THE GODFATHER AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to demonstrate how The Godfather by Francis Ford Coppola challenges the myth of the American Dream. The thesis of the paper is that The Godfather is not a film seeking to re-establish American norms and ideals, but that it tries to break down and shed light on the corrupt side of the modern American society through the myth of “the American Dream”. The structure of the paper is so that first, what other academics and critiques have to say about Coppola’s attempt to criticize the American society and ideals will be visited, as this will give the reader a clearer understanding of the film’s meaning and message. Then, analyses of how certain characters are built and how their presence and attributes contribute to the film’s meaning will be conducted, topped off with the usage of props.

Keywords: film studies, the godfather, the godfather trilogy, francis ford coppola, gangster film, 1970s cinema, minorities in film, ethnic groups in film, american dream.

First released in 1972, Francis Ford Coppola’s The Godfather is perhaps the most influential film in terms of the gangster genre. Winning two Academy Awards in its release year for the Best Picture, and as for Marlon Brando the Best Actor, it is also one of the highest profit making films in history. However, The Godfather’s legacy as one of the greatest gangster films cannot only be legitimized on the basis of its recognition by the Academy nor its success at the box office. It is a film that can clearly be differentiated from its predecessors in the gangster genre, as The Godfather “reversed the viewpoint, looking from inside the underworld out into a hopelessly corrupt society from which tradition, loyalty, honor and respect for one’s elders had almost totally vanished.” (Clarens 1980, p. 277) Thus, it is not a Hollywood film that seeks to re-establish the preeminent American norms and values, but in fact it aims to deconstruct the myth of American dream that is so strongly embedded in the American culture and society by telling the story of an Italian-American mafia family based in New York.

Therefore, in this paper I will try to analyze The Godfather in terms of how it actually tries to deconstruct and metaphorically challenge the myth of American dream. In order to do this, I will especially focus on characterization as it is one of the most vital iconographic instruments to create meaning through the actors and

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actresses, and also the various props used across the film, as they also contribute greatly to the overall idea of the film through how they are used by these characters.

Before discussing how *The Godfather* seeks to challenge the notion of the American dream, first we must define and know what it beholds. In popular culture, when mentioned, most of us will think of the American dream as being able to achieve success and enough money to make an honest living if we work hard enough, or as Zakaria puts it, “this general prosperity and well-being for the average person.” (Zakaria 2010) As a result, regardless of their education, inheritance or opportunities, the grand idea of the American dream suggests that anybody who works hard enough will be able to achieve some sort of well-being for themselves in the ‘great free state’ of America.

Walter Fisher argues the idea of the American dream is a ‘myth’ that deceives most of the people who firmly believe in it (1973). He expands on the notion of American dream by suggesting that there are two strands of myths that constitute it, namely the first being the materialistic myth and the second being the moral myth. The first one concerns the achievement of success by any common person. Their background information, gender, ethnicity, or personal history does not even matter. The only thing that matters according to Fisher is “the values of effort, persistence, playing the game initiative, self-reliance, achievement and success.” (Fisher 1973, p.161) Therefore, this strand of the American dream should ideally provide individuals with success as long as they show commitment to their goals. On the other hand, the second strand of the myth is the moral aspect, which concerns being ‘good’ and fair to everybody. In this sense, “the values of tolerance, charity, compassion, and true regard for the dignity and worth of each and every individual” are completely paramount in order for the individual to place his or her quest for the American dream within the society (Fisher 1973, p.161). As a result, it can be argued that *The Godfather* contests this multi faceted structure of the American dream as Michael Corleone, like his father before him, ‘plays the game’ in a very much committed sense, but because on the moral aspect he fails to acknowledge the importance of family values and respect for others, he is not seen as an ultimately ‘successful’ character who was able to fully accomplish the American dream per se. I will go into more detail how Michael represents the corruption and failure of America, which is on the other side of the medallion vis-à-vis to the American dream, when I proceed to the character analysis part later on.

Now how the American myth operates within materialistic and moral spheres of the society is demonstrated, how this myth is deployed within the gangster genre should be looked at since *The Godfather* is a rather radical example of these types of films. Shadoian argues that “the gangster film is a vehicle that responds to our wish to have our dreams made visible to us in a form that retains their dreamlike qualities but contains a narrative that is the living dream of its hero who makes it happen, actualizes it.” (2003, p.3) By ‘us’ Shadoian means the viewers of the film, and thus argues that the viewers actually reflect their own perceptions of the American dream through the characters in the gangster film, because these characters come so close to actually realizing it, especially through the materialistic aspect. However, the moral aspect of the American dream is the main obstacle that stops gangster characters from becoming the ‘perfect American citizen’ with no crime record and a happy family.

As Munby illustrates, “the gangster championed the desires for public recognition of under and misrepresented part of American cultural and ethnic urban popular classes,
in which the gangster became a cultural hero, a person who was able to challenge the system.” (Munby 1999, p.37) To build upon Munby’s argument, the gangster is surrounded by what I call a ‘sense of false success,’ as in most films, as well as in The Godfather, the main gangster has accumulated respect and wealth, but all through the ‘wrong’ means, by means which fall into the unacceptable part of the moral spectrum, such as through violence and corruption. This process, as in the case of Micheal Corleone, notably de-legitimizes his success in terms of the American dream myth, and makes him a character who is able to ‘challenge the system’. In a way then, as Warshow argues, the gangster is speaking for all of us who want to reject the qualities and demands of modern life and is what many people want to be, but on the other hand, what many of us are afraid we may become (1962).

Now that the implications of the American dream and how it has been reflected in the gangster movie genre was discussed, we can move on to analyze how The Godfather intends to challenge this ‘myth’. In order to do this, characterization is a solid place to start. The film starts out as the depiction of the Corleones as a mafia family of an immigrant background, but gradually turns into the story of Michael’s rise to power. Obviously, Michael Corleone’s characterization must be analyzed because as he is the protagonist, us as the viewers “project [ourselves] into the protagonist, responding much as the protagonist would.” (Plantinga 2009, p. 104) Thus, how the film conveys the message about the American dream is mainly done through the character of Michael, via his experiences and development.

Initially, Michael does not strike the viewer as a character who would typically get involved in the dirty businesses of his family, which involve extreme violence and crime, things not necessarily compiling with the moral code of the society. He signals this himself during the wedding scene of his sister in the early stages of the film, being a fresh college graduate and also a war veteran, sitting under the shade with his Anglo-American girlfriend, away from all the other traditional Italian members of his family, which implies that he is the least likely son to take over the kind of shady business that his family is running. However, we all know that his character develops to be like the rest of the men in his family, which are street smart and immoral characters who aim to achieve the American dream that beholds the notions of success, money, and respect. Therefore, the idea of the family and how it is eminent in The Godfather as a motif is important to examine since it represents the moral strand of the American dream vis-à-vis to the material strand, and as Shadoian (1977) observes, this moral strand is a more viable way of observing how capitalism and the American dream deceived its believers.

Cawelti (1976) recognizes that the earlier films of the gangster genre used crime as a vehicle to move up the social ladder. Typically, the protagonist of immigrant background would be involved in criminal activities in order to have access to money, success, and respect, which would bring the material aspect of the American dream into reality, although the moral aspect would often be eschewed while trying to achieve the other one. In contrast, the Corleones have already established the material aspect until some extent. We can see this in the opening scene, where Don Corleone is approached by another member of the mafia, who is asking the Don to kill the guy who beat up his daughter, and the Don rejects this as he thinks the other mafia person has not respected him enough. This signifies that as a member of the Corleone
family, the Don is already in a powerful and respected position as others come to him to ask for 'favours', i.e. to take care of businesses that involve crime.

Thus, the family already has accumulated some level of respect and reputation. As a result, it is evident that in contrast to the earlier films of the gangster genre, where the individual protagonists’ tale of the fulfillment of the American dream is depicted, The Godfather is about a family that has already fulfilled the material aspect of the American dream until some extent, from which if held apart, the story of the protagonist gangster, Michael Corleone, would make no sense. Therefore, the family is a centralized theme and motif where the other characters in the film are responsible against, whereas in the earlier films the narrative would centralize more on just the personal journey of the protagonist gangster, who often had to build respect, success, money and morality himself.

To return to Michael's character, he is lucky in the sense that he inherits all the material strand of the American dream from his family, which also constitutes the main moral sphere he is surrounded by. Moreover, he is not a static character but a very dynamic one, since we witness his personal rise to power, which is related more to the material aspect of the American dream, within the context of the family, which supplies the moral sphere. Hence, with the shooting of his father Don Corleone, Michael starts to get more involved in the family business, taking baby steps at the beginning, who transforms into a true street-smart, gun-savvy criminal after taking revenge for his unrighteous battering by the police in an Italian restaurant. This scene is crucial for Michael’s characterization since it is the first time he is being truly violent on his own terms, he actually wants to take revenge, unlike the cool college boy he was first depicted as. Another important motif here is that the killing of the police officers are co-planned by the other members of the family, who also choose the Italian restaurant setting for the killing, which ironically merges the moral sphere of the family, which is supposed to be good-willing, clean and noble because it is of the Italian heritage, with the material sphere, since this killing is motivated by retrieving back the respect which was damaged by the unrighteous beating of Michael. As a result, Coppola juxtaposes the moral codes of the society with the material initiatives to have access to the American dream, but as it can be seen through this scene, when combined, the picture is just corrupt and disastrous.

In terms of his nuclear family, Michael meets his first wife in Sicily where he goes into hiding after killing the officials. This is again an homage to Italian norms and values, where traditionally an Italian man like Michael would wed another women of the same heritage, and that’s what he does when he goes to his forefathers birthplace. However, although the reason why is not clearly disclosed in the narrative, they break up and when Michael comes back to America, he immediately seeks his ex Girlfriend Kay, whom he eventually marries.

This marriage is key to understand the narrative and characterization of Michael since it denotes the unification between the Italian heritage of the Corleone family and the Anglo-Saxon American heritage of Kay, which symbolizes the quest for the American dream by the immigrant population. Thus metaphorically, Michael fulfills the American dream to some extent by marrying into it, as now he is bonded to the American norms and values not only as an immigrant living on its soil, but through blood as well. Therefore, as Coppola has admitted to in interviews, through Michael’s characterization and scenes like the revenge in the Italian restaurant where moral sphere is presented ironically as a counterpart of the material sphere, the Corleone
family can be read as “a metaphor of America’s state of corruption, both in spirit and commerce, which represents its tragedy.” (Poon 2006, p. 69) Thus, family is the tiniest and perhaps the most important societal unit in which we can observe capitalism and the American dream’s effects, and Coppola accomplishes a magnificent job presenting this through the pursuit of American dream by a gangster of Italian immigrant heritage, who has no place in the American society without his family.

Another scene in the film, which contributes to Michael’s depiction as the gangster in the quest for the American dream, is the notorious final scene of his son’s baptism. We can immediately notice that this scene is heavy in terms of meaning and significance because in contrast to the film’s prolonging linear narrative, this scene is cross cutting between two different events happening at the same time, creating the illusion of synchronization. While the baby is being prepared for the ceremony by the priests, we can see the gunmen shaving and getting dressed, as if them, too, are getting ready for a ritual about to take place. More ironically, as the priest asks Michael if he renounces Satan, he answers ‘I do’, and via the immediate crosscutting, we see his men start killing their enemies (2:40:40). When the baby is finally baptized officially with the holy water, the dead bodies left behind from the massacre are shown, cold with horrified expressions on their bloody faces. The calmness on Michael’s face at the meantime represents how reluctant he is against the massacre of extreme violent measures taking place in contrast to his son’s holy baptism.

As Berliner (2010) recognizes, this is the scene where Michael’s developing character is on a whole new level: now, his transformation is complete, and he is ready to face his duplicity, where he will have to juggle the moral and materialistic together if he wants to succeed as the new Don of the Corleone family, as implied by the cross-cutting technique. Moreover, Shadoian argues that Michael’s “transformation from a figure reasonably close to historical actuality to a near mythic condensation of forces is a sign of an entrenched moral/ethical confusion of the culture.” (1977, p.6) It is paramount to recognize his character’s shift in terms of the American society since it mirrors the effects of the American dream where citizens are deceived continuously by the myth of working hard will unlock every door in front of you and bring you success. As the case of Michael exemplifies, in order to achieve the Dream in terms of materialistic aspects, often you have to sacrifice morality and family, just like Michael lies about ‘renouncing Satan’ at the baptism of his own son, while simultaneously ordering the death of others. Perhaps what Coppola himself meant by ‘the Corleones as a corrupt metaphor for the Americans society’ is most eminent in this scene, as we can witness what a man is capable of doing in order to achieve success, wealth and respect.

After how Michael’s characterization served to symbolize the quest for the American dream, let us look at how props were used in order to help the gangsters in the film in the same sense. As Schatz (1981) observes, suits, guns and cars have always been important to the genre as emblems of the gangster’s social position. According to McArthur, “clothes have always been important in the gangster film, not only as carriers of iconographic meaning but also as objects which mark the gangster’s increasing status” (1977, p. 120). The pinstripe suit, worn by many of the characters including the Don earlier and Michael later, is one of the signifying props that the characters are ‘respectable’, which is of paramount importance in the mafia/gangster
world. On the other hand, the better dressed the person is, the more power he holds in the film, which verifies McArthur’s observation.

To exemplify, in the beginning of the film, the Don is often seen wearing smart pinstripe suits, like his other men, but he wears a red carnation in his pocket, which differentiates himself from the others as the owner of the power due to the color and position of the flower on top of his well-tailored suit. As he grows old and let’s go of his force, he is seen sporting more and more comfortable outfits, like the outfit he’s wearing when he is chasing his grandson in the garden, the event that eventually lead to his death. On the other hand, in terms of Michael’s characterization, earlier on in the film we see him sporting more relaxed outfits, such as a casual shirt and a jacket in his sister’s wedding, opposed to the tightly fitting pinstripe suits of his other relatives. This signifies the marginal position Michael held within family at the beginning, the image that he is the least likely son to take over the business, as he is a war veteran and a well-behaved college boy, who dresses like one as well. However, as he develops to become more powerful, he starts wearing the same sort of suits and hats as the other members of the family, which signify and support his transformation into a fully established mafia Don.

Guns are also important props in The Godfather because they are tools used to accumulate respect and obedience by force. The respect accumulated by the Corleone family in the mafia world is mainly due to the function of guns, since they are powerful tools to force people into doing corrupt or unlawful activities, which is what the family is respected for. Therefore, it can be said that guns are used in order to accumulate what I called as ‘the false sense of success’ earlier in my essay because it is a mean that can cause violent outcomes, which is frowned upon in the moral sphere, but is nevertheless acted upon in order to be successful in the material sphere of the American dream. Moreover, the characters carelessly carry around massive guns and almost always they are used to actually kill people rather than just to frighten or threaten them, which again highlights the corruptness and failure of the Dream that orders both of the spheres to be fulfilled in their right terms.

Cars also contribute to the ‘false sense of success’ achieved by the gangsters, as they serve a role similar to the pinstripe suits’. The more powerful you are, the shinier and bigger your car is. The Don or Michael are never seen actually driving the car, but are always in the comfortable back seat like a boss, whereas the flatter characters are seen driving. On the other hand, McArthur adds “the automobile has become such a powerful icon within the gangster genre that some characters will be in fear at just the sight of an automobile before they see who is actually driving the vehicle.” (1977, p.121) This is true, as Don Corleone is first shot and wounded when he gets out of his car to buy fruit, which implies that the shooters already know its him because of the big shiny car, similar to when Sonny is killed in the toll booths while he was driving in the same sort of car, which means that although not feared, the shooters already know who was in it before they actually saw the driver. Respect, reputation and wealth is signified by owning a car like this, which is also a common metaphor in other literature criticizing the American dream, such as Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman.

To sum up, props such as the suits, guns and cars play an important role in terms of contributing to the overall meaning of The Godfather not only because they are inseparable from the gangster genre, but also because they are often symbols for achieving the American dream that promises success, wealth and respect. On the other hand, Michael’s characterization is the most prominent iconographic element in
The Godfather through which us as the viewers can observe how American capitalism and its ideological by-product, the American dream, is actually an illusion that proves many wrong because of the incompatibility between the moral and material spheres of the society. Using the iconographic elements of the gangster genre, director Coppola created The Godfather in such a way that contests all the inner aspects of the American dream ‘myth’ and puts forward its effects on the family, which is the smallest unit of the society, and thus suggested a critical view of the American society, which sets the film aside from its ancestors in the same genre.

Filmography
The Godfather: Part I (of the Trilogy). Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, USA, 1972
REFERENCES


