Reading 'Quality American Television' Drama:

A student-centred learning concept based on *The Sopranos*

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Frieda Pattenden, M.A.

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1. Gutachterin: Prof. Dr. Randi Gunzenhäuser
2. Gutachterin: Prof. Dr. Angela Hahn

1. Introduction: *The Sopranos*, an American phenomenon in Britain

> It has won 21 Emmies, five Golden Globes and even been parodied by Hillary Clinton in her presidential campaign; reasons enough to explain why *The Sopranos* – the violent and compelling tale of murderous New Jersey mobsters – has been voted the greatest TV drama series of all time by a panel of *Guardian* TV critics. (Lusher, 2010: 37)

This praise for the outstanding success of *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007) comes from one of the many, many more articles churned out by the British quality press, especially *The Guardian*, about the series since it was first broadcasted in 1999. The fact that *The Sopranos* was voted the best TV drama series ever did not surprise me that much. What did and still does surprise me is that the British press have lavished so much praise on an American series. It seemed to me praise indeed from a British culture which had prided itself for so long on its own home-produced television drama and now was suddenly transferring its attention onto what has been coined by *The Guardian* and many British television journalists and scholars as "Quality American Television" (Sweney, 2009).

The idea and motivation for my project lies within a whole mixture of elements which fortuitously came together for me three and a half years ago in summer 2006. The first, my already avid interest in the phenomenon of 'Quality American Television', the second, my teaching focus as a teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the University of Munich and the third, my need for a PhD topic.

The emergence of this so-called genre of 'Quality American Television', which seemed to come out of the blue, was also quite a shock to me and, it appears, to many other Britons. Having grown up in the television-dominated culture of Britain from the 1970s-1990s, I had the strong conviction that British television drama was by far superior to particularly American television drama with British drama production 'masterpieces' as *Brideshead Revisited* (ITV, 1981*), The Jewel in the Crown* (ITV, 1984), *The Singing Detective* (BBC, 1986), *Pennies From Heaven* (BBC, 1978), *Prime Suspect* (ITV, 1991-2006) and *Cracker* (ITV, 1993- 1996). This sentiment is obviously shared by *The Daily Mirror* journalist Jim Shelley:

> It's hard to believe now, but in years gone by there was nothing we Brits loved more than telling ourselves that American people had less taste than we did – especially over TV. All that cheesy, patriotic rubbish they loved: Happy Days, Little House on The Prairie, Diff'rent Strokes... God, their culture was so vulgar. (Shelley, 2010)

This disdainful British attitude towards American culture has in fact a very long tradition. In an article in *The New Yorker* entitled *The Unloved American* (Schama, 2003), British historian Simon Schama writes of this long tradition describing it as "two centuries of alienating Europe". He traces the comments of many European writers, including Dickens and Kipling, about American vulgarity: "A constant refrain throughout this long literature of complaint, and what European intellectuals even now find repugnant, is American sanctimoniousness, the habit of dressing the business of power in the garb of piety." (Schama, 2003)

In stark contrast to this tradition of disdain for American culture, *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, generally considered some of the main sources of debate about the media in Britain, have been continually running articles in recent years praising the "new 'golden age' of challenging US TV" and the "unprecedented wave of critically acclaimed dramas" (Harris, 2006) and contrasting it with the British form which has often been derided:

> The vibrancy of American TV is also throwing the situation in Britain into sharp relief. Once hailed as a repository of quality TV, British output looks poor compared with its American equivalent. (Harris, 2006)

Ricky Gervais, one of the currently most respected figures in British television as creator of the successful comedy series *The Office* (BBC, 2001-2003), was quoted in 2006 to have called British TV drama compared to American "second division", stating: "*The Sopranos*, *24*, *CSI*, *The Wire*, bang! We've got nothing like that. Nothing! It's such a big gap." (Wright, 2006) Within the space of a decade the emphasis of the importance of television drama in British popular culture seems to have completely shifted focus from British to American productions: "Today, US television is where cultural debates are sparked, and where popular culture renews and reinvigorates itself." (Patterson and McLean, 2006)

Partially fuelled by this British press coverage, I bought DVD box set after box set of 'Quality American Television' series starting off with *CSI* (CBS, 2000-), *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), *The L Word* (Showtime, 2004-2009), *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2000-), *24* (Fox, 2001-) and *Six Feet Under* (HBO, 2001-2005), but all these paled into insignificance when I started watching *The Sopranos*. I was completely hooked right from the first few seconds of episode 1. The series traces the life of Tony Soprano, a forty-something, overweight murdering mob boss, who juggles his family life of wife, Carmela, and two 'typical' teenage children, Meadow and

Anthony Junior, with the demands of his other 'family', the mob and all its criminal activities. Despite Tony's murderous tendencies, he shows his 'human' side by trying to please his ever-complaining mother, appease his wife and various mistresses, deal with the emotional ups and downs of his children and also by starting therapy to overcome his childhood traumas after he suffered a number of panic attacks. This unlikely storyline of mob boss having therapy, said to have been adapted from *Analyse This* (Warner, 1999), an arguably weak comedy movie starring Robert de Niro and Billy Crystal, developed into one of the most critically acclaimed and hugely successful television series ever made. For me I could see right from the beginning of my watching of *The Sopranos*, the series was a remarkable mixture of high entertainment mixed with incredibly complex narratives and characterisation, a series which got me thinking and kept me thinking for days afterwards.

The second element in the chain of circumstances leading to this project was that I had been living in Germany and working as an English teacher at the University of Munich Language Centre since 1999. In my teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to German university students, I had based much of my teaching on using television, including drama but also other genres (documentaries, comedy, news programmes), as a source for my English language teaching. I had been fortunate to have had the opportunity of using a multi-media language laboratory for my teaching and therefore had developed and practised a range of approaches and methods to using audio-visual materials in language learning in an environment which, using computers, enables students to work actively with the materials and independently from the teacher.

The third element was that I had just finished a master degree at the University of Munich (LMU) majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language and minoring in American Cultural Studies. I had particularly enjoyed American Cultural Studies, especially studying American popular culture and in particular film. I decided I would like to build on these studies and branch into the field of Television Studies.

My need and desire to find a PhD project led me to the idea of combining all three of these elements, the phenomenon of 'Quality American Television', my training and experience of teaching EFL using digital audio-visual materials and continuing and building on my studies in American popular culture in the field of American Cultural Studies. The aim of my project which developed out of this, perhaps unlikely combination of elements, was to design, create and pilot a teaching concept and ultimately a structured course for German university students in the practical analysis of

'Quality American Television'. The television text which I based my project on was *The Sopranos*, a new type of highly intellectualised postmodern text which has recently entered popular culture which, I will argue, due to its complexity demands new innovative approaches in education.

2. Television: The educational challenge of *The Sopranos*

> Father Phil: Hope I'm not barging in --
>
> Carmela: No, no. Just watching TV.
>
> (Season 1, episode 5) (Chase and Soprano Productions Inc., 2002: 88)

The aim of this chapter is to introduce this doctoral thesis by first examining the challenges of and reasons for teaching and studying television and secondly how I approached achieving my aim of designing, creating and piloting a teaching concept and structured course for German university students in the practical analysis of 'Quality American Television'.

Television is the most powerful cultural and political medium since World War II. However, perhaps after video games, television is the most despised entertainment medium. It has been continually bombarded with criticism and disdain from almost every sector of society: politicians, educators, academics and probably from many potential students of television. Often the 'danger' of television is attributed to its 'addictive' and 'seductive' nature reflected in the quotes below:

> Television: chewing gum for the eyes. Frank Lloyd Wright (Miller, 2010: 8)
>
> Television! Teacher, mother, secret lover. Homer Simpson (20th Century Fox, 1994)
>
> I hate television. I hate it as much as peanuts. But I can't stop eating peanuts. Orson Welles (Applewhite, 1992: 328)

Particularly vehement criticism has come from the academic community who have often blamed television for what they perceive as the demise in cultural and educational standards among their students. Television has been accused, among other things, of turning viewers into passive and uncritical zombie-consumers and perpetuating stereotypes of women and minorities. Pierre Bourdieu, professor of sociology at the Collège de France described as a "leading dissident intellectual" on the cover of his book *On Television* (1998), laments, for example, the wasted opportunity of using television to promote democracy: "[Television] could have become an extraordinary instrument of direct democracy" but is "turning into an instrument of symbolic oppression." (Bourdieu, 1998: 12) Toby Miller in his recent introduction *Television Studies: the Basics* (2010) refers to the research projects undertaken to 'prove' the damaging effects of television on education: "Educators are often greatly

afeared of television. A slew of studies seeking to account for the alienation between college students and their professors places the blame for student disinterest in pedagogy on the popular, and especially TV". (Miller, 2010: 9)

This attitude is certainly not one which belongs to past derogatory attitudes towards television. When answering a recent email interview I conducted, Bernd Eßmann, who teaches television courses to undergraduate students at the TU Dortmund University, said that one of the major obstacles in using television in his courses was some of the students' own negative attitudes towards the material. First his students saw film as a superior medium to television and secondly, they regarded television as purely an entertainment medium and not a text which should be analysed:

> I have the impression that quite a few consider film and TV (the latter even more so!) as more entertaining than something to really reflect on. (Maybe in some cases they really don't WANT to do it since it might take the fun out of it if you think about what entertains you.) They sometimes seem to have problems taking the material really seriously and considering it actually worthwhile analysing in detail. (Eßmann, 2010)

These critical attitudes present the television educator with the challenge of often having to defend the integration of television into education, even to their own students. However, when examining the arguments for the teaching of television as a legitimate educational activity, both in schools and at universities, they are very convincing.

The first argument is based on the role which television plays in most people's daily lives. Despite many beliefs that television is on the demise due to the spread of the internet, in fact the amount of television being consumed has actually risen. In 2005 in the US the average household watched 8.18 hours of television per day compared to 7.2 hours in 1997 (OECD, 2007: 191). In 2009, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published its predictions for the future of television in its member countries, which include the US, the UK and Germany. The OECD sees television as an expanding and evolving market which is likely to be fought over by the established cable television operators and the up and coming DSL providers: "Television has become a lucrative potential market for DSL providers and a historical revenue stream to protect for cable operators." (OECD, 2009: 4) In addition the organisation highlighted the amount of investment currently going into the provision of higher quality broadband transmission for television: "Operators are investing heavily in new, high-speed broadband networks and this allows a much richer audio-

visual experience than early broadband connections were capable of transmitting." (OECD, 2009: 4)

With the amount of television consumption on the rise and more growth being predicted with such high investment in new technologies, the question must be asked why a medium which affects our daily lives to such a great extent is often excluded from or is on the periphery of education curricula. Eileen Lewis in her handbook to teaching television in British schools, *Teaching Television at GCSE* (2008), also criticises the lack of attention television has received in education, particularly at school level:

> [Television] can be hugely informative, a source of great pleasure and a site for creative and technological innovation. It can be both inspiring and groundbreaking and, without doubt, it affects our perceptions of ourselves and of the world around us. Yet only quite recently has this important medium been accepted as worthy of serious study. (Lewis, 2008: 4)

The need for students and pupils to acquire skills which enable them to be critical, discerning and analytical in the field of media is clear. Lewis also emphasises this need, stressing that with the ever-increasing amount of different media communication, including television, these skills are essential:

> As we get most of our information about the world through the media, and in particular television, it is important that we understand it. With the advent of multichannel and digital viewing, television's increased accessibility means that it continues to impinge upon our lives. (Lewis, 2008: 5)

These types of analytical skills are often collectively referred to as 'media literacy' skills by media educationalists. In the UK, the need for promoting media literacy skills in education has even been formally recognised by the government with the passing of the Communications Act in 2003. This act recognised the impact of television (along with other new media such as the internet and mobile phones) by giving the government watchdog, Office of Communications (Ofcom), the responsibility for promoting media literacy. Ofcom's definition of media literacy is one also based on the acquisition of skills primarily to enable individuals to be discerning about their choices of media:

> Media literate people will be able to exercise informed choices about content and services, be able to take advantage of the full range of opportunities offered by new communications technologies and be better able to protect themselves and their families from harmful or offensive materials. (Ofcom, 2004)

David Buckingham (2003) takes his definition of media literacy a step further than just these analytical skills, he also emphasises the need for a greater understanding of the economic, external forces which drive the media:

> […] media literacy is a form of *critical* [emphasis in original] literacy. It involves analysis, evaluation and critical reflection. It entails the acquisition of a 'metalanguage' – that is, a means of describing the forms and structures of different modes of communication; and it involves a broader understanding of the social, economic and institutional contexts of communication, and how these affect people's experiences and practices. (Luke, 2000) Media literacy certainly includes the ability to use and interpret media; but it also involves a much broader analytical understanding. (Buckingham, 2003: 38)

If the acquisition of these types of media literacy skills is to take place, there is a strong need for the development of practical course designs for all age groups in education. Fuelled by the official promotion of media literary skills in the UK, the British Film Institute (BFI) has recently started publishing a series of excellent handbooks for teachers of television called *Teaching Film and Media Studies* (British Film Institute, 2004-2010), which includes titles as *Teaching TV Soaps* (Alexander and Cousens, 2004), *Teaching TV Drama* (Points, 2007) and *Teaching Television at GCSE.* (Lewis, 2008) These books are hands-on practical guides for school teachers, which contain some theoretical background to teaching media, but mainly consist of schemes of work and teaching case studies based on a variety of authentic television programmes. These books are geared towards school teachers and pupils, there is, however, a definite lack of practical course design books for teaching television at university level and this is a gap which I would partly like to fill.

The way in which I decided to approach designing and developing my television course to promote media literacy was to combine two teaching approaches, the first found in Cultural Studies and the second in Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

Cultural Studies scholars advocate a theoretical post-structuralist approach to analysing culture, especially emphasising the active role that an individual plays in this analysis. The field of Cultural Studies was the initiator of recognising all forms of culture not just 'high' culture, including popular culture, as worthy of study, as Casey et al. (2002) state: "Today, the notion of culture has been broadened, democratised and made more complex to include popular and commercial forms". (Casey et al., 2002: 61) This approach to studying culture also places great emphasis on the idea that culture is not fixed but multi-faceted and ever changing.

Campbell and Kean (2006) in their introductory overview of current discussions in American Cultural Studies call for new approaches as a basis to work from. They highlight that American culture has often been defined by the dominant discourse which they describe as a "white, male, middle-class, heterosexual perspective" (Campbell and Kean, 2006: 3) as opposed to including the whole spectrum of discourses from other social, economic, ethnic, sexual orientation groups. They argue that instead of taking the dominant discourse for granted, students should be encouraged to recognise the complexity of "the contested terrain" (Campbell and Kean, 2006: 14) between these various discourses. Randi Gunzenhäuser (2006) has taken this fighting characteristic of Cultural Studies a step further by calling it: "Cultural Studies: Streitkultur" (Gunzenhäuser, 2006: 30). This 'contested terrain' or 'Streitkultur' can be seen as an invitation for students to enter the discussion and has the advantage over 'high' culture in that it is less monitored, which means for students that their contributions can be less guarded, more spontaneous and potentially more fun.

In addition, American Cultural Studies scholars now advocate taking a postnational approach to culture. The idea of a heterogeneous single nation of America, which has often been presented, has "played down its diverse components." (Campbell and Kean, 2006: 12) Campbell and Kean advocate regarding American culture as a "culture of many voices", which "has to be examined with close consideration of the ways in which those differences relate to those who have the loudest voices, the most authority, status and wealth, and those which do not" (Campbell and Kean, 2006: 12-13) and imposing a single meaning misrepresents "the complexity of the text (or nation) itself." (Campbell and Kean, 2006: 12)

In recognising the complexity of the 'contested terrain' of culture, students should be encouraged to consider each cultural artefact or in the case of television, a television programme, as a cultural text which can be analysed or 'read'. As stressed by Roland Barthes (1972), the meaning of a text is not fixed and can be interpreted by readers in different ways. Therefore in order to make a reading of a text, the reader must play an active role, as described by a current and eminent Television Studies scholar, Glen Creeber (2006): "[Post-structuralism] is at pains to acknowledge the active role of the reader in making meaning […] and looking for multiple meanings within a 'polysemic text'." (Creeber, 2006: 38) The relatively new field of Television Studies which has developed out of Cultural Studies has also adopted these current critical reading approaches demanding that the emphasis be placed on analysing a television

text from many different viewer perspectives and not expecting to find a definitive reading.

As a consequence it is vital, if a post-structuralist approach to studying television texts advocated in Cultural Studies and Television Studies is to be applied, that the individual student or reader is given the opportunity within the teaching and learning environment to make their own active reading. However, although the importance of making an individual reading and recognising the importance of the active role of the reader in making meaning about a text is greatly emphasised by Cultural Studies and Television Studies scholars, there is very little guidance given in their work on how to actually enable students to do this. This is where the educational methods and approaches to promoting active learning in the field of English as a Foreign Language can be implemented.

Within the field of Education in general and EFL, the approach of promoting and enabling the active learner has had a long tradition since the 1970s. This is often described as "self-directed learning" or "autonomous learning" (Hedge, 2000: 77). In this type of learning the traditional role of the teacher as the imparter of all knowledge and expertise and the student as the receiver of this knowledge and expertise is no longer accepted. The teacher is now seen as an enabler or 'facilitator' in helping and guiding students in their learning through being a resource organiser, advisor, collector/creator of materials and tutor. In EFL teaching, Michael Legutke and Howard Thomas promote the idea that language teachers should aim at achieving a facilitating learning environment for students:

> Creating and managing an atmosphere in which the learner is encouraged to get involved, providing language resources and monitoring language use, and providing technical expertise and presentation skills, for example. (Legutke and Thomas, 1991: 289)

The role of the student has changed in the sense that students are now encouraged to take responsibility for their learning which involves, for example, having to make choices about and research their own learning focus or topic. Hedge talks of "the good language learner" who should have "an ability to define [their] own objectives; awareness of how to use language materials effectively; careful organization of time for learning, and active development of learning strategies." (Hedge, 2000: 76)

Many of the methods developed in the field of EFL have been aimed at encouraging the student to take an active role in their learning and develop their own

learning strategies. When defining learning strategies in ELT, Joan Rubin emphasises the active in her use of the word 'do': "any set of operations, steps, plans, routines, used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information […] that is what learners 'do' to learn and 'do to regulate' their learning." (Rubin, 1987: 19)

An example of EFL methods which promote the learner taking an active role includes task-based-learning or even project-based learning in which the teacher provides the parameters and framework for a task or project which students have to actively perform or create often in negotiation with other learners.

A further example and new opportunity of promoting active and autonomous learners in language learning and other areas of education has been seen with the introduction of computer technologies. These technologies have provided the opportunity for teachers and learners to move away from the traditionally teacher-centred classroom learning environment and explore new forms of teacher-student and also student-student communication, as described by Nunan:

> Technologies […] alter the nature of community: traditionally, learning 'communities' are controlled at universities by teachers through tutorial or seminar groupings, […] but communication and information technologies radically alter these structures, enabling quite different groupings, communication patterns and power structures. (Nunan, 2000: 31)

The aim of my project was to create a teaching concept which enables students of television to actively engage with the reading of television texts and train them in strategies to become informed and active readers. The way in which I approached this aim was to combine the current Cultural Studies and Television Studies approaches to making readings of *The Sopranos* as a television text with the educational, predominantly EFL, approaches and methods of promoting the active learner and training the learner.

The following chapters of this doctoral thesis show how I worked my way to achieving this aim. My research design for this project was divided into five different stages. Stage one was to conduct my own detailed structured critical and analytical reading of *The Sopranos*. In doing this, I not only put myself in the reading position of the teacher, as a collector of learning materials and creator of teaching concepts, but also in the position of the student having to make my own individual readings from the text. In stage two I designed and developed materials for an intensive blended learning course concept for American Cultural Studies students at German universities. In stage three, I piloted the seminar at the TU Dortmund University in March 2009 over a three-

week period. Stage four was the evaluation of feedback, both oral and written, which I had gathered from both participant students and teachers involved in the pilot seminar and other workshops which I had given about my concept. Stage five was the writing of this doctoral thesis.

In this doctoral thesis I will argue two main points. First, I will demonstrate that *The Sopranos*, as an example of 'Quality American Television', is a highly complex and intellectualised postmodern text which is not only an ideal reading text due to its polysemic nature but is a text in current popular culture which challenges and demands readers to do the work in creating their own meanings. As argued by the author Christopher J. Vincent:

> The tone of *The Sopranos* does not dictate morals and meanings. Rather, it simply presents pieces of a puzzle and lets the viewer do the work of putting them together. No two people have exactly the same interpretation of the show and that is a testament to its artistic power and merit. I believe it holds, for everyone, a key to greater understanding to their lives and the world in which they live. Whether regarding family relationships, work-related stress, the climate of American society, or personal demons – it's all in there if you're willing to unpack it (Vincent, 2008: 1).

Secondly, I will show that media literacy skills can be promoted and practised through the active reading of television texts. This active reading can be facilitated through a careful and structured course design, which combines cutting-edge approaches to reading texts in Cultural Studies and methods in Education aimed at promoting the autonomous and active learner.

In order to support my argument I have structured the rest of this thesis as follows: In chapter three, I trace the development of the academic approach of reading television texts in the context of the beginnings of television as a medium in the 1930s to the current day. Chapter four investigates the phenomenon of 'Quality American Television', the production and distribution context of the making of *The Sopranos* and investigates the reasons for the series being the ideal reading text for students. In chapter five, I declare my intended reading approach which I promote in my course design and in addition I test out my approach by making my own individual reading from *The Sopranos* on the topic of gender. In chapter six, I present my course material and design and discuss the aims and motivations behind my planning and design of the course. Finally in chapter seven, I present my assessment of the feedback given to the course and evaluate the course concept as a whole.

3. 'Reading' television 'texts': A historical perspective

'Reading' television is the accepted contemporary term or even 'buzzword' used to describe the approach to the critical analysis of television in the academic field of Television Studies. In the field of television drama, there has even been a recent book series published by I.B.Tauris entitled *Reading Contemporary Television.* Individual book publications within this series have been prolific. Between 2006 and 2007 there have been nine publications focusing on 'Quality American Television' including: *Reading Desperate Housewives* (Akass and McCabe, 2006), *Reading The Sopranos* (Lavery, 2006), *Reading The L Word* (Akass and McCabe, 2006) and *Reading 24* (Peacock, 2007).

However, it is still unusual for the average television viewer and also often for students studying television to think of their viewing as 'reading' and/or the television programme considered a 'text'. This is in contrast to printed text where 'reading a text' is considered the standard term and analysis procedure. Therefore, it is vital for students and teachers in the field of television studies to have first obtained a clear theoretical and historical understanding of how and why the 'reading' of 'texts', including the 'reading' of television 'texts', has developed before attempting such a reading.

Methods of critical analysis of television should not be seen as separate from other forms of literary criticism. In his discussion of the issues and methods of the textual analysis of television, Creeber (2006) advocates an examination of the historical roots and development of television critical analysis and that this examination should be seen as "part of a larger intellectual tradition of methods and analytical procedures" (Creeber, 2006: 26).

The approaches to analysing literary texts must also be seen as a process in which changes can be seen as reflecting the historical and cultural *Zeitgeist* of a particular time but also very often as rejections of previous approaches: "the different forms of textual analysis employed today can be partly seen as a reaction against the type of methods and procedures used and employed in the past." (Creeber, 2006: 26)

However, an examination of the historical roots of television should not focus entirely on the changes in methods of critical analysis. Television is a medium which has been dramatically influenced by the economic, social, cultural and political context in which it is produced. Therefore an examination of this context is necessary. Jonathan

Bignell (2008) highlights the four main influencing factors affecting television production as "technologies, institutions, regulations and the expectations of audiences" (Bignell, 2008: 61).

Technologies have played a major role in the dramatic development of television since its humble beginnings in the 1930s, to a far greater extent than in the development of print media. In television drama, for example, there is a vast difference between its early beginnings in Britain when classic theatre productions were broadcasted live on television and the current digital age when high definition picture and sound quality can be viewed broadcasted on television, on DVD or as a download or stream on the internet. However, it must be noted that great advances in technology are not made for the mere sake of technological advancement but for commercially driven market demand as also stressed by Bignell:

> The recognition of a potential market, and programme content that can be sold to this market, is a precondition for the successful introduction of a new television technology. (Bignell, 2008: 41)

The type of institution which produces television has also been a great influencing factor in the type of television made. Whether, for example, it is a state controlled institution or an institution which is commercially driven, or even a combination of the two, the commercial, political or even moral aims of that institution play a decisive role.

Regulations include the type of regulatory censorship imposed on television makers which could restrict them as far as, for example, the amount of profanity, violence and sexual content in their programmes is concerned.

In the 60 years of television, audiences have become progressively more experienced and demanding in their viewing. These changes in audience expectations have meant that television producers have had to make great efforts to try and predict what type of programming audiences want at any particular time.

Therefore in order to have a more balanced examination for this historical perspective of 'reading' television, I will firstly trace the roots of the critical analysis of television and the development of Television Studies as an academic discipline mainly from a British perspective from the beginnings of television as a medium to the modern day not only in the intellectual 'traditions and analytical procedures' which Creeber (2006) focuses on, but also attempt to place these approaches in the context of television's dramatic developments in terms of technologies, institutions, regulations

and audience expectations. In order to provide a framework for my historical overview, I have taken three phases in the history of television used by Rogers, Epstein and Reeves (2002): 'TV I', 'TV II' and 'TV III' (Rogers, Epstein and Reeves, 2002: 43-57), although as Medhurst states: "When each period starts and ends is notoriously open to debate." (Medhurst, 2006: 115) I will attempt to examine these aspects of television history in the UK and the US.

3.1   TV I: Beginnings

The TV I phase which began in the 1930s in the US and the UK and lasted until about the mid to late 1950s can be categorised as a time of scarcity in television. Scarcity in the sense that television was initially in an experimental phase both technically and programme content-wise. It was considered the preserve of the affluent (with the acquisition of a television set seen as a sign of great economic status) and radio still remaining the dominant broadcasting medium for the mass audience. For example, by the time the US entered the Second World War in 1941, there were thirty-two commercial television stations broadcasting to only a few thousand owners of television sets in America's largest cities (Bignell, 2008: 46). Really it was not until after World War Two and the beginning of the 1950s when a wider audience was able to access television, although generally this was not on a privately owned television set in their homes but was often in a public viewing area. For many Britons their first experience of television was a BBC live broadcast of the Queen's coronation in 1953 in a crowd huddled around a tiny screen in a public place. It is estimated that over 20 million people watched the BBC coverage (BBC, 2008).

The effect that a television-producing institution and the regulations which govern those institutions had on programme content can be seen particularly markedly when one compares the US and the UK in their initial stages of television. In the UK the British Broadcasting Company, a commercial company, was given sole rights to broadcasting in Britain, firstly on radio and later on television. The first General Director of the BBC, Lord Reith, started his now infamous 'Reithian mission' which meant that BBC programming was aimed at maintaining high moral and social standards and promoted the best culture to its audiences and rejected advertising. Of course the types of 'standards' and 'culture' were defined by Reith and the BBC. Reith justified his approach by insisting that he was protecting the British public from themselves, giving evidence to the Crawford Committee in 1925, Reith was quoted to

have said: "He who prides himself on giving what he thinks the public wants is often creating a fictitious demand for lower standards which he himself will then satisfy." (Snannell, 1991) Therefore in Britain, public service broadcasting was established with the BBC given monopolistic rights financially and content-wise.

In contrast in the US, television was modelled on the organisation of radio broadcasting, with national networks like NBC and CBS supplying programming to local stations. These local stations paid the national networks to broadcast gaining income themselves from commercials and the sponsorship of programmes. Programmes were sponsored by a single company or corporation.

Therefore commercialism characterised US television with television companies producing what they considered to be what most people wanted to see in order to obtain the highest profits. This profit-driven nature of television and its direct influence on programming content was also criticised within the US, most famously by Newton N. Minow, Federal Communications Commission (FCC) chairman in his 'vast wasteland' speech given on May 9, 1961 at a time when there were only three networks:

> When television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there, for a day, without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper, without a profit and loss sheet or a rating book to distract you. Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland. (Johnson, 2005)

The academic approach to television during this first 'TV I' phase was generally one of disdain or at best that of considering television irrelevant to any contribution to culture. Clearly therefore television was not considered worthy of any academic study by the educated elite. In Britain, for example, this attitude was especially influenced by the work of F.R. Leavis and 'the classical tradition' approach to analysing literature (Creeber, 2006: 27). This approach praised 'high culture' (mostly classical literature), being particularly concerned with celebrating the authorial genius of a single author. The classical tradition also belittled the increasing rise of 'mass' or 'popular' culture as these newer forms of culture were seen as threatening the great English 'classics' and also as the product of industrial production. Leavis saw it as his role to educate the masses out of their intellectual and cultural decline (Creeber, 2006: 37). It can be seen there is a strong parallel between the principles of the 'classical tradition' and those held by Lord Reith and the founders of the BBC.

Disdain from the educated classes was not only directed at the medium of television itself but at the audiences who were watching it. There was the idea that television had negative effects on audiences and could either be used for propaganda purposes as seen in Nazi Germany and/or that representations of violence on television, for example, might corrupt and deprave audiences. The television audience was therefore seen as entirely passive, vulnerable and easily manipulated. As Hills describes, messages broadcasted on television could be "directly 'injected' into viewers' minds" (Hills, 2006: 94).

A further criticism levied at television came from the Frankfurt School of Marxists writing in Germany and America from the 1930s. They held the assumption that the mass media was a result of industrial production. They argued that the corporate control over mass culture, with television being perceived as an obvious purveyor of mass culture, meant mass culture was produced for commercial gain in a mass market (Casey et al., 2002: 129-34).

To sum up in the TV I era the academic approach towards television was either one of rejection as a cultural product of any value and/or seen as a dangerous and manipulative device which could be used by unscrupulous groups (political extremists or 'money-grabbing' capitalists) to further their own rather unsavoury aims.

3.2   TV II: Mass

The TV II phase from roughly the mid 1950s until the mid 1990s has been described by many television historians as television's 'golden age' as it rapidly spread to an increasingly huge world-wide mass audience and took over from radio as the main source of home entertainment and information. By the early 1960s, 90% of US households had TV sets and 80% in the UK (Medhurst, 2006: 121).

Many technological developments took place to increase the comfort, pleasure and attraction of television viewing. For example, the transition from black and white television sets to colour ones, by the mid 1980s the popularity of the video recorder gave viewers more autonomy in deciding when and sometimes where they watched television and during the late 1980s and 1990s cable and satellite started to pose a major threat to terrestrial television.

As far as television institutions were concerned, there was a dramatic rise in the number of television providers with the television industry becoming more and more

competitive both in the highly commercialised US sector and increasingly in Western European countries where the emphasis originally in the founding of television had been on public service broadcasting. A more market-driven approach was growing. In the UK, independent commercial television started in 1955 with the establishment of ITV (Independent Television), funded by advertising revenue and not, like the BBC, by a licence fee. The introduction of commercial television represented what Medhurst (2006) describes as "an ideological shift away from public service broadcasting (in the form of neo-liberal thinking) led to the abandonment of Reithian principles"(Medhurst, 2006: 121). In a House of Lords debate, Lord Reith himself likened commercial television to the bubonic plague:

> Somebody introduced dog-racing into England…. And somebody introduced Christianity and printing and the uses of electricity. And somebody introduced smallpox, bubonic plague and the Black Death. Somebody is minded now to introduce sponsored broadcasting into this country … Need we be ashamed of moral values, or of intellectual and ethical objectives? It is these that are here and now at stake. (BBC, 2009)

Within the TVII era there was a gradual shift in the attitude of television producers to audiences. In the US during the heyday of network broadcasting in the 1960s, television producers' main aim was to attract as many viewers as possible to any particular television programme. In terms of television content this meant that the networks tried hard not to offend anyone and produced what Nelson describes as 'LOP' ('least offensive programming') (Nelson, 2006: 79). However, increasingly starting in the US at the beginning of the 1970s, the networks began to think much more demographically as Alvey describes: "Executives were paying more attention to *who* was watching as well as *how many*." (Alvey, 2004: 40) Medhurst (2006) talks of the transition from broadcasting to narrowcasting in the TV II era with broadcasters trying to locate niche groups seeing this development as a result of profound changes in western societies: "when societies become more diverse and multicultural and when cable/satellite channels inevitably multiply" (Medhurst, 2006: 121). For example, in response to the recognition that audiences had become more fragmented one of the conditions Channel 4 in the UK was given for its foundation as a new semi-commercial channel was specifically to cater for minority audiences. The Annan Committee Report of 1977, which investigated the need for a new television channel in the UK alongside the BBC and ITV, stated: "we do not want more of the same. There are enough

programmes for the majority [...] what is needed now is programmes for the different minorities which add up to make the majority." (Channel 4, 2009)

In general by the end of the TV II era, the number of television providers had expanded dramatically, not only to supply the vast mass television audiences but also to tap growing audiences demanding programming to cater for their needs, for example, ethnic minorities and other language communities. Also the gradual move away from public service broadcasting to commercial or even semi-commercial television called into question the role of television broadcasters as the moral and intellectual leaders of society (Bignell, 2008: 47).

During the TV II era a dramatic change in the academic approach towards culture and especially popular culture was taking place with the principles behind the 'classical tradition' being heavily criticised and largely rejected by a newer intellectual generation. This rejection of the 'classical tradition' was spearheaded by the structuralist movement of the 1960s and 70s and in the UK especially by the emerging Cultural Studies Department at the University of Birmingham led by Stuart Hall. Structuralism seemed to set itself up to counter the principles of what was advocated by the 'classical tradition'. Unlike the 'classical tradition', structuralism rejected the idea of prioritising high culture and downgrading popular and mass culture seen by the 'classical tradition' as the product of the industrial revolution taken from the Frankfurt School's notion of the culture industry. Structuralism regarded all cultural products as the same using the word 'text' to describe them. An example of this structuralist perspective on text is shown in the work of the French literary theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes in his work *Mythologies* (Barthes, 1972) in which he talks of the 'signification' of practically everything around him, not only the books and paintings of high art, but also the slogans, trivia, toys, food, and popular rituals of contemporary life.

In addition and in contrast to the 'classical tradition', structuralism, as implied in its name, attempted to offer a clear methodology of analysing text based on semiotics by reading the meaning of any particular text in a system of 'signs'. This was a direct criticism of the form of analysis used in the 'classical tradition' which offered few methodological procedures and was criticised for being too subjective and arbitrary (Creeber, 2006: 28). Structuralism held that texts were composed of a complete system of 'codes' which could be 'decoded' if certain practices were followed. For example,

Stuart Hall (1980) produced his 'encoding/decoding' model of texts whereby he advocated that within a text there were codes placed or encoded into the text which then could be deciphered or decoded by the text reader. Hall maintained there were three different types of readings which could be made: firstly, 'preferred readings' which fitted with the meanings 'encoded' into a text by the text maker(s), secondly 'oppositional readings' which rejected the preferred reading and thirdly 'negotiated readings' which accepted parts of the 'preferred' reading and rejected others (Hall, 1980).

This structuralist approach in academia not only meant that television as part of popular culture could be included into the notion of what constituted culture but also equipped researchers with the 'tools' with which to analyse television in a semi-scientific way. This led to much emphasis on the study of television audiences and the extent to which they are 'influenced' by television. An example of audience research can be seen in the ethnographic study by Ien Ang (Creeber, 2006), who identified 'resistant' and 'oppositional' readings by those viewers placed at the social margins. In Ang's case she researched the power of emotions among women as part of their viewing experience when watching the classic American soap of the 1980s *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-1991)*,* concluding that: "the significance of the craving for and pleasure in romantic feelings that so many women have in common and share" should not be "invalidated" (Ang, 2003: 234)*.* As Nelson comments, this research placed more emphasis on what people *do* with television (Nelson, 2006: 78) rather than how they are manipulated by it. This view of the power of the audience to make meaning from a text was taken further by Schrøder (1992) who asserted that a text can only have meaning through interaction with readers: "text itself has no existence, no life, and therefore no quality until it is deciphered by an individual and triggers the meaning carried by this individual." (Schrøder, 1992: 207) Nelson sees this development as a new era of 'the agency' of readers, in which readers have "their freedom to make meaning or determine their own lives" (Nelson, 2006: 79). However, he does stress that there are limits to this reader freedom as readers can never totally divorce themselves from their own reading context: "[the reader] is constrained by the structures of texts, of television institutions and societies." (Nelson, 2006: 79)

To conclude, the study of television was beginning to be taken seriously by a number of academics, especially those working in the framework of the new and

emerging field of Cultural Studies. It was also in this era when the concept of television as texts worth studying evolved, leading to the use of the term 'reading' to mean the critical analysis of the television text.

3.3   TV III: Digital

The TV III era could be said to have started around the mid 1990s and is still in progress. It is an age described by Ellis as "full of new technologies, new challenges and new uncertainties" (Ellis, 2000: 162). It has been dominated by dramatic developments and changes in technology, especially digital technology, which have either been initiated by or have initiated new audience expectations and changes in television regulations and institutions. Three major areas of technological advance can be identified.

Firstly, the rapid increase in the number of channels available on satellite and then on multi-channel cable television. This boom in channels was jump started by government deregulation of the television industry in many Western countries. In the US, the ratification of the Telecommunications Act in Congress in 1996 paved the way for deregulation. Many of the new satellite and cable channels' income is derived predominantly from subscriptions rather than advertising and therefore aimed at making programmes targeted much more at niche audiences like linguistic minorities, homosexuals and special interest groups such as football or erotica. As McCabe and Akass stress, the American television industry of the TV III era emphasized diversification and competition with customer satisfaction high on the agenda (McCabe Janet and Akass, 2008: 84).

A further consequence was the sudden and huge competition the new cable and satellite channels posed to the terrestrial channels. In the UK, even the BBC has had to rethink as its traditional image as a quality and impartial television provider has come under increasing competition. BBC News 24, a cable and satellite news channel, was set up the UK first competitor to Sky News, which had been running since 1989.

Secondly, with personalised, interactive television or 'push media', for example *TiVo* and *Replay TV* in use since 2000, the viewer has been able to digitally record and store programmes. In addition the internet has started to become an increasing source of television for many viewers, moving away from the traditional television set. The result of this is that the viewer can become much more autonomous in their viewing and also

much more independent from the collective audience and the traditional idea of television of all watching the same programme at the same time. However, a different type of 'collectivity' has developed in the form of online interaction about television, often particular programmes or series are discussed, debated and criticised in online forums initiated by online newspapers. *The Guardian*, for example, encourages online discussions, recently asking readers to vote on what they regard to be their "TV show of the Noughties" (Frost, 2009).

Thirdly, there has been a remarkable improvement in the sound and image quality of television through digital technology. The introduction of HD TV (high definition television) whereby the viewing experience has become very similar to going to the cinema with huge screens and all-round sound systems. This has given television producers the opportunity to be much more ambitious and creative as far as sonic and visual effects are concerned.

The changes brought about by these technologies have led to a heated public debate on the nature of television today. On one side there is the 'dumbing down' theory that the sheer quantity of television being produced for such a vast number of channels (currently in the US the average household has more than 130 channels (Spangler, 2009)), has meant that the quality of television produced is getting worse and worse. With 24 hour news channels for example, the pressure of having to have news running all day means that there is an endless amount of repetition of news stories as often the headlines are broadcasted every 30 minutes. The competition with other 24-hour news channels to get the latest breaking news often leads to poor reporting and bad picture and sound quality as speed of delivery is of greater importance than quality.

On the other side there is the theory that the deregulation of television has given especially the cable channels the freedom and independence to create more challenging and innovative programming. This is due to many being subscription only channels which gives them the freedom to explore more adult themes and show more controversial content to audiences who have made an informed and active decision to view a particular channel. For example, the CBS owned US cable channel *Showtime* has particularly won a reputation and vast critical acclaim for showing quality and challenging gay and lesbian dramas including *Queer as Folk* (Showtime: 2000-2005) (about a gay men community in Pittsburgh) and *The L Word* (Showtime: 2004-2009) (tracking the lives of a group of lesbians in Los Angeles).

The TV III era represents a distinct break from the beginnings of television with programming no longer being driven by what a certain intellectual elite or a government feels is suitable for audiences to experience as culture. Television is now much more driven by producers pandering to audience expectations as they battle among the huge number of competing channels for a market share. As Bignall (2008) comments: "Broadcasters no longer attempt to lead the nation to the top of the cultural pyramid, but instead reflect what they believe to be the demands of contemporary society." (Bignell, 2008: 22)

Digital television has made an unprecedented impact on how television is produced and received and as Medhurst (2006) remarks, despite television audiences being in decline with the rise of the internet "television is still in the process of transformation and is clearly playing a role in the new media revolution." (Medhurst, 2006: 123)

By the 1980s, in academic literary criticism in general, structuralism was under increasing attack and was being superseded by post-structuralism. Structuralism was accused of focusing far too heavily on how a text worked rather than any notion of the 'quality' of the text. For example, in the landmark work of John Fiske and John Hartley *Reading Television* (Fiske and Hartley, 1978), the authors, as well as offering a method of analysis for television texts, were open about actually enjoying watching television. It was, as Hartley himself comments in the foreword to the updated 2003 edition: "Uniquely, almost […] written by people who *liked* TV." (Fiske and Hartley, 2003: xiv) It was seen as the first major work which did not openly try to 'prove' and identify the negatively manipulative nature of television as was the case in much structuralist research of television.

Another criticism of structuralism is that it focuses too much on the text and the close analysis of that text and neglects who or what produced the text, in what social, historical and political circumstances (Casey et al., 2002: 246). Nelson (2006), in what could be described as a post-structuralist approach suggests that the reading of a television text should be done from "production to reception" (Nelson, 2006: 79), dividing the process into three key stages: the "production/distribution context", the "text (context)" and the "reception context". (Nelson, 2006: 79)

Furthermore, structuralism's 'semi-scientific' approach (coding and decoding) was seen as being particularly dense and actually a little tedious (Creeber, 2006: 28). In

addition, it seemed to over-emphasise the "conclusive nature of readings" (Creeber, 2006: 28), meaning that researchers did not acknowledge that a range of other readings may be possible from the same text.

Post-structuralism represented a move away from the idea of making an ideological analysis, often seen in structuralist text interpretations, and towards discourse analysis. Discourse analysis, based on the original ideas of French social theorist Michel Foucault, is concerned more with identifying 'discursive practices' that continually struggle to create power and meaning in texts and rejects the idea of a 'dominant ideology' (Marxism, feminism) (Creeber, 2006: 38), one of the main theories behind structuralism.

So again with one form of literary criticism being rejected, another was evolving out of this rejection. Post-structuralism focuses much more on the idea that within each text there is a plurality of meanings, that each text is always a product of reader interpretation and that ultimately no meaning is ever absolute or fixed but mainly a product of the act of the reader.

The study of television texts tended to follow the approaches and methods developed in Cultural Studies, Media Studies and Film Studies. However, in the last twenty years and especially in the UK, Television Studies itself really appeared as a separate academic discipline, although there is still much resistance to its validity and snobbery from many groups of society, including other academics.

According to Creeber (Creeber, 2006: 29) in Television Studies 'reading' a text has taken an eclectic approach mainly derived out of structuralist and post-structuralist traditions. Creeber continues to argue that Television Studies' rich intellectual history means there are a variety of methods and approaches which can be adopted, which he broadly describes as *textual analysis*. These can include "semiotics, narrative theory, genre study, ideological analysis, psychoanalysis, content analysis, linguistic analysis discourse analysis […]" (Creeber, 2006: 29). The implications of this for students of television are that they need to state the type of analysis they wish to use to read a particular television text: "There are so many different forms of textual analysis available to the television critic that it is crucial to distinguish what kind of textual analysis you are employing from the start." (Creeber, 2006: 33)

So in Television Studies there are no set rules, but Creeber warns that the reader must also be aware of the shortcomings a reading approach has as well as its positive

sides: "It is important to remember that all methods have their benefits and their deficits. To be aware of both is crucial if you are to produce an original and convincing reading of a television text." (Creeber, 2006: 33)

Therefore despite the study and analysis of television texts being intrinsically linked to the study and analysis of other forms of cultural texts with the use of the idea of 'reading' a text, in recent years scholars in the emerging field of Television Studies have advocated a much broader approach to text analysis asking the reader to make their own decision in their approach to a particular text.

3.4   TV I-III

In this conclusion of TV phases I-III, I will attempt to summarise in terms of the four influencing factors discussed at the beginning of this chapter: technologies, institutions, regulations and the expectations of audiences.

The dramatic change in and the huge amount of financial investment poured into technologies linked to the broadcasting (and 'narrowcasting') of television over the last eighty years has been driven by an ever-increasing market demand for audiovisual viewing. First from a mass perspective in the broadcasting era with the improvement in the basic television set and now in the digital age in terms of viewing television on a whole spectrum of types of screen with programme sources from satellite, cable and now more and more from the internet. However, not only the receivers of television have increased the quality of sound and vision for the viewer, producers of television now have a highly sophisticated array of technology available to create programming which can now rival the quality of cinema.

The founding institutions which led to the creation and development of television in the UK and US were initially quite different. In the UK, the power to produce and broadcast television was put into the sole hands of public service broadcasting, the BBC, whose responsibility was to educate the masses. Television's beginnings in the US were dominated by commercial networks, selling to local television companies, sponsored by large corporations who wished to advertise through the programming. However, this clear division in the UK and the US has now become much more muddied as, the UK in particular, has pandered much more to the US commercial form of television production. First with the creation of terrestrial independent television channels and today on UK cable and satellite television there is a

vast array of commercial stations which are very similar to the US model. This development has meant a significant demise in the power and dominance of public service broadcasting in terms of the BBC.

The changes in regulations controlling television production over the last eighty years has often led directly to quick and sudden changes in the type of television available to viewers. In the UK this was seen with the creation of Channel 4 in the 1980s which focused much more on niche target audiences and in the US subscription cable channels mushroomed as a direct result of the ratification of the Telecommunications Act in Congress in 1996.

The attitude of television producers towards its audiences has almost made a complete turn around since the beginnings of television. The initial and rather arrogant ideas of using television as a tool to educate its rather 'stupid' audiences to, for example, obtain a high level of cultural experience has largely been dropped by today's television producers. Now television programming is much more focused on trying to produce a viewing experience which will attract, often niche target audiences, and thus motivate them to pay directly for this experience.

The academic approach to television often mirrored these changes in television in general. For example, television audiences were first seen as a pliable and passive mass group which could be manipulated into thinking or believing what the producers wanted them to believe. Today, however, many television scholars see television viewers as active individuals who interact or create a discourse with a particular television text and thereby create their own meaning about that text and therefore do not automatically follow the dominant discourse 'programmed' into it by the text creator.

Despite television having been the most powerful and most-watched mass cultural medium of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the academic study of television has been a slow and almost painful process with television scholars repeatedly fighting disdain and prejudice not only from the educated elite but also from among themselves. The approach to studying television at an academic level has really been piggy-backed on the development of critical text analysis in Cultural, Media and Film Studies with the idea of 'text' broadening out to mean any cultural artefact in any cultural sphere, including the mass cultural sphere. With this much broader concept of text also came the notion of critically analysing a text through 'reading'.

These very broad and diverse academic beginnings have meant that many forms of textual analysis have been applied to the study of television especially since the

1970s. For example, some scholars focus on audiences, others on ideology and others more closely and sometimes exclusively on the text itself. Today, however, it is acceptable as a reader of television texts to adopt one's own eclectic approach on the condition that the critical perspectives that this approach adopts clearly outlined in advance.

4. *The Sopranos* as a 'quality' text: This is not television, this is *The Sopranos*

> "Fine art" is not necessarily fine in any sense of qualitative excellence [...] There are certain movies and television shows (*The Sopranos* is everyone's favorite example), which on any scale of values are masterpieces, they are very fine "works of art" in some sense, yet they are not high or fine art and do not aspire to be regarded that way, but lie rather comfortably within the sphere of mass culture. Interview with W.J.T. Mitchell (Dikovitskaya, 2001)

The unprecedented success of *The Sopranos* can be seen not only in the popular spheres of the viewing audience and the press but also from the vast attention it has attracted in more 'elite' academic spheres. In this chapter, the extent of this success in both the popular and academic spheres will be explored and then the reasons for this success examined which include the economic, regulatory and institutional contexts surrounding the production of *The Sopranos*. Finally elements which make the series one of the main examples of 'Quality American Television' and a postmodern television text will be analysed which make it the ultimate reading text for students studying in the field of television.

4.1   The popular and elite success of *The Sopranos*

> Television has done much for psychiatry by spreading information about it, as well as contributing to the need for it. Alfred Hitchcock (Hitchcock, 1960)

The Sopranos was the first cable series to achieve larger audience ratings than its broadcast network competition. Despite HBO subscribers only representing a third of the total US TV audience, the series was watched by an estimated 14 million viewers in 7.3 million homes during its third and fourth seasons (Thorburn, 2007: 61). As Bill Carter reported in *The New York Times* this was a very 'exclusive' success: "HBO now has the first television megahit ever to be unavailable to the majority of viewers." (Carter, 2002)

Thorburn continues to argue that the success of *The Sopranos* in sheer audience numbers was a huge shock and "demoralising for broadcast networks" (Thorburn, 2007: 61) and marked the end of the network's broadcasting monopoly: "The show's success in the ratings against 'free' network programs was decisive evidence that the mass audiences and consensus programming of the broadcast era were now historical artefacts." (Thorburn, 2007: 61)

Almost right from the airing of the first episode, the quality media press in the US and the UK was full of rave reviews. By 2006 John Patterson and Gareth McLean in *The Guardian* were predicting the end of Hollywood and film as the audiovisual quality medium, particularly highlighting *The Sopranos* as one of the main television series to have surpassed anything being produced for the 'big' screen. They asked:

> Is cinema in its death throes? Movie stars and directors are decamping to the small screen, and *The Sopranos, Simpsons* and other unlikely heroes are making this a golden age of television. When the quality's so high, […], why step out of the living room? (Patterson and McLean, 2006)

Days after the screening of the final episode of *The Sopranos* in 2007, *The New York Times* was already asking its readers "What will we do without Tony Soprano?" (*The New York Times*, 2007), continuing to make parallels between *The Sopranos* and great works of literature which were also delivered in serial form:

> There has never been anything quite like *The Sopranos*. The series that David Chase created for HBO has retrieved something of the experience newspaper readers once savored, back when great novels by Dickens, Dostoyevsky or Balzac appeared in weekly instalments. (*The New York Times*, 2007)

Still in 2010, almost three years after the broadcasting of the last episode, the media critics at *The Guardian* have voted *The Sopranos* "the greatest TV drama ever made […] it as an original, absorbing and affectionate study of complicated family values." (Lusher, 2010)

It was not only in the US and UK where the journalistic praise from the quality press reached such heights. In Germany the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* has run many articles on the remarkable quality of *The Sopranos*. In an article entitled: "Plädoyer fürs Glotzen", Jürgen Schmieder tries to motivate readers to watch television but only quality television like *The Sopranos* which he describes as "eine moderne Form des Epos" (Schmieder, 2008).

Even for the more sensational and perhaps more visually-oriented press, *The Sopranos* made a tremendous impact. This could be seen when *Vanity Fair* celebrated *The Sopranos* with a whole front cover feature and hailing the show as "The Greatest Show in TV History" (*Vanity Fair*, 2007) and featuring a photo by referred photographer Annie Leibovitz of Tony Soprano smothered in the seemingly photoshopped body of a naked blonde all except for red high heeled shoes with David Chase, the show's creator peering out from behind them.

Perhaps more surprising was the impact of *The Sopranos* on what could be regarded as the more elitist cultural spheres. Cultural critics, who perhaps had previously disdained television for not constituting true art, hailed the show as a groundbreaking work of art. This unique status as a cultural icon was shown for example in the screening of the entire first two seasons of the show at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMa) in New York in 2001. Laurence Kardish, the Senior Curator of the Department of Film and Video at MoMa who organized the screening appears to reveal in the event's press release his own surprise that such a television series could be made to such a high standard: "David Chase and his team have created a series distinguished by its bone-dry humor and understated, quirky, and stinging perspective – not usually seen on television." (Museum of Modern Art New York, 2001)

Even some members of the psychology and psychoanalytical professions in the US became hooked by the series, as reported in *The New York Times* in 2001: "Psychologists and psychiatrists around the country – especially the psychoanalytically inclined – have been watching the HBO series, which just ended its third season, with an almost cultish devotion." (Stead, 2001) The main attraction seems to have been what was considered the realistic portrayal of psychotherapy in the show:

> "So many therapists like the show," said Dr. Barbara Pizer, a psychologist who practices in Cambridge, Mass., and teaches at Harvard Medical School. "It's a heightened and condensed version of what goes on in real life."
>
> "*The Sopranos* offers a refreshingly credible version of what happens in therapy", according to Dr. Pizer and other analysts.
>
> "It's the best representation of the work we do that has ever been in film or on television," said Dr. Philip Ringstrom, an analyst at the Institute of Contemporary Psychoanalysis in Los Angeles. (Stead, 2001)

The praise and attention lavished on *The Sopranos* by scholars of television has been, to say the least, quite overwhelming, brimming over with superlatives, here are four examples from many:

"It is probably the first great work of American art in the twenty-first century."

(Thorburn, 2007: 69)

"[*The Sopranos* is] the richest and most compelling piece of television – no of popular culture – that I've encountered in the past twenty years is a mediation on the nature of morality, the possibility of redemption, and the legacy of Freud." (Willis, 2002: 2)

"*The Sopranos* is the best television drama ever...in my humble opinion [...]." (Nelson, 2006)

"To say that the series has generated a great deal of *buzz* seems somehow inadequate – unless buzz can be deafening." (Rogers, Epstein and Reeves, 2002: 48)

Perhaps the ultimate accolade given by Television Studies academics and educators was the organising of an academic conference in May 2008 in New York entirely devoted to the series and mourning their loss of *The Sopranos* as it was entitled: "*The Sopranos*: A Wake". The conference was attended by many of the key television academics who had been writing about the series since its beginnings including David Lavery, Robin Nelson, Kim Akass, Janet McCabe, Paul Levinson, Glen Creeber and many more. Joan Acocella (2008) commented in *The New Yorker* about the conference presenters: "While these people were sober academics, they were also "*Sopranos* freaks." (Acocella, 2008), showing how emotionally involved many of these academics had become in the series.

4.2   The context of the making of *The Sopranos*

Despite the overwhelming praise and often surprise shown by the critics, scholars and the general viewing public at the success of *The Sopranos*, this remarkable show was not just a lucky coincidence with someone in the world of television deciding that finally a television show of tremendous quality should be made which would amaze everybody. It has even been argued, perhaps even perpetuated by HBO itself with their brand slogan: "It's not TV. It's HBO." (Home Box Office, 2010), that *The Sopranos* and other subsequent 'Quality American Television' dramas were not actually television at all but some new form of media located somewhere between television and film. Thorburn also comments on this new type of genre: "*The Sopranos* has secured its landmark status in American cultural history. It is a brilliant hybrid culmination of film and television." (Thorburn, 2007: 69)

However, as highlighted in chapter three, television is highly influenced by the regulatory, technological, institutional and audience expectation contexts in which it is made. *The Sopranos* is no exception to this rule, therefore in order to get a clear understanding of how it was possible to make a show like this at all, one must examine these contexts in which the show was made. This idea is reiterated by Rogers, Epstein

and Reeves: "it is important to situate these 'ground-breaking/smash hit/critically-acclaimed' original series (to use the promotional language of HBO) in the history of the American television experience." (Rogers, Epstein and Reeves, 2002: 43) Rogers, Epstein and Reeves also emphasise the examination of the contexts in which the show was made, naming them "enabling conditions that make possible the production of *The Sopranos*, *Sex and the City*, *Six Feet Under*, and the other original series that enhance the 'aura' of the HBO brand." (Rogers, Epstein and Reeves, 2002: 43)

The regulatory context plays a vital role in the 'enabling' of *The Sopranos.* The series is firmly situated towards the beginning of the TV III or digital phase of television described in chapter three. With the deregulation of US television under the ratification of the Telecommunications Act in Congress in 1996, the federal government gave cable networks the possibility of producing television programs which were outside the boundaries of the standard network television "least offensive programming" (Nelson, 2006: 79) model. HBO, the makers of *The Sopranos*, immediately stepped up its business plan of 'original programming', the aim of which was to attract the 'right' subscribers. In HBO's case this meant moneyed, professional males between 25 and 45 (Nelson, 2006: 84) to the network through producing original programming which would appeal to this particular market group. The cable networks did not have to pander to the wishes and desires of advertisers or censors, but needed to fulfil those of their selected subscriber audiences so they would keep paying their subscriptions. As Rogers, Epstein and Reeves (2002) state:

> the bottom line for premium cable networks is not ratings, or even demographics – it is, instead, the intangible of customer satisfaction that takes on a tangible form in the monthly payments for services rendered." (Rogers, Epstein and Reeves, 2002: 47)

Basically HBO set up a completely different marketing and branding strategy for its programming to attract a niche, wealthy, educated and mainly male audience.

Nelson (2006) highlights the target market of *The Sopranos* as 'AB1 males' who have significant disposable income and are "'appointment viewers' (busy professionals who work long hours and do not watch television habitually but make a point of tuning or recording)" (Nelson, 2006: 84). This meant that the subject matter of *The Sopranos* not only had to match its target audience but had to make them watch again and again to ensure their subscription payments. Nelson argues that *The Sopranos* does just that as

its focus is on the "strong bonds between males of the older generation" and "speaks directly":

> […] to American men, and perhaps to men of a certain age across the globe, whose professional success and relative wealth have not brought them unmitigated happiness in a world which increasingly makes no sense and does not adhere to established values. (Nelson, 2006: 84)

The deregulation of American television in 1996 also allowed the premium cable networks, like HBO, the creative freedom to explore much more adult themes and more controversial content. On first viewing *The Sopranos*, it is quite clear that the level of nudity, profanity and violence in the series is much higher than in any non-cable network television drama. This is not to say that these levels are necessarily gratuitous, after all one would assume, for example, it to be quite likely that mafia members are going to use the 'f' word and other very strong language as part of their daily routine. As Levinson (2002) also comments that the presence of "curse words" in *The Sopranos* "lends a reliable verisimilitude to every episode" (Levinson, 2002: 29). Nudity is also quite evident throughout the series, interestingly as Levinson (2002) also points out, *The Sopranos* uses a clever technique to lever nudity into its various narratives by making one of the main setting venues in the series the Bada Bing!, a strip club, which Tony and his mob mates use as a base from which to conduct their 'business'. This means in practice that while mob members are doing business in the foreground, the background is often filled with dancers showing their breasts while pole dancing and serving drinks.

Two further points which have greatly changed the viewing experience as a result of deregulation compared to network television, especially perhaps for a target audience which considers itself to have more money than time, are firstly that there were no commercial breaks in *The Sopranos* on HBO when it was screened and also that each episode was shown three times in one week.

No advertisements not only means that each episode is uninterrupted but means the viewer can sit back in their chair and become totally absorbed by the show, giving the viewing experience a similarity to watching a movie. This type of absorption is often described by Film Studies scholars as a 'dream-like' state which viewers enter into when watching an uninterrupted film in a darkened cinema as described by Casey et al. (2002): "Spectators become part of a 'regime of belief' in that dreaming and (film)

reality appear to be similar states engulfing the viewer." (Casey et al., 2002: 182) It is also interesting to note that Casey et al. in 2002 did not think that this similarity between dreaming and watching film could also be applied to watching television as television could not bring its viewers into this dreamlike state: "The conditions of television viewing are quite different from those of cinema-going." (Casey et al., 2002: 180) Television could not create this 'dream-like' state due to its commercial disposition of having to include advertising: "television inherited a necklace of flaws from radio. Punctuated by commercials, viewable only once […] in contrast, motion pictures offered uninterrupted narrative and opportunities for repeat viewing" (Levinson, 2002: 27). Not only does no commercials mean no breaks but perhaps even more importantly, it means that the entire show is not written around including commercial breaks, often leading to some rather simplistic and obvious network television drama techniques like 'cliff hangers' just before the break in order to make the viewer return "network television dramatic series were created – written from the very first word – with commercial interruptions in mind." (Levinson, 2002: 27). This meant that the creativity of such network television dramas was often greatly reduced and when quality programming was produced, it was against all the odds: "It is a triumph of human creativity that anything worthwhile was able to emerge from the Procrustean bed of TV commercial interruption." (Levinson, 2002: 30) *The Sopranos*, in dramatic contrast, did not suffer from these restrictions. It had no advertisements chopping up the narrative into the standard TV commercial breaks. This meant that the creativity within the series could flow giving it an almost film-like quality:

> Undriven, unriven by commericals, *The Sopranos* is able to soar. Nothing distracts from an intensity that beats like a nearing anvil; nothing gets in the way of our quiet contemplation of an endearing moment. There are interruptions, all right – but these are the interruptions of the rest of our lives during the week. (Levinson, 2002: 30)

Secondly, each episode in *The Sopranos* was planned to be shown three times in one week on HBO unlike the usual network dramas of the time which had a 'throw-away' quality and often were just aimed at keeping viewers entertained enough to keep them watching during the commercial breaks. Likening to what is conventionally regarded to be the quality of film, the level of narrative and character complexity in *The Sopranos* means that repeat viewings do not detract from the enjoyment but often mean that viewers achieve a deeper insight into their viewing experience "viewers could in

subsequent showings pick up and appreciate complexities and aspects of the program missed the first time around." (Levinson, 2002: 29) Robert J. Thompson (2007) argues that the producers of *The Sopranos* were quite conscious of this multiple viewing not only made possible through several showings a week on the network but also through the vast sales of DVD box sets of the series: "Producers now make shows with the knowledge that each episode might be viewed and scrutinised over and over again." (Thompson, 2007: xix)

The deregulation of American television in 1996 was the great impetus to enable HBO to make it financially viable to attract a niche, moneyed, professional target audience by producing high quality, complex, challengingly-themed programming and moved them away from having to pander to the wishes and desires of advertisers or censors. The flagship series of this new type of programming for HBO was *The Sopranos*, with no commercial breaks and multiple weekly showings, it has an intense film-like quality which proved not only to be a great commercial success for HBO: "*The Sopranos* [...], is at the epicenter of a shift in the economic organization of the television industry" (Thorburn, 2007: 47) but also, almost as a type of by-product, one of the most critically-acclaimed drama series ever made for television.

4.3 *The Sopranos* as a 'quality' reading text

There is no doubt that *The Sopranos* has been embraced by numerous Television and Cultural Studies scholars as one of the finest examples of 'Quality American Television', a term which has primarily developed as a result of the rise of premium subscription television networks and the 'quality' drama series they subsequently have produced. The exact definition of 'Quality American Television' has been hotly discussed by Television Studies scholars since the term first came into use with Robert J. Thompson's 1997 book *Television's Second Golden Age* (Thompson, 1997). Thompson himself comments on the difficulty of any definition, although he does give some criteria for 'quality':

> The precise definition of 'quality TV' was elusive right from the start, though we knew it when we saw it. These shows were generic mongrels, often scrambling and recombining traditional TV formulas in unexpected ways; they had literary and cinematic ambitions beyond what we had seen before, and they employed complex and sophisticated serialised narratives and inter-series 'mythologies'. (Thompson, 2007: xix)

McCabe and Akass also give some indicators of what these quality criteria might be:

> America's networks had launched 25 new shows for the autumn 2006 schedule, an unprecedented 16 of these were dramas and most had multi-layered storylines and complex characters, involved in ambiguous moral dilemmas. (McCabe and Akass, 2007: 10)

Despite these indicators it is more important to state that the only certainty about 'Quality American Television' was that many, many television critics and scholars saw this new 'genre' of television drama as so unprecedented and exciting because it gave them texts crying out to be analysed: "*The Sopranos* is a rich narrative that deserves, even demands, close critical analysis." (Rogers, Epstein and Reeves, 2002: 43) In 2002 Andrew Antony of *The Observer* even poked fun at this seeming academic obsession of analysing *The Sopranos*: "If *The Sopranos* [...] is arguably the most accomplished drama in television history, there is no doubt at all that it's the most analysed." (Antony, 2002)

However, if one examines these 'quality' criteria, it is quite clear that they are there in abundance in *The Sopranos*. For example, the narrative structure of *The Sopranos* is extremely complex and can be described using Nelson's (1997) term as a "flexi-narrative" (Nelson, 1997: 30). This means that throughout a single episode there are many narratives running, some of which start and end in that episode, some which continue from previous episodes, some come to a type of closure within the episode, some which have closure in future episodes and others which run throughout the full six and a half seasons (86 episodes) and only then come to closure. An example of a narrative lasting almost the whole series is the one of Tony starting his therapy with Dr Melfi at the very beginning of season one and, despite a few interruptions, it only really ends towards the end of the last season when Melfi finally comes to the conclusion that she is merely perpetuating Tony's life of crime by supporting him through his various psychological crises.

Steven Johnson (2005) also examined *The Sopranos* narrative complexity in close detail comparing it with previous popular television drama series which have also been regarded as good or 'quality' shows, in this case *Dragnet* (NBC, 1951-1959), *Starsky and Hutch* (ABC, 1975-1979) and *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987). In the chart Johnson has taken an episode from each of these four television dramas and analysed

the number of narratives contained within each episode. He has designed the chart so the beginning of the episode starts on the left and finishes on the right, with the number of narratives shown in the number of lines each show's box contains. For example, the first show, *Dragnet,* can be seen to only have one narrative which runs for the entire length of the episode, shown in the chart by one solid black line running left to right. *Starsky and Hutch* has two narratives, a short one for the beginning and the end of the episode and the main one which runs in the middle. *Hill Street Blues* is much more complex with nine different narratives running in the episode, shown in the number of lines of boxes, however, only on rare occasions do these narratives overlap with each other, most of the time another narrative starts when the previous one stops. In the analysed episode of *The Sopranos* there are also nine different narratives but to add even more complexity, for much of the episode two, three and even four of these narratives are running concurrently.
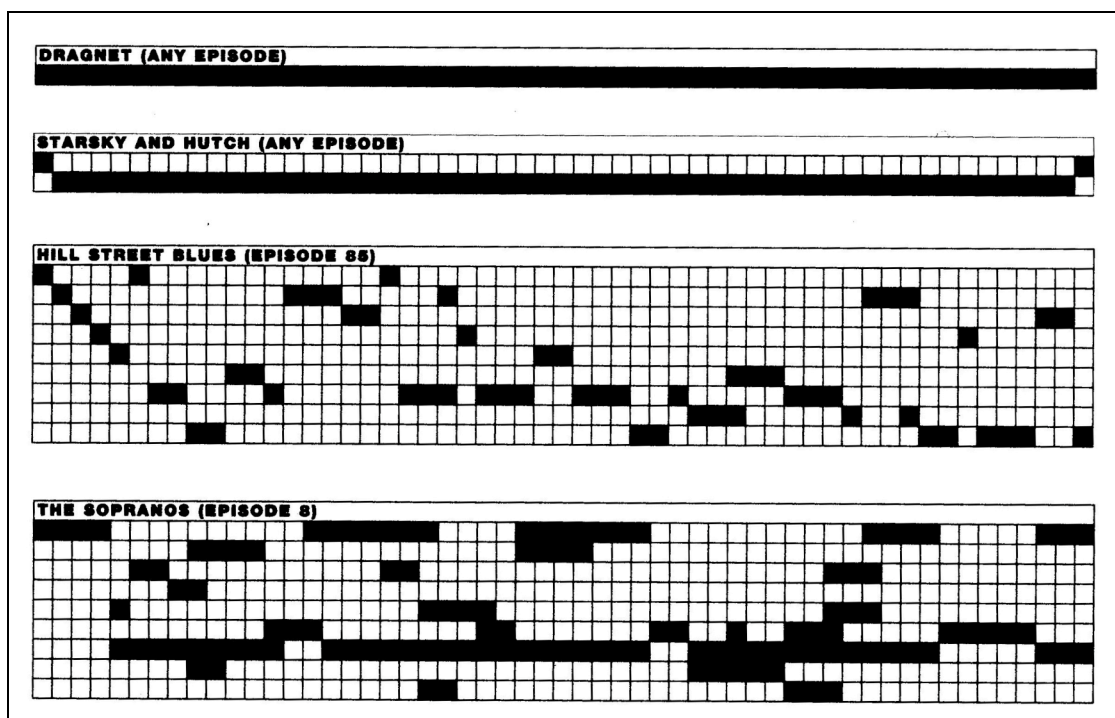

Chart showing the increasing complexity of narratives in four selected television drama series from 1951- 1999 (Johnson, 2005: 69).

Johnson declares *The Sopranos'* narrative structure as "The most ambitious show on TV to date" (Johnson, 2005: 69) because of using 'multiple threading' which follows a dozen narrative threads over the course of an episode, a number far greater

than any of the previous television dramas he compares it with. It is also not always clear which narrative thread is the dominant one and often a single scene is connected to three different threads. Although Johnson states that audiences have been "trained up to manage this number of narratives" (Johnson, 2005: 71) due to the steady increase in the complexity of narratives over the decades of television, this multithreaded structure does however demand much more analytical input from the reader: "Some narratives force you to do work to make sense of them, while others just let you settle into the couch and zone out." (Johnson, 2005: 63) *The Sopranos* is definitely one which makes the reader 'work' to develop their own meanings and conclusions from the narrative structure rather than 'zoning out' and letting the narrative explain itself.

Another 'quality' feature in *The Sopranos* is its complex characters which are often involved in "ambiguous moral dilemmas" (McCabe and Akass, 2007: 10). For example, despite Tony Soprano's obvious psychopathic murderous crimes committed throughout the series under the dubious name of work duties, the reader is still often faced with the dilemma of working out whether Tony is not actually just a likeable rogue when he displays fatherly love for his children or humour or even feelings of protection towards his therapist. Tony is by far not the only character who places the reader in this type of dilemma. The reader is also confronted with the question of whether Carmela Soprano is a victim of extreme mafia patriarchalism or a manipulative and conniving woman who uses her position as the boss's wife to achieve her own mostly financial aims. In addition, is Jennifer Melfi, the seemingly selfless and eternally patient therapist of Tony, really altruistic in her treatment of Tony or perhaps more motivated by her own perverse desire for the ultimate in possessing a powerful and dominating man? These are some of the dilemmas the reader is continually faced with throughout the series. But none of these questions are really ever answered by the characterisation or the narrative, it is always left up to the reader to decide.

The way in which the characters speak, often with very strong New Jersey and New York accents is also very difficult for readers to fully understand. The characters often talk very fast using a lot of mafia jargon, for example: 'goomah' (mistress), 'whacked' (murdered), 'douche-bag' (useless idiot) and 'camel nose' (Jew). Johnson (2005) suggests that the average viewer does not truly understand many of the words

they hear and the intensity and speed of the language forces the audience to filter: "You have to know you're not supposed to know." (Johnson, 2005: 82) Again this requirement to filter information demands active and sophisticated skills from the reader.

The Sopranos also contains numerous postmodern references to gangster movies and other genres, for example Tony Soprano is continually yearning to be "the tall and silent type" like Gary Cooper or James Cagney in *The Public Enemy* (1931). Also references to *Goodfellas* (1990) and *The Godfather* (1972, 1974, 1990) come thick and fast, for instance in season 1, episode 8, Christopher Moltisanti's (played by Michael Imperioli) shooting of a young bakery cashier in the foot, mirrors a much younger Imperioli as the victim of such a shooting in *Goodfellas* (Thorburn, 2007: 64-65). Although it is perfectly possible to watch and enjoy *The Sopranos* without recognising these references, their recognition gives the reader another layer of complexity to analyse and as Thorburn also argues, makes the viewing experience a more intimate one: "the viewers' knowledge of characters' histories and interconnections" (Thorburn, 2007: 67) helps to develop an intimate relationship between the characters and audience.

In addition, the fact that the genre of *The Sopranos* can never be pinned down to one specific genre but that it is a "hybrid of several forms" (Nelson, 2006: 83) adds to the series' ambiguous nature. The series is a mixture of the gangster or mafia genre movies combined with many elements of soap and family television dramas. As Creeber (2004) points out this ambiguous genre form again makes viewers work, they cannot sit back and relax secure in their knowledge of how a particular genre works "by incorporating both elements of television and cinematic practice into its essentially hybrid form, it focuses the viewer to confront the very means by which the narrative is produced, contained and finally received." (Creeber, 2004: 108)

The Sopranos in its 86 episodes covers a wealth of complex themes dealing with or at least touching upon almost any contemporary cultural debate. These include the family, gender, violence, racism, sexuality, psychotherapy, marriage, parenthood, adultery, prostitution, religion, race, food, obesity and many, many more. This wealth of themes often means that two readers can view the same episode of *The Sopranos* and each person can conclude that the overriding theme of the episode to be quite different from each other. For example, I conducted an experiment with a fellow reader both

watching episode 2, season 1. I concluded that the overriding theme was about Tony's difficult relationship with his mother and him trying to persuade her, against her vehement resistance, to go into a care home for the elderly. However, my fellow reader thought that the main theme in the episode was the portrayal of Tony's psychotherapy with Dr Melfi, feeling that she as a viewer was being put into the position of Tony stating: "We live our feelings through Tony." (fellow reader) This polysemic nature of *The Sopranos* is not only a further indication of the richness, complexity and quality of the series but also means that often the individual context of the reader in merely choosing the themes to read plays an important role.

These 'quality' elements in *The Sopranos* – its narrative complexity, ambiguous characterisation, frequent links to previous cultural references, hybrid genre – have led scholars to name it a 'postmodern' television text. Creeber (2006) describes the nature of postmodern television as reflecting "the increasing slippage in meaning that occurs between text and reception by allowing audiences greater room to experience the pleasures and anxieties of textual uncertainty." (Creeber, 2006: 34)

This 'textual uncertainty' within *The Sopranos* makes it a television text ripe for close analysis because the uncertainty gives the reader the freedom to interpret the text from their own individual perspective. Ultimately this makes *The Sopranos* the perfect reading text for students and this is the reason why I chose it to develop my television reading course around.

5. Offering a reading

The way in which I would like to approach reading television in this thesis and also in the subsequent 'Reading Television' course materials is based on the idea of "offering a reading" given by Robin Nelson (Nelson, 2006: 84). For me Nelson's use of the word 'offer' gives the impression that each reader can submit their own individual reading of the text's meaning to the discourse surrounding a particular text. Then the reader must wait for it to be accepted, partly accepted or rejected by other readers, however, due to the fact that this reading is an offer. It cannot be expected either by the reader themselves or by those receiving the reading that it will be considered the definitive meaning which can be derived from a text.

Nelson also emphasises that a particular reading depends on the reader's own individual socio-cultural and economic context. He goes on to illustrate this point by reading *The Sopranos* from the perspective of HBO's target audience, "AB1 males" (white professional males between 25 and 45) (Nelson, 2006: 84), saying that the series could be seen by this group as focusing on the interaction of middle aged and younger men in modern society: "The strong bonds between males of the older generation not matched by the fecklessness of the younger men." (Nelson, 2006: 84) However, Nelson is also quick to state that this reading should be seen as only one of many which one could offer:

> I am, of course, offering a reading from the imagined position of a member of *The Sopranos'* target audience. This is not the only possible reading but it will hopefully be recognised as an account of a key **discursive position** [emphasis in original] of the series as it might impact on key readers. (Nelson, 2006: 84)

In preparing a course for university students to read a television text, it is essential that course teachers put themselves in the position of the student reader and try to make their own individual reading in order to work out approaches and strategies which can be incorporated into the course design. As discussed in chapter three, Creeber (2006) advocates that each reader should declare their 'intended approach' (Creeber, 2006: 33) to reading a television text:

> There are so many different forms of textual analysis available to the television critic that it is crucial to distinguish what kind of textual analysis you are employing from the start. (Creeber, 2006: 33)

In this chapter I intend to do precisely that, to make a reading of a selected theme in *The Sopranos* according to my declared intended approach.

5.1 My intended reading approach

In order to make a reading from this individual perspective, I believe that reading a television text should be seen as a process of interaction between the text and the reader on many different levels and for clearly identified aims. The reading should start as broadly as possible and then steadily narrow down to focus on more and more detail within the text.

The first step in the reading process is to read the text as a whole, for its own sake and purely for enjoyment. Although enjoyment of the text may not be a prerequisite for selecting it to teach with, it allowed me to read the text perhaps as an average consumer would. This involved attempting to follow the text's plot, getting to know the various characters within the text and identifying its genre. In the case of *The Sopranos* this part of the reading can be quite intense due to the complexity of its flexi-narrative structure, its use of ambiguous characterisation and it being of a hybrid genre. In addition, due to the sheer length of the series, it was necessary to get an overall view of the story arcs which take place, some of which continue throughout the six seasons.

The second step is to re-read the text using a structured approach in order to help me focus on specific elements within the text beyond the storyline. For this approach I decided to develop the idea of a 'television reading diary' in which I made a detailed record of my viewing experiences when re-watching the first season of *The Sopranos*. The diary contains two pages for each episode; the first page is 'while-viewing' and 'post-viewing' (see appendix 1). The 'while-viewing' section is aimed at helping the reader concentrate on anything in the storyline which is particularly noticeable them. In addition it attempts to get the reader to focus on the film techniques (sound, camera angles, lighting…). This multi-tasking strategy of learning to watch for storyline and film techniques simultaneously is suggested by David Bordwell (2004) to train students as a way of developing their 'film memory' (Bordwell, 2004: 11): "if you intend to write about a movie, you will want to watch with particular concentration." One strategy is to develop a 'film memory': "You can decide to notice certain aspects of film technique." (Bordwell, 2004: 11) Bordwell does stress, however, that it is not easy to concentrate on both story and technique at once: "You can learn to watch for both technique and story. It's multi-tasking, like driving a car while carrying on a

conversation. It just takes practice." (Bordwell, 2004: 12) The multi-tasking difficulty for readers was the reason why I decided to make a clear distinction on my reading diary page between reading for story and reading for technique so I could purposefully focus on doing both tasks.

With the 'post-viewing' page of the diary entry I wanted to reflect on and identify cultural themes in the episode which I felt were particularly prominent to me as an individual. Also, in an attempt to help myself with identifying these themes, I asked myself to try to describe the emotions I felt while I was watching that particular episode. Carl Plantinga (2006) argues that this type of reader-oriented method of focusing on the role which the reader's emotions play in the meaning which they derive from a text has often been underestimated by film scholars: "If we want to explore the cultural role of movies, if we wish to expand our conception of the poetics of cinema, then we cannot ignore the place of emotion elicitation and affective experience within film viewing." (Plantinga, 2006: 81) Although this approach of identifying one's emotions in the reading process has been mainly used in film analysis, I feel it is particularly appropriate when reading *The Sopranos* due to the film-like immersive nature of the series (see chapter four).

The third step is to illustrate the choice of theme by selecting one short 3-5 minute sequence from an episode in the series which particularly highlights the theme I wished to explore. Bordwell (2004) calls this method of selecting a short sequence to highlight a particular theme "making a segmentation" (Bordwell, 2004: 20). This helps students to focus on their detailed reading on a manageably-sized piece of text, as Bordwell continues to argue that: "breaking the film into sequences gives you a convenient overview, and your segmentation will often suggest things that will support or help you nail down your thesis." (Bordwell, 2004: 20)

The final step is to make a written analysis of the theme I had chosen, first by presenting a thesis within the context of *The Sopranos* as a whole, then drawing on my wider readings from steps one and two. In order to illustrate my reading, I will use my detailed analysis of my chosen sequence.

Therefore the reading must start as broadly as possible, first through the first stage of enjoyment reading and then steadily narrowing down as the reading becomes more and more focused, concentrating on film techniques and also using one's own

emotions in order for readers to be able to identify the themes within a text which are most prevalent to them.

My reading process could be described as an eclectic one in the sense that it uses a variety of approaches from different academic fields. It has structuralist elements in that it encourages the reader to focus on the film techniques and according to the Stuart Hall (1980) 'encoding/decoding' model could be seen as codes planted or encoded into the text by its producer to evoke particular effects. These film technique codes can then be decoded by the reader to lead to their own particular meaning or reading.

The process also tries to encourage readers to move their focus away from the text and focus on themselves as active viewers through identifying their own emotions towards the text and thereby helping them to establish which scenes and themes are most important to them. This method of moving the focus away from the text and more towards the viewer is based on the concept of reader-oriented theories in Cultural Studies as described by Sonia Livingstone:

> [Reader-oriented theories] view texts not as repositories of meanings but as sets of devices which guide the negotiation of meaning by the reader. Texts are analysed for [….] invitations to the reader to elaborate, contrast or negate aspects of the text. (Livingstone, 1998: 101)

However, my chosen reading process is predominantly based on the post-structuralist ideas that the text does not have meaning in itself, meaning can only be derived from the interaction of an individual reader with the text and that there is no definitive meaning which can be drawn from a text. The only valid reading one can make is from one's own perspective as an individual as argued by Casey et al.:

> Post-structuralists see meaning as always being in a constant state of flux, rather than being final or fixed […] texts are contradictory and the meanings they produce are both plural and fluid. The 'true' meaning of a text can never be really known […] a preference for any particular reading is, in part, constructed out of and based upon certain beliefs and values […] and is not guaranteed by the text itself. Ultimately what is provided is a provisional account […]. (Casey et al., 2002: 235)

Therefore there is a fundamental difference between reading and interpreting a text. Making a reading, as opposed to making an interpretation, requires the reader to personalise their analysis from their own personal and even emotional perspective and context. Creeber encourages this type of individual, subjective reading when he gives the following tip to students: "Never be afraid to phrase your reading in the first person (i.e. 'I read this scene this way …'), as it may be a good way of highlighting the subjective nature of the reading you are offering." (Creeber, 2006: 37) An interpretation

demands a more objective critical analysis which brings in the opinions of those authorised by institutions to do so, for example, academics and scholars who are respected in their particular fields. In the traditional academic view, bringing one's personal and emotional side into an interpretation would be frowned upon and considered bad style. An example of this in shown by Kelly Griffith (2006) in her popular guide to students *Writing Essays about Literature: A Guide and Style Sheet*, Griffith explicitly states: "Avoid extreme subjectivity (overuse of 'I')" (Griffith, 2006: 243), she continues to advise students "if you fill your essay with phrases like 'I feel,' 'I think,' 'I believe,' 'It seems to me,' your essay, no matter how thorough and well reasoned, will sound overly opinionated." (Griffith, 2006: 234)

5.2   Offering a reading of gender relations

> Rosalie: It's not just us. The president of the United States, for crying out loud. Look what his wife had to put up with, with the blow jobs and the stained dress.
>
> Angie: Hillary Clinton? I can't stand that woman.
>
> Rosalie: I don't know. Maybe we could all take a page from her book.
>
> Carmela: What? To be humiliated in public, then go around smiling all the time? That is so false. I would dig a hole, I would climb inside, and I would not come out.
>
> Rosalie: All I know is that she stuck by him and put up with the bullshit, and in the end, what did she do? She set up her own little thing.
>
> Carmela: That's true, isn't it? She's a role model for us all. (season 3, episode 12) (Chase, 1999-2007)

After every episode during my initial global viewing of *The Sopranos* I was left, often for days, pondering themes which had particularly touched me, provoked me or generally just made me think. For my own reading process I have taken one of the themes that was most noticeable to me and then put my reading process approach to the test in order to investigate the particular theme in more detail.

On first viewing *The Sopranos*, knowing that it was about a violent Mafia family set in New Jersey, I presumed that the portrayal of the female characters would be fairly two-dimensional, the result of an extremely patriarchal mafia structure, either as protected mafia 'molls' (wives) and 'goomahs' (mistresses) or as naïve victims of mafia crime, such as prostitutes or strippers. This presumption derived from my previous experience of gangster genre films such as James Cagney in *The Public Enemy* (Warner

Brothers, 1931), *The Godfather* Parts I, II and III (Paramount, 1972, 1974, 1990) and *Goodfellas* (Warner Brothers, 1990), all of which *The Sopranos* continually references[1]. An example of this referencing is the casting of the same actress, Lorraine Bracco, in both *Goodfellas* and *The Sopranos*. In the television series she plays Dr Melfi, the psychoanalyst, and in the movie she has the role of Karen Hill, a mob moll, used and abused by her philandering mafia husband. The mere fact of choosing the same actress to play the psychoanalyst in *The Sopranos* should have been an indication to me that the portrayal of women in the series was going to be different.

Although there are plenty of mob 'molls', 'goomahs' and female victims of mob crime throughout *The Sopranos*, for me there is a plethora of fascinating and multi-dimensional female characters: Carmela Soprano, Dr Melfi, Livia Soprano (Tony's ever-complaining and conniving mother), Janice (Tony's gold-digging and manipulative sister) and Meadow Soprano (Tony's academically-gifted daughter, who also demonstrates remarkable insight into the workings of the Italian mafia from a very young age). Without exception, all of these female characters demonstrate elements of incredible strength and intelligence, which they frequently use to work situations in their favour and to their own advantage.

Carmela, for example, appeared to me in the opening episodes of the series as the innocent and often naïve benefactress of Tony's criminal activities. She seemed to bury herself in the role of the traditional American Italian mother and housewife, with scenes of Tony's murderous and philandering mafia actions often interspersed with seemingly endless ones of Carmela working in the kitchen, cooking heavy Italian food for her family and dealing with the day-to-day chores of her children and home. However, it soon becomes apparent that Carmela is no innocent by-stander but is most of the time trying to suppress the truth, mostly to herself, of how Tony is able to provide her with such a luxurious lifestyle: huge suburban house with swimming pool, endless amounts of expensive jewellery and watches, her own Mercedes parked in the garage. However, when emergency situations arise, with for example, a threatened raid by the FBI or Tony's life threatened by a mafia family rival, Carmela is the first to spring into action,

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[1] These references to gangster movies are done quite deliberately by David Chase to the extent of paying homage to these film masterpieces. In an interview by Peter Bogdanovich (2004), Chase states: "*Goodfellas* is my Koran" (David Chase, 1999-2007).

helping Tony to hide weapons and wads of cash or treating a threat on Tony's life as a type of family crisis which has to be faced with a confident and calm attitude.

Evidence of Carmela's ability to show strength and support in 'every-day' mafia life-threatening situations is shown at the end of season 1, episode 13, after Tony reveals to Carmela that a threat was made on his life which was initiated by his own family members, his mother, Livia, and his Uncle Junior. The catalyst to the threat was firstly that Tony had passed on gossip about Junior that he practised oral sex on his 'goomah', considered in the patriarchal mafia world as a particularly unmasculine practice, and had caused great offence to his uncle. Secondly, both Uncle Junior and Livia had discovered that Tony was having psychotherapy, also totally unacceptable as a member of the mafia due to the security risk of information about their criminal activities getting into the hands of either the FBI or any other criminal organisation. These two factors led to Junior arranging an attempt on Tony's life with Livia's consent.

My selected sequence begins with an opening shot of Tony's house looking safe and homely against the darkening sky with the sound of summer insects buzzing. This shot of seemingly calm domestic bliss is in total contrast to the crisis happening inside with Tony having to deal with the fact that his own mother was ultimately responsible for the attempt on his life. We cut to the inside of Tony and Carmela's bedroom with Tony looking forlorn and broken, sitting on the bed in his vest. The camera angle is an eye level shot giving the viewer an intimate look into the bedroom and also a rather unflattering view of Tony's ample belly.
Carmela is much more calm and collected, dressed in a silky robe with an immaculately presented hairdo, as opposed to Tony's rather rough-looking vest and shiny, balding head, playing her wifely role by bustling around Tony by organising a sleeping tablet.

On taking the pill from Carmela, Tony laments: "What kind of person can I be, when his own mother wants him dead?" This is the point when Carmela shows her clear-headedness by using this crisis situation to her own advantage and not missing this opportunity of openly criticising Tony's mother for her conniving ways. In response to Tony's question Carmela replies: "The problem is not with you. That woman is a peculiar duck, she always has been." She then tries to console Tony by comparing how he and his sisters behaved to their mother: "Both your sisters left New Jersey so young you would have thought they had contracts set on them […], but you were different you

tried to make it work". Her true aggression towards Livia, who is really threatening not just the life of her husband but also her whole family and lifestyle, is revealed in her words: "I could kill her […] with these two hands." At this point Tony and Carmela's focus on the cause of the threat diverges quite dramatically; Carmela continues to blame Tony's mother, but Tony still behaves like the true Italian son doting on his mother, rejecting Carmela's attempts to rile him against his mother. He puts the blame on his uncle and his mocking of his unorthadox sexual behaviour and also on his own decision to have therapy with the line: "Cunnilingus and psychiatry brought us to this." Tony now starts to work himself up into an angry state by planning his revenge tactics, not on his mother but on his uncle and the hitman he hired. This change in Tony from his forlorn and defeated position to one of anger and revenge is reflected in the moving camera angle which pans slowly to the right so that both Tony and Carmela are seen in profile. The focus is no longer on Tony's soft and vulnerable belly but now on his determined clenched jaw and his forward-looking gaze, Carmela rests her chin on his shoulder contemplatively.

At no point does Carmela give up her attack on Livia, blaming her for Tony's psychological problems and his consequent need for therapy: "You had to see a shrink because of the mother you had." Tony continues to ignore Carmela's reasoning and again only focuses his anger on his uncle and the hitman: "I'll take care of my uncle and I'll take care of Mikey P and I'll get some satisfaction, but inside I'll know." The scene closes with these puzzling words from Tony and I was left wondering what he actually knows. It seems to me that Carmela demonstrates strength and resolve as she is the one with the much greater insight into the cause of the death threat and the reason for Tony's depression and panic attacks, his mother. Tony, on the other hand, is just papering over the cracks of the problem by trying to deal with the symptoms of condition rather than the cause with attacking his uncle and the hitman.

This is one of the many examples of Carmela demonstrating her ability to act with insight in trying to manipulate a situation in her favour. Her aim in this scene is to protect her husband, not only from the direct threat on his life but also from his psychological problems which also put his position as boss in jeopardy. Tony being killed or usurped from his boss position would also bring great uncertainty to Carmela's financial security and also her dominant position in the circle of mafia wives with whom she frequently meets throughout the series.

In this offering of a reading on the representation of gender roles in *The Sopranos*, I have attempted to follow my proposed reading process. I started off as widely as possible, selecting my theme from the huge selection of cultural themes touched on in the series. This gender theme was one of the many on which I personally was often left contemplating after my initial overall reading. I then proceeded to select the character of Carmela to make an attempt at pinpointing elements in her which show my perception of her not as the classic used and abused mob wife, but as a woman with the insight to assess her position in the patriarchal mafia world she lives in, but then to have the ability to manoeuvre within this world to work it to her advantage. I then chose one of her many confrontational dialogues with Tony to make a detailed reading to reveal Carmela's ability at standing up to her mob boss husband and make her voice and opinion heard.

Using my own reading experience and my declared reading approach as a model, I then went to develop my reading course for German university students which I will discuss in the following chapter.

6. Designing the reading course: A practical context

The *Proseminar* course I designed, wrote and piloted entitled: "Reading your way towards media literacy with *The Sopranos*: A killing blended learning seminar" took place at the TU Dortmund University over a three-week period in March 2009. The prime aim of the course, as declared in its title, was to increase students' levels of media literacy through providing them with a practical context based on the specific television text *The Sopranos* in which to actively experience the theory behind reading television. The type of media literacy I wished to promote in my course was based on the definition given by David Buckingham (2003). There are three elements in Buckingham's definition: first, the ability to analyse and evaluate media, secondly, the acquisition of tools with which to analyse and thirdly, gaining knowledge and understanding of the social, economic and institutional contexts of the way the media was produced. (Buckingham, 2003: 38) In my course evaluation in chapter seven, I will assess whether I have fulfilled this aim.

In this chapter I will discuss the reasoning behind the course design I chose to achieve this aim, including the specific course phase aims, structure, approaches and methods and an overview of the course content. I will also demonstrate how many of the learning strategies advocated in modern language learning, which I have used in my capacity as a teacher of English as a Foreign language (EFL), can be successfully adapted for a Cultural Studies course. In addition, I will also introduce two teaching strategies which I developed uniquely for this course: Role-play reading and InsideOut reading. However, the student responses to the course activities and tasks will be discussed in the following chapter as part of the course evaluation.

6.1 Blended learning structure

I adopted a blended learning structure for the three-week course which meant it comprised of three learning phases, two online and one face-to-face phase.

As most of the students on the course would be relatively new to the approach of actively reading a television text, I felt it was essential that they would feel supported by me as the teacher but also the rest of the group not only during the classroom contact time but during the entirety of the course including the introductory printed text reading and final writing processes. Therefore I decided to adopt a blended learning structure to the course which would allow for this, as Garrison and Vaughan describe: "A blended

learning environment offers the potential not only to create but to sustain a sense of community beyond the temporal limits of the face-to-face context". (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008: 33)

A further intention was to create a course in which students had to play as active a role as possible throughout. Using a blended learning structure meant that I, as the teacher, could create structured tasks for students on the online platform and could give feedback throughout the course. The switching of learning environments from online to face-to-face and back to online also promoted different learning skills. For example, online phases can be helpful in giving students support and motivation through group and teacher-student communication when attempting traditionally more individual and reflective tasks like completing background and theoretical reading for the course or writing essay assignments. Being able to give students support during the online phases means that the face-to-face time can concentrate fully on the tasks which require more spontaneous responses during partner, group and teacher contact, for example, in group discussions and oral presentation practice. With using blended learning in my course, I hoped to achieve the scenario which Garrison and Vaughan (2008) describe as the basic principle behind it:

> The basic principle is that face-to-face oral communication are optimally integrated such that the strengths of each are blended into a unique learning experience congruent with the context and intended educational purpose. […] Blended learning is not an addition that simply builds another expensive educational layer. It represents a restructuring of class contact hours with the goal to enhance engagement and to extend access to Internet-based learning opportunities. (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008: 5).

In other words, I did not use blended learning just for the sake of integrating online elements into my course because this facility now exists at universities. I wanted to use blended learning to make optimum use of the variation in learning environments to facilitate different student-centred learning skills.

6.2 Learning platform

For the online phases of the course I decided to utilise the TU Dortmund University's learning platform. There are several learning platforms available to educational institutions including *Blackboard* (Blackboard Inc., 1997-2010), *WebCT* (Blackboard Inc., 1997-2010) and *Moodle* (Moodle.org, 1999-2010). However the TU Dortmund University uses the *EWS* (E-Learning WorkSpace) platform which is actually produced and maintained by the university itself. The *EWS* system is only accessible to students

and teachers with a valid password and each course is allocated a workspace. Each workspace contains a "public" area which all students and staff can see which can be used to advertise the course content, dates, enrolment conditions etc. If students wish to participate in a particular course, they can request to join the course, the course teacher receives an email and can give the new participants access to the "private" course content. Within this "private" area course teachers have a variety of areas and tools at their disposal. The areas are: "materials", where teachers can upload materials for students, reading resources for example; "cooperation" is where students can upload files, their assignment tasks for instance, and where there is a *wiki* function available where all participants can contribute to the same online page; "communication" contains a forum, chat and email sending function; finally "management", where the teacher can, for example, allocate rights to the participants and compose course lists. On first impression the EWS system seems to be much less user friendly than *Moodle* that I was used to, For example, I was disappointed it does not contain an html editor with which to create one's own customised webpage for a course but just a standard rather bland default layout:
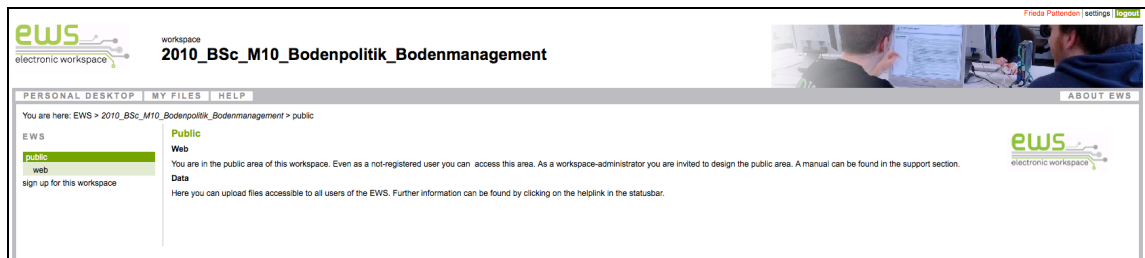
Example of a course with the default *EWS* layout (TU Dortmund University, 2010).

As is the case with traditional course materials, the strong visual presentation of the materials is important so I decided to abandon the rather bland default interface of the *EWS* platform and create my own customised one using an html writer for Mac called *Rapidweaver* (2008). This simple program with clear instructions enabled me to create a html site using a template which I could then upload onto my course profile area on the *EWS* platform. I was able to create my own simple navigation for the three course phases, also it allowed for the simple uploading of stills from the series, essential for a course which deals with a visual medium.

6.3   Participant profile

The targeted course participants were German undergraduate students of American Cultural Studies and of Education. This meant that the course had to cover two basic areas as it was offered to two types of student groups. First for the American Cultural Studies students, it had to be designed to give them television text reading strategies and secondly for the Education students it could be seen as an example of how to incorporate audio-visual materials into teaching. The public course description on the university learning platform read as follows:

> The aim of this seminar is to provide students with the necessary learning tools and strategies to make both spoken and written analyses or 'readings' of American contemporary television. The seminar can be used as a practical example of how audio visual material can be effectively integrated and exploited at all levels of education. (Pattenden, 2009)

When registration for the course closed, which successfully took place using the *EWS* registration system, eight students had registered.

6.4   Online phase one: Preparing to make a reading

As discussed in chapter two, the history of Television Studies and approaches to analysing television texts is particularly complicated which Hills (2006) describes as the "pendulum of TV theory" (Hills, 2006: 89). This complexity often makes the initial studying of television texts difficult for students and an understanding of the background to Television Studies is helpful:

> students new to the subject frequently find it such a difficult and confusing area of study, often not appreciating why certain methods and procedures have to be carried out and why they often take the form they do. (Creeber, 2006)

Therefore the main purpose of online phase one was to give the students a strong theoretical and historical foundation to reading television.

The first reading task the students were set, communicated to the participants using the *EWS* group email function several weeks before the official course start, was to watch a minimum of the first season of *The Sopranos* (13 episodes). There is some argument among Television Studies educators about if it is necessary for students to watch the text before making a reading. Lewis suggests: "When beginning the course, it is often easier to choose texts that students are less familiar with. This helps them to view the programmes as objects of study and establishes an analytical approach"

(Lewis, 2008: 15). However, following my reading approach (see chapter five) it was necessary for the students to have the opportunity of reading the text as a whole in their own time for its own sake and purely for enjoyment. As I gave this task without any related activities or guidance, students were free to start forming their own opinions about the text without any interference from me or other sources (newspaper reviews, secondary literature). Naturally I did not forbid this type of background reading but the first focus was the students' encounter with the text itself.

First encounters

A teacher's first encounter with a learning group is notoriously crucial in setting the educational tone for the rest of the course. This is no exception in the case of a course which starts off with an online phase. For the online phase one, I was based in Munich and the eight participating students in Dortmund. This meant that a short initial introductory face-to-face meeting to explain the *EWS* learning platform and overall course structure did not prove feasible. Therefore all participant introductions, course structure and task explanations had to be placed online.

As one of my aims in the course was for the students to express their emotional and individual engagement with the text, I decided, using *Rapidweaver,* to create a personal daily blog giving guidelines to the course content and tasks but also trying to be motivating and friendly for the online phases of the course. I chose an informal and chatty style giving a bit of background about myself, showing my own emotional and personal experience with *The Sopranos* and adding a photo of myself and Dominic Chianese, who played the character of Uncle Junior in *The Sopranos*, and whom I met at *The Sopranos: A Wake* (Levinson, 2008) conference in New York:

> As you can imagine, it would be strange to base a whole course on a certain TV series without liking it, so I can tell you quite openly that I think *The Sopranos* is simply the best television I have ever seen and I can also tell you I've seen a lot of television!! For me after watching, the characters, scenes, narratives, even the colours and music, just the 'feel' of the whole thing stayed with me for days and days afterwards. I will even admit, that after watching the first 4 seasons back-to-back and having to wait for season 5, I started to miss Tony Soprano (a little sad I know!). Anyway, here is a photo of me and someone else you might recognize from the show: (Pattenden, 2009)
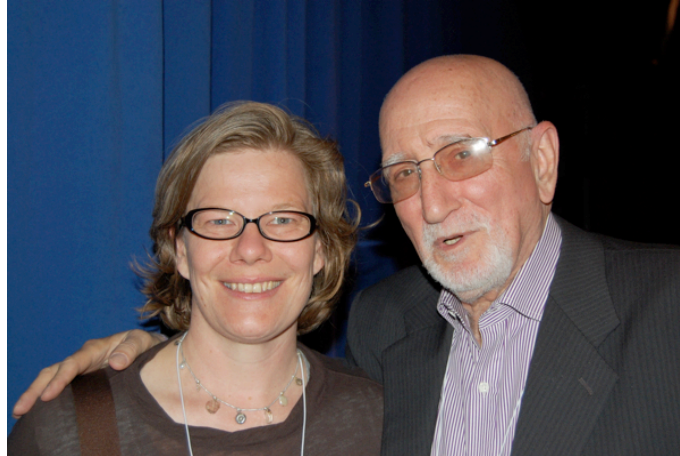
The actor Dominic Chianese (Uncle Junior) and I taken at *The Sopranos: A Wake* conference in May 2008 (Pattenden, 2009).

Background reading

My chatty and friendly blog style was also a ruse for the equipping students with the theoretical foundation and tools on which to build their media literacy. For this purpose I chose three main theoretical themes: "TV Analysis and History"; "*The Sopranos*"; "Film Language". For each of these themes I selected appropriate printed reading material for the students mainly from Television Studies scholars but also a whole selection of newspaper and magazine articles. The selection of texts was made particularly difficult due to the wealth of press coverage and also academic interest which *The Sopranos* has provoked.

This rather intensive printed material reading and theoretical beginning to the course were also intended as setting the academic tone, dispelling any myths that a course about television could be a soft option, especially if it is about a text which they particularly like. As Lewis also comments:

> There are problems in engaging with popular culture. Trying to teach a text […] without a pedagogic framework can generate a superficial response. Students' familiarity with a text may prevent them from recognising the need for rigour and in-depth analysis. (Lewis, 2008: 13)

The aim of the "TV Analysis and History" theme was to make students acquainted with the historical development of approaches to television critical analysis or reading a television text. Before getting students to make their own readings in the face-to-face phase, it was vital that students first understood the concept behind the type of readings they were going to make. This opinion is concurred with by Eileen Lewis (2008) in her guide to teaching television: "Students need to develop […] a theoretical

understanding of key media concepts." (Lewis, 2008: 15) The selection of texts involved many of those already discussed in chapter three of this thesis with texts by Glen Creeber's "An Introduction to Studying Television" (Creeber, 2006: 1-11) and "Decoding Television: Issues of Ideology and Discourse" (Creeber, 2006: 44-55), Jamie Medhurst's "Case Study: A (Very) Brief History of Television" (Medhurst, 2006: 115-23) and Robin Nelson's "Analysing TV Fiction: How to Study Television Drama" (Nelson, 2006: 74-92). All of these texts discuss the changes in academic approaches to analysing television texts and the development of Television Studies as an academic field. On the fourth day, I introduced the discussion by Steven Johnson in *Everything Bad is Good for You* (Johnson, 2005: 62-84) on how the level of complexity and consequently the demands on the viewer in television drama has increased dramatically since the 1960s which he illustrates using the example of increased narrative complexity. On the final day the first text I brought in was from David Bordwell entitled: "Where to Watch" (Bordwell, 2004: 5-11) about how the viewing location and also viewer constellation can effect the viewing experience. The second text was by Campbell and Kean called: "American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture" (Campbell and Kean, 2006: 1-21) on understanding the multiple meanings of culture and on how a meaning about any cultural text should be seen as the "contested terrain" (Campbell and Kean, 2006: 14).

"*The Sopranos*" theme involved investigating the reactions to *The Sopranos* from the media, not only from the English-speaking press with articles from *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair* and *The New York Times* but, as the students are studying in Germany, it seemed quite relevant that we should also examine the reactions from the German-speaking media. Surprisingly perhaps for the students, many sectors of the German quality press, especially the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, also declared *The Sopranos* as a work of significant cultural importance, comparing it to great classic series writers like Balzac and Dickens.[2] In addition it was also necessary for the students to investigate the production and distribution background of *The Sopranos* as an example of the phenomenon of 'Quality American Television' (as discussed in chapter four). This follows the approach proposed by Nelson (2006) that a

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[2] The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented on the last episode in *The Sopranos* with the article: "Wie bei Balzac" (Jörg Häntzschel, 2007).

television text should be considered the product of a wide variety of influences, including economic considerations and the "production/distribution context" (Nelson, 2006: 79) must also be examined in order to make a thorough analysis of the text. As discussed in chapter four, the 'production/distribution context' played a decisive role in the making of *The Sopranos*. For this theme, however, I avoided secondary literature texts on *The Sopranos* which discussed any particular cultural theme in the text, for example, mafia, gender, violence, family … so as not to influence the students' own readings in the coming face-to-face phase of the course.

The purpose of the third theme, "Film Language", was to give students the necessary tools and framework to be able to describe their readings of a television text in the face-to-face phase of the course using film/television techniques and technical language. Lewis (2008) also considers this specialist language as an essential basis for media text analysis: "Media language […] underpins all textual analysis and study of media texts" (Lewis, 2008: 32). Creeber concurs with this view when he recommends that students "need a basic understanding of sound and image and the language used to discuss them." (Creeber, 2006: 38). The film/television techniques covered in the reading materials included camerawork, editing, sound, lighting and *mise en scène*. The materials were taken from a selection of Television and Film Studies scholars starting with Creeber's "Case Study Shot-by-shot Analysis" (Creeber, 2006: 38-43), a very helpful overview of these techniques and suggestions on what effect they could have on the viewer. Finally excerpts from Karen Lury on "Functions of the Image" (Lury, 2005: 46-56) and David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson called "Framing" (Bordwell and Thompson, 2004: 259-66), which deal with the possible effects of camera angles, and "Sound in the Cinema" (Bordwell and Thompson, 2004: 366-88) which discusses how sound can influence meaning.

Reading for gist and detail

Preparatory reading for most university courses generally involves the lecturer producing a reading list or even a reader booklet in advance of the course for the students. From my experience this method of setting reading tasks is quite inefficient as often some students conscientiously read the materials while others turn up for the course having only partially done the reading and some without having done any at all. This disparity in the amount of preparatory reading also leads to inefficiency in the rest of the course, often making discussions about the topics covered in the reading difficult

due to the lack of necessary background knowledge of some students. However, educators, especially those in the EFL field, advocate teaching reading strategies to students in order to improve reading efficiency. Michael J. Wallace (2004), for example, states that effective reading is reading "more actively, in a more focused way, in a more time-efficient way, with greater understanding and more critically" (Wallace, 2004: 9).

In online phase one, I particularly wanted to promote the active participation of students in the preparatory reading for the course and therefore adapted some of EFL reading strategies to encourage efficient reading. For this purpose, I was able to utilise the *EWS* learning platform.

I organised the course workspace for online phase one using some of the available tools in the *EWS* learning platform. Firstly, the area "data" was where I uploaded all the printed materials and which appeared day by day in a separate folder during the online phase one. This day-by-day releasing of the materials was done so as not to overwhelm the students with the amount of reading but also to promote the motivational idea that the students were reading the texts communally, albeit not in the same physical location, but together during the same time period.

Once the students had the printed reading materials, they had to post the gist (the main idea) of each reading text onto the forum under "communication" on *EWS*. I insisted that the gists had to be posted onto the forum by 5 p.m. on the same day, firstly so that I would have time as moderator to comment on them for the next day and secondly in order to encourage focused and speed reading within the limited time given.

I used the *wiki* under "cooperation" to set up a glossary of useful words, terms and phrases to which students should add to during their reading. A *wiki* is an online area which members of that area can contribute and cooperate to achieve the same aim or to give the Wikipedia definition "A *wiki* (pronounced /ˈwɪki/ WIK-ee) is a website that allows the easy creation and editing of any number of interlinked web pages via a web browser" (*Wikipedia.org*, 2010). In the case of my course, students could contribute to develop a glossary. The glossary was also divided into the three reading themes of "TV Analysis and History", "*The Sopranos*" and "Film Language". The purpose of the glossary was to create a working communal resource, not only of the technical film language terminology, but also of authentic and current vocabulary used by journalists and Television Studies scholars not just about *The Sopranos* but also for analysing television texts in general. As the students, despite a generally high level of

English, were non-native speakers I felt it was essential to draw their attention to specific television terminology within the printed reading material for them to use later in the course in their oral and written readings of *The Sopranos*. Below is a screenshot of the custom-made glossary for the course showing the "TV History and Analysis" page and some of the entries made by the students.

word/phrase	Context	Meaning	Opposite	Source
niche programming	one of the characteristics of the TVIII phase in television history	television aimed at a specific social and/or economic group		Medhurst (2006:123)
Television Studies	field of study	academic discourse related to the content, the audience and/or the history of television and its socio-political dimension		Creeber
Golden Age	television developed from "radio with pictures" into an independent medium with specific content (e.g. television drama)	mid-1950s and early 1960s (TVI)		Medhurst (2006:118)
HBO	Cable network that is famous for adult-oriented original TV shows, including *The Sopranos*.	Home Box Office		Patterson/McLean (2009:7/12)
Qualitiy	Textual Analysis	How is meaning constructed and transmitted to a reader (or in this case: viewer).		Creeber (p.28)
Fordism	Television History	The idea of combining mass production and mass consumption to reach economic growth.		Medhurst (2006: 117)
"classical tradition"	approaches/ methods of Media (originally Literary) Analysis	represented i.a. by British scholar F.R.Leavis between the World Wars, a textual analysis which was highly subjective, functionalized for ideological intentions and "lacking in any strict methodology" (Creeber, 27)		Creeber(p.27)

A custom-made course glossary on *EWS* (Pattenden, 2009).

Students were given clear instructions in a downloadable PDF file on how to make entries into the glossary. I made the entry table structure in advance, again using the EFL methodology of encouraging students to record vocabulary in the context in which they found it in the "context" column: "Designing topic-based word-networks […] of multi-word items […] help learners store lexical chunks" (Müller-Hartmann and Schocker-von Ditfurth, 2004: 103). In addition, insisting that students have to perform a task on the word/phrase using other words in English and resisting giving any German translations is another method often advocated in EFL, especially in Communicative Language Learning: "Das Motto eines kommunikativen Englischunterrichts lautet verkürzt 'So viel Englisch wie möglich, so wenig Deutsch wie nötig'." (Doff and Klippel, 2007: 205). Not only is it considered more efficient to learn vocabulary in the target language rather than through translation, the greater effort in creating the meaning means that the student is more likely to remember the word. This method is also advocated by Hedge: "if learners have to perform certain activities on unfamiliar words

in texts, there is a good chance of retaining the words." (Hedge, 2000: 120)

The last feature which I made frequent use of during online phase one was my daily blog, which I continued in html format. I used it mainly to introduce the printed reading materials for each day, identifying the themes which I had chosen for that particular day and guiding students to focus and make forum comments on certain aspects. For example, when introducing "Day Three: The German Experience", I gave the following guidance for the selected articles in the theme "*The Sopranos*":

> A selection of articles in the German press (with a slight *Süddeutsche* bias, after all I am living in the heart of *Süddeutsche* country!!). Interesting to note how the German press has been explaining the lack of success *The Sopranos* has had on German TV, this might lead you on to thinking about the status of television in German culture, especially perhaps among educated people? Could the series have ever worked on German TV, was it that Tony Soprano in German just didn't fit?
>
> Btw, for the glossary, don't add any German words, but think of some good English translations of some of the ideas raised. (Pattenden, 2009)

My blog was also the place where I tried to give encouragement and praise, something which teachers often forget to do, to the students who were new to gist reading on an online learning platform:

> Thank you for your enthusiastic start to the course, I'm very happy with your varied gist responses, I hope you are liking the texts you're reading. There has really been so much written about *The Sopranos* in the press but also by academics that it's really hard to select just a few texts for you.

In order to use the *EWS* features described above I suggested in my blog the reading strategy I wished the students to adopt, in order to encourage more efficient and effective reading largely based on the EFL reading strategy of 'reading for gist'. The instructions I gave the students were as follows:

> In online phase one you will be given many (I know you will think rather a lot!) different reading texts. You may think that it's a bit strange that a course which is about a major television series includes so much reading. Do not be overwhelmed by the amount of reading, you are not expected to make detailed notes or memorize a lot of information! I would like you to adopt the following 'reading for gist' strategy:
>
> 1. Read the text to the end without stopping to look up any words or underline anything.
>
> 2. Write one sentence which describes the gist (the main point/argument) of the text, add your gist sentence to the forum.
>
> 3. Re-read the text, this time reading for detail, underlining any useful words or phrases.
>
> 4. Add the words/phrases to the glossary we are compiling as a group.

(Pattenden, 2009)

Using these reading strategies in combination with the tools on the *EWS* online learning platform meant that during their preparatory reading, the students were first given time to reflect on the materials on their own but then were also under motivational time and group pressure to interact with the other students online in adding their gists and vocabulary to the forum and glossary. This allowed for what Garrison and Vaughan (2008) describe as the "two inseparable elements of inquiry - […] reflection and discourse" (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008: 31).

Online phase one aimed at putting *The Sopranos* as a television text and also the approaches to analysing TV into a current context. It also tried to provide students with the technical and linguistic tools to be able to describe their own future television text readings. The utilisation of the online tools on *EWS* in preparation for the face-to-face television text reading phase aimed at making the reading of printed materials more active and efficient. Online phase one finished with my last blog entry looking forward to the face-to-face course phase:

> See you Wednesday, come armed with all this reading in your heads, I hope you've enjoyed it, I know it's been a lot but it will give you a great foundation for the rest of the course!! Frieda (Pattenden, 2009)

6.5 Face-to-face phase: Offering spoken readings

The main aim of this phase was to help the students bridge the gap between the theoretical approaches to reading a television text covered in online phase one and actually applying them using the concrete example of *The Sopranos* as a television text. In short, the aim was to teach students the skills of television textual analysis.

For the purpose of this face-to-face phase overview in this thesis, I will divide the course up into the morning and afternoon sessions. Each session had a clear intention, taking students step-by-step through the process of offering a detailed reading of one or more short sequences in *The Sopranos*. Watching television texts in a classroom environment with the aim of making a detailed analysis is quite different from watching the text for its own sake and for pleasure. It was therefore important that the students were made aware of what the aims of each session were and received clear and structured tasks to achieve this aim. As Lewis (2008) also emphasises:

> Students need to know how the study of a particular text fits into their course and how they are expected to use it. They should be given a rationale and clear tasks to carry out during their viewing and study short sequences […]. This may involve

taking notes, completing worksheets or focusing on specific elements in order to contribute to a group discussion. Whatever the task, it unambiguously signals that the student needs to be consciously involved in the consumption of the text. (Lewis, 2008: 14)

Practicalities

The face-to-face phase of the course took place at TU Dortmund University over a two and a half day period of three morning and two afternoon sessions. As I wanted the students to be able to view the video sequences from the text on their own individual screens and to be able to control the starting and pausing of a clip themselves, the venue for the course was a computer lab which had PCs set up with sunken flat screens, sound cards and individual headphones. The room also had controllable lighting, good external speakers and a data projector to allow for comfortable group viewing of sequences.

Also, as we would be doing much close analysis of short (1-5 minute) sequences from *The Sopranos*, I had digitalised the clips I wished to use in the course into Mpeg format files which can be played using most of the standard audiovisual players including *Windows Media Player* and *Quick Time*.[3]

It is important when planning such a course that the technical practicalities are well thought-through and tried out in advance. Technical difficulties, for example, clips not being in a playable format, sound unclear or not loud enough can seriously detract away from the desired spontaneous reactions from students to a particular sequence.

Choice of sequences and activities

Choosing suitable 1-5 minute sequences from such a vast television series like *The Sopranos* with its 86 episodes was a daunting task. However, for my selection process and my consequent learning activity creation, I again adopted a method I had applied in my EFL teaching. This selection and activity approach is advocated by Jane Sherman in her book *Using Authentic Video in the Language Classroom* (2003). Sherman recommends that when creating activities one should adopt the "generic, generative and gentle" (Sherman, 2003: 7) approach which she explains like this:

> The activities are *generic* in that they emerge naturally from the particular kind of video programme, sequence or shot, and exploit its particular qualities.

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[3] Under German law clips of audiovisual material can be made for educational purposes of a maximum length of 8 minutes. (Das Bundesministerium der Justiz, 2008).

They are *generative* in that they can be used again and again with other similar programmes, sequences or shots.

They are *gentle* on the student because what they ask for tends to come naturally. (Sherman, 2003: 7)

I particularly tried to keep the 'generic' approach in mind when selecting scenes and creating student reading activities, as I thought it was important not to think of an aim of the activity first and then find a scene to fulfil this aim but to allow the text to guide me in creating an activity and in this sense it would 'emerge naturally' from the text.

Day one a.m.: Theoretical review and identifying the 'codes of television'

In order to make a clear link between what the theoretical approaches to reading television texts covered in online phase one and the practical reading of television texts in the face-to-face stage, I gave the students a quiz (see appendix 2) to complete with a partner about the printed reading materials in online phase one. The intention of the quiz was to draw out the salient approaches and concepts from these printed reading materials which would be the main focus in the face-to-face phase. Students were asked, for example, to discuss why television scholars talk about television as 'the text' and what they understood about Nelson's concept of 'offering a reading' (Nelson, 2006: 84). Finally, students were asked to say to what extent they thought the film/television maker can influence the audience. I asked this as the final question as I felt that this question would really show if they had understood the post-structuralist concept that the meaning of a text is not solely dependent on the text's creator/producer but also on the text's reader:

post-structuralism usually emphasises the 'gaps' that occur between text and interpretation. In particular, post-structuralists tend to argue that only at the moment that a cultural product is 'read' by its audience does it even become a text, i.e. a complex site of struggle for meaning and understanding. (Creeber, 2006: 34)

The second task was to give students the opportunity first to identify film techniques or 'codes of television' within a short sequence taken from the opening scene of *The Sopranos* season 1, episode 1. Students were given a worksheet (see appendix 3) based on the overview of 'codes of television' given by Creeber (Creeber, 2006: 42) to help students produce a 'shot-by-shot' or close analysis of a television text. In this overview, Creeber lists a selection of the various forms of camerawork, lighting, editing, sound and music and *mise-en-scène*. He also adds some suggestions on what potential effects these techniques could have on the viewer. For example, in camera

work, a long shot could have the effect of "distancing, removed, neutral, often used in an establishing shot to set the scene" (Creeber, 2006: 42). It is important to note here that Creeber only talks of the 'potential' effects of these techniques rather than their definite effects.

Technique	Effect
Establishing shot (ES)	Usually sets the scene (e.g. a shot of the house where the action takes place)
Long shot (LS)	Distancing, removed, neutral (often used in an establishing shot to set the scene)
Extreme long shot (XLS)	Distant, removed
Close-up (CU) (head-and-shoulders shot)	Intimacy, empathy
Extreme-close up (XCU)	Emotion, drama, a vital moment
Shot/reverse shot (SRS)	Creating a dialogue between two people
High-angle shot (HAS)	Domination, power, authority
Low-angle shot (LAS)	Weakness, powerlessness
Eye-level shot (ELS)	Equality, empathy
Point-of-view shot (POV) (usually simulating a character's view of a scene)	Individual perspective
Wide-angle lens	Dramatic
Standard lens	Everydayness, normality
Telephoto lens	Voyeurism
Soft focus	Romance
Deep-focus (everything is in focus)	Everydayness, normality
Shallow focus (a scene only partially in focus)	Draws attention – 'look at this'
Three-point lighting (a subject is lit three ways)	Normality
Low-key lighting (or *chiaroscuro*)	Sombre, depressing, gritty
Underlighting (light source from below)	Sinister
Backlighting (light source from behind)	Mysterious, enigmatic
Soft lighting	Complimentary, warmth
Hard lighting	Realistic, gritty
Fine film stock	Natural, everydayness
Grainy film stock	Documentary realism
Hand-held camera (Steadicam)	Shaky, documentary realism
Whip pan (momentary lack of focus)	Documentary realism
Cross-cutting (two scenes edited together)	Allowing one scene to comment on the action of another
Dissolve	Continuity
Jump cut	Juxtaposition
Flashback (a scene from the past)	Narrative and temporal depth
Montage	Action, intensity, drama
Diegetic music/sound (from an identifiable source in the narrative)	Realistic
Non-diegetic music/sound (not from an identifiable source in the narrative)	Dramatic and emotional

Creeber's "Summary of Television Techniques and Their Potential Effects" (Creeber, 2006: 44).

In the identifying 'codes of television' activity, students were given the worksheet which listed the techniques and the potential effects they have and were required first to identify as many of these techniques as possible in a selected sequence, viewing the sequence on their personal PCs.

The sequence used for this activity was the opening of *The Sopranos* season 1, episode 1, in which Tony's first session with his therapist Dr Melfi is intercut with scenes of him and Christopher Moltisanti, his nephew, punishing one of their debtors by chasing him through a public area first by foot, then by car and finally breaking his leg and beating him up. When Tony talks to Dr Melfi about this incident he speaks using the euphemism of having coffee with a "business associate". I selected this particular scene sequence because of the stark contrasts between the scenes in Dr Melfi's office

and the car chase in which a variety of techniques are used to create different effects. The scenes in Dr Melfi's office are sedate and controlled with subdued lighting, it has no music only Tony and Dr Melfi speaking and very little movement, creating the atmosphere of the serious nature of the therapy Tony is embarking on. In contrast the car chase scenes are lit with bright outdoor natural lighting, fast moving, have electric guitar chasing-style music and a lot of action. With regard to camera angles, for example, both the scenes in Dr Melfi's office and the car chase scenes contain a variety of camera angles. The angles in Dr Melfi's office are much more placed and lingering, for example, Tony's contemplates her statue outside her office for what seems quite a long time and when entering her office the viewer does not take the perspective of Dr Melfi but the angle of Dr Melfi's analyst's chair.

In contrast, the camera angles in the car chase scene are a quick succession of close-ups of Tony in the car obviously enjoying the chase, to Tony's driving perspective shot through the windscreen, to longer shots of the 'business associate' running for his life across the public area. These fast switches in camera angles throughout the car scene give the impression of speed and the close-ups of Tony enable the viewer to witness the scene from his personal perspective of the chase highlighting his macabre enjoyment of chasing and hitting a man running for his life.

After first identifying the techniques used in the sequence, the students were secondly required to reflect on the effects that the camera angles and other techniques had on them and assess whether the effect on them corresponded with the potential effect given by Creeber. Thirdly, students were asked to compare the effect they experienced from a particular technique used in the sequence with that of another student. Finally I took a small selection of techniques from Creeber's list and we discussed as a group the spectrum of effects which different members of the group had experienced.

The aim of this exercise was first to give students the experience of identifying concrete examples of film techniques within the chosen text with the potential of being able to use these techniques as a means of explaining their reading of a sequence. Secondly, this exercise also helps to move the students away from just focusing on the spoken dialogue within a text to support their readings and helps them concentrate on the many other features which make up an audiovisual text like sound, camera angles, lighting etc. In addition, through comparing the type of effects that these techniques had on different readers, the activity also attempted to demonstrate the concept that the

'codes' used by a text producer can often be interpreted differently by each individual reader. After giving the students these tools for the close analysis of scenes, the next step in reading training was to focus on how the viewer's individual reading perspective and emotions can effect their reading of a text.

Day one p.m.: Identifying emotions and changing viewing constellation

The first three reading activities which I used in this part of the course were aimed at training students in following my television reading approach discussed in chapter five. The aim was to encourage them to focus on and identify their own emotions towards a text and thereby helping them establish which scenes and themes are most important to them. In addition I wanted students to view and read each of the three clips using a different viewing constellation (as an individual, with a partner or as a group). This was an attempt to highlight that a change in viewing/reading constellation can lead to a different viewing experience and affect an individual's reading of a text.

I based the structure of all the reading activities used in the face-to-face phase on the classic EFL three-stage structure of pre-watching, while-watching and post-watching tasks which is often used both in designing EFL audio- and audiovisual-based activities. The purpose of using these stages, as in EFL, is to give students a clear task structure. The pre-watching stage can give students some relevant background information to the particular text or instruct them to take a specific focus point. This purpose is mirrored in EFL teaching as described by Tricia Hedge (2000) for listening tasks "An important objective for the pre-listening phase is to contextualise the text, providing any information needed to help the learners appreciate the setting and the role relationships between participants." (Hedge, 2000: 249) The while-watching stage normally involves an easy-to-note-down task, for example, box-ticking or marking on a spectrum line, and helps students to focus on the relevant aspect of the text started in the pre-watching stage, as Hedge describes: "The work at the while-listening stage needs to link in relevant ways to the pre-listening work." (Hedge, 2000: 252). Post-watching often involves a more reflective and extended answer or discussion about the pre-watching and while-watching focus, as Hedge also states: "Post-listening tasks can take students into a more intensive phase of study" (Hedge, 2000: 252).

"Reading Television Activity 1: Reading as an individual" (see appendix 4) related to the first opening sequence of season 2, episode 1. This sequence is a type of synopsis of the whole of season one, it shows short scenes of the main characters in

season one going about their every-day business: Livia, Tony's mother, in hospital; Carmela cooking Italian food; Tony collecting cash from his mob partners; Christopher, Tony's nephew, snorting cocaine and watching gangster movies on TV; Tony giving his daughter Meadow driving lessons; Paulie, a member of Tony's mob, having sex with a prostitute, Tony cheating on his wife with his goomah.

In total there are twenty-one separate short scenes set to the music of Frank Sinatra's song "It Was A Very Good Year". I chose this sequence firstly because there is almost no other sound in the sequence except for the Frank Sinatra song, again as I wanted the students to move away from focusing on the spoken dialogue. Watching this sequence presents a good opportunity for students to explore which element they find themselves focusing on, the sound or the images. For the while-watching task, students were asked to mark on a scale which element they thought they were focusing on more, the sound or the images. The second reason for choosing this sequence was due to the amount of short scenes it depicted in quick succession. In the first part of the post-watching phase, I first asked students to state how many different scenes there were and then to state which five stood out for them in particular. With this task I attempted to show students that the scenes which they had chosen could be quite different from the ones chosen by other students and this could depend on their own individual interests and reading context. The second post-watching task asked students to reflect on the feelings which this entire sequence left them with. They were then asked to try and explain what elements in the sequence they thought had caused these feelings. This task again was aimed at showing students that their feelings from the same sequence might range from being similar to quite different from those of other students and that the reasons they gave could also range from being based on similar different elements in the text.

"Reading Television Activity 2: Watching with a partner, reading as an individual" (see appendix 5) was based on a short sequence also from season 2, episode 1. The scene depicts two rather green new mobsters working for Christopher Moltisanti, Tony's nephew, are running a fraudulent telephone financial advice company which is only pushing one company's stocks to buyers. The scene is set in a classic open plan office with the standard office sounds of telephones ringing and a row of employees sat at desks talking on the phone. The two mobsters listen into employees selling shares when one mobster overhears an employee is giving 'real' financial advice to customers by giving information about other types of stock which would be more profitable. On

hearing this both mobsters come up behind the employee while he is still on the phone to the customer and poor boiling coffee on his neck. When the employee protests claiming that the stocks they want him to sell: "are a dog", the mobsters pour more hot coffee on him and kick him to the ground and continue to beat him up while he is down. When the manager tries to intervene they threaten him with a knife. On seeing this, the other shocked-looking employees in the office proceed to just carry on with their work and the standard office noises of phones ringing and talking resume while the beaten up employee is known by the others to be still lying under his desk.

The reason for choosing this particular sequence was the dramatic shift in atmosphere in the scene from a conventional office environment to the unexpectedly gratuitously violent incident of the employee being kicked to the ground and beaten repeatedly while down. I personally considered this a shocking transition that such an incident could occur in such a conventionally safe environment of an office. I thought this scene offered a good opportunity to first question the students on to what extent, if at all, they found the scene shocking and for them to say when exactly, if at all, they felt this. Therefore in the while-watching stage I asked the students to mark on the scale how shocking they found the scene and in the post-watching stage I asked them to identify which particular part of the scene affected them the most, giving them the following options:

The first coffee pouring ▢

The second coffee pouring ▢

The kicking of the worker on the floor ▢

The threatening of the manager ▢

The reaction of the other workers in the office ▢

The students were then asked to reflect on the reason for the answers they gave. The final part of the post-watching exercise was for students to try and categorise this particular sequence into a cultural theme. Again, this follows my intended reading procedure approach highlighted in chapter five of identifying a cultural theme to use as a focus when choosing what to read in a text. This is particularly relevant when using *The Sopranos* as a reading text due to its extreme length and the vast number of cultural themes it covers, students should practise narrowing down their viewing to focus on a particular theme.

The final activity in this part, "Reading Television Activity 3: Watching as a group, reading with a partner" (see appendix 6), was related to a scene in season 1, episode 1, when Tony is describing his first panic attack to his therapist. He is barbequing outside in his garden, observing the ducks, which he has become particularly attached to, swimming on his pool. The ducks fly off, presumably to migrate, and Tony suddenly finds it difficult to breath, says: "I felt like I had ginger ale in my head", blacks out and collapses to the ground. On collapsing to the ground the can of firelighter fuel which he was using for the barbeque falls onto the lit grill and explodes in seconds. With this Carmela and Meadow run to Tony's aid, Sylvio, Tony's mob colleague, puts the fire out with a fire extinguisher and Carmela shouts: "call 911". What was particularly noticeable during this scene and the reason for me choosing this particular sequence was the type and variation of the sound used. First while Tony is seen preparing the barbeque watching the ducks, the non-diegetic voice of Tony relating the progression of his panic attack is heard over the music of Puccini's "Chi il bel sogno di Doretta" from the opera *La Rondine*, this music becomes steadily louder continuing through Tony's attack and collapse until it suddenly stops with the explosion of the firelighter fuel. For me the use of such a beautiful song from Italian opera is quite incongruous with the visual of Tony's fat, cigar-filled face crumpling with anxiety as he watches the ducks fly off and collapses behind the barbeque. When the music stops the reality and true danger of Tony's attack is suddenly noticeable as we are returned right back into the action of the scene with the diegetic voices of Carmela and Meadow shouting in fright and for help.

In this third reading activity in the post-watching stage, students were asked to reflect on when they felt the danger in the scene. For me it was only after the explosion as the music gave the scene a dream-like quality up until that point. Secondly they were asked if they could remember what happened to the music and thirdly what type of music is was. Finally they were asked to identify the cultural topic of this scene and were asked to compare every stage of these post-watching tasks with a partner in order to be able to present the comparison between them and their partner to the rest of the group.

These first three activities in the face-to-face phase were aimed as an introduction to the reading procedure training discussed in chapter five. The purpose was firstly to sensitise the students to aspects in the text which they may not usually consciously notice, in this case especially sound. Secondly, the activities aimed at

highlighting the variation between viewers in terms of their emotions and meanings when reading the text. Thirdly, they offered a practical context for students to identify cultural themes within the text. Finally, students were asked to discuss to what extent the changes in viewing constellation, as individuals, with a partner and finally as a group, influenced their readings of the text.

Day two a.m.: Role-play reading

The method of using role-play is quite common in teaching and training in many different disciplines but has been particularly prevalent in the field of EFL in order to give students a context in which to practise fluency in speaking. As Hedge (2000) states:

> As students take on a variety of roles during a programme of role-plays they will practise language which varies according to the setting, the formality of the situation, the degree of politeness or emotion required, and the function required for the particular role, for example to persuade, disagree, complain, invite and so on. (Hedge, 2000: 280)

I adapted this commonly used method of role-play in EFL, but instead of promoting oral fluency as in the case of EFL teaching, I wanted to create a practical teaching context following the advice Nelson gives to encourage student to reflect on their own reading and the readings of others:

> A good starting point is to identify the target market and to note the 'preferred reading' of the text from that specific point of view. If your own reading is reflected outside that, it is worth reflecting on your own reading and then trying to imagine how the text might be read by others situated elsewhere /differentiated by age, class, gender, ethnicity etc.). (Nelson, 2006: 85)

In this extract, Nelson identifies a post-structuralist approach for students to enable them to read a particular television text from other social, economic and gender contexts than their own. As it was my stated intention to encourage students to be able to identify "the contested terrain" (Campbell and Kean, 2006: 14) in the reading of multiple meanings from a text, I decided to take this approach from Nelson and create a method of how this could be done in the classroom, a method which I called 'role-play reading'.

First students were given a role other than their own to read the text from. I based the first reading role on Nelson's suggestion of taking the target market audience declared by HBO, "the target market of The Sopranos is AB1 males" (Nelson, 2006:

84). I expanded this 'AB1 male' description of this role to a moneyed, white, professional male between 25. The second role I chose was a counter gender role to the first role which was a moneyed, professional female between 45 and 65. I divided the group up into two halves: one group was given the male role to read the sequence from and the second group was given the female role. Both groups were shown the same sequence and given the same activity. The selected three different sequences from *The Sopranos* I used for role-play reading were based on the theme of gender relations which I thought would fit in well with the male/female roles I had chosen. A further reason for choosing the gender relations theme were the surprisingly many academic feminist commentaries which I found on *The Sopranos* which did not just slam it as a text which advocates the horrors of a patriarchal and violent mafia world. For example, Rebecca Traister under the intriguing title of: "Is *The Sopranos* a chick show?" (Traister, 2004) reiterates this surprising feminist standpoint arguing: "Why an ultraviolent drama about a New Jersey mafioso paints a more nuanced portrait of women than anything you'll find on Lifetime" (Traister, 2004). Kim Akass and Janet McCabe also declare: "Far from being trapped by the all-embracing patriarchal structures she [Carmela] finds herself in, she finds ways to work them to her advantage." (Akass and McCabe, 2002: 154). This view from female academics that *The Sopranos'* portrayal of women can be seen as what Traister describes as: "engrossing, and confusing, and genuine" (Traister, 2004) has also been criticised. Martha M. Lauzen with equal conviction in *The LA Times* describes *The Sopranos* to contain "thoroughly regressive portrayals of women [...] the show's writers give these psychologically and physically brutalized women no means of escape and no power" (Lauzen, 2001). These wildly diverse readings from academic on gender relations in *The Sopranos* made me think that this would be a good topic to concentrate on in order to give the students the opportunity of reading *The Sopranos* as a polysemic text. I chose three sequences on the theme of gender relations for the three role-play reading activities in the course which I thought could be read differently depending on the reading context.

"Reading Television Activity 4: Role-play Reading 1" (see appendix 7) was based on a sequence from the many battling dialogues which occur between Tony and Carmela throughout the series. This particular dialogue, from season 1, episode 4, begins with Tony having another panic attack and collapsing on the floor of the kitchen in their home. Carmela rushes to Tony's aid, helps him up, commenting to Tony that the

medication given to him by his therapist does not seem to have helped him. The deceit between them as a couple is immediately highlighted when Carmela refers to Tony's therapist as a 'he' and Tony notably does not correct her. The classic stereotypical male-female communication problem of women often complaining about men's inability to express their feelings, is revealed when Carmela remarks that Tony finds personal feelings difficult to talk about. Tony, taking the classic male stereotypical viewpoint, tells Carmela that she has to talk about everything. Tony proceeds to tell Carmela that he wants to quit his therapy, saying that a man with his type of job cannot reveal too much of himself. Carmela responds to this with telling Tony that if he does end his therapy, he is putting their marriage at risk because he is not dealing with his panic attacks with her comment: "I'm telling you Tony if you give up now, I'm going to have to re-evaluate things". The camera angles chosen in the scene reiterate the rift which has developed between Tony and Carmela, throughout the whole scene they are never put side by side into one frame, almost identically angled over-the-shoulder shots are used showing each of them talking heatedly to the other. To me this emphasises the idea that they are apart in their marriage but of equal power in this argument.

In the pre-watching information it was made clear to the students which roles they were to read the scene in and also what the purpose of role-play reading was; to experience reading from a different context than one's own and to realise that the reading they make as a result of taking on the role may be different from the one they would normally make as themselves and also different from the other group who have been given the opposite gender reading role. The while-watching task which both groups had to complete for this scene was to mark on a linear scale which character came out of the argument better, Tony or Carmela. Finally, the post-watching task was for the students to discuss with a partner in the same role as themselves what the main reason was for Tony wanting to end his therapy. I predicted for this final task that the male role group would say that Tony thought that his position as mafia boss was being jeopardised through revealing too much about himself in therapy. In contrast the female group would say that Tony just did not feel comfortable talking about his emotions either to his wife or his therapist. The students' responses to this activity will be revealed in the following evaluation chapter.

"Reading Television Activity 5: Role-play Reading 2" (see appendix 8) was based around a scene this time between Carmela and her Italian American friend Charmaine. The two women are clearing up after Carmela had a party the night before for which Charmaine and her husband Artie had done the catering. At this point in the series, Charmaine and Artie have fallen on hard times after Arti's successful Italian restaurant, *Vesuvius*, had been burned down in a fire and they were waiting for the insurance company to pay. What Charmaine, Artie and Carmela do not know is that it was actually Tony's mob who were responsible for burning down the restaurant in order to claim the insurance money. In the scene Carmela tells Charmaine that she seems upset, Carmela assumes that it is because of their business worries. However, it becomes clear that this is not what has been upsetting Charmaine, but more what she sees as Carmela's rather patronising attitude towards her of flaunting her wealth. Charmaine first rejects Carmela's sympathy about her financial situation and then proceeds to reveal to Carmela that before Tony and Carmela were married, she and Tony slept together while Carmela was on vacation. The scene ends focusing on Carmela's open-mouthed face watching Charmaine leave.

I chose this scene due to the high context situation it depicts about the relationship between Carmela and Charmaine. On the surface they appear to be two friends helping each other out, however, Charmaine's revelation to Carmela shows a definite crisis in their friendship. The reason for this revelation is not obvious and is therefore open to a variety of readings.

In the pre-watching phase, the students were asked to switch roles from the one they had in the previous activity. The while-watching task asked students to mark on a linear scale which character, Carmela or Charmaine, they thought the role they were assuming would sympathise with most in this scene. In the post-watching phase students were asked to discuss with another member of their 'role' group what they thought Carmela's sympathy towards Charmaine was based on and how they explained Charmaine's revelation to Carmela. The reason for me choosing this particular scene was based on my assumption that the female role would be more in tune with the underlying bitchy wrangling which can occur among women than the male role would. Therefore the female role would be more likely to sympathise with Charmaine while watching the scene, see Carmela's sympathy towards Charmaine as patronising and explain Charmaine's revelation as an attempt to put herself on a morally higher level than Carmela, as she does not have to rely on mob money and therefore is justified in

respecting herself more than Carmela can. Again the results of this activity will be shown in the next chapter.

"Reading Television Activity 6: Role-play Reading 3" (see appendix 9) is based on the scene between Tony and Carmela in season 1, episode 13 which I used to base my reading procedure on in chapter five. The scene takes place in Tony and Carmela's bedroom just after Tony found out that his mother and his uncle were behind an attempt on his life. This scene in contrast to the arguing scene used in "Role-play reading 1" depicts a more harmonious atmosphere between Tony and Carmela. This harmony is emphasised visually as the camera angles used in the scene show them together as a couple in the soft domestic light of their own bedroom. However, there is also an underlying power battle going on between them, Tony wants to take revenge on his uncle's hitman and Carmela wants to attribute the blame the murder attempt on his mother.

The students were again asked to switch roles from the one they had in the previous activity. In the while-watching stage they were asked to mark on the scale how strong Tony seemed in the scene. In the post-watching stage, they had to discuss with a partner what they thought, from the perspective of the role they had assumed, was the main reason for the threat on Tony's life.

I chose this scene because I made the assumption that the male role would read Tony as strong in this scene because he promises revenge on the hitman and his uncle. However, the female role would read Tony as weak as he does not confront himself with the fact that actually it is his own mother who is really behind the death threat. Carmela does acknowledge this straight away but Tony chooses to ignore it.

This method of role-play reading is an attempt to produce a method using a concrete text example which allows students to experience a post-structuralist approach to reading television texts as defined by Creeber:

> post-structuralism […] declares that all human knowledge […] is ultimately interpretative. […] [Post-structuralism] is at pains to acknowledge the active role of the reader in making meaning and looking for multiple meanings within a 'polysemic text'. (Creeber, 2006: 38)

The taking on of a stereotypical role when reading the text is an exaggerated method of moving students out of the comfort zone of their own reading perspective and making them work at trying to imagine how someone from a specific gender, economic and social background might read the text. The comparing of the two groups

after the role-play reading activities can highlight the divergence in meanings which can arise. This method promotes the idea that the reader plays an active role in the making of meaning and that a text can have multiple meanings, with both of these elements often depending on the perspective from which the text is read. Also it highlights Nelson's idea that readers should not come to a definitive analysis of a text but are 'offering a reading' (Nelson, 2006: 84) which can be added to the discourse or 'the contested terrain' (Campbell & Kean, 2006: 14) surrounding a text.

Day two p.m.: InsideOut reading

When making an analysis of a text, students often show a lack of confidence in developing their own ideas about the text and therefore rely far too heavily on the ideas of the 'experts' who could be their teachers, lecturers and/or television scholars writing secondary literature. This lack of confidence is highlighted by David Gauntlett on his website *Theory.org.uk's nine suggestions for getting on as a media student* (Gauntlett, 2008):

> It might seem convenient if your lecturers could just tell you everything you need to know, in lectures, and then you could write it down in essays or exams later. But that's not how it works.
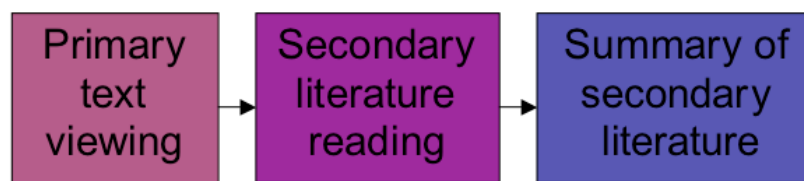>
> […] (So, you might ask, what are lectures for? Lectures should introduce you to interesting things, and stimulate you to find out more. But they can only be a 'taster' for the big meal of ideas and knowledge that is out there – and to get you thinking for yourself)."(Gauntlett, 2008)

This reluctance to develop their own ideas does not fit in with the post-structuralist approach to making a reading which promotes the idea that every reader's reading is valid and contributes to the discourse surrounding a text. As Creeber advises students of Television Studies: "Always use textual analysis with confidence […]. Regard your reading as part of a 'dialogue' with others" (Creeber, 2006: 37).
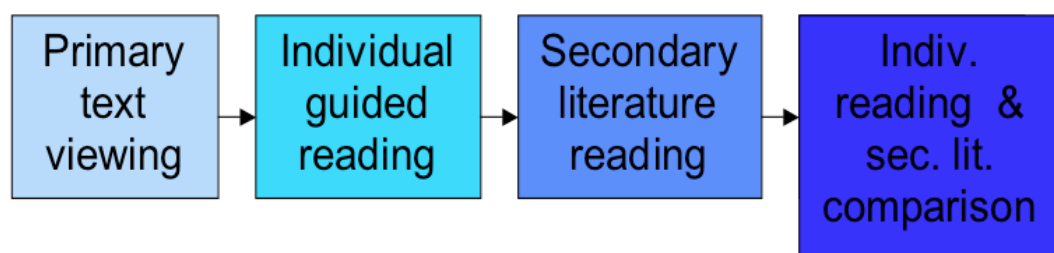
In this phase of the course, I wanted to develop a strategy to help build students' confidence in their own readings before they start reaching for the readings of the 'experts', often thought of by students to be scholars and teachers. This strategy I called 'InsideOut reading'. InsideOut reading is an attempt to invert the standard method in many students' literary criticism approach. This inversion is highlighted in the following chart which compares the standard method of viewing the primary text, followed by reading some of the secondary literature and finally making a summary of

the secondary literature in order to address a particular aspect of a text. As can be seen in the chart, InsideOut reading gives students the opportunity and space to reflect on their own meanings in the text through an individual guided reading. This guided reading is created by the course teacher and consists of a series of questions which relate directly to a television scholar's reading of the primary text. Students must first discuss and reflect on these questions before they read the scholar's reading which is the third stage of InsideOut reading. Finally students make a comparison, either spoken and/or written, between their guided reading reflections and the secondary literature the guided reading related to. In InsideOut reading the importance of the students' own readings is emphasised by placing their reading before that of a secondary literature scholar. The secondary literature scholar is merely used as a comparison, not as a definitive source.

Standard text analysis method

| Primary text viewing | → | Secondary literature reading | → | Summary of secondary literature |

InsideOut reading

| Primary text viewing | → | Individual guided reading | → | Secondary literature reading | → | Indiv. reading & sec. lit. comparison |

A comparison of a typical standard text analysis method with InsideOut reading (Pattenden, 2010).

As discussed in chapter four, the postmodern nature and the "textual uncertainty" (Creeber, 2006: 34) of *The Sopranos* as a television text means that the readings of many of the themes presented in the series have been read diversely by many different scholars. This is described by Creeber as the "**slippage in meaning** [emphasis in original] that occurs between text and reception" (Creeber, 2006: 34).

These 'slippages' even lead some critics to be uncertain about any overall theme of *The Sopranos* as demonstrated by Kathryn Flett (2008) in *The Observer*: "[*The Sopranos*] held a mirror up to America. It was not about the mafia, it was about the family and, in fact, it was not really about the family either, it was about America." (Flett, 2008). Flett's uncertainty again reiterates my argument that *The Sopranos* is an ideal reading text which keeps the reader working and leads to many diverse readings.

In order to illustrate diverse readings of the same cultural theme to the students, in my InsideOut reading course activity I decided to take the theme of representations of aggression and violence against women, another theme which occurs throughout *The Sopranos*. I was personally quite ambiguous for a while on how to read the incidences of aggression and violence in the series, especially the scenes which involved women. I felt that, although the way aggression and violence against women was depicted was often graphic and quite terrifying for me which made me look away and feel repulsed, at the same time, I did not feel these representations were gratuitously indulging in the violence.

One particular episode which has caused a lot of controversy in the way violence against women was depicted is season 3, episode 6, entitled "University", also called episode 32 by critics. In the episode, Tracee, a young and rather naïve-looking stripper working at Tony's stripclub, the Bada Bing!, is punched and beaten to death outside the club by her so-called boyfriend, father of her unborn child, mob member and psychopath, Ralphie Cifaretto. This episode even has its own *Wikipedia* page (*Wikipedia.org*, 2010) and on *TheSopranos.com* website there is a forum showing the range of opinions about the controversy surrounding this particular episode:

> I am disgusted with *The Sopranos*. Your portrayal of women is extremely disturbing. Just because a woman is a whore doesn't mean her life has no value as your story line states. So it's no big deal to beat one to death. No loss to society. All life has value, this is not a third world country where life is valueless. […] Your story lines can still be effective without being so pornographic or degrading. I won't know because I will not watch *The Sopranos* anymore. You spit on family values and condone infidelity for men as a needed recreation and expect the wives to accept this. Yes, I have a choice not to watch, and I choose not to.

> I was very affected and disturbed by this episode. But not offended. This show is not about nice people. It is mesmerising, and interesting […]. (*TheSopranos.com*, 2001)

Feminist television scholars have also engaged in the controversy surrounding episode 32. Merri Lisa Johnson (2007) offers a detailed reading of the episode from a feminist perspective in her book section "Gangster Feminism: The Feminist Cultural

Work of HBO's *The Sopranos*" (Johnson, 2007). Johnson sees *The Sopranos* as offering an opportunity to explore representations of violence:

> *The Sopranos* clearly qualifies as a site of 'primetime feminism', fulfilling quality television's role, formulated eloquently be Bonnie J. Dow as 'an important ideological forum for public discourse about social issues and social change' (Dow, 1996: xi). In its representations of rape, battering, and spousal murder, the third season of *The Sopranos*, more than the series as a whole, persistently takes up the feminist cultural work of examining 'the economic and social roots of violence,' mirroring a key tactic in cutting-edge cultural studies (Jenkins et al., 2002: 11). (Johnson, 2007: 28)

I took two particular scenes from episode 32 which Johnson comments on in her reading, but instead of simply giving the students Johnson's interpretation to read the scenes by, I made structured questions based on Johnson's comments which would allow students to decide to what extent they agreed with her reading or not.

The first scene was taken from the opening scene of the episode in the Bada Bing!. The camera first focuses on the topless dancers in the club two of which are swinging half-heartedly around a pole on the stage. They are dancing to a track by The Kinks, "Living On A Thin Line", which is a soft American rock song, the lyrics depicting the hopelessness and danger of life:

> Living on a thin line,
>
> Tell me now, what are we supposed to do?
>
> Living on a thin line,
>
> Tell me now, what are we supposed to do?
>
> Living on a thin line,
>
> Living this way, each day is a dream.
>
> What am I, what are we supposed to do?
>
> Living on a thin line,
>
> Tell me now, what are we supposed to do?
>
> "Living On A Thin Line" (The Kinks, 1984)

The sound and lyrics of the song contrast strongly with the trashy erotic dancing of the topless girls in the visuals.

Tony and Silvio are sitting at the bar discussing a business deal. As is frequently the case throughout the series, the topless dancers, as they totter around the poles on their platform heals, are treated by the mob members as a kind of backdrop to conduct their

business in front of. Tracee enters the scene, dressed in outdoor clothes carrying a plate. It is clear that her appearance is not that of a regular stripper like the ones on the stage with their blown-up breasts and dyed, permed hair. Tracee has a naivety about her with her fresh pretty young face, soft eyes and natural hair, she even has a brace on her teeth which serves to accentuate her youth. Tracee thanks Tony for the previous advice he had given her to take her son to the doctor and presents him with some homemade date nut bread which she has made for him. Tony, not unkindly, tells her that they do not have the type of relationship that warrants her making him bread by saying: "Don't take this the wrong way, but you can't be doing stuff like this". Tony reminds her that she is his employee not his family. Tracee seems disappointed by this answer but is then chivvied along by Silvio to get changed for her work as a topless dancer.

After watching the scene students were given "Reading Television Activity: 'InsideOut Reading' Clip One" (see appendix 10) to discuss with a partner. The four questions were based on the reading which Johnson (2007) gave of the scene. Firstly they were asked what they thought Tracee's motivation was for offering the gift, secondly what the significance of the bread was, thirdly, why Tony rejected Tracee's offer. Finally they were asked to mark on a linear scale which character, Tony or Tracee, they thought looked more foolish in the scene. The next step was to discuss as a group the reading ideas the students had offered for these questions. As a group discussion, the final step was to show the students the quotation from Johnson of how she had read the scene and for them to note any differences and similarities to how they had read the same scene when addressing the same aspects as Johnson.

Johnson interprets Tracee offering the bread as her attempt to enter the socially respected world of "good […] womanhood" (Johnson, 2007: 30) and "create a traditional family dynamic" (Johnson, 2007: 30). Johnson sees Tony as rejecting Tracee's offer because she tried to switch the roles of "good and bad womanhood" (Johnson, 2007: 30). This was Johnson's quote which I gave to the students to analyse:

> Tracee, a dancer at the Bada Bing! strip club, […] attempts to create a traditional family dynamic in her life. In the opening scene she approaches Tony with a gift of homemade date nut bread and is gently reprimanded for trying to shift roles within the binary of good and bad womanhood. In Tony's layman's terms, 'You can't be doing stuff like this.' (Johnson, 2007: 30)

The second scene which I chose from episode 32 was the scene which had caused the most controversy among viewers. It starts with Ralphie sitting in the back room of the Bada Bing! bantering and telling a rude joke to the other mob members

who laugh raucously at his punch line. Tracee comes in to get changed for work and starts unpacking her stuff into a locker, ignoring Ralphie. Ralphie tries to get a reaction from her, she insults him in front of his friends by saying: "Yeah right, what man?". Tracee leaves and goes outside the club and Ralphie follows her into the dark outside the Bing. He pretends to show concern for her, she rejects his advances and reprimands him for not having called her for days. Ralphie apparently tries to soothe her by telling her he has got to work so he can support her and their baby and that he is making plans for them to set up home together. Tracee immediately softens and declares she loves him. Ralphie continues with his wind up:

> Ralphie: Hey if it's a boy, we'll name him after me, if it's a girl, we'll name it
> Tracee after you … this way she can grow up to be a cock-sucking
> slob just like her mother …are you out of your fucking mind? (Chase,
> 1999-2007)

Ralphie' vicious words show Tracee's wishes to have him as a faithful father and partner to be completely ridiculous. In anger at the realisation that he has just been winding her up with his empty promises and malicious comments, she spits in his face, finally managing to slap him in the face. After this hit, the joking and jeering suddenly leave Ralphie and he approaches Tracee with a face of pure menacing aggression. He punches her full into the upper body, she pulls away, standing in front of a metal crash barrier next to the road, she screams: "Did it make you feel good, do you feel like a man?". With his masculinity insulted again, Ralphie can no longer contain his aggression, without the slightest consideration for Tracee as a woman or even a thought for his unborn baby, he approaches her with vicious intent in his eyes and punches her with a high left hook full in the face, Tracee falls to the ground gasping.

Visually the scene now becomes darker and slightly unclear at Ralphie continues to hit Tracee with all his strength which is heard in the sound of the every powerful punch he lands and also her excruciating moans and whimpers. After several ruthlessly smashing blows with his fist, he kills her by pulling her by the hair and smashing her head many times against the metal crash barrier.

After he has finished, he stands up, struggling for breath saying to her: "Look at you now" as if he believes justice has been served. The brutal violence of the scene is ultimately depicted more through the strength of the sound with the ferocity of Ralphie's words followed by the intense hitting and moaning sounds of the beating. Visually the scene becomes darker as the violence intensifies, we see brief shots of

Tracee's body being flung around by Ralphie and ultimately all that can be seen of Tracee after the beating is a very brief and very dark shot of lifeless and bloodied body.

After watching the scene students were given "Reading Television Activity: 'InsideOut Reading' Clip Two" (see appendix 11) to discuss with a partner. The three questions related to the clip were based on the reading which Johnson (2007) gave of the scene. Firstly, the students were asked what they thought Tracee's motivation was for wanting to be with Ralphie; secondly, what they thought had triggered Ralphie's violence against her; thirdly, students were asked if they felt the scene's representation of violence for them was merely gratuitous or not gratuitous by marking a linear scale and then they were asked to explain how they came to their answer. Finally they were given Johnson's reading of the scene to compare with their answers:

> [Tracee's] desire to live with Ralphie, the motivating factor in this scene, returns us to the destructive effects of the dominant ideology of home as safe haven, for it is Tracee's unwavering psychological investment in this fiction that blinds her to the dangers of making a home with the wrong person, and her insistence on entitlement to this home triggers his violence against her. (Johnson, 2007: 37-38)

In the quote, Johnson sees Tracee's motivation to be her overriding wish to acquire the stereotypical domesticated life with a house which means she ignores the fact that her boyfriend and father of her unborn child is a violent and uncontrolled psychopath. Johnson thinks that Ralphie's violence towards Tracee also stems from his own desire to have a safe home and domestic life and his anger at her audacity for thinking that he would be prepared to give up this dream to be with a stripper who he could never respect:

> Tracee wanted Ralphie to provide attention, affection, and a little house. He sees these requests as evidence that she is 'out of [her] mind' – doesn't she realise that he too yearns for the idealized domestic life he sees in Tony's family, and that a stripper wife could never be part of that picture? In failing to recognize herself as an unwanted class marker, Tracee runs into the brick wall of Ralphie's fist. (Johnson, 2007: 38)

Both these quotes were analysed in a class discussion. The extent to which students concurred or disagreed with Johnson's reading in both of these scenes described in episode 32 will be discussed in the following chapter on the assessment and evaluation of the course and methods.

InsideOut reading gives students the time and space to first reflect on a particular scene and consider for themselves some aspects of meaning in the scene addressed by a television scholar before being confronted directly with the scholar's

actual reading. The aim of this reading is to move students away from relying on secondary literature as the definitive meaning of a text and ultimately empower them to argue about the meaning of the text from their own perspective rather than just from that of the 'experts'.

Day three: Presenting a reading

The final part of the face-to-face stage was for students in pairs to plan, create and present a five-minute presentation of a reading they had made from one scene in *The Sopranos*. The aim of this activity was first to give students the opportunity and freedom to select their own scene and theme from *The Sopranos* and offer their own individual reading. Secondly, students had to present their readings with a clearly defined thesis statement in a structured presentation to the rest of the group.

For this activity I advocated a step-by-step approach to planning, creating and preparing a presentation which I often use in my EFL teaching. A step-by-step approach is also emphasised by Wallace (2004) who particularly stresses the "preparation stage" to students when making a presentation for academic purposes and suggests five steps:

1. making sure you understand the topic

2. making sure you understand the frame (given in the rubric, that is the instructions as to what to do)

3. generating your own preliminary ideas on the topic

4. researching the topic

5. writing up the topic

(Wallace, 2004: 124)

First I gave students clear guidelines, the 'rubric', about my expectations of the presentation. These guidelines were that each pair of students should present a detailed reading of one 2-3 minute scene from *The Sopranos* in a PowerPoint presentation of 4-5 minutes. The PowerPoint presentation had to be no more than six slides, calculating one slide per minute with an extra slide for the title, and no more than three points per slide. In order to highlight some of the basic blunders which many presenters make using PowerPoint I showed them a four minute *You Tube* clip featuring US comedian Don McMillan (McMillan, 2007) which is particularly good at showing, in a comic way, the problems with, for example, too much text on a slide, bad font and colour schemes, non spell-checked text, too many bullet points on one slide. I have found that showing this

clip is an effective and quick way of avoiding these problems in student presentations.

Students were also told that the presentation had to be freely spoken with only the use of minimal keyword notes prepared on cards. I find that speaking freely when giving a presentation has to be given as a clear guideline otherwise I am often confronted with presentation read from a written script. As Andy Gillet points out on his excellent website called *Using English for Academic Purposes: A Guide for Students in Higher Education* (Gillett, 2009), a distinction must be made between the demands of spoken language and written language:

> In seminars, the same as with writing, plan your talk. If you are going to get as many marks for speaking as writing, spend as much time on it as your writing. Written language is different from spoken language. If you just read out your essay, no one will understand you. (Gillett, 2009)

In addition, the speaking had to be equally divided between the two presenters so that each speaker spoke for a roughly equal amount of time. The presentation had to be clearly structured with an introduction and overview, main body and conclusion. Students were given a presentation planner worksheet to help them plan using this structure (see appendix 12). They were also given a handout of basic marker and linker vocabulary to use throughout their presentations. The aim of this is to make the transitions between each phase and point in the presentation fluent and clear (see appendix 13), in EFL often referred to as "signposting" (Wallace, 2004: 125). The presentation was not allowed to be descriptive but had to contain a clear thesis statement in the introduction, which then had to be proven in the main body and clearly answered in the conclusion. Every example given to support the arguments in the main body had to contain at least one visual element, a still or very short clip from the scene.

The step-by-step process which students had to work through to produce the presentation was as follows: First they were given the choice of taking either one of the scenes we had already viewed in the face-to-face course or choosing their own 2-3 minute scene from the text. Secondly, they had to identify a cultural theme in the scene which they would like to investigate and attempt to come up with a 'working' thesis statement. This means a thesis statement which would probably not be the final one which they would use in their presentation but one which they could work with to develop the ideas for their presentation. Thirdly, students had to make a detailed analysis of the scene they had chosen through discussion with their partner, highlighting any film techniques which they thought helped to explain the thesis they had come to.

Fourthly, students had to discuss their thesis statement with me and convince me that it really was a thesis they were presenting rather than a description of the scene which students are sometimes prone to doing.

After having their thesis statement 'okeyed' by me, they then had to structure their reading according to the presentation planner, making sure that for each point they wanted to present they had a concrete example from the text. Next students had to practise their presentation with each other and using their PowerPoint presentation, critiquing each other and making sure that their timing was according to the guideline of a maximum of five minutes. Finally students had to present their presentation to the rest of the group.

When a presentation was taking place, each observing student had to complete the feedback sheet (see appendix 14) during each presentation in order to encourage the observers to reflect on what they liked and/or thought could be improved in the presentation and also to be able to contribute actively to the five minute feedback session at the end of each presentation. This active involvement is stressed by Anderson, Maclean and Lynch (2004) who emphasise:

> the need for the language learners to take an active part in the evaluation of the performances […] *debriefing* is not just another way of saying 'correction by the teacher'; it should be a genuinely *collaborative* discussion of what was done and said in a performance. (Anderson, Maclean and Lynch, 2004: 141)

Being able to articulate a reading verbally within a tight structure is a good introduction to being able to produce a written reading. A written reading uses a similar structure of introducing a thesis statement, backing up an argument in the main body and finally presenting a strong conclusion of how the thesis statement has been proven in the work which leads to online phase two.

6.6 Online phase two: Offering a written reading

The main task of online phase two was for students to offer a written reading of a theme based on one selected scene from *The Sopranos* in the form of a structured essay. Again I used writing procedure methods I use in EFL teaching and adapted them for students of television. The procedure takes the students through a step-by-step approach to choosing their theme and scene, developing their own thesis statement and essay title, creating their essay plan and ultimately writing their own essay. In EFL, it is often emphasised that writing an academic style essay should be seen by students as a

process. Zemach and Rumisek base their guide to EFL students entitled *Academic Writing from Paragraph to Essay* (Zemach and Rumisek, 2003) around this writing process principle helping students with "developing and supporting a central thesis, organising an outline from which to write, and writing effective introductions and conclusions." (Zemach and Rumisek, 2003: iv)

Although the essay was an individual task for students, I wanted to utilise the *EWS* platform, not only to upload useful essay writing resources but also to use my blog and the forum tools to encourage students to post their thesis statements, essay titles and plans so they could obtain feedback from me and other students in an online space which all course participants could view.

The essay writing resources which I posted on the *EWS* and which I drew students' attention to in the final stages of the face-to-face workshop, were four PDF texts on aspects of essay writing which I have found to be problematic for students. The first PDF resource (see appendix 15) helps with the definition of a thesis statement, how to develop a thesis statement from a 'working' thesis statement to a 'final' thesis statement and how to avoid 'weak' thesis statements. The second PDF resource was on how to write an effective paragraph (see appendix 16), how to structure a paragraph with a topic sentence, main body and a concluding sentence. The third PDF (see appendix 17) gave tips on how to cite from primary and secondary literature. The final PDF (see appendix 18) dealt with structuring an essay effectively and what should be included in an introductory paragraph, the main body of the essay and in the concluding paragraph. These PDF resources were an attempt to try to pre-empt problems students often have in academic essay writing which often render their essays to be unstructured, rambling and too descriptive rather than tightly structured, to the point and analytical.

The guidelines and strategy for the essay writing I gave in my blog on the *EWS* are given below:

> To achieve the 'Schein' you must do the following:
>
> * Decide on and post onto forum a cultural theme you wish to read from a maximum of one episode (or even part of an episode).
>
> * Make a detailed reading of the episode you have chosen using the film techniques and reading methods we practised in the face-to-face phase.
>
> * Decide on and post onto the forum a title which should start with: "Offering a Reading of …"

* Decide on and post onto the forum a thesis statement (the direction you want to take in your essay, see PDF in the data section for help on thesis statements).

* Decide on sources you want to use in your essay, for example, 'theory' reading sources from OP1 and/or secondary literature on *The Sopranos* (see reading list below). Please note, only use secondary literature to compare and contrast with your own individual reading of the text. (see PDF on how to cite correctly in the data section)

* Plan and submit a detailed plan of your essay (see PDF on essay plans in the data section) as a Word document on *EWS*.

* Submit a 15-page essay on *EWS* by the deadline given below.

* Submit course feedback form (find in data section).

(Pattenden, 2009)

The strategy for choosing an appropriate scene or section from the text and a related cultural topic was based on the individual reading strategy which we had practised in the face-to-face phase of the course and which students had also used to select a topic for their presentations. I thought it was important for students to continue to focus on the idea that they were offering a reading of their own of the text and were not trying to guess what 'the audience' or 'the viewer' in general might think. Therefore I insisted that the students start their essay titles with "Offering a reading of …", to keep them focused on the idea that it was their personal reading. Of course students were required to refer to the primary text throughout their reading. However, I also gave students the option of using secondary literature to support their arguments from the theoretical approaches to reading television texts covered in online phase one. Students were also free to compare their own reading of a particular theme or topic with that of a television scholar as we had done in the InsideOut reading activity.

Finally I felt it would be motivating for students to post their thesis statements and essay titles onto the *ESW* platform for others to compare and comment on and for all students to be able to view my comments. Often as a teacher one finds that one is repeating the same comments many times to individual students who have encountered the same essay writing problems. I feel that it is motivating and perhaps even consoling for students to see that others have similar difficulties which can be relatively easy to rectify. Giving deadlines for posting the stages of the essay writing, the thesis statement, essay title, essay plan and final essay, onto the forum was also an attempt at encouraging students to work step-by-step to producing a good analytical essay with

any problems they encountered on the way having been addressed in the forum and/or by me before they handed in their final essay.

6.7 Course overview

The course "Reading your way towards media literacy with *The Sopranos*" provided a practical context for students of American Cultural Studies and Television Education to experience a post-structuralist approach to reading television texts outlined in chapter five. In order to create the practical context I adapted EFL teaching methods and strategies to give a step-by-step structure to making both spoken and written readings. These methods were aimed at pre-empting known problems which students have with giving presentations and essay writing, for example, taking a too descriptive and non-analytical approach. In addition, I developed my own methods, role-play reading and InsideOut reading. Role-play reading to encourage post-structuralist reading through changing the individual reading perspectives. InsideOut Reading to motivate students to be confident in their own readings, enabling them to add to the discourse about the text rather than just relying on secondary literature and other 'experts'.

The scenes which I selected from *The Sopranos* to base my reading activities on, demonstrated ways of visually and aurally constructing relationships of characters in these scenes between Carmela and Tony, Carmela and Charmaine and Ralphie and Tracee. For example, when Ralphie and Tracee are discussing their fantasised domestic life together, the aural of Ralphie's words making the promises to Tracee is in direct contrast to the visual of his sarcastic and menacing face.

In the next chapter I will evaluate the course based on student feedback and my own assessment.

7. Course evaluation

In order to evaluate the design of my television reading course, I need to re-examine the aims I set for the course and then try to ascertain whether these aims have been achieved. The overall aim was for students to understand the theory behind a post-structuralist approach to reading television texts through applying this theory to a segment of the text and producing their own individual spoken and written readings.

7.1 Evaluation methods

The data I have available for evaluation from the course can be divided into two main categories, formal and informal. Firstly, formal feedback data from the course participants and from myself as the course trainer includes formal feedback questionnaires (see appendix 19) filled in by the course participants on completing the course, formal interviews recorded with course participants conducted six weeks after handing in the final essay and finally my own filling in of the feedback questionnaire from the perspective of the course trainer. This formal feedback data can be seen as explicit in nature as the feedback asked for explicitly focuses on the evaluation of the course methods and content.

The informal feedback data can be seen in the form of student forum and glossary contributions on the *EWS* in online phase one, individual readings of the text when completing the activities and the presentations during the face-to-face phase. Finally forum contributions, email exchanges and submission of the final written reading in the form of a structured essay in online phase two. This informal data can be seen as implicit feedback in the sense that none of it was given with the specific intention of giving direct feedback about the course content or methods. The informal data is in the form of spoken and written student production from the course predominantly to fulfil the set tasks or activities. For the evaluation of this informal data, I will use a qualitative research approach advocated by Uwe Flick (2009) who stresses the importance of "the researchers' reflections on their research as part of the process of knowledge production" (Flick, 2009: 14). In other words, the researcher's (in this case my) interpretations of this informal data form a vital part of the evaluation. Flick argues that what may have previously been seen as the subjective reflections of the researcher should now be seen as an intrinsic part of the analysis:

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative methods take the researcher's communication with the field and its members as an explicit part of knowledge instead of deeming it an intervening variable. The subjectivity of the researcher *and* of those being studied becomes part of the research process. Researchers' reflections on their actions and observations in the field, their impressions, irritations, feelings, and so on, become data in their own right, forming part of the interpretation […] (Flick, 2009: 16)

Flick sees the use of the researchers' reflections in qualitative research as a recognition of our postmodern pluralistic age and that we now live in a time in which "the era of big narratives and theories is over. Locally, temporally, and situationally limited narratives are now required." (Flick, 2009: 12)

In order to structure my evaluation in this chapter I have divided it into the three course phases: online phase one, the face-to-face phase and online phase two in which I will present the formal and informal data with my related reflections as the researcher.

7.2   Online phase one

In the formal feedback for online phase one, I asked students to comment on the overall organisation I used on the *EWS* platform and then on the individual tools I and they used which included the forum, the glossary, my blog and the selected reading text PDF files.

I felt the *EWS* organisation was clear as the students seemed to have no problem navigating around it even though some had not used *EWS* before. This clarity was helped as I only used some of the *EWS* tools, blog, *wiki* glossary, forum, download area for PDF files and I did not feel pressured to use all the technical features which can be a temptation for some teachers. Generally the students' reaction to the *EWS* organisation was very positive with, it seemed to me, one student even expressing surprise that it functioned without any problems: "Was good, in my opinion. Everything worked from the start and the tasks were pretty clear to me." (Andreas)

As part of the formal feedback, the students and I also commented on the individual tools and materials used in online phase one. Despite the time it had taken for me to personalise the *EWS* platform, especially creating the new blog webpage and the glossary, this was time well spent, especially the blog which helped to create an open and relaxed atmosphere. Generally students responded in an open and spontaneous way to requests to post their introductions of themselves and why they had chosen to do the course:

Hello my name is Luisa. As you might have noticed from reading my surname, I am Italian. My father comes from a town between Rome and Naples. The Mafia plays an important role there and I chose this course because I am quite interested in the mafia, and mafia related TV programs/ movies - such as the godfather etc. - have always captured my attention. (Luisa)

Hi, my name is Raoul. I always liked to do film and TV analysis, and I love *The Sopranos*, so I'm grateful for the opportunity of achieving "Media Literacy" on the basis of this series. (Raoul)

I updated my blog every day, commenting on the students' contributions in the form of forum gists and glossary additions which they had submitted the day before. It was an effective way of motivating the students through this printed text reading part of the course and giving them pointers on what to focus on while continuing their reading.

The reading material selection was also generally well received by students, despite the time pressure of having to read several texts in one day. Leïli commented on the selection in the feedback: "I liked that there were many cross-references between the texts and that we got quite a broad selection of various approaches to *The Sopranos*" (Leïli). I also felt that the reading selection was a good mixture of more academic texts dealing with approaches to analysing television texts to newspaper and magazine articles highlighting the impact of *The Sopranos* in mainstream media.

Having to write a gist statement for each of the texts they had read was aimed at encouraging the quick skim reading of texts to obtain a basic understanding and avoid slow, detailed and usually unnecessary note-taking. However, in the first couple of days of online phase one it proved more difficult than I anticipated to convince students of the value of doing this. Most students had never done this before and some did not know what a gist was before this course: "In the beginning it was hard to figure out what we had to do (I had never even heard the word 'gist' before), but after the first 2 or 3 gists it became easier." (Andreas) However, by the end of this online phase, most students appreciated the chance to interact with me and the other students about the course reading material before the start of the face-to-face phase: "it is a nice idea to respond to the (out of class-) readings in some way already." (Leïli) For me as the course teacher, getting students to do gist reading gave me some idea of their level of understanding of a particular text and enabled me to tailor-make my blog guidance for the next day to encourage students to focus on certain aspects of a text which, for example, they had perhaps missed or new points which had been raised by another student. It was also interesting to note the slightly different focus students have when writing a gist about the same text. For example, the two gists below were written by two

different students about Creeber's text "Analysing Television: Issues and Methods in Textual Analysis" (Creeber, 2006):

> gives an (also historical) overview of the origins and developments of the various methods of Textual Analysis and shortly introduces them, also indicating how they relate to (that is, complement, contradict and emerge from) each other. (Leïli)

> Televisison Studies apply various forms of textual analysis and critical perspectives, ranging from close reading to historical investigation. (Christoph)

Leïli focused on the different types of textual analysis which have evolved whereas Christoph focused on the idea that the academic field of Television Studies uses these different types of textual analysis. In my forum comment about these two gists, I commented that for the purposes of the reading television course, it is important to focus on, which Creeber does in his text, how the academic field of Television Studies uses these different approaches to analysing text and that television constitutes texts to be analysed, rather than the history of textual analysis in general.

I believe that my assumption that this type of gist reading was a good motivator for other students to complete their own reading by the deadline and compare their understanding with that of other students generally worked for most students. However, there was one student who found this type of communal supervision from me and the other students a little daunting. Perhaps he was not used to having his reading monitored quite so closely which he admitted to me in an email away from the eyes of the other students: "Today I needed almost 4 hours just to read and understand the texts. I don't mean this as a reproach. In comparison to others I'm just a bit slow." (Raoul) I think this shows that one must accept as a teacher of a course which demands a lot of active participation, there will always be some students who will struggle with this, especially perhaps when coming from an educational background which involved much 'spoon feeding' of information to students. In order to counter this scenario of a student feeling intimidated by the amount/difficulty of work and/or the presence of other students in the online learning environment, it is important for the course teacher to be vigilant in monitoring that each student is contributing and also to be praising and commenting on the contributions. If a student is seen not to be contributing, the teacher can make general comments on the forum about the lack of contributions or enquire individually to the student using email for privacy to find out if there is a problem and how it can be solved.

The entries which the students made into the *wiki* glossary which were divided into three different theme sections "TV History and Analysis", "*The Sopranos*" and "Film Language" were mostly carefully selected words and phrases from the reading material. The gathered words and phrases had the potential of helping students to focus on authentic language from academic Television Studies and newspaper television critics and commentators. With students having to select the vocabulary instead of the course teacher, the students were actively and collaboratively creating their own television vocabulary resource. The glossary end product was definitely impressive, with some students having contributed more than others but all students had made an attempt to contribute. I made both gist adding on the forum and vocabulary contributions compulsory in online phase one. I have found that if making contributions is not compulsory, there is the tendency for some students not to contribute and tend to just observe, a phenomenon which has been described by online educationalists as "lurking" (Dennen, 2008: 1624). I think a valid criticism of the use of the glossary came from one student's feedback form when she stated: "I liked the concept, but there should have been some work on that during the face-to-face-phase maybe too" (Leïli). We did of course use technical and academic television vocabulary throughout the following phases of the course and referred specifically to it in the quiz review of the printed text materials and the identification of television techniques at the beginning of the face-to-face phase. However, I think it would have been better to have actively referred to the glossary directly, even if it had just been in the quiz review, to create an activity which would have meant students had to evaluate and use the glossary which they had made.

In my opinion, online phase one was successful in fulfilling its aim of familiarising students with the main academic approaches to reading television texts, with the 'production/reception' context of *The Sopranos* and with some of the basic film techniques also used in television. Reading the printed course materials within the context of an online learning environment meant that students were motivated by the group to read the texts efficiently within a certain time span, were aided in their reading focus by the course teacher and other students, mutually created an online vocabulary resource in the form of the *wiki* glossary and were able to put questions to the course teacher and other students throughout this preliminary period of the course. None of these features are usually available to students in a traditional face-to-face course. As the course teacher using the initial online phase meant that I was able to monitor the

students' understanding of the printed reading material much more closely than would be possible in a conventional purely face-to-face course with a reading material list given as a pre-course task. In addition, I was able to guide students much more effectively in the focus of their reading and answer any queries which arose from the reading, the making of the glossary and the writing of gists.

7.3   Face-to-face phase

For the evaluation I will divide the face-to-face phase into the different activity types: the quiz, identifying television codes, the first three warm-up reading activities, role-play reading, InsideOut reading and preparing and performing the spoken reading presentation. I will evaluate the formal explicit feedback given by students and also a selection of implicit feedback in the form of activity tasks produced by students.

The reading review in the form of a quiz worked well. The quiz focused on the main concepts and approaches of TV analysis theory which they had covered in their reading and which we would use in the face-to-face part of the course. The activity revealed clearly that most students had done the reading thoroughly and had a good idea of the concept of 'reading' a television text. As Leïli remarked: "the quiz was very good to check on what we have gotten from the readings and recall the contents (make them available) to use and work with them in class." (Leïli)

The intention of the television codes activity was for students to apply the codes as listed by Creeber (Creeber, 2006: 42) to selected sequences in *The Sopranos*. Students responded very positively to this task, I think enjoying the idea of acquiring tools or some sort of concrete structure on which to base their readings of the text. Leïli's feedback on this activity was a: "good 'technical' intro, I found it essential giving us/ going over the the basic tools in class to do the 'media readings'" (Leïli) and Tino commented: "Nice task to deepen one's understanding of filming techniques." (Tino).

It was encouraging that students reponded so positively to identifying the different techniques, however, I think this had a lot to do with students needing a safe structure to build their reading around. Many would have been happy to do this for longer and not to go deeper into exploring the uncertainties of post-structuralist readings from different perspectives which was to come in the following activities. Also while doing this television codes activity, I had to be careful that students did not start guessing what they thought might be the text's director's/producer's intentions behind

using these codes but rather focus on the effect that the use of these codes had on them as individual readers.

The following part of the course were three warm-up reading activities (described in chapter six). The aims of these were to encourage students to identify their emotions when viewing a text, focus on other elements in the text, for example images and sound, rather than just the dialogue and ultimately compare their own readings of the text with those of others in order to assess the differences (and similarities) in their readings.

To evaluate this part of the course I will present the answers given by students to "Reading Television Activity 3: Watching as a group, reading with a partner" (see appendix 6) which relates to the clip when Tony has his first panic attack while barbequing (see chapter six for scene description). The first question which the students answered was when do they first feel the danger in the scene. The answers varied from: "right from the beginning" to a popular one given by three students: "when the ducks flew off" to: "when Tony's facial expression changes" to: "when the grill explodes" until right at the end of the clip: "when the family members arrive". Through discussing this wide variety of responses recorded by students which spanned almost the entirety of the one-minute clip, it could be shown that individual emotional responses to the text, in this case when a viewer feels the danger in the scene, can vary quite considerably.

The second question in this activity concerned the music in the clip, what happened to the music and what type of music it was. As stated in chapter six, the music is Puccini's "Chi il bel sogno di Doretta" from the opera *La Rondine*, which becomes steadily louder continuing through Tony's attack and collapse until it suddenly stops with the explosion of the firelighter fuel on the barbeque. The answers to these questions given by students were again quite diverse and often quite different to what really happened to the music in the clip. One student wrote: "The music stops when Tony collapses" which is incorrect because it stops only with the explosion, another said: "the music gets louder, then quiet again when the people talk" which is again incorrect as it does not get quieter but completely stops with the explosion and when the family members arrive. Another student remembered the music accurately stating: "the classical music swells and abruptly stops with the explosion", in comparison to the student who wrote could not recall anything: "Could not really remember – it stops? No idea". As far as the type of music was concerned again one student could not remember at all, while three students said is was classical music and two identified it as opera

singing. As could be seen by these results, some students remembered the music precisely and were even able to identify the type of music while others could not remember anything at all about the music. Giving students the opportunity to compare their results, firstly with a partner and also with the rest of the group, meant again that the great differences in individual readings which can arise from viewing the same sequence can be quite dramatic.
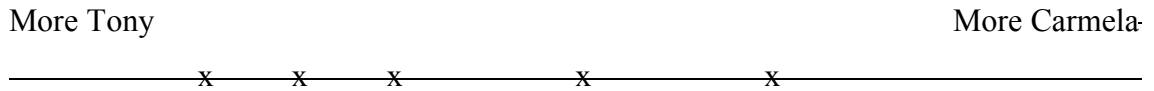
As also stated in chapter six, while completing the first three warm-up reading activities, students were given the opportunity to view and discuss them in a variety of constellations. When asked about the different constellations in the formal feedback, I found it surprising that two students expressly stated that they found reading as an individual much easier than reading as a group. Tino stated: "I don't like groupwork. Other than this it was fun" (Tino). Andreas even said he believed individual reading to be more usual than reading in a group, shown when he wrote about reading as an individual: "that [reading as an individual] was not so new since everybody does that anyway when he/she reads a book or watches TV. But it was interesting to express one's thoughts and even make them clear to oneself (mostly those things are more or less automatic)" (Andreas). When he talks about reading as a group he states he found this difficult because he seems to feel that discussing the readings of others makes his own reading weaker: "[Reading as a group] was a bit hard at times since it somehow waters down your own reading if you have discussions about how others read something" (Andreas). The aim was to encourage students to reflect on how changing the context of one's reading through using these different constellations could influence their own reading of the text.

The aim of the three role-play reading exercises was to highlight to the students how adopting another role, in this case a different gender role to one's own, can dramatically change the reading which one produces.

For the evaluation of role-play reading I will present the results of the first two role-play reading activities. As described in chapter six, in the first activity students were divided into two 'role' groups. The first "a moneyed, white, professional male aged between 25 and 45 (AB1 male)" and the second "a moneyed, professional female aged between 45 and 65". The division of the groups was made randomly and each group was a mixture of both female and male students. The students were asked to read the same sequence of Tony and Carmela arguing about Tony wanting to end this therapy and answer the same related questions. The first question asked students to

mark on a linear scale which character, Tony or Carmela, they thought came out of the argument better. Below are the results which came from this question:

Results of male role group

More Tony   More Carmela

```
_____x____x____x_____x_____x_____
```

Results of female role group

More Tony   More Carmela

```
_____xxxx_
```

It is clear that the female role students felt strongly that Carmela came out of the argument better, whereas the male role students were more undecided, although they seemed to side more with Tony. When asked the question what the students thought from their role's point of view, was the reason for Tony wanting to end his therapy, the male role group came up with the following answers:

> Tony is used to being in charge, so I believe he feels uncomfortable stepping out of position in therapy.
>
> He wants to protect his job, he says therapy is too much exposure for him.
>
> His argument that he is a mafia boss and cannot have therapy is half true. It's more an excuse not to talk about his feelings.[4]

It appears that the male role students felt strongly that the reason for Tony wanting to end his therapy was the threat it was to his job, this was in fact the argument which Tony himself gives. The female role students came up with the following answers to this question:

> He's afraid of thinking/knowing too much about himself.
>
> He's afraid of showing too much of himself.
>
> Therapy shows him to have weaknesses.
>
> Ignoring the problem is easier for him.

The female role students clearly side with Carmela's argument that Tony does not want to talk about his feelings, neither to her nor to his therapist.

---

[4] The answers to the reading activities in the face-to-face phase were given anonymously and therefore no student names are given.

Despite the fact that both gender roles in this activity watched the same clip together on the same screen and answered the same questions related to the clip, the difference in readings between the two gender roles results were more dramatic than I had imagined. The important factor for the purposes of my role-play reading activity aim was that the differences were there and that the students should be made aware of them through the feedback discussion. It was also interesting and promoted discussion to produce a chart of the linear scale results (like the ones above) on the white board for students to view a graphic of how the two gender roles had answered the question. Generally the students were also surprised as to the extent of the differences between the readings of the two role groups and enjoyed discussing reasons for these differences.

The second role-play reading exercise "Reading Television Activity 5: Role-play Reading 2" (see appendix 8) was related to the sequence when Carmela and her friend Charmaine are clearing up after a party in Carmela house. Carmela expresses her sympathy to Charmaine about her difficult financial situation and in response Charmaine reveals to Carmela she had an affair with Tony when Carmela was on vacation before Tony and Carmela were married.

The students in the course switched gender roles from the one they had in the previous activity to answer the questions after viewing the clip. The first question asked students to mark on a linear scale who, from their role's perspective, they sympathised most with in the scene, Carmela or Charmaine. The results for the two role groups were as follows:

Results of male role group

Carmella   Charmaine

———
          x x   x   x

Results of female role group

Carmella   Charmaine

xxxx——

It is clear that the female group strongly sympathised with Carmela whereas the male group were again fairly divided in their answers. The reasons for their answers were shown in their responses to the post-viewing questions. The first post-viewing question

was for students to explain the reason for Carmela showing sympathy towards Charmaine. The male group gave the following answers:

> She [Carmela] feels sorry for her [Charmaine] because of the loss of the restaurant.
>
> She [Carmela] wants to show she is stronger and protective towards her [Charmaine].
>
> She [Carmela] wants to help her [Charmaine] and feels compassion.

The female role students came up with the following reasons for Carmela's sympathy:

> Carmela has everything while Charmaine has lost everything so Carmela wants to help.
>
> Charmaine offered to help Carmela with her party despite losing everything.
>
> Carmela wants to play her role of compassion as the mafia boss's wife.

While the male role seems to focus more on the literal meaning of Carmela's words, that she genuinely feels sorry for Charmaine and wants to help her, the female role is searching for some ulterior motives which Carmela might have like, for example, demonstrating her power as the mafia boss's wife.

The second post-watching question asked students to explain the reason for Charmaine's revelation of her past affair with Tony. The male role group came up with the following suggestions:

> Charmaine is just telling Carmela the truth.
>
> Charmaine is bored by Carmela's continuous talking and wants to shut her up.
>
> Charmaine is offended by Carmela.

The female role group in contrast gave the following answers:

> Charmaine wants to hurt Carmela because she is miserable and cannot stand Carmela being happy. She wants to turn Carmela into a victim of Tony.
>
> She deliberately wants to hurt Carmela or make her feel insecure – maybe she dislikes the way Carmela patronizes her.
>
> Charmaine wants to destroy the 'holy world' of Carmela so her own sorrow will seem less.
>
> Charmaine wants to remind Carmela that her position is nothing extraordinary.

Again with these answers to the second question it is clear that the male role group does not attempt to go far beneath the surface with reading this scene. However, the female role group again pinpoints deeper and more malicious motives for Charmaine's

behaviour. In this second role-play reading activity the dramatic difference in reading seems clearly dependent on the context of the individual readers.

It was noticeable while conducting the role-play reading activities that some students found putting themselves in the position of another gender role relatively easy, while others did not. To me it seemed that particularly male students found it difficult to put themselves into the position of the female role and commented about this while doing the activity and also in the formal feedback as Tino remarked: "You can't pretend imagining to be a woman in her fifties." (Tino). A method of combatting what I felt to be inhibitions on taking on another role was giving the students two or three role-play reading activities to complete with different clips, getting the student groups to switch roles after each activity. In doing the activity several times I felt that the students became more used to adopting the roles and most overcame any inhibitions or embarassment they had initially. Although as Hedge also points out in EFL role-play teaching, the ability or willingness to take on different roles depends on the individual: "The problem is exacerbated when roles require students to change their status, personality, or even gender. Ultimately it will depend on the willingness and motivation of students to change persona, and this is an individual matter." (Hedge, 2000: 280)

Another criticism which was levied at the concept of role-play reading from the point of view of the students was that they felt that using these gender roles was too speculative because the roles were just stereotypes. Leïli and Andreas commented about this in the formal feedback:

> Nice idea but I think it soon became obvious that all these role-readings were only very speculative and stereotypcial and somehow moot, maybe. Not sure what we were to draw out of this exercise. (Leïli)

> That was okay, although I thought that it was at some points so superficial that it rarely had anything to do with the respective role. I for myself found it hard to not put my own opinion into it. (Andreas)

There appears to be a pervasive idea among students that the use of stereotypes in role-play reading is in some way superficial or unrealistic. In order to counter these comments, it should be pointed out that when reading a television text we are not dealing with what is realistic or unrealistic but with the meaning that an individual reader attributes to a particular text. Secondly, it should also be emphasised that television itself as a medium makes strong use of stereotypes, especially in television drama and advertisements, in order to make connections with and draw in the viewer quickly. As Creeber also comments: "Television is particularly susceptible to the use of

stereotypes because the medium often needs to establish character almost instantly before an audience loses interest and switches off" (Creeber, 2006: 47-48). Even *The Sopranos*, as discussed in chapter four, is probably one of the most complex television texts ever made uses stereotypes throughout and as Nelson pointed out for commercial reasons it even targeted an AB1 male audience which is again a stereotype.

Therefore I believe that although it is certainly true that some students, although not all, find taking on another role difficult, role-play reading can also be used to help show the extent to which television as a medium uses stereotypes in order to make it easily accessible to audiences and keep them interested.

However, I think the principle aim of using role-play reading to highlight the differences in readings which taking on another role can bring was largely fulfilled. This view was also given by a German *Gymnasium* teacher, Sabine Franz, who took part in another role-play reading session with me and gave the following feedback on how she believed role-play reading could help her in her teaching of *Gymnasium* students:

> I teach French and German at the *Gymnasium* and therefore I work a lot with texts. What I realized, especially in the 'Oberstufe', is that pupils keep wondering, how it can possibly be, that multiple interpretations are possible and several ones can be 'right' simultaneously. In the Oberstufe I keep telling them that the most important thing is that they can show in the text (belegen) why they interpreted it the way they did.
>
> The role play reading, no matter if with literary texts or films, I thought, might be a good way, to illustrate, that an interpretation also depends on the perspective of the 'reader', and a movie watcher is also a reader, looking at the movie as a 'text'. And multiple ways of reading a text are possible. Taking a role while 'reading' the text makes it more transparent that it always depends on the perspective, how you understand things, and if pupils learn to look at a situation, like the ones you showed us in 'The Sopranos', they might understand better, that there is not only one way of looking at a text (although it might be hard for them to take the perspective of a person between 25 and 45, if not nearly impossible in this particular case).
>
> Still, I think, that this is a very interesting approach in teaching literacy skills, by making the pupil look at a text form different point of views (roles in your case) and then judge a situation in different ways, which are all 'right' in their way. (Franz, 2009)

It is interesting to note in this quote how Sabine feels that role-play reading has a significant transfer potential into other forms of literary analysis and teaching environment, in her case teaching literary analysis skills of predominently printed texts to school pupils.

As described in chapter six, the aim of the InsideOut reading activity was to motivate students to develop their own reading of a certain section of the text before refering to a reading made by a television scholar of the same text section.

The formal feedback from students on InsideOut reading was very positive, they seemed to accept it more readily than role-play reading although InsideOut reading was still quite an unusual approach for them to take. Leïli commented on the novelty of reading like this: "we do not usually approach a text this way, I liked the encouragement you gave us to do so deliberately" (Leïli). I think generally the students appeciated being given time and space to develop their own reading before consulting those of a scholar: "it only makes sense to reflect on your own thoughts on a subject before grabbing others. I'd find it very sad if this technique isn't widespread." (Tino) Although this was not to say that the students found it easy to come up with their own interpretations and did acknowledge that this is often more difficult than just relying on secondary literature, as Christoph remarked: "I found the approach challenging because I couldn't rely on secondary literature for interpretations of the text, coming up with my own reading was difficult." (Christoph)

Implicit feedback to InsideOut reading can be seen in the responses to the activities which students made. For the questions related to the beginning of episode 32 in which Tracee, the stripper, offers Tony bread in the Bada Bing!. Students responded to the first question: "What motivates Tracee to offer the gift?" with the following responses:

> Tracee wants to thank Tony for his advice to see the doctor.
>
> She wants to say thank you to Tony for sending her son to the doctor.
>
> Tony paid her son's doctor's bill.

Interestingly the last answer is completely false as nothing was said about Tony paying the bill, perhaps this answer was given assuming Tony's benevolence towards Tracee. For this answer, the students mostly gave the literal meaning in the words of Tracee who says in the scene: "I just wanted to say thanks". Johnson, however, interprets Tracee's motivation to be her trying "to create a traditional family dynamic in her life" (Johnson, 2007: 30), with Tracee treating Tony as a benevolent father figure.

The second question which the students were asked was: "What is the significance of the bread?" Students answered in the following way:

> thoughtful, childish

'breaking bread' with someone is a sign mutual respect

homemade, self-made, requires effort from the maker

The students seemed to have interpreted the significance of the bread as Tracee trying to get Tony to respect her for her effort in making him something homemade. However, the students do not refer specifically to Johnson's idea that the making of bread symbolises "good womanhood" (Johnson, 2007: 30) in the sense that Tracee wants to "shift roles within the binary of good and bad womanhood" (Johnson, 2007: 30) through presenting the bread to Tony.

For the third question: "Why does Tony reject her offer?", the students gave the following answers:

Tony is her employer and it's therefore inappropriate for her to give him a gift.

Tony is a mob boss and Tracee a stripper.

Tracee has another boyfriend and therefore Tony does not 'own' her.

Again the first student is mainly reading Tony's words literally as Tony himself says: "I know but I've already got a family and they give me gifts, what we have is an employer – employee thing". However, the second student's answer that Tony is a mob boss and Tracee a stripper implying that they do not have anything close to a traditional family-like relationship comes closer to Johnson's reading of Tracee trying to move away from her stripper role into that of a traditional domesticated housewife role. The last student's comment that Tony backs away because Tracee already has a boyfriend is something which is not raised by Johnson at all. In this case the student could be encouraged to develop it into an argument that Tony is not behaving so benevolently but is merely keeping his hands off another man's property.

The final question related to this clip asked students to mark on a linear scale which character, Tony or Tracee, they felt looked more foolish in this scene. The results were the following:

More Tony   More Tracee

———————X—————————X—————————X—————————XX—————————X—————————X———————

As can be seen, the students' responses were quite varied, with a slight overall tendency to feel that Tracee was more foolish than Tony. Johnson, however, is quite clear about

which character she considers to come off more foolishly in this scene when she talks about "the ludicrousness of a stripper who bakes" (Johnson, 2007: 30).

Many of the initial answers which students gave were their 'gut' responses to the questions. However, I found that through comparing their answers with the scholar's, students felt more confident through classroom discussion to develop their own reading ideas more deeply which may or may not have coincided with those of the scholar's.

The second clip in the InsideOut reading activity related to the scene in episode 32, described in more detail in chapter six, in which Ralphie having had his masculinity mocked by Tracee, ends up battering her to death outside the Bada Bing!.

The first question the students were asked again based on Johnson's reading was "What is Tracee's motivation for wanting to be with Ralphie?". The answers the students gave were as follows:

> Tracee wants financial and emotional security.
>
> She wants a family life, suburbia.
>
> Love?
>
> She says she loves him.
>
> She is pregnant from him.
>
> She is attracted to the promise of a white picket fence and being middle class.
>
> She wants a way out of her current status as a prostitute.

In this question the students' answers of Tracee wanting to improve her financial and social situation through her relationship with Ralphie were much closer to Johnson's reading. Johnson says about Tracee:

> she entertains hyperreal fantasies of a future home with her gangster boyfriend […] Tracee's domestic desires measure the extreme distortions produced by the dominant ideology of family values, as she pictures a stereotypical 1950s' conclusion for her story: a loving marriage, a fulfilling motherhood, and a well-run house – all tidily poised at the end of a New Jersey cul-de-sac. (Johnson, 2007: 30)

Of course Johnson's reading is again much more developed than the students' but they also had similar images of domestic bliss with their use of words like "suburbia" and "the white picket fence" which correspond to Johnson's "New Jersey cul-de-sac" image. The students also made allusions to the idea that Tracee's desire is quite unrealistic by questioning the idea that she loves Ralphie. Again Johnson is much more ruthless in her dismissal of Tracee's dreams calling them "hyperreal fantasies".

The second question related to this clip was: "What triggers Ralphie's violence against her?" The students responded like this:

Ralphie wants total power, he is abusive and she is vulnerable.

It's violence for the sake of violence.

Tracee's violence provokes him, she slaps Ralphie first.

He lost control of himself.

No real reason.

She questioned his masculinity "Do you feel like a man?"

She makes fun of him in front of his buddies.

In their answers the students seem to focus very much on Ralphie's violence being a result of his violent and aggressive nature. Only in the last two answers do they refer to Tracee's questioning of his masculinity as a trigger. Johnson argues that the trigger of Ralphie's violence is his disgust at Tracee's assumptions that he would even consider having a stripper as a wife when his status, in his opinion, would merit a much more respectable calibre of wife: "doesn't she [Tracee] realize that he [Ralphie] too yearns for the idealized domestic life he sees in Tony's family and that a stripper wife could never be part of that picture?" (Johnson, 2007: 38)

In the final question the students were asked to mark on a linear scale to what extent they considered the representation of violence in the murder scene of Tracee gratuitous or not gratuitous, here are the results:

Gratuitous   Not gratuitous

xx——————————————————xx————x———x—————x————x——

Generally the students erred more on the side of not gratuitous, explaining their answers mostly with comments about the lighting, the dominance of the sound and not the visuals during the actual murder act:

The camera perspective is slightly distorted.

The violence is mostly heard but not shown.

Mostly it's the sound.

The scene is not 'staged' and therefore it is not voyeuristic.

The arguments in favour of the violence being gratuitous compared the representation with that of an action movie with one student commenting: "The scene is gratuitous as it could be from an action movie." Johnson, writing from her declared feminist perspective, does not deal directly with the question of whether the representation of violence in episode 32 is gratuitous or not, but more specifically asked whether the representation of violence against women in the episode reinforces sexism or not. Johnson comes to the conclusion that the scene can be read as both reinforcing and not reinforcing sexism: "Tracee's story accentuates some of the most complex questions of postmodern feminist media theory […] how to read representations of violence as *both* reiterations of sexism *and* primetime feminist challenges to sexism" (Johnson, 2007: 52). Johnson even continues to suggest using the scene of Tracee's murder as a practice text to give readers the opportunity to read the complexity of the scene: "We might begin […] by working to read this stripper-bashing scene without lapsing into the seductive but simplistic reactions of bashing sex work or bashing men or bashing the media" (Johnson, 2007: 53). I think that these results from my InsideOut reading activity using Tracee's murder scene proved Johnson right, its ambiguity as far as meaning is concerned was definitely reflected in the students' answers.

InsideOut reading certainly proved very popular with students who enjoyed making their readings and afterwards comparing them with those of the scholar. I think they definitely felt more confident in questioning the scholar's readings when they did not correspond to their own. However, in order for InsideOut reading to be successful I think it is important to select a scene which is particularly ambiguous and even provocative in its subject matter because this will encourage a wider range of readings among students. Ultimately InsideOut reading provides a concrete teaching context in which students can experience the 'contested terrain' of meanings which can be read from a certain text.

The aim of giving the students the task of holding a presentation in the course was to invite them to present their own spoken reading of a particular theme in a segment of the text. For the evaluation of the presentation task I will analyse the presentations they produced through both their PowerPoint presentation and also scripts from video recordings made. This will help me to identify whether students had used the approaches to reading television texts which had been discussed and practised in the course. These elements included reading from an individual perspective; focusing on

film techniques/television codes to support one's argument; focusing on image and sound rather than only dialogue and action.

Some students seemed surprised that I expected a presentation to be planned and created during the face-to-face phase in a relatively short amount of time. However, most used the time effectively, choosing a cultural theme and a manageable short sequence from the text quickly. Leïli appreciated having the opportunity to complete the task in the classroom environment: "it was good to do it in class for once, very good and helpful that you were there to discuss questions with us or give advice so immediately" (Leïli, 2010).

The students worked in pairs on their presentations and the themes which they chose ranged from reading the intimacy of the home, the toleration of violence, romance between psychiatrist and patient to Tony's complex relationship with women. All of these presentations were based on the detailed reading, using many of the television code tools, of one short scene. For the purposes of this evaluation I will focus on two of the four presentations given.

The first by Leïli and Antonia entitled: "Husbands and Wives - and Mothers or The Intimacy of Home in *The Sopranos*" made a detailed examination of one of the scenes used in role-play reading activity 3, in which Tony and Carmela discuss in their bedroom Tony's recent discovery that his mother and his uncle were behind an attempt on his life. In their presentation Leïli and Antonia wanted to back up their thesis statement that the representation of intimacy can only take place in the presence of women in *The Sopranos*. The students focused on three elements in the scene: sound, camera and lighting. For sound they highlighted the initial sound of crickets at the beginning of the scene which shows Tony's house lit up with: "the natural sound of crickets at night". They contrasted this sound with Tony's business environment and the artificial sounds of, for example, the Bada Bing!. As far as camera work was concerned, they focused on the bedroom scene which depicts Tony sitting on the bed with Carmela standing behind. They felt that the progression of the camera angles from low-level to eye-level medium shots, ending with close-ups of the two added to the idea of increasing intimacy between the two characters. They suggested that the extremely slow and gentle movements of the camera during these shots accentuated the feeling of Tony and Carmela at the centre of their most private/intimate room. They found the lighting in the scene to be low-key, "dim" and "soft" which exuded a strong feeling of warmth and, of course, intimacy. They concluded with the idea that: "only in the intimacy of the

home is it possible for Tony to openly talk about his problems and fears". I felt that within the limitations of this short presentation with tight preparation time these students had made a good attempt at identifying a theme within a short scene. They had produced their own individual reading of the text backing up their arguments by highlighting elements of sound, camera angles and lighting which we had practised in earlier parts of the course. The presentation was well-structured with the clear identification of a thesis statement in the introduction which was addressed in the main body using specific examples from the text and reiterrated in the conclusion. My only major criticism of the presentation was that the PowerPoint was entirely text and did not utilise the opportunity which PowerPoint as a tool offers, of using stills and very short clips from the scene to back up an argument.

The second presentation I wish to discuss was produced by Sebastian and Christoph entitled: "'What about Pussy?' How the waiting room scene characterises Tony's relation to women". In contrast to the first presentation discussed it used visual stills from the scene to great effect.

The students based their reading for their presentation on the depiction of Tony's relationship with the statue in Dr Melfi's waiting room. They divided their presentation into four parts: cutting, lighting, sound and the statue.

The students focused on the use of various types of cutting in the scene. They argued that the use of "shot and reverse-shot with simultaneous zoom" between Tony and the statue added to the increasing sense of tension within Tony. This, combined with "jump cuts" from the statue back to Tony, served to highlight the stark contrast between him as a relatively ungraceful and overweight mafia boss and the femininity and elegance of the statue.

The detail the students identified in the scene with the lighting was impressive, they focused on how the statue itself was lit. They argued that the face in shadow and the body, especially the breasts, lit, symbolised Tony's relationship with women. The darkness of the face represented the female mind as a mystery to him and the lit up breasts his preoccupation with the female body.

For sound the students focused on the fact that while Tony is contemplating the statue there is absolutely no sound and therefore no distraction from the images which to them added to Tony's apparent discomfort with the statue. The students argued: "Tony is alone with his thoughts/feelings which is accentuated by the uncomfortable silence for Tony as well for the viewer".

As their last point the students examined the image of the statue itself, concluding that the statue represented a "natural" and "'everyday' femininity". They saw her face as "stoic" and "indifferent" but the body as "exposed" and "vulnerable", again perhaps symbolising Tony's greater difficulties with the female mind.

In their conclusion the students stated they felt that the statue is "a representation of the female" which makes Tony feel vulnerable and threatened.

I thought this presentation was an excellent example of how an effective and detailed reading can be made by just taking a few elements from a very short scene which contains little movement and no dialogue or sound at all. It was particularly interesting that the students used the same image of the statue in three of their slides but every time they discussed it they used it to emphasise a different aspect. This I found very effective as it served to highlight to the other students the amount of meaning which can be gleaned from just one image. Therefore it showed them when making an effective and detailed reading it is only necessary to take a very short segment or even just a still of a television text.

Although some presentations were not that polished due to the limited amount of preparation time in the face-to-face phase, they all offered a reading of a well-defined topic and were fundamentally based on the approaches we had discussed and worked on in previous parts of the course. Initially there was a tendency of students to want to include many different scenes, attempting to want to cover whole story arcs within the series, but when they started their detailed analysis they quickly realised that one scene provided quite sufficient material for a detailed reading. It is true, however, that producing a presentation in an afternoon and presenting it the next day makes demands on students to work independently and quickly which some found hard: "short time, little time for comments and discussion and questions and explanations and background" (Raoul). I appreciated the following comment from Tino who noticed the attempt of the students to try and utilise the new skills they had learned: "People seemed eager to squeeze newly learned information into their presentations." (Tino)

Overall the face-to-face stage was an intense learning experience both for me and the students. The reading activities they were required to complete demanded they that the focused not only on completing the task but also on reflecting on the approach they were practising while doing the task. For example, during the InsideOut reading tasks, the students were asked to read the scenes from their own indicicual perspective and compare their reading with that of the scholar. In addition, they were required to

reflect on the post-structuralist approach they were practising of offering an individual reading. This double challenge of completing the task and reflecting on the approach make these activities very challenging both for the students and for the teacher who also has to focus and encourage the students to fulfil both elements of the task.

7.4 Online phase two

The aims of the essay idea gathering and preparation activities in online phase two were to encourage students to select a cultural topic and a specific segment of text on which to base their individual reading using the approach and tools we had discussed and practised. As discussed in chapter six, I emphasised very much the importance of a thesis statement and good working title starting with "Offering a reading of …" and also stressed the importance of a tightly structured essay with clear introduction, main body and conclusion. In the formal feedback the students seemed appreciative of this step-by-step guided approach to developing their essay thesis statements, titles and plans. Both Leïli and Tino commented on the essay writing guidelines I uploaded on *EWS*:

> the texts you uploaded helped me really with coming to terms finding and formulating my thesis. (Leïli)

> I do like to say though, that all your posted tips on the *EWS* are indeed helpful and much appreciated. Especially younger semesters can profit immensely from a little help like that. I sure do. (Tino)

The essay thesis statements and titles which the students posted onto the *EWS* were varied, well thought out and showed individually chosen themes. The themes ranged from aging, identity, divorce and separation to intimacy. During the essay writing process I tried to motivate students to post their thesis statements and essay titles onto the *EWS* forum so that they could exchange and comment on each others' ideas. However, although they all posted their thesis statements and titles for the other students to see, none of them commented on the titles of each other, they merely waited until I made a comment about them. I was a bit frustrated with this but I consoled myself with the idea that at least the *EWS* gave them the opportunity to view each others' posts and therefore they were able to compare the ideas of others with their own, albeit passively.

After these initial essay title posts, the students continued to develop their ideas with me by submitting their essay plans and asking any questions that came up. However, the plans and the questions were mainly submitted in the form of direct

emails to me and not posted onto the *EWS* forum. In this situation when the students start reverting to one-to-one contact, as a teacher I had to be realistic and also sensitive to the students who were embarking on a relatively new exercise of writing an individual reading of a television text and were probably a little certain about it and therefore did not feel confident enough to post their essay plans onto the forum. However, I was pleased that they felt confident enough to communicate with me about the progression of their work.

The main point which arose relatively frequently in the email questions was whether is was really necessary to state explicitly throughout the essay that it was an individual reading. This was an email enquiry I got from Leïli:

> Another thing I wanted to ask you is about the commentary you gave onto my essay plan sheet. Do you actually want us to WRITE that 'this is OUR reading only' to each idea? I think that it is just a SUBJECTIVE account becomes clear from the fact that it is US Writing the paper already, doesn't it? It is a bit annoying to always write – and read – that something is something 'in my opinion', 'to my mind' or 'in my understanding'. And this is also something we've learnt in 'Academic Writing' courses, that we should actually NOT write this in academic essays; I guess maybe that's also why I am feeling so 'allergic' to it. What do you think to this? How should I proceed? (Leïli, May 2009)

My answer was that I really did want them to try to openly state that it was her own individual reading, although I do agree with her that sometimes continually stating this can become a bit tedious. However, for the purposes of writing this essay, I wanted her to focus on the fact that it was her own individual reading in order to prevent any lapses into trying to guess what the audience or the viewer in general will feel. Therefore I thought that through continually stating this fact in the essay would help maintain this focus. I also quoted her Creeber's opinion on the matter:

> try not to make too many assumptions about the 'reader' of a text i.e. 'The audience will read this scene this way'. We can never be entirely sure how a text will be 'read'[…] Never be afraid to phrase your reading in the first person (i.e. 'I read this scene in this way...'), highlight the subjective nature of the reading you are offering. (Creeber, 2006: 37)

Throughout the course, it seemed to me I was often having to combat attitudes and approaches which students had learned or assumed were correct. For example, never using 'I' in a critical analysis of a text and a belief from the students that the reading of a secondary literature scholar is more valid than their own. I expected to have these questions when I designed the course but it was interesting to see how deeply ingrained they were. For example here with Leïli's question about using the first person

which she asked even after completing and discussing this individual reading point in online phase one and the face-to-face phase.

For the purpose of evaluating the 15-page essays which were submitted to me, I have decided to examine two in detail to ascertain whether they reflected the reading approach and practise we had covered in the previous phases of the course. The two essays I have decided to evaluate were written by Andreas and Tino.

Andreas's essay entitled: "Offering a Reading of the Seniority of Uncle Junior" explored the theme of aging focusing on the character of Uncle Junior under his posted thesis statement "Uncle Junior is really insecure because of his age, even despite his status as mob boss." Andreas chose season 1, episode 12, entitled "Isabella" to base his reading on, this follows the approach we discussed of selecting a text segment from which to make a reading. In the episode Uncle Junior makes two failed attempts on Tony's life using two assassins contracted by another mobster, Donnie Paduana. Andreas argues that Uncle Junior is too old and does not have the charisma or stamina to pull off being a mob boss and is treated without respect by other gang members which is emphasised through the use of technical features in the episode.

After the first failed attempt, Junior and his mob assistant, Mikey Palmice, meet with Donnie. On Junior's orders, Mikey reluctantly ends up killing Donnie for the failed assassination attempt and also because Junior resents Donnie's lack of respect for him. Andreas analysed the sound and camera angles in this scene in order to ascertain how Mikey's lack of respect for Junior as a representative of the mafia old school is highlighted. For example, while driving to the *rendez-vous* Donnie is listening to loud rock music in his car while Junior is driven by Mikey in silence, Andreas argues: "The clash between Donnie and Junior […] is a clash between the generations, old school versus new school, good manners versus rebellion, silence versus rock music." (Kuhlmann, 2009: 10). In the scene Andreas argues that the camera angles used often make Junior appear smaller that Mikey despite the fact that Junior is the boss "when Junior is talking to Mikey about Donnie, the camera position is chosen so that Mikey is clearly standing above Junior, bowing down to him so that they can talk." (Kuhlmann, 2009: 12)

Although Andreas's essay was well-structured, had good arguments supporting his thesis and made clear that he was giving his own individual reading of the scene, most of his reading relied on his interpretation of the action and dialogue within the scene. He did attempt to include the technical features, like sound and camera angles, to

support his reading, however, he did this through referring to these under two separate subtitles within his essay of "Sound" and "Camera". My main criticism of the essay was that his argumentation would have been more effective if he had incorporated these and more technical references into his reading of the action and dialogue and not made them two separate points. It was interesting to note that other students also referred separately to the technical features in their essays. It seemed to me that they were treating these elements as if they were an extra part of their reading, as if they were types of 'add-ons' rather than an integral part. I think again this demonstrated another ingrained attitude within the students which would require more practice for them to feel confident enough to see the technical features as having the same level of importance in their reading as the dialogue and action. However, the fact that they had included the technical features in their essays at all was a good first step towards this integration.

Including the technical features of a media text is an essential part of media literacy as the use of technology is one of the important elements which distinguishes media texts, especially audiovisual texts, from other types of written and printed text. This skill is identified by Buckingham as one of the skills which constitutes media literacy: "Refer to elements of film language when explaining personal responses and preferences (e.g. shot, cut, zoom, close-up, focus)." (Buckingham, 2003: 40)

The second essay I wish to evaluate is Tino's essay, by far the best essay submitted and entitled: "Offering a Reading of 'Whitecaps' *The Sopranos*' Fourth Season Finale". His essay explores the theme of separation based on the season 4, episode 13, entitled: "Whitecaps", when Carmela finds out about Tony's infidelity with an ex-maid of his mother's, Svetlana, and she finally decides to separate from him. Tino's posted thesis statement was: "While Carmela's decision to separate from Tony is unwavering from the moment on she hangs up the phone on Irina, Tony only slowly accepts his wife's choice to be that steadfast." Tino's essay was excellent in that it integrated almost every part of the reading approach into his own reading.

At the beginning of his essay he clearly defines his intended reading approach by making references to Creeber's reading suggestions:

> In my reading of "Whitecaps" I will analyse the technical aspects, i.e. the camera use, light and editing as well as the drama of the progressing story. I will also pay special attention to the mise-en-scène and the use of sound and music. In light of these aspects my reading will remain subjective and personal. As Creeber (2006) says regarding reader interpretation, 'meaning was never absolute or fixed but mainly the product of the act of the reader' (Creeber, 2006: 29). (Perlick, 2009: 4-5)

Tino selected two scenes within the episode for his close analysis, however, before doing this he positioned the episode of "Whitecaps" within the context of the series. He explains succinctly how the build up to Tony and Carmela's separation had been a process over the previous seasons, focusing on Tony's repeated infidelities to which Carmela tries to turn a blind eye and Carmela's growing discontentment and guilt about how they finance their extravagant lifestyle. Tino clearly explains the strategy behind the background he gives to Tony and Carmela's relationship:

> The presented situations give insight into the complexity of Tony and Carmela's marriage. One must understand their history in order to analyze their respective behaviours in 'Whitecaps'. Carmela, staying faithful to her church, waited for years for Tony to change. When she realized that the only change could only come from her, she fled responsibility, thus growing more frustrated. While having Tony pay for her endurance with expensive gifts, she allowed him to proceed with his cheating. Thus he expects to be able to talk her out of separating when their house of cards finally crumbles. (Perlick, 2009: 9)

Tino carefully integrates his references to film techniques into his reading. For example, he starts his detailed reading of the scene just before Carmela announces that she wants to separate which, he argues, presents Tony as weak and unaware of Carmela's increasing anger through focusing on the camera angles in the scene:

> In the single shot Tony is filmed from above making him look inferior to Carmela's elevated position, Now in focus we see he's sitting in a corner between two walls – there's not much wiggle room left for Tony as the episode will show. Carmela's unhappiness has manifested itself in physical problems leaving her face expressionless. (Perlick, 2009: 10)

Tino illustrates all of his camera angle readings with stills from the scene, for the above comment he uses the still below showing Tony depicted very small behind Carmela's sick face and sandwiched into a corner.

Also when analysing the scene in which Irina, Tony's ex-mistress, reveals that Tony was not only sleeping with her but also with her cousin Svetlana, Tino focused on the lighting in the women's two bedrooms to illustrate his reading:

> This way she [Carmela] appears alone but at the same time she has left the carefully lit shirts, i.e. the "good" wife behind her. Irina's bedroom is lit brightly whereas the drapes are down in Carmela's. The subtle contrast visually underlines Irina's deed of shedding light / truth into Carmela's world. (Perlick, 2009: 10)

Tino also combines film techniques to aid his reading. In the scene when Carmela really decides to leave Tony, he combines camera shot and sound:

> Carmela's strong facade only crumbles when Irina reveals Tony's affair with her cousin Svetlana. Realizing that it isn't another dancer or prostitute Tony had on her

side, a situation she could deal with but a person she knows, Carmela enters a state of shock. All anger and determination escape her face. At this moment all sound is reduced and the camera remains on her face in close up for four seconds as she stares into the air. It is at this moment when Carmela decides to leave her husband. (Perlick, 2009: 10)

In general, Tino's essay reveals his extensive knowledge of the series which enables him to place "Whitecaps" into a clear but succinct narrative context. He clearly declares his reading approach, stating that he is making an individual reading based on Creeber's suggestions. He proceeds to read the scenes within the episode through integrating his reading of the dialogue and action with the technical features. His essay traces Tony's slow acceptance of the seriousness behind Carmela wanting to separate. I graded the essay with a 1,0 which it deserved.

Both these essays and all the others submitted to me demonstrated a fundamental understanding and application of the post-structuralist reading approach we had discussed and practised.

7.5   Overall course evaluation

The first part of this overall course evaluation will be based on a spoken interview which I recorded with Leïli six weeks after the course had ended. The second part will be my own overall course evaluation.

The purpose of the interview was to obtain an overall impression of the course in hindsight. With the questions I asked I tried to focus on the course in general, asking Leïli to explain what she understood of the reading television approaches we had discussed and applied in the course.

Firstly I asked what Leïli understood now by 'offering a reading', her answer reveals her understanding of texts having multi-meanings and that no one meaning is the definitive one:

> In general, I understood this as an approach which fits into this postmodern idea of reading of texts, which is pluralistic and it doesn't claim to have the right reading or the right understanding of a text and … well, this is how I understood this idea of "offering a reading". (Leïli)

Secondly I asked her to explain what she thought the process you have to go through was in order to 'offer a reading'. Her response shows that she thinks of reading as a process which starts with the text as a whole and that you first have to make your own reading before presenting it to others:

> In regard to what we learned or talked about in the seminar, I would say that you would have to see or read a text i.e. *The Sopranos* or a book or any text and then have your own understanding of it and then try to get to the point where you can base your understanding on some things i.e. the formal realization of some TV scene and then you can "offer" this reading to another audience, trying to explain your reading based on these…(Leïli),

Thirdly I asked her how easy she thought making a reading was, she answered:

> At the beginning I found it quite difficult and thought what is the use of it? I'm not a fully-grown academic and stuff like that. So I found it hard. Then with the tools you gave us we could do the reading and then I kind of could make sense of it. And I also understand that with this pluralistic approach that there can be different readings and that these are all subjective individual readings. (Leïli)

This third answer reveals that she found the process difficult but was given more confidence through examining the technical features used in the text.

The fourth question asked if she had ever used a similar approach in textual analysis before:

> Actually, this was something what I found was pretty new in your course, because usually I feel we are rather driven towards considering the opinions of others scholars' articles and often we are asked to do this first or this is my feeling. (Leïli)

The final question asked what she thought she had got out of the course:

> I think I am now much more aware that reading from different contexts can radically change a reading of the text. Also I think it has opened my eyes to accepting that other readers are different and that's ok. (Leïli)

As I think can be read in the answers which Leïli gave in this formal interview and also in all the other explicit and implicit feedback evaluated in this chapter, the main aims of the course were definitely achieved. These aims being that television should be seen as a cultural text which can be read like any other cultural artefact; the only reading an individual can make is from their own subjective perspective; the context from which a reading is made can have a great effect on the outcome of the reading; the readings of scholars are not necessarily the 'right' readings and should be questioned and discussed rather than just accepted; it is helpful when making a reading to focus on the technical features in the television text and not only read the dialogue and action.

Generally, in my opinion, the students had understood this post-structuralist approach to reading television texts through applying them first in the reading activities in the face-to-face phase and afterwards through offering their own both spoken and written readings in the form of a presentation and a structured essay. Some difficulties

were revealed through the piloting of the course, for example, in taking on the roles in role-play reading. However, most of the difficulties encountered were largely a result of students not having had so much experience of reading from their own individual perspective before or having had other more traditional approaches engrained into them. I believe that with more practise of the reading activities and tasks, students could become more accustomed to this approach and enjoy the freedom of making their own readings of any cultural text from any medium.

The target course participant groups of students of Cultural Studies and students of Education within the German university system could benefit from the course in the following ways: For Cultural Studies students, this course as a *Proseminar* could offer students a sound foundation of the practice and acquisition of media literacy skills. These skills could then be built upon and used in *Hauptseminar* courses in which students are required to make more extensive individual readings of any cultural text. For Education students, the course could be seen as an example of methods and approaches which practise and promote media literacy skills in a course based around a selected media text or texts.

If Buckingham's definition of media literacy, discussed in chapter two, is re-examined, the work and contributions of the course students definitely demonstrate his explanation of the term. Firstly, "[media literacy] involves analysis, evaluation and critical reflection" (Buckingham, 2003: 38), the work which the students produced demonstrates these elements, for example, in their spoken and written readings, the students clearly showed how they had analysed, evaluated and reflected on a particular theme and text segment to produce their own individual readings of the text. Secondly, "[media literacy] entails the acquisition of a 'metalanguage' – that is, a means of describing the forms and structures of different modes of communication" (Buckingham, 2003: 38), with their integration of the text's technical features, the students showed that they had acquired language and tools on which to base their readings. Thirdly, "[media literacy] involves a broader understanding of the social, economic and institutional contexts of communication, and how these affect people's experiences and practices." (Buckingham, 2003: 38), students revealed their understanding of the social, economic and institutional context of the making of *The Sopranos* shown. For example, this was shown in the students' forum contributions in online phase one when they summarised and commented on the reading material texts which discussed the production/distribution context of *The Sopranos*. Therefore the

students had achieved the main aim of the course expressed in its title and had read their "way towards media literacy with *The Sopranos*".

8. Summary

This doctoral thesis presented the theoretical foundations, creation, development and piloting of a course concept which promotes and practises the critical analysis or 'reading' of television texts. The text which the concept is based on is *The Sopranos* (HBO: 1999-2007), one of the US television series coined by the media press and Television Studies academics as 'Quality American Television'. *The Sopranos* is a 6-season television drama epic spanning 86 episodes which traces the lives of Tony Soprano, a violent, murderous but sensitive and likeable mafia boss from New Jersey, and his two families: his blood family of wife and two teenage children and his mob family.

In chapter one, I explained my initial reason for choosing *The Sopranos* as my reading text which was its media reception in Britain, my native country. In the British media press, *The Sopranos* has been heralded the best television drama ever made which British television journalists admit is a phenomenon from a country which had always previously considered itself the 'Mecca' of television drama. *The Sopranos* as a prime example of 'Quality American Television', combined with my 20-year experience as a teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and my previous studies in American Cultural Studies were the impetus for this project.

In chapter two, I presented the challenges and reasons for integrating television texts into educational programs. The main challenge is that television still has a low reputation in terms of educational and cultural value among academics and teachers. This educational prejudice can be countered by arguing that television features so heavily in our daily lives, despite the rise of the internet, and therefore media literacy skills should be promoted in education. Media literacy skills should provide learners with analytical and reflective tools and methods with which to read television and other media texts. Also these skills should encourage learners to consider television and media texts within the social, political, institutional and economic contexts in which they were produced and distributed. Finally in this chapter I stated my two-part thesis statement: firstly to demonstrate that *The Sopranos*, as an example of 'Quality American Television', is a highly complex and intellectualised postmodern text which

is not only an ideal reading text due to its polysemic nature but is a text in current popular culture which challenges readers to do the work in creating their own meanings; secondly, to show that media literacy skills can be promoted and practised through the active reading of television texts. This active reading can be facilitated through a structured course design, which combines cutting-edge approaches to reading texts in Cultural Studies and methods in Education aimed at promoting the active learner.

Chapter three traced the historical development of the critical analysis or 'reading' of television 'texts' within the context of the history of television broadcasting to the present day. At the beginning of television as a medium until roughly the beginning of the 1970s, the academic approach towards television was one of disdain. Television was either considered a manipulative political or economic tool particularly by Marxist academics, or, as all forms of popular culture, was considered not considered worthy of study at all as it did not constitute 'high' culture. By the early 1970s, the academic approach towards popular culture, including television, dramatically changed with the foundation of Cultural Studies as a formal academic discipline and the establishment of the idea that all cultural artefacts should be considered as cultural 'texts' which could be analysed or 'read' using structuralist approaches or tools. Television was starting to be considered as a medium worth analysing. In the last twenty years, with the establishment of Television Studies as an academic discipline, television scholars tend now to take an eclectic but predominantly post-structuralist approach which means that a text can have multiple meanings and a reading of a text is a product of reader interpretation but no reading is ever absolute.

Chapter four discussed the 'quality' nature of *The Sopranos* as a television text by first examining the success of the series both in popular and 'elite' cultural spheres. Secondly, the regulatory, economic and institutional contexts of the making of *The Sopranos* were examined to explain why it was possible to make such a complex television series. Finally, the elements within *The Sopranos* as a text which constitute its 'quality' genre were highlighted, including complex 'flexinarrative', intertextuality and ambiguous characterisation. These features contribute to *The Sopranos* being labelled a postmodern text and add to its polysemic nature which means that the text demands the reader to work at coming to a meaning and make it an ideal reading text on which to base a post-structuralist television reading course.

Chapter five presented my intended reading approach for my television reading course. My declared approach is an eclectic one with some structuralist and reader-

response elements of the reader identifying their own emotions when reading but it is mainly based on the post-structuralist approach of offering an individual reading. I advocated regarding reading a television text as a step-by-step process which first starts by reading the text as a whole, second by pinpointing a cultural theme which is prominent to the reader, third by selecting short segments of the text which illustrate this theme and finally by making a detailed reading of the meaning. The reading should not only focus on the dialogue and action within the segments, but analyse the film techniques used. I illustrated my reading approach with a reading of the theme of gender in *The Sopranos* offering a reading using my procedure of Carmela Soprano. I argued that she is not just the innocent victim of her husband's criminal activities but is often passively complicit in his crimes.

Chapter six presented the aims and reasoning behind the design and creation of my course concept, structure and reading methods and activities. The overall aim of the course was to promote the theoretical post-structuralist approach to reading television texts through the design of reading methods and activities which promote active individual readings. I presented my own developed methods of role-play reading and InsideOut reading. Role-play reading encourages students to experience the differences in meaning which can be read from a text when reading from a different personal context or role than their own. InsideOut reading promotes students making their own reading before consulting that of a scholar or 'expert'. I also integrated computer-assisted learning throughout my course through the use of a blended learning structure, an online course platform and digitalised audiovisual clips to encourage active and often autonomous reading. Ultimately in the course, the students had to make both an individual spoken and a written reading of a cultural theme in *The Sopranos* in the form of making a presentation and writing a structured essay.

Chapter seven made an evaluation of the formal and informal feedback given by students about the course using a qualitative research approach which places emphasis on the subjective evaluation of the researcher. This evaluation demonstrated, mainly based on the answers which students gave to the reading activity tasks and their spoken and written readings, that the course concept and design was effective in first providing students with a practical context in which to experience the differences between individual readings offered and also provided them with a step-by-step structure in which to make and present their own readings from *The Sopranos*.

The following chapter will discuss some of the wider implications of this project.

9. Conclusion and implications

> Tony: That morning of the day I got sick? I'd been thinking: it's good to be in a thing from the ground floor. I came too late for that, I know. But lately I'm getting the feeling I might be at the end. That the best is over.
> (season 1, episode 1) (Chase and Soprano Productions Inc., 2002: 2)

This doctoral thesis presented a structured and innovative television reading course concept which successful promoted and practised media literacy skills. The concept combined the theoretical approach of the individual reading of texts in Cultural Studies and approaches and methods in Education which promote the active learner. *The Sopranos* proved an ideal reading text and a vital link between these two approaches due to its polysemic nature which demands the reader to work at making their own meanings from the text.

Although my television reading course was aimed at a specific student target group of American Cultural Studies and Education students and was based on a certain text, I consider my course concept to be dynamic and have considerable transference potential. Potential not only in the teaching of 'Quality American Television' texts and the academic fields of American Cultural Studies and Education, but also in other academic disciplines. First I will examine this potential in terms of the course concept, secondly in terms of what it means to teachers and thirdly in terms of the integration of television texts into education and the promotion of media literacy skills.

The design, creation and implementation of my television reading course certainly involved a great deal of work and time. The creation of such a course would probably be considered unrealistic for many school and university teachers, however, there are elements from the course which could be selected by teachers and easily applied to the teaching and learning in all types of academic field.

The course concept successfully promoted the active role of students in selecting their own cultural topic and text segment from which to make their own reading. This empowerment of the student to confidently make their own topic and text selection could easily be transferred into the teaching of other types of cultural texts. For example in the teaching of film, internet and even printed texts in Cultural Studies and also other academic disciplines which demand textual analysis, for example, Literature Studies.

In addition, the integration of study skills and strategies, for example, essay writing and presentation skills, into the course content and structure is another element

which could be considered in many other academic disciplines. It should not be taken for granted that students, even those at university level, already possess these skills.

The use of a blended learning structure which provides students with teacher-student and student-student interaction in the pre- and post-phases of the course, for example, with monitored pre-course reading material tasks, could be used in any academic discipline, in Humanities and Science subjects.

This project demonstrated that it is possible to create a practical context in which students can actively experience a complex theoretical concept, in the case of my course, the post-structuralist approach to reading texts. Teachers, especially those teaching at university level, should recognise the potential and need for creating new course concepts and methods which create this practical context for students which help to illustrate complex theories in their disciplines.

However, as some of the feedback I received from my course also illustrated, students, especially in the German university system, are still quite unused to developing their own ideas and not focusing on the teacher or academic 'experts' as the ultimate source of knowledge. This means that the implementation of student-centred teaching approaches and methods can be met which some distrust and resistance from students. Teachers must therefore be prepared to persevere in implementing these approaches and to clearly explain the reasons for using such methods, giving the students time to get used to them.

The successful combination of theoretical and methodological approaches in my course design should demonstrate that there is much room for interdisciplinary transference between the field of Education and other specialist academic disciplines. Other academic disciplines, especially at university level, should consider trying to focus on promoting the active learner through the integration of student-oriented teaching methods. However, this transference should be seen as a two-way exchange not just from Education to another academic discipline. Education can also benefit from focusing on the learning challenges which other academic disciplines present their teachers with and develop concepts and methods together with those other fields in order to improve the effectiveness of their courses. This in turn will add to the continual improvement of educational methods in both fields, as stated by Angela Hahn (2010):

> If there is no interdisciplinary exchange between *Didaktik* and other academic fields, we will not make any improvements in teaching. This holds for both directions: *Didaktik* needs to know about the academic discipline – which usually is the case,

and the other disciplines need to know about *Didaktik* – which usually is not the case. (Hahn, 2010)

In terms of the teaching of 'Quality American Television' texts in Cultural Studies, *The Sopranos* may be one of the most revered texts but there are countless other highly intellectualised postmodern texts which are still being produced. These new texts include *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007- present), *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006- present) and *True Blood* (HBO, 2008- present). The impact of 'Quality American Television' should therefore be seen as a continuing phenomenon in popular culture and teaching and learning strategies which integrate these texts must continue to be developed.

Finally it should also be recognised that the critical analysis of television texts promotes and practises media literacy skills essential in our ever-increasing media-dominated daily lives and therefore should not be seen as a light 'extra' in education. It is of vital importance that educators in Cultural Studies but also many other educational and academic fields, should integrate television and all other types of media texts into their teaching programs, both at university level and in schools. As one of my course students commented to me in the coffee break during the course: "These analytical skills are not just about television, are they? They're life skills".

As far as my relationship with *The Sopranos* is concerned, it will continue as even after many viewings I am still making fascinating connections between the lives of those New Jersey gangsters and my own life. However, for now and for the purpose of this doctoral thesis, it has been a long journey but as in the words of one of Tony Soprano's mob cronies when calling him to say that a murder Tony ordered had been carried out: "It's done".

Appendices

Appendix 1

Viewing Diary

Series:	
Season:	
Episode:	
Viewing date:	
Viewed by:	

While viewing:

Make notes of anything you find noticable

Story	Scene

Technique (sound, camera angles, ...)	Scene

After-viewing:

Themes	Scene

Emotions (what you felt)	Scene

2

Appendix 2

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos
Face-to-face
Online Phase 1 Review Quiz

F r i e d a   P a t t e n d e n

From your online phase one reading, answer the following together with a partner (this is **not** a test!)

TV Analysis and History	
1. Why do television scholars talk about television as 'the text'?	
2. What would you say have been the main stages in television analysis?	
3. What do you think Nelson means when he talks about analyzing television as "offering a reading" (Nelson, 2006: 84)?	
4. How do you think the definition of culture as a "contested terrain" (Campbell & Kean, 2006: 14) can be applied to reading television?	

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos
Face-to-face
Online Phase 1 Review Quiz

F r i e d a   P a t t e n d e n

The Sopranos

1. What characteristics do you think 'Quality American Television' has?	
2. How do you account for the success of *The Sopranos*?	

Film Language

To what extent do you think the film/television maker can influence the audience with film techniques?	

Appendix 3

Reading your way towards media literacy with *The Sopranos*
Face–to–face phase
Identifying 'codes of television'

Frieda Pattenden

Code	Description/ Effect	Obser -ved	Where/Effect on you	Effect on your partner
Camera- work				
Long shot	Distancing, removed, neutral (sometimes used as an establishing shot)			
Medium shot	'Head-and- shoulders shot'			
Close-up	Intimacy, empathy			
Point-of- view shot	The camera simulates the perspective of a particular character			

Reading your way towards media literacy with *The Sopranos*
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Reading your way towards media literacy with *The Sopranos*
Face–to–face phase
Identifying 'codes of television'

Frieda Pattenden

Code	Description/ Effect	Obser -ved	Where/Effect on you	Effect on your partner
High-angle shot	Domination, power, authority			
Low-angle shot	Weakness, powerlessness			
Eye-level shot	Equality, empathy			
Shot/rever se shot	Creating a dialogue between two people			
Standard- lens shot	Everydayness, normality			
Wide- angle shot	Dramatic			

Reading your way towards media literacy with *The Sopranos*
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Reading your way towards media literacy with *The Sopranos*
Face–to–face phase
Identifying 'codes of television'   Frieda Pattenden

Code	Description/ Effect	Obser -ved	Where/Effect on you	Effect on your partner
Telephoto lens	Voyeurism			
Soft focus	Slightly blurred picture; sense of romance			
Deep focus	Everything is equally in focus; everydayness, normality			
Shallow focus	A scene only partially in focus; draws attention			
Other				

Reading your way towards media literacy with *The Sopranos*
Face–to–face phase
Identifying 'codes of television'   Frieda Pattenden

Code	Description/ Effect	Obser -ved	Where/Effect on you	Effect on your partner
Lighting				
Low(-key) lighting	Sombre, depressing, gritty			
High lighting	Gaiety, optimism			
Three-point lighting	A subject is lit three ways; normality			
Underlight-ing	Light source from below; sinister			
Backlight-ing	Light source from behind; mysterious, enigmatic			
Soft lighting	Complimentary, warmth			

Identifying 'codes of television'

Code	Description/ Effect	Obser -ved	Where/Effect on you	Effect on your partner
Hard lighting	Realistic, gritty			
Other				
Editing				
Chronolo- gical/ continuity editing (like *24*)				
Cross- cutting	Two scenes edited together; allow one scene to comment on the action of another, speed up the action			

Identifying 'codes of television'

Code	Description/ Effect	Obser -ved	Where/Effect on you	Effect on your partner
Dissolve (between shots)	Seamless feel, continuity			
Jump cut	An abrupt cut between scenes; emphasise juxtaposition			
Flashback	Scene from the past; narrative and temporal depth			
Montage	A number of scenes quickly edited together; action, intensity, drama			
Other				

Identifying 'codes of television'

Frieda Pattenden

Code	Description/ Effect	Obser -ved	Where/Effect on you	Effect on your partner
Sound and music				
Diegetic music/ sound	From an identifiable source in the narrative; realistic			
Non-diegetic music/ sound	Not from an identifiable source in the narrative; dramatic, emotional			
Other				

Identifying 'codes of television'

Frieda Pattenden

Code	Description/ Effect	Obser -ved	Where/Effect on you	Effect on your partner
Mise-en-scène	'staging': the organisation of setting, costuming, lighting and actor movement. Useful term when describing the overall style or composition of a scene. For example, the general Mise-en-scène was dark and gloomy, bright and optimistic etc..			

Source: Creeber (2006: 39-42)

Appendix 4

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos
Face-to-face

Reading Television Activity 1: Reading as an individual

F r i e d a   P a t t e n d e n

Pre-watching Information

Watch the opening sequence from *The Sopranos* (season 2, episode 1) and try to do the tasks without discussing with (or even looking at) anyone else.

While-watching

Mark on the scale which element of the scenes you think you are focusing on the most:

more images   more sound

Post-watching

1. How many different scenes do you think there were?

2. Which are the scenes that stick in your mind the most? Make a list of a maximum of five:

    i. _____

    ii. _____

    iii. _____

    iv. _____

    v. _____

3. What sort of feelings does the entire sequence leave you with?

amused	□	surprised	□	_____	□	_____	□
entertained	□	sad	□	_____	□	_____	□
empty	□	happy	□	_____	□	_____	□
shocked	□	depressed	□	_____	□	_____	□

Try to explain your answer:

_____

_____

_____

Appendix 5

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos
Face-to-face
Reading Television Activity 2: Watching with a partner, reading as an individual

F r i e d a   P a t t e n d e n

Pre-watching Information

You are going to watch a clip from *The Sopranos* (season 2, episode 1) with a partner, do the while-watching task alone and then the post-viewing tasks without discussing them with anyone else.

While-watching

Mark on the scale how shocking you find this scene:

not at all shocking   very shocking

Post-watching

1. Which part of the scene affected you the most?

    The first coffee pouring ☐

    The second coffee pouring ☐

    The kicking of the worker on the floor ☐

    The threatening of the manager ☐

    The reaction of the other workers in the office ☐

2. Try to explain why you feel this about the part of the scene you have chosen.

    _____
    _____
    _____

3. Do you feel that the victim was in any way at fault for his fate? (Why/why not)

    _____
    _____
    _____

4. What cultural topic category would you give this scene? _____

Appendix 6

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos
Face-to-face

Reading Television Activity 3: Watching as a group, reading with a partner

F r i e d a   P a t t e n d e n

Post-watching

Try to do the following tasks **with a partner**:

1. When did you feel danger in the scene?

You	Your partner

2. What happened to the music?

You	Your partner

3. What type of music was it?

You	Your partner

4. What cultural topic category would you give this scene? _____

5. Be ready to present a comparison of your answers with your partner's answers to the rest of the group.

Appendix 7

Group A

Pre-watching Information

Your role: you are a moneyed, white, professional male aged between 25 and 45 (AB1 male). Do the tasks below, all the time trying to think from the perspective of your role:

While-watching

Mark on the scale which character you think came out of the argument better:

More Tony   More Carmela

Post-watching

Discuss with a partner:

What do you think is the main reason for Tony wanting to end his therapy?

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos
Face-to-face
Reading Television Activity 6: Role-play Reading 3

F r i e d a   P a t t e n d e n

Group B

Pre-watching Information

Your role: you are a moneyed, professional female aged between 45 and 65. Do the tasks below, all the time trying to think from the perspective of your role:

While-watching

Mark on the scale how strong Tony seems in this scene:

weak   strong

Post-watching

Discuss with a partner:

What do you think is the main reason for the current threat on Tony's life?

Appendix 8

Reading your way towards media literacy with

The Sopranos

Face-to-face

Reading Television Activity 5: Role-play Reading 2

Frieda Pattenden

Group A

Pre-watching Information

Your role: you are a moneyed, white, professional male aged between 25 and 45 (AB1 male). Do the tasks below, all the time trying to think from the perspective of your role:

While-watching

Who do you sympathize most with in this scene?

Carmella   Charmaine

Post-watching

Discuss with a partner:

1. What is Carmella's sympathy towards Charmaine based on?

2. How do you explain Charmaine's revelation to Carmella?

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos
Face-to-face
Reading Television Activity 5: Role-play Reading 2

F r i e d a   P a t t e n d e n

Group B

Pre-watching Information

Your role: you are a moneyed, professional female aged between 45 and 65. Do the tasks below, all the time trying to think from the perspective of your role:

While-watching

Who do you sympathize most with in this scene?

Carmella   Charmaine

Post-watching

Discuss with a partner:

1. What is Carmella's sympathy towards Charmaine based on?

2. How do you explain Charmaine's revelation to Carmella?

Appendix 9

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos
Face-to-face
Reading Television Activity 6: Role-play Reading 3

F r i e d a   P a t t e n d e n

Group A

Pre-watching Information

Your role: you are a moneyed, white, professional male aged between 25 and 45 (AB1 male). Do the tasks below, all the time trying to think from the perspective of your role:

While-watching

Mark on the scale how strong Tony seems in this scene:

weak   strong

Post-watching

Discuss with a partner:

What do you think is the main reason for the current threat on Tony's life?

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos
Face-to-face

Reading Television Activity 4: Role-play Reading 1

Group B

Pre-watching

Your role: you are a moneyed, professional female aged between 45 and 65. Do the tasks below, all the time trying to think from the perspective of your role:

While-watching

Mark on the scale which character you think came out of the argument better:

More Tony   More Carmela

Post-watching

Discuss with a partner:

What do you think is the main reason for Tony wanting to end his therapy?

Appendix 10

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos
Face-to-face

Reading Television Activity: 'Inside-out Reading'

F r i e d a   P a t t e n d e n

Clip One

1. What motivates Tracee to offer the gift?

2. What is the significance of the bread?

3. Why does Tony reject her offer?

4. Which character do you feel is made to look more foolish in this scene, Tracee or Tony? Put a cross on the line:

More Tony   More Tracee

Appendix 11

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos
Face-to-face

Reading Television Activity: 'Inside-out Reading'

F r i e d a   P a t t e n d e n

Clip Two

1. What is Tracee's motivation for wanting to be with Ralphie?

2. What triggers Ralphie's violence against her?

3. To what extent do you feel the representation of violence in the scene is gratuitous? Put a cross on the line:

Gratuitous   Not gratuitous

Appendix 12

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos
Face-to-face

The Presentation Planner

F r i e d a   P a t t e n d e n

Topic:

STRUCTURE	WHAT?	NOTES
1. Introduction/ Overview	Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em	
2. Main Body	Tell 'em	
3. Conclusion	Tell 'em what you told 'em	

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Appendix 13

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos

Face-to-face

Presentation Language

F r i e d a P a t t e n d e n

Starting	I'd like to tell you about…
	Today I aim to…
	I've divided my talk into three points…
	I'll give a brief outline of…
	Please feel free to ask questions at the end / during my talk.
Introducing a topic	Let me start with…
	I'll begin with…
	Let's turn now to the question of …
Signposting	Firstly,…
	Secondly,…
	Thirdly,…
	Finally,…
Comparing and contrasting	likewise, similarly…
	on one hand, on the other hand, on the contrary, rather,
	yet, but, however, still, whereas, in contrast …
Moving on	Now let's look at….
	I'll move onto…
Going into detail	Let's focus on…
	Let me elaborate on…
	Let's look at… in more detail.
Concluding	To sum up…
	To conclude…
	That deals with …

Appendix 14

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos
Face-to-face
Presentation Feedback

Frieda Pattenden

Presenters: _____

Title: _____

+	⚒

Appendix 15

The Sopranos
Online Phase 2
1. Thesis Statements

F r i e d a   P a t t e n d e n

A thesis statement:

- tells the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion.
- is a road map for the paper; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
- directly answers the question asked of you. A thesis is an interpretation of a question or subject, not the subject itself. The subject, or topic, of an essay might be World War II or Moby Dick; a thesis must then offer a way to understand the war or the novel.
- makes a claim that others might dispute.
- is usually a single sentence somewhere in your first paragraph that presents your argument to the reader. The rest of the paper, the body of the essay, gathers and organises evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation.

How do I get a thesis?

A thesis is the result of a lengthy thinking process. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading an essay assignment. Before you develop an argument on any topic, you have to collect and organise evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts (such as surprising contrasts or similarities), and think about the significance of these relationships. Once you do this thinking, you will probably have a 'working thesis', a basic or main idea, an argument that you think you can support with evidence but that may need adjustment along the way.

Examples

Example 1: Essay assignment: "Compare and contrast the reasons why the North and South fought the Civil War."

> The North and South fought the Civil War for many reasons, some of which were the same and some different. = **weak thesis statement**

You decide that you are going to argue that the North believed slavery was immoral while the South believed it upheld the Southern way of life.

While both sides fought the Civil War over the issue of slavery, the North fought for moral reasons while the South fought to preserve its own institutions. = **working thesis statement**

While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own right to self-government. = **final thesis statement**

Example 2: "Write an analysis of some aspect of Mark Twain's novel Huckleberry Finn."

Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn is a great American novel. = **weak thesis statement**

In Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain develops a contrast between life on the river and life on the shore. = **working thesis statement**

Through its contrasting river and shore scenes, Twain's Huckleberry Finn suggests that to find the true expression of American democratic ideals, one must leave "civilized" society and go back to nature. = **final thesis statement**

Adapted from The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2007)
http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/thesis.html

Appendix 16

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos
Online Phase 2
2. Structuring a Paragraph

Frieda Pattenden

To structure a paragraph follow the steps:

1. The topic sentence

A paragraph should convey **one** idea, the topic sentence (normally the first sentence in the paragraph) should state this idea. For example: *The opening sequence of The Sopranos season 2, episode 1 conveys the feeling of deep melancholy.*

2. The body

Make a list of specific elements in the scene which convey the feeling of melancholy for you. You are now ready to use these ideas to help you write the body of your paragraph. Using the table below, write a complete sentence for each of the ideas you have on your list:

idea	full sentence

3. Fluency: adding linkers to your paragraph

Linkers can help connect ideas in different ways.

Linker examples:

Continue an idea:
again, along, also, another, as well as, in addition

Show time:
about, before, later, next, soon, until, when….

Show cause of effect:
as a result, because, since, so, therefore…..

Show contrast:
although, but, even though, however, still, yet…..

2. Structuring a Paragraph

F r i e d a   P a t t e n d e n

Put your topic and supporting sentences together and then add an appropriate linker for each sentence.

4. The concluding sentence

The concluding sentence acts as a summary for the paragraph and basically re-states the idea you gave in your topic sentence and summarising your illustrations. You should use different words and preferably a different sentence structure from the topic sentence.

For example:

A feeling of deep melancholy is steadily created throughout the sequence due to ……

5. Reviewing: checking your first draft

Copy and paste your concluding sentence into the box with the rest of your paragraph, check the following in your paragraph:

- Does your topic sentence really convey the main idea of the paragraph?
- Do all the supporting sentences really support your topic sentence?
- Does your concluding sentence really summarise your supporting sentences and re-state the main idea?

6. Proof-reading

Check/do the following in your paragraph:

- Spell-check your work. In Word make sure you're the standard language is set to English (click on 'Extras' -> 'Sprache' ->'Sprache festlegen' -> 'Standard' -> confirm standard language as English), then check spelling (click on 'Extras'-> 'Rechtschreibung und Grammatik').
- Add commas. There are two basic guidelines for commas in English:
  1. You do not put a comma after a relative pronoun in a sentence when the information after the relative pronoun is important, for example:

     The scene <u>which</u> strongly evoked a feeling of the ruthless advancing of time was ……

     The 'which' in this sentence is the relative pronoun, there is **no comma** in front of 'which' because the information coming after is essential (defining) and not extra.
  2. Apart from the relative pronoun rule, English has become quite relaxed with commas (unlike German which has very precise rules) and you should put a comma either where you feel the reader needs to breathe or

where you would like to emphasise a certain piece of information. For example:

In the opening three scenes of the sequence, the music was prominent in creating the atmosphere of the ravages of time.

7. **Now re-read your paragraph again, if you like it then put it into your essay!**

Appendix 17

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos
Online Phase 2
3. Citations

F r i e d a   P a t t e n d e n

1. In-Text Citations
The purpose of in-text citations is to direct your reader to the source of outside information you have used. Enough information must be supplied so that the reader can easily locate the source in your Bibliography at the end of your essay. There are various citation styles but usually for Cultural Studies the MLA (Modern Language Association) style is used.

If the author's name appears in your text, simply write the page number of the specific reference in brackets:

> Creeber remarks that television, "constructs representations of the world based on complex sets of conventions" (1)

The author's name is put in brackets if it does not appear in your text:

> Television is not a direct reflection of the world, it: "constructs representations of the world based on complex sets of conventions" (Creeber, 1)

2. Works Cited
The 'Works Cited' is an alphabetical list of those works which you actually refer to specifically in your essay. Note that the first line of each entry is at the left margin and the other lines are indented. This makes it easier for the reader to find a specific reference.

Book by author
Creeber, Glen. *Serial Television: Big Drama on the Small Screen*. London: Bfi Publishing, 2004.

Book by more than one author
Campbell, Neil, and Alasdair Kean. *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture*. Second ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.

Journal article
Nelson, Robin. "'Quality Television': '*The Sopranos* Is the Best Television Drama Ever...In My Humble Opinion...'." *Critical Studies in Television* 1, no. 1 (2006): 58-71.

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Reading your way towards media literacy with

The Sopranos

Online Phase 2

3. Citations

Frieda Pattenden

Newspaper/magazine article

Lawson, Mark. "Till Death Do Us Part." *The Guardian*, 30.08.06 2006.

Online journal article

Traister, Rebecca. *Is "The Sopranos" a chick show?* Updated 06.03.04

<http://dir.salon.com/story/mwt/feature/2004/03/06/carmela_soprano/index.html>.

Accessed 12.05.08.

Appendix 18

4. Essay Planning

Frieda Pattenden

Once you have completed your pre-writing idea-gathering activities, you need to select which ideas will be useful for your essay and to organize them logically. The standard structure for an English essay is as follows (although the number of paragraphs will differ, of course):

Introductory paragraph

> You never get a second chance to make a first impression! Start your essay with an interesting, attention-grabbing introduction with, for example, a provocative quote or example. This should lead to your **thesis statement**, a single sentence that sums up your position on the topic.

Main body

> The body of your essay consists of all the paragraph between the introduction and conclusion. Each body paragraph will deal with one main point expressed in the **topic sentence** of each paragraph.
> The topic sentence must be supported by **specific** examples from the scene or episode from the text.
> Between the paragraphs there are **transitions,** linking words and phrases that show connections between ideas.

Concluding paragraph

> The **conclusion** sums up your arguments, often referring back to the example and/or the thesis statement given in the introductory paragraph. You should not include any new points or examples.

Adapted from Meier (2006: 8)

Appendix 19

Reading your way towards media literacy with
The Sopranos
Online Phase 2
Course Feedback   F r i e d a   P a t t e n d e n

Please comment on each element of the course:

Online Phase One (OP1)

   OP1 *EWS* organization:

   The reading text selection:

   My blog:

   The forum:

   The glossary:

   Gist reading:

Face-to-face Phase

   Day 1 am:

   OP1 reading review:

   Television code reading

   Day 1 pm:

   Reading as an individual:

   Reading as a group:

   Day 2 am:

   Role-play reading:

   InsideOut reading:

   Day 2 pm:

   Preparing presentation:

   Day 3:

   Giving presentation:

Online Phase 2

   Essay idea gathering:

   Essay planning:

   Essay writing:

   Thank you for taking part and reading the best television ever made!

Erklärung

Hiermit versichere ich, dass ich diese Arbeit ohne fremde Hilfe angefertigt und die verwendete Literatur vollständig angegeben habe. Die Stellen der Arbeit, die anderen Werken entnommen sind, habe ich unter Angabe der Quellen kenntlich gemacht.

Acknowledgements

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