

The Godfather III Reviewed

Reviewed by Kwame Dawes

Not many critics have come out and said that *Godfather Three* was really as good as its predecessors. In fact long before the film was released there was great skepticism about its quality. In a *Maclean's* cover story, the film was dismissed as too hastily put together and somewhat disjointed. Its attempts at grandeur are judged inadequate when compared to the epic scale of the two earlier movies and much was said about the wisdom of opening the show on Christmas day.

I went to see the film with some skepticism, and I was quite impressed with the work. I have to state that my interest in the film lies largely in Coppola's ability to translate the classic tragic form of Elizabethan drama into the genre of film with so much success. More importantly, the film manages to create a modern tragedy complete with the classic structures of a Shakespearean piece without seeming overly pretentious and incongruous. Corleone is a tragic hero who is haunted by his murdering of his brother. In an attempt to remove himself from the sins of his youth, Michael, the Godfather, decides to do away with all his illegitimate business and enter into the world of high finance. However, he discovers that the world of legitimate business is not legitimate and more importantly, that he can not rid himself of the ghosts of the past. The film becomes a wonderfully enacted struggle of an individual to contend

with his soul and his destiny in the face of a tarnished past and a present and future that are filled with pressures which could prevent him from achieving redemption. The Godfather's attempts to go straight are sincere and it is this passionate intent that lends the film the tragic quality.

Corleone's tragic flaw is difficult to identify and it is this that one may read as one of the flaws of the film. For, the wonderfully orchestrated killings that take place at the end of the film do so not because of any failure on his part to take action, but because he has carried out actions in the past that will not stop haunting him. In the classic tragic mode, the protagonist is granted a flaw; a character trait, a quality that is active and one that affects the course of events in the present. When the Godfather clenches his fists and declares that "just when I thought I was getting out, they have drawn me back in again," one gets the impression that he is getting back in. In truth, he doesn't. He is never drawn back into the illegitimate actions of the past rooted in his gangster ethics. Instead, he hands the reigns over to his protege and nephew who then plots the multiple assassinations of several people. Arguably, by giving this man "the order" he has played his hand and entered the world of the gangster again, and it is this tragic error that costs him his life. But this is not entirely true. Corleone's life is threatened long before this. His position as a

probable assassination victim is decided as soon as he attempts to go straight. The actions that lead to the death of daughter are all the product of his past; the past of the first two films. It is this fact that flaws the film and makes its dramatic action less compelling than it could be.

However, the performances are outstanding and the directing is as good as one can find in film today. Diane Keaton as Michael's ex-wife is an effective foil to the protagonist's power. She stands as one who is not overwhelmed by his dominion over all things and it is she who manages to evoke the human quality in the larger than life figure. She grants to the film what little female respectability that the film contains. Al Pacino's performance is riveting for its capacity to portray the troubled angst of a man who is crippled by an intense guilt about his actions and who is trying to protect the ones he loves in the only way he knows. Talia Shire, who plays Connie, the sister of Corleone has developed into an even stronger actress than she was some fifteen years ago. Her hardened pragmatism and her faith in the family borders on a kind of villainy, but this off-set by her stern love for her brother and her obvious love for other members of the family. She is a hard woman who is fortunately on the side of the "good-guys." Andy Garcia who plays Corleone's new Hotspur of a nephew is the prototype of the young Italian mafia type who has a

heart to love and a hot headed aggression that is deemed cute and macho. He has less of the sensitivity and calm of the young Pacino nor does he have the folk hero quality and concern for community that Marlon Brando's godfather possessed. This new godfather belongs to the 90's. He lacks depth and will probably take the family right back to the world of hoodlums and gangsters. It is possible, however, that with as long a hiatus between this movie and the next (which seems inevitable if Coppola's finances don't regain a good footing) the actor will develop a certain depth that will grant the new film the same tragic grandeur.

The performers of Sophia Coppola has been subject to much criticism and after watching the film, one must agree that she is in above her head in the part. It is not that she can't act; she can. However, her performance lacks the confidence that the role demands. Her characterization of the troubled daughter of Michael Corleone is sweetly simplistic and void of complexity. Her death is disturbing only because of the effect it has on Michael Corleone and his ex-wife. One is filled with an intense curiosity as to what Winona Ryder could have learnt to the movie had she not failed to hold the part because of exhaustion. Her ability to combine a youthful innocence with emotional and sexual complexity would have strengthened the ensemble strength of the piece.

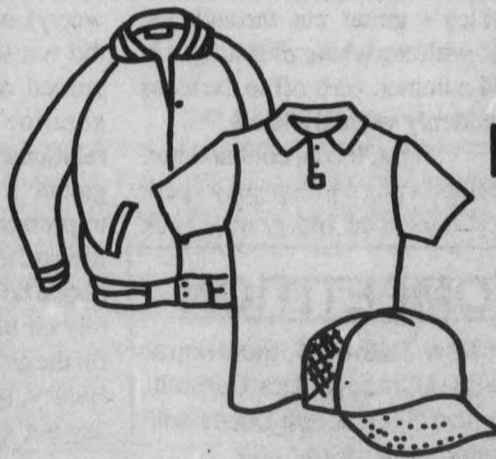
Coppola's film is a

success, however for it manages to draw the viewer into the world of the Italian gangster without losing sight of the existence of a moral ethic at work in the community. Coppola's skill is his ability to prevent us from dismissing the Corleone's a mere criminals who should all be put away for at least three hours. Naturally, the reality of the mafia world is romanticized in his films and the insistence that the true Italian gangster does not deal in drugs is merely a product of racial stereotyping within the underworld. That Michael Corleone's attempt to go straight is thwarted by the ostensibly straight men in high finance is an indictment on the society at large which tries to then suggest that all dealings that have to do with great sums of money are as illegitimate as the business of being a gangster. The argument is strained by the fact of violence which underlies the mafia world. It is this deception that characterizes the film and the two films before that, which gives the work of Coppola and Puzo a certain ideological problematic. But these are exceptional films that I am convinced will remain genre classics for years to come. If you have not seen *Godfather III*, don't be dissuaded by the grudging reviews, go see it. You will be well entertained and teachers who have to teach Shakespearean tragedies now have a popular example of the tragic form that will supply them with a current vocabulary with which to explain tragedy in the class room.

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