

Evolution of the gangster genre



The generally accepted idea of a classic gangster was generated by Hollywood. Before the Kefauver hearings, with the exception of *Scarface* (1932), the majority of gangster films featured mobsters that were removed from any Mafia and did not tend to contain Italian characters. After the hearings, the genre has become narrower; mainly associating with Italian Mafiosos. Hollywood represents gangsters as dressed in tailored suits, violent, and traditional Italian. Before the enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1934, movies like *Scarface* were scrutinized for their excessive use of violence and the glamorization of organized crime.

Still, audiences filled theaters to see the stars like Paul Muni, Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney depict Al Capone-like gangsters featured in headlines. Which made the gangster genre extremely popular, but short lived. Johnny Fontane in the 1972 blockbuster *The Godfather* sobbed " oh Godfather, I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. " On the day of his daughter's wedding, Don Vito Corleone, head of one of five New York crime families, grants favors. He sits behind his desk, mostly in the shadows as many people ask for favors of justice and reaffirm alliances.

Fontane knows he does not have a chance of starring in an upcoming film. Corleone agrees to secure the lead role for Johnny, in exchange for his undying friendship. Corleone reassures Johnny the producer will cast him, saying one of the most renowned lines, " I'll make him an offer he can't refuse. " These depictions set Don Corleone up to be a very revered and respected man. He is powerful and mysterious. He is a man of action. He has the power to serve justice when the cops will not.

This scene may be similar to how the actual mafia behaves, but as in most gangster movies, could without doubt be an exaggerated. Francis Ford Copula transformed Mario Puzo's novel into a movie. He brought the gangster genre back from social disapproval. Copula transformed the genre from being an exaggerated account based on mobsters that shot up American cities to a deeper look into the workings of a family during a time of transition. The shift not only symbolizes the outlook of the American ideal of gangster but also the swing of what is now culturally acceptable.

Going along with the time, The Godfather reflects many of the findings of the Kefauver hearings. Corleone-rival Don Barzini destroying a photographer's footage of him at the Godfather's daughter's wedding when the FBI is there trying to gather evidence. Also, there is no longer a prohibition on alcohol, thus there is no need for the mafia to have a claim. Drugs and gambling is now culturally relevant; making The Godfather a social commentary and a movie that is deeply rooted in family, traditions and honor.

The Godfather is the story of the Corleone family. Don Vito Corleone, the head of the family guides his son's quest to take his place. Vito Corleone's refuses to enter the drug trade; which causes him to end up in the hospital with gunshot wounds. His youngest son Michael (Al Pacino) takes up the responsibility of leadership. As a decorated war veteran, he had honor and principles. Michael did not want to become his father or be a part of his business. Alas, he finds himself claiming to the top of the chain.

From the beginning, The Godfather has a sets the tone for the darker side of life that comes with success. The characters are dressed in pricey tailored suites and fine dresses. The over abundant shadows are a metaphor for the

despair that comes with the lifestyle. The cars are menacing. Guns are like a diamond is for a woman. Violence ensues because of vengeance, love, or greed. In Scarface violence was used to take control of the organized crime. In Godfella the lifestyle of drugs, money and power was so seductive.

All the right elements of the model gangster are still sewn throughout the film to pay homage to the classics as well as perpetuate stereotypes. The subplots changes only because the times have changed. After his father is attacked by a rival family for not going into the business of drugs, Michael decides to run the family while his father recovers. We see the shift in the tone of the film while Don Corleone lays in the hospital. He is supposed to have guards because his like is in danger and he is venerable. At this point Michael is also venerable.

Scared he become everything he did not want but also afraid that things will spin out of control for his family. He begins to show that he is in control when he makes the nurse move his father. After this, he starts wearing pin-striped suits, a classy hat and his demeanor is more formal and controlled. Before Michael stepped up and took control of the family, he thought, dressed, and acted differently. When Michael goes to Las Vegas to meet with his older brother Fredo he has become fully immersed into the mafia as an Italian gangster, just like the rest of his family.

His transformation is complete when he says " I'll make him an offer he can't refuse," just like his father would have. Previously those words were only used by his father (as a threat), but now they are used by Michael indicating that he is becoming the man his father once was. There is a religious overtone in the gangster genre. Little Ceaser starting with a biblical

reference. "...lives by the sword shall perishes by the sword. " At first the religious qualities symbolized the struggle between good and bad.

Italian families and traditions are heavily influences by the Catholic Church which only adds more emphasis on the religious imagery. At the point Michael becomes the Godfather to his sister's child he assumes leadership and is now officially responsible for the family and their business. His relationship to the baby is it is a new beginning for the family structure. At the end when he lies to his wife after he tells her that she can only question his affairs one time. She pretends to believe but you can see the distrust in her eyes as the office door closes, closing the door on his previous life.