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## ETHICAL UPLIFT, “NOT FOR NUTHIN” Charles J. Stivale

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*The Sopranos* by Dana Polan.  
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illustrations. \$74.95 cloth,  
\$21.95 paper.

Dana Polan's *The Sopranos*—the first volume of Spin Offs in the established Duke University Press series *The Console-ing Passions*—presents the challenge to readers, and especially to viewers/fans, of how one might read, understand, and interpret a popular media product in the age of corporate marketing strategies and commercial tie-ins and spinoffs. Throughout a two-part study—the first part devoted to “*The Sopranos* on Screen,” the second to “*The Sopranos* in the Marketplace”—Polan suggests that no nonironic, non-problematized, thus no simple interpretation is possible especially of a series created by writers and producers who deliberately exploited the show's ironic content and shifting cultural status. In the prologue, Polan focuses on the controversial nonending of *The Sopranos*'s final episode as a way to emphasize two main foci of the study: on one hand, series features and motifs (part I) that engendered such fervent audience involvement over a decade and reactions to the nonending, and, on the other hand (in part II), the life of the series *after* its purported end via new media products, including the web.

Focusing on the apparent narrative inadequacies of the series' nonending, Polan argues that many fans fell into several interpretive traps: most notably, they confused narrative levels—“the fiction versus its fabrication and its narration” (5)—and, by demanding to

know what “happened next,” they implicitly denied that Tony Soprano “exists inside a fictional context that has creators behind it” (5). Another trap is that “the show itself had already made clear that no such end would probably be fully satisfying within its framework” (6) by deliberately situating the developing story with references to other, comparable cultural products—for instance, Martin Scorsese’s *Goodfellas* and *The Godfather* films—that *The Sopranos* would evoke, but not imitate. Also, to this strategy of “refusal to satisfy the viewers’ easy expectations,” Polan connects David Chase’s indebtedness to modernist European cinema, yielding an experimental creative thrust, “a practice of popular modernism . . . blending the comforts of the already known with the challenges of the boldly new” (9). Hence, the audience had been set up by this “work of popular culture deeply invested in irony, but an often playful one caught up in the undoing of each and every certainty [one might] try to formulate about the show” (9). Finally, alongside these complex creative strategies, Polan situates the series’ status within the growing corporate mediaverse as a market commodity, as a sociocultural signpost (extending even into the 2004 presidential race), and as an intersection of “not only meaningfulness and substance, but also [of] hipness, newness and cutting-edge innovation” (15).

The different motifs addressed in the “on screen” section I include narrative strategies (in chapter 2; for example, the mix of stand-alone stories with continuous serial tales, and expansion strategies via backstory, unforeseen interactions, and new characters), the complex role played by food (in chapter 3, linking nutrition to memory and also revealing how the insignificant detail could gain significance through later narrative deployment), and the concomitant role played by forgetfulness (in chapter 4; that is, how plotlines disappeared and also how character development seemed to be undone as a character remained locked into cycles of repetition of familiar behavior). In contrast to this repetitive pattern, in chapter 5, Polan borrows the concept of “late style” from Theodor Adorno and Edward Said to describe *The Sopranos* as a manifesto of “the sentiment that [artworks] have literally arrived late on the scene of history and that there’s nothing affirmative left to be said” (65)—hence, belatedness both biologically (for the individual) and historically (for a society). The overarching thematics of the loss of moral certainty—for example, Tony Soprano’s reverence for the lost heroism of Gary Cooper and disdain for the growing culture of victimization—result in a series “peopled with characters who seem out of sync, stuck in a time out of joint” (66). These thematics of loss also

engage issues of physical decay (bodies losing strength, vigor), and Polan ironically reads this belatedness as a caution *not* to read too much into the series' "seeming display of deep meaning" (69), noting the ways that the show can operate "in the register of farcical deflation, reiterating that there may be something both sad and laughable about the destiny of seriousness in ironic times" (71).

Polan shifts the reading strategy significantly in chapter 6, addressing the viewers' experience of *The Sopranos* as a mode of gaming, as they learn "how to assemble the data of a vast fictional universe that requires one to remember plot details and character interrelation across vast stretches of episodic narrativity" (73). While this focus does divert the reading somewhat from the "on screen" thematics, Polan takes up the gaming strategies in order to question, in the chapter's concluding paragraphs, the show's relationship to its target audience. That is, the narrative-as-gaming approach yields a vicarious experience (a kind of Second [viewing] Life, as it were) through which "*The Sopranos* enables the urban sophisticate a chance to slum, an opportunity to throw off propriety and flirt with a scandalous and even dangerous world," since this work of popular culture "provides a temporary, ludic space to indulge in political *incorrectness*" (85). Yet again, ironies abound since the target viewer—cast by Polan as

"upscale," "liberal do-gooder," and "possess[ing] disposable income"—gets set up as seeking to "flirt with taboos and to push the envelope of propriety," while HBO can produce what such viewers might value as "high-quality TV even as it eschewed many of the imputed foundations of such quality in profound drama, moral uplift, deep seriousness, and liberal responsibility" (85). Although Polan ends the chapter there, this apparent digression into narrative-as-gaming allows him to pull the veil away and impute viewers' inherent bad faith and hypocrisy. In this sense, while the chapter's title is "Gaming *The Sopranos*," it's the viewer who has gotten gamed by HBO and through this analysis.

The shift away from a tight focus on series' features and motifs continues henceforth: in both chapter 7 ("Getting High in *The Sopranos*") and 8 ("Qualifying 'Quality TV'"), Polan's concern is the paradoxical status of a popular media product as representing so-called *quality TV*, a term in media studies for "shows of supposed high value" (86). Hence, in chapter 7, the "getting high" in the title refers only incidentally to drug use and primarily to culture in terms of the art-house form of *The Sopranos* (due to the influence of European cinema on producer David Chase), notably, the sobriety of style, the theatrical influence on the production, and idiosyncratic, even mysterious scenes (like the many dream

sequences; Christopher's near-death view of hell as an Irish bar; and Tony's coma-induced visions and subsequent peyote trip in the Nevada desert). Polan's key point returns yet again: all of these traits "may hint at meaning but never deliver it up since their real power lies in their performance of style and look" (99). Then, in chapter 8, Polan locates *The Sopranos* within the TV medium's search for quality initiated by the tradition of American golden age televised dramas of the 1950s. Polan also explores, in chapter 9, another aspect of quality TV in the medium's early decades, specifically the domestic sitcom that had a strong influence on *The Sopranos*, with the added twist, of course, that in *The Sopranos*, the depiction consists of intersections of *two* families, domestic and Mafia. Polan concludes chapter 9 by emphasizing that any attempt to separate *The Sopranos*'s quality from the popular culture and comedy to which the show owes so much would constitute "a rearguard action, the quite unintended comedy of an often university-based criticism" (112).

This rather surprising sneer signals Polan's segue to chapter 10, "Against Interpretation," an unnecessarily lengthy meditation on (and against) his already developed point that "mak[ing] too much of the meaning of things would be to run the risk of overinterpretation" (113). Whereas Polan's shift of focus in chapters 6 through 9 toward

gaming and quality TV complemented and enriched the already stimulating analysis of features and motifs (chapters 2–5), chapter 10 comes off as a rather high-minded and, indeed, peculiar imitation of *The Sopranos*'s "piercing [of] the pretensions of high art," in this case, contra the critics thereof. Polan's complaint is that critics (notably, authors of "a half dozen or so *academic* books on HBO's *The Sopranos*," Polan's emphasis) treat the show "as a vehicle for real-life issues and claim that the show's emotional and intellectual appeal stems from trafficking in such topics" (114). Although Polan admits that such issues do serve as "signposts that audiences recognize and can lock into," his objection is that these are really "recognizable big issues that bring one into the work but that serve ultimately as free-floating motifs in a playful environment where proper morality is suspended and where willful ambiguity is exploited" (115). While Polan seems blissfully unperturbed that this statement is, in itself, an interpretation, he provides undaunted a list of ways academic critics fall short, for example, through repetitiveness and a "discourse of obviousness," and often by inappropriately applying standards of political correctness (notably, regarding ethnic stereotyping).

So, while distancing himself from such purported misreadings of *The Sopranos*, he carefully hedges

his critical bets: "The point is not so much that any reading is the correct one but that the critic needs to be attentive to the complexities of the means by which *The Sopranos* incorporates issues and themes into its plots as ambiguous motifs that can be read and evaluated in numerous ways" (117), a statement to which I return below. Polan chastises "most scholarly interpreters of *The Sopranos*" for having sought "firm moral lessons in the show . . . as if the only way to legitimate serious scholarly attention to the series is to attribute a sort of ethical uplift to it" (120). Not that *The Sopranos* does not raise moral issues "that scholars claim to find in it. It does, indeed, constantly raise them, but not in a way that can be readily resolved" (123). Yet, Polan provides little evidence that anyone, scholars or others, actually seeks to resolve any such issues at all.

Still, the real issue for Polan seems to be the manner in which postmodern cultural products defy interpretative strategies, since "postmodern works not only are about the difficulties of final meanings, but they often directly represent the ill-fated encounter between interpreter and text by staging scenes where interpreters fail at making meaning" (124). That is, works like *The Sopranos* are savvy both by showing "the pretense of interpretation at work" and by "gently mock[ing] the activity" (125). Given the narrative structure

that includes regular psychotherapy, references to film and literary analysis, and, of course, an array of dream sequences, as well various "culture mavens," aka (says Polan) "veritable sanctimonious creeps" (130), the series undoes the powers of high culture to endow "higher qualities of ethics and discernment" by "portray[ing] cultural capital as something urban professionals flaunt smugly as one more tool of power, influence, scheming, and condescension toward others" (130). The real caution for viewers and (mis)interpreters of all stripes is that "*The Sopranos*, then, may be sardonically postmodern in its cynicism about progress and the rationalists who believe in it and who want their art and culture to offer uplifting, deeply serious lessons about it" (132).

So, as we turn to the final chapter in part I (chapter 11, "New Jersey Dreaming"), the reader has been duly warned not to be pretentious enough to seek depth or seriousness or, at least, to be cautious in doing so. Yet, in a chapter that would have been better placed among the early ones (on the series' features and motifs), Polan returns to the thematics of a "New Jersey of the mind," "the artifice of escapism, even as a darker anxiety lurks below" (134). This chapter deals really with how the characters, like us, try to construct a reality that protects them from "fallen, degraded realities" that surround us/them through postmodern

culture's turn to "sardonic laughter" (136). Notable here, says Polan, is "the interplay of 'gorgeousness' and 'garbage'" (136), human waste products and detritus opposing "any notion of a nostalgic gorgeousness" (137). Hence, New Jersey stands as the quintessential locus of dilapidation, of waste, of the crass, and to this dismal vision corresponds the nonending with which Polan began the study: "*The Sopranos* at least recognizes an end to fantasy, recognizes the limits of comfort, recognizes the inadequacies of nonstop consumption, . . . hint[ing] at a larger world of issues and responsibilities beyond its fiction, even as it may refuse to offer any clear path through them" (141).

Various issues relating *The Sopranos* to the marketplace already appeared in part I, and Polan fully takes up this focus in part II. Concluding that "*The Sopranos* meets up with its fans in specific locales—from bus tours to ivory towers—and each of these gives the show new value" (145), Polan presents (in chapter 12, "Tie-Ins and Hangers-On") and chapter 13 ("Touring Postindustrialism") his tale of taking *The Sopranos* bus tour in North Jersey, as well as a brief review of *Sopranos*-related products (DVDs, paraphernalia, pinball machines, various kinds of books, and especially cookbooks). However "goofy" these tie-ins and ancillary products may be, they tell us "something serious about the workings of popular culture in the

media economies of today" (154). Polan's review of the bus tour helps him advance his conclusions regarding this "market of wannabe parasitism" around the series: "Just as the show depicts in its story world both the profitable activity of the Mafia (and the Mafia housewives) *and* the envy of those who have a fascination with that activity and want to glom onto it, . . . so too does the show itself, as economic and cultural fact, captivate onlookers and encourage hangers-on to want to profit from it" (161). In chapter 14 ("Cashing In on the Game"), he reports on how the local New Jersey *Star-Ledger* served as a kind of unofficial promotional device for the production of successive seasons of the series. However, this journal was emulating (or serving as model for) activities of various North Jersey residents also seeking to benefit from the show's existence, and Polan very cannily finds a device to show how the fiction mirrors reality. For, in the montage from the last episode of season 2 in which the celebration at Meadow Soprano's graduation party is intercut with scenes of illicit, Soprano Mafia-family activity "that dramatizes economics as an ever-expanding network that eventually will draw everyone into its sphere of influence for better or for worse, for economic advancement or decline" (166)—the tie-ins (books, bus tour, etc.) similarly participate "in the informal economy around the

authorized transactions the show engages in" (172).

As he nears the end of the study, Polan presents chapter 15, which more formally considers "Cable and the Economics of Experimentation," making the not-surprising point that HBO, rather than being in this series for the art (at least not primarily), was in it for the money. To do so, HBO attracts a certain quality (aka demographic) of viewer as subscriber, but does so without needing to please advertisers, hence engaging "in broader-based marketing through sex, sleaze, and violence as much as uplifting quality" (176). Despite HBO executives' denial of calculated strategies to enhance the cultural appeal of *The Sopranos*, Polan points out the link between HBO subscription and upcoming seasons of the series, product placement *within* the series, and also the "cable futures" of the show, for example, through its syndication in expurgated format on the A&E channel. Not that *The Sopranos* typified the HBO auteur-ist series (this honor fell to Larry David, according to the *Los Angeles Times* columnist Paul Brownfield [182]). But by situating *The Sopranos* "within the larger context of a media industry that is endlessly testing the waters of social taste at large" (183), Polan suggests how *The Sopranos* gained "an aura of cinematic resistance to standard television screen images" (185) and served "as a fitting symptom of cutting-edge New

Hollywood" (187). Moreover, as Polan concludes the chapter, the success of *The Sopranos* incited network and cable outlets to seek comparable success through imitation, fueled by a kind of "HBO envy" across the industry.

By following this lengthy analysis of popular media and corporate interests with a mere two-page final coda (chapter 16, "This Thing of Ours"), Polan underscores one of three objections I have to this challenging but ultimately disappointing study. First, slipshod editing seems to account for the two-page finale that actually belongs within chapter 12, on tie-ins, and the book would certainly have benefited from an actual concluding chapter synthesizing both parts of the study. Other editing anomalies include the lengthy chapter 15, which would have better served (in edited form) as the introductory chapter, thereby grounding subsequent analyses within the broad industry framework. The long footnote 1 in chapter 1 (198–200), on the relationship between post-modernism and narrative, would have been better suited within the text. And which keen editorial eye let this parenthetical assertion into print, that in *The Godfather* part 1, as a result of the assassination attempt early in the film, "Vito [Corleone] eventually dies of his wounds" (21)? Were this so, all of Vito's subsequent efforts to counsel Michael Corleone and the famous heart attack in the tomato patch



would have occurred from beyond the grave.

The missing conclusion and questionable editing correspond to my second objection regarding the book's incompleteness, in that Polan misses several kinds of televisual evidence that would have bolstered different points. Notably, given his discussion of the series' relationship to Hollywood culture, on one hand, and the deliberate narrative references to the movie industry, on the other, Polan inexplicably omits any reference to the hilarious season 6-I, episode 7, "Luxury Lounge," during which Christopher and Little Carmine Lupertazzi visit Los Angeles and court Sir Ben Kingsley for a role in their slasher/mob film, *Cleaver* (with Christopher and his Alcoholics Anonymous buddy, Murmur Zancone, then mugging Lauren Bacall for her luxury lounge swag). Polan also omits discussion of the premiere of *Cleaver* (season 6-II, episode 1, "Soprano Home Movies") and the tie-in video, with the bonus DVD feature "Making *Cleaver*."

Another objection links to such incomplete detail, specifically Polan's interpretive lapses, which he seems to anticipate with the previously cited injunction "that the critic needs to be attentive to the complexities of the means by which *The Sopranos* incorporates issues and themes into its plots as ambiguous motifs that can be read and evaluated in numerous ways" (117). Polan is quite selective in

presenting certain narrative elements while omitting others, and drawing conclusions based on less, rather than more, information. One example is Polan's use of the scene of psychotherapy (season 3, episode 3, "Favorite Son") in which the therapist, Jennifer Melfi, tries to help Tony understand the trigger for his panic attacks (the sight of freshly cut meat) with a comparison to Proust's madeleine. Whereas Polan (and many online citations of this particular scene) limit the reference to Tony's reply, "This sounds very gay," the conclusion Polan draws is altogether unsatisfactory, that "Melfi's learned allusion and Tony's disdainful response flit up and float away in relative insignificance" (50). On the contrary, the information gleaned from this scene constitutes it as a *major* (not minor) turning point for the viewers' (and characters') understanding of the narrative backstory, as well as the subsequent narrative.

Another example of an interpretive lapse is Polan's reference to the Vito Spatafore Jr. subplot (good kid turned Goth nihilist following his dad's brutal murder) as "an inconsequential plot line" and to Vito Jr. as "a youthful character who mattered to no one" (23). In pointing to this as typical of a show that took "its leisurely time" in presenting "a discrete, disconnected subplot" when "it should have been hurtling toward a startling narrative conclusion" (23),

Polan fails to cite the earlier scenes of the Spatafore children trying to make sense of their father's sudden absence, then reappearance, and then final disappearance and newspaper reports of the murder and assertions of homosexuality. Whereas Polan wants these "precious moments" to have been devoted to the battle between Tony and Phil Leotardo, he seems to miss the importance of these minor sequences as contributing poignantly to establishing closure in one narrative thread and thereby showing the impact of this New Jersey–New York City battle on the lives left behind. Both of these examples, I contend, constitute interpretive lapses, and, no doubt, my differences with Polan do correspond to his injunction regarding the possibility for multiple readings and evaluations. However, whereas he sees the Vito Jr. subplot and the Proust discussion as minor (the former) and relatively insignificant (the latter), as both a fan *and* a critical reader, I find both to have important connections and significance to the overall narrative.

I would extend this critical difference to Polan's misguided reading of the Vito Sr. story, which he sees as an "interruptive detour" that points to "the ways *The Sopranos* incessantly gives itself over to detour and distension of narrative progression" (23–24). However, the entire Vito Sr. tale creates important links to the overall narrative in several ways: first, at the end

of season 5, the Tony Soprano vs. Phil Leotardo battle begins with the vengeance sought by Phil (for his brother's murder by Tony's cousin, Tony II). So, in season 6-I, the Vito Sr. tale emerges as much more than a detour: Vito's homosexuality is a dual insult to Phil's family values, as an infraction of the mob's code and as an insult to Phil's own family (since Vito's wife, Marie, is Phil's second cousin). Moreover, Vito's execution by Phil is both a direct challenge to Tony's leadership and thus an escalation of the Tony vs. Phil battle that constitutes the focal confrontation of the final season 6-II. While Vito Sr.'s sojourn with "Johnny Cakes" in New England may have been a rather odd episode of "Brokeback Mafia," the overall arc in season 6-I establishes the intractable personality of Phil and his disgust with the weakness he sees in the north New Jersey version of "this thing of ours."

Polan delimits an excellent set of features and motifs to analyze and, by and large, acquits himself well in his readings, as well as in their situation within the popular media. As I hope I have made clear, my differences concern not only the organizational and analytical lapses I have identified, but also Polan's seeming inability or unwillingness to see his own analysis as part of the university-based criticism for which he has so little use. For someone who insists on the importance of noting the irony in

*The Sopranos* and on how the show mocks the activity of interpretation, Polan seems unaware of the irony in his own critical stance. Of course, in the grand scheme of things—for example, corporate marketing and continued production of (relative) quality TV, not to mention global warming and economic crises—such objections and academic disputes are altogether petty and the stuff of ridicule, revealing my perhaps too self-absorbed commitment as a fan to a show that has had, and continues to have, meaning to my recreational and critical activities. Still, whatever the strategies might be behind HBO's production of its various series, shows like *The Sopranos*, *Oz*, *The Wire*, *Deadwood*, and *Rome* all allow viewers a means to invest in various fictional worlds, tales, and characters, and to enjoy these on whatever levels and at whatever depths appeal to them. As a colleague pointed out to me, while Polan and others might put "quality" in quotes, if the shows weren't of real quality—the kind that comes without quotes—we wouldn't be having this discussion, nor books devoted to this series.

—Wayne State University