
From the Instructor

Morgan's study brings to conscious critical attention the deeper affective dimensions of *The Sopranos* subtly crafted in the interplay between the dominant level of the visual text and the more elusive dimensions effected through various auditory elements. Many viewers will have some conscious awareness of certain more obvious aspects of the soundtrack. So, as Nochimson points out, the contrast between the tough A2 gangster cut rolling through the credit sequence and the opening scene with Tony sitting in the cloistered silence of the psychoanalyst's waiting room is abrupt enough to be read more or less on the surface. So also is some of the narrative content of the lyrical associations playing out in apposition to overall episodes with rolling credits, or at times embedded as soundtrack accompaniment in specific scenes.

Morgan's analysis, however, goes beyond these relatively obvious juxtapositions to explore how not only the more overt narrative lyrical content reinforces narrative lines in the dramatic action, but also how more subtle aesthetic elements not only of sound, including animals, telephones, and other ambient elements, but even also of the absence of sound, as in the sessions with Melfi, play into the richly developed texture of the psychoanalytical process that sets *The Sopranos* apart from all that had preceded it in the genre. Morgan quite rightly detected how the layered mysteries of the psychoanalytic process playing out in Soprano's troubled and contradictory psychology are expressed through the subtle aesthetics of sound, and how specifically the various dynamics of sound serve not only to convey the un-, or sub-conscious processes unfolding in Soprano's psychoanalytic adventure, but also how they serve to engage unconscious mechanisms of our own sympathy with and in their suspension—revulsion at the monster within.

— Michael Degener

WR 100: Renaissance TV: Serial Drama and the Cable Revolution

From the Writer

The idea for this paper began with a gasp-inducing epiphany while watching episode number five of *The Sopranos* series. This epiphany was born from the animal noises distracting Tony Soprano as he murders Fabian Petrulio and it evolved into the thesis described in this paper as more and more evidence of a relationship between sound and the theme of psychoanalysis became apparent to me. I originally submitted “What’s Out of Sight is Not Out of Mind” as my second paper for Professor Michael Degener’s WR 100 course, “Renaissance TV: Serial Drama and the Cable Revolution.” With the permission of Prof. Degener, the piece turned into my final paper because I felt I had so much more to explore on the subject of sound in *The Sopranos*. Thus, the paper grew in length and in range of thought, representing the culmination of my work in the WR 100 course.

Early on in watching the series, I noticed some interesting characteristics about the music in the show, most notably the fact that the music did not always seem to match the narrative content of the show, which brought me to pay close attention in my notes to the effect of the music. Thus, when Tony became briefly distracted at the subtle sounds of animal noises while killing Fabian Petrulio in episode number five my theory about the music began.

— Morgan Barry

WHAT'S OUT OF SIGHT IS NOT OUT OF MIND: PSYCHOANALYSIS AND SOUND IN *THE SOPRANOS*

It is difficult, after forging a relationship with the undeniably charming Tony Soprano, to watch him kill Fabian Petrulio. In watching his many therapy sessions, family dinners, and his often child-like behavior, we come to form an endearing image of Tony. It is thus all the more disturbing to watch this beloved yet tempestuous family man strangle another, who like Tony, is a father and husband too. We wince and grimace watching the victim's purpling face, his bulging veins and eyes, Tony's hands bleeding as they are cut by the wire around Fabian's throat ("College"). This image of Tony as a brutal killer is indelible. However, at this potent moment, there is a breach in Tony's brutal killer exterior. With his hands still firmly holding the cord around Petrulio's neck, Tony looks up, eyes flinching slightly, at the sound of an animal in the distance. In this moment, the subconscious Tony, that Tony possessed of a certain humanity and conscience, breaks through the monstrous exterior. The process of psychoanalysis, which is brought out in the narrative content of the show in Dr. Melfi's office, is thus augmented by the added effect of the auditory register. For Tony, what is out of sight is not out of mind, as *The Sopranos* uses the elements of sound, music, and silence as accompaniment to the unfolding of the psychoanalytical process in the show.

In the scene where Tony kills Fabian Petrulio, the ambient natural sounds of the auditory register serve to reiterate the psychoanalytic process in the show by lending an ear to Tony's thoughts as he commits the murder. We first see an incongruity between the auditory and the visual register when Tony looks up at the sound of animal in the woods as Petrulio mentions Tony's daughter Meadow ("College" 47:50). He looks up a sec-

ond time, distracted by the sound again, after “the rat” is silenced (49:00). The significance of Tony’s distraction at these sounds is then finally made obvious when he looks up a third time as the sounds of a telephone ringing and quacking ducks (which Tony sees flying overhead) are combined in an overlay together just before showing a close-up shot of Meadow’s face as she waits for her father. The use of sound in the scene seems to suggest that Tony is thinking of his family in this difficult moment.

The occasional incongruity between the visual and the auditory register intones multiple dichotomies in the show, highlighting particularly the contrasts between the conscious and the subconscious and the two sides of Tony Soprano. Although in the visual aspect Tony is murdering Fabian Petrulio, the distraction caused by and the significance of the sounds in the scene suggest Tony’s mind is somewhere else, a duality that resembles the process of psychoanalysis. Tony is first distracted by the animal sounds as Petrulio mentions his daughter, Meadow, who is waiting for him to rejoin her for a college tour. As he is leaving the scene of the murder, the sound of a ringing telephone plays in conjunction with the quacking ducks. Meadow reveals after Tony rejoins her that she had called their hotel room several times looking for him. This playing of the telephone thus connects the two in the auditory register despite their being in two different places on the level of conscious action, or the visual aspect. Similarly, we along with Tony are made to think of his family as the quacking ducks recall Tony’s association of a family of ducks with his own family in the first episode of the series. The contrast between what we hear versus what we see resonates with the process of psychoanalysis in that it demonstrates the complexity of Tony’s character. On the surface, to all appearances, Tony is a tough and powerful mob boss; the auditory elements, however, provide evidence that harkens to what lies within the subconscious beneath his tough exterior, which the audience has become accustomed to in watching Tony’s family interactions and therapy sessions.

This incongruity between the visual and the auditory registers is most distinctly played out in the scene with Fabian Petrulio. At the moment when Tony looks up at the animal sounds of the woods around him, we get a glimpse at both sides of Tony, the man and the monster, in one shot, the image of Tony’s eyes looking up to the sky as his hands pull the cord wrapped tightly around Fabian’s throat. This image recalls

Freud's theory of the struggle between the id, the ego, and the superego, or between man's instinctual desires and his conscience. This struggle between the id and the superego correlates to the struggle between the monster and the family man occurring within Tony's psyche in this scene. Furthermore, it is accentuated by the contrast between the conscious, as demonstrated by the visual register, and the subconscious, as demonstrated by the auditory register. It is the exposure of this dichotomy in Tony that is the overall purpose of the juxtapositions of music with the dynamics of Tony's psychoanalysis.

In addition to the sound design of ambient elements notable in the scene in the woods, the use of music has the effect of resonating with the psychoanalytical element of the show. Although her essay focuses primarily on the narrative content of the show, Martha P. Nochimson, in "Waddaya Lookin' At?: Re-reading the Gangster Genre Through 'The Sopranos'," comments briefly on the effect of the music of the title sequence in the first episode, which appears to contrast the narrative content of the episode. The title sequence, which "is scored by a guttural rendition of 'Woke Up This Morning,' a song with the refrain 'Got yourself a gun'," is contrasted, she claims, by such things as "Tony's seductive 'innocence'" as he plays with the ducks in his pool as well as "Tony's position of subjective child-like confusion in the psychiatrist's office," shown immediately after the song ends (8). Such is the case in many instances where music is incorporated; however, at the end of the first episode the song played does not contrast, but rather is correlative to the narrative content of the episode. The first episode introduces the character of Tony Soprano, a somewhat sensitive family man who has been thrust into a life of crime through life circumstances. The song playing as the credits role immediately at the end of the episode is a cover of Johnny Cash's "The Beast in Me" ("The Sopranos" 59:00). The song's lyrics, which describe "the beast in [the singer]" that "is caged by frail and fragile bars," harken to resonances of psychoanalysis as it relates to Tony Soprano. Tony, like the song's singer, must conceal part of himself from the world; "caged by frail and fragile bars" is the depressed, emotional, and sensitive Tony who "has had to learn to live with pain" without confronting it. Thus the lyrics, specifically as they relate to Tony, reflect the process of psychoanalysis, which deals with the layers of the conscious and unconscious that constitute the self.

Just as the show reflects the inner workings of Tony's subconscious, it also calls out changes in it as well. In the twelfth episode of season one, entitled "Isabella," Tony grapples with the symptoms of depression in the wake of the disappearance of his friend, Pussy Bonpensiero. Tony is reduced to lying in bed all day, "wallowing" in his depression and self-pity (25:20). This potent bout with depression brings Dr. Melfi to add Lithium to his cocktail of anti-depressants, "to give a jolt to [his] system," (16:20). However, the medicine, Tony reports, makes him feel, "dead, empty" (16:39). Tony's feelings of depression, self-pity, and emptiness are expressed by the song "Tiny Tears" by Tindersticks, which plays as Tony takes his medication and slumps into bed, with such lyrics as "You've been lying in bed for a week now" and "you know you're gonna cry, cry." As he deals with the challenges of his depression, conspirators form a plan to kill Tony, a plot that comes to its climax when he is attacked on the street by two thugs. Just before the attack begins, "Tiny Tears" plays again as Tony walks down the street. As the chorus comes to a crescendo, the music is halted abruptly with the sound of shattering glass as Tony dives into his car and begins to fight off his attackers. The abrupt end to the sad ballad of Tony's depression signifies a change in Tony's psyche as the life-or-death situation at hand sparks the needed jolt to his system, putting an end to his wallowing.

In the same way that the show reflects the process of psychoanalysis to the visual and auditory aspects, *The Sopranos* also applies psychological manipulation to its treatment of its audience. *The Sopranos* plays with the psychology of its audience by stripping the show of what is called ritual violence wherein music is played together with violent images in order to subdue the quality of realism. This occurs in one of the first scenes of episode one of the series where Tony beats a man whom he ran down with a car in a public park. The scene begins with the music adding a comical element to what is shown as a jaunty 1950s classic ("I Wonder Why" by Dion and the Belmonts) plays while Tony excitedly chases down his victim ("Sopranos" 9:40). The sense of enjoyment in watching the scene cultivated by the added comical element is halted abruptly at the end of the song when the car finally hits the man. When Tony gets out of the car and begins attacking the helpless wounded man, reality replaces theatricality, as in the void of the lack of music only the sounds of the violent

blows are heard. The blunt transition from music to silence is shocking, as the violence is made more realistic by the lack of music. We, like the bystanders on screen with their wide eyes, gaping mouths, and sickened expressions, are disturbed. In causing us, the audience behind the screen, to experience the same visceral reaction as the 'real' audience of the violence, the show places the spectator in the moment. With music removed, we are not watching theatrical violence or ritual violence, but real violence, and are therefore forced to acknowledge the voyeuristic tendencies of the modern audience. The show thus plays with the psychology of spectating through the use of music.

Silence or the lack of sound is similarly effective in scenes taking place in Dr. Melfi's office where the psychoanalytical process plays out. In other scenes of the show, music is used in order to demonstrate what is happening within Tony's subconscious. As Dr. Melfi and Tony discuss such problems as his relationship with his mother, his feelings towards death, and his depression, all that can be heard is the sound of their voices and their discussion. In these instances, we do not need music to remind us of the other side of Tony, as is the case when he murders Fabian Petrulio, for example. In Dr. Melfi's office music is not needed for this purpose of conveying Tony's subconscious as Tony's subconscious is the main focus of the narrative content. The sole instance wherein music is played in Dr. Melfi's office comes just before the very end of season one in the final episode when Tony comes to see Dr. Melfi after confronting his mother about her hand in the attempt on his life ("Dream" 54:22). He comes to find her office conspicuously empty, except for a custodian listening to loud music out in the hallway. This juxtaposition in Dr. Melfi's presence being always accompanied by silence and her absence being accompanied by music is reflective of the effect of music in the show. In the scenes in her office, music is not needed as Dr. Melfi herself acts as the conduit through which Tony's subconscious is reached and the psychoanalytical process is acted out.

The subconscious thoughts and feelings drawn out in the silence of Dr. Melfi's office are later reiterated by the music of the show when at the end of each episode a song plays expressing similar ideas to those uncovered in scenes where the process of psychoanalysis occurs in the narrative content. This occurs at many significant junctures in the show wherein the

two sides of Tony seem to come into conflict. In the third episode of season one, “Denial, Anger, Acceptance,” Tony mourns the coming death of his dear friend and long-time associate Jackie Aprile, Sr. In his mourning, he ponders his own thoughts about death, which he discusses in therapy with Dr. Melfi. In a therapy session, the subject of Tony’s brute criminal nature is broached when Dr. Melfi asks, “Do you feel like a...thing lacking humanity?” (“Denial” 40:04). Minutes later, at the close of the episode, Elvis Costello’s “Complicated Shadows” plays echoing this conversation between Melfi and Tony as the speaker addresses, “all [those] gangsters and rude clowns” whose “time has come,” and who must face judgment “for what [they]’ve done.” Costello’s question harkens back to Melfi’s question to Tony about his humanity.

The scene in which she asks this question ends before Tony can answer, suggesting that this is perhaps a question that is not yet answerable. The integration of the song, with its punitive lyrics, however, suggests that whatever the substance of Tony’s subconscious emotional side, it does not matter, for he will be judged for the wrong actions of his conscious, criminal side. Thus, the music has the effect here of not just addressing the process of psychoanalysis, but also calling it into question. Here it seems that whether or not there is more to Tony does not matter, he is still a criminal. The ability of the music to recall these discussions of Tony’s subconscious in the therapy sessions offers a reflexive quality to these scenes. Through this mirroring effect, we may scrutinize the therapeutic process in greater detail. The music being played during the credits renders a moment of reflection unencumbered by distracting action in the visual register as well.

The music of *The Sopranos* serves to reiterate the process of psychoanalysis in the show by adding a dimension that reflects the conscious and unconscious elements of the self. While on the conscious, surface level Tony may be murdering Fabian Petruccio, the music demonstrates how his mind is wandering, turning to thoughts of his family and his daughter. As Nochimson acknowledges in her essay, “Waddaya Lookin’ At?”, the music has this same ability to counteract the narrative content while also being able to emphasize it in greater depth as shown by the integration of Cash’s “The Beast in Me” or Costello’s “Complicated Shadows.” This manipulation of psychology also touches the audience as the juxtaposition of music

and silence affects our experience as spectators of the show. In watching the show, we sympathize with Tony; according to the psychoanalytical process played out in the show, Tony, a sensitive man, does not inherently fit the role of the cold and unfeeling mafia-man. The use of the music, however, calls our sympathy into question, asking: does Tony's soft side exonerate him of his crimes? Is he any less of a monster? What does it say about us, the voyeurs of these crimes, that we are entertained by watching them and love the man who commits them?

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