

Document Citation

Title	Kiss of death
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Source	<i>Sight and Sound</i>
Date	1992 Jun
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	33
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The Godfather, Coppola, Francis Ford, 1972

Kiss of death

It's 2am. *The Godfather* is on television. A few lines of dialogue, a couple of enigmatic or emphatic gestures – I'm hooked, riveted to the screen, awake until 5am. I've seen it before. That doesn't matter.

Maybe it's Al Pacino's eyes, those sad, lustrous and dog-like eyes that later glow fierce and tough as his character metamorphoses, like coal under the earth's weight and pressure, from soft to hard. Mikey Corleone, sensible, quietly defiant, educated, who's not going to be his father's son, who's not going to enter the family's dirty business (families are dirty business) is transformed into Michael Corleone, an avenging angel/devil, who's driven to wreak justice/havoc by the near-murder of his father, the Godfather, Don Corleone, Marlon Brando.

Maybe it's the subtle movement of Brando's massive, padded cheeks and jaw. I may be secretly wishing that the wads of cotton Brando placed inside his mouth – to change his speech and appearance – will tumble out, that he'll begin to drool (he does drool a little during his death scene). I know the cotton won't pop out; I've seen this movie many times (we've all seen the movie before, it's always the same movie, or they're all the same movie).

It's not the wads of cotton. Between you and me, I'm easily seduced by appeals to undying loyalty. I'm in thrall to loyalty's sinister and ineluctable twin, betrayal. Womb to tomb, 'til death do us part, it's the love that dares to speak its name – family and father.

Fatal talk

The Godfather is in the name of the father, the son and the holy ghost. It's a love story, essentially without women, about men, a powerful Oedipal narrative in which if the sons stay close to, and respect, the Father, no one will get hurt. Oedipal fantasies dance from scene to scene, as one by one the sons obey or betray – in the name of the father-auguring salvation, the father's love, or retribution, death.

(The first movie I went to at night was a Russian version of *Romeo and Juliet*. My father took me. I don't remember how it happened that we went alone together, to this movie in particular. We sat close to the screen, the movie house was nearly empty, and both of us cried. I was seven or eight, if memory serves, and if it does, what does it serve?)

Outside, on the street, the dealers have vanished for the night and not even the usual drunks are sitting on the church steps, singing golden oldies. But I'm sure I'm not alone, I'm sure the city is filled with thousands of *Godfather*-watchers who, like me, experience any of its appearances as a second, third or twentieth coming. I sway inwardly to the pulse of cinematic illusion, to the power of a family romance, to the narrative of nation and family, to the mystery of make-believe. Folded into its *mise en scène*, absorbed into its story, I listen as the men talk that fatal talk. Don Corleone huskily whispers to Michael, "Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer". (You

Loyalty, family, fathers and the women of 'The Godfather' seduce novelist Lynne Tillman as she watches Coppola's film – again and again

don't have to be a Mafia *capo* to understand – any paranoid knows he's right.)

Along with its make-believe, what is it I make believe? (*The Godfather* encourages guilty confessions.) A wish for some ultimate authority to relieve me of the burden of conscience, the desire for an unshakeable tradition to which I would belong without question, a longing for an unambivalent relation to the family? My family. In *The Godfather*, of course, ambivalence threads its tortuous way through the projector, laid on to and into the picture as if it were its soundtrack.

Love is the background for hate, hate for love. They exist in immediate relationship to each other, almost as (gun) shot-counter-shot. In *The Godfather Part II*, Michael gives the order to have his brother Fredo, who betrayed him, and the family, killed. The scene of Fredo's death is perfect in its duality, its ambivalence. Coppola cuts from the lake, where Fredo and his assassin are fishing, to Michael standing behind a large plateglass window (he's got the big picture window, the screen, and like us he's also a spectator). In the boat, which is rocking gently, Fredo is praying, but we already know he prays when he fishes – but does he know he's about to be whacked? Cut to Michael at the window, waiting. Cut back to the boat and the lake. Then to Michael. Then to the lake, without the boat. A gunshot. Cut to Michael, his head drops down; to the boat, Fredo's body slumps down.

I can replay that scene again and again in my mind. And I've probably got it wrong, the sequence of shots is most likely different. Fredo's murder was set in motion earlier when Michael vowed to destroy all those who tried to have him killed. "In my bedroom, where my wife sleeps, where my children play". One night, with Michael in earshot, Fredo inadvertently (unconsciously) let slip that he was one of them, but Michael won't revenge himself until their mother dies. La Mamma Mia. Respect. Honour the Family. Even so, Michael gives the order – "He's your brother, Mikey, he's nothing without you" – to have Fredo killed. Murder in the family is a tragedy; killing someone else, the family business.

(As a child I loved watching the family's home movies and used to set up the projec-



Family ties: Marlon Brando as the Godfather



Avenger's tragedy: Fredo, left, with Michael

tor and show them to myself over and over. There must be something appealing to me, let's face it, about a passionate family struggle that leads inevitably and tragically to death/murder. Which reminds me of *Rocco and His Brothers*. Is *The Godfather* the American *Rocco and His Brothers*? *Rocco* reminds me of *Romeo and Juliet*, which makes me think of doomed love, doomed families, my father and me...

The first time I saw *The Godfather Part II*, it was playing on Broadway in Times Square. After Michael's wife (Diane Keaton) tells him that the miscarriage he thought she'd had was actually "an abortion, it was an abortion, Michael", he slaps her, hard. Many in the audience – the majority – cheered. I walked out.

Family romance

The Godfather women, an oxymoron? They are mothers, sisters, daughters, wives and mistresses, and nothing else. They are good or bad, saved or discarded. Michael's wife's challenge to his authority – in effect, patriarchy – is the abortion. He throws her out and she becomes a pariah. Given life-in-patriarchy, is *The Godfather*, I wonder, as much a 'woman's picture' as a 'man's picture'?

That kiss of death. Maybe it's that kiss, that absolute articulation of ambivalence, that mortal meeting of mouths, of Eros and Thanatos, that I relish most. What a romance. *Famille fatale*.

The Godfather Part II is on tomorrow night. I'll try to tape it. My obsession gobbles time (in a way, obsession is about time, it uses and makes nothing of time). The thrill is losing myself in it again and again and again. My history in its version of History (the nation's history as one immigrant family's story; *The Godfather* supplies the past also to render its own internal authenticity). My family romance in its Family Romance (my mother warned, "The only people you can count on are your sisters"). Were I still a child (I suppose I am, in a way), I might be hoping that in *The Godfather's* next coming, there'd be a happy ending. Lynne Tillman will be in London in June for readings from the new *Serpent's Tail* anthology, 'Serious Hysterics'.