

Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* Trilogy

Edited by

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Francis Ford Coppola, the director. Copyright Paramount Pictures, 1972. Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive

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

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

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 crystalizations 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.



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 preeminent 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

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

the powerful and ultimately repressive force of the industry. The biographical record is well established and often repeated. The second son of Carmine and Italia Coppola, Francis Coppola was born in Detroit in 1939. Carmine Coppola was a professional musician, a concert flautist, composer, and conductor, who played under Toscanini in the NBC Symphony. Francis, stricken by polio at the age of nine and confined to bed for a year, grew up in the New York City suburbs. He attended Hofstra University where he was an active and indeed much celebrated figure in campus theater, graduating in 1959. He enrolled at the UCLA Film School where he won writing awards, met many of his friends and collaborators (mostly from USC), and found his first professional work in "the nudies." His apprenticeship at twenty-three began with Roger Corman, "King of the B's," who financed his first commercial feature, *Dementia 13* (1963). While working for Warner-Seven Arts he wrote, and in 1970 received an Academy award for, the script of *Patton*. Three films later (two small, independent-minded films and a Hollywood musical), in 1970, at the age of thirty-one he was offered *The Godfather*.

In 1969 while on the road in Nebraska shooting *The Rain People* from his original script (an identity story of a woman who "misplaces her children"), Coppola searched for a way to give institutional form to his idea of independent film making. From 1969 to the mid-1990s, Zoetrope was the public face and form of Coppola's attempt to merge personal, auteurist film making with an ensemble cast with a new type of studio film and associated distribution. The principal drama of Coppola's artistic life has been the effort to make this vision a functioning reality. With money from Warner Brothers, in 1969 Coppola set up a small, highly equipped studio in San Francisco for development. On seeing Lucas's *THX-1138* and the scripts for *Apocalypse Now* and *The Conversation*, Warner asked for its money back. However, the Zoetrope concept of the return of artistic control of film making to film makers and the real efforts he made in that direction was the basis of his reputation as the godfather of the New Hollywood.

In the 1970s Coppola reached international stature and acclaim

by directing four highly successful films: *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather Part II* (1974) (both at Paramount); the *Conversation* (1974), an art film about electronic bugging; and his Vietnam film, *Apocalypse Now* (1979), done with United Artists. The two *Godfather* films raised Coppola to the heights of the industry, becoming among the most profitable and acclaimed films of the era. Both films won “Best Picture.” *Godfather Part II* earned Coppola “Best Director” in 1974. In the same year, *The Conversation* earned the “Best Picture” award at the Cannes Film Festival, and a few years later *Apocalypse Now* was nominated for eight Academy Awards.

In 1979 Coppola was at the peak of his reputation. His record of financial and artistic success was legend. He was seen as a flamboyant, even reckless, risk taker, an innovative technological visionary, a devotee of film as an international art, the patriarch of the “Auteur Renaissance” in Hollywood, and an ambitious mogul ready and committed to change Hollywood. The testing of the limits of his personal physical endurance and even sanity in the shoot of *Apocalypse Now* consolidated his image not only as the godfather of blockbusters – he produced one of the most successful movies of all time – but the crazed auteur protagonist of “the ultimate movie.”

With his purchase of Hollywood General Studios in 1980, Coppola’s entrepreneurial ambitions became embroiled in a financial morass that led eventually at the end of the decade to personal bankruptcy and artistic decline. At the start, the Zoetrope spirit and its believers were ensconced at the Hollywood studio. Coppola distributed – in magnificent style – a number of foreign classics, including Abel Gance’s *Napoleon*. He distributed new work by leading European and Japanese directors and assisted and supported new productions by old friends. The business concept behind Zoetrope was to gain greater control over the film-making process by financing development of new projects with loans secured by future revenues. Coppola was studio artistic director and all-round godfather. But, in addition, he was committed to pay for new projects and maintain the staff with his own money. In taking on *One from the Heart* (1980), Coppola, an enthusiast of the coming com-

munications “revolution” was betting that the new technologies, in particular video, would profoundly alter the technological basis of film production. Innovation proved to be expensive. On release, the film recouped only a small fraction of its high cost. Development of key projects faltered or collapsed, and when Coppola became producer and sought additional loans, costs grew. The large debts incurred for setting up the studio and the development of expensive creative projects was only half-satisfied by the bank-ordered sale of the studio in 1984. The Zoetrope experiment of institutionalizing his pioneering new way had collapsed.

In the second half of the 1980s, Coppola moved again in the two directions that had defined his artistic personality – toward small experimental works in locations distant from Hollywood (the black-and-white *Rumble Fish*, for example) and works as a director-for-hire at established studios. Critical opinion had it that he brought skill as a craftsman but little in the way of feeling to these Hollywood projects. *Peggy Sue Got Married* (1986), a back-to-the-future story set in 1960, was his biggest hit of the decade. *Tucker: The Man and His Dream* (1988), the story of a startup, independent automobile manufacturer of the 1950s who contended with Detroit – and lost – was generally understood as a personal allegory of creativity and survival. In 1990 he completed *The Godfather Part III* and subsequently turned to directing and to producing faithful adaptations of works of classic horror. After he declared personal and corporate bankruptcy in 1992, the considerable profits from *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* allowed Coppola to clear his debts and move on.

THE GODFATHER FILMS IN CONTEXT

The crime genre is a traditional, long-standing form of American film making. The genre shows a different face according to the ways it adapts to changing social circumstances. By delineating the urban boundaries of the lawful, the genre indicates the possibilities and limits of living and representing American life outside the law. Jack Shadoian, in his *Dreams and Deadends*, is

right to say that the genre is the central paradigm for investigating the inherent contradictions of the American dream of success.

The genre is structured by a fundamental antagonism – between the gangster and the law. The result, violence – of a specific kind – is the signature gesture of the genre. In the classic form, the law was ultimately legitimate and governed the perspective on the story. In the Vietnam era, however, the values attached to the conflict between the two parties were reversed. In *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), for example, audience identification with the outlaw position of the protagonists was legitimated and the couple mythologized by the force of the violence directed against them. The distinctive place of the *Godfather* films in the evolution of the Vietnam era crime genre was its displacement of the classical conflict in an essentially conservative direction by reinstating the Church as the arbiter of justice. In these films the police and legal apparatus have been rendered as incidental – either ineffective or corrupt – present only at the periphery of the action. Legitimate civil authority is nearly invisible, simply an external reference for the criminal enterprise. The opposition between the gangster and the law as the animating conflict of the genre has dissolved. The dramatic locus shifted in the trilogy to a conflict among criminal gangs.

The social world created by the *Godfather* films is that of an aggregation of cooperating, competitive criminal families that requires the implicit sanction of the legitimate world. The first two films bring together and interlock two stories – the struggle over control of the changing postwar, Italian-American underworld and, second, the management of the problem of generational succession – that is passing control within one family from father to the right son. In this world the gang is the family and the family the operative unit in war for self-preservation and expansion. The fortified compound is its physical emblem. Strategic assets must be defended and preserved. Self-preservation requires the men of the family to take their place within the patriarchal/military order. Women occupy a space apart. Loyalty to the family is the fundamental ethic. Family affiliation can take several

forms: relations by blood, by marriage, and by employment. Breach of the law of loyalty is punishable by death.

Dramatic action in this world can be initiated by a challenge from without (Sollozzo wants to kill the Don to get access to his official assets, the judges, etc.) or by defection and deceit from within (Carlo betrays Sonny, Fredo betrays Michael). Murder and intrigue for business advantage are the principal mechanisms by which this world moves. In the *Godfather* films the law of the civil order (police and so on) has been replaced by the iron law of familial self-preservation in the name of the father. This is why the story of Michael the son is so important: it leads to the problem of paternal succession, to the problem of power, and finally to the quest for redemption.

As the protagonist of the trilogy, Michael Corleone is the modern successor to the prewar ways of his father. With both a war experience and a college degree, he figures a new era in the world of business signaled by his move from New York to Las Vegas. Like his father, however, Michael's rise to power and his operational legitimacy is founded on a murder. He must still operate between the old (Sicily) and the new (America). The transformation of his personality ("That's my family, Kay, not me") toward ruthlessness is, however, a requirement to occupy his future position. The murder is a decisive, calculated move, the defense of the father at the hospital innovative and strategic. His sexuality is bound to the norms of the family. As patriarch he assumes the responsibility to protect the family (he must be circumspect and reasonable), and in the name of the family, Michael destroys it.

Though violence is by no means exclusive to the crime genre, the genre's conventions take on special cultural weight and significance. Traditionally, the central violent action of the classic form of the genre involved sanctioned agents of the law, that is to say professionals, doing a job. Killing by lawmen was sanctioned in the name of the social order and justified by criminals often in the name of evasion. The violence of the *Godfather* films, however, does not take place within that sanctioned framework. Rather, it takes place almost wholly within the criminal underworld (even

when the underworld as in *Part III* is an elevated one) and takes two principal forms – violence as a business strategy and part of a rational calculation with a wholly secular justification (Sollozzo: “Blood is a big expense.”), and the second: killing as punishment for betrayal of family loyalty. There are degrees of violation and sanction. At the ultimate level, killing of blood relatives (Fredo), is not a *crime* but a *sin* that only the Church can mediate.

In the world of the *Godfathers*, violence is not arbitrary or meaningless. On the contrary, it is a constituent part of a scheme of justice rooted in social necessity. Indeed, the social fabric of the film is constituted by violence. The *Godfather* films, in other words, treat violence as a necessary fact and as part of the social contract that creates the world. Though violence is often graphic (Luca Brazzi’s strangulation), it is never gratuitous. It functions clearly in a strategic plan and its ethical meaning is never obscured. Sonny’s close-up, bloody death by machine gun on the road followed by a kick to the head is a telling emblem of gangland viciousness. By contrast, Michael’s killing of Fredo as he recites his Hail Marys at a great distance carries with it the sense of a moral transgression. Subsequently, Michael suffers. In the *Godfather* films the Church replaces civil law as the ultimate arbiter of justice. Moreover, the Church is a law above the family. Between the presentation of violence as social fact and as religious transgression, is an aesthetic order, evident, for example, in the dramatic culmination of *The Godfather Part III*, which is cast in an operatic mode. Under Coppola’s direction, violence is part of an aesthetic whole and figures importantly in a moral vision on the historical world he represents.

THE ESSAYS

The commentary and criticism on Coppola is extensive. There are literally thousands of items – including Web pages, newspaper articles, essays, books, interviews, films, and so on. The most up-to-date published coverage of his career as a whole is Peter Cowie’s *Coppola: A Biography*. For historical perspective, we

are reprinting here, as appendixes, articles published at the time the films first appeared: William Pechter's "Keeping Up with the Corleones" (1972) and David Denby's "The Two Godfathers" (1976), supplemented with a selected part of a wide-ranging interview with Coppola published shortly after the release of *The Godfather Part II*. The main part of this book, and its reason for being, are the five remarkable, original chapters by leading American film scholars.

Jon Lewis's chapter, "If History Has Taught Us Anything . . .," provides a perspective on the place of the *Godfather* films in the post-1960s Hollywood studio system. In a vivid style of writing that pictures the lives, attitudes, motivations, and argot of the people involved, Lewis shows how the behind-the-scenes business circumstances of the industry and its key players shaped the *Godfather* films. Lewis shows how these films got made and why they are the way they are. The chapter is a case study of a certain kind of collaborative, Hollywood-style film making – the struggle between a young, strong-willed director with an original creative vision and the array of powerful financial interests. For Lewis, the forcefulness and self-assertation of the director in the board room, on the set, and in his public statements was a demonstration of the viability of the "auteur theory" at this uncertain moment in Hollywood history. The power to create the film with a certain cast and style lay principally, but by no means exclusively, with the director. At points the vagaries of ego and price, especially in casting, required a change of plans. Dramatic confirmation and ratification of the importance of the creative individual in the system could be seen in the striking success of these films with both audiences and critics. Coppola was the linchpin of a notable change in the post-1960s studio system: he demonstrated that a personal artistic vision could be, and might even be necessary to, the foundation of enormous financial success, one that inaugurated the Hollywood blockbuster syndrome. The Director's Company, formed to take stock of prominent young directors, was one of a long line of efforts to capitalize on directorial talent in a studio setting. The prestige of Coppola's initial achievement and the

amount of money he made for the studio were measures of his impact and guaranteed his control of *Parts II* and *III*.

For Alessandro Camon, Mafia conduct and its meaning are intimately linked to its mythology, a mythology profoundly changed by the movies. Originally rooted in protection of landowners against possible peasant appropriation of land, over time the Mafia organization became the vehicle both for the protection of property held by aristocrats and for mobility for the underprivileged. The Mafia ethic is a deeply social one concerned with the reproduction of the importance of hereditary status and, in particular, solidifying the bond between father and son. Its patriarchal foundation and the associated paradigm of masculinity – of silence, honor, and protection – governed the relations of men and women in the family. It brought together in an unstable balance two antagonistic attitudes – deep familial devotion and ruthless extermination of enemies in the name of the family.

The acculturation of this Sicilian-originated myth and its translation into popular culture, and into the *Godfather* films in particular, necessarily required adaptation. In America, the celebration of the traditional ethic underwent a cultural displacement that ultimately took the form of disillusionment with its progressive adulteration. The myth was caught between the forces of preservation and assimilation. The mainstreaming of the Mafia myth within a commodity culture profoundly altered its traditional contours and justifications. Popularization of what had been secret, making it public, turned it into spectacle. The *Godfather* films represented a decisive moment in this process of acculturation and disintegration. The films, novels, and television serials put the Mafia code of silence into play, significantly changed the Mafia outlook on itself, and helped move forward crime itself as a journalistic and aesthetic commodity. While undergoing an erosion of its justification, the Mafia became a media creation in its own right. Camon not only provides us with an anatomy of the paradoxes of this mythology, the polarities of its orientation, but in the outline of its historical evolution, shows how and why Mafia mythology has been adapted to modern forms of mass entertainment.

Vera Dika's analysis of the transformation of the image of the Italian criminal and her account of its function as a kind of stereotype provides a view of the *Godfather* films as an American cultural phenomenon. Mafia, she points out, is not a code of lawlessness. Originally, the necessity of the Mafia code lay in the need for a means of protection of the poor or powerless from the injustice of landlords. In *The Godfather*, the Mafia functions by a return to the traditional code to arbitrate injustice and provide protection. The emphasis in the first film especially and in *Godfather Part II* in the retrospective sections is on the chivalrous code of the old Godfather and his Old World ways – a treatment that diminishes his association with crime. The films merge this ethic with a system of family values. Much of the violence in the films is justified by the masculinist ethic in defense of family. By setting the story in the immigrant past and authenticating it with a wealth of historical detail and associated nostalgia, Coppola provided his audience with a reality substitute – an imaginative vehicle for occluding and reworking contemporary anxiety and discontent with the changes in America wrought by the Vietnam war. The film's image of a powerful American success story is invested in the complex aesthetics of nostalgia. The film presents a historical past with the possibility of traditional honor pictured, to be sure, in the process of deteriorating under the pressure of American life. The cinematic image of solitary, masculine power was in fact, Dika argues, a filmic substitute for an actual loss – that of the family, the nation, and even the integrity of the individual in the Vietnam era. *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part II* are, moreover, a fantasy covering over and transforming lost white male privilege from a perspective very much like the men who made the film. "Italianicity," the term Dika gives to a cluster of cultural traits, is a cinematic reconstruction of the genre that grounded the social world of the film in many believable, "authentic" details of period and place. This reconstruction and recasting worked, one might say, for ideological ends. *Part III* for Dika is a self-conscious criticism of the enabling mythology that supports *I and II*. Dika's chapter offers a cultural analysis of the films' popularity and reads

the Italian connection as a refashioned emblem of an American past recounted in the postmodern mode of nostalgia.

Glenn Man's chapter on genre and ideology investigates the contradictory makeup of the crime genre. He regards the genre as formed by the play of a complex set of oppositions – individual/society – being the principal one. In the classic form, the criminal had to give way, usually by death, to the insistence on social order regulated by the law. By the 1960s, however, as in *Bonnie and Clyde*, the perspective of the narration sided with the outsiders, identified with their vitality, and experienced the violence of establishment repression. The classical valences of the opposition – individual/society – were subject to reversal. For Man, *The Godfather* puts forward a positive picture of the family as the fundamental term of social order. But insofar as the family is a metaphor for the social order more generally, the film is an implicit criticism of that order. Coppola's dramatization of Michael's hypocrisy at the very end of the film makes this criticism evident. Through romanticization of the Vito/Michael bond, the film masks criticism of the dominant economic mode in America – rampant capitalism. *The Godfather Part II*, however, makes this criticism overt. It self-consciously works to deromanticize Michael by making more explicit the analogy between the family and the economy as models of social order. Coppola goes further in showing that the cause of Michael's moral disintegration is inseparable from his struggle for social dominance through elimination of his competitors or any other agent (Fredo, for example) that cooperates with them. Man sees the principal impulse in *The Godfather Part II* as a frontal criticism of the ideology of capitalistic self-justification. Michael comes to mirror the world the family inhabits – that is to say, the predatory destructive violence of Mafia business. The paramount exponent of family order becomes the chief architect of its destruction. *Godfather Part III* continues the critical outlook of *Part II* and expands the scope of venality to the "legitimate" world of international high finance. Michael's efforts to atone for his sins can only be pursued within the Church, which is itself subject to fraud and murder. Though sincere in his desire for

redemption, he cannot escape from a world made corrupt by the practitioners of modern business. His attempt at redemption through familial restoration in that world is doomed to failure. His son refuses to follow his father by insisting on a career in music, and his daughter is killed by bullets intended for him. Man treats Coppola's ideological roots as an analysis and confrontation with the contradictions inherent in the psychical and ethical requirements of modern big business. The films stand as major critical statements of the American way of life by staging a drama that shows the price of such huge success.

Naomi Greene in "Family Ceremonies: or, Opera in the *Godfather* Films" argues that in both form and spirit the films are similar to the great works of nineteenth-century Italian opera. She identifies several fundamental formal, operatic strategies that constitute the architecture of the trilogy. They include the films' insistence on the role of the chorus to form and enlarge the drama; the role of musical leitmotifs as a regular reminder of what went before; the use of structural repetition and of comparison from film to film to mark events and to signal change (for example, the ceremonial events that open all three films); the inclination to treat events that provoke extreme emotion in ways that skirt melodrama. But the principal operatic strategy she identifies in the trilogy is the juxtaposition of the ceremonial and the everyday, the sacred and the profane. This contrast is especially evident in scenes of violence where a life is taken. Greene identifies this essential aesthetic as the transformation of the everyday through operatic means, usually liturgical in content, toward the ceremonial. This operatic mode of representation of events runs throughout the films and serves to show how far, morally, Michael has fallen. But in addition, the trilogy draws on operatic narrative and theme to enlarge the resonance of the subject – in particular by the use and reference to works of Mascagni and Verdi. The music of *Cavalleria Rusticana* defines the end of *Godfather Part III*. Likewise, Verdi's *Rigoletto*, a story of the inadvertent murder of a daughter through the intrigues of the father, informs and gives import to the ending of the trilogy. Finally, Greene argues, inas-

much as Verdi's operas were works involving the fate of a nation, the historical scope makes the subject of the *Godfather* films nothing less than the American experience in this century, and like Italian opera, gives Coppola the perspective to witness and evaluate its moral significance. Coppola can be viewed, Greene argues, as the inheritor in terms of both theme and mode of a powerful operatic tradition.