I tuned into “The Sopranos”, and wound up watching a Nietzsche episode instead.

David Chase has definitely decided to get as introspective as possible this year, and tonight’s episode might have had the most. A rocket scientist going on about quantum physics in a bullet ridden rap star’s hospital room; “who am I” questions suddenly springing up out of nowhere; wind and dinosaurs as metaphors…all add up to an episode that was both enthralling and frustrating.

Recap: Tony’s back up and no longer acting like Randle Patrick McMurphy before the Chief gave him that final pillow facial. But he is saying that he’s “not feeling himself”, and he spends pretty much the entire episode proving that fact. (Hint for later on…the nurse first talking to him states that it’s a normal reaction from coma patients, and it will go away. I sure as hell hope so…a ‘kindler, gentler’ Tony is a boring Tony).

The hospital provides several mini-dramas throughout the episode that gives us several unique characters. First up is Jan’s former religious music ‘friend’ Aaron. He’s at the hospital with a “Terri Schiavo: You Go Girl” t-shirt (and I still have no idea what that means), and along with him is a fundamentalist PlasticPastor named Bob (who shall now be called Pastor Botox), waxing on about how birth control is a sin, but Viagra is OK. That Tony doesn’t throw the Reverend of the First Misogynist Church of Falwell through the window is the first sign that he’s not feeling quite up to snuff.

Second visitor is Jason Barone, the son of the owner of the garbage collection company that Tony used as a front. Dad's gone, and naïve Jason wants to sell the company, not understanding what it's all about. He's also doesn't understand that it's one of Johnny Sack's fronts that is trying to buy him out. Actually, there isn't enough room in this write-up to detail all that Jason is clueless about.

Next on the scene is Utilization Review Specialist, and Tony's lust at her lasts all of about 15 seconds until he finds out that all she wants is to get him out of the hospital so that the insurance company she works for doesn't shell out as much money. It's nice to see that even a mafia kingpin has to deal with bureaucratic assholes sometimes. If she and Pastor Botox procreated, there's a 90% chance the child would have "666" etched somewhere on his scalp…assuming mommy didn't eat him first.

The two guests on the non-soul-sucking side are Hal Holbrook as a retired rocket scientist, and DaLux, a rapper that caught nine slugs, meaning he's about to go quadruple platinum because of it. Tony manages to strike up a friendship with both of them, with the scientist providing the other extreme from the fundamentalist regarding his outlook on life and "what it all means". I was kind of disappointed with how they used Hal Holbrook. By the end of the show, he's had his larynx removed because of cancer, and hasn't long to live. Holbrook is such a great actor; I would have enjoyed seeing him in a more expanded role.

Meanwhile, Paulie is the other major story of the week. Seems his dying aunt, the nun, has one last little deathbed confession to make. She's not his aunt…she's his mother, and the woman he thinks is his mother is actually his aunt, as he was given to her to avoid public shame before Aunt/Mom went into the convent. Darth Vader then chimes in "Paulie. I'm you're father"…and the lost/shot Russian says "Paulie…I'm your sister"

Now we all know that Paulie is going to take this in a calm, unselfish, mature, rational manner, don't we? That is; after he throws mama's LCD flatscreen out the window, cuts off her money, spaces out continually with Tony, cries like a

baby when Jason's mom tells a sob story, and then kneecaps Jason. Paulie? Acting rationally? Bill Cowher has a better chance of keeping all his saliva in his mouth during a game.

DaLux has a protégé at the hospital, who voices his concern of not having enough 'street cred' because he's never been shot. Bobby, having been bitched out by Tony earlier about carrying more of his weight (so to speak), convinces the sap to pay him $7,000 for "expert marksman" Bobby to shoot him in "the fleshy part of the thigh". Heh. More on that later.

War is coming between Tony and Johnny Sack's crew, and it won't be the little skirmish that it was last season. The garbage business negotiations end with them reaching an agreement that still manages to leave both sides extremely pissed…Tony more than Johnny. He feels he's being taken advantage of due to his condition, and it's about the only thing bringing glimpses of the old Tony out. At the end of the episode, Tony sits outside as the wind blows…happy to be alive, and all that shit. Don't expect that inner peace to last very long.

As I said earlier, it was a very different type of episode…one that actually was more enjoyable the second time around on Tivo, when I focused in on the conversations a little closer. Perhaps a bit risky in the almost overuse of metaphors from Chase, but at least he hasn't yet gone to David Lynch levels of strangeness seen in season two of "Twin Peaks".

Next week: It seems that Tony's "every day is a gift" mentality is freaking out his side and encouraging Johnny Sack's side to go after them. My guess is that there will be a loss of some sort on Tony's side at the hands of Phil that will totally set him off, and once he does, he'll go medieval on someone's ass.

Best Scene: Tony, Paulie, DaLux (and his entourage) and the rocket scientist in the hospital room (suite) watching a fight on a big plasma TV. The focus bounced around more than an ADHD eight year old after a pound bag of Skittles, but it was

still a mesmerizing thing to watch.

Most humorous Scene: Bobby shooting Da Lux's protégé in the ass. Now THAT is going to give some major street cred to the homie (not). All I could think of after watching that scene was Gene Wilder in "Blazing Saddles", talking about turning around and walking away after a six year old yelled "draw" at him. "The little bastard shot me in the ass!" That, and Forest Gump ("I got shot in the butt ox").

Best Lines:

Aaron: "Have you heard the good news?"
Tony (wincing in pain trying to up his morphine): "JESUS CHRIST!"
Aaron: "That's right."

Latest Whacking Odds:

1) Vito – Tony didn't exactly have many kind things to say about him. Carmela also let Tony know about Vito possibly shorting her on the Columbian heist money. It's not a matter of "if" with Vito, only "when".

2) Phil – Between getting squeezed by Johnny Sack, and the aggravation he's causing Tony's boys, I'd also put Phil on the 99% whackable list. Might even happen during the same episode Vito goes down (and we can double entendre that one to death, can't we?)

3) Paule – I'm sticking to my uneducated guess that Paulie, Silvio, or Christuhfuh gets it this season. After these meltdowns, the odds are heavily 'favoring' Paulie.

4) Uncle JuniorMummyHead – Not mentioned much last night…except for Tony telling Bobby to never mention him again.

5) JT – I just don't see him making it through the year. Knowing that Chris does meet up with Ben Kingsley, we know the movie storyline continues…which can't be good for JT's long term viability.

6) Finn – still on the list as long as Vito is alive.

7) Jason – we haven't heard the last of him. Although if Finn bites it, Jason may end up hooking up with Meadow. And their relationship ends up facilitating Paulie's cement shoe fitting.

8) Pastor Botox – But I first want to see this Pat Robertson wannabe with a line of blow on his nose and a hooker on his crotch.