

## **The Godfather, Part II (1974)**

**"We're bigger than U.S. Steel."**

### **Major Credits:**

Director: Francis Ford Coppola  
Screenplay: Mario Puzo and Coppola, based on Puzo's novel  
Cinematography: Gordon Willis  
Music: Nino Rota; additional music by Carmine Coppola  
Cast: Al Pacino (Michael Coreleone), Robert Duvall (Tom Hagen), Diane Keaton (Kay Adams), Robert DeNiro (Vito Coreleone), John Cazale (Fredo Corleone), Talia Shire (Connie Corleone), Lee Strasberg (Hyman Roth), Michael V. Gazzo (Frankie Pentangeli), Troy Donahue (Connie's boyfriend)

### **Background:**

After the enormous success of **The Godfather**, Coppola astounded critics and audiences by producing a sequel that was at least the equal of the original. He had been disappointed by the response of many viewers who thought the ending of the first film glamorized the Mafia life. "I felt I was making a harsh statement about the Mafia and power at the end of **Godfather I** when Michael murders all those people, then lies to his wife and closes the door. But... many people didn't get the point... I felt **Godfather II** was a chance to rectify that." In addition to clarifying his own moral position, Coppola gave the new film an epic scope by cutting between past and present, old world and new, and by linking the corruption of organized crime to that of American politics. He also brilliantly illustrated how the audience's memory of **The Godfather** could be employed to enrich its comprehension of the sequel.

Much of the film's success was also attributable to Coppola's reassembling most of his original collaborators: Willis, Rota, Puzo, as well the cast members. To replace Marlon Brando as the young Vito Corleone, he signed on Robert DeNiro, who won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor. DeNiro carefully studied Brando's performance and managed to incorporate traces of Vito's raspy voice as well as his famous expressions (the audience cheered when he repeats the catch line "I'll make him an offer he can't refuse") into his characterization. Less recognized but equally compelling are the supporting roles played by Robert Duvall and John Cazale. The film also gained a lot of interest by casting Lee Strasberg, the famous director of The Actors Studio and generally regarded as America's foremost acting coach, in the role of Hyman Roth. It was Strasberg's first screen appearance.

### **Cinematic Qualities:**

1. narrative structure--The story in **The Godfather, Part II** involves flashbacks to construct the evolution of the Coreleone family. Coppola employs slow dissolves between sequences, underscoring the thematic links between Vito's rise to power and Michael's corruption of power.
2. color--As in the original but perhaps in a more pronounced way, **Godfather II** employs color in an expressive way. The historical

sequences in New York's Little Italy, for example, are shot in sepia tones, creating a varnished, nostalgic look, while the sequences in Nevada or Cuba (actually the Dominican Republic) are deliberately over-exposed to suggest the unnatural environment or the intense heat.

3. mise-en-scene--Coppola's frames are usually carefully composed, despite the film's general adherence to the realist tradition. Note, in particular, how he employs images of the Statue of Liberty and the American flag during the flashbacks and how he qualifies the reconciliation between Michael and Fredo at their mother's funeral.

4. music--The **Godfather** films have often been described as "operatic" not only for their melodramatic plots but also for the pronounced role of music in influencing the audience's responses. In this film, the diegetic music--at the Tahoe communion party, at the music hall and saint's festival in Little Italy--becomes as important as Rota's and Carmine Coppola's famous score.

#### Topics for Discussion:

1. Consider the many ways, general and specific, that Coppola conjures up our memory of the first film. Does the context in which these intertextual references (allusions) occur in **Part II** alter our understanding and response to them? What is the effect of the final flashback, which serves as the film's epilogue?

2. The representation of violence in **Godfather II** seems significantly different than in I. Define the differences, and explain how they serve the altered thematics of the sequel.

3. In addition to alluding to its predecessor, **Godfather II** also draws upon our cultural memory of events that follow the diegesis (end of the 1950's). Some of the imagery, in other words, anticipates visual history the audience has witnessed on television. Select two or three such scenes that, by blurring the distinction between past and present, contribute to the mythic aspect of the film.

4. Several characters from the original film--notably, Kay, Tom Hagen, and Fredo--are significantly developed in the sequel. How does their personal evolution contribute to our understanding of the **Godfather** saga in its entirety?

5. In **Godfather II**, Coppola expands the portrait of a Mafia "family" to include the nation as a whole, allowing for greater emphasis than the original on The American Dream. What is the film's perspective on such elements of mythic American experience as the melting pot, individual initiative, the rags-to-riches story, and the tenets of capitalism?

## *The Godfather, Part II*, "The Assassination of Don Fanucci" Sequence Analysis

The sequence, which runs about seven minutes, depicts the film's crucial turning point, indeed, the crucial event in the entire *Godfather* saga, with Vito's ascent to power. It is a triumph of cinematic *realism*, its astonishing impact all the more impressive because it contains virtually no dialogue.

### 1. *The Festival*

Content and Theme:

- Public celebration
- Merger of ethnic and national identities (flags, national anthem)
- Merger of religion and capitalism (Christ effigy strewn with dollars)
- Class conflict (white suit vs. working class clothes)
- Self reflexivity: the puppet show

Form

- Establishing shot (location, historical detail)
- Tracking shots (premonition of conflict, horizontal tracks in opposite directions)
- Cross cutting between public and private space
- Camera angles (POV and power relationships)
- Music (solemnity, ritual)

### 2. *The Assassination*

Content and Theme

- Transfer of power
- Agility, Determination, Composure
- Assassination of Sollozzo in *The Godfather* (flickering light/subway sounds, initiation into violence, disposal of gun)
- Retribution (prolepsis: assassination of Don Ciccio)

Form

- Camera angles
- Lighting (suspense)
- Match cut
- Sound (esp. third shot; off-screen music)

### 3. *The Return*

Content and Theme

- Separation of family from business
- The Man of the Crowd
- Again, the merger of ethnic and national identity (flag, song)
- Prolepsis: Michael's inheritance

Form:

- Backlighting
- Music (diegetic introduction of "Godfather" theme)
- Composition ("family portrait" recalls wedding photo in *The Godfather*)