

Running Joke: Criticism of Italian American Culture through Comedy in *The Sopranos*

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Introduction

Often read as tragic realism, *The Sopranos* has rarely been seen in the light of the comedy created in every episode. While a number of television critics and commentators have compared the series to the tragedies of Shakespeare (Bushby 2007, Macintyre 2007, Varble 2007), none have focused on the comic elements, which, as I will show, are descendants of Italian *Commedia dell'Arte* and Shakespearean comedies. The best way of seeing this is to focus on the character Paulie Walnuts, whom I see as an Italian American version of the *zanni* of the *Commedia* or the fool/clown of Shakespeare.¹ In this article, I present David Chase's serial narrative as a comedy that serves not only to create laughter but also to criticize U.S. and especially Italian American culture through the character Paulie Walnuts. Before I launch into this reading I want to present a few words on just how we might read the seriality of Chase's narrative.

So much of what we know as criticism of television programs comes to us through the lenses of theater and film studies, and while these approaches cover the basics of critiquing stock characters, plots, shots, sound and scene making, it does little to make us aware of the

¹A *zanni* is the servant figure in the *commedia dell'arte* troupe. See Robert Henke, *Performance and Literature in the Commedia dell'Arte* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002).

power that seriality has as it «allows viewers, performers, and characters to settle into familiar relations» (Logan 2015: 33). As Elliot Logan points out in one of the few articles that cover performance in serial television, «Central also is serial television’s provisionality, which allows for such relations—and the understandings arrived through them—to be radically revised by previously unforeseen or unplanned turns of even, performance, style or tone, and for the discoveries found therein to further ramify into the future» (Ibid.: 33-34). Paulie, one of the few characters to be in nearly every episode, from the beginning of the series to the end, develops unlike any other through what I can only suggest is his evolution as a dramatic tool for the writers. Logan cites critic Sean O’Sullivan to strengthen his point: «This aspect of television serials—their ongoing expansion into an unformed future—poses substantial challenges to the criticism of such works (O’Sullivan 2013)» (Ibid.: 34). It is from this point of departure that I look back to one of the most successful serial television programs in U.S. history to explore the role that humor plays in the criticism of Italian American culture in *The Sopranos*. I am specifically interested in the way Paulie “Walnuts” Gualtieri (played by Gennaro Anthony Sirico) can be read as the program’s central clown or fool as he evolved over the eight-six hour-long episodes during its six season run².

I see Paulie as an Italian American who represents an element of the Italian American community that is regularly criticized by the series writers. Through Italian American eyes, he can be read as the “chooch” or “ciuccio”. In an earlier article I discussed in detail the origins and function of the “chooch” in Italian and Italian American

² Logan quotes from the preface of Andrew Klevan’s *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation* (2005): «We may well be rewarded for concentrating on a performer as they *merely* turn a street corner, sit in a chair, touch a wall, move around a bedroom or carry a bunch of lowers [...]. Interpretations unfold and complicate with our moment-by-moment experience of view the performer’s activity». I use this cue as my entry into the study of the comic evolution of the character Paulie Walnuts in my exploration of the use of comedy in *The Sopranos*.

cultures. I see him/her as a “signifying donkey” who represents the hard working immigrant type who seems stubborn and stupid, yet can often provide brilliant and valuable insights into life. Mikhail Bakhtin has observed that the figure of the donkey has been known for centuries to symbolize the common folk and their position at the bottom of the social hierarchy, he writes: «The ass is one of the most ancient and lasting symbols of the material body lower stratum, which at the same time degrades and regenerates» (1984: 78). This dual function of the figurative “ciuccio” is what I will be exploring through my reading of the performances of Paulie Walnuts throughout *The Sopranos* series.

One of the most popular and critically acclaimed serials in the history of U.S. television, *The Sopranos* lasted six seasons, from 1999 to 2004. The HBO smash hit is riddled with humor, but hasn't usually been read with this perspective in mind. From its number of episodes, 86 – a restaurant term that suggests the end of something –, to characters' names as well as the names of their possessions, the series is loaded with signs of humor. To better understand the comic basis of the series it will help us to look to Dante Alighieri, who explained his use of “Commedia” in a letter he addressed to Lord Can Grande della Scala:

To understand the title, it must be known that comedy is derived from *comos*, “a village,” and from *oda*, “a song” so that a comedy is, so to speak, “a rustic song.” Comedy then is a certain genre of poetic narrative differing from all others. For it differs from tragedy in its matter, in that tragedy is tranquil and conducive to wonder at the beginning but foul and conducive to horror at the end, or catastrophe [...]. Comedy, on the other hand, introduces a situation of adversity, but ends its matter in prosperity [...]. Tragedy uses an elevated and sublime style, while comedy uses an unstudied and low style, which is what Horace implies in the *Art of Poetry* [...]. (1973: 100)

Dante begins his *Commedia* in Hell and ends in Paradise. David Chase begins *The Sopranos* in the hell of earth and ends the six-year season with an Italian American version of *Paradise*, the prosperous family at the dinner table. In the end, I read *The Sopranos* as an imaginary song of an Italian American cosmos played in the key of comedy.

Humor and Italian American Culture

The Soprano family is an Italian American success story, having achieved the “American Dream” in many ways. They are descendants of the Italian immigrants to the United States who had much to dream about as they made their way to the U.S., but they also had much to fear. Often those fears became the basis for humor that appeared in the *macchiette* (sketches) of actors like Eduardo Migliaccio, known on the stage as Farfariello, who performed Italian language based comedy in New York during the early twentieth century. The end of public Italian language entertainment due to the loss of the Italian language as the major means of communication among generations has led to the loss of a tradition of humor that once was a major tool in dealing with fears and coming to terms with issues of personal and public identities. It has also led to the development of a public presence of humor that is more reactionary than revolutionary in that it doesn’t offer alternative or progressive perspectives of the status quo of contemporary American life.

Without the vehicle of humor that helped to identify common problems, confront uncertainties, identify and combat injustices, and strengthen community identity, immigrant fears would grow into terrors that would be repressed. Take a look at the perils involved with immigrant travel and entry experiences, crystallized in such films as *Nuovomondo* (2006), the 1891 mass lynchings in New Orleans, the terror of the experiences of Sacco and Vanzetti, and that of enemy alien internment during World War II, and then the Post War Rise of media Mafia mania, and you will see the obstacles that have kept Italian

Americans from publicly identifying as Italian Americans, a crucial step in creating a tradition of humor.

Professor Gaetano Cipolla points out in his essay “Do Sicilians Have a Sense of Humor?” (2016) that while it may be difficult to see, humor is very important in Sicilian culture.

Only by seeing the tragic events of their history through a carnival reflecting mirror could Sicilians have survived to this day as independent thinkers, only by adopting a reflective attitude that is universally accepted on the island as a just response to the vicissitudes of life could they have overcome the ever present temptation to become tragic figures. That attitude is expressed in a nearly untranslatable exhortation Sicilians use as advice to others when things get too overwhelming. The expression is “futtitinni!” No matter how important things are, this advice tells people that nothing is worth getting sick over it. “Futtitinni” means “don’t let it weigh on you too much, don’t be obsessive about it!” This expression was brought to a grotesque dimension by Pirandello when he invented “la filosofia del lontano” for one of his characters [Dottor Fileno in “A Character’s Tragedy”]. “The philosophy of distance” was a character’s response to the tragedies of life. In order not to be too upset by painful events, this Pirandellian character projected them into the past, pretending they happened not that day or the week before, but years before. Thus when one day his young daughter died he reacted by being cheerful as though the death had occurred many years before. Pirandello’s “filosofia del lontano” is a form of “futtitinni” to the nth degree. It’s born from the same attitude that places inner peace, tranquility of mind, above the ups and downs of daily life. It is a desire to smooth over the rough and rocky road on which Sicilians have had to walk in their history.

While the transference of this sense of humor to the U.S. can be found in the early comic theatrics of the likes of Eduardo Migliaccio and Nicola Paone, it is something that weakened, at least publically, as Italian immigrants assimilated into American culture. This sense of

distancing is one that will catch the attention of more contemporary Italian American writers, as we will see in the work of Don DeLillo and others.

In an earlier article³ I have identified what I have called an irony deficiency in Italian American culture that most often occurs in the generation of children of immigrants. This deficiency contributes to the lack of development of a tradition of humor in Italian American culture that is observable in most other American ethnic groups. Irony deficiency comes from ignorance (especially of one's history), fear, and or the inability to detach oneself from what it is that can be ironized. This leads to the disease of literalism evidenced by the inability to figure out, or outfigure, attempts to be humorous.

A recent site for observing this disease is in many of the responses of individuals and organizations to such programs as *The Sopranos*. More unified acts by Italian Americans have been launched against fictional portrayals of the mafia than were ever mounted against the real mafiosi in the United States.

The complete opposite is true in Italy where people have risked and lost their lives in pursuit of reality. So what is it about irony deficiency that leads to such behavior?

Now I must be clear that I am not saying that children of Italian immigrants lack irony altogether. Certainly there is a great deal of irony in the writings of the likes of Jerre Mangione, Pietro di Donato, John Fante and Rita Ciresi; what I am interested is where in their writings the irony is located, where it isn't, and why there is a lack of it in certain situations. And so one of the sites to observe this is in the portrayal of the working class Italian in American comedy.

One of the great historical crises of the 20th century was the alienation of working-class identity from everyday consciousness. As

³ See my essay "'What'ya Mean I'm Funny?' Ball-Busting Humor and Italian American Masculinities", *Gender and Humor: Interdisciplinary and International Perspectives*, Ed. Chiara Delia and Raffaella Baccolini, London, Routledge, 2014: 240-252.

we can tell from the most recent election campaigns, the focus of political attention has shifted to the middle class, at the expense of the working-class majority of the United States.

For illustration purposes, let's take the mafia obstacle as an example of how public humor constructed by Italian Americans is used as a tool in constructing American identities.

The Gangster as Comic Trope

Roberto Saviano, author of *Gomorra*, the powerful story of the Camorra in Naples writes that silence is not the way to confront the fear of organized crime, and I would add that neither is protesting dramatic portrayals of mafiosi. As I mentioned earlier, Italian Americans have spent more time and money fighting fictional gangsters than they have fighting real mafiosi in their midst. And as we will see, the humor generated around the Mafia, especially that of stand-up comedians, rarely, if never, employs irony, and almost always reinforces negative stereotypes.

In the past, Italian American public silences have been created by two fears. One is the fear of the real *mafiosi*, which is what keeps the gangsters alive and well; the other is the fear of being publically identified as Italian American. These fears have resulted in the creation of a present day silence of Italian Americans about the true nature of their culture, leaving their representation in the hands of the mass media that maintains ignorance about Italian American realities. Not knowing their own past has led Italian Americans to combat fictional representations the way Don Quixote went after windmills. They do this so as not to reveal the fragility of their ethnic identity.

Famed dame of American etiquette Emily Post tells us that «a man whose social position is self-made is likely to be detested» (quoted in Foster 2005: 50), unless, I would add, he is the Italian American gangster, in which case, he will be adored. Prior to Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), no one wanted to be identified as a gangster, and that includes the gangster himself. After the film, everyone wanted to be a gangster and they could. All they

had to do was dress, act, and talk like the gangsters in the movies, and they were set. In his novel, *Underworld*, DeLillo uses the gangster as a source of humor. When the wife of the novel's protagonist Nick Shay Costanza tells one of his coworkers that Nick is half Italian, the coworker says:

"I hear it in that voice he does." She asks: "What voice?"

"The gangster making threats."

"What gangster?"

"It's a voice he does. Expert, stereotyped, pretty funny." (1997: 165)

Later, Nick reveals a secret from his past to his wife in the same mobster voice: «In udder words I took him off the calendar». Nick's secret is that when he was a young boy he accidentally killed a man. Nick's imitation of the gangster's voice shows that anyone can "become" a gangster figure. And he takes on the gangster persona as a way of distancing himself from the reality of his real life – of having killed someone. However, beyond the idea of imitating the gangster, Nick relates to the gangster in terms of solitude. «I've always been a country of one. There's a certain distance in my makeup, a measured separation like my old man's» (Ibid.: 275). He presents a Latinate word that explains it, a word that interestingly connects the artist to the gangster; that word is "lontananza":

Distance or remoteness, sure. But as I used the word, as I interpret it, hard-edged and fine-grained, it's the perfected distance of the gangster, the syndicate mobster—the made man. Once you're a made man, you don't need the constant living influence of sources outside your self. You're all there. You're made. You're handmade. You're a sturdy Roman wall. (Ibid.: 275)

DeLillo has actually taken the quality of the gangster and turned it into something to be emulated by those who want to achieve, if not independence, then certainly a sense of the ability to survive without

much dependence on others. When the professional man takes on the gangster he becomes a rebel public intellectual who can mock the very society in which he thrives. He uses the gangster figure to distance himself from his working-class identity.

We know from a number of studies that the American gangster has, for a long time, been associated with Italian American culture, and my earlier study sought to answer why that is, and I thought I did. But what I missed along the way is that the humor created in the gangster figure also coincides with the way Italian Americans themselves react to this controversial figure. If the gangster gave Italian Americans anything besides social discomfort (what Italian Americans call “agida”), it was an early public sense of power, and this can be observed even today in the comedy of Mike Marino. Unlike what we will see in *The Sopranos*, Marino’s gangster is one of the many examples of Italian American comics using the gangster figure to develop reactionary humor.

Marino prefaces his popular bit, *The Italian President*, by stating his qualifications for speaking about Italians in the U.S. He is blonde, light skinned, but is the son of two Italian immigrants. «I’m full-blooded Italian», he tells us in his sketch on the Italian American president. In the sketch he riffs on what might happen if the U.S. president was an Italian American. In it he uses all the usual stereotypes fostered by the media-made Italian American gangster figure (Marino 2010).

In this routine, he gives the audience exactly what they expect from media made Italians: the tough guy gangster who defies acceptable ways of behaving. And while we know there is no way that two men can achieve what he has the two Italians from New Jersey achieve by locating Bin Laden, the laugh comes more from the absurdity of the situation than its possible reality. In this way then, Marino’s comedy is simply reactionary; he doesn’t present any real incongruency that might help us think differently about the social problem his characters address. Things are quite different in the gangsters created by David Chase.

When a Fool is not just a Fool: Paulie Walnuts as Italian American Everyman

William Shakespeare's fools appear in his plays and are distanced from other characters by their dress, their actions, their words and their comments about the action that takes place in the dramas. The role of the fool is to attract the audience's attention through his ability to say things that other characters can or would never say. In this way, the fool is set up by the writer to bear the brunt of the author's criticism of the society he has created. Paulie Walnuts can also be read in the *zanni* character of Commedia dell'arte. Robert Henke tells us,

Popular literature regarding the *zanni* reveals an oppressed and degraded figure informed by salient ties to the animal world. He is alternatively capable of naïve ignorance and satiric, if usually apolitical, critique at the expense of his social and economic superiors. His zoomorphic range, fleshed out with verbal and especially gestorial repertoires cognate with the Venetian tradition, renders him an anti-mimetic performer. (2002: 23)

As we will see, Paulie Walnuts is invested with a number of these characteristics of the *zanni*. Played by Tony Sirico, who prior to becoming an actor was a mob associate who had real life experiences that he brings into the character he portrays, Paulie Walnuts brings to the series a strong, "anti-mimetic" quality that shows us that life finds its expression through art.

This, I will argue is the very function of Paulie Walnuts. The writers of the show set him up as the brunt of their criticism of Italian American society, but through him, they are also able to criticize the larger American society in which Paulie must function in order to be a successful gangster. Throughout the series, Paulie's character has a two-fold purpose: to point to the strengths and weaknesses of old school Italian immigrant culture and to be juxtaposed to the larger mainstream American society. Of all the characters, Paulie is the one most connected to immigrant culture. He is the one who remembers

the stories of the old immigrants; he is the one who was witness to their speech, behavior, and he absorbed their culture, superstitions and all. Paulie, as a soldier in Tony Soprano's army, is a worker, a good earner, who is willing to do anything to serve his master Tony. Through him, the writers can both poke fun of Italian American immigrant working-class culture as well as criticize American culture. This gangster version of the Shakespearean fool warrants close attention if we are to understand the series as a comedy.

David Chase, the creator and executive producer of the hit series *The Sopranos*, conceived the program in the tradition and spirit of the traditional U.S. gangster film, but he executed it as a commentary on both the genre and contemporary life in the United States. Of all the characters that come to us through *The Sopranos*, the one who develops the most through the series is the one very few critics have taken seriously perhaps because from the first episode, Paulie Walnuts serves as a narrow-minded ethnic other – an ethnic purist and chauvinist. Through him, the writers regularly present a figure that separates the Italian “us” from the American “them”.

Like Shakespeare's fool, Paulie is one of the most colorful characters, in all ways: his dress, his speech, his antics. Like the court jester he's outlandishly costumed: be it leisure suits or Armani knockoff suits, his colors are bright and always coordinated. He's common, vulgar, street smarts not school smarts, his language betrays his creation by television writers as he possesses sophistication that would betray the regular malaprops that he utters.

Paulie seems simple minded, old fashioned, and he doesn't understand that he's different. He is continually confounded by the reality of American life. He is superstitious, sentimental, old school, perverted, psychopathic, and yet, of all the characters in the entire series, there's an arc that takes him from an insensitive thug who thinks nothing of verbally putting down most other characters to the loyal soldier who is not afraid to confess his inner fears to the very man he serves. Paulie Walnuts is a zany character, something Sianne Ngai tells us presents a «distinctive mix of displeasure and pleasure [that] stems not only from its projection of a character exerting herself to

extreme lengths to perform a job, but also from the way in which it immediately confronts us with our aversion to that character» (2012: 11). Through Paulie, a zaniness is created, an experience Ngai says, «remains unsettling, since it dramatizes, through the sheer out-of-controlness of the worker/character's performance, the easiness with which these positions of safety and precariousness can be reversed» (Ibid.).

Paulie regularly acts as a counterpoint to themes such as therapy: he's tried it even before Tony, yet never talks about it except when Tony mentions that he is in therapy, and Paulie's response is that he tried it and learned some coping skills. Paulie also serves as a voice of reason when those around him are losing their minds. Through his character the writers often present a traditional sense of Italian American identity. While they offer it up as typical, they use it to criticize Italian American culture for being out of step with contemporary American culture, evoking the stereotypes that earlier media have presented. His car horn sounds out the opening notes of "Speak Softly Love", the well-known theme song from *The Godfather* film (1.11: 26:31); the ring tone of his cell phone is Paul Simon's "Cecilia", a song with the final line, "I fall on the floor and I'm laughing" (6.21: 29:22).

Chase goes to great lengths to have us identify Paulie as the show's clown, as in the scene from episode five of the second season in which we find Tony and Paulie at the Lou Costello Memorial Park, at the front of which is a statue of Louis Francis Cristillo, the famous American comedian who, one of the earliest Italian Americans in vaudeville, made his name as the chubby fall guy of the Abbott and Costello comedy duo. The scene opens with Paulie staring at the statue (2.5: 8:02 – 9:33). Tony arrives and presents Paulie with the news that Furio is arriving from Italy and that Paulie is being "bumped", receiving a promotion to boss of the crew. As the scene progresses we see the Costello statue over Paulie's shoulder, and it ends with a high shot looking down from the statue's point-of-view to Tony and Paulie hugging; Paulie has been promoted under the gaze of one of the Italian American patron saints of comedy.

While Paulie is making fun of other characters, we can see that Chase is using him to make fun of aspects of Italian American culture. In the second episode of the first season “46 Long”, Pauly and Big Pussy are trying to track down a stolen car and visit a chain of “Starbuck’s-like” coffee shops in search of an employee who was part of the heist. As they are waiting for their drinks Paulie laments what he calls «this espresso shit» (1.2: 15:46 – 16:21) – how U.S. corporations have commodified Italian style coffee, pizza, calzone, and buffalo mozzarella. And later he is seen staring down the espresso makers on the shelves of the store. When Big Pussy whines, «Again with the rape of the culture». Here the writers use Paulie to represent the oversensitivity of Italian Americans who feel their culture has been hijacked by capitalism. Paulie swipes a coffee pot and walks out, an act that represents old school justice: you steal from us, I steal from you (1.2: 23:39 – 24:14). This theft is also a classic act of the *zanni* figure.

Paulie is the character most affected by the return to Italy dramatized in the fourth episode of the second season, entitled “Commendatori”. His are the first words that come to us as they exit the car in front of the Hotel Excelsior in Naples: «Look at this place. The mother country. T, Here they make it real». Tony responds, as though providing the example that Paulie’s argument needs: «Vesuvius, Jesus. Who’s going to tell Artie that mural he spent all that money on looks like a used Trojan compared to this». After Christopher comments on the beauty of Neapolitan women, Paulie asks the driver, in terrible Italian: «Oh, paisan, tutto I “whattayacallit” femmina bello coma qui?». This exchange, as so many others in the series, represents the gap between Italian Americans and Italians, here, a linguistic gap that increasingly becomes a site of humor throughout the series, especially for those who can identify proper Italian speech (2.4: 12:45 – 13:24). Christopher is impressed as he thinks Paulie really knows how to communicate to the local Italians; Paulie, however, comes off as a fool, especially in the eyes of the local Italians⁴.

⁴ While Paulie’s Italian is incorrect, it is another example of how he is more culturally informed than his gangster buddies.

When Tony and the boys are addressed as “Commendatori,” by the hotel manager, it is Paulie who responds: «Commendatore. Like a commander. I like that. That’s respect» (2.4: 14:20). Here is another gap between the Italian and the American, one that is cultural rather than linguistic. What Paulie doesn’t get is the irony intended through the exaggeration that the manager uses. This point is once again lost on Paulie as he uses the term to address a table of men outside a café (one of whom is David Chase): «Commendatori, buongiorno», he says, yet they ignore him. They think he’s making fun of them. Paulie replies, «Cocksuckers» to their snub (32:32). And once more, as he is walking along the “lungomare” (waterfront) he salutes a man he meets, «Commendatore, buongiorno». The man responds, «La conosco? (Do I know you?)». Tony replies, «I’m from America». And the man responds in Italian, «From NATO? You cut our ski lift cable» (42:10). The apolitical Paulie doesn’t get it, but the audience does as he moves on in a bliss of ignorance.

Try as he might, Tony, unlike Paulie, fails to really connect to anything in Naples. Earlier, in a restaurant scene Paulie asks,

“Tone, Tone you try this octopus yet?”

“I’m talkin’ here. You’re like a child with the food and the pussy. What’s going on here Paulie?”

“It’s a big thing for me T. I was never over here. OK? My brother was and my other brother the doctor was with all of his bullshit.” (16:42 – 17:00)

And later, we see Paulie staring at a forkful of squid-inked pasta and he calls out to the waiter: «Can I just get some macaroni and gravy?». His Neapolitan hosts can’t figure out what he wants and thinks that the gravy he is asking for might be “grapes.” When they realize he wants pasta and tomato sauce, one says to the other, «And you thought the Germans were classless pieces of shit» (20:06 – 20:40). Paulie’s linguistic ignorance keeps him oblivious to their contempt.

Towards the end of this episode, Paulie is lounging in bed after a tryst with a Neapolitan prostitute. He calls out, «Hey cara mia bring

me one of those plums from the breakfast tray». She has no idea what he's asking for, so he grabs one himself, then says, «I gotta hand it to you, great fruit you got here; che belle frutte», the camera then cuts to the nude woman, cleaning herself in the bathroom. He continues, «None of them fucking steroids. Come si dice steroids?».

He says, «Steroide», she yells out. And he retorts: «Who said you're not a great conversationalist? Fucking twat». She walks back to the bed, «There's my little fragolina (strawberry)». He tries again to connect with her. «You know my grandfather was Neapolitan». The prostitute with him could care less as he opens up to her about his family's origins. Then he asks her where she's from. When she replies Ariano Irpino, he tells her that's where his grandfather is from. «We come from the same town. Our families probably knew each other». While he feels connected, she remains disinterested and unimpressed.

Paulie unlike most of the other characters makes this trip real. He believes he's reached some kind of understanding of his background; he tells Big Pussy, who picks them up from the airport, «I feel sorry for anyone who hasn't been, especially any Italians» (42:36 – 44:57). Paulie, who has obviously been touched by his return to his family's homeland, never sees the distance between himself and the Italians, who thinks, as many Italian American tourists do, that there is a difference between Italian American and Italian cultures, and that Italian Americans are the more Italian of the two.

Paulie knows his place in the crew is that of comic and he resents when others try to upstage him in that role. Much of his humor goes unrecognized even by himself, as when he attributes Machiavelli's philosophy on war to "Prince Matachabelli" (the name of a perfume line). While other characters can be comical and there are those who try to upstage him. They might be successful in the battle, but ultimately they lose the war. Examples of these are Paulie's own nephew, Little Paulie (played by Carl Capotorto) in episode nine of season five, when after a smart retort Paulie Walnuts confronts his nephew with «Why you always try to top me?» (5.9 12:04 – 12:24). Then there's Tony Blundetto (played by Steve Buscemi) in episode two of season five, who (in the style of Jackie Gleason) makes fun of Tony's girth and is

told in Tony's threatening voice, «You don't make fun of me» (5.2: 37:00).

Tony misreads Paulie's intention of honoring him as an affront to his authority in episode thirteen of season five, when Paulie salvages a painting of Tony's racehorse that has been killed and has an artist repaint Tony in a Revolutionary War general's outfit. Tony makes a visit to Paulie's home and when he sees the retouched painting hanging on the wall accuses Paulie of making fun of him (5.13 31:00 – 33:13). «That's no joke», screams Tony as he takes the painting down, carries it outside and tosses it into the trash. He doesn't see this as Paulie's attachment and loyalty and hurts his "servant's" feelings.

Through Paulie Walnuts the show's writers poke fun at the legacy of immigrant frugality. Paulie, who has been shown to be somewhat generous in public, especially in the way he takes care of his mother, maintains a private sense of penny pinching when it comes to his personal spending. Even though he's just participated in one of the biggest financial scores of his life, he still depends on coupons for his basic needs (6.3: 24:50). With this scene the writers remind us of the frugality of those born to parents who grew up knowing poverty, and who, in spite of their success, still engage in the same economic behavior. In this same episode, we observe Paulie's self-centeredness in the way he acts while visiting Tony in the hospital after Tony was shot by his Uncle Junior. Paulie is warned by others that Tony can't be agitated, and yet, as he converses with him his words send Tony into cardiac arrest (6.3: 40:15 – 42:20; 42:58 – 43:12 ; 43:40 – 44:40).

What is powerful about the presence of one who is a minor character along the way is that by the end of the series, it turns out Paulie Walnuts has become a major character, and while he doesn't get the same amount of screen time as the Soprano nuclear family members (he does appear in 73 of the 86 episodes – fourth behind Tony, Carmela, and Christopher in most appearances), his actions are pivotal both in the development of the plot and in the overall interpretation of the inner and outer stories contained in the series. In the inner stories, Paulie is steadfast in his loyalty to the profession, if not always to Tony. While he does stray a bit, as when he is lured by

the temptation of Johnny “Sacks” Sacrimoni, who suggests he might take Tony’s place should something happen to Tony, Paulie does little to bring it about.

In the larger story, he represents a dying generation of Italian American culture that was raised in poverty and rose to middle-class lifestyle, all the while maintaining, for the most part, working class values as well as Italian immigrant working class behavior and mannerisms. American education did little to erase those from Paulie’s generation, though by the time we get to Paulie’s nephew, like Tony’s children, we get a sense that higher education is the key to creating that distance between the generations. This is quite obvious in the characters of Tony’s neighbors: the Cusumanos. We see it also in Dr. Melfi, Tony’s psychiatrist, who bristles as her encounters with Tony reconnect her with her working-class origins.

What happens to Paulie Walnuts throughout the series doesn’t happen to any of the other characters that seem to be tied to the writers’ whim as to what might need to happen in order to move from episode to the next. In the sixth and final season, we get the most appearances of the Walnuts character, and through those appearances we get a clearer look at the true function of the fool whose actions compose some of the more humorous moments in the series, and yet deliver some of the greatest insights into Italian American culture that take us beyond the stereotype of the gangster figure and into the more complex nature of one who has grown up Italian American.

Paulie, we learn in season six, episode four, is actually the illegitimate child of a nun who had sex with a soldier at the USO during World War Two, and because she was a novitiate, she gave the child to her sister, Maria Nuccia who raised Paulie as her own. “Aunt” Dottie tells this to Paulie on her deathbed (6.4: 13:12 – 15:29). Later in the same episode, Paulie confronts the woman whom he thought was his mother as she returns from a trip to a casino.

“Is there something you want to tell me about?”

“What?”

"I just saw Aunt Dottie, and guess what, turns out she's not my aunt, turns out she's my mother."

"No, that's not true."

"Don't bullshit me; you've been bullshitting me my entire life."

"Paulie."

"It's true, isn't it? Isn't it? Son of a bitch!"

"Oh how I dreaded this day."

"I gave you everything; I gave you a son's love all under false pretense."

"No."

"You're a fraud and a phony. And she's even worse, she's a whore, my mother's a fucking whore."

"Don't say that; she was a young girl; she wanted to be a nun, but she got in trouble."

"And you helped her out. Cooked up this little scheme. Forget who gets victimized."

"I loved you; I always loved you." [As he runs away she cries out] "Paulie!" (6.4: 18:47 – 20:00).

Here, the writers return to the mother/son relationship that they worked on between Tony and his mother; only now they show an example of a son who actually retaliates against the wrong he perceives his mother enacted. Later, when Paulie comes to visit Tony in the hospital after having been shot by his uncle Junior, Paulie meets a priest who asks about Tony's condition. Paulie responds: «He's in a lot better shape than those fuckin' nuns you got there» (6.6: 20:57).

Paulie, we find out, has lived his whole life not knowing his true origins. This revelation unsettles Paulie at a time when his self-confidence and his previously steady faith in his work is at its lowest. We see the emotional effects in a scene in which he is walking with Tony down the hospital hallway. Tony confronts him:

"You got your head up your ass today."

"My aunt Dotty's been sick. The call I got, she just died."

"I'm sorry. You were close. Your mom's sister or your dad's."

"Mom's."

"She must be broken up, huh.....Your aunt, she's the nun."

"Yeah."

"I always wondered. They got hair under there?"

"Yeah, short."

"Maybe you don't want to talk about it."

"Yeah."

"Those wedding rings they wear. Are they really married to Jesus?"

"So I understand." (6.4: 24:27 – 25:41).

Paulie's preoccupation with this new knowledge keeps him distant from the man he serves as evidenced by his short responses, and the intense scowl through which he delivers his lines.

Later in the hospital, Paulie joins Tony in the room of another patient watching a boxing match. Tony finds out the patient has bet money on the match and tells him he could do better betting through Paulie. «My friend here'll give you 375, right Paulie». Paulie doesn't respond. Paulie, ignores the conversation and instead comments on the fighter's fate: «It's a life of abuse». «Yes, well he is a boxer», says another patient, Schwinn, a retired scientist from Bell Labs. Paulie responds, «It's the same for everybody. Look at you T. You do your Uncle a kindness you get shot for your efforts. You think you got family. But in the end, they fuck you too». Tony dismisses Paulie's comments, «He's grieving, his aunt just died».

Paulie goes on to philosophize:

"I tell you we each and every one of us are alone in the ring fighting for our lives, just like that poor prick."

"Well that's one way to look at it," says Schwinn.

"You got a better one?" says Paulie.

"Don't get me started. It's complicated."

"Think I'm stupid?"

"It's actually an illusion those two boxers are separate entities."

"What the fuck?"

"The separate entities are simply the way we choose to perceive them. It's physics...everything is connected."

The television begins to waver, and Paulie wisecracks, «You're so fucking smart, fix that TV» (27:25 – 29:18). Through this conversation, Paulie, in true *zanni* fashion waxes philosophically, suggesting that Schwinn possesses an intelligence that is not practical, leading him to the conclusion that his street smarts trumps book smarts.

Later in the same episode, we see Tony in the hospital hallway staring through the window of an intensive care room (33:34). Paulie comes by and the impact of his mother's behavior once again surfaces through their conversation.

“Horrible thing. They brought this girl in, third degree burns over eighty percent of her body.”

“You wouldn't believe the week I had.”

“What, there's a little girl burned in there, Jesus Christ.”

“Sorry T.”

“No. Now what the fuck is with you. And I want some answers 'cause you're starting to drive me fucking nuts.”

“This remains between us?”

“Of course.”

“My aunt who died, she wasn't my aunt. She was my mother.”

“What, (snickering) your aunt the nun was your mother?”

“Some cocksucker G.I. knocked her up during the war. Russ.”

“So what is your mother?”

“My Ma is my aunt, she adopted me to hide the family's shame. You believe this shit? All I did for her.... Worse thing. I'm not who I am; it's like my whole life is a joke, a big fucking joke on me” (34:58).

Paulie, from this point on, begins to lose the role of jester in Tony's court and begins to move in a very different direction. He's next seen confronting the woman who he had thought was his mother in her room at the old people's home (36:33 – 37:51).

«I went without so you could have. The mink coat, the massage chair from Sharper Image. The flat screen TV».

The last thing he does before he leaves her is to throw the television set he bought her out the window, and he tells her, «You're on your own. I never want to see you again» (45:18 – 46:51).

When Tony chastises Paulie for not going to his real mother's funeral, Paulie responds:

“I tell you something else. I'm done with Nuci [Paulie's mother]. Four gs [four thousand dollars] a month for that nursing home. Fuck that.”

“What're you gonna do? Throw her out in the street?”

“They way I see it, serves her right.”

“What the fuck, Paulie? That woman loved you. She fed you. How many times she bail you out of the can when you were a kid? Huh? Am I right?”

“I'll tell you what really fries me. It's not Nucci, it's Dotty.”

“You know what your problem is you go around and pity for yourself..... You got to get beyond this petty bullshit. You're part of something bigger. When you gonna learn that? (46:49).

Paulie's whole life was spent working in that “something bigger”, his whole identity was wrapped up in that work, and now that his sense of self has been shaken, so has his whole attitude toward his work and his relationship to his master. In the very next scene, Paulie watches Tony's interaction with a woman, his partner in business, as she begs Tony to not harm her son. Paulie leaves the room and cries. The sensitivity we perceive in what until now has been a heartless gangster is quite touching and allows us to see the real depth of Paulie's character (49:06 – 49:45).

The emotions of the clown come out in episode nine of Season Six when Paulie runs into his “mother” at the annual feast of St. Elzéar of Sabran, the patron saint of his family's town in Italy. Through Paulie's efforts to cut corners and maximize profits he refuses to give the money to have the saint paraded with the gold hat. When a children's amusement ride breaks down and injures some of the riders

his mother blames it on him letting the saint be paraded without the hat. He tells her,

“Fuck that voodoo, eh.”

“You cursed your mother, a blessed nun.”

“She had it comin. You both did.”

“I didn’t bring you up like that.

“You’re a fake, that’s how you brung me up. Fuck the two of
yous.”

He leaves her in tears. (6.9: 42:02 - 42:52)

Later, when Paulie enters the Bada Bing strip club to meet someone, he walks past the stripper pole behind the bar and sees the Virgin Mary hovering at the pole (48:40 – 49).

This vision sends him back to the woman whom he once believed was his mother. He has nowhere else to go. When she sees him she says,

“Paulie. I don’t want to argue.” He’s silent as he walks into her room.

“What are you watchin?”

“Lawrence Welk Program, channel 55.”

He sits down on the couch. They are both silent.

“You want some cookies?” she asks.

He shakes his head. She sits down next to him, and the two of them sit watching the program (50:43 – 52:15). Paulie, now as the prodigal son, returns to the comfort of the only family he’s ever known. In spite of what happened between the two of them, the mother/son bond is still there.

It is in the final episode of the series the *zanni* that Paulie is shows its importance both in creative and critical dimensions of the show’s production. The episode, “Made in America” (6:21), finds Paulie sitting at the kids’ table during a funeral reception in Artie’s restaurant where once again he spouts his version of clichéd

philosophy. As he is looking for a seat, Meadow Soprano invites Uncle Paulie to sit with them. He responds, «Yeah, I'll sit with you, I'm young at heart». And then he does something that only, in my experience, old men in already too-tight suits would do to feel comfortable after a large family meal: he unzips his pants, pats his stomach, lets out a moan and says, «Oh, did I eat. In the midst of death we are in life, huh? Or is it the other way around?». Meadow tells him it was the other way around. «Either version you're halfway up the ass. Pardon my French sweetheart. What're gonna do. Life goes on».

Anthony Jr. goes into a critical tirade about today's immigrant and the American dream; his cousin says, «You're all over the place, I don't know what you're saying». And Paulie responds «He's saying, the *framus* intersects with the *ramistan* approximately at the *paternoster*» (10:26). These nonsense lines echo the silliness we might recall from something like *The Three Stooges*; they are his old-world way of saying that AJ is making nonsense, but in reality, AJ's criticism of the U.S. consumer culture is timely and cogent (8:38 – 10:29).

Paulie's superstitious qualities emerge as he confronts a cat that wandered into the safe house on the Jersey Shore while Tony and his crew were hiding out. When he sees the cat on the table in their office at Satriale's pork store, he yells, «Get him the fuck out. These are snakes with fur. The old Italians will tell you, you can't even put them around a baby. They suck the breath right out». Then he scares the cat off the table (23:52 – 24:54). The next time Paulie walks into the *Bada Bing* and he looks quickly at the empty stage and the stripper's pole, then does a double-take, as though he expects to see the Madonna again (27:40 – 28:04), reminding us that his thinking is shaped by immigrant folk culture.

Paulie's connection to the animal world once again gets attention when he walks into the pork store and sees the cat, purring, staring at a picture of the late Christopher Moltisanti. Paulie gets excited and yells out, «What the fuck. This fuckin' animal's history, today. Pick him up». Paulie grabs a broom to hit the cat and is stopped by Tony's entrance. «T. You see this shit. He does it all the time he says. Look at him, Staring at the dead kid. Gives me the fuckin' creeps» (31:32 – 32:27).

Tony asks for privacy and then offers to make Paulie the skipper of the Cifaretto crew. «With due respect, I'd like to just mull it a little. I'm no spring chicken no more. I don't want to be dying on you...» (32:45 – 33:50).

Paulie's final scene finds him moving away from the clown and returns him to the servant. At this time, he is the highest ranking of Tony's soldiers to still be alive and faithful. Tony asks him if he's made a decision about his promotion.

“All due respect, and I mean that from the bottom of my heart. I'm going to pass.”

“I don't fuckin believe this. Why?”

“Every guy who ran that crew died prematurely. I beat cancer once, you have no idea what that does to you?”

“This is not part of an overall pattern.”

“I moved the picture, the fucking thing came to the new spot and stared.”

Tony tries to rationalize it, but Paulie still worries.

“Tone, I never told this to another living soul but. One time at the Bing I was alone to meet Eddie Lindon. I saw the virgin Mary.”

“Why didn't you say something. Fuck strippers. We could've had a shrine. Sold holy water in gallon jugs. Could've made millions.”

“I tell you something deep in my heart and you laugh it off.”

Tony brushes it off and says that he'll put Patsy at the head of the crew. «Prick, you always know what to say to me, don't you?».

Paulie's last line is: «I live but to serve you my liege» (47:34 – 49), reestablishing his master/servant relationship to Tony in the very language register used by Shakespeare.

Beyond Stereotypes: A Conclusion

What *The Sopranos* did better than just about any other mediated portrayals of Americans of Italian descent was to deconstruct earlier, prefabricated stereotypes that went on to influence public perceptions of Italian Americans. To understand how and why stereotypes affect viewers' conceptions of reality, we need to know where stereotypes come from and why they are used. Stereotypes are meant to project possibilities and not to reflect realities. Stereotypes in storytelling have always been used to entertain adults and to instruct youth about proper and improper behavior. As we have created better understanding of the working of the human mind, storytelling became less dependent on the use of types, that is, as writers began to delve into ways of representing the mind, the use of flat figures becomes more and more relegated to popular entertainment.

Stereotypes eliminate complexities and allow you to rest assured in your expectations of what will happen so that you are lulled and not jolted by stories. Whenever a stereotype is destroyed, it is usually through a sophisticated experience that leads us deeper in our understanding of what is human. There is a difference between storytelling and life telling, and that difference is made evident through a proper education. Stereotypes mask the reality they attempt to portray or represent. In order to be drawn into a story we need to pretend that this is something that might really happen. If this doesn't happen, then the artist has lost us and we are always conscious that this is a story; these thoughts lead us into other thoughts, like what we're going to do after the movie or other things that occupy our daily thoughts, taking us out of the dream world of story and back to the real world we were trying to escape in the first place.

Film and video artists believe they are using these figures to say something about American society, and the best ones do; however, but really, those who do not understand these stereotypes cross the line between reinforcing ignorance and changing perceptions. I attribute this to the late development of a recognizable Italian American intelligentsia and the absence of exposure to alternative experiences of

Italians in American history. Until Italian Americans are educated to their own histories, know their own stories, and tell them to others, they will never have the power to challenge the negative images that are presented. Until those histories become part of education in the United States, the stereotypes will continue to be interpreted as reality. Without cultural developments such as the Harlem Renaissance, the American Civil Rights movement would have never developed to change perceptions about African Americans. Where is the Italian American Renaissance?

The only way to deal with the persistence of the stereotypes that distort perceptions of Italian Americans is to become more public with culture, to exchange ignorance for knowledge and prejudice with trust. If we achieve this in the classroom we can turn students into teachers, who will make the streets a better place. We must inundate the classrooms, the museums, the libraries, theaters, and media with versions and visions of Italian American culture that place those stereotypes in the shadow of the great lights we have created for the world to see.

The key to disarming a stereotype and relegating to its simple storytelling function lies in the ability of the beholder, the audience, to acknowledge the greater complexity of life that the type hides. And this ability comes only through experience. When your experience is limited to two-dimensional stories, your life-view becomes filtered by stereotypes.

Remember, what you see is not about accurately representing reality, but rather is a way of telling you a story. You need to ask yourself, what story am I being told, what am I asked to believe, and how can I interpret this so that I can relate it or not to reality? The storyteller has a goal that is quite different from the story receiver. The storyteller must get you to believe or see something a certain way, your goal is to see it any number of ways so that you can disarm the power of the storyteller and use that power in your favor, as a way of improving your life. This is what the HBO series does through the development of the character Paulie Walnuts.

We last see Paulie sunning himself outside the pork store; the cat is on the sidewalk to his right (49:00 – 4:06). This is right where we first met him in season 1 episode 1 (12:06). Paulie returns to where he was, but now he is a different man, or is he? So what do we learn from following the fool in *The Sopranos*? First of all, through Paulie Walnuts, the writers of the show are able to insert a running joke throughout the entire series that enables them to poke fun at traditional notions of Italian immigrant culture, and at the same time, show that those notions also serve as viable criticisms of U.S. capitalist culture. Paulie, who is certainly more reactionary than revolutionary, reflects the many Italian Americans who assimilated quickly into American culture, in spite of holding on to traditions and superstitions of Italian folk culture. Paulie's old-world shaped insights into contemporary American life serve to remind us that he is nothing without his connection to his family, even when he is hurt by the woman he thought was his mother. His return to her, as his return to Tony's rule at the end of the series, reveals the stability of family-centered Italian American culture, and while, through Paulie, we have learned to laugh at and with the characters of the series, we have also learned that by reading the comic elements of *The Sopranos* we can view this iconic serial in a different light, one that enables us to see and read the shadows cast by the stereotypes that have previously distorted and limited our readings of Italian American culture.

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