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# ON THE POPULARITY OF THE GODFATHER

TODD GITLIN

Francis Ford Coppola, the Hollywood screenwriter and director, seems to be something of a pop culture genius in "giving the people what they want," for as a rule "the people" want different and contradictory things. Coppola's script for *Patton* succeeded in convincing anti-war people that they were seeing an exposé of the arbitrary and cruel military mind, while, reportedly, Richard Nixon took the film as a warrant for invading Cambodia. No mean achievement. To succeed in this mode, the pop artist must be on both sides of the fence at the same time, or in rapid succession. The evil hero must be portrayed with some faithfulness and sympathy; sympathy also must be pumped up at crucial moments to indicate that his cruelties are *necessary*; he is neither free nor culpable; he is like you or me. His cruelties must be presented in full, to indicate their human toll; yet his behavior must be explicable, even "moral," within the terms of the film, to undermine the illusion of choice and replace it with a sense of total surrender. The evil hero acts as you would act in his place, yet without the annoying doubts which would confound your own choice; were he a ditherer like you or me, he would not be hero enough. Finally, the forces acting on the evil hero must be those you would *prefer* to be acting on you; they must be great simplifiers in complex times; otherwise he would be expected, like you or me, to hedge his commitments in a labyrinth of petty everyday considerations. The evil hero, to be popular and worthy of mass identification, must be a creature of pure and immense forces.

The genius of Coppola's film of *The Godfather* is built on its construction of just such a hero, who operates and makes choices within a milieu of pure elemental values. The film is popular, so far as I can tell, across all class, ethnic, sexual, and political lines, because it brilliantly appeals to some of our prime national nostalgias. The film's technique, of course, is a contributing factor. This "neo-naturalism," in which long boring conversations sound long and boring and actors look comparatively ordinary, has an appeal of its own, and the film's technical brilliance—if that is not too extravagant a word for a quite devious play on our emotions—lies in its joining of naturalistic details and a melodramatic plot. Yet such

The Godfather

Performance 9-8-, 1972

technique alone does not fully explain the film's popularity, for other recent films have exploited the technique of neo-naturalism punctuated by melodramatic violence without comparable commercial results. No, the popularity is in the content.

*The Godfather's* audience is composed of those who still yearn, at some level of consciousness or unconsciousness, for certain mythic American dreams. These dreams are false, for they have never existed in the pure form to which nostalgia pays tribute. There is first the nostalgia for the ethnic/extended family, that presumably almost tribal institution which provides an object for deepest loyalty, and rewards it, while providing more or less clear rules for most social situations. The opening sequence, the wedding of Don Corleone's daughter, sets up the family nostalgia, and it is never lost. By the time the FBI goons show up to jot down the guests' license numbers we are already on the side of the family. Obviously, in a time when the collapse of flags and institutions leaves the yearning for belonging in limbo, the family becomes a natural object to be revived—in myth if it cannot be revived in reality. (In *Patton* this object is the flag.) Indeed it is not just the extended family in the abstract but specifically the *patriarchal* family; the primary role of women in the film (and it is severely limited) is to be protected from upset, violence, betrayal, and finally from the truth. Yet women seem as enthusiastic about the film as men; perhaps they share in the nostalgia, and with part of themselves long for a time of clear subordination, before a confusion of other roles and identities opened up. And then, of course, the family is not that boiled-down, bleached American television family but an exotic Sicilian one, whose exoticism is all the more vivid against the backdrop of relatively unpretentious wealth. The film taps a hunger for ethnicity, a desire to recrystallize out of the melting pot, to "rediscover roots" (*somebody's* if not one's own) which can make us feel, even briefly, that we are not like the rest of those nondescript melted-down Americans. When audiences shy away from the bland identity of "American," and cannot find alternate identity as a class, what is left but the ethnic throwback?

Interwoven with nostalgia for the ethnic family is the nostalgia for absolute power. This is more explicitly mythic, since most of us have never experienced anything like it. "I'll make you an offer you can't refuse"—who these days would not like to be able to make such an offer to an enemy, or to anyone? Needless to say, the appeal of absolute power is especially great at a time when social disorder appears a permanent feature of our lives, when "powerlessness" seems a pallid word to describe the prevailing sense of having lost control. It may not even be too farfetched to say that life-and-death power over others is especially appealing to a nation now experiencing the limits of its presumably matchless power in Asia. Is *The Godfather* the "expression," as Marxists would say, of an empire at an impasse? It does make sense that the film, like the novel, is set in the Forties, a time of greater innocence in power, war, and love, at least as it is now remembered. The period, in any case, distances the violence and makes it more palatable; a contemporary setting would bring the family's monstrousness too close to home.

Papa Corleone himself is an evocation of precisely what absolute power is supposed to be like: stern but forgiving, commanding but with common sense, shrewd but sentimental. A true American pragmatist, he demands loyalty; once loyalty is secured, he will extend his power by forgiving the miscreant, thereby enlarging his realm. Brando's Don Corleone conveys precisely the right tough-tender mixture to earn our respect—an emotion, after

all, compounded of love and fear. He is an American Pope exacting rituals of allegiance and at the same time extending indulgences. His face is soft but not quite flabby, suggesting some higher humility; and he is a sad character, to temper the arrogance which we would expect to accompany his social role. He is no overreacher; when he argues against the family's getting involved in the drug traffic, his arguments are a mixture of morality and public relations; after all, people will not stand for the drug traffic. A fine American politician, Don Corleone.

But this is not his film and could not be, given the fact that American audiences want their heroes young and up-and-coming. It is in Al Pacino's Michael that Coppola creates the evil hero who carries the burden of our nostalgias. What more appealing figure than the good son who tries to go straight (war hero, Ivy Leaguer, blonde Anglo-Saxon fiancée) only to be called by his truest instincts to the defense and finally the leadership of that institution to which he owes everything? The symbolism of Michael's return from prodigality enables us to exult in his striving for independence and then in his re-entry into the family and subsequent career, in sympathy with him all the way. Indeed the moment of his conversion—at the hospital, when he becomes the man of action to protect his father from impending attack—is the most convincing moment in the film. Wilfrid Sheed has written in *The New York Review of Books* that with Michael “we go from Jekyll to Hyde, with no believable chemical in between.” Yet the audience is, I believe, fully aware of the nature of that chemical: Michael loves his father, it is as simple as that. (Perhaps it is more complicated, perhaps until then Michael had been his mother's boy; it is hard to tell, since Mrs. Corleone casts scarcely any shadow in the film, or for that matter in the book.) Along the way, his motives are buttressed: by the cop's breaking his jaw (to give him a little private vengeance to pursue), by his exile, by the murder of his Sicilian goddess-wife and of his brother Sonny.

Loyalty generates commitments which entail the risk of further pain and, ultimately, of moral taint; love of father is not without risk. Yet the alacrity with which Michael becomes the man of action—and it happens *before* the cop appears to place Michael in literal physical jeopardy—accurately feeds the audience's need to believe that it would be good and right to spring to one's father's defense *just like that*, whatever the consequences. Having made that move, Michael earns our undivided loyalty. He had first made the break and become a good boy, but he has not forgotten where his allegiance really lies. Unlike his brother Sonny, whose constant, barely controlled temper makes him one-dimensional, Michael undergoes the change of heart which allows our identification to unfold continuously and with ease. He is clean but not slick, decent but not a patsy, civilized but not a deserter, decent to his fiancée but not “henpecked”; he is relaxed but he never forgets a grudge; he is a man of action but not impulsive—he will wait years for the right (i.e. effective) moment for revenge; he is devoted (to his Sicilian wife) but not sentimental; he learns well from his father but is not trapped in his father's caution. Indeed the film skips over Michael's presumed period of mourning after the murder of his Sicilian wife. We never see him vulnerable, as if he along with Joe Hill were saying, “Don't mourn, organize!” He accepts leadership of the family empire and makes it his. He is not a builder but an extender of empire, in a time when empire-builders are faintly ludicrous and old-fashioned. This means he is very much a contemporary, the organization

man who bursts just far enough out of the mold to enable him to go to the head of the class. A very attractive political model, neither founding father nor revolutionary but a man who knows how to use the system, to be both traditional and innovative. (Robert Kennedy and George McGovern were and are of the same social type, though to much different ends.) Because his business is violence and because his motives are, within the framework of the film, unexceptionable, he is, in Robert Warshow's description of "the gangster as tragic hero," "what we want to be and what we are afraid we may become." Yet he is significantly different from Warshow's 1948 model of this type, indicating a major change in film's (and audience's?) attitudes toward violence over the past twenty-five years. "The typical gangster film," Warshow wrote, "presents a steady upward progress followed by a very precipitate fall." Michael's only fall is moral, and even then it is not he who is made to suffer for his success, unless we credit the dubious proposition that one pays for one's lies. Michael's aplomb is unshaken when at the end he lies to Kay about his role in the last cycle of murders. The moral seems to be that the right combination of loyalty, planning and cunning still pays off; it is possible to succeed, and isn't that good news in a time when virtues seem to get you nowhere?

But of course the moral, if there is one, is a good deal cloudier than that because Michael's moral catastrophe is so shockingly, so propagandistically portrayed as to threaten shattering that identification with him and his choiceless choices which has dominated the bulk of the film. Specifically, the sequence in which Michael's attendance at his nephew's christening is intercut with a sequence of murders is so crudely powerful that it throws much of the film into question, or seems to. If this is the logical endpoint of Michael's choices, and it does seem to be, then isn't something wrong with the entire trajectory of his life, and by extension with the family's rackets and even with the beneficent Don? It is not so much the sheer volume of violence in that sequence but the hypocrisy of Michael's position that is thrown into sharp relief. And while we don't seem to mind violence, we are still very queasy about hypocrisy.

This vivid representation of the premises of a logic that has had us enthralled (in both senses) for over three hours seems to be an effective device for discrediting the entire logic, or is it? The weakness—and strength—of this denouement is that it is purely propagandistic, and as such does not succeed in annulling most of the film's emotional logic. Michael seemed to be doing right all along, but his course ends in horror. What are we to conclude? Either that the rules of Michael's game are evil, or that basically he was going the right way until suddenly he made a "tragic mistake." Given Michael's power to exact our identification throughout all but the last few minutes of the film, it is far easier psychologically, if not logically, to come to the second conclusion. If only Michael had not attended the christening, or at least not so devoutly; if only he had been portrayed as contrite, wringing his hands at the "necessity" of murder. Then he could have remained the tragic hero.

But Coppola (and, before him, Mario Puzo in the novel) could not leave him that way, perhaps for a very simple reason. It was my sense watching the film, and later reading the book, that they are both—up to the last minutes—very effective briefs on behalf of the Mafia. Even the reference to blacks as "animals" comes from a more philistine chieftain, and cannot outweigh the more conspicuous virtues of the Corleones—and Don Corleone

himself has (implausibly, given what we know of the Mafia, and yet plausibly, within the emotional structure of the film) opposed the heroin traffic as long as prudent, perhaps even longer. The internal logic of the family's dealings is built on an ethic of fair exchange and public service in a society that, as Michael points out, is ruled by principles no different from those of the family; so the premises of those dealings recede into the background. The standard *apologia* for big crime—basically, “When in Rome . . .”—is very appealing. But it may be that Puzo and Coppola were themselves so enamored of the texture of this life that not until the end did they realize they had constructed an apology for murder (even if it is only the murder of other gangsters and a corrupt policeman). The only way to retrieve some semblance of standard morality was then to tack on the propagandistic ending in which the moral price of success is suddenly made plain. We taste the sweet revenge we've been waiting for, in a form that indulges our moralistic need to discredit the whole Corleone world—to cancel the bad faith the rest of the film has engendered by its violence accepted wholly within the family's terms. Or such may have been Puzo's and Coppola's attempt. But a last-minute shot of anti-gangster propaganda cannot counterbalance the effect of a steady diet of sympathy. Why should we suddenly care for Kay in her moment of betrayal when we have not previously been given much reason to sympathize with the position of the Corleone women? We may be thrown into turmoil by Michael's double hypocrisy, but this is only a *logical* and last-minute qualm. Our emotions had long since been given to Michael, and they are not so easily retrieved. Perhaps the applause that greets the film indicates the audience may have their distaste for the Mafia and their admiration and longing as well.

The alternative for a film, of course, is not to be didactic, but rather to show, by way of situation, dialogue, setting and gesture, the continuous logic of evil, a process which would not require a propagandistic moral. But then we would have to know what evil is, wouldn't we? The popular film has instead to entice us with an identification that begs the significant questions. If, as Michael says, the Corleone family works no differently from the government, and if we all know in our bones this is true, then by what standards may we judge anything or anyone to be more or less evil? *The Godfather* represents the triumph of moral relativism since there is no one—no man at least—within the film who embodies a different way of living, there is no alternative to the family. There is a conflict of persons but no conflict of ideas or values. There is really only one significant *choice* in the film, namely Michael's re-entry into the family, and it is so natural to him it scarcely seems a choice. This is the awesome strength of *The Godfather*, to mirror the sometimes exciting inertia and choicelessness of people in the rut of social forces.

A word about the violence in the film. A horrible murder scene is expertly injected every time the action flags. The violence of “realistic” bullet holes and pain and blood has already become cliché; it is strangely routinized, almost anticlimatic. Coppola builds to each murder so obviously—with music, or, as in Sonny's murder at the tollbooth, with a painfully slow attention to detail—that we have time to avert our eyes, as if he is saying, “You know by now what's coming, it's what I have to do, so be forewarned.”

The new gore-chic is as hypnotic as it is repugnant. “How are they going to shock (titillate) us next?” Violence so steadily horrible is no longer horrible, it becomes incorporated as an “art form” of its own. Anyway, our squeamishness is offset by the fact that the only

innocent murdered is Michael's Sicilian bride, unless we count the producer's horse—but the producer himself is so repulsive (and probably Jewish to boot), we are glad to see him “get the offer he can't refuse” whatever the price to his horse. As for the other victims, they are getting what they deserve. The injuries inflicted on the Corleone side merely fuel our desire for revenge. Contrast this with the violence of *Bonnie and Clyde*, which seems to have ushered in this new “realistic” mode of violence five years ago: the fact that they killed innocents only (and paradoxically) heightened our identification with the outlaws, because if we were to choose them at all we had to choose them warts and all. Those in the audience who took sides with Bonnie and Clyde were fiercely partisan. In any case the official violence finally done to Bonnie and Clyde was so magnificently shocking that I remember leaving the theater in stunned silence, and passing a National Guard armory and feeling like slashing the tires of a jeep. The dead innocents were forgotten. (I was told of a spectator who at the end of *Bonnie and Clyde* stood up on his seat and screamed, “Fucking pigs!”) After *The Godfather* there is neither silence nor shriek, rather applause. Violence begets violence, and everyone has gotten what he deserves. Our final feeling for Michael—if we allow that the last sequence works—is that he is just another good-man-gone-corrupt; we have nothing of the romantic populist feelings we shared with and for Bonnie and Clyde. *Bonnie and Clyde* was a blend of violence and explicit romance, a film of disturbed innocence. Even the violence done to bystanders was “regrettable” and accidental. *The Godfather* is a film of *methodical* and *organized* violence, in which death is denatured and has almost no sting.

In the end *The Godfather* is to the organization-family what *Bonnie and Clyde* was to high-spirited anarchic youth. The Corleones' crimes are careful and systematic where Bonnie and Clyde's were impulsive. Neither victims nor executioners in *The Godfather* are ever exultant; indeed the most conspicuous emotions shown in the film are loyalty and grief. It may not be farfetched to say that while in 1967 we were ready to indulge our fantasies about small-scale, impulsive, quasi-populist violence as an attractive style of life, in 1972 we know that violence is a horrible ritual that belongs, like everything else, to large organizations. “Our” criminal identifications have shifted from the free-lance street-fighter to the organization man, from adventure to business; violence has drifted from romance to ritual.

Like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Godfather* makes only passing reference to the origins of criminal violence. As Pauline Kael noted at the time, *Bonnie and Clyde* foreswore any attempt to show the social roots of Clyde's criminality simply by introducing him only after he has already launched his career as crook. No Thirties-style social realism here, except for Clyde's almost gratuitous sympathy for the foreclosed farmer and the couple's later reception by migrant farmers. Where Puzo's novel contains a flashback of Don Corleone's rise from the slums and his consolidation of warring groups into an empire, the film begins with the Don at his peak and never bothers to “justify” the family's business as, say, “a route of upward mobility for ethnic groups barred from the legitimate social ladder, etc.” The family is the family, it does what it does, period. It is a tribute to our gullibility and the film's insidiousness that this piece of pro-Mafia propaganda, this sugar-coated angle on How Empires Get Kept Up in America, seems to be naturalistic art precisely by avoiding those glimpses of conflict which make naturalism “natural.” *The Godfather* is neither American tragedy nor “slice-of-life,” it is the classic American success story writ large and meant to be taken whole.