

# ***The Godfather and The Godfather Part II***

By Michael Sragow

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Although Francis Ford Coppola has often been depicted — and loves to depict himself — as primarily an emotional and intuitive director, “The Godfather” is a film filled with correct *choices*, painstakingly thought out and passionately carried through. Part of what made it a breakthrough as a crime movie is that it’s about *gangsters* who make choices too and aren’t propelled simply by bloodlust and greed. They’re battling for position in New York’s Five Families, circa 1945-1946. If Don Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando) and his successor Michael (Al Pacino) come off looking better than all the others, it’s because they play the power game the cleverest and best — and the game is sordidly exciting.

For all the movie’s warmth, you could never confuse the Corleones or their allies and competitors for fun-loving ethnic types. The first scene shows the Don exacting deadly patronage, coercing an undertaker named Bonasera into vows of love and pledges of unmitigated loyalty in exchange for a feudal bond than can’t be broken or forgotten. Before Coppola has finished cutting between Don Vito accepting fealty in his office to his daughter celebrating her wedding outside — with the sepia interiors and golden exteriors illustrating the split in the Corleones’ lives — we’ve also heard the Don tell a Sinatra-like singer, Johnny Fontane (Al Martino), that a “man who doesn’t spend time with his family can never be a real man.”

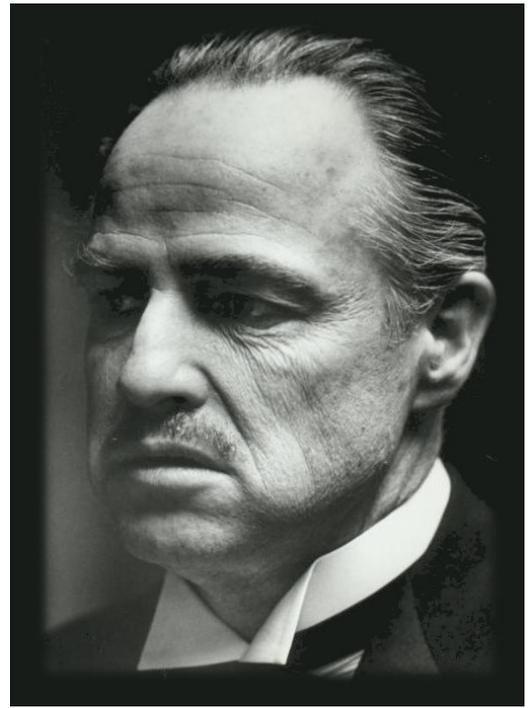
Once Coppola ties the themes of power and family together, he takes off with a story in the grand tragic manner. Its motif is the corruption of once justifiable goals, their altering through histories of struggle and domination. The Corleones are one generation removed from Sicily. They’re in the business of staying alive in America, and part of their business requires them to kill

The growth of Michael Corleone and Pacino’s startling physical and emotional alteration in the role give the film its shape. A college man who is also a World War II hero, he tests his strength and cunning in the streets to avenge his father’s near-murder. He states his rationale to his girlfriend (later wife) Kay, played by Diane Keaton: “My father’s no different than any other powerful man. Any man who’s responsible for other people, like a senator or

president.” Kay responds, “You know how naïve you sound? Senators and presidents don’t have men killed.” In a line that marked a breakthrough for mainstream political awareness when the film premiered in 1972, Michael wearily answers, “Who’s being naïve, Kay?”

But when Michael says his father’s way of doing things is finished, he *is* being naïve. And the way Pacino plays him, you can tell that deep down he knows the vortex of mob violence has sucked him in. Pacino’s performance is so intimately felt-out that each milestone (or, in Kay’s view, millstone) on his path both catches you by surprise — and registers indelibly. There’s the moment he stands guard in front of the hospital and realizes that his hands aren’t shaking (though the good-hearted baker next to him can scarcely hold on to his cigarette). There’s the chilly air of corporate homicide he adopts to prove to his brother, Sonny, that his plan to kill his father’s would-be murderer and a crooked cop is “not personal ... it’s strictly business.” And there’s the volcanic eruption of the actual double homicide.

What makes this both horrifying and seductive is that we’re not just seeing the hardening of a killer but the strengthening of a young man who’s getting back to his roots. That becomes clear when he hides out in Sicily and marries a local beauty named Apollonia (Simonetta Stefanelli). It’s as if blasting the dreams of a straight life and getting scarred in single-warrior combat have reconnected him to the earth. He returns to New York with the authority of someone who’s touched the psychic bottom.



*Marlon Brando as Don Vito Corleone.  
Courtesy Library of Congress*

To this day it's jolting to see Brando as Don Corleone — the receded hairline, the gray pencil moustache, jowls hanging off a twisted mouth, and a voice cracked from years of command. Brando makes the character extraordinarily complex largely through his physical expressiveness. He walks as if his shoulder blades were pinned behind him (which emphasizes an old man's paunch in front). But the sensibility beneath the authority is astonishingly agile: the Don can suddenly break into mimicry, or turn his daughter in a waltz with a slight protective bent that catches sentiment in movement. Brando puts so much substance into his relatively few scenes, blowing hot and cold with equal éclat, that he enables Coppola to draw parallels between his sons and himself through nuances at once fleeting and concrete.

James Caan plays the eldest boy, Sonny, like the Don without his lid on. He feels that when he's indulging his appetites (for action and for sex), he's fueling the fires that protect his family, but his lack of control triggers a gang war that ends in his own death. Caan animates his body with a high-strung, barely controlled rage; when he lets go, kicking and bashing his wife-beating brother-in-law Carlo (Gianni Russo), the effect is scary and exhilarating. He's like a Brando action hero on amphetamines. (Carlo's wife, Connie, played by Talia Shire, gives a vividly unsentimental performance, expertly toeing the line between pathos and hysteria.) John Cazale's Fredo, who'd be next in line were it not for his weak nature, has the disarming nakedness and sensitivity Brando showed in movies like "The Men." Even Robert Duvall, as Tom Hagen, Don Vito's German-Irish adopted son and consigliere, echoes Brando in his eloquent wariness, his furtive intelligence.

The film begins with a trumpet solo that sets off sad, comic, and heroic vibrations. As the brass flourish turns into a waltz, courtship strolls and wedding bashes, church rituals and ritual murders, merge in an eternal dance of life and death. Part of the black magic of "The Godfather" is the way it depicts how Catholicism operates in the Corleone universe — as salvation *and* cover for evil. When Coppola intercuts a christening with a mass assassination, "The Godfather" brings us into the worldview of the wicked, where there is no God, only godfathers.

With breathtaking confidence, "The Godfather Part II" (released in 1974) expands the tragedy and black comedy of its predecessor. It takes the aging Vito Corleone of the original back to his youth, pointing up the irony of his rise in Little Italy's crime hierarchy after having lost his parents to a vendetta in his native Sicily. Vendettas —

"honorable" killings — are often the subjects of romance. But here, to the House of Corleone, vendettas prove as potent an ancestral curse as any suffered by the House of Atreus. Coppola cuts from the younger Vito to his successor, Michael — and whatever glow Michael got when he reached power fades as he sets about consolidating it. The Don's legacy of hypocrisy and crime eats away at Michael's soul.

These two movies together are not really about the deterioration of the American dream. What they say is that for immigrant groups that became the country's backbone — Italians, Jews, Irish, and others — the American Dream was limited from the start by the burdens of poverty, unsettled scores, and insular ethnic cultures. As in the Old World, they were prey to powerful economic and political forces. But here those forces took more various, insidious forms. Many Vietnam-era movies told us that America is evil, but the more complex, implicit message of these two films is that in America the evil sleeps with the good. The same Senate committee that exposes the Corleones includes a politician in the family's pocket — one of many who've paved the Corleone's road to criminal ascendancy.

In the original "Godfather," Michael wanted more than anything to escape the Corleone tradition, to be his own man and an American, but familial love and obligation took charge of his desires. In "Part II" he is as haunted by his father's ghost as Hamlet is. He's learned everything from his old man except the things that can't be learned, and he can't hide his inadequacy. And in many ways, Michael is a victim of history. By the time he becomes Don, there's not much family feeling left in the Five Families; the mob has adopted business practices as impersonal as those of the CIA, and not even lionhearted Vito, had he lived, could have reversed that trend. But if Michael's role is that of an antihero, Pacino's ability to invest it with tension is heroic; he gives a dynamic interpretation of depression and listlessness.

There is still gaiety as well as viciousness in the Corleone's subculture — that's what makes the picture shattering. Michael V. Gazzo plays Frankie Pantangeli, a Corleone capo and one of the movie's most amiable characters. He evokes constant nostalgia for Vito's happier times, whether looking at canapés — which he pronounces "can-a-peas" — with distrust, or teaching the tarantella to a Nevada band. He contrasts movingly with Lee Strasberg as Hyman Roth, the mob financial wizard who almost persuades Michael to buy into Batista's Cuba. Strasberg even seems to regulate his character's pulse; he's instinctively calculating.

Robert De Niro's young Vito has the same careful intelligence, focused warmth, and regal bearing as Brando's Don. But he's a lithe young man with a smidgen of naïve enthusiasm. When he and his partner take proprietary pride in their olive-oil company front, they look as delighted as any wholesome greenhorns opening shop. Yet Vito is ready to forge a chain of murder that will wrap around his clan for generations — twisted yet unbroken, like an infernal Moebius strip. Although "The Godfather" and "The Godfather Part II" depict an American family's moral defeat, as a mammoth, pioneering work of art it remains a national creative triumph.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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