

The Gun, the Pen, and the Cannoli: Orality and Writing in *The Godfather, Part I*

DAVID SUTTON

Department of Anthropology
Southern Illinois University
Carbondale, IL 62901-4502

PETER WOGAN

Department of Anthropology
Willamette University
900 State St.
Salem OR 97301

SUMMARY *The overwhelming popularity of The Godfather argues for the fact that it serves as an American myth by suggesting resolutions to key contradictions in American society. These contradictions focus on the relationship between impersonal capitalism and the personal world of family relations. While this has been noted in previous studies of the film, the key symbolic tension between orality and writing has gone unnoticed. In this article we argue that food acts as a symbol of personal honor, ethnic authenticity, and family relations, which is brought into tension with the written word. For Don Corleone, food and drink set up cycles of long-term exchange relationships, they seal oral contracts, and make "friendships" (i.e., business relationships). These are counterposed to the impersonal and pseudo-rational world of money and the written contract, as represented in this film by the non-Italian world and the American legal system. Through the revelation of previously unexplored symbolic tensions, we hope to show the value of applying anthropological analysis to popular films.*

Critics from Fredric Jameson onward have explored the way the film *The Godfather, Part I* deals with capitalism and family life, placing the film in a long-standing tradition of gangster films that focus on the relationship between the individual and society.¹ Therefore, to say that *The Godfather* deals with capitalism comes as no surprise at this point, and yet it has never been made clear specifically *how* capitalism is represented in the film and to what effect. To fill this gap, this article focuses on two specific sets of symbols in *The Godfather*: "orality," which stands for a gift economy, and "writing," which stands for capitalism and its legal arm, the state.² Our analysis of these opposed symbols attempts to reveal important, previously unnoticed aspects of the film's running commentary on capitalism, particularly relations of trust as mediated through oral and written contracts.

The symbolism of writing and orality has deep roots in Western culture. James Clifford makes this point in his analysis of writing as a symbol of civilization's inauthenticity: "Since antiquity the story of a passage from the oral/aural into writing has been a complex and charged one. . . . Words and deeds are transient (and authentic), writing endures (as supplementarity and artifice)" (1986:115–116). Clifford's focus on writing as inauthenticity is particularly relevant in the case at hand, and just as Clifford argues that the flip side of this view is nostalgia for a lost world of orality, we will argue that the appeal of the Corleones largely lies in nostalgia for an ethnic solidarity that has not succumbed to writing's "irretrievable loss" (Clifford 1986:115). But while Clifford focuses on

ethnographic texts, we transport his interest in writing and nostalgia into the realm of media representations, expanding the usual anthropological parameters of analysis.

James Carrier and Daniel Miller have recently called for anthropologists to engage in "a rearticulation of the private and the public through a clear understanding and portrayal of the consequences of each of these for the other" (1999:43). Here we suggest one avenue of analysis, through the examination of a compelling cultural text through which the relationship of "private virtue and public vice" (and vice versa), is explored. We argue that the image of the Corleones is compelling because it offers the possibility of reconciling capitalism and personalism, the public and the private. *The Godfather* offers a mythic capitalism redeemed—capitalism with a sense of honor, family, and personal commitment, thus seemingly bridging the split in industrial capitalism between the "public" world of markets and the "private" world of morality and strong emotion (see Carrier 1990; Carrier and Miller 1999). The movie also offers a vision of the opposite: the destruction of private worlds that goes along with a commitment to "rational" market behavior. It captures these oppositions, mythically, in the twinned symbols of orality and writing.

It is important to state from the outset that we do not assume that *The Godfather* tells us anything about the Mafia or Sicilian culture, but only that it tells us something about how American dilemmas concerning capitalism and family life are played out against the fantasy space of ethnic "authenticity." Our focus is on the film text itself, rather than viewer perceptions of the film. Our premise here is that the film has fascinated Americans precisely because of its ambiguity and ability to target strains and tensions in American culture.³ A central aspect of the movie's appeal—the reason it can be watched over and over—is that, like a good myth, it toys with viewers' ambivalent feelings about these messy strains and tensions in American culture. Accordingly, we would never expect an audience to come away with a unanimous, untroubled interpretation of the film's meaning; there will be as many different interpretations as there are different opinions at any time about American capitalism, the state, family life, and so on. We are therefore not trying to offer a single, final interpretation, but only to uncover hidden symbolism that is so fundamental in the film and American culture that it is likely to be a factor in individual interpretations.

This symbolism will be explored in three pivotal scenes that correspond to three major stages in the Corleone family's trajectory. The first scene sets up a strong contrast between mainstream "unhyphenated" Americans and Sicilians, but in the later scenes the lines separating the two cultures are increasingly blurred, creating a complex, ambiguous commentary on the relationship of ethnic identity to American mainstream society.

Wedding Scene: An Initial Opposition between the Old and New World

In the opening wedding scene, the symbolism of writing and food establishes a stark contrast between American and Sicilian society. Writing is identified with mainstream American society, specifically the State and capitalist relations; while the Corleones are implicated in this society, we also see—through their disdain for writing, and use of food and drink—that they belong to another cultural order.⁴

For example, FBI agents in the parking lot are writing down license plate numbers on notepads, an FBI agent flashes his identification badge at Sonny, Don Corleone's son, and the legislative and judicial branches of the government are represented through telegrams sent by senators and judges. The most striking example of the symbolism of writing, though, is the story of Don Corleone making

a bandleader "an offer he can't refuse." As the Don's son Michael tells the story, a bandleader denied requests to release the Don's godson from a written contract, so "Luca Brasi held a gun to the bandleader's head, and my father assured him that either his brains or his signature would be on that contract." The Don's "offer" both equates and counterposes guns and writing. Brains and ink are both liquids that control life: without your brains you are dead, and by signing a contract you can "sign your life away." The gun is also comparable to the pen in that both are sleek, hand-held instruments. These parallels, however, only serve to highlight the showdown between these two types of power: the written contract symbolizes the American legal, capitalist system and its ostensibly supreme power, but, in this case, legal contracts run up against the brute force of the Sicilian Mafia, and writing clearly loses. Inverting the saying about the pen being mightier than the sword, the Godfather shows through this dramatic power play that, when push comes to shove, he is more powerful than the American State and its written contracts. Moreover, his style of power is different. Whereas the state's power is abstract (based on laws), mediated (communicated through writing, not through face-to-face interaction), and supposedly inflexible (tied to the letter of the law), the Don's power is physical (the gun to the head), personal (the Godfather-godson relationship), and flexible (allows for changes in circumstances).⁵

This contrast between the Old and New Worlds is further developed in this first scene when we see how the Don forms bonds with his supporters. Rather than legal contracts, the Godfather's own "contracts" are sealed with gifts (usually food and drink), gestures, and verbal pledges—in short, a gift-giving economy. As we observe different visitors in the Don's office, we learn about the rules—the "dos and don'ts"—of this symbolic economy.

Above all, the methods employed by the undertaker Bonasera are particularly revealing as a negative example, a textbook case of everything you should *not* do when dealing with the Godfather. Bonasera comes to the Don because the American legal system has failed him: The two boys who beat and raped his daughter have been freed by the courts with nothing more than a suspended sentence. Bonasera therefore turns to the Don for vengeance, but he makes a crucial mistake when he asks, "How much shall I pay you?" In response, the Don gets up, and, after a long, painful pause, he says, "Bonasera, Bonasera, what have I ever done to make you treat me so disrespectfully?"⁶ The Don is deeply offended by Bonasera's attempt to invoke a contractual relationship in which services are immediately rendered on payment of a named cash amount. Presumably Bonasera makes this sort of faux pas because he has been overly Americanized (the movie opens with Bonasera saying "I believe in America"), so the Don has to educate him on the conventions of this patron-client relationship. Rebuking Bonasera and reframing the relationship as one of long-term gift exchange and friendship, the Don says: "You don't ask with respect. You don't offer friendship. You don't even think to call me Godfather. Instead, you come into my house on the day my daughter is to be married, and you, uh, ask me to do murder, for money" (the Don says "for money" in a tone of disgust, almost unable to utter the words). And then, after agreeing to grant Bonasera's request, the Don ends by saying "Some day, and that day may never come, I'll call upon you to do me a service; but, until that day, accept this justice as a gift on the day of my daughter's wedding." Eschewing capitalist contracts, the Don prefers long-term gift exchange, with its idiom of generosity and friendship.

Disregard for money is also expressed by the Don's eldest child, Sonny, who breaks a reporter's camera and then throws bills on the ground in a contemptuous gesture suggesting that money is trash. No attempt is ever made to count the

money, so we can assume that Sonny has thrown much more money on the ground than the camera was actually worth—to count the money would be beneath him. Like his father, Sonny belongs to a world of honor, expressed in his statement to the FBI agent in the car: "Goddamn FBI, don't respect nothing." The clash of the two worlds is further highlighted by the juxtaposition of the wordless FBI agent flashing his badge and Sonny responding by spitting on the ground. Both Sonny's actions and his father's set up a basic contrast between American capitalism and what Pierre Bourdieu characterizes as a "gift economy":

The gift economy, in contrast to the economy where equivalent values are exchanged, is based on the denial of the economic (in the narrow sense), a refusal of the logic of the maximization of economic profit, that is, of the spirit of calculation and the exclusive pursuit of material (as opposed to symbolic) interest, a refusal which is inscribed in the objectivity of institutions and in dispositions. It is organized with a view to the accumulation of symbolic capital (a capital of recognition, honor, nobility, etc.) that is brought about in particular through the transmutation of economic capital achieved through the alchemy of symbolic exchanges (exchange of gifts, challenges and ripostes, women, etc.) and only available to agents endowed with disposition adjusted to the logic of "disinterestedness." [Bourdieu 1997:234–235]

Bourdieu's characterization, which recalls Weber on precapitalism and the formalist–substantivist debate in economic anthropology, may be problematic as an ethnographic generalization, but it aptly captures the contrast embodied in the film's social imaginary.

To be sure, this contrast should not be overdrawn: the Corleones are not opposed to money per se, nor are they a familial haven in a heartless world of capitalism.⁷ In fact, the Corleones are committed businessmen. This becomes increasingly clear (and complicated) as the film progresses, but even in this first scene viewers will recognize that the Corleones are running a business: They meet in an office and make references to "jobs" and the "family business."⁸ In fact, if the Corleones were not capitalistic at least to some degree, comparisons with Americans would be untenable. The Corleones are our distant cousins, not exotics. Nonetheless, the Corleones are capitalists with a difference: They value honor, kinship, and long-term gift-exchange—a culture in which counting money and naming cash values is seen as antisocial behavior.

The correct model for interaction in this gift economy is provided by the baker, who asks the Don to help his future son-in-law remain in the United States. The baker never mentions money; rather, the Don reads his thoughts. After his request has been granted, the baker leaves the room saying "and wait till you see the beautiful wedding cake I made for your daughter," showing that he participates in food exchange like the Don, who, of course, is providing food and drink for everyone at the wedding.⁹ The Don has also specifically given the baker a drink (held throughout this scene), a drink that represents conviviality, as opposed to the drink Bonasera accepts as solace when he starts to weep. Simply put, the undertaker represents death while the baker represents life. Not only does the baker provide food (physical sustenance), but he engages in the male-dominated gift exchange that leads to the social reproduction of the family: He is visiting the Godfather to insure that his daughter will marry Enzo, an Italian boy who has been working in his pastry shop. In this sense, the baker and the Don (whose daughter is also being married) both participate in the exchange of women that perpetuates social life and family honor; by contrast, the undertaker has been thwarted in his proper male role as benefactor and protector of female honor ("she will never be beautiful again").

As the baker's example shows, part of this symbolic economy also involves male exchange and nurturance through food—men feeding other men. In another example, Don Corleone is shown physically embracing his godson Johnny as he leaves his office, saying, "You look terrible, I want you to eat." These words follow the Don's lecturing Johnny on the importance of being a "family man" and also stand in contrast to the bandleader's exploitation. Nurturing other men and being a "family man" are all part of being a good businessman in this gift economy.

Speech performatives do the work of cementing mutual commitments with the Don, rather than signatures on written contracts. For example, Luca Brasi vows "I pledge my never-ending loyalty, Don Corleone," and the undertaker says "Be my friend, Godfather," after which he bends down and kisses the Don's ring to confirm their new relationship. Also, jumping ahead for a moment to the later scene with the heads of the Five Families, Barzini says, "We all know him [Don Corleone] as a man of his word," adding "Look, we are all reasonable men here. We don't have to give assurances as if we were lawyers." In other words, a man of his word can be trusted; not only does he abhor a lawyer's written contract but even speech performatives can sometimes be dispensed with.¹⁰ In this sense, a man's word approaches the most binding "contract" of all: kinship bonds, which are so strong that they do not require explicit expression.

The Corleone family is bound together by such ties of kinship, placing them at the opposite end of the spectrum from written contracts. Most Americans, too, believe that written contracts do not mix with family life: This belief underlies the outrage over pre-nuptial contracts, which represent the invasion of formal market principles into family life, one of the only domains that is supposed to be exempt from these principles. Dependence on state contracts impugns family trust, the very basis of the "diffuse, enduring solidarity" of kinship (see Schneider 1968). By the same token, it would be simply unthinkable for the Don to ask his sons to sign a work contract.

The Godfather suggests that "family values" should carry over into the "rational" world of business decisions. This ongoing tension in American society has been recently raised by "socially conscious" companies such as Ben and Jerry's or Smith and Hawken.¹¹ But, at the same time, the film plays upon the fact that the gift economy is *already* present in American society—in the form of dinners, lunches, and drinks with clients and colleagues, the talk on the golf course, the expense accounts, the entertaining hosted by spouses, and so on. The problem is that, despite the ubiquity of these personal gift exchanges, rational interests and economic efficiency are still supposed to be the decisive factors: you can't come to a corporate meeting or press conference and say, "I gave John the contract because he's my friend and he took me to the Knicks game." The movie plays on this contradiction between ideals and practice, the tension between an ideology that propounds the importance of objective, rational, efficient decision making versus actual practices based on subjective, committed personal relationships. In response, the Corleones offer the possibility of a cleaner, less dissonant reconciliation between American ideals and practice, between emotion and objectivity.

In particular, the Corleones offer a resolution to the American split between family and business. Generally speaking, bourgeois ideology opposes the mixing of these two spheres: Work is supposed to be rational and efficient, and the family is the realm of affect and strong emotion. This split causes considerable social and psychological strain as work time competes with family time, and family members with differing occupations often become distant from one another, both psychologically and geographically. For the Corleones, though, business and

family are one and the same realm, and both are thriving. The family business is, of course, decidedly patriarchal: the men run the business, women do not enter the office, and business is never discussed at the dinner table. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that the Don's office is located in his home (especially in the early 1970s when the film came out and before the "electronic commute"), in which the men can quickly move back and forth from the office to the kitchen. Children play just outside the office, as we learn in the very first scene, when several children burst into the room just as Luca Brasi is finishing his pledge. Immediately after this the Don walks out of his office into his own backyard to dance with his wife at a wedding that, as part of ongoing gift exchange, is ultimately all part of his business. In this sense, work-family and gender boundaries are much less rigid than they might appear at first glance. This work-family unity, then, is specifically based on men fulfilling traditional gender roles as breadwinners, protectors, and active fathers. The film also specifically depicts close familial relations *among men*, indeed male love between fathers, sons, and brothers, expressed in the course of their "business" relationships. That a movie in which a father and his sons work at the same business, men cry, sons try to save their father, and the father affectionately hugs and kisses his sons could be so compelling to the many American males who revel in being able to quote line for line from this movie¹² is suggestive of the social tensions being mythically "resolved."¹³

This is also not to deny that the movie portrays a certain horror at the Corleones' "business," even in the early scenes, reflected most prominently in Kay's open-mouthed shock at the story about the "offer he couldn't refuse." This horror notwithstanding, the overall effect, as many commentators have noted and in keeping with Clifford's analysis, is to create a nostalgic appeal. Having primarily emphasized this old-versus-new world opposition in the first scene, though, the film proceeds to show that the Corleones are not all that different from Americans, especially when the family starts changing under the leadership of Michael, who represents the second-generation's attempt to bring the Sicilian and American worlds closer together. The film suggests that the authentic ways embodied by Don Corleone will become corrupted as the family grows away from its "ethnic roots." Once again, these shifts are symbolized through striking images of the oral and the literate.

Michael's Murder: An Attempt to Combine the Two Worlds

The Don's son Michael is clearly identified with mainstream American society rather than his father's business: He's an American war hero, he went to college, and he tells his WASP girlfriend in the first scene "that's my family, Kay, that's not me." Michael's distance from his family is also indicated by the fact that he only learns about the attempted murder of his father from a newspaper headline, thus depending on the mediation of print rather than face-to-face interaction. However, in this second stage of the film Michael's understanding of print media allows him to propose an innovation on his father's methods, an innovation that sets him on course to become the Don's heir. Michael's proposal is offered in a crucial scene in which the sons and the *caporegimes*, lieutenants, are debating how to respond to Sollozo, the drug dealer who has just tried for a second time to kill the Don. Sonny, the hot-headed eldest son and interim Don, wants to take revenge against Sollozo and his ally Tattaglia, but Tom Hagen, the voice of moderation, advises against any immediate action, lest it cause an all-out war that cannot be stopped. Tom clinches his argument by informing everyone that

Sollozo is at least temporarily invulnerable because he's being guarded by a police captain named McCluskey.

At this point Sonny concedes to Tom ("Alright, we'll wait"), but to everyone's surprise Michael then proposes that he will kill both Sollozo and McCluskey. Sonny and the *caporegimes*, Tessio and Clemenza, start to laugh loudly at Michael's proposal and Tom looks away in disbelief. The others did not understand what Michael had grasped: the power of print. Drawing on his understanding of literacy, Michael's solution is to kill the drug dealer and police captain, and then follow up with newspaper stories about "a crooked cop who got what was coming to him," that is, putting a different spin on the killing and precluding retaliation from the state and the public. Michael's proposal was an innovative blend of guns and newspapers, a combination that was not envisioned by the others, who were still operating on the Don's own gun-versus-pen opposition. The shift in relations between the Corleones and writing is even captured in the seating arrangements in this scene. As the camera slowly zooms in, we see Michael seated directly between Sonny, standing for brute force, and Tom, who, as the adopted German-Irish son and lawyer, has until now been a mediating figure controlling literacy for the family (Tom is even sitting behind a desk and typewriter in this scene). Michael, however, is proposing to take the family's relationship with writing to a new, more public level, bringing the Old and New Worlds closer together.

As we saw earlier, the American and Sicilian worlds were initially opposed in the story about the bandleader who had to choose whether his brains or his signature would be on that contract. In a parallel image, Sonny says to Michael, "What do you think this is, the army, where you shoot 'em from a mile away? You gotta get up close like this . . . budda-bing! You blow their brains all over your nice Ivy League suit." In other words, just as written contracts should be kept clean and pure, unstained by blood and brains, so should a nice Ivy League suit; these two worlds are separate and opposed. Moreover, like the contrast between legal writing and the Don's connections, the difference is a question of impersonal versus personal relations: mainstream Americans interact at a distance, through written contracts and by shooting from a mile away, whereas the Corleones talk directly to each other and put a gun right up to their enemy's head. In fact, in Mario Puzo's book even a handgun is considered impersonal and Americanized, compared with the more direct, traditional garrote: "The *caporegime*, Clemenza, took Sonny in hand and taught him how to shoot and to wield a garrote. Sonny had no taste for the Italian rope, he was too Americanized. He preferred the simple, direct, impersonal Anglo-Saxon gun, which saddened Clemenza" (Puzo 1969:219).¹⁴ Michael, however, sees a way to combine the Mafia's "up close and personal" style with the more distanced, mediated relationships of mainstream America, making the press work for rather than against the family's violence.

Food symbolism also marks this change. Shortly before this scene Clemenza is shown attempting to give Michael some pointers about cooking, particularly Italian cooking. In a scene that has echoes in many subsequent Mafia films, Clemenza is shown making spaghetti sauce, while narrating the recipe to Michael. As an "old school" figure, Clemenza is part of the tradition that includes Don Corleone and his godson ("I want you to eat"), in which men cross over into nurturing roles as part of a gift economy. Of course, it is also significant that Clemenza is not teaching Michael any old recipe, but a recipe for spaghetti sauce, that is, one immediately associated with "authentic" Italian traditions. By contrast, Michael and the others are shown involved in a new kind of food consumption in a subsequent scene before Michael kills: While waiting for a phone call at

Sonny's house, everyone sits around the table eating take-out Chinese food. This quick, non-Italian food is neither nurturing nor "authentic," marking the new, Americanized relations that are signaled by Michael's killing.

Michael's act of killing takes place in a restaurant, seemingly associating him with the oral interactions described above for Don Corleone. However, though sitting at the table with his two victims, Michael does not eat and barely speaks at all during the scene. By keeping his mouth closed to food and not touching the drink that Sollozo has handed to him as a gesture of truce, he resists the vulnerability of social interaction. Michael's resistance to food (and vulnerable social relations) is comparable to the way he remains impassive when Clemenza teases him about his girlfriend and teaches him how to "cook for twenty guys." Finally, in a significant jump-cut, the scene of Michael retreating from the bloodied bodies of Sollozo and McCluskey is immediately followed by the image of newspapers being printed and then men eating spaghetti. At least for a brief moment it seems that Michael has managed to reconcile the two worlds, that he has found a way to integrate food, writing, and violence.

The Moe Green Casino Scene: Inversion of the Movie's Initial Position

As we see by the end of the film, killing Sollozo and McCluskey was a turning point in the Corleone family's trajectory: Once Michael started to use the American system (symbolized by the newspapers), and given his determination to make the family "totally legitimate" within five years, the family was set on a path of ethnic self-destruction, moving toward the ideal-typical American business model of "rational" profit making. The culmination of this movement occurs in the Moe Green casino scene, in which the symbolic structures of the opening wedding scene are completely inverted.

Whereas in the wedding scene Vito Corleone provides a party with food, drink, and music, Michael arrives at Moe's casino and coldly dismisses the women and musicians that Fredo had brought for a surprise party. Echoing his father's line from the wedding scene, Michael also tells Fredo he is going to take over Moe's casino by making Moe "an offer he can't refuse," but then Michael does something that would have been unthinkable for his father: He asks Johnny to sign a stack of written contracts (taken out of Tom's briefcase), agreeing to sing at the casino for the next five years. Michael has completely inverted his father's ways. As noted above, the movie starts with a joyous celebration with food and drink, a story about the Don getting Johnny out of a legal contract, Johnny singing voluntarily for the party, and the Don embracing Johnny and telling him, "You look terrible, I want you to eat." Now the exact opposite is occurring: Michael is coercing Johnny into signing a legal contract, they are sitting at a dinner table with empty plates and untouched drinks, and everyone in the room is somber and joyless. Michael has entered the world of legal contracts and capitalism, precisely the world that his father had repudiated. Michael is both symbolically and literally leaving his father behind, taking the Corleone business to Las Vegas, a strange town several thousand miles away from his father's neighborhood and connections in New York. Michael is also shifting the very nature of the family business from food to money. Instead of the olive oil business, a symbol of Italian authenticity and a gift economy where greed at least seems secondary, Michael is moving the family into the casino business, thus inverting the first scene in which direct involvement with money is seen as an insult to honor.¹⁵

In other words, in the process of trying to become a legitimate American businessman, Michael has been forced to lose much of his Old World ways. Without the authenticating symbols of ethnic roots—food and the oral contract—

Michael is not a benevolent patriarch, but another corrupt, corporate raider. Making Johnny sign a contract can be seen as a prelude to the stunning, horrific killings during the famous baptism scene that ends the movie. It marks the transition to a world in which honor is no longer the guarantee of a man's word. Violence is no longer hidden behind honor, but revealed at the heart of the American system of doing business. Indeed, this was foreshadowed in an earlier exchange between Kay and Michael, in which Kay claims that Michael is naïve in thinking of his father as a typical powerful American male. The Don, according to Kay, is unlike American politicians and businessmen, because these latter "don't have people killed." Michael's succinct reply is "Who's being naïve now, Kay?"

It is also important to note that on another level these oppositions are always blurred: All along the Corleones have been devoted to wealth making (if not capitalist profit making) in a cruel and efficient manner. At the same time, though, the film suggests, at least initially, that perhaps capitalism could be redeemed by a more humane, "honorable," and personalized system of values that transcends "the bottom line" and the cold impersonality of the state and multinational capitalism. The written and the oral, then, are key symbols for this refracted image that plays upon contradictory American ideas about business and family. Initially we are provided with the image of an "authentic" ethnic world in which business can be personal and run on principles of honor, but ultimately we see that this combination is extremely problematic and difficult to maintain under the corrosive influence of mainstream American society. *The Godfather* suggests that American society is both like the Mafia in its quest for the consolidation of power and *worse than* the Mafia, since this power is unredeemed by the gift economy, which buffers the effects of power and offers a certain justice.

The movie closes with a triumphant Michael clearly identified with the written word: He is in his office, reading papers, and surrounded by books on the floor; when his sister comes in crying about the murder of her husband, she slams down a newspaper on Michael's desk and screams to Kay, "Want to know how many men he had killed before Carlo? Read the papers, read the papers! That's your husband." Then, in a gesture befitting any contemporary American politician, Michael denies everything to Kay, showing the devaluation of his own word. The final image is Michael's office door closing on Kay as she prepares Michael a drink, the final rejected gesture of social connectivity that leaves the new Don in his office of books, cut off from his family and his father's Sicilian ways.

Theoretical Discussion

Written and oral symbolism, then, are woven into the film's fabric from the first to last scene. In particular, this symbolism resonates with writing symbolism—including the nostalgia and sense of "irretrievable loss"—that Clifford examines. Expanding on Clifford's analysis and extending it to mass media representations, we have demonstrated the relevance of this anthropological perspective to less familiar territory—the "other" world of popular culture.

In the process, we have also attempted to add new insights into *The Godfather*. Our analysis is perhaps closest to that of John Hess (1976), but whereas Hess focuses on the critique of capitalism in *The Godfather, Part II*, we have limited ourselves to the first movie in the trilogy, where the critique is much less blatant and thoroughgoing. Indeed, other *Godfather* scholars, for all their perceptive analyses of capitalism and family themes, have also overlooked the specific symbols of food and writing. And yet these symbols are crucial in opening up new ways of interpreting the film, leading us to conclusions that are at odds with

those of earlier analyses. While previous scholars have found the film's social critique in its revelation that American business is like the Mafia, we argue that the critique comes as much or more from the opposite direction: from the fact that American business is *not enough* like the Mafia. For example, Fredric Jameson assumes that the film shifts criticism of capitalism onto the "pure Evil of the Mafiosi themselves" (1979:146). Glenn Man echoes Jameson (useful qualifications notwithstanding) in his discussion of the film's "myth of the Mafia as evil" and its suggestion that the "Mafia's evil is society's evil as well" (2000:115). Mann concludes that "The romanticization of Vito/Michael and the whole Corleone family deflects from the prosocial myth of the Mafia as evil and puts on hold the subversive myth of society as evil" (2000:115).

While Bourdieu's gift economy can be equated with what Glenn Man refers to as the film's "romanticization" of the Corleones, we do not see this romanticization as a deflection from the critique of society, nor do we find the deflection that Jameson (1979:146) sees as the gangster genre's primary ideological function: "the substitution of crime for big business . . . the strategic displacement of all the rage generated by the American system onto this mirror image of big business." Instead, we argue that the Corleones' romanticized image *is* the critique, in the sense of what Clifford (1986:114), following Raymond Williams and Stanley Diamond, calls a "critical nostalgia," a way "to break with the hegemonic corrupt present by asserting the reality of a radical alternative." To fantasize about lost worlds is to criticize the present, since "every imagined authenticity presupposes, and is produced by, a present circumstance of felt inauthenticity" (1986:114). The romanticized image of the Corleones' gift economy presents just this sort of critical nostalgia—a world without legal contracts, and a world that is unabashedly based on strong emotional ties formed through food, drink, and kinship.

Our approach clearly has an affinity with that of Thomas Ferraro, who argues to good effect that previous scholars have mistakenly treated family and business as separate themes in the film. But as much as we agree with Ferraro's basic point, we cannot agree with his specific conclusion about the critique of capitalism offered by the film (or, in Ferraro's case, by Puzo's book): "Professionals often complain about taking work home with them, mentally if not literally. How much more frightening, then, is the alternative Puzo presents: when some Americans go home to papa, they end up confronting the boss" (Ferraro 1993:38). Quite the opposite, we suspect that most Americans wish at some level that their work and family lives were *more* integrated; even if this wish does not literally translate into desire for a family business (still not an option for many, given all the other economic and ideological forces mentioned earlier), there is at least enough ambivalence to make the Corleone image appealing and/or fascinating. In addition to Ferraro's excellent point about the importance of American valorization of ethnicity as a reason for the film's popularity, we would add that the film deals not only with ethnicity but also with what ethnicity symbolizes, including male solidarity and, more generally, ongoing dilemmas about reconciling the "personal" and "business."

How individual viewers pick up on these issues, however, is an open, empirical question for future research. The more important point is that both the Corleones and Americans are struggling with many of the same cultural dilemmas, and a central aspect of the movie's appeal—the reason it can be watched over and over—is that, like a good myth, it toys with viewers' ambivalent feelings about nasty strains and tensions in American culture.

Notes

1. In this regard, the best, most relevant previous analyses are the following: (1) Ferraro 1993, (2) Jameson 1979, (3) Hess 1976, and (4) Browne 2000. In particular, in Browne's edited volume see the chapters by Glen Man (2000) on family and capitalism, Jon Lewis (2000) on the ironies and influence of business and mob maneuvering in the making of the films, and Vera Dika (2000) on ethnicity. On the general relationship between gangster films and society, see Warshaw (1975). The director, Francis Ford Coppola, even stated in an interview that he consciously treated the Mafia as a symbol for American capitalism: "I always wanted to use the Mafia as a metaphor for America. If you look at the film, you see that it's focused that way. The first line is 'I believe in America.' I feel that the Mafia is an incredible metaphor for this country. . . . Both are totally capitalistic phenomena and basically have a profit motive" (quoted in Farber 1972:224).

2. "Orality" is being used here loosely as a rubric for the various methods employed by the Corleones (gifts, food, gestures, speech performatives), but the opposition between the written and the oral is not meant to be reified. In terms of the state, Corleone functions much like James Bond and Wild Bill Hickock. While both of these latter characters work for andersonize the state (Drummond 1996:127–168), the Corleones can also be considered an extension of the state, given that Don Corleone enjoys a symbiotic relationship with judges and senators and even aspires to have Michael become a senator someday. In this sense, we could say that *The Godfather* also serves paradoxically to personalize the state, to give it a human face.

3. This approach has been developed by Drummond (1996), who uses popular films as key texts to construct a reading of mainstream American culture.

4. *Cannoli* is an Italian pastry that looks like a long brown tube, stuffed with a sweetened filling of whipped ricotta and often containing nuts, citron, or bits of chocolate. See also *cannenoli*, the savory form of cannoli. Compare "cannon," a large weapon, from the Italian, "cannone," equivalent to "canna," a tube. A famous line in *The Godfather* runs, "Leave the gun, take the cannoli."

5. The "intelligence" of the bandleader is also being devalued. Brains are commonly a metonym of intelligence—as in the expression "he's a brain"—and, given the importance of education in American society, intelligence of any sort is also symbolized by literacy. This literate intelligence is now being devalued in the worst way: Those brains are about to be splattered all over the written page.

6. This pause actually lasts for 16.3 seconds, which feels like an eternity, particularly in movie time.

7. We obviously concur here with Ferraro's (1993) argument that, for the Corleones, business and family are one and the same.

8. For example, Tom says "Who should I give this *job* to?" and the Don says "Give him [Carlo] a living, but never discuss the *family business* with him." The bodyguard Paulie's reference to cash values—he fantasizes about stealing the bride's wedding purse, which contains "twenty, thirty grand, in small bills, cash"—is an exception that proves the rule about attitudes toward money in this first scene: It foreshadows Paulie's later betrayal of the Don because of greed. The presence of the bridal purse itself does not contradict the Sicilian emphasis on gifts: as in American culture, money can be converted into a gift if it is properly dressed up as such, that is, by placing the money in a sealed envelope and putting all the envelopes in a special container (in this case, a white silk bag), without counting the money in public view. Luca Brasi, for example, would never just open up his wallet and hand the Godfather some bills for the bridal purse (see Carrier 1990).

9. To the extent that this mention of the cake seems like an overeagerness to repay the Don's favor, it could be considered a violation of the usual rules of delayed gift exchange. Such telescoping can be partly attributed to the film's need to condense maximal information in this one scene, and, moreover, the true, delayed repayment occurs later in the film when the baker's son-in-law risks his life to help Michael protect the Don at the hospital.

10. In this scene, the Don actually does make a promise, saying he "swears on the souls of his grandchildren." However, with Barzini's implication that the Don does not even need such a speech performative, this scene comes close to the scene in *The Freshman* in which Marlon Brando tells Matthew Broderick that "everything I say is, by definition, a promise." The Don's disdain for writing is also strikingly clear in this passage from Mario Puzo's book:

The president [of the bank] always treasured that moment when he had offered to give Don Corleone a written document proving his ownership of the shares, to preclude any treachery. Don Corleone had been horrified. "I would trust you with my whole fortune," he told the president. "I would trust you with my life and the welfare of my children. It is inconceivable to me that you would ever trick me or otherwise betray me. My whole world, all my faith in my judgment of human character would collapse. Of course I have my own written records so that if something should happen to me my heirs would know that you hold something in trust for me." [Puzo 1969:277]

11. Carrier (1997) provides an analysis of the philosophy behind Paul Hawken's company "Smith and Hawken," which derives from some of the tensions explored in this article. In particular "Smith and Hawken" is posed as a response to the impersonal world of bureaucratic organizations and the systematic pursuit of monetary profit. Instead of written policy books and employee manuals, Hawken argues for employees who make "moral" decisions based on personal feelings: "You must give permission to your employees to do what they think is right. . . . No policy book could cover all . . . contingencies. Don't even try to concoct one. Our policy book says this: it has to feel right" (cited in Carrier 1997:142).

12. As Meg Ryan noted in the film *You've Got Mail*, "What is it with men and *The Godfather*?"

13. Gender images are certainly not the only source of the appeal of *The Godfather*. The portrayal of Italian ethnicity was also one of the sources of the film's popularity, as argued by Dika (2000) and Ferraro (1993).

14. In the film, on the other hand, if not used in the way Sonny suggests, guns could act like bombs in 20th-century wars, notable for their increasing distance and mediation, as documented by Bourke in *An Intimate History of Killing* (1999). Bourke in fact argues for a general nostalgia for "intimate," face-to-face combat in contrast to "the horrors of modern mechanized warfare" (1999:48) in the accounts of American and British soldiers during the Vietnam War and the first two world wars. The bayonet was seen as the weapon that could bring back the chivalric personal element in warfare that was seen to characterize the past, but which had been increasingly displaced in modern warfare.

15. This inversion is also highlighted in the first scene of *The Godfather, Part II*, also a wedding scene, but in this case one in which Italian food and music have been replaced by standard American fare (Uncle Leo asks for red wine and traditional music, and is given champagne cocktails, canapés, and "hickory-dickory-dock"). As with the first scene of *The Godfather, Part I*, Michael is conducting business in his office during the wedding, but in another striking inversion, Michael is shown eulogizing the value of money to his niece's fiancé. For an excellent analysis of this sequel, see Hess (1976).

References Cited

Bourdieu, Pierre

1997 Marginalia—Some Additional Notes on the Gift. In *The Logic of the Gift, Toward an Ethic Generosity*. Alan D. Schrift, ed. Pp. 231–241. New York: Routledge.

Bourke, Joanna

1999 *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Basic Books.

Browne, Nick, ed.

2000 Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* Trilogy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Carrier, James

1990 Gifts in a World of Commodities: The Ideology of the Perfect Gift in American Society. In *Social Analysis* 29(1):19–37.

1997 Mr. Smith, Meet Mr. Hawken. In *Meanings of the Market*. James Carrier, ed. Pp. 129–158. Oxford: Berg.

Carrier, James, and Daniel Miller

1999 From Private Virtue to Public Vice. In *Anthropological Theory Today*. Henrietta L. Moore, ed. Pp. 24–47. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Clifford, James

- 1986 On Ethnographic Allegory. In *Writing Culture*. James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds. Pp. 98–121. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dika, Vera

- 2000 The Representation of Ethnicity in *The Godfather*. In Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Trilogy*. Nick Browne, ed. Pp. 76–107. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Drummond, Lee

- 1996 *American Dreamtime: A Cultural Analysis of Popular Movies, and Their Implications for a Science of Humanity*. Lanham, MD: Littlefield Adams Books.

Farber, Stephen

- 1972 Coppola and *The Godfather*. *Sight and Sound: International Film Quarterly* 41(4):217–224.

Ferraro, Thomas J.

- 1993 *Ethnic Passages: Literary Immigrants in Twentieth-Century America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hess, John

- 1976 *Godfather II: A Deal Coppola Couldn't Refuse*. In *Movies and Methods: An Anthology*. Bill Nichols, ed. Pp. 81–90. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Jameson, Fredric

- 1979 Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture. *Social Text* 1(1):130–148.

Lewis, Jon

- 2000 If History Has Taught Us Anything . . . Francis Ford Coppola, Paramount Studios, and *The Godfather Parts I, II, and III*. In Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Trilogy*. Nick Browne, ed. Pp. 23–56. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Man, Glenn

- 2000 Ideology and Genre in the *Godfather* Films. In Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Trilogy*. Nick Browne, ed. Pp. 109–132. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Puzo, Mario

- 1969 *The Godfather*. New York: Signet.

Schneider, David

- 1968 *American Kinship: A Cultural Account*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Warshaw, Robert

- 1975 *The Immediate Experience*. New York: Atheneum.