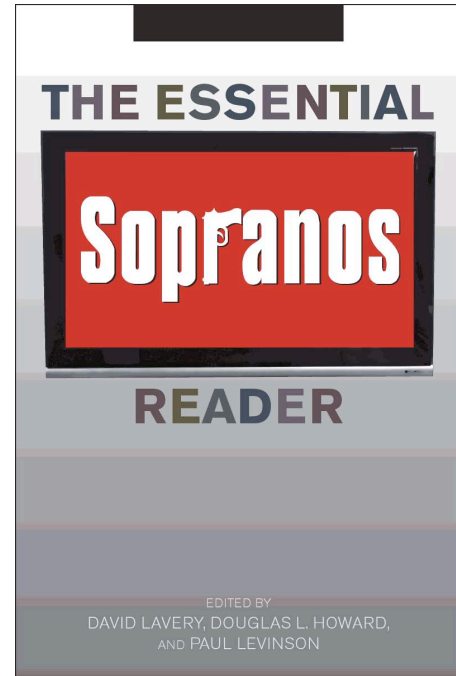


## Carl Wilson

### **“I let you be a part of my movie”: Christopher Moltisanti and the Development of the Gangster Genre**

In analyzing early gangster films, John McCarty and David E Ruth both describe how the actual and fictional Gangsters of the '20s and '30s echoed each other to create a grammar of the gangster film. They were bootleggers and racketeers who found time to frequent trendy restaurants; they represented “new consumerism”, always wore “fashionable attire,” and “new automobiles appeared with iconographic regularity.” They occupied the city, represented technology, and had a strong code of honor (McCarty 19; Ruth 66-69). Nevertheless, according to Barthes, “The notion that “all westerns (or all gangster films, or all war films, or whatever) are the same” is not just an unwarranted generalization, it is profoundly wrong: if each text within a genre were, literally, the same, there would not be enough difference to generate either meaning or pleasure” (14). Therefore, the real and ‘reel-life’ emphasis of certain elements that come to constitute a typology through their repeated occurrence are dependent upon “logonomic systems”, structures that are “based on rules of inclusion and exclusion in creating textual boundaries or paradigms” (Harries 33), to articulate meaning. These systems are socially defined as they are contingent upon the viewer’s accumulated cultural capital to generate distinction, so while certain patterns of imagery constitute an essential part of the gangster genre, the boundaries of the genre are not fixed; it evolves, it adapts, and it is entirely context dependent.



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In *The Sopranos*, the character of Christopher Moltisanti is frequently used to foreground and accentuate the series' similarity and difference with various clichés and intertextual sources of the gangster, and this essay will explore and discuss the significance of the three most distinct sites in which this process occurs in *The Sopranos*: the transtextual small units of gangster imagery, the intertextual formulation and interplay of grouped basic units, and Christopher's conscious and unconscious attempts to rewrite his position within the text.

All texts are intertextual, but Christopher is incapable of recognizing how the smaller units that are brought into play affect his narrative existence. Christopher finds that the "regular-ness of life is too fucking hard for" him ("The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti," xxx), but in *The Sopranos*, leading an irregular life as a gangster places Christopher in several situations antithetical to his desired position. Part of Harries' definition of parody is that the process "creates a level of ironic incongruity with an inevitable satiric impulse" (6) and Chris's inability to *perform* his job as expected by himself and the viewer often embodies this practice. Over the course of the six seasons, Christopher unsuccessfully steals suits ("46 Long"), finds himself being carjacked ("The Strong Silent Type," xxxx), and is chastised for complaining about standing in the rain in an overtly cinematic "gangster" shot replete with camera zoom, spot lighting, and thunder and lightning at night time ("College," 1.5) There are many other examples of Christopher reiterating the normative codes of the gangster genre only to either invert the viewers expectations or misdirect them, and these moments hold a paradoxical position within the show because while they are classically motivated and add to the legitimacy of the episodes, "realism," the comedic ruptures also challenge the gangster image in fiction; and it is the tension of this dynamic that can generate pleasure for the viewer and advance the gangster genre.

This strategy is more intense with the Season 3 episode, "Pine Barrens" (3.xxx), in which Christopher and Paulie lose their ability to function effectively with their culturally received gangster methodology

and become lost in the wood, attempts to sustain the inner 'reality' of the show while generating the potential for satiric humor from every aspect of the central storyline. In "Pine Barrens", Chris and Paulie's captive, Valerie escapes and disappears in a sequence of events that invokes the horror genre to demonstrate how the gangsters have been removed from the safety of their own genre domain, and it would appear that as a consequence of this recontextualization the symbolic grammar of the gangster becomes inverted. For example, while referencing the inappropriate context of his "fashionable attire", Christopher declares that he is "not dressed for this shit" and the gourmet food that they have become accustomed to in Vesuvius has been replaced by partially frozen condiment packets from a fast food chain. With this breakdown of generic support, the tautology of the gangster is repudiated as Chris and Paulie can not gang up on Valerie. Without the capacity to draw positively from the information system of the gangster genre, Christopher is accurate when he says that "Captain or no captain, right now we're just two assholes lost in the woods." The episode of "Pine Barrens" draws humor from the incongruous activities of its bewildered participants compared to the narrative that an audience might expect, but the episode goes further as it demonstrates that genre and narrative control exist outside the remit of the characters within *The Sopranos*. Christopher Moltisanti is capable of interactivity with the text but he is incapable of agency, because as he tries to alter the presentation of his character within his reality, he foregrounds his capitulation to the evolving conditions of the gangster genre. Furthermore, this capitulation to an uncertain generically evolving narrative is a source of fear for the gangsters within *The Sopranos*.

In "Pine Barrens", Christopher is faced with the humiliation of his parodic situation and is convinced that Paulie is going to choke him so that Tony will have just his version of events, and in "Two Tonys", the tale of Pine Barrens reappears to be rewritten. Christopher and Paulie are reciting events to their mob friends when Christopher attempts to end the story from his perspective, saying: "never would've happened

if Paulie hadn't initially overreacted, but it's one for the books." Paulie contests, but Chris continues to elaborate on the story, recollecting that Paulie had lost his shoe. This is met with the excited exclamation: "wait you lost your shoe? You didn't tell us about that." Subsequently, the gangsters are annoyed at Paulie starting a fight with Chris, making Christopher leave; but they are not disgruntled because they are concerned with the consequences of the scuffle in a real world context (as Christopher and Paulie had been at Pine Barrens). They are frustrated because, like the viewer of *The Sopranos*, they expected to hear the conclusion to a new variation of the gangster genre, or as they put it: "a good story".

As narrative actions turn into stories repeated within the narrative, Christopher is consistently denied closure on asserting his version of events. Incensed with the Tony and Adrianna 'blow-job in a car crash scandal' becoming a matter of false public knowledge, Christopher declares that irrespective of what may have occurred between the two characters, "It don't make no difference. Even if it wasn't true, it's what people think" ("Irregular Around the Margins," xxx). In the "Meadowlands" (xxx) episode, Christopher finds that rumors are spreading about him soiling himself out of fear during his mock-execution despite his desperate exclamations to the contrary that "that didn't happen". Christopher's lack of control over the basic elements of the gangster genre is foregrounded for the viewer's immediate satisfaction, but it is also used to add a level of density to the textuality of *The Sopranos*. The "satiric impulse" of Christopher's dilemmas demonstrates that the context in which the referential moments are deployed needs to be assessed by the viewer against the similarities and differences of prior transtextual articulations of the gangster genre.

David Chase has asserted that *The Sopranos* "is a mob story about what's happening in the mob right now—as opposed to the *Godfather* movies, which were about the past. They were in the '40s and '50s. *GoodFellas* was about the '60s through the '80s. So, they were period pieces. And *The Sopranos* isn't a period piece. It's about

the mob today" (McCarty 246). Nevertheless, as I have shown, the gangster genre is a developing discourse in which it is dependent on previous and concurrent articulations in order to generate meaning, so while *The Sopranos* may be about "today" and draw in elements from the contemporary gangster, it situates itself in reference to the past. Christopher and his cohorts attempt to order their world to suit their demands by using the generalized, and therefore unpredictable, codes of the gangster genre. However, they constantly run into difficulties and are permanently frustrated by their attempt to dictate their own place within the narrative.

As David Pattie has shown, the senior characters in *The Sopranos* appear to possess self-reflexive autonomy through quoting *The Godfather* trilogy, but they fail in their attempts to imitate "a code of behavior that is well-nigh impossible to follow" (141). The gangsters in *The Sopranos* are captivated by *The Godfather* as an archetypal paradigm on how they feel that they *should* behave, but they are primarily a product of Scorsese's gangster films. According to Remnick, these films, "beginning with *Mean Streets* in 1973, are about guys who sit around all day eating, gabbing, and collecting money in bags, guys who intimidate truck drivers and mailmen, guys for whom no petty scam is an indignity" (43). Christopher immediately distances himself from *The Godfather* and his elders when in the "Pilot" episode Christopher misquotes a line from the film and utters "Louis Brassi sleeps with the fishes." Nevertheless, Christopher never references a Scorsese gangster film as being a direct influence on his self image; when a character that looks like Scorsese enters a club, Christopher ecstatically shouts out to him that he liked "*Kundun*". This comment may seem ironic as one would expect him to prefer one of Scorsese's gangster films, but in choosing to favor a story about a child (the future Dali Lama) growing up while negotiating the responsibilities laid upon his shoulders, Christopher exaggeratedly foregrounds the dramatic narrative in which he has unwittingly placed himself.

Despite his apparent distancing, several key moments in *The Sopranos* can be directly attributed to the likelihood of Christopher

reflexively acting upon his knowledge of Scorsese's 'low-level' mob films. When Christopher is going to become a made man ("Fortunate Son"), he fears that he is going to be whacked like Tommy in *GoodFellas*, so that when he safely arrives at the ceremonial place of initiation his cohorts mock him for watching too many films; and at the end of *The Pilot*, Christopher feels consistently undermined and mentions "a development girl out in Hollywood. She said I could sell my life story for fuckin' millions. But I didn't. I stuck with you." Tony's unsympathetic response is to grab his nephew by the collar, threatening, "I'll fucking kill you. You gonna go Henry Hill on me now?" From this exchange it becomes obvious that *GoodFellas* is a genre precedent known to the gangsters within *The Sopranos*, but unlike *The Godfather* it is loaded with negative connotations for the Sopranos crew, and so, whether a character is perceived to be (un)like Henry Hill is an integral marker within their value system.

As with the deployment of the smaller aspects of the gangster genre within *The Sopranos*, the intertextual (mis)quotation of a gangster film has two primary functions; to 'comment' upon the text in which it is invoked, to implicitly connect to the first, thus allowing a negotiated development of the boundaries of the genre. Because this second process is contextually based, it is impossible for the 'comment' of the first process to be exactly the same as the text that it is within, and *The Sopranos* frequently foregrounds and plays with this difference.

In *GoodFellas*, the newly initiated Henry Hill says "I didn't have to wait in line at the bakery on Sunday mornings anymore for fresh bread. The owner knew who I was with . . . I'd always come first." In a later scene, Spider (played by Michael Imperioli who also plays Christopher in *The Sopranos*) tells Tommy "Why don't you go fuck yourself?" to which Tommy pulls a gun out and shoots him in the foot. In "The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti", Christopher enters a bakery and unlike Hill he is forced to "wait in line" for pastries. Annoyed that he is *still* not getting respected despite now being a gangster, and as an unconscious act of intertextual revenge, Christopher earnestly asks

"What is it? Do I look like a pussy to you?" then shoots the counter boy who drops to the floor shouting, "You motherfucker, you shot my foot." Christopher appropriately replies, "It happens". This scene in *The Sopranos* appears humorously 'natural' within the reality of the show, but it is also a replicated and contextually modified product that has additional layers of significance that are contingent upon the viewer's genre awareness.

The presence of *GoodFellas* is vital to the narrative and thematic development within *The Sopranos*, but I contest Remnick's observation that Scorsese's influence starts with *Mean Streets*. The mobsters of *GoodFellas* and *Casino* are not interested in discussing movies, and Charlie in *Mean Streets* reflexively declares "Let's go to the movies" only when he has free time that is separate from his life as a gangster, but in Scorsese's first full length feature film, *Who's That Knocking at My Door?* (referred to hereafter as *Knocking*), the central character, J.R., constantly, and with mixed results, references Western genre movies as markers of his own cultural knowledge and social situation, which mirrors Christopher's passion for films and reliance upon them to define himself without understanding the subtexts of the films invoked and the context in which he articulates them.

In *Knocking* there is a scene in which several young gangsters behave recklessly with a gun. As the gun is fired, the camera cuts to a montage of various stills of actors and action scenes from *Rio Bravo*. The camera finally pulls back to reveal a *Rio Bravo* movie poster and J.R. and his girlfriend leaving the cinema. In *The Sopranos*, the same diegetic disrupting technique is used when Christopher murders his 'younger generation' counterpart, Emil Kolar, in The Pilot and the scene is suddenly inter-cut with black and white images of Dean Martin, Humphrey Bogart, and Edward G. Robinson. However, while J.R. is shown to walk out of a cinema immediately after the montage, suggesting that what he has seen will eventually influence his young and reckless position within the text (paralleling how the western genre informed the early origins of gangster genre), the images in Christopher's world are hanging on the wall in front of him, suggesting

that Christopher has not been only influenced by, but has actually become, another dynamic within the same discursive network.

Christopher is intertextually intertwined with his genre heritage and so it is entirely appropriate that Christopher's demise in "Kennedy and Heidi" (xxxx) occurs with a direct reference to Scorsese's most recent gangster film, *The Departed* (xxx), and appears to be based on the death of Johnny-Boy in *Mean Streets*. The Christopher character of *Mean Streets*; Johnny-Boy constantly gets himself, and by extension his cohorts, into trouble through misguided attempts at getting noticed and becoming 'made'. Both Christopher and Johnny-Boy are last seen alive in a car with the central character of the story; they both insist on turning up the volume of the music in the car; and then they both die in a car crash, with the central character emerging relatively unscathed. Christopher's unanticipated demise appears to mimic Johnny-Boy's pathetic death and iterate their generic similarities, but unlike Johnny-Boy, Christopher's death was not the immediate consequence of any narrative thread reaching a termination point. To understand the motivation for Christopher's seemingly random death in *The Sopranos* the viewer's ability to decipher and cross-reference the contextual and intertextual aspects of the scene is crucial.

The Pink Floyd track, "Comfortably Numb", Chris elects to play in the car, is an effective, if unconsciously chosen, commentary and foregrounding of his own drive to avoid the "regularness of life". However, the song that Chris forebodingly refers to as a "killer" is also used in Scorsese's *The Departed* soundtrack which he has consciously selected to play to Tony. Christopher is playing the soundtrack to accompany his own life and reinforce the gangster imagery that he has actively sought to surround himself with, but "Comfortably Numb" appears in *The Departed* when Billy Costigan attempts to avoid being exposed as an undercover agent. In presenting himself as a character similar to, but not exactly like, gangsters from *Knocking*, *Mean Streets*, *GoodFellas*, *Casino*, and *The Departed*, Christopher has become super-saturated in referential signification. However, the subjective differences that Christopher generates within the text in

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"Kennedy and Heidi" actively *suggest* to Tony (and knowledgeable viewers) that the paranoia of a drugged-up Johnny-Boy styled subordinate handing him over to the FBI has come full circle from the "Pilot" and "The Strong, Silent Type" episodes ("I gotta worry if you'll flip over a nickel bag of white powder?"). Consequently, the car crash scene ends with a final compromise of sorts: Tony attempts to save his own narrative based on his assumptions of the gangster genre, and Christopher literally becomes one of 'the departed'.

In *The Sopranos*, Christopher wants to be like his mythological forefathers, but the rules that are tied in with tradition, via the gangster genre, are stifling the "younger generation" (The Pilot). In "46 Long" (xxxx), Christopher tells his cohort Brendan, "It's not like I'm getting anywheres playing by the rules..... Fucking chaos. Nobody knows who is running things anymore". Christopher eventually realizes that "Maybe one reason why things are so fucked up in the organization these days is guys running off not listening to middle management. We have to stick together. Why be in a crew? Why be a gangster?" but as Christopher attempts to understand the rules that govern his existence, he becomes increasingly torn between "listening" and behaving independently.

In Season 1, when Christopher's existential funk is impeding his ability to function as the gangster he wishes to be, he tries to explain his problem to Paulie through an analogy with script-writing: 'Everybody starts out somewheres. But then they do something or something gets done to them that changes their life. That's called their arc. Where's my arc?' Self referentially, Paulie responds to Chris's doubts by reminding him that characters in films are make believe and that they themselves are real and very much arc-less; but Christopher replies: 'You're missing my point. I got no identity. Even Brendan Filone's got an identity and he's dead.' Christopher's reflexive moaning appears to foreground a symbiotic connection between his character and his narrative, but from his counterargument to Paulie about identity, Christopher shifts his emphasis from narrative concerns and indicates that his real problem stems from a specific stress on

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character: his not being recognized by the media and given a public identity. Christopher is not aware of his personal arc and it remains of limited importance to him, but he fails to realize it is his consistently thwarted attempts to cultivate self-significance that will be ultimately responsible for him dying at Tony's hands in his (generic) rise and fall narrative arc.

When Jeffrey Wernick announces that the "execution style slaying of Soprano family associate Brendan Filone" could have been part of a "power struggle," Christopher is not only livid at the fact that "No one would ever have ranked him as associate" ("The Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti"); he is dumbstruck that, while Brendan is given an identity far more important than the one he possessed in his lifetime, Christopher's name is not even mentioned. A discrepancy has arisen in Christopher's diegetic world between the reality of the gangsters and the media that portrays them. Although Chris later finds consolation in an article, that briefly labels him as a "reputed gangster", throughout *The Sopranos*, Christopher consistently fails to make himself recognized within his world as a 'significant' character. In the episode "A Hit is a Hit", Christopher envies the glamorous media saturated lifestyle of the gangster rapper, Massive G., and argues for the relative authenticity of his image with his equally genre-defined girlfriend, Adrianna: "That guy's a gangster? I'm a gangster! I'm an O.G. Original gangster! Not him. . . . And they're on T.V." Christopher's privileging of the media and his dissatisfaction with his situation reflexively lead him to trying ways of altering his narrative through filmmaking.

Christopher's first foray into a Hollywood gangster mode is when he attempts to write the script for *You Bark, I Bite*, but in becoming involved with the movie industry, Christopher has opted for 'bark' over 'bite'. Christopher takes acting lessons for writers in the Season 2 episode "Big Girls Don't Cry" (xxxx), so that he can understand more about the process of creating fiction. His desire to act in a scene from *Rebel Without a Cause* reflects his attempt to reiterate his own identity as a rebellious young gang member; but it is only when he is

sufficiently distanced from the identity he wished to manipulate that he excels in antithetical roles such as a police officer and a nervous wreck who clings to legs weeping. Christopher is experimenting with different character types that can be found within the gangster genre but his active engagement with the 'weaker' figures impacts upon his day job. In the same episode Chris shoves a paint brush, a symbol of creativity, up a mans nose as a threat but when Furio re-enacts the narrative, the situation turns out to be the most physically violent succession of events over the entire run of *The Sopranos*. Furio gets his money, because unlike Christopher, Furio isn't play acting but living his role, and at the end of the episode, Christopher engages with this distinction when he decides to beat up an actor in class and walk out on that part of his life. Adrianna tries to tell Christopher that acting and writing is all about feelings, but as Furio has shown, being a successful monomaniacal gangster means repressing those thoughts and just doing the job.

Despite his flirtations with writing and acting, Christopher is better at living out his fictional life than he is at creating one. When Chris turns up on the set of Favreau's new film, he is immediately able to contribute the realistic yet extreme dialogue that "sounds more interesting" and is authentic to his gangster world, but was entirely missing from his own script. ("D-Girl," xxx) However, when Christopher relates his anecdote about the transsexual burnt by acid, Amy the movie executive can visualize the story as a film, uttering 'Crying Game,' to which Christopher denies his story the capacity for transference into another genre and reflexively reaffirms that his story was real within his world and if it is portrayed in fiction then there will still be real consequences for himself.

By trying to shut off the intertextual leakage that surrounds him, in "D-Girl" Chris confesses in a moment of unwitting self-reflexivity to the film-maker, Jon Favreau, that he could only envision playing himself in a movie. Christopher is naively convinced that a fictional version of himself in a movie would have to be like the 'real' fictional version of himself, and this exclamation is doubly reflexive because

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Michael Imperioli is a screenwriter who is also playing a screenwriter. The scene is additionally self-referential because Jon Favreau is actually playing himself in the scene, and the fictional Favreau is going to steal Christopher's 'real' stories for his new script, *Crazy Joe*, which ironically, is supposed to be based on the life of the real gangster Joe Gallo. Therefore, Christopher's encounter with Jon Favreau has had an effect the reverse of that intended. Instead of limiting and refining the presentation of himself, the condensed reflexivity of Christopher's situation demonstrates to the viewer, and not Chris, the impossibility of consolidating varied images across numerous planes of reality.

Despite the presentation of Christopher as a reflexive product of prior texts, his proximity to the fictional worlds he wishes to create impedes his conscious attempt at generating new texts, and it is only once he cedes control and becomes a film producer that he begins to produce a direction he wishes the gangster genre would follow. Appropriately, in "Mayhem" (xxx) the television writer J.T. Dolan, is lecturing to a small group about how writer's mythologize their inner narrative, when gangsters burst into the room, kidnap Dolan and blackmail him into writing Moltisanti's own thinly masked inner narrative. When talking to Tony B in "Sentimental Education" (xxx), Christopher offers that "other people's definitions of you" are sometimes "more about making themselves feel better". Despite his initial pitch, Christopher's film appears to be more like *The Sopranos* than *The Godfather* and so it doesn't quite disguise all of his hidden "definitions". Silvio states that "Chrissy's the last person [he] would have confused with Marty" ("Stage 5," xxxx) but Scorsese's films and *Cleaver* are quoted and contextualized within *The Sopranos* to comment upon the characters of the television show. The central character of *Cleaver* appears to be a variation on Christopher—*Cleaver* was originally called *Pork Store Killer*, thus echoing Chris's meeting with Kolar; Christopher states that the film is "about a wiseguy with a big mouth, and bigger dreams" ("Mayhem"); and the character looks and dresses like him. However, while Christopher positions himself in the role of the anti-hero, Tony assumes that he is like Sally Boy, the

bathrobe wearing boss that is murdered. Tony takes Sally Boy to be an example of the adage, "imitation's a form of flattery" ("Stage 5"), but once he is confronted with the possibility that the character on the screen is some form of monster, he is also quick to reflexively point out that "it's a movie. It's fictional". Christopher has been a primary example of how the intertextual introduction of fictions is significant in recontextualizing characters within *The Sopranos*, but Christopher attempts to control this discursive process from within the text by diverting Tony's position as a culturally competent viewer of *Cleaver*. In trying to provide an alternate genesis for his film, Christopher has Dolan tell Tony that the protagonist's "whole persona" was stolen "from Broderick Crawford in *Born Yesterday*"; however, once Tony has watched the alleged intertext, he can see that this is not the case. Consequently, it is because of *Cleaver's* difference to *Born Yesterday* that Tony finds his similarity to Sally Boy reiterated and reinforced. In *Cleaver*, the gangster myth has been expressed in original texts which have created new contexts in which the gangster genre can operate, but Christopher's experience with film production parallels his gangster arc: he desired to control his presentation and once he attains the methods with which to do it, he self-destructs for the viewer's pleasure and makes the gangster genre more complex.

Christopher's complex interaction between his narrative and genre heritage is contingent upon the audience's ability to recognize the similarities and differences between *The Sopranos* and other gangster texts. When Christopher tells Dolan "I let you be a part of my movie" ("Walk Like a Man," xxx), he could also be talking to the viewers of the television series *The Sopranos*, but whereas Dolan is shot dead for not listening to Chris's confession, the audience is repeatedly given an opportunity to actively consider, and take pleasure from, the numerous ways in which Christopher Moltisanti has consciously and unconsciously negotiated, recontextualized and developed the gangster genre.