dear movies

DREAMS

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Melfi's dreams

Natalia Lomaia explores psychonalysis and dreams in *The Sopranos*

"I don't think art should give answers. I think art should only pose questions. And art should not fill in blanks for people, or I think that's what's called propaganda. I think art should only raise questions, a lot of which may be even dissonant and you don't even know you're being asked a question, but that it creates some kind of tension inside you."

— David Chase

"The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind."

— Sigmund Freud

Growing up during the 1990s in Georgia, TV shows or movies even slightly about organised crime, clans, gangs, or any type of street violence, chaos, and too much testosterone, weren't something I enjoyed watching. I have never seen *The Wire, Boardwalk Empire, Godfather of Harlem,* or *GoodFellas*. To me, themes like this were not only triggering on some level but somehow incredibly dull as well – I couldn't romanticise them as others seem to. So of course, it never occurred to me to watch *The Sopranos*. I remembered the show vaguely from my early teens – occasionally hearing it play from my grandparent's bedroom or having it in the background while eating. After that, I always associated *The Sopranos* with *The Godfather* –

which I never liked either (I know, I know, I still acknowledge its cinematic value) – and the photos from which every single jerk in my hometown had as a profile photo on Facebook.

Then my boyfriend was given a Sopranos family cookbook last Christmas, and everything changed. Since Berlin was in lockdown and we had already watched every single pointless show on the planet, after some convincing on my boyfriend's part, I agreed to watch the first season. Because my boyfriend worked a lot during that period, it took us a while to get through (apart from that one time when I actually sneaked into the bedroom while he was working and very guiltily but happily binged some episodes alone), so I had plenty of time to really reflect on the show. And, after all my reservations, *The Sopranos* has become one of my favourite TV shows and James Gandolfini's acting is the most impressive, breathtaking, magnificent performance I have ever seen on screen.

Although it feels like I was the last person on earth who didn't know anything about the show before watching it, for those who also don't know, *The Sopranos* is an American crime drama about New Jersey-based Italian-American mobster Tony Soprano (played by James Gandolfini). As well as being a mafia boss for most of the series, Tony also experiences panic attacks and visits a psychiatrist, Jennifer Melfi. This aspect of therapy adds a very unique layer to the show, because we not only get to see Tony's deeds (which are mostly horrifying) but also his intimate, internal world. A TV show about a mobster, no matter how good, is still just a TV show about a mobster – but what if he was depressed, had panic attacks, and went to therapy?! What if we could dive deeper into his inner life, dreams, childhood, traumas, fears and intense vulnerabilities?!

It soon became clear to me that the show was not just about the mafia, it was also about psychoanalysis. Because I am currently studying to become a psychoanalyst, the show's therapy storyline became extremely impressive, terrifying, but also very believable to me. Psychoanalysts are simply living, breathing people, and they can only do so much. Even if they try their best, even if they gain degrees from the best possible universities, even if they have years and years of work experience, they can still,

very often, make mistakes. After all, even Sigmund Freud called psychoanalysis an "impossible profession" in which "one can be sure beforehand of achieving unsatisfying results". While watching Melfi, I was thinking about all the ways in which I would want to avoid failing, or perhaps the ways I could learn to try and fail better – not because I am better than her, but precisely because I know, for certain, that I'm not. Every human is prone to failing, particularly in the way Melfi does in the show – because of denial and fear.

Here's what I mean: from the very first season, Tony's psychiatrist is under pressure from her colleagues and family to stop working with him because it's dangerous and morally wrong. But Melfi persists, defending her decision with professionalism and ethics, which for me, seemed brave and respect-worthy. After all, even if Tony's morality is questionable, psychiatrists are not priests. Later, Melfi's motives become more and more unclear: technically, she rarely crosses any ethical lines, but she seems to be personally intrigued by Tony's questionable morals. He teases at her hidden desires; the animalistic, darker, more untamed part of her. Most likely, the suppressed side of Melfi is the result of her being stigmatised as an Italian-American in New Jersey just like Tony. But unlike Tony, she chooses to prove that she is indeed cultured, educated and civilised. Probably, this never left her enough room to explore uglier, darker parts of her personality. On the one hand, she tries her best to help Tony, often successfully. On the other, she seems to derive pleasure from feeling moral superiority over him while at the same time being drawn and even attached to him.

According to analytical psychology, we all carry an unknown, dark part called the 'shadow'. Psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung theorised that "because one tends to reject or remain ignorant of the least desirable aspects of one's personality, the shadow is largely negative". According to Jung, the less someone's shadow is "embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it gets". Jung describes the shadow as something very "prone to psychological projection, in which a perceived personal inferiority is recognised as a perceived moral deficiency in someone else." Tony's impulsivity, his almost animalistic sexuality, his disregard for rules, his 'evilness', is a direct trigger of Melfi's

shadow – everything she fears horribly but at the same time, deeply desires.

Through maintaining a close relationship with Tony in the safest possible environment, Melfi flirts with the darker side of herself – (not with Tony as it sometimes seems) but still, despite the effort and consultations with colleagues, she never fully dares to dive deeper into her own unconscious. Instead, she explores Tony's problems and thus, in some sense, her work with Tony is not about him, not about a client. Essentially, it's about her own desires and fears.

In the season three episode 'Employee of the Month', Melfi is attacked and violently raped in the parking garage of her work building. Although the rapist is arrested, he is later released because the police lose the chain of custody. This information infuriates and shocks Melfi, even more so when she walks into a fast-food restaurant and sees the rapist's smiling picture on the wall with the title 'employee of the month'.

When the justice system lets her down and all her attempts to find closure fail, Melfi is filled with uncontrollable rage and a crazed desire for revenge. The two parts of her personality (one civilised and rational, the other suppressed, infuriated, potentially violent) clash more intensely than ever. She even considers asking Tony for help and opens up about it to her therapist and colleague, Elliot. When Elliot reminds her that telling Tony is not a civilised way to cope with her trauma, she snaps: "Oh, don't worry, I won't break the social compact. But that's not saying there isn't a certain satisfaction in knowing that I could have that asshole squashed like a bug... if I wanted!"

Later, Melfi has a very curious dream: she sits at the desk in her office, at night, alone in the dark. There is a strange sign on the door that says "high voltage, call New Jersey Gas and Electric Company before digging". She opens it to find an identical room, with an Acme Cola vending machine in the centre. Instead of inserting coins into the machine, she uses dry macaroni, and when she reaches in to get the soda, her hand gets trapped. Suddenly, a barking Rottweiler appears and terrifies her. Then the rapist appears and moves towards her. The dog attacks the rapist, who screams and cries in agony.

Melfi's dream tells us much more about her hidden desires and fears than any of her actions or words do. In psychoanalysis, dreams are a crucial part of understanding the unconscious – According to Sigmund Freud, they represent "a disguised fulfilment of a repressed wish". In this case, the Rottweiler represents Tony Soprano taking revenge on her behalf. The two identical therapy rooms could be a representation of two clashing parts of her personality. For me, the soda Melfi tries to get from the vending machine represents the cheap thrill she gets from digging into Tony's problems and psychic life, thus demonstrating how dehumanised Tony has become to her.

Tony is an embodiment of Melfi's suppressed desires and fears; of everything she would hate to consciously recognise as part of herself. She sees him as this 'high voltage', intriguing, dangerous creature who satisfies her need to flirt safely with the darker parts of her own self, while also enabling her to avoid fully becoming aware of that feared part. Precisely because of this, she, in turn, unknowingly, enables Tony to become a better criminal.

Melfi continues working with Tony for the next three seasons, but eventually she aggressively reveals that she refuses to treat him any longer. Tony is, of course, confused and hurt: "We're making progress! It's been seven years!" he yells. Melfi replies and waits silently for him to leave. Earlier in the episode, Melfi attends a dinner party with Elliot and some other colleagues. The conversation somehow shifts to the recent study claiming sociopaths take advantage of talk therapy. During this discussion, Elliot reveals, very casually, that Tony Soprano is Melfi's patient – a severe breach of doctor-patient confidentiality and one which embarrasses, angers, and upsets her. Elliot dismisses her reaction by saying everyone at the table is a professional. Back at home, Melfi reads the mentioned study herself. It's these events that seem to convince her to finally stop working with Tony for good. Purely as a therapist, Melfi fails her client. For me, even though she (almost) never (technically) breaks any ethical rules and principles, she fails Tony much more than, for example, Elliot fails her by breaching doctor-patient confidentiality.

Melfi is, undoubtedly, not the worst therapist. Still, maybe, in this 'impossible' profession, you need to go beyond every

imaginable limit to stretch your own abilities. And maybe, only such efforts and attempts could count as good enough. In Melfi's case, this would mean daring to dig deeper into her own unconscious and becoming aware of her own fears – instead of being in denial and projecting all of her anger on Tony, and then justifying her decision to terminate the therapy altogether with professionalism and ethics.

I loved watching *The Sopranos* because it forces you to examine and withstand the complexity of human nature and motivations. In the space of six seasons, it provides a space to explore our deepest desires and dreams – through Melfi's two contrasting sides and how she relates to her mob-boss client, and of course, through Tony himself.