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Intro to Film Studies

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The Godfather: A Chilling Journey to the Underworld

From the era of organized crime that dominated much of the political and urban life of the 1920s and early 1930s, the Second World War was a particularly quiet time for mobsters in cities such as New York, Boston, and Chicago. But as the soldiers returned home to their families and as political stability returned to Italy, the homeland that offered connections to many American mobsters, organized crime flourished once again. One such reason for this was mob-backed companies working to dominate the 1950s construction boom in Sicily. The fictional Corleone family, with strong ties to their lineage in Sicily, faces the trials and tribulations of a family deeply embedded into the New York Mafia in Francis Ford Coppola's cinematic masterpiece *The Godfather*. *The Godfather's* strong editing by use of intercutting and the utilization of enhancing musical score, as well as the powerful performance of Al Pacino allow the audience a heightened dramatic discovery of the lives of members of a 1950's Italian-American mafia.

Coppola's use of intercutting allowed for a juxtaposition of reality and corruption to truly capture the secret lives of those working for the "underworld." These juxtapositions were crucial to the film's effective showing of the unsuspecting public against the illicit activities of the Corleone family, especially at the beginning and ending. At the beginning, cross-cutting between Don Vito's daughter's wedding in the daylight and the Godfather's secret business meetings in his dimly lit office open the movie with the strong contrast that is vital in the accurate portrayal of a

gang. The editing gives the appearance of outer normalcy the family has on the rest of society, even those attending the wedding, with the meetings inside the house serving to show the truth about their "line of work." Similarly, one of the last scenes uses the same intercutting shots for a slightly different purpose that pulls together the main thematic ideas of the film. In this scene, Michael Corleone, standing as godfather at Carlo and Connie's baby's baptism, is interrupted by shots of Michael's hit men carrying out murders of the family's enemies. It very effectively ties together the themes of innocence, justice, and vengeance, as it brings the film full circle to Michael's hand in the mafia business despite his outer appearance of innocence. There is also great irony in Michael saying at the baptism that he has not dealt with Satan, as it simultaneously shows his men carrying out his orders to kill.

Beyond the interplay between and within scenes to the actual scenes themselves, the emotionally evoking music allows the audience to feel as the Corleone's would have, heightening the suspense of the film. For instance, at the moment where Sollozzo, a man who deals with the Corleone's rival family gang, abducts Tom, the attorney and "fourth son" of Don Vito, the score intensifies the fear Tom and the other gang members feel as the scene is filled with uncertainty. The unpredictability of those involved in each family of the mafia creates the basis for suspense, yet it is amplified by the depth and breadth of the musical score. As the film progresses, the music evokes the constant fear that looms over the gang and drives them, as well as the audience, almost to paranoia. One such example was in the scene where Michael was alone guarding his father at the hospital and the music builds as he hears someone on the steps. However, it is merely his anxiety over being caught feeding into his paranoia and the audience's, as the person at the steps is merely Enzo the baker who came to visit his father with flowers.

Yet what creates some of the most realistic emotions that captivate the audience is Al Pacino's chilling performance as an innocent civilian-turned-hardened-mafia-boss. It is difficult enough for an actor or actress to play a complex and merciless individual, but what really made Pacino's performance of Michael Corleone stand out was his thorough and realistic transition as the character transformed from beginning to end. At the same scene at the hospital with Don Vito, Michael is able to use his panic about his father's lack of protection to plan his own actions to save him. What was so crucial in this scene was that Pacino had to convey two emotions at once, both his concealed panic as a civilian and his resolute appearance as the son of a mafia boss. Seldom did he appear acting, but truly reacting to the situation as a civilian would have. At the very end of the film, once Michael has evolved to secure his late father's former position in the mafia, he confronts his brother-in-law Carlo about his involvement in his brother Sonny's murder in an unnerving performance rivaled only by former powerful performances by Marlon Brando. The confrontation truly shows his full ability to so colorfully portray a merciless leader and the full transformation his character had made since the beginning when he refused any involvement in the family business.

Audiences will forever adore the glimpse into worlds that are so far removed from their own that they hardly know they exist. As is the case with the recent book *Gang Leader for a Day* by Sudhir Venkatesh about the infiltration of a Chicago drug gang, audiences at the time of *The Godfather's* release until today have been captivated with the mysterious and dark world that teems just below the average. Coppola's masterpiece was in how effectively he brought this world into fruition and how well he was able to make viewers feel as if they were caught between the dangerous clandestine families of the Italian-American mafia, stuck in the spellbinding, difficult, and corrupt lives of those just under the noses of the law.