

THE GODFATHER PART III

Directed by Francis Ford Coppola
Produced by Francis Ford Coppola
Distributed by Paramount Pictures
Released in 1990

The first thing that critics get wrong about *The Godfather Part III* is that it does not carry forward the subtle, inspired commentary on crime, business, and loyalty explored by its illustrious predecessors. The film does and makes its ruminations very explicit. But assuming the film lacks something on this score, this should not be dispositive (assuming one can enjoy movies that *do not* explore Deep Issues). There is no rule that a sequel must carry on in the same style as its predecessor(s). *The Godfather Part III* is a more conventional crime tale, more conventionally told. But it's still a great movie.

Other criticisms don't wash either. A big one concerns the absence of Robert Duvall. (Duvall refused to participate because his salary demands were not met.) It's easy to forget, but as *The Godfather* was winding down, Tom Hagen is told that he will no longer be consigliore. He is told by Michael that things will get too heavy, and that he is "out." At the end of the second movie, Hagen is, once again, marginalized, and it even seems like Michael is thinking about killing him for disloyalty or incompetence. Bizarrely, this occurs after Michael flees Tahoe for Florida, telling Hagen, "You're gonna be the Don," a giant tease that goes nowhere. We never even see Hagen make big decisions; he just keeps jogging in place.

So to act like Hagen has to be in *III* is just bizarre. His character has nowhere to go—he's been shunned twice; his purpose is to demonstrate how irrationally distrustful and paranoid Michael had become. George Hamilton takes over the character's function with élan.

Actually, there's no reason for Kay to be in this film either. The last we saw of her, Michael shut the kitchen door on her in *The Godfather Part II*, and she was symbolically banished. Here, she's back, and Michael is very penitent. That's all she's good for—telling Michael what a creep he is, pushing him to let Tony go, and floundering about trying to decide if she forgives him. Take note—there isn't one scene she's in which advances the plot.

But it is great to see the same actors playing roles they originated eighteen years earlier—folks like Jeannie Linero as Lucy Mancini, Gabriele Torrei as Enzo, and Franco Citti as Calo.

We get a lot of new characters, just like the second movie. And Vincent Mancini is a dynamo. Brilliantly played by Andy Garcia, he is volatile, cunning, and endearing in his ruthless loyalty.

The second Godfather movie shares many characteristics of the first film and is unique only in its parallel structure of stories decades removed.

In fact, the kill-the-enemies climax of *The Godfather Part II* was a pale imitation of the simultaneous killings in *I*, particularly because the killings in *I* were unified in that they all happened within minutes of each other and were intercut with Michael participating in a baptism. In *II* we have no ironic parallel action. It's almost like Coppola felt he had to kill the characters off because it was expected of him.

By *Part III*, Coppola had had time to reflect on the defining characteristics of the franchise. He stages an amazing 20-minute-long orgy of baroque murders, all while Michael enjoys "Cavalleria Rusticana," an opera about Sicilian revenge, and one of the planned killings takes place in the opera house, and four counter-kills (one being the Pope!) occur, while all the while unbeknownst to Michael, he is the target for assassination. And not only is the structure and symbolism rich, but the killings are just wild—especially Luchesi's. The audience is thinking, how is Calo going to get this guy? He's guarded, there's no weapon. Then...BAM—the eyeglasses pierce the aorta!

But, alas, the film isn't perfect. The fashions in this movie are inappropriate for 1979 (especially the thin-knot ties). But recall that *The Godfather* featured an extraordinary quantity of sideburns for the 1940s. Also, *III* seems to tread over the same ground—Michael feels guilty, Michael's getting scammed, Michael's sick and tired; Vincent is violent, Vincent loves Mary; Mary loves Vincent; Kay is conflicted, Don Altobello is a two-faced ham; politics and business and crime and love and the Church are all corrupted (but family is great). There's much talk about Michael making amends and trying to step out of the business, but it's just talk. He claims, as he always does, that he's fighting for his family. But nobody wants to kill Tony, Mary, and Kay. And instead of renouncing this evil of retributive violence, instead of retreating, he taps Vincent to be the Don, so he can get his hands bloodied, instead. Michael shows great patience through the story, and he is in the right—the great grievances in the end are the back-stabbing Immobiliare deal and the murder of Don Tommassino. Are we supposed to think that Michael can benefit by having his enemies murdered, but he need not bear responsibility? Sure, Vincent is a smart and ruthless guy—the bit with the two burglars should convince us of that. But if it's really Vincent's plan, then why is Michael punished by losing Mary at the film's climax? Is it the whole 'past sins' thing? They must be really in the past since, the whole movie through, Michael has been magnanimous, calm, and has scorned violence.

And we know Vincent isn't punished. Some have speculated that his character is so devious that he pretends to be in love with Mary in order to get closer to Michael. This is a fair assumption in light of the fact that Andy Garcia never looks comfortable with Sofia Coppola—the cooking scene where they finger dough balls together is the film's nadir.

Michael's been trying to keep Vincent away from Mary the whole movie. After Vincent doesn't obey him, Michael awards him the Don-ship *on the condition that he gives up Mary*. So this time he really, *really* means it. The whole thing just feels a little forced; maybe, if Vincent is just feigning affection for Mary, his genuine sorrow when he has to give her up derives not from his love for her but from his sorrow of leading her on.

Finally, she gets shot by the assassin who is going after her dad. So Michael tried to keep her away from Vincent, because he is willfully immersed in danger, but it was her proximity to her father that brought death. (And remember, Michael was targeted for a business deal, not because of gangsterism.) How is this punishment for Michael?

It only kind of makes sense if Michael was complicit in the death-fest, only leaving the details to Vincent as acting Don. Thus, the danger that Vincent poses falls on Michael because he took Vincent as his tool. Thus, if they can symbolically merge, when Michael warns Mary to stay away from Vincent, he really needs her to stay away from him. Yet Mary wants to be closer to her dad, and in Sofia Coppola's most dispassionately acted scene, Mary tell her father

that she hopes running the Corleone Foundation will draw them closer, an idea Michael responds warmly to. Yes, Michael would happily die for his family. And if he'd just died when his enemies wanted him to, his family would be safe.

Moreover, Michael, talking to the corpse of Don Tommassino, says, "I swear on the lives of my children, give me a chance to redeem myself and I will sin no more." Assuming he broke that promise, the irony is fitting—the life of his child was taken.

Even though the dramatic justification for this gets a little convoluted, Mary's death is nicely anticipated by the brief puppet show Michael and Kay watch in Corleone, where a girl is subject to an honor killing by her father because of her sexual involvement with her cousin.

Similarly, the film sets up some very intriguing red herrings. When Vincent goes to Don Atobello acting like he wants to betray Michael, Don Atobello questions Vincent's desire to work with him since, if Michael dies, Mary controls everything (and Vincent, by default, would then take over).

Other teases and surprises are the priest presenting the bread (when we think it's the assassin with a shotgun); the twin letting his guard down when it seems his brother has killed the hired assassin, only to be killed, himself; Michael receiving treatment at the St. Christopher Medical Center *Corleone* Pavilion; and when Vincent, after the Atlantic City hit, yells, "I say we hit back and take Zaza out!," Michael replies softly, "Never let anyone know what you're thinking" (a nice reminder of Vincent's parentage, and a touch peculiar since Michael wasn't at the meeting where Vito reprimanded Sonny). Also of note is when Michael tells Vincent, "When they come, they'll come at what you love." We seem to be meant to think that Mary will somehow become a pawn in a grand scheme to split Vincent and Michael and destroy the Family, but, instead, Mary becomes the last victim, killed, like his late wife, in his stead.

Finally, Vincent, for all his deviant genius, gets duped in the end. To kill Zaza, he set up an elaborate trap where the hooded guys had shotguns, and he posed as a policeman on horseback. One of their team members separated Zaza's bodyguard from Zaza by talking smack and keying a Cadillac that Zaza was raffling off. With Zaza's man dead, Zaza was exposed and an easy mark for Vincent. At the end of the film, the assassin decides to improvise since he was thwarted in his first attempt on Michael. He gets the young guy who is his apprentice to do his donkey imitation *while holding a shotgun* in order to attract attention. Three guys go over to take care of him, leaving Michael vulnerable. That's when the assassin fires. Vincent, watching all of this, should have realized that the real killer would not attract attention to himself by sounding like an ass (and he knows there's a killer there—the twins are dead). Instead, Vincent gets fooled by the same trick he used himself.

The film is beautifully scored. This was the last project of Carmine Coppola, the director's father. He deftly blends Nino Rota's indelible themes into a sonic tapestry of his own. And the work of integrating the opera with Rosa's music is unbelievably good, probably the best music editing ever done in a movie. The little-remembered love theme, "Promise Me You'll Remember," composed by Carmine Coppola and sung by Harry Connick, Jr., closes the film and gives an elegant lift to what would otherwise be a very bleak finish.