

**Ilaria Bisteghi**

**The New Serial Television Narrative: *The Sopranos* and Relay Race Structure**

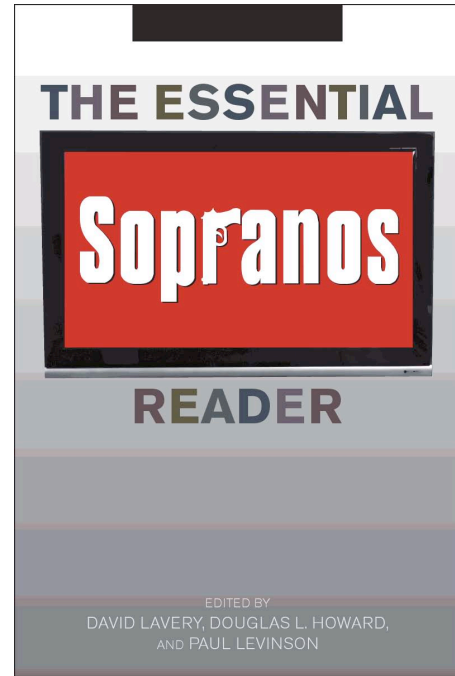
The *Sopranos*' diegesis, its story world, is based on what could be called *relay race structure*, whose main characteristic is potentially infinite narrative expansibility.<sup>1</sup>

The distinction Katherine Young makes between *Taleworld* and *Storyrealm* in her paper "Edgework: Frame and Boundary in the Phenomenology of Narrative Communication" has been valuable in understanding how the new serial narrative of *The Sopranos* contradicts Casetti's theoretical scheme. I

have adjusted Young's work and method to the investigation of audiovisual texts. No longer set in the specific context of verbal narrative analysis, the concepts of *Taleworld* and *Storyrealm* become useful to deconstruct Casetti's idea of *genre framework* and spot its theoretical weaknesses. Together with Veronica Innocenti's definition of *narrative interstice* Young's analytical structure highlights the *Sopranos* creators' ability to keep the text permanently open to any possible change or evolution.

Referring specifically to "Meadowlands" (1.4), "College" (1.5), and "Pax Soprana" (1.6), I will explain how the *relay race structure* functions continuously swinging between continuity and rupture, thus opening *interstices* through which new elements can filter in and widen the plot.

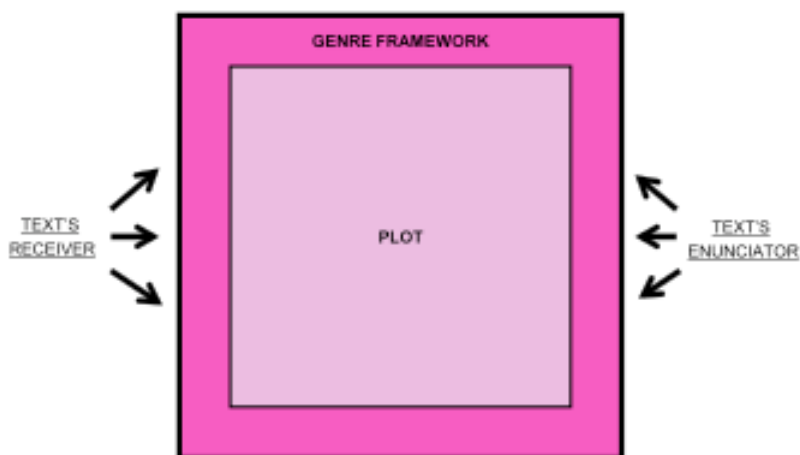
**Francesco Casetti and Katherine Young**



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According to Francesco Casetti what distinguishes television serials from other audiovisual texts is the preponderance of the *frame*—that is, *genre*—over theme and plot. While overlooking the narrative growth of the story, *genre* protects its frame from those external elements that could disrupt its coherence and in so doing shapes both the construction and the reading of the text. On the one hand, the enunciator creates and develops the text according to *genre codes* and on the other the viewer (or receiver) frames and interprets the text according to those same codes.

The TV series textual structure according to Francesco Casetti (1984)



The genre framework influences serial texts at different levels of intensity: in some it appears to rule the entire narrative process, while in others theme and plot (seem to) gain strength and the *genre* influence becomes less detectable. In the latter, the text includes elements which are foreign to the pure genre formula and absorb part of the attention the viewer would otherwise focus on the recognition of genre.

Such a narrative strategy smartly disguises that it is actually genre which ultimately directs the viewer's reading process, binding him *de facto* to a limited range of possible interpretations. "The formula," according to Casetti, "stands out after absorbing the seeming diversions of the text, thus pushing over and expanding the boundaries of the genre attribution" (1984: 31). As a consequence the genre

framework progressively thickens and ultimately comes to identify with the TV series itself.

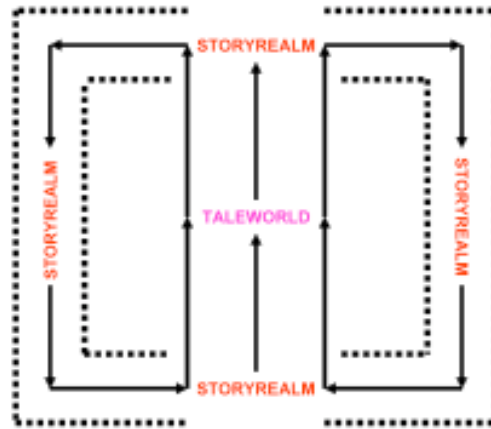
Casetti's thought, can be deconstructed, however, using Katherine Young's analysis of narrative mechanisms within conversation. In a 1984 article for the journal *Semiotica*, Young elaborated a theoretical scheme that revolves around three major concepts, each corresponding to a specific area/function of the narrative discourse: the Taleworld, the Storyrealm and the Realm of Conversation. Despite significant differences between Young's analysis and the approach taken here, I believe the concepts of Taleworld and Storyrealm to be extremely useful to my idea of relay race structure. No longer set in the specific context of verbal narrative analysis, the Taleworld and the Storyrealm are given different functions whereby the former is posited as *the world of the plot* and the latter as *the narrative world that frames the plot*. If one accepts that the Storyrealm functions as the frame of the Taleworld, the Storyrealm becomes also the genre reference for the Taleworld, though not in Casetti's terms. Indeed asserting that "frames . . . do not enclose . . . one realm, but specify a relationship between two" (1982: 312), Young ascribes to the Taleworld and the Storyrealm a strong flexibility. None of them prevails over the other; on the contrary they have the same importance in the construction and interpretation of the diegetic process.

An elastic frame, the Storyrealm does not contrast with or re-absorb the Taleworld's centrifugal forces threatening its genre codes. On the contrary: the Storyrealm circumscribes the boundaries of the fictional territory without forcing the narrative material within a rigid genre framework.

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Taleworld and Storyrealm in the new television serial narrative



The scheme above shows how during its evolution the Taleworld can come across different Storyrealms, undergoing significant modifications but at the same time enacting deep changes on such frameworks and genre codes. In *The Sopranos*, for example, the plot is affected by continuous genre influence, but the genre likewise adapts, through the progressive change of its codes, to the complex of events and characters staged by the plot.

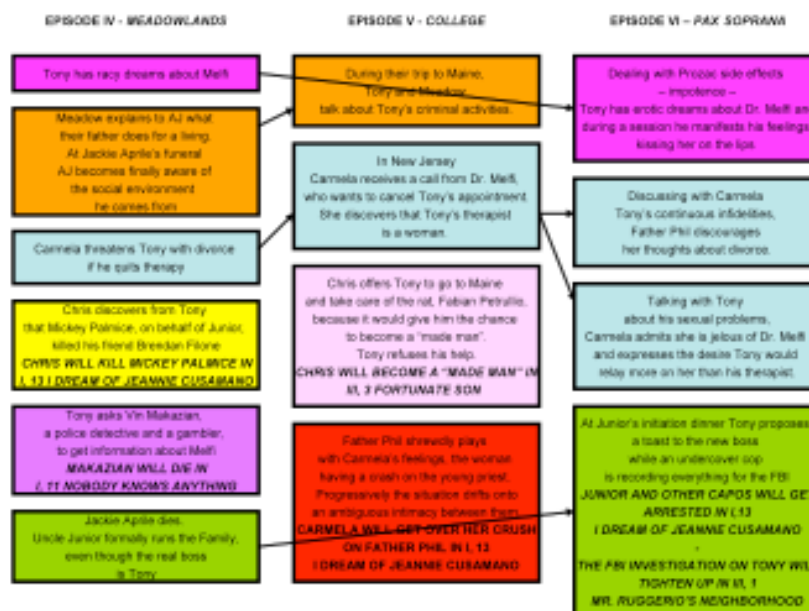
### **Relay Race Structure and the Concept of Narrative Interstice**

Despite the fact that the gangster movie represents the main genre (or Storyrealm) *reference* for *The Sopranos*, it is difficult to trace in the series the classical distinction between the main narrative thread and secondary plots. On the contrary the show extends several different narrative lines and the diegesis progresses according to a sort of *relay race* among them. A foregrounded diegetic line leads the narration for a while and then shifts to the background, handing the task of carrying forward the plot over to another line. The leading role of one narrative thread with respect to another is much like the baton in a relay race; never fixed or stable, it is passed along from one to the other. Given the consequential absence of an established

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hierarchy, no theme can be clearly classified as secondary or subordinated for good. The continuous variations in the plot are provided by those secondary narrative strands which unpredictably emerged into the foreground, creating new elements of interest for the viewer. Such elements can either be developed in full, spanning many episodes (and seasons), or simply blow over after a single one.



In the scheme above, narrative units are interconnected to each other as well as launch new diegetic threads to be developed eventually. Such an example is particularly interesting because it includes "College," often considered an anomaly within the series' overall narrative arc and cited by David Chase as the quintessential example of a stand-alone, "little movie" episode (Bogdanovich Interview) a sort of digression or temporary suspension of the main plot lines. Nonetheless "College" is strongly linked to the previous episode by a structural connection, which is the relationship between Tony and his kids and how they deal with their father's job (see orange squares). While in "Meadowlands" this issue revolved around AJ's doubts about Tony's professional path, in "College" it evolves into Meadow's total awareness of her father being in the Mob. Tony's chance encounter with the rat Fabian Petrullio represents an effective

counter-commentary to what he has just admitted to his daughter and develops the issue of the Mafia boss' imperilled existence.

Furthermore, it proves how the relay race structure affects not only the plot and its narrative lines but also the use of genre. In "College" the narration swings continuously from the gangster movie genre to the drama genre and back: as a Mafia boss Tony has to kill Fabian Petrullio, but at the same time, being on a trip with Meadow, he cannot give up on his paternal role. The drama aspect (exemplified by Meadow and Tony's interaction with her) saves Tony from the gangster—Petrullio's attempt to shoot Tony fails because Meadow is there with her father—and structurally keeps the episode from slipping into one exclusive genre reference. The particular use of both aesthetic and thematic elements bridges the gap between the 'gangster movie' and 'drama' genres and blurs the differences in a coherent narrative pattern.

"College" is linked both to the previous and the next episodes, "Pax Soprana," by another important issue concerning Carmela's attitude toward Tony's therapy sessions and Dr Melfi's gender identity (see blue squares): in "Meadowlands" Carmela threatens Tony with divorce if he quits therapy, but immediately after that when he is away with Meadow, she takes a phone call from Dr Melfi and discovers her husband's therapist is actually a woman. She loses her mind out of jealousy and fiercely expresses her intention to leave him. In the subsequent episode, "Pax Soprana," Carmela has a conversation with Father Phil, who discourages her thoughts about divorce. It is interesting to notice that while in "Meadowlands" she wanted to separate from Tony because he wanted to give up therapy, two episodes later her motivation has changed: she is convinced Tony is having an affair with Melfi and wants to leave him for what she considers his umpteenth betrayal. Once again the relay narrative structure proves to be effective in converting all the varying input coming from the characters in narrative variations or sudden upsets to the benefit of the viewer. At the end of "Pax Soprana," the narrative balance is temporarily re-established when Carmela and Tony try to

confront each other maturely, Carmela admitting she has been jealous and Tony acknowledging he lied about his therapist's gender because he already knew how his wife would react.

"College" also starts a couple of new narrative threads: on the one hand, Carmela's naïve crush on Father Phil (see red square); on the other, Chris' longing to become a "made man" (see lilac square). The former will find its resolution in the last episode of Season 1, "I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano," when Carmela finally rids herself of her obsession for the priest, ridiculing his hypocritical and ambiguous attitude towards the women of his parish, while for the latter viewers will have to wait until Season 3, "Fortunate Son" (3.3) to see Chris' dream come true in the traditional Mafia blood ritual (and even there things will not go the way Chris has always imagined them to go!).

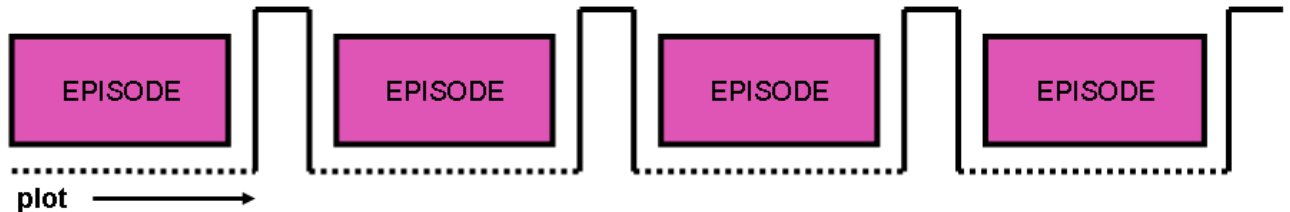
"Meadowlands" also launches a pair of diegetic lines that the show will develop and bring to an end later in the season: on the one hand the episode introduces a new character, Vin Makazian, a corrupt policeman and gambler Tony uses as a private investigator to get more information about Dr Melfi's private life (see purple square). Makazian will commit suicide by jumping off a bridge seven episodes later ("Nobody Knows Anything," 1.11). On the other hand, Tony reveals to Chris that his friend Brendan Filone has been executed by Uncle Junior's hit man Mickey Palmice (see yellow square). Chris will avenge Brendan and close the loop by shooting Mickey in a forest in the very last episode of the season ("I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano").

All these examples provided bear witness to the effectiveness of the relay race structure as the organizing principle of the text. While such stratagems prevent the viewers from getting bored and losing affection for the show, switching from one *genre* to another and from one narrative thread to a new one, they also allow creators and writers to open significant gaps in the text and develop the story randomly and unpredictably. Indeed it is precisely through these gaps or *interstices* that external elements can filter in, assuring a potentially endless enlargement and enrichment of the plot.

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The concept of narrative interstice is particularly important when attempting to understand how a relay race text is built. Analyzing *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB, 1997-2001; UPN, 2001-2003), Italian film scholar Veronica Innocenti places side by side two hypotheses which imply a dual perspective on the text. On the one hand, she identifies a structure based on the autonomy of each episode while the plot develops in the interstices between such narrative units (Innocenti 2005: 171).

*Autonomy of the episode: the plot develops in the interstices between the narrative units*



On the other, she seems to overturn that construction referring to those episodes, belonging to the sphere of “imaginary tales” (Eco 1984: 239), and working according to the formula “what . . . if . . .” which develops in the interstices of the plot and appears dissimilar (Innocenti 2005: 174).

*Focus on the plot: the episodes identified as “other” develop in the interstices of the plot*



These two sides are not as oppositional as seems at first sight. Rather, depending on which perspective we choose to observe the construction of the plot, we can either emphasize the autonomy of the episodes (and in this case the plot develops in the interstices between them), or we can focus on the plot (from which we see how the episodes grow in

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the interstices of the plot). In both cases we are in the presence of discontinuous and non-linear narration, which takes advantage of the cracks in the structure in order to allow external elements to filter in and participate in the relay race system.

### **Episode Self-Sufficiency**

A relay race structure based on narrative *interstices* explains the wide range of variations a series can combine and the reason why *The Sopranos* foregoes the traditional stratagem of the cliffhanger. The viewer is no longer forced to watch the next episode to see how things have gone because the plot does not have a linear development. In *The Sopranos* the episode closure is never perceived as a sudden cut in the event flow but rather as its temporary suspension.

If we watch a soap opera for the first time we practically understand almost everything that is going on, but when we do the same with *The Sopranos*, despite the fact that each episode appears to be self-conclusive, we don't "get" that much of the story. This happens because the program's structure does not depend on one main narrative thread or genre framework, and there are no such things as satellite themes or genres. On the contrary, plot and genre are pulverized in multiple narrative lines and genre frameworks. The reason why Casetti's theory no longer works applied to *The Sopranos* is that the show eschews a hierarchy among its narrative lines and genre frameworks.

Such structural fragmentation makes it more appropriate to speak of self-sufficient episodes rather than of self-conclusive ones, because each episode appears as a complete, though not concluded, entity: the fragments that compose each episode can indeed develop subsequently, but they are assembled in such a way that the episode in any case can stand alone. Thus while a regular viewer perceives the episodes as self-sufficient, the strong and compulsory connection among the different narrative units is still apparent.

The viewer's affection for the Sopranos' family does not depend—as in many other TV shows—on a pre-planned lack of information to be

supplied when the following episode is viewed. Given the relay race structure, the (not necessarily) narrative threads that start in an episode may come to a resolution in the following one or span over several episodes: on the contrary certain diegetic lines launched in one episode live in a kind of quiescent state before re-emerging to the surface several episodes later if not in the following season(s).

Relay race structure looks credible to viewers because it is true to life. To understand such realism and the way it operates within a serial narrative, I think it is useful to refer to what Katherine Young argues about beginnings and endings in stories: "*Taleworlds* . . . are realms experienced by inhabitants not as beginning or ending, but as ongoing. The story cuts out a portion of the *Taleworld* to recount, but the *Taleworld* extends beyond the boundaries set in it by the story" (1982: 282, 283). This statement describes very well what viewers feel when they watch *The Sopranos*. They have the clear perception of looking only at a portion of the characters' lives while beyond the television screen there is a non-staged real existence, which continues with its own rules and routines, independent from the story told by the events on the screen. Relay race structure does not dispel, however, the multiple diegetic inputs in a schizophrenic juxtaposition of different narrative plans. On the contrary it justifies such combination of dissimilar plots and genres with the effective representation of real life.

Finally a few considerations on how the particular structure of the text affects the way the audience watches the show. I have already explained why the episodes of the series should be considered not self-conclusive but rather self-sufficient. The textual fragmentation encourages viewers to adopt an active approach if they want to understand what is happening on the screen: they have to reconstruct the narrative sequence of the plot lines, establish the cause and effect connection between different narrative elements, understand allusions and references to other television shows and movies, recall the history and mythology of organized crime in America, and so on. The more the viewers know about the story, the series, and any other related

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subject, the deeper and clearer they will comprehend the show and its subtexts. Indeed there are different levels of complexity to which viewers according to their cultural tools can understand and interpret the *Sopranos'* text. But everybody enjoys the show because no matter what they know about the Sopranos family and gangster iconography, they are all requested to participate in the construction of the textual meaning. And that is the reason why the series has become so popular.

*The Sopranos* requires us to reshape television spectatorship as active participation in the construction of the text. Viewers are free to move back and forth and in and out of the narration to catch all the details and references they need to understand what is going on in the show. Achieving such a high degree of maturity, television language can rely more on the viewers' reading abilities and is no longer afraid of them.

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<sup>1</sup> I started from two different approaches to narrative analysis: Italian Film scholar Francesco Casetti's theory on serial television (Casetti 1984: 13, 47) and Katherine Young's analysis of narrative construction in verbal discourses (Young 1982: 277, 315). Also extremely useful has been Italian film scholar Veronica Innocenti's concept of *narrative interstice* (Innocenti 2005: 169, 179), which supports my idea of the relay race as a flexible structure open to external elements and influences.

This work will begin from a critique of Francesco Casetti's attempt to provide an exhaustive formula for the construction and interpretation of television series texts. Finding Casetti's *frame/genre* theoretical axis too limited to explain *Sopranos'* complexity, I have replaced it with *realism* as the ultimate point of reference for the text's coherence. As the diegesis proceeds its structure grows more and more flexible because *genre* no longer regulates the *hierarchy*

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among the several narrative threads. Casetti applies his theory to shows like *Dallas* or *Starsky and Hutch*, which are however very distant from the current ones.