

The Sopranos.

By Dana Polan.

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232 pages.

Dana Polan's *The Sopranos* is a considered study of the television series as a screen and marketing phenomenon. To this end, Polan aims to "describe and analyze those specific and even unique features of the series that both fostered intense audience involvement in its original unfolding . . . and . . . contributed to the series' extended role in a vaster media landscape" (1). The author invokes, among other things, critical theory, semiotics, new media and media economy scholarship, and postmodernism. As a case study of the modern media environment, with its focus on synergy and the extension of media product across the expanse of the controlling conglomerate's subsidiaries, as well as into the popular culture of its audience(s), *The Sopranos* is a thoughtful and intensive tour de force. Polan, professor of Cinema Studies at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, in addition to numerous contributions to various media study volumes, has in the past focused on American cinema and its cultural and economic moorings. Particularly effective was his analysis of Hollywood's role in the generation of meaning (and patriotism) during World War II, *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative, and the American Cinema, 1940-1950* (Columbia University Press, 1990). Until the establishment of television as the medium of choice for Americans in the 1950s, film was unrivaled as a window on, and reflection of, American culture; in fact, as Polan demonstrated, it was a potent generator of culture. With *The Sopranos*, Polan transposes his obvious erudition to the "new" dominant medium of television, specifically cable, with the series serving as a case study for discussion of the modern, conglomerate-dominated environment.

The book is presented in two parts. Part I focuses upon the evolution of the Home Box Office (HBO) series, from conception through the final episode. Particularly informative and valuable is the discussion of creator David Chase's efforts to play with and often foil audience expectations. The program consistently manifested his awareness of not only the filmic gangster genre at its source but also his proclivity for assimilating European modes of narrative in contrast to the Hollywood paradigm of storytelling. This was on display in the final nonending of the series, wherein menace permeates but is never resolved. Taking place in a diner, where the show's main characters, Tony, Carmela, and family, meet to enjoy a meal, much of the audience undoubtedly was reminded of *The Godfather*, wherein Michael Corleone "does in" the corrupt police captain and the interloping mobster, "The Turk" Sollozzo, over a meal at a "safe" restaurant. In *The Sopranos* the end seems to be coming from every direction as various patrons appear to pose a threat—but if the end ever comes, it is in the mind of the viewer for Chase abruptly ends the series. Of course, those familiar with the series know that it abounds with images and storylines that are reminiscent of Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* film. Coppola, in fact, has stated publicly that the series was essentially nothing more than an updating of the universe he created. This is an area that might have been explored in greater depth by the author. This omission, perhaps, is logically excusable based on Polan's focus on the production and marketing aspects of the series.

Students of media will benefit from Polan's discussion of Theodor Adorno's (and Edward Said's) notion of "late style" in relation to the evolution of the series. He provides a concise and clear application of the concept that should benefit media scholars and students alike. Readers will also benefit from chapters detailing the narrative strategies for the program and their reception by the audience(s). The primary contribution of this volume is, in fact, its detailed analysis of the program's reception and the context for it. Of course, the show is one of the most successful series in television history, and in the modern environment a central issue is how this context and reception play into the marketing of the series. To that end, Part II details the dissemination of *The Sopranos* product across the wide expanse of parent company Time-Warner's holdings. Polan clearly demonstrates the extent to which *The Sopranos*, through its content and broad dissemination, has become a marker of American culture, serving as a metaphor for greed, corruption, and avarice in American life—whether at the individual level or as the bedrock for corporate culture.

If there is one criticism to register, it would be that the author spends so little time discussing the stereotypes presented by the series. After all, in its depiction of Italian Americans, the series is firmly entrenched in the dominant trope: The experience (and attendant stereotypes) of the New Jersey–New York Italian American is front and center, complete with its thick-tongued and ham-fisted address of American WASP culture. It is difficult to imagine a treatise on a work based so singularly on any other ethnic group spending so little time describing and deciphering the images of ethnicity. For many Italian Americans, myself included, viewing the program is a pleasure, but a guilty pleasure nonetheless. Like *The Godfather* before it, the series manages to simultaneously generate varying degrees of pride and disgust, depending on the sensibilities of the viewer. The author does briefly address the issue of ethnic identity and stereotypes, but primarily in terms of the issue as played out in the lives of the characters. While the show's navigation of the issue often made for entertaining television, it also raised the hackles of various citizen organizations concerned over the show's depiction of Italian Americans. In a time when "synergy" continues to dominate the corporate climate, the one-hour program was translated into a variety of formats, all of which trafficked to some degree in depictions of the stereotypically thick-tongued, inelegant, and violent Italian American. Still, in the end, the book is more about the business of programming and product exploitation than about the "Italianness" of the program's content, and to this end the author accomplishes his goal of describing the show's uniqueness and market success. The book is suited to graduate students and advanced undergraduates.

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