10. *The Godfather* and *Taxi Driver*

DESPITE their external extravagances, the Left and Right films' underlying traditionalism reconfirmed the New American Cinema's dependence on the paradigms established by Classic Hollywood. Almost entirely faithful to the continuity conventions, both sets of movies quickly neutralized (through stereotyping[1] and overuse) the few New Wave innovations they had borrowed. To maintain the reconciliatory pattern, the industry blurred the two groups' differences until each cycle contained ingredients of the other. Most obviously, the Left's outlaw heroes now appeared in self-contained "families," while the Right translated its formerly domestic official heroes into loners more isolated than the outlaws themselves.

By covertly minimizing the distinctions between the Left and Right films, Hollywood encouraged its audience to attend both cycles. This strategy involved a new, self-consciously intertextual means of avoiding choice, for it counted on a reconciliation occurring, not in individual movies, but in the mind of the filmgoer, who, despite taking seriously the superficial polarization, went to both groups. Thus, *Patton*'s glorification of an eccentric general found its complement in *Little Big Man*'s damning caricature of Custer, and *Easy Rider*'s paranoid view of policemen, in the sympathetic naturalism of *The French Connection*.

With single films, the industry relied not only on its blurring tactics, but also on the divided audience's increasing willingness to use a movie to confirm its own predispositions. For the Left, *Bonnie and Clyde* was a story of martyrdom; for the Right, it was a cautionary tale. The Right saw Dirty Harry as the ideal cop; for the Left, he merely verified the counterculture's worst

fears. Counting on these opposed responses, Hollywood engaged in the calculated ambiguities Pauline Kael decried in *The French Connection*:

> The movie presents [Popeye] as the most ruthless of characters and yet—here is where the basic amorality comes through—shows that this is the kind of man it takes to get the job done. It's the vicious bastard who gets the results. Popeye, the lowlifer who makes Joe or Archie sound like Daniel Ellsberg, is a cop the way the movie Patton was a general. When Popeye walks into a bar and harasses blacks, part of the audience can say, "That's a real pig," and another part of the audience can say, "That's the only way to deal with those people. Waltz around with them and you get nowhere."
>
> I imagine that the people who put this movie together just naturally think in this commercially convenient double way. This right-wing, left-wing, take-your-choice cynicism is total commercial opportunism passing itself off as an Existential view.[2]

As the political divisiveness of the sixties subsided, a more profound distinction arose between naïve and ironic filmgoers. Preferring unselfconscious forms, the naïve moviegoer retained his affection for traditional genre pictures straightforwardly told. The ironist, by contrast, bored with conventional movies, favored art films and revisionist reworkings of Classic Hollywood formulas. While the ironic audience had always existed, the increasing popularity of foreign movies, cult films, and television parodies suggested that its numbers had grown markedly in the early 1960s.

The industry's solution to this new division was the "corrected" genre movie, a film like *Butch Cassidy*, which could provide enough straight action to appease the traditionalists and enough self-consciousness to satisfy the iconoclasts. In effect, the wide appeal of both the Left and Right films derived from their double nature: all, in fact, were "corrected" genre pictures, capable of being taken two ways. Where the Left used its westerns, gangster movies, prison stories, and science fiction movies to imply a pop ecological seriousness, the Right romantically humanized authority figures largely neglected by the American Cinema. Significantly, however, heavily "corrected" films, which systematically frustrated expectations promoted by their genres,

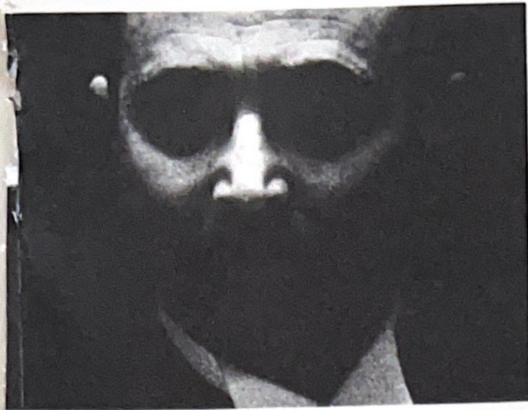
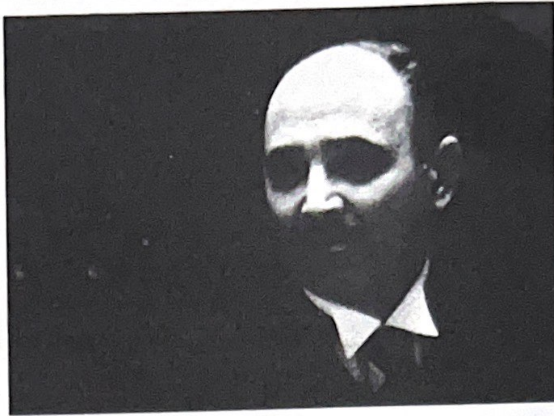
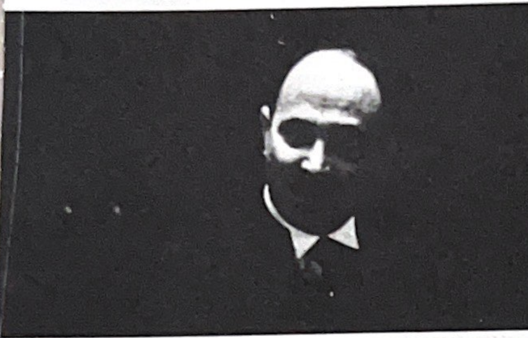
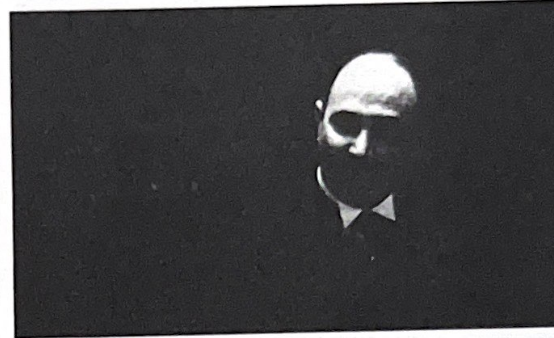
almost uniformly failed at the box office: neither *Badlands* (a *Bonnie and Clyde* variant), *New York, New York* (musical), *The Conversation* (private eye), *Mean Streets* (gangster), *Payday* (musical bio), *The King of Marvin Gardens* (*noir* romance), nor even the widely promoted *Nashville* (musical) made the Top Twenty lists. Their lack of success reconfirmed the audience's fundamental conservatism, its persisting reluctance to part with the mythological categories that these films challenged.

The most important of the "corrected" genre movies were two films that managed to identify themselves with the preeminent modes of the late sixties and early seventies—the Left and Right films. Each of these series, in effect, came to an end in a corrective movie which, while appearing to be only another member of the class, opened up the cycle's basic story to admit previously suppressed, incompatible values. The film that completed the Left cycle was *The Godfather* (1972, 1974); the film that completed the Right cycle was *Taxi Driver* (1976).

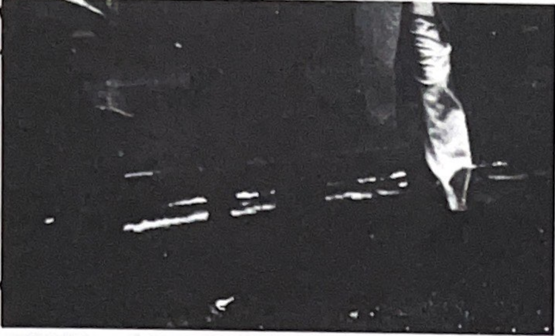
THE GODFATHER

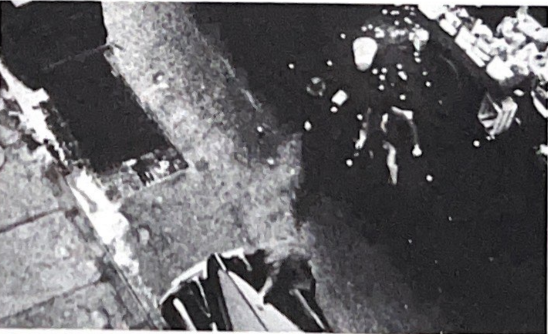
Through 1974, *The Godfather I* had earned more money than any film in the history of the cinema.[3] The movie's extraordinary commercial success depended, among other things, on its ability to perfect the contemporary period's two most popular forms: first, as part of the Left-Right cycle, it blurred completely those distinctions that had separated the cycles; second, as a "corrected" genre picture, it balanced ideally between reassuring conventionality and disquieting revisionism. As a result, *The Godfather I* appealed to both the Left and Right, and to both naïve and ironic filmgoers.

By using all the cycle's basic elements, and then intensifying and extending them to their logical conclusions, Francis Ford Coppola made *The Godfather I* the ultimate Left film. Its protagonists, like all those of the Left movies, were outlaws. Typically, the movie encouraged its audience to identify with these outlaws, to regard their refusal to pursue ordinary careers as the metaphorical equivalent of the counterculture's rejection of the

establishment. "I refused to be a fool, dancing on a string for all those big guys," Don Corleone (Marlon Brando) explained to Michael (Al Pacino), a boast that approximated the Wild Bunch's "We're not associated with anybody."





The Godfather I employed standard means to maintain audience sympathy for its heroes. Formally, Coppola's subjective point-of-view shots (often reserved for key moments) narrowed the viewer's perspective to that of the protagonists. Typical was the film's dramatic opening shot of the Undertaker ("I believe in America"), a highly restricted long take (circumscribed by tight framing and a totally dark background) that a pullback dolly gradually revealed as issuing from Don Corleone's point of view.

The film began, therefore, by firmly planting the viewer in Don Corleone's shoes, and confining him there (or with the Don's family) for most of the initial wedding sequence. Forty minutes into the movie, however, Coppola abruptly disengaged his audience's identification with the Don, gradually relocating it in Michael (a move suggested perhaps by *Psycho*'s exemplary transferal from Marion Crane to Norman Bates). As Hitchcock had done, Coppola marked this break with a sudden transition from a shot of the attackers taken from the victim's point of view to an objective shot of the attack itself filmed from an unmotivated overhead angle.

Subsequently, Michael so fully monopolized the audience's sympathy that a hospital shot-reverse shot sequence between the Don and his son ("I'm with you now") allowed the camera to assume Michael's position while denying it Don Corleone's. Thus, although Brando's eyes looked directly into the camera, the reverse shot of Pacino originated from a more neutral position.

Thematically, *The Godfather I*, like all the Left films, controlled the identification process by isolating its heroes in a moral vacuum in which they could appear as forces of justice. Thus, the movie carefully limited the Corleones' victims to those who deserved punishment (a venal Hollywood producer, a crooked cop, family traitors, other gangsters wanting to sell drugs), thereby insuring that the audience's sympathy for the family would not be undermined by the sight of innocent blood. *The Godfather*'s image of a corrupt establishment (with its hypocritical police and politicians) derived directly from the Left cycle's standard justification for its protagonists' outlawry, made explicit in Dennis Hopper's rationale for Wyatt and Billy's dope-dealing in *Easy*

Rider: "They peddle dope," he wrote, "because that seems no worse to them than the Wall Street tycoon spending eighty percent of his time cheating the government."[4] *The Godfather*'s refusal to admit strong characters with competing values prevented this facile analogy from being scrutinized. Kay, normal society's only representative, remained too diffident (especially as played by Diane Keaton) to provide a challenge to the Corleones' values, which thus became the movie's moral norm. As with most of the Left and Right films, any opposition to the protagonists' standards occurred not within the film itself, but between the film and its audience. Although a viewer could take issue with the family's morality, no one in the movie (except Kay) did so.

At key junctures, *The Godfather*'s thematic and formal identification controls merged. One sequence, for example, which used Corleone's refusal to deal narcotics ("Drugs is a dirty business") as a sign of his relative probity, concluded with a completely subjective shot of the fearsome Luca Brasi taken from the Don's point of view. "I'm a little worried about this Sollozzo fellow," Corleone advised his hitman; "I want you to find out what he's got under his fingernails."

The hero with which *The Godfather I* urged its audience to identify was the perfect mixture of the Left and Right prototypes. On the one hand, Don Corleone represented the ideal outlaw, free of restrictions, able to intervene unilaterally to help family or friends. To a large extent, therefore, the movie, like all

the Left films, appealed to the American Dream (increasingly frustrated in contemporary society) of being able to do exactly what one liked. But having written the script for *Patton*, Coppola certainly recognized that with his power, Corleone also satisfied the Right's ideal of efficient authority. In the most perceptive review of the film, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., implicitly described this connection:

> The film shrewdly touches contemporary nerves. Our society is pervaded by a conviction of powerlessness. *The Godfather* makes it possible for all of us, in the darkness of the movie house, to become powerful. It plays upon our inner fantasies, not only on the criminal inside each of us but on our secret admiration for men who get what they want, whose propositions no one dares turn down.[5]

To the Don's image of uncompromising independence, however, *The Godfather I* added the Left's motif of the family, here deepened into a basic narrative device that often opposed Corleone's autonomy. Thus, the Don's fears for Michael forced him into a humiliating reconciliation with archenemies Barzini and Tattaglia. Within their own circle, however, and within the movie's closed world, the Corleone family resemble a romanticized, self-supporting commune.

The Godfather I adopted another standard Left motif by implicitly acknowledging the frontier's closing. Repeatedly, significant scenes took place in darkened, sealed, claustrophobic rooms.

More important, the movie represented Walter Prescott Webb's postfrontier world where limited resources required the family's explicitly competitive ethic. Predatory capitalism, Webb had argued, could only operate nonviolently at a time "when wealth existed in such abundance—and so out of proportion to the number of people who could share it—that everyone could engage in the scramble for it without creating social disaster."[6] In advising the Don to move into narcotics, Tom Hagen tacitly argued that this grace period had passed:

TOM HAGEN: There's more potential in narcotics than anything else we're looking at. And if we don't get into it, somebody else will—maybe one of the Five Families, maybe all of them. Now, with the money they earn, they can buy more police and political power. Then they come after us. Now we have the unions, we have the gambling, and they're the best things to have, but narcotics is a thing of the future. Now, if we don't get a piece of that action, we risk everything we have—I mean, not now, but ten years from now.

Hagen's warning was *The Godfather*'s equivalent of Pike's challenge to the Wild Bunch ("We've got to start thinking beyond our guns, them days is closin' fast") or *Butch Cassidy*'s "Who *are* those guys?"—an image of the inexorability of scarcity.

Unlike many Left films, *The Godfather I* did not contain protagonists who explicitly modeled themselves on pop myths. But the movie repeatedly emphasized the power of corrupt dreams to determine behavior: in the film's terms, Don Corleone was merely a capitalist extended, someone who had taken literally the American success myth and done everything in his power to achieve it. Characteristically, his last conversation with Michael took on Horatio Alger tones:

DON CORLEONE: I never . . . never wanted this [the gangster life] for you. I worked my whole life, and I don't apologize, to take care of my family. And I *refused* to be a fool, dancing on a string held by all those big shots. I don't apologize—that's my life. But I thought that . . . that when it was your time, that . . . *you* would be the one to hold the strings: Senator Corleone, Governor Corleone, something. Well, there just wasn't enough time, Michael. There wasn't enough time.

Michael's reply ("We'll get there, Pop, we'll get there") indicated that he had inherited his father's goal. Indeed, *The Godfather I*

made clear that in preparing to avenge his father, Michael had rehearsed and adopted a role created by the Don. "That's not what Pop would do," he cautioned during Sonny's brief reign as family head. As the new Don, Michael adopted his father's idiom to scold family members. After the Sollozzo meeting, Vito had admonished Sonny, "*Never* tell anybody outside the family what you're thinking again." Having seen Fredo defend Moe Green, Michael warned, "Fredo, you're my brother, and I love you, but don't ever take sides with anyone against the family again, *ever*." Michael's self-consciousness, however, lacked the playfulness normally associated with the Left heroes' use of ready-made images: Clyde had enjoyed his theatricality; Michael saw his part as a burden.

With Brando's Don Corleone absent, *The Godfather II* further complicated the stock Left motif of role-playing. First, Michael's imitation of his father now required that he refer to behavior primarily existing in another film. Second, DeNiro's conception of the young Vito clearly derived from Brando's original, including the raspy voice and trademark gesture of resting his head on one hand's outstretched fingers. Both these borrowings, the character Michael's and the actor DeNiro's, clearly revealed the sequel's overt intertextuality, and thus, by implication, the inherent artificiality of the cinema itself, a world where characters grew not from "life," but from other fictions.

BY MAKING the ruthlessly powerful Vito and Michael a father and son devoted to their family, *The Godfather I* skillfully drew on the crucial imagery of both the Left and Right cycles. Not surprisingly, the violence-family coupling also constituted the key to the movie's ideal balance between traditional and revisionist filmmaking. *The Godfather I* was the perfect "corrected" genre picture. On the one hand, it demonstrated the persisting power of the traditional mythology; on the other, it suggested that such mythology rested on irreconcilable contradictions, previously concealed. If it offered enough action to attract the naïve filmgoer, it also offered enough ideological criticism of that action to please the ironists. "We had been sure of the square audience," co-scriptwriter Mario Puzo observed of the movie's huge

success, "and now it looked as if we were going to get the hip avant-garde too."[7]

As a "corrected" genre picture, *The Godfather I* achieved its exquisite balance by confining its critique to tacit references in an otherwise compelling story. In making its subversions thematic rather than formal, the movie reversed the *noir* strategy of convulsing conventional plots with radical style. Formally, in fact, *The Godfather* was more conservative than any of its Left predecessors; it eschewed New Wave pyrotechnics, relying instead on Classic Hollywood's continuity rules. Significantly, the movie's few stylistic distantiations satisfied both the ironic audience's desire for critical perspective and the naïve audience's desire for involving excitement. Thus, while *The Godfather*'s key formal device, parallel editing, provided a means for exposing hypocrisy, it was also cinema's most traditional way of generating narrative suspense. Indeed, D. W. Griffith had recognized this device's double potential as early as 1909's *A Corner on Wheat*, where his crosscuts between an evil grain speculator and a bread line achieved both a dialectical critique and a narratively compelling sequence. In juxtaposing Connie's wedding party with Don Corleone's murder plans, a christening with Michael's gangland killings, a First Communion party with Michael's scheming, a religious festival with Vito's first murder, *The Godfather* implicitly demonstrated, to those predisposed to think about such things, that American society functioned on two levels: an ideologically whitewashed exterior and a foundation of predatory violence. For those not so predisposed, these sequences merely represented particularly gripping instances of Classic American narrative cinema.

The Godfather I's ideal balance of traditional filmmaking and revisionist critique found its perfect expression in the film's crucial sequence, Michael's murder of Sollozzo and his hired cop, McCluskey. To satisfy both the naïve and ironic audiences, this scene had to be simultaneously involving and repellent, a mechanism for making the viewer want the murder to happen and for making him feel appalled when it did. The sequence's final thirteen shots accommodated both needs by alternating between point-

SHOT 1

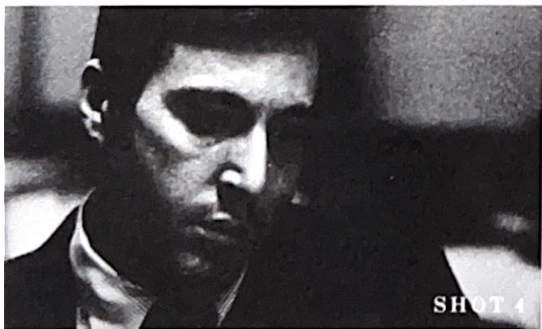
SHOT 1

SHOT 2

SHOT 3

SHOT 3

SHOT 4


SHOT 4

SHOT 5

SHOT 5

SHOT

SHOT 7

SHOT

SHOT 9

SHOT

SHOT 11

SHOT 1

SHOT 13

of-view shots, that identified the viewer with Michael, and objective long shots, whose frozen tableaux encouraged estrangement.

Shot 1 reestablished the positions of Sollozzo and McCluskey by filming them from Michael's vantage point as he emerged covertly armed from the bathroom. Indeed, only Michael's own entry into the frame modified what at first appeared a purely subjective view. Shots 2 and 3, a simple reverse figure completed by Michael's walk to the table, narrowed the focus to the spatial seam between Michael and Sollozzo. In 4, by zooming in on Pacino's face from a neutral position, Coppola intensified the sequence's involvement with Michael while avoiding identifying the camera with Sollozzo's point of view. The nearly full subjectivity of Shot 5, with the gun jutting into the frame, placed the viewer in Michael's position as he fired on Sollozzo. Shots 6 and 7, another reverse figure, shifted the seam of significance to the space connecting Michael and McCluskey and further implicated the spectator in the developing action.

The carefully restricted perspectives of Shots 1-7 set up the shock of Shot 8's sudden objectivity. Shots 1-7 had unmistakably suggested, "This is what it feels like to commit a murder" (exciting); Shot 8 replied, "This is what a murder looks like from a bystander's position" (appalling). Shots 9-12 immediately retracted this newly acquired distance by plunging the viewer back into the space between Michael and McCluskey. With Shot 13, however, Coppola once again withdrew from the action, alienating the viewer with a long shot that took in the entire space

of the room and the customers in it. Like Shot 8, Shot 13's sudden remoteness broke the absorbing spell created by the previous shot-reverse shots' restricted perspectives.

This sequence illustrated *The Godfather I*'s optimum commercial balance between compelling narrative and modernist critique. As a scene, the murder was at once utterly absorbing and incipiently alienating, with Shots 8 and 13 working to "correct" the involvement promoted by the classical reverse figures. Significantly, Coppola limited this "correction" to two shots, never imitating Godard's long stretches of formal rupture. As a result, *The Godfather I* could appease the growing ironic audience without losing the still more sizable naïve audience.

Coppola's basic strategy to retain the naïve audience, however, lay in primarily confining his "corrections" to tacit thematic analogies between the Corleones and capitalist America. In interviews, Coppola repeatedly made these analogies explicit, as if they alone had legitimized what he regarded as essentially trashy material. "I was desperate to give the film a kind of class," he said in another context; "I felt the book was cheap and sensational." He had taken on the project, he admitted, only because his independent Zoetrope Productions had put him $300,000 in debt, but rereading the novel had generated a different reaction: "I thought it was a terrific story, if you cut out all the other stuff. I decided it could be not only a successful movie but also a *good* movie."[8]

From the start, therefore, Coppola had intended to make a "corrected" film. His remarks, however, suggested a crucial departure for the American Cinema: where Classic Hollywood's great directors (Walsh, Hawks, Ford, Curtiz, Capra) had measured themselves by their ability to use the inherited paradigms, the new ambitious filmmakers equated quality with "corrections" of those paradigms. (Significantly, the same equation obtained in post-*Sgt. Pepper* popular music.) Almost certainly, their model for this new vision was *Citizen Kane*, the first major American commercial movie to subvert Classic Hollywood's standard patterns. Not surprisingly, therefore, Coppola's ambitions for *The Godfather* involved him in replicating *Kane*'s displacement of a latent social critique onto the story of one rich and powerful man's failure to find happiness.

The Godfather I's enormous commercial success indicated that, in fact, Coppola's intended anticapitalist critique operated at most as a subtext, readable by those predisposed to do so. Only the constant references to "business," a loose pragmatic that superseded all personal ties, brought the critique into the open. "Tell Michael it was only business," Tessio said matter-of-factly, having been discovered as the family traitor; "I always liked him." While this confession implied that the rudimentary outlaw ethic of brotherhood, so common to the Left films (especially *The Wild Bunch*), had given way to an extreme, every-man-for-himself individualism, the movie never made this message overtly political.

Despite this reticence, however, *The Godfather I* went further with its "corrections" than the standard "New" American movies, which Stanley Kauffmann described as "entertainment films on which 'meaning' is either grossly impasted or is clung to only as long as convenient."[9] In fact, although Coppola insisted that the popular audience had missed his point,[10] the movie's primary critique lay in more subtle exposures, whose power depended on that very audience's intertextual sophistication. Thus, real disenchantment with Michael resulted less from his murders (which the film's own logic justified) than from his betrayal of Classic Hollywood's basic myth. For only a filmgoer who recognized Michael as a reluctant hero (conceiving of his intervention as temporary) could experience the full shock caused by his subsequent development into a grotesque parody of the official values. Similarly, only someone intuitively familiar with the Andy Hardy image of the family could respond completely to *The Godfather I*'s disquieting mixture of paternalism and violence, best captured in Don Corleone's last conversation with Michael. As father and son sat together in the garden, a child's bicycle standing in the background, their talk resembled scenes between Judge Hardy and Andy, while confounding two worlds that Classic Hollywood had kept apart:

DON CORLEONE: So . . . Barzini won't move against you first. He'll set up a meeting with someone that you absolutely trust guaranteeing your safety, and at that meeting you'll be assassinated. I like to drink more wine than I used to. Anyway, I'm drinking more.

MICHAEL: It's good for you, Pop.

DON CORLEONE: Your wife and children, are you happy with them?
MICHAEL: Very happy.
DON CORLEONE: That's good. I hope you don't mind the way I . . . keep going over this Barzini business.
MICHAEL: No, not at all.
DON CORLEONE: It's an old habit. I spent my life trying not to be careless. Women and children can be careless, but not men. How's your boy?
MICHAEL: He's good.
DON CORLEONE: You know he looks more like you every day.
MICHAEL: He's smarter than I am—three years old and he can read the funny papers.
DON CORLEONE: The funny papers! . . . Look, uh . . . I want you to arrange to have a telephone man check all the calls that go in and out here because . . .
MICHAEL: I did it already, Pop.
DON CORLEONE: It could be anyone . . .
MICHAEL: Pop, I took care of that.

In occasional westerns (e.g., *Shane, High Noon*), Hollywood had managed to reconcile the conflicting claims of violence and family by justifying force used against a community's enemies. *The Godfather I*'s most moving scene—Michael's reunion with his near-fatally wounded father—appeared to reconfirm that reconciliation by foreshadowing the son's revenge. As the movie developed, however, it punished the audience for its complicity in this myth. Indeed, by *The Godfather II*, Michael himself had recognized the myth's falsity: "By being strong for his family," he asked his mother, "could a man lose it?"

The reversal had begun in *The Godfather I* with a scene that startlingly frustrated audience expectations. Having had brother-in-law Carlo killed, Michael was confronted by his own hysterical, accusing sister ("And you stood godfather to our baby!") and by his wife, Kay. "Michael, is it true?" she asked incredulously. "Don't ask me about my business, Kay," he replied coldly.

KAY: Is it true?
MICHAEL: Don't ask me about my business.
KAY: No . . .
MICHAEL: *ENOUGH!* . . . All right. This one time . . . this one time, I'll let you ask me about my affairs.
KAY: Is it true?
MICHAEL: [utterly sincere] No.

For all Coppola's talk about capitalist analogies, this scene was *The Godfather's* most telling departure from Classic Hollywood's forms. Typically, its startling quality depended on implicit references to other movies, where violent men admitted their acts but explained their necessity to women who forgave them. The audience's memory of those movies made Michael's lie come as a shock and prove more damning than any of his crimes.

The Godfather I quietly reversed other stock conventions inherited from the Left films. While the Don displayed the outlaw hero's flawless sixth sense (anticipating Barzini's assassination plans for Michael), the movie elsewhere took care to undercut Hollywood's traditional portrayal of anti-intellectual intuition as infallible. Indeed, *The Godfather I* repeatedly demonstrated that the most intuitive, emotional character, Sonny, was not only the most vicious, but also the most stupid, continually allowing his temper to damage himself and his family. Even more significantly, survival now rested on organization and legal manipulation, previously depicted as the means of the enemy (as in *Butch Cassidy's* railroad-Pinkerton team, or *The Wild Bunch's* banker-bounty hunter coalition). Where the Left's heroes had remained individual entrepreneurs, the Corleones had become a corporation, equipped with lawyers and given to rational planning that even involved debates on potential "acquisitions" like narcotics. Where the Left's heroes had struggled to escape from carefully conceived ambushes, the Corleones themselves set the traps, planned the assassinations, and used the law to escape punishment. In *The Godfather I*, in other words, the outlaw heroes had corrupted themselves with the most debased of society's institutions.

By fully integrating these "corrections" into a compelling narrative, however, *The Godfather I* maintained its coveted balance between tradition and revision. Indeed, for all of Coppola's talk of anticapitalist analogies, the movie demonstrated the durability of Classic Hollywood's paradigms. In effect, *The Godfather I* was the *Casablanca* of the 1970s. Not surprisingly, the film's conventional style, period setting, attention to detail, devotion to storytelling, abundance of stars, big budget, and enormous length together provided the model for the wave of conservative movies that followed it: *The Way We Were* (1973), *The Day of the*

Jackal (1973), *The Sting* (1973), *The Great Gatsby* (1974), *The Towering Inferno* (1974), *Jaws* (1975), *Shampoo* (1975), *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), *The Great Waldo Pepper* (1975), *Marathon Man* (1976), *Rocky* (1976), *A Star Is Born* (1976), *The Other Side of Midnight* (1977). Not only did *The Godfather I* fail to radicalize the American Cinema, it ultimately made it more reactionary, spawning the blockbuster complex that reduced the industry's flexibility by fixating its attention on a very few presold, lavishly produced, heavily promoted films.

Without its sequel, *The Godfather I*'s Marxist critique of American success myths would have remained tacit. *The Godfather II*, however, made its "corrections" far more overt, and in doing so, upset the original's ideal commercial balance. (While still a sizable hit, the far more costly sequel earned only one-third as much as *The Godfather I*.) "This time," Coppola confessed, "I really set out to destroy the family. And I wanted to punish Michael."[11] Nevertheless, despite these claims, *The Godfather II*'s "corrections" operated squarely within the traditional American mythology, working variants on frontier imagery and the ideologically determined platitude, "It's lonely at the top." Compared to Godardian cinema, these "corrections" remained mild indeed. That they nonetheless cost the film two-thirds of *The Godfather I*'s audience suggested that American filmgoers had become only marginally more receptive to revisionism than in *Citizen Kane*'s day.

The Godfather II's chief commercial handicap lay in its strategy of alternating between scenes of Vito's youth and Michael's maturity. The parallel montages that *The Godfather I* had used primarily to generate excitement thus became the sequel's basic structuring principle, dialectically indicating the discrepancy between auspicious beginnings and their sterile issue, but also retarding narrative development. Clearly, however, this schema provided *The Godfather II* with the means to "correct" the Left cycle's mythology. First, the expanded chronology that resulted from the juxtapositions spelled out the analogy linking the history of the Corleones to the history of America. As a whole, in fact, *The Godfather* managed to represent all the stages of American development: the immigrant arrival (the child Vito sitting

alone in an Ellis Island room, under the Statue of Liberty's shadow); the wilderness struggle for material comforts and status (Vito's early activities in New York's Little Italy); the Robin Hood phase of frontier individualism (Vito's early criminality); the robber baron period (the mature Don Corleone of *The Godfather I*); and finally, the entrenched, organized corporate state (represented by Michael, to whom fellow syndicate operator Hyman Roth boasted, "We're bigger than U.S. Steel").

More thoroughly than most Left films, *The Godfather II* also sketched the trail of America's receding frontiers. The Corleone family movements—from Sicily to America, from New York to the West (Las Vegas and Lake Tahoe), from the West to the "externalized" frontier in Cuba—followed the direction of America's own history, from Jamestown to Vietnam. But the Corleones, like all Left heroes, arrived late, finding their frontiers closing as they reached them. Thus, the New Land's promise became the teeming, predatory world of Little Italy, and the West's landscapes had shrunk to dark rooms where men discussed "business" behind heavy curtains that shut out views of the mountains. Even Cuba failed the Corleones; Michael arrived to witness Batista's fall and Castro's beginnings.

Like the other Left films, *The Godfather II* depicted a postfrontier world of scarcity and violence. Unlike them, it sought to avoid idealizing its protagonists as last representatives of a glorious past. *The Godfather II*, in fact, suggested that America had been a postfrontier world from the beginning, and that perhaps the very idea of a condition that could accommodate extreme individualism without violence was the most fundamental illusion of all. Initially, the film's organization seemed to suggest a pastoral past in which Vito appeared in a favorable light. His pre-organization-man, Robin Hood banditry, interventions against corrupt landlords, and devotion to his family all implicitly criticized the coldly efficient Michael. Their contrast suggested the basic outlaw hero-official hero dichotomy, with Vito's energy invoking, in Philip Rahv's terms, the appeal of life conceived as an opportunity rather than as a discipline.[12] But ultimately, the Vito sequences revealed that behind the Corleones' rise lay Vito's own brutal murder of Fanucci. While the Left heroes had fought in

the open, Vito hid in the darkness to ambush his enemy, shooting him with a revolver carefully wrapped in a towel to muffle the sound.

As Pauline Kael observed, the Vito sections of *The Godfather II* "satisfied an impossible yet basic human desire to see what our parents were like before we were born and to see what they did that affected what we became."[13] These sequences, then, worked like the imaginary movie in Delmore Schwartz's story "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," providing a vision of the past whose consequences could be felt in the present. While partially nostalgic, the Vito scenes also suggested that the entire structure of the Corleone family, and by implication of America itself, rested on a crime at the inception: they thus confirmed *Liberty Valance*'s notion (itself derived from *Red River*, and subsequently picked up by *Easy Rider, Little Big Man*, and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*) that the American Dream had gone wrong from the start. Watching Vito stalk Fanucci, an ironic filmgoer might have felt like Schwartz's narrator, pleading with his parents to reconsider marrying: "Don't do it. It's not too late to change your minds, both of you. Nothing good will come of it, only remorse, hatred, scandal, and two children whose characters are monstrous."

In fact, however, almost no filmgoers did feel this way. First, by structuring *The Godfather II* around one sustained parallel figure whose juncture lay in a previous movie, Coppola unwittingly subverted the connections between Vito's crime and Michael's behavior, creating instead a dreamlike state in which causality seemed suspended. More important, despite Coppola's intended Marxist critique of America's predatory origins, DeNiro remained too attractive as Vito and Fanucci too one-dimensionally villainous as a character for the audience not to wish his murder. Indeed, as Vito fired, a purely subjective shot of Fanucci placed the viewer in the position of the killer. Throughout *The Godfather II*, the audience's indentification with the Corleones remained almost complete. As a consequence, the movie revived (while reversing) the standard problem of so many postwar films: clearly Coppola's intent did not coincide with his movie's actual effect. In fact, *The Godfather* glamorized its protago-

nists and contributed at least one phrase to the national idiom: "I'll make him an offer he can't refuse."

The Godfather's failure to become the subversive movie of Coppola's designs reconfirmed the *Cahiers du cinéma*'s point that an effective ideological critique occurs primarily at the level of style.[14] By restricting his challenge to a thematic attack on the traditional American mythology, Coppola failed to dislodge the representational system (especially the identification mechanisms) that sustained it. At its worst, therefore, *The Godfather* inadvertently resembled the Mafia itself, adopting a superficial cloak of respectability (chic, Watergate-era anticapitalism) to conceal its tactics of manipulation (maintained by its style's invisibility).

At its best, on the other hand, *The Godfather* recognized what

the *Cahiers* critics had not: that cinematic "style" lies not only in filmic syntax, but also in the expectations created by the popular cinema's fundamental intertextuality. In reversing so many of those expectations, *The Godfather* effected a more subtle critique whose immediate result was the end of the intrinsically nostalgic Left cycle.

The power of this critique derived precisely from its traditionality. In many ways, in fact, *The Godfather*'s revisionism resembled that of *The Great Gatsby*, the script for which Coppola had written between his original film and its sequel. Michael was a kind of Gatsby, losing and finding his first love, trying to remake the past, attempting to undo the logic of an original crime. Like Fitzgerald's novel, Coppola's movie suggested that American tragedies resulted from a misguided interpretation of a promise that still existed. Not surprisingly, the movie's final image, with Michael sitting on a lawn chair beside his great empty house, alone by the lake in gathering darkness, recalled Daisy's green light and Gatsby's vigils, and Fitzgerald's concluding passage that suggested how much had been wasted and how much remained:

> Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.
>
> And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.
>
> Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomor-

row we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And one fine morning—

And so we beat on, boats against the current, borne ceaselessly into the past.

TAXI DRIVER

Even in hindsight, the most surprising thing about *Taxi Driver* remains its commercial success (twelfth at the box office in 1976). With its X rating, heavy doses of violence and profanity, and failure to use major stars, it seemed automatically destined for a relatively small audience. More important, as a "corrected" Right film, it faced a far more treacherous problem of balance than had *The Godfather*. For the Left movies originally pitched at the developing ironic audience, "corrections" had always been not only part of the basic marketing strategy, but also the key to acquiring "legitimacy." In the Right cycle, on the other hand, aimed at the naïve audience, "corrections" always threatened to appear "artsy," the most damning adjective possible in that context. As a result, the Right movies had generally limited their revisionism to injecting naturalist detail into traditional stories of police and revenge. Formally, these films almost entirely eschewed New Wave devices, preferring instead to refine conventions inherited from Classic Hollywood.

The Right cycle's standard procedures appeared to suggest the impossibility of making a heavily "corrected," commercially successful Right movie. Worse, even if someone *could* do it, *Taxi Driver*'s Martin Scorsese (director), Paul Schrader (scriptwriter), and Robert DeNiro (principal actor) seemed an unpromising team. All had strong previous associations not only with the Left cycle, but also with a highly revisionist style of filmmaking that borrowed extensively from the New Wave.[15] None (except DeNiro, who had appeared in *The Godfather II*) had found any major commercial success. And yet together they produced the most popular "corrected" movie in the American Cinema since *Citizen Kane*.

Like *Kane*, *Taxi Driver* mounted its challenge to Hollywood's paradigms on both formal and thematic fronts. Also like *Kane*,