

# Morality and Legality in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* Trilogy

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## **Introduction**

Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, *The Godfather* (1972) and its sequel *The Godfather: Part II* (1974) are renowned as films that transformed the lowly 'gangster' genre into an art form. Both films are usually rated equally to be among the greatest cinematic masterpieces ever made. Made almost two decades after the first *Godfather* film, *The Godfather: Part III* (1990) was widely dismissed as an extremely disappointing conclusion to an epic saga about the Italian-American crime syndicate, the Corleone Family. In a previous article, I suggested the importance of considering Coppola's three films as a trilogy.<sup>1</sup> Yet the last film was clearly the product of a different Hollywood era and studio context. By 1990, the age of radical, 'counter-cultural' filmmaking had long ended,<sup>2</sup> and social protests against the Vietnam War and Watergate were replaced by the relative conservatism and complacency of the post-Reagan, early-Bush years near the end of the Cold War. The departure of *Godfather III* from its predecessors is evident from the ethical direction of the trilogy. The first two *Godfather* films create an image of the Corleone Family as an extra-legal authority, which abides by a personal code of conduct and administers an alternative system of 'justice.' While *Godfather I* and *II* do not encourage unequivocal support for the Corleones, they do provoke a re-evaluation of conventional standards of legal and moral behaviour by placing the audience in an uncomfortable ethical position, where they can neither condemn, nor completely sympathise with, the Family. Unlike the earlier films, *Godfather III* removes the audience from its ethical dilemma. Although viewers are encouraged to sympathise wholeheartedly with the protagonist Michael Corleone, they are no longer encouraged to support the idea that the Corleone Family provides an alternative system of 'justice.' At its conclusion, the trilogy seems to maintain conservative notions of morality and legality.

By saying that *Godfather I* and *II* place their viewers in an ethical dilemma, I am aware that not all viewers feel the same way about the films. On the contrary, I argue that the films invite a polarised response. From one perspective, the

presentation of violence and criminal conspiracy provokes feelings of disgust towards the perpetrators, but from another perspective, the narrative discourse of the films compels our sympathy with characters that are essentially evil. Some viewers may resist the manipulation of the trilogy's narrative discourse, and (like many contemporary reviewers of *Godfather I*) adopt the pro-social position of condemning the criminal behaviour of the Corleones. Others submit to being shaped into an 'insider' of the Family and enjoy the empowering, though anti-social, experience of inclusion within an exclusive Mafia community. When I refer to 'viewers,' I am mainly interested in those who occupy a middle ground between these opposed positions, in other words, the viewers that occupy a uniquely indeterminate subject position, poised between sympathy with, and judgment against, the Corleone Family. Paradoxically, the manipulation of viewers into this state of moral ambivalence forces them to re-evaluate their understanding of what constitutes 'moral' or 'legal' behaviour. While both leaders of the Family (Don Vito and his son Michael Corleone) compromise themselves *legally*, they nevertheless seem justified in *moral* terms to fulfil their patriarchal duty to protect not only the 'Family' as a business entity, but more importantly the interests of the 'family' as a domestic clan. Blurring the traditional distinction between 'morality' and 'legality,' *The Godfather* Trilogy interrogates the issue of whether an individual can justifiably transgress the law as long as he acts within the boundaries of his personal moral standards.

### ***The Godfather* (1972)**

In "Foreword: *Nomos* and Narrative," Robert M. Cover argues that legal meaning derives less from formal legal institutions than from the "*nomos*" or "normative universe" which is much larger in scope than defined precepts and principles laid down for the purpose of social control.<sup>3</sup> According to Cover's definition, this *nomos* includes not only a "corpus juris, but also a language and a mythos":

The normative meaning that has inhered in the patterns of the past will be found in the history of ordinary legal doctrine at work in mundane affairs; in utopian and messianic yearnings, imaginary shapes given to a less resistant reality; in apologies for power and privilege and in the critiques that may be leveled at the justificatory enterprises of law.<sup>4</sup>

Cover's theoretical model suggests that 'official' precepts of justice articulated by formal institutions of law do not hold exclusive control over legal meaning. Instead, we derive our understanding of the law through our exposure to narratives which challenge our thoughts about legal principles. Cover's theory provides a basis for discussion of the narrative of the *Godfather* films, which functions on two normative levels. On one level, the film is a critique against "the justificatory enterprises of law," as it presents the audience with two Mafia Dons, who operate outside the law, but within their personal *nomos* or code of normative behaviour; on another level, the film is about the "utopian and messianic yearnings" of these Dons to attain legitimate power which is denied them for as long as they continue abiding by their own norms and refuse to submit to the laws sanctioned by those in legitimate, political authority.

The critique against state-sanctioned law in *The Godfather* begins from the opening scene of both Mario Puzo's 1969 novel and Coppola's film adaptation. A funeral director, Amerigo Bonasera, seeks retribution against two youths who attacked his daughter. Denied legal remedy by a judge who suspends the sentences of the perpetrators on the fallible basis that "the law in its majesty does not seek vengeance," Bonasera feels compelled to address his case to the Don, who is prevailed upon to grant him a different form of "justice."<sup>5</sup> Puzo's novel juxtaposes the legal and judicial authority of an 'official' courtroom with the extra-legal and 'unofficial' authority of Don Corleone to advance an explicit critique against state-sanctioned authority. In contrast, the film's critique is more subtle. Omitting the scene of the courtroom, Coppola restricts the audience's perception exclusively to the "justice" meted out by the Don. The funeral director invokes the Judeo-Christian conception of justice – "an eye for an eye" – but the Don recognises that murdering the perpetrators of the assault against Bonasera's daughter would not be a proportionate punishment of the crime. "That is not justice," says Vito, "your daughter is still alive." In addressing the needs of the victim without being excessively harsh to the criminals, his judgment of the circumstances appears to provide a more approachable and equitable alternative system of justice than the state. By presenting the Don in this light, the opening suppresses pro-social criticism of the Don, even though his exercise of power is clearly illegitimate.

The Don's sense of personal and familial honour is the most charismatic feature of the justice which he provides. Fundamentally, his initial refusal to grant

Bonasera's request is not motivated by the injustice of murder in the circumstances. His sole concern is that Bonasera had approached him only *after* the failure of legal avenues, which he interprets as a sign of impertinence:

DON: Bonasera. Bonasera. What have I ever done to make you treat me so disrespectfully? If you had come to me in friendship, then the scum that wounded your daughter would be suffering this very day, and if by chance an honest man like yourself should make enemies, then they would become my enemies. And then they would fear you.

Like the members of the audience, who are entering the 'world' of the Mafia for the first time, Bonasera is prejudiced against the Don as the head of a powerful organisation capable of performing any act of retribution against its enemies as it wishes for the benefit of its members and loyal subjects. From his naïve perspective, anyone can receive this extra-legal justice, tailored solely to the interests and desires of the victim and the victim's family, if he offers the right amount of money. The Don's response is a defence against Bonasera's (and the audience's) 'low-brow' view of him as a hired assassin, and according to Roger Ebert, the beginning of a "brilliant conjuring act, inviting us to consider the Mafia entirely on its own terms."<sup>6</sup>

In asserting his right to create an alternative system of justice based on subjective familial loyalty and honour, Vito Corleone clearly breaches legally constituted processes, yet he gratifies our lust for vengeance against injustices that fail to be redressed through legitimate means. In John G. Cawelti's opinion, *The Godfather* is a "particularly complex form of the vigilante myth, with the Corleones taking the law in their own hands to establish justice in the face of a totally corrupt and unjust social order."<sup>7</sup> However, "vigilantism" is not an accurate description of the Corleones' conduct since the Family ignores rather than rebels against the legitimate world. Politicians, judges and policemen occupy a peripheral place in the film, and pose no serious obstacle to the Family's criminal enterprises, which implies their complicity with Mafia activity. By suggesting that Don Corleone's mode of authority poses an alternative, the film diminishes our pro-social tendency to condemn him for repudiating the state-sanctioned legal order and situating himself above the laws that other citizens are obliged to obey. Against our own better judgment, we are moulded into an 'insider' of the Corleone Family, complicit with its code of moral behaviour.

The opening scene that privileges the insider's perspective is part of a sequence that juxtaposes the private dealings inside the Don's office with scenes of his daughter Connie's wedding taking place outside the house. While tending to business, the Don watches the late arrival at the wedding of his youngest son Michael with a non-Italian girlfriend Kay Adams. Michael's early position in the film is unique: Although he is a member of the domestic 'family,' he despises, and distances himself from, the 'Family' as a criminal enterprise. Explaining to Kay the moral stance that he takes against the Family, Michael tells her a chilling story about the Don's relationship with Luca Brasi, the strange but seemingly harmless man whom Kay notices is talking to himself in a corner. The story involves Johnny Fontane, who is regaling wedding guests with a romantic song while Michael tells his story. Johnny's solo career was made possible only when the Don threatened to kill the bandleader, who initially refused to release Johnny from a contract to sing exclusively for his band. To convince the bandleader to change his mind, says Michael, "my father made him an offer he couldn't refuse ... Luca Brasi held a gun to his head, and my father assured him that either his brains or his signature would be on the contract." Michael's vivid recount is meant to bias Kay against his father and destabilise the viewer's conception of the Don as a reasonable and honourable man. However, Kay is unaware of the Don's meeting with Bonasera, and also the scene (preceding Michael's story) where Luca Brasi is shown ineptly (and therefore, rather comically) pledging his loyalty to the Don. For the viewer, Luca's experience of 'stage fright' in front of his employer suggests the Don's power as a man who commands the respect, not only of those (like Bonasera) who ask favours from him, but also of those who work for him. Whereas the viewer gains privileged 'insider' access to the rituals performed inside the Don's room, Kay remains an 'outsider,' as she is limited to an acquaintance with the Family's affairs through Michael (also an outsider at the beginning of the film). Presented with both perspectives of the insider and the outsider, the viewer is placed in a morally equivocal subject position.

Michael's position as a knowing 'outsider' of the Family is, however, short-lived. Despite his initial, pro-social stance against the Family, he feels compelled not to remain a detached spectator after two assassination attempts are made against his father, first in a street, and later in hospital. Hatching a scheme of vengeance, Michael volunteers to kill the two men responsible for the conspiracy against his father – Sollozzo and the corrupt police captain McCluskey, who has

been bribed to protect him. Experienced members of the Family – Sonny, Clemenza and Tessio – laugh at Michael, whose scheme they believe is motivated by his desire for vengeance against McCluskey, who punched and broke his jaw while he guarded the Don outside the hospital. “This is business, and *this* man,” says Sonny, patronisingly to his youngest brother, “is taking this very, very personal.” No one in the room except Tom Hagen, the Don’s lawyer and *Consigliere* (‘counsellor’), takes Michael seriously. With a lawyer’s instinct, Tom senses (and is wary of) a distinctive change in Michael’s character. In Puzo’s novel, the reader is told that “Hagen looked a little sad but not surprised,” but in the film, Tom’s scepticism about the possibility of the plan’s success is mixed with his admiration of Michael’s cunning and audacity in its invention.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the others in the room, he sees in Michael the makings of an astute and dangerous Don. As Sonny suggests, under the Family’s code of conduct, “business” is to be kept strictly separate from “personal” matters, and therefore retaliatory action is to be taken only if it furthers the Family’s business interests, not for the purpose of settling a personal score. However, both Tom and Michael share an implicit, mutual understanding that, in times of crisis, business can become extremely personal, and the Corleones must be prepared to sacrifice their personal ethics if they wish to survive in a world of treachery, where their enemies do not consider themselves bound by a moral code.

Tom’s insight into Michael’s potential future as a Don proves to be prophetic: Michael does eventually succeed to the Family business, and as the trilogy progresses, he becomes a more ruthless leader than his father. After murdering Sollozzo and McCluskey, Michael avoids police arrest and retribution from the other Families by escaping to Sicily, where he accidentally falls in love with a local girl named Apollonia. To gain her hand in marriage, Michael displays the authority of a seasoned Don as he makes an “offer” to the girl’s father, who simply “can’t refuse.” If Signor Vitelli attempts to betray Michael to the Corleones’ enemies in America as a means of getting rid of an unwanted suitor, his “daughter would lose a father instead of gaining a husband.” Michael’s threat against Vitelli’s life is likely to draw a morally equivocal response from the viewer. On the one hand, we may be disgusted and horrified by Michael’s tactics, but on the other hand, we may admire the authority (even the arrogance) with which he now conducts himself as an experienced member of the Mafia. The character of Michael

becomes more intriguing as he further compromises himself in moral terms and tests the boundaries of the viewer's sympathy.

Many film critics who praised the quality of *The Godfather* were nonetheless disturbed by the sympathetic appeal which Coppola created for his evil characters and their behaviour.<sup>9</sup> Thus aesthetic appreciation of the film seems in conflict with the viewer's ethical consciousness and pro-social criticism against the Corleones' abuse of power. In order to avoid complicity with the Family's criminality, we must actively try to extricate ourselves from the film's diegetic premise, which constantly undermines our ability to condemn Vito, and even the more sinister Michael Corleone. In developing our sympathies for these two representatives of an illegal authority, the first *Godfather* film can be accused of failing to provide an objective critique of state-sanctioned law. Coppola believed that his ending of the film with the succession of Michael, who is much less scrupulous than the Don, was already a condemnation rather than a continuing affirmation of the Mafia as an alternative system of justice.<sup>10</sup> The director thought that he had balanced the sympathies of the audience by showing the moral deterioration of the Corleone Family under Michael's authority. What Coppola perhaps failed to recognise was that the audience had already developed an earlier identification sympathetic with Michael (particularly during the character's exile in Sicily), enabling them to consider his increasingly immoral behaviour as justifiable. However, two particular scenes in the film threaten to destabilise the viewer's sympathy with Michael near the end of *Godfather I*. The first depicts a meeting between Michael and Kay after his return from Sicily; the second is the baptism sequence, the most definitive four-minute sequence in the film.

At the opening of *Godfather I*, the viewer, unable to fully comprehend the Family's code of conduct until later scenes, shares Kay's position as an outsider of the Family. Since our understanding of the Corleones is no greater than Kay's, our relationship with her is one of equality. But as the narrative develops, we become immersed into the insider perspective that gives us privileged access to the Mafia rituals performed by the Corleones, and gradually, our superior knowledge distances us from Kay. The marginalisation of her outsider perspective is most pronounced in the scene where she sees Michael for the first time since his return from Sicily. A sequence of cuts disguises an intriguing ellipsis whereby a period of over a year has lapsed, but the viewer has no means of knowing what has happened to Michael subsequent to the death of his wife Apollonia (the innocent

victim of a car-bomb meant for her husband) and preceding his approach to Kay. The complex focalisation in the scene offers a rare moment in which the viewer knows more than one character (Kay), but less than another (Michael). Despite this qualification of our perspective, our knowledge remains superior to Kay's, as she is completely oblivious of Michael's traumatic experiences. Michael's treatment of Kay, whose feelings he exploits by proposing marriage to her without mentioning his first wife, arouses suspicions regarding his sincerity towards her, as does his justification of the Family business in which he is now involved:

MICHAEL: My father is no different from any other powerful man – any man who is responsible for other people, like a Senator or a President.

KAY: Do you know how naïve you sound?

MICHAEL: Why?

KAY: Senators and presidents don't have men killed!

MICHAEL: Oh, who's being naïve, Kay? Kay, my father's way of doing things is over, it's finished. Even he knows that. I mean, in five years, the Corleone Family is going to be completely legitimate. Trust me, that's all I can tell you about my business.

Unlike the viewer, an 'insider' whose impartiality may already be compromised, Kay recognises that the Family's power is based on the kind of violence and extortion which Michael himself initially rejected. "That's my Family, Kay, it's not me," he had said at his sister's wedding. But Kay's suggestion that Michael's defence of his father's actions sounds naïve only serves to confirm her own naïveté of the fact that she is not speaking with the Michael she had previously known, but a man who has murdered and become his father's heir. Michael not only sounds, but also appears, dramatically different from his former identity as the college student and war hero in army uniform. His sombre, formal attire, paler features, and the black car trailing behind him as walks down the street with Kay, suggest the extent to which he has assumed the life of a Corleone.

At the end of this scene, the viewer is perhaps more inclined to sympathise with Kay than Michael. However, it is the baptism sequence that puts the audience's sympathy with Michael to the ultimate test. Whereas Coppola employs a 'classical' style of direction (motionless camera, slow pace, minimal cuts) throughout most of *The Godfather*, he experiments brilliantly with parallel editing in the baptism sequence to create a dramatic visual and aural contrast between the religious ceremony being conducted inside a church and the sacrilegious murders being perpetrated by Michael's men outside. The sequence begins with a long-shot

of the Corleones, gathered together to witness the baptism of Michael's nephew. Michael had agreed earlier (at Kay's request) to act as godfather to Connie and Carlo's son. A priest begins to conduct the ceremony in Latin. Organ music (by J. S. Bach), mingled with the Catholic litany and sounds of the baby's cries, is playing in the background, enhancing the religious atmosphere, which grows more intense and menacing as the sequence continues. Having established the mood, the camera begins to cut back and forth from shots of the baby being prepared for its baptism to shots of Michael's men preparing to murder the enemies of the Corleone Family. The informal rituals performed by the men contrast with the sacramental activity in the church: While the priest anoints the baby with oil, a half-dressed Rocco Lampone pieces together his rifle, Peter Clemenza wipes his car on the driveway, Willie Cicci takes a shave in a barber's shop, and Al Neri disguises himself by dressing in police uniform. When the priest addresses Michael (in English) for the first time, shots of his men moving into position are cross-cut with shots of two would-be victims: Barzini walks down a corridor out of a building, and Moe Greene relaxes inside a massage parlour. The sequence reaches a climax when the organ pauses abruptly at the priest's words: "Michael Francis Rizzi, do you renounce Satan?" The silence is broken by a sharp musical crescendo, followed by two shots fired by Clemenza at one victim inside a lift. The sound of the subsequent murders (the firing of guns, the screams of victims) is also timed to coincide with the rise and fall of the music, which is temporarily suspended each time Michael answers the priest to renounce Satan and his works. After Clemenza shoots the man in the lift, Cicci shoots a second victim through the glass of a revolving door; Moe Greene is shot in the eye through his glasses by an anonymous assassin; Lampone and an accomplice kill Philip Tattaglia in bed with a whore; finally, Neri kills Barzini and his men, then escapes in a get-away car. As the baptism concludes, an overview of the carnage is shown with one-second shots that fill in the natural pauses of breath made by the priest as he pronounces the final liturgy: "*In nomine patris* [shot of Tattaglia smothered under blood-spattered blankets], *et filii* [shot of victim trapped inside revolving door], *et spiritus sancti* [shot of Barzini and his men] ... *Amen.*"

Any illusions of Michael's moral decency appear to be obliterated by the end of this sequence, which leaves the viewer no alternative but to condemn Michael. Obviously, the appropriate response would be to feel offended by Michael's actions because no one with a social conscience can condone his cold-blooded

murders. Yet the visual spectacle of Michael destroying his enemies with such ruthless efficiency encourages us to admire, rather than condemn, him. Although the baptism-murders are often interpreted as directorial commentary against Michael's hypocrisy, they ultimately convey Michael's supernatural (almost god-like) power in orchestrating murder in five different locations at once while assuming the responsibility of godfather over his domestic family. The baptism makes him 'godfather' in more senses than one. Despite the loss of the 'insider' perspective (Michael appears more as object than subject during the sequence), this part of the film places us in a very uncomfortable state of moral ambivalence, where we can commit to neither sympathy nor judgment, approval nor loathing, complicity nor condemnation. If, despite the horrifying nature of Michael's crimes, we still feel that he is morally justified to defend his Family's honour, then our own loyalty to state-sanctioned law and social morality becomes questionable. Not only does Michael horrify us, but *we* also become horrified by ourselves and our complicity with him.

The viewer's moral ambivalence is perpetuated to the end of *Godfather I*, which concludes by privileging the insider, rather than Kay's outsider, perspective. This contrasts with the conclusion in the book, which firmly places the reader in Kay's position as she watches Michael accepting 'homage' from his loyal *caporegimes*:

Kay could see how Michael stood to receive their homage. He reminded her of statues in Rome, statues of those Roman emperors of antiquity, who, by divine right, held the power of life and death over their fellow men ... The caporegimes stood before him. In that moment Kay knew that everything Connie had accused Michael of was true. She went back into the kitchen and wept.<sup>11</sup>

In this passage, the reader is told explicitly that the reality of her husband's true identity dawns on Kay. But in the film, Kay's knowledge about her husband is left ambiguous. The penultimate shot of *Godfather I* shows Kay in the foreground pouring a drink, while Michael (in a deep-focus, long shot from her perspective) is in the background receiving the fealty of his men inside his study. Although the penultimate shot is from Kay's perspective, the *final* shot positions the viewer to look out to Kay from within Michael's room (the insider's perspective) before Al Neri shuts the door on her. Glenn Man's argument that the subjectification of Kay's perspective relegates Michael "to the position of object" does not take account of the fact that the door excludes Kay rather than the viewer, who ends the

film with Michael and his *caporegimes*.<sup>12</sup> The shutting of the door on Kay suggests the viewer's complicity with Michael's crimes. We have known for some time that Michael is a criminal while Kay may only have begun to fathom the dark side of his character and the nature of his power.

### ***Godfather II* (1974)**

After he made *Godfather II*, Coppola admitted to feeling "disturbed that people thought I had romanticized Michael, when I felt I had presented him as a monster at the end of *The Godfather*."<sup>13</sup> Although the audience's identification with Michael becomes problematic by the end of *The Godfather*, the trilogy does not offer a balanced critique of his illegality and immorality until *The Godfather: Part II*, which conflates the Mafia with the corruption that plagues the American political system. As his father had done before him, Michael withdraws from a family celebration (his son Anthony's first communion) to conduct business inside his house, which is now situated on the banks of Lake Tahoe in Nevada. His first meeting is with Senator Geary, who, having thanked Michael in front of his guests for a large monetary endowment, privately treats Michael's generosity with disdain. In response to the senator's stated intention to raise the price of gambling licences for the Corleone Family alone, Michael tells Geary, "We're both part of the same hypocrisy; but never think it applies to my Family." Thus, as Man suggests, "*Part II* fulfils the potential for critique in *Part I* as it depicts the corruption of the gangster as part of a larger corruption" that stems from Michael's adherence to a system of capitalism, not for the sake of preserving the family's domestic unity, but for the sake of increasing the exploitative, economic power of the Family's commercial enterprise.<sup>14</sup>

Through the complex parallel editing of young Vito's rise to power from 1917 to 1925, and Michael's decline in the 1950s, *Godfather II* achieves a dramatic contrast between the father and the son, the 'romanticised' and the 'deromanticised' vision of the Mafia. Consequently, the moral tensions established in *Part I* are qualified in the sections which feature Michael in *Godfather II*, because he is no longer presented as an object of sympathy. According to Diane Jacobs, this makes the sequel less provocative than the original:

In *The Godfather*... we are confronted with the dilemma of viscerally wanting to see the Corleone enemies killed off, while intellectually realizing that we're encouraging homicide. *The Godfather* is much more insidious emotionally than

its 'arty' sequel, because it plays with the exhilarating phenomenon of audience identification. By the middle of *Godfather II*, Coppola has distanced us from his increasingly fulsome characters.<sup>15</sup>

Although Michael continues to intrigue us, his coldness distances the viewer from him. Kay, who acted as the 'moral chorus' to Michael's illegitimacy in *Godfather I*, becomes an even harsher critic of her husband in the sequel.<sup>16</sup> Dancing with her husband, she reminds him of his promise to her seven years ago that the Family would be completely legitimate in five years. Michael's failure to keep his promise is confirmed when assassins attempt to kill him through his bedroom window. After the bedroom shooting, Kay sits in silence with her daughter Mary in her arms, glaring resentfully at her husband for allowing his Mafia activities to endanger his wife and children. She is again angry but helpless when Michael leaves for Miami to identify the traitors both outside and inside the Family. As she prepares to drive the children out of the Family compound (which is under surveillance like a fortress), guards refuse to let her leave. Sarcastically, she says to Tom Hagen, "Am I a prisoner, is *that* it?"

Kay's moral anger reaches a climax during her confrontation with Michael after he successfully eludes the Senate committee hearings by implicitly threatening harm to the brother of the prosecution's witness, Frank Pentangeli. Tom Hagen had previously informed Michael that Kay lost her baby through a miscarriage, but she now reveals the truth:

KAY: Michael, you *are* blind; it wasn't a miscarriage; it was an abortion... just like our marriage is an abortion, something that's unholy and evil! I didn't want your son, Michael. I couldn't bring another one of your sons into this world! ... I know now that it was over. There would be no way, Michael, no *way* you could forgive me. Not with this Sicilian thing that's been going on for two thousand years!

Provoked by this confession wrought as an attack on his authority, Michael strikes Kay on the face and ostracises her from the Family. When he later discovers her meeting with their children, Anthony and Mary, in secret, he symbolically shuts the door on her, recalling the final shot of *Part I*. The complete exclusion of Kay makes her more representative of an outsider than before.

Michael's authoritarianism is further emphasised by his conduct towards Tom Hagen. Having demoted Tom from *Consigliere* to lawyer (Tom had previously held both roles), Michael nevertheless restored their relationship at the end of

*Godfather I*. By making Tom responsible for his family while he is in Miami, he appears to trust Tom more than any other member of his organisation in *Part II*. However, once Michael discovers that Hyman Roth (his father's trusted friend) orchestrated the assassination attempt, his paranoia overwhelms his ability to trust anyone, including Tom. In *Godfather I*, Tom was a reassuring figure; for as he never agonised over any conflict between loyalty to the law or loyalty to the Family, so he preserved for us the illusion of the moral rectitude or integrity of his code of conduct. Although Tom remains faithful to the Family in *Godfather II*, his growing unease towards Michael's excessive penchant for violence threatens to dispel the viewer's illusion of his and the Family's moral integrity. In a meeting with Michael and two high-ranking members of the Family, Al Neri and Rocco Lampone, who are now *caporegimes* replacing Clemenza and Tessio, Tom tries to convince Michael that murdering Roth would be meaningless. In other words, the murder will settle a personal score, but will serve no business purpose:

TOM [frustratedly]: Just consider this Mike, that's all. Just consider it. Now Roth and the Rosatos are on the run. Are they worth it? ... I mean, you've won. Do you want to wipe everybody out?

MICHAEL: I don't feel I have to wipe everybody out, Tom. Just my enemies. That's all.

[TOM is silent, but his face clearly shows his dissatisfaction].

MICHAEL [more pointedly]: Do you ever want to come along with these things I do, or what? Because if not, you can take your wife, your family and your mistress and move them all to Las Vegas.

TOM: Why do you hurt me, Michael? I've always been loyal to you. I mean, what is this?

MICHAEL [in Sicilian]: *So, are you staying?*

TOM [also in Sicilian]: *Yes, I'm staying.*

Whereas Tom agreed with Michael's plan in *Godfather I* that the murder of Sollozzo and Captain McCluskey was necessary, he clearly differs from Michael here in an instance where he believes "business" ought to take precedence over "personal" desires for revenge. Whilst this verbal exchange emphasises Tom's misgivings, it also highlights his powerlessness. Michael's cruel intimation that Tom's role is merely to "come along" with his decisions and his stinging remark in the presence of others about the lawyer's extra-marital affairs, forces Hagen into a hasty admission of loyalty ("I've always been loyal to you") and a submission to Michael's authority ("Yes, I'm staying"). The abrupt shift from spoken English to Sicilian is akin to an act of re-dedicating Tom as an 'insider' of the Family under

the auspices of Michael, whose methods are much less discriminate than his father, regardless of whether Tom likes them or not.

As if to reaffirm his loyalty to Michael, Tom visits Frank Pentangeli, who is being held in FBI custody as a witness against Michael. In a scene which recaptures the audience's sense of his complicity with the murder of Tessio near the end of *Godfather I*, Tom helps the Family dispose of a traitor by arranging Pentangeli's suicide.<sup>17</sup> Realising that his visit is closely monitored by security, Tom carefully obscures the implications of his conversation by speaking with Pentangeli in coded Mafia discourse. After reminiscing over the "old times" when the "Corleone Family was like the Roman Empire," Tom says gravely, "When a plot against the emperor failed, the plotters were always given a chance to let their families keep their fortunes." Immediately Frank realises that *he* is the "plotter" in the lawyer's allegory, who must kill himself in order to pacify the wrath of Michael (the "emperor"). Tom's ability to maintain the appearance of legality while manipulating a situation to fulfil the Family's criminal purposes conveys his power, but it also suggests at a subconscious level the personal cost that he must suffer from discharging his responsibilities as *Consigliere*. Although Tom never openly shows his emotional wounds, his experience with Pentangeli raises questions about the moral deterioration of the Family, which, under Michael's patriarchy, has become divorced from its primal character as a 'family' – a system of domestic relationships based on love and trust that forgives the faults of its members and does not treat every error of judgment as a betrayal deserving fatal punishment.

Against Tom's advice, Michael orders a blood-purge against his enemies at the end of the sequel, as he did in the first film. However, unlike the baptism-murders, he cannot claim moral justification for the gratuitous murders of Roth, Pentangeli and Fredo Corleone, his own brother, all three of whom had legitimate reasons to betray Michael. Roth planned the failed assassination attempt because he wanted to avenge the murder of his friend Moe Greene, who was killed in the *Part I* baptism sequence; Pentangeli offered to testify against his boss because he believed Michael had first betrayed him to the Rosato brothers; and Fredo, who was 'passed over' when Michael succeeded to the headship of the Family business, assisted Roth because he was tired of being patronised by his younger brother.

If Coppola had chosen to end his film with the murders of these men, the viewer may have felt compelled to condemn Michael. Instead he ended with a

sequence that seems to restore the morally equivocal position of the viewer in the original film. In Pechter's opinion, the "brief flashback to the Corleone Family in its halcyon days" at the end of *Godfather II* jeopardises Coppola's project to expose the Corleone's corruption unambiguously.<sup>18</sup> While Michael is presented throughout the sequel as a heartless killer, the final flashback allows us to question whether things could have been different had he chosen to maintain a moral stance against his Family. Returning Michael to his earlier idealism, the flashback can be seen as a narrative device used by the director to comment on the state of Michael's decline from a state of innocence to a state of moral desolation. In 1941, Michael's youthful and idealistic belief in his ability to resist involvement in the Family business is, from the 1959 perspective at which the sequel concludes, highly ironic. Alternatively, the flashback can be read as originating from Michael's own memory. If Michael is indeed nostalgic for his past, and the analepsis does represent his personal lament for his loss of innocence, then this incites us not only to consider how far he has fallen, but also to reflect on the sacrifice of moral values which he has made for the sake of the Family.

Ending with the image of Michael alone at the dinner table, as the other Family members congregate in the hall outside to surprise the Don on his birthday, this first analepsis fades out as a second one begins to fade in, repeating a previous scene from the 'prequel' section of *Part II*: on a train, Vito bids his boy Michael to wave goodbye as they leave the town of Corleone, Sicily. A final dissolve draws the viewer back into the present, zooming in for a final close-up of the lonely figure of Michael, surrounded by dead leaves, which suggest the extent of his moral decay. If interpreted as directorial commentary, the flashbacks condemn Michael for forsaking his innocence; but if interpreted as Michael's personal memories, they give his character a degree of pathos. Despite all his despicable crimes, there is something tragic about Michael whose corruption has originated, not in a lust for wealth and power, but from a noble desire to defend his Family. His memories create a kind of epilogue, which identifies with rather than alienates us from his sense of loss. Consequently, we once again occupy the morally equivocal position where we can neither judge nor sympathise with the Don.

### ***Godfather III (1990)***

The reinstatement of the tension between sympathy and condemnation at the end of *Godfather II* sets up the expectation that the last film of the trilogy would

maintain the viewer in the same ethical position as its predecessors. Instead *Godfather III* removes the audience from a position of moral ambivalence. By making *Godfather III* a film about the *personal* tragedy of Michael Corleone, Coppola creates unqualified sympathy for his evil protagonist, who previously displayed no sign of a conscience, but now (as an aging Mafia Don) appears to reap the consequences of his sins. Presented as a modern-day King Lear, Michael openly reveals the guilt that decades of criminality have wreaked on him, physically, emotionally and spiritually. His guilt is particularly apparent in the scene of his confession to the murder of his brother Fredo. In contrast to the baptism sequence in *Part I* which exposes his hypocrisy, this scene of Michael at confession “makes the audience privy to the depth of his spiritual emptiness” and desperation to gain redemption.<sup>19</sup>

While the portrayal of Michael’s remorse removes the most intriguing aspect of his character (his incapacity for self-pity), it also reconnects him to his father Vito, who had expressed a desire for legitimacy before passing the Family legacy to his son near the end of *Godfather I*. In his last speech to Michael before his death, Vito says:

I worked my whole life – I don’t apologise – to take care of my family. And I refused to be a fool, dancing on a string held by all those ... big shots. I don’t apologize – that’s my life – but I thought that ... that when it was your time, that ... that *you* would be the one to hold the strings. Senator Corleone. Governor Corleone.

Although Vito denies any feelings of regret toward the illegal and immoral activity he has been engaged in throughout his career, he nevertheless sounds apologetic for failing to legitimise the Family’s business before passing it onto Michael for whom he had envisioned a future as senator or governor. Vito’s speech expresses what Robert Cover refers to as the “utopian or messianic yearnings” of an individual to achieve true justice, not just the semblance of justice.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, even the Don recognises the limits of his alternative system of justice, and wishes to conform to state-sanctioned laws and social morality. When Michael first assumes control of the Family, he appears intent on pursuing his father’s goals, but in *Part II*, he loses the urge for legitimacy, and instead expands his illegitimate business to the detriment of the Family and his personal morality. By the time an aged Michael regains the passion to fulfil Vito’s dream in *Part III*, he has compromised his moral integrity to such a degree that he seems an epitome of the

tragic figure of Macbeth, who “in blood / Stepped in so far that should [he] wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er.”<sup>21</sup>

That Michael does not completely lose faith in his ability to achieve legitimacy for the Family is suggested by his determination to sell off the Corleone business to other Mafiosi and invest his money in International Immobiliare, a European conglomerate owned by the Vatican Church. However, his attempt to withdraw from the Mafia incurs the jealousy of Don Altobello, an old associate who wants a share in Immobiliare which Michael denies him. Like Hyman Roth in *Part II*, Altobello takes revenge by orchestrating an assassination attempt against Michael during the latter’s meeting with other Mafiosi in Atlantic City. If not for the bravery of his nephew and bodyguard Vincent Mancini, Michael would almost certainly have been killed in the helicopter shooting. Although he survives, the trauma of the attack takes its toll on him, and he suffers a severe diabetic stroke when he discovers Altobello’s treacherous role in the conspiracy. “Just when I thought I was *out*, they pull me back in!” are Michael’s last coherent words before he goes into shock.

Michael’s tragedy stems from his “fate of being forever tied to his past associations,” but he is also doomed not to regain his wife’s trust.<sup>22</sup> After eight years of marital estrangement, Kay returns in *Godfather III* to support her son, who is determined to discontinue his law degree and pursue the career of an opera singer. Michael blames Kay for approving Anthony’s decision, which provokes a heated confrontation. “You know, Michael, now that you’re so respectable, I think you’re more dangerous than you ever were. In fact, I preferred you when you were just a common Mafia hood,” she insults him. Her previous ineffectiveness as a voice against Michael would appear to make her presence somewhat superfluous in *Part III*. As an outsider throughout the trilogy, Kay is incapable of comprehending her husband’s character or the violence that is inherent to his Family’s cultural ethos. In a film that compels unequivocal sympathy with Michael, Kay’s high-sounding morality seems more alien to the viewer in *Part III* than in the earlier films.

In an effort to reconcile with Kay, Michael takes the opportunity of a family reunion in Sicily for their son’s operatic debut to take her on a tour of Corleone, where he shows her his father’s birthplace and his own place of refuge after the murder of Sollozzo and McCluskey in *Part I*. Although unconvinced by Michael’s justification of violence in the name of family honour, she is genuinely moved by

his appeal for forgiveness, and confesses that she had never stopped loving him. However, their reconciliation is abruptly stymied by the arrival of a message that Don Tommasino, a close friend of Michael, has been murdered. As Michael grants the messenger permission to avenge Tommasino's death, Kay watches her husband through the doorway, once again an outsider to the rituals from which Michael cannot escape. Thus the conflict between Michael the insider and Kay the outsider remain unresolved. The ending of the film, moreover, holds no promise of a future reconciliation between them. After their son's successful operatic debut, their daughter Mary is killed on the steps of the Palermo opera house by an assassin hired to assassinate Michael, whose inconsolable grief is conveyed by a soundless scream that lasts for what seems to be an interminable period of time. As Naomi Greene writes, "The place of the scream we do not hear is filled, instead, by Mascagni's music [from his opera *Cavalleria Rusticana*] – as if it alone could express the depth of Michael's anguish and grief."<sup>23</sup> Despite the fact that Kay sees her husband's anguish, she is nowhere to be seen in the last scene of the film, which shows Michael as he dies alone, slowly slumping in his chair and collapsing to the ground with no companion but a dog to witness his passing.

If Michael is unable to gain his wife's forgiveness at the end of trilogy, then he is certainly denied the opportunity to resolve his differences with Tom Hagen. A subsidiary character in the earlier films, Tom was nevertheless a crucial 'barometer' that allowed the audience to measure Michael's moral decline. In his first draft of the screenplay for *Godfather III*, Coppola intended to depict Tom overcoming his qualms over the ethical direction of the Family, and assisting Michael with the task of legitimising the Family business. Unfortunately Paramount CEO Frank Mancuso refused to pay Robert Duvall more than \$1.5 million for the actor to revisit the role of Hagen. As a result, Duvall withdrew from the film, and Coppola had to rewrite the script, substituting Hagen with a WASP lawyer named Harrison (played by George Hamilton). As Jon Lewis rightly suggests, "Mancuso's refusal to meet Duvall's asking price had a significant impact on the film; it further disconnected *The Godfather Part III* from its two predecessors, it seemed to strengthen the film's thematic attending legitimacy as a betrayal of family and ethnicity, and it ultimately altered the way many people read the film (in that Hamilton's presence served as a reminder of Duvall's absence)."<sup>24</sup> If Coppola had been able to film *Part III* with his original script, the audience would have been given (as in *Parts I* and *II*) the polarised perspectives of Kay and Tom,

who are both ethnic ‘outsiders’ but differ from one another in one important respect – the extent of their conformity with the cultural mores of the Corleone Family. Whereas Kay’s refusal to conform with the Family’s *nomos* maintains her status as an ‘outsider,’ Tom’s acceptance of the Corleones’ code of conduct makes him no different from an ‘insider’ of the Family. Without Tom’s advocacy for the Family’s right to conduct themselves according to its personal *nomos*, *Godfather III* is deprived of a crucial figure, whose presence reassures the audience that sympathy (and complicity) with Michael is not tantamount to an abandonment of morality even if it requires one to compromise conventional legal and moral standards.

### Conclusion

Central to the narrative of *The Godfather Trilogy* is a conflict between the ‘outsider’ and the ‘insider,’ the broad interests of society and the narrow interests of the Family. This conflict remains unresolved by the end of the trilogy because Michael, the quintessential ‘insider,’ is never given the opportunity to resolve his conflict with Kay (the quintessential ‘outsider’) and Tom (the ‘insider’ who nevertheless experiences an ‘outsider’s’ qualms with respect to Michael’s more excessive behaviour). However, it is this very lack of resolution that challenges the comfortable securities of what we may perceive to be our private moral and legal boundaries. The personal loss suffered by Vito and Michael in the course of their careers as Mafia Dons suggests the trilogy privileges a rather conservative ideology: Crime ultimately does not pay for father and son. Yet their sense of familial honour ultimately induces admiration, rather than pro-social criticism. Although the Dons disregard the law, they nevertheless seem justified in aligning their behaviour with familial, rather than social, standards of morality, and their audacity in constructing a normative code distinct from state- and socially-sanctioned norms reveals the largeness of the *nomos* which they inhabit. As Cover writes, “No set of legal institutions or prescriptions exists apart from the narratives that locate it and give it meaning. For every constitution there is an epic, for each decalogue a scripture. Once understood in the context of the narratives that give it meaning, law becomes not merely a system of rules to be observed, but a world in which we live.”<sup>25</sup> The law is only a fraction of the normative universe in *The Godfather* films. By locating the Corleones’ norms within a discourse of familial honour, the trilogy broadens our perspective on the law beyond institutions and

prescriptions, and brings us into the realm of *nomos*, which we are individually called upon to create and maintain.

### **Filmography**

*The Godfather*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount, 1972. *The Godfather DVD Collection*. 1991.

*The Godfather: Part II*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount, 1974. *The Godfather DVD Collection*. 1991.

*The Godfather: Part III*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount and Zoetrope Studios, 1990. *The Godfather DVD Collection*. 1991.

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- 1 Phoebe Poon, "The Corleone Chronicles: Revisiting The *Godfather* Films as Trilogy," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 33.4 (Winter 2006): 187.
  - 2 For more details on the influence of 'counter-culture' on Hollywood films in the late 1960s and 1970s, see Glenn Man, *Radical Visions: American Film Renaissance, 1967–1976* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994).
  - 3 Robert M. Cover, "Foreword: Nomos and Narrative," *Harvard Law Review* 97.1 (1983): 4.
  - 4 Cover, 9.
  - 5 Mario Puzo, *The Godfather* (1969; London: Arrow, 1998), 12.
  - 6 Roger Ebert, "The *Godfather* (1972)," *Chicago Sun-Times* (16 March 1997 [accessed 4 April 2007]). Available from <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19970316/REVIEWS08/401010321/1023>.
  - 7 John G. Cawelti, "Myths of Violence in American Popular Culture," *Critical Inquiry* 1.3 (1975): 533.
  - 8 Puzo, 134.
  - 9 In Judith Crist's opinion, the film was "as 'good' as the novel – and as essentially immoral and therefore, in its new incarnation and availability to the illiterate, far more dangerous": "Review of *The Godfather*," *New York* (20 March 1972): 69.
  - 10 See John Hess, "Godfather II: A Deal Coppola Couldn't Refuse," in *Movies and Methods: An Anthology, vol. 1*, Bill Nichols, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 83.
  - 11 Puzo, 438.
  - 12 Man, *Radical Visions*, 127.
  - 13 Hess, 83, citing Francis Ford Coppola, "Godfather II: Nothing is a Sure Thing," *City* (San Francisco) 7, no. 54 (11-24 Dec. 1974), 34.
  - 14 Glenn Man, "Ideology and Genre in the *Godfather* Films," in *Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather Trilogy*, Nick Browne, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 120.
  - 15 Diane Jacobs, *Hollywood Renaissance: The New Generation of Filmmakers and their Works* (New York: Dell, 1980), 107.
  - 16 Man, *Radical Visions*, 123-5.
  - 17 Towards the end of *Godfather I*, Salvatore Tessio is led away to be shot for betraying Michael to Barzini. In a final effort to avoid his fate, Tessio asks, "Tom, can you get me off the hook? For old times' sake?" to which Tom replies, "Can't do it, Sally." As Tessio is led into a car to be shot off-screen, the camera pauses on Tom, who stands behind a window to watch the murder from inside the house. For the first time in the film, he shows a momentary pang of regret over his complicity with the Family.
  - 18 William S. Pechter, Review of *Godfather II*, *Commentary* 59.3 (1975): 79.
  - 19 Phoebe Poon, "The Tragedy of Michael Corleone in *The Godfather: Part III*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 34.1 (2006): 67.
  - 20 Cover, 9.
  - 21 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Cambridge School Shakespeare, Rex Gibson, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), act 3, sc. 4, lines 136-8.
  - 22 Poon, "The Tragedy of Michael Corleone," 68.
  - 23 Naomi Greene, "Family Ceremonies," in Browne, 146.
  - 24 Jon Lewis, "If History Has Taught Us Anything ... Francis Coppola, Paramount Studios, and *The Godfather* Parts I, II, and III," in Browne, 48.
  - 25 Cover, 4-5.