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Paul Graham  
paul.graham@dana.edu

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## Revisiting Violence in *The Godfather*: The Ambiguous Space of the Victimage Model

### Abstract

This article closely revisits and praises the long, contemplative scenes and the fast contrapuntal cutting of the violence displayed in *The Godfather* to show how the movie's superior editing and filming style help to overturn its own violent message. Thus, the film, however cynically, completes Girard's the victimage model without actually immolating its would-be scapegoat. By inhabiting the deconstructive "space" of the scapegoating motif, the film's bloody scenes undercut themselves and help to enact a message against the violence within the ideologies of the American Dream, capitalist competition, or any other factor that may serve to mitigate Michael Corleone's actions.

The easiest way to sum up René Girard's writings is to say that a series of imitative behaviors will build up over time until they reach a crisis, which a community will vanquish by eliminating an innocent scapegoat or surrogate victim. What makes Girard's work so compelling is that he provides, through comparative analysis, an overarching, mythological framework for human societies and seeks to explain religious rituals through the violence of some early sacrificial event. But Girard refuses to leave his readers with either a pessimistic narrative of death and destruction or a negative image of religion. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of religious beliefs and the presence of moral behavior by intimating that they help to hold together communities through ritual. Whenever the cohesive fabric of a community becomes threatened, it naturally seeks to restore order by falling back on its collective beliefs. This means that Girard's work strenuously seeks out a moral imperative, which puts a regenerative spin on what he calls pure and sacrificial violence, while condemning revenge and wanton chaos—because one act of regenerative violence will prevent future outbreaks of total crisis. Eventually the retelling of myths about the scapegoat evolves into a set of guidelines or rules by which societies commemorate surrogate-victim events in order to continue avoiding crises. The historical scapegoat, who was once ostracized by his community, becomes a hero or savior through time. Thus, Girard provides an ambiguous space for the surrogate victim, where he both absorbs and repels violent behavior, enacting a deconstructive message for his community (*Violence and the*

*Sacred* 93, 252-55, 303; *The Scapegoat* 49, 55-56). Thus, the final and most important point of his work, it seems to me, is his grand hopefulness that all societies should be in perpetual waiting for a return to definitive and solidified communal harmony.

Movies like *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) would seem to be decrying the very absence of that harmony and the continuing sense of mimetic turmoil and revenge it entails. But Coppola's filming style cuts through the simplicity of such ideas by exploring the ambiguous space discussed above. That space is of major importance to the more thought-provoking and poignant exponents of violent cinema, because it allows us pause to consider the consequences in killing; it asks us to cherish human relations above all else, no matter how bad the situation. Thus, the violence of a scapegoating motif stands as both a horrific act and an argument against any more bloodshed. An obvious Girardian reading of *The Godfather* would apply the victimage model to Michael Corleone's (Al Pacino) activities only to find that he falls short of becoming a real scapegoat because he ultimately fails to occupy the ambiguous space by continuing the bloodshed and getting revenge on his rivals. As far as the film's plot is concerned, one can watch Michael rise to power by killing a mobster and a corrupt policeman. The ensuing gang war serves as the communal discord Girard discusses very often as the seat of mimetic crisis in which Michael participates by becoming

a syndicate member. Similar to a textbook scapegoat, Michael draws exultation from his family (and possibly the audience) and revulsion from several rival mobsters who ultimately hope for his immolation. Yet his demonic lapse back into the mimetic tumult, by acquiescing to bloodshed's contagion, condemns him once and for all as anything but a true surrogate victim. In this article, I want to go beyond that kind reading and re-examine the movie's bloodshed to show that it ultimately evokes compassion and completes the scapegoating mechanism. This means that the real completion of the victimage process lies in Coppola's brilliant camera work, where the ambiguous space is fully opened and brilliantly utilized. I will examine two techniques he uses with exceptional ability—slowly edited, contemplative takes and fast contrapuntal editing—in order to demonstrate that *The Godfather* takes partial delight its violent scenes, yet it does prod viewers forcefully, inciting us to think about the consequences of hurting others.

The humanitarian values associated with regenerative or "good" bloodshed, as opposed to the entertainment-based or frivolous brand, has enjoyed recent scholarly treatment both in and out of Girardian contexts. Take, for example, Stephen Prince's detailed and fascinating study of the early days following the Production Code's demise. In *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies*, Prince often exalts Peckinpah's work by saying that the director appealed to audiences' appetites for violence, while denouncing the

inhumanity and cruelty of inflicting pain by force. Peckinpah wanted to evoke a strong sense of ambivalence in voyeuristic pleasures associated with the killing and maiming of individuals. He intended to portray ultraviolence honestly and ridicule viewers' pleasure by realistically capturing the unpleasant effects of violent activity (221). The politically conscious director found little value in violence that was portrayed as quick and entertaining; he preferred to show death as the slow and horrible consequence of violence, refusing to remove physical pain from its emotionally stressful counterpart. Stephen Prince explains the conclusions that can be drawn from examining Peckinpah's work: "[T]he physical and emotional pain that Peckinpah placed on screen have their basis in a compassionate and empathetic response toward the tragedy of human violence and the loss of life it entails. This pain is a clear index of his humanistic orientation" (222).

Prince's judgments constitute a high standard that requires humanitarian concerns to be projected by violent imagery. The real challenge, implied in the final pages of his book, for would-be followers of Peckinpah's style, is that they not take advantage of their station as messengers by creating sensational slaughter simply to generate ticket sales. Prince rejects the idea that filmic legates associated with Peckinpah include Quentin Tarantino and John Woo just because their movies project stylistic ultraviolence. A true descendent of the gifted director would have to concentrate on the consequences of violence. Prince's extensive and lucid

expostulations on the auteur's work are instructive to this discussion because they serve as a viable supplement to Girard's conclusions about violence and the state of ambivalence.

As if to expound upon that subject, Devin McKinney has written a lucid essay, "Violence: The Strong and the Weak," amounting to an entire theoretical outlook on cinematic brutality. Like Prince, McKinney rejects the "weak" bloodshed of so many modern films as a simple and juvenile device for them to compete against each other in the marketplace. Watching people get shot down and fall below the sight of the camera is a convenient way for the audience to move on without actually considering the seriousness of what they just viewed. McKinney castigates several recent films for their flashy and meaningless bloodshed, as he shows how it engenders an artistic void. *Reservoir Dogs*, for example, is an aggressively sadistic film that enjoys violence for violence's sake, while becoming the pop-cultural pastiche of meaninglessness it readily yet humorously acknowledges itself to be. *Basic Instinct* is a movie that closes off any insight into the human soul that it might have to offer by exhibiting a sensational brand of bloodshed (104-05). The weakest exponents of this variety do not allow for identification with the victim or victimizer. For the most part, they render the components of atrocity with neutrality and "hot, stylized air" (102). In cases of especially weak examples, the story serves the violence, rather than allowing the

violence to serve the story. Filmic brutality of the weak variety does not force audience contemplation: it "simply doesn't last; it gets left on the floor with the candy wrappers" (103-05).

McKinney's preference, on the other hand, is for scenes that invite contemplation of the pain in violence, "which demands the commitments of those still living." "Strong" violence, McKinney says, "has subtext, carries the weight of fear and mystery, and is piercing enough to shoot past the crap violence we all drink like beer. . . . As much as anything, it is the grasp of consequence that distinguishes strong violence from the weak" (100-01). This more edifying brand of violence situates the audience in the victim's or victimizer's point of view; "it enables shifts in one's moral positioning"; it enacts paradoxes that are "rich and mazelike." McKinney finalizes his call for depth in the depiction of violence with this challenge:

If a film makes the decision to be violent, it shouldn't go about its business timidly: no art ever came of a hedged bet. But most of the violent pictures that cross the screen these days, however dangerous they appear, are as conservative at the heart as a Disney fable. These films hedge their bets on the level of audience involvement by refusing a full commitment to their own content: they want to look at horror, but they don't want to feel it, smell it, take the chance of getting sick from it. By insuring itself in this way, a violent film can't help but resist a viewer's emotional investment, which, frustrated, displaces itself onto an academic admiration of style. (108)

McKinney's standards echo Stephen Prince's because of a yearning to see "good" come from movie bloodshed. They have in common a preference for the depiction

of suffering so that violent scenes not look frivolous, and audiences receive something more than voyeuristic thrills from their moviegoing experiences. Also implied in McKinney's call for "shifts in one's moral positioning" is the Girardian ambiguity and ambivalence inherent in the scapegoating process. If a violent scene truly depicts the horrors of inflicting pain, viewers may first see them as cathartic releases for feelings of revenge, but, second, they may vicariously feel the pain and reconsider.

Another writer, Ronald Austin, takes up this same argument and deals directly with the victimage process. In "Sacrificing Images: Violence and the Movies," Austin discusses the popular cinematic conceptions of scapegoats. He demonstrates that many rebellious or downtrodden characters were assigned to the victimage process in the earlier days of Hollywood production. Their truly ambiguous positions as both dregs of society and audience favorites afforded them compliance with Girard's model. As Girard stipulates in all of his books, the surrogate victim must come from the margins of his community, bearing neither guilt nor innocence in the troubles of his people. And as his story proceeds through history, it changes slowly from persecution to veneration. But Ronald Austin explains that, as history progressed, the big-screen "heavy" soon replaced the loveable tramp. And the sixties and seventies saw the most cynical iterations of the heavies, whose evil drew audiences' scorn and derision. Hating these modern

scapegoats allowed viewers catharsis whereby they blamed the heavies for all society's wrongdoings and felt a sense of closure when the villain was punished at the end of the film. In the case of violent films, the villain's immolation very often leads to easy satisfaction and fascination with his wildly and spectacularly violent death. Since the period of cynicism, spawned by America's own breakdown over the Vietnam War, violence of this brand has carried little sacral quality and has increased in order to appease communal needs to see it. It affords the audience with no sense of deep meaning, no sense of irony, no sense of concern for those around them. According to Austin, modern movies' violent scenes "constitute the chief symptoms of what Girard defines as 'mimetic crisis'" (27). As a result, Austin mourns the loss of ambiguity on the part of the scapegoat and the increase in superficial violence that seems to have taken its place. His new prescription for contemporary cinema is simple: "[Movies] can lessen [the mimetic crisis's] infectious nature by depicting violence in a moral context that does not demonize or dehumanize" (28).

Indeed, *The Godfather* would seem to fall under Austin's critique and continue with its "infectious nature." When Coppola turns the camera against Michael Corleone and begins denying him audience identification at the end, we can easily and safely condemn him because he is not one of us. But upon closer inspection of the violent scenes themselves, we can find humanitarian appeals and

redemptive value. This means that the film does double duty in condemning the Corleones and their ruthless volition to compete in the capitalist milieu by any means necessary, while simultaneously telling audiences that violence and revenge are not the answers.

The first such scene to do this is the infamous display of the severed horse's head in Jack Woltz's (John Marley) bed; it instantly reminds us that the warm-seeming elder Godfather (Marlon Brando), who strokes a cat while listening to his supplicants, is anything but a nice man just trying to provide for his family. The real power of the scene, I find, is that it occupies the screen, almost unedited, for a full forty seconds, from the first sight of the horse's blood to the wide shot of the head itself, Woltz's terrible screams spanning much of the time. The length of the scene educes an artful rendering of and meditation on death. As the sun rises over his house, Woltz sleeps peacefully into the early morning. The camera moves in a slow tracking shot from the foot of the bed to a much closer view just behind Woltz's head and shoulders. As he slowly uncovers himself to reveal more and more blood, the musical score adds to the scene's development. Once the gruesome horse's head is revealed, Woltz's utter shock is considerable, as he sits, drenched completely in blood, looking at the head, which viewers are made to gaze on for additional six seconds. His wailings are the very essence of deep, primal fear.

Sporting a severed horse's head, *The Godfather* flouts gangster conventions by depicting a non-human killing. The shock for Woltz is reflective of our own shock as we view the gruesome and unexpected. No matter how merciless, the brutal killings of the movie's gangsters can be expected in a film about revenge and the lure of easy money. Yet nothing can prepare us for the sight of a severed horse's head lying at the foot of a bed. The scene promulgates elements of the horror genre, rather than drama, and it extracts from the audience a genuine thrill of surprise. The head was jarring to a theater full of mainstream moviegoers, and it certainly made for a lasting impression. When people recall the scene, they must necessarily recall the merciless deeds of the Corleone clan. Just like anyone else now, Woltz, the major movie producer, who has verbally abused a high-ranking mobster (Tom Hagen), is reduced to a frightened old man.

Like this slow-moving, tension-building scene, there are several other lengthy death scenes that invite a wealth of contemplation and warrant some discussion. Brasi, Sollozzo and McCluskey's demises also help constitute Coppola's contribution to screen violence. All these murders have, by today's standards, exceptionally long screen times in common. These scenes typically involve blood, excessive, enduring pain, and closeup camera shots.

A graphically brutal scene, Luca Brasi's (Lenny Montana) strangulation, mirrors the older Mafia's total annihilation by younger generations who prefer to

move with commerce's tide and invest in heroin. As suffocation suggests, Luca Brasi is depicted as a man drowning under the weight of mob pressures. He is fat, old, and loyal. It is no accident, therefore, that his loyalty and dedication to Don Corleone seems comical at Connie's wedding in the very first sequence of the film's events. Brasi, surprised and delighted that he has been invited to the wedding, sits outside the Don's office and rehearses his appreciation, stammering over his words. He does no better when finally inside the office, but the Don acknowledges his gratitude.

Brasi's violent death dominates the screen as a closeup in which he strains his round, full face, his tongue dangling to one side and eyes bulging. After Sollozzo stabs him in the hand, confining him to the bar, the garroting lasts a full thirty seconds with Brasi gagging and wheezing desperately. The simple length of time it takes to kill him, combined with various camera angles, emphasizes the brutality of gang violence. An eye-level view of his staring eyes evokes feelings of intensity and horror. As he slowly sinks below the camera's view, the feeling produced is a loss commensurate with the dying of an older regime: slow, deadly, violent. This "bad guy" becomes vulnerable and pathetic.

In a wonderfully intense scene, when Michael eliminates McCluskey and Sollozzo (Sterling Hayden and Al Lettieri), the most apparent aspect is that their murders do not seem rushed, even though Michael must leave the restaurant at once.

Instead the scene is self-conscious and slow about its own violence. The three men gather for a dinner meeting at a Bronx restaurant, where Tessio has left a gun for Michael behind the toilet. Just before Michael returns to shoot his two enemies, the sound of a train passing in the background becomes louder and louder. The rushing, screeching noise parallels Michael's inner turmoil and his anxiety associated with having to kill. But a spray of blood soon issues from the back of Sollozzo's head, as the bullet goes through, and the sound of the train subsides. The implication is that Michael's immediate turmoil dies with Sollozzo; killing is suddenly a little easier, and Michael displays greater resolve as he guns down the police captain in perhaps the grisliest of all the killings. Extracting Michael, therefore, from his position as coddled son, Coppola shows Michael as new leader now, losing his moral grounding rather quickly, because of the intense desire for revenge against the attempted murder of his father.

Captain McCluskey's shooting, along with Sollozzo's demise, occupies about thirty seconds of screen time. There is a medium shot, showing Michael from the side, his arm completely and confidently outstretched. He shoots the policeman once in the neck, and then the film cuts to a closeup of McCluskey holding his throat and gurgling. The sound from his throat alone conjures images of savage death and adds to the grisly character of the slaying. His pain looks unimaginable, and his facial expressions evoke sympathy for even this crooked man of the law.

Viewers are not allowed to dismiss the corrupt cop and move on with the narrative. As the cop sits there choking on his own blood, Michael shoots him in the head, and McCluskey's face begins to twist and contort, colorfully illustrating his pain. Still the policeman holds his position for a few seconds before the camera cuts back, exposing Michael's hardening look as he becomes a criminal in front of our eyes. Finally, McCluskey falls rather abruptly against the table. Blood sprays, dramatic falls, Michael fleeing to the tune of loud, tone-setting music: these effects are exciting, yet almost certainly entertainment is intended as the secondary function. The primary purpose is to have us concentrate on the pain in violence itself. Hence these lengthy death scenes are not just catalysts for cinematic action; they are there—they sit still on screen - to show the ugliness and desolation that is death. For, as much as *The Godfather* is an indictment of the cruel progress of American commerce, and as much as viewers are to see McCluskey as corrupt law enforcement and Brasi as a dying breed, the audience is also to see all the men involved as mere men on some level.

Our displeasure in looking at the victims' agonies should evoke feelings of shame for their killers. In the moments it takes to kill people, the fact of whether or not they side with the Corleones is immaterial. When we really get a chance to look, to gaze upon their deaths, they sit or stand before us looking straight ahead - head and shoulders facing the camera directly, for all the audience to witness their

vulnerability. These characters are not allowed the dignity of a side shot, nor are they allowed the quick exit from the film below the camera's range. Slowly and eventually they cease to look like mobsters and begin to look more like what they really are: men dying. If the sheer duration of each death scene gives us pause to ponder these issues, so does each closeup. When the camera zooms in on their faces, it exposes them for a moment in complete isolation, disclosing their weakness and vulnerability to mortality. For their last moments on earth, they have to live with the agonizing physical pain, as well as the pain of all their sins and involvement in organized crime. More importantly, the audience has to live with the memory of the horrible images it has just witnessed, and the specter of murder's consequences becomes unmistakable. Shock, horror, displeasure contribute to a lingering reminder that death and killing come with a set of circumstances that amount to more than just the elimination of an enemy. Taking Robert Austin, Stephen Prince, and Devin McKinney's recommendations as reasonable, one realizes that Coppola has surpassed the compassion in violence that Peckinpah advocated. What makes all my assertions above possible is that violence and its physiological component, pain, have been considered and enmeshed together.

Scandalously, however, Michael harnesses power and profits from their deaths, save for Brasi. He rises to the level of a major player in the business he once rejected. If we feel any relief on Michael's behalf when he avenges the attempt on

his father's life by killing McCluskey and Sollozzo, the unflinching stare on his face later, during the baptismal rite, should fully discourage us. This is Coppola removing the subjective point of view so that we witness Michael's complete turn inward, toward negativity and revenge. And the killings at the film's finale make it very difficult to imagine any sequence of events in the history of American cinema, illustrating such a final delving into evil, rendered more effectively. As he becomes the spiritual godfather to his nephew, Michael Francis Rizzi, Michael also consolidates his power over the Five Families and crystallizes his role as the criminal godfather.

But what I want to emphasize here is that the speed of editing reflects Michael's total withdrawal into his own hell and sin as a person. No less artistic and commendable than the slowly edited scenes examined above, these faster, more abruptly edited moments of the baptismal slayings infuse the film with their own poignancy. The power of speed, dramatic music, Catholic pageantry, and Michael's aloof stares lies in the very haste with which they are rendered and the onslaught of pain they create. Although much of the anguish is inflicted psychologically onto the audience through Michael's mutilation of religious and moral tradition, the fallen dons, old and robbed cleanly of their final years, provide adequate examples of suffering during their last seconds on earth.

Concurrent with this development is Michael's complete flouting of his religious convictions. As Girard makes clear, societies of lessening spiritual values yield bastardizations of the scapegoat, and to that end Michael Corleone is at once a symbol of evil and a symbol of capitalist greed's overtaking spiritual matters. According to Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*, "the sacrificial crisis, that is, the disappearance of the sacrificial rites, coincides with the disappearance of the difference between impure violence and purifying violence. When this difference has been effaced, purification is no longer possible and impure, contagious, reciprocal violence spreads throughout the community" (49). Like the modern judicial system and the electric chair, which Girard maintains are controlled non-spiritual forms of revenge, Michael's order to massacre his enemies is nothing more than a continuation of the carnage. And the baptism scene's intercutting amounts to an erasure of the sacred; each time the camera takes in the richness of Catholic pageantry and its sacred rituals, they are negated by the constant reminder that the violence is louder and more spectacular than the ceremony. Commenting on this issue, Robert Kolker suggests that the church is being used as a kind of superficial protection:

It is significant, for the narrative, in its clear presentation of Michael as a vicious man, willing to use ritual as a shield for his character ... The religious protection that guides the family can be seen as a shield and a fraud: the baptism that covers Michael's slaughter of his enemies, the saint plastered [in Part II] with bills that is carried through the procession that

covers Vito's murder of Fanucci indicates that rituals can be used to hide corruption. (177, 190)

With a more lucid essay that represents a spiritually articulated rethinking of this topic, John R. May has taken it a step further. In "*The Godfather* Films: Birth of a Don, Death of a Family," he demonstrates that "both ritual and myth . . . are integral to the narrative structure and symbolic fabric of *The Godfather* films." (68). The essay centers on the films' biblical allusions and references to Catholic ritual as a way of condemning Michael. Observing that several important instances in all *Godfather* films unfold in sets of three, from tripartite killings to Michael's lying to Kay, May's discussion reveals that Michael's transgression is a structured, unholy hypocrisy. Each instance of his forswearing the devil is actually a reversed affirmation, amounting to an evil version of the holy ritual he ostensibly supports: "Michael Corleone's threefold renunciation is a solemnized lie signaling the demonic bond of hypocrisy that holds together the human race; the matter and form of his sacrament of rebirth as the Godfather are not water and Spirit of truth, but blood and deception" (69). This backwards ritual Michael has enacted demonstrates a precise dismantling of deeply engrained morality that the church is supposed to represent. A quick examination of the filmic oscillations from the church to the carnage should suffice in illustrating this point.

After Clemenza kills Don Stracchi<sup>1</sup> in the elevator, Michael declares that he renounces Satan. Cut to Moe Green, shot in the eye, through the glasses, slowly

dropping his head, paralleling the pipe-organ music, as he lies face down on the massage table. The blood gushing freely from his eye is a horrible image, and the closeup of his cracked lens is an added touch of realism. Still, the scene cuts quickly to Michael remaining stoic, then to Cicci shooting Don Cuneo in a revolving door. The camera then returns to Michael declaring that he renounces all the works of Satan. Behind him is a congregation of witnesses to the ceremony, symbolizing and reinforcing family support. Yet viewers' attention is ripped from these otherwise tranquil and holy scenes by the loud and dramatic displays of carnage, which threaten to overshadow images of the church. Don Tattaglia and a woman suffer the agony of machine-gun blasts in a hotel bed, blood spurting freely as Coppola elects not to hold back. Then the camera returns to Michael rejecting the promises of Satan, just before the most moving and grisly of all assassinations—the death of Don Barzini (Richard Conte). Flesh hangs from his back as his arms go up, announcing his terrible pain. Then, there is a cut to his rolling down the steps of a public building. This shot provides for high drama while not letting viewers see the gross detail of his mutilated body. His tumble down the steps emphasizes, with dramatic flair, the end of the whole ordeal: Michael's consolidation of power and his ironic embrace of evil. The violence emerges here as its own statement, a testament to the cruelty of death; even a man like the treacherous Barzini looks pathetic as he yields to the final pains of death and Michael Corleone's selfish concerns. "Michael Rizzi, go in peace, and may the Lord be with you. Amen," says

the priest, as Don Michael gazes on him for a moment, understanding the irony. Michael's hypocrisy is so blatant that one wonders about his sanity as he stands in front of the priest, affirming his faith, while his henchmen carry out orders to mutilate his enemies in broad daylight. This is no longer the Michael Corleone who murders Captain McCluskey out of love for his father; this is the confident mob boss, completely removed from any sense of emotion. These scenes candidly expose Michael's lack of concern by continually referring back to the images of the church and shots of the priest with the innocent child, portraying them as his polar opposites.

Reviewing the film with this in mind, we can take comfort in the fact that not all movie bloodshed exists as action-packed fun. Of course, the film seeks partially to mitigate Michael's actions, bringing in complications and avoiding a facile ending, because of its indictment of capitalist competition and accumulation. Yet, at the same time, the bottom line remains: that violence is unthinkable, whatever the context. Coppola's filming technique helps to condemn all of the murders and to humanize the victims in such a way that killing does not look attractive. As a portrait of the complete breakdown of community, family, individual and moral upbringing, *The Godfather* cries out for their restoration to wholeness.

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<sup>1</sup> May's article gives the dons' names from all the Five Families.

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