

Made in America: *The Sopranos*

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Abstract

Drawing from the author's own personal experience watching *The Sopranos* in three different countries, this essay discusses the phenomenon of the television series, which aired for eight seasons and became a staple of the popular culture of the world.

Key words: *The Sopranos*; popular culture; HBO; global culture; consumption.



“Made in America” read the copy in an advertisement that appeared in selected periodicals before “the Final Episodes” ran on HBO, beginning April 6, 2007. Pictured was Tony’s stern visage, in the right foreground, while in the left

background stood the Statue of Liberty. Why emphasize the national origin of the *Sopranos* series? After all, it was already one of the most well-known and most celebrated series in American television history.

An answer to this simple question is immediately overcome by larger, vastly more complex questions, having to do with such weighty matters as the distinct cultural horizons of any one nation state, the specific character of global popular culture, and the technological capabilities of television, video, and DVD technology at the present time.

Of course the United States is where the series was born, and the United States is where it subsequently experienced its first death. But by the time this advertisement appeared, *The Sopranos* was being reborn globally, in the form of special-access channels or DVD rentals available in virtually every country on earth. And already there were other countries where *The Sopranos* was being offered real-time through HBO, just as it was in the U.S.

In addition, back home the imminent first death of the series was enjoying a deferral, since another cable network, A & E, had begun showing expurgated episodes of the entire six-year run to date. In one respect, the HBO advertisement was a plea to let *The Sopranos* complete its initial run first, rather like permitting a person live out a complete life span, before subjecting the body to the harvest of organs for transplants.

In a more important respect, the advertisement was an elegy to this life span, which could barely be completed in its country of origin. By that April 2007, what did America offer anymore insofar as *The Sopranos* was concerned? Well, the Final Episodes, shown live. After one showing, they would be variously available to the world. But for that one Sunday evening hour, eight more times, the made-in-America-series would continue to live where it was born.

Trouble is, for the rest of the world the series was never confined exclusively to

the United States. I know, because for a good portion of its duration, I never lived exclusively within the United States myself. To be able to see real-time transmission remained either impossible or elusive to its very end—and that fact then illuminated, I think, something of the existence of *The Sopranos* (not to say popular culture itself) as a global phenomenon.

Begin at the beginning. My wife and I only started viewing the first season during the original U.S. broadcast of the second season. The two of us were living in Japan. A friend of the wife of a friend had taped the first season. When she finished the tapes, she loaned them to us. Hooked immediately (for all the reasons critics have been celebrating for years) we saw the first season over the course of a month or so. But not quite all of it.

Would Tony be killed? We had to wait two months before the final episodes made their way round to us—and so it went for the episodes of subsequent seasons. A whole year passed before we were able to see tapes of the second season of *The Sopranos*; by then, the broadcast of season three was over in the United States. Unless we were prepared to concede to the series the status of a movie it never was, it remained crucial to see the episodes in chronological order. Yet not so fast. By the end of the second season, HBO began to release official VHS tapes for individual purchase or rental at video stores.

During two weeks of summer's end in 2002—as my wife was preparing to take a new job in the U.S and I was preparing to complete the final half-year of my contract in Japan—the two of us watched rented videos of each episode of season three. It wasn't like watching a movie. The experience was too haunted by the ghost of real-time transmission. But it

wasn't like watching television either. Those tapes came from shelves with plenty of other tapes.

Suddenly in any case we were up-to-date! Better yet, we now had a plan to continue in sync the new season. My wife could now tape each weekly episode of season four – scheduled to begin a month after my departure – and send it to me in Japan. She proceeded to do so. It worked! If she sent them Monday morning, most of the tapes arrived to my address in Japan by Friday.

I watched each week's tape with the couple who had first lent me their tapes of season one. On Sunday we had lunch first at our favorite Turkish restaurant – it should ideally have been Italian but in Japan you already eat plenty of noodles – and anticipated possible plot developments. *The Sopranos* became a social occasion, unless, while arguing over Carmella's character or speculating about AJ's future, it toppled into a graduate seminar.

Season five? Months later, now back in the U.S. at last and able to see each new Sunday night's episode by the mere press of a button, I missed the social occasion. In fact, I missed the sheer *drama* of being able to see *The Sopranos*. Made in American and now possible (for me) to consume in America, the series lost something vital: its power to elude national borders. Who was I? Just another American, watching *The Sopranos*, which was, finally, just another American show.

Season six? Again, it was too easy of access – just resubscribe to HBO (I canceled after season five was over) and tune in each wholly American Sunday night. This season, though, a complication eventually developed. My wife and I wanted to go to Brazil for a month. We had worked out a plane

schedule that began the Sunday following the broadcast of the final episode of the season. Or so we thought. Wrong. Damn. We miscalculated by a week.

Considerations of cable programming in other countries ignore not only how expensive or complicated it was to connect but how, at that time, its availability was often restricted to a few major cities. If HBO was in fact available in Brazil, I didn't know anybody who had it or could get it. So back to the videotape. Someone would have to tape the final episode of season six for us. But who? Asking proved to be very complicated.

Suffice to say that a DVD copy of the last episode of season six did arrive at my door from UPS a few days after we returned from Brazil, one month after this episode was initially broadcast. However, making this copy almost cost the friendship, and had already stretched the bonds of two others. I wouldn't have been so difficult to get a copy made of this final episode in Japan, my wife and I agreed.

Now fast forward a year-and-a-half. During this time of course *The Sopranos* became even less exciting and provocative as it had been initially. In large part this was so because it had ceased to be an exclusively televisual phenomenon. Instead, like so many other popular or critically acclaimed television shows, the seasons of *The Sopranos* had become part of the culture of the video library, whereby even shows from the 50s had been made available for consumption through ceaseless media reproduction.

Moreover, as video stories switched from VHS to digital technology, I had – like so many other fans – picked up at random a few discounted VHS tapes from earlier seasons of *The Sopranos*, brand new.

Only in my case, these copies never ceased to seem priceless. Not so long ago I would have given just about anything to have had a single tape in hand. Being able find ways to view *The Sopranos* had become one definition of my life, as a hapless kind of global being rather than a hopeless national one.

I'm not sure whether or not it was clear to me when we left for Brazil that the series would not end with the season's final episode. Six months later, though, when we left for Spain, it was clear not only that there would be another season but that during the four months we would be in Spain we would have to miss the first month of this final season. So it was once more into the breach of different temporal intervals and mutually exclusive national horizons.

Did Spain have real-time access to HBO-sponsored broadcast of *The Sopranos*? (By this time, 2007, Japan did, albeit filtered through another cable service, Sky TV, and then only if your residence had fiber-optic cable.) It proved impossible to determine. Best to assume we – or our building in Spain (which turned out not even to have cable) – would simply have no access to the U.S. broadcast. No matter if, during the eight years of the series, technology may well have effectively rewired the globe (as well as redefined forms of cultural reproduction).

If we wanted for a final time to pick up the season live on HBO after we returned from Spain, once again a friend would have to be asked to tape the first four episodes for us. Blessedly, one offered. (Despite his assurance that HBO's new on-demand service would enable viewing of these same episodes once I got back.) So my wife and I left the country for a final time at ease, even if by this time my own personal drama to retain the

opportunity for real-time viewing had a somewhat nostalgic air. A few years ago, yearning for contact with the original American broadcast moment made sense. Why bother now?

After all, the cultural apex of *The Sopranos* had already been reached in the U.S. And in just a couple months we—in Nishinomiya, Curitiba, Alcalá de Henares, and everywhere else on earth – would all be able to see (or at least be able to learn) if, or how, Tony got wacked. The series would be then be over, and then become fully available to assume its due place in the video library. One could reasonably anticipate the day when its episodes will be shown on television rather as one or the other of *The Godfather* movies regularly now appears.

Perhaps not over every channel everywhere on earth quite yet, and not even over every cable channel. Yet while Americans may legitimately await some new or final permutation of *The Sopranos* – a video game? a cartoon? a sitcom based on some remaining member of Tony's crew? – they will have to admit that what is over for good is the original location of *The Sopranos* in American broadcast time and American cultural space. It may indeed be made in America. But it's now consumed, or available to be consumed, everywhere on earth.

In fact, my own hapless experience trying to watch the seven seasons of the series over the course of eight years in three foreign countries reveals that, if the first broadcast time could never quite be recaptured, it could always be taped, on a person-to-person basis. In turn, the taping effectively anticipated from the beginning the technological revolution whereby all television came to be reborn as video. Another line from another HBO ad: "It's not TV. It's HBO." True and

false. True because any series now already anticipates its reproduction. False because the foundation of this reproduction remains—at least for the moment — original television transmission.

And what of the cultural space? It exists to be expanded, again through technology, which enables any point of origin to be transmitted (at least in theory) and adapted (for better or worse) according to the codes of any one particular country. Of course, if only because of its subject is Italian-Americans, *The Sopranos* itself has in fact never taken place solely within the confines of one country only (and has prominently featured throughout other nationalities such as Russians or Chinese). In this respect especially, the series now provides the basis for a restaging of venerable questions about popular culture, such as whether or not it is reducible to American popular culture.

One thing for sure: few shows in history other than *The Sopranos* have exhibited the power of American television to make contact with new forms of technical reproduction and wider frames of cultural reference. However, this is not the only story. Culture begins locally, before it circulates globally, and television provides a crucial instance of this fact, because, even as it passes into video and DVD, any series remains fraught with time to the very end of its original

transmission. Once you get behind, you can't really catch up.

A copy, like the eventual global product, will prove to be something else entirely—and, at least in my experience, you won't be quite sure what. So it was nice to be able to see the very last unproblematically televised episode of *The Sopranos*, in the company of millions of other Americans. Each proceeded, like me, to assess the merits of its curious conclusion, deliberately suspended in time. What can we make of it? At least one thing: the suspension, like the HBO advertisement, was designed to register the future of the series as a global commodity.

As such, the temporal circumstance of its original television broadcast ceases to matter. The new, full global circumstances for the consumption of the series depend upon the ease with which it joins the culture of the video and DVD library, which is effectively apart from time. It is not effectively apart from national origin. *The Sopranos* will always be comprehended as “American.” But speaking as one American who tried to enact a national identity only to see it repeatedly collapse into a global one, it might have been nicer still – to the very end – to have seen the final episode somewhere else.

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