Proceedings of the 25th International Conference on Literature and Psychoanalysis: 3-9

Ian McEwan's imp of the perverse

CLAIRE KAHANE[*]

In Ian McEwan's first collection of short stories, *First Love, Last Rites*, a repressed pedophiliac murders a little girl whom he has seduced into following him by promising her the sight of butterflies; in another story, "Homemade" a fourteen year old boy, pushed by his buddy to rid himself of the epithet 'virgin,' has sexual intercourse with his little sister. In an early novel, *The Comforts of Strangers*, a bored and physically attractive young couple visiting Venice fall under the spell of a decadent host, who, having stalked, then wined and dined them, ultimately drugs the woman and kills the man while she watches helplessly. Sadism, masochism, pedophilia, incest – these acts are common to McEwan's early fiction; not surprisingly, then, he has been called "a writer obsessed with the perverse" (Kiernan Ryan). And indeed, while McEwan's later fiction – *Enduring Love, Atonement, Saturday* – assimilates the perverse into more complex concerns with the world at large, McEwan still indulges his imp by obsessively introducing into his fictions scenes that shock if not awe the reader, traumatic scenes that disrupt the ordinary surface of life and shadow the remaining action. In this paper, I want to explore McEwan's early use of perverse scenarios, which seem self-consciously to exploit psychoanalytic ideas of perversion. To what end? Is the question I want to pose at the start.

But first, a major detour: What do I mean by the perverse?[1] A cursory overview suggests that perversion as a term in psychoanalysis seems one of those elastic signifiers, like hysteria, its boundaries vague, its referent inconsistent, though its etymological core is not, for central to its denotation is the idea of deviation, literally a turning away from an existing "norm" and thus implicitly a subversion of conventional values[2]. [A student recently remarked to me that when she thinks of perversion, she sees it as a visual image, a straight line with normativity at its end, and a line going off at mid point to the right to form a kind of "Y." I like that image, and that (WH)Y: it shows that the perverse always takes its direction from the norm, ie., is always in tension with it as a deviation, but also a question – why?][3].

---

[*] Visiting Scholar, UC Berkeley, Professor Emerita SUNY-Buffalo, Department of English, USA.

[1] ["Why in this enlightened day would one choose to entitle a work "Perversion" Robert Stoller asked about his book of that title some thirty years ago. Yet though he agrees that the term sounds moralistic and abhorant, Stoller goes on to assert, "perversion exists". *Perversion: The Erotic Form of Hatred*, 3.

[2] While hysteria became a useful paradigm in the 1970's for thinking about gender beyond the pathological, became indeed a politically privileged term for feminists, today it is not hysteria but perversion that has been taken over by the culture to serve a non-pathological transgressive function. Judith Butler's writings, for example, dwell on the productive power of "the negative". In negation, as Vicki Kirby points out, Judith Butler finds "the possibility of regeneration and human freedom" (11). This strategy of seeking the political potential of errancy, instability, failure, gaps, excess and deviation is a key one... and the enduring political objective in Butler's work (100).

[3] In *Saturday*, McEwan's protagonist muses on the infinite suggestiveness of jazz, given the limited number of chords, or of a Jane Austen novel: "When player and listener together know the outcome so well, the pleasure is in the deviation, the unexpected turn against the grain" (27). In this sense, the novel as a genre is itself to a great extent dependent on deviation from the norm, and could therefore be considered a perverse structure.

In psychoanalysis, which has its own norms, the turning away is primarily about sex. The sexual norm from which perversion ostensibly turns away was first laid out by Freud around the turn of the 20th century: “the achievement of orgasm by means of genital penetration”[4] – a definition which remains the straight line in most psychoanalytic thinking. And since genital penetration is a one way street – only the male organ or its fetishized counterpart can genitally penetrate – it was typically the male that was seen as the pervert, turning away from this “normal” act of heterosexual penetration, replacing it with another aim and object that avoided a direct encounter with the female genitals. Thus as Laplanche and Pontalis note, perversion is present... “where the orgasm is reached with other sexual objects (homosexuality, pedophilia, bestiality, etc), or through other regions of the body (anal coitus, oral sex); where the orgasm is subordinated... to certain extrinsic conditions which may even be sufficient in themselves to bring about sexual pleasure (fetishism, transvestitism, voyeurism and exhibitionism, sado-masochism, etc.” (306).

But here the “why?” enters. Why this deviation? We know Freud’s answer: to disavow – disavowal being the defining mechanism of perverse structures – the possibility of castration symbolized by the female genitals, feared as a potential punishment for transgressive wishes. Against this possibility, the male subject disavows what he sees, or does not see, regresses to an earlier state of polymorphously perverse gratifications, where bodily parts – breasts, hands, feet, eyes, hair, feces, urine – are eroticized as objects of the drive, ostensibly allowing the perverse subject to enjoy sadism and masochism, scopophilia and exhibitionism – the components of a sexuality before, or beyond, the oedipal boundaries and its prohibitions.

Moreover, it is not only actual body parts that become the objects of the drive, but also inanimate objects that are fetishized and become necessary catalysts to gratification. By replacing a fearsome absence with a presence, or the invisible and unknown of a sexuality hidden within the folds of the female body with a visible and eminently touchable material object or piece of clothing that covers over an anxiety-provoking mystery, or stands in for it, the pervert can sustain the fantasy of “nothing is missing” or “nothing is to be feared”. But as has been increasingly remarked upon, this stance also disavows sexual difference insofar as difference is based on something missing. Indeed, by fetishizing material objects, perversion makes of gender-identity itself a material performance, a role indicated by the material metonymies of sexual identity. High heels, fur, keys, items of clothing – each fetish object is given meaning by its metonymic proximity to the fearsome site of female sexuality or by its metaphoric resonance in the mind of the pervert. Only recently has female fetishism been acknowledged, and women also allowed to be perverts, defined mainly through their cross-dressing or sexual masquerades, enactments that seem clearly to challenge the absolutes of sexual difference as defined by the dominant culture. Jan Matlock, for example, noted the existence of female fetishists in the psychiatric literature of early 20th century, pointing out that Clerembault and Freud removed them from the category of fetishists. Emily Apter argues for the concept of maternal fetishism, the baby often playing the role of a fetish object for the mother, a point which links up with Freud’s early concept of phallic transformations: faeces, phallus, baby, all interchangeable psychic objects. And Louise Kaplan, also claiming women have their own perverse enactments, defines perversion as a psychological strategy that demands the performance of a social stereotype of masculinity or femininity. As she notes, the perverse subject enacts a rigidly repetitive and defensive sexual ritual that avoids the sight of the female genitals; like Robert Stoller, Kaplan concludes that the repeat performance is designed to help the person survive a childhood trauma with a sense of triumph over it.

In the last several decades, a host of books with varying theoretical assumptions have emerged that redefine perversion, its psychic function and its treatment. Lacanians who believe that the aim of analysis is “to allow the analysand... to enjoy his or her enjoyment” argue that insofar as the drives always seek satisfaction that might be considered perverse (Fink, 1997, 41), the aim of the treatment is by no means normalization but “to give permission for perversion” (Miller, 1996, 314). In the words of Slavoj Zizek, enjoy your symptom. In contrast, Anglo-American theorists such as Otto Kernberg argue that in perversion, there is no real freedom to enjoy; perversion demands "the restriction of sexual behavior to one of the infantile partial drives *as an obligatory precondition* for the achievement of sexual excitement... All sexual perversions combine severe inhibition of sexual freedom and flexibility with the idealization of the sexual scenario derived from the particular polymorphous perverse infantile drive that is dominant" (italics mine, 2006, 22). Robert Stoller describes perversion as an erotics of hatred and emphasizes the ways in which perverse acts typically take the form of a revenge fantasy that converts childhood helplessness to narcissistic omnipotence, trauma to triumph[5]. "Perversion" Stoller remarks, "is the result of family dynamics that, by inducing fear, force the child who yearns for full immersion in the oedipal situation... to avoid it" (xvii)[6]. But avoiding oedipal conflict brings with it its own anxieties; Bruce Fink notes "the horror as well as the pleasure of living within the mother's domain of jouissance, never free to enter the ordinary world of more temperate, symbolic desires and disappointments." (Rothenberg & Foster, Introduction, 4). Somewhat analogously, within Kleinian discourse, which focuses on object-relations in the mother's domain, perversion is seen as a disavowal of the depressive phase, an inability to acknowledge separation from the mother, a defense against growing up. Insofar as perversion is a defensive strategy, sexuality becomes a means of binding a narcissistically wounded psyche through the instrumental use of another.

---

[4] This definition is quoted in Laplanche and Pontalis, 131.

Clearly, as this brief overview suggests, analytic thinkers are split in their descriptions. What seems clear in these formulations, however, is that the perverse subject's restricted focus on a part object, imaginary or real, is a means of avoiding a primary engagement with another separate and gendered subjectivity[7].

Ian McEwan seems no stranger to these psychoanalytic ideas. Mcewan's first collection of stories, *First Love, Last Rites* vividly portrays through the consciousness of a child, or childlike character, perverse acts that may shock the reader, but are narrated with a kind of sexual innocence or affectlessness seemingly free from the guilt demanded by oedipal law. Indeed, McEwan suggests that the perverse enactments of his protagonists are not a function of transgressive desire for the other – the adolescent protagonist of "Homemade" who has sex with his younger sister Connie actually finds her repulsive – but a way toward imagining themselves into or out of a gendered identity. In the context of these stories, gender identity itself seems a flimsy disguise, a role these protagonists assume as if it were a costume given to them by the Other, and evoking some puzzlement as to its meanings. Or else they feel entrapped by a sexual position that is part of a self- alienating cultural repetition compulsion and opt to withdraw from human society altogether.

In the title story, "First Love, Last Rites" for example, (note that only a comma separates first love – literally the mother – from a death-ritual) a young man narrates his immersion in a dream-like summer ritual – sex on a table in an increasingly filthy room he and his girlfriend Sissel inhabit overlooking the river Ouse (a characteristically easy phonemic pun that marks much of McEwan's early writings). She is escaping from her dysfunctional family by immersing herself in an absolute present moment, refusing even to think thoughts because thinking can't be controlled and might take her elsewhere. He, a first person narrator caught in the net of his own adolescent sexual compulsions, envisions his repeated entrance into her body as a kind of existential adventure, a reverse evolution, or rather helpless devolution, into primordial part objects, a kind of masochistic fantasy that can humiliate him by precipitating premature ejaculation.

---

[5] Stoller distinguishes between aberrations and perversions, one attempting self cure, the other hostile attack. I prefer to treat them as one category: deviance from the oedipal norm.

[6] Perversion is a psychic structure, a specific relation to the paternal function as well as more commonly a description of behaviors (4).

[7] Lacan discusses Freud's insight that the sadomasochistic drive is directed toward the active sadistic subject rather than the masochistic object. "*At what moment*, says Freud, *do we see the possibility of pain introduced into the sado-masochistic drive?* – the possibility of pain undergone by him who has become, at that moment, the subject of the drive. It is, he tells us, at the moment when the loop is closed... when the subject has taken himself as the end, the terminus of the drive". (*Four Fundamentals* 183. The italics are Lacan's).

> Once I was inside her I was moved, I was inside my fantasy, there could be no separation now of my mushrooming sensations from my knowledge that we could make a *creature* grow in Sissel's belly. I had no wish to be a father, that was not in it at all. It was eggs, sperms, chromosomes, feathers, gills, claws, inches from my cock's end the unstoppable chemistry of a creature growing out of a dark red slime, my fantasy was of being helpless before the age and strength of this process and the thought alone could make me come before I wanted (118, italics mine).

This fantasy of regression to primordial life is disturbed, however, by invasive realities, one of which is Sissel's ten year old brother Adrian, who, also in a flight from family, recurrently tries to disrupt their erotic dyad and turn it into a pre-prepubescent playspace for three. More disturbing to their sexual coupling is the sound of a creature [note McEwan's use of the same term as for the imaginary fetus] gnawing on the other side of the wall – a sound the narrator at first thinks is part of his internal fantasy of feeding a "creature" inside the woman's body with his semen, a fantasy in which feeder and fed shift boundaries, in which mouth/breast/penis and fetus all flow into one another, interchangeable imaginary objects[8].

But in a move characteristic of perversion, fantasy becomes reality; the climax of this devolutionary scenario occurs when the source of the gnawing, a fat rat, finally emerges from the other side of the wall, from the hidden place of unconscious fantasy into the real world, a disgusting and dangerously frenzied real creature with teeth bared. Terrified by the actuality, after several failed attempts to catch the rat, the narrator smashes it triumphantly against the wall so that it splits open, "like ripe fruit... A faint smell crept across the room, musty and intimate, like the smell of Sissel's monthly blood" (128). After making this vivid sensory link between the pregnant rat and Sissel's sexual body, the narrator is both horrified and fascinated to discover the rat was a pregnant female, its hopeless brood still wriggling in the sac. Although the earlier phantom of a gnawing fetal-maternal creature has been made all-too-viscerally real, now the affect is reversed: the rat is transformed from a repulsive and fearsome creature with a biting mouth into an awesome maternal vessel of new life, which the now-guilty narrator has killed. Accordingly, the tone shifts from fear and disgust to a guilty awe that extends to Sissel as well. "She parted the gash in the mother rat with her forefinger and thumb pushed the bag back inside and closed the blood-spiked fur over it" (128-129). Although the description of Sissel's fingering of the gash and the blood-spiked fur has a perverse and even masturbatory resonance, this act becomes part of a religious ritual of interment for them both, the last rites that are meant to provide a resolution and an absolution. The fetal sac is pushed back into the mother; the dead rat is put gingerly into a dustbin. Afterward, in an analogous act, the narrator returns the one eel he had caught to the muddy waters of the Ouse, and returns to the sexual relation with Sissel, a relation now seemingly revivified by his confrontation with, and acceptance of, a maternally-inflected vision of death-in-life/life-in-death. Still, the last word of the story, "Yes" –an affirmation of life – seems more a literary device, Molly's "Yes" perversely stolen by McEwan from Joyce's *Ulysses* for his own purposes, than an earned transformation of the perverse scenario that has preceded it[9].

In other stories, it is not the acceptance of sexual difference but liberation from it that is the perverse spark of the pleasure of the text. Yet even in stories that play with sexual identity as a performance that can be varied, the protagonist is never free from the threat to the self – the sense of its unreality – that such play implies, or from a frighteningly powerful maternal figure that induces a kind of primal narcissistic anxiety. "Disguises" the last story in *First Love, Last Rites,* is a perverse *tour de force* in this regard. Henry, the young protagonist, is forced to dress in a girl's clothes by his guardian aunt and mother-surrogate, Mina, a retired actress, and to play roles devised by her. The opening fragments retrospectively allude to her role-playing:

---

[8] Masud Khan writes about the fusion of body images in perversion; in his description of a case, the man identified with the body of his female partner, and experienced her sensations in a shared sentience, this idealized mutuality a form of remembering/imagining his relation to the mother as a total experience (35).

[9] McEwan said he actually started to write the story with Molly's "Yes" in mind. In a longer paper I discuss McEwan's desire to inhabit the mother, the primal other, who, like Molly or the great Mother Anna Livia Plurabelle, the lady of the river and the muse in and of *Finnegan's Wake,* embodies the circle of narrative itself. Modernist texts haunt McEwan's imagination as if they were internal objects, phantoms texts inhabiting his own. See Abraham and Torok's concept of "the phantom" in *The Shell and the Kernel*, 165-187.

> Mina that Mina. Soft and breathy now and thick glasses too remembers her last appearance on stage. Sour Goneril at the Old Vic she took no nonsense, though friends said even then the mind of that Mina was slipping. Prompted they say, in Act One, shouting at the guilty A.S.M in the interval, and scratched him with her long vermilion nail, below the eye and to the right, a little nick across the cheek (131).

The first word, the name Mina, repeated, "*that* Mina" evokes another Mina: the female victim turned victimizer-vampire in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, an association strengthened by the reference to her "long vermilion nail" that scratched "a little nick across the cheek" in her anger at the assistant stage manager. Playing on a split identity, between role and actor, between social performance and private reality, the narrative voice literally splits Mina in two, into subject and object, into real and Real, in the next paragraph:

> Two days later Brianie died, her sister, Henry's mother, so Mina confusing dates persuaded Mina at the funeral tea, and this is what she told her friends, she gave up the stage to tend her sister's child then ten years old and in need, so Mina told her friends, of a real mother, a Real Mother. And Mina was a surreal mother.

In the kind of post-modern linguistic play that McEwan would increasingly foreground in his later fictions, Mina becomes the surreal mother, more Real (i.e., terrifying) than real (good enough).

> In the drawing room of her Islington house she drew her nephew to her, pressed his blotchy face *into the padded now and scented bosom* (*italics mine*, 132).

We might note the implication of aging shrunken breasts in "padded now" a negative image quickly enfolded in its prepositional phrase. Mina's action here repeats Dracula's perversely maternal embrace of Mina in the original novel, when Dracula forces Mina to his breast to drink his breast-blood in a seductive/oral assault, and thus raises the spectre of a specifically maternal vampirism that haunts the story[10].

In what seems to me an uncanny link to another text, the characters in "Disguises" seem to have stepped out of a case history, described by Stoller, of a young boy whose mother was ill and who has been raised by his aunt and her daughter. As Stoller writes, the women "unfortunately shared an immense hatred for males and for males' masculinity. Given the freedom to act upon him, they were able safely to attack his expanding masculinity... by altering his appearance" (71-72). When his mother came to visit "a few weeks before she died, the aunt and cousin introduced his mother to a "new neighbor girl" – a traumatizing event to which Stoller attributes his patient's subsequent transvestism[11].

While I would not want to claim that McEwan read Stoller (although certainly McEwan has a sophisticated knowledge of psychoanalytic texts), he is clearly fascinated by the ambiguity of gender identity and the play of oscillating sexual identifications. His fictions often allude to androgynous desires in his characters which, like perversions more generally, in promising to erase sexual difference, in the words of Francette Pacteau, "satisfy a narcissistic fantasy of completeness that defends against fantasies of loss and helplessness" (64)[12]. Women as well as men in McEwan's fiction can in this sense act perversely, responding defensively to the power of a fearsome maternal imago. In "Disguises" for example, it is the surrogate mother-figure Mina – a pedophilic cross-dresser – who is the pervert, a maternal sadist, who, costumed as an army officer, inducts the innocent child into perverse acts and unsettles his gender identity. And later, when Henry visits his new found school friend Linda, it is at the instigation of *her* mother that he again cross-dresses, putting on Linda's old clothes. Although the act is rationalized – it is to prevent his soiling his new clothes – wearing female clothing excites him: when he looks in the mirror, Henry becomes fascinated with his figure as a girl/boy; he sees and now also feels himself part of Linda, a Henry/Linda androgyne[13].

---

[10] Although games as such by their rules and structures serve to provide limits to perverse enjoyment, in "Disguises" the gender games initiated by Mina erode those limits, and threaten "to pull the subject back... to the presymbolic world in which the self is engulfed by the mother's demands... at the expense of subjectivity" (Rothenberg & Foster, 4).

[11] Stoller's work on core gender identity that is laid down in the first three years of life is the bedrock of his interpretation of the origins of perversion, which he sees as a response to the threat to one's core gender identity (73). This is Stoller's more ego-oriented reconfiguration of the more classic Freudian concept of castration anxiety as the source of perversion.

At the story's climax, a costume party devised by Mina, in which other people are costumed in their ordinary social dress – McEwan's throw-away comment on the conventional role playing of ordinary life – Henry, forced to appear in female dress and blonde wig, and having drunk too much, in a grotesque twinning sees his friend Linda across the room being literally man-handled by an officer who we are to understand is Mina in her military garb repeating an action Henry had experienced earlier in the story. Time and place and character all dissolve into confused fragments:

> The man in the chair was pulling Linda on to his lap, Linda and Henry, he stood in front of his bedroom mirror feeling free, made a little dance as Henry and Linda, was pulling Linda on to his lap held her tight there behind her head, she was too frightened to move, terrified and could not make her tongue move and who would hear her in all these voices?... the man in the chair pressed her face tight against him, would not let her go, Henry thought who was to blame? (165).

In a drunken helplessness Henry/Linda moves toward them as the syntax climactically mirrors the disintegration of gender distinctions in his/her own mind.

As this brief survey suggests, McEwan's early fictions use psychoanalytic concepts of perversion to depict the anxious confusion or traumatic encounter of a child or childlike character with the sexual world and the strategies necessary to ward off a fearsome and sadistic maternal figure who threatens particularly the male child. Typically, McEwan's protagonists seek protection from a female body whose mysteries both repel and seduce. The move toward a sexual identity – when it happen – often masks a perverse desire to inhabit the other, to be contained absolutely in sameness rather than separated by difference, and a corresponding fear of being lost in the other, trapped, devoured. Who am I? – the hysteric's question – is perversely answered in a psychic regression to a body not yet sexually defined, before wholeness and difference, or to a sexual masquerade which allows a play with being both sexes – responses that can also be read as defenses. In short, like Henry's school compositions in "Disguises" which mime classic gothic plots, McEwan's family romance is typically a gothic tale played out by children in the Real world[14].

But the later novels seem to have assimilated these perverse structures and to have gone beyond them. Indeed, through their engagement with the imbrications of personal and political history, they suggest an acceptance of oedipal limits and difference while also mourning the loss of a fantasmatic omnipotence. Yet I think they do more: and here I offer a partial answer to my opening question: to what end does McEwan use perverse scenarios? Not only do they both express and contain primal anxieties about normative sexual roles, but they also sustain an ambivalence that is itself a mode of cultural critique, an assault on the hegemony of the norm, and on the very concept of deviation. We might recall that in the 1970's and 1980's, perversion became a political banner for groups oppressed by patriarchal norms – gays and women primarily[15]. Their call for a politics of perversion engendered new discourses, as for example queer theory, now part of mainstream academic life, and contributed significantly to the expansion of aesthetic possibilities, even to new aesthetic forms[16]. As Chasseguet-Smirgel has remarked, "Man has always endeavoured to go beyond the narrow limits of his condition. I consider that perversion is one of the essential ways and means he applies in order to push forward the frontiers of what is possible and to unsettle reality" (61). Certainly McEwan unsettles reality in his fiction, allowing at best, forcing at worst, the tectonic plates of the psyche to reveal its fissures.

---

[12] Francette Pacteau talks about "the fantasy of completeness that avoids penetration – without guilt" as "an imaginary pre-oedipal condition in which psychological gender identity is not tied to physiology, but can play with possibility; fixation or regression to that psychic state" (63).

[13] Of interest in relation to "Disguises" Jann Matlock points out that clothing fetishists desire either cloth/clothing for purposes of arousal, while "costume fetishists desire sexual contact with partners wearing certain costumes or want to dress themselves in certain costumes, frequently those of the opposite sex" (33).

[14] Ironically, in a story with many gothic turns, Henry's school compositions are literally gothic plots whose well known conventions mime the perverse scenarios involving sadism, masochism, and entrapment by vampirish figures evoked by his relation to Mina.

WORKS CITED

Abraham, N., & Torok, M. (1994). *The shell and the kernel* [Ed. Nicholas T. Rand]. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Khan, M. M. (1979). *Alienation in perversions*. New York: International Universities Press, Inc.

Kernberg, O. (2006). Perversion, perversity, normality: Diagnostic and therapeutic considerations. In Dany Nobus & Lisa Downing (Eds.), *Perversion: Psychoanalytic Perspectives.* London and New York: Karnac.

Lacan, J. (1978). *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis* [Ed. Jacques Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan]. W.W. Norton and Co, Inc.

Laplanche, J. & Pontalis, J.-B. (1973). *The language of psychoanalysis* [Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith]. W.W. Norton and Co., Inc.

Matlock, J. (1993). Masquerading women, pathologized men: Cross-dressing fetishism, and the theory of perversion, 1882-1935. In Emily Apter & William Pietz (Eds.), *Fetishism as cultural discourse*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Pacteau, F. (1986). The impossible referent: Representations of the androgyne. In Victor Burgin, James Donald, & Cora Kaplan (Eds.), *Formations of fantasy*. London: Methuen.

Stoller, R. (1975). *Perversion: The erotic form of hatred*. American Psychiatric Press, Inc. by arrangement with Pantheon Books, Random House.

Vicki, K. (2006). *Judith Butler: Live theory.* Continuum International Publishing Group.

---

[15] See for example Mandy Merck's *Perversions: Deviant Readings by Mandy Merck (1993)*.

[16] For example, the power of waste, a perverse theme at the center of contemporary literature since Beckett, is increasingly part of a postmodernist aesthetic in which detritus and the excremental vision replaces nature as an aesthetic norm. Indeed, waste management, once the province of the mafia, as in The Sopranos, is now a cultural imperative.