

What is so Good About *The Sopranos*?

By Enes Erbay*

The boundaries between television drama and cinema have blurred in recent years. Tim Van Patten, the director of *The Sopranos*, once said “This show [*The Sopranos*] is like making a feature in nine to twelve days”.

This review looks at what is quality television and what makes *The Sopranos* so successful. “Quality Television” term has started to be used by critics and scholars after 1990s to describe a genre which contains the style, content and its subject. They use this term to qualify the television show to higher than others. But what are those reasons making those shows better than others? Kristin Thompson's criteria for “quality television” programs are “...a quality pedigree, a large ensemble cast, a series memory, creation of a new genre through recombination of older ones, self-consciousness, and pronounced tendencies toward the controversial and the realistic”. Also, US group Viewers For Quality Television describes Quality Television as “A quality show is something we anticipate, focuses more on relationships, explores character, it enlightens, challenges, involves and confronts the viewer; it provokes thought...”

Cinematic Television

The elements that make the TV series more cinematic are

The logo for the television series 'The Sopranos'. The word 'The' is in a smaller, white, serif font above the word 'Sopranos', which is in a larger, white, serif font. The background is black.



good acting, good script and a big budget. In *The Sopranos*, each episode is polished like a feature film. They shoot it on 35mm film and 16:9 aspect ratio. They keep the scenes a bit longer than usual. They focus on the characters more than the action. Each character has its own arc and personal inside problems. For example, in the season three, the episode seven, the audience watches Carmela Soprano is dealing with herself being a wife to a sinner and criminal husband. Or Vito's own story within few episodes in season 6, he is dealing with his mafia fellows finding out that he is a homosexual. As David Chase says, it is more visual than talking. Also during the shooting process having higher budgets gives them to work on the episode like it is a feature film.

What is so good about *The Sopranos*?

The creator of *The Sopranos* David Chase (David DeCesare), is a member of an Italian-American family in New Jersey. He says that it is impossible to grow up in New Jersey and not to envy mafia life style. His first intend was making a film called *The Sopranos* which is a story of his old neighbourhood in New Jersey. He wanted to add his family's stories and combining them with some mafia flavour. However, after some time, he realised that making this a TV show would be better. He set the main roof of the show within the idea of Tony Soprano seeing a psychiatrist and dealing with his mother's issues from his childhood.

The Sopranos has all the elements that make a TV series a Quality TV. Like big group of good actors, excellent script, shooting it on 35mm film, stories more about the characters, more visual style, 16:9 aspect ratio etc. All those elements make *The Sopranos* more cinematic and better series than the other ones.

In the show, most of the characters are Italian-American. Some of the actors had been in some projects together earlier from *The Sopranos*. David Chase had interviews with all the actors personally. One of the main criteria of choosing the right actors is the accent.

To be more specific, we should focus on to the characters inside the show. First of all, we should focus on the head of the family, Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini). Tony is the 3rd generation member of an Italian-American family. His grand fathers came to America from Naples, Italy, as stone workers. They settled down in New Jersey. Later on, as a second generation, Tony's father

got into illegal business and so Tony. So, as a mafia member, we can say that Tony is an anti-hero. These characters acts and do their duties as other protagonists successfully but their methods to do these tasks are different than typical protagonists. It is the same case with Tony Soprano who can be evaluated as a typical anti-hero. Anti-hero characters are mean, brutal, selfish, sarcastic, pessi-



mistic, and they contempt the social values. So, anti-heroes act within a classical hero impulses but he also carries those weak characteristics with himself. Because of that, the audience cannot identify those characters with themselves but they can't ignore them as well. We can see all these characteristics in Tony Soprano.

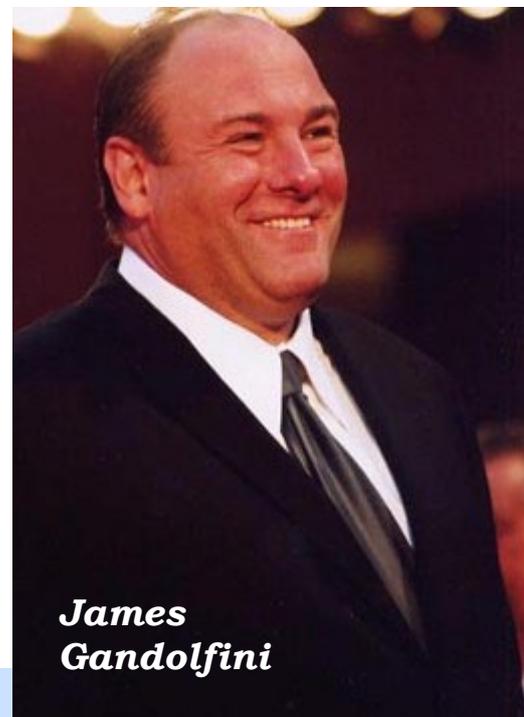
After the scripts of the last episodes, the audience have started to realise that he is not a typical mafia boss figure. The audience noticed his sick and repulsive actions and they accepted that he was a defected character as such. He has a lot of atypical characteristics than earlier mafia figures in cinema or literature. Such as his sense of humour, his psychological issues about his mother and talking about these issues to a psychiatrist, and usually being on medication (antidepressant). Thanks to the great acting of James Gandolfini, Tony Soprano became the most phenomenal character of television history. He won over ten awards for his performance in *The Sopranos*. At the end of eight year, James Gandolfini says "The character has been with me for so long, it's a relief to let him go."

All actors add a lot of quality to the show with their great performance. One of them is a recognizable actor, Steve Buscemi. He joined *The Sopranos* in the fifth season. When David Chase confessed that he wanted him in the show from the minute he created it, the same confession came from Steve Buscemi who said that he wanted to be in the show from the minute he saw the show. However, until the season five, they had never mentioned it to each other. David Chase says "We never talked about it because I was embarrassed to ask him to come on the show. He's Steve Buscemi, he's got a thriving feature career, and the TV life is very difficult for an actor". Also, Steve Buscemi says "It's something that I thought about sometimes but I was too shy to mention it". At the end, it happened and Steve Buscemi became a part of *the Sopranos* family. Apart from acting, he also directed one episode in the fifth season. After his great performance in that, he was nominated for the Best Supporting Actor and for the Best Directing for a Drama Series.

The end of *The Sopranos* caused a big conflict among its fans. Some fans were really happy about the ending but some of them did not like the ending. Steve Buscemi was one of the happy ones "I loved it. I thought it was brilliant... When it cut to black, I was shocked but I was relieved because I don't think I could have taken it if I had to witness anything happen to his family or to him." **PR**

Notes:

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**James
Gandolfini**