

Document Citation

Title	The Godfather
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Source	<i>Time Out (London)</i>
Date	1972 Aug 25
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	40-41
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	The Godfather, Coppola, Francis Ford, 1972

Background to the Film

By April of this year 'The Godfather' whose budget was round the 6½ million dollar mark, was taking a million dollars a day. No company in the last fifteen years has owned as large a percentage of a movie as Paramount do of this-85%.

It all started back in '65 when Puzo brought a 20-page outline to Paramount — the embryo novel. They were enthusiastic. He then received an advance on it from his publisher. Four years later Puzo approached Paramount again, this time with the complete manuscript and sold them the rights for a reported 25,000. Escalation clauses have since brought an additional 85,000 dollars. Puzo was then round fifty years old, the author of three previous novels, all critical successes but financial failures. But Paramount had by this time cooled towards the idea of another Mafia movie, having flopped with 'The Brotherhood'.

Puzo's novel became an all-time best seller. And Paramount hired Al Ruddy to produce the film. Ruddy had the advantage of having brought his last two pictures in under budget ('Making It' and 'Little Fauss and Big Halsey'). Ruddy got Puzo to write a screenplay for his novel and persuaded Francis Ford Coppola to direct and co-write it as it turned out.

Coppola

Coppola's career wasn't blossoming. His first movie was the usually forgotten 'Dementia 13' which he made for Roger Corman. He then shot 'You're A Big Boy Now' released to coincide with 'The Graduate' and completely wiped out. It got good reviews. Then he made 'Finian's Rainbow' which everyone seems to agree was a bummer and 'The Rain People' a personal project of the looking-for-America kind, that has a cult following. It hasn't been released here. He then sponsored 'THX' a cold but interesting sci fi movie that flopped in the States and still awaits a release here. Coppola was also involved in some John Korty films that distributors find hard to handle.

Casting

Brando was first choice for Don Corleone, and apparently his bizarre padding of his lower jaw with cotton wool and high pitched whine were his own ideas. His facial 'disguise' gives his performance all the grace and subtlety of an athlete on crutches . . . but there you go. The second choice was Olivier. Paramount Vice President Robert Evans promised he wouldn't give parts to non-Italian Americans after representation from the Mafia-dominated Italian American League. They landed up with Al Pacino (from Actors Studio, off Broadway and Panic in Needle Park'), James Caan from 'Red Line 7000', 'Glo Glory Guys' and 'El Dorado', as well as Coppola's own 'Rain People' and 'T.R. Baskin'. Caan rehearsed his part, if not on the actual guy Sonny was modelled, at least on a Mafioso friend of a friend.

Future Godfathers

In April this year Paramount chief Evans came to Europe to supervise the

production of four foreign language versions (French, Italian, German, Spanish). His goal — that these four versions should each become in their own country as successful as the film was in the States. That's what happened with 'Love Story' and that brought Paramount an additional 30 million dollars foreign gross.

The idea of a follow-up was already being worked on before the film's release. Coppola will co-produce it with Ruddy. Rumour has it that Coppola is planning to direct his own six hour version follow-up.

And there's of course the inevitable offshoot subindustry. Yes, folks, you can now get (in the States) Godfather tee shirts, spaghetti, pizza franchises, bakeries, lemon ice stands, a tv series, the Godfather game, and to cap it all Puzo's finished another book called 'The Godfather and Other Confessions' which discusses the making of the film.

Mafia lends a hand

The five New York Families were put out at not being invited to the New York premiere. There were attempts to black the premiere of the film — in Kansas City they bought out the whole opening night house and kept the cinema empty. There was the thing about deletion of the words Mafia and Cosa Nostra from the script. In February of last year they mailed every elected official in the States asking them to intercede with Evans to get the words deleted to prevent the film 'defaming Italian Americans'. The producers and the League and Joe Colombo met in a fancy Italian restaurant and came up with some agreements — to drop the words and the casting of a few non-Italian Americans was agreed on; other actors were apparently dropped.

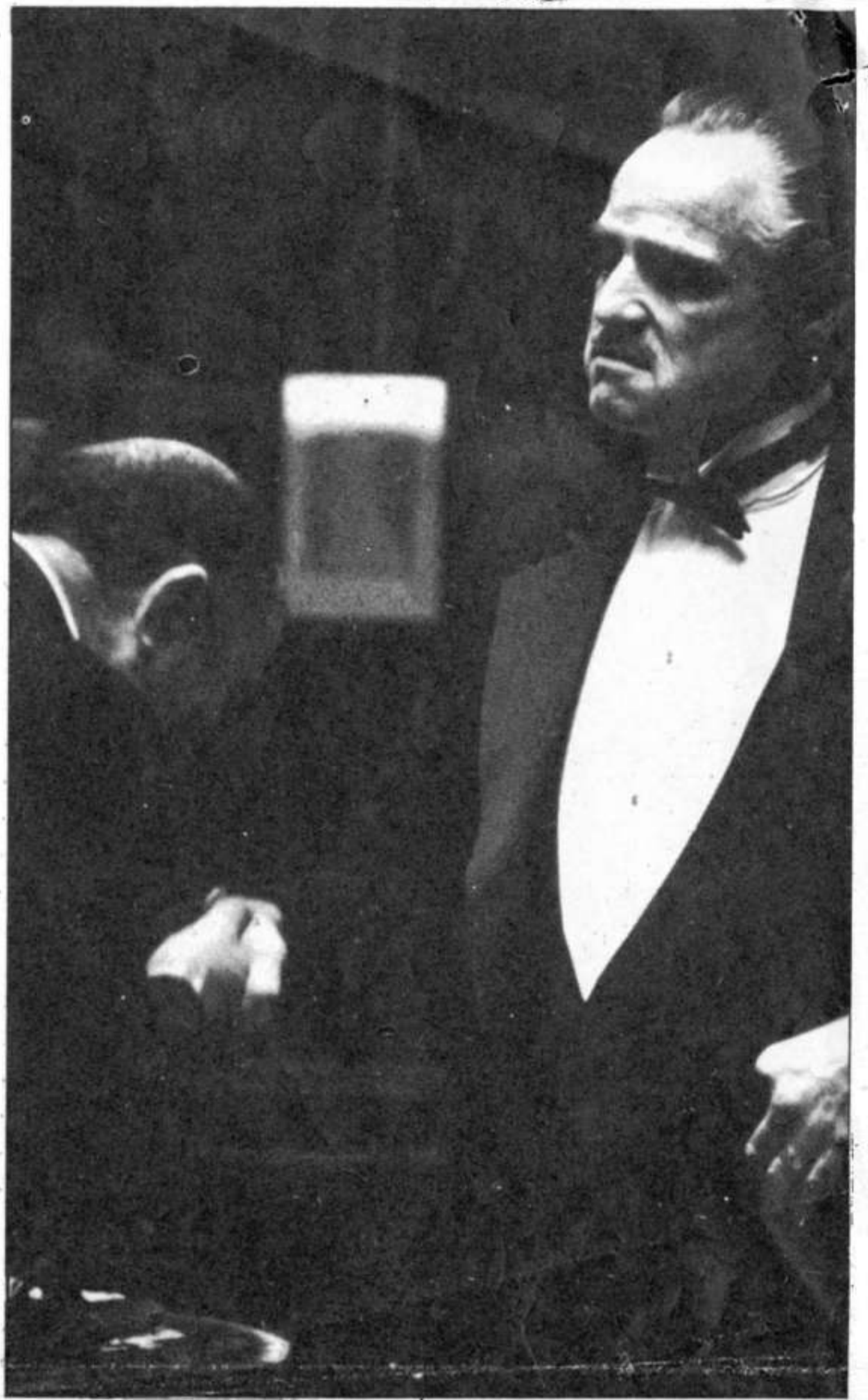
Union problems that had been besieging the production then apparently disappeared completely. The League and the production team got on well. Colombo of course was later gunned down at Columbus Circle while the movie was being shot at the St Regis Hotel. Mafia members laid on a number of private screenings for Family parties.

Making Us An Offer We Can't Refuse

(*'The Godfather' directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Produced by Al Ruddy. With Brando, Al Pacino.*)

'The Godfather' is not conceivably an action film or a gangster movie — its characters have nothing at all in common with those heroes who giggled themselves in curbside death through any number of 40s and 50s films. It is, with its large cast of generally undefined characters, and its insistence on painting large pictures of an environment, more of a spectacular.

It explores a subculture, a way of life. The inter-Mafia feuds barely touch the outside world at all. We experience events from within the Corleone stronghold and 'The Godfather' joins the ranks of dynasty films. It could be about the passing of a business empire from father to son. At the heart of the spectacle lies a family melodrama — a boy grows to manhood. It's this more than the more panoramic scenes that animates the whole structure into a kind of life.



'Power like we've never seen it before' — 'The Godfather' at ABC One, Empire, Paramount and Universal

The Godfather

Essentially 'The Godfather' is about power and the effective wielding of power.

The opening sequence sketches in the emotional context that the film sustains through its whole three hour length. We see a man's face in close-up, isolated, speaking into camera. His speech is at first remarkable then embarrassing then thought-provoking. He starts with the words 'I believe in America'. Then he goes on to tell us (and gradually we realise that the camera — thus the audience — is watching from Don Corleone's position behind the desk) about the rape and scarring of his daughter by a couple of thugs who got only suspended sentences. He's come to Corleone for justice — their deaths. The Don explains that that wouldn't be justice. Then we cut to a wedding party outside. A small girl is dancing with her father, standing on his shoes and reaching up as high as she can (feet in close-up), people are singing, there's a stage and a band, and food, and a singing idol Don Cor-

leone has manoeuvred into number one position. Outside the gates sit the squat De Sotos, and the armed guards. Back inside Don Corleone is seeing a constant stream of visitors, the humble who've come to pay tribute, the desperate and the argumentative.

That first speech is all we're to see of the Mafia's power basis in reality. The emphasis of the movie lies elsewhere — in getting across the emotional implications of the Don's position. We don't come to him as suppliant but as equal.

The film's way of avoiding the issues the script raises proves to be a major limitation, especially where the direction is often both reverent and dull, and hampered by an off-key sense of period. The very obvious idea of the Family as a metaphor for the straight family, for instance, is there but that's all. The same happens with the idea that the Mafia's tentacles of obligation and favour are used to draw the individual into his pre-ordained social context. Another, and very powerful concept, emerges in a chunk of dialogue

of the film: 'My father is not from any other powerful family. At Senators and Presidents don't have men killed.' 'Now, who's being killed?' It's a strong and relevant notion that it remains outside the film's main concerns. It has less to do with timidity about impinging on real life; more about the way Coppola has brought the novel to the screen.

The film concocts a world that is outside our society yet — magically — ordered, even gracious, that is paternal, has its codes of behaviour, its hierarchy and is fundamentally and above all safe.

It's all there — the laughter, the tears, the weddings and funerals, the killings, the family, the father, the altogether meals, the gutlevel response, the spaghetti and meat balls recipe and the instructions for wiping out a rival family head. Killing is the long arm of business. We're enveloped in the standards and ethos of the Family and we accept them.

Coppola takes very literally a character's remark about the need to separate business from personal concerns to the point that he's forced into integrating the two by that director's last resort — shock intercutting. (You sticks the two together and hopes that someone makes something out of it.) Hence the intercutting of the church service in which Michael is made Godfather with footage of his orders for the elimination of a rival being carried out in gory detail.

It's noticeable that those parts of the film that deal strictly with violence and intimidation as part of everyday business life are weakest from the point of view of characterisation when it con-

cerns the anonymous, especially compared with Michael's desperate search for a hidden gun on his first big job. Only when we are allowed to confront a single developing character (and one who doesn't take the Family lifestyle for granted) does the film as a whole gain a dynamic. Michael's rise to position of head of the Family provides another dimension to the theme of power and its wielding.

The film ends with his final decisive use of the position of Godfather and Don in this masculine world, marked by the strategic device of a calculated lie to his second (non-Italian) wife. He deceives her deliberately and the camera respectfully withdraws, moving out of the room, from where it reverentially watches Michael greeting his henchmen — alone, self-contained, worshipped.

'The Godfather' like 'The Ten Commandments' shows us the wielding of power like we've never seen before. Coppola adds to this the whispery suggestion of being allowed to see behind doors we hardly knew existed, and the period cabs, period fade outs, newspaper headline superimpositions etc add to this effectively. Beyond this we have a dynamic which allows us to watch tradition regenerating itself with son succeeding father within the rich dimension of time (9 years) with immediacy given by quick injections of gut-level response.

So 'The Godfather' becomes a phenomenon that has out-taken 'Gone With The Wind' 's thirty year take in nine months. A blockbuster, a film company's way to cash a paycheck.

Verina Glaessner