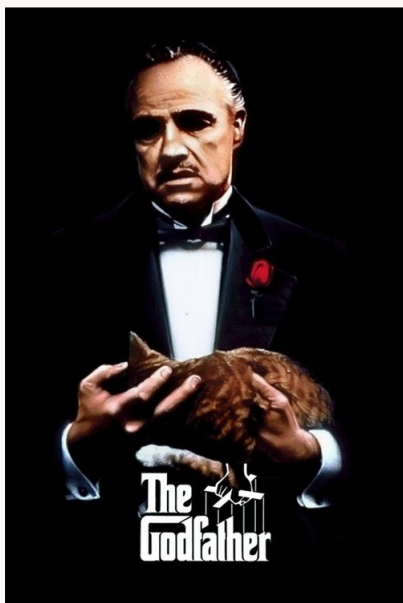




DRAMA · CRIME

The Godfather

1972 · Directed by Francis Ford Coppola

New Hollywood

Gangster Film

Auteur Cinema

New York, 1945. The Corleones are one of the city's most powerful crime families, and its patriarch holds court on his daughter's wedding day. The film follows a family business built on favours, loyalty and quiet threat, and a household where private life and organised crime cannot be separated.

DIRECTOR Francis Ford Coppola

YEAR 1972

RUNTIME 2h 55m (175 min)

COUNTRY USA

GENRES Drama, Crime

CAST Marlon Brando, Al Pacino, James Caan, Robert Duvall, Richard S. Castellano

MUSIC Nino Rota

IMDB 9.2 / 10 (2,222,804 votes)

ROTTEN
TOMATOES 97% (critics)

METACRITIC 100 / 100

TMDB SCORE 8.7 / 10 (23,675 votes)

WHERE TO
WATCH

Stream (US): Amazon Prime Video, Paramount Plus Premium, Paramount Plus Essential, Paramount+ Amazon Channel, MGM Plus Roku Premium Channel, MGM Plus, Paramount+ Roku Premium Channel, Amazon Prime Video with Ads

Rent: JustWatch TV, Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home

Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 A defining film of New Hollywood and the gangster genre

Coppola's breakthrough showed a major studio could release a long, dark, morally complex drama and make it a huge popular hit. It reset the gangster film and became a model for 1970s American cinema.

2 Marlon Brando and Al Pacino in career-defining roles

Brando's Vito Corleone and Pacino's Michael are among the best-known characters in American film. Caan, Duvall and Keaton add to an ensemble in which almost every small part is vivid.

3 Craft that rewards close attention

Gordon Willis's shadowed interiors, Nino Rota's score and a patient, precise structure make the film as much a study of image and rhythm as of crime.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

The film is a cornerstone of the New Hollywood period, when young directors gained unusual control inside the studios. It also gave the American gangster story the weight of tragedy and family saga.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch it as a family drama first: every meeting, meal and ceremony is also a negotiation about power.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- How light is used, especially in the opening study scene, where faces are partly lost in shadow and the room seems to hold secrets.
- How rarely the camera moves. Scenes are built from patient, composed frames, so any shift in distance or position stands out.
- The contrast between warm, crowded family gatherings and quiet, tightly controlled business conversations, and how each is staged and sounded.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

Who in this family looks most at ease with its way of life, and who only seems to be?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Industry:** Paramount was financially shaky in the late 1960s and hoped to turn Mario Puzo's bestselling novel into a hit. It hired Coppola, then in his early thirties with few successes.
- **Dominant styles:** American films were absorbing European art cinema, location shooting and more ambiguous heroes. *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) had shown audiences would follow outlaws into violence and sympathy.
- **Audience:** Vietnam and the political scandals of the period left many viewers distrustful of institutions. A story in which family loyalty stands against official authority landed in that mood.
- **Genre history:** Earlier gangster films, such as those of the early 1930s, were mostly short, fast stories of street criminals. Here the crime family is treated as a dynasty and a business.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

TRADITION

1930s Hollywood gangster cycle

Films such as *Little Caesar* and *Scarface* made the criminal rise-and-fall story a genre. *The Godfather* deepens it into a family saga.



FILM

Bonnie and Clyde (1967)

It had shown that audiences would embrace outlaws and stylised, shocking violence, opening the door to more morally ambiguous crime stories.



FILM

Citizen Kane (1941)

Its portrait of private power, shadowy interiors and layered family history stands behind Willis's approach and the film's study of a dynasty.



THIS FILM

The Godfather (1972)

NEW AT THE TIME *A studio crime picture played as a slow, dark family tragedy, with criminals as the central characters and the story told from inside their world.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made in an America shaken by Vietnam and Watergate-era distrust, by a young director working under studio pressure on a gangster novel set in the 1940s.

- **Country and moment:** Released in 1972, the film arrived amid the Vietnam War, urban unrest and a growing loss of faith in government and institutions. Audiences were ready for stories that questioned American power and respectability.
- **Immigrant experience:** The story is set in the postwar world of Italian-American families in New York. It draws on the history of immigrant communities, their outsider status, and the pursuit of the American dream by other means.
- **Society and audience:** Italian-American organisations, notably Joseph Colombo's group, protested the project's portrayal of their community. The producers reportedly agreed to avoid the word "Mafia" in the script. The film nonetheless became a huge popular success.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Coppola was in his early thirties and had made only modest films. Paramount, which was in financial trouble, doubted him and clashed with him over casting and budget. He was also drawn to the project by his own need for money, and he saw the Corleones as a family story.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Deliberate and spacious. Long dialogue scenes and ceremonies build the world before the plot tightens, with brief, sudden bursts of violence.
- **Style:** Classical, composed and dimly lit, with period detail across 1945 to 1955. It looks like a painting, not a thriller.
- **Performance:** Restrained and naturalistic. Much is said through stillness, glances and understatement, not speeches.
- **Language:** Mainly English, with some Italian and Sicilian dialogue that is subtitled.
- **Format:** Colour, widescreen, 175 minutes. Plan for a full evening, as the story needs time to accumulate.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

16+ SUGGESTED AGE

Ratings range from FR 12 to GB 18 (R in the US, FSK 16). Given graphic violence, mature themes and length, 16 suits watching together.

Official ratings: US R · UK 18/15 · Germany 16 · France 12/18

- **Good for:** Older teens interested in film craft, acting and storytelling may enjoy this landmark drama of family, loyalty and power, with famous performances, rich period detail and a slow-burning, absorbing story.
- **May unsettle, graphic violence:** Several sudden, bloody shootings and killings, some shown in close detail. Violence is central to the story and recurs throughout.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** Organised crime, corruption, revenge and betrayal are treated seriously, with moral compromise and loyalty to family at the centre.
- **May unsettle, language and sexuality:** Includes strong language, ethnic slurs, some nudity and sexual references.
- **May unsettle, pace:** Nearly three hours, with long, talky scenes and many characters. Younger viewers may find it hard to follow or sustain attention.
- **Explain first:** It is set in 1940s America, among Italian-American immigrant families. Some language and attitudes, including towards women, reflect the period and the criminal world shown.
- **Explain first:** The story involves many family members and rival groups. A quick who's-who of the Corleone family helps you follow it.
- **Explain first:** The film shows crime as glamorous in places but is not endorsing it. It is worth noticing how it presents the cost of power.

Talk about it after: *Why do you think characters justify their actions as 'business' or 'family', and do you think those reasons excuse what they do?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film explores how a family business that claims to protect its own can reshape and consume the people inside it. It can be read as an American success story turned inside out, in which loyalty, ambition and the wish to be respectable lead somewhere dark.

THEMES

- **Family as power structure:** Blood ties are both the source of love and the machinery of crime. The same rituals, weddings, baptisms and meals, carry affection and command.
- **The corrupted American dream:** The Corleones use the language of business, favours and legitimacy. The film shows crime as a mirror of capitalism, with the immigrant's rise bought at a cost.
- **Inheritance and choice:** Michael begins apart from the family business. The film asks how far a person can resist what he is expected to become, and what is lost in accepting it.
- **Respect and violence:** Order depends on honour, reputation and the threat behind courtesy. Violence is presented as policy as much as passion.
- **Concealment and moral blindness:** Characters keep the truth from those closest to them. The film can be read as showing how love and denial let evil operate in ordinary domestic spaces.

Key scenes

Bonasera's request

The opening sets the film's rules: a petition made in a dim study, a favour that creates a debt, and a world of private justice. It introduces Vito's authority through dialogue and light alone.

The restaurant meeting

Michael's decision turns the quiet son into a different man. The tension is built through sound, such as the rattle of a passing train, and by close attention to his face, not by action.

The baptism intercut with the killings

Church ritual is cross-cut with murders, joining religion, family and violence in one sequence. It is a landmark of editing, in which Michael's vow and his deeds are placed side by side.

The closing door

The last shot places Kay outside the room where Michael's new life is shown. Framing and the closing door state the film's moral cost without a word of commentary.

Filmmaking

- **Cinematography:** Gordon Willis lit many interiors from above, leaving eyes in shadow and giving the family's rooms a hidden, ceremonial feel. Warm amber tones in the period setting add richness and menace.
- **Direction and structure:** Coppola balances huge set pieces with intimate scenes, and uses the family's rituals as a spine. The story moves with calm control even as events accelerate.
- **Performance:** Brando's soft, hoarse Vito and Pacino's gradual hardening are opposite kinds of acting. Caan, Duvall and Keaton add contrast through warmth, caution and distance.
- **Music:** Nino Rota's score mixes a lyrical main theme with Italian dance and folk colours. It gives the family a tender sound that sits uneasily with what they do.
- **Writing:** Puzo and Coppola adapted the novel into a script that trimmed its subplots and kept a focus on the family. The word Mafia is never spoken, and talk of business and favours replaces it.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

New York, 1945. At his daughter Connie's wedding, Don Vito Corleone receives petitioners in his study while his youngest son Michael, a decorated war veteran, introduces his girlfriend Kay to the family. Michael wants a life outside the business.

A rival, Sollozzo, asks for the Corleones' protection in the narcotics trade. Vito refuses, and he is shot and left near death. Hot-headed Sonny takes charge, and Michael volunteers to kill Sollozzo and a corrupt police captain, McCluskey, at a restaurant. He then hides in Sicily, where he marries Apollonia, who is killed by a car bomb meant for him.

Back in New York, Sonny is ambushed and killed. Vito arranges a truce among the five families and explains that Michael must lead. Michael returns, marries Kay, and takes control as his father withdraws.

Vito dies while playing with his grandson in the garden. At the baptism of Connie's child, Michael stands as godfather while his men murder the heads of rival families and traitors inside his own circle, including Tessio. He also has Connie's husband Carlo, who helped set up Sonny's death, killed. Michael lies to Kay about it, and as men greet him as Don, the door closes between them.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **Casting battles:** Paramount resisted both Marlon Brando, seen as a difficult risk, and Al Pacino, then little known and considered too small for the part. Coppola kept pushing for them, and both proved central to the film's success.
- **A troubled shoot:** Coppola was reportedly under pressure during filming, with studio doubts about his pace and style. The film was shot largely on location in New York in 1971 and a Sicilian sequence was filmed in and around Savoca and Forza d'Agrò.

- **The Mafia question:** Italian-American groups protested the project, fearing stereotypes. Producer Albert S. Ruddy made concessions, and the word Mafia was left out of the script, which instead speaks of families and business.
- **The Rota score:** Nino Rota's score drew an Oscar nomination that was later withdrawn, because he had used material from an earlier film score. The music remains central to the film's identity.
- **Myth:** Brando accepted his Best Actor Oscar for the film. **Reality:** Brando declined it. Sacheen Littlefeather appeared at the 1973 ceremony on his behalf and explained that he was protesting the treatment of Native Americans by the film industry.
- **Myth:** The film openly uses the word Mafia and endorses the real organisation. **Reality:** The word is never spoken in the film. The production avoided it after pressure from Italian-American groups, and the film presents its criminals as a family enterprise, not a portrait of a real organisation.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

TRADITION

1930s Hollywood gangster cycle

Films such as *Little Caesar* and *Scarface* made the criminal rise-and-fall story a genre. *The Godfather* deepens it into a family saga.



FILM

Bonnie and Clyde (1967)

It had shown that audiences would embrace outlaws and stylised, shocking violence, opening the door to more morally ambiguous crime stories.



FILM

Citizen Kane (1941)

Its portrait of private power, shadowy interiors and layered family history stands behind Willis's approach and the film's study of a dynasty.



THIS FILM

The Godfather (1972)



FILM

The Godfather Part II (1974)

Coppola's sequel widens the story across generations and is often held as a rare equal to the original.



FILM

Mean Streets (1973)

Martin Scorsese brought a rougher, more personal Italian-American crime world to the screen in the same New Hollywood moment.



FILM

Goodfellas (1990)

Scorsese's crime epic answers the Corleones' dignified myth with a fast, intimate view of everyday gangster life.



TRADITION

Prestige crime television

Series such as *The Sopranos* treat the crime family as a domestic drama, a framework made familiar by this film.

Reception and reputation

The film was a major commercial success on release in 1972 and was widely praised by critics, especially for the performances, the direction and the scale of its storytelling. Some commentators worried about glamorising crime, but the film's seriousness quickly set it apart from ordinary genre fare.

The Godfather is regarded as one of the central works of American cinema and the template for the modern crime epic. Its reputation has grown with the sequel, and its images, lines and music have become cultural shorthand.

Awards Oscars and Cannes

Academy Awards: 3 wins from 10 nominations, including Best Picture, Best Actor (Marlon Brando, who declined the award) and Best Adapted Screenplay (Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola). Nino Rota's original score nomination was withdrawn.

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Everyday phrases:** "I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse" became one of the most quoted lines in English, used well beyond crime talk for any pressure disguised as a deal. "It's not personal, it's strictly business" also became common shorthand.
- **Italian-American identity:** The film shaped how the Mafia is pictured in popular imagination, and Italian-American groups have long objected to the stereotype. Even so, its depiction of family, weddings and food made it a touchstone for many Italian-American viewers.
- **Parody and homage:** The horse's-head scene, Brando's mumbling, cheek-pinching Don and the Nino Rota theme are staples of parody and homage, from *The Simpsons* to comedies like *Analyze This*. The *Sopranos* characters themselves discuss the film.
- **Real-world gangster talk:** The film's vocabulary of "godfather", "family" and "capo" now frames journalism on organised crime and corporate or political power. "Godfather" is routinely applied to dominant figures in business, music and politics.

Its lasting influence

It set the template for the serious, character-driven crime film, from Scorsese's *Mean Streets* and *Goodfellas* to television series such as *The Sopranos*. It also helped establish the prestige sequel through *The Godfather Part II*.

WHAT NEXT?

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

The Godfather Part II (1974)

Coppola's own continuation deepens the story and the questions the first film raises, so it follows directly.

SEE WHAT INFLUENCED IT

Bonnie and Clyde (1967)

This landmark of early New Hollywood shows the shift toward outlaw protagonists and bold violence that made The Godfather possible.

FOLLOW THE IDEA

Citizen Kane (1941)

Another portrait of power and family told through shadowy, carefully composed images, useful for seeing the tradition behind Willis's look.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

Once Upon a Time in the West (1968)

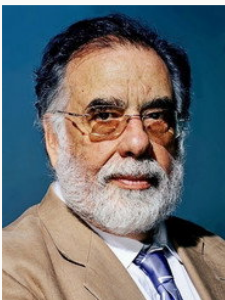
Sergio Leone's slow, operatic western shares the patient pacing, elegiac mood and Italian musical sensibility, with a very different idea of violence.

JUMP FORWARD

Goodfellas (1990) COMING SOON

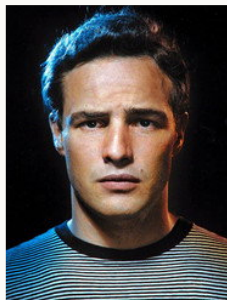
Scorsese's crime film shows how later directors responded to The Godfather, replacing its ceremony with speed and street-level detail.

FULL CAST AND CREW



Francis Ford Coppola

DIRECTOR



Marlon Brando

ACTOR

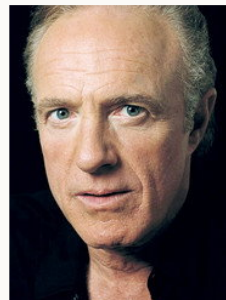
as Don Vito Corleone



Al Pacino

ACTOR

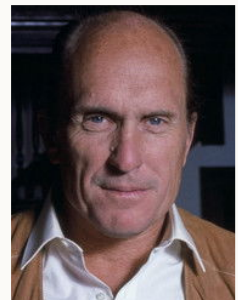
as Michael Corleone



James Caan

ACTOR

as Sonny Corleone



Robert Duvall

ACTOR

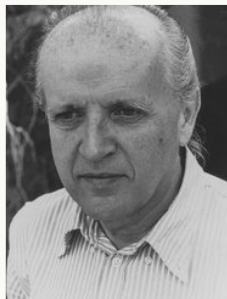
as Tom Hagen



Richard S. Castellano

ACTOR

as Clemenza



Nino Rota

COMPOSER

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