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## From Here to *InFinnerty*: Tony Soprano and the American Way

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# From Here to In*F*innerty

## *Tony Soprano and the American Way*

Terri Carney

As fellow critics have pointed out in a myriad of published studies on the series, *The Sopranos* challenges the traditional gangster genre formula and brings the mob closer to all of us: Tony and his gang inhabit a recognizable world of Starbucks, suburbia, and SUVs. They discuss issues of the day, the same ones we discuss when we turn off the TV after the episode.<sup>1</sup> In short, they inhabit a quotidian reality that is continuous with our own, and we are prevented from drawing the neat lines that allow us a comfortable remove from the horror of the “criminal world,” as David Simon’s book *Tony Soprano’s America* convincingly demonstrates. Indeed, the series is an allegory that shows how the workings of the Italian American Mafia are not so different from the latest incarnation of the American way crystallized in the contemporary, corporate, middle-class consumer culture of the baby boomers, or what David Brooks has deemed “bobo culture.”

Both groups, the Italian American Mafia and the bobos, espouse individualistic values, thrive in liberal markets, and dabble in partial morality to justify their wealth accumulation and the me-first practices that obtain that wealth. If indeed *The Sopranos* is a meditation on the possibility of redemption, as Ellen Willis claims in “Our Mobsters, Ourselves” (2), then the question of Tony’s morality and possible redemption is indisputably linked to our own. Cathleen Kaveny echoes this reading when she claims that “the everyday brutality of ‘civilian’ American family life bears an uncomfortable resemblance to life in the ‘family’ of organized crime. So the question of whether the Sopranos and their circle

can be redeemed, in my view, is inextricably related to the question of whether we ourselves can be redeemed" (11).

If the whole series investigates this question of redemption for Tony and pushes viewers to see Tony's universe as an extension of our own, it is the Kevin Finnerty sequence ("Join the Club," 6.2, and "Mayham," 6.3) that intensifies this central concern and ratchets up the pressure on both Tony and the viewers to own up to their participation in immoral systems. After Junior shoots Tony as a kick-off to the final season ("Members Only," 6.1), Tony lies in a coma with a gaping hole in his stomach while his friends and family maintain vigil at his hospital bedside. At this critical moment, when Tony's fate hangs in the balance, his mind wanders to a realistic dreamscape that many have convincingly interpreted as a sort of purgatory, where we meet the watered-down, middle-management, businessman version of the Tony we know, or, as I will call him for purposes of clarity, "Tony Business." His name is Tony Soprano, he looks like Tony Soprano, and he is from New Jersey, but something is not right. We recognize James Gandolfini's physique, yet his gait and accent have been normalized, and we gather that he is a salesman in the field of precision optics who is attending a professional conference in Costa Mesa, California, a town sandwiched between the heat of raging forest fires and the beacon light of a neighboring town, again symbolizing a limbo for Tony's alter ego.<sup>2</sup> In the comascape of Tony's mind, he projects himself as a moral, normal everyman, but his vision is plagued by persistent interruptions of the reality he would leave behind.

In the alternate universe of comatose Tony Mafia, Tony Business is an honest man with a wife, two kids, and a successful professional life. While on the business trip, at the hotel bar, Tony Business finds he has picked up the wrong briefcase and wallet and that his own are gone. He is now in possession of Kevin Finnerty's identity: his license, credit cards, briefcase, and business papers. We soon learn that Kevin Finnerty, like Tony Business, is a businessman, one who has angered a group of Buddhist monks by selling them a faulty solar heating system and then ignoring their numerous attempts to contact him with complaints. The rest of the sequence, which continues over two episodes, centers on Tony Business's struggle to resist assuming the identity of Kevin Finnerty, even as the evidence accrues that they are one and the same. I read this sequence as being about the possibility for Tony Mafia's redemption, which is predicated on Tony Business recognizing Kevin Finnerty as a facet of himself. By doing so, Tony Business would accept the dishonesty

and fraud that Kevin Finnerty symbolizes and dissolve the superficial differences between the two men, thereby denying the coma dream of being an honest businessman. In order to be saved you must own your sins.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that Tony Business is being held accountable for another man's immoral practices dramatizes degrees of guilt and complicity within a business culture that defines success by monetary gain and reduces humanity to a stack of identification cards and boarding passes. When the Buddhist monk responds to Tony Business's argument that he is not Kevin Finnerty with an ironic "To a certain extent, all Caucasians look alike," he gives voice to an overarching theme: all businessmen, from Tony Business to Kevin Finnerty to Tony Mafia, will have to account for their part in the corrupt practices of accumulating wealth in disregard of fellow human beings, whether those fellow humans be murdered or more indirectly victimized. Of course, this circle of complicity implicates us, the viewers, as well: the Kevin Finnerty sequence is an allegory for how our collective business practices and materialist culture taints all of us. We, like Tony, are unavailable to redemption as long as we blindly support and enable an economic system that is self-justifying even when perpetrating "victimless" crimes such as polluting the environment or cheating employees out of benefits and retirement packages.<sup>4</sup> As another monk urges: "Someone must take responsibility."

Tony Business and Kevin Finnerty are incremental steps on the line that connects us to Tony Mafia, and we are called on to own them both. Such a direct summons for audience awareness is, of course, safely tucked into the dream cycle, thereby subduing any violent or unseemly reactions to heavy doses of cognitive dissonance. It is funny to think about the largely negative reaction to the sequence, with many bloggers and online commentators expressing impatience and disgust with the story line. It is as if resistant viewers were in therapy and faced with a new truth about themselves that they are unwilling or unable to accommodate, similar to when Tony faces the evidence of his mother's murderous plot against him and throws a table in Melfi's office ("Isabella," 1.12).

Tony Business does not recognize Kevin Finnerty as his responsibility despite unrelenting pressure to do so, although he reluctantly adopts his identity coordinates at key moments when convenient. For example, without his own identification and credit cards, Tony Business is "forced" to book a hotel room under Kevin Finnerty's name and credit

card. As he confesses to his wife on the phone, he is worried about committing fraud, but he does it all the same.<sup>5</sup> (Significantly, one of Tony Mafia's "victimless" crimes is credit-card fraud, a scheme that preys on seniors.) In the hotel lobby, Tony Business checks in as Kevin Finnerty and attracts the attention of the angry Buddhist monks, who now identify him as Kevin Finnerty, the solar-heating salesman who sold them a faulty system and never returned their calls. Still sure that he is not Finnerty, though he admits jokingly that there is a strong resemblance, Tony Business tries to explain his situation, but to no avail. The next day an envelope slides under his hotel room door with a summons for him, Kevin Finnerty, to appear in court over the matter. Through this sequence, we see how easy it is to be corrupted, how seamlessly he flows from Tony Business to Kevin Finnerty, and how difficult it is to turn back once you have taken the first small step downward.

The involvement of the viewers in the checkered moral universe of American business practices is intensified by the use of crosscutting, which can underline contradictions, hypocrisies, and unresolved conflicts that require awareness if they are to be resolved. As Glen Creeber points out in "TV Ruined the Movies," the technique of crosscutting "between scenes of extreme violence and domestic warmth . . . gives an important moral and ethical context to the story, graphically revealing the hypocrisy that lies beneath the Mafia's respectable veneer" (131). An example of this technique in *The Sopranos* occurs in "College" (1.5), in which Tony's brutal murder of an old enemy is juxtaposed with a bucolic New England college tour with his daughter Meadow.

In the symbolically dense Kevin Finnerty episode, that central strategy is used almost frenetically, rendering the Tony Mafia–Kevin Finnerty–Tony Business spectrum a fluid, borderless terrain of identity. The editing in the Kevin Finnerty episodes continually juxtaposes the worlds of Tony Mafia in the hospital and Tony Business/Kevin Finnerty in Costa Mesa, yet unmistakable overlaps and echoes from one to the next create a thick connective tissue that suggests strong parallels between the two. The viewer is therefore put in the same situation as Tony Business: unable to definitively say where one businessman begins and another ends.

The most pervasive of these connecting themes is what I will call the Asian theme.<sup>6</sup> There is an undeniably negative, almost threatening tone to this thematic fiber of the connective tissue, and a persistent emphasis on the material trumping the spiritual, or at least a failure to integrate

the two in any meaningful balance. In the Costa Mesa universe, Tony Business has several tense encounters with the Buddhist monks and even drives out to their Crystal Monastery, a visually rich setting replete with Buddhist statuary and gardens, to discuss the Kevin Finnerty misunderstanding. In the Tony Mafia universe, there are many Asian references in the hospital: Tony Mafia's doctor is Asian, and similar in appearance to one of the Buddhist monks in the Kevin Finnerty sequence; Janice mentions having had Chinese food when arriving to relieve Carmela at Tony's bedside; Christopher references the new Asian horror-film craze when talking about his film ("Asians flip for those films"); Meadow makes two seemingly unimportant mentions of the Asian hospital workers, once to A.J. ("The Chinese guy is going to change his meds") and then, later, when she escorts Paulie into Tony's hospital room and warns him about the Asian nurse ("She's a real ballbuster"). The peacefulness we stereotypically attribute to Buddhism and Eastern spirituality is haunted by an aggressive, even menacing tone or is reduced to a commodity. As if to drive this point home, we notice that A.J. is wearing a T-shirt with Asian lettering and Sil's bathroom decor incorporates Chinese lettering in an ornamental pattern.

Another pervasive theme echoing between the two realms is responsibility and memory, two essential ingredients in the formula for redemption. Tony Business is told by his telephone wife that he is "too distracted with work" and that this whole Kevin Finnerty mix-up is "partly [his] fault." The Buddhist monk at the monastery responds to Tony Business's explanation of not being Kevin Finnerty with a pragmatic version of Buddhist theory: "Yeah, I know, no me, no you, only trees, but we need heat. Someone needs to take responsibility." This responsibility/memory theme suffuses the Tony Mafia world as well. In Junior's prison interview for mental competency, the central question to be determined is whether he will bear responsibility for his crime against Tony Mafia. In the very next scene, in a strategic montage sequence, we switch realms to witness Tony Business, who has just been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, say to the doctor, "My uncle has memory loss," a comment that connects the Alzheimer's theme to a failure to own one's crimes, or at least an excuse not to see them as your own. The topic of responsibility and memory gets a sardonic, humorous treatment at Phil's dinner table, back in the Tony Mafia universe again, where Phil and Vito discuss the death of Phil's brother. A newly enraged Phil declares, "I don't forget," pounding his fist for punctuation. But then one of the wives interrupts

with an offer of tea or coffee, and a few seconds later, after a brief contemplative pause with Vito, Phil resumes their conversation with, “I forget what we were talking about.” “Me too,” responds Vito, creating an ironic perspective for the viewer, who sees the frailty of human memory and the consequences for personal responsibility. Finally, Dr. Melfi and Carmela discuss the heavy responsibility on Tony and Carmela for having raised their children in a world of duplicity and deception, and Melfi unequivocally places responsibility on Carmela, who seems to accept it in a moment of extreme, painful clarity.

A third and final theme strengthens the connective tissue—a collection of health-related elements, namely stomach ailments, MRIs, and Band-Aids. Tony Mafia’s gaping stomach wound seems to reverberate semantically between the two worlds: Charmaine Bucco in Carmela’s story has stomach cramps, and Tony must save her from drowning; A.J. has stomach issues after eating a burrito; and Tony Business’s daughter reports that his son can’t get on the phone because he is vomiting. Tony’s head is also in two places at once. In Carmela’s unforgettable monologue over Tony Mafia’s hospital bed, she recants telling Tony Mafia during an MRI (in the pilot) that he is going to hell: “You are not going to hell, I didn’t mean it.” From this scene we switch to Tony Business in Costa Mesa, where his doctor discusses Tony’s MRI after his fall down the hotel stairs. His diagnosis is early Alzheimer’s. In one of the final scenes of the Costa Mesa setting we recall the image of lonely and confused Tony Business in his hotel room with a Band-Aid on his head, contemplating his Alzheimer’s diagnosis, a sad scene that quickly segues to Paulie at his kitchen table cutting coupons for Band-Aids, all the while complaining about having to give Carmela a cut from the last heist.

The three themes highlight the lack of balance in Tony Mafia’s life and the consequences he must face: he has not managed to integrate the compartments of his life; he has not taken responsibility or repented for his numerous sins/crimes; and his physical and mental ailments symbolize the price for his disconnectedness and his partial morality.<sup>7</sup> He will not be redeemed, and the consistent implication for the viewer into the world of Tony Mafia means a similarly bleak reading of our own chances at redemption. The series has repeatedly used strategic casting, or what we might call “actor residues,” to conflate or confuse viewers’ reality with that of the fictional characters, again pushing to incriminate the viewer in the moral universe we are loath to accept as our own.<sup>8</sup> In some cases, it is a previous acting role that lends a savvy intertextuality

to the series, as is the case with Michael Imperioli (Christopher) and Lorraine Bracco (Melfi), who were both in *Goodfellas* (1990). In others, as in the case of Tony Sirico (Paulie), real-life behaviors can flavor the *Sopranos* character, creating a three-dimensional quality that leaps into our own sphere of reality and inscribes an eerie textual self-awareness. In the concentrated Kevin Finnerty sequence, the effect of ontological seepage deepens through the characters of Kevin Finnerty, the man on the driver's license in Tony Business's limbo, and Lee, the woman at the business dinner who kisses Tony Business in the hotel parking lot, resulting in a blurring of the world of the Italian American Mafia and that of bobo America.

The casting of Sheila Kelley as Tony Business's fling Lee imports an actress residue that solidifies our reading of Tony Business as a tamer version of Tony Mafia. The actress founded a successful exercise craze based on the movements of striptease and pole dancing, which she calls the "S factor." The website detailing the philosophy and mission of her business ([www.sfactor.com](http://www.sfactor.com)) sells suburban soccer moms who have likely never been in a strip club the chance to release their inner goddess. If Tony Business is Tony Mafia's watered-down self, it makes sense that Tony Mafia's omnipresent stripper girls are replaced with the mainstreamed version of stripping, which is sold to the average American woman wanting to lose a few pounds and look good for her husband while grabbing a bit of feminist self-possession, even as she spins around a stripper's pole in high heels and little clothing. Like Tony Business, she represents the world of bobos: selling things without selling out. Corporate gain is justified by the purported spiritual underpinnings of the business product or mission; as Brooks pithily puts it, the "comfortable contortion of caring capitalism." Along with the aggressive Buddhist monks, Sheila Kelley's character taints the white-bread Tony Business with the residue of violent and sexy mob life under the bland veneer of middle-class, middle-management mid-America. Tony Business is the honest businessman who figures as a cog in the military-industrial complex; Kevin Finnerty is the dishonest businessman who sells solar heat to Buddhist monks; and we are somewhere on that same spectrum, along with Tony Mafia.

The clever casting of Lee plots us closer to the world of Tony Mafia, and the Kevin Finnerty character contributes to the same effect. Kevin Finnerty's address in Kingman, Arizona, which we see on his driver's license in the sequence, can be found on Google maps. Kingman is equidistant (around one hundred miles) to two American tourist attrac-



tions: Las Vegas and the Grand Canyon, capitals of materialism and spirituality, respectively, polar pillars of the fundamental tension embodied by bobo culture.

When Tony Mafia awakens from his coma, he seems changed by his experience, but soon he is back to business as usual. When he suffocates a bleeding and barely breathing Christopher after a gruesome car accident (“Kennedy and Heidi,” 6.18), Tony attempts to revisit the revelatory experience from his coma, perhaps trying again to effect real change in his life. He heads out to Arizona (Kevin Finnerty’s state), hooks up with a college student who strips for money (an upgraded stripper like Lee), and enjoys an altered state of consciousness by taking peyote (like his altered state of coma). High and happy, Tony Mafia and the educated stripper win big at the Las Vegas casino and wind up at a scenic park that conjures the spiritual, natural beauty of the Grand Canyon. Here, Tony appears to have a revelation: while staring at the sunrise over the desert, he screams, “I get it!” A sort of identity labyrinth is created, and the worlds of Tony Mafia, Tony Business, and Kevin Finnerty echo and repeat the personal coordinates of each. The peyote episode confirms that Tony Mafia’s redemption is connected to the Kevin Finnerty sequence, and that his redemption/revelation is, indeed, illusory: he “gets it”? The “get it” would mean to assume responsibility, yet clearly he still thinks he can reconcile greed and virtue—that he can have them both by somehow blending wealth accumulation and violence with spiritual purpose and fulfillment.

Our bobo culture tries to reconcile materialism and spirituality but fails. We are still, like Tony Business, reluctant or unable to accept responsibility for the evils of individualistic, corporate capitalism, which fuels greed and personal gain at the expense of spirituality, communitarianism, and shared humanity.<sup>9</sup> Many viewers hated the Kevin Finnerty sequence. The salient themes in these two episodes show that violence and greed prevail over spiritual and other methods of “coping,” like therapy and Buddhism. Indeed, narratives of integration such as Buddhism, psychoanalysis, and bobo capitalism merely enable us to remain disconnected, like Tony. They are a Band-Aid to a deeper, structural problem: our collective and willful Alzheimer’s.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

1. Various studies confirm that the world of *The Sopranos* is one we all share, whether we call it postmodern, post-countercultural, bourgeois, me generation, or suburbia. Albert Auster states: “Theirs is a world of suburban

split levels, shopping malls, soccer moms and dads, SATs, and videogames. . . . Indeed the old urban restlessness of the gangster has been replaced in *The Sopranos* by suburban smugness” (11).

2. See two chapters from Richard Greene and Peter Verneze’s 2004 book *The Sopranos and Philosophy: Wilson, “Staying within the Family,”* which treats Tony’s morality as a mirror of our own contemporary business ethics, and Gini, “Bada Bing and Nothingness,” in which Al Gini notes, “In his mind he’s just a businessman trying to get by and do well for his family” (11).

3. Kaveny writes: “As a self-described devout Catholic, Carmela surely knows that redemption from sin requires repentance and a firm resolve to amend one’s ways” (13).

4. See Green, “I Dunno about Morals.”

5. According to Verneze, fraud is lower in Dante’s circles (along with deception) than murder or greed. It is a uniquely human sin and our greatest evil (186).

6. See Combs for a look at how Tony tries and fails to incorporate Eastern thought into his world.

7. Combs concludes that “Tony compartmentalizes his life as a coping mechanism. He distances his emotional and spiritual self from his consciousness in order to cope with his racism, sexism, and inhumanity. Unless he recognizes the connectedness of all things, the imbalances in his life, and his role in promoting unhappiness in others, Tony’s entire life, let alone his therapy, will fail to promote harmony” (24). Santo connects Tony’s fat body with the corruption of the American Dream, greed, and moral bankruptcy.

8. Several other *Sopranos* critics discuss what I call actor residues: Creeber (“TV Ruined the Movies,” 126), Yacowar (11), Akass and Macabe (148), and Bondanella (309).

9. Richard Stivers writes: “For meaning to be effective it must be shared meaning that binds people together in common responsibilities and reciprocal moral relationships. Consumerism is a shared belief but it leaves one psychologically isolated, for it is based upon freedom without responsibility. The attempt to create meaning in consumerism, to spiritualize consumerism, fails because its utopian promise of perfect happiness and health cannot be achieved in this world, and therefore happiness and health remain transitory, as anxiety, suffering, and death constantly remind us” (69). Martha Nochimson describes “a culture awash in pious pronouncements about the value of both individualism and family which allows no way to integrate the blood ties of family with the isolating drive necessary to individuals bound for success” (“Waddaya Lookin’ At?,” 5). Steven Hayward and Andrew Biro assert that “Tony is trying to sustain community solidarity and at the same time must relentlessly focus on the bottom line. Forced to inhabit a world in which the forces of commodification are such as to continually emphasize individualism and personal gratification at the expense of solidarity and communal pleasures, it is perhaps not surprising that Tony is insecure” (209).

10. Willis examines how Tony “uses what he’s learned in therapy—that you can’t compartmentalize your life—to more fully accept his worst impulses” (7).