

Investigating the Role of Impression Management in Fostering Audience Connection to Anti Hero Characters: A Case Study of HBO's *The Sopranos*

Georgia Kerrigan¹

¹*School of Communications / Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland*

Abstract: *A prerequisite of exploring a novel method of understanding, constructing, and enjoying fictional antiheroes is a thorough knowledge and grasp of the existing academic research into this field. This article seeks to critically compare and contrast the relevant literature within the area of antihero-audience relationships and apply each study to the primary focus of this dissertation, Tony Soprano. The audience's fierce loyalty and support towards Tony Soprano, despite witnessing his attempted murder of his mother, begs the question of why people identify so strongly with Tony Soprano even after seeing such depraved behaviour on screen? The original version of this article was submitted as the literature review in the author's final year dissertation on the BA in Communication Studies programme.*

Keywords: *Impression management; television drama; The Sopranos*

Cognitive film scholar Margrethe Bruun Vaage draws on moral psychology and emotion to answer this question. Vaage outlines her understanding of the audience's attraction to antihero characters within her book *The Antihero in American Television* (2015). To build her basic theory of "fictional relief" and "reality check", Vaage drew on Haidt and Greene's model of a "dual-process of morality", which states that judgement comes first from instinctual and quick moral intuition before undergoing a slow process of rational deliberation (cited in Schibart, 2018, p. 172). Here, fictional relief refers to most viewers' initial instinct to accept television as fiction, thus feeling little obligation to make a moral judgement of the content consumed. In simple terms, fictional relief occurs when the audience feels comfortable letting their "cognitive guards" down (ibid). Vaage maintains that without the audience's cognitive guards there to condemn the protagonist's actions, there is an inevitable moral amnesty for the narrative to become nefarious in the name of entertainment. However, seeing Tony attack his mother in *I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano* may, in Vaage's view, have forced a reality check in viewers. In this case, the reality check is the more complex side of the theory occurring when the antihero does something so wicked the viewer questions the moral integrity of what they are watching.

Alternatively, García (2013) views the audiences' potential reaction to Tony's behaviour in *I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano* as a momentary lapse in allegiance. In his work, García recounts two narrative processes used to encourage audience identification with the character: allegiance and alignment. Alignment refers to the employment of spatio-temporal relationships and subjective access within narratives to reveal the character's desires, feelings, and actions to the audience, thus painting the antihero as a complete and complex character. Smith argues that viewers follow and align with a series' protagonist through their domestic and professional life. Spatio-temporal relations, recounting the view of a character's behaviour in their environment, can be explored through reviewing Tony's relationship to the Bada Bing! Stripclub, which acts as his social outlet, office, and a second home in many ways, and also recounting his behaviour within the Soprano family house.

The opening scene of *46 Long* (s.01, ep.02) takes place in the back office of the Bada Bing! and provides a base example of the male-centric environment prevailing in this club. It opens on a close-up shot of the office's television with a television host discussing the Italian Mob's downfall in America. The dialogue includes the detail that "John Gotti-life in prison-no chance of parole". The camera then

pans to Tony, sitting around a desk with his consiglieri Silvio and underboss Paulie, counting a large pile of cash. Around them, the rest of the crew mill about, smoking, lifting weights and reading the newspapers. Although he does not speak much, Tony's absolute dominance of the environment of the Bada Bing! is made abundantly clear as he casually governs the room. When Paulie changes the channel away from the mob discussion, Tony demands he changes it back. Tony then confidently passes his judgements on the commentary made by the television experts. As the television discussion continues to snub the status of the mafia, Tony commands of Silvio: "cheer me up, baby." Silvio then provides entertainment to the group in the form of his impression of Al Pacino's famous line from *The Godfather Part III* (1990) - "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in". Silvio is relieved by Tony's approval of his impression - "Is that Al Pacino or is that Al Pacino?".

Further, Walker (2002) discusses the importance of a statement Tony makes during a discussion about the concept of cloning which occurs in this scene: "I tell my kids, only God can make a life". Within this simple statement, Tony asserts himself confidently as the head of the Soprano family, discrediting Carmella as a mother and giver of life. Additionally, he aligns his power with a "highly traditional understanding of divine power" (ibid, p. 112). This statement mirrors the dominant *Sopranos* narrative trajectory, Tony craving to remain in power and control.

This struggle for power and control is mirrored within a domestic scene in the Soprano household in *Nobody Knows Anything* (s.01, ep.11). During a Soprano family breakfast, Meadow brings up the subject of sex, stating that she does not believe it should be a punishable offence. Horrified that his daughter would discuss such a taboo subject, despite spending a considerable amount of time at a strip club, Tony assures his daughter that "it may be the 90's out there, in this house it's 1954", shutting down the conversation.

Moreover, the viewer gains subjective access to Tony's inner thoughts, feelings and desires through his therapy sessions with Dr Jennifer Melfi. If we compare the opening scene of *46 Long* (s.01, ep.02) to the show's pilot episode, we see Tony's actions shift when he is no longer in the environment of the Bada Bing! In the opening shot of this scene of this episode, we see Tony sitting pensively in Dr Melfi's waiting room. Framing our view of Tony are the legs of a female nude sculpture that sits across the room from him. The subsequent pan between the statue, standing firmly with confidence, her hands above her head, and Tony's face - emoting anxiety and suspicion - reaffirms Tony's loss of control over his environment. Both Dr Melfi's waiting room and office are well-lit, bright and sterile, while the back office of the Bada Bing is dark, cluttered and decorated with posters of naked women and famous criminals. Tony and his crew may be in a position of total dominance over the Bada Bing! and many other places in New Jersey, but Dr Melfi remains in control of her practice.

While Tony begins his first therapy session gloating about the prestige of his career, he ends it crying. When discussing the departure of a family of ducks from his swimming pool, which triggered a panic attack for him, Tony admits to his deep-rooted fear of losing his family. Additionally, within this therapy session, Tony admits to feelings of depression. Thus, through the therapy session, the audience gains a deeper insight into Tony as a three-dimensional character. García contends that alignment built through spatio-temporal relations and subjective access to information, encourages the viewers to see Tony as a multifaceted and complicated character.

On the other hand, allegiance concerns a narrative's bid to influence audience's sympathies for or against a character. Tony Soprano may gain an audience's allegiance by having a certain number of morally just and admirable traits such as being kind to animals and providing for his family. Tony also cares about his children's education, as a good father arguably should. He is also charming and charismatic. However, allegiance is not unconditional. Just as extreme behaviour from a character

might, in Vaage's view, inspire a reality check from audience engagement, allegiance can effectively dissolve if a character disappoints a viewer.

García and Vaage agree that the key to having a successful antihero narrative that keeps audiences engaged and loyal to the protagonist lies in straddling the fine line between hero and villain. If a leading character is purely evil, the audience may choose not to engage with the show at all. Vaage suggests that the process of moving back and forth between "fictional relief" and "reality check" requires us to question our moral compass, assuming all members of the audience have a coherent or similar moral worldview. A "bad fan", as coined by Emily Nussbaum, reads the antihero as either alluring or evil and does not fluctuate between "immersion and distanced moral reflection" (cited in Schubart, 2018, p. 173). Vaage calls on this concept to affirm her view that this oscillation between the various stages of captivation and disgust keeps the audience engaged. Likewise, García states that antiheroes reside on the thin line between allegiance and disillusion. In *House Arrest* (s.02, ep.11), Jennifer Melfi describes the complex relationship between the audience and Tony aptly when she says to her therapist, Dr Kupferberg, "It's like I'm watching a train wreck. I'm repulsed by what he might tell me, but somehow I can't stop myself from wanting to hear it". Jennifer apparently views Tony with a similar fascination and aversion as the audience. At the beginning of the second season, Melfi decides she can no longer act as Tony's therapist, fearing the imminent danger of being so close to a dangerous criminal. However, this fascination with him and the hope that he can be 'cured' ultimately leads her to continue working with Tony.

Furthermore, Smith (1995) states that television develops a "structure of sympathy" which, over many hours, allows the narrative expression to create an emotional structure of storytelling that "forces" us to commiserate with corrupt characters. García suggests that *The Sopranos* and other similar shows are "emotionally predigested" (p. 3) for the audience to sympathise with the antiheroes and come to appreciate their desirable traits as much as their unattractive ones. To elaborate, American film philosopher Noël Carroll discusses contemporary film and television's emotional determinism to elicit a particular emotional response from viewers. Carroll suggests that filmmakers emotionally predigest fictional films for their viewers through selecting the "details of the scene or the sequence that they think are emotively significant and thrust them, so to speak, to our faces" (Carroll cited in García, p.4). In other words, *The Sopranos* writers desired the viewer to see Tony as nothing but a ruthless criminal, they would not have included Tony's tender side.

Tony's vulnerable side is showcased in the first season as he witnesses his longtime friend and ex-boss, Jackie Aprile Sr., battle cancer. In *Anger, Denial, Acceptance* (s.01, ep.03), Tony visits Jackie in the hospital and arranges a surprise visit from a Bada Bing stripper in an attempt to cheer him up. Later, we see Tony become emotional when discussing Jackie's health with Dr Melfi. Tony's love for his friend and fear that he might lose him is evident. When Melfi brings up the possibility that Jackie might die, Tony grows petulant and upset. He cries:

[L]et me tell you something. This man has had chemo every day for three fuckin' weeks and he still has every last hair on his head. Every last hair on his head and he's got a beautiful head of hair. So don't tell me about how it sounds because you don't know him and you don't know me and you don't know what the fuck you're talkin' about!"

Later, in *Meadowlands* (s.01, ep.04), the camera focuses on Tony's lamenting face as he throws some soil on top of Jackie's coffin at his funeral. García maintains that intentional moments of tenderness such as this one, throughout eighty-six episodes, encourage the audience to appreciate Tony's desirable traits, despite being also aware of his ugly side.

Furthermore, the lesser evil and depravity of the antagonist, as mentioned by García, echoes Vaage's discussion of the contrast between the antihero, who by nature possesses some virtuous

qualities and antagonists in the show who are purely evil. While some specific actions or behaviours may render us into a state of 'reality check', actions from surrounding characters remind the viewer that the antihero exists somewhere on the spectrum between a hero and a villain. For example, in *Employee of the Month* (s.03, ep. 04), when Dr Melfi is raped by a random fast-food worker while leaving her office at night, Tony's past actions seem inconsequential in comparison. Melfi even confides in her own therapist that she dreams that Tony will protect her from her rapist, idealising a simple moral code based upon a hierarchy of power. Melfi revels in knowing that Tony's power and violence could serve to insulate her; "Oh don't worry, I'm not going to break the social compact. But that's not saying there's not a certain satisfaction in knowing that I could have that asshole squashed like a bug if I wanted". Equally, García states that the constant presence of someone worse in the show labels the antihero as "the good guy" (2013, p.11).

García outlines two additional methods to maintain an overall positive attitude toward an antihero; character victimisation and family as a source of emotional and moral support. Character victimisation is seen frequently throughout *The Sopranos* as we witness Tony fall victim to crippling panic attacks, bullying from his mother, work stress and the eventual loss of control of his family. These are struggles that many 'average' audience members may relate to, reasserting Tony's status as an 'ordinary' person with an extraordinary job. In addition, Jennifer Melfi frames Tony as a victim of emotional abuse from his mother, suspecting that Livia was a narcissist suffering from Borderline Personality Disorder. "There are some people who are not ideal candidates for parenthood" (*46 Long*, s.01, ep.02). As the series progresses, the portrait of Tony's upbringing grows even more bleak. In *Fortunate Son* (s.03, ep.03), Tony recalls his first panic attack, which occurred when he was eleven years old, while watching his parents share an intimate moment while cooking roast beef for dinner. Earlier that day, young Tony witnessed his father chop someone's finger off to get that meat. Despite his disturbing upbringing, Tony was the only Soprano child who looked after their mother and father, former mafia-boss Johnboy Soprano, in their old age; both of his sisters having fled once they turned eighteen. Tony's struggles to work through the damaging effects of his childhood with Dr Melfi throughout the series can be seen to affirm his status as a victim. Additionally, the backing track to *The Sopranos'* opening credits - *Woke Up This Morning* by A3 - may spur further sympathy from the audience. The lyrics "born under a bad sign" position Tony as an underdog trying to overcome his complicated relationship with his mother, while descriptions of his father never teaching him "about right and wrong" frame Tony as being predisposed to violent tendencies, never apparently having learned any better.

Family within the antihero narrative almost becomes a means to an end for the antihero to justify his actions. The family encourages the combination of public and private space for the protagonist (García, 2013), leading the audience to view the "wounds of time" in the character's life Perez (2011, 27). Within *The Sopranos*, the audience bears witness to Tony's moral corruption, but we also see him emotionally sob and shake as he rescues his son from a brutal suicide attempt (*The Second Coming*, s.06, ep.19). In the moments leading up to AJ's suicide attempt, he sits on the diving board of the Soprano family pool with a plastic bag on his head and a cinderblock tied to his ankles. Crying, AJ pulls the plastic bag over his head and leaps into the water. Ultimately, AJ regrets his decision and pleads for someone to help him. Tony finds his only son wailing and struggling to cling to the diving board. After jumping into the water and rescuing AJ, Tony cradles his son in his arms. "Come on, baby," Tony coos. "You're all right, baby." Conversely, in Vaage's view, an antihero's status as a family man can cushion the impact of their crimes in the audience's eyes. In other words, caring and providing for a family can verify that an antihero is not totally without morals; "he is loyal toward his own and can thus be seen as following a moral code" (2015, p. 39).

In an alternative view to Vaage and García, Shafer and Raney (2012) question the importance of making moral judgements when appreciating an antihero. Drawing from Affective Disposition

Theory (ADT), the leading approach in understanding vicarious entertainment and enjoyment, Shafer and Raney suggest that over time viewers shield themselves from the responsibility of making a moral judgement through developing a story schema. A later study (Janicke and Raney, 2015) of forty self-professed fans of the television show '24' and sixty-one non-fans, found that the show's self-proclaimed fans enjoyed the show more than those non-fans who were unfamiliar with the show's content. It is suggested that such a difference in the viewing experience was because the former relied on the story schema they had developed for 24 and similar narratives, while the former relied on ADT.

This story schema - a "mental representation containing expectations about how a narrative is internally structured and how it will unfold" (Mandler, 1984) - allows viewers to enjoy the antihero narrative despite the wrongdoings shown on screen. Shafer and Raney report and discuss findings from three studies supporting speculation that viewers may develop a story schema. These studies suggest that a) the enjoyment of an antihero requires the development of a story schema containing moral disengagement which is necessary in order to enjoy an antihero and b) such schemas alter how a viewer watches and enjoys an antihero narrative. Just as Vaage suggests that moral judgement is a key to appreciating the antihero, Shafer and Raney discuss the possibility that moral disengagement may be the key to supporting and enjoying Tony Soprano.

ADT suggests that one's moral conviction of the behaviour and motivations defines the initial disposition to the character at hand. As viewers, we generally wish happiness and success for loved characters and punishment for characters we disapprove of. The antiheroes' position as being somewhere between the devil and a hero appears to unravel this argument to a certain extent. Janicke and Raney (2015) suggest that viewers should not need to act as an "untiring moral monitor", as once offered by Zillmann (2000, p.54), to develop positive feelings towards a morally ambiguous character. This view directly opposes research by Vaage and García, who suggest that viewers fluctuate between fictional relief and any form of reality check or allegiance and disillusion. Despite their questionable actions, Raney and Janicke assert that the antihero remains the protagonist at the centre of the story, seeking to overcome the enemy. Thus, viewers will make their judgements accordingly. Recalling our primary example of Tony plotting to strangle his mother, viewers may accept this attempted murder as simply part and parcel of the antihero narrative experience, according to the story schema theory.

To conclude, the work of Margrethe Bruun Vaage, Alberto N. García and Daniel M. Shafer and Arthur A. Raney, discussed within this literature review, tends to focus on the audience's judgement of and reaction towards the antihero's actions. Although this approach is credible and engaging, it fails to acknowledge the connection and empathy viewers may share with a wide range of antihero characters. With the knowledge gained from this literature review, this dissertation will explore a novel viewpoint in a reading of *The Sopranos*.

Word count: 3,110 words (excluding abstract, keywords and references)

References

Coppola, F.F. (1990) *The Godfather: Part III*. Paramount Pictures, Zoetrope Studios.

Donatelli, C. and Alward, S. (2002) "'I dread you'?: Married to the Mob in The Godfather, Goodfellas and The Sopranos', in Lavery, D. (ed.) *This thing of ours: investigating The Sopranos*. London: Wallflower, pp. 60–71. Available at: https://dcu.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/353DCU_INST/jrp0g3/alma991002202059707206.

García Martínez, A.N. (2013) Sympathy for the Devil: Adorable Antiheroes in Contemporary TV Series, paper delivered at the *Workshop Identity and Emotions in Contemporary TV Series* conference. Pamplona, 25-26 October 2013. p 29-42. Available at:

<https://dadun.unav.edu/bitstream/10171/38871/1/Sympathy%20for%20the%20Devil.%20Adorable%20Antiheroes%20in%20Contemporary%20TV%20Fiction.pdf>

Garcia, A.N. (no date) 'Sympathy for the Devil: Adorable Antiheroes in Contemporary TV Series'. Available at:

<https://dadun.unav.edu/bitstream/10171/38871/4/Sympathy%20for%20the%20Devil.pdf>.

Janicke, S.H. and Raney, A.A. (2015) 'Exploring the role of identification and moral disengagement in the enjoyment of an antihero television series', *The European Journal of Communication Research*, 40(4). doi:[10.1515/commun-2015-0022](https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2015-0022).

Schubart, R. (2018) 'Margrethe Bruun Vaage: The Antihero in American Television', *Mediekultur: Journal of media and communication research*, 34(64), pp. 171–173. doi:[10.7146/mediekultur.v34i64.105910](https://doi.org/10.7146/mediekultur.v34i64.105910).

Shafer, D.M. and Raney, A.A. (2012) 'Exploring How We Enjoy Antihero Narratives', *Journal of Communication*, 62(6), pp. 1028–1046. doi:[10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01682.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01682.x).

Smith, M. (1995) *Engaging characters: fiction, emotion, and the cinema*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vaage, M.B. (2017) *The antihero in American television*. London: Routledge (Routledge advances in television studies, 3).

Walker, J.S. (2002) "'Cunnilingus and Psychiatry Have Brought Us To This": Livia and the Logic of Falsehoods in the First Season of *The Sopranos*', in Lavery, D. (ed.) *This thing of ours: investigating The Sopranos*. London: Wallflower, pp. 109–123. Available at: https://dcu.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/353DCU_INST/jrp0g3/alma991002202059707206.

Zillmann, D. (2000) 'Basal morality in drama appreciation', in Bondebjerg, I. (ed.) *Moving images, culture, and the mind*. Luton: University of Luton Press.

Episodes Cited

'46 Long' (1999) *The Sopranos*, Season 1, Episode 2. Written by David Chase. Directed by Dan Attias. HBO, 17 January.

'Denial, Anger, Acceptance' (1999) *The Sopranos*, Season 1, Episode 3. Written by Mark Saraceni. Directed by Nick Gomez. HBO, 25 January.

'Meadowlands' (1999) *The Sopranos*, Season 1, Episode 4. Written by David Chase and Jason Cahill. Directed by James Patterson. HBO, 31 January.

'Nobody Knows Anything' (1999) *The Sopranos*, Season 1, Episode 11. Written by Frank Renzulli. Directed by Henry Bronchtein. HBO, 21 March.

'I Dream of Jeanie Cusamano' (1999) *The Sopranos*, Season 1, Episode 13. Written by David Chase. Directed by John Patterson. HBO, 4 April.

'House Arrest' (2000) *The Sopranos*, Season 2, Episode 11. Written by Terence Winter. Directed by Tim Van Patten. HBO, 26 March.

'Fortunate Son' (2001) *The Sopranos*, Season 3, Episode 3. Written by Todd A. Kessler. Directed by Henry Bronchtein. HBO, 11 March.

'Employee of the Month' (2001) *The Sopranos*, Season 3, Episode 4. Written by David Chase, Robin Green and Mitchell Burgess. Directed by John Patterson. HBO, 18 March.

'The Second Coming' (2006) *The Sopranos*, Season 6, Episode 19. Written by David Chase and Terence Winter. Directed by Tim Van Patten. HBO, 20 May.