

“SPEAK ABOUT DESTRUCTION”: REPRESENTING 9/11 IN *THE SOPRANOS*

A Thesis
by
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Abstract

“SPEAK ABOUT DESTRUCTION”: REPRESENTING 9/11 IN *THE SOPRANOS*

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Broadly definable as an interdisciplinary study of televisual texts, literature, and history, this thesis analyses David Chase’s *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and its engagement of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks. Tracing the show’s narrative and aesthetic roots to its pilot episode, I explore how narrative and aesthetic elements contained in 9/11 television newscasts elicited both an alteration and an exaggeration of the show’s structural and symbolic elements. Furthermore, I illustrate the impact of televisual mediation on the act of viewership, demonstrating the manner in which *The Sopranos* and 9/11 newscasts employed authoritative narrative perspectives as a means of disseminating vital information to viewers.

Methodologically, I employ a narratological approach to show through close textual analysis how elements of location and sequential ordering inform the creation of unique story worlds, and how these story worlds operate symbiotically with viewers in creating meanings beyond the texts.

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Dedication

To Big Veetz, Cam, and Ginootz; to Nana, Poppy, Mema, and Papa; to James, Landry, Uncle Steve, and my favorite godmother, Donna; to Joseph, Jen, Sab, Uncle Bino, and Aunt Jackie; to Ava, Frankie, Aunt Anna, and Frank; to my godfather, John, and Cousin Johnny; to Anthony and Amanda, Kiké and Claudia—

TONY: I'd like to propose a toast to my family. Someday soon, you're gonna have families of your own. And if you're lucky, you'll remember the little moments—like this—that were good. Cheers.

—“I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano,” 1.13

To Scotty Schmoons, Stevie K and Secoco Beach; to Tootie, Sam, and Frankie Boy; to Coach, Hammer, and Papa Nel—

TONY: Look at those guys, huh? They had some times, huh?

—“Rat Pack,” 5.2

And most of all, to my soulmate, Mallory—

“Don't stop believin'...”

—Journey, “Don't Stop Believin'” (as heard in “Made in America,” 6.21)

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Introduction

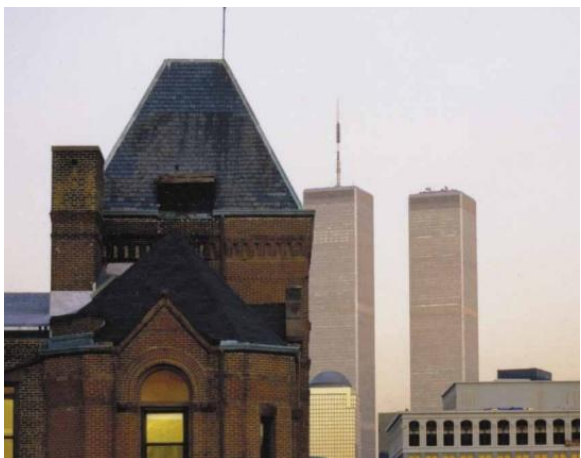


Figure 1. Foreground: The Humanities Building at St. Peter's Prep in Jersey City, New Jersey, circa 2001 (Photo: Petrean staff).

In this thesis, I discuss the ways in which the September 11, 2001 terror attacks and their core themes of identity, trauma, and terror were digested and aestheticized by David Chase's *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). I was an eyewitness to both events—I watched United Airlines Flight 175 slam into the South Tower of the World Trade Center while standing at the intersection of Grand and Warren Streets on my first day of high school at Saint Peter's Prep in Jersey City, New Jersey (see fig. 1), and I watched the saga of Tony Soprano's "two families" unfurl while sitting on a couch on Sunday nights at my childhood home in Secaucus, New Jersey. As a result of these experiences, I was inspired to look deeper into the way in which my family—along with countless families around the world—huddled around a television set in the aftermath of 9/11, staring at repeated images of violence, watching as heroes and villains were established by small-screen narratives, and above all else seeking answers from spectacular television events. It is precisely *how* this act of television viewership corresponds with the way in which we consume a work of fictional drama like *The Sopranos* that I address in this thesis. I compare the viewing of 9/11 alongside the

In this thesis, I discuss the ways in which the September 11, 2001 terror attacks and their core themes of identity, trauma, and terror were digested and aestheticized by David Chase's *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). I was an eyewitness to both events—I watched United Airlines Flight 175 slam into the South Tower of the World Trade Center while



Figure 2. James Gandolfini's final onscreen appearance as Tony Soprano ("Made in America," 6.21: June 10, 2007).

viewing of *The Sopranos* to offer a fresh perspective of the historical event and a new understanding of our tendencies as viewers of televised texts.

The question of *how* a television text operates—both in terms of signifying meaning and establishing ambiguity—is a central concern in television studies, particularly in the recent work of Jason Mittell. In *Complex TV*, Mittell outlines an approach to television studies that considers the influence of historical forces on both the production and consumption of televised texts, describing the modern televised serial as “less of a linear storytelling object than a sprawling library of narrative content that might be consumed via a wide range of practices, sequences, fragments, moments, choices, and repetitions” (7). This narrative content, he argues, achieves meaning in texts like *The Sopranos* through the exploitation of established television storytelling norms—the essential aspects of beginnings, characters, comprehension and ends found in conventional programming—and the work of fan communities in pulling the text to new exegetic dimensions—whose efforts to uncover new meanings in the show’s various fragments and moments fall under the category of forensic fandom.

In this thesis, I approach both *The Sopranos* and the September 11, 2001 terror attacks using the tools offered through Mittell’s definition of television studies. While this methodology directly fits the televisual format of *The Sopranos*, it is also a suitable approach towards greater analysis of 9/11 for a number of reasons. Studies demonstrate that the popular narrative of 9/11—punctuated by themes of identity, trauma, and terror—was established primarily through televised presentation, as the repeated footage of United Airlines Flight 175 penetrating the South Tower of the World Trade Center (see fig. 3) and its attached newscaster commentary provided the vast majority of Americans with their only

source of information regarding the day's events (Stempel 17). The centrality of televised newscasts to the consumption and construction of 9/11, as further studies show, was an element borne out of television's technological accessibility and an affect-based response to the crisis by viewers who saw the capacity for television to provide "not only facts and meanings, but a kind of therapy" in distancing themselves through mediation (Mogensen 103). Furthermore, television coverage of 9/11 and its aftermath not only bore a distinct resemblance to serial television drama, but also influenced a significant narrative restructuring in *The Sopranos*.



Figure 3. The final approach of United 175 is captured on live television. Clockwise from top left: ABC, Fox, NBC, and Warner Bros. Television (WPIX-TV).

Examining 9/11 as a television event, especially in the context of televised serials like *The Sopranos*, reveals the following narrative elements: the story began *in medias res* with the surprise attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center and inspired audiences through

its repeated images of circumscribed violence (with stations editing footage to remove the sights and sounds of jumpers) and its overall narrative uncertainty. Soon, its narrative scope expanded to focus on a robust cast of characters, clearly marking the Bad (Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, the “Axis of Evil,” global terrorism) in order to highlight the Good (President George W. Bush, the New York City Police Department and Fire Department, the United States Armed Forces, American democracy). As the 9/11 story evolved, with thematic concerns moving from domestic preservation to foreign occupation, network executives worked in collusion with the White House in order to maximize the public’s comprehension of an increasingly complex grand narrative (Westwell 8). Ultimately, viewers were told to “never forget” the essential themes of identity, trauma, and terror, as the story of 9/11 essentially faded to black, spiraling into the realm of the confused and the unknown, its loose narrative ends obscured by the passing of time. As a result, the 9/11 narrative never reached proper closure, leaving viewers with more questions than answers.

A similar examination of *The Sopranos* reveals how the show represented 9/11’s core themes of identity, trauma, and terror by modifying and manipulating several components of the show’s narrative structure in order to project those themes to its viewership. This includes the introduction of new beginnings that worked to establish tones of uncertainty and loss in the narrative; new characters whose ill-fated trajectories served the development (or degeneration) of coping strategies in other characters; new issues regarding comprehension that challenged viewers through chronological uncertainty and other types of so-called “red herrings”; and loose ends that reflected logical ambiguity, confusion, and the unknown. Each of these narrative alterations took effect in season four of *The Sopranos* (which first aired following a sixteen-month hiatus on September 15, 2002, marking the beginning of series’

post-9/11 run) and reflected an abrupt departure from the devices and themes established in the show's pilot episode and reinforced in subsequent season premieres.

As open-ended television spectacles of tremendous historical significance, both 9/11 and *The Sopranos* continue to challenge those viewers whose incessant demands for concrete answers are matched only by their burning desire to decode and dissect the frames and footage associated with these programs. The level of forensic fandom encouraged through these texts speaks to their rich semiotics and unsettling open-endedness, a combination of factors crucial in eliciting hermeneutic uncertainty through *apophenia*—the process of projecting patterns onto data—and *pareidolia*—in which those patterns are perceived as meaningful shapes or sounds (Walker 335). This thesis concludes with a state-of-the-field assessment of those “unofficial” fan productions that claim to offer various “explanations” (see fig. 4); rather than relegating these texts to a trivial realm, I argue that the videos produced and posted by aficionados of 9/11 and *The Sopranos* articulate a synthesized understanding of developmental technologies and the vast potential of digital authorship while affirming *and* transforming the critical resonance of the programs they seek to explain.



Figure 4. Top: Still from “*The Sopranos* Ending Properly Explained,” by YouTube user “docmatt.” Bottom: Still from “Believe Your Own Eyes—9/11—No ‘Planes’ Were Ever Used” by YouTube user “sv3rige.”

Chapter One: Beginnings

TONY: It's good to be in something from the ground floor. I came too late for that, I know. But lately, I'm getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over.

—"Pilot," 1.1

"The intelligence community has, for some time, been warning—in a steady drumbeat—that Osama bin Laden has not been heard from...and they only believed it was a matter of time. I believe that today, that is going to be their suspicion."

—CBS's Jim Stewart, September 11, 2001, 9:17 A.M. (fourteen minutes after UA 175 struck the South Tower of the World Trade Center)

"This is a world destruction / your life ain't nothin'."

—Time Zone, "World Destruction" (as heard in "For All Debts Public and Private," 4.1)

The role of beginnings in serial television, whether in terms of pilot episodes or season premieres, is to assist viewers in developing a show-specific method of aesthetic interpretation. Part of this is accomplished through what Mittell refers to as "education and inspiration"—beginnings teach viewers how to effectively engage a serial text by quickly orienting them with its narrative norms, and they entice viewers with aesthetic originality in hopes of eliciting repeat consumption (56). Relationships, conflicts, and character identities are represented and alluded to in pilot episodes and season premieres with varying degrees of explication in order to educate viewers of the peculiarities comprising their storyworlds; sometimes, we, as active viewers, cannot help but be inspired to "fill in the blanks" and make various assumptions in response to the causal uncertainties established by the pilot, and other times we are left with little imaginative wiggle room as the result of highly explicit narrative construction. Beginnings also seek to ensnare viewers by introducing them to a vocabulary of visual, sonic, and vernacular content that the active viewer gradually absorbs and applies to future interpretive acts. The repetition of these elements works to color the expectations of the audience while connecting episodes and themes across vast expanses of time. Narrative

structures of television serials thusly operate in a push-and-pull dynamic with their viewership, supporting, subverting, and often times surprising them as the series progresses. Season premieres work in accordance with these principles while drawing upon the reactivation and reappropriation of established themes for dramatic effect.

Moving methodically through narrative beginnings allows us to better identify and examine the poetic devices that drive both the projection and reception of individual stories. In analyzing script elements like opening moments, narrative disruptions, and the various introductions of characters, key plot points, and relationships, we can locate precisely how and where affect is derived and viewer expectations are formed.

The first goal of this chapter is to move methodically through the narrative components established through the beginnings of two distinct televisual events—the pilot episode of *The Sopranos* (originally aired January 10, 1999) and the dayside network news coverage from September 11, 2001, a unit of television that served as the “pilot episode” of a programming roll-out that included presidential addresses and primetime photo opportunities, live-broadcast military invasions (“Shock and Awe”) covered by implanted TV journalists, and big-budget annual retrospectives. This examination includes issues of location, sequential ordering, and thematic content established by these beginnings to establish the background of my argument—that *The Sopranos*, from its pilot episode, oriented audiences with a method of interpretation that would later become vital in assessing the confusion and calamity produced by the multivalent signification of 9/11.

The second goal of this chapter is to apply these findings to a narrative analysis of “For All Debts Public and Private,” the season four premiere/first post-9/11 episode of *The Sopranos*, as a means of tracing the narrative development of the series against the historical

influence of 9/11 on its verisimilar storyworld. Through such an influence, we can find the series' semiotic stakes elevated in seemingly every narrative angle possible, but my examination focuses on issues of retroactive meaning-making and enhanced depictions of destabilization, especially in terms of how these elements were manifested in several newly introduced (and freshly modified) characters. This brings into focus the foreground of my argument—that post-9/11 episodes of *The Sopranos* provided viewers with a narrative of disorder and destruction that contrasted poignantly with the greater story of 9/11 and its televisual components.

I conclude this chapter with a synthesis of these two examinations, reflecting on a new understanding of the roots of affect and viewer expectation in televisual events. Half of this conclusion involves establishing a new approach to 9/11 studies—by considering its televisuality, we can better understand the ways in which meaning-making was conducted on 9/11, and whether or not that mode of conduct was particularly comprehensive, satisfying, or factually correct. The other half of this conclusion, naturally, involves reconsidering *The Sopranos*—typically lauded for its stylistic and thematic advancements of the serial television format, the show has never before received recognition for its refusal to allegorize the events of 9/11 in favor of exploring the limits of narrative uncertainty in a time of chaos and confusion. I discuss the depths of these limits in my next chapter; this chapter concludes with an overview of the beginnings to two similar narrative ends.

Location



Figure 5. Credit montage still (“Pilot,” 1.1: January 10, 1999).

Clearly prioritized in the initial narrative constructions of both *The Sopranos* and 9/11 is the establishment of a concrete story space. The beginnings of both works are highlighted by the manner in which the spatial characteristics of these storyworlds are laid out in no uncertain terms. Neither of these works could be construed as part of a “magical” or “fantastical” tradition, one in which viewers would easily understand (or even demand) a move toward an explicit definition of location—*The Sopranos* is a realist drama predominantly focused on a verisimilar narrative mode, and the television coverage of 9/11 works as a narrative rejoinder to real-world events—but nevertheless these works go about doing so. What we find in these works, then, is a production move that hopes to eradicate any doubt in the mind of the viewer as to *where* actions will transpire and *what* the dimensions of these locations will be. In other words, the construction of these story spaces affect how viewers engage in the type of “imaginative situating” described by Mieke Bal, with

alternatingly obvious and oblique measures of indicating narrative location eliciting varied responses from viewers (43). The following section looks at *why* these texts take such an approach to matters of location.

In *The Sopranos*, the explicit definition/designation of story space allows for the contrast granted through spatial complementarity to flourish throughout the narrative. The complementarity established here involves situating New York against New Jersey, a move that demarcates the glitz and glamour of cosmopolitan life from the grit and garbage of the city's stinky suburban sister to the south. This stems, to an iconic degree, from the credit montage that leads off all but one of its 86 episodes ("46 Long," the series' second episode, contains the only instance of a cold opening in the *Sopranos* corpus). In this credit montage, the landmarks lining Tony Soprano's drive from Manhattan to his North Caldwell *palazzo* flash on the screen in rapid succession, shot from the point of view of an unseen occupant in the passenger seat of Tony's red Suburban (a metaphor, perhaps, for a viewer held captive by the narrative unfurling offered by the show). Complementarity presents itself here through the depiction of the Manhattan skyline as viewed from *outside*, rather than *inside* the city, a complete reversal of spatial norms (see fig. 5).

Outnumbering shots of iconic skyscrapers in this montage are images of New Jersey's working class anti-icons, like the Bunyan-esque Wilson Carpet statue in Jersey City and the "Pizzaland" storefront in North Arlington. However, the most notable piece in the credit montage is the initial shot capturing Tony's passage through the Lincoln Tunnel, one of the principle portals traversing the boundary between Manhattan and Weehawken, New Jersey. Through this shot, we become aware of the narrative significance of boundaries as presented through the New York/New Jersey spatial opposition. This idea of an interstate boundary,

especially in an ideological sense, drives the motivations of many—if not all—of the show’s major characters, a sentiment evinced by Phil Leotardo’s observation of New York’s “five fucking families and this other pygmy thing over in Jersey” (“The Blue Comet,” 6.20). Leotardo’s further comments read as a reflection on the mediation of tradition and conduct elicited by this boundary: “They make anybody and everybody over there. And the way that they do it is all fucked up. Guys don’t get their finger pricked. There’s no sword and gun on the table” (“The Blue Comet”). The dangerous ramifications of these traditional/economic differences work as a narrative function of these boundaries, with cross-boundary interactions regularly producing negative effects on the life-and-death potentialities of the story’s actants (from the perspective of the DiMeo/Soprano family). Thus, the New York-New Jersey spatial complementarity elicits numerous narrative oppositions throughout the text: favorable-unfavorable, safe-unsafe, fortunate-unfortunate, familiar-strange, and so on, binaries that are both supported and destabilized throughout the series.

The pilot episode of *The Sopranos* establishes a symbiotic relationship between character and location by emphasizing the propensity of these characters to reap, if not exploit, the fruits of their safe, favorable, fortunate, and familiar terrain. Tony’s no-show position as “waste management consultant” reflects, at the very least, both a symbolic affinity toward the dross and detritus of his homeland and a cavalier approach to turning Jersey junk into Garden State gold. Christopher’s casual observation regarding the DiMeo/Soprano family business (“Garbage is our bread and butter”) is laden with a certain glee regarding the depths of their spatial pillaging (“Pilot,” 1.1). We find further examples of New Jersey’s spatial favorability (the use of the Great Falls in Passaic to intimidate a

recalcitrant debtor) and fortune (the designation of Tony’s backyard pool as a mating ground for migrant Canadian ducks) at play throughout this pilot episode.

Additionally, the establishment of location in *The Sopranos* provides meta-discourse on the show’s relation to other shows, setting it apart from contemporaneous Manhattan-based programming like *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), *Friends* (1994-2004), and especially HBO’s *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). James Gandolfini’s remarks regarding HBO’s decision to pick up the show’s pilot reflects the subversion of spatial significance at play in *The Sopranos* (i.e., its opposition to Manhattan versus the centrality of the city in the aforementioned programs): “This wasn’t four pretty women in Manhattan. This was a bunch of fat guys from Jersey. It was an incredible leap of faith” (Martin 11). Such a “leap of faith” not only reflected the difficulty encountered by showrunner David Chase in finding a viable television home for the series, but it also represented the change in expectation for viewers who expected a mob story in the vein of the *Godfather* trilogy, *Once Upon a Time in America*, *Goodfellas*, or *A Bronx Tale*. The storyworlds in these films championed the streets of New York City and posited them as helpers to their protagonists; in this sense, *The Sopranos* represents a subversive departure from the ideological realms signified by the streets of New York City in both mob cinema and recent television history.



Figure 6. Opening still from CNN’s special coverage on September 11, 2001.

Similar to the case of *The Sopranos*, it was necessary to construct a definitive sense of location in order to elicit narrative significance through the television coverage of 9/11. Retrospective analysis of 9/11 newscasts might suggest that there was little doubt regarding the location of action on that morning. Most Americans of adult age can easily identify the locations that are essential to the story of 9/11 on a whim (the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field outside of Shanksville, Pennsylvania), thereby allowing this point to seem obvious. However, this is hardly the case—the concept of location was itself a major variable in the day’s coverage, and perhaps the essential element in establishing further themes of suspicion and multiplicity in the greater 9/11 narrative, which I discuss in detail later in this chapter. The issue of *how* location (and the unique spatial elements comprising this location) worked to establish the narrative beginnings of 9/11—and *why* producers of the 9/11 story were so preoccupied with matters of location—starts by looking at the role of social interaction in creating storyworlds.

“You are looking at obviously a very disturbing live shot there,” CNN anchor Carol Lin remarked during the first televised images of American Airlines Flight 11’s smoldering impact crater in the North Tower of the World Trade Center (see fig. 6). “That is the World Trade Center,” Lin continued, “and we have unconfirmed reports this morning that a plane has crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center” (Cellini). It is here that the narrative’s etiological concerns—to identify the causal beginnings of the smoldering crater—find their roots, but it is also important to note that the tools used in achieving this aim were substantially different in the autumn of 2001 than they are today. The more technologically cumbersome elements of digital photojournalism, such as digital recording, file compression, and broadband Internet accessibility, were still in their infancy and had yet to gain traction in

the workflow of even the most progressive newsrooms (Stubblefield 27). Therefore, in the absence of instantly-accessible social media content, eyewitnesses and their *oral testimonies* became the essential actants in sorting out the etiological dilemma central to the 9/11 narrative (versus, perhaps, cell phone video recordings, Tweets, and other forms of social media).

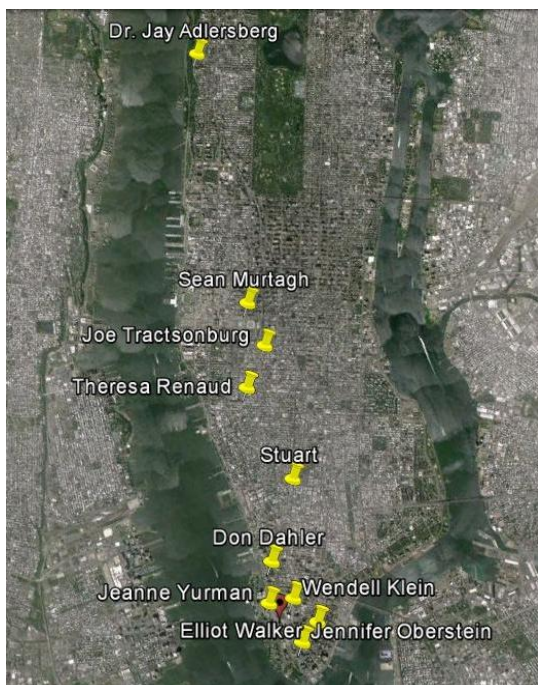


Figure 7. Positions of eyewitnesses who provided oral testimony regarding AA 11's unfiled strike on North Tower during ABC, CBS, CNN, and NBC news broadcasts on September 11, 2001.

The Twin Towers' spatial dimensions were key components in elevating eyewitnesses to a position of tremendous narrative significance in the story of 9/11. The unmatched height of the towers against the Manhattan skyline rendered them visible for many miles—especially on a morning as bright and cloudless as that of September 11, 2001—which increased the probability of disaster viewership in a region of equally unmatched population density. Charting the location of eyewitnesses to American Airlines Flight 11's strike on the North Tower of the World Trade Center on a map of Manhattan (see fig. 7)

reveals that onlookers from as far as six miles north of the towers provided oral testimony on newscasts that morning. However, the towers soon became an agent of narrative confusion precisely because of their height—even if particular faces of the building were obscured from onlookers as the result of their spatial positioning, these same onlookers were under the

assumption that they were *fully* “seeing” the building due to its pronounced vertical presence within the Manhattan skyline.

For example, eyewitnesses who were to the south of the towers—like Jennifer Oberstein—were physically unable to see American Airlines Flight 11 penetrate the North Tower, as the plane struck the building’s north face, but were still in a prime position to view the collision’s aftereffects, in the form of fireballs, sonic booms, smoke clouds, and so on. Their testimonial reflects this lack of essential causal information; Oberstein, the sole telephone guest during NBC’s special coverage prior to United Airlines Flight 175 striking the South Tower, provided viewers with more confusion than context during her interview with Katie Couric:

COURIC: Can you please tell me what you saw and give me any information about what’s going on there?

OBERSTEIN: Yes, I have to tell you, it’s quite terrifying. I’m in shock right now. I came out of the subway at Bowling Green. I was heading to work in Battery Park at the Ritz Carlton Hotel and I come out and I heard a boom, looked up and there was a big ball of fire. I’m now looking north at the World Trade Center and it is the left Twin Tower. I’m looking north. I’m in Battery Park right now and you can hear the fire engines and the emergency crews behind me and it is unbelievable...I’ve never seen any fire like this in the air. The pieces of the building were flying down. It looks like the top, maybe, twenty floors. Intense smoke. It’s horrible. I can’t even describe it.

COURIC: Do you have any idea what kind of plane it was?

OBERSTEIN: I’m sorry?

COURIC: Do you have any idea what hit the World Trade Center?

OBERSTEIN: What it was?

COURIC: Yeah, what kind of plane. We're getting reports that a plane hit the building.

OBERSTEIN: Oh, I didn't even know that. Honestly, I was walking up and looked up and saw a big boom [sic] and fire. You know I gotta tell you, we were all saying around here that it was very interesting that it would be a bomb and it would be so high up, so perhaps it was a plane. We have no talk of a plane, however, I have to tell you, there is something flying in the air. I mean, it's mind boggling and it's horrifying. (Couric)

Over at CBS, Bryant Gumbel's first telephone guest, a server at a Soho-based restaurant later identified as Stewart Nurick, provided a similarly ambiguous account of American Airlines Flight 11 striking the North Tower:

GUMBEL: Alright, so tell us what you saw, if you would.

NURICK: I literally, I was waiting a table and I literally saw a—it seemed to be like a small plane. I just heard a couple noises. It looked like it, like, bounced off the building and then I heard a—I just saw a huge, like, ball of fire on top. And then the smoke seemed to simmer down. And it just, um, you know, a lot of smoke was coming out, and that's pretty much the extent of what I saw.

GUMBEL: A private aircraft?

NURICK: I'm not sure if it was. It just seemed like a smaller plane. I don't think it was anything commercial.

GUMBEL: Could you tell us whether or not it was a prop or a jet?

NURICK: I honestly don't know. It happened too quickly. (Gumbel)

Through Nurick's testimonial, we can discern another physical aspect of the Twin Towers that carried with it significant narrative implications. The sheer size of the towers, with their storied verticality and substantial width, created a sort of optical illusion for eyewitnesses, one that rendered commercial airliners puny in comparison. From the beginning, spatial dimensionality in the 9/11 story elicited both a confluence of narrative angles and an overall thematic sense of suspicion, which I discuss later in this chapter. For now, however, it is vital to focus on the way in which the towers worked to disrupt and confuse an already imperfect model of information transmission (eyewitness reportage) as the result of their spatial dimensions.

At approximately 8:46 A.M., American Airlines Flight 11 impacted the north face of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Seventeen minutes later, United Airlines Flight 175 struck south face of the South Tower. The first event was recorded by three known sources: the production team of Jules and Gedeon Naudet, who were filming a documentary about the New York City Fire Department at the intersection of Church and Lispenard Streets in lower Manhattan; Pavel Hlava, a construction worker who caught the event on camera from the mouth of the Holland Tunnel while documenting his commute into the city; and German mixed-media artist Wolfgang Staele, whose "Untitled" media project captured the plane's approach and explosion from a Brooklyn-based camera trained on the Twin Towers and set to transmit snapshots at four-second intervals to a screen at Chelsea's Postmasters Gallery. All three of these recordings did not reach the mainstream media until weeks after the attacks.

The second strike was captured by all major network news cameras (see fig. 3) and dozens of civilian devices, rendering the event instantly accessible and infinitely analyzable, unlike that of American Airlines Flight 11's largely undocumented impact on the North Tower. However, even with the aid of easily-examinable/highly-transmittable footage, the runoff of visibility/verticality-based "information contaminants" still managed to seep into the story and disrupt causal narrative processes. For example, WNYW's Dick Oliver, reporting from Park Row a full six minutes after the impact on the South Tower, raised the following point of contention in his remarks to anchor Jim Ryan regarding the allegations of planes hitting the towers: "Some people said they thought they saw a missile...we might keep open the possibility that this was a missile attack on these buildings" (Brown). Here, we see *how* the optical illusion caused by the spatial dimensions of the towers (and exhibited in Nurick's testimonial) contributed to a complete breakdown in the integral discursive mechanics of investigative meaning-making on 9/11. For eyewitnesses, commercial jetliners not only appeared smaller than usual when contrasted with the mighty Twin Towers, but they appeared in unfamiliar *positions* (flying at sea level) and *contexts* (flying into a skyscraper) as well. As a result, American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175 became mistaken for all sorts of "non-jetliner" objects—from private planes to missiles, objects whose believability certainly trumped that of the Boeing 757 when factored in to said positions and contexts.

All of this brings to our attention the issue of focalization raised by the location and spatiality of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers. To this extent, Bal writes:

Perception...is a psychological process, strongly dependent on the position of the perceiving body....The degree to which one is familiar with what one sees

also influences perception. When the Central American Indians first saw horsemen, they did not see the same things we do when we see people riding. They *saw* gigantic monsters, with human heads and four legs. These had to be gods. Perception depends on so many factors that striving for objectivity is pointless. To mention only a few factors: one's position with respect to the perceived object, the fall of the light, the distance, previous knowledge, psychological attitude towards the object; all of this and more affects the picture one forms and passes on to others. (100, emphasis in original)

While Bal's observations drift dangerously into the territory of subjective self-mythologizing and the Othering of the observer, they nevertheless assist us in understanding how the indiscriminate qualifications of actors in the 9/11 story, especially those prioritized as "eyewitnesses" (and therefore designated as essential narrative actants in the televisual narrative) such as Nurick, managed to undermine the narrative authority of the information superstructure through the dissemination of largely divergent, position-specific stories. All of this, again, points back to the spatial dimensions of the Twin Towers (i.e., their visibility and verticality) and the narrative implications of location.

Two final points regarding the role of location in the narrative beginning of 9/11: first, the concept of location in the 9/11 story expanded to a point of limitless spatiality after the strike on the Pentagon and the crash outside of Shanksville. Its function, in a sense unlike the contemplative moment between plane strikes in Manhattan—and certainly different from the binary positive-negative/safe-unsafe spatial opposition of New Jersey/New York in the pilot episode of *The Sopranos*—expanded as well, as location became a veritable villain in the 9/11 story. Viewers could not help but consider their personal vulnerability after the third

and fourth planes went down, signifying the complete spatial decentralization of the narrative. These fears flourished during a time of journalistic deterioration, as Bryant Gumbel demonstrated an uncharacteristic sense of disquietude on CBS's "Early Show" at 9:56 A.M.:

GUMBEL: Hold it, Mr. Jenkins! We're looking at...There are two jets right now approaching the World Trade Center! We're watching...hold on...I'm sorry, no. The one aircraft has cleared. We can't tell whether it was a plane or a chopper from our vantage point. I apologize, Mr. Jenkins, but we're more than a bit gun-shy. (Gumbel)

It is fitting, in light of the "gun-shy" disposition elicited through 9/11's spatial decentralization, that Korey Kay & Partners' "If You See Something, Say Something" anti-terror vigilance ad campaign was pitched to New York City's Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) on September 12, 2001. In the space of an hour, terrorism went from something confined to imaginary peripheral countries, to something confined to the cities, to something that confined all who dared to pay attention. Danger was everywhere and nowhere at once.

The image of spatial instability presented in the television coverage of 9/11 provides the first major contrast between issues of location in pre- and post-9/11 episodes of *The Sopranos*. As described above, the show's early depiction of "home" was static, definite, and confined—a depiction drastically undermined by 9/11's smoldering towers and pillowing dust clouds engulfing entire cityscapes. While overall discrepancies remains between Tony's New Jersey and the New York of Johnny Sack, Carmine Lupertazzi and co. in post-9/11 episodes, viewers witness the spatially destabilizing effects of 9/11 in New York's *increased* danger and New Jersey's sudden precariousness. I will discuss the spread of terror to the suburbs in my section on "For All Debts Public and Private," where the essence of a

mutually beneficial “Jerseyness” vanishes in the presence of a geographically boundless phantom terror.

Finally, the elements of spatial location in the 9/11 story also provide meta-discourse on television viewership, specifically in relation to viewer response. Throughout this section, I have discussed in detail the various difficulties and distortions presented by spatial location elements in conveying and constructing an “official narrative” in the story of 9/11. We have seen how the reliance on eyewitness accounts in this construction led to an undermining of narrative authority and a confluence of narrative streams, issues that upset the accessibility of the story by disrupting its rhythm and arresting its teleological development. I must conclude this section, then, by contending that the most profound issue raised by the use of spatial location in the narrative beginning of 9/11 is one of demand—the demand of steadily flowing content, the demand of continuous access to clear information. While much ink has been spilled regarding the symbolic targeting of the Twin Towers, I’ll argue that there was a far more pressing concern in attacking the towers for their literal value as a strategic broadcasting point (as evinced by the North Tower’s 362-foot-tall communications mast, which transmitted feeds from a dozen television and radio stations). In capitalizing on the broader functions of this spatial element, the perpetrators of 9/11 demonstrated that terror resides in a liminal space between information deluge and information deficiency. The frozen image that appeared on WPIX satellite feeds for the majority of the day, representing the final transmission sent from the communications mast before the collapse of the South Tower rendered it non-operational, is an appropriate metaphor for the effective creation of spectacular storyworlds through the subversion of spatial elements (see fig. 8).



Figure 8. Final television transmission sent from the North Tower communications mast.

Sequential Ordering

Both *The Sopranos* and the television coverage of 9/11 demonstrate a tendency to deviate from chronologically sequential narrative structures in their beginnings. For *The Sopranos*, this tendency alone is nothing noteworthy, as it reflects a common practice in complex television narratives to “often reorder events through flashbacks, retelling past events, repeating story events from multiple perspectives, and jumbling chronologies” (Mittell 26). However, this section examines the construction of anachronism in the show’s pilot episode with a pronounced emphasis on *how* it works to qualify Tony Soprano as the story’s focal center and *what* it implies for further anachronistic constructions in the show’s development. A similar process is assessed in the newscast of the 9/11 tragedy: while the practice of “retelling past events” and “repeating story events from multiple perspectives” is standard in journalism, the overwhelming causal uncertainty posed by the essential questions of 9/11 (who did this, and why?) caused these practices to function as meaning-makers in and of themselves during the first day of the event’s news coverage. This section examines such use of retroversion and selective repetition and their impact on the general narrative of 9/11 as a means of locating the true “beginning” of the hunt for Osama bin Laden.

Almost the entire first act of the pilot episode of *The Sopranos* is devoted to a meeting between Tony and his psychiatrist (Dr. Jennifer Melfi, played by Lorraine Bracco). This meeting contains two distinct narrative devices that serve as figurative “housewarming gifts” from producers to welcome the audience to the pilot episode—conflicting interpretations of an inciting event (the discussion over whether or not Tony had a panic attack) and a flashback, complete with first-person narration (Tony’s retelling of the day he “got sick”). The initial conflict establishes Dr. Melfi as a *helper* to Tony’s *hero* by detailing

the circumstances that brought them together. The flashback and its attached narration introduce viewers to Tony's nuclear family (Carmela, Meadow, and A.J.) and extended "family" of business associates (Christopher, Silvio, Artie, Uncle Junior, and others) while explicitly judging several characters through the narrator's pointed speech (Meadow's best friend, Hunter Scangarelo, is a "bad influence," while Christopher is "an example of" a standard-less, pride-less new generation) ("Pilot"). Sometimes, the flashback abruptly ends and the narrative jolts back into the present tense when Tony reaches a particularly unsavory event that would exceed the boundaries of doctor/patient confidentiality. For instance, when the Pussy Malanga hit becomes apparent in the anachronistic flashback world, narrator-Tony ends his speech, with present-tense Tony saying, "This situation came up. It involves my uncle. I can't go into details on this one" ("Pilot"). Other times, viewers gain insight into Tony's ability to lie by witnessing him perpetrate an event in the anachronistic flashback world (his beat-down of recalcitrant debtor Alex Mahaffey) that he describes as a completely different set of circumstances to Dr. Melfi in the present tense (how he "had coffee" with Mahaffey) ("Pilot").

What strikes second-time viewers of *The Sopranos* the most in regards to the pilot episode is the presence of Tony's voice-over narration in these flashback scenes. Rather than chalking it up to a production misstep ("Pilot" is the only episode in the series to feature voice-over narration), I'll argue that Tony's voice-over narration is used here—and only here—not only to offer up exposition quickly, but to point viewers towards the idea of a Tony-centric storyworld. I examine various issues regarding Tony's character development in a later section, but for now it is worth mentioning that this use of voice-over narration is an effective, if not obvious, tool in eliciting a sympathetic viewer response to Tony. The textural

properties of the voice-over recording indicate that the session took place on a dub stage, rather than overlaying the video track from the flashback on top of dialog recorded in Dr. Melfi's office. This textural deviation elicits a different response to Tony's voice—viewers feel now as if *they* are the addressee in this candid moment. Combined with the privileged look at the warp and woof of Tony's story weaving style gleaned through the flashback, the pilot episode of *The Sopranos* uses anachrony as a device to calibrate the viewer with a Tony-centric universe, thereby forcing viewers to rely on Tony's complex (and often convoluted) conversations with Dr. Melfi to guide them through the show's scrambled chronology.



Figure 9. Effects-enhanced replay of United Airlines Flight 175 striking the South Tower.

Like *The Sopranos*, television coverage of 9/11 began *in medias res* and was therefore destined to undergo various alterations in its sequential ordering as a means of guiding viewers through a complicated chronology. The most notable aspect of this was the repetitious display of United Airlines Flight 175 penetrating the South Tower of the World Trade Center. Five of the major news networks captured the event during their live coverage,

but in the hours following the strike, significant airtime was devoted to the presentation of amateur footage showing the plane's approach from new angles (Orlick 241).

We can initially deduce a number of scenarios and narrative constructs that would necessitate such incessant replaying: the news media as a conduit for public information, with the event constituting a matter of unparalleled national importance; the news media as a fundamentally commercial enterprise, with the event reflecting a direct fulfillment of the “if it bleeds, it leads” news mantra; and the news media as an investigative entity, with the event representing an unsolved mystery. Of these three frameworks, the last one deserves further exploration for the way in which it positions the 9/11 story as a conflict that could be solved, a puzzle that could be pieced together. With each callback to footage from “moments ago” (see fig. 9), viewers became privy to an increased awareness of how repetition and the employment of retroversive narrative modes was all part of a strategic meaning-making ploy by a rapidly deteriorating narrative authority. This is similar to the reliance on flashbacks in *The Sopranos* to flesh out the mystery of Tony's history. Perhaps the next replay would attract a call from someone with concrete answers; perhaps the next amateur video to surface would contain a smoking gun to put all questions to bed; perhaps the next session with Dr. Melfi will provide viewers with essential insight into Tony's condition.

However, these repetitions only served to imbue the 9/11 story with further uncertainty and open-endedness, a factor evinced in WB anchor Kaity Tong's contemplative remarks: “We see this shot over and over. It does not fail to boggle the mind. And I don't think this image will ever be erased from our minds” (Tong). The “boggling” aspect of it all stemmed from the way in which these repeated images undermined traditional narrative structures of conflict and power—by watching the plane explode as it hit the tower, we could

surmise that the villain/opponents of the 9/11 story were eliminated as part of their act of opposition, a logical conundrum that only worsened with each repetition. There was, then, no possibility for a narrative cycle of improvement to play out, no way for a hero to intervene and vanquish these foes. Coupled with subsequent events, such as the attack on the Pentagon, the crash of United Airlines Flight 93, it became abundantly clear that a narrative cycle of deterioration—not a tragedy, but worse, a failed story—was at play.

By injecting causality into this sequence of deterioration, the news media was able to assert its narrative authority and repackage the day's content into something resembling a traditionally complete story, one with increased readability and a narrative cycle of improvement. The introduction of Osama bin Laden as a *persona non grata* allowed this narrative renovation to take place. Fox News' Jon Scott provided this introduction within thirty seconds of United Airlines Flight 175 striking the South Tower of the World Trade Center: "Now, given what has been going on around the world, some of the key suspects come to mind—Osama bin Laden, who knows what" (Doocy). Establishing bin Laden as the probable perpetrator of the central conflict in the 9/11 story worked to resignify the images and videos of destruction that had already aired numerous times as pieces of evidence pointing to the dastardly deeds of a criminal mastermind, thereby retroactively reordering the sequence of events into a causal chain versus the chaotic mess that it seemed in the absence of a central antagonist. This worked as long as one was willing to accept this new information on faith alone—a suspension of belief, so to speak, that is at the core of the televisual experience.

Through this examination of sequential ordering in the beginnings of *The Sopranos* and the television newscast of 9/11, we observe how the pilot episode of *The Sopranos*

primed viewers to a mode of retrospective investigation (using the framework of psychoanalytic analysis, dream interpretation, and narrative flashback) that would become central to the investigation of televised evidence on 9/11. Repetitious anachronism, in the form of highly repeated imagery, depends on evolutions of narrative and aesthetic newness (in the form of new videos, new angles, and so on) in order to remain relevant, newsworthy, and effective. As Orlick observes, “the value of [eyewitness] video diminishes the further the story evolves, unless new videos emerges that present new evidence. Otherwise, that original video of the disaster ceases to become informative and simply desensitizes the viewer” (Orlick 241). *The Sopranos* addresses this type of kickback during its post-9/11 run:

DR. MELFI: Freud says dreams are wishes.

TONY: Dreams are wishes? I thought you said that dreams represent repressed urges and—

DR. MELFI: —It depends.

TONY: I oughta quit this fucking therapy. “Maybe it’s this, maybe it’s that.” Maybe it’s *vaffanculo!* What about impulse control? I been sitting in this chair for four years and nothing’s been done about that! And it leads me to make mistakes at my work! What good did you do me with that?

DR. MELFI: Let’s get back to the dream.

TONY: Oh, fuck the dream, it’s just a dream. Jesus Christ, the money I spend here, I could’ve bought a Ferrari. At least I would’ve got a blowjob out of that.

DR. MELFI: What do you mean?

TONY: Please. Don’t get me started.

DR. MELFI: I think you're glossing over the significant accomplishments we've made in here.

TONY: "My mother would come when she looked at a pot roast." "Oh, you're second in the birthing order." "Oh, Carmela's driving the car, how fucking interesting."

DR. MELFI: When you first came here, you were clinically depressed. You suffered from panic attacks that put your life in danger. There's been significant relief in both those areas.

TONY: You're right, but I mean, come on. ("Calling All Cars," 4.11)

Evinced in this selection is the potency of a narrative cycle of improvement as a framework for disparate, troubling imagery in establishing narrative authority—a technique similar to the one used by news outlets in repackaging graphic videos and photographs within a readable/legible story frame (i.e., the instant bin Laden argument) to assert their narrative authority over the day. Just as Tony's ire briefly dissipated after Dr. Melfi's referencing of past attacks and subsequent physiological improvements, mainstream attitudes regarding causal uncertainty and confusion temporarily diminished in the wake of bin Laden's summary implication by multiple newscasters. These attitudes would resurface later for those viewers who felt that the vilification of bin Laden papered over the fact that no true revenge could ever be enacted on the terrorists who perpetrated 9/11, a circular sentimentality similar to the lack of progress in Tony's therapy as a result of his papering over the inescapable truth of his business practices. As Tony returned for more sessions with Dr. Melfi, so too did the American public continuously return to the unfolding televisual narrative of the "War on Terror." The element of content-based manipulation involved in both texts is demonstrative

of the importance of sequential ordering in the development of narratives—as we have seen through this examination, authority is established not only by the projection of story arcs, but by significant acts of retroactive meaning-making.



Figure 10. Dr. Melfi's office, the narrative center of retrospection ("46 Long," January 17, 1999).

Thematic Content

Resulting from the narrative elements outlined above, the pilot episode of *The Sopranos* resonates with themes of multiplicity and deception. Digesting this thematic content guides active viewers of the pilot towards the development of a show-specific mode of aesthetic interpretation, and this mode of interpretation is largely informed by suspicion. Viewers quickly realize that the many promises and proclaimed truths presented in the show are rarely worth their face value and that the true motivations of characters are often oblique and rarely correspond with their actions. As characters in *The Sopranos* are often rewarded for acting on their suspicions (trusting no one, shooting first, asking questions later) so too is the suspicious viewer rewarded for suspecting an ulterior motive lurking behind every deed, a henchman hiding behind every corner. Even more significant is how the conflicts stemming from issues of suspicion resonate across the series as a whole, with references to inciting events occurring at later points in the show's development.

The television coverage of 9/11 contains many of the same themes as the pilot episode of *The Sopranos*, but rather than suggesting or rewarding a specific mode of viewer engagement with the text, the graphic nature of the coverage compels active viewers into the development of an interpretive mode that is informed by paranoia and self-preservation. In this sense, textual engagement is marked with a hermeneutic anxiety, an apprehension of meaning in light of highly multivalent signification. Viewers realize that the narrative's unfolding of repeated violent events suggests the continuation of catastrophe; this realization inherently elicits the notion that that the next scene of violence presented on the screen could be located within their own environs. There is no positive payoff offered by this interpretive mode. However, the reordering of narrative components created through the presentation of

Osama bin Laden as a probable suspect in the attacks offers viewers a reward by defining the source of their paranoia and directing their unease towards the achievement of a specific resolution (the capture/execution of bin Laden). Accordingly, the desire for such resolution resonated across the greater story of 9/11 but was ultimately unfulfilled, as narrative loose ends remained even after bin Laden's death in 2011 (in the form of unresolved wars, continued domestic terror attacks, and the refusal to provide photographic evidence of bin Laden's body).

This section has two functions. First, and most prominently, it examines the affective elements found in the pilot episode of *The Sopranos* ("Pilot"). In this spirit, I move point-by-point across the episode, examining the themes raised through its various narrative constructions. The second function of this section is to examine the affective elements found in the television presentation of 9/11 in a similar fashion. By placing these two texts in an interlocking conversation with one another, we can better examine what is and is not mutual in their beginnings, a factor that allows us to recognize their symbiotic status—simply, *The Sopranos* was tapped in to a zeitgeist that was rendered explicit by the events of 9/11. Ultimately, this section sets the table for the conclusion of this chapter, which details how the narrative structure of post-9/11 *Sopranos* episodes underwent various alterations stemming from the televised destruction of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks.

The use of multiplicity to elicit compound signification and promote a confluence of meaning in the pilot episode of *The Sopranos* is just one of the ways that suspicion enters in the mind of viewer and character alike. For instance, "family" is thematically central to Tony's psychotherapy, as he and Dr. Melfi conclude that his bizarre fascination with ducks—resulting in castration dreams that involve a type of "water bird"—is the result of profound

familial concerns. However, in the span of a single episode, the viewer has become aware of at least five families in Tony's life—the migrant duck family, his nuclear family, his mother, uncle, and extended family, his fraternal “mafia” family, and his harem-like family of *comàre*.

Suspicion thusly is affected in the viewer through any further narrative gesture toward “family” or “families” as a result of the sheer multiplicity of meanings elicited by the word “family” as well as the slippery interplay between its stations (i.e., where does one family end and the other begin?). As the series progresses, viewers witness iconic signifiers that work to attribute the notion of family across this spectrum of meaning, only adding to the level at which multiplicity is absorbed. These situations represent multiplicity operating on the semiotic level of the narrative—from the ways in which the Catholic wedding ceremony is mirrored in the ceremonial “making” of Christopher as a member of the mafia family, complete with vows made at an altar (“Fortunate Son,” 3.3) to the customary diamond brooch (see fig. 11) bestowed upon members of Tony's family of *comàre*, a token of initiation, conquest, and subservience echoing the role of the ring in marriage (“Calling All Cars,” 4.11). We find in *The Sopranos* multiple applications of singular iconographic and linguistic elements as an effective tool for establishing suspicion.

The increased signification of “family” itself becomes an agent of conflict and intrigue, as characters must cope with the many meanings of this familiar term. There are the ostentatious bedside tributes to a comatose Tony by politically-ascendant members of his crew that are thwarted by the hospital's “family only” policy (“Join the Club,” 6.2); the tumultuous undermining of Paulie's understanding of his own family structure upon learning that his mother is actually his aunt (“The Fleishy Part of the Thigh,” 6.4); and the call-to-arms

inspired by the categorical downgrading of the Soprano/DiMeo crime family to a “glorified crew” by Phil Leotardo and other representatives of the NYC-based Lupertazzi crime family (“The Blue Comet,” 6.20). These situations represent multiplicity operating on the micro-level of the narrative, as the discovery of multiple meanings becomes a moment of epiphany for characters and an affirmation of suspicious reading on behalf of the viewer.



Figure 11. TONY: It’s this diamond pin that I send to every woman... (“Calling All Cars,” 4.11: November 24, 2002).

Multiplicity was perhaps the principle factor in imbuing the 9/11 narrative with an unparalleled level of widespread terror and motivating further story events. Images of a *second* plane hitting a *second* tower drove commentators toward crafting a narrative framework for the day’s events, evinced in WNYW anchor Jim Ryan’s remarks made just seconds after United Airlines Flight 175 struck the South Tower: “I think we have a terrorist act of proportions we cannot begin to imagine at this juncture” (Brown). News of the attacks on the Twin Towers allegedly motivated a passenger uprising on United Airlines Flight 93; a recording of a call placed by flight attendant CeeCee Lyles demonstrates that knowledge of

the attacks spread to the cabin, allowing us to surmise that the anticipation of multiplicity lead to the downing of the flight (Kean 456). Without a clear concluding event in the story of 9/11, the element of multiplicity remained unresolved, implanting a similarly unresolved theme of suspicion in the public consciousness.

Multiplicity, and the larger suspicions surrounding multiple meanings, multiple partners, and multiple motives, exists as a significant plot device in *The Sopranos*, and its influence on the relational dynamics of the series is apparent from the pilot episode. These situations represent multiplicity working on the macro-level of the narrative. For instance, as Tony lay supine on an MRI machine table, awaiting examination of what he believes to be a brain tumor, he attempts to cajole Carmela into nostalgia-induced pity by noting how they “had some good times. Had some good years” (“Pilot”). Carmela, suspicious of Tony’s family of *comàre*, capitalizes on the multiple meanings of “good times”—and the many types of “good times” had by Tony at her expense—by eviscerating her husband with allegations of infidelity (“What’s different between you and me is you’re going to Hell when you die!”) (“Pilot”). The conflict over spousal commitment spreads out over the entirety of the series, allowing suspicion-based controversy to seep in to elements external to the household, such as Tony seeing a female psychiatrist (“College,” 1.5) and John Sacrimoni’s presence at an intimate dinner (“Pax Soprana,” 1.6). It hits its crescendo with Carmela stealing Tony’s cash from a bag of bird food (“Mergers and Acquisitions,” 4.8) and explodes with Carmela kicking Tony out of the house in the season four finale (“Whitecaps,” 4.13). Fittingly, the four-season-long conflict concludes with a callback to the MRI argument, reinforcing the pilot’s significance as a developmental tool for crafting show-specific mode of aesthetic

interpretation by multiplying the existence of particular phrases and rewarding those viewers who cared to pay attention for such multiplication:

TONY: Don't worry: I'm going to hell when I die. Nice thing to say to a person heading into an MRI.

CARMELA: You know, Tony I have always been sorry I said that.

("Whitecaps")

The pilot episode of *The Sopranos* also relies on the use of deception in order to render it nearly impossible for any viewer *not* to harbor suspicions toward each of the characters integral to the overall narrative. Perhaps there is no better example of the establishment of deception in the pilot episode than through the initial presentation of Meadow. The pastoral implications of Meadow's namesake work to instill deception on the semiotic level—hidden behind the innocent teenage girl who shares an annual tea-and-macaroons date at the Plaza Hotel with her mother is the dangerously precocious spawn of duplicitous parents (already labeled a "master of lying and conniving" by Carmela) whose deceptive tendencies challenge the family's hierarchical authority structure ("Pilot"). In Meadow, we have a clear-cut example of the sort of narrative push-and-pull that the pilot works to achieve: the viewer cannot help but be torn between considering Meadow as a feisty (but nonetheless innocent) teen *and* a budding miscreant.

Understanding the use of deception as both a magnet for suspicion and a way to articulate the suspicion of others is an integral interpretive skill for reading *The Sopranos*, and the pilot episode works to demonstrate this through Meadow's actions in Acts One and Two. Tony's off-screen narration establishes the suspicion held by Carmela in regards to Meadow's closest friend, Hunter Scangarelo (played by Chase's daughter, Michele

DeCesare). “My wife feels this friend is a bad influence,” Tony intones, and the scene immediately cuts to a breakfast-table conversation where Hunter proclaims how excited she is that Meadow will be joining her family in Aspen during the upcoming Christmas holiday (“Pilot”). Carmela quickly steps in with a maternal rebuke (“Miss Meadow, we made a deal—you keep your school grades up and you keep your curfew between now and Christmas, *then* you get to go”) that is brushed off by Meadow as quickly as it is received (“Pilot”). Tony enters the kitchen, and the subject is dropped, but an important observation is made by Meadow—her mother is on to her. The only appropriate response from Meadow, using the lie-or-be-lied-to maxim of Soprano family interaction, is to try harder to deceive her mother. That the next image of Meadow in Act One is of her perched on an air conditioner unit, vainly attempting a stealth re-entry of her room via the outside window—and that her mother has mistaken her for a burglar and is pointing a Kalashnikov at her—speaks to the quite severe levels of deception and suspicion at play in the Sopranos household.



Figure 12. A precocious Meadow Soprano demonstrates her effective use of the side-eye (“Pilot,” 1.1: January 10, 1999).

What is vital to the pilot episode's establishment of deception as a narrative theme is that characters are depicted as willing to sink to unfathomable depths and cross all types of moral boundaries in order to preserve themselves and (hopefully) avoid the suspicion of others, a principle demonstrated through Meadow's completely insane responses to her mother's attempts at discipline. Upon being quizzed by Carmela as to *why* she was trying to climb into her own bedroom window, Meadow instinctively offers up the kind of creative gem that only a "master of lying and conniving" could deliver with a straight face: "I notice the glass rattles every time I walk to the laundry room. Do we have any, what-do-you-call-it, putty?" ("Pilot"). Slipping even further into the abyss of young adult embarrassment, she immediately deflects Carmela's admonishment into a critique of her newly thirteen-year-old brother, A.J.: "You locked my bedroom window on purpose so I'd get caught!" ("Pilot"). While such an amateurish deployment of deception as an agent of preservation and critical interference certainly stinks up the screen, it ultimately serves to establish a narrative principle that foregrounds the similar use of deception by Tony, Carmela, and almost every other character in the series, albeit with varying degrees of success.

Meadow also serves to represent a narrative point of intersection where themes of multiplicity and deception strike a strange chord against a larger backdrop of suspicious interaction with members of her nuclear family. This is put on display late in Act Two, where Carmela attempts to appease her daughter (and perhaps assuage her own fears of being an ineffective disciplinarian) by offering to take her to the Plaza Hotel for their traditional brunch under the painting of Eloise. In this scene, Meadow displays an interesting multiplicity of narrative modes—a sort of interiorized discursive world—that works to

simultaneously deceive her mother, cater to her own suspicions, and ultimately affirm her identity as an individual that is in some way separate from the nuclear family.

The first move made in this direction is in Meadow's rebuttal to her mother's insistence that she partake in the tradition: "To tell you the truth, I felt it was dumb since I was eight. I just go because you like it" ("Pilot"). Here, we witness the employment of an entire duplicitous state of being—a multiplicity of self—that has purportedly been used by Meadow to deceive her mother for the better part of eight years. When Carmela again attempts to play peacemaker, sharing her most tender hopes that their tradition would last well into the days of Meadow's own motherhood, she is savagely eviscerated by a response from her daughter that is more an acerbic projection of autonomous desire than anything remotely resembling an honest, conscientious reflection on the mother-daughter dynamic: "Hopefully I won't be living here by then" ("Pilot"). This sets Carmela off, and she finds it appropriate here to scold Meadow about how she "can't just lie and cheat and break the rules you don't like" ("Pilot"). In a display of her awareness regarding Carmela's complicity in the illicit practices of Tony's "mafia" family, Meadow showcases the knowledge she has gleaned through multiplicity and deception with an icy side-eye glare (see fig. 12) that leaves her mother dumbfounded; she promptly returns to her emails before politely asking Carmela to "Close my door, please" ("Pilot").

This set piece works to hammer home the thematic weight of suspicion in the narrative, shown here to be an especially corrosive component of the most "sacred" of spaces, the Soprano household. Even within this self-contained social unit, viewers are able to witness the subversive use of multiplicity and deception on levels that would typically be reserved for interaction with unsavory individuals in the outside world. Such a demonstration

works to strategically demolish the assumptions of tradition, civility, and greater relationship norms in the mind of the viewer, forcing the audience to reformat and establish a new mode of aesthetic interpretation through the absorption of this narrative. As *The Sopranos* moves further into its story, these locations—both in terms of narrative components and physical environments—are revisited as a means of reactivating and reappropriating established thematic material.

Themes of deception are also fundamental to the story of 9/11. Deception allowed teams of terrorists to gain control of the planes by using fake bombs and misinformation—the latter demonstrated in American Airlines Flight 11 hijacker Mohammed Atta’s intercom message to passengers that “[everything] will be okay, just stay quiet... We are going back to the airport” (Kean 19). The vehicles of destruction used by these terrorists were deceptive in their own right; while planes had been used as staging grounds for hijacks in the past, even being demolished by surreptitiously planted bombs, such as in the case of the “Lockerbie bombing” of Pan American Flight 103 in 1988, never before had planes been successfully repurposed into missiles and flown into buildings. The unprecedented aspect of this event is evinced in then-United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s 2002 remarks to reporters: “I don’t think that anybody could have predicted that these people would take an airplane and slam it into the World Trade Center, take another one and slam it into the Pentagon, [or] that they would try to use an airplane as a missile” (Hall 2).

Deception (in the form of misinformation) was also used by the United States government to ensure the protection of President Bush and other Cabinet members in the aftermath of the 9/11. Air Force One was regularly flown as a decoy while the President traveled aboard an unmarked Gulfstream jet, causing media sources to produce false reports

as to the President's true whereabouts in a larger scheme to thwart potential assassination plots (Wagner 1). This need for an informational bait-and-switch reflects the security implications of a rapidly-refreshing, publicly accessible narrative (i.e., television news) in a time of terror. As I discuss in my next chapter, offshooting conspiracy theories regarding the narrative loose ends of 9/11 were largely influenced by a suspicious reading of these otherwise "white hat" deceptions. However, such suspicions are only bolstered by the broader use of deception in warfare by the United States:

Deception has been a potent weapon throughout the recorded history of warfare, and the fight against terrorism is a form of war. Often, it is necessary to deceive the public as a means of combating an enemy.... To take an example from World War II, the D-Day landings of 1944 were preceded by one of the greatest deception schemes in history. As everyone now knows, the Allied plan was to land massive armies in Normandy, but it was essential to persuade the Germans that the main blow would come somewhere else, namely in the Pas de Calais region. The Allies planted false leads for German spies to find showing that the invasion target was Calais, not Normandy. They created huge fake "armies" of bogus tanks and trucks, constructed out of wood and canvas for German aircraft to photograph. When the invasion actually took place in Normandy, the Germans refused to believe that this was the main attack, and kept their forces in reserve in preparation for the "real" landings expected near Calais. Deception won the battle and, perhaps, the war. (Jenkins 118)

Similarly, narrative countermeasure—in which characters are alluded to and introduced through deceptive practices—is another way that *The Sopranos* affects suspicion in its viewers. While Junior Soprano’s sanctioned hit of “Pussy” Malanga figures as a key plot point in the pilot, we are never formally introduced to the latter, thereby rendering it unclear as to whether the “Pussy” in question is actually the *other* “Pussy” (Salvatore “Big Pussy” Bonpensiero, played by Vincent Pastore). Any information that could clarify the identity of this “Pussy” is highly mediated and thus dubious—like Silvio’s grapevine-style gossip in Act One or the strip club conversation between Christopher and Hesh in Act Two—which works to maintain the narrative’s affect of suspicion until Act Three, when Christopher catches televised news footage of the *real* “Pussy” being released from prison. Appropriately enough, the newscaster announces that *this* “Pussy” is “often confused with fellow mobster ‘Big Pussy’ Bonpensiero,” thus clarifying the ambiguity and releasing the active viewer from a state of suspenseful meaning-making (“Pilot”). Such a set piece works to instill a sense of deception and self-doubt in even the most active viewer, straddling the (mis)informational line in order to elicit a heightened sense of aesthetic awareness in these viewers and temporarily keep them off the trail of further narrative developments. However, the move to clarify ambiguity is representative of pre-9/11 *Sopranos* narrative structure; as my next section demonstrates, unresolved ambiguity and permanent deception are vital elements of the post-9/11 *Sopranos* run.

In subsequent seasons, the deceptive practice of narrative countermeasure is manifested in the presentation and predicaments of supporting characters to great effect. Identical twin brothers Patsy and Philly Parisi (both roles are played by Dan Grimaldi) are established in a peculiar way: Philly makes his first and final on-screen appearance in a

minute-and-a-half scene documenting his murder at the hands of Gigi Cestone (“Guy Walks into a Psychiatrist’s Office,” 2.1). Nearly twelve screen hours elapse before viewers are challenged by Grimaldi’s second appearance—a scene in which he suddenly pops in to present Tony with a garment bag during a dinner at Nuovo Vesuvio:

TONY: **Patsy** been in?

SILVIO: He’s looking for you.

PUSSY: Where the fuck they get the fried zucchini flowers?

SILVIO: It’s fantastic. It’s stuffed with melted dry *ricotta*.

PUSSY: Yeah?

SILVIO: Help yourself, you fat fuck....

TONY: Tell Arthur of the Ritz to send a couple of plates of zucchini flowers out.

PUSSY: And some *zuppa di mussels*....

TONY: Oh! Prince Rogaine!

ARTIE: Here you go, some *zuppa di mussels*, and Tony, you got the last dozen flowers.

TONY: Do me a favor, put these on the menu for Meadow’s graduation party.

ARTIE: Hey, those were some colleges she got into, your kid....

TONY: Things are good, what the fuck? Richie Aprile’s in the Bermuda Triangle. All my enemies are smoked. Oh, oh, oh!

PUSSY: Hey, **Patsy**.

TONY: What the fuck? Don’t bring that in here. Wait outside in the car, I’ll come out. What did I say? In the car. (“Funhouse,” 2.13, emphasis mine)

What is notable in this scene is the use of superfluous dialog and surprise as narrative countermeasures to subvert viewer awareness and education. No mention had been made during the twelve episode narrative expanse between Philly's death and Patsy's appearance here that the two were related, that the Parisi family consisted of twin brothers, or even that there was a "Patsy" in the DiMeo/Soprano crime family at all, further validating Mittell's observation of the "challenge of trying to analyze meaning in a serial text: it changes as you watch it, or how it means shapes what it means" (345). The discussion at the table focused entirely on food matters and talk of a telephone calling card scheme, with no anticipatory exposition given to the impending appearance of a man whose twin brother was violently assassinated at Tony's request in the season opener. Patsy was silent in his screen time, meaning his signification operated in a purely visual/iconographic realm, which further meant that viewers were almost entirely unable to adequately differentiate between the brothers (even the names Philly and Patsy are hardly distinguishable, especially after twelve episodes transpire where neither brother is mentioned). Interestingly, this issue of discrepancy is addressed later in the episode in Tony's E. coli-induced fever dream:

TONY: By the way, Patsy, coat went over big. She loved it.

PHILLY: I'm Philly.

TONY: Sorry, right, Philly. Yeah. Thought you were your brother. You know, I just bought a sable off him. I'm sorry I had to do that. ("Funhouse")



Figure 13. Patsy or Philly? (“Funhouse,” 2.13: April 9, 2000)

Even with Tony’s explicit mentioning of the fraternal link between Philly and Patsy, the active viewer is left with it a healthy dose of suspicion resulting from these scenes. The mediation of a dream sequence does little in the way of assuaging confused viewers—it is the act of establishing narrative congruity (the Philly-Patsy link) in a moment of utter narrative incongruity (the dream sequence) that produces such a masterful stroke of paranoid unease on the text (see fig. 13). Did Philly really die? Was the whole thing just a dream? Did I miss something? Furthermore, we can catch a glimpse at the instability of Tony’s inner sanctum and the deterioration of a once-stable social group, both in the sense of motivation (informants and snitches, like Pussy) and meaning-making (Philly-Patsy), through this scene. Pussy’s assassination at the end of “Funhouse” does little to quash this downward descent and implosion of the crime family, which only worsens as the series progresses (which I discuss in my next section).

The greatest of the narrative countermeasures in *The Sopranos*—and one of the most ridiculously effective loose ends/deceptions in television history—is manifested in the minor character of Valery (better known as the Russian). In a one-off episode (“Pine Barrens,” 3.11) Christopher and Paulie visit Valery to collect a loan payment; chaos ensues resulting from a perceived lack of respect on Paulie’s end, causing the debtor’s windpipe to be smashed. The two bumbling Mafiosi stuff Valery into a Cadillac’s trunk and take off for the Pine Barrens (millions of acres of desolate forest in southern Jersey) to dispose of the body. However, the plot is foiled upon realizing that Valery is still alive. Christopher and Paulie decide to force the Russian to dig his own grave; further chaos ensues, resulting in Valery fleeing the scene amidst a hail of gunfire. Christopher believes he delivered a fatal shot, but he and Paulie fail to find the body, succeeding only in getting lost in the dense forest. The Russian is not found in this episode and fails to resurface for the remainder of the series.

Valery’s miniscule significance in the grander scheme of things was overshadowed by the tremendous public outpouring of concern for his whereabouts (Sepinwall 62). In many ways, the question of “What Happened to the Russian?” became the “Who Shot J.R.?” for a new generation of television viewers, a troubling prospect for showrunner David Chase:

They shot a guy. Who knows where he went? Who cares about some Russian? This is what Hollywood has done to America. Do you have to have closure on every little thing? Isn’t there any mystery in the world? It’s a murky world out there. It’s a murky life these guys lead. And by the way, I do know where the Russian is. But I’ll never say because so many people got so pissy about it.

(Martin 163)

Chase's comments speak not only to a realization of the American addiction to narrative closure, but to the terrifying recognition of *apophenia*—the process of projecting patterns onto data—and *pareidolia*—in which those patterns are perceived as meaningful shapes or sounds—at play in the *Sopranos* viewer community (Walker 335). Rumors abounded regarding the possibility of the Russian resurfacing to exact some sort of sinister revenge on Tony and his crew in Internet forums and newspaper editorial pages in the weeks and months following the episode (Sepinwall 63). These narrative offshoots created a small, but nevertheless significant, story community in which fandom challenged the authority of the writer, and I believe Chase's comments reflect the pushback of authorship against the unauthorized manipulation of the technologically-equipped masses. I remember partaking in this sort of speculative pseudo-investigation/reportage, claiming to have spotted Valery playing drums with “The Swingin’ Neckbreakers” in season four’s “No Show” (see fig. 14), further postulating that he was positioning himself to strike Tony at the Crazy Horse nightclub later in the episode. What’s essential in the sort of narrative countermeasure manifested in the Russian is the fact that it was constructed in the penultimate pre-9/11 episode of *The Sopranos*, prefiguring the sort of suspicious meaning-making and speculation that would come to embody not only post-9/11 episodes of the show, but the greater public post-9/11 mentality towards the news media’s presentation of the global War on Terror (especially regarding the bogeyman-esque depiction of bin Laden). While this section demonstrated how the show managed to reflect a certain social sensibility that was in the air during the run-up to 9/11, my next section discusses the impact of 9/11 on the show’s narrative elements—or how the show managed to speak *to* 9/11 without necessarily speaking explicitly *about* 9/11.



**Figure 14. Top: The Russian (“Pine Barrens,” 3.11: May 6, 2001).
Bottom: The Russian? (“No Show,” 4.2: September 22, 2002)**

“For All Debts Public and Private”



Figure 15. Modified credit montage still (“For All Debts Public and Private,” 4.1: September 15, 2002).

This abstract shot of a highway barrier (see fig. 15) replaced the reflection of the Twin Towers in Tony’s side-view mirror (see fig. 5) in the opening credits of “For All Debts Public and Private,” representing the show’s first move in refiguring its post-9/11 aesthetic methodology. When *The Sopranos* returned for its fourth season on September 15, 2002, explicit mention of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks was avoided in favor of several new narrative elements that bridged the gap between the show’s verisimilar storyworld and the terror-spooked environs of Northern New Jersey and Lower Manhattan. Larger themes of coping, mourning, and blowback became central thematic elements of the unfolding story, while issues of domestic insecurity, paranoia, incongruity, and retroactive meaning-making drove the narrative to the boundaries of fiction and reality. Viewers were subjected to thirty-nine reproductions of that brilliantly framed shot of the Twin Towers in the car’s mirror prior to “For All Debts Public and Private.” Replacing this shot with the stark image of the barrier

wall, then, served to dramatically introduce viewers to Chase's symbolic treatment of 9/11. It suggests the sinister trajectory of United Airlines Flight 175 without employing the image of an airplane. It suggests the overall destructive nature of 9/11 through the absence of an expected image—the Twin Towers. In this manner, the post-9/11 episodes address the figurative elephant in the room through abstraction, absence, and narrative alteration, all of this beginning in “For All Debts Public and Private.”

Before moving on, the image from the altered credit montage deserves a closer look, particularly for its use of directionality. A similar treatment of directionality is found in the most popular mediated images of 9/11—the shots of United Airlines Flight 175 penetrating the South Tower of the World Trade Center that were captured by network news helicopters and disseminated globally in real-time on the morning of September 11, 2001 (see fig. 3). Bernhard Debatin's study of these specific images recognizes the rhetorical value of directionality in conveying the narrative of 9/11 across a broad spectrum of viewers; he writes: “A person or object moving from the left to the right indicates ‘going away,’ or ‘leaving,’ in Western culture. Contrary to this, moving from the right to the left indicates ‘coming back from,’ or even ‘coming home.’ Thus, the incidental camera perspective of this particular sequence created a powerful connotation that strongly underscored a feeling that terror has finally come to us—to our homeland” (169-170).

This shot-for-shot replacement also serves to refigure the credit montage's representation of return, or “coming home,” a narrative device I had previously identified as a key element in establishing the show's narrative beginnings. The alteration of this montage acts as a representation of the destabilization of New York-New Jersey spatial complementarity and its implicit binaries (favorable-unfavorable, safe-unsafe, fortunate-

unfortunate, familiar-strange, and so on). In light of the alteration, the credit montage becomes a foil to the notions of safety and security that it once signified. Season four establishes Tony's Jersey homefront as Ground Zero for turmoil, conflict, and insecurity.

The opening scene of "For All Debts Public and Private" further enriches the destabilizing essence of this abstract image. Tony's traditional slipper-dragging saunter towards the sidewalk-bound *Star-Ledger* is scored to the jarring industrial stomp of Time Zone's "World Destruction," a song whose lyrics resemble a subliminal mission statement on behalf of the show's producers:

Speak about destruction! Speak about destruction!

This is a world destruction, your life ain't nothing

The human race is becoming a disgrace

The rich get richer while the poor are getting poorer

Fascist, chauvinistic government fools

People, Muslims, Christians and Hindus

Are in a time zone just searching for the truth

Who are you to think you're a superior race?

Facing forth your everlasting doom

We are Time Zone: we've come to drop a bomb on you

World destruction, kaboom, kaboom, kaboom! (Time Zone)

Accordingly, *The Sopranos* seems unconcerned with merely "speaking" about destruction and chooses instead to demonstrate the effects of terrorism on those who fall into the categories laid out by Time Zone: those who believe in their innate superiority, those who ostentatiously flaunt the value of their otherwise valueless lives—in other words, the entire

Soprano gang and their associates. In fact, the sole instance of direct engagement of 9/11 in “For All Debts Public and Private” reads as a general lampooning of such speech acts, as Bobby and Tony tuck in to a drunken diner meal and manage to reveal the inanity (and insanity) of verbalizing the event:

BOBBY: Mom really went downhill after the World Trade Center. You know, Quasimodo predicted all this.

TONY: Who did what?

BOBBY: These problems. The Middle East. The end of the world.

TONY: *Nostradamus*. Quasimodo’s the Hunchback of Notre Dame.

BOBBY: Right. Notre Damus.

TONY: Nostradamus, and Notre Dame. It’s two different things completely.

BOBBY: It’s interesting, though, they’d be so similar, isn’t it? And I always thought, “Okay, Hunchback of Notre Dame. You also got your Quarterback and Halfback of Notre Dame.”

TONY: One’s a fucking cathedral.

BOBBY: Obviously. I know, I’m just saying. It’s interesting, the coincidence.

BOBBY: What, you gonna tell me you never pondered that? The back thing with Notre Dame?

TONY: No! (“For All Debts Public and Private”)

For instance, viewers immediately witness a mixed progression (or perhaps more appropriately, a complication) in the character of A.J. Soprano that reflects the aforementioned narrative issues raised by 9/11. Act One opens with a close-up of Carmela reading A.J. an article in *The New York Times* on nepotistic Italian business practices

(“Official Favors: Oil That Makes Italy Go Round”). A.J., the exquisitely pampered man-child, is effectively dressed down at the breakfast table, stripped of all literary agency by both his inability to engage the text-on-hand (as Carmela must read aloud to her young adult son) and the deep-rooted textual malnourishment that he displays on screen (a substantial stack of *New York Times* issues sits in front of A.J. as he munches on his nutrition-less breakfast of Fruit Loops and orange juice; it is revealed that he has been hiding the newspapers under his bed for what appears to be the better part of the calendar year).

What we are left with, what emerges from this stack of newspapers, is an image of sequential re-ordering as a means of pursuing retroactive meaning-making that mimics the news media’s narrative pursuits on 9/11. A worlding A.J. (in the Heideggerian sense) attempts to access the riches of these recovered texts from his family breakfast table on a sunny fall morning, seeking this proverbial “food for thought” in troubling times. He has certainly honed in on the general dynamic themes of his family’s literary habits (i.e., his father’s preoccupation with newspapers) while taking textual matters a step beyond Tony—choosing *The New York Times* over the New Jersey-based *Star-Ledger*, further destabilizing the binaries yielded through New York-New Jersey spatial complementarity.

At this point in the series, unlike the formative episodes described in my previous sections, Chase and his crew are equipped with an appropriate historical perspective that allows them to cast judgments on the real-world life-and-death potentialities of ideological actants vis-à-vis their on-screen portrayal. Through the image of a worlding A.J. (see fig. 16) viewers are treated to a refutation of signifiers (valueless to A.J., the newspapers have been jettisoned along with whatever else is crammed under his bed) and a pervasive sense of cynicism in the prospect of objective signification (wherein old newspapers are typically

filled with information that has changed, one-time facts that are no longer necessarily true, turning the act of re-reading these papers into a futile exercise). What we can infer from this scene, simply, is that there is *no way* that A.J. can hope to recover from this monumental lapse in vigilance, there is no hope in catching up with the runaway train that is global news; there is no sense in cramming for this test. Additionally, and much like the aforementioned discussion on repetition-based desensitization, we are left with an image of the sign's capacity to defeat itself (the newspaper's innate redundancy, the pointlessness of warehousing back issues) in a markedly post-9/11 context.



Figure 16. Post-9/11 food for thought (“For All Debts Public and Private”).

Carmela undergoes a similarly mixed progression and demonstrates an elevated level of domestic insecurity and an increased risk of egotistical implosion in post-9/11 episodes of *The Sopranos*. It is fitting that season four ends with her exploding on Tony and demanding a divorce, because her post-9/11 character is marked by equal tones of paranoia and proactivity. Her anxieties are sparked off by a glimpse at former mob wife Angie

Bonpensiero serving sausage samples at a nearby supermarket, and for the first time in the series, she is candid with Tony when delivering a dire estimation of their future, even including a not-so vague allusion to 9/11 in her diatribe:

CARMELA: I'm worried, Tony.

TONY: About my weight?

CARMELA: About money.

TONY: You're getting a little less allowance than usual. I told you, it's temporary. Super Bowl last year, we didn't lay enough off.

CARMELA: No, it's not just that. I'm worried about you, about the future about me and the kids, if something happens to you.

TONY: I don't provide for you?

CARMELA: I saw Angie Bonpensiero today. She was handing out free Polish sausage at the supermarket.

TONY: Don't start. I supported her. You're so worried about the money.

CARMELA: Who is gonna support your children and me if, God forbid, something happens to you? That's the point. Sil? Paulie? That is frightening.

TONY: You'll be taken care of....The money stays where it is, with what's going on in the world today.

CARMELA: There's always some excuse....Let me tell you something, or you can watch the fucking news—everything comes to an end.

("For All Debts Public and Private")

The tenor of this argument captures both the increased sense of paranoid unease in the post-9/11 Sopranos household and the "See Something, Say Something" zeitgeist of its

fictionalized locational reference. While general discomfort and occasional instances of mayhem were typical expectations for Soprano family members and New York City residents—a source of pride, even—prior to 9/11, the influence of post-traumatic stress on a terror-stricken region undermined the perceptions held by these people. Where they once bragged about the products of their superior strength, they now mourned over the wounds that marked their vulnerability. Where they once touted the fruits of their prognosticative capabilities, they now lamented the fallibility and folly of such pursuits. Such recognition of one’s own hubris is aestheticized masterfully in the following sequence, which operates by destabilizing an expected callback to the ducks breeding in Tony’s pool in the series’ pilot episode (see fig. 17):



Figure 17. No hope for ducks visiting Tony’s post-9/11 pool (“For All Debts Public and Private”).

Such an increase in domestic instability seeps into Tony's work life, leading to a string of poor business decisions that never quite rectify themselves. He follows up this heated exchange with Carmela by entering the Bada Bing and promptly beating his bartender, the affable Georgie Santorelli, for wasting ice. He then focuses his wrath to his captains, reprimanding them for their diminished output in a time of dire economic straits (Uncle Junior's costly RICO trial):

TONY: This thing is a pyramid, since time immemorial. Shit runs downhill, money goes up. It's that simple. I should not have to be coming here, hat in my hand, reminding you about your duty to that man. And I don't wanna hear about the fucking economy either! ("For All Debts Public and Private")

I mention these examples not only to illustrate how Tony has become unhinged because of heightened domestic instability, but also to show how Tony refuses to digest Carmela's criticism, instead regurgitating it in the direction of his peers. Depicting through Tony the wanton refusal to learn from one's mistakes was a way for *The Sopranos* to latch on to public antipathies toward post-9/11 United States military aggression. Present in the post-9/11 zeitgeist was a suspicion that a teachable moment was squandered and a valuable opportunity lost in the move to "Shock and Awe" the Middle East:

We know too that post-9/11 offered Americans an unprecedented opportunity to undertake a great project that would strengthen America in some lasting way—a Manhattan project for energy independence. This opportunity could have enlisted young and old alike, as well as science and industry, in a national movement for greater conservation, a crash effort to produce enough renewable energy, efficiencies, and domestic production to wean us gradually

off oil imports. But this opportunity has been squandered. And today America stands nearly alone in the world. (Denzin xx)

While contemporary scholarship tends to turn its nose up at the mention of authorial intention and the real-world experiences of the people responsible for bringing texts to life, it would be a crucial oversight to this document if we did not discuss the security concerns of David Chase and his crew in the aftermath of 9/11, as they offer an interesting rejoinder to Tony's domestic quarrels. Shooting at Silvercup Studios in Queens and on location throughout the greater Northern New Jersey area meant that the crew spent the majority of its time working in a government-designated "Red Zone," a now-defunct color-coded assessment indicating a severe risk of terror attacks by the United States Department of Homeland Security. In *Difficult Men*, Brett Martin discusses his first-hand experience with Chase and crew as they adapted to life in the "Red Zone." Martin's observations correspond nicely with our observations of Tony and Carmela's heightened anxieties in season four:

The stress only intensified after 9/11, when Chase, the man who had been obsessed with nuclear destruction for as long as he could remember, became fearful of flying. At Silvercup [Studios], he demanded heightened security and code-activated locks to be installed on the doors to the writers' offices. The new reality of terrorist threats dovetailed with Chase's deeper worldview, said [his] assistant. "It's the world against him. People are horrible and they want to get him. Whatever's happening, it's an injustice against him." (161)

Falling in line with the sense of Silvercup Studios becoming a target rather than a strategically beneficial location, the heightened element of domestic insecurity established in "For All Debts Public and Private" worked to erode any degree of spatial favorability

enjoyed by Tony prior to season four. His North Caldwell *palazzo* was once a prime stash house for his illicit cash reserves; now, it is the scene of a brutal back-and-forth between Tony and Carmela, with each trying to outsmart the other in accessing, hiding, and moving the various cash loads stored around the property. Like Chase's concerns regarding the doors to the writers' offices, Carmela's chief obstacle during this conflict is the padlock guarding Tony's bird feed container in the back of the house, an obstacle she eventually overcomes prior to (temporarily) overcoming the burden of cohabitating with her unfaithful husband.

Moving outward from the house, but nevertheless remaining in his native New Jersey, Tony begins to experience severe repercussions stemming from his use of land. Tony and Assemblyman Ronald Zellman cook up a plot to buy up houses on Frelinghuysen Avenue in Newark (see fig. 18) in "For All Debts Private and Public." This scheme seems beneficial at first, yet it ultimately serves to ignite a massive war with New York resulting from allegations of improper profit sharing. It bears mentioning that the plot itself was hatched as a result of cancerous political self-destruction; Zellman and community activist Maurice Tiffen manipulated a welfare system allotment of low-income housing funds and reappropriated those funds for personal gain. Tony's resulting quarrels with New York—and the belt-whipping Zellman receives from Tony after the latter learns of the former's relationship with one-time Soprano *comàre* Irina Peltsin—reflect an appropriate level of narrative blowback for these injustices, similar to the understanding of blowback—or "the unintended consequences of earlier, covert American operations"—that circulated in the public sphere after 9/11 (Newman 1).

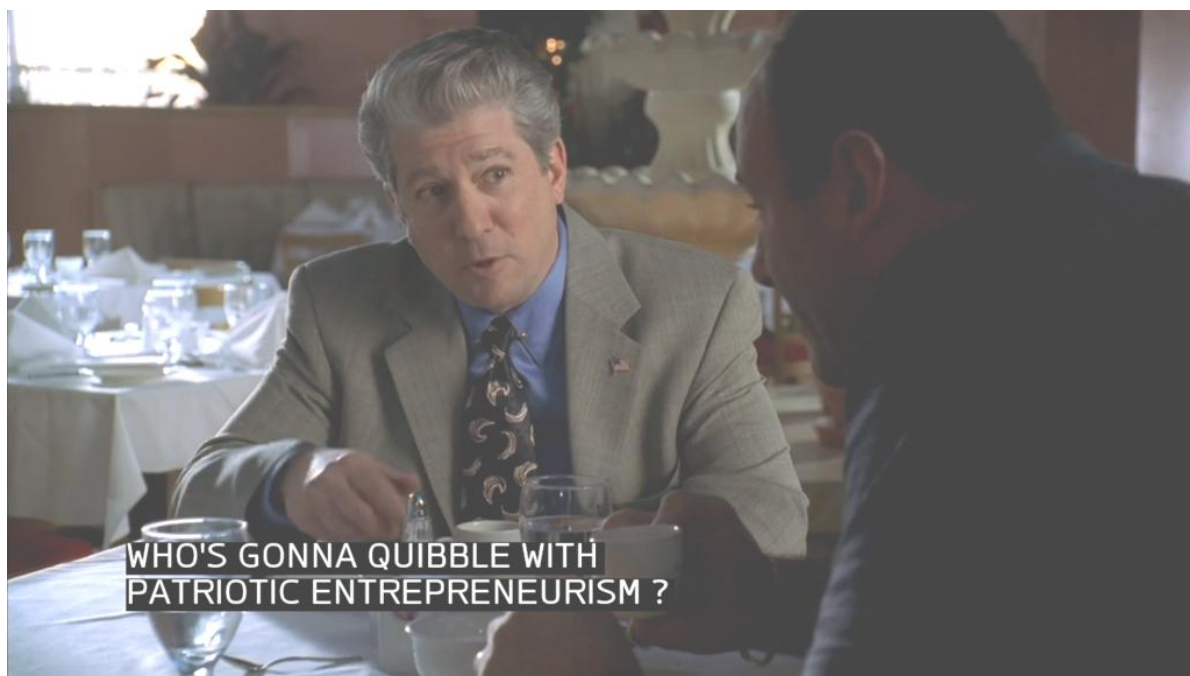


Figure 18. A flag pin-adorned Assemblyman Ronald Zelman discusses a housing scheme with Tony (“For All Debts Public and Private”).

The notion of outside terror agents invading domestic spaces, or “coming home,” preoccupies the majority of all post-9/11 episodes of *The Sopranos*. While previous seasons focus on the self-loathing incurred through the meting out of pain and punishment in the name of “mob justice,” season four begins the practice of exploring the notion of “bringing the war home,” in the parlance of post-9/11 politispeak. Even though the show had always focused on the FBI’s surveillance of the crew—and of the various rats and snitches that turned on their associates, a narrative trajectory embodied in the arc of “Pussy” Bonpensiero—the elements involved in this surveillance intensify in post-9/11 episodes.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the case of Adriana’s compromised privacy resulting from the intercession of FBI agent Deborah Ciccerone-Waldrup (masquerading as private shopper Danielle Ciccolella) into her life. While Ciccolella first approached Adriana in the season three finale (“Army of One,” 3.13), it is in season four that we witness the extent of her disingenuous movements within the greater Soprano family. Ciccolella is privy

to highly personal information from Adriana—including Adriana’s fears of her own infertility as the result of a medical mishap during an abortion procedure—as well as intimate interactions with Christopher and the denizens of the Crazy Horse nightclub on multiple occasions. However, it is in the season four premiere that Adriana makes the mistake of bringing Ciccolella over to the Soprano residence during a Sunday dinner—a mistake that Adriana eventually pays for with her life (“Long Term Parking,” 5.12).



Figure 19. A flag pin-adorned FBI mole ushers Uncle Junior to his room (“For All Debts Public and Private”).

Similarly, Tony and Junior’s use of Dr. Schreck’s office as a clever work-around against house arrest restrictions is thwarted by the FBI’s use of a mole in “For All Debts Public and Private.” In this case, their understanding of a spatially favorable location—one that, they believe, cannot be wiretapped as a result of doctor-patient confidentiality—is shattered, leading towards increased anxieties regarding the perceived omnipresence of the authorities in a post-9/11 world. Furthermore, the agent-in-hiding turns out to be an attractive female nurse (see fig. 19), one that Uncle Junior had regaled with song and a spontaneous

overflow of the “zephyrs that are blowing through his mind” on multiple occasions (“For All Debts Public and Private”). The anxieties, therefore, have increased to a far more precipitous height as the result of the authority’s encroachment on that most sacred of chauvinistic male targets—the unassuming civilian woman. In the post-9/11 *Sopranos* run, a PATRIOT Act-era anxiety regarding surveillance, safety, and terrorism comes to the forefront: nurses and “spa pals” are no longer secure, privacy is no longer a possibility, and everyone is a potential threat, regardless of appearance.

This threat extends to distant family members who encroach upon the inner sanctum of the Soprano nuclear family, most notably evinced in the conflict between Tony and Ralph Cifaretto that reaches its apogee in season four. In Ralph we find a peculiar narrative construction—he does not necessarily oppose Tony, but nonetheless manages to provide him with unwanted obstacles and other headaches *while* being one of his top earners (see fig. 20). This sort of character falls under Bal’s description of the anti-subject: “not an opponent, [but one who] pursues his or her own object, and this pursuit is, at a certain moment, at cross purposes with that of the first subject” (32).

In season four, Ralph and Tony’s personal and professional intersections occur at a dizzying pace. In the season premiere, Tony reprimands Carmela for referring to Ralph in a familial context (“I thought we got that straightened out months ago....It’s not ‘Uncle Ralph’”) before Ralph visits the house for his first Soprano family Sunday dinner (“For All Debts Public and Private”). During this visit, Ralph not only hurls anti-Semitic comments towards one of A.J.’s friends, but also has a cocaine-fueled tryst with Tony’s sister, Janice, in the bathroom. This is also the Sunday dinner that undercover FBI agent Danielle Ciccolella

attends, further signifying the presence of disorder at the Soprano home—sarcastically referred to by Tony as “Peaceful Acres”—in post-9/11 episodes (“No Show”).



Figure 20. A flag pin-adorned Ralph Cifaretto attends Tony’s reading of the Riot Act (“For All Debts Public and Private”).

Through Ralph, the otherwise picayune becomes highly problematic. While Ralph’s pillaging of the \$300 million-dollar Newark Esplanade construction project gratuitously lines his boss’s pockets, his monopoly over no-show carpenter jobs causes a rift within the DiMeo/Soprano family that undermines Tony’s credibility amongst his captains (“No Show”). Upon initiating a meeting to settle these issues, Ralph unleashes a remark regarding Johnny Sack’s wife and her “95-pound mole” that nearly starts a war with New York (“No Show”). Even the issue of *comàre*—a disposable commodity in the “business”—elicits intersectional issues, as Tony and Ralph share the company of art dealer Valentina la Paz, much to Tony’s displeasure.

The introduction of Valentina la Paz marks a narrative turning point where Ralph’s sexuality began to threaten the DiMeo/Soprano inner sanctum. It provides the text with a

germinal point of sexual normativity that eventually evolves into the infamous ostracism of Vito Spatafore, an outed gay man who just happened to be a family captain. Through Ralph's relationship with la Paz—and continuing through his relationship with Janice Soprano—Tony becomes aware of a degree of deviance that is shocking not necessarily for its fraternal implications, but for its intersection with Tony's familiar haunts. After paying her a \$3,000 bribe, Janice discusses Ralph's proclivities with her brother, information that viewers had already witnessed through several graphic scenes involving vibrators and gunplay:

JANICE: He bottoms from the top.

TONY: I don't even know what that means.

JANICE: It means he has to control things, but he pretends he doesn't. Like, he'd make me fuck him with a strap-on and call him my bitch, shit like that.

TONY: What about plain old fucking?

JANICE: I'm telling you. He can't get hard that way. And if he could, I don't think that he'd want to. ("Mergers and Acquisitions")

Earlier in the episode, Tony learns from la Paz of Ralph's desires to have her "drip candle wax on his balls" and bring a cheese grater into the bedroom ("Mergers and Acquisitions"). Unsurprisingly, it would be the last episode that Cifaretto would survive.

This brings us to the biggest intersection in not only the subject/anti-subject world of Tony and Ralph, but between *The Sopranos* universe and the post-9/11 political landscape: Pie-O-My, a multivalent signifier steeped in conflicting tones of opulence and deficiency, risk and reward, preservation and liquidation. She is an animal of singular beauty whose winning ways indicate her belonging at the highest of high-stakes competitions, with plans in

place to run in the Breeders' Cup ("Mergers and Acquisitions"). However, she is hampered by assorted physical ailments that cast a shadow on her pecuniary prowess:

TONY: How's our girl?

RALPH: *Our* girl?

TONY: Yeah, she had a hot tendon.

RALPH: You know, it's always something with her. You should see the veterinarian bills. Fucking racket.

TONY: Know what I think we should do, if you don't mind my saying?

Switch her shoes to those titanium ones that Heshie was telling me about.

They don't weigh anything, so they're good for a tender hoof.

RALPH: Sure, why not. ("Pie-O-My")

Initially, viewers are tipped to the intersectional nature of Pie-O-My's payoff potential by the very tone of this exchange. Ralph, the horse's ostensible owner, occupies a subservient role to Tony and is therefore obliged to "kick up" his profits from the horse. Tony, as a self-professed "captain of industry type," not only indulges in these tributes but cannot control himself from exercising a certain degree of involvement in the horse's day-to-day operations, regularly visiting the stalls, suggesting strategic maneuvers to the trainer and rider, and coming as close as he ever had to meditation by sitting in silence with the supine horse on a rainy evening ("Pie-O-My"). The mechanisms of Ralph's revenge begin to kick in—he redirects a call regarding a medical payment request to Tony's residence, attracting suspicion from Carmela ("You bought a racehorse?" "No, I didn't buy it." "It followed you home?") while demanding action, and money, from Tony, resulting from his implied complicity in ownership by calling the horse "*our* girl" ("Pie-O-My"). After Tony swoons la

Paz, who convinces him to commission a painting depicting himself and Pie-O-My in the Winner's Circle, Ralph torches the stalls, killing Pie-O-My in the process and cashing in on a \$200,000 insurance payout. Tony, in a half-vengeful, half-gratifying act, responds by showing up to Ralph's house and killing him with his bare hands, before ordering Christopher to perform a posthumous decapitation on the perpetrator (see fig. 21).



Figure 21. A graphic imposition of meaning (“Whoever Did This,” 4.9: November 10, 2002).

But did Ralph *really* kill Pie-O-My? Here is where the multivalence of Pie-O-My-as-signifier produces a plethora of signifieds that resembles the narrative shoehorning of bin Laden as 9/11 villain and the rush to judgment apparent in the persecution of Saddam Hussein and Iraq resulting from dubious reports of his harboring terrorists, “yellow cake,” and other so-called “weapons of mass destruction” after 9/11. While Tony was adamant in his claims of Ralph’s culpability, no tangible evidence existed placing Ralph at the scene of the crime—and with the fire marshal reporting that it “looked electrical, [and] they found pieces of a blown-out light bulb in a stall and the hay was a natural accelerant”—it just “made sense” that Ralph was responsible (“Whoever Did This”). Killing Ralph took care of a

pesky—but ultimately benign—*persona non grata* while also providing Tony with synthetic narrative closure in the mysterious death of Pie-O-My. Tony’s sacrosanct status allowed for this act of violence to take place without fear of recompense; his narrative authority elicited the requisite revisionist history to smear and “disappear” Ralph, implicating him for arson amongst his associates before disposing parts of his body in disparate locations and feigning ignorance as to his whereabouts in the days and weeks to come.

The justification for Ralph’s summary execution calls to mind the October 7, 2002 speech at the Cincinnati Museum Center in Cincinnati, Ohio by then-President George W. Bush, an address notable for “laying out the initial justification for war against Iraq vis-à-vis the events of 9/11” and inextricably linking Iraq to al Qaeda (Hodges 69). This speech deserves inclusion in the annals of rhetorical history for the way in which it was used to sell what turned out to be a complete fabrication—as the non-partisan *9/11 Commission Report* concluded, no link existed between Iraq, al Qaeda, and the September 11, 2001 terror attacks:

[Meetings] between Iraqi officials and bin Laden or his aides may have occurred in 1999 during a period of some reported strains with the Taliban. According to the reporting, Iraqi officials offered bin Laden a safe haven in Iraq. [He] declined, apparently judging that his circumstances in Afghanistan remained more favorable than the Iraqi alternative. The reports describe friendly contacts and indicate some common themes in both sides’ hatred of the United States. But to date we have seen no evidence that these or the earlier contacts ever developed into a collaborative operational relationship. Nor have we seen evidence indicating that Iraq cooperated with al Qaeda in developing or carrying out any attacks against the United States. (Kean 66)

What's fascinating in a side-by-side reading of Bush's Cincinnati speech and Tony's facetious remarks to Christopher regarding Ralph's demise is the way in which the stunning rhetorical devices of the former are brutishly reappropriated—but nonetheless mimicked—in the latter. Take, for instance, the invocation of history used in the outset of the Bush speech to imply a preexisting dilemma whose addressing is of immediate concern:

The threat comes from Iraq. It arises directly from the Iraqi regime's own actions—its history of aggression, and its drive toward an arsenal of terror. Eleven years ago, as a condition for ending the Persian Gulf War, the Iraqi regime was required to destroy its weapons of mass destruction, to cease all development of such weapons, and to stop all support for terrorist groups. The Iraqi regime has violated all of those obligations. It possesses and produces chemical and biological weapons. It is seeking nuclear weapons. It has given shelter and support to terrorism, and practices terror against its own people. The entire world has witnessed Iraq's eleven-year history of defiance, deception and bad faith. (Hodges 72)

Bush begins by identifying Iraq as a comprehensive “threat” in no uncertain terms. In the space of seven short sentences, he demonstrates Iraq's history of sinister disobedience before sizing up its destructive capabilities (chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons) and providing an idea of the scope of humanity involved (a self-destructive terror threat that “the entire world has witnessed”). While Tony skimps on some of these details, he nevertheless slovenly and succinctly sums up Bush's fanciful exposition in a set of sentences:

TONY: Guy was a piece of shit. Whoever did this, it should have happened a long time ago (“Whoever Did This”).

Both speech acts rely on symbolic power to overcome assumptions and appeal to audience sensibilities with a hegemonic display of common sense. For Bush, this involved capitalizing on his Commander in Chief distinction to present democracy as both a natural human right and a liberating force while situating the invasion of Iraq as an essential causal element in preventing a chain of horrific events from occurring anywhere on the globe:

From Pakistan to the Philippines to the Horn of Africa we are hunting down al Qaeda killers...The liberation of Iraq is a crucial advance in the campaign against terror. We've removed an ally of al Qaeda and cut off a source of terrorist funding. And this much is certain—no terrorist network will gain weapons of mass destruction from the Iraqi regime because the regime is no more [applause] (Hodges 79).

For Tony, this involved flaunting his authority over Christopher—a distinction that spanned both blood and business—in order to present a fictionalized timeline of events that appealed to an understanding of suffering and compassion, a stark revision of the cold-blooded act of bashing Ralph's head against the floor until he died. Notable is Christopher's sincere response to Tony's lie, which seems to mimic the positive audience response represented by the applause in the Bush speech; together with Tony's approving reply, it demonstrates the audience's intended digestion of the synthetic rhetoric:

TONY: Listen. About this fucking guy. I came over. He was still moaning. He died almost right away. The ambulance wouldn't have helped him anyway.

CHRISTOPHER: Paulie was in New Paltz all day. I know that for a fact.

TONY: Good. ("Whoever Did This")

Both speech acts elicit pathos through the construction of fear scenarios that stem from an implied causality. Bush holds his audience captive by arriving at images of total destruction after sequences that outline Iraq's involvement in the producing the building blocks of those images, the "weapons of mass destruction" whose vagueness only increases any attached implications of terror:

Knowing these realities, America must not ignore the threat gathering against us. Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof—the smoking gun—that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud. As President Kennedy said in October of 1962, "Neither the United States of America, nor the world community of nations can tolerate deliberate deception and offensive threats on the part of any nation, large or small. We no longer live in a world," he said, "where only the actual firing of weapons represents a sufficient challenge to a nation's security to constitute maximum peril." Understanding the threats of our time, knowing the designs and deceptions of the Iraqi regime, we have every reason to assume the worst, and we have an urgent duty to prevent the worst from occurring (Hodges 83)

Tony, again, is blunt in his approach to rhetoric, but nonetheless as effective as Bush in designing an ethos-driven appeal that ensnares its audience by luring them to the trap with heaps of pathos. He accomplishes this by setting out a hypothetical scenario in which he and Christopher are persecuted for Ralph's death—an event that remains shrouded in mystery for Christopher—and drives home the urgency of his plans by ridiculing his heroin-affected nephew for his substance abuse problems, falsely (but effectively) asserting his moral and ethical superiority over the situation:

CHRISTOPHER: So, what do you wanna do?

TONY: Get rid of the body. Tried to move him myself, but I couldn't.

CHRISTOPHER: Why do we have to get rid of the body?

TONY: What, the fucking questions now? When they find him like this and somebody will, there'll be a major fucking investigation. We got enough light shining on shit. Junior's trial, and all that. No body, no murder... What the fuck is wrong with you?

CHRISTOPHER: Nothing.

TONY: Don't lie to me. You're high.

CHRISTOPHER: I smoked half a joint before you called. I'm fine.

TONY: Look at you, your nose is running, you fucking junkie. You promised me you wouldn't do that shit anymore.

CHRISTOPHER: I *didn't*.

TONY: Jesus fucking Christ, can you even do this?

CHRISTOPHER: He was a captain, T. He was the biggest earner.

TONY: You gonna lecture *me* now? You fucking drug addict!

CHRISTOPHER: Not me. But other people are gonna wonder. ("Whoever Did This")

The brilliance of this *Sopranos* set piece is in its use of privacy, in which viewers are granted the privilege of a behind-the-scenes look at hegemonic myth-making. We can imagine, in an abstract sense, this scene to contain a similar sense of raw urgency as that of the writer's room at the White House during the construction of the Bush speech. When Tony preaches the importance of "no body, no murder," viewers witness *how* narrative closure—

specifically, the lack *of* such closure, and the use of open-endedness—is used by narrative authorities to effectively promote their positions. Without a body, Tony and Christopher can elude all sorts of unsavory implications and repercussions from friends and foes alike, while escaping government scrutiny. At the same time, the lack of substantial details in buzzwords like “weapons of mass destruction” and “acts of terrorism” allows the Bush administration to operate with a substantial degree of subterfuge, appealing to broader issues of fear and self-preservation without revealing the various contradictions and inconsistencies inherent to their argument.

Seeing as how Chase and his crew are equipped in season four with an appropriate historical perspective that allows them to cast judgments on the real-world life-and-death potentialities of ideological actants vis-à-vis their on-screen portrayal, Ralph’s posthumous decapitation resonates with a meaning beyond the show and certainly beyond the immediate visceral response elicited through the sight of a (prop) severed head (see fig. 21). The writers were able to imbue the scene with a subliminal sense of vulgarity by capitalizing on the symbolic value of beheading, which had reentered American public consciousness through *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Daniel Pearl’s horrific February 1, 2002 execution. With Pearl’s murder on the table, I’ll argue that this scene speaks to the inherent brutality of Tony’s rhetorical subterfuge—not only did he murder “a captain” and “the biggest earner” in the family and thereby weaken the business, as Christopher rightly notes, but his psychological manipulation of Christopher represents new depths of Tony’s depravity. As he reveals to Dr. Melfi in the season four premiere, “Over the last few months I started the process of bonding [Christopher] to me inseparably” (“For All Debts Public and Private”). This process, as I will now demonstrate, mirrors the post-9/11 concept of public information.



Figure 22. Christopher hears the tale of Lieutenant Barry Haydu (“For All Debts Public and Private”).

The post-9/11 episodes of *The Sopranos* place Tony and Christopher’s relationship at the narrative forefront. Vital to the Tony/Christopher dynamic is the manner in which the former disseminates information to the latter. This is indeed representative of the “process of bonding” that Tony mentions to Dr. Melfi; however, viewers must fill in the blanks as to the level of truth involved in this process. In Tony’s presentation to Christopher of the tale of newly-retired Lieutenant Barry Haydu—the man, he alleges, who gunned down Christopher’s father, Dickie Moltisanti—viewers are treated to a distillation of this dynamic in one act. What transpires is indicative of the interpretive possibilities and suspicions raised in post-9/11 examinations of official government discourse regarding the causal elements of destruction and the marking of targets in the larger War on Terror.

Tony’s pointed invocation of patrilineal obligation resonates with the same emotions surrounding the overarching significance of Saddam Hussein within the Bush family. His

initial mentioning of Haydu involves an image of the man as a historical threat to Dickie Moltisanti:

TONY: [Haydu] did the hit for Jilly Ruffalo. [Ruffalo] and your old man were in the can together. Jilly stabbed your old man's cellmate to death. So, when your old man got paroled, he tracked down Jilly. Took out his eye so bad, he couldn't even put a glass one in. Loyal, your old man. ("For All Debts Public and Private")

Christopher's response to this tale reveals his disquietude over several key points of information, a lack of narrative stability that Tony capitalizes upon in providing (alleged) essential details that complete the narrative:

CHRISTOPHER: That's what I heard. Some guy's eye. They hit my dad right outside my house, right? He was bringing home a crib for me?

TONY: Yeah. Well, no. He was outside the house, but he wasn't carrying a crib. He had a bunch of TV trays. Could've been a crib just as easily. ("For All Debts Public and Private")

With his narrative authority fully asserted, Tony hands Christopher a paper containing Haydu's address and sends him on his way. Christopher breaks in to the house prior to Haydu's arrival and incapacitates him upon entering the door. When Haydu regains consciousness, he finds himself handcuffed to a staircase banister. In their ensuing conversation, elements of discursive subversion and authoritative intentionality move to the center of the story:

HAYDU: Look, I don't know who told you I had anything to do with your father's death, but their information is faulty or they are deliberately not telling you the truth.

CHRISTOPHER: Are you inferring that you didn't take cash from Jilly Ruffalo to whack my father while he was carrying a TV tray for me to watch TV?

HAYDU: I don't know anybody named Ruffalo. You're being set up! He's lying to you, whoever he is.

CHRISTOPHER: It wouldn't make any difference.

HAYDU: What do you mean, it wouldn't make any difference?

CHRISTOPHER: He wants you dead. ("For All Debts Public and Private")

While Haydu's move for self-preservation cannot be overlooked—a factor that would invariably lead him to make any excuse or weave any sort of tale—the recognition by Christopher that “it wouldn't make any difference” is what makes this scene compelling in light of its real-world antecedents. Saddam Hussein had been a target of interest for the Bushes for at least two decades prior to 9/11. He was, at one point in this timeline, a “useful” figure (as Tony surmised of Haydu), receiving generous support from the United States government at the onset of the Iraq-Iran War. It bears mentioning that bin Laden went through a similar fall from grace, also resembling a “useful” figure in the eyes of the U.S. government during the Soviet-Afghan War (Fisk 10). Regardless of what happened on 9/11, invested viewers of the emerging story of the War on Terror cannot help but surmise that “it wouldn't make any difference” whether or not either of these men were actually involved in

the day's destruction—someone, especially the President of the United States, wanted them dead.

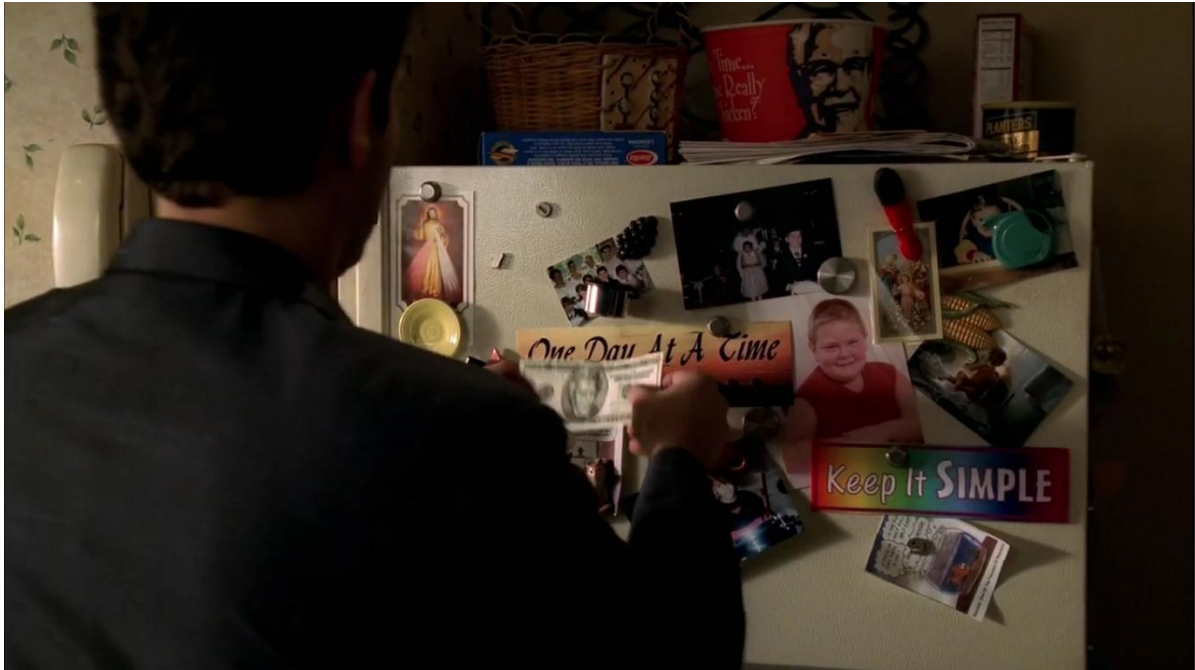


Figure 23. Christopher posts his reward for killing Barry Haydu (“For All Debts Public and Private”).

After killing Haydu, Christopher reaps the meager reward of a \$20 dollar bill in the ex-lieutenant's wallet. The episode's final scene features Christopher in a mournful, but accepting mode, seated at the kitchen table in his childhood home, smoking a cigarette while examining an older picture of his father. In an inspired moment, he moves to the refrigerator and affixes the bill atop one of two motivational placards (“One Day at a Time,” “Keep It SIMPLE”) (see fig. 23). For Christopher, this marks the completion of his cycle of mourning. Whether the bill's position signifies an endorsement of proactivity over prolonged grief is not as important as Christopher's near-elation over *Tony's* intercession in this matter, a perspective he voices numerous times throughout the remainder of the series. The faith placed in Tony as the result of this intercession falls in line with the notion that Christopher

has fully come to accept Tony as the prime father figure in his life, an acceptance problematized by the fact that he dies by Tony's hand in "Kennedy and Heidi" (6.18).

Sudden and unexpected death is one of the chief agents of terror in *The Sopranos*' post-9/11 period. These deaths carry with them the burden of mourning; the various modes of mourning presented in *The Sopranos* examine how characters to *react* to violence and loss rather than *enact* it. Notable among these tragedies is Bobby Baccalieri's loss of his wife, Karen, to a fatal car accident ("Christopher," 4.3). His is a form of grief unique to the show up to this point, as Bobby, whose faculties of discernment and perception are among his strongest attributes, must bear the burden of having been on the same road as Karen at the time of her death, even passing the wrecked vehicle in traffic, yet failing to notice her as she suffered and died nearby. Suitably, Bobby's lament resonates with tones of disbelief and regret:

BOBBY: I should've known. I should've known you needed me. I should've been with you. I should've been in your place. My love, my sweet love....

That day when she had the accident I was stuck in traffic. And my son called because Karen wanted me to pick up steaks and eggplants. And I was mad at her for sending me. I was tired. I was mad at her. But I was stuck in traffic because of her accident. She was up the road ahead of me, lying in twisted metal. But I didn't know, and I could've been with her. I should've been there to help her. But I was mad at her. My sweet Karen. My sweet girl.

("Christopher")

The manner in which proximity and pain factor into this selection are part and parcel with the greater representation of verisimilitude at play in the series, in the sense that

Bobby's irreconcilable grief is tied in to the conundrum of coping posed by 9/11. First, there's the troubling persistence of memory in mourning, the continual reminder of where one was at the time of the event ("The day when she had the accident...") especially in relation to the epicenter of tragedy ("up the road ahead of me"). Such recall serves only to exacerbate the trauma of the day; Bobby is preoccupied by the notion that he "should've been there to help" Karen precisely *because* she was in his general vicinity at the date and time of the accident. His repetitious invocation of sentimentality ("I was mad at her...I was mad...") demonstrates not only the guilt of the ineffectual onlooker, but the itching wish to replay the events of the day in order to change circumstance ("I should've...I should've...I should've...").

While Bobby's desire for historical revisionism speaks to the most basic of human coping strategies, his fantasized role-reversal with his dead wife ("I should've been in your place") speaks to the inherent uniqueness of the spectacle of physics and pain that comprised her final moment. The extent to which Bobby mentally projects himself into Karen's "place" is fully fleshed out by Bobby's mentioning of the specific details surrounding Karen's brutal end—the "twisted metal" that crushed and mangled her body. While this desire for physical transference certainly finds its roots in Bobby's spiritual ("She was an angel") and patriarchal ("My sweet girl") core beliefs, it does not operate outside of the realm of man's peculiar fascination with the image of atrocity, a contemplative zone of duality described by Susan Sontag as "both a mortification of feelings and a liberation of tabooed erotic knowledge" (98).

The repetitious imperative to "never forget" 9/11 is also an admission of this Sontagian state, seeing as how contemplators of the destruction of the Twin Towers are

titillated by imagining “what it must have been like” to have either been in one of the planes—or in one of the towers, or to jump from the 105th floor, and so forth—before being overcome with shame. Nothing better exemplifies the allure of this liberation/mortification dichotomy than the case of the three BASE jumpers who leapt from the then-unopened World Trade Center “Freedom Tower” on 30 September 2013, filmed their freefall in stunning high definition, and then promptly turned themselves in to the authorities (Rosenberg 1).

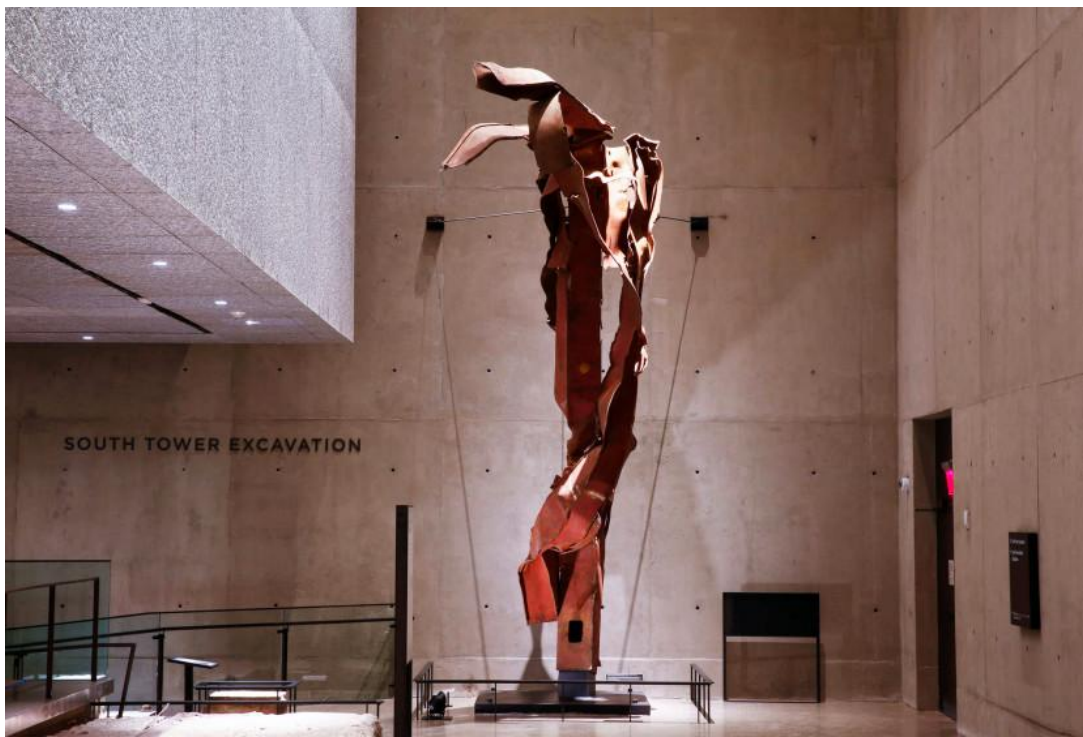


Figure 24. *Impact Steel*. 2001. Steel. New York: September 11 Memorial and Museum.

It is precisely through Bobby’s mourning of Karen that we see how *The Sopranos* signifies 9/11 without explicitly “going there,” relying neither on the use of clunky similes nor any sort of allegorical narrative construct, but nonetheless speaking *to* the mechanisms and peculiarities of the event. In this set piece, for instance, David Chase and his writing staff cash in on the semiotic value of metal, especially steel, in a post-9/11 cultural economy of signs.

There is a great paradox at play here; the image of steel, on one hand, as a modernist technological marvel, providing sound structure to support man as he goes about living in the most efficient manner possible. About sixty percent of the modern automobile is comprised of steel, forged in one way or another to appear sleek and sophisticated while eliciting the sort of fuel-efficient statistics that justify an economical advantage to the consumer (Fountain 1). In the case of the Twin Towers, their 200,000 tons of steel served in a similar capacity to iconically mark progress and capitalist efficiency, as architect Minoru Yamasaki's use of the building's facade as a load-bearing wall (versus the traditional method of skeletal, *interiorized* structural support) meant more column-free floor space inside the building, thereby allowing more commercial real estate to be sold (Douglas 204). The manner in which two Boeing jets penetrated this steel on 9/11 served to undermine its structural properties, but its aesthetic properties remained intact, as evinced in the serpentine articulation of the *Impact Steel* found-art installation housed at the September 11 Museum and Memorial in Manhattan (see fig. 24).

The Jersey-*bourgeois* lifestyle afforded by Bobby and his Soprano family associates is, in essence, enabled by the efficiency of steel and marked by its presence. Their stainless steel kitchens are stocked with the “steaks and eggplants” and other delicacies that are shipped to their local supermarkets in steel containers, representing their position as apex consumers, absolutely detached from any sense of sustainability while claiming residence in the “Garden State.” Furthermore, their livelihoods are dependent on steel, whether in the pillaging of construction sites, the mismanagement of waste disposal companies, or in the operation of an assorted arsenal of steel-based firearms. That the official logo of *The Sopranos* is stylized by a (steel) handgun replacing its lowercase “R” bears testament to the

role of steel in transcending these otherwise lazy and lethargic “fat fucks” to the positions of political and societal influence that they hold dear.

Yet, as evidenced on 9/11—and as demonstrated in the Bobby-Karen episode—the paradoxical nature of steel lies in its capacity to confound. There are repercussions signified through its very presence, a price to pay for the luxury of its strength. Beyond the obvious caveats of automobile operation and collapsing buildings, well past the observation of the way in which steel structures can awesomely crush, decimate, and obliterate, I am referring to the way in which steel acts as an ocular roadblock, an “Iron Curtain” of the eye, and how such obfuscation affects the mourning process. For instance, Bobby’s fascination with the brute physicality at play in Karen’s death is stoked by his inability to *see* Karen within the heap of car parts and mangled steel that he passed on his car ride home (“I didn’t know...”). Without her image marking the site, Bobby’s reading of the scene was one of pure stimuli, unadorned with its requisite emotional attachment, another instance of bad driving, or another obstacle in getting home. This not only fuels his guilt, as Bobby is forced to scrutinize the event over and over in his mind, searching for a connecting image that was never there, but it also acts to enhance the atrocities committed behind the “steel curtain” as Bobby must rely on a speculative, versus an empirical, assessment of the violence endured by Karen. Furthermore, the *Sopranos* text provides us only with one instance of Bobby gazing on Karen’s body after the accident—at the funeral home, laid out in a casket, her face artificially freed from the agony of the accident as the result of the mortician’s craftsmanship. Only here can Bobby finally *see* Karen, yet the Karen of his eye bears little resemblance to the Karen of his mind.

The silver lining to September 11 is that it provided critical observers with a large-scale case study on the role of perception in the processing of trauma. Analysis of the processes and efficacies inherent to 9/11 coping strategies (i.e., methods of mourning that must account for an absence of substantive information regarding the manner in which a loved one was lost) has subsequently opened a chasm of critical discourse on the influence (and impotence) of photography on 9/11. Thomas Stubblefield's remarks on the ocular effects of what I referred to earlier as the World Trade Center's "steel curtain" provide a foundation for such examination; he writes: "With the vast majority of the dead dying behind the curtain wall of the towers' facades, 'the most photographed disaster in history' failed to yield a single noteworthy image of carnage" (4).

Such a lack of humanity, such a dwarfing of corporeal suffering by the towering images of abstract penetration and collapse offered by these photographs, elicits the sort of "derealization" of 9/11 discussed by Slavoj Žižek in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*: "While the number of victims—3,000—is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see—no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people" (13).

Realizing that which has been virtually rendered *unreal* through the mediation of 9/11 speaks to why the documentation of such personal carnage is necessary in providing survivors with adequate tools for coping. In this manner, Sontag's remarks on the certainty and assurance provided through photography are especially insightful: "Photographs lay down routes of reference, and serve as totems of causes: sentiment is more likely to crystallize around a photograph than a verbal slogan. And photographs help construct—and revise—our sense of a more distant past" (85).

Furthermore, the 9/11 mourner's need for such certainty, as discussed by Laura E. Tanner, stems not only from the inability of the spectator to realize that which transpired behind the "steel curtain," but also from the manner in which the collapsing steel structures pulverized their victims, causing "the failure to locate and identify bodies, the endlessly elusive process of seeking 'the thing itself'" and a "general struggle to bring those lost out of the realm of the image to render their past presence real" (225-6).

So what was left to mourn after the dust had settled in lower Manhattan? What was there for the families to come collect, to take home with them as a reminder of a significant life? The compound effects of the spectator's distance and the issues brought about by such displacement, both in light of the "steel curtain" ocular phenomenon and the larger issue of 9/11 mediation, are the only mementos available to these mourners, manifested into what Tanner refers to as "phantom grief" (226). Tanner's description of phantom grief sheds light onto the persistent need for historical reassessment and replay in the mind of the mourner, and is worth reproducing here:

In the case of September 11, however, the knowledge of thousands of American lives lost creates a space—literal, cultural, and psychic—for a bodily absence which implies a presence once known or accessed. If the embodied dynamics of grief contribute to the illusion of sustained material presence, the knowledge of devastating absence after September 11 generates a "phantom grief" that implies the severing of a connection generated only through "the afterlife of the imagination." Suspended between the image and the thing itself, the phantom griever struggles to apprehend as lived experience a loss that both is and is not virtual. (226)

The idea of “phantom grief” is also an apt metaphor for the affliction experienced by viewers as the result of narrative loose ends. As I will examine in my next chapter, *The Sopranos* and the story of 9/11 are two examples of texts that resist closure. Precisely how they manage to evade comprehensive assessments, along with the texts spawned through acts of so-called forensic fandom as a result of this lack of closure, will be the focus of my examination.

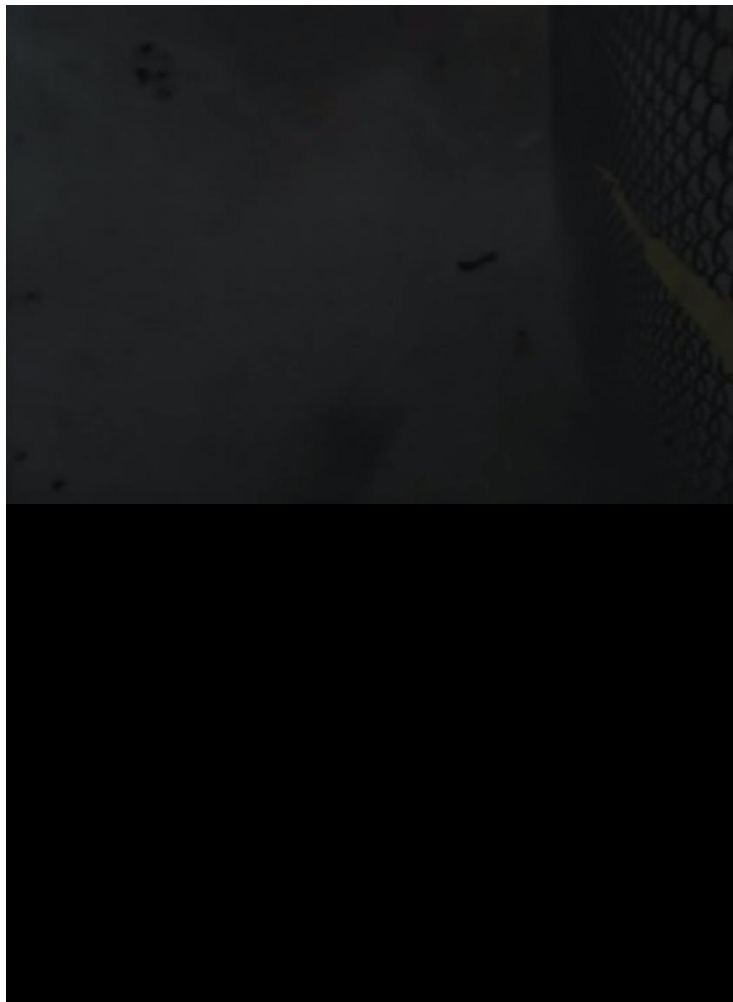


Figure 25. Top: CBS photojournalist Mark LaGanga’s final shot before falling into darkness after the collapse of the North Tower of the World Trade Center.
Bottom: Controversial final frame from *The Sopranos* finale (“Made in America,” 6.21: June 10, 2007).

Chapter Two: Ends

TONY: Can't you tell me what the fuckin' thing means? I mean, you obviously know. Why do we have to go through this exercise every time?

DR. MELFI: I don't obviously know. I didn't have the dream. The meaning is elicited through verbalization.

TONY: And the gehoxagogen is, uh, framed up by the ramistan...

—"Calling All Cars," 4.11

It's impossible to write about this subject, and yet impossible to write about anything else. Nothing else touches us.

—Frédéric Beigbeder, *Windows on the World* (8)

PHIL: Either it has meaning or no meaning.

—"The Blue Comet," 6.20

Up until this point in my writing, *The Sopranos* and 9/11 have never strayed too far from one another, intertwined like partners going steady into the wee hours at an all-night dance of critical evaluation. While we cannot speak definitively about the roots of their infatuation—it is beneath us to dissect the motivations of our hearts, let alone the hearts of others, *especially* in compulsory academic texts—we can, and have, traced their relationship back to common beginnings. We identified a shared sense of location between these two texts, an engagement of the New York metropolitan area that they wear on their proverbial sleeves as a telling sign of their affirmative attitudes towards hermeneutic instability and the diverse possibilities of meaning presented in a senseless world. We witnessed both partners engaging in various acts of spacetime disruption, repeating and revisiting chronological tangents at whim during their individual quests for identity. Beyond all else, we concluded that *The Sopranos* and 9/11 were never *truly* separate entities, as their core content seemed as if it was produced in a singular act of genesis—even though *The Sopranos* was born two-and-a-half years before its preordained partner. I'll leave the issue of whether or not their union is inherently incestuous to the next generation of ersatz scholars.

Sadly, this is the point where *The Sopranos* and 9/11 must part ways. Although both texts capitalize on ambiguity and a lack of closure as a means of arriving at a similar final destination, their ends fall into two distinct categories, two separate doors at the end of the same hallway. *The Sopranos* falls under the category of a formal conclusion—a finale, or as Mittell refers to it, “a conclusion with a going-away party” (322). Mittell continues:

Finales are defined more by their surrounding discourse and hype than any inherent properties of the narrative itself, as they feature conclusions that are widely anticipated and framed as endings to a beloved (or at least high-rated) series. Finales are not thrust on creators but emerge out of the planning process of crafting an ongoing serial, and thus the resulting discourses center around authorial presence and the challenges of successfully ending a series....Such discursive prominence of finales raises the narrative stakes of anticipation and expectation for viewers, and thus finales frequently produce disappointment and backlash when they inevitably fail to please everyone.

(322)

The anticipatory “hype” leading up to *The Sopranos* finale (“Made in America,” originally airing June 10, 2007) reached a fever pitch that was matched only by the impassioned “backlash” to its failure/refusal to tie off narrative loose ends. In this chapter, I will examine the textual elements of “Made in America” that led to such a response. I will then look at the higher-order public responses that sought to sift through the ambiguous finale in search of a kernel of truth and meaning—the fan videos that claim to offer various “explanations” of the ending. The idea of the limits of authorship, or lack thereof, presented in these examples of forensic fandom speak to David Chase’s formidable presence in the

public consciousness; as I'll argue, these fan texts work to validate, rather than destabilize, the official *Sopranos* text.

Like *The Sopranos*, the 9/11 story is largely a story without end. However, its presentation certainly never reached cessation, let alone anything resembling a wrap-up or a conclusion in the way that *The Sopranos* clearly did. Instead, the 9/11 story resides within a perpetual state of narrative resurrection. Its beginnings are explored annually, if not more frequently, by a commemorative culture that chooses to “never forget” the bravery and brutality displayed on that day. Moreover, the sign “9/11” has become exponentially significant in the decade-plus since its inception as a referent to the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, serving all points of the political spectrum to justify both bellicose and benign applications. Mittell’s observations regarding the reasons for resurrection in serial television speak to the enhanced role of the 9/11 story in American society: “[The] motivation [for resurrection] seems to be having more stories left to tell and the freedom to tell them in other mediums” (321). As a result of this narrative freedom, the story of 9/11 is one in which the falcon can no longer hear the falconer.

Because of 9/11’s profuse signification, skeptics and scholars alike have returned to its beginnings in suspicious scrutiny of both the (alleged) vagaries that have served as concrete evidence in these applications and the (alleged) coincidences that the official government narrative has chosen to ignore. In this chapter, I will examine the textual elements found in the television coverage of 9/11 that have incited the many so-called “conspiracy theories” related to the event. I will then address the role of forensic fandom—in the form of self-produced videos that attempt to analyze and “explain” these various theories—as a driving force in post-9/11 hermeneutics.

“Don’t Stop...”



Figure 26. Tony’s would-be assassin? Or an innocent ice cream parlor patron? (“Made in America”)

On the evening of June 19, 2013, almost six years to the day after *The Sopranos* finale aired on HBO, James Gandolfini suffered a heart attack and died while vacationing with his family in Rome, Italy. While two children lost their father and the world lost a talented actor, fans of *The Sopranos* lost any hope for closure to the series vis-à-vis a rumored *Sopranos* movie or any other narrative rebirth of the show.

This anxiety for closure stemmed from the ambiguous final scene of the series finale, “Made in America,” a masterful study in suspense that was shot at the now-historic Holsten’s Ice Cream Parlor in Bloomfield, New Jersey. Scored to Journey’s 1981 rock anthem “Don’t Stop Believin,’” the scene features members of the family descending one-by-one upon the parlor for a late night meal of milkshakes and onion rings—“Best in the state,” as far as Tony is concerned—before the image abruptly cuts to ten seconds of darkness, an absence of sight and sound that is broken only by the closing credits (“Made in America”).

Between Tony's arrival at Holsten's and the final cut to black, viewers are presented with a wide range of callbacks, some reaching as far as to the show's pilot episode. For instance, the ringing bell that accompanies each opening of the shop's front door immediately recalls the dockside boat bells from the closing scene of "Sopranos Home Movies" (6.13). This callback reactivates Tony's portrayed mode of existential reflection during this scene, a contemplative state brought on by his conversation with Bobby Bacalieri earlier in the episode:

TONY: My estimate, historically, eighty percent of the time it ends up in the can like Johnny Sack, or on the embalming table at Cozzarelli's.

BOBBY: Don't even say it.

TONY: No risk, no reward.

BOBBY: I mean, yeah, our line of work, it's always out there. You probably don't even hear it when it happens, eh? ("Sopranos Home Movies")

As a result of *this* callback, viewers are drawn—yet again—to "For All Debts Public and Private," where Tony first offered his self-assessed prognostication for the future in the larger context of ends and endings:

TONY: There's two endings for a guy like me. High-profile guy. Dead, or in the can. Big percent of the time.

DR. MELFI You've never talked this frankly.

TONY: Even with all this terrorism shit, the government has resources up the ass. As far as legal bills are...

DR. MELFI: Anthony!

TONY: What?

DR. MELFI: Why don't you give it up? ("For All Debts Public and Private")

This succession of references is enough for some fans, like the infamous "Master of Sopranos" blogger, to conclude that the final frame of the series represented a point-of-view (POV) depiction of Tony's murder at the hands of the "Man in Members Only Jacket" (see fig. 26), with the subsequent silence representing how one would not "hear it happen." In this example of forensic fandom, we can witness what Mittell's description of "amateur [narratology], noting patterns and violations of convention, chronicling chronologies, and highlighting both inconsistencies and continuities across episodes and even series" actually looks like:

In "Sopranos Home Movies," there is an earlier bell ringing/POV scene that foreshadows Holsten's. In the scene, Tony is sitting in a chair on a dock by himself the next morning after his fight with Bacala. Tony looks in deep thought and may be contemplating his own mortality; which [sic] is confirmed by his subsequent conversation with Carmela. As Tony is deep in thought he hears a bell. Tony then looks over as sees that the ringing is coming from a boat (presumably the same boat where Tony and Bacala had the "never hear it" conversation just moments earlier) tied to the dock (the sound may be coming from a fog bell). The boat is shown from Tony's POV. Tony then turns back to the water when he hears the bell ring again; this time it is louder. Tony now clearly looks disturbed and looks over and Chase cuts to another Tony POV shot of the boat. A duck is then seen flying away behind Tony, foreshadowing Tony losing (through his own death) his family. Furthermore, the beginning of the scene cuts back to Bacala flipping through the stations on

the radio. At one point the song “[This] Magic Moment” is heard. This song also closes the episode and is shown on the jukebox in Holsten’s. (Master of Sopranos 4)

The over 45,000 words laid out by “Master of Sopranos” on her forensic fan blog are indeed worthy of perusal by any ardent *Sopranos* fan. As Mittell notes: “The [“Master of Sopranos”] argument is so detailed and well supported that it is hard to imagine reading it and not being convinced that if there is a story motivation for the final edit, it is only explicable as Tony’s final moments of life” (336). However, I have two points of contention that I believe refute the “Masters of Sopranos” argument, and I will now lay them out (in less than 45,000 words).

The first point of contention deals with a lack of investigative depth on behalf of the “Master of Sopranos” writer/researcher in her engagement of callbacks, specifically the callback to “For All Debts Public and Private.” As I provided the relevant Tony-Dr.Melfi quote earlier (“Dead, or in the can. Big percent of the time”), so too did “Master of Sopranos” in her reading of the series’ final scene. However, this is representative of selective cherry-picking, as Tony’s quote continues by revealing several details that elicit a completely different conceptual understanding of endings:

TONY: You didn’t let me finish. There’s a third way to wrap it up. You rely only on family.

DR. MELFI: Not many men could survive without the love and support of their wife and children.

TONY: No, I’m talking about business. You trust only blood. (“For All Debts Public and Private”)

Tony's referral to broader themes of familial reliance is indeed reflective of the finales of the show's first three seasons (i.e., the first half of the series), all of which feature his family engaging in a mode of dining, either at home or in a restaurant. Indeed, "Made in America" ends in a similar fashion—the Soprano family at a dinner table, discussing A.J.'s future and waiting for Meadow to parallel park her car. I contend that the notions of a family's future—both in terms of Tony's business future in light of Phil Leotardo's recent death, and his children's professional prospects—is far more complex, and perhaps even more frightening and impactful, than the conventional "whacking" implied by writers like "Master of Sopranos." The invocation of deeper/subtler thought has always been at the heart of *The Sopranos*—both in an exploration of the madness of mediocrity and the wonders of the mundane—and David Chase's recent remarks reflect such a reading of the scene:

I tried to build the tension and suspense as much as possible. That's why I could go back out to Meadow and her car-parking. I could use all that stuff to affect the pace. I think almost every director is thinking about the pacing. That's what directing is. I did want to create the idea that you would wonder if something was going to happen in there. Meadow is filled with nothing but very, very deep emotions about parking her car. But possibly a minute later, her head will be filled with emotions she could never even imagine. We all take this stuff so seriously—losing our keys, parking our car, a winter cold, a summer cold, an allergy—whatever it is. And this stuff fills our mind from second to second, moment to moment. And the big moment is always out there waiting. (Greenberg 47)

There are two key takeaways from Chase's comments here: first, the concept of "big moments," which writers like "Master of Sopranos" take to construe death and finality, but what I consider to be more in line with revelation, complication, and any other narrative alteration that involves continuation—something that falls in line with Journey's imperative to "don't stop," the final words heard before the screen cuts to black. Perhaps Meadow is entering Holsten's at that final moment prepared to announce to her parents that she and boyfriend Patrick Parisi (DiMeo/Soprano family soldier Patsy Parisi's son) are engaged to be married, a revelation that would imply the continuation of Tony's biological family *as well as* his business family. This would most definitely fall under the category of a "big moment," invoking a suitably *Sopranos* vibe of ambivalence in which Tony would be dignified and depressed (with his daughter becoming a wife and a mother, but perhaps giving birth to another mob soldier) while fulfilling Journey's "don't stop" imperative. What a moment this would be!

My second point of contention with "Master of Sopranos" stems from my second takeaway from Chase's comments: the implications of his intention to "create the idea that you would wonder if something was going to happen in there" (Greenberg 47). In *The Sopranos*, there is a very clear through-current demonstrating the show's conscious approach towards its own production of suspicion and confusion. I have addressed this point earlier in reference to the manner in which Tony recommends disposing of Ralph's body ("No body, no murder," to which Christopher replies "People are gonna wonder...") ("Whoever Did This"). In this example, viewers are privy to meta-discourse on the creation of suspense and confusion, represented through Tony and Christopher's destruction of the signifier (i.e.,

Ralph's body) in order to avoid signification and the repercussions of the signified (i.e., discovery of the body, investigation, and indictment).

However, there is an even more important instance of this sort of meta-discourse that works to frame the series beautifully—an instance in the show's pilot episode which details the strategic destruction of a sign in order to avoid signification and the repercussions of the signified. As "Master of Sopranos" fails to note, the following example provides the series with an elegant structural bookending, as it speaks to Chase's decision to drop the black screen on viewers in the midst of a highly suspenseful scene:

PUSSY: The Kolar uncle is gonna find the kid dead on one of his bins and get out of our fuckin' business? No way.

CHRISTOPHER: "Louis Brasi sleeps with the fishes."

PUSSY: *Luca* Brasi. Luca.

CHRISTOPHER: Whatever.

PUSSY: There's differences, Christopher, okay? From the Luca Brasi situation and this. Look, the Kolars know the kid is dead. It hardens their position. Plus, now, the cops are looking for a fuckin' murderer.

CHRISTOPHER: So, what do you wanna do?

PUSSY: He disappears. He never comes home. They *know*, but they *don't* know. They hope maybe he'll turn up—*if*.

CHRISTOPHER: Yeah.

PUSSY: Yeah. Come on. Let's get him. Take him to Staten Island. I'll cut him up. ("Pilot")

In this example, we find insight into the mechanisms of the final scene that not even the highest form of criticism can so elegantly lay out. To begin, there are certainly “differences” between cinematic mob fare and *The Godfather* (featuring Luca/“Louis” Bratsi), just as there are fundamental formal and aesthetic differences between *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos*. These differences are in line with the latter’s identity as a complex serial program, or a non-linear “sprawling library of narrative content that might be consumed via a wide range of practices, sequences, fragments, moments, choices, and repetitions” (Mittell 7). An obligation inherent to exemplary creation in this formal mode involves evading the suspicions of the viewing public (i.e., critics with “positions,” judgmental enforcers who are “looking for a fuckin’” clean conclusion to things). Central to this evasion would be *avoiding* the Michael Corleone post-bathroom murder trope. Therefore, the most effective mode of intrigue involves “disappearing” the causal signifier, causing viewers to *know* (or *think* they know) what happened, but to not *really* know what happened. The ten seconds of darkness at the end of “Made in America” reflect the artistic practice of burning the evidence—or taking the narrative ends to Staten Island and cutting them up, as Pussy suggests.

Do I have an idea as to what happened when things went dark at the end of *The Sopranos*? Of course, and I have discussed it to some extent above. However, the grandest conclusion I could possibly make regarding the show is that I enjoyed (and continue to enjoy) it immensely and that I consider it to be a prescient and profound look at American identity pre- and post-9/11. No other work of art, in my opinion, has aestheticized the conflicted state of being that a post-9/11 American citizen endures as *The Sopranos* has. Long live New Jersey, and long live David Chase.

“Never Forget”



Figure 27. The only known images of American Airlines Flight 77, taken from two Pentagon security cameras operating at 1 FPS. Left column: Approach. Right column: Impact.

The trauma incurred by viewers of 9/11 newscasts stemmed from the interplay of information deluge and information deficiency at the core of its presentation. While dozens of professional and amateur videographers documented United Airlines Flight 175 approaching and impacting the South Tower of the World Trade Center, there are only three known recordings that capture American Airlines Flight 11 hitting the North Tower seventeen minutes earlier, none of which are on par with the general fidelity of the South Tower videos. Only two known images exist featuring American Airlines Flight 77 during its approach to the Pentagon (see fig. 27) and both images were captured by low-fidelity Pentagon security cameras that operated at a recording speed of one frame per second (FPS). There is no known recorded evidence of United Airlines Flight 93 prior to it crashing outside of Shanksville. Starkly contrasting the paucity of these recordings was the dearth of official reports detailing the events that occurred on board these planes and inside/around these buildings.

Resulting from the lack of visual evidence regarding the beginnings of three of its four inciting events, curious viewers of 9/11 televisual newscasts were faced with the task of performing some acrobatic hermeneutic acts, most of which involved the terrifying prospect of employing one's imagination to connect diverse informational tidbits in order to arrive at something resembling a complete understanding of the event. This sort of information presented itself in a deluge, consisting either of an authoritative oral account, thereby disseminated through a speech act and unadorned by graphical representation, or worse, of a product of terrified hearsay.¹ Even if video *did* exist of the event in mind—for instance, United Flight 175—the curious viewer would still have to imagine what the on board conditions were like, whether or not the report of Mace being sprayed to incapacitate passengers was true, whether or not stewardesses were being stabbed, and so on. With the vast majority of the day's action occurring behind metal and steel screens, the content projected on television screens across the world could only accomplish so much in terms of presenting a complete story and would often waver between deluge/deficiency states.

Of course, “completely understanding” the events of 9/11 is an impossible task, and the difficulty in doing so speaks not only to the larger human experience but to the specific strategy at the very core of terrorism—to disrupt informational processes and elicit mass panic, confusion, and fear in onlookers. Nevertheless, thousands of people have attempted to rectify that disruption and create a new understanding of 9/11 outside of its immediate historical context. I am engaging in such an act through this writing. Many other traumatized viewers, however, refuse to adequately engage the physical and philosophical extremes

¹ I was personally privy to copious amounts of the latter as I resided five miles northwest of the Twin Towers in September of 2001—from reports of attacks at the Space Needle and Golden Gate Bridge to warnings that caravans of marauding, machine-gun equipped terrorists were entering our town. I can imagine that most people who lived through 9/11 have similar tales of disinformation, regardless of where they were on that day.

presented in 9/11, opting instead to relegate the event to a supernatural realm—one in which an omnipotent cabal of the financial elite concocted and carried out the attacks in accordance with their larger schemes of resource manipulation and global population control. While commonly referred to as conspiracy theorists, I have chosen to refer to these viewers as forensic fans, with their explanatory/investigative texts occupying a central position in 9/11 forensic fandom.

At the crux of 9/11 forensic fandom is the synthesis of cutting-edge technological speculation that spans a veritable gamut of disciplines. The loose ends left in the wake of the 9/11 television newscast are scrutinized using this discursive panoply, albeit with varying degrees of amateurishness—from allegations of graphic design and digital image manipulation accounting for the irregularity in newscast shot composition, thereby suggesting a concerted effort to create the illusion of airplanes striking the Twin Towers (“September Clues”) to hypotheses suggesting the controlled demolition of the buildings using cold fission and directed-energy weapons, allegedly supported by the rapid pulverization of steel evinced in collapse videos (Dr. Judy Wood’s “The Hutchison Effect and 9/11”).

As hinted at through the cursory description of the two forensic fandom videos above, the most commonly cited loose ends of the 9/11 narrative by these forensic fans usually involve the following story points:

- The terrorists’ ability to pilot planes at high speeds into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon (i.e., were planes actually used on 9/11?)
- The sudden collapse of the Twin Towers (i.e., how could two airliners bring down two steel structures?)

- The crash of Flight 93 (i.e., did combat planes intervene?)
- The Pentagon attack images (i.e., is a plane depicted in the frames?)

These loose ends are often stitched together in a variety of ways, using many different—and often times contradictory—assumptions and technological claims. The following is a brief overview of the truly labyrinthine postulations circulating within 9/11 forensic fandom:

- Military drones OR missiles equipped with holographic imagery projection OR internal bombs (with computer simulated airplane overlays added in post-production) struck/blew up the Twin Towers
- The collapse of the Twin Towers was a controlled demolition resulting from the use of basement bombs OR nuclear devices (leading to the memefication of the phrase “Jet Fuel Can’t Melt Steel Beams”).
- Flight 93 was brought down by jet planes and its passenger revolt was a mythological cover-up OR it never existed, and a missile struck the area outside of Shanksville.
- A missile OR an undisclosed non-jetliner projectile hit the Pentagon.

Naturally, an offshoot of the skeptical branch of 9/11 forensic fandom has emerged in response to the traction gained by these arguments online. This subset of 9/11 forensic fandom seeks to counteract this perceived disinformation while engaging in the same sort of practices crucial to retrospective analysis—synthesizing observable and recorded data with new technologies and testing the various hypotheses that circulate within this community. While amateur contributions to this subset of 9/11 forensic fandom exist, the most notable texts come from professional sources of considerable academic and industry acclaim.

Between 2003 and 2007, computer science engineers at Purdue University produced two computer visualizations detailing the effects of trajectory-based impact damage and jet fuel dispersion on structural integrity in the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, respectively. In 2006, graphic designer Mike Wilson and the team at Integrated Consultants, Inc. produced a recreation of American Airlines Flight 77's approach to the Pentagon, addressing the perspectival issues raised by the Pentagon security camera's 1FPS fish-eye lens in an attempt to debunk alternative theories regarding the identification of the object in question (see fig. 28). Perhaps the most influential document in this category is David Dunbar and Brian Reagan's *Debunking 9/11 Myths: Why Conspiracy Theories Can't Stand Up to the Facts*, which features a foreword by Republican Arizona Senator John McCain in which he lambasts the skeptical branch of 9/11 forensic fandom:

Though the evidence for Al Qaeda's central role in the 9/11 attacks is overwhelming, many have found the facts unsatisfying. Perhaps this is understandable. We want to believe that 10 men could not murder our citizens, destroy our grandest buildings, and terrorize our country. Surely, something more was at work....

Any explanation for the tragedy of 9/11 must start and end with the facts. The evidence, the data, the facts must be gathered, compiled, analyzed, and then—only then—can conclusions be drawn as to what happened. This is precisely what the various investigators have done, and in doing so they have performed a great service to our nation. And yet still the conspiracy theorists peddle their wares. They ignore the methods of science, the protocols of investigation, and the dictates of logic. The conspiracy theorists chase any bit of information, no

matter how flimsy, and use it to for their preordained conclusions. They ascribe to the government, or to some secretive group, powers wholly out of proportion to what the evidence suggests. And they ignore the facts that are present in plain sight. (Dunbar xii-xv)

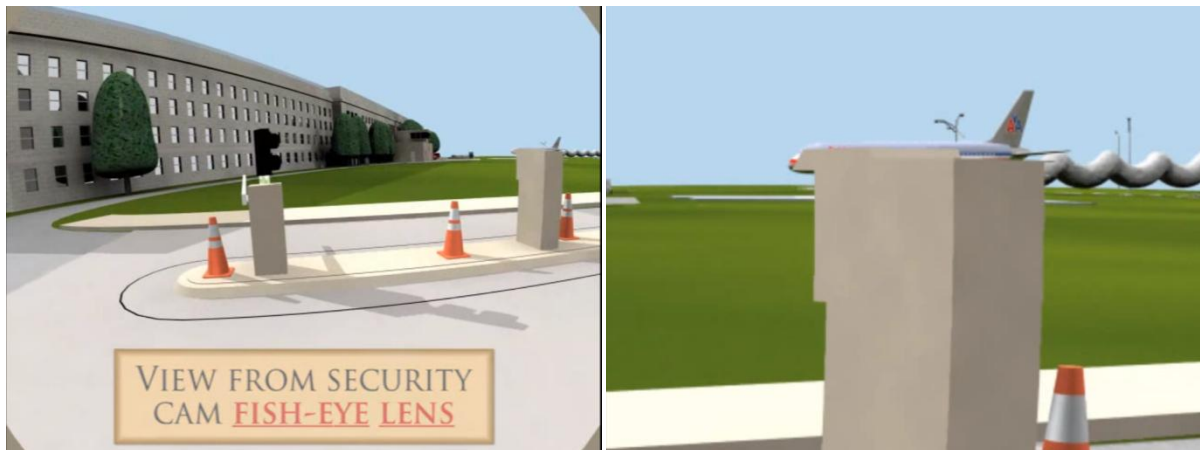


Figure 28. Computer recreation of American Airlines Flight 77 approaching the Pentagon debunks the “no plane” theory (Images: Integrated Consultants, Inc.)

While McCain is correct in identifying the disproportionate degree of power ascribed to government groups and various other conspiratorial entities in the *speculative 9/11* forensic fandom videos, his argument overlooks the influence of informational processing-based trauma resulting from the televisual mediation of 9/11. I contend that the “chase for information” he describes as an endemic element in such speculation is a natural byproduct of the “overwhelming” amount of evidence raised on 9/11 (again, to use the Senator’s own words). While McCain goes on in this foreword to discuss the “proper lessons of 9/11” and what he believes to be “truly important to this country” in the wake of the event, his castigation of this community of traumatized viewers is largely unnecessary. Rather than considering these YouTube-savvy citizens to be enemies of open democracy, the Senator’s “proper lessons of 9/11” should expand to include an understanding of stimulation-based

paranoia, fear-based apophenia and pareidolia, and perhaps an unequivocal denouncement of a 24-hour news cycle driven by sensationalist speculation.

Regardless of the political beliefs espoused by either wing of 9/11 forensic fandom, what their ever-growing swath of content ultimately represents is the collective search for stimulation from what Sontag calls “the posthumous shocks engineered by the circulation of hitherto unknown photographs” (85). It is vital to focus on the impetus behind the videos, and the reason why the cycle of relevant content creation continues to turn, as it resides in the quest for a “truth” that could serve as an antidote to the ache of absence described by Tanner. We can look at it all as the efforts of concerned spectator-survivors seeking further “information” and new “revelations” in hopes of traversing the Zizekian gulf between reality and the Real, an area described by Tanner as “that which is and is not virtual” (226).

Encore

If we bring *The Sopranos* and 9/11 together for one last dance, especially during this closing number, we can better understand the affective (mis)significance of 9/11 as reflected in the viewer response to the final scene of “Made in America.” The anger resulting from Chase’s decision to cut to ten seconds of darkness perhaps stemmed from a perceived slight in the give-and-take of an unspoken viewer-producer contract—if I give you 86 hours of my time, you will reward me with closure. We can imagine, then, a similar response from the viewers of 9/11 newscasts—if I place my trust and comfort in your hands, you will lead me to serenity. Of course, there was no serenity to be found in the repeated images of plane strikes and fireballs, of collapsing towers and crying relatives, of invasion and aerial bombardment. In this sense, *The Sopranos* and 9/11 both teach their viewers that there is blowback at the end of every raw deal.

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Vita



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