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978-0-521-55950-8 - Francis Ford Coppola's Godfather Trilogy

Edited by Nick Browne

Excerpt

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NICK BROWNE

## Fearful A-Symmetries

### VIOLENCE AS HISTORY IN THE GODFATHER FILMS

By almost any account, the *Godfather* films are monuments on the landscape of American cinema. There are, of course, differences of intention and achievement among the three, but the first one, *The Godfather* (1972), stands out in popular and critical opinion as one of the enduring works of the American cinema. The standing of *The Godfather Part II* (1974), nearly comparable to the first, lies not only in its art, but in its outlook, so rare in American films from early 1970s, on a flawed American protagonist as an emblem of American empire. *The Godfather Part III* brings out the theme of redemption present in Coppola's vision from the start. It is natural to regard these films as a trilogy to deal with the continuity of a directorial vision of the century-long working through of economic crime and punishment in the inner sanctum of an American dynasty.

As a commercial venture, *The Godfather* and, to a lesser extent, *The Godfather Part II* were blockbusters. In its day, *The Godfather* was one of the most profitable films of all time. Over the years, it is said, the trilogy did business of more than a billion dollars. *The Godfather* continues to be loved by the public and remains one of the few enduring, still popular classics of American cinema. The films were breakout, critical successes as well, earning more than two dozen Academy Award nominations among them. *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather Part II* (1974) both won Academy Awards as "Best Picture." Coppola and Puzo won twice for "Best

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Adapted Screenplay." Coppola won "Best Director" for *II*. Brando and DeNiro both won acting awards. Moreover, the first two films amounted to a social phenomenon – they entered into every level of American culture – high and low – sometimes by attitude, sometimes by quotation, and sometimes through their iconic, signature scenes. The first two films entered not only movie history, but American mythology as well, and have stayed there for more than twenty-five years.

The distinctiveness of the *Godfather* trilogy lies at the intersection of the national character of the system of American film genres and the tradition of the European art cinema. These works exhibit a very high level of craft in the making of the film. The sets, costumes, lighting, cinematography, sound, music, editing, and so on together provide an extraordinary level of sensuous delight in cinematic design and presentation. The *Godfather* films are, moreover, deeply rooted in the conventions of the American crime film and the social experience of the ambitious outsider that shapes that genre's attitudes. The distinctiveness of Coppola's and Puzo's adaptation of Puzo's novel lies in its reinterpretation of the generic conventions of the crime film in the direction of the family melodrama and the epic. It is this transformation of subject matter that gives the films their popular appeal.

The Coppola aesthetic, that is to say the sensibility and concept that informs these works, is at the same time realist and theatrical. The films might even be regarded as antimodernist in the way they foreground action taking place in the photographed world without the need for special effects and in the understated transparency of their cinematic technique. Notwithstanding the fact that some of the most celebrated scenes are those assembled by Eisenstein-like juxtaposition (for example, the intercutting of the execution of the enemies with Michael's godson's baptism that includes the line "Do you renounce Satan?"), the Coppola aesthetic is ultimately one of "mise-en-scène" – that is to say of acting, blocking, and delivery of dialog. The narrative of *The Godfather* possesses the simplicity of linear development by plausible

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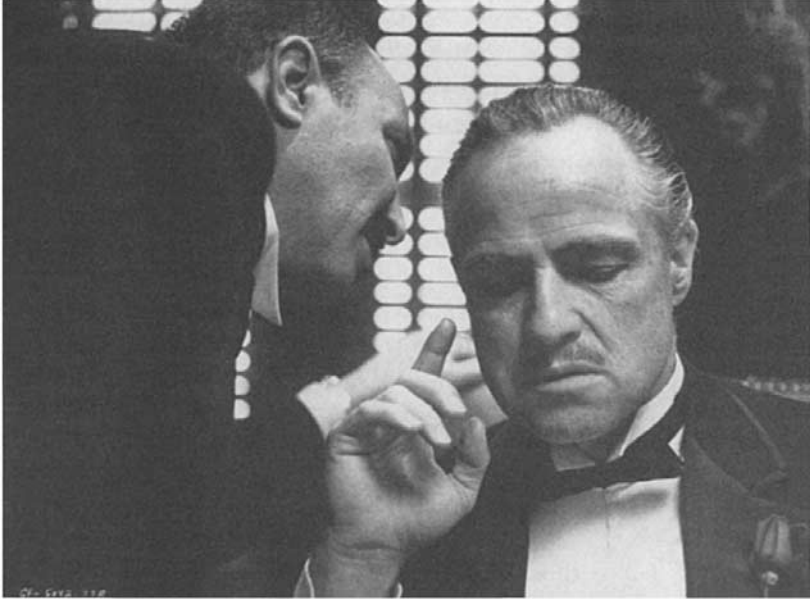
complication following reliable dramatic laws of action and reaction. *Godfather II's* narrative architecture – the alternation of present and past – taking the viewer back through the century – though initially complicating – locates the contemporary story of the 1950s and 1960s squarely within a chronological presentation of American history. This history takes the form of repetition with a difference – namely, underlining the progressive loss of aura and the weakening justification for violence through a narrative pattern of parallelism and counterpoint – for example, the comparison of opening festivals, the decisive act of murder that launches and establishes both godfathers, and so on.

The films' power is closely connected to the tour-de-force performances of Brando and especially Pacino and to the distinctively American style of acting – “the method” – that they embody. The brilliance of Coppola's direction per se (that is, beyond the forcefulness and ingenuity needed to write and cast the films) consists of two parts. The first is eliciting from actors, individually and together, performances that convincingly take the character across the changes of time and experience to render absolutely definitive crystallizations of Coppola's interpretation of the story as the decline of honor in the ascent to power. He shapes Brando's aging, judicious, distracted benevolence with the emergence of Pacino's movement away from simple filial duty toward the calculating, aggressive, repressed, and hypocritical killer of foe and family that he becomes. The second quality of Coppola's direction consists of the discovery of a cinematic style, principally through framing and composition of individual shots, that gives epic force and meaning to the actors' work. It is a cinema of transparency, a cinematic style that has no need to call attention to itself but only to display the inherent theatricality of the action taking place in the middle distance, for it is the framelines and the lighting that create dark hollows and zones of significant illumination that give meaning to the actors' looks, movement, and lines. This cinematic style does not present but discloses the drama. The dialogue is not literary though it comes from a novel, but seems to issue directly from the

milieu. The opening shot of *The Godfather* is a striking anomaly to the norm that confirms this thesis. Beginning with a riveting story of insult and injustice recounted by the undertaker Bonasera directly to the camera, the drama unfolds by an almost imperceptible slow reverse zoom that moves across the desk to disclose a listener and stops behind the shoulder of the unidentified figure – the Godfather – as we see in the reverse shot. This technique, possible perhaps only in cinema, clearly defines the space of the actor, aligns it to the principal character, and underlines the inherently spatial integrity of the drama. It is this concept of a stable, centered space and the determined positions of the actors in the frame that helps to give the characters their particular dramatic and epic weight. The cinematic frames, though deliberately composed, are rarely beautiful in their own right, but function both to recount the story and to interpret it by tone, scale, and texture. Rarely has American cinema made such powerful use of overtones to dramatize a scene. The importance of *Godfather* films lies both in their knowledge and redeployment of the conventions of the genre and in a directoral intelligence operating within the most distinctive traditions of American theater as adapted to cinema.

The writing on the *Godfather* films has mostly been journalistic. Apart from a few articles in small journals, writers of articles and books usually have documented the production of the films – that is to say, the hiring of Coppola; the writing, the casting, and the shooting; the history of troubles on the set; the story of the Mafia, and so forth. The result has been a comprehensive picture of the inner workings of the production of the movies. Coppola, by contrast, has offered expansive and frank statements about his aesthetic ambitions and the intentions that informed the films. What is often missing from the general critical picture of these films is analysis of the form, function, and significance of the films and the social and artistic context of Coppola's achievement. This book provides an orientation to these critical topics for persons who want to go beyond production history, personality, and anecdote to view these works critically as American masterpieces.

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Marlon Brando, the Godfather. *The Godfather* (1972), Copyright Paramount Pictures, 1972. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive

### SYNOPSIS

*The Godfather* (1972) is the story of the struggle of the Corleone family of New York, principally its head Don Vito and his youngest son Michael, to maintain and eventually transform the family business in the face of murderous challenges by other Mafia families to their preminent position. Ultimately, it is the story of father and sons, and of an old world and the new, and of Michael's succession to power as head of the family.

The film opens at the family compound on Long Island in 1945 with the grand wedding of the Don's daughter Connie and with Michael's return from the war accompanied by his fiancée, Kay. From within his darkened sanctuary/office, the Don dispenses justice to an aggrieved petitioner and agrees to help his godson get a leading part in an upcoming Hollywood movie.

The film's story moves decisively forward with "the Turk's" (Sollozzo's) request for the Don's help – a million-dollar loan and access to the Corleones' political network of judges, politicians, and police – in order to expand his criminal empire in narcotics. When the Don refuses in order not to jeopardize his other businesses, Sollozzo's partners kill Luca Brasi, the Corleones' number one tough guy, shoot the Don himself, leaving him wounded in the street, and kidnap the Don's number one adviser, his adopted son Tom, a lawyer who he expects will negotiate a peace. Fredo, the second son, is left crying in the street. With the Don in the hospital, the eldest son, the hot-blooded Sonny, plans an all-out frontal attack against Sollozzo's associates. On a visit to the hospital, Michael discovers and foils a second attempt on his father's life. Seeing that his wounded father will remain in danger until a decisive step is taken to eliminate the threat, he coolly plans and carries out a daring execution of Sollozzo and his police ally McCluskey by shooting them point blank in a quiet restaurant. Michael secretes himself in Sicily under the protection of his father's old friend.

The war between the families expands. Sonny is set up by Connie's husband Carlo and Michael is set up by his own bodyguard. Sonny is killed, but a bomb intended for Michael explodes, killing his young Sicilian wife instead. To end the killing and bring Michael home, Don Vito negotiates a peace by making a political accommodation with the other families – Barzini and Tattaglia. Michael returns as head of the Corleone family and as time passes convinces Kay to marry him – promising that the business is soon to be fully legitimate. He plans to resettle the family and its business in Las Vegas by taking over the casino in one of the big hotels run by Moe Greene.

The rival families in New York, however, plan to have Michael killed. Drawing on his long experience of interfamily war, the Don tells Michael that he will be betrayed by someone in his own group. After expressing regret for the life Michael has entered and the lost opportunities of possible legitimate power, the Don dies quietly while playing with his grandson. The funeral shows who

the traitor is, and Michael plans his revenge for Sonny's murder. While Michael stands godfather to his nephew's baptism, his enemies from within his own group – Tessio, and Connie's husband, Carlo – and the others from without – the heads and operatives of the rival families (Barzini, Tattaglia, Cuneo, and Stracchi and Moe Greene) – are slaughtered one by one. When confronted by his wife Kay with responsibility for Carlo's death, Michael denies it. The film ends as Michael closes the door against his wife and his lieutenants bow to kiss his hand, recognizing Michael officially as the new Godfather.

*The Godfather Part II* (1974) interweaves two related stories – that of the coming of age of Vito Corleone (the aging Don of the first film) in the early part of the century (1901–1918) and the struggles of his son Michael in his conduct and defense of Mafia business in Las Vegas, Havana, and Washington, DC, in the late 1950s. The film tells a story of the corruptions of power and personal price that Michael must pay for its exercise.

These two historically distinct stories are presented in alternating strands beginning in 1901 with the murder of Vito's father by a Sicilian Mafia Don and his escape to America, and concludes with Michael alone outside his mansion at Lake Tahoe in Nevada. Vito's story, set in Little Italy, concerns his friendship with the young Clemenza, and the beginning of his life of crime, culminating in the murder of the local Black Hand boss and his elevation to a man deserving respect.

Don Michael's story, the present of the film, begins at a party in Lake Tahoe celebrating his son Anthony's first communion. Michael and a U.S. senator from Nevada discuss the arrangements for a gambling license for a Las Vegas hotel. Michael rejects the senator's demand for a payoff and turns instead to consider a possible partnership with Hyman Roth, a Florida Mafia chief and old friend of his father. Frankie Pentangeli, now head of the Corleones' businesses in New York, asks Michael's help in eliminating the Rosato brothers' challenge to his control. But Roth is the patron of the Rossatos and Michael declines.

After an attempt on his life, Michael leaves his business in Nevada

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to Tom and joins in a partnership with Roth. Shortly after, Senator Geary falls under Corleone control when he is found with a dead prostitute. In New York the Rossatos, with the secret help of Fredo, Michael's weak brother, bungle an attempt on Pentangeli's life.

Michael joins Roth in a provisional agreement with the Cuban dictator in Havana to take over gambling there. Against the backdrop of a popular revolution that unseats the dictator, Michael decides to pull out and discovers that his brother Fredo has been secretly assisting Hyman Roth and was in fact involved in the attempt at Lake Tahoe on his life. Michael confronts a guilty Fredo, who flees. Before departing a chaotic Havana, Michael tries unsuccessfully to have Roth killed. He returns home to learn that his wife has miscarried.

Pentangeli, believing that Michael tried to have him killed, turns state's evidence. Michael is called before a Senate committee investigating organized crime, but with Senator Geary's public defense of his good character and Pentangeli's curious refusal to testify, the inquiry collapses. Kay tells Michael she intends to leave him and that contrary to what he was led to believe, she had an abortion – refusing to bring another Corleone son into the world and declaring “all this must end.” Michael and Kay become completely estranged.

At the funeral of their mother, Connie asks Michael's forgiveness for her neglect and for her brother Fredo. Michael plans his final revenge for the attack on him and his family. Pentangeli commits suicide like a good soldier and Michael arranges to have Roth and finally his brother Fredo killed. A flashback shows a young idealistic Michael who has just enlisted in the Marines at a festive birthday party in 1941 with his father and brothers. The final scene shows Michael after having seen his brother killed sitting alone and bereft against a cold winter sky.

*The Godfather Part III* (1990) opens eight years after *Part II* ended with a desolate and now derelict mansion at Lake Tahoe. Don Michael Corleone has moved to New York City, is divorced from Kay who has since remarried, and is separated from his children. The haunting memory of the death of his brother Fredo remains on his mind.



The story proper begins on the day Michael – now fully legitimate – is to be recognized by the Pope for his philanthropic work by his induction into the distinguished Order of Saint Sebastian. At the festive celebration afterward, he meets his grown-up son Anthony who declares that he refuses to participate in family business and will pursue a singing career instead. His daughter Mary meets and falls for her cousin Vincent Mancini, Sonny Corleone's hot-blooded, grown-up illegitimate child. The inheritor of the Corleone business interests in New York is now Joey Zaza. Michael is asked to arbitrate the bad blood between Zaza and Vincent, his lieutenant. Each wants the other dead. Vincent declares he wants to protect Michael, and Michael slowly agrees to introduce Vincent into the ways of the world.

The archbishop in charge of the Vatican Bank asks Michael for financial assistance. The bank, it turns out, has lost more than \$700 million. Michael, seeking a way to wash away his history in crime, agrees to deposit \$600 million when he is recognized as chairman of a venerable European holding company, Immobiliare, in which the Church has a 25 percent stake. The archbishop agrees pending final ratification by the Pope in Rome. The other Mafia families of New York want, of course, to be part of the deal, but Michael refuses and terminates his business relationship with them by giving each, except Zaza, a generous payout. Zaza, insulted, declares war. The meeting ends with a helicopter attack, killing many of the heads of the families and leaving the question: Who is behind Zaza – who is the secret enemy? Though Michael's \$600 million has been deposited with the bank, ratification of his appointment as chairman is delayed when the Pope falls ill.

Michael has a diabetic stroke and has to be removed to the hospital. While Michael is recovering, Mary and Vincent consummate their romance, and with Connie's okay, Vincent kills Zaza. Upon recovering, Michael sets up with his old friend in Sicily, Don Tomassino, in order to celebrate Anthony's debut at the Palermo Opera House. Lucchesi, a high official in the Vatican banking hierarchy, is identified as the probable prime mover behind Zaza. Michael begins to distrust Altabello, and the go-between, and through Vincent intrigues to bring out Altabello's true colors. He

learns that Altabello and Lucchesi are plotting his murder. Michael is introduced to a good priest, Father Lamberto. He confides his financial problem and for the first time in his adult life, makes a confession including the fact that he ordered his brother's death. Michael asks Kay as well for forgiveness.

The plot to cover up financial fraud at the Vatican and the plot to kill Michael proceed. The ill Pope dies and the good priest is elected to replace him. Michael, sick and seeking redemption, turns over the management of the counterplot and his protection to Vincent. Vincent is recognized by Michael as the new Don Corleone, but there is a price. Vincent must renounce his love for Mary and definitively separate from her. The new Pope sets out to clean up Vatican finances and ratifies the Immobiliare deal, effectively installing Michael as chairman. While the premiere of *Cavalleria Rusticana*, an opera of betrayal and revenge, unfolds in Palermo, Michael's counterplot unfolds in Rome through his agents: Altabello is poisoned at the opera, the deceitful archbishop is shot, Lucchesi is stabbed, and Keinszig ("God's banker") is seen hung from a bridge. The plot to kill Michael during the performance at the opera house goes wrong and the action spills out onto the front steps. The assassin shoots and wounds Michael but is shot dead by Vincent. Mary, however, has been hit by a bullet meant for her father and collapses dead in front of him. Michael utters a profound cry of loss and despair.

The scene on the steps dissolves into a reprise of the dance between father and daughter that took place at the opening of the film, followed by a montage of dance scenes – Michael with Apollonia, Michael with Kay – which dissolve in turn to images of a dying Michael, a very old man, alone in the Sicilian sunshine.

#### COPPOLA: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

The public image of Coppola the artist tends, probably more than other film directors, to converge around the figure of the man himself. Coppola's career is often read like Orson Welles's – as an emblem of conflict between an independent genius and