

THE GODFATHER (1972)

"Leave the gun. Take the cannoli."

Major Credits

Director: Francis Ford Coppola

Screenplay: Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola, based on
Puzo's novel

Cinematography: Gordon Willis

Music: Nino Rota

Costumes: Anna Hill Johnstone

Cast: Marlon Brando (Don Vito Corleone), Al Pacino (Michael), James Caan (Sonny), Robert Duvall (Tom Hagen), Richard Castellano (Clemenza), Abe Vigoda (Tessio), Diane Keaton (Kay Adams), Talia Shire (Connie), John Cazale (Fredo), Gianni Russo (Carlo), John Marley (Jack Woltz), Simonetta Stefanelli (Apollonia)

Background

After attending film school and making a few porno flicks, Coppola began his career in commercial films working for Roger Corman at American International Pictures, which specialized in low-budget movies for the drive-in circuit. He graduated to writing scripts for Patton and The Great Gatsby and directing rather undistinguished films (You're a Big Boy Now, The Rain People) before hitting it big with The Godfather.

Based on the best-selling novel by Mario Puzo, The Godfather became the highest grossing movie of all time and as such, marked an important change in American film production towards the "blockbuster mentality": costly productions with saleable story lines and enormous advertising campaigns. The tremendous popularity of the film brought about The Godfather, Part II, with Robert De Niro playing the young Vito Corleone along with much of the original cast.

Cinematic Qualities

The Godfather is firmly rooted in the realist tradition, providing unbroken audience participation in its lengthy (175 minutes) narrative through a seamless editing style (e.g., shot/reverse shot in dialogue scenes) and careful attention to period details. Its symbolic resonance (such as when, near the end of the film, Michael sits in the creased leather chair vacated by his father) and expressionistic moments (the intense sound of the subway just before Michael assassinates Sollozzo and McCluskey) always originate in realistic images.

1. cinematography--Willis often composes the mise-en-scene with a painter's eye for color; the melodrama is reinforced by contrasting scenes of darkness and light, most obviously in the opening wedding sequence.

2. acting--Brando, of course, won an Oscar for his performance (which he refused), and Pacino is compelling in his transformation from war hero to assassin, but The Godfather is equally marked by superb supporting players, particularly Robert Duvall as Tom Hagen and (in a part significantly expanded in Godfather II) John Cazale as Fredo. Note how all the minor characters are precisely developed and command our attention.

3. camera movement--three notable examples among many: a) the backward dolly in the opening scene, withdrawing us not into a safe establishing shot but deeper into darkness; b) the restless, voyeuristic tracking shot in Woltz's bedroom; c) the slow track towards Michael as he plots revenge against Sollozzo, transforming a three-shot in depth (Sonny in foreground, Tom in background) into a privileged close-up.

4. cross-cutting--Coppola's editing gives new dimension to the technique of Porter and Griffith. Note the dialectical relationships established in the cutting from office to wedding, from New York to Sicily, and from baptism to assassination.

Topics for Discussion

1. Coppola both revives and revises the classical gangster genre under the influence of recently successful films like Bonnie and Clyde and the political paranoia of the late Vietnam era (Watergate is a more pronounced influence in Godfather II). How does he transform the conventions of the traditional gangster movie as defined by Robert Warshaw? Compare The Godfather with such classic gangster films as Little Caesar, Public Enemy, and White Heat.

2. "I believe in America," the undertaker Bonasera begins the film; while Clemenza pisses in the marshes and Paulie is executed, a panoramic long shot carefully includes the Statue of Liberty in the left background. With these and many other touches, Coppola links the Corleone story with the mythic idea of America. How does The Godfather reflect upon particular American values and beliefs?

3. Robert Phillip Kolker (A Cinema of Loneliness) suggests that there are three Corleone families operating one within another: the outer family, including women and children; the inner circle of men only, intent on "business"; and the myth of family, a concept that keeps the outer circle secure, and the inner circle motivated for more power. Examine how the film's emphasis on "family" complicates our view of the Corleones--and of ourselves.

4. "I make no apologies. That's my life," Vito tells Michael near the end of the film. The Godfather has been criticized both for its gory display of violence and its glamorization of organized crime, in short for its blatant amorality. Is it possible to define Coppola's moral attitude towards his subject?