OXFORD LECTURE 2

BREAKING THE RULES

Good evening. Last week we had credits. This week another television convention probably slightly alien to the world of university lecture halls. Today I have to give a parental advisory, as they're known in the States. There is in the coming hour some language, best described as being "of the street." Most of it will not emerge from my lips, but appears in the extracts I will be showing. Those with delicate sensibilities in this area are free to block their ears.

For those of you who were here last week, and have graciously come back for more, and are not blocking their ears, Tom and his girlfriend escaped safely, and the bomb went off somewhere else.

You may remember that I recounted the rise of my company Kudos, mapping its journey through our 3 most famous and successful shows. Spooks, Hustle and Life on Mars, all in their very different ways changed the face of drama in Britain. They were hailed as ground-breaking. Genuinely like nothing that had appeared before in the UK TV firmament. You don't have to take my word for it. When Hustle appeared on the scene, the Sunday Times wrote: "every so often there is a radical shift in popular television. Someone takes a look at what is happening, decides they don't like it and heads off in a completely new direction. This is what happened with Spooks, the shiny, fast-paced series about MI5, and it's happening again with Hustle." And for The Observer, Life on Mars "raised the bar of contemporary drama so high it must have had TV commissioning editors wondering where to sign up for classes in pole-vaulting."

These shows reinvented the genre by ignoring what had gone before, quite simply by breaking most - if not all - of the rules that had been tacitly accepted as defining the architecture of any mainstream, primetime drama.

I don't believe you can make truly great drama if you don't smash at least some of those rules. Which is why I'm calling this talk "Breaking the rules."

Broadcasters by their nature are risk-averse, even though most of the great TV success stories are born out of left-field. The best and most recent example of this in the US is ABC's zero-to-hero reincarnations with Lost and Desperate Housewives, neither of which had any of the obvious ingredients for triumph if you looked at the Law and Order and CSI-dominated world into which they were launched.

But it probably takes just such career-threatening leaps of creative faith to re-adjust to a changing world. In fact, the senior executives at ABC who had steered Lost and Desperate Housewives through development at the network did jeopardise their careers. They were both sacked before either show even went on air.

The political certainties of the world that gave birth to the largely reassuring procedural outcomes of shows like Law and Order and CSI have disappeared in the fight against an invisible global enemy.

No wonder the weird and unsettling island that is Lost - with its multiple layers of hidden mysteries - suddenly becomes the new and more accurate mirror of human experience.

I'll be talking more about Lost in a couple of week's time.

So, this evening I said I was going to explore some of the quite magnificent American drama series of recent years. And I am.

But before I begin I have a confession to make.

I set out to sweep through 15 years of great American drama, encompassing shows like The West Wing, NYPD Blue, ER and CSI. And a few others, too. But the more time I spent viewing, reading and thinking about what I really wanted to say, the more I found myself drawn, like an iron filing to a magnet to just 2 US shows, so I'm afraid that's pretty much what you're going to get.

And I can only hope that by the end of the hour you will understand why I have taken this seemingly narrow focus.

The 2 shows in question broke every rule in the book, before making up some more rules of their own, and smashing them too. I want to share with you thoughts and observations about those shows that in my view stand head, shoulders and torso above the crowd in an attempt to unravel how and why they resonate so powerfully with their audience.

I alluded to these rules - mostly in the breach - last week in discussing Spooks, Hustle and Life on Mars. Here - in no particular order - is a brief recap of this potent list of "do not's". Breaching any of them puts a drama series in danger of confusing its audience, discombobulating its audience, alienating its audience or taking its audience out of their comfort zone. In other words, either losing an audience altogether, or diminishing it to the extent that the show ceases to justify its cost and place in a schedule.

Rule 1 - Do not stray from cops and docs, the staple diet of primetime, mainstream drama series. The breach - neither Spooks nor Hustle had anything to do with the familiar precincts of police station or hospital.

Rule 2 - Do not bend or blend genres. The breach - Life on Mars was a time-travelling cop show that could have failed with fans of both sci-fi and police drama.

Rule 3 - Do not fly in the face of audience expectations or genre conventions. The breach - Spooks killed its leads - over and over again.

Rule 4 - Do not deviate from naturalism or realism. The breach - Hustle's characters routinely address the camera; Life on Mars takes place entirely inside someone's head… Or does it?

Rule 5 - Do not turn justice on its head. Good needs to triumph over evil. The breach - in Spooks, a corrupt government (often ours) frequently prevails and good people die. Hustle celebrates the triumph of high-end criminality every week.

Rule 6 - Do not over-estimate your viewers' intelligence and avoid at all costs dealing with complex issues. The breach - Spooks' weekly political machinations are sometimes so convoluted that even we don't quite know what's going on. Hustle's cons frequently take on the opacity of a 3-dimensional game of chess. And the riddle at the heart of Life on Mars is open to so many different interpretations that I'm looking forward to there being a degree in it.

Rule 7 - Do not go dark. If audiences want to kill themselves they listen to Leonard Cohen and Joy Division. They don't turn to the TV. The breach - again, Spooks maintains a cynically and bleakly consistent view of global political agendas; and Life on Mars has a hero whose soul is in constant torment.

Rule 8 - Do not create a morally ambivalent universe - the breach - Spooks' heroes kill and torture; it is often unclear that the cause of their supposed enemies is anything other than just, while their friends and allies may pose a greater threat; Hustle's heroes are all professional criminals; and the station chief in '70's Life on Mars is a misogynist, racist, homophobic thug whose every utterance is at best politically incorrect - and we love him.

Rule 9 - Do not trick your audience. Your narrator must be reliable and detached. The breach - Hustle's raison d'etre is to pull the wool over the eyes of its audience. Life on Mars is narrated effectively by someone who doesn't know if he's alive or dead, whether he's gone mad, is in a coma or has travelled back in time. He is the most unreliable of unreliable narrators.

Rule 10 - Do not have characters talk as they do in real life or they will be rambling, dull and largely unintelligible. The breach - None. Spooks, Hustle and Life on Mars obeyed this rule. It's a hard one to break. Though I'll be talking next week about one great show that does break this rule.

If it seems convenient that I have conjured 10 rules from last week's lectures, it is.

I, too, may turn out to be unreliable. In truth, as I hope to show, I think the rules are all different threads from the same cloth. There is ultimately one uber-rule. More of that later.

Let me start by showing you the opening 60 seconds from episode 1, series 1 of the Fugitive, the first American drama I remember watching. It aired in the UK from 1964, so I was only 7 or 8 and I can't imagine what induced my parents - who are here tonight - to let me stay up and watch such adult fare. It held me rapt from week to week, it was a huge influence on me and I still refer to it constantly.

This clip shows the first 60 seconds of the drama, which explains the entire backstory of the show – Dr Richard Kimble is on a train, on his way to death row, having been found guilty of his wife's murder. But suddenly the train is derailed and Dr Kimble escapes…A voiceover establishes his innocence and his search for the one-armed man he saw running from the murder scene. Every episode began with this opening. Audiences were never lost.

This is a stunningly economical set-up. Literally, at the end of the first minute, you know everything you need to know. Today, The Fugitive is probably better known for the self-defeating movie remake starring Harrison Ford.

Though I of course didn't know it back in the early '60's, The Fugitive, an iconic drama series which ran for 5 years, ticked many of my rule-breaking boxes. While its hero Richard Kimble was a doctor by trade, it wasn't a cop or a doc show. There wasn't a precinct of any description. Kimble was a man on the run, a fugitive from justice, as well as a man from whom justice could be said to be fleeing. The system wasn't working for him. He was trapped in a living hell. His world was paranoid, dark and uncertain. The police were the bad guys. Today, of course, there would be the added bonus of a politically incorrect disabled villain, the probable murderer. Back then, he was just a one-armed man.

So, this rule-breaking thing isn't new. But it was rare then.

And it's just as rare now. That said, it obviously cannot be the case that the self-evidently risky stratagem of breaking rules guarantees the delivery of iconoclastic and ground-breaking drama. On the contrary it is far more likely to lead to exceptionally poor drama - fragmented, unengaging, about nothing. The failures are many and live on only, to use business guru Nassim Nicholas Talleb's gloriously evocative phrase: "in the unseen cemetery of invisible consequences." Equally, of course, it is possible to create terrifically successful, impactful drama by breaking no rules. ER is a case in point. ER is truly an exceptionally well-written, fabulously cast and brilliantly made hospital show. It's not genre-busting.

So, what is that makes for great TV drama? The best? The most impactful and resonant? I'm not sure there's a better description of a great story than Joseph Campbell's in his iconic essay collection, "A Hero With A Thousand Faces": "it will always be the one shape-shifting yet marvellously constant story that we find, together with a challengingly persistent suggestion of more remaining to be experienced than will ever be known or told." Let's savour those phrases for

a moment.

SHAPE-SHIFTING

MARVELLOUSLY CONSTANT

CHALLENGINGLY PERSISTENT

MORE REMAINING TO BE EXPERIENCED THAN WILL EVER BE KNOWN OR TOLD

These are true of all great fiction. Two of these, though, struck me as most relevant to the great TV drama of recent times. The first was shape-shifting. It hints at the unexpected, the surprising, the unpredictable and the rule-breaking. More than any other of its rival story-telling forms over the past 20 years - novels, plays, movies - TV drama has been shape-shifting - evolving, re-inventing itself, revolutionising the telling of stories for a mass audience. And it's been doing it really really fast.

And that's what I'll be talking about in a couple of week's time. Drama's ability to shape-shift and how it might be evolving over the coming years.

The other of Campbell's phrases that seemed especially relevant is "MORE REMAINING TO BE EXPERIENCED THAN WILL EVER BE KNOWN OR TOLD". That is the stuff of today's talk, because when you break the rules you create a space in which the imagination of the audience can fly. Where there are puzzles to be solved and ambiguities to be savoured. It's what I was particularly referring to last week in my exploration of Life on Mars.

As the 20th century drew to a close, with a few notable exceptions, TV drama series were not flying. Instead they were mired - on both sides of the Atlantic - in fealty to increasingly repetitive conventions of realism and naturalism. They were still holding a mirror up to a very literal view of the world and the reflection found there was becoming increasingly familiar, dull and tarnished. Apart from anything else, why did stories about our lives have to take place in police stations or hospitals? Was there any one on the planet who was not a cop or a doc? Stories set in these worlds were efficient enough delivery mechanisms for narrative hooks and excitement, but did they really sing of the richness and complexity of life as it is truly lived and experienced by real people? It all felt a bit flat. Literally lacking in lustre. In fact, if you were a psychiatrist you might have come to the conclusion that TV series were suffering from depression. They were in need of ECT.

I'm going to start by talking about a drama series that didn't break just one or two rules in establishing itself as possibly the greatest drama series ever made. Like a blast of electro-convulsive therapy, it broke all of them. Its creator was

surprisingly inspired by 2 other iconic series.

The first inspiration, nearly 20 years on is still in a class of its own with its disturbingly macabre combination of a morally crippled small town, a murder mystery and a dream-like supernatural parallel reality. Here, with the mother of a murdered girl being comforted by her daughter's best friend is a short reminder of David Lynch's Twin Peaks.

From episode 1, season 1, starting at 30 minutes 52, following the murder of her best friend Laura, Donna goes to visit Laura's parents. Whilst sitting talking, Sarah, Laura's mother, suddenly has a vision or hallucination of an evil-looking man at the back of the room.

If you think you know what game-changing 21st century drama series had the darkly surreal Twin Peaks as one of its 2 key inspirations, you may want to think again when I tell you that the 2nd show cited by its creator was The Simpsons.

I hope there's no one in this room who's never seen this riotously funny and inspired celebration of dysfunctional family life, but this is Oxford, so, just in case, here's a taster:

From episode 3, season 9, we see the Simpsons at home, on the sofa – Lisa has asked how she came to have a saxophone but is getting frustrated by her parents inability to tell a story that doesn't centre around Bart – but as he observes "they're just giving the audience what they want – Bart by the barrel load!" (from 7 minutes 02, to 7 minutes 46.)

Are you there yet? OK, final clue coming up. Here's the pitch for my first iconic show as recalled by the TV boss who gave it the go-ahead: "I said to myself, this show is about a guy who's turning 40, he's inherited a business from his dad. He's trying to bring it into the modern age. He's got an over-bearing mom that he's still trying to get out from under. Although he loves his wife, he's had an affair. He's got 2 teenage kids…He's anxious, he's depressed, he starts to see a therapist because he's searching for the meaning of his own life." So far, not only nothing special, but in the eyes of this TV boss' anxious colleagues, the idea was off the scale of dark. There was one missing ingredient which did nothing to allay the fears of most people at this network. The TV boss concluded: "I thought, the only difference between him and everybody I know is he's the don of New Jersey." The show is of course The Sopranos, the network HBO, and the executive a visionary by the name of Chris Albrecht, HBO's Creative Chief at the time. He thought the idea had universal appeal.

His colleagues continued in their belief that in addition to the material being unappealing and the gangster hero charmless, the title was confusing and would lead audiences to believe the show was about opera singers.

David Chase, the Sopranos' creator had apparently wanted to write a show

about his own relationship with his mother. That on its own might have been a stretch for a drama series intended to return in 13 hour blocks, year in, year out, even for a network as bold as HBO. But develop that into a story that has as its main protagonist a gangster so troubled by his violent and corrupt lifestyle that Oedipal feelings for his mother only play a small part in his need for therapy, and you have a recipe for something truly ground-breaking.
I had always assumed that David Chase's inspiration lay in Martin Scorcese movies or The Godfather; or in TV shows like Hill Street Blues. Clearly these are references, not least because characters in The Sopranos frequently talk about them.

But according to Chase himself he wanted to create something - and I quote - "with the attitude and the comic dysfunction and the vulgarity of The Simpsons". And as for his other key touchstone: "I also started thinking about it as David Lynch's Twin Peaks in the Jersey meadowlands."

In other words, central to Chase's vision was a combination of a comedy cartoon family and the most surreal TV drama ever to have hit the mainstream. Little wonder that rules were about to be smashed.

Before I continue, here's a short clip from the first series. Tony visits his mother in hospital. Pretty humdrum stuff. Sort of thing you'd see in Casualty every week. The sting in the tail? Tony knows that his mother was recently involved in a plot to kill him.

Tony arrives at the hospital to be told that his mother has had a stroke, and reacts – in an unusual filial response - by smiling. He finds her on a trolley being wheeled out to an ambulance and delights in telling her he knows what she's been up to – he knows that she's tried to have him killed. His mother appears to be smiling back at Tony. This only enrages him further. From season 1, episode 13, 50 minutes 33 to 51 minutes 53.

Two great smiles in that clip, aren't there? First Tony's when he hears his mother's had a stroke. Not the most expected of filial responses. Then hers. And for all Tony's yelling, you're never quite sure. Is it a smile, or just post-stroke rictus?

As you can see from that short extract, while there may be issues that would preoccupy both classic precinct shows, The Sopranos is not only not a police or a hospital drama, it's the antithesis of one. Its protagonists - far from being in the business of enforcing justice or saving lives - are actively engaged in the thwarting of justice and the taking of lives. Though it's fair to say that without Tony's people around, cops and docs would have far less to do.

That's not, of course, what The Sopranos is about. At one level it's about families, and almost soap-like in its focus. As I said earlier, Chase is thought initially to have told HBO that he intended to write a series exploring his relationship with his mother. This on its own would have been unlikely to have

made any waves, disturbing as Chase's relationship with his mother - if that clip was anything to go by - may have been.

But the background of a Mafia family provided the perfect Trojan Horse for a quite different mix of stories and writerly investigations. Two families in one - the first with bonds forged (or tarnished) by blood and DNA; the second bound by the rigid code of the cosa nostra, complete with its uniquely primitive and ruthlessly doctrinaire moral framework. Its omerata.

I was talking the other day to Frank Spotnitz, one of the original lead writers and executive producers on The X-Files. He believed the source of all great drama to lie in two words - secrets and ***anger***. Consider now the two groups of people whose own lives are most bound up in secrets and ***anger***. I would suggest you need look no further than families and criminal gangs. Combine them, as Chase did with The Sopranos, and you have the basis for something quite combustible.

As HBO's own ad for the show proudly declared: "one family or another will kill him."

The Sopranos routinely tops best drama of all time lists, however you word your Google search. I was delighted a few weeks ago - having already written quite a lot of this talk - when the Guardian's critics produced a list of the Top 50 dramas of all time. Yet again, The Sopranos headed the poll.

This show has also, by the way, spawned more academic and quasi-academic literature than any TV drama in living memory. Among the papers whose titles caught my eye were - and none of these titles are made up, I promise: Mike Lippman's "Know thyself, Asshole: Tony Soprano as Aristotelean Tragic Hero"; George Anastasia's "If Shakespeare Were Alive Today He'd Be Writing The Sopranos"; Peter H Hare's "What Kind of God Does This?" (apparently an exploration of some of the series' moral and theological questions and problems - no doubt like "is there ever a time when God wouldn't mind if you murdered your uncle?"); and my favourite essay (you'll only get this fully if you've watched the show and know that Tony's topless bar is called the Bada-Bing) - Al Gini's - wait for it - "Bada-Being and Nothingness: Murderous Melodrama or Morality Play." Sadly, I've read none of them, but it's good to know that academe is not all Keats, Quantum Physics and Kirkegaard.

As I said, The Sopranos broke every rule…Most radically, it broke the rule that said do not create a morally ambiguous universe; don't fly in the face of conventional morality - in particular, you can't have heroes who are murderers. They have to be reliable. Quite simply, your heroes have to be heroes. This is the entire subject of next week's lecture, which is about the irresistible rise of the anti-hero in 21st century TV drama series.

I'll be dealing in much more detail with the character of Tony Soprano then. But for the moment I want to explore a few of the other rules the Sopranos broke to

establish itself as the iconoclastic drama series of our age. And why it works so brilliantly.

Chase was in his fifties when he wrote the pilot for The Sopranos, something I find personally very comforting. And he was bored. Bored, undoubtedly by his own failure to escape from the servitude of writing on other people's shows. He'd honed his craft on dramas like The Rockford Files and Northern Exposure (which give you some sense of the amiable landscape from which the irascible Sopranos emerged), and never before created his own hit. But he was old enough, jaded enough even to be bored with the rules, as he put it "the niceties of network television. I couldn't take it anymore. And I don't mean language and I don't mean violence. I just mean story-telling, inventiveness, something that could really entertain and surprise people."

He then went on to clarify what he felt was wrong with network TV. "I think the first priority is to push a lifestyle. I think there's something they're trying to sell all the time….I think what they're trying to sell is that everything's OK all the time, that this is just a great nation and a wonderful society, and everything's ok and it's ok to buy stuff…There's some indefinable image of America that they're constantly trying to push as opposed to actually being entertaining."

So, instead of the story-of-the-week mechanic that had until then largely governed story-telling in series drama, Chase and his team of writers set out to make something that was character-driven, funny, ironic and subversive - everything in fact you would expect a drama inspired by the Simpsons to be.

It also portrays a dark, bleak, cynical, perverse vision of humanity - in addition to being incredibly violent, deeply politically incorrect and peppered with increasingly convoluted fantasy sequences. In the 5th season, for example, Tony has a dream that lasts 20 minutes! That's 40% of the entire show.

Yet it is also extraordinarily subtle. And it is in this subtlety - drawing on all those seemingly unsubtle elements - which its unique potency resides. The devil in The Sopranos - literally and metaphorically - is in a tapestry of exquisitely observed detail, its meticulous thread by thread unravelling of human behaviour. It's obviously hard to convey this by talking about it or showing you small moments. But I'm going to try.

There's a quality of observation and attention to detail in each and every characterisation - even the minor players - that leaves the rest of TV drama floundering in respectful awe. One example: in spite of the fact that The Sopranos was not inspired by gangster movies, the show's characters are wonderfully film literate and regularly reference their own cinematic paradigms. Yet this is not so much self-conscious writing as terrific research. Real-life mafia don John Gotti was observed by the New York detective staking him out to be deliberately modelling his behaviour more and more on characters in the Godfather films.

And another example of this is that they do something - and this may seem banal, but that's partly my point - that we all do, which outside of The Simpsons, is never seen. Characters in The Sopranos actually watch TV, and talk about it. Just like us. In fact, apart from The Simpsons, it makes them more like us than any other family depicted on the small screen.

And that's not the only couch they spend a lot of time on.

Tony Soprano became the first fictional gangster (and, for all I know, non-fictional gangster as well) to go into therapy. He is on the psychiatrist's couch, and through him the heart of darkness at the centre of contemporary American society is put under the microscope. The Sopranos at a macro level is the United States on the couch.

I want for the moment to return to the micro level, to the subtlety that gives The Sopranos its unique place in the pantheon of TV fiction. It follows from Tony being in therapy that one of Tony Soprano's key relationships in the series is with his shrink, Dr. Jennifer Melfi. To some extent, she takes on the role of our eyes and ears. On behalf of the audience, she listens to Tony bare his soul - that is, when he isn't lying to her, too. Tony sings to her like the soprano he is and so betrays his omerata - the code of honour that is supposed to keep him silent. With Melfi, the closest we the audience have in this world to someone who shares our own moral code, we sit in judgement on Tony - for the most part, silently. She represents us.

There's an episode in the 3rd series in which Melfi is brutally raped. The police mess up, and in spite of the fact that Melfi has identified the perpetrator, he gets off on a technicality.

Up to this point in the series, empathising somewhat oddly as we have been with Melfi's patient - the murderous thug that is Tony Soprano, we have been rooting for justice **not** to work. Tony's enemies are our enemies and that includes the police. For Melfi, of course, we now desperately want this profoundly flawed system to mend itself in her favour. We want the police to function effectively. We share her rage and hurt, which has been further compounded by her discovery that the rapist has been named Employee of the Month in a local pizza joint. Here Melfi is telling **her** therapist about a dream she had in which her assailant is set upon by a huge dog.

From series 3, episode 4, this clip begins half way through the scene at 41 minutes 39 when Melfi realizes who the dog in her dream is representing – Tony. She realizes that, if she wanted to, she could have the rapist "squashed like a bug" by Tony and this revelation empowers her for the first time since her attack. The clip finishes at the end of the scene at 42 minutes 55.

We're sophisticated viewers, schooled in this stuff. We know what she's thinking. If the police can't sort it out, she knows a man who can. She does

after all potentially have her own personal vigilante on call. She knows how she can get the justice she wants. We want it for her, too. In her previous session with Tony Soprano - before the rape - she had been trying to persuade him to abandon her treatment of him in favour of behavioural therapy.

So, when Tony comes in for his next session, here's what happens:

From the same episode as the previous clip, starting at 47 minutes 10, and running to the end of the episode, Tony tells Melfi he thinks her suggestion of moving on to behavioural therapy is a good idea. But Melfi realizes she doesn't want to lose him as a patient and breaks down when realizing she's on the edge of asking Tony to take revenge for her rape. Tony doesn't know what's wrong (having been told she'd had a car accident) but senses she's wanting to say something or ask him something, but on asking her "do you wanna say something?..." Melfi is simply silent. The episode ends…

This is mesmerising writing. Not only have we - the audience - been seduced into an empathy with Tony Soprano's moral world view, Melfi doesn't do what we want her to do, leaving us stranded on the wrong side of the moral divide. As for Tony, unlike us, he doesn't know what's happened to Melfi.

We want him to exact a hideous retribution on the rapist. It's our need for revenge. So now it's our moral canvas under the spotlight. We, and those of the society of which we are a part. We're aching for her to do it. And she says nothing. Melfi has - in her rant to her therapist - led us to the door of this profoundly illiberal, utterly politically incorrect position. But we're the ones who have taken out our own personal keys and unlocked the door.

As one critic of the show wrote, "we are not alone in such impulses if one of the most morally upstanding characters in the series fantasises about vigilante justice when the American justice system falls flat." As I discussed last week, audiences are powerfully drawn to characters who bend or break the rules to make a broken society work again. And the more irredeemably broken our society seems to be, the more attractive these morally ambiguous heroes become. More on that next week.

Rules being broken here - the hero Tony Soprano does not come flying to the rescue, because he doesn't even know there's rescue required; moral values are inverted, not just with our complicity but active encouragement; audience expectations are defied - the rapist gets off, with no justice being done - pure or rough. And so we are forced to ask ourselves: is the morality of the mob - as in Mafia - really so very different from that of the mob that is society itself? The morality of us.

But unlike conventional crime drama, here's a story so like life itself - random, cruel, messy, violent and scary events can happen to good people, that they have not brought upon themselves, and that are wholly outside their control.

Conventional, ordinary story-telling delivers comforting certainties, a clarity of outcome.

The alternative route, neatly described by a Sopranos fan writing in the Daily Telegraph, is to be "wilfully cryptic and refuse to spoon-feed impatient viewers with neat storytelling devices."

This is rule-breaking television drama.

It offers ambiguity, which is so much more interesting, so much more sophisticated and above all, so much more like life itself. That's the uber-rule that I alluded to earlier, the one rule to replace all if you want to make great drama. Reject clarity, certainty and easy answers. Embrace ambiguity.

Why doesn't Melfi tell Tony? It would have been so simple, so neat. That mystery is emblematic of what makes The Sopranos so special. James Woods, in his brilliant How Fiction Works, cites fellow critic Stephen Greenblatt, who argues that in his tragedies, and I quote: “Shakespeare systematically reduced the amount of ‘causal explanation a tragic plot needed to function effectively and the amount of explicit psychological rationale a character needed to be compelling. Shakespeare found that he could immeasurably deepen the effect of his plays, that he could provoke in the audience and in himself a peculiarly passionate intensity of response, if he took out a key explanatory element, thereby occluding the rationale, motivation, or ethical principle that accounted for the action that was to unfold. The principle was not the making of a riddle to be solved, but the creation of a **strategic opacity**.’ Why does Lear test his daughters? Why can't Hamlet satisfactorily avenge the death of his father? Why does Iago ruin Othello's life?" I love that phrase - strategic opacity.

The sophisticated narrative embraces these "**unconsummated stories."** It is these "unconsummated stories" that are the outcome of strategic opacity - just one of great tools at the disposal of TV drama when it is breaking rules and embracing ambiguity, to create stand-out series.

Matthew May in his book The Pursuit of Elegance (subtitled: Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing) quotes this poem by Lao Tsu:

Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub,
It is the centre hole that makes it useful.
Shape clay into a vessel,
It is the space within that makes it useful.
Cut doors and windows for a room,
It is the holes which make it useful.
Therefore profit comes from what is there,
Usefulness from what is not there.

This perfectly describes the kind of ambiguous story-telling that puts The Sopranos on a different plane. What is left unsaid, rather than what is said.

What is left undone, not what is done.

Matt Weiner, one of the lead writers on The Sopranos, is on the record as saying: "We were allowed to be increasingly experimental in our writing…Only on The Sopranos could you write long, silent sequences in which the characters said nothing. One page of silence costs the same as 5 pages of dialogue. But silent scenes are often the most revealing."

The scene we have just seen - all about what was left unspoken - is a perfect example of what he's talking about. It may not surprise you to know that Matt Weiner went onto create Mad Men, the highly regarded series set in an early '60's advertising agency in New York, which celebrates the space between words like no returning drama series currently on television. As Matthew May writes in The Pursuit of Elegance, this is "the power of the missing piece," where "maximum impact is exacted with the minimum input."

He was writing about the success of Toyota design, by the way. There is no reason for a philosophy that underpins the making of inspired and mould-breaking TV to be any different from that which underpins ground-breaking new technology and design.

In TV terms, this minimal writing, a celebration of ambiguity, is all about (May again) "creatively engaging people's imaginations by leaving out the right things." Which is, of course, as Weiner will have observed in the crafting of Mad Men, precisely the recipe for success behind the greatest advertising. In this way, May continues, the world takes on a "new form, a life of its own - one with real staying power."

The Sopranos did indeed have real staying power, and quickly established itself as the inspiration for a handful of outstanding dramas on HBO. One of which is my next first among equals. According to those who gave birth to it, the inspiration came as much from a couple of movies as it did from television's Sopranos. The movies were Harold and Maude and The Loved One, both about people obsessed with death in general and funerals in particular.

If the pitch for The Sopranos was quite unlike anything else on television, the pitch for this series was stranger still. Here was a series to be based around a family-run funeral parlour. With characters that came to be described - quite accurately - by one critic as "cleverly literate, miserable and spiteful," and its tone "dark, ironic and sardonic," this was not conventionally appealing fare.

Apart from death itself, this show was to be preoccupied with almost every taboo known to television drama: homosexuality, mental illness, old age, sickness, adolescence, drug addiction, race and class. Oh yes, and in addition to that, there would be at least one death kicking off the show every week. Not an obvious recipe for success. Welcome to the marvellous world of Six Feet Under. Now, like The Sopranos, ranked not just as one of the great family dramas of all time, but as one of the great dramas of all time. Period.

I should perhaps at this point say something about HBO, the channel that has single-handedly reinvigorated the scripted form. In addition to The Sopranos and 6 Feet Under, in the last decade it has been responsible for Sex in the City, Curb Your Enthusiasm, The Wire, and many more. Iconoclasts all, and I'll be talking about The Wire next week in the context of anti-heroes and the morally ambiguous world they represent.

Partly this was to do with the inspirational leadership of Chris Albrecht, HBO's President of Original Programming who nurtured and then green lit all these shows - none of which would have been seen without the benefit of hindsight, as anything other than potentially career-ending creative risks, so radical a departure were all of them from anything that had gone before.

But HBO had a unique place in the US broadcast firmament. Unlike the behemoth commercial networks - ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox - whose business models were underpinned by advertising revenue and the high prices that massive ratings could drive, this relatively new kid on the block didn't need ratings. It made its money out of subscriptions to its service, much like Sky in the UK, but with no ads. So this meant it needed shows that were noisy and talked about, shows that punched above their weight, won prizes and column inches. Hence their mantra: "It's not TV, it's HBO". They were literally ur-television, un-television, anti-television - or at least anti all that had gone before. They just had to be different.

High quality, compared with the staple fare on the networks certainly, but their business model was all about creating a must-have product, a sense that if you didn't have HBO you were a 2nd class citizen. It was packaged snobbery in a way. It was all about keeping up with the Jones'. So the marketing focussed on flattering their potential audiences - as one critic put it "to make them feel good about their choices." These shows didn't have to garner the mass market ratings of a CSI or Law & Order. They just had to generate buzz. And that's what they did.

And in the case of the best of them, massive ratings, too. But that was a bonus. They drove subscriptions to astronomical levels. HBO was, for the beginning of the noughties, supreme - unstoppable, unrivalled in quality and cultural impact.

Back then to 6 Feet Under. It's creator was Alan Ball - his TV credits had included Grace Under Fire and Cybill (with Cybill Shpeherd), but after winning the Oscar in 2000 for his movie screenplay American Beauty, he became the most sought-after writer on the planet. He could have been seduced by the movie end of Hollywood, but he'd been excited by The Sopranos, inspired by the possibilities that landmark series had thrown open for the medium so often disparaged by a snobbish movie fraternity. Ball went into see one of Albrecht's senior colleagues, Carolyn Strauss who, because of her abiding passion for the two darkly comic movies I alluded to earlier, both of which had revelled in a wicked and mischievous approach to the dead, asked Ball if he'd be interested in writing a show set in a funeral home.

Given that his movie, American Beauty turns out to have been narrated by a corpse, it's perhaps not so surprising that Ball embraced the idea and then some. The seeds of magic realism that had been sewn in American Beauty took root from the first moments of Six Feet Under when Nathaniel Fisher, the patriarch of the family who become the focus of the series, is killed in a horrific car accident, and yet maintains an unsettling presence in his family's life and loves for the entirety of the show's run. Interestingly, when Ball delivered his pilot script, Albrecht is reputed to have said "It feels a little soft. Give it more edge, make it a little more fucked up." That's what made HBO so special. "More fucked up" is not a note you get very often from creative executives at broadcasters.

As New York Times writer Bernard Weinraub had dryly observed, "On network television, everything is explained. Nothing is ambiguous." In other words, "edge" was in short supply.

Ball's sister had died in a tragic accident when he was a boy. It had affected him deeply. More…edge - for Ball - wasn't hard to find.

6 Feet Under - premiered six months before 9/11 - was eerily prescient of a time when the world was going to have to reassess how it coped with death on a grand scale. It took hold in the hearts and minds of its audience as Bush barred the media from access to bodies returning from war.

As Ball said: "we want to deny that death exists. We make entertainment out of it in starker movies. But we deny the reality." And he went on: "if the show is about anything, it is about the fact that everything ends."

US culture has in a way always been preoccupied - one might even say obsessed - with death. But through its depiction of murder in crime shows and grisly illness or injury in hospital shows, this treatment of death is always from a perspective that ends before the funeral home. 6 Feet Under takes up the story at the very point where cultural representations had just stopped. Ball's manifesto: "this is a show about death. Let's kill someone every week." And so they did.

It is a convention of most TV series that the first person you see is going to be someone to take note of, they're going to be a major player in the life of this episode. But in 6 Feet Under that person is going to die, sometimes shockingly, sometimes tragically, and often with gleeful black comedy. Occasionally they will reappear as a ghost, engaging in Socratic dialogue with one or a number of our regulars. But more often than not they will be silent, splayed out - naked, disfigured, being pulled back together, stitched up, made up and spruced up to be given the verisimilitude of life, even to look better as a corpse than they had ever looked in life.

This is 6 Feet Under's brilliant, savage and damning satire on the modern world's obsession with surface and appearance. "A sardonic commentary," as

Mark Lawson once described it, going on to add that it was "a brilliant subversion of the established device in hospital dramas in which the opening scenes tease us with the illness or injury of the week." This is the rendering polished, shiny and harmless of all that is ugly, brutal and real. A Nip/Tuck for the dead.

Here's a fabulous scene in which the still new head of the family business, David Fisher is trying to sell his wares:

This clip is taken from season 1, episode 6, at the beginning of the scene at 6 minutes 04, where David has to explain to a recently bereaved widower about what happens to a body after death and tries to persuade the bereaved man to have his wife's body embalmed. This is a witty, tender and beautifully observed scene where the widower grapples with his mourning and the practicalities of death, running up to 7 minutes 39.

That old man's wife just died simply in her sleep, but other opening deaths have ranged from that of Thomas Alfredo Romano who was chopped into pieces by an industrial dough mixer while cleaning it, to porn star Viveca St John who died when her cat knocks heated rollers into her bath - and I'll leave you to extract the schoolboy pun at the heart of that scene; Chloe Ann Bryant Yorkin whose skull is shattered when she stands up through a limo sunroof and hits her head on a traffic light; to Jonathan Arthur Hanley who dies at the breakfast table when his wife hits him over the head with a frying pan; to - and one of my favourites, Dorothy Sheedy who is run over when she races into the middle of the road having mistaken a flock of airborne inflatable sex dolls for an angelic rapture.

Like The Sopranos, 6 Feet Under is also about an inherited family business. And both the Sopranos and the Fishers are in the death business - one dispensing it, the other one tidying it up.

Both not only have a recently deceased patriarch, but also very powerful and faintly unhinged mothers…And they both explore a crisis at the heart of all Western capitalist societies. In a society where anything is possible for anyone, everything has simultaneously become impossible for everyone - without the help of experts. Just as death cannot be handled without the professional help of an organisation like the Fishers, so Tony Soprano's life cannot be lived without a therapist. The choices and the possibilities, and the pressures they bring to bear, induce not joy and freedom, but anxiety and dependency. All experience has become mediated. As Ball commented: "one reason our culture is so shallow is that we ignore death - we pretend it doesn't exist. The death care industry in America has become all about hiring professionals to take care of it and sanitise it."

In fact, watching the best of US TV drama - and there are no better examples than The Sopranos and 6 Feet Under - is akin to watching America lying on the psychiatrists couch. Their protagonists deal with matters of life and death on a

daily basis, and if they're not actually in therapy, their dialogue is often at least quasi-therapeutic in nature. Which is not unlike conversations in everyday America, as long as you don't stray more than 100 miles from either coast.

And I think for British audiences this is one of the reasons these shows can be so compelling. As a culture, we tend to repress. Our TV alter-egos being a reflection of ourselves therefore rarely (outside of the more melodramatic soaps) wear their hearts on their sleeves.

Americans on the other hand don't repress. On the contrary they express, frequently in highly charged existential fashion.

Look at this scene from 6 Feet Under, when Nate Fisher, David's younger brother, emerges from the weekly funeral that is as much a part of the series' grammar as the weekly death. He is with his gloriously complicated and tricky new girlfriend Brenda.

This moment is taken from series 1, episode 5, starting at 52 minutes 11. Nate thanks Brenda for taking the time to attend a funeral, so she can see Nate at work. Their chat leads on to a discussion about belief in God and Brenda makes her feelings very clear when she says "I think it's all totally random…we live, we die, ultimately nothing means anything..." The scene finishes at 53 minutes.

So, the relationship's going well, then.

This level of metaphysical debate (smashing as it does the rule about avoiding complex issues) is pushed to the limit because 6 Feet Under also engages in a highly sophisticated and multi-layered view of life after death. At a physical level, it deals quite literally with the effect of death on a body - damage and decay. Then at a psychological level, with its often devastating impact on those left behind. And, finally, with its confident embracing of the supernatural - there's not only a death in every show, but a ghost, too - notions of an afterlife. It is ironically in its dialogue with the dead that this series best capitalises on the funeral business as being more about the living than the dead. And here the break with naturalism is complete. In the extract you're about to see, Nate confronts his father's ghost in a room he has just discovered was his dad's secret bolt hole:

Returning to episode 6 of season 1 (starting at 26 minutes 30), Nate has discovered a secret hideaway of his fathers, which he visits in a dream and talks to the ghost of his Dad. He's angry with his father "what the hell is this place, this music?...what the hell did you do here? Who the hell are you?" "You could have told me you were proud of me" Nate asks, "You were never around to tell…which is exactly what I was proud of you for" retorts his father. Just before Nate wakes from his dream his father whispers in his ear the meaning of life that he's discovered since dying. We don't hear what is said. This clip ran up to 28 minutes 04.

One of the most insightful father/son conversations in all of television drama. And Dad is dead.

These ghostly interventions are the visual representations of the ambiguity I was celebrating earlier. Occupying as they do a liminal or threshold state - hovering between life and death, between substance and vapour, between earth and the afterlife - they are, like the best stories, open and indeterminate. They are in transition, their precise status subject to interpretation. Like Nate, TV audiences have been trained to need answers that are unequivocal, clear and precise, to feel somehow deprived if a story does not spoon-feed them a solution. But the best stories occupy a different space. Here's a moment later in the same episode, when Nate shows Brenda the room.

This final clip is taken a little late in episode 6, starting at 32 minutes 50, when Nate takes Brenda to show her his father's hideaway. He's grappling with why his father had this place, why he never told any of the family about it. Brenda makes him see that his father kept this from them deliberately, "just his and no one elses" and goes on to say "if you didn't know him when he was alive, you never will." Mystery is more interesting than knowledge. The clip finishes at the end of the scene at 34 minutes 16.

Brenda has it right. She's talking about story-telling. The pleasure and richness comes from the not knowing, the having to think about it. This is the only way you learn, not if you're spoon-fed all the answers. And I believe this touches on a more profound role that the best drama series play in the lives of their audiences.

The poet Schiller wrote that: "Deeper meaning resides in the fairy tales told to me in my childhood than in the truth that is taught by life." Whether we remember being read to by our parents or not, our earliest experiences of story-telling are likely to have come from fairy tales. Our rules of story-telling are founded in those experiences. Princesses (or heroines) are beautiful, princes (or heroes) are good-looking and brave, step-mothers are bad, and good always triumphs over evil. They're simple rules and as you will have noticed from soaps and run-of-the mill drama, they pretty much hold good for TV and movie story-telling today.

But Schiller wasn't talking about rules, he was talking about truth and about life.

In his massively influential THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT, Bruno Betteheim argues that: "our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives." His thesis is that fairy tales prepare children for life - in other words, help them find that meaning - by introducing them to the most appalling things that life may throw at them - death, betrayal, wickedness, mortal danger, monsters. Certainly, their imagery and their morality have a profound effect on the young, and their impact on us all is life-long. And Bettelheim goes onto argue that much of what fairy tales are doing for children

is to take on their "existential anxieties" in a way that parents can't or won't - "the need to be loved, the fear that one is thought worthless; **the love of life, the fear of death."**

But is that it? When we move on from fairy tales, are we - to steal one of their mantras - "ever-after" getting enough from life to teach us all we need to cope with life itself. Does the need for these profound lessons about life and death just evaporate? I think not.

Just because fairy tales don't work for adults, that isn't to say that adults suddenly lose the need for this kind of learning tool. Appalling, difficult and traumatic events, excruciating moral dilemmas and impossible choices - these are among the puzzles that life throws at us. Mercifully, these moments are rare and surprising (unless you are one of the writers of poverty porn - a Child Called It and the like - in which case this stuff hits you every day), and nothing previously experienced by you will have prepared you for them. That's why grown-ups need fiction, too. Some enjoy a mixed economy of novels, plays, movies and TV. But for the vast majority TV drama is what they consume. The average adult in Britain reads less than 2 novels a year (most of them by JK Rowling, Dan Brown or Stephanie Meyer), yet watches on average 28 hours of TV each week. That's how - as they leave the world of childhood stories - people equip themselves for adult life. How else do we immerse ourselves in - and so prepare for - divorce, illness, family crisis, difficult people, physical peril, emotional trauma, impossible children, debt, and death? These are the dragons and monsters of our own physical world, and vicariously through the best of TV drama we rehearse the coping mechanisms that we hope against hope we will never have to unleash for real.

I quoted Joseph Campbell earlier, one of his tests of a great story being that they offer MORE REMAINING TO BE EXPERIENCED THAN WILL EVER BE KNOWN OR TOLD

He was talking about myths, of course, stories told by men and women to each other for as long as they could talk. For me, the great TV drama series are those that take the place of myth in the modern world. To quote Campbell again, these are the stories "that are the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind." These are the stories that "touch and inspire", inspired as they are themselves by the stuff of the world of which they are a part.

Fairy tales are very much like unsophisticated drama, with their "once upon a times" and their living "happily ever afters." What fairy tales and unsophisticated drama series have in common is that they follow the rules.

Resonant, meaningful drama needs to accommodate a profound sense on the part of its audience that life isn't like that. It's not a fairy tale. There are disappointments, hiccups, bumps in the road, even disaster and tragedy. These can happen not just to deserving baddies, but to good people as well -

be they star-crossed lovers, the old, the weak, the infirm, or the just plain ordinary. In fact, this is exactly the kind of person to whom bad stuff happens, once you leave the comfort of fairyland for this crazy old thing called life. We are also, of course, living in times that are further removed from fairy tales than ever before. The collapse of the nuclear family, a mounting uncertainty about who the good guys are in the world and a general shortage of princesses means that if, as most of us did, you grew up on fairy tales, adult life is a bit of a shock. TV drama can no longer get away with a cosy view of the world. It needs to reflect a contemporary universe in which you can't always get out of the enchanted forest, where the witches' spells are likely to be more powerful than yours and where the handsome prince is probably on the sex offender's register.

This is the universe of The Sopranos and 6 Feet Under. They are fairy tales for grown-ups. They inspire, illuminate and teach us. They are about nothing less than life itself.