



## 4 Living in the Moment

No doubt, much of our experience, and our memory, of our popular culture revolve around resonant moments: the unforgettable lyric or the striking musical riff, the memorable line of film dialogue, the endearing comic routine, the bravura moment in which style is shown off for its own sake, and so on. Think, for instance, of the fascination that the Academy Awards show has with montages of great moments from great movies. But if one way we use our popular culture is to pick and poach momentary pleasures from it, it is also the case that some cultural works themselves appear to take the fascination with the moment as a structuring principle. In a 1960s essay influential in literary theory, “The Reality Effect,” critic Roland Barthes had argued how details mentioned in a literary work frequently serve as a realist veneer to foster additional interest and reader investment in narrative development.<sup>1</sup> In a sense, much of today’s postmodern popular culture reverses the relationship, so that it is the narrative which now serves as a mere alibi to a variety of plays with form and style. Think, for instance, of special effects-driven spectacular cinema, which often combines the emptiest of plots and the flattest of characters with striking spectacle. Think, more generally, of the fascination with look and design over narrative substance and meaning in so many films, television shows, advertisements, and other works of visual popular culture. In its own fashion, *The Sopranos* tells a series of great stories, but it also uses those stories self-reflexively to insist on its own virtuosity in weaving complex performances—of acting, of visual display, of experiments with temporality and multi-

plicity of characters and character situations—around its varied narrative premises.

The series' impulse to live in the present and its dispersion of a single and singular narrative coherence into a multiplicity of shifting ways of telling a series of stories are frequently and, in their own way, logically accompanied by a sort of narrative forgetfulness. Plot lines may simply disappear and characters may not always seem to learn the lessons of the moment and carry them on into their narrative future. Undoubtedly, a kind of "forgetting" has always been central to episodic television, where each week a fixed set of characters enters into adventures similar to ones they have been involved with in previous weeks and for which they seem to have gained no new insight: Lucy Ricardo, for instance, endlessly tries to get onto her husband's show (and thereby spice up her bounded domesticity), and the Clampetts endlessly confront an urban modernity that they never appear to get the hang of. Growing up, my own favorite was *The Wild, Wild West*, where each week assistant Artemis Gordon would fabricate some clever gadget for spy James West, and that very gadget would turn out to be needed in that episode *but* would never show up again in any subsequent one. Watching the show, I could well get into the various stories, but I also began to sense—as I think many consumers of popular culture do—how conventions of the form and of the individual work could often override any "reality effect."

In terms of this fundamental forgetting endemic to the episodic series, a 2004 *Saturday Night Live* parody of an advertising campaign for the then upcoming fifth season of *The Sopranos* is singularly perceptive. The hiatus between seasons had started to get very long, and this might well test the viewers' memory skills over the years. As the *SNL* narrator announces that the fifteen-month wait for the new season of the series has ended, the screen shows Tony coming into the kitchen of his house and facing hostility from Carmela. When he asks her what he's done to incur her anger, she replies that she can't remember, and this launches the entire cast of *The Sopranos* into an attempt to recollect what happened in previous seasons and episodes (the only thing they all recollect well is that Janice and Ralphie had had weird sex together). Stevie Van Zandt (played by Jimmy Fallon) shows up in E Street Band clothes to say

that it has been so long he's forgotten his character's name and has gone back to performing with Bruce Springsteen. The narrator intones, "*The Sopranos*. The show everyone is talking about, because they're trying to remember just what happened last season."

In *The Sopranos*, such "forgetting" is both structural and thematic. That is, some of the effect derives from the nature of episodic television and its concern for relatively self-contained offerings that tell full, if miniature, stories in their own right, only to start the process all again with the next installment. Some, though, comes from the particular story world *The Sopranos* traffics in. On the one hand, the Mafia operates in the television series as a veritable army, where those sacrificed on the field of battle are always able to be replaced by the next soldier in line and where there will, in any case, be new battles to be fought (and new stories to be told of them). On the other hand, many of the men and women in this particular world are presented as figures of somewhat stunted personality and ambition, fixed in their personality traits, and given over to desires of the moment which take priority over any long-term vision or concern with growth. In some cases, characters rely on the others around them to forget past insults, to overlook the consequences of change and accept it as merely an extension of the present, or to bury the hatchet and proceed as if it were all business as usual. The show, and also the characters in it, frequently work in a sort of iterative mode where they submit to the same behavior again and again. Carmela, for instance, may bridle at Tony's infidelities, but she also constantly retreats to a position where she accepts these as coming with the territory when you're married to a Mafioso. Perhaps no scene captures this sense of a willed repetitiveness on the part of the characters so well as one from the very first episode: in succession, we see Tony take his mistress to a restaurant and then cut to a scene of him taking his wife to the same restaurant, the maitre d' now greeting Tony with the declaration that he hasn't seen him in a long time. The implication is that the maitre d' is playing along with Tony's infidelity and covering up for it, just as Carmela herself has learned a kind of forgetting around Tony's sins of the flesh. In the story world of *The Sopranos*, characters will often try, through compromise, to live life as they always have, and this entails a willful forgetting of change; at the level of the show's temporal

structuring, this entails scenes that frequently appear as repetitions of earlier ones, that leave out information about any change that has transpired between one repetition and the next (for example, it's unclear how much time has transpired between Tony's taking his mistress and his taking his wife to the same restaurant), and that substitute a slow unfolding of plotless duration for eventful narrative.

In this respect, it is tempting to read the non-ending ending of the series in season 7 as, in fact, offering a closure of sorts, even if no end to the narrative was shown. In this view, there is no need to show what might happen next, since in a sense we know already what life had been like, is like, and will be like, for each character: Tony thus will always be seeking quiet moments with his family, even as he knows that menace could come from anywhere and at any time; Carmela may try to find furtive moments of independence, but ultimately she will always be there to stand by her man; Meadow will always be a bit unskilled at things like parallel parking and will always be coming to family events from her own life elsewhere; A. J. will always have limited career ambitions (or, rather, he will have ambition but not the follow-through) and will settle for whatever brings him immediate material comfort (like onion rings).

In the show, living in the present moment goes along with a concomitant structure of stasis, repetition, and cyclicity, where characters seem to replay certain types of behavior again and again rather than move forward. *The Sopranos* tells tales, and certainly by season 7, it has gotten somewhere that it hadn't been before (if only because certain key characters have died), but it also keeps telling versions of the same stories as its characters compulsively repeat the behavior ingrained in them.

Take, for example, the fraught, even perverse, relationship between Tony Soprano's drama-queen sister Janice (Aida Turturro) and Soprano gang member Richie Aprile (David Proval) in season 3 of the series. That season, like the final season, has its own promise of violent and ultimately consequential confrontation between Tony and a rival—in this case the very psychopathic Richie, who, although a member of Tony's gang, is increasingly going his own way and provoking Tony. But suddenly the logical drive of that narrative and the viewer's expectation of a bloody confrontation is fully disrupted when Janice shoots Richie

dead in a domestic squabble. While Janice's killing of Richie comes as a great shock, and not only for what it means in itself but for what it does to the viewer's strong narrative expectation of a final, violent confrontation of Richie and Tony (rather than Janice), the very fact of Janice's taking up with Richie in the first place comes soon to fit a pattern by which in various seasons she becomes involved with members of Tony's crew, often with disastrous results. The surprise of Janice's first dispatching of a lover becomes naturalized into cycles in which she will do terrible things, each unbearable in its own way but all of them becoming predictable markers of her monstrous nature. Over the seasons, as she moves in and out of amorous relationships, Janice will disappear and then reappear, and entirely new narrative situations will develop, but they all seem to come back to this one narcissistic woman who never will change, no matter how many Eastern philosophies she studies or how many revelations of new paths she claims to have had. Perhaps over the years there is some slight intimation of narrative progression (Janice's last relationship in the series, her husband and gang member Bobby Bacala, might have been a keeper—at least until Bobby gets killed by Phil's guys). However, the greater logic is one governed by the impossibility of progress and by the entrapment of characters in modes of behavior and attitude they can never really get out of. Revealingly, in season 5 Janice—irascible and quick to flare up and pick a fight—tries to change her violent ways (or, rather, is ordered by Bobby to do so) by taking an anger-management class. But whatever progress she makes there is quickly undone when Tony (who alone was privy to her killing of Richie) baits her into new outbursts of anger and thereby confirms that she will always be who she is. As Janice bears out to the extreme, characters in the series may show promise of progress, but it is as often the case that their "stories" are non-narrative ones of regression, in which they fall back on attitudes and modes of behavior they always have displayed.

Perhaps, if we want to play the game of comparing *The Sopranos* to a literary genre, it should not be so much to the story-centered, character-driven form of the nineteenth-century novel—for example, Dickens's *David Copperfield*, whose famous opening line establishes its strong investment in overarching narrativity: "Whether I shall turn out

to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.” Perhaps a better reference might be the literature of the picaresque, that genre in which a character of relatively fixed identity and minimum psychological development over time goes through an episodic series of adventures that come to him (or, more rarely, her) as discrete events and that never coalesce into a single story, never add up to constitute a progress of any sort, and maintain the central character as fairly unchanged from one episode to the next. Think of Voltaire’s *Candide*, who unflinchingly wanders from one situation to another, learning only what he implicitly knew all along—that this is the best of all possible worlds and that he must cultivate his own garden. This could be Tony’s lesson too, one that he also has always known, except that his garden is the erstwhile “Garden State” known as New Jersey, and it is not so much to be cultivated as exploited and picked over.

But even more than the picaresque, which still attends to one primary character even though it surrounds him or her with a larger cast of colorful figures to interact with, *The Sopranos* is, as its title reminds us, not the story of one protagonist but an adventure in the plural. To be sure, Tony Soprano is certainly the central pivot of the story, but *The Sopranos* shows itself adept at multiplying its focus across diverse characters. Across the ebb and flow of the episodes, the story of this or that person—and not just immediate Soprano family members—will flare up for a moment, only to fade as another story comes to the fore. For example, diverse characters are granted dream or fantasy sequences in which their hopes and fears are given visualization. And at the very local level of individual shots, any number of characters—important and not so important—can suddenly be provided with strong representation of their subjectivity through vivid point-of-view shots (for example, in season 2, Tony’s bedridden mother Livia awakes in a daze to a blurry shot of flowers that the always-calculating Janice has brought to her bedside). Even as it concentrates nominally on Tony, point of view in *The Sopranos* floats among the characters as a corollary to the way its narrative lines float from episode to episode, fading, modulating, disappearing, reappearing in new guises and with new consequences for further narrative development.

The series' diverse characters wander from event to event in a "movement" that ultimately is a stasis and repetitiveness of its own. Motion and motionlessness work together in this regard. Typical in this respect is an episode from season 6 entitled "The Fleshy Part of the Thigh." Tony is in the hospital recovering from the near-fatal wounding by his senile Uncle Junior and finds himself vulnerable to musings about the meaning of life. Various versions of such meaning present themselves in the form of visitors and patients that come into his hospital room or that he meets as he wanders the halls and who offer him diverse philosophies of existence. Thus, an evangelical preacher shows up to proselytize for the need to come to Christ, and Tony likewise encounters a patient, a Bell Labs engineer named John Schwinn (Hal Holbrook), who speaks to him of a belief that the universe is composed of an essential oneness. With each case, with each philosophy, Tony seems to be listening and mulling his options, even though his gangster identity might make any conversion to a higher belief system unlikely. At the same time, Tony has several encounters with yet another patient, a wounded rap star, and gives him insider advice on high-level sports betting. In other words, Tony continues to engage in the illicit business typical of his way of life even as he seems to be contemplating some sort of spiritual or cosmic alternative to it. The hospital, then, serves structurally for the episode as a resource for various narrative lines, each of which brings with it its own form of suspense—for example, might Tony become born again?—and each of which participates in the episode's overall delaying and seeming forgetting of ostensibly major plot lines that had been set in place before the detour of Tony's wounding by his uncle. Importantly, then, when Tony does choose a course of action, it is to go back to the life of the mobster: wheeled out in his wheelchair by his family and Mafia associates, he demurs at saying a last goodbye to John Schwinn, and it is clear that Tony is returning to business as usual. In other words, when Tony does opt for a path, it is one that cycles him back to what he's always been. He begins again, just as the narrative begins again, now having brought him out of the wounding subplot and back into the workaday world of Mafia business.