The Godfather

Director: Francis Ford Coppola
Al Pacino: Michael Corleone
Marlon Brando: Don Corleone

Plot Synopsis

Don Corleone is the head of the Corleone family, one of five mafia families which have control of territories spread across New York. On the day of his daughter’s wedding, his family comes together in full for the first time in a long while, including his youngest son Michael. The young Michael has been off at war and returns with a girlfriend, both of whom have no desire to be involved in the family’s mob affairs. After the joy of the wedding fades however, it its replaced with tension. A drug lord, tied with one of the other families, attempts to convince Don Corleone to join in on the narcotics. This ends in disaster, with Don Corleone shot, war among the families, and elder son Sonny taking charge of the Corleone family.

Though he attempts to keep from becoming involved, Michael finds himself increasingly drawn closer to the darker affairs of the family’s life. He even ends up at the hospital, using wits
to protect his father from being assassinated in his sleep. As time progresses, he grows more distant from his lover, and far closer to the mafia, something which he seems to have more an affinity for than even Sonny. In the end, Michael decides that he must be the one to kill the drug lord, crafting a brilliant plan involving hiding a weapon inside the meeting place before hand, while working under the guise of setting up peace negotiations. Michael succeeds in ending the lives of the corrupt drug lord and a police captain, and is shuttled to Sicily for safekeeping.

While Michael attempts to adjust to his new life, Sonny continues running the Corleone family… nearly into the ground. As Don Corleone slowly grows back to health, Sonny deals violently with the conflict between the families, as well as his newlywed and pregnant sister’s abusive husband. This all comes to a head when Sonny is mercilessly gunned down by the other Dons, while Michael gets married in Sicily, only to have his new wife murdered as well. Don Corleone, regaining strength, makes a deal with the other families to agree to the drug trade, and to stop the violence. Upon striking the deal, Michael is brought back into the country.

With Sonny dead, the Don begins grooming the darkening Michael to replace him as the head of the family. Michael promises to keep his father’s arrangements, though he doesn’t trust the other families to keep the no kill policy after Don Corleone’s death. Michael is faced with a quick dilemma, as his sister asks him to be the Godfather of her child. His decision is briefly halted when his father dies of a stroke suddenly. At the funeral, Michael grieves the loss of both is innocence, as well as his father, and accepts both the position of Don, and the rite of Godfather.

On a bright day, within a stained-glass church, Michael attends the christening. As the ancient words are spoken, Michael’s hitmen fill the other Dons with lead at various places around the city, ending the leadership of the five families and giving Michael full control of New
York. He has become the Godfather. After weeding out the corruption within his own ranks, he takes his seat in the office of his father, preparing to make future offers which none shall refuse. (Coppola 1)

**Theme**

*The bond between family is unbreakable.*

The plot entirely revolves around the themes of family and togetherness. From the five families, to the specifics of the Corleone family, it litters the screen. Even when characters fail or betray, they are almost always given second chances or second thought, simply due to familial connection. Every character, specifically Don Corleone, regards family as the highest bond. This is the primary reason why the bloodshed between families is such a horrifying war to all of them. It is an unthinkable betrayal. (Dramatica 3)
Symbol

The christening of Connie’s child symbolizes Michael’s baptism into the role of Don.

Michael agrees to be the Godfather of Connie’s child immediately following his father’s death. During the ceremony, as his first act as Don, he has every other family head assassinated. As this all progresses in tandem, in one of cinema’s finest examples of editing, we see both the child’s baptism, as well as Michael’s symbolic transition into a criminal overlord. (YouTube 5)

Camera Choices in specific scene

The film opens with simply dialogue over darkness, telling us to listen. When the light comes up, we’re right in the face of the man speaking, drawing us into his story. This ultra-close shot slowly pulls back in a reverse zoom, allowing us to follow every snippet of the story as the room
is revealed. The room itself is darkly lit, yellows, browns and blacks being its color palette. It’s a very muddy color; a morally conflicted room. As we zoom out, the character speaking in shrunk, appearing as an ant to the looming silhouette that come into view in the foreground, a specter listening intently to the conversation. Don Corleone. As the man concludes, the Don motions him over, still without cutting. We see the man lean down and whisper his request in his ear, while Don Corleone does not move, the man moves for Don Corleone.

We then cut to the Don’s reaction shot, framed in a medium low angle, dictating further that the listener is the one in power here, not the speaker. He will not help the man. We see a wide shot of the entire room, showing the Don sitting at his desk in comfort as the man leans over the desk begging. Situated around the corners of the room are bodyguards, blending into the dark edges of the light.

Coppola then shows us a POV from the man, who is now revealed to be named Bonasera, allowing us to watch in the same helplessness he feels as Corleone denies his request. Behind Don Corleone are a series of window shades, casting a strong and stable horizontal light across him.

We are then treated to an angle from below of Bonasera, his face darkened as he asks Don Corleone to kill the men who ruined his daughter’s life. Corleone stands, and we follow him in a medium shot as he retreats towards the horizontal blinds, drawing in their strength. He
makes his way around the desk, and stands over Bonasera, towering above. An elemental oppressor. Bonasera cowers in a high angle, and kisses the Don’s hand, calling him by the title Godfather. (YouTube 4)

Visual Design

The Killing of Sollozzo and McCluskey

In the middle of the film is a tense and poignant scene in which Michael is tasked with eliminating the men responsible for the attempt on his father’s life. The shooting is to take place in a small Italian restaurant. The building is very empty, creating a lonely isolation. This is furthered by the fact that the sequence takes place at night, a red neon sign blazing in the window. The interior of the restaurant is very much browns and grays and white, giving it an earthy, authentic feel. Both Sollozzo and McCluskey often overlap with Michael, giving the feeling that he is trapped. Unable to escape. There is a lot of horizontal lines in the design of the building in the blinds and the walls showing that someone strong is in control, but also a lot of diagonals and curves, drawing interest, and perhaps keeping us guessing as to who is in control.
Michael wears a shirt with a diagonally lined collar, accentuating his face, which bears a large bruise from a prior incident. Sollozo’s tie is very diagonal, and McCluskey has a napkin tucked into his shirt. Every character here has something near their face, drawing attention to their features. It’s all about the eyes in this scene.

Michael gets up to go into the bathroom, which is small and enclosed. It’s filled with horizontal lines, as Michael is revealed to be in control. However, there are some diagonal lines as well, and some vertical lines. In fact, there are a few verticals in the scene, including on the toilet where the gun is stored, as well as the backs of the seats in the restaurant. Perhaps this subtly adds to the spiritual change of Michael from uninvolved younger son, to mafia protégé.

To be also noted is that Michael is constantly boxed in by things, here being the doors in the bathroom stalls. This really displays that despite the fact that he’s going to make it through this, he somehow knows that this event will change him forever, and doesn’t want to go through with it. Michael leaves the bathroom, and is no longer boxed in by Sollozzo and McCluskey. He is in control, and he seals his fate, ending the two villains, starting his path into becoming something far more sinister. (YouTube 2)
Michael is the **Hero**, though a flawed one.

The story follows him from the beginning of the film, and many plot points revolve around him or things happen because of him. When he returns from Sicily, beginning to take over from his father, the aging Vito becomes his **Mentor**, literally teaching him how to run the business well, though Michael goes his own way in a lot of ways. When his father dies, he gets revenge. In the **Resurrection**, Michael has all the other Dons murdered while he is declared Godfather of his sister’s child.

**Sound Effects**

Perhaps the greatest use of sound in the film, and in *films*, is that of the overlapping of the christening audio with the murders of the Dons. This dream-like Latin speech throws a spirituality into the commencement of the atrocity taking place on screen. The line “do you renounce the devil and his works” line still gives goosebumps forty years later. It’s a wonderful sequence that owes a lot of its effectiveness to the use of sound. This, along with the rain on a
New York night, the rumble of forties cars, the deafening gunshots, all pull us deeper into the mafia story of the ages.

**Music**

One of the most amazing and memorable aspects of the Godfather, outside of the acting and visuals, is the astounding score by Nino Rota. The score blissfully employs slow strings and a melodic theme that perfectly captures the Italian/Sicilian blood of the film. It’s a beautiful score that both evokes the country and the darker movements of the characters descending into increasingly terrible events. Though the score isn’t ever present, its use is sublime, impacting the audience with moments of tragedy. (Rota 7)

**Editing**

The editing in the Godfather is a thing of beauty, and despite the film’s near three-hour runtime, the masterful way the scenes are laced together truly adds to its grace. The film has a near immaculate pacing. Each scene flows beautifully and gives sequences a perfect grace, blending the sounds and music together with just the right transitions and style. However, where the film’s editing truly shines is in it’s brilliant moment to moment editing. Coppolla’s team utilizes many longer held takes, ramping up suspense and action, allowing us to dwell on the emotions of our characters. This pulls us even further into the tragic nature of the film. Scenes like this could include the haunting scene where a horse is found in an unexpected place, as well as the opening. There are also genius uses of cross cutting such as the aforementioned christening sequence, as well as Sonny’s unfortunate demise. These subtleties make the Godfather one of the greatest films ever edited.
Göethe’s Three Questions

What was the Artist trying to do?

Francis Ford Coppola crafted a beautiful, tense, terrifying, tragic, and heartfelt story. Despite it being about people who are, quite simply, not doing legal or good things, the film treats them as real people. In any other film of the time, the mafia would’ve been the bad guys, but here they are treated as three-dimensional and at times even noble. After the inner turmoil and heartbreaking conflicts of the 1960’s, be it racial, ideological, or legal, the ideal of the American family unit was torn. First, in the bestselling novel by Mario Puzo, and then more widespread in Coppola’s epic gangster film, Americans found the security of familial trust and devotion exhibited by the Corleone family appealing, even desirable. What was important about the Godfather was not that it seemingly glorified the mafia, but that it glorified family.

How well did he do it?

The Godfather is constantly praised and referenced even nearly fifty years later. It was nominated for 11 Oscars and won 3, including Best Picture. It also won Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola an Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay, and Best Actor for Marlon Brando’s performance as Don Corleone. (IMDB 6) It isn’t just a gangster film, but rather the film against which all
other gangster films are measured. It holds up today just as well and has aged like the fine wines
the characters therein enjoy. Coppola created amazing characters that have carved their way into
pop culture, with the Don Corleone character having been referenced and parodied so many
times that it’s impossible to consider counting them all. Despite the protagonists of the film
being members of the reviled mob, we still think of them more for their humanity than for their
many flaws as people, just as we should do with each other.

Was it worth doing?

Today considered by many to be one of, if not the greatest film ever made, the Godfather
was absolutely worth creating. It has stood the test of time, standing just as powerful now as it
did in the 70’s. The film crafts multiple characters who are still believable, easy to love, and easy
to hate. In the current troublesome times in our country, The Godfather’s tale of togetherness in
times of strife, as well as the tragedy of Michael as he slips ever deeper into corruption, seems
almost prophetic of America today. The film is still beautiful as well, being shot gorgeously on
film with the kind of hard noir lighting which would soon become popular in the industry,
making the film seem hauntingly ageless. The film not only influenced American pop culture in
its heyday, references to the film show up as recently as Disney’s 2016 animated film Zootopia,
in which a hedgehog who makes a convincing Brando lookalike serves a crucial role. (IMDB 8)
The film even influenced the real-life mafia, for the term Godfather was not actually used within
the mob before the release of the film. (Gambino) The film was, is, and will be a remembered
and influential piece of media that will stand the test of time. In short, when someone asks you to
watch the Godfather, they’re making you an offer you just can’t refuse.
Works Cited


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