

PART 5

THE GODFATHER REVISTED

An assessment of the movie as viewed through modern eyes by an Italian American film critic

BY DANTE CIAMPAGLIA

FIFTY YEARS ON, *THE GODFATHER* IS firmly assimilated into America's pop culture firmament. Mentioning it leads to a predictably comforting barrage of one-liners and impressions: an offer he can't refuse, it's business not personal, Brando's rasp, bada-beep-bada-bap-bada-boop-bada-beep.

For Italian Americans like myself, the film uncorks other memories: the opening wedding, the climactic baptism, the dialects, the relationships. These are especially potent for Italian Americans of a certain vintage. When *The Godfather* was released in 1972, it was the first time—anywhere, in any media—that we saw familiar experiences represented with pathos and an intimacy that confirmed our place in America.

For nearly a century, Italians were at the mercy of a narrative controlled by others. Laborers, entrepreneurs, housewives, children, rich, poor, young, old—all were seen the same way: as criminal,

suspect, undesirable, not American, thanks to sensational stories about organized crime that fed off of and into Italians' cloistered communities and the innate distrust of outsiders and authority they imported from the old country. Italians' fierce sense of secrecy, which made them such easy marks for criminal exploitation, also made them soft targets of scurrilous rumor and debasement.

The Godfather—a Shakespearean tragedy directed by an Italian American, written by two Italian Americans and stocked with Italian American actors—took a sledgehammer to the hackneyed caricatures. That it did so in a mob

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story—the oldest of all stereotypes and millstones—complicated things. When the film was in production, members of the Italian American Civil Rights League protested the all-Italians-are-mobsters view they were sure was confirmed by the adaptation of Mario Puzo’s lurid bestseller. They eventually backed off, but the plot particulars were beside the point for many Italian American viewers. As went *The Godfather*, so too would the modern Italian American experience.

As a fiercely proud first-generation Italian American, I’ve always found myself grappling with *The Godfather’s* place in the cultures I straddle. It’s a conversation that’s constantly evolving, a testament to the film’s endurance beyond its milieu.

So where do I stand today, 50 years after *The Godfather’s* release and having watched the film—at all stages of my life and maturity—too many times to count accurately? To say it plain: I love *The Godfather*—as cinema, as storytelling and as cultural reappropriation. (I prefer *Part II*, but that’s a different essay.) And like so many other Italian Americans, I see myself in the film. My immigrant family—dad, grandparents, aunt, uncle—came to the U.S. in the late 1950s at the tail end of the last significant wave of Italian immigration. Their small mountain village, Pizzoferrato in Abruzzo, feels so

present, spiritually if not physically, as Michael and his bodyguards hike through the Sicilian hinterlands; the relationship between Michael and Kay feels so similar to that of my dark-haired Italian father and blonder American mother (at least in a macro sense). But the scene that truly resonates is that of Vito’s death, while playing among the tomato plants with his grandson Anthony. I have vivid memories of goofing around with my much shorter but no less imposing *nonno* in his garden when I was a kid, and the actor playing the grandson, Anthony Gounaris, looks so much like me at that age (from his features to his clothes to his haircut) it’s spooky.

I’ve also lived with the darker stereotypes that a film like *The Godfather* makes “OK.” I’ve been called the epithets. I’ve had classmates get in my face about my dad being mobbed up. I’ve had people deliberately mispronounce my name and act like I should-a talk-a like dis. As Tom Santopietro, author of *The Godfather Effect*, said in his 2012 book, “In some ways, Italian Americans are still the ones that are okay to make fun of.” *The Godfather*, in its prestige and centrality of organized crime to the Italian American experience, gives more than enough cover for that attitude to perpetuate.

How do you square that tension between the excellence of the film and the way it’s appropriated by certain audiences? I’ve decided you don’t. As a young man with a hotter head, I struggled and thrashed to look beyond the license it gave some to marginalize Italian Americans as a monolithic crime syndicate. But if I was more Santino Corleone then, I’ve edged closer to Michael now, more confident and steely-eyed in not allowing others to dictate the conversation.

Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) and his new bride and first wife Apollonia Vitelli (Simonetta Stefanelli) get married in a traditional wedding ceremony in Sicily in The Godfather.



The Godfather, like all great art, has an ever-shifting legacy. In its broadest strokes, the film reflects and celebrates the story of Italians in America: the struggles, success, exasperation, industriousness and effects of assimilation. So what if it's about gangsters? Five decades after its release, the film endures because it's not about crime—or, at least, not of the Mafia variety. *The Godfather* is a reckoning with American ambition and the perils of American institutions, especially for the nation's immigrants. If the country worked fully and equally for all, there would be no need for someone like Don Corleone. What is his *success* if not an indictment of America? Make the Corleones the Morgans or the Rockefellers and there'd be no doubt about the subtext.

But, paradoxically, *The Godfather* is also a confirmation of the American Dream: work hard, persevere and you too can swim in milk and honey. That's the view that appealed—and still appeals—to Italian Americans, a people who, like so many others,

Above: Morgana King (left) plays Carmela Corleone, wife of Marlon Brando's Don Vito Corleone.

Opposite: Al Pacino's Michael Corleone transforms throughout the film from a son who is distant from his family to one who takes his father's place as the Don.

were held down, kept back, lynched and degraded but nevertheless persevered to claim a place in the American story.

That kind of cultural validation and Homeric mythmaking is what keeps me coming back to *The Godfather*. The film confers dignity. It places me and my daughter and my dad and my grandparents and my future kin and ancient ancestors on a continuum that leads from the Old World to the New to one we can't yet imagine. That hopefulness resonates more forcefully than prejudices injure.

The Godfather gave Italian Americans like me permission and confidence to reclaim the narrative—to tell our own story. More than the Oscars or one-liners, that's its true legacy.

