

# THE GODFATHER PART II

Directed by Francis Ford Coppola  
Produced by Francis Ford Coppola  
Distributed by Paramount Pictures  
Released in 1974

**E**mboldened by press accounts documenting the *Apocalypse Now* shoot as a self-destructive Odyssey, some critics confronting the film for the first time in 1979 tried to undermine Francis Ford Coppola's monumental achievement. Though its filming was as arduous as the war itself, they faulted him, a man who had never served in uniform, for promoting *Apocalypse Now* as the definitive statement on Viet Nam. To this day the film retains its primal angst and resolute daring, while film critics everywhere jealously disparage the pioneering work of yet another generation.

Coppola is a keen observer, a progressive thinker who learns as much from talking to others as he does consulting his cherished collection of books. His early films find their genesis in childhood experiences—his mother's strange departure and subsequent return to the pressures of family became *The Rain People* (1969); a love of musicals nourished by his father led to *Finian's Rainbow* (1968); and his Manhattan misadventures as an AWOL military school cadet fostered *You're A Big Boy Now* (1967). Similarly, the ultimate triumph of *The Godfather Part II* lay in Coppola's eye for detail and his need for a verisimilitude transcending the limits of perfunctory storytelling. These characteristics are the product of childhood tragedy.

Francis Ford Coppola, born April 7, 1939 to Carmine and Italia Coppola, was a poor student who moved a great deal and thrived on the love of his family. Living in New York City, he contracted polio at the age of nine. The corridors of the hospital in which he was examined were packed with children from all over—the polio outbreak was reaching epidemic proportions. As Coppola recalled later, what frightened him more than the pain of that first night's treatment were the cries of the other kids. More subtle horrors were to come: "[The] next day I was in a bed in some other part of the hospital, and I was in a very good mood, but I remember I tried to get out of the bed, and when I got out I went down; I couldn't lift myself up. That's how I discovered I had lost the use of my left arm."

Bedridden for almost a year, he retreated into a world of fantasy, watching the little television programming available at the time, reading books, and making short films by re-editing home movies shot by his family.

But he hardly saw them. Polio was so contagious that any interaction, particularly for children, was risky. With a physiotherapist and the encouragement of his father (who rejected the advice of a doctor who said he would never walk again), Francis regained mobility and returned to school. A residual limp would always serve to remind him of these youthful trials.

Coppola's fascination with movies and technology continued after he'd recovered. He was able to charge neighborhood kids to see his movies, and soon after developed an interest in the backstage mechanics of the theater.

Meanwhile his father, an expert flautist who played in the world-class NBC Symphony, felt under-appreciated, continually stymied in his quest to become an esteemed composer. He

encouraged his son to study engineering and forget the arts. Ironically enough, it was his son's very persistence in the arts that finally gave Carmine Coppola his big break twenty years later.

Following the example of his admired brother August, Francis enrolled at Hofstra University in 1956, with a drama scholarship. He was an immediate sensation, transforming the Theater Arts Department with his tireless enthusiasm, wresting control away from the faculty and securing it for the students. His greatest success was the musical "Inertia," for which he wrote the lyrics. He won three Dan H. Lawrence awards for theatrical direction and production.

During these same four years Coppola discovered the works of Sergei Eisenstein at the Museum of Modern Art and, observing that filmmaking allowed more creative possibilities than the stage, he resolved to become a director. Eisenstein's spectacular use of montage would inform Coppola's movies for many years to come.

He enrolled in the film program at UCLA. Disheartened by the woeful lack of communal spirit that made his efforts at Hofstra so rewarding, he forged ahead alone. After a few years of work with B-schlock king Roger Corman he was able to secure the chance to make a film of his own, *Dementia 13*. Corman supplied \$20,000, which he intended to cover the entire budget. The film was to be shot in Ireland, so he sent a woman there to handle the finances in his stead.

But Coppola talked her into making over all the money in his name. He then conferred with an English producer who, thinking the film was already in production, supplied him with another \$20,000 to secure the chance to distribute it. Corman found out and wanted to withdraw his initial production money, but it was now under Coppola's name. He was vindicated when the film made a tidy profit.

Soon Coppola had a steady screenwriting job with Seven Arts. Working for a few more years, he climbed out of a financial hole and was ready to shoot a project he'd long nourished. He had written a script about a teenager's misadventures in New York City, but Seven Arts had control of it since it was written on company time. To strengthen his position Coppola bought the rights to a similar story, an English novel called You're A Big Boy Now. He then told Seven Arts that even though they owned the screenplay, he controlled the property it was based on. This shrewd move gave him the leverage he needed to helm the project.

Coppola hit upon a fresh way of rehearsing the actors. He wrote two scripts. One was for rehearsal, and the other for shooting. The actors worked on the rehearsal script for weeks, becoming fully attuned to their characters. Then Coppola presented the shooting scripts, with its totally different dialogue. Already secure in their roles, the cast performed with a freshness that only comes from using new material.

This method helped to offset the director's inexperience, but the first day of shooting he was forced to burn an hour trying to stage a set-up while the crew killed time. He eventually quit bothering to match action as it was causing him a heap of trouble.

Still, *You're A Big Boy Now* won a lot of admirers for Coppola, and enjoyed modest commercial success. He used it as a thesis, earning his Masters of Fine Arts from UCLA.

In the subsequent years his stock continued to rise. He built a reputation as the radical working to undermine the Hollywood establishment from within. Coppola also fostered the careers of new artists like George Lucas. He matched disaster (the insolvent American Zoetrope

enterprise) with triumph (an Oscar for his *Patton* screenplay), and found himself in a position to film Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*, initially conceived as a modest gangster film. He accepted Paramount's offer, but found his judgment constantly questioned by the studio execs. They wanted the film to be released as soon as possible in order to capitalize on the book's runaway success, but if Coppola was fired they realized the production would be set back six months. Thus, finally secure, Coppola consolidated his position and produced a modern masterpiece, the top-grossing film to date.

But he had no intention of making a sequel. Up to that time sequels were poorly made, shot by different directors, designed to capitalize on a studio's good fortune. His mind was changed when he met with some Russian film executives in San Francisco. They asked him if he was going to make "The Godfather Part II." The simple logic of the title bowled Coppola over, and he began to look at a sequel not as a chance to cash in, but as a chance to overhaul movie history: "It seemed like such a terrible idea that I began to be intrigued by the thought of pulling it off—simple as that. Sometimes I sit around thinking I'd like to get a job directing a TV soap opera, just to see if I could make it the most wonderful thing of its kind ever done. [...] You know that feeling when something seems so outrageous you just have to do it? That's what happened to me."

Granted total control of the project, Coppola made some bold decisions.

Actors Studio founder Lee Strasberg, who had never acted on film, came out of retirement to play titan-hood Hyman Roth. He was reluctant at first, but a 45-minute meeting between Strasberg and Carmine Coppola made him change his mind. Strasberg became ill during shooting, but instead of delaying production as they did when Al Pacino contracted pneumonia, Hyman Roth's character was re-written as an ailing man.

Richard Castellano, the highest-paid actor in *The Godfather*, chose not to return. His role was rewritten as a Corleone left behind in New York—Frankie Pentangeli, brought to life by playwright Michael V. Gazzo. (This character shift benefits the film, for if Castellano had appeared, both Tessio and Clemenza would have turned out to be traitors, undermining Michael Corleone's assessment of Clemenza ["Tessio was always smarter"] in *The Godfather*, while also undermining the significance of Fredo's betrayal.)

One actor that everyone wanted to see again was Marlon Brando, but he refused, citing mistreatment by the studio after he had refused his Oscar. Another man would have to play the Don in his formative years. Robert De Niro, considered for the role of Sonny in the first film, impressed Coppola mightily in *Mean Streets* (1973). (Incredibly, Coppola almost handed responsibility for *The Godfather Part II* to newbie *Mean Streets* director Martin Scorsese!) De Niro moved to Sicily for six months to capture the feel of the culture and the language—most of his performance is subtitled. Ironically enough, the absence of Brando as Don Vito contributes to the character's very grandeur, providing a fascinating contrast to Michael in the '41 flashback that we'll consider later.

To capture the feel of the real thing, Coppola instructed Dean Tavoularis to retro-fit several block of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, restoring them to their 1920s appearance. This was the only way to achieve the look of a long street that doesn't curve away out of sight, like those on the studio backlot. The permission of the city and the residents of the

neighborhood were necessary but, despite the logistical headaches, on film it all looked spectacular.

Cinematographer Gordon Willis shot the remarkable sets with flair, taking care to use the same camera and lenses from the first film.

The production was monumentally large. More a continuation than a sequel (particularly as it's also a prequel), *The Godfather Part II* was shot in Lake Tahoe, Las Vegas, Washington, D.C., Sicily, and the Dominican Republic (where Paramount's parent company Gulf + Western owned much land).

Editing a 200-minute film takes a lot of time, and Coppola expressed his disappointment that he had to have it out at Christmas when he really needed three more months to sort through the material. During a San Diego preview, *Time Magazine* reported, the film's final hour "seemed jumbled, confused, cold. All during the showing Coppola muttered notes to himself into a pocket tape recorder. [...] The idea of an intermission was scrapped."

This was the last American motion picture to be printed with Technicolor's storied imbibition process. The lab was held open for about three weeks to accommodate the film, then dismantled and sent to China.

When the smoke cleared, the movie proved a solid investment, but audiences itching for the stylized violence of *The Godfather* were disappointed. Still, whether it is Sight and Sound or the AFI lists, *The Godfather Part II* is consistently recognized as an extraordinary piece of filmmaking.

The credit is Coppola's. Pauline Kael encapsulated his achievement well: "Coppola is the inheritor of the traditions of the novel, the theater, and—especially—opera and movies. The sensibility at work in this film is that of a major artist. We're not used to it: how many screen artists get the chance to work in the epic form, and who has been able to seize the power to compose a modern American epic? And who else, when he got the chance and the power, would have proceeded with the absolute conviction that he'd make the film the way it should be made? In movies, that's the inner voice of the authentic hero."

Accompanied by a moody trumpet solo, the opening title of the film quickly informs us that the sober mood of *The Godfather* will not be contrasted herein. We're granted an impressionistic look back on Michael's ascension to unbridled power, the moment when Clemenza, the last of the old guard, finally accepts Joe College as his superior.

After some preliminaries are dispensed with (along with Vito's family), we are launched into the modern-day story chronicling Michael Corleone, some five years after the end of the first film. It is now 1958. Young Anthony is celebrating his first communion. Whether the people there are really that excited about Anthony or just excited about the Corleones' wealth is a fair question. Senator Frank Geary isn't there for Tony. In the first film a senator who was invited to the wedding declined to show, and that's a much more significant celebration. This economical opening (plus the captains-of-industry board meeting in Havana) shows how the Corleones have ascended into another strata of power.

As the Senator and Michael square off in Michael's study, the tension between them is electric, Geary demonstrating staggering impudence by attempting to extort Michael in his own house, while denigrating his family in the vilest of terms. When Michael balks, Geary redirects

the cannon on Michael's desk so instead of targeting Michael's guest, the cannon targets Michael. When Geary refuses to cave in, knowing Michael would be supremely reckless to ever hurt a senator, Michael and Tom face a thorny problem. They resolve it by killing Geary's usual prostitute and leading the Senator to believe that somehow his actions precipitated her death. Geary can merely grasp that Michael Corleone helped him out of a jam. So Michael, instead of letting vengeance be the end result of all his business stratagems, recognizes that it would be wiser to keep someone as high-placed as Geary partial to the Corleones' interests.

The plot of the Vito section is Vito's survival of Don Ciccio, his challenge to and succession of Don Fanucci, and his revenge on Don Ciccio. Michael's story is all about cleaning up after an assassination attempt on his life. We keep wondering if Pentangeli or Roth was responsible. Our ruminations are upset by Michael's habit of intense compartmentalization, even to the extreme of telling both our suspects that he knows it was the other guy who did it. And then he tells Fredo that Roth did it, Michael all the while trying to coax out of Fredo something incriminating that will betray his involvement. That's the only reason Michael invited Fredo out for a drink. And in Michael's last talk with Roth Michael asks who had Frank Pentangeli killed. (Michael had just asked Roth's permission to kill Frankie a few days earlier!) So we have to wonder if Michael is trying to outfox Roth, knowing that Pentangeli is still alive.

Roth's attempt on Pentangeli (through the auspices of the Rosato brothers) is one of the most confusing parts of the film. In the end, we learn from Hagan (the only reliable repository of the plot) that Roth set it up. Of course, if the plan was really to kill him, why does the hit man say, "Michael Corleone says 'Hello'" as he maneuvers the garrote into position? (There's no reason to mislead a man who's about to die about who's actually killing him.) The hit man is working for Roth, but when Pentangeli survives, he reasonably believes that Michael turned on him, so he succumbs to the Feds' entreaties that he become a stoolie.

Was the plan even more complex than Hagan can grasp? If so, the plot culminates with the Senate hearings—Michael, by being nice to Geary, garners a valuable friend in a high place; Roth is similarly duplicitous by staging an attempt on Pentangeli. So while Michael gained an ally, Roth made sure he was saddled with a counter-balancing enemy. These guys are evil geniuses.

One of the less explicit questions of *The Godfather Part II* is what Roth and Michael tell each other they're planning. (They tell, but don't conspire, since it's unlikely they ever trusted each other and intended to follow through on their promises.) According to Johnny Ola, Hyman Roth is the only great old gangster who's still going strong, and it's because Roth always made money for his partners. An implication here is that if another mobster is more valuable to you alive, that's the only reason not to knock him off. So did Roth make it because he gave all his partners a piece? Or did he first make *everyone* a partner, and *then* give them a piece (hoping they wouldn't come after him since they'd be killing the goose that laid the golden egg)?

Regardless, Roth, at story's end, is reputed to have \$300 million. So why did he ever want Michael as a partner? For that sum he could have covered Cuba in hotels! Maybe he wanted Michael so Michael would work with him, not against him (since someone so powerful with similar business interests [hotels and gambling] can hardly be expected to remain neutral).

It's possible that Roth just wants to take Michael's \$2 million and then kill Michael, just to stick it to him. (Hyman Roth always makes money for his partners...until they can no longer complain when he doesn't.)

If there ever was a big plan (when Roth makes his remarks about being bigger than U.S. Steel) it could be that no two Mafia families of disparate ethnicity (here the Jewish and Italian mobs) have ever worked together on big projects. Michael Corleone and Roth are going to show that there's no reason to go on fighting each other. The United Mafia can carve up Cuba, then go to work on America. (As an aside, one of the joys of this sequence [on top of the incongruity of this tract home providing the meeting place for two of the most powerful men in America, and the wife who, complaining about the TV volume, seems oblivious to the nature of their conversation] is the conclusion of the scene. Michael asks for Roth's acquiescence in Frankie's murder. Roth merely says, "He's small potatoes," and scarfs up a potato chip!)

We saw almost nothing of Vito and Mama Corleone in the first film. She seemed happy, but were they happy together? In the second film we learn that they were very happy. She asks nothing of his work, her one foray into his world her innocent request that he help a widow keep her apartment (a sequence of events that's played for laughs, but reveals Vito's unique capacity for employing silent threats and head-spinning demands while demonstrating patience and humility; Vito is a nice guy—he makes a *fait accompli* feel like a negotiation). Vito tells his wife nothing about what he does, but goes out of his way to shield her from pain and privation. She asks him if things are better at work. He politely refuses to talk about it, then, seconds later, goes into the bathroom with the satchel of guns a stranger (Clemenza) has just tossed to him for safekeeping. A few days later, he loses his job when Don Fanucci imposes on Abbandando to hire his nephew. This puts Vito out of work. Vito, first playing dumb to make the grocer stew, then shifting to magnanimity, recalls the many kindnesses Abbandando has shown him, promising he will not forget. Then Vito refuses a heaping box of groceries from Abbandando. The future Don does not accept charity—he dispenses it. That night, Vito doesn't lay his burdens on his wife. They have enough problems, being poor. Why is this obvious? He brings her home a pear, and she is thrilled! He then, in one of the few beautiful moments in a bleak film, tugs at her hand and shares a delicate kiss. Despite his awful day he wants to show his beautiful wife how much he loves her.

Michael hasn't been able to work the same charms on Kay since before they were married. Tired of being marginalized and fearful that they'll all get killed, Kay turns the end of Part I on its head; by aborting, she, to the extreme, combines work and family. How can she have nothing to do with his business? His business is her family. If Michael is going to insist on using his family to carry on the evils of his empire, then Kay has just as much a right to stop him. Just as Michael killed Captain McCluskey and Sollozzo to save the family, she killed their burgeoning baby boy so Michael wouldn't have another eager pair of hands to carry out his nefarious deeds.

It's a great scene, maybe the best in the movie, there in the Washington hotel when Kay announces that she's leaving him. He's been through a lot. She doesn't have a clue, and when he asks her, exasperated, "What do you want from me?," it's hard not to sympathize. He never cheats on her. Think on the Cuba scenes. At that disgusting hell hole of a club that Fredo drags

them to, there's some elongated super stud 'raping' a sacrificial virgin! Everybody's slack-jawed except Michael. Just like in the first film, when he went to Vegas on business and told Fredo to get rid of the girls, Michael will not tolerate lasciviousness, and he is strictly business. He probably still has something of a moral code. He is loyal in thought and deed to his wife.

But she wants more than just monogamy. She has no life. In an amusing echo of the first film, we again see Kay and Tom having a fruitless discussion at the Corleone compound gate. In the first film, she was trying to deliver a letter to Michael, and Tom was trying to make light of the hulk of a car that had been blown up while explaining why nobody could contact Michael. In this film, Kay isn't even allowed to leave the grounds. But they'll do the shopping for her. Yea!

So Michael really thought that Kay 'lost' the baby. This is the only time in the movie that he is duped. Nobody could beat him, but his wife could. And she, taking Geary's example, lays into Michael like nobody ever has, telling him that he is despicable and "blind."

One would like to think that Michael slaps Kay not because she's insulting him, but because she killed their kid. She wasn't going to even tell him, but, angry that he only wants to solve the problems in their marriage rather than prevent them, she lets him have it with both barrels. The whole scene is a shock and a marvel. It would have been better, perhaps, to have Kay leave the story right here, rather than just returning to beg for the kids to hug her and have a door shut in her face for the second time in two movies.

After what happens with Kay and Fredo, Mama Corleone's assurances that you can never lose your family do indeed ring hollow. You can't *lose* your family, sure. But if they intend to get lost that's another matter entirely. The only family member who draws closer to Michael is Connie. He provides her the tough love and stability that perhaps (recalling Carlo's deprecation of her as a "spoiled guinea brat") she was denied by her father, who, like Michael, probably had a lot going on.

The 1941 sequence is the capstone to the film. Finally, after switching between Michael and young Vito storylines, Coppola takes us someplace different: December 7, 1941 at the Corleone's Staten Island enclave. Pearl Harbor has just been bombed, and the United States has awakened from its slumbers. There will be war. But even before we get to the meat of the scene you could cut the irony with a knife:

First, it is Sonny who introduces Carlo to Connie. It was Sonny who played matchmaker to a man who would abuse his sister and get Sonny killed. Second, only Fredo, whom Michael will eventually order murdered, congratulates Michael on joining the Marines (perhaps all along it was only these two that wanted to escape the stifling weight of expectations imposed by the family). Third, Tom enjoins Michael, faulting him for making superfluous all the Don's plans for his special son. So here's Tom trying to dictate to Michael how his life will proceed, and just a few minutes earlier in the film we saw Michael denying Tom the freedom to leave the Corleone operation, withholding his trust and any hint of kindness.

The scene is ultimately about allegiance. Sonny, as the eldest son, is naturally most in tune with the sentiments of their father. He says the enlistees are saps because "they risk their lives for strangers." He doesn't trust America, and his only loyalty is to his family (he's not even

loyal to his wife). While it is true that one's family will be the last to let him down, we all have a moral responsibility to preserve the social contract, if for no other reason than because the social contract preserves the family.

The Corleones, with their money and violence, can operate independent of, and parallel to, the government that the great majority of the citizenry adhere to. Michael, already knowing he wants nothing to do with the criminal Corleones, loves his country and wants to demonstrate his dedication by enlisting. And perhaps he wants to atone for the sins of his father by giving himself over to the Cause. By 1941, the Corleones cannot rely on America since they never gave America a chance. They've been thieving, pimping, bootlegging, and killing; America cannot embrace a criminal dynasty that takes everything and gives nothing. The Corleones exploit the vices and fears of their fellow man.

Consider Frank Pentangeli. The FBI agents who guard him tell him that he's going to be a hero for taking down Michael Corleone. But Frankie doesn't want to be a hero to his fellow Americans—he's estranged from them. He doesn't care about his country, just his family. And he knows that once he rats on Michael he'll have nothing left. His country doesn't love him, and now his family doesn't either.

In the Vito section, Clemenza tells Vito to let him and Tessio make the decisions; Vito is still wet behind the ears—when the Don demands money, you don't ask, how much?. But Vito makes a great point, there at the table as he takes control of the gang. Fanucci is the reigning Don because people fear him. Yet their gang of three outnumbers him, and they've got plenty of weapons. Fanucci is the Don because years ago he fought for that territory and won. Sure, Maranzalla backs Fanucci up, but Maranzalla probably doesn't care who's giving him his cut—whether it's Fanucci or Corleone.

Why can't it now be their turn?

This is the way with nation-states. For all the talk about the rights of indigenous people, self-determination, and colonial exploitation, it is force that claims and holds land. When two people-groups fight over a piece of land, whoever can win will take it. There's no right or wrong involved because there's no way of enforcement apart from force. And then we're back to fighting over land.

Might makes right.

But once a nation-state, like America, is established, the people cannot just kill each other for land. Between nation-states, it is good to get along because it's usually the path of least resistance. But between citizens, they must get along because it is the law.

So property is to be bought and sold in an orderly fashion. To function as the Mafia does is to declare oneself an enemy of the state, above it all, exempt from the rules. Mafiosi have no intention of following societal conventions designed to forestall chaos. The Mafia either uses money to buy acquiescence of law enforcement (all too common), overwhelms law enforcement by force or threat of force (thankfully uncommon), or is destroyed by the hammer of the state (our ideal resolution).

When Michael signs up with the Marines, he is making a plain statement not just that he loves his country, but that he is tired of his family. His service signals a clean break, and it is the one aspect of Michael's life that the querulous senator will applaud, many years later. As Michael explains to Tom, he has his own plans for his future. Sonny just calls him "stupid."



Then everyone leaves. Michael, shunned by his family, sits alone at the table. The contrast between the forlorn Michael and the distant cheers of welcome is depressing. His father is never seen, his absence making his importance all the more apparent. Everything in the family comes back to the Don. Michael must escape all this before it is too late. And yet, while he hates what his family does, he loves his family.

This is his curse.

So it's already too late. To save his family from destruction at the hands of rival mobsters, he will soon become everything he despised, all the while desperately trying to convince himself that the Corleones are on the very cusp of legitimacy.

Actually they're more despicable than ever.

But Michael shouldn't get all the blame. The Godfather could be avuncular and grandfatherly because he only had to consolidate power. He didn't need to fight to keep it. That fell to Michael. But once Vito launched his family on this path, they were destined for either spiritual or physical annihilation. Consider the wonderful irony when Vito has just killed Don Fanucci. Vito appeared to treat the whole matter with great aplomb and detachment. The Don is dead, and the murder weapon will never be found. He rejoins his family, enjoying a neighborhood parade, his sons waving tiny American flags. He holds his youngest, Michael, and tells him he loves him very much. Here we see that Vito does not take lightly the murder he just committed. But he did it for his family. And in taking this monumental step, he has condemned his son to a life of sin.