THE PLEASURES OF DISAPPOINTMENT: SEQUELS AND THE GODFATHER, PART II

TODD BERLINER

Film critics normally view sequels as exploitative products that cash in on the popularity of earlier blockbusters, invariably inferior to the original films. However, most critics today consider the 1974 sequel to The Godfather not only better than the first movie but one of the best movies of the decade. This fact seems even more surprising when one considers that the first Godfather is one of the most beloved films of all time and was, for a brief period, the greatest blockbuster in film history. When The Godfather debuted in 1972, it shattered all the major box office records. It made $8 million in its opening week in national release. It brought in a million dollars a day for twenty-six days and $2 million a week for 23 consecutive weeks. In less than six months, it surpassed Gone with the Wind to become the biggest box-office grosser in history, earning $86,275,000 in rentals by the end of its first year in release. The critics loved it too, on the whole, except that many thought it romanticized and glamorized the Mafia.

The astounding success of The Godfather surprised everyone involved with the picture,

especially the executives at Paramount, who immediately began badgering director Francis Ford Coppola for a sequel. If the sequel had only a fraction of the financial success of the original movie, it would mean enormous profits. The Godfather, they reasoned, was a formula for success, and, plagued by financial troubles, Hollywood studios in the early seventies coveted successful formulas.

In the late sixties and early seventies, theater attendance dropped to record lows. In 1946, 90 million Americans attended the movies each week. That figure dropped to 47 million per week in 1956, and by 1967 attendance fell to a mere 17.8 million, finally hitting an historic low of 15.8 million in 1971, the year before The Godfather’s release (Steinberg, 371). Commentators blamed television, the high cost of movie tickets, and the poor quality of the films. Whatever the cause, Hollywood studios in the sixties recorded their worst financial losses in history. Scrambling for audiences, studio executives hardly understood what people wanted from the movies. As a result, studios in the seventies banked on the successes of earlier hits by producing strings of horror movies and disaster movies and whatever else they hoped would please the public. The Godfather spawned a litter of Mafia movies (such as The Don is Dead [1973], Lucky Luciano [1974], The Black

Todd Berliner is Director of the Film Studies Program and Associate Professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. He has also written articles for Film Quarterly, Cinema Journal, and Style and is currently completing a book entitled Aesthetic Perversity in Hollywood Cinema: American Film Style in the 1970s.
Godfather [1974], and Lepke [1975]) just as Bonnie and Clyde (1967) and Easy Rider (1969) had engendered movies about sympathetic outlaws and what had come to be called youth culture (Little Fauss and Big Halsey [1970], Getting Straight [1970], Dirty Mary Crazy Larry [1974], The Sugarland Express [1974]). Sequels to popular movies had an almost guaranteed audience, typically earning two-thirds of the profits of the original films (Chown, 103). Not surprisingly, Hollywood loved them, even though the critics did not, and the 1970s saw the greatest incidence of film sequels in Hollywood’s history to that time. They Call Me Mr. Tibbs (1970 sequel to In the Heat of the Night), Ben (1972 sequel to Willard), Shaft’s Big Score (1972) and Shaft in Africa (1973, both sequels to Shaft), The Trial of Billy Jack (1974 sequel to Billy Jack), Herbie Rides Again (1974) and Herbie Goes to Monte Carlo (1977, both sequels to The Love Bug), Airport ’75, ’77, and ’79, Sounder: Part 2 (1976), Exorcist II: The Heretic (1977), Damien—Omen 2 (1978), and Beyond the Poseidon Adventure (1979) exemplify a small number of the sequels that made it to theaters in the seventies, critical assassination notwithstanding.1 Hollywood was taking few chances.

Most of these sequels have not seen an audience since their first runs, whereas The Godfather, Part II has had several re-releases and regularly plays on network and cable TV, and, as we shall see, many film critics regard it as the best movie of the period. Examining first the aesthetics of sequelization and, in particular, the disappointment with which audiences normally greet sequels, this article sets out to explain why The Godfather, Part II is so much more admired and beloved than the numerous other film sequels released around the same time, probably more admired and beloved than any other sequel in film history. As with most sequels, Godfather II disappoints its audience, but it does so in a peculiarly extravagant way. The film’s conspicuous refusal to satisfy paradoxically serves as a source of audience pleasure. Taking an inventive approach to sequelization, the film incorporates into its plot the very nostalgia, dissatisfaction, and sense of loss that sequels traditionally generate in their viewers, thereby giving thematic resonance to audiences’ inevitable disappointment with movie sequels.

In order to understand what makes Godfather II an unusually impressive sequel, we must first understand the exigencies with which film sequels contend and the typical ways in which filmmakers approach the burdens of sequel making.

Sequels, Spectacle, and Loss

Scholarship has hardly addressed the phenomenon of film sequelization, and the few critical treatments that exist focus almost exclusively on the horror film series that began inundating theaters in the late seventies and haven’t tapered off since.2 One full-length book has been devoted to literary and film sequels, Part Two: Reflections on the Sequel, a chronologically organized collection of essays, mostly by period specialists, which begins by examining epic sequels of the Greek Bronze Age and ends by looking at Hollywood sequels of the 1980s and ’90s. It will come as no surprise that the theme common to the essays is that sequels consistently let their audiences down. The essayists normally treat audience disappointment as an unavoidable consequence of publishers’ and movie studios’ attempts to profit quickly on the successes of earlier hits by churning out invariably inferior products (although several of the essays look at some notable exceptions to this
rule). Paul Budra and Betty Schellenberg, in the introduction to Part Two: Reflections on the Sequel, also note “the inevitably changed [historical] conditions which make it impossible to achieve a precise repetition of the experience” of the original work (5).

In their treatments of the sequel, however, the essayists deal only in passing with perhaps the most pertinent historical fact when considering audiences’ common dissatisfaction with sequels: the prior experience of the original popular work. Even if the sequel were every bit as good as the original, and experienced by an otherwise identical culture in equivalent historical circumstances, it would nonetheless disappoint audiences because nothing can equal one’s first experience of something great.

In a book on eighteenth-century English literature that also touches on literary sequels, Terry Castle suggests that “sequels inevitably seem to fail us in some obscure yet fundamental way” (133). Her remarks, directed at Samuel Richardson’s sequel to his novel Pamela, pertain just as well to film sequels. As with Budra and Schellenberg, Castle focuses principally on the socioeconomic reasons for the inevitable disappointment of sequels (especially on the profit motives of publishers and authors); however, she also considers aesthetic causes when she suggests that the readers of literary sequels “are motivated by a deep unconscious nostalgia for a past reading pleasure” (134):

A sequel can never fully satisfy its readers’ desire for repetition, however; its tragedy is that it cannot literally reconstitute its charismatic original. Readers know this; yet they are disappointed. Unconsciously they persist in demanding the impossible: that the sequel be different, but also exactly the same. Their secret mad hope is to find in the sequel a paradoxical kind of textual doubling—a repetition that does not look like one, the old story in a new and unexpected guise. They wish to read the “unforgettable” text once more, yet as if they had forgotten it. (134)

The almost inescapable failure of sequels results from the fact that, at the same time a sequel calls to mind the charismatic original, it also recalls its absence, fostering a futile, nostalgic desire to reexperience the original aesthetic moment as though it had never happened. Hence, the experience of a sequel differs fundamentally from that of rewatching a beloved movie. Although in both cases we enjoy something that reminds us of our initial pleasure, second viewings of a movie restore the original film to us—even enabling us to relish new insights and details missed on the first viewing. Sequels, by contrast, can only remind us of the original film, and continually and conspicuously fail to reinvoke that initial pleasure.

To compensate for the sequel’s inherent sense of absence and loss, the maker of a movie sequel tends to supply excessive amounts of whatever audiences seemed to have liked most about the first movie. Magnum Force has three times the violence of Dirty Harry. Rocky wins in Rocky II. Airport involved the hijacking of a standard jetliner; ten years, three sequels, and dozens of stars later, Universal released Airport ’79: The Concord. The shark in Jaws II is even bigger than the first; Jaws III is in 3-D. The escalation of violence and thrills in sequels seems to occur at a rate higher than that in movies generally, an understandably excessive evolution considering that a sequel must compete not only with other films in its genre but also with the original film it imitates. Though it can be exciting to enjoy the souped-up version of the initial experience, once the closing credits start to roll, one might feel some-
what exploited, as though all the oohhing and aahhing were evoked too cheaply.

Lianne McLarty suggests that, from one perspective, the sequel “marks the end of originality and results in the triumph of surface over depth, spectacle over meaning and history” (201). A movie sequel not only banks on the spectacular profitability of its predecessor; it often takes spectacle for its subject matter, hence the tendency of sequels to overdo the most spectacular elements of the original movie, such as violence, special effects, and stars. In fact, a movie sequel is almost invariably a version of the original movie as spectacle, a lavish display of the mere surface of the prior work. Even plots and characters turn into spectacles in a sequel. When C-3PO and R2-D2 make narratively gratuitous reappearances in George Lucas’s prequels to the initial Star Wars trilogy, the prequels attempt not only to reinspire the audience’s affection for the characters but to call up the spectacle of C-3PO and R2-D2 by superficially reiterating their connection to the prior films we loved. Or consider Coppola’s extraordinary efforts to include in The Godfather, Part III as many of the actors from the first two movies as he could work in. It is understandable why audiences would want to see Al Pacino again, but why should we care about seeing Al Martino as Johnny Fontane or Richard Bright as Al Neri? The sequel makes these characters spectacles for us, banking on their association with the original Godfather movies and on our excitement for their bare presence here. The familiar faces also help maintain continuity with the first film; their reappearance eases us into the new movie, reinforces the existence of a world we remember, and strengthens our sense that we have reentered a milieu that continues to function according to consistent and recognizable patterns.
The Ostentatious Disappointment of
*The Godfather, Part II*

Because of the peculiar burden of sequels and the damage a failed sequel can do to a filmmaker's career, directors of Hollywood blockbusters typically refuse to direct their sequels. In fact, Coppola refused on at least six occasions to make a sequel to *The Godfather*. After the first movie, he said:

I could make five failures, and I'd still be the guy who directed *The Godfather*. There's only one way to undo that fast, and that's to attempt to make another *Godfather*, and fail. If it bombs, then people will look at the first *Godfather* and say it was all Brando, or whatever. If I took my career to an insurance actuary, he'd tell me to lay off the sequels if I wanted to stay healthy. (Biskind, 81)

He had joked that the only sequel he would make would be *Abbott and Costello Meet the Godfather* (Murray, 53), but when Paramount offered him a million dollars plus a cut of the gross to produce, write, and direct a sequel, *The Godfather, Part II* began to take shape. Coppola also wanted complete creative control and he got it. The first film had reversed Paramount's financial slump, and the studio was desperate for another *Godfather*.

After the unprecedented success of the original film, the sequel was bound to disappoint, and, on its release in December 1974, it did. As with most sequels, it made a profit, but its success came nowhere near that of its predecessor. *Part II* took almost a year to gross as much as the original had in its first month of release, ultimately grossing in its first run only one-third of the profits of the first movie ($30.1 million in rentals as compared to $86.3 million for the first movie), "considerably less than the conventional
two-thirds Paramount expected” (Chown, 104). In his book about Coppola, Jon Lewis writes that Part II “was a great success with the critics” (17), and, as evidence, he cites Pauline Kael; however, Kael wrote one of the only good reviews the sequel received from a major critic. Most critics found the sequel slow, confusing, and sloppy. Moira Walsh’s review in America was more typical: “It is supposedly inevitable that sequels are inferior to the original. Besides, the film runs an impossible 200 minutes without intermission. Over and above its episodic structure, the film’s narrative takes various unsettling quantum leaps” (116). Walsh touches on critics’ three main complaints against the movie: too long, too confusing, and inferior to The Godfather. John Coleman from New Statesman wrote, “it is 25 minutes longer than [The Godfather] and about twice as confusing” (669). (Some critics might have seen an early cut of the movie, now unavailable and apparently more confusing than the final cut released to the public. However, critical opinion on the film’s disorganization was virtually unanimous, regardless of the version.) The New York Times’ Vincent Canby hated the movie and wrote that a “thick fog of boredom . . . settles in before the film is even an hour old” (The Godfather; Part II: One Godfather Too Many, 19). Although the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences loved it—it won six Oscars, twice as many as the first movie, including another for best picture—the movie failed to receive any Golden Globe Awards or New York Film Critics Awards, both awarded by the press. 7 Coppola did receive the National Board of Review’s award for best director; however, he won not for The Godfather, Part II, but for his other movie that year, The Conversation, which also won the award for best picture. 8 Critics announced their year-end top-ten lists about a month after Part II’s release, and The Conversation made more of those lists than Coppola’s Godfather sequel: In my own tally of 25 major critics’ “best films of 1974,” The Conversation came in fourth for the year and The Godfather, Part II tied with The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz for sixth place. 9 Part II even made some ten-worst lists. 10 The movie received a few notable good reviews—Kael called it a “modern American epic” (66), and Richard Schickel considered it “a worthy successor” (73)—but on the whole critics thought this sequel was like any other: a big let down.

Within a few years of Part II’s release, something remarkable happened: The movie’s critical stock began to rise, and film scholars and critics started treating it as a classic worthy of praise equal to or stronger than that lavished on The Godfather. Robert Bookbinder’s 1982 The Films of the Seventies calls Part II “one of the few film sequels of the seventies that actually improved upon the original” (99). Gerald Mast said the same in his 1986 textbook A Short History of the Movies. Most reviewers eventually came to consider the sequel superior. Michael Goodwin, film critic for City (which Coppola, in fact, published at the time), gave Part II a tepid review when it came out, but, in his 1989 book about Coppola, he admits that he “underrated the film badly” (Goodwin and Wise, 185). The Village Voice’s Molly Haskell initially panned the movie and excluded it from her list of the 11 best movies of 1974, but in 1978, in a survey for James Monaco, she inexplicably lists Part II among the ten best movies of the decade. Monaco had surveyed 20 of the world’s leading critics to determine what they considered the ten best films made between 1968 and 1977. The Godfather, Part II and Nashville led the list with 12 votes each; The Godfather came in third
with ten (Monaco, 441–453). Hence, whereas in 1975 a survey of critics placed Part II sixth for the year 1974, three years later a similar survey ranked it number one (along with Nashville) for the past decade. Many of Monaco's critics simply grouped both Godfathers as one item, perhaps in an effort to sneak in an eleventh pick, but also suggesting a tendency to regard Part II not as a sequel but rather as a continuation of the same classic movie. (Sight and Sound's prestigious top-ten poll lists, in its 2002 survey, The Godfather and The Godfather, Part II together as the fourth best movie of all time.) Hence, though initially critics considered Part II an inauspicious attempt to capitalize on the success of The Godfather, over time most critics began to judge the sequel even more highly than they did the original film.

To find an explanation for the surprising turnaround in critical opinion, we must look to Coppola and Puzo's inventive response to the burden of movie sequels. Unlike most sequels, which try to outdo the pleasures of their predecessors, The Godfather, Part II gives us ostentatiously less of what we liked about the original movie. The film has none of the romance, glamour, or charm of the first Godfather, and its protagonist, the new Don Corleone, has none of the glamour, romance, or charm of the old don. Far from trying to hide these deficiencies, Part II encourages its audience to feel deprived and to look back mournfully at the original film, to feel the very disappointment that critics expressed in their initial reviews. Simply put, The Godfather, Part II makes a success out of what sequels typically do in failure: it does what the original did but in a way that is less satisfying. The rest of this article sets out to show that the movie's success at failure is a source of pleasure for audiences, pleasure that paradoxically emanates from an experience of conspicuous disappointment.

Before demonstrating the truth of this improbable idea, I want first to establish the ways in which the sequel as a sequel lets its viewers down.

A Pattern of Deterioration

The first two Godfather movies parallel each other in many ways, and Part II always looks worse in comparison. None of Michael's entourage in Part II, for example, has the liveliness or charisma of the characters who surrounded Vito. Clemenza and Tessio have both died, and as caporegimes (or captains) Michael has Al Neri and Rocco Lampone. If you cannot recall them, the reason is that Coppola and Puzo neglected to give them personalities. Michael's consiglieri, his adopted brother Tom Hagen, seems even more businesslike than before; in fact, Tom now looks broken, Michael having kept him out of much of the Family's activities. Sonny is dead, and no one in this movie has his fire and charm. Frankie Pentangeli is a spirited character, but antiquated, and he often seems to represent the attitudes and personality of a virtually obsolete world. When Fredo runs into Pentangeli at the celebration of Anthony's first communion, for example, he says, "Seeing you reminds me of New York, the old days." Luca Brasi, loyal to the end, is also dead. In his place, Michael has a nameless, speechless, and charmless bodyguard whose size and shape vaguely remind one of Luca. Michael's enemies offer none of the malicious delight of the enemies in the original film. Compare, for instance, sickly, practical Hyman Roth to the fiery Virgil "the Turk" Sollozzo. Even Michael himself appears less charming than in the first Godfather, having lost his youthful idealism and acquired a sterile, icy manner, like a stolid CEO. He
certainly has none of the warmth of the old don, who never treated his family coldly or manipulatively. We can see Michael’s likeness to his father, but the comparison invariably makes Michael look worse.  

Several events in Part II seem to repeat events from the original picture. Both movies introduce their characters to us at religious celebrations, for example. The Godfather begins at Connie’s wedding reception at the Corleone home in New York as the don sits in his study granting favors to visitors. Although the first scene in Part II shows us a flashback of young Vito as he escapes the Sicilian Mafia and emigrates to America, ten minutes later the movie switches to its first modern-day scene: the first communion of Michael’s son, Anthony. During the celebration at Michael’s compound in Lake Tahoe, the don conducts business, as did his father before him, sitting in his study, receiving visitors. Jeffrey Chown notes that in both films “bright outdoor action [is] contrasted through cuts with the dark inner sanctums in which the respective dons conduct business” (106). However, Anthony’s celebration has none of the familial feeling or ethnic flavor of Connie’s wedding. Only respectful Italians visited Vito in his study. Michael’s visitors include the aggressively anti-Italian Senator Geary, who tries to bully the don. Later, a garishly dressed Connie and her fiancé, Merle (played by the WASPish Troy Donahue) visit Michael, wanting only money from him, not his blessing. At the party, we are also reintroduced to Fredo, now married to the blonde and drunken Deanna. Frankie Pentangeli remarks that “out of 30 professional musicians, there isn’t one Italian in the group” and none can play a tarantella. The festivity looks eerily lifeless and businesslike, designed to look respectable. No Johnny Fontane appears. No family members sing “Che La Luna.” Instead, Senator Geary introduces the Sierra Boys Choir, “as a special added attraction,” who perform “Mr. Wonderful” on behalf of Michael Corleone (the senator mispronounces the name) for having made a “magnificent endowment” to the University. Professional dancers perform a tango. Whereas in the first movie the Corleones seemed defiantly against the establishment, in the second they have entered it.

Even the murders in Part II let us down. One could hardly forget the vivid image from The Godfather of Captain McCluskey shot in the throat in Louis’ restaurant, or of Luca Brasi garroted, a knife through his hand, but how many viewers remember that in Part II Michael’s bodyguard strangles Johnny Ola with a coat hanger (if they remember that Ola is killed at all) or that the same bodyguard is shot by Cuban soldiers? These murders sound graphic, but the movie treats them so nonchalantly that the result is forgettable. The murder of Hyman Roth makes a stronger impression, but it is not very thrilling. The assassination happens at the airport after Israel, Argentina, and Panama refuse the old man asylum. When Rocco shoots him, Roth looks ailing and frail, not in the least threatening to anyone; it’s hard to get excited about his murder. The most memorable murders in the movie occur when Vito shoots Don Fanucci through the cheek and mouth,
and when he disembowels Don Ciccio in Sicily, but they both occur in flashback. Scholars have remarked that both The Godfather and The Godfather, Part II present murder ritualistically, contrasting it with religious ceremony, and that toward the end of each film Michael stages a series of murders depicted in montage; however, though the murders in Part II echo those in The Godfather, they are also a disappointing reminder of the more exciting violence we saw before.

The editing of the two films’ climactic murder montages also indicates the tendency of the sequel to, on the one hand, call to mind corresponding elements of the first movie, and on the other, leave out the original film’s most thrilling aspects. An elementary comparison of the editing shows us that, though both montages last roughly four minutes, the montage sequence in Part II has 17 cuts and combines three scenes (four deaths total), whereas the comparable sequence in The Godfather has 68 cuts and combines six scenes (depicting eight deaths and the baptism of Connie’s son). The montage in the first film, then, averages about 17 cuts per minute—as compared to about four cuts per minute in the sequel—giving it a tremendous sense of momentum, especially toward the end as the cuts speed up.

The Godfather’s murder montage uses graphic matches and other repeated imagery in order to link the various shots to one another, and most of the echoed images are characterized by physical movement: a swift panning shot of the priest’s hand, moving from holy water to the baby’s forehead, matches a similar shot of a barber’s hand, as he moves from the shaving cream dispenser to the face of a Corleone assassin, Willy Cicci; Rocco and Neri are both seen preparing guns; the image of Neri using a cloth to wipe sweat off his face echoes that of Clemenza making the same gesture as he climbs a staircase; Clemenza, Cicci, and Don Barzini all quickly move up or down stairs; five doors swing open dramatically during the 45 seconds in which the shootings occur (an elevator door opens to reveal a mob boss as Clemenza shoots him; another gangster is shot in a revolving door; assassins burst through a hotel door firing machine guns at a mob leader in bed with a woman; Moe Green’s assassin is also seen barging through a door, just before he shoots Green through the eye; the door of a speeding car opens in order to allow Neri’s quick escape after he shoots Barzini and two others on the church steps). The images of murder are intercut with those of the baptism and edited to the tempo of dramatic organ music, the baptismal liturgy, and the screams of the infant.

By contrast, what unites most of the images and sounds in the comparable sequence in Part II is their sluggishness: Roth’s feeble walk and the deadpan speech he gives to the press; the subtle rise and fall of the lake on which Fredo fishes, his body perfectly still; a bloodied Pentangeli motionless in a bathtub. The sequence, moreover, has little of the dramatic tension of the montage in the first movie. Except for Moe Green, each victim in The Godfather recognizes his imminent death and vainly fights against it, whereas the victims in the sequel never resist: Roth merely slumps into the arms of the police, and Neri shoots Fredo from behind. Pentangeli isn’t murdered at all—his death is a suicide, a somewhat disappointing revelation because the sequence leads us to expect assassins will barge in on him. In fact, we don’t even see the deaths of Fredo and Pentangeli, both of which occur off screen. The most visually exciting killing is that of Rocco, Roth’s assassin, shot twice by police as he tries to escape. But Rocco is part of the Corleone Family, his death a
narrative side-bar; it’s hard to feel thrilled by it. Throughout the sequel’s murder montage, slow and somber theme music plays, instilling none of the anxious excitement of the organ’s dramatic crescendos in The Godfather.

The Pleasures of Disappointment

Far from trying to outdo The Godfather, the sequel deliberately falls short of the original. It courts our disapproval. However, at the very moment we condemn the movie for being inferior to its predecessor, we can enjoy witnessing the parallels between the two films and the pattern of deterioration. That pleasure—the pleasure of noticing something—does not, by itself, provide a very rich experience. The Godfather, Part II, however, enriches and complicates our pleasure by anticipating our judgments and thematizing them. Our own feelings of disappointment and deprivation as we watch the movie reflect those very elements within the story itself. To put this point another way, our experience of The Godfather, Part II mirrors prominent elements of the movie’s subject matter: loss, nostalgia, and deterioration.

Just as we contrast the present movie with the previous one, many of the characters contrast their lives now with their lives when Vito was don. “Times are changing,” Michael says to his mother after he learns of Fredo’s betrayal, a line indicative of a persistent nostalgia among the characters. The most sustained discussion of the old days occurs between Tom Hagen and Frankie Pentangeli, shortly after Pentangeli disrupts the Senate Hearings:

HAGEN: You were around the old timers who dreamed up how the Families should be organized, how they based it on the old Roman legions, and called them “Regimes” with the “Capos” and the “Soldiers,” and it worked.

PENT: Yeah, it worked. Those were the great old days. You know, we was like the Roman Empire. The Corleone family was like the Roman Empire.

HAGEN: [sadly] Yeah, it was once.

The movie gives no indication that Michael has any less power or money than his father did. On the contrary, he seems wealthier and has even more control over the legitimate world than Vito had, but Pentangeli and Hagen see the Family as having deteriorated. It has lost something less concrete than power and money, and without needing the movie to specify it an audience can vaguely understand what Hagen refers to because we have felt the loss ourselves.

This passage, which occurs late in the movie, depicts one of many mournful reminiscences. Similar references to what has been lost appear throughout the sequel. In fact, the opening shot of the movie, before the flashback to Sicily, lands on Vito’s empty chair. Throughout the film, numerous characters lovingly recall the old don. Michael, for instance, reminisces about his father’s study, and Fredo wishes he could “be more like Pop.” Connie refers to her father at Anthony’s communion celebration as she explains a toast made at the dinner table, “Cent’ Anne”: “It means we should all live happily for a hundred years, the family. It’d be true if my father were alive.” The death of Vito is an ever-present loss, continually mourned. Connie also draws parallels between Michael and Vito, just as we do. At one point she screams at Michael, “You’re not my father!” but makes up with him later in the movie: “You were just being strong for all of us the way Papa was.” One cannot help but hear the
inadequacy of the comparison even as Connie asserts the similarity between the two men.

Early reviewers of Part II recalled the original movie with a sense of loss that almost mimics that of the characters. Paul Zimmerman’s mixed review of the movie in Newsweek expressed his regret when he recollected the first Godfather: “The extended, highly personal coda makes one hungry for the relatively uncomplicated entertainment values of the original. If ‘Godfather II’ is less satisfying than its predecessor, it is because it refuses to answer this perhaps vulgar but nonetheless real need” (79). Vincent Canby’s pan of the movie began just as mournfully:

The only remarkable thing about Francis Ford Coppola’s The Godfather, Part II is the insistent manner in which it recalls how much better his original film was. Among other things, one remembers ‘The Godfather’s’ tremendous narrative drive and the dominating presence of Marlon Brando in the title role, which, though not large, unified the film and transformed a super-gangster movie into a unique family chronicle. (“‘Godfather, Part II’ is Hard to Define,” 58)

Canby’s sorrowful remembrances, especially his reference to Brando as The Godfather’s dominating and unifying force, sound much like those of Connie, Fredo, and Michael when they think of Vito. We can observe a similar sentiment in Molly Haskell’s damning review in The Village Voice (Haskell, you will remember, first panned the movie and then, in 1978, named it one of the ten best films of the past decade): “Brando’s absence hangs over the new picture as his presence . . . hung over the previous one” (88). One could substitute “Vito” for “Brando” in Haskell’s sentence, and it would turn her pan of the movie into a shorthand plot summary. Critics did not see that their disappointment as filmgoers emasculated an analogous disappointment expressed by the film’s characters. I do not mean to suggest that what critics say about Part II precisely reflects viewers’ experiences of it; however, such consistent critical remarks can indicate some of an audience’s responses, and it is striking how often and how closely the reactions of critics of the movie follow those of the characters in it.

The most conspicuous nostalgia within the film does not come from the mouths of any of the characters but rather from the back-and-forth movement between time sequences. The film’s alternations between the grim modern world and the quaint old one create a quality of bittersweet longing for the past. These alternations also provide the best examples of how our longing for the first Godfather, as we watch Part II, emasculates the nostalgia within the film’s plot: the flashbacks remind one of the original movie at the same time those segments contrast with the modern narrative and make the present day seem dismal by comparison.

Numerous details in the flashbacks bring to mind the original movie. The shots of Corleone, Sicily; the introduction of young (fat) Clemenza and young (skinny) Tessio; even the acting style of Robert De Niro—who won an Oscar for his performance of Vito, just as Brando did—all call to mind corresponding aspects of the original movie.
Everything sentimental or romantic in the movie—such as Vito’s arrival at Ellis Island, his gift of a pear to his wife, and his grateful thanks to his employer (the grocer, Abbandando) for behaving like a father to him—occurs in flashback. At one point, Abbandando’s son Genco asks Vito his opinion of a beautiful stage actress, to which Vito replies, “To you she’s beautiful. For me there’s only my wife and son.” Vito’s world is brutal, but it has a romantic feel—an atmosphere accented by the scenes’ warm visual tones—and we always know the difference between the good guys and the bad.20

It is clear that Coppola wanted to contrast the two narratives of Part II. He said in an interview for his own magazine, City: “I thought it would be interesting to juxtapose the decline of the Family with the ascension of the Family: to show that as the young Vito Corleone is building this thing out of America, his son is presiding over its destruction” (Aigner and Goodwin, 36). The stories of Vito and Michael parallel each other in several ways, with Michael’s story always appearing empty and cold by contrast. John Hess points out that the sentimentality of the flashbacks sets up “the audience for the demolition of the sentiments in the following [modern-day] sequence” (82). Other scholars have also remarked on the way the two narratives contrast with and comment on one another. It would be superfluous for me to rehash their arguments, but my point is that all the romance, charm, and family feeling we associate with the first Godfather exist in flashback only, and these scenes contrast sharply with the modern ones.

The final flashback of the film differs from the others and best illustrates the strong correspondence between the nostalgia within the movie and that of the audience watching it. It is the “coda” that Paul Zimmerman refers to, the flashback that makes him “hungry” for the first film (79). In a past much less distant than that of the previous flashbacks, the movie depicts the family waiting to surprise Vito on his birthday. Fredo, Tom, Connie, and Michael sit at the dinner table, as well as Sonny, Carlo Rizzi, and Tessio, all three of whom died in the original movie. Michael shocks his family by telling them he has enlisted in the army, just as the thirty thousand other men did who, as Michael says, chose to “risk their lives for their country” after Pearl Harbor. The scene ends with Michael sitting alone at the table while a surprised Vito, just out of our view, is about to come through the door. It then dissolves to a shot of the younger Vito, played by De Niro, leaning out of the window of a train and waving the hand of a small boy, presumably Michael, as they leave Sicily. Not until the shot dissolves to Michael’s older, contemplative face do we realize that the flashback signified his own memory trip.

A fitting resolution to the movie, the scene unites the elements that make The Godfather; Part II an unusually fine sequel. First, the flashback comes closest of all the scenes in the sequel to replicating the atmosphere of the first Godfather. Though these events take place prior to those of the first movie, it has the same feel of The
Godfather, largely because the original actors returned to reprise their roles. Seeing them is like running into your old high school teachers at your old high school. Coppola pleaded with Brando, unsuccessfully, to return for just the one scene, but the fact that Vito remains just beyond our view only adds to the sense of loss. The scene also reintroduces familiar themes from the first movie by showing us a relatively harmonious family, except for the independent and idealistic Michael. Watching it, we can more clearly than ever before contrast the Michael from the first film with the Michael from this one. Finally, once we realize that the flashback is Michael’s own reminiscence, the segment becomes expressly about the loss and nostalgia that inundate the modern narrative. Michael is doing just what the movie invites us to do—remember the past with regret.\textsuperscript{21}

**Conclusions**

This article has attempted to demonstrate that viewers make an association—although apparently they remain unaware of it—between their experience of The Godfather, Part II and the film’s subject matter. The association results from the fundamental similarity between the degenerative turn from original movie to sequel and the degeneration of the Corleone family that dominates the plot of Part II. The film incorporates into its narrative the same kind of nostalgia, dissatisfaction, and sense of loss that sequels traditionally generate in their viewers, so that audiences’ disappointment with the sequel as a sequel reverberates with the film’s themes.

I have focused on a curious commingling of the two realities operating in the movie, two realities that indeed operate within every work of fiction: the reality of the fiction and the reality that the fiction is just a fiction. Most of the time, when experiencing a fictional work, we maintain the integrity of each reality by denying the existence of the other. In order to accept the character Vito as a real person, we must deny that in reality the actor Marlon Brando is playing Vito; and to recognize that Vito is just Brando in disguise, we have to deny that Vito is a real person. Still, works of fiction can mix these realities and continue to preserve their integrity—when, for example, figures in a painting look at a painting, or actors in a play take on the roles of actors in a play. Artists for centuries have exploited the peculiar self-reflexivity of this gimmick because it gives works of art a sense of felicitousness: the characters behave in a way that seems to befit both our world and theirs. When, at the end of A Midsummer Night’s Dream, the characters sit back and watch a performance, they do what we are doing in our universe. The two realities of the fiction, normally so distinct, connect in our minds, and yet the theatrical illusion remains intact.

From Edwin Porter’s Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show (1902) to Woody Allen’s The Purple Rose of Cairo (1985), both of which depict the confusion of film’s two realities, filmmakers have played on cinema’s potential for self-reflexivity. But the effect needn’t be so heavy-handed. More subtle correlations between realities can have a much richer effect because the resonances work below the level of our conscious understanding and because the connections we make are not as logical and straightforward as in Porter’s and Allen’s movies. Special effects, for example, feel appropriate to the science-fiction genre not only because they allow the genre to create futuristic visual imagery but also because special effects are themselves scientific and futuristic. One need only recognize the incongruity of the digital visual effects in such films as Gladiator (2000) and Young
Sherlock Holmes (1985) to see the point; for reasons that don’t exactly make sense, the special effects in those films come across as anachronistic. In a more sophisticated con- mingling of realities, as John Wayne aged in the 1960s and 1970s and as the genre grew passé, westerns—such as The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962), True Grit (1969), The Wild Bunch (1969) and The Cowboys (1972)—often dealt with the death of old heroes or the death of the West itself. The resonance between the outdated western genre and the fading western frontier gives these late westerns a feeling of rightness, because the two logically unrelated phenomena seem naturally to belong together. The correlation between realities is, moreover, intellectually exciting as we make passing connections between fundamentally different, in fact mutually exclusive, universes: the real universe in which we are sitting in a movie theater watching a movie and the fictional universe depicted on the screen.

The Godfather, Part II does something similar and even less conspicuous. Part II causes us to make casual connections between two incompatible, but genuinely analogous, realities without letting us know we are making them. We view the sequel with disappointment (in our real world), and we see our judgments reflected thematically (in the fictional world of the movie), yet we do not consciously consider the parallel. The parallel remains substantively irrelevant to the film (just as the parallel between the dying west and the dying western is substantively irrelevant), yet it feels felicitous because disappointment is as natural to a sequel as the dying west is to a late western or special effects are to a science-fiction film. I suspect Part II’s seductive subtlety led early reviewers to mistake their opinion of what happens in the sequel for their opinion of the sequel itself. They accused the movie of being what it is about: the disappointing aftermath to the loss of the godfather.

Notes


2 For scholarly treatments of various horror-film series, see, for example, Budra; Clover; and Dika.

3 Lynette Felber, for instance, begins her essay with the assertion, “The idea that ‘sequels are always disappointing’ suggests that both a reader’s failure to repeat an original reading experience and the inferiority of a work produced merely to capitalize on a previous success are inevitable” (119). As do many of the essayists, Felber seeks to complicate the universality of this premise by examining some illustrative exceptions.

4 Lianne McLarty writes that Hollywood sequels “are often promoted as ‘new and improved,’ suggesting that the sequel will deliver more than the first.” (204–205)

5 McLarty also questions this assertion by arguing that the sequel is, from another perspective, a definitive post-modern text because it adopts “postmodernism’s central stylistic feature”—intertextuality—and signals “to an audience the awareness that texts beget texts” (201).

6 Chown also writes, “While film historians credit this film as the beginning of the modern sequel phenomenon, it had none of the phenomenal success of the first Godfather” (104).

7 The Golden Globe Awards represent the opinions of the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, an association of about 80 foreign journalists who cover American film. That year
China town swept the awards, including best picture (drama), best director, and best actor. The New York Film Critics Circle is an association of critics that votes yearly on achievements in motion pictures. Amarcord won their best picture award that year, and Fellini won the best director award.

8 The National Board of Review began as the National Board of Censorship in 1909, a volunteer citizen’s committee that previewed and evaluated films’ content, temporarily averting governmental attempts to censor Hollywood. After the name change, it began, among other things, awarding prizes to motion pictures. It conducts what is considered the oldest of the “best picture” polls.

9 I collected the 1974 best-of-the-year lists of 25 nationally known critics. In my survey, The Conversation received 16 total votes, whereas only ten of the critics considered The Godfather, Part II one of the best movies of 1974, and no critic in my survey considered it the best movie of the year. Both of Coppola’s films were surpassed by Amarcord (17 votes), Chinatown (18 votes), and Scenes from a Marriage (20 votes). The critics were Joy Gould Boyum, Vincent Canby, Pat Collins, Kathleen Carroll, Jay Cocks, Judith Crist, Jim D’Anna, Bernard Drew, David Elliott, Joseph Gelmis, Michael Goodwin, Molly Haskell, Howard Kissel, Stephen Klain, Stuart Klein, Martin Levine, the National Board of Review, Rex Reed, Charles Phillips Reilly, Andrew Sarris, Walter Spencer, Frances Taylor, Archer Winsten, Bill Wolf, and Paul D. Zimmerman. All the critics had compiled their lists by the end of January 1975. The following graph summarizes the top-ten films named by the critics in my survey; the vertical axis indicates the number of critics who put each film in their lists of the top-ten films of 1974:

10 See, for example, Barbara Thomas.

11 Some of the other notable good reviews came from Judith Crist, “Murf” in Variety, and Frank Rich. Most of the critics, however, did not consider the sequel superior at the time. For instance, despite his high opinion of the sequel, Rich makes a number of unfavorable comparisons to the first movie. “The gangland war that Coppola and Puzo . . . have devised . . . seems a tiresome rehash of the Five-Family wars of The Godfather . . . The historical relationship of De Niro’s Vito and Pacino’s Michael . . . is just no match for the Dimmesdale-Chillingsworthesque symbiosis of Brando’s Vito and Pacino in the first film” (57). “Though flawed” is an often repeated phrase among favorable reviews.

12 “The Godfather, Part II, one of the few sequels as good as or better than the original, is so different in style and structure that the two parts also form a ‘conversation,’ a genuine historical dialectic” (Mast, 438).

13 In her review of the movie, entitled “The Corleone Saga Sags,” Haskell wrote, “Without [The Godfather’s violence], the characters are not only not mythic—they are not even very interesting. . . . The use of Italian dialogue, with English subtitles, can’t quite conceal its inanity. . . . Even among the brothers, there is a lot of emotional display . . . but the actual dialogue could be contained on the back of a grocery list” (88).

14 Monaco surveyed the following critics: Peter Biskind, Vincent Canby, Richard Corliss, Peter Cowie, Jan Dawson, Stephen Farber, Michael Goodwin, Molly Haskell, Diane Jacobs, Richard T. Jameson, Stanley Kauffmann, Greil Marcus, Janet Maslin, Gene Moskowitz, Frank Rich, Clayton Riley, Andrew Sarris, Richard Schickel, David Thomson, and Francois Truffaut. Monaco’s complete list of top films and the top-ten lists of each critic may be found in his book (441–453).

15 Early in 1975, Monaco had surveyed ten leading critics to determine their opinions of the best films of 1974. At that point, only three of the critics he surveyed included Part II on their lists, and no critic considered the sequel the best picture of even that one year. Moreover, although in early 1975 most of Monaco’s critics ranked The Conversation higher than Coppola’s Godfather sequel, in Monaco’s 1978 survey, The Conversation received only three votes, tied with
three other movies for 15th place.

16 By the time Paramount released *The Godfather Part III* in 1990, the tendency to group the first two movies together had become standard practice among critics. A few critics of *Godfather III* gestured toward differentiating the first two *Godfathers*. In the *National Review*, John Simon wrote: “There is nothing here that wasn’t done as well or better in Parts I and II (especially II)” (65). David Denby of *New York Magazine* does more than other critics to distinguish the virtues of the first two films in his review of the third, but he does not consider *Part II* inferior overall: “Though perhaps not as exciting or as emotionally involving as the first film, *Godfather II* was a work of aggressive high intelligence, a bitter and sardonic view of the corruption of America” (57). *The Godfather* was exciting, *Part II* intelligent.

17 Jeffrey Chown also notes that scenes in *Part II* are “juxtaposed with our memory of the first *Godfather* film,” and he also describes “the degeneration of Michael and the Corleones” (106). Chown, however, does not note the relation between the degeneration of the Family and the “degeneration” of the audience’s experience when moving from the original film to the sequel.

18 The end of *The Godfather* depicts the murders of the heads of the other families during the baptism of Connie’s baby. At the end of *Part II*, Fredo says “Hail Marys” just before he is shot. The sequel also contrasts Vito’s murder of Don Fanucci with a religious procession through the streets of Little Italy, and Vito’s brother Paolo is murdered during the funeral procession of their father.

19 The following table compares the editing of the four-minute murder montages in the two films:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Cuts</th>
<th>Cuts/min</th>
<th>Scenes combined</th>
<th>Murders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Godfather</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Godfather II</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20 Though scholars often suggest that Coppola is more of a harsh realist than the romantic Puzo, he makes his Vito a good deal more scrupulous than the Vito from the novel. The movie draws the flashbacks from what Canby calls “the bits and pieces of Mr. Puzo’s novel that didn’t fit into the first *Godfather*” (“*Godfather, Part II* is Hard to Define,” 58), but Coppola leaves out the ways in which Vito gained power by bullying his customers into buying from him, by violently destroying his competition, and by having Luca Brasi hack off the limbs of a rival family’s gunmen.

21 Although the scene gives a strong feeling of *The Godfather*, one element differentiates it from that movie, beyond the fact that these events take place before the beginning of *The Godfather*: we remain remote from the characters, never quite entering their world. We watch them, rather than identifying ourselves with them. I can best explain what I mean by focusing on a single detail—the birthday cake Tessio brings to the table. We glimpse the cake as the characters open the cake box; we see them admire the cake; but, if this were a scene from *The Godfather*, we would see a shot of the cake from their perspective. Instead, we look at *them* while *they* look at the cake. The flashback feels like a flashback (rather than, say, early unused footage) because of this removed quality.

**Works Cited**


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