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Nearer, My Godfather, to Thee

Time may have jumped the gun a little by calling it "an Italian-American *Gone with the Wind*," but at the very least *The Godfather* elevates the gangster movie to a new and impressive level. Most gangland melodramas remain just that: They concentrate on the action, the killings, the superlatives. The innards, the motivations and relationships that illuminate the wellsprings of the criminal mind, go unexplored and undefined. Such films are known in the trade, quite properly, as "action pictures," and their success or failure rests entirely on the amount of ingeniously violent activity they convey.

The Godfather exists on another plateau. To be sure, there is violence in abundance. Men are shot, machine-gunned, knifed, and garroted. In one horrendous sequence, a movie executive is "persuaded" to cast a film in accordance with the mob's wishes after discovering the severed head of his

prize stallion at the foot of his bed. But, unlike so many films of late, this film never suggests that it was called into existence merely to exploit such violence. In *The Godfather*, we are dealing with people—home-loving, tightly knit, folksy people—who also happen to kill a lot. If we are to understand their mores, we must also accept this peculiar penchant of theirs.

Actually, the killings seem almost incidental. As is explained repeatedly before or after a brutal murder, "Nothing personal, you understand. It's just a matter of business." It is this "matter of business" that clearly fascinated Francis Ford Coppola, who both directed and coscripted the film (with author Mario Puzo). Coppola, himself an Italian-American, seems to have found in Puzo's book a symptom—perhaps a metaphor—for the separation between our private lives and our public activities. A number of Italian or-

ganizations have already gone on record as protesting the very production of *The Godfather*, but in my view it transcends this kind of factionalism. The cancer that it reports is rooted in our way of life; it has become part of our American system. It is no mere coincidence that at a meeting of the *capos*, when the talk veers to politics, they favor the American way and are unalterably opposed to Communism.

But for the most part, *The Godfather* concerns itself with familial aspects of (although the word is never used) Mafia affiliations. It opens with an undertaker who approaches the Godfather for "justice" after the police have released the youths who raped his daughter. Meanwhile, preparations are under way for the wedding of Don Corleone's daughter, and the Don's youngest son, Michael, returns home from World War II. Two sides of the Don are thus exposed immediately—warm ties with his own family and his relationship with the "family" that pays him obeisance in return for anticipated favors. The presence of a thinly disguised Frank Sinatra at the ceremony, tied to the Don by his own (again thinly disguised) obligations, adds to a sense of verisimilitude. Not surprisingly, it is this persistent feeling that it's all true that makes the film so enormously effective. And it arises less from the real-life parallels that one might find in author Puzo's narrative than in director Coppola's brilliant handling of the verifying detail. Although the film spans a full quarter of a century, there is never a moment when one questions where or when. Songs, posters, a Las Vegas billboard ("Jack Entratter presents Dean Martin

and Jerry Lewis") recapture an era even more effectively than do the authentic motorcars and women's dress styles. When singer Al Martino, as singer Johnny Fontane, bends over his microphone while performing at the wedding and all the teen-aged girls scream in unison, it recalls immediately the old days at the late Paramount.

But beyond the authenticating detail of time and place is the detailed home life of the film's principals. Although the Don has a fairly palatial estate in New Jersey, much of the activity seems to center about the kitchen. His daughter, married to a henchman, has an utterly tawdry, overdecorated, middle-class apartment in Brooklyn. These are people dealing in millions, but their life-patterns—like their mentalities—hold them close to their origins. Coppola creates an incredible sense of dynasty, of one generation passing the mantle on to the next. But by the time the mantle has been passed, one is fully aware of the shoddy material.

A final word on casting: It is as original as the entire concept of the film. Marlon Brando, who physically defies Puzo's description of the Godfather, hasn't been so felicitously cast since *On the Waterfront*. Al Pacino, his son and heir, creates waves of pity and revulsion as he makes his way, albeit reluctantly, to *capo*. Robert Duvall makes a lasting impression as the *consigliere* who blows with the winds. But so, in fine, does everyone who appears in this extraordinary film. The characters have been written as people—and the right actors have been found to make them all marvelously believable people. □

"Nothing personal, you understand. Murder's just a matter of business."

