooch in the shape of a horseshoe. He sends the same brooch to every women he breaks up with. To Tony every "women on the side" is the same woman – a sexual object, a possession to entertain him for a while before he moves on. Tony tells his friends who he has 'been with,' the expectation being that he is the only one who can 'have' that particular woman.

At one point Tony is dating a Russian girl named Irina. After they break up Tony learns that Irina is dating a business acquaintance. When the man asks if Tony would mind if they dated Tony says "What am I her father? Enjoy yourself. She's a great girl – a little needy – frankly I'm glad to have her off my payroll" (*Watching Too Much Television*). Irina, in Tony's mind is an employee, a burden. In some sense he is like her father. He pays her living expenses as he pays for Meadow, and he is old enough to be her father. Later he goes to the man's house and thrashes him with a belt. He says "of all the girls in New Jersey you had to fuck this one – go ahead, cry like a bitch" (*Watching Too Much Television*). Tony views the girl as a possession that was taken from him though he was not dating her anymore. Tony's use of the word 'bitch,' is intended to insult a man, but also indicates the general attitude of men towards women.

Misogyny

Indeed, misogyny, defined as the hatred of women, is revealed on *The Sopranos* verbally and non-verbally. Women are referred to as 'bitches', 'cunts', 'whores', and in other derogatory ways. Name-calling and identifying women as different from men places women in the category of 'Other.' Further, if a man wants to insult another man he uses names usually reserved to describe a woman such as a 'bitch' or 'cunt'. Or, he will insinuate that the man's mother will perform sexual acts as a way of insulting him. Even Tony's young son Anthony Jr. tells his

friend that his mother 'blows' (*Meadowlands*). Things associated with the feminine are also seen in a negative light. When Christopher is upset Tony tells him "this is no time to go on the rag" (*Tennessee Moltisanti*). The women are treated as less than human in the way they are physically, emotionally, and sexually abused by the men in their lives. When Ralph Cifaretto impregnates one of the strippers at the Bada Bing! he beats her to death when he finds out she is pregnant. Paulie 'Walnuts' steals from one of his mother's friends at the nursing home and when she catches him in the act he bludgeons her to death. Carmela, Janice, Adriana and Dr. Melfi all suffer forms of physical abuse during the course of the series, and other forms of abuse have already been detailed above.

<u>The Importance of Appearance</u>

Rapping (1999) writes that "appearance, of course, has always been crucial to the representation of women on TV." (p. 281)Appearances are very important to the women on the show. The female characters appear to see their appearance as a project, something on which they must continually focus. They take very good care of themselves, getting manicures and pedicures, visiting day spas, hair salons, and working out together. Carmela works out, takes tennis lessons, and often checks her appearance in the mirror or the reflective surface of the oven if she is in the kitchen. Meadow sees Carmela's efforts and refuses to eat breakfast. Meadow's friend Hunter says she uses bulimia to get her parents' attention. And yet, as images of ideal feminine beauty abound in our culture, and the women take on the body project, the women in *The Sopranos* are attractive but not 'super-model' quality. Irina and Valencia, two of Tony's many girlfriends, are both beautiful. Tony's pursuit of perfection in women is limited to girlfriends – Carmela, while attractive, is not a super-model.

Berger's notion that women see *themselves* as objects is dramatized in an episode during season 4 called "The Weight." That the episode is called 'The Weight' is indicative of how important the issue is to the narrative. At a dinner where only men are present one of Tony's associates, Ralph Cifaretto makes a joke about Ginny saying she is "having a 90 pound mole removed from her ass." In the next scene Ginny is seen in her bathroom weighing herself and

writing down the number on the scale. She weighs 250 lbs. Tony goes to see Johnny Sac, Ginny's

husband and member of the competing New York crime organization, shortly after the incident.

> Tony: You and Ralph are friends - you go way back.
>
> Johnny: Did you hear what my *friend* said about my wife – said she had a 90 lb. mole on her ass.
>
> Tony: That's deplorable.
>
> Johnny: She's been fightin' a weight problem since the kids were born. Weight watchers, Richard Simmons – fasting – she works very hard.
>
> Tony (points to his belly) you tellin' me how hard it is?
>
> Johnny: It's different for women – body image, self-esteem. I'll tell you though I never had a problem with Ginny's weight – to me she's beautiful – reubenesque – that woman is my life – to think she was being mocked – she's the mother of my children.

In a rare show of honor and respect for women (from any man on the show), Johnny

expresses his love for his wife. He understands how important body image is for women and he

recognizes how hard she has worked to lose weight. He defends Ginny throughout the episode,

but when he catches her sneaking candy he blames her for the problems he has at work, a result

of the insensitive joke. Johnny leaves for a trip, but forgetting something, returns home minutes

later. He finds Ginny in the basement with a big box of candy.

> Johnny: What the hell is this? I thought you were on the Atkins.
>
> Ginny: I was, I am, it's hard John, I'm trying. (He picks up the box and dumps the candy bars all over her.)
>
> Johnny: This is how you try? I'm not out of the house ten minutes?
>
> Ginny: I was dizzy – I was having low blood sugar.
>
> Johnny: What happened to the fruit salad, then?
>
> Ginny: What's wrong with you? Why are you yelling at me?

Johnny: Did I ever ask you to go on a diet? Did I ever ask you to be thin for me? Fasting, the nutra-systems, those God damn deal-a-meal cards.

Ginny: It's the world John – our culture.

Johnny: Fuck that. Do you have any idea what you've done? You lied to me – you lied.

Ginny: I know I've put on weight these last few years. I see other wives – the way men look at them.

Johnny: Don't I look at you like that? Haven't I always? (Ginny nods and cries.)
It was your idea, all this dieting nonsense.

Ginny: I wanted you to be proud of me.

Johnny: I am proud of you. I love you.

Ginny articulates the cultural norm and the fear that accompanies not looking like everyone else. She recognizes that she is an "object," and fears she is not worth looking at. Ginny's motivation for losing weight is to please her husband. She diets so Johnny will be proud of her. Ginny is dependent upon her husband's opinion of her for her own self-esteem, and recognizes that she does not have the self-discipline to lose weight. The other men, in reference to a popular whale, call her 'Shamu'. Thus, it is socially acceptable to make fun of a woman for her weight, women should be thin, and that being overweight is a sign of weakness and a loss of control. Though Johnny defends Ginny he later tells a business associate it was "my wife's honor, my honor" that was at stake. Ultimately, Ginny is an extension of her husband, and it is *his* honor that concerns him, not hers.

Most of the women on the show are attractive according to cultural standards. Dr. Melfi is usually shown in her office, well-groomed with not a hair out of place. She wears tailored suits, hose, pearls and pumps and drives a Jaguar. Dr. Melfi dresses well and takes care of herself. She is materially well-off without a man but recognizes that she is an object of vision. For Carmela and the wives of Tony's friends, the work to keep up their appearances is for the men in their lives versus themselves. They maintain their appearances to maintain their *positions*. In every episode Carmela is well dressed, her hair is highlighted, nails are perfectly manicured and

outfits, if not tasteful, are expensive. Even Carmela's workout clothing matches and is expensive looking. Carmela spares no expense when it comes to her appearance. She has her hair done for events such as a hospital benefit held at their home, and treats herself to weekly manicures, facials, and more. Her appearance is closely regulated by Tony as evidenced when he finds she got her haircut without his permission. He says: "What the hell did you do to your hair? I thought we agreed you were gonna talk to me first if you were gonna do something to your hair." Carmela is Tony's possession over which he has such control that he can regulate her hairstyle.

Appearances, or "image" are also very important to men. When Tony and his friends go into the city for parties and gatherings they wear double-breasted suits, silk ties, and long formal overcoats. Still, many of the Soprano men are overweight, some grotesquely so, and it doesn't seem to bother them, no is it a sign of failure.

Feminism

Feminism is seen as a negative mindset on *The Sopranos*. The one character who claims to be a feminist, Tony's sister Janice, is a lying, manipulative woman who has ulterior motives for even the most benign activities. Janice claims to be a feminist, but to her feminism means searching for identity outside the norm. She practices alternative forms of medicine and refers to God as 'She'. Though she claims to be a feminist she accepts Tony's financial support – in fact, she welcomes it and asks for more. As the media functions as an ideological tool, this representation of feminism places all feminists in a negative light. There are other references to feminism and feminists on *The Sopranos*. Carmela Soprano and her friend Rosalie discuss finances and how their husbands control the money in the household. Carmela says: "I'm not a feminist – I'm not saying 50-50" but she would like to be consulted on household matters. To Carmela feminism means having an equal role in the household she shares with her husband. Tony's friend Sil says his daughter is opposed to the strip club the Bada Bing! because it "objectifies women and all that feminist shit" (*Down Neck*).

The Rewards of Accepting Traditional Gender Roles

The women on *The Sopranos* accept the identities that the male characters want for them. They are strippers, mothers, daughters, girlfriends, and always seen in relation to men. While the men move freely from business settings to home, to strip clubs, etc. the women are mostly limited to the domestic sphere. Exceptions include the strippers seen at the Bada Bing!, Dr. Melfi in her office, and Charmaine Bucco in the restaurant. Charmaine and Artie Bucco own Vesuvio, an Italian restaurant frequented by Tony and his crew. Charmaine is also Carmela's childhood friend and is one of the few positive representations of women on the show. She embodies honesty and hard work and despises Tony and the other mobsters who frequent Vesuvio. She is honorable, diligent in her work, and is constantly discouraging Artie from associating with Tony and his friends. Charmaine knew when she married Artie that she would not enjoy the same socio-economic position as Carmela but she accepts her station in life without complaint because she says she can sleep well knowing she is hard-working and honest.

There is a pattern of 'punishment' for the women on the show who break from the patriarchal model. Her 'reward' for her moral righteousness is a divorce from Artie because he has been corrupted by Tony and his friends. Tony loaned Artie a significant amount of money which he could not pay back, and he ends up in a deep depression and almost loses his restaurant. Charmaine has enough, and files for divorce. Charmaine ends up divorced and alone. Dr. Melfi, who works outside the home and is a mother as well, ends up divorced and is raped in season 3. The rape occurs in her office parking deck long after everyone else has left work. The rape can be seen as punishment for putting work before family. Adriana is also 'punished' when she tries to break free from the Mafia and becomes an FBI informant. Tony finds out, and Adriana is killed. Finally, Bobby Baccalieri's wife Karen who is a loving mother and wife is killed in a car accident. Bobby was the only one of Tony's friends that did not have a girlfriend, and Karen's death is devastating to him. Bobby is punished for being a loving father and husband, and being just as loyal to his family as he is to the family business.

The women on *The Sopranos* are varied and complex, but they all have something in common: they are willing to endure the patriarchal structure because the perceived benefits outweigh the abuse. The women who are able to 'escape' do so through death. Adriana, who becomes an FBI informant in exchange for 'a way out,' is killed. Karen Baccalieri, who perhaps was treated well in comparison to the other women, is killed in a car accident. Other women who attempt to escape the system through divorce are stymied. When Carmela attempts to file for divorce, Tony has hired every lawyer in the tri-state area so that she will not have any options. In addition, she doesn't have the money to pay a lawyer. As a result, and because of yet another reconciliation with Tony, she stays in the marriage. The bottom line is that the oppression of women is a constant on *The Sopranos*, and for these women escape has proven to be impossible.

In the course of this research, I realized that my interpretation of the women was very harsh. Perhaps the structural constraints were so limiting that the women were forced into 'survival mode' with no thoughts of escape. Dr. Melfi kept Tony as a patient because she was afraid of what would happen if she didn't. Carmela stays in her marriage because she fears for her life. As noted earlier, I offer only one 'reading' of the text, and other interpretations are, of course, possible.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusions

> Patriarchal ideology, according to Millett, (1970) exaggerates
> biological differences between men and women, making certain
> that men always have the dominant, or masculine, roles and women
> always have the subordinate, or feminine, ones. This ideology is so
> powerful that men are usually able to secure the apparent consent
> of the very women they oppress. They do this through institutions
> such as the academy, the church, and the family, each of which
> justifies and reinforces women's subordination to men, resulting
> in most women's internalization of a sense of interiority to men.
> Should a woman refuse to accept patriarchal ideology and should
> she manifest her mistrust by casting off her femininity – that is,
> her submissiveness/ subordination – men will use coercion to
> accomplish what conditioning has failed to achieve." Intimidation,
> observed Millett, is everywhere in patriarchy. The streetwise
> woman realizes that if she wants to survive in patriarchy, she had
> better act "feminine," or else she may be subjected to "a variety of
> cruelties and barbarities. (Tong, 1998)

As a regular viewer, media scholar, and a feminist, the fact that the master narratives of the show was structured in patriarchy was immediately and unquestionably apparent. What else could be expected from a show set at the intersection of three institutions steeped in patriarchal relationships: the Italian-American family, the Catholic Church, and the Mafia? And yet, the patriarchy which undergirded *The Sopranos* wasn't that to which I'd become accustomed to viewing on television; Tony Soprano was no Ozzie Nelson, though both were the "breadwinners" of their families. Carmela Soprano was no Donna Reed, and Dr. Melfi, unlike Mary Tyler Moore, had no workplace "family" to support her.

In light of this, the question guiding this research was: how are women represented in *The Sopranos*? I sought the answer to that question, in part, by asking a number of secondary questions:

How does the program represent and reinforce a patriarchal system?

What is the 'proper role' of women as represented in *The Sopranos*?

Do women in *The Sopranos* accept or reject the patriarchal structure?

Do women in *The Sopranos* have power? If so, what is the nature of
that power? How is it used?

As the analysis in the previous chapter noted, *The Sopranos* world was patriarchal. Gender roles, with rare exceptions, were consistent with the dominant ideology of patriarchy; men were seen in the public, business world, while women were seen in the private sphere. However, this was not the patriarchy of *Father Knows Best* and 50's sitcoms. While the family norms in a general sense were the same, this was an extreme form of patriarchy, bordering on dysfunction.

Oppression of women came through various forms of power including emotional power, physical power, and economic power. In exchange for maintaining a life of luxury, the women endured physical violence and a constant state of fear, and economic control by men. Having no education and no means of earning a suitable living on their own, the women were 'kept down'. Women, both married and single, were viewed as objects or possessions. The strippers at the Bada Bing! were passed around like candy, as were Tony's girlfriends. In marriages, women 'belonged' to men. Women respected the marriage vows, while it was a given that men would have girlfriends. Finally, there were obvious examples of misogyny throughout the series.

The 'proper,' gender-appropriate role for women represented in *The Sopranos* is in the home, taking care of the children, and meeting the needs of their husbands. They are expected to dress well, represent the family well, work out and stay in shape. They are to ask permission before altering their appearances or making decisions about the children. Thus, even in the private sphere, the "proper" role of women is disrupted. The women in *The Sopranos*, with few exceptions, are vulnerable, emotionally needy and financially dependent. Ultimately, they accept their role in the patriarchal structure when they realize that death is the only form of escape. Carmela wants a divorce from Tony but realizes that if she divorces she will not be able to

maintain the lifestyle to which she is accustomed. She has no education and no way to support herself. Then, too, Tony informs Carmela that he has retained every lawyer in the tri-state area; Carmela would be unable to obtain adequate representation if she decided to go through with the divorce. The relationship maintains the power inequality it has always had. Adriana wants to marry Christopher so badly that she will endure physical abuse, being told what to do, how to dress, where to work, and how to behave. Meadow Soprano wants Tony to pay for her education, her wedding, her car, and otherwise meet all her needs, and so she complies with his wishes. Even the strong female, Dr. Melfi, acquiesces to male dominance. She doesn't want to lose Tony as a patient so she tolerates his attempts to seduce her, and even though she knows Tony has had people follow her and check into her personal life, she maintains the relationship.

Still, though the women are oppressed, they do have some power. That power, however, is limited and ultimately recovered by the male characters. Livia and Carmela's knowledge of Tony's illegal activities gives them a framework for understanding Tony's world, and therefore, power. For example, Carmela's knowledge of Tony's income gives her 'permission' to ask for more of an allowance. Livia's understanding of the business allows her to exert influence with Uncle Junior, as when she suggests Tony get 'whacked.' As noted earlier, Livia is able to emotionally harm Tony by making him feel unloved by his own mother. Carmela doesn't have real power in relation to Tony, but uses his power to get what she wants from others. Dr. Melfi has an academic edge over Tony, and as she is treating him, she has the power to help him work through his depression. However, she is afraid of him, and therefore he remains in power.

As noted in the quotation opening this chapter, intimidation is everywhere in patriarchy. "The streetwise woman realizes if she wants to survive in patriarchy, she had better act "feminine," or else she may be subjected to "a variety of cruelties and barbarities." The women in *The Sopranos* learn that there are consequences for challenging traditional roles, for failure to act feminine. Dr. Melfi, a professional, is seen more frequently in her office than in a personal setting. Her 'punishment' for this excursion into the public sphere is that she sacrificed her family. She is divorced with one child, seeing her ex-husband only on occasion. There is a

general feeling that it was her work that lead to the divorce, even though her husband was in the same profession. The 'punishment' becomes even greater. When late leaving work, Dr. Melfi is raped in the parking garage.

Adriana is 'punished' with beatings when she oversteps her bounds with Christopher. In one instance, she encourages him to enter drug treatment, and he asks 'where do you get your balls' and punches her in the face. Adriana's other 'crime' is betraying the Family, and her punishment is death. She begins working with the FBI, and when Tony finds out he has her killed. In Tony's eyes disloyalty to the Family is the ultimate sin (unfortunately his loyalty does not extend to his marriage).

Unanswered Questions: Opportunities for Future Research

Grounded in cultural studies, feminist theory, and feminist media studies, this research was based on a number of assumptions. First among these is the belief that meaning is socially constructed and never fixed, but constantly produced and reproduced. Second, culture can only be understood in relation to issues of power. Third, popular culture is a site of struggle, "a place where conflicts between dominant and subordinate groups are played out, and distinctions between the cultures of the groups are continually constructed and reconstructed" (Hallows, 2000, p. 27). Fourth, that is it essential to understand how media help shape the values, norms, and beliefs that reinforce gender inequities. And finally, research is a political act. "Feminism, as a critique of existing social relations, assumes change is not only desirable but necessary" (Rakow, 1998, p. 278).

Representation has been a key focus of feminist media research; this textual analysis has contributed to literature in this area. However, as cultural studies scholars have argued, meaning is not something that resides unchanged in a text. Instead, meaning "arises out of a struggle or negotiation…such negotiation takes place during processes of textual production, within the text itself, and in audience readings" (Thornham, 1999, p. 3). Obvious extensions of this work would explore the negotiation of meaning in the production and consumption / reception moments.

Meaning is "encoded" in the process of constructing a text. Hall (1973) noted that a variety of factors influence this production, among them: "routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, (and) definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience" (p. 92). Issues of political economy also enter into message creation. As noted in the literature review, some investigation "behind the scenes" of *The Sopranos* has been undertaken (see Rucker, 2002, Yacowar, 2002). However, these studies have been largely descriptive, and intended primarily for general audiences. A systematic analysis including interviews with the creator, writers, and actors as well as on-location observations during actual production could provide valuable insight into meaning-making as the text is constructed.

Fiske (1987) has noted that television enables audiences to actively participate in meaning making. Underlying this observation is the notion that texts are polysemic, they mean different things to different people depending upon interpretation. Research with viewers of *The Sopranos* through in-depth interviews or focus groups can answer important questions about how audiences negotiate the meaning of *The Sopranos* text in the context of their lives. Are viewers conscious of the patriarchal structures reinforced in the narrative? If so, do they actively engage with the depictions or do they dismiss them, perhaps as "unrealistic," irrelevant, or merely as "entertainment"?

In her book, *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media*, Macdonald (1995) poses a question to which feminists have long sought an answer:

> …why (do) women, many of whom would disown these very
> myths of femininity if they were presented as explicit points of
> view, happily collude with them, and indeed find pleasure in them
> when they are reproduced in the popular media? (p.1)

In-depth interviews with audience members can provide insight into women's pleasure in patriarchal texts.

I have always enjoyed watching *The Sopranos*, and have echoed Macdonald's question about loving a show that directly opposes my beliefs. The violence and language towards women is offensive, the traditional gender-role expectations limiting. Also, as I stated earlier, I have only a marginal interest in organized crime. What I found captivating about the show was the family structure and the relationships resulting from the patriarchal environment. Specifically, I was interested in how the women, living within the patriarchal structure, were represented. To the casual viewer the Soprano family represents a return to the traditional family structure. A closer reading, in the form of a textual analysis, revealed a fractured family and an extreme form of patriarchy. As a feminist scholar the goal of this research was to offer a critical reading of a popular text in hopes of understanding how the women were represented. My hope is that other feminist scholars will undertake a similar project and offer alternate readings of the text, continuing valuable work in feminst television criticism.

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