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The Sopranos Experience

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The *Sopranos* Experience

by

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Dedication

I'd like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Ken and Tammy, and my sister, Sarah, whose loving support and mental guidance have been instrumental in my ability to complete this project. Whether I pack my belongings to drive to California or South Carolina or Florida, they've always supported my adventuresome spirit and encouraged me in my pursuits. For that, I give thanks!

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Abstract

My thesis explores what I call the "*Sopranos* Experience," which draws upon both the historical conventions of the gangster genre as well as the aesthetics and economics of pay-cable television to complicate *The Sopranos'* (HBO, 1999-2007) psychological relationship with the 21st-century, neoliberal American audience. The *Sopranos* Experience explicates how wavering identifications and dis-identifications that develop for the spectator through the series' form and content draw the responsibility of an audience away from moral ultimatums that attempt to finalize their experience with the genre, and towards a more personal ethical entanglement with the characters and their socioeconomic anxieties and desires. The ethical entanglement highlighted by *The Sopranos* reveals an entanglement that has always existed for the gangster genre throughout its history that has been recognized, but not thoroughly explored by previous gangster scholarship.

Because of the *The Sopranos*' psychotherapy story arc through Tony's (James Gandolfini) relationship with Dr. Melfi (Lorraine Bracco), psychoanalysis plays a key role in the *Sopranos* Experience. The serial form and narrowcasting develop a more in-depth psychological relationship between the spectator and the characters than seen in previous gangster genre films. Through the psychoanalytic theory of Jean Laplanche, I argue the spectator's closer relationship with the series not only results in the spectator's

constitution of self through the fictional characters, but that this constitution of self extends into their lived, everyday experiences with others.

In this discussion of the psychological connection between the spectator and the characters, their shared anxieties about and desires for socioeconomic stability in a neoliberal environment mobilizes the spectator's relationship not just with the series, but with others in their lives. In recognizing their atomized role in the viewership experience, *The Sopranos* allows the spectator to make ethical demands about their atomization and vulnerability in a neoliberal society. Because they can recognize the collective's similar situation, the spectator is situated to make larger demands about socioeconomic systems that atomize the individual.

Introduction

My thesis explores what I call the "*Sopranos* Experience," which draws upon both the historical conventions of the gangster genre as well as the aesthetics and economics of pay-cable television to complicate *The Sopranos'* (HBO, 1999-2007) psychological relationship with the 21st-century, neoliberal American audience. The gangster genre has historically been imbedded in class economics, family structures, and the space of the home to draw identifications with its similarly classed audience while eventually disavowing any sympathetic relationships with the gangster by destroying him in a blaze of gunfire or locking him behind bars. *The Sopranos* adopts the foundational conventions and shock aesthetics that draw audiences to the gangster genre and, through the serial format of pay-cable television and HBO's niche-marketing economics, develops an extended and more ethically complex psychological connection between Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) and his 21st-century American audience.

The American audience with enough disposable income receives Home Box Office's pay-cable television format straight into their family living rooms, locating the extended relationship with Tony in the audience's private sector. Thus the form through which Americans receive *The Sopranos* is entangled in the class economics, family structures, and domestic spaces that audiences traditionally identify with the gangster genre. While the nature of Tony's anxieties often revolve around a dangerous, illegal underworld, his desires for power and control in business and at home, extensively shown

through psychotherapy sessions with Dr. Melfi (Lorraine Bracco), often mirror those of the middle-class American spectator's own late capitalist and 21st-century familial frustrations. Within this perfect marriage between form and content, lies the *Sopranos* Experience.

Because Tony barges straight into the viewer's living room, the center of family life, and consumes the dedicated audience's time, money, and emotional involvement, the series develops a new spectatorial experience that shifts the psychological relationship between the gangster and the audience from public to private. While earlier gangster cinema relied on both public viewings in movie theaters as well as public morals to guide their narratives, *The Sopranos* enters individual audience members' living rooms and creates a more ambiguous ethical entanglement with the private spectator. In atomizing the American viewer through narrowcast television, the form of HBO presents media that appears tailor-made for the individual spectator's tastes and social frameworks. However, through the program's content in the psychotherapy sessions with Dr. Melfi, Tony is often asked to consider himself in relation to those around him, including his family and his gang. In doing so, the content of the series, though narrowcast, urges the viewer to consider their broader social constitutions of themselves, which is in direct tension with the series' presentation as a personalized product for the viewer. This tension between form and content drives the show's psychological considerations for 21st-century Americans in a neoliberal capitalist environment.

Rather than inviting spectators to draw socially based moral conclusions about and condemnations of Tony, *The Sopranos* revels in producing uncertain entanglements between the audience and the characters on screen. Though the primary focus is on Tony,

the serial nature of the program allows for multiple, fully developed characters, whose roles in Tony's life and the spectator's experience are equally important. The therapy sessions with Dr. Melfi isolate Tony from the criminal underworld and allow him to express his personal anxieties about and desires for authority while at "work" or at home, encouraging direct psychological identifications with the 21st-century American audience. The late capitalist American may well share Tony's anxieties about financial freedom, college tuitions, home remodeling plans, and the "company's" economic stability. Meanwhile, the thrilling and seductive shock aesthetics of Tony's brutal crimes attract spectators to the series while simultaneously providing moments at which the audience dis-identifies with Tony. These dis-identifications are in direct tension with the economic and psychological identifications the series builds between Tony and the audience, and like the identifications, contribute to the complexity of the viewer's relationship with the series.

The *Sopranos* Experience explicates how these wavering identifications and dis-identifications that develop through the series' form and content draw the responsibility of an audience away from moral ultimatums and towards personal ethical entanglements with Tony and his anxieties and desires. Because the series enters directly into the spectator's home through advancing media technologies, the content and form both fulfill a shift from public to private. Meanwhile, the tension between the narrowcast, privatized viewing experience of pay cable and the characters' considerations of their larger social constructions reveals the audience's conflicting experience with the program. At once seeing the series as an isolated, privatized object, the spectator also considers their own

social constructions of themselves because of the psychotherapeutic nature of *The Sopranos*.

The *Sopranos* Experience reveals two major consequences for the spectator's relationship with the gangster genre. First, because of the audience's ambiguous psychological relationship with Tony, *The Sopranos* reveals the complicated tensions in class economics and social structures that have existed throughout the history of the gangster genre. Many scholars recognize the complexity of the identifications or dis-identifications that exist between the gangsters and their spectators but ignore the audience's ambiguous relationships with these characters thanks to the moral ultimatums established by the ends of the films. By contrast, the *Sopranos* Experience revels in this ambiguity to show how a spectator's relationship with the gangster is not morally complete, but rather, an ambiguous experience that opens up psychological considerations for the spectator about his or her own public and private personas.

In this psychological consideration of the spectatorial experience, I bring in the psychoanalytic theory of Jean Laplanche to open up a conversation about the ways in which people constitute themselves in others around them. For the spectator, this means forging certain identifications through the continual, serial nature of the television program and constituting part of themselves in both the characters on screen as well as others in their daily lives. Rather than have a moral conclusion about the show, I argue the spectator becomes ethically entangled in the entire experience. In discussing how the *Sopranos* Experience implicates the spectator in ethical entanglements, I hope to uncover how 21st–century shifts in the gangster genre's form and content mirror shifts in American capital. As American capital became deregulated and began to follow a more

neoliberal course, the anxieties and desires that result from the privatization of the markets reflect those of the gangster on screen and the spectator at home. So, as the spectator experiences a privatized relationship with the series, it also allows them to consider their larger socioeconomic role in neoliberal America. This consideration not only reveals the depth with which *The Sopranos'* psychologically affects its spectators, but also reveals the spectator's ethical entanglement with the form and content of new media in a neoliberal environment.

Historical Backdrop: Economics, Media Technologies, and the Gangster Genre

The final shot of the final episode of *The Sopranos* created public outcry when the series officially went off the air in 2007. As Tony dines with his family at a local burger joint, a close-up of him looking at the front door as his oldest child, Meadow (Jamie-Lynn Sigler), walks into the restaurant, abruptly cuts to black. Unlike gangsters of the past, Tony is not whacked, he does not go to jail, he does not rat on his crew, or turn towards a more socially acceptable lifestyle. The series leaves Tony and the audience as abruptly as the relationship began. Questions about the longevity of Tony's ability to run his business linger, as do uncertainties about the futures of the characters in his biological and criminal families. The ambiguity of the final scene of the series allows the spectator's relationship with the series to continue because the entire *Sopranos* Experience lacks a strong moral judgment. Throughout my thesis, I suggest this unresolved tension has always existed in the gangster genre, but *The Sopranos'* shift to pay-cable television exposes the tension and provides the opportunity for explicating what it means for the gangster spectator. As a result, the series permits me to fill a void in scholarly literature

written about the gangster genre and point to the tension between spectator and gangster as an ongoing, evolving entanglement rather than final moral judgment.

The gangster genre has complicated accepted American ideals as early as D. W. Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), when the protagonists, wronged by a gangster and his crew, eventually vouch as false alibis for the gangster just as he's on the verge of incarceration. Later, the three foundational gangster features, *Little Caesar* (Mervyn Leroy, 1931), *The Public Enemy* (William Wellman, 1931), and *Scarface* (Howard Hawks & Richard Rosson, 1932), all attempted to create strong moral ultimatums for their audiences by condemning the gangster to death at the end of the films.

Throughout the history of the genre, the thrill of the gangster experience and the excitement of the shock aesthetics used to deploy the narrative have continually created a tension for viewers between sympathetic identifications with the criminal and morally driven moments of dis-identification from the gangster's illegal activity. Identifications and dis-identifications are not cut and dry, but are rather an ambiguous combination of placing oneself in the shoes of the characters and though the spectator may not commit violence as seen on screen, they justify the actions, as they would assume the character does, through sharing their socioeconomic anxieties and desires. Many scholars have noted how class economics, the space of the home, and family structures helped the gangster film forge identifications with its American audiences. Along with these identifications, the gangster genre historically utilized shock aesthetics to thrill the audience. While providing moments at which the spectator could step back and dis-identify with the illegal activity on screen, these moments also excited the spectator while

depicting immoral actions. The genre, then, has been indebted, either by obligation or by choice, to presenting moral ultimatums that condemn the gangster's illegal activity in order to put up a front that manages the tensions and moral ambiguities that arise from this complicated identification between the gangster and spectator. While academics have noted these tensions and ambiguities, they also allow the moral ultimatums of early gangster films and sympathetic readings of the later Corleones and Henry Hills to push aside more complicated structures of identification in the genre.

David Ruth and Jonathan Munby provide the most elaborate discussions of how the earliest gangster films created identifications with the Prohibition-era American audience. While *Little Caesar, The Public Enemy,* and *Scarface* were certainly different films, they all shared similar thematic and aesthetic techniques and the same socioeconomic context. In discussing the appeal of these early gangster films, I pair the mass consumption of the genre across classes with the mass efforts of industrial capital in the late 1920s and early1930s. In examining the gangster's anxieties and desires about economic class, I refer to industrial capital's promises of unifying the collective toward an acknowledged goal. In this unification, come anxieties about the individual's atomized role in the larger industrial machine and his or her desire for quicker success. These anxieties and desires are prevalent throughout the early gangster films, though, as we will see, they are strikingly different for the various classes in the audience. Ruth and Munby present the spectator's identifications with the gangster from two different class perspectives, and both Ruth and Munby compare the rise of the gangster with the "American Dream" to incite discussions of ethnicity, corporate structures, conspicuous consumption, and censorship battles and present the gangster in a more sympathetic light.

Throughout *Inventing the Public Enemy,* Ruth argues that the white, middle-class public's interest in the gangster was provoked by insecurities and changing ideals that resulted from shifting economic and social structures in the first quarter of the 20th century. He notes that by establishing the urban environment as the central location for criminal activity, the physical location of the genre indicates characters of a lower class. By connecting the lower class with the immigrant American, Ruth argues, "The portrayal of the criminal as an exotic, biologically driven alien reflected some American's basic values and promoted powerful cultural and political messages" (15). This depiction of the gangster as a lower-class immigrant allowed the white middle class to feel comfortable distance from his crimes. While Ruth claims that criminals reflected "aliens" in a sense of class economics and national citizenship, he also notes how the early films depicted the criminal organization as a reflection of early 20th-century American capitalist ideals. Similar to the American corporation's ideals, "the fundamental business strategies explored by the inventors of the gangster were growth, consolidation, and organization" (43). By recognizing the gangster as an "exotic" other who adopts American corporate practices, Ruth implies ambiguities in the identifications and dis-identifications between the gangster and the spectator, but he never fully explores this ambiguous relationship. By leaving this tension underdeveloped, Ruth fails to recognize the complexity of the relationship between the gangster and the audience's desires and anxieties.

From the other class perspective, Munby focuses on how early gangster films developed strong identifications with lower-class audiences. He concedes that features prior to the 1930s, such as *The Lights of New York* (Bryan Foy, 1928), were presented from an urban, middle-class perspective because they were the ones paying to watch the

films. However, due to the American audience's increasing ability and desire to fill theaters, the economics of the spectator became more diverse. The reductions in production costs for cinema, the rise of sound, and the increase of theaters allowed for audiences of varying incomes to become spectators of Hollywood productions. A vital point in his argument discusses how the likes of Edward G. Robinson, James Cagney, and Paul Muni were all "Lower East Side kids" who grew up in the "ghetto-street culture" and could speak the "tough talking street vernacular" on screen (41). Through the actors, the genre developed street credibility, allowing a more direct connection with the lower-class spectators' desires for and anxieties about the characters' rises in class.

Yet Munby fails to examine how dis-identifications between the spectator and gangster affect these identifications that are built throughout. For example, in *The Public Enemy,* the film follows Tom Powers (James Cagney) from his childhood shenanigans through his upbringing into the gangster lifestyle. The lower-class audience might identify with Tom's environment as well as his desire for upward class mobility and quick cash. The spectator's entire experience of the film depicts "a new hero whose way of seeing corresponds more accurately to the problems of modern urban-American everyday life" (Munby, 55). What Munby ignores is that Tom's brutal death at the end of the film works to encourage the lower class away from a life of crime. This film, then, provides both identifications and dis-identifications for the lower class, evoking their anxieties and desires about class economics in America. Because the ethnic criminal falls victim to the moral ultimatums at the end of the early gangster films, the audience's desires for and anxieties about wealth brought out by their viewership are ambiguous. Munby fails to fully examine the fact that the lower-class audience's identifications with

the gangster are more ambiguous and complicated than the moral ultimatum at the end of the film suggests.

So while Ruth places an emphasis on the middle-class's dis-identifications with the gangster, Munby principally offers a look at the lower-class's identifications with the gangster. Both Ruth and Munby, then, observe a tension within the early gangster films by showing how diverse audiences have strong identifications and dis-identifications with the characters on screen. Viewing the genre from two different class perspectives, both authors point to the fact that the genre appeals to spectators of various economic and ethnic backgrounds. However, Ruth and Munby also allow the final moralizing scenes of the early gangster films to distract from the audience's complex relationship with the gangster. I suggest that the early gangster film's ability to reach across economic class and appeal to a mass audience reflects the ambiguous relationship that exists within every spectator's experience of the gangster. The moral ultimatums only work to conclude the film, but they do not finalize the spectator's varying identifications and dis-identifications with the gangster. The spectator's anxieties about and desires for class mobility in American economics are highlighted through this experience, in spite of the moral ultimatums that end the films.

As I have suggested, all three early gangster films share a common ending that utilizes violent shock aesthetics to depict the downfall of the gangster. Richard Maltby's essay "The Spectacle of Criminality" discusses how these shock aesthetics were at once thrilling moments of spectacle and places of dis-identification for the American audience. When the early gangster feature first came into production, the Hays Office put pressure on directors to move the violence of the films off screen. However, Maltby notes that

moving the violence off screen not only failed to detract from the films' aesthetic cultivation of thrills, but also actually heightened those thrills by displacing the consequences of the gangster's violent actions. Maltby writes that gangster "actions, including their violent actions, were moved off-screen, in the name of minimizing any appeal their representation might continue to hold for delinquent viewers. Action was, however, understood as being subsumed within the character, and the industry's principal concern remained in the inappropriate appeal of characters and stars" (143). Even though the violence was moved off screen, the violent nature of the characters and the use of their violence for upward class mobility still existed. For the spectator, then, placing violent actions just off screen or moving them into the shadows of the film created moments of dis-identification that neither detracted from their identifications with the gangster, nor lead the audience to total disgust with the gangster. In reality, the censorship of the gangster films in the 1930s prevented the audience from having more violent dis-identifications with the gangster and thus allowed the complex relationship between the spectator and gangster to be heightened by the ambiguity of the dis-identifications. While moving the violence off screen prevented the audience from seeing brutal murders, the very suggestion of violence still allows for a visualization of crime and provides more ambiguity in the spectatorial experience than it does clarity.

The introduction of the Production Code and the moral conservatism that resulted from America's involvement in World War II completely changed the landscape for the gangster genre due to both a reconfiguration of the narratives within the films as well as through advancing media technologies. The Hays Production Code put an end to the gangster film whose central characters were the gangsters, changing to focus on the law

enforcement officials hired to bring these criminals down. William Keighley's *'G' Men* (1935) marked this transition with James Cagney playing a lawyer turned crime fighter, rather than the gangster himself. The G-Men films that followed for the next decade were focused more on the crime fighting side of mob activity and only depicted criminals as psychopathic murderers.

This shift in content is also reflected in the genre's major transformation in form through the television series *The Untouchables* (1959-1963). As a broadcast television series, *The Untouchables* developed strong moral conclusions throughout the series as Eliot Ness' G-Men stopped various fictitious criminals throughout Chicago. Broadcasting the series brought the gangster genre directly into the spectator's home, which sparked negative feedback from more conservative audiences about the violence being depicted. By the end of the series, producers tried to cut down on the violence in order to broaden its appeal, but by 1963, the series was dropped. The (quasi) gangster genre's introduction to broadcast television was brief but established important considerations for the genre's formal shift to television. In directly entering the home of the spectator, the genre needed to find a niche market that was willing to be subjected to the violence. As we will see, television's focus on narrowcasting and the introduction of pay cable were vital in the gangster genre's ability to survive in the television format.

The personalization of the gangster genre as seen through the move from cinema to television also becomes evident in the content of the films, creating a more personalized depiction of the gangster's family for the spectator, and thus, expanding identifications and dis-identifications between the two. As the genre leaves moral ultimatums behind in the 1970s, it no longer provides easy resolutions to these tensions,

but rather, creates messy entanglements of desires and anxieties that develop not just through identifications and dis-identifications from depictions of economic class, but also through depictions of familial roles. The gangster genre of the 1970s further complicates the experience of the viewer by infiltrating the space of the home and family structures of the gangster characters. While there are certainly moments in the early films that depict the domestic sphere (Cagney's devotion to his mother in *Public Enemy* or Muni's incestuous relationship with his sister in *Scarface*), the home does not become a primary location in the gangster film until Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974, 1990) and Martin Scorsese's run of *Mean Streets* (1973)*, Goodfellas* (1990)*,* and *Casino* (1995).

Again, this shift in content for the gangster genre is linked to the shifting economic climate of the 1970s. After the relatively successful post-war climate in American economics created by Fordism, Taylorism, and high levels of regulation from Keynesian economics, the market hit somewhat of a plateau. In attempting to anticipate future inflation, the Nixon administration imposed wage and price controls in 1971. However, the oil crisis in 1973 and the Watergate scandal disrupted both Nixon's economic and political agendas. A decade later, Ronald Reagan's political and economic policies focused on deregulation of the markets in order to decrease inflation. By deregulating the economy, corporate economics became more privatized. The privatization of markets created new anxieties for the individual trying to reestablish stability in the newly deregulated economic environment. This desire for a more stabilized role in the economy is reflected in the genre's privatization of the gangster racket into the protection of the biological family.

For the literature written about the films of the 1970s, the involvement of the gangster's home and family favors sympathetic readings of ethnic and familial solidarity rather than allowing these narrative developments to further complicate readings of the spectator's relationship with the gangster. Chris Messenger's excellent *The Godfather and American Culture* discusses the impact of *The Godfather* trilogy's full immersion into the family structure. In *Godfather II* Vito Corleone (Robert De Niro) murders the greedy mob boss Fanucci for the betterment of his fellow neighbors, then proceeds to walk through his Italian-American neighborhood and return to his wife and children. Messenger notes, "Such a scene takes place in the public domain and is transmitted through the powerful images of patriotism, ethnic richness, family solidarity, and maternal and paternal love. Any ethical imperative against murder is canceled by Vito's strong presence. Here is where his power begins" (10). Notice the use of an ultimatum in reading this scene: the "ethical imperative" is "canceled" by Vito's presence, as well as the insinuation that violence produces dis-identifications for the audience. While Messenger recognizes that *The Godfather* inter-mixes violence in the community with the gangster's patriarchal role in his family, which suggests a complex moment of both identification and dis-identification for the spectator, he tends to put more weight on a single moral reading. Likewise, Phoebe Poon's essay, "The Godfather Films as Trilogy," recognizes that the inclusion of the domestic family in the gangster racket "adheres to a code of honor, situated above the crude vigilantism that informs our conception of the gangster as a flagrant outlaw" (189). For Poon, the gangster, as a family man, draws identifications with the viewer that abide to a higher moral code, providing moral justifications for the viewer's indulgence in the gangster's violence.

Messenger and Poon recognize that family life and criminal activity in *The Godfather* become intertwined, but they use this intertwinement to create their own moral ultimatums about family life as a sympathetic tool for the violence on screen. Because of the serial form of *The Sopranos*, more screen time is devoted to Tony's home than any other gangster before him. Rather than read the home as a space meant to solely create sympathetic identifications with Tony (though no doubt it does), my discussion of the *Sopranos* Experience complicates the spectator's relationship with the home beyond a space that neutralizes violence through spectator sympathies. Rather, I argue that depictions of the familial roles and domestic spaces of the gangster only serve to provide new moments of identification and dis-identification that reflect the gangster and the spectator's privatized anxieties and desires on an economic and familial level.

As the audience grows closer to the gangster's home and family life, the gangster's desires for and anxieties about power and control are exposed on the familial level both in the biological family, as well as within the Mafia "family." The genre in the 1930s focused on drawing identifications from the gangster's desires for upward class mobility and the films of the 1970s emphasized these same desires through depictions of the family. In the gangster films of the 1990s the anxieties and desires that stem from economic atomization are connected and incorporated with depictions of the domestic space. The total deregulation and privatization of markets in the early 1980s from "Reaganomics" sparked the beginning of neoliberal capital in America, shifting the anxieties and desires of the individual towards concerns over this privatization. With the promise of free, open markets, the individual's necessary ability to be both an entrepreneur yet still part of a larger corporation created a strong tension for the

neoliberal capitalist's position. The anxieties about neoliberal capital develop through uncertainty about who has power or control over their own economic successes. These uncertain anxieties are reflected in the gangster's desire for control over both their biological and criminal families.

Henry Hill's (Ray Liotta) rise in *Goodfellas* depicts his accumulation of wealth and power through both the shock aesthetics of his illegal activity and by using Henry's home as a presentation of his increasing wealth. Most scholarship reads the gangster genre's move inside the home as a way to combine two different "families" and spaces, creating a sympathetic shield over the gangster's violent actions. Rather than read this shift toward familial spaces as strictly a sympathetic move, Patricia Keeton notices the problems that arise in combining the two "families." Keeton argues, "The myth of the business (Mafia) as the basis of the survival of the family is revealed instead to be the very source of its destruction" (139). She insists that mob life destroys the family, as if they are totally separate spheres. While I recognize these two realms as different physical spaces and agree their intermixing adds complexity to the gangster figure, I argue the anxieties and desires of both the gangster and spectator are utterly entangled between the two.

Because the domestic sphere receives so much attention in the films and television series in the 1990s, there is too much sympathy read into scholarly discussions of the familial and domestic space. Rather than reading the family as a sympathetic cover for mob violence, as Messenger and Poon do, my focus is on how, like Keeton acknowledges, these two realms are entangled amongst the various characters and spaces. Tony's anxieties and desires extend to both his biological and criminal families, which

more often than not bleed together, whether it's to celebrate milestones or run to the bakery. In my reading of the *Sopranos* Experience, I focus less on pointing out divisions between mob life and family life, and focus more on reading the audience's complicated experience of *The Sopranos* as the product of entanglements from mob life, family life, and the lives of the spectators themselves.

Central to the spectator's entanglement with *The Sopranos* on an economic, familial, and domestic level is the genre's move to serial television. Tony's upper-middle class desires, his patriarchal role in both his biological and mob families, and the continuous depiction of Tony in his McMansion are combined with the depictions of and story arcs for his biological and Mafia families. In dedicating time to these various story arcs, the spectator's relationship with the series becomes a more ambiguous picking and pulling of identifications and dis-identifications. In *The Essential HBO Reader* David Thorburn writes, "Tony Soprano is a stone killer and mob boss, but he is also a middle-aged father with a discontented spouse. …The juxtaposition—sometimes the intersection—of these apparently alternate worlds generates complexities undreamt of in most movies or earlier forms of television. The program mobilizes a sustained, ongoing experience of moral ambiguity" (65). Thorburn suggests the serial nature of *The Sopranos* compounds Tony's moral dilemmas both at work and at home as the audience has wavering identifications and dis-identifications with the whole experience. While I agree that the spectator's close relationship with all of the characters creates one messy entanglement in which there are no moral conclusions within the content, I argue that the spectator's entanglement happens through the technological form as well.

By the time the gangster genre moved to HBO's pay-cable television service in 1999, television technologies expanded dramatically to place the spectator in central control of their viewership. In 2001, HBO subscribers gained the ability to watch content on demand, giving the spectator the privilege to schedule his or her own time slots and privatizing his or her viewership. In tension with this privatized control is the fact that the narrowcast content of HBO's original series came directly from larger media conglomerates, in this case AOL Time Warner, which directed the various channels that operate under their control. For the viewer, then, this creates a problematic relationship with the content due to the fact that though he or she perceives control, his or her viewership is atomized as part of the larger corporate agenda. Here, the form, pay-cable television, through which the spectator receives the gangster content, points to neoliberal anxieties stemming from atomization and privatization.

The privatized spectator receives the content as part of HBO's niche marketing and narrowcast content, creating a spectatorial experience that appears to be privatized for each individual, even though millions of viewers tune in to see the show. In doing so, HBO makes each individual spectator feel a special relationship with his or her programming in order to gain loyalty. With its tagline, "It's Not TV. It's HBO," the HBO brand has established itself as a premium network that develops higher quality programs than cable television by consistently hiring the best talent and creative teams to deliver quality products. Nudity, profanity, and graphic violence are made available to the paying HBO customer, and without the interruption of advertisements, the HBO experience is apparently less obstructed and purportedly carries more entertainment value in the American television audience. Deboarh Jaramillo's article "The Family Racket: AOL

Time Warner, HBO, The Sopranos, and the Construction of a Quality Brand" recognizes that "without financial constraints under which the networks function, HBO can target narrowly segmented niche markets, a concept essential to its branding" (63). Thus, as viewers experience more control over their viewership, they perceive their relationship with television as a bottom-up relationship in which they hold control. However, as Jaramillo points out, the viewer's privatized viewership is actually a small portion of the corporation's larger economic plan. I argue, then, that the *Sopranos* Experience highlights this tension in the viewer's experience by utilizing a privatized marketing scheme while fully participating in larger corporate economics. This problematic tension highlights the economic anxieties and desires that result from the neoliberal capitalist market for both Tony and the spectator.

Tony is introduced to the audience as a man who has a substantial amount of power, but he constantly struggles with the ways in which others view him as a man, father, and leader, causing him to have anxiety attacks and depression. Tony's anxieties extend from everyday economic and social anxieties about providing for his family, to guiding his daughter through young adulthood, to avoiding federal agents and occasionally murdering his best friends. For the spectator, these various anxieties with which Tony deals throughout the series provide multiple points of identification and dis-identification on both personal and professional levels. Identifications with *The Sopranos* also operate beyond Tony's personal socioeconomic problems. From the extensive screen time dedicated to various characters, the series explicates the desires and anxieties for the American middle-class in general. Because the show focuses equal parts on Tony's

biological family and Mafia family, the spectator's identifications extend into their own private conceptions of economic, familial, and domestic roles.

Important to my argument about the spectator's identifications with the characters is a vein of scholarship that reads the gangster's desires for and anxieties about power as a reflection of contemporary middle-class struggles in America. While most authors pick up on particular aspects of the series that reflect American economic or social anxieties, scholarship avoids looking at tensions that develop through the form by which the content is delivered. Thorburn recognizes that the way Tony runs his underworld enterprise bleeds into his patriarchal role in the family but avoids what this means for the spectator. He suggests, "Tony's two families are really one. …The corruption, violence and hypocrisy that are the tools of his trade seep into and come to define his own family, as they did his father's before him" (65). I agree with Thorburn but want to complicate this thought with the idea that there aren't just two families but three families becoming one; the third being that of the spectator. Likewise, Ingrid Walker Fields suggests, "*The Sopranos* dramatizes the struggle of the middle-class American family *as* mob life" (619). Here, Fields suggests the mob's idealization of patriarchal "power has very limited currency in a culture of conspicuous consumption and progressive social changes" (615). I agree with her assertion that the socioeconomic anxieties in the show are utterly complicated with both the mob and biological families, as well as with the spectator themselves. The anxiety Tony feels about his lack of power mirrors those of the neoliberal individual, for whom expanding social changes are both freeing yet terribly atomizing. By connecting Tony with the spectator in this manner, I argue the identifications and dis-identifications that develop through their relationship reveal the

tension that has existed throughout the history of the genre. Tony's socioeconomic desires and anxieties mirror those of the spectator, and through new media technologies, these anxieties reach the spectator through both form and content. This privatized viewership experience develops an ethical entanglement in which the spectator potentially considers his or her role in this meeting of form and content.

The spectator's ethical entanglement with *The Sopranos* not only adjusts the ways in which scholars have discussed previous gangster content, but also the ways in which the spectator perceives his or her relationship with the media through which they receive the content. By 2006, near the end of *The Sopranos,* DVR and online taste profiles from companies like Netflix were developed, giving spectators new control and a more narrow relationship with their viewership in their home. In creating more privatized viewership, these new technologies allow the spectator to control the specific times and places they watch television, while also adjusting the ways in which they choose which content to watch. Gary Edgerton notices, "Consumers at home [are] slowly becoming more proactive in their TV viewing behavior; their adoption of these new television accessories aid. … in the industry's wholesale transition from broadcasting to narrowcasting (targeting a narrower, more defined audience), as consumers search … out what they want … to watch as never before" (6). This transition from network broadcast to niche-market narrowcasting highlights my claim that the *Sopranos* Experience creates an ethical entanglement for the viewer because, as the viewer actively pursues a television series on HBO's network, HBO pursues a target audience right back. The privatized viewership that results from enhanced control over viewership atomizes the individual spectator. Because his or her viewership has been privatized and narrowcast and the

spectator has also sought out the content, he or she is placed in a position in which he or she is more likely to develop a strong psychological relationship between him or herself and the content he or she chooses to watch. In the development of this relationship, the spectator's experience extends beyond his or her living room and into his or her lived, everyday interactions with others.

The Psychological Consequences of the *Sopranos* Experience

As I have suggested, *The Sopranos'* ambiguous final episode allows the spectator to revel in the ethical entanglements that the show develops between Tony and the audience, as well as between the spectator and the neoliberal environment in which he or she lives. In these entanglements lie a restructuring of the spectatorial experience in the gangster genre through the pay-cable and serial formats that creates an extended and more complex psychological experience for the viewer. Like the gangster genre, which draws identifications and dis-identifications between the gangster's and the spectator's own economic classes, family structures, and domestic spaces, HBO's pay-cable television format is also responsible for entangling the viewer's privatized experiences with the characters in the program because of its niche marketing and extended viewership.

Through the serial nature of the television series, as well as HBO's niche marketing, the privatization of the form through which the spectator receives the content creates the spectator's ethical entanglement with the series. Because the spectator develops a personalized experience with *The Sopranos* in which his or her own economic, familial, and domestic concerns are entangled with both the form and content

of the series, the spectator develops a psychological relationship with the characters on screen. In this psychological relationship, the spectator constitutes him or herself in the characters on screen as way of working out his or her own socioeconomic anxieties in a neoliberal environment. The spectator's constitution of him or herself extends beyond his or her relationship with the series and into his or her lived, everyday experiences with others. While I argue this psychological relationship between the spectator and the gangster genre has always existed, *The Sopranos'* privatization of both content and form creates an environment for the spectator's psychological experience with the gangster.

From the television theory of Amanda Lotz, Julianne Newton, and William Uricchio, I show how the privatization of television technologies and economics in the 21st century unexpectedly works with Jean Laplanche's psychoanalytic theories of the individual's constitution in otherness, demonstrating how the *Sopranos* Experience affects the spectators' interactions with those around them. The atomization of viewer experience through narrowcasting at once gives the viewer a semblance of control and alienates his or her experience from the larger public. Through Laplanche's discussion of enigmatic signifiers, I suggest that this atomized viewer experience actually facilitates a place for psychological ethical entanglements with Tony and other characters that guide the spectators' interactions with others in their lives.

With advancing television technologies, the viewer perceives more control over the media he or she consumes, privatizing his or her viewership experience and drawing him or her closer to the content on screen. In her book, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized,* Amanda Lotz argues that the individualization of the television viewer reaches new heights in the 21st century through technological and societal practices.

Because new devices can capture television in multiple formats at multiple times, these technologies "rupture… the norm of simultaneity in television experience and enable… audiences to capture television on their own terms" (35). With this more individualized experience, television is narrowcast toward specific niche markets in order for an audience to pursue the program. As I have discussed, this shift in television economics and marketing is essential to the *Sopranos* Experience because it places the viewer at the center of his or her own consumption, while HBO is simultaneously narrowcasting toward a niche market. By placing the individual spectator at the center of perceived control, HBO allows audience members to consume on their own time in their own spaces even though they are fulfilling a larger economic plan. This privatization of the viewer experience entangles the audience with larger questions of power and control in the modern, privatized neoliberal capitalist environment.

The serial nature of the television program also allows for spectators to incorporate *The Sopranos* into their lives on a continual basis, and through the spectators' increasing control over their viewership, they perceive their continual relationship with the series as a personal connection. By allowing the spectator to feel in control of his or her viewership experience, HBO creates an atmosphere wherein its audience has stronger connections and emotional involvements with the narrowcast content and characters. One of the first theorists of television, Raymond Williams, developed the concept of televisual flow in which the broadcasting of programming by major networks, along with specific advertising campaigns, were timed and compiled in order to create a flow that matched shifting television demographics throughout the day. I take Williams idea of "televisual flow" and apply this structure to Lotz's ideas about individualized spectatorship. In doing

so, I suggest that the 21st-century American viewer develops his or her *own* flow in television programming. By shifting the flow from the networks to the individual, the spectator pursues programming that best suits his or her own psychological desires and anxieties. So, despite the fact that neoliberal atomization provides spectators with a viewership experience that facilitates more in-depth psychological considerations of themselves, this is exactly where the show points the audience toward broader social understandings of themselves.

Driving the spectators' desires and anxieties are their relationships with the characters on screen and the various identifications and dis-identifications they draw from these characters. Because the economics of the pay-cable form and the content of the gangster genre are so interwoven with the spectator's own economic class, family structure, and domestic space, I argue that the tangled desires and anxieties experienced by the spectator in the *Sopranos* Experience are actually a means through which the individual spectator mediates relationships and interactions with those around them.

This psychological relationship emerges from the spectator's privatized psychological experience with the various characters on screen and the ways in which the spectator constitutes him or her self in the identifications and dis-identifications drawn from the characters. In Laplanche's *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis* (1989), he describes the infant human as being thrown into a disorienting world in which they have no idea how to communicate or survive. For Laplanche, this thrown-ness establishes the foundation for his psychoanalytic theory in demonstrating the infant's reliance on those around them to help and guide the young human toward socially competent behavior. In the section "*Die Hilflosigkeit,*" Laplanche describes how the child's being thrown into the

world produces a "helpless condition or a distressful state" (97). In showing how the child needs help from others, Laplanche is focusing on the fact that, from birth, children have little biologically programmed when it comes to their inner desires, social challenges, or physical dangers in the world other than their perceptions of the behavior or the reactions of those around them. Laplanche argues that how a human constitutes his or her selfhood is through the reactions of others to his or her behavior with accepted social structures remaining an enigma. The maturing child is thrown into an adult world, "an objective world which the child has to discover and learn about in the same way that it learns to walk or to manipulate objects. It is characterized by the existence of messages (defined in the broadest sense; they may be linguistic messages, or simply language-based messages, and can be either pre-linguistic or paralinguistic) which ask the child questions it cannot yet understand" (124). The child's inability to understand basic messages means that his or her behavior is entirely reliant on the reactions they receive from others. In this manner, the individual bases his or her actions on what they take to be the desires of others. Because of this constitution of the self in others, the human's social consideration of him or herself is utterly entangled with others.

For the content of *The Sopranos*, Laplanche's psychoanalytic theory helps explicate Tony's psychological desires for and anxieties about others around him. From the beginning of the show, Tony reveals that he believes he is living in a declining era and that his business has seen better days. Along with Tony's nostalgia about his criminal enterprise, the show reveals his constant psychological battle with his mother, his desires and anxieties about raising law-abiding children, his never-ending need for sexual conquests over younger women, and his inability to fulfill his patriarchal role both at

work and at home. By depicting Tony's conflicting desires and anxieties in the sessions with Dr. Melfi, the series shows how Tony's selfhood is constituted in those who create the mold for his life. As Tony constitutes his selfhood in others, so, too, I argue, does the spectator constitute his or her selfhood in Tony. In identifying with Tony's neoliberal anxieties and desires, the spectator consciously and unconsciously sees Tony, and the characters around him, as places in which they constitute their own socioeconomic understanding of themselves.

From original identifications in content, which I have argued come from economic class, family structures, or Tony's suburban home, the audience picks and chooses the psychological identifications that they will allow to dominate their relationship with Tony. This ability to pick and choose comes directly from the HBO pay-cable format, which places the spectator as a perceived self-controlled individual. The psychotherapy sessions with Dr. Melfi work as self-reflexive points in the series, pointing out that there are moments for psychological growth for Tony, where he learns the ways he constitutes himself in others that are poignant for the desires and anxieties of the 21st century spectator as well. Just as Tony works through his problematic conceptions of his own identity, the spectator, through their continual experience with the series, constitutes portions of his or herself in the various characters. Even though Tony's anxieties dominate the show, other characters have desires for economic mobility or social development that also resonate with the audience. The serial nature of the program creates an environment in which the audience constitutes portions of their selfhood in various characters in *The Sopranos*, which, in turn, affects the ways they constitute themselves in others in their lived experience. This psychological relationship the

audience has with the show encourages the spectator to feel in control over his or her own viewership while also suggesting their recognition of the ways in which they ignore or put off their larger social implications. The psychotherapeutic theme in the show draws the audience further into the series' programming as a site for the unconscious working out of the paradoxes of 21st century, neoliberal economic and familial concerns.

As the 21st-century American viewers become attached to *The Sopranos* as a place where they can recognize desires and anxieties about their social roles at work or home, they still hold the series as an external object even though it very much operates within their economic or social constitutions of themselves. In Williams' chapter "Advertising: the Magic System," he suggests that the magic of modern advertising happens when people consume not out of a feeling of need but believing they control their desires for products out of luxurious want. The spectator of *The Sopranos* does not watch Tony go through psychotherapy out of a need for psychotherapy; however, the audience has a therapeutic psychological experience with Tony because they identify their own wants, desires, and anxieties within those of the characters. This comes back to the spectator's ethical entanglement with the series in which he or she at once recognizes his or her ambiguous identifications and dis-identifications with the series, yet continues to participate in its larger economic framework. Though the privatized viewer experience suggests the audience's relationship with the series only exists on a private, personal level, the viewer's psychological connection extends beyond his or her relationship with the characters to his or her social performance of self.

Prior television theory has indeed suggested that specific programs have implications for the viewer on a psychological level beyond just pure entertainment.

Julianne H. Newton's *Television as a Moving Aesthetic: In Search of the Ultimate Aesthetic – the Self* explains, "By addressing our deepest fears, anxieties, and desires through the experiences of real people and fictional personae, we cut open the raw innards of the human psyche for mass view" (117). Newton suggests that the psychological impact of television happens on a massive social scale. However, with the privatization of both the form and content of the television series, I suggest that the *Sopranos* Experience's psychological consequences are focused on a much more individualized level. The spectator's ethical entanglement with the series reveals that his or her individual relationship with *The Sopranos* is part of a larger economic formula. Similarly, the spectator's psychological relationship with the series expands as part of his or her larger social constitution of self. So, the alienation that results from the *Sopranos* Experience allows the audience to consider their collective atomization and vulnerability, despite their privatized viewership experience.

This psychological constitution of the self in others that exists through the privatization of the viewership experience of media expands as technology further personalizes the viewership. Advancing technology in the 21st century further privatizes the viewer experience through developing taste profiles for its subscribers. Uricchio recognizes how new technologies in television individualize visual flow and recreate it based on an individual's taste profiles and viewing history. Urrichio lays out a model that companies like Netflix and HBO's mobile website, HBOGO, have developed in which, "the diverse appeals and programs currently associated with broadcasting will inevitably be exchanged for the logics of taste profiles and the continuities of the familiar, both of which will be guaranteed by adaptive agent technologies. In the process, the textures of

televisual flow will likely be more homogenized than not" (179). I use Urrichio's argument to discuss how the spectator constitutes portions of him or herself through each separate program that they have incorporated into their televisual flow. So, for example, the "*Sopranos* Experience" can be combined with a "*Breaking Bad* Experience" and a "*Game of Thrones* Experience" in which the spectator recognizes certain tensions in their psychological anxieties and desire through each portion of their televisual flow. Not only do the programs become separate parts of a larger flow, but the spectator's psychological constitution of him or herself in each program becomes a larger part of his or her social constitution of themselves. A spectator's personal understanding of him or herself, then, could be completely constructed from relationships developed through media content.

All of these internal and external employments of the show are what I mean when I say there is a complicated psychological viewership in the wavering identifications and dis-identifications happening in the *Sopranos* Experience. While spectators are developing their own televisual flow through HBO's pay-cable format they are also constituting parts of themselves in Tony Soprano and the various characters around him. This means that, as *The Sopranos* adjusts the perception of the spectator in relation to those around them, so, too, does his or her relationships to other programs embedded in their flow. I focus on *The Sopranos* because I see the marriage of gangster-genre content with the advancing personalized televisual flow as sharing similar usages of class economics, familial structures, and the space of the home to connect with the spectator. While *The Sopranos* reveals the spectator's ethical entanglement with the genre, this entanglement extends beyond content and into the spectator's everyday experience in a neoliberal environment. Television media, then, represents an evolving theater of

psychological growth that, through developing technologies, works as a fraction of and opens up the consumer's personalized visual flow and psychological considerations of him or herself in others.

Organization

My first chapter focuses on developing the historical identifications and dis-identifications between the viewer and gangster in order to depict the gangster genre not as morally tidy, but rather, as a messy and complicated set of relationships between the spectator and the gangster that creates ethical entanglements, rather than moral judgments. In order to do so, I discuss the historical and economic moments in which various gangster films or television series were created in order to explicate how spectators' identifications and dis-identifications with the genre reflect their economic anxieties and desires in that particular moment. In the gangster genre's move to pay cable television, I show that the spectator becomes more entwined with the gangster than ever through the privatization of viewer experience, leading me to a discussion of the spectator's individualized experience with the characters on screen. Painting the history of the gangster genre from the early features of 1930s, through the *Godfather* films of the 1970s, into Scorsese's films of the 1990s, and finally to David Chase's *The Sopranos,* fosters a discussion of how *The Sopranos* exposes ethical entanglements with spectators and reveals a gap in gangster scholarship that has overlooked the ongoing entanglement that exists between the spectator and the gangster.

My second chapter uses television theory and the psychoanalytic theory of Jean Laplanche to show how HBO's narrowcasting and niche marketing, combined with the

serial nature of the program, has a more privatized impact on the psychology of the spectator. This psychological impact affects the spectator's consideration of him or herself in Tony, in HBO and AOL Time Warner's economics, as well as in his or her lived experiences with others. I point toward the tensions that develop between the spectator's increasing control of his or her own televisual flow through advancing technologies and HBO's niche marketing and narrowcasting to demonstrate how television seriality, especially in pay cable, unexpectedly entangles the viewer's own personal conceptions of themselves with the anxieties and desires of the gangster on screen. This entanglement has lasting effects for the viewer's relationships with others in their own lives.

A short epilogue points toward how more contemporary television shows such as AMC's *Breaking Bad,* HBO's *Boardwalk Empire,* and fantasy programming like HBO's *Game of Thrones* utilize similar conventions and technologies to create entanglements between the spectator and the characters on screen. I hope to create a conversation about the content of what some critics are calling "arc television" and the advancing media technologies that implicate audience members into a more personalized, psychological relationship with these programs. This psychological connection with visual media becomes a part of the spectator's conception of his or her own personality and continually adjusts the ways in which they constitute themselves in others.

Chapter One: The Privatization of the Gangster

Through this chapter, I argue that the gangster genre's major shift in focus both in form and in content from public spaces and mass desires to private homes and individual economic concerns reveals the spectator's ambiguous relationship with the gangster genre. At the forefront of the changes in form and content of the gangster genre are the changes in American capital from the 1930s through the 21st century. As American capital shifts from regulated, industrial capital and leaves behind Keynesian economics in favor of neoliberalism's deregulation and privatization of the market, I argue that the simultaneous shift in the gangster genre's economic concerns introduces an important shift in viewership from public to private. In privatizing the viewer's relationship with the gangster, neoliberal anxieties and desires are evoked through the spectator's identifications with the gangster's class, family, and domestic space. The privatization of gangster content also aligns with the genre's formal shift towards private viewership, entangling the spectator through both form and content.

The shifting economic climate and privatization of markets that results from the transition from industrial to corporate to neoliberal capital is reflected in the privatization of media technologies throughout the late 20th and early 21st century. As media transitioned from solely relying on theaters for mass distribution to developing broadcast television, the audiovisual content gained the ability to directly enter the homes of spectators and privatized their viewership experiences. Though the content entered

directly into their homes, early broadcast television was still produced for the masses. However, with the privatization of markets through neoliberal capital, cable television developed multiple networks and channels through which content could be delivered. In this privatization of the markets, narrowcasting toward specific niche markets dominated cable television's marketing goals. So, as technology allowed for media to enter directly into the home, the spectator's experience was further privatized by narrowcasting and niche markets.

I argue that this formal transition from public to private is also reflected in the genre's depiction of the gangster's private sphere. The early gangster features of the 1930s allowed for broad audiences to identify with the gangster by appealing to multiple class identifications within single films. These films represented the gangster as a public entity, from which spectators identified or dis-identified with the gangster's actions, anxieties and desires through a broad depiction of economic class. However, as the genre transformed through the 1950s and into the 1970s, the gangster's sphere begins to revolve around the family racket and their role as a unit in the changing economic environment. In these depictions of family, the spectator still identifies and dis-identifies with the gangster's actions, but his anxieties and desires are reflected through both professional and personal concerns. In representing familial characters, the gangster genre develops a more ambiguous relationship with the spectator through identifications and dis-identifications that revolve around the representation of the family as part of the greater Mafia objective.

By the 1990s, when media had fully infiltrated the spectator's home, the focus of the genre, too, directly enters the home of the gangster, exploring the anxieties and

desires not only of the gangster's economic and familial concerns, but also those of his biological family. Because the content so closely explores the gangster's private life, the spectator's identifications and dis-identifications with the gangster are forged on a more personalized level. In combining the spectator's identifications through depictions of the gangster's economic class, familial roles, and domestic spaces with the shock aesthetics and criminal activity that have always been present in the gangster genre, the spectator's relationship with the gangster becomes an ambiguous entanglement of wavering identifications and dis-identifications. Because economic class, familial roles, and the domestic spaces are the centers of these wavering identifications and dis-identifications, the historical economic moments in which the gangster film or series is created directly influences both the gangster's and the spectator's anxieties about and desires for power and control at work and at home.

While I argue that this open, ambiguous relationship between the spectator and the gangster entangles the two, the film's or series' conclusions and scholarship written about the gangster genre tend to focus on finding ways to create moral ultimatums for the audience. Scholars have written about the complicated or uncomfortable identifications and dis-identifications with the gangster and have argued these ambiguous relationships are closed, as seen through the moral ultimatums in the films of the 1930s. In truth, most gangster films do end with a bloody showdown, send the gangster to jail, or put him in protective custody for sending his pals to the slammer. These moral ultimatums that finalize a gangster film put a quick and dirty end to the audience's ambiguous experience with the gangster. However, as I argue, the spectator both identifies and dis-identifies

with the gangster, and his or her relationship with the characters becomes an ambiguous entanglement that cannot be covered up by a moral reading or conclusion.

I argue that *The Sopranos* marks a pivotal point in the gangster genre in which the audience's ambiguous relationship with the gangster remains open and exposed. The identifications and dis-identifications that have complicated the spectator's experience are not remedied by a moral conclusion, but rather, an ambiguous, open-ended finale. On June 10, 2007, with David Chase's audience anticipating the final seconds of *The Sopranos*, the screen abruptly cut to black, and everyone froze. Some people called their network providers to see if their cable had been shut off, while others took to message boards on the Internet in outrage. The abrupt cut to black that whacked the series off air only added to the confused experience of the television show. What had happened? Rather than destroy Tony or his chaotic Mafia network, Chase chose to end the series with an ambiguous cut to black. *The Sopranos'* ambiguous ending is important because it allows for the individual spectator's consideration of his or her own identifications and dis-identifications that have developed with and throughout the series to subsist.

The Sopranos, then, highlights what I call the ethical entanglements that develop between a spectator and the gangster genre. The ethical entanglements result from the ambiguous identifications and dis-identifications that occur throughout a gangster film or television series through both form and content and their larger economic concerns for the spectator. From the three foundational gangster films of the 1930s to Chase's *Sopranos*, the depictions of the gangster's economic class, familial structure, and the space of the home focus more on the individual spectator's narrowcast, private concerns. By recognizing his or her own ambiguous relationship with the gangster, the spectator

does not necessarily subscribe to the moral ultimatums with which the genre once asked the spectator to identify.

In considering the spectator's varying identifications and dis-identifications with the gangster genre, I argue that the spectator has had and always will have ethical entanglements with the gangster genre. When the genre was focused on mass address, the spectator was encouraged to leave with an individual moral judgment of the gangster, yet the more privatized, ambiguous experience with the gangster actually causes the spectator to develop more ethical demands about his or her viewership. Because *The Sopranos* reveals the spectator's ethical entanglement with the genre, through which they may consider the broader economic implications of their viewership, I argue series reveals an entanglement that has always existed as part of the spectator's experience with the genre. In doing so, I situate *The Sopranos* in a way that reveals a gap in gangster scholarship, which generally avoids the complex relationships between spectators and the gangster. Not only does recognizing the spectator's ethical entanglement with the gangster shift the way previous scholarship has talked about the genre, but it also establishes the groundwork for a more personal psychological discussion of the spectator's relationship with the gangster, which I explore in my second chapter.

The Public's Enemy

For audiences in the 1930s, the early gangster films appealed to mass identifications by creating public personas with which the different classes could all find ways to identify. The very titles of the films from the 1930s suggest their focus on mass appeals in order to reach a broader social audience. *The Public Enemy, Little Caesar,* and

Scarface are all broad names for the characters in the film, encouraging a collective experience of and relationship with the characters in the films. A Public Enemy, a Caesar, and a Scarface are characters the masses could recognize as immoral and deserving of destruction. By appealing to the broad audience, early filmmakers were able to reach multiple levels of economic classes by uniting them under the same flag.

The economic identifications and dis-identifications with the gangster of the early 1930s serve the sense of upward class mobility being driven by the promises of industrial capital. An important factor in driving economic identifications with the gangster of the 1930s is the ability to identify with the growing middle class's and struggling lower class' anxieties and desires for upward class mobility and economic turmoil stemming from the depression. Jonathan Munby and David Ruth discuss the 1930s gangster through these two classes (Munby the lower and Ruth the middle) and through their recognition of economic identifications and dis-identifications for both classes, the genre's mass appeal becomes evident. While spectators could have identified with the gangster's desire for the quick accumulation of wealth, the shock aesthetics of the genre were both thrilling spectacles and also served as points of dis-identification, highlighted further by the moral ultimatums at the end of the films. These moral ultimatums, established by the Hays Office as part of censoring the violence in the films, attempted to provide a succinct conclusion to what proves to be a very complex viewership experience.

The fact that Munby and Ruth are able to discuss the gangster genre through various classes brings out the unifying goals of industrial capital, as well as the individual's anxieties and desires that stem from his or her economic position. Industrial capital's promises of unification for economic success for the country as a whole created

anxieties about and a desires for the individual's own personal economic success. America's economic growth and prosperity during the 1920s provided new structures of labor, such as Fordism, which created "a new model for producing the capitalist commodity (with relatively high wages for a fraction of the working class, and a strong increase in productivity due to mass production and rationalization), and a new model for realizing the value thus created (with development of mass consumption, which spread to part of the working class, whose conditions of living approached those of the middle strata)" (Beaud, 180). This new model largely focused on unifying a collective toward a mass goal in order to create efficient production, high profits, and better wages. While working conditions under Fordism were certainly not glamorous, they did provide a structured work environment such as Ford's "five-dollar day," which guaranteed its workers structured work days and payments. For this rising middle class, Fordism meant higher demands for personal production under the common goal.

The economic and social success of industrial capital for this new middle class from the 1920s was just about torched in the Great Depression, causing a major change in the regulation of American capital. With the New Deal, the American government's regulation of the economy came in full force establishing "a formula [employers] could stick to: child labor was forbidden, the work week was set at forty hours in the offices and thirty-five hours in industry and a minimum wage was established. The NIRA (National Industrial Recovery Act) guaranteed to workers the right to organize themselves freely and to choose their representatives, which facilitated the development of unions (Beaud, 185). In laying the foundation for Keynesian economics, the New Deal helped establish the basic guarantees seen in Fordism as national requirements. While

they were not identical, basic social and economic guarantees were put in place for the benefit of the small middle class, and the promise of economic uplift was on the horizon for the lower class.

The early gangster films used this tumultuous economic environment of the late 1920s and early 1930s to create identifications with both the middle and lower classes in order to achieve the mass audience to which their films were distributed. For the lower class, the content of economic uplift and the "rags to riches" dreams for many Americans, especially immigrants, were major points of identification. In *Little Caesar,* Rico's (Edward G. Robinson) rise from a petty criminal who holds up gas stations to a powerful crime boss is depicted through his intense desire not just for power, but also recognition. Munby points towards Rico's ethnicity (and Robinson's upbringing on New York's lower East Side) and the ethnic accent of the character as strong points of identification that were assumed but had not existed in gangster films before the sound era. For Munby, the gangster's ethnic vernacular "begged the question of what had been formerly taken for granted in Hollywood's representations of the ethnic urban lower class. Moreover, in light of the universal afflictions the Depression brought to American society, the ethnic gangster's struggles with economic and cultural disenfranchisement resonated with a growing national condition" (43). The ethnic gangster, then, was able to connect with the lower class through his direct, physical representation of the lower class and with the rest of America through his desire for class mobility.

Though the ethnic lower classes identified with the early gangster, both the identifications and dis-identifications that developed through violence provided more ambiguity in the viewership experience. About a quarter of the way into *Little Caesar,*

Rico's partner, Joe (Douglas Fairbanks Jr.), is offered a job making a hundred dollars a week as a professional dancer. Though Joe prefers to make an honest living with his dancing career, he is torn between living an honest life and his pact with Rico. His loyalty to Rico forces Joe to continue his involvement with the underworld gang, and he agrees to participate in the robbery of the nightclub in which he works. As Joe walks from his dressing room toward the lobby where he must signal the gang to come make the robbery, the camera pans across the crowd through which Joe traverses. Wearing a new tuxedo, Joe glad-hands and smiles at those whom he is about to betray. Here, his loyalty to his lower-class upbringing is evident through the façade he establishes around those for whom he must now perform. As someone who desires economic wealth but has anxieties about living in a high society to which he or she does not belong, the lower-class spectator may identify with Joe's loyalty.

Once Joe gives the signal in the lobby, a quick succession of shots shows the robbery and Rico's brutal violence as he murders an innocent city commissioner. This scene evokes the varying identifications and dis-identifications that potentially develop for the lower class in the early gangster film. At once identifying with Joe and Rico's desires for wealth, the mise-en-scene shown in Joe's movement through the opulent nightclub portrays the character's anxieties about actually assimilating into such a world. However, after Rico shoots the commissioner, a medium shot of Joe shows him looking back and forth from Rico to the man, further displaying his uncertainty about which life to lead. His loyalty to his friend endangers both his employment and his moral compass. This uncertainty in Joe's expression directly reflects the spectator's uncertainty about identifications and dis-identifications in the scene. The audience's uncertainty also stems

from the characters with whom they identify or dis-identify. While the audience identifies with Joe's anxieties about transitioning from lower class to middle class, this is not the only point of identification for the spectator. The spectator also identifies with Rico's desire for quick wealth, while dis-identifying with Rico's brutality. In identifying and dis-identifying with both Joe and Rico, there is no clear moral judgment here for the audience, but rather, tension between their identifications and dis-identifications with the characters' economic anxieties and desires as well as their violent actions.

The lower-class spectator's anxieties and desires about upward economic mobility occur simultaneously with the middle class's own anxieties and desires about economic stability and class assimilation. In describing Rico's economic anxieties, Munby writes, "*Little Caesar*'s Italian fraternal gang represents ethnic community as the 'real' realm of social relations, which is condemned only to mimic the rarefied rules of the legal norm. The gang and the urban territory it rules are ultimately simulations of an idealized normative America" (50). Munby's point is that even though the ethnic gangster creates economic wealth on his own terms, he still follows the middle class's social norms. For the viewer, these social norms are affirmed by the film and there is relief in the character's inability to fully achieve them. Munby provides the example of Rico's banquet during which no one can deliver a proper speech recognizing Rico's accomplishments. Even though he has the economic success, Rico is socially inept in his new class.

The early gangster's mass appeal, then, comes directly from the multiple points of identification and dis-identification he creates across classes. In the middle of *Scarface,* one of the film's more reflexive scenes shows Tony Camonte (Paul Muni) enjoying a

night at the theater. While the show is in between acts, Tony stands outside in a nice tuxedo, casually smoking a cigar and discussing the events of the show with his fellow gang members. Surrounded by his crew, Tony wears upper-class threads, smokes fine cigars, and attempts intellectual discussions about the play he is seeing at the theater. Tony's conversation about the play comes off as a childish understanding of its plot, and his inability to have an intellectual conversation or fit in with the upper-class atmosphere are evident. This depiction of someone who has moved up in social class is a point of identification for middle-class viewers, who want to see themselves as moving upward in economic class, but also want to avoid Tony's failure to assimilate into his upper-class status.

The identifications and dis-identifications between Tony and the audience's economic anxieties are confused when one of Tony's messengers pulls up in a car and announces he has spotted one of the gang's targets at a bowling alley. Tony decides they have to leave the show in order to make the hit but leaves one of his guys behind to see the rest of the show and report back as to how it ends. In the following scene, Tony, still dressed in his theater garb, receives the final plot points from the show and then proceeds to enter the bowling alley and gun down his rival. Unlike Rico, who killed an unarmed public commissioner, Tony kills a fellow Mafia man. This inter-Mafia killing does not encourage dis-identification through its brutality so much as through its depiction of the violent actions that have produced Tony's wealth. Ruth argues that moments like these create dis-identifications for the middle-class audience in showing a criminal who has usurped his right to social mobility through his violent crimes. Ruth writes, "Warnings about the rapid growth of this *deviant* class reflected fears of many native-born

Americans that respectable society would be overrun by the rapidly multiplying immigrant laboring class. Decent society was under siege from a dangerous lower class, and the criminal exemplified the threat" (14). Even as Tony represents an ethnic threat, the middle class identifies with his desire to assimilate into the higher classes, though they ultimately dis-identify with his gangster activity. These are the same identifications and dis-identifications experienced by the lower class, except their anxieties about their specific location in their economic class are slightly different. In this manner, the early gangster films reach a mass audience by utilizing economic class as a central place of identification and dis-identification, even though they evoke separate anxieties and desires from the separate classes.

Class identifications and dis-identifications in the early gangster features existed for *all* classes, helping the gangster genre reach the broader audiences for which they were produced and distributed. I argue that all classes were thrilled not only by ideas of social mobility, but also through the shock aesthetics of the genre. Though an audience may dis-identify with the character's actions, this may not take away from the thrills of machine-gun fire, speeding cars, and big explosions. This problem was not lost on Will Hays and his emergent Production Code, the goal of which was to censor all content conceived as inappropriate, including the visible violence of the gangster films. Richard Maltby notes that violence was moved off-screen "in the name of minimizing any appeal [its] representation might continue to hold for delinquent viewers" (143). While Hays tried to remove the thrill of violence, moving the violence off-screen did not always have the desired effect.

In moving violence off screen, the spectator's identifications and dis-identifications with gangster violence and its aims become blurred due to the fact that they are not subjected to the brutality with which they dis-identify. In *Scarface,* any time a character is killed, Hawks uses the mise-en-scene to create an X, establishing a motif for the viewer to recognize when a character is about to be killed. Stephen Prince describes it as follows, "When characters in the film die, the set design or the lighting creates a cross or X on-screen as a way of winking at the viewer and self-consciously weaving violence into the iconography of the film. This cumulative strategy leads the viewer to anticipate each new act of violence as an opportunity to search the screen for the motif within the composition" (23). Prince identifies the X's as "tableaux" that signify death, and Prince's words, his very diction, tell the real, playful story. The X's "wink" at the spectator as a "strategy" that leads to "anticipation" of an "opportunity to search" for violence throughout the film. While the X's operate as a creative signifier and alternative to showing the actual violence that takes place within the film, they also become one big game for the spectators to play. *Scarface* leads the spectator into a "strategy" for watching the film, and if the audience pays close, active attention, they will have the "opportunity to search" for violence in pleasurable ways. In *Scarface*, then, the violent actions of the gangsters shift from being representations of the horrific crimes of criminals to a fun game. Violence in this film is directly associated with fun, thus completely undercutting the moral message the Hays Office would have been striving to accomplish.

Similar to the removal of violence in early gangster cinema, the strong moral messages distributed throughout early gangster films aimed for moral ultimatums through

which an audience is supposed to view the films. Bookending *The Public Enemy,* are two different moral messages meant to singularly determine the spectator's experience with the film. The first, a foreword from Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc., states, "It is the ambition of the authors of 'The Public Enemy' to honestly depict an environment that exists today in a certain strata of American life, rather than glorify the hoodlum or the criminal." Anticipating the various identifications and dis-identifications that have described, this moral message claims to "honestly depict [the] environment" of the criminal. However, nothing about the film's portrayal of the gangster is "honest," especially during scenes in which the gangster's actions are demonized.

In an attempt to discourage criminal activity, part of the moral ultimatums in the early gangster features hinged on the violent and graphic destruction of the criminal. At the very end of the film, Tom Powers's (James Cagney) family receives a phone call that Tom will be returning home from the hospital where he has been recovering from a gang shooting. As his mother runs upstairs to prepare his bed, there's a knock at the door. When Tom's brother opens the front door, we see Tom from a low angle, bandaged and bloody, dead and tied to a board. The shot then cuts to a close-up of his face and back to the low-angle shot, in which Tom's dead body falls face first into the family's foyer. Tom's brother looks straight into the camera with a cold face and walks directly towards the audience, causing the screen to go black. Immediately following this blackness, another message from the filmmakers appears: "The end of Tom Powers is the end of every hoodlum. 'The Public Enemy' is not a man, nor is it a character—it is a problem that sooner or later we, the public, must solve." Not only does this final scene graphically dramatize the death of Tom Powers by placing the spectator on the ground, where Tom's

dead face eventually hits the floor, but it also initiates a second moral ultimatum, concluding with a call to action. In contrast to other violence, which is moved off screen, this most graphic moment is shown, and accentuated, in order to create a violent visual depiction of the gangster's downfall, one that was meant to resonate with the audience as their final visual experience with the film.

Early gangster films created ambiguous relationships between the gangsters and the spectators by incorporating the spectator's own economic anxieties and desires into the gangster narrative while presenting the genre through public theaters to mass audiences. Scholars such as Carlos Clarens allow the moral ultimatums at the end of the films to create a barrier between the gangster and the spectator, even when they recognize this relationship is more complicated than the ultimatums suggest. "A violent, causal death (the gangster shot by police or an adversary as a result of more or less complex plotting) reconciled the gangster with society *in extremis*, but the major genre heroes usually died, as they lived, in isolation from society" (57). Clarens recognizes a complicated spectatorial experience but allows the ultimatum to "reconcile" the spectator's ambiguous relationship with the gangster. I argue the final moral ultimatums do not create distance from the spectator, but rather, complicate the spectator's already entangled relationship with the gangster even further. The fact that audiences participated in this complex relationship as a mass audience shows how the collective's desire's for economic mobility and anxieties about Depression-era America were utterly entangled with the class economics portrayed by the gangster on screen. By creating a thrilling spectacle that was projected for public display, violence further encouraged an audience's mass enjoyment of and apprehension about the early gangster film. Rather than creating

films in which audiences walked away with strong, social moral ultimatums, the 1930s created the gangster genre as an ambiguous visual experience for spectators.

Family Feud

From the 1930s through the 1950s, gangster films transformed to productions of organized crime syndicate films, depicting crime as a massive organization that operates through the lens of legitimate corporations. The spectator's personal identifications and dis-identifications with the classic gangster return, however, through Francis Ford Coppola's epic gangster features. The gangster films of the 1970s not only created identifications and dis-identifications with the American audience on an economic level, but also extended spectatorial relationships with the gangster to familial structures. Again, we see this transformation in the very diction of the titles of the films. Coppola's *Godfather* (1972) connotes extended familial relationships within the gangster racket, while Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973) focuses on the Little Italy neighborhood that ethnically connects all of the characters. As the gangster film incorporates figures of family into its narratives, it relies less on the depiction of class economics to appeal to various audiences because of their more personal, ideological conceptions of familial structures. Notice that Coppola uses the Corleone family as the main structure for the underworld's organization and their massive estate as the central location for meetings and decision-making. On the contrary, *Mean Streets*' central locations are poorly lit bars and tiny New York apartments. However, these films incorporate the family into the structure of the underworld and place new emphasis on the crime "family" becoming part of the biological family. While the economic goals of the gangster will always be class

mobility and the accumulation of wealth, the 1970s gangster films proved that they could relay this message through a more individualized convention of depicting the family as part of the Mafia enterprise, without relying solely on economic class identifications.

Along with this more familial depiction of the gangster within the genre's content, the media technologies through which spectators received cinema and visual media shifted towards more domestic spectatorial spaces. With the popularity of television and the introduction of the VCR, the spectator's individual control of his or her viewership expanded significantly through the 1950s and into the 1970s. With this shift in form, the spectator's more privatized viewing spaces allowed for his or her experience to be less involved with the economic goals of the masses and more focused on the individual consumer's own economic and familial concerns.

Again, the backdrop for this change in content and form for the gangster genre lies in the shifting economic situation for American capital. After World War II, America's economy experienced a dramatic increase in industrial growth by implementing Fordism and Taylorism anywhere possible in order to mechanize and regulate American capital gains. Michel Beaud describes the economic culture of the 1950s as "an atmosphere of reassuring euphoria," leading some economists to declare, "the post-Keynesian era has developed currency and taxation policies which can create the necessary buying power for avoiding great crises as well as chronic recession" (223). However, the limitations of Keynesian economics ultimately did result in less production and growth. The saturation of markets and the inability to grow led to a steep fall in both production and consumption within the American market.

Thus a major shift in American capital and social structures occurred to break

away from the Keynesian economic practices. Part of the shift in American capital occurred through the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s and Free Speech movement in the mid-1960s. The push for individual freedoms in the ’60’s went hand in hand with breaking away from the regulated, capitalist structures that had led America into an economic crisis. David Harvey describes the relationship between the push for individual liberties and breaking away from corporate capital as follows, “For almost everyone involved in the movement of ’68, the intrusive state was the enemy, and it had to be reformed. And on that, the neoliberals could easily agree. But capitalist corporations, business, and the market system were also seen as primary enemies requiring redress if not revolutionary transformation” (42). The early 1970s, then, marked a transitional period in breaking away from the labor-intensive corporate practices that had lead to such great prosperity in the 1950s toward new industries and technologies that led “in the direction of increased internationalization and globalization” (Beaud, 267). As technologies enhanced the ability for global telecommunications, the ceilings of the market drastically expanded. This more globalized economy required privatization of industries and openings for foreign investment, leaving certain economic regulations behind and opening up a more privatized, free market.

Just as new technologies shift the abilities of the economy, so, too, do they transform the media through which people receive entertainment. With the introduction of broadcast television to American mass media in the 1950s, the viewership of audiovisual media began to shift from public theaters to the private home of the spectator. While content was still broadcast for mass consumption, a new focus was placed on the individual consumer with media entering the domestic sphere. Television brought visual

media into the home of the spectator and created a new, more personalized visual experience. However, the early years of television were entirely reliant on broadcasting content over each particular network to reach a mass audience. Raymond Williams recognizes, "Broadcasting can be diagnosed as a new and powerful form of social integration and control. Many of its main uses can be seen as socially, commercially, and at times politically manipulative" (17). Broadcast television, then, looked to achieve similar moralizing backdrops that dominated the early gangster films from the 1930s. These white, middle-class morals encouraged the same individual moral judgments seen in the films of the 1930s.

For the gangster genre, then, morality dominated the goals of the networks and depicting such criminal actions as seen in the early features could not be risked at the expense of moral integrity. In depicting these mass moral values, gangster and crime television desired individual moral judgments despite the fact that ambiguous entanglements exist. Because television's social motives were generally conservative, *The Untouchables* (ABC, 1959 – 1963) was born as a crime television program whose central characters were not the criminals, but rather, the law. Following Eliot Ness and his group of G-Men, the program's narrative focused on cracking down on criminals and bringing them to justice. Though the program did not focus on the criminals, it still depicted plenty of violence, causing controversy among more conservative adult viewers. Even though the violence was disturbing for some viewers, it also seemed to be the catalyst for the program's ratings. Similar to the early gangster features, the violence was both a thrilling part of the spectacle of the genre, but also a problem in the broad reception of the gangster's actions. In broadcasting to the mass American audience, *The*

Untouchables struggled to create mass appeal due to the outcry against and desire for violence.

In the third season, the producers tried to depict Eliot Ness's wit and mental prowess rather than his physical dominance over criminals. Though there was still violence, the series focused more on the moral, intellectual side of fighting crime. Basically the program wanted to have its cake and eat it, too, by depicting violence but still keeping a moral lens, and by the third season, viewers had had enough. In an unsuccessful "effort to revitalize the show during its fourth year, the producers tried to cut down on the violence and add a little more substance, with Ness using his brains to outwit the bad guys rather than his tommy gun" (Snauffer, 29). Without the violence, the television program became another boring broadcast and was dropped in 1963. *The Untouchables* shows the challenges of depicting the gangster genre over broadcast television through its inability to satisfy the entire country's moral agenda. Even though the overarching message was the triumph of law and order, they still could not avoid backlash from the genre's shock aesthetics. The spectator's inability to *prevent* violence entering their home became just as much of a problem as the violence itself. The changing media technologies added to the gangster genre's effects on the spectator but limited its appeal as broadcast content. Evident through *The Untouchables*' problems is the need for a niche market that would be willing to be subjected to the violence of the gangster genre as part of the story, rather than immediately writing it off as immoral.

As the form through which media reached the spectator entered the familial space, so, too, did the content of gangster cinema. Rather than depicting the criminal enterprise through the moral lens of network television's G-Men, the 1970s gangster films returned

to gangsters themselves and delved even deeper inside the streets of the local neighborhood and the homes of the criminals. With the gangster film focusing on familial structures, the genre created more instances for identifications and dis-identifications to occur between the gangster and the spectator. While the gangster's goals in economic success are still prevalent, the spectator's relationship with the gangster extends beyond economic concerns to thinking about familial structures, including familial codes of honor and loyalty as well as responsibility within the various roles of the family.

Entering the familial space of the gangster creates further tension for the spectator in combining the biological family's motives, desires, and anxieties in their specific economic or familial roles, with those of the gangster. This combination provides more instances of identification and dis-identification that resonate with audiences on a broader and, surprisingly, more personalized level. For example, the opening scenes of *The Godfather* immediately blend Don Vito Corleone's (Marlon Brando) roles as provider and protector of his domestic family and his leadership role as the Don of his Mafia business as well. Under the umbrella of the wedding ceremony for Vito's daughter, both extended family members and extended business partners are intermixed, showing how Vito's domestic family, primarily his sons, are integral parts of the organization and control his "Family." While the audience may not directly identify with the economic success of the Corleones and the opulence of their familial lifestyle, they do create identifications with their familial practices, in this case, the celebration of a family member's wedding.

The opening scenes of *The Godfather* depict Vito in his office with his chief advisor and adopted son, Tom Hagen (Robert Duvall), meeting with various friends and

business partners to the Mafia "Family." The first shot of the film is a conversation about justice between Vito and fellow Italian-American immigrant, Bonasera (Salvatore Corsitto), taking place through one, long, slow zoom. As the conversation focuses on the lack of respect given to Bonasera by local police after the brutal beating of his daughter, the camera slowly falls over the shoulder of Vito. As the camera settles over and behind the Don's shoulder, Bonasera begs and pleads Vito to fulfill the justice he seeks for the men who beat his daughter. The slow zoom is important for two reasons. First, it shows Bonasera's paternal emotional predicament and love for his daughter as he seeks justice. Second, the audience eventually is placed just behind Vito's seat of authority, and through this technique, the film establishes a relationship between Vito and the viewer. By placing the audience almost directly in the chair of authority, the film begins to teach the audience the codes by which Don Vito runs both of his families as shown from the Don's point of view.

As the camera shifts to an establishing shot of the office, Vito's eldest son, Sonny (James Caan), and Tom Hagen appear as witnesses to Vito's acceptance of Bonasera's request for justice. Although Vito accepts Bonasera's request, he lectures the man on respect and insinuates that this favor will need to be returned in some unforeseen manner in the future. Like a father lecturing his son, Vito submits to Bonasera's requests only after teaching him a familial lesson. Phoebe Poon situates Vito's paternal instincts in a larger moral framework. She notes, "The Don exerts patriarchal authority over his Family. Those who work closest to him are not hired men but his own sons or adopted 'godsons,' all of whom respect him not as the leader of a corporation but as the upholder of the Sicilian Mafiosi values by which they all abide. He is a figure of familial authority

more than a figure of organizational authority. This paternalistic attitude and desire for legitimacy extracts Don Vito from the evil and corruption associated with the common gangster and elevates him into an iconic father figure who deserves the loyalty of the clan" (190). While I agree that Vito's "paternalistic attitude" creates sympathetic responses from the spectator, I disagree that Vito's decisions "extract" him from his "evil" decision-making.

In fact, Vito's decisions that lead to violence and murder create moments of dis-identification that complicate the spectator's relationship with the Don. For instance, the scene from *Godfather II* mentioned in my introductory chapter shows a younger Vito murder the mob boss, Fanucci. After the murder, Vito helps a community member and displays his paternal emotions to the community he serves. Vito's murder of Fanucci is depicted as a successful and glorified moment in *Godfather II* because it displays Vito's physical power and intelligence as a man, while also showing he is a moral man, justifying his place as Don. Yet, literally seconds before we see Vito helping the community, he kills a man in cold blood. The paternal instinct with which he acts as a leader in his community does not wipe away the brutal murder as if it never happened. Ingrid Walker-Fields, a popular culture theorist, notes, "Seeming at times a benevolent patriarch, the Don exacts loyalty, friendship, and respect, but wields these as weapons as well. His code calls for effective brutality even as it masquerades as generosity and good will" (618). Using his patriarchal roles as weapons is exactly where the spectator experiences *dis-identifications* with the gangster. Because of these dis-identifications, the all too easy assumption that depicting the gangster as a family man justifies his violence ignores the fact that the violence still exists and is not blindly accepted by the spectator.

The ending of *The Godfather* shows Michael (Al Pacino) exacting revenge upon those who have betrayed him, reaching the audience on the familial level under the blanket of safety and revenge for his family. Intercut between the brutal murders Michael stands as godfather to his nephew at a baptism in a church. Like the moral ultimatums that bookend the films from the early 1930s, this moment is designed to justify Michaels's actions by depicting him as a family man who is simply adhering to the "code" and "honor" of the familial patriarch. Chris Messenger writes, "A two hour movie often attempts to push an audience toward such heroic identification by defining the 'justifying' circumstances in outlaw psyches, a cinematic tradition most often linked to … *The* Godfather" (254). The goal, being, to give the audience a lasting moral ultimatum that allows them to leave the theater morally content, rather than utterly confused about their relationship with the gangster. Though the ending suggests Michael is simply fulfilling his roles as a patriarch, the audience has been subjected to arguably the most brutal sequence of violence in the entire film. The combination of the gangster's crimes with his role as a patriarch creates unresolvable identifications and dis-identifications for the spectator's experience on both economic and familial levels.

By evoking the audience's familial identifications and dis-identifications with the gangster, the films of the 1970s reflect the privatized economic concerns of the American family as well as the privatization of their viewership experience. While films were still shown in theaters, the infiltration of media into the familial space was in full swing, and the genre reflects the more privatized viewer experience in privatizing the gangster content. By identifying or dis-identifying with the gangster's economic and familial

concerns, the spectator's complex relationship with the gangster develops on a more individualized level.

Now, It's Personal

As the gangster genre entered the 1990s, the spectator's individualized identifications and dis-identifications with the gangster were retained through depictions of the gangster's economic class and familial roles. However, as media technologies such as the remote control and TV Guide and On Demand technologies allowed for the privatization of spectator viewership, the gangster genre's focus shifted towards both the homes of the gangsters and the spectators themselves. The more individualized titles of the films reflect this focus on the individual gangster. Titles like *Donnie Brasco* (Mike Newell, 1997), *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999), or even *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990) indicate specific men, or groups of men, and their respective Mafia affiliations. This move to the domestic space provides yet another location for ambiguous identifications and dis-identifications to develop between the spectator and the gangster and does so on a more individualized level.

The privatization of the viewer experience in the gangster genre goes hand in hand with the privatization of American capital moving forward from the political and economic crises in the mid-1970s. The election of Ronald Reagan in 1981 marked a turning point in the economic climate for America. With "Reaganomics" came "'an across the board drive to reduce the scope and content of federal regulation of industry, the environment, the workplace, health care, and the relationship between buyer and seller.' Budget cuts and deregulation and 'the appointment of anti- regulatory, industry-

oriented agency personnel' to key positions were the main means" (Harvey, 51-52). These economic changes were the building blocks of neoliberal capital in America. In cutting budgets as well as nearly eliminating regulation of the private sector, neoliberal economics produced dramatic growth in American capital due to increased competition and efficiency produced by the private sector. Private investment in the free market created an expanding American economy, and "by 1990 or so most economics departments in the major research universities as well as the business schools were dominated by neoliberal modes of thought" (Harvey, 54). While neoliberalism increased private investment, it also put higher pressure on the individual's anxieties about his or her economic situation. Without state regulation for the public, as seen in Keynesian economics, "each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being. This principal extends into the realms of welfare, education, health care, and even pensions" (Harvey, 65). Placing this type of pressure on the individual created new anxieties about the atomizing effects of neoliberal capital, which ultimately becomes reflected through the form and content of the late 20th and early 21st-century gangster.

As American capital followed neoliberal economics, this privatization of the market was reflected through both the individual's increasing control over his or her media viewership as well as through developing television technologies and introducing channels with narrower markets. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, videocassettes, VCRs, and remote controls became available for American consumers, giving viewers increased control over their televisual experience and further developing the ways in which they could capture and view moving images. As cable television became more and more

privatized in the ’90’s, channels were able to target more narrow audiences through more privatized advertising economics. Television theorist Amanda Lotz remarks that at this time, “The emergence of so many new networks and channels changed the competitive dynamics of the industry and the type of programming likely to be produced. … These more narrowly targeted cable channels increased the range of stories that could be supported, … and their particular economic arrangements allowed them to schedule series with themes and content unlikely to be found on broadcast networks” (15). Television’s shifting economic environment provided the opportunity for even more privatized pay-cable networks to find their niche.

By narrowcasting cable television directly at a target audience, channels were able to target niche markets and take greater risks in the content they showed, which, for the spectator, created a closer relationship between the channel and their viewership. In cable’s ability to narrowcast, there was a promise “not merely to bring us more television channels, but also to facilitate interaction between individuals. … In the 1980s, cable channels originated more programming, innovation was defined as network-style programs with harsher language, more nudity, more explicit violence, and more adult themes” (Meehan, 245). This formula for content is exactly what the Home Box Office service brought to paying customers by the late 1980s. As a pay-cable subscription service, HBO had been around since the ’70’s offering access to live sporting events and full Hollywood movies. However, not until the ’80’s and ’90’s did HBO begin developing original content. By the 1990s, HBO had coined its tagline, “It’s Not T.V. It’s HBO,” implying “the series and specials produced by and presented on HBO are a qualitative cut above your usual run-of-the-mill television programming” (Edgerton, 9).

HBO's original content, then, enjoyed the freedoms of pay cable's economics in receiving a majority of its income from subscription fees and thus not having to adhere to advertiser's concerns over content. Because the spectator directly pays for his or her subscription to HBO, his or her relationship with the service becomes more privatized because of his or her direct connection to the programming. The mentality being, I provide for HBO, so HBO provides for me. This privatized mentality is reflected not just through the spectator's relationship with the economics of pay-cable television, but also in the form through which they receive the content.

Through the 1990s and into the 21st century, new media technologies dramatically privatized the viewership experience, creating a more personalized experience between the spectator and the gangster. Throughout the late '90's and early 2000s, "TV content [was] adapted across as many platforms as possible (including traditional TV sets, DVD players, the Internet, MP3 Video players, stand-alone and portable digital video recorders [DVRs], and even mobile phones). … The new digital era of 'on-demand entertainment' … signal[ed] the beginning of 'the end of TV' as most people knew it before 1995" (Edgerton, 14). By increasing the private experience of television and audiovisual media, as well as placing the spectator at the center of control over the content of his or her viewership, advancing media technologies create a personalized experience for the spectator. With the thousands of channels and programs available, the spectator's selection of a series automatically heightens his or her relationship with the characters on screen because, from the spectator's point of view, he or she has selected the characters and incorporated them into his or her audiovisual media cavalry.

For the gangster genre, the spectator's individualized viewership experience,

brought on by new media technologies, is reflected through the depiction of the gangster's own private realm. In this more privatized depiction of the gangster's domestic space the spectator's identifications and dis-identifications with the gangster reflect his or her anxieties and desires about the privatization of the neoliberal environment from which these films and series were born. In Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, Henry Hill's (Ray Liotta) concerns about his job as a member of the Mafia and his role as husband and father are ever-present, yet the film places an additional focus on Henry's suburbanized home. Throughout *Goodfellas,* Henry's rises through the Mafia ranks and economic ladder are followed by tours of the homes he purchases. In a scene that displays a loft purchased for Henry's drug-trafficking mistress, Janice (Gina Mastrogiacomo), the spectator indulges in the home by thoroughly seeing its minute details. Janice shows her apartment to her girlfriends while Scorsese's camera tracks and pans from room to room. The frenetic pace with which the camera moves mirrors the high-paced, commodity-centric attitudes of the characters exploring the apartment, as well as, perhaps, the audience watching the film. The camera focuses on the fine details of the silk designer sofa, an elaborate *armoire,* and French perfume, yet passes each object as just another product on the shelf.

For the neoliberal spectator, this commodity centric attitude potentially reflects his or her goals, providing economic identifications with Henry and his mistress in exploring their anxieties about and desires for economic wealth. Neoliberal capitalism requires "production for profit, profit for accumulation, accumulation for new production," yet "accumulation – shrouded within the circulation of commodities, stimulated by competition and by the quest for monopoly, and continuously supported by

entrepreneurial innovation – gives rise to and nourishes a complex abundance of transforming dynamics" (Beaud, 308). The neoliberal model does not follow a straight and narrow path for capitalism's goals, but rather, relies on various forms of trade, borrowing on credit, and investment. Henry's accumulation of wealth must be reflected through his endless purchasing of commodities, which could be bought on credit, assuming his future capital gains. The reliance on future capital gains means pressure to indeed make money in the future in order to pay off the credit, so that one can put more commodities on credit. This never-ending cycle of neoliberal commodity consumption is reflected through the frenetic depiction of Henry's apartment, and the spectator identifies with these neoliberal economic anxieties.

By quickly depicting the apartment as one large commodity, Scorsese depicts the consumer-driven, free-market economy in which the spectator lives. Twenty minutes later, the audience receives yet another tour of Henry's newest home. As revealed by his wife, Karen (Lorraine Bracco), this house is more opulent than Janice's apartment, complete with a hidden entertainment wall and imported furniture. With the same tracks and pans seen earlier in the film, Scorsese reveals the house to be another step up the ladder of the America Dream for Henry and his family, yet presents the home in the same temporal aesthetic. Through this presentation of Henry's commodities, "the gangster in *Goodfellas* is depicted as being integrated into society," and "society more closely resembles the suburbs than the urban setting associated with the genre" (Keeton, 140). Keeton hints at the fact that Henry's homes may represent those of the suburban spectator, but I argue these identifications go much deeper than visual similarities. Henry's economic anxieties about the expectations of neoliberal capital and desires for

wealth are reflected through the commodities depicted in his domestic space and the spectator identifies with these same economic anxieties and desires.

While depictions of the gangster's home as seen in *Goodfellas* make a move toward the domestic space to create identifications with the audience they also continue to create dis-identifications as well. For instance, Janice's loft, the same apartment presented to the audience through a commodity-centric aesthetic, accentuating all of the fine details of the domestic space, eventually houses Henry's intricate cocaine-distribution ring. So, while the audience may identify with the home's luxuries, the gangster activity still provides places for the spectator to dis-identify with the film. Scorsese's camera obsesses over furniture, lamps, clothing, and endless material objects, projecting the spectator's own desires for these material goods, yet also treats cocaine, weapons, and bloody corpses with the same frenetic pace and attention to detail. By commodifying the shock aesthetics of the genre, Scorsese builds dis-identifications for the spectator with the same visual aesthetic through which the spectator identifies with the gangster.

In matching the spectator's identifications and dis-identifications with Henry's anxieties and desires about neoliberal commodification, the spectator is located as Henry's equal, however different they may be. This presentation of the gangster develops a more personalized relationship between the gangster and the spectator. By the end of the film, Henry rats out his friends and is forced to go into the federal protective custody program. The final scene of the film tracks past multiple middle-class homes, some still under construction, in a suburban neighborhood. Each home in the scene has identically plain and symmetrical architecture and equal square footage. The camera rests on Henry,

picking up the newspaper in front of his home as the narration concludes, "I'm an average nobody, get to live the rest of my life as a schnook." This moment is quite possibly the most ambiguous moment for the middle-class American spectator. Throughout the film, the spectator has enjoyed the bodily thrills of Henry's violent murders, drug trafficking, quick wealth, and carefree consumerism through Scorsese's commodification of these identifications and dis-identifications. Yet, the end of the film sticks Henry in a neighborhood that very well resembles the neighborhood in which the audience sits while watching the film. Henry's "death" in *Goodfellas* is to be stuck in the very economic class, familial role, and domestic space as the average middle-class American watching the film. Desires for material wealth and anxieties about the "free" market drive the spectatorial experience with *Goodfellas* just as they drive the character's motives.

In connecting the spectator and the gangster through their shared anxieties and desires stemming from neoliberal capitalism, the spectator is situated to consider his or her experience with the gangster as an ongoing entanglement, rather than drawing a final moral conclusion. Henry is not obliterated by machine guns, nor does he violently destroy his fellow Mafia members. By leaving the Mafia and entering the environment of the spectator, Henry and the spectator are drawn together, potentially causing the spectator to consider how his or her socioeconomic situation may also reflect a "death." In leaving the spectator entangled with the gangster, *Goodfellas* lays the groundwork for the ethical entanglement I argue happens through the *Sopranos* Experience.

The serial nature of *The Sopranos* allows this entanglement with the gangster to subsist through multiple seasons and years, fully immersing the spectator's private

conceptions of his or her economics class, familial roles, and domestic space with those of the gangster. HBO's production of *The Sopranos* not only creates identifications and dis-identifications with the spectator through depictions of economic class, familial roles, and domestic spaces, but the pay-cable format also brings the gangster genre directly into the homes of the spectator, completing the genre's shift from public viewership to a completely private experience. No longer is the gangster the "Public Enemy" for the whole nation, or a member of the "Mean Streets" of the local neighborhood; he *is* Tony Soprano. The individualized title of the show is a direct reflection of the privatized format through which HBO delivers its content, as well as the neoliberal capital through which narrowcast television was made possible. As I have suggested, the 1930s gangster films appealed across classes to reach mass audiences through economic concerns, while the gangsters from the 1970s through the 1990s entered familial and domestic spaces, further entangling the spectator with the gangster. However, until this point, the spectator, though entangled, experienced the gangster genre through a physically limited time frame, spanning a couple of hours. With the gangster's move to serial, pay-cable television, the spectator does not receive the gangster as a single product of entertainment that lasts only a few hours, but rather lives, grows, and evolves with the gangster through multiple seasons and years. This ongoing viewership creates an extended, more personalized relationship in which audiences become overexposed to the gangster's life. Whether Tony takes some Prozac, murders a rival mobster, or has a bout with diarrhea, the audience views these events from their living-room sofas, in their own domestic spaces. Thus, the audience literally comes closer to the gangster than ever before.

The wavering identifications and dis-identifications that have been around since the 1930s still exist in *The Sopranos,* but become more personalized through extended viewership. The audience literally spends more time with Tony and his family, and through the privatized distribution of HBO, the only means of distribution for the series is to directly enter the spectator's home. Not only does the arc of the entire series entangle the spectator through identifications and dis-identifications with the gangster through depictions of economic class, familial roles, and domestic spaces, but every episode does so as well. This continuous, ambiguous relationship between the spectator and the characters on screen may suggest certain degrees of moral closure per episode, but the series' entanglement with the viewer remains ongoing.

For example, in the fifth episode of Season 1, "College," Tony takes his daughter, Meadow on college visits throughout New England. While at a gas station, Tony catches a glimpse of an old member of his gang, Fabian Petrulio (Tony Ray Rossi), who defected into the witness protection program and whom Tony decides he must kill. As Tony prepares his violent act of vengeance, he also provides paternal support for his daughter as she makes her college decision. Intercut between these scenes are scenes of Tony's wife, Carmela (Edie Falco), back in New Jersey hosting the family's priest for a late-night dinner. While sexual tension is suggested between Carmela and the priest, most of their conversation revolves around Carmela's faith and insecurities about being married to a gangster. Just through the story arc we can pinpoint identifications and dis-identifications that may occur for the spectator through the narrative form. On an economic level, Tony is dealing with his daughter's transition from high school to college, which also develops familial identifications with Tony for parents of teen-aged

children, as well as with Meadow, who is also dealing with the transition through this "college visit." Domestically, Carmela must hold down the fort while avoiding inappropriate sexual impulses towards another man while her husband is away. Amidst this sexual tension, Carmela also questions the means by which her family thrives. Just in the set-up of the story, multiple spectators find ways to identify with the characters through their various familial roles. However, dis-identifications still exist, entangling the spectator by complicating their familial identifications.

The dis-identifications that occur within each episode, season, and for the series as whole never fully disrupt the viewer's relationship with the characters, but only further entangles the spectator. After dinner one night, Tony allows Meadow to go drinking with some college students so he can buy time to hunt down Petrulio. After having no luck, Tony and an intoxicated Meadow return to their motel where, unbeknownst to them, Petrulio awaits their return. The audience, here, fears Tony's death, but surely cannot see it as unjustified, considering they have just seen Tony hunt for Petrulio throughout the evening. Intercut here, Carmela performs a formal confession with her priest, confessing her addiction to the perks of being married to a gangster. Again, the spectator dis-identifies with Carmela's acceptance of Tony's gangster activity, but also identifies with her desire to keep her family nucleus together. Next, a tight tracking shot shows Petrulio stalking Tony and his daughter, waiting to get a good shot on Tony. From a point-of-view shot, looking down Petrulio's gun, we see Tony. Suddenly, from off screen, an older couple distracts Petrulio, delaying his shot and saving Tony's life. In this moment, the spectator is meant to feel relief for Tony but has been placed in the very position that could have ended Tony's life. Fifteen minutes later, Tony is strangling Petrulio from

behind with a rope. Despite Petrulio's pleas, Tony kills Petrulio, literally with his bare hands, showing no remorse. While the audience may dis-identify with this brutal moment, being placed in the spot of the gunman from earlier in the episode allows him or her to acknowledge that had Tony not killed Petrulio, Petrulio would have killed Tony. In this sequence, every scene provides identifications and dis-identifications through which the spectator must maneuver, creating a totally ambiguous relationship between Tony and spectator.

The camera in these scenes shows very little bias as to character motives or identities, and mostly provides an omniscient view of the entire episode while retaining its close, tightly framed aesthetic. With this aesthetic, the audience is encouraged to feel multiple emotions through varying perspectives, causing them to experience identifications and dis-identifications with characters in or around Tony's life. Not only does the series create intense moments of identification and dis-identification for audience members through the content, but the form through which they see the show is also brought directly into their domestic space. When Tony and Meadow return home from college, none of Carmela's anxieties about being married to Tony are resolved, and Tony is not more or less a good husband or father. However, the fact that they're still together as a couple and Tony has survived his latest gangster adventure provides enough closure for the audience, who then turns off their television and returns to their domestic space as well.

Even though there is relative stasis in the series, no major tensions in the narrative have been resolved, and the spectator's ambiguous relationship with Tony persists until the next episode. *The Sopranos* explicates the spectator's ethical entanglement with the

gangster because the serial format of pay-cable television creates these on-going identifications and dis-identifications with the spectator's own economic class, familial roles, and domestic spaces. Again, just as the content displays the spectator's entanglement with the gangster, so, too, does the form through which they receive the content. The privatization of the viewing experience for the spectator doesn't cause him or her to make private moral judgments about the program because of how personalized his or her relationship with the characters has become. Rather, in considering his or her own experience with the program, the spectator is prepared to consider his or her role in the production and distribution of the program. This preparation comes from the spectator's ongoing ambiguous relationship with Tony, which they have paid for in their subscription to HBO. Through HBO's niche marketing and narrowcasting, the channel receives income directly form the spectator. Because of this privatized relationship between the spectator and HBO, the spectator's role in the economics of pay-cable allows him or her to make ethical demands about his or her ongoing, ambiguous viewership experience. Because the neoliberal market gives the spectator false mastery, and thus incites vulnerability in his or her conception of his or her viewership, the spectator may question or make demands about the collective's atomization and vulnerability. The spectator's entanglement with the gangster has always existed, but the fact that *The Sopranos* allows the spectator to feel in control of their viewership through a pay-cable subscription that returns time and again to the series with which he or she has an ambiguous relationship, lays the foundation for the *Sopranos* Experience.

The Sopranos depicts the anxieties and desires of the spectator from an economic, familial, and domestic perspective, yet in no way attempts to resolve these identifications

and the brutal murders with which the audience dis-identifies through any moral objective. There are no moral ultimatums underlying the program, and the history of the genre helped prepare audiences for the ways in which the show depicts not only all of the characters, stemming from both of the gangster's "families," but also all facets of the gangster's lifestyle. Scholars have noted *The Sopranos* indebtedness to the gangster genre from which it was born, as well as its unique distribution through the pay-cable format. In concluding her argument about *The Sopranos,* Martha Nochimson writes, "David Chase and his creative community are inviting us to be very adult in our consideration of the crime culture and very sophisticated about its role as a metaphor for the tangled desires of our daily lives. We might even say that with *The Sopranos*, mass culture comes of age as entertainment provides a truly popular examination of important popular realities" (13). While I certainly agree with Nochimson's reading of the sophistication with which the modern audience must read the series, I suggest that the series is revelatory through what it uncovers about the spectator's entanglement with his or her entertainment. If the spectator continually has wavering identifications and dis-identifications, yet repeatedly returns to the series without needing moral conclusions, then the viewership experience takes on higher importance for the spectator than the content itself.

Because spectators have control over the technology through which they receive the gangster content, they perceive the control they desire from living in an uncertain neoliberal environment. Since HBO is a commodity just like the television through which it is received, the spectator desires ownership over the content in the same way they own the television. Even though spectators of HBO may perceive a bottom-up relationship with *The Sopranos* in which they control their viewership experience, their experience is

still the product of neoliberal capital through narrowcast televisual content. In her essay, "The Family Racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, The Sopranos, and the Construction of a Quality Brand," Deborah Jaramillo examines the complexities of HBO's relationship with AOL Time Warner as they pertain to the spectator. In discussing HBO's child-parent relationship with AOL Time Warner she writes, "Channels such as HBO are still seen as independent entities looming over broadcast networks rather than just cogs in a larger conglomerate's entertainment holdings. … Much of the imaginary landscape is shaped by the allegedly impartial institution of audience measurement" (70). So the audience's measurement of a television series on HBO only controls the content to a certain extent, because at the end of the day, when they pay for HBO, AOL Time Warner is making money regardless of whether or not the subscriber is interested in *The Sopranos.* The revelatory ethical entanglement that results from the spectator's experience with *The Sopranos* comes from the spectator's realization that, regardless of his or her perceived viewership control within the home, he or she still provides economic support for a series whose entire existence relies on larger corporate success. HBO wants the spectator to have both identifications and dis-identifications with the gangster, as they always have, but the shift in viewership control allows for the spectator to perceive their own, atomized entanglement with the series.

Here, is where the spectator's ethical entanglement with the gangster genre becomes highlighted by *The Sopranos.* In recognizing this atomization, interestingly, the spectator may question his or her experience as part of the couple million other viewers who share this experience. In recognizing the collective's atomization, the spectator then is put into position to make certain ethical demands about his or her political and

economic situation. The spectator, then, is ethically entangled with both the content and the form, potentially driving him or her to develop public demands about his or her role in this neoliberal, economic structure. This problematic relationship with HBO evokes the same anxieties the spectator has about neoliberalism's promises of free, open markets and economic success but utter disregard for the individual's well being. *The Sopranos* doesn't care with who or how or why a spectator identifies with the program, or what this means for their conceptions about their own economic class, familial roles, or domestic spaces. All that matters, as far as AOL Time Warner is concerned, is that the spectator continues to subscribe to HBO. For the spectator, this has larger consequence in the consideration of his or her role in a neoliberal society. If his or her individual concerns are of no consequence, then the promise of the privatization of investment and a free open market that allow the individual to pursue whatever they want becomes a façade, leading the spectator to ethical demands for the collective. I argue this ethically entangled experience highlighted by *The Sopranos* is an experience that has always existed for the spectator of the gangster genre since the 1930s. Just as *The Sopranos* ends on an ambiguous black screen, the spectator's experience with the gangster has always been ambiguous, regardless of how successfully the genre has tried to finalize the gangster through moral agendas.

While I'm not trying to claim that the average audience member has a conscious dilemma about whether or not they want to watch *The Sopranos*, I am suggesting that the series creates a viewership experience that encourages the spectator to consider his or her own infatuation with or enjoyment of the program as a part of the gangster genre. This more individualized consideration of viewership, developed through the privatization of

viewer experience, emphasizes the spectator's experience first. This direct relationship through form and content allows me to make a psychological connection between the spectator and the gangster, as I do in my second chapter, thanks to *The Sopranos'* consistent return to psychotherapy throughout its story arc.

Chapter Two: The Psychological Experience

As I suggested in my first chapter, throughout the history of the gangster genre the characters and the spectators have been entangled through the increasing privatization of on-screen depictions of the gangster's economic class, familial roles, and domestic spaces. Through the 20th and into the 21st century, the content in the gangster genre has increasingly become privatized. As a consequence, identifications and dis-identifications for the spectator extend into the gangster's private domestic spaces, creating a more privatized relationship between the gangster and the spectator, and shifting the genre's appeal away from mass audiences toward the individual spectator. In this privatization, the spectator's ambiguous relationship with the gangster is left open, showing how the spectator is ethically entangled with the gangster. By uncovering this ethical entanglement, *The Sopranos* reveals a relationship between the gangster and the spectator that has always existed but that gangster scholarship has generally avoided in favor of moral readings.

In this chapter, I explore how the form of the gangster genre is also privatized through narrowcasting and the serial nature of pay-cable television. Like the privatization of content, the evolution of media technologies shifts the spectator's identifications and dis-identifications with the gangster in a neoliberal environment by directly connecting the gangster's anxieties with those of the spectator. By placing the spectator in control of his or her viewership, he or she perceives independence and mastery over his or her

viewing experience. However, the atomization of the viewer as part of a top-down, larger corporate goal is evident in HBO's relationship with AOL Time Warner, which narrowcasts content directly towards the consumer. Narrowcasting and the serial nature of this relationship develop a more intimate psychological relationship between the spectator and the characters that leads to an atomization of the viewer experience in addition to a false sense of independence and control.

In my first section, I trace television history from broadcasting to narrowcasting, a marketing strategy developed by major media corporations aimed at targeting a niche audience for specific content. The spectator's more personal relationship with a television show or film is a direct result of large corporations narrowcasting their content directly toward the audience. Narrowcasting creates a privatized viewership experience in which the spectator perceives bottom-up mastery and control over the content they choose to watch. In tension with this privatized viewer experience lies the underlying fact that major corporations such as AOL Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, and News Corporation have divided and diversified their programming in order to reach their target audiences. As a spectator, I feel like I am in control of what I am watching and when I watch it, yet overshadowing my perception of independence and mastery over my viewership experience is the blanket of media moguls who have directly narrowcast their content toward my taste preferences. The neoliberal capitalist state of media in the 21st century atomizes programming so that the individual feels in charge of their own happiness, but ultimately his or her viewing experience is at the will of the larger corporate structures. I suggest as the individual perceives this tension in their false sense of independence and mastery over their viewership, it matches Tony's anxieties and desires about atomization

and vulnerability in neoliberalism on political, social and economic levels. The ethical entanglement from content, as demonstrated in chapter one, allows for this entanglement through form to have stronger implications for the spectator.

In the second section, I discuss how the serial nature of *The Sopranos* extends the spectator's ethical entanglement with characters, providing opportunities for stronger psychological connections to be made between the spectator and the characters. The television serial entangles the spectator through depictions of the many characters in Tony's life. Because so much screen time can be dedicated to the various characters in Tony's biological and Mafia families, the serial nature of the program allows for the spectator's entanglement to exist across the span of characters. As Tony repeatedly visits Dr. Melfi to uncover the source of his panic attacks, she guides him to see the ways in which he constitutes his behavior in others around him. By encouraging Tony to recognize these things, the series establishes a psychological foundation for the spectator, too. For the *Sopranos* Experience, then, the psychotherapy sessions between Tony and Dr. Melfi, while driving the narrative, work as formal expressions of the anxieties and desires of both Tony and the audience. In this psychological relationship between the spectator and Tony, mutual anxieties and desires that develop from living in a neoliberal society are expressed through content as well as the technologies that privatize the viewer experience. In analyzing this relationship, I mobilize psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche's theory of seduction to explore how the shift in television distribution entangles the spectator with *The Sopranos*, allowing the spectator to adjust his or her social constitution in characters from the series as well as those in his or her daily life.

In the third section I discuss how this psychological relationship developed through the spectatorial experience of *The Sopranos,* extends into the spectator's lived, every day relationships with those around them. The psychological impact of the show as a social phenomenon suggests tensions between the individual's privatized experience of the program and his or her implication in the broader social production of *The Sopranos* as well as other television series, films, and new media in an atomized neoliberal society. Through advancing media technologies, the spectator experiences more power and control over his or her viewership, creating a sense of independence and mastery over the content. Film catalogs, DVR, instant streaming, and taste profiles have altered the way spectators choose and consume any kind of media, television and film included. The spectator's psychological relationship with media, beyond the gangster genre, extends into their interactions with others as part of their social construction of themselves. As I have noted, the spectator's false sense of independence and mastery can lead them to recognize their atomization and vulnerability as consumers in a neoliberal society. From this recognition, the spectator has the ability to become conscious of their atomization in neoliberalism and make ethical demands about his or her and the greater collective's social and economic situation. The audience's constitution of themselves in others can span not just through relationships with the characters, but also through their ethical entanglement with the series as a new media object.

From Broadcast to Narrowcast

In tracing television's formal shift from broadcasting to narrowcasting, we will see the ways in which the spectatorial experience has shifted from public to private,

allowing the formal viewer experience to complement the privatized content geared towards the spectator's economic class, familial roles, and domestic spaces. From narrowcasting comes the ability to create niche, pay-cable markets through which companies like HBO develop content geared towards that particular market. In discussing narrowcasting's takeover of cable television, I argue that narrowcasting allows for a sense of independence and mastery in a bottom-up selection of content, but that this sense of mastery is put into tension with the atomizing, top-down relationship between the spectator's reception of a narrowcast material, and the pay-cable channel's relationship to larger media networks. Despite the media technologies that allow the spectator to perceive control, the inevitable top-down relationship to companies like AOL Time Warner atomizes his or her experience and evokes the anxieties and desires stemming from neoliberalism that are reflected in the content as well. This atomization lies as a direct result of neoliberalism, allowing the spectator to consider his or her vulnerable role not just as a spectator of television, but as a spectator of a larger economic system as well. This recognition may lead to demands for less atomized, collective care on the part of the social and economic system in which the spectator lives.

In the early 1950s, with the entire nation tuning into a handful of broadcast networks, each network had to find ways to capture audience viewership yet still create content for mass enjoyment. During these early years in television production, Raymond Williams coined the term televisual *flow* in reference to the sequences of programming that were put together in order to catch the attention of the desired audience throughout all hours of the day. Televisual flow links drastically different programs throughout the day through particularly placed advertisements, sequences of programs directed at

various demographics, and trailers that prepare viewers for content to come. Williams notes that these, "trailers of programmes to be shown at some later time or on some later day, or more itemized programme news. This was intensified in conditions of competition, when it became important to broadcasting planners to retain viewers – or as they put it, to 'capture' them-for a whole evening's sequence" (85). Williams critiques viewers who thought of advertising as interruptions within the network's programs, and instead pieces the entire network's broadcast together as one particular flow. He describes a flow as a confusing experience that "would be like trying to describe having read two plays, three newspapers, three or four magazines, on the same day that one has been to a variety show and a lecture and a football match. And yet, in another way, it is not like that at all, for though the items may be various the television experience has in some important ways unified them" (89). In his definition of flow, Williams recognizes the shortcomings of broadcast television and hints towards the incorporation of narrowcasting into the television market. Because of the broadcast's confusing juxtapositions of content, narrowcast channels would make television viewership less obstructed. The broadcast flow that Williams describes is a very top-down formula in which the networks address their audiences through flows that aims to retain these viewers for as long as possible. Though Williams was writing in 1974 and certainly could not predict the ways in which television would advance technologically, or the ways in which the capitalist economy would change, his development of televisual flow is still relevant in a discussion of an individual's viewer experience. The major shift in television production comes from the privatization of content. With the shift to narrowcasting, the necessity to capture one person's visual flow on one channel

throughout a day becomes unnecessary due to the expansive amounts of channels, which are all owned by a handful of companies, that are made available on cable television. So, expanding media technologies allow for a more individualized flow in which the spectator chooses their programming. While this give the spectator perceived independence and mastery over their programming, the larger control from major media corporations still exists.

The shift from broadcasting to narrowcasting was not, however, like leaving behind a VCR in favor of DVD player. While the technology and economics of the medium were certainly changing, television theory locates a number of important aspects of television that were retained through the transition. As we know, broadcast's whole goal was to capture as much of the nation's attention as possible throughout the entirety of a day, yet this does not mean that content was always broadcast for *everyone*. Lotz writes, "This was the era of broadcasting in which networks selected programs that would reach a heterogeneous mass culture" (Lotz, 11). In broadcasting to the entire nation, the viewership experience becomes one of mass identification and appeal. Broadcasts, though, represented the moral standards of a heterogeneous white middle class, programming with which the masses were asked to identify or dis-identify. The audience's identifications and dis-identifications from the content were focused on strong, public moral messages as identified in Chapter 1 through discussions of programs like *The Untouchables*. While broadcasts were successful in their moral foundations and aims, there were audiences that the broadcasts were not capturing. The transition to narrowcasting multiple channels was always a possibility but not until the deregulation of the economic structures of television were the networks able to diversify and narrowcast.

As networks began to realize that particular markets, timeslots, and content definitely had their own audiences and saw a way to narrow their target audiences, the target audience perceived this narrowcast as a bottom-up experience in which they had the mastery to select their programs from amongst the many channels. Narrowcasting, then, developed as "a result of demographic and ratings changes starting in the late 1970s … [and] allowed for a different kind of aesthetic sensitivity in primetime programming. Broadcasters began to value smaller audiences if the income-earning potential and purchasing power of those audiences were high enough to offset their limited numbers. Narrowcast shows that averaged ratings and shares…would never have survived a decade earlier, given the higher ratings expectations in broadcasting at that time" (Caldwell, 9). The development of the narrowcast located the specific audience, in its particular economic environment while at the same time making viewer feel in control of their content selections. Narrowcasting not only found markets that would support a particular program, but also created a connection between the spectator and the content as a result of his or her own pursuit of the program.

While at first the more narrow channels focused on basic subjects from sports to political news, they eventually diverged into even more specialized areas to further privatize channel selection and evoke more individualized viewer experiences. Amanda Lotz recognizes that "as the number of cable channels grew … this targeting became more and more narrow. For example, by the early 2000s, three different cable channels specifically pursued women (Lifetime, Oxygen, and WE), yet developed clearly differentiated programming that might be 'most satisfying' to women with divergent interests" (14 – 15). While narrowcasting was developing within the variety of channels

being offered, it was also happening within channels already established. For HBO, this meant offering separate HBO channels within their subscription service. "In 1998, HBO developed multiplexing (splitting its signal) further by creating the megabrand HBO the Works, a collection of channels that includes HBO2, HBO Signature, HBO Family, HBO Comedy, HBO Zone (added in 1999) and HBO Latino (added in 2000)" (Edgerton, 10). Now, within the pay-cable network, the spectator could pinpoint channels focusing on his or her desired genre or narrative content, while remaining in the private space of his or her home. In doing so, the spectator developed a sense of mastery over his or her viewership while enjoying the content they had chosen for their own private space.

The individualized experience of content, then, allows the spectator to have a closer relationship with the content or characters on screen. What Lotz hints towards and what William Uricchio describes are the ways in which narrowcasting and advancing television technologies put televisual flow into the hands of viewers themselves. This more personalized flow comes as a direct result of consumers having the capability to record their programs and view them instantaneously as well as having technologies available that adapt to individual spectator preferences. In discussing televisual flow as it exists today, Uricchio writes, "We have seen a shift in the televisual environment from broadcasting as an activity associated with the public sphere to narrowcasting via metadata and adaptive agent mediations of individual tastes. And we have seen a shift in the form of the viewer-television interface – particularly in the notion of flow – that has slowly transformed from being centered on programming to active audience to adaptive agent" (180). Uricchio argues that television shifts from a public spectacle of programming, to an active pursuit of particular interests, to an even more privatized

interface that adapts to and suggests consumer's preferences. As the consumer begins to feel more in control of his or her viewership, and programming is tailored to his or her particular tastes, televisual flow becomes a part of individual control over the television. Lotz refers to television in the 21st century as the post-network era in which audiences "capture television on their own terms" thanks to advancing technology and increasingly privatized markets (35). She writes, "The ubiquity of specific content has been eliminated as broad audiences have come to share little programming in common and less frequently view it simultaneously" (35). Lotz' description of the contemporary ways in which narrowcasting reaches audiences and how audiences control content shows that audiences very rarely share programming interests in the post-network era. Because audiences have their own specific, narrow channels they choose to watch, their individualized flow allows for a more personal connection to occur between the spectator and the content within a given channel.

Despite the spectator's perceived mastery of a bottom-up relationship with narrowcast content, the fact that larger media corporations control the narrowcast channels actually atomizes the private viewership experience as just another part of the corporation's larger goals. This neoliberal atomization, which the spectator perceives as freedom and control, yet is simply a smaller part of the larger corporate agenda, is reflected through the content of *The Sopranos*, as I have shown, as well as through the formal viewership experience. Underlying the spectator's sense of control lies the fact that they are indeed paying for the privilege to access HBO's programming and that HBO's niche marketing has acknowledged the spectator as a member of its target demographics. Because HBO is a subsidiary under the AOL Time Warner corporation,

the brand must be considered as part of a much larger capitalist enterprise. In Deborah Jaramillo's "The Family Racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, *The Sopranos*, and the Construction of a Quality Brand" she discusses how HBO's brand has been developed as the better alternative to broadcast television. The slogan, "It's Not T.V. It's HBO" shows just how clearly HBO desires to distinguish itself from broadcast networks. Because of the pay-cable format, HBO's audiences typically have the extra income to afford the service, and with the service identifying itself as superior to broadcast television, then there is a reciprocal identification between the quality programming for the quality audience. HBO creates a brand in which its consumers believe they "can handle graphic language, sex, and violence in more thoughtful and productive way than broadcast viewers" (Jaramillo, 66). Situating the audience as feeling both privileged to receive the product and also above average quality when it comes to viewership strengthens the spectator's independence and mastery with regard to a program.

However, the spectator's perceived mastery and privileged viewership is really just part of HBO's narrowcast goals and niche marketing, ultimately atomizing the viewership experience. As Jaramillo points out, "Channels such as HBO are still seen as independent entities looming over broadcast networks rather than just cogs in a larger conglomerate's entertainment holdings" (70). This important tension is where the spectator's ethical entanglement with a program points to his or her anxieties as part of a neoliberal market. Even though the spectator pays for and enjoys the more individualized experience of the program, they are utterly entangled with AOL Time Warner's larger economic goals. What is perceived as an individualized economic choice is, in fact, a submission to the larger corporation's marketing. This individual submission may lead

the spectator to recognizing the collective's atomized experiences. In doing so, the spectator is positioned to make ethical demands about the lack of individual concern for the sake of corporate success. This tension in viewership control is where the audience's vulnerability and atomization as part of neoliberalism becomes evident as part of the viewer experience. At once achieving individual mastery in viewership, a privatized experience, spectators are still atomized by the larger corporation's narrowcast goals and may challenge this vulnerability as an atom for the sake of the collective's political, social, and economic well-being.

The audience's ethical entanglement with the narrowcast nature of *The Sopranos* is evident in its early episodes. Just as the spectator desires mastery over his or her viewership, Tony reflects his desire for mastery over technology as part of his greater socioeconomic concerns. In the second episode of the first season, "46 long," Tony wires a new telephone system into the strip club, the Bada Bing, where he runs the Mafia network. While one of his workers struggles to learn the new phone system, his nephew arrives at the Bing with a carful of DVD players he has stolen from a delivery truck. While Tony is outside questioning the value of the DVD players, his worker takes an important call and puts the guy on hold. When Tony reenters, he finds that his worker has hung up on the caller, which infuriates Tony. In the beginning of this scene, Tony's inability to show mastery over the technological advances in his life draws both identifications and dis-identifications with the spectator at home, who may feels mastery over his or her ability to control his or her television experience, yet also deals with similar struggles to learn advancing technology and fully understand relationships with technology in a larger economic model.

The content, as the scene continues, plays a similar game between identifying and dis-identifying with Tony's socio economic struggles. When Tony calls his mother to check up on her, the phone call distracts her long enough for the mushrooms she was cooking in the kitchen to catch on fire. These scenes are intercut, showing the frantic panic of his mother attempting to put out a fire, and Tony, in medium shot, trying to control the situation from the bar. At this point in the series, Tony's major concerns are focused on modernizing the technology around his Mafia family to prepare for a federal investigation and securing the safety of his aging mother who fails to take care of herself. As Tony continually grasps for mastery over these situations in both of his families, he fails to control everything he desires, leading to his panic attacks. Tony's anxieties about and desires for economic stability, including preserving his business and fulfilling his familial role as provider and protector, are never really resolved. Despite his grasps for mastery and control, he is constantly forced to recognize his atomized socioeconomic roles. There are no healthcare systems in place for Tony to reach out to, or public council for his uneasy legal situation. Tony must deal with all of the problems he faces in his social and economic life by himself, atomizing his role in society and creating the anxiety that eventually leads to his panic attacks.

The viewer, then, is situated to feel identifications with Tony as moments in which they are drawing direct comparisons between their anxieties and desires and his own. As evident through a consideration of the larger socioeconomic concerns facing Tony, HBO is narrowcasting these feelings across the nation to millions of viewers of various ethnicities, genders, and ages. Though the viewer feels mastery over his or her viewership because he or she so closely identifies with Tony while situated in the privacy

of their own home, millions of other viewers are experiencing these same identifications from the exact same content. The audience, then, is ethically entangled with Tony on the level of content and the level of form through which *The Sopranos* reaches them. Even though they are made to feel like they are special and the only ones capable of enjoying the program, spectators are simply on the receiving end of narrowcasting, creating a more privatized portion of a larger economic plan. Surprisingly, as narrowcasting creates an atomized viewer who experiences independence and mastery and vulnerability in their socioeconomic position, this ethical entanglement actually creates a possibility for the viewer to make ethical demands in their conception of the collective's atomization. Because *The Sopranos* was so successful, the individual viewer may recognize that their particular entanglement exists across the millions of viewers who, too, tune into the program. This recognition of the collective's ethical entanglement has consequences not just for the viewer's experience with HBO, but also in their lived everyday relationships with others.

"I Don't Put Much Stock in Those Weirdo Counselor Types"

The serial nature of *The Sopranos* allows for this ethical entanglement through both content and form to extend for multiple seasons and years. The psychoanalytical themes and serial format of the series explores Tony's interactions with others through dedicated story arcs that fully develop the various characters and their relationships to Tony. As Dr. Melfi encourages Tony to consider the ways in which he interacts with others, the spectator develops a psychological connection with the series as a whole. Through a discussion of Laplanche's seduction theory, I explore how the serial nature of

The Sopranos allows the spectator to become entangled with Tony's therapy on a psychological level. Moreover, due to the serial nature of the program, the spectator's psychological relationship does not end with Tony, but has lasting effects in his or her lived, social constructions of themselves. With this extended viewership, the spectator's ethical entanglement with the form and content of the series extends not just into ways viewers consider themselves in relation to characters or others around them, but also into their roles in the neoliberal socioeconomic environment in which they participate.

With the serial form, comes an elongated experience that has micro rises and falls, or tensions and releases, within episode arcs, and macro rises and falls through seasons and the series' arc itself. Through seriality, the gangster genre retains the ambiguous identifications and dis-identifications that have been present since the beginning of the genre but employs them over a much longer period of time. The extended spectatorial experience of the serial format creates ongoing identifications and dis-identifications with the spectators, allowing for the spectator's psychological relationship with the gangster, in *The Sopranos*' case, to expand across almost a decade. Serial television's ability to connect with a spectator on a psychological level comes from the simple fact that none of the major tensions for the series are resolved per episode, or may be solved throughout the whole series. The spectator remains entangled in his or her viewership experience, allowing him or her to consider what psychological connections between the characters retains his or her spectatorial interest.

These continuous entanglements between the spectator and the characters in the series encourage ongoing and ambiguous relationships with the series. In discussing primetime television melodrama serials, Jane Feuer writes, "Since serials offer temporary

resolutions, … the moral universe of the primetime serials is one in which the good can never ultimately receive their just rewards, yet evil can never wholly triumph. Any ultimate resolution – for good or for ill – goes against the only moral imperative of the continuing serial form: the plot must go on" (558). In keeping the audience in continual moral limbo, the serial format never allows for the moral ultimatums seen in the early gangster films to take hold, because if they did, then the show would be over. Instead, the moral foundations of the show are in constant limbo, leaving the audience psychologically entangled with the characters and their actions, never pinning down the specific characters as morally good or bad. Stuck in this limbo, the audience doesn't feel obligated to develop an opinion one way or another about major characters and thus, their uncertain psychological relationship with these characters doesn't need to be fully resolved. Because of this ambiguity, the audience's psychological relationship with the characters are never clearly defined or manages by the series itself, placing the spectator in control of their psychological identifications or dis-identifications.

Because the spectator can have this type of open and free relationship with the characters, none of the characters are "off the market" as far as their relationships with the spectator is concerned. While a spectator may dis-identify with a character, that does not necessarily mean they completely shut down their psychological identifications with the character either. The serial nature of the program places the spectator within the central social sphere of the characters on screen, psychologically identifying with their various socioeconomic anxieties and desires. Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch name this phenomenon as a key feature of the television serial. Newcomb and Hirsch read television's seriality "as a primary aspect of the rhetoric of television, one that shifts

meaning and shades ideology as series develop. Even a series such as *The Brady Bunch* dealt with ever more complex issues merely because the children, on whom the show focused, grew older" (508). As I've argued about the gangster genre's indebtedness to focusing on the gangster's economic class, familial relations, and domestic spaces, the serial format not only creates complex issues for the gangster himself, but also his Mafia "family," his biological family, and whomever these characters are connected to as well. When meaning is shifted amongst the characters, the audience's identifications or dis-identifications shift as well, keeping the spectator's psychological concerns equally as central as the character's.

As Tony struggles for mastery and control over his two families, the spectator identifies with his neoliberal anxieties and desires, placing the spectator amongst Tony's psychological considerations. By involving themselves in Tony's analysis, the spectator's relationship with the serial nature of the program has guides them to desire Tony's understanding of himself as part of the spectator's own psychological growth. In "Funhouse," the second-season finale of *The Sopranos,* Tony wakes up with a horrible fever and a bout of food poisoning. Partnered with his weakened physical state is Tony's anxiety about the fact that his long-time captain Salvatore "Big Pussy" Bonpensiero (Vincent Pastore) has been divulging information to federal agents. Through a series of fever dreams Tony comes to the realization that the only way to resolve this problem is to whack Big Pussy. While Tony and his gang take care of Big Pussy, Tony's mother gets picked up at the airport for trying to fly with a stolen ticket that Tony had given to her as a present. Though Tony makes a massive decision for the safety of his mob family by killing a prominent captain in the gang, he still winds up in the hands of the police as a

result of his mother and his inability to control his extended biological family. Alongside all of these problems in Tony's Mafia family, his nuclear family is celebrating Meadow's graduation from high school. In the therapy session after Tony kills Pussy and makes bail for the plane ticket, Melfi attempts to break new ground with Tony by directly commenting on the sadness of his childhood and his inability to reconcile his poor relationships with his family. Rather than answer any questions directly, Tony begins to sing a song, put his feet on the coffee table, and dismisses Melfi's therapy as "little snacks for thought for me to take home." As Tony rejects Melfi's attempts to further his understanding of his self, he does not appear to reconcile any of the anxieties that have driven the entire episode. Instead, the finale ends with multiple shots of Tony's biological and Mafia families celebrating in his upper-middle class home.

For the spectator, these moments, murdering his best friend, getting arrested, and celebrating Meadow's graduation are all events from which Tony could discover his psychological relationship with others in his life. The whole goal of psychotherapy is for Tony to reveal and confront his anxieties and desires, but in this episode, Tony childishly avoids moments for growth. The spectator may recognize Tony's childish defense mechanisms, which encourages the spectator to think about Tony's entanglement with others even though he refuses to do so. The spectator perceives no relief in this episode's tension through the Melfi therapy scene, but only has a more confused sense of who Tony Soprano is as a man. The identifications and dis-identifications a spectator may feel throughout this episode waver around different economic, familial, and domestic concerns, but the general interest in Tony's psychological growth is what drives this particular episode. Even though Tony had to murder one of his best friends in order to

keep his business running, tried to send his mother on vacation just to get rid of her, and watched his daughter reach an important milestone in her development into adulthood, Tony never confronts any of these events in the psychotherapy scene. The serial format of the television program allows for these various scenarios to provide the spectators with identifications and dis-identifications on each level of content, creating a desire in the spectator to resolve these tensions through psychotherapy. In avoiding moments of reconciliation, the series never allows the spectator to reach moments of moral understanding or definitive conclusion, yet instills in the spectator the desire for psychological growth as the most important aspect of their ambiguous spectatorial experience.

With the television serial, I suggest that audiences become psychologically attached to these characters, and their psychological connections with the characters not only drives their viewership, but also affects the ways in which they consider their own psyches. The viewer develops an understanding of the format of *The Sopranos* in that it will continue to challenge his or her relationships with and conceptions of the characters. In Julianne H. Newton's essay "Television of Moving Aesthetic: In Search of the Ultimate Aesthetic-The Self," she argues that in "addressing our deepest fears, anxieties, and desires through the experiences of … fictional personae, we cut open the raw innards of the human psyche for mass view" (117). Newton's thesis revolves around people pursuing art that they believe reflects their personal, preferred aesthetic. Newton later argues, "Television is a powerful medium in our arsenal of extensions of self, of efforts to be more than self, and of efforts to understand self. And that aesthetic, while always moving, is the ultimate we seek. What many consider to be a dominating ideological

weapon of the corporate elite can, with conscious effort, be reversed into an instrument for self-actualization" (Newton, 119). The psychotherapy sessions between Tony and Dr. Melfi not only draw out the spectator's desire for Tony's "self-actualization," but also instill in the spectator a psychological connection with Tony that potentially provokes their own desires for self-actualization. In the same way Melfi urges Tony to recognize how he performs for others, the spectator's psychological identifications with Tony and the various characters with which he interacts, develop through the serial nature of the program and potentially begin to reveal the ways in which the spectator constitutes him or herself in the characters.

The serial nature of the program and the active viewers who pursue pay-cable television situate themselves in a position to reach psychological relationships through utilizing the series as an extension of themselves over a period of time. The regimented viewership of a television program comes from the spectator purposely including the program in their flow and investing their time into the series. In doing so, the television program becomes part of the social structure of the spectator's life in a similar way as a friend they see on a weekly basis impacts their lives. Tuning in weekly to a program establishes a regimented relationship, not unlike psychotherapy sessions, that provides opportunities for the spectator to recognize constructions of him or herself in the characters on the show. The psychoanalytical structure of *The Sopranos* further serves this formal ability of the television serial.

Because television's significance extends beyond casual entertainment in this manner, the psychological impact of a television series, particularly on pay-cable television, affects the spectator in both his or her private and public social constructions

of themselves. Laplanche's psychoanalytical theory of seduction and enigmatic signifiers explores the ways in which people constitute themselves in others. For Laplanche, the individual consistently considers the question, "Who am I, in relation to you?" Laplanche's key point, here, is that rather than the infant human simply learning *how* to mature into an adult, the infant learns *for whom* they must become in various social situations. This consideration of the self in others develops as part of the child's social maturation, which inevitably extends into adulthood.

Laplanche recognizes that the individual's connection with the world is much more complicated than linear models of learning and adhering to society's rules suggest. After exploring a thought experiment that exposes the human child's inability to recognize physical dangers, Laplanche describes his theory of seduction through the Freudian terms of id, ego, and super-ego in order to redefine the individual's experience with others. For Laplanche, these terms are not centered around the self, but rather composed of the social interactions between the individual and others. Because an infant child cannot understand language or social structures, the reactions of others to his or her behaviors constitute his or her social boundaries. When a child's inappropriate impulses meet socially established laws and values, he or she does not think, "This is bad," but rather, receives a negative social response and thus recognizes the behavior as inappropriate only in so far as the reactions he or she has received from others.

Laplanche leads into his discussion of enigmatic signifiers by discussing the way in which the maturing young individual perceives and interacts with the world around them. The maturing child is thrown into an adult world, "an objective world which the child has to discover and learn about in the same way that it learns to walk or to

manipulate objects. It is characterized by the existence of messages (defined in the broadest sense; they may be linguistic messages, or simply language-based messages, and can be either pre-linguistic or paralinguistic) which ask the child questions it cannot yet understand" (124). For Laplanche, the enigmatic signifier sparks the individual's constitution of him or herself in others not because he or she tailors his or her actions to understandings of social laws, etiquette, or boundaries, but rather, directly towards the responses they receive from people around them. Before Laplanche, psychoanalysis had been content with recognizing that the child becomes a part of the adult social/sexual world by learning language and ways to signify his or her desires and anxietie. Pushing further, Laplanche suggests that the maturation of the child comes from his or her reception of "messages," others' reactions to behavior committed by the self, and the individual's direct response to these messages.

Thus, the super-ego, for Laplanche, is constituted strictly in the individual's perception of how others respond to his or her actions or words. Laplanche writes, "The [super-ego] is made up of cultural imperatives and is signified by commandments; Freud tells us that it is bound up with the law. The general theory of seduction means, however, that this opposition loses much of its pertinence. If, that is, the drive originates in messages (but not, of course, solely in verbal messages), we have to conclude that there is no initial or natural opposition between the instinctual and the cultural. The general theory of seduction centers upon the notion of an enigma" (137). The "commandments" here are the social responses or reactions from others through which the person guides their behavior. While socially accepted rules govern society as a whole, these signifiers are just an enigma for the person's behavior. These signifiers give the individual a basis

from which he or she can construct him or herself in relationship to those around them. For instance, a younger person learns respect for elders because of a combination of learned social values while also from his or her social interaction with the elder who demands the respect. The young child controls or restrains urges because of the social expectations of the elder. Once the child matures into an adult, he or she still practices this constitution of self in otherness. In his theory, Laplanche suggests that a person's anxieties and desires come from a chaotic swirl of his or her own perception of self combined with the confusion as to how they ought to constitute their social being in others. Any social interaction for Laplanche, then, is a complicated moment in which the human being considers him or herself in relation to whoever may surround him or her.

The Sopranos situates Tony as an individual who is fixated on the ways in which his family perceives him, his crew acknowledges him as a boss, and his historical place within his social surroundings. In portraying himself as the "alpha-male," Tony desires mastery over the ways in which others perceive him. Like he controls the family income, the actions of the gang, or the upbringing of his children, Tony wants control over his own self. However, the panic attacks that lead him to Melfi's office show his lack of control over his environment and disillusionment with his own understanding of who he is as a person. While Tony wants to be seen by everyone around him as an autonomous and complete whole, the sessions with Dr. Melfi help him realize the ways in which his self is constituted in others.

Tony's personal psychological chaos becomes evident in the various ways he must constitute his notions of manhood for the different people in his life. For the crew he must be a cold blooded killer, for his wife a provider and lover, and for his children he

must be a role model and patriarch. Through the identifications and dis-identifications that emerge from these depictions, the spectator also constitutes parts of him or herself into the life of Tony and the various characters with whom he interacts. The spectator's ethical entanglement with Tony and these other characters comes from his or her constitution of self in their mutual anxieties and desires about economics, familial structures, and domestic roles in neoliberalism. The spectator's ethical entanglement with *The Sopranos* continually drives his or her psychological relationship with the series through ambiguous identifications and dis-identifications with the characters.

The panic attacks that led Tony to seek Dr. Melfi's help come as a result of Tony feeling anxiety about the ways in which his Mafia family, his biological family, and his extended biological family, his mother in particular, see him as a man. The first scene of the first episode of *The Sopranos* opens with Tony meeting Dr. Melfi in her office for the first time. The very first shot of the opening scene of *The Sopranos* is a close-up of the spread legs of a statue of a nude woman with Tony, in deep focus, triangularly placed between her legs. Tony glances upward and the next shot is a close-up of the statue's naked breasts. As the camera cuts to a medium close-up of Tony staring at the statue, it tracks closer to Tony's expression. Intercut here is a zoom into the face of the statue, then back to Tony. Breaking this moment is the initial entrance of Dr. Melfi. Immediately, David Chase situates Tony as a confused persona, both an infant child, being born between a woman's legs, and a sexually charged adult, staring at her nude breasts. Even this distinction is blurred because we cannot discern whether his gaze at the breast is for nourishment or sexual desire. Tony is depicted as a man whose construction of himself, in relation to women in particular, is utterly confused.

Tony's childish resistance to psychotherapy early on in the series creates a driving impetus for the spectator to chart Tony's development. In doing so, the therapeutic nature of the series is also enacted for the spectator. The first psychotherapy scene begins with an uncomfortable silence, during which Tony quickly glances from one object to another in the room, taps his fingers on his knee, and appears like a child, both reluctant and impatient. As he hesitantly opens up a discussion about the panic attack that caused him to black out and subsequently landed him in Dr. Melfi's office, Tony discusses the events that led him to feeling all of his stress and anxiety. The camera cuts from the office, to an establishing shot of Tony's McMansion, a massive, upper-middle to upper-class home set amongst the green hills of New Jersey suburbia. This shot establishes Tony's economic status with which the audience potentially identifies either directly, or indirectly through its desire for upward class mobility. The next shot cuts to an overhead shot of Tony lying in his bed. With his wedding ring visible, Tony is presented as the patriarch of the home, yet he lies uncomfortably on his bed, looking depressed and compromised in his role. On a familial and domestic level this shot presents Tony as both protector and provider for the home, and presents the anxieties and desires he may feel about the ways in which he is perceived in this role. In these early depictions of Tony, his child-like response to therapy is in direct contrast with his economic and paternal situation, establishing for the audience the room that exists for Tony to grow.

After establishing the psychological work to be done, the series directly connects Tony's economic anxieties and desires with those of the spectator, creating a location throuh which the spectator can constitute part of him or herself in Tony. The camera cuts to a tracking shot following Tony down his long driveway to fetch the morning

newspaper. In a voice-over from the dialogue in Melfi's office, Tony says, "Lately, I'm gettin' the feeling that I came in at the end, that the best is over." Dr. Melfi quickly responds, "Many Americans, I think, feel that way." Tony continues, "I think about my father. He never reached heights like me, but in a lot of ways he had it better. He had his people; they had their standings; they had pride. I tell ya, what do we got?" In this conversation Tony and the spectator become entangled as he discusses basically what he sees as the struggle of the modern middle class. By not knowing his place in the privatized, neoliberal society, Tony's anxieties and desires directly mirror those of the spectator. As I have argued before, these initial scenes connect the audience and Tony as mutual subjects of neoliberalism in which the privatized economy promises free markets and unlimited possibilities for investment in trade, but also atomizes the individual as a smaller and alienated part of a larger economic operation. In this initial mutual identification, the viewer begins to situate his or her spectatorial experience as amongst Tony.

Tony's and the spectator's anxieties and desires as presented here, are directly affiliated with their place in neoliberalism. In describing the neoliberal state, David Harvey writes, "Each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being … Individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings … rather than being attributed to any systemic property" (65 – 66). Tony's anxieties come from the atomizing effects of neoliberalism, from the mounting pressure to run his family and business while constantly performing his self and manhood for the various people in his life. The spectator identifies with Tony's anxieties about the atomization and vulnerability that result from neoliberalism

and use his character or the series as a whole as a place to constitute their own anxieties and desires through the characters on screen. The serial nature of the program makes this more pronounced than in previous gangster formations. This type of psychological relationship works not just in the privatized experience with Tony, but with the various characters in his life as well.

The series utilizes the characters in Tony's biological family to create psychological identifications between Tony's anxieties and desires for his family's well being and the audience's own conception of his or her familial roles. Dr. Melfi's conversation leads Tony to discuss his daughter, while, intercut with this conversation, Carmela prepares breakfast for Meadow and Anthony, Jr. (Robert Iler) in the family kitchen. In this extremely cliché domestic scene, Carmela wishes Anthony, Jr. a happy birthday and feeds her children breakfast. Here, identifications create new layers for the spectator with the various characters and their roles in Tony's life. Identifications of parenthood, morning routines, and average middle-class concerns are prevalent. By dedicating this screen time through the serial format, *The Sopranos* prepares the audience for the numerous psychological relationships that will develop throughout the series. Here, the viewer develops his or her own individualized conceptions of the characters and their roles within Tony's life. For instance, Carmela's role as a dutiful stay-at-home mom may forge identifications with some women who share a similar domestic role and dis-identifications for women who work. For men, some viewers may identify with Tony's ability to provide for his family, while others dis-identify, creating anxiety about their inability to provide for their families. In this way, the characters create identifications and dis-identifications across genders and classes. The spectator can begin to constitute him

or herself in the economic class, familial roles, and domestic spaces being depicted in *The Sopranos.*

In depicting Tony's constitution of self in his Mafia gang, the spectator develops identifications with Tony's anxieties about economic stability and desires for control, yet dis-identifies with Tony's actions. The camera cuts to Tony and Christopher driving to work. Here, the all too comfortable identifications that have been established in the domestic scene begin to take a turn for the spectator, as Tony begins to show sides other than a successful, loving husband and father. Tony scolds Christopher for not following orders then spots someone he recognizes along the rode. The following scene is described by Tony's voiceover from Dr. Melfi's office as a normal business conversation, however what's depicted on screen shows Tony and Christopher chasing after the man in their car through a business park. For the spectator, the scene potentially mocks their economic situation yet provides thrills through Tony's violence. In this very scene, both identifications and dis-identifications take place. Tony eventually hits the guy with the car and proceeds to punch him while demanding money the guy owes him. The next scene depicts Tony meeting with his captains, discussing future business ventures. Here dis-identifications between the spectator and Tony are possible since the series shows Tony's ruthless gangster side, directly juxtaposed with his depiction as a family man.

In the same way that Dr. Melfi encourages Tony to recognize his entanglement with others in order to relieve his desires for mastery and control, *The Sopranos*, as a series, encourages the spectator to recognize his or her inability to have mastery over his or her experience with the characters on screen. Just as Tony desires mastery and control over his socioeconomic situation in both his biological and criminal families, the

spectator, too, desires their control over his or her viewership experience with Tony. However, through the atomization of narrowcasting and the serial nature of the program, the spectator never truly masters his or her relationship with the characters on screen. The spectator's inability to totally master their relationship with Tony is reflected in their psychological constitution of themselves in the characters on screen. Even though advancing media technologies and neoliberalism promise mastery and control for the spectator, *The Sopranos* highlights his or her inevitable entanglement with the series that cannot be remedied through a moral ultimatum or conclusion. The spectator's ethical entanglement with the series creates a psychological connection with the characters that reveals not just how the spectator constitutes him or herself in the characters, but also what this means for the spectator's experiences with others in their lived, daily interactions.

Beyond the Living Room

As I have suggested, the gangster genre's historical connections with the spectator through economic class, familial structures, and the space of the home operate as a means for the spectators to identify or dis-identify with the characters. The *Sopranos* Experience complicates this even further by incorporating the spectator into a psychotherapeutic world by way of narrowcasting and seriality. *The Sopranos'* foundation in psychotherapy through Tony's visits to Dr. Melfi explicates the psychotherapeutic nature of the program while revealing socioeconomic tensions between the spectator and the program. While spectators identify with the genre on the level of content, the pay-cable television format

and niche marketing literally work out middle-class anxieties about the atomizing effects of neoliberalism.

These social stakes for the audience are troubling because in believing they have control over their viewership and power over their flow, the spectator's experience is much less economic or politically freeing than they perceive. The false individualism that the consumer feels is subjected to AOL Time Warner's economic efficiency and political foundations that allow it to exist. In Pierre Bourdieu's essay "The Essence of Neoliberalism," he describes this situation as a reduction in public and social concern. He argues massive corporations like AOL Time Warner "sanctify the power of markets in the name of economic efficiency, which requires the elimination of administrative or political barriers capable of inconveniencing the owners of capital in their individual quest for the maximization of individual profit, which has been turned into a model of rationality" (4). Thus, the HBO viewer is made to believe that HBO cares about his or her viewership and respects his or her individual tastes, in the same way that Netflix develops taste profiles. While individual taste is being highlighted, these companies are utterly caught in the practices that atomize and push the individual toward financing a corporate conglomerate. Because the individual is alienated from the public, this allows the spectator to consider the collective's experience of this atomization, positioning the spectator to make ethical demands about the collective's socioeconomic situation.

In creating this atomization, the series directly juxtaposes the neoliberal anxieties and desires of the characters with the "many Americans" who have tuned into the program. In the same way that Tony is sitting on the chair, opening his inner self for Dr. Melfi and the camera, the spectator sits on his or her chair, in his or her suburban home,

in the same regimented timeslot (which they have created), having his or her anxieties and desires about 21st-century American life and media explored by the program. The psychotherapy that takes place in the series, then, does not just operate on the level of content, simply exploring the life and problems of Tony, but also through the form of the television serial for the audience as well. If, as Laplanche's psychoanalytic theory suggests, one is radically implicated in the larger social production of signifiers, and the ways in which one constitutes him or herself is in his or her interactions with others, then the audience that takes part in the *Sopranos* Experience is also constituting themselves in response to the characters they see on screen just as much as they are with their coworkers, family members, and friends. Because the spectator's anxieties and desires about living in a neoliberal world are exposed and transformed by the constitution of their self in others, the social stakes of the *Sopranos* Experience reach well beyond the living room of the spectator.

The spectator's constitution of him or herself in others is not solely restricted to gender identification or through particular characters. For example, though Meadow is a female who has gown up more privileged than many Americans, an early-twenties male adult can consider the economic anxieties that arise when transitioning from high school to college. Likewise, most young adults may identify with Christopher's anxieties about and desires for increased roles in their business, despite the fact that Christopher is a cold-blooded murderer. Because the show follows Tony's family equally as closely as it follows his gang, the instances when a diverse audience can respond to characters' actions or beliefs are multiple and not restrained by conventional identity categories. While this allows the show to have a multiplicity and plasticity to reach multiple

audiences, the underlying tension that exists throughout the experience is the fact that HBO knows exactly what it is doing when it makes the conscious decision to become so embedded in Tony's biological and Mafia families.

In the first couple of scenes from the season three finale, "An Army of One," Anthony, Jr., is shown sneaking into his high-school teacher's office to steal answers to an exam; Jackie Aprile, Jr., (Jason Cerbone), the son of one time Jersey mob boss, Jackie Aprile, Sr., (Michael Rispoli) is forced to go into hiding after failing to rob a card game; and Paulie (Tony Sirico) is shown putting his mother into a retirement home. The opening scenes run the gambit from childhood mischief, to criminal adult mischief, to emotional familial choices. In these opening shots, the spectator has all sorts of places where they identify or dis-identify with how the characters act, but I argue that they latch onto the identifications, say of having to put one's aging mother in a retirement home, as places in which they constitute part of their own anxieties about becoming autonomous individuals in a neoliberal society. For the moments with which they dis-identify, like hiding in a random person's home in a rough neighborhood after committing a crime, the audience uses this moment to congratulate itself for making the correct adult decisions to avoid this scenario.

From this opening sequence, *The Sopranos* allows the spectator's private identifications and dis-identifications to form an atomized yet entangled psychological relationship with the characters on screen. The show allows this in order for the spectator to perceive his or her autonomous experience with the series, even though they are utterly entangled with the series through the multiple characters and themes. Because of the spectator's neoliberal desire to be seen as an autonomous subject, HBO's marketing

paints a picture of a company that is separate and free from broadcast networks. However, as a member of AOL Time Warner, HBO's construction only exists because of the freedoms it receives from being part of a larger media corporation. Thus the tensions of living in a neoliberal capitalist world are ever-present throughout the *Sopranos* Experience in that, even though the spectator feels in control of his or her viewership and has specific, individual psychological development through his or her experience with the program, the major corporations that have privatized the market are still cashing in on everything that is produced by HBO. While the spectator feels this vulnerability in their atomization, they may consider connections to others that this corporate structure seems to forbid. By recognizing the collective's atomized experience, and their social constitutions in one another, they surpass their atomization and are positioned to make ethical demands about neoliberalism's false notion of an atomized individual.

The spectator, then, has this ethical entanglement with the television series that spills out into the constitution of him or herself in others around them. In recognizing that they have shared anxieties and desires about their socioeconomic environment, the spectator is not pushed toward establishing moral ultimatums, but rather making ethical demands about their position in neoliberalism. Because the spectator is ethically entangled with *The Sopranos,* his or her constitution of him or herself in the characters on screen mirrors his or her entanglement with others despite living in a privatized, neoliberal society. Here, Laplanche's psychoanalytical theory goes hand in hand with pay-cable television's serial format due to the fact that the individual pursues a series as a part of their social network in a similar way they pursue a good friend's relationship. A television program can become an extension of the spectator's social network and

consistently ask the spectator to be socially entangled with the characters on screen. As Tony sees Melfi week after week to express his anxieties about the world in which he operates, the viewer too, sits on a couch every week, and relieves or assures his or her desires and anxieties about his or her economic or familial situation through the characters with whom he or she identifies.

In doing so, the *Sopranos* Experience creates a psychological relationship with the spectator in which he or she utilizes what he or she has seen on the television show not for moral reasons, but possibly to challenge the ethics of the neoliberal society in which they live. From the series, a spectator can take away basic psychological understandings of masculinity, femininity, parenthood, violence, etc. and see the various ways in which they constitute these psychological understandings of themselves in others. Because of his or her ethical entanglement not just with the show but also with others in his or her life, the spectator can mobilize the series to create ethical critiques of privatized healthcare, education, or other socioeconomic systems in neoliberalism. These ethical demands can extend into the ways in which the spectator interacts with others and corporations such as HBO, AOL Time Warner, and the like.

Epilogue: Extending the Experience into Arc Television

From my first chapter, I show how the privatization of American economics reflects the privatization of the gangster genre's depictions of economic class, familial roles, and domestic spaces. Shifting from mass appeal to privatized viewership, the genre's content, too, mirrors this privatization. In developing this privatization of the content I argue the spectator's identifications and dis-identifications with the gangster occur through more private lenses, developing a spectatorial experience that is more entangled with the gangster. Because of this more privatized entanglement, the moral ultimatums developed from the early features in the gangster genre are left behind due to the spectator's ambiguous, entangled relationship with the gangster. *The Sopranos* highlights the spectator's ethical entanglement with the gangster in which their ambiguous relationship is ongoing beyond the conclusion of a film or series, and causes the spectator to not just question their viewership experience with the gangster, but also their role in the larger socioeconomic context of neoliberalism.

This ethical entanglement occurs not just through the content of the gangster genre, but also through the increasingly privatized form in which the spectator receives the content. In discussing the transition from mass appeal toward more private viewership, I trace the transition from broadcasting to narrowcasting in order to show how changing media technologies affect the spectator's relationship with their viewership experience. From narrowcasting, the spectator at once has desire for independence and

mastery in his or her viewership experience in choosing which narrowcast content to watch, yet this bottom-up experience is in tension with the atomization of the spectator's experience through the top-down control of larger media conglomerates control of narrowcast content. The tension in the control of the spectatorial experience reflects Tony's anxieties about his control over his social and economic roles in the increasingly privatized neoliberal economic environment, which, as I argue in the first chapter, the spectator shares. The serial nature of the program, then, extends these identifications and dis-identifications through both form and content throughout the televisual experience. The psychotherapeutic nature of *The Sopranos* reflects the therapeutic nature of serial television, incorporating the spectator's own psychological connection with the series. Through Jean Laplanche's theory of seduction I argue that as Tony begins to discover the various ways in which he constitutes his self in others so, too, does the spectator's privatized experience with the series allow he or she to recognize his or her own constitution of his or her self in the characters on screen. Through the narrowcast, serial nature of the spectatorial experience, I argue the spectator's constitution of him or herself in the characters extends beyond their particular viewership of the series, and into his or her lived interactions with others around them.

Thus, the *Sopranos* Experience, which draws out the spectator's ethical entanglement with the series and the larger socioeconomic implications of this entanglement, has larger consequences beyond the actual spectatorial experience. The *Sopranos* Experience explicates what I see as happening in current serial, or "Arc," television. This term, "Arc television," refers to dramatic serials that follow a certain set of characters as they participate in a major plot arc, like that of a novel. Where sit-coms

flourish in the situational life of the characters, and soap operas have a fluidity of stories and characters, Arc television focuses on one major story, through which the audience sees the characters interact, change, grow, or die. Just like with *The Sopranos,* current media technologies allow spectators to create slots in their personally developed taste preference and flow to develop individualized psychological connections with these shows. In their pursuit of a show, viewers' anxieties and desires resulting from being an individual in a neoliberal society are exposed in order for the viewer to become entangled with the television series. By connecting with the spectator through more privatized content, arc television develops these wavering identifications and dis-identifications with the various characters through the serial format in order for the individual spectator's experience to become a psychological experience that extends into their interactions with others in society. As an extension of the spectator's larger economic and social construction, their televisual flow, which they construct for themselves, has similar influence on the constitution of themselves in others as do the their actual, lived relationships.

Like the *Sopranos* Experience, I argue that a series like AMC's *Breaking Bad* (Vince Gilligan, 2008 – 2013) develops its own spectatorial experience as a combination of ethical entanglement through form and content to develop a portion of the spectator's constitution of themselves in their televisual flow. With a similar narrative framework to the *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad* depicts Walter White (Bryan Cranston) in his economic class, familial role, and domestic space in order to create ambiguous identifications and dis-identifications for the audience. Thanks to DVR technologies and AMC's narrowcast marketing goals, the privatized content mirrors the private viewership, entangling the

spectator through the same formula as *The Sopranos*. However, while *Breaking Bad* shares some "gangster" sensibilities, it also opens up possibilities for the viewer's constitution of self through considerations of the education and criminal systems, corporate influence, and the social systems of marriage and parenthood. Like *The Sopranos, Breaking Bad*'s depictions of these systems allows for the spectator to remain entangled with the series through seriality, narrowcasting, and new media.

As media technologies advance, the entanglement with the shows change drastically, further individualizing the spectator's experience with the program, thus simultaneously further atomizing their experience as part of the larger corporate agenda. In discussing Arc television's extension beyond the narrowcast, critic Thomas Doherty writes, "All of the shows have fervent-slash-maniacal fan bases whose Facebook tentacles and official and unofficial Web sites ratchet up viewer investment in the text and cement emotional imprinting" (1). The technology expands the spectator's relationship with the program well beyond the actual viewership and into discussion boards and fan pages, further individualizing the spectator's experience, yet making their atomization as part of the neoliberal market even more evident. By perceiving control through personalized websites made "for the fans," the spectator develops an even stronger emotional or psychological attachment with a series, despite the fact that the larger media corporation's control continues to guide the narrowcast.

This ethical entanglement for the spectator extends beyond gangster and criminal content, and transcends genre to really focus on the spectatorial experience of a program. HBO's *Game of Thrones* (David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, 2011-present), a fantasy series adapted from *A Song of Ice and Fire,* a novel series from author George R. R. Martin

utilizes similar identifications and dis-identifications through content and form between the spectator and characters, despite the series' fantasy narrative. While the spectator does not live in a world of dragons and magic spells, they do have recognitions of economic class, familial roles, and domestic spaces as depicted in the series, however fantastical the depiction may be. A major theme in *Game of Thrones* revolves around what it means to have power, or what power even is. As various families battle for the throne, the viewer may consider how these power struggles translate to their own familial or corporate connections. Like *Breaking Bad, Game of Thrones* has a strong presence on Internet websites and offers all of HBO's current technological capabilities that include interactive maps and cast and crew commentaries. The spectator's relationship with the entire series, from the set to the actors to the narrative, is more privatized than ever, yet the spectator's viewership remains an atomized part of HBO and AOL Time Warner's larger corporate plans.

The spectator's ethical entanglement with Arc television is contrived from very similar constructions of content and form as seen in *The Sopranos.* Though these series lack a psychotherapy narrative, they do indeed build psychological relationships with the spectator through their ethical entanglement. So, as a spectator creates his or her own personalized flow, they develop constitutions of themselves in the various characters across their flow. In this manner, a spectator's visual media flow can combine a *Breaking Bad* experience with a *Game of Thrones* Experience to develop constructions of themselves within the multiple characters, ultimately extending into the ways in which they construct themselves in others in their lived every day experience.

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