Abstract: *The Sopranos* is one of television’s most acclaimed series, ushering in the rise of the twenty-first-century primetime serial and helping to elevate the medium’s cultural status. But Sean O’Sullivan problematizes our understanding of the show’s seriality, highlighting episodes that function more as short stories than as chapters in a novel, and thus illuminating how the program’s story structures and themes explore and challenge the norms of television narrative.

When Jennifer Egan discusses her inspirations for *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, the winner of the 2011 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, she often cites *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007). Egan’s book has nothing to do with mobsters or federal agents. Rather, it is a loosely connected series of thirteen chapters, tracing over several decades a group of people affiliated with the music business. When it came out, there was considerable debate about whether the book should be called a novel or a collection of short stories. The style and point of view can vary drastically from chapter to chapter; characters that may have seemed “major” sometimes drop out and sometimes reappear, with “minor” characters at times taking over the reins. It was this structural restlessness, this ambivalence about linear connection, that Egan found appealing in the HBO show: “The lateral feeling of it, [and] not to have to always be focused on the forward thrust. There were whole episodes where you had no idea why this was going to be important in the bigger scheme of things, and yet it was fascinating; I loved the idea . . . of letting it feel meandering.” Egan points here to the powerful anti-serial riptide at the center of the most widely celebrated serial drama of the last decade, its resistance to the accumulative forces of consequence, continuity, and progression that nineteenth-century installment fiction and twentieth-century soap opera marketed as their defining features. This essay will spotlight two episodes from the show’s initial season, each of which operates “laterally” in relation to the rest of that season.
The first of these is the most highly praised of all episodes of *The Sopranos*; the second is one of the least beloved. That gulf in reception illustrates the attractions, perils, and effects of rupturing serial conventions.

Egan’s diagnosis would undoubtedly please David Chase, creator and showrunner of *The Sopranos*, since his aversion to the traditional television business drove the design and ethos of the show. Chase described his early creative differences with the channel:

> There was a little bit of friction the first season between myself and HBO, because they were more interested in the serialized elements and I was not. “What’s going to happen from one episode to the next?” “Are they going to kill Tony or not?” “Who planned it?” Or: “What’s the result of what happened in episode 2?” I was more interested in discrete little movies.²

If Egan uses a metaphor of movement—the “lateral” rather than propulsive tendency of a narrative—Chase offers an arboreal image:

> If you look at a Christmas tree, people don’t care about the trunk of a Christmas tree; they only care about the lights and the balls and the tinsel. But the trunk has to be there. So we always referred back to that; we had this continuing story, which people seemed to get involved in. I didn’t intend to do a soap opera.³

Chase’s notion of “people” here is helpfully contradictory. On the one hand, “people” got involved in the continuing story—namely the trunk of the tree; on the other hand, “people” care only about the surrounding baubles, those visual delights that make the trunk pleasingly invisible. This conflict between what “people” want—perhaps different kinds of people, or more likely the same people in different moods of narrative consumption—speaks directly to *The Sopranos*’ self-conscious shifts between satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

The most famous hour of the series, and Exhibit A of Chase’s stand-alone storytelling preferences, is “College” (February 7, 1999), the show’s fifth episode. Composed of just two storylines, rather than the typical model of three or four, “College” follows Tony and his daughter, Meadow, during her college tour in Maine and Tony’s wife, Carmela, during her dangerous flirtation with Father Phil Intintola back in New Jersey. The dramatic core of the episode is Tony’s discovery of a former mob informer, ensconced in rural New England thanks to the witness protection program; Tony tracks the “rat” down and garrotes him while Meadow is being interviewed at Colby College. *Time’s* James Poniewozik reflected a critical consensus in 2007 when he ranked “College” as the best episode in the series’ history, citing its riveting opposition “between the family and Family parts
of Tony’s life.”4 “College” precisely fits Egan’s sense of The Sopranos’ commitment to “lateral” movement, since the psychiatric environment and particular Mafia conflicts of the show’s first four episodes are absent. Chase deemed it the show’s “most successful episode . . . a film noir in and of itself”; critically, “it has nothing to do with anything that happened beforehand, and it has nothing to do with anything that happened later . . . To me, that was the ultimate Sopranos episode.”

In terms of the show’s central figure, “College” produces ripples neither in the area of plot—there is no event-consequence to Tony’s actions here—nor in the area of character—Tony does not “discover” something about himself at this point, and there appear to be no psychological aftershocks. But if we think of “character” not just as a fictional person’s mental or emotional conditions, but as a relationship between that fictional person and a viewing audience, in fact “College” had significant ramifications for what “happened later.” As Chase tells it, this storyline represented another major conflict with HBO in the inaugural season; channel executive Chris Albrecht worried that the gruesome, hands-on execution of the informant would harm Tony’s “relatability,” destroying the audience’s ability to connect with the series’ main character. Chase stuck to his guns, on the grounds of verisimilitude, saying that “if we’re really gonna believe this guy is a credible mobster, he’s gotta kill people. In real life, that’s what these people do.”

That conflict between creator and channel illustrated how “character” can mean something very different in two different contexts, whether in the show’s internal world or diegesis, as championed by Chase, or in the world inhabited by the shows’ viewers, foregrounded by HBO.

Five weeks after “College,” another episode of The Sopranos would also enact the lateral move, Chase’s preference for the “discrete little movie”: “A Hit Is a Hit” (March 14, 1999), the show’s tenth hour. The chief preoccupation of “A Hit Is a Hit” is music, and specifically the music industry—as advertised by the title, which reflects the impossibility of understanding why some music succeeds commercially, and why some does not. The two chief storylines are bridged by the gangsta rapper Massive Genius—someone who truly has nothing to do with what happened beforehand, or with what happened later, since he appears nowhere else in The Sopranos. One of the two plots involves his attempts to get “reparations” from Tony’s friend Hesh Rabkin, a Jewish mob associate who exploitatively managed R&B bands in the 1950s; the other involves Christopher Moltisanti’s attempts to get his girlfriend, Adriana La Cerva, started as a music producer, with Massive operating as an advisor who is frankly more interested in Adriana herself. Massive essentially takes control of The Sopranos at this juncture, operating as the central agent of plot and serving as the focus of tension and desire. Structurally, the show borrows here from the anthology format, a televisual genre wherein each episode produces a self-contained story, with no relation to
predecessor or successor episodes. Contemporary viewers of *The Sopranos* would have been uncertain about how much to invest in Massive’s character and storylines. Does he matter, in the grand scheme of things? The answer to that question depends on what we imagine *The Sopranos* to be.

Given the central role of music in the episode, it is worth noting that music in *The Sopranos* was a defining authorial concern for David Chase. He made clear that getting a significant music budget was critical to his original deal with HBO, and that “music and this particular cast of actors” were his favorite parts of the series. The show’s use of diverse, pre-existing musical sources—from Bruce Springsteen to Radiohead to opera—meant that each song or selection required no direct reference to the preceding or succeeding one; each musical cue was “discrete,” just as Chase wanted for the episodes themselves. A familiar score in a series, with familiar melodies and practices, helps create continuity; we might think of the recurring musical intensification that typically led to commercial breaks on *Lost* (ABC, 2004–2010), giving that show—which roamed across many genres and styles—an auditory serial thread for the audience, a welcome contact with the familiar. Chase’s aversion to this kind of continuity even applied to his original plan for the title sequence, where he wanted to feature a different song every week. He characterized the televisial convention of using a single initial theme every week as “bourgeois”; but HBO insisted on “something identifiable” at the start of each episode, and he relented. Music’s ability to signal familiarity or change, in other words, represents another version of the continuous and the discontinuous. The cluster of material that we call an album offers a musical parallel to the structural tension between the novel and a series of short stories. A “concept album,” like a novel, promotes connectivity, the promise that the order of the songs is crucial, that everything is linked—a start-to-end logic that mimics one version of serial drama. A collection of singles or separate pieces, like a series of short stories, fractures connectivity, minimizing the importance of sequence and allowing individual songs to be freely excerpted from the group. The first season of *The Sopranos* tested the boundaries between novel and short stories, between concept album and singles collection, and “A Hit Is a Hit” proved to be a particularly problematic case.

“A Hit Is a Hit” appears nowhere in any roll call of the show’s most cherished moments. The *TV Guide Sopranos Companion* summarized and lamented it thusly: “Gangsta rapper meets boy gangster in this rather contrived episode of culture clash that pulls us away from the compelling intrigues of recent episodes.” This judgment expresses a typical way in which serial viewers compartmentalize and justify opinion and evaluation. “College” also depends on contrivance, and on pulling away—from the serendipitous re-encounter with the mob rat to the circumstances under which Carmela and Father Phil spend a night under the
same roof. But “contrivance” in that earlier context is forgiven because the payoff or pleasure trumps, for many viewers, the artifice of accident on which the plots of “College” rest. The schism of reaction between “College” and “A Hit Is a Hit” illustrates the risk/reward of abandoning televisual convention; Chase’s inclination toward a “discrete” rather an integrated hour of events, topics, or people defines what we might call the conflicted or restless television serial, a twenty-first-century phenomenon of which *The Sopranos* has been the most vivid exponent. The most prominent successor, in the conflicted/restless vein, may be *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–present). That show’s creator, Matthew Weiner, was a staff writer for the final seasons of *The Sopranos*, and his series frequently disrupts expectations of serial momentum and narrative convention. “I don’t want there to be a formula,” Weiner has said. “I don’t want people to know what to expect ever when they turn the show on.”

“A Hit Is a Hit” parallels “College” in terms of subject matter, and in terms of season placement. Both episodes obsessively examine art and culture, from an apt quotation from *The Scarlet Letter* that Tony sees on a wall at Bowdoin College during Meadow’s interview to debates over authorship and musical inspiration that occupy the later episode. “A Hit Is a Hit” intensifies the attention to art that we see in “College,” moving from a flurry of allusions to a focus on how art is made, and how art works. And structurally each episode functions as a break, interrupting a defined four-episode serial sequence. “College” follows the first quartet of shows, which depict the illness and death of acting boss, Jackie Aprile, and Tony’s clever orchestration of Uncle Junior’s rise to boss; “A Hit Is a Hit,” meanwhile, appears just when the conflict between Tony and Uncle Junior is on the verge of exploding. Those two placements within the season, however, are not exactly analogous. One crucial difference is that of accumulation. Four hours into cooking a serial season, when the flavors have yet to take hold, we may be tolerant of something new. But after nine hours we are much more likely to grow impatient; Chase’s commitment to the “discrete” film produces distinct problems at distinct points of a thirteen-episode story. A second difference is one of consequence, or aftermath. While “College” may have “nothing to do with” plot and character in terms of the major serial developments of the season, it has a great deal to do with character in terms of our relation to Tony; by contrast, “A Hit Is a Hit” will leave no wake of any kind. In many ways, it is the more radical of the two episodes, and the one that comes closer to performing the subversive job of rejecting serial conventions, within the guts of a singularly successful serial edifice, than anything else Chase and his team attempted. That struggle between freedom and form is explicitly addressed in “A Hit Is a Hit” when a record producer advocates for the clear, connective structure of a song like The Beatles’ “She Loves You” while the lead singer of Adriana’s band, Visiting Day, argues for
something “introspective” and unschematic—another version of serial confor-
mity contrasted with a rejection of recognizable pattern.

Even more than music, one might say that the main topic of “A Hit Is a Hit” is
performance—the performance not just of songs, but of identity categories like
race, class, and ethnicity. Massive Genius performs a designated street persona
but has a degree in Urban Planning; Hesh declares that, as a Jew, he was “the
white man’s nigger” long before hip-hop. In a third story, Tony feels that he is
asked to put on a lower-class, goomba minstrel show in front of his rich neigh-
bors, especially the Cusamanos, in order to gain access to their country club.
The emphasis on performance, and on the instability of identity, connects to the
episode’s focus on the destabilized meanings of capitalism, status, and art in the
postmodern world—the arbitrary value of money after the disappearance of the
gold standard, of status after the 1960s social revolutions, and of art after the col-
lapse of aesthetic hierarchies. “A Hit Is a Hit” is the first Sopranos episode to begin
in New York City, the American epicenter of capitalism, status, and art, and the
precipitating incident of the plot is the unexpected seizure of a huge pile of cash.
Even the “D” story, the smallest element of the episodic interweave, touches on
money and value as Carmela gets involved in the gossipy suburban world of hot
stock tips. Each of these plots points to the fluctuating, possibly arbitrary nature
of worth, meaning, and desire. Christopher offers another version of the prob-
lem of distinguishing how we know what matters, what fixed values things have
or lack, when he laments the imponderables of Adriana’s potential new business:
“Music—it’s not something you can hold in your hands, you know. Like football
betting cards, or coke.” Gambling chits and illegal drugs are the new gold stan-
dard; art, money, and status are an indecipherable mess.

“A Hit Is a Hit” essentially serves as a televisial essay on late twentieth-cen-
tury culture more broadly, including treasured objects such as Murano glass, bi-
dets, Versace clothing, and the Godfather films. The Sopranos, of course, would
soon become such an object itself, a register of cultural acuity for those sharp
enough to subscribe to HBO or purchase the DVDs; the episode, produced in
the vacuum before the first season was aired, divined that a work of television
might also turn into a valuable and tradable commodity, a nugget of knowledge
that is worth something if we think it is worth something. “A Hit Is a Hit” ends
with a clear gesture of viewer-teasing, as Tony—who is eventually frozen out of
the Cusamanos’ social circle—asks his neighbors to do him “a solid” by hiding a
wrapped box, without revealing its contents. We know that the box is filled with
sand, but they regard it with terror: “What is it? Heroin?” “A weapon? Could be
anything.” That box represents the uncertain condition of the entire episode, its
immersion in the traumatic but inescapable state of American current affairs,
where things mean what they mean only by context, or by shared guesswork.
This is a world—both on- and off-screen—where the intrinsic seems opaque or antique, and we can know only by relation. Likewise, a serial episode of a television drama “means” what it means in relation to its seriality, to its relational context with preceding and succeeding episodes. An episode like “A Hit Is a Hit,” which rejects its serial place, may seem to its detractors to create a void of meaning; “A Hit Is a Hit” is unbeloved precisely because it troubles our understanding of what *The Sopranos* is, as a serial narrative enterprise.

The episode shows us that *The Sopranos* is not a collection of characters, in the way that, say, *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001–2005) is a collection of characters; rather, *The Sopranos* is a way of thinking about serial narrative. That distillation of the show may be discomfiting. In a sense, “A Hit Is a Hit” is not so much the companion episode to “College” as its inversion. If that earlier episode appeared to institutionalize our relationship to Tony as the cornerstone of the show, the later one disrupts our sense that any single element, or even any stable cluster of elements, can define the show’s essence. One legacy of “College” and “A Hit Is a Hit” is “Pine Barrens” (May 6, 2001), a late third-season episode involving Christopher and Paulie’s pursuit of a Russian through snowy woods—a Russian who disappears and is never found. “Pine Barrens” was number two on James Poniewozik’s list of *The Sopranos*’ greatest hits—a fact for which he apologized, calling it the “most un-*Sopranos*-like of *Sopranos* episodes,” a “distinctly contained short story... in a series that unfolds like a novel.”11 As I have been claiming, *The Sopranos* does not unfold like a novel; it unfolds like *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, a text that hovers deliberately on the boundary between short story and novel. It is precisely the “un-*Sopranos*-like” episodes that most fully define the series’ narrative interests.

Within the genre of the lateral move, “Pine Barrens” may be closer to “College”; both episodes feature familiar characters in a rural setting trying to kill, in alternately comic and grim fashion, a problematic foe whom the audience has never
encountered before and will never see again. And both seem to be “about” a core territory of the show—underworld assassination—as opposed to being “about” something irrelevant—the world of music—even though David Chase manifestly cares a lot more about music than he does about underworld assassination. Perhaps the most radical consequence of withholding context and consequence can be found in a very different kind of Sopranos episode, one featuring a hugely important serial event. In the sixth-season “Kennedy and Heidi” (May 13, 2007), a major character dies, and Tony ends up on a guilt-ridden, drug-driven escapade in Las Vegas; the episode concludes with him in a peyote haze, staring at a Western sunrise and proclaiming, “I get it!” This grand scene of epiphany suggests a moment of reckoning; surely we’ll find out, a week later, what Tony “got.” Instead, in the next episode, it’s as if that epiphany never happened.

“Kennedy and Heidi” gives the lie to narrative nostrums of “arc” and “development,” screenwriting-manual simplifications of how people operate and how lives happen; surely, it is more “real”—to use the key term that David Chase used to justify the central plot of “College”—to suggest that we as people often end up exactly where we started, that we change very little, that epiphanies are fleeting and delusive and ignored. And which is more “artificial”: the episode that wanders off course, or the episode that obeys the authorial click-clack of plot sequencing? “A Hit Is a Hit” valorizes the disruption and the pause, over the flow. Its model—the collection of singles—taps into our current moment of iTunes, and the crumbling of the album as a serial object. “A Hit Is a Hit,” as an anti-serial serial episode, in 1999 anticipated the digital atomization of culture consumption. Is a season a concept album? Or is a season a collection of singles? Can it be both at the same time?

NOTES

2. The Sopranos, “David Chase Interview” (Season 1 DVD, HBO Video, 2001).
3. Ibid.
5. The Sopranos, “David Chase Interview.”
8. The Sopranos, “David Chase Interview.”

**Further Reading**


