

21M.284 Essay 3-3

The Godfather (1972) is the most popular movie of all times, according to the *Internet Movie Database*. In this prospectus, I explore some of the reasons why *The Godfather* continues to fascinate us, more than 30 years after its release.

The Godfather succeeds as a movie because it goes beyond the typical crime film. It depicts the mafia not only as a criminal organization, but also as a family. The characters are complex, sympathetic despite their flaws. The godfather, Vito Corleone, is a man of principle despite being a man of violence. His son, Michael Corleone, first appears as a good civilian and a war hero –we are led to immediately like him. As Michael progressively takes over as the new godfather, we see him capable of even more ruthlessness and violence than his father, and yet, our sympathy remains despite our shudder.

The music, by Nino Rota, contributes to making *The Godfather* a memorable movie. The Godfather theme is very melodic; it is a tune that the audience can sing and remember. The tune is sad, melancholic; it has an air of funeral march, of fatality. Nino Rota wrote the Godfather theme as a waltz, so its function in the movie is versatile. It functions as a waltz when the godfather dances with his daughter at her wedding, and as a warning or resolution, in many scenes of violence.

One of the most memorable scenes of violence is the one where the movie director discovers the head of his favorite horse in his bed – the horrific doing of Vito Corleone to intimidate the director in giving an important movie role to his godson Johnny Fontane. As the view dissolves from one cut of the mansion to the other, the Godfather Theme is played by a solo trumpet. The view then dissolves to the room of the director, zooming on his bed. The music becomes more menacing, with instruments joining in a frenzy resembling the agitation of horror movie music. Little fragments of the theme are repeated nervously in a loop. The music gets louder as we see more and more blood, and the director trying to

understand its origin. When the horse head is finally revealed, the music stops in a climax, leaving the director screaming in musical silence.

As the power shifts from Vito Corleone to his son Michael, the new Godfather Theme emerges. We first hear it after Michael avenges his father by shooting Virgil Sollozzo (who ordered his father's murder because he refused to enter his heroin business) and the corrupt policeman McCluskey in a restaurant. The new theme is also sad and fatalistic, sounding even more ominous and menacing than the old theme. It appropriately reveals how there's no turning back for Michael, once he stepped into the family business.

The final scene of *The Godfather* is powerful. We see Michael fully assuming his role as the new godfather, while leaving his wife in the dark. She asks him whether he really murdered his brother-in-law, and he finally answers 'no', lying to her. As she goes into the other room to fix them a drink, she is shut off from his husband, who is ceremoniously greeted by mafiosi in his office. The new godfather's theme is played, reinforcing Michael's power and his wife's doubts.

In conclusion, *The Godfather's* status as one of the greatest movies of all times is well-deserved. The movie is full of memorable scenes and lines. The music, with its Italian air, its sadness and its power, perfectly fits the movie.