

**“Keep your friends close but your enemies closer”:
The Ambivalent Portrayal of the American Mafia in *The Godfather
Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974)**

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Abstract:

The article discusses the ambivalent portrayal of the American Mafia by analyzing Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Part II* (1974). The aim is to inspect how the film director represents organized crime in the US of late 1950s and early 1960s. The research methodology involves conducting a film analysis to shed light on the techniques used to represent the Mafiosi. The film depicts the brutality of Mafia and emphasizes the importance of family, while embodying the achievement of a corrupted American Dream. In short, the article argues that despite its release more than fifty years ago, *The Godfather Part II* remains a relevant film offering a complex portrayal of the American Mafia and its ethics.

Keywords: American Dream; family; mafia; ruthlessness; *The Godfather Part II*

1. INTRODUCTION

The United States is a leading country in cinema with Hollywood releasing numerous films each year that cost millions of dollars and achieve huge commercial success. According to Box Office Mojo the highest-grossing films of all time, produced by American companies, are: *Avatar* (\$ 2.9 billion), *Avengers: Endgame* (\$ 2.7 billion), and *Avatar: The Way of Water* (\$ 2.3 billion).

It can be said that American films have become a part of the daily lives of millions of people all over the world. Indeed, fans from various countries enjoy Hollywood productions, identifying with their characters and feeling connected to the US.

One particularly influential film that deserves deep examination for its exploration of the problematic topic of criminality in the US is Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Part II*, which captivated millions of viewers worldwide.

Released in 1974, the film was received positively by viewers and critics while also achieving a huge commercial success by grossing \$ 93 million worldwide. The film was nominated for eleven Academy Awards at the forty-seventh Academy Awards ceremony and won six Oscars. In 1993, it was selected for preservation in the US National Film Registry of the Library of Congress for its cultural and aesthetic importance.

This article aims to explore the strategies used by the director of *The Godfather Part II* to depict the complex and ambiguous nature of organized crime. A film analysis is used to examine how Coppola represents the Italian-American organized crime in the US during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Film analysis is primarily concerned with examining the visual and textual content of a motion picture. It is “not intended to analyze ‘film language’ but to look instead at the means a film employs to communicate with viewers” (Mikos, 2014, p: 410). However, it is important to note that current research indicates that there is no correct, universal way to write film analysis (Aumont & Marie, 2020, p: 29).

This article contributes to the ongoing debate on the portrayal of organized crime in American cinema by focusing on *The Godfather Part II*.

The analysis includes a close reading of the film, along with an examination of the screenplay and relevant scholarly literature. The author analyzes the film’s narrative, characters development, cinematography, and sound, to argue that despite being released over 50 years ago, *The Godfather Part II* remains a relevant film offering a complex and realistic portrayal of the Italian-American mafia and its ethics.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Background

Etymologically speaking, the Italian word “Mafia” has been used since 1875 to refer to a “Sicilian secret society of criminals”. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as “a similarly conceived criminal organization in the U.S.”. The Sicilian Mafia refers to its own members as Cosa Nostra, a phrase meaning “our thing”. It is an association of criminal syndicates whose members are famous for their heavy-handed role in protection racketeering, alcohol and drug smuggling and other organized illegal activities across Italy, the United States and beyond.

The Mafia emerged in the mid-nineteenth century during the reign of the Bourbons of Naples. The Sicilian mafia initially developed to protect land from predatory attacks, at a time when publicly provided security was scarce and banditry was widespread (Bandiera, 2002, p: 3). In fact, the lack of police enforcement on the island pushed many Sicilian peasants to be involved in criminal activities and as a consequence, landowners turned to extralegal protectors who organized themselves into the first Mafia clans.

Moreover, in the late nineteenth century, a wave of immigration from Italy to the United States occurred. Many Mafiosi established gangs in the destitute neighborhoods of East Harlem, the Lower East Side, and Brooklyn. They replicated the traditions and methods of their Sicilian ancestors by engaging in the illegal activities such as drug trafficking, gambling, prostitution, political corruption, extortion, kidnapping, frauds, counterfeiting, weapon trafficking and murder.

By 1900, Black Hand (Mano Nera), a method of extortion, was imported from Italy to the US. It was used by gangsters from the Camorra and the Mafia to extort successful Italian-American immigrants. The Black Hand soon became synonymous with crime in Little Italy (Dash, 2009, p: 89) and the term itself was adopted by the American press to refer to a secret criminal organization known as The Black Hand Society.

On January 16, 1919, the Eighteenth Amendment of the US Constitution was ratified, prohibiting the manufacture, sale, and transportation of alcoholic beverages. This led to a black market for alcohol, providing criminals with an extra source of income.

Gardaphé (2003) asserts that, “although criminal gangs had long occupied American cities, the Prohibition Act of 1920 and the desperate poverty brought on by the Great Depression in the 1930s provided opportunities for individual crime leaders to emerge and thrive” (p: 57). Indeed, banning sales of alcohol in the US increased criminal activity and contributed to the rise of organized crime until the Eighteenth Amendment was repealed by the Twenty-first Amendment.

In 1931, the Sicilian Mafia boss Charles ‘Lucky’ Luciano established The Commission, which consisted of the bosses of each of the strongest families. In New York City, there were five main families also called the Five Families, the Gambino, Lucchese, Genovese, Bonanno and Colombo (Dainotto, 2015, p: 92).

Families are the most important units of the Italian-American Mafia, but they are not familial groupings. Luciano made sure that the New York Five Families had connections with the Chicago Syndicate in addition to several other criminal organizations. He created The Commission to maintain his own power and to prevent gang wars. Therefore, he is considered as the father of modern organized crime in the US.

2.2 Mafia, Media, and Academia

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the illegal activities of criminals such as Al Capone, John Dillinger, Bonny and Clyde and Pretty Boy Floyd became national news in the epic of the Great Depression that ruined the lives of millions of Americans. Public opinion at that time started to view

gangsters as national heroes like Robin Hood, who stole from the rich to give to the poor and rose up against tyranny and social injustice.

Americans had heard many fascinating stories about the Mafia for a long time but it was the US Senate that confirmed the existence of this criminal organization and its threat. On May 3, 1950, the Special Committee to Investigate Crime in Interstate Commerce also known as the Kefauver Committee, was established and chaired by Senator Estes Kefauver. The committee’s final report concluded that crime was primarily the responsibility of state and local authorities. Moreover, the report recommended the creation of a Federal Crime Commission and a Department of Justice racketeering squad.

The television broadcast of the committee’s hearings attracted great public interest as Americans became more aware of the issues of corruption and organized crime. At the same time, members of the Italian-American Mafia started to be viewed as subjects of fascination because of their wealth and power.

The members of the Italian-American Mafia were immortalized in iconic films which often depict them as merciless criminals who seek power and money. Some notable films include *Lucky Luciano* (Francesco Rosi, 1973), *The Godfather Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola 1974), *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990), *Donnie Brasco* (Mike Newell, 1997), and *The Irishman* (Martin Scorsese, 2019), just to name a few. The following sections will only focus on the portrayal of the world of Mafia in Coppola’s film.

There is also a significant body of literature addressing various aspects of US organized crime in general and its cinematic portrayal in *The Godfather* saga in particular.

In his book *American Mafia: A History of Its Rise to Power* (2004), Reppetto provides the readers with a detailed chronicle of the ascension Mafia, from its beginnings to its peak within the US society. Also, Raab’s book *Five Families* (2016) offers a compelling account of the rise and fall

of New offers a compelling account of the rise and fall of New York's leading Italian-American criminals, including Lucky Luciano, John Gotti, and Paul Castellano. Additionally, the book addresses the potential revival of Mafia, particularly as law enforcement's focus shifted toward homeland security and away from mobsters.

Messenger (2002) analyzes both the *The Godfather* novel and its cinematic adaptation by Coppola, suggesting that the Corleone family has become an integral part of American culture. In contrast, Akkan (2017), through an analysis of academic critiques, character development, and the use of props, argues in her article entitled "The Godfather and the American Dream", that Coppola's film highlights the corrupt side of American society through the myth of the American Dream.

Ambrogio (1978) investigates how Coppola's films depict the widespread issue of corruption within American-Italian Mafia by contending that it reflects broader societal problems in the US.

Finally, Berliner (2001) explores the film viewers' connection between their viewing experience and the film's thematic content. Berliner argues that this association arises from the similarity between the decline from *The Godfather* (1972) to *The Godfather Part II* (1974) and the degeneration of the Corleone family that dominates the sequel's plot.

All in all, the above references provide valuable insights into various aspects of the Mafia and its cinematic representation in *The Godfather* saga. However, a significant gap remains in understanding the complex and contradictory portrayal of the Mafia in specific films. Unlike other studies that focus on the Mafia's rise, fall, and cultural impact, this paper explores the ambivalent representation of American-Italian mobsters within a single film, *The Godfather Part II*.

3. Portrayal of the World of the Mafia

3.1 Ruthless Criminals

The director's first strategy is to depict Italian-American Mafia members as ruthless individuals who operate outside the law. Due to the constraints of this article, the analysis will focus particularly on Michael (Al

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Pacino) and Vito Corleone (Robert De Niro), the two primary criminal figures in the film.

The Godfather Part II opens in 1901 in the Sicilian village of Corleone during the funeral of young Vito’s father, Antonio Andolini, who was killed for insulting Don Ciccio, the local Mafia ruler. Because he vowed to exact revenge on the Don, Vito’s elder brother was killed as well during the parade. This tragic event sets the stage for a cycle of violence that shapes Vito’s life and subsequently Michael and the entire Corleone family’s future.

Coppola’s film simultaneously tells two stories: young Vito Corleone’s rise from a shy Sicilian immigrant to a feared mob boss in 1920s New York, and his son Michael’s ascend as Don, fighting to uphold the family’s legitimacy and authority in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Jess-Cooke (2009) notes that Coppola cuts back and forth between the parallel narratives of young Vito and Michael to inform viewers the characterization of Michael, as well as the specific family and cultural ties that result in generations of mob activity (p: 42). Thus, the film director juxtaposes the two narratives of the father (Vito) and the son (Michael), highlighting that ruthlessness and violence are passed down through generations.

After the assassination of Vito’s older brother, his desperate mother went to see the Sicilian boss of the Mafia responsible for her husband and son’s deaths, Don Ciccio (Giuseppe Sillato). She pleaded for the life of her last living child, Vito by arguing he was only nine, slow-witted and never spoke. Yet, Don Ciccio told the widow he did not fear what the child might say but fearing how powerful he could become when grown up to seek revenge.

Indeed revenge is a central theme in the film, serving as a potent catalyst that transforms characters into ruthless figures driven solely by their relentless pursuit of justice. The widow attempts to kill Don Ciccio after realizing his cruelty towards her son Vito. Years later, Vito Corleone, now a respected boss and mobster in New York returns to Sicily and seek

revenge by stabbing Don Ciccio as shown in figure 1 below.

Fig.1. Vito Corleone stabbing Don Ciccio (Frame 02h 42m 40s)



Source: Francis Ford Coppola, 1974

Coppola uses the medium close-up shot to capture the pain and shock on Don Ciccio's face, emphasizing the gravity of the moment. As Brown (2016) argues, the medium close-up shot allows the film viewers to be closer to the action by enabling them to see people's expressions, details of how they are dressed. Thus it makes the viewers more involved in what the characters are saying and doing (p: 63).

Vengeance is served when the young Vito kills the Sicilian mobster who murdered his family members decades ago. Likewise, Michael Corleone becomes a ruthless criminal to maintain his family's position in New York. He orders the assassination of the Jewish mobster Hyman Roth (Lee Strasberg), who betrayed him and attempted to kill him. Similarly, he pressures Frank Pentangeli (Michael V. Gazzo), who was going to testify against him, to commit suicide after bringing Frank's brother from Sicily. Michael even orders the assassination of his own brother after the latter's betrayal.

To secure his power, Michael becomes a ruthless mobster and criminal. For instance, when he advises his underboss, Frankie, to keep his friends close but his enemies closer, the audience truly grasps the extent of his merciless. Even his trusted *consigliere* and lawyer and Tom Hagen (Robert Duvall), an orphan taken in by Vito Corleone when he was a child,

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questions whether it is worth spreading more violence and killing more people. Michael coldly responds, “I don’t feel I have to wipe everyone out, just my enemies.”

Similarly, when Michael’s subordinates express doubt about the feasibility of assassinating the ruthless Hyman Roth, he asserts, “if history has taught us anything, it’s that you can kill anyone.” Paoli (2008) notes that in Sicily of the late nineteenth century “the gaining of an honorable reputation can be made and maintained only through force and physical” (p: 74). Indeed, Michael Corleone establishes a solid reputation for himself as a merciless mobster, which helps him earn respect and fear within New York’s criminal underworld.

The scene where Roth’s men attempt to kill Pentangeli emphasizes the brutal and merciless nature of the mobsters in *The Godfather Part II*. They first try to suffocate him before resorting to gun fires as shown below in figure 2.

Fig.2. Downtown New York City Shooting (Frame 01h 09m 37s)



Source: Francis Ford Coppola, 1974

The extreme long shot is used to establish the location and create an overall atmospheric impression (Owens & Millerson, 2012, p: 156). The urban space in which criminality takes place reminds viewers that Mafia activities developed alongside the ruthless American capitalist system, often

characterized by violent competition. The scene of the shooting downtown New York City feels more realistic as Coppola avoids using non-diegetic sounds, which only the audience hears, to enhance the drama of the violence. Consequently, the audience is exposed to violence solely through the direct impact of the gunshots. As Grønstad (2008) puts it, “the artist cannot but portray the world as it is, and if movies are violent it is because society is violent” (p: 56).

With that said, it is worth keeping in mind that cinematic representations often necessitate adding dramatic elements to engage audiences and foster empathy with the characters. For instance, if anyone were to make a film about the last hour and a half of their life, or of most people’s lives, it will not generate audience’s interest. Put simply, films create narratives which emphasize certain dramatic elements such as themes, symbolism, sounds, and special effects. In the case of *The Godfather Part II*, Coppola chose to dramatize criminality and the world of the Mafia by making the audiences identify with the two main characters, Michael and Vito Corleone.

All in all, *The Godfather Part II* portrays several aspects of the harsh realities of organized crime in the US during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Coppola focuses on Vito and Michael Corleone who both resorted to violence to consolidate their power. By doing so, the film director highlights the brutal nature of their world and emphasizes how the Mafia world relies on ruthlessness as a structural force and as a personal quality to preserve control.

3.2 Importance of Family

The film director emphasizes the importance of family in the Mafia world as he portrays it as both a source of authority and a structure for doing business. First, the term “family” is used 87 times throughout the film, according to textual analysis of the screenplay. The frequency with which the term recurs indicates how important the theme of family is to the development of the story. Also, the opening scene of the film portrays the Corleones as a dynastic family and particularly when Michael succeeds his deceased father Vito as Don. The camera focuses on the empty chair where

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Vito used to conduct business to symbolically reinforce the generational power transfer within the Corleone family. Finally, the film’s final scene takes viewers back to 1941 as the Corleones gather and celebrate Vito’s birthday which emphasizes the enduring strength of family ties.

The Corleones are central to the film’s narrative; however, it should be recognized that family is also depicted as a complex and destructive force, often leading to tragic consequences.

After Michael and his wife Kay Adams-Corleone (Diane Keaton) survive an assassination attempt he visits his underboss Frank Pentangeli to determine if he is still loyal to the Corleone family. Michael furiously shouts: “In my home! In the same room where my wife was sleeping; where my children come in their pajamas”. As Michael expresses his anger, the audience perceives his vulnerability as his enemies wanted to kill him along with his family in their own home.

Michael becomes more unstable when Kay decides to terminate their pregnancy. He initially believed she had a miscarriage as a result of the assassination attempt, but when she reveals the truth his anger intensifies and he slaps her, coldly asserting: “you won’t take my children”. Kay’s decision to have an abortion becomes the only way for her to leave Michael permanently. Consequently, Michael separates her from their children, permitting only brief visits where she can hug them.

The conversation between Michael and his mama (Morgana King) marks a turning point in the film, as Michael questions his mother about his father’s true feelings, wondering if he ever feared losing his family. His mother reassured him, “you can never lose your family”.

Betrayal is viewed as an unforgivable offense in the Corleone family. In fact, the code of the Italian-American mobsters places a strong stress on trust and loyalty, and any act of betrayal, especially if it comes from a family member, is punished severely.

Family betrayal is illustrated by the case of Fredo (John Cazale), who turns against Michael. He is depicted as a weak underboss unable to control

his drunken wife and this is viewed as a negative trait in the values of Mafiosi. Feeling passed over and forgotten, Fredo wants to be treated with respect.

Knowing Fredo is weak, Hyman Roth manipulates him into betraying his brother Michael during the assassination attempt on his life. Fredo faces the ultimate consequence for his betrayal when Michael gives him the kiss of death at a New Year's Eve party in Havana, Cuba. He tells him: "I know it was you, Fredo. You broke my heart" (See the figure below).

Fig.3. Kiss of Death (Frame 01h 39m 45s)



Source: Francis Ford Coppola, 1974

The kiss of death is known as "Il bacio della morte", meaning a member of the mob family has been marked for death by the boss for his betrayal. By kissing the traitor on the lips, he is informed that his days are numbered (Sifakis, 2005, p: 245).

Michael does not want any connection with his betraying brother or to concern himself with his fate. He insists that Fredo stay away from the hotels and his home. Michael also requires advance notice if Fredo plans to visit their mother, so he can avoid being there. The Don instructs his henchman Al Neri (Richard Bright) to make sure nothing happens to Fredo while their mother is still alive. However, following her death, Michael orders Fredo's execution.

Coppola portrays the idea that in the criminal underworld, authority corrupts and alienates individuals, leading them to make immoral decisions.

One may argue that Michael’s tragic flaw is that he loses his family as a result of fighting to protect it. Browne (2000) notes that “as patriarch he assumes the responsibility to protect the family...and in the name of the family, Michael destroys it” (p: 15). Indeed, dehumanized and devoid of compassion, he sacrifices the very people he sought to protect, reflecting his internal conflicts and ambiguities, as well as the disastrous result of his pursuit of power.

3.3 A Corrupted American Dream

Coppola’s final strategy consists in highlighting the mobsters’ pursuit of a corrupted American Dream. This idea is embodied in several literary and cinematic works such as F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*, 1925), Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle*, 1906), Brian De Palma (*Scarface*, 1983), and Martin Scorsese (*The Wolf of Wall Street*, 2013), among many others.

It must be noted that there is a substantial body of literature and research dealing with the American Dream and its definitions (Cullen, 2004; Bloom, 2009; Pearson, 2017). The term “American Dream” was created by James Truslow Adams in 1931 when he defined it as a dream of a land where everyone has access to opportunities based on their abilities and accomplishments (p: 404).

In the film, Coppola highlights the fact that thousands of Italians left their homeland to settle in the US at the beginning of the twentieth century to make a decent living. The scene of the immigrants on the boat seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time has become iconic in contemporary cinema, as they look upon a symbol of freedom and the promise of a better life (see figure 4 below).

Fig.4. Immigrants staring at the Statue of Liberty (Frame 00h 07m 39s)



Source: Francis Ford Coppola, 1974

The non-diegetic music of the Italian composer Nino Rota enhances the dramatic impact of the scene by establishing powerful emotions generated by the sounds of strings and woodwinds. The melody's tone crescendos to stress the hopes and dreams of immigrants; yet there is also a sense of melancholy and nostalgia as they left Italy to settle in a new foreign land.

Coppola represents the idealized hopes of thousands of Italian immigrants who wanted to make their dreams come true in the US. Nevertheless, he suggests that the American Dream was compromised by Vito and his son Michael since the two became involved in the organized crime to achieve riches and success.

Vito settles with his wife and young child in the desperate Little Italy neighborhood of New York City. He works hard to provide for his family; however, Don Fanucci (Gastone Moschin), a ruthless Black Hand mobster, forces a grocery owner to fire Vito and replace him with his nephew. As a result, Vito kills Don Fanucci and turns to robbery, becoming a powerful figure. Coppola represents Vito as an ambivalent character as he has corrupted the traditional ethos of achieving the American Dream through hard work and sacrifice. Akkan (2017) contends that the protagonist, coming from an immigrant background, engages in criminal activities to obtain money, success, and respect. In the process, he fulfills the material

aspects of the American Dream, but he frequently ignores its moral components (p: 27).

Vito is a poor man driven to criminality because of tough circumstances. Therefore, Coppola leaves it to viewers to decide whether he should be viewed as a villain or a tragic anti-hero, willing to do anything to save his family.

The Godfather Part II embodies the realization of a corrupted American Dream through Michael Corleone, the most powerful mobster in the US during the late 1950s and early 1960s. In the first installment of *The Godfather* saga, Michael is introduced as an exemplary US citizen who graduated from college and served his country during World War Two. He was initially an outsider of the family business as he typified the core values of the dream based on meritocracy and hard work.

However, he is later transformed into a ruthless mobster resulting in the transgression of the dream. Al Pacino noted in an interview that his character Michael “has to start out ambivalent, almost unsure of himself and his place ... caught between his Old World family and the postwar American dream” (Grobel, 2006, p: XXI). Indeed, Coppola portrays Michael as an ambivalent and conflicted character who ultimately resorts to violence to preserve the family business and achieve his ambitions.

All in all, *The Godfather Part II* offers an ambiguous portrayal of the fulfillment of the American Dream. While the film highlights the upward mobility achieved by Italian-Americans, it also exposes the corrupt foundations of this success when driven by greed, ambition, and immorality.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, *The Godfather Part II* skillfully portrays the brutal world of the Italian-American Mafia, highlighting the ruthless nature of its members, emphasizing the role of family, and exposing a corrupted American Dream fulfilled by mobsters.

Coppola used various cinematic techniques to present a realistic

account of organized crime in the US, often relying on charismatic antiheroes to engage audiences. However, it is crucial to remember that these dramatizations can obscure the harsh realities of mobsters, who are devoid of compassion. For instance, the portrayal of Michael as a complex and conflicted character may evoke sympathy, but it should not overshadow his ruthless actions.

Regarding family, Michael's approach to protection differed altogether from his nurturing father, Vito. Cold and calculating, Michael alienated his wife Kay and killed his own brother Fredo. In *The Godfather Part III* (1990), which explores the themes of redemption and regrets, the old Michael Corleone faces the consequences of his actions as his son chooses not to follow his criminal path whereas his daughter is tragically killed by his enemies.

Finally, Coppola's film can be viewed as a social critique of American capitalism. It illustrates how countless immigrants struggled to achieve their dreams while mobsters and their corrupt political allies enjoyed an unfairly privileged lifestyle.

In short, *The Godfather Part II* remains a cinematic masterpiece that continues to provoke debate, even though it was released decades ago.

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