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Art of Film

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The cinematographer, also known as the director of photography, is responsible for arranging and controlling the lighting of a film and the quality of the photography. Gordon Willis, along with director Frances Ford Coppola, made *The Godfather* a visual masterpiece with his brilliant cinematography. Every cinematographer and director has a certain vision in which they want to portray the story at hand. Willis and Coppola worked together to execute their vision for The Godfather and when it was released in 1972, it was considered “one of the most brutal and moving chronicles of American life ever designed within the limits of popular entertainment” (Canby).

Motion picture lighting is rarely motionless, for even the smallest amount of movement of the camera or the subject can cause the lighting to change (Giannetti 17). A lot of thought is taken into account on what the lighting of each scene should look like when making a movie. There are various different styles of lighting that reflect the genre or mood of the film. Willis is famous for his low-key style of lighting in The Godfather. “The colors are not only subdued, they’re suffocating in airless dark rooms. In this shadowy world, only an occasional wisp of color is allowed to escape” (Giannetti 24). Willis underexposed his film and sought a color balance of a soft amber that he called a “yellow tone.” He relied on low light levels for interiors to present a visual distinction to the psychological developments emerging on-screen (Lebo 70). This type of lighting can mostly be seen in the scenes where Don Vito Corleone is in his office. The opening scene of the film shows Don Corleone and his associates in his office while a man is begging a favor of the don. The lighting is very dim and dark; the only slip of light we see is that coming through the cracks of the window shades. This opening scene of darkness and shadows sets the mood for the film and symbolizes the Don’s power as well as the evils that take place in the family business. Another interesting tactic Willis used while creating his vision is that he frequently chose not to show Don Vito Corleone’s eyes throughout the film. According to Giannetti, a traditional standard is to make sure an actor’s eyes are always visible. Willis thought that the don would seem more sinister if we couldn’t see his eyes while he was conducting business (Giannetti 39). This made the don appear more powerful, evil, and mysterious bringing even greater depth to his character.

Lights and darks have had symbolic implications since the beginning of humanity. Darkness typically suggests fear, evil, and the unknown. While light usually symbolizes security, virtue, truth, joy (Giannetti 18). There is such a vast contrast in the beginning of the film from the dark lighting inside Don Corleone’s office, compared to the vibrant colors of his daughter’s wedding taking place outside. This contrast shows the happiness and fun times of a wedding with the underlying tribulations taking place inside. Willis decided to shoot the entire film in a “tableau format” which meant setting the shot as if it was viewed as a painting in a frame and using predominantly a stable camera, with minimal movement, zooms, or pans (Lebo 70). Willis stated that without the use of zoom lenses, helicopters, or any contemporary film devices, “you get a better retrospective feeling on period films done this way” (M&C). The scene in which Sonny is ambushed at the tollbooth and killed is beautifully and interestingly crafted. There could have been so many different shots and camera movements, maybe even a helicopter shot to show everything that went on, however Coppola and Willis chose to give you simple shots using all the different angles of the scene. There are numerous angles but not that many camera movements, which sticks with their vision of a tableau format. The scene is very moving and captures the violence and ambush perfectly without the use of complex and contemporary camera movements.

The shots, although mostly static and not complex, are executed brilliantly in part with the tone and feel of the movie. There is much depth and interesting visual patterns throughout the film. Often times you see layers in the frame instead of just one person in the frame. Such as in the scene where Sonny is on the phone doing business but also in the far right of the frame in the distance you can see his wife through the hallway in the kitchen. This kind of shot gives depth but also symbolizes the distance between wives and the family business. It provides an element of secrecy and evil because Sonny’s wife is left in the distance. Another shot that illustrates Michael’s descent into deception is the end scene where you see Kay and also in the frame you see Michael down the hall and through the doorway into the don’s office, which is now his office. It is dark where Michael is and there is only a slight light reflecting off of Kay, which symbolizes Michael’s takeover of the family business and the darkness and evil that comes with it. The door is shut on Kay and that ends the movie, indicating how she is shut out from the mystery and corruption that will now consume her husband’s life.

Gordon Willis’s work on The Godfather is viewed as a milestone in photography. His dark, dreary lighting and simplistic shooting style give the sumptuous tones of fear, evil, and mystery that surround the Corleone’s family business. His tableau style of shooting indeed looks like beautiful still lifes and paintings (Lebo 73). The cinematography, which casts the early parts of the film in slight amber tones and presents many scenes in the depths of shadows, is beautifully executed.

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