

# Cannolis, Crime, and the Cost of the American Dream

BY ALISON HIRSCH  
Princeton University

## ABSTRACT

An hour into Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) is a scene that captures one of the film's central themes: the cost of American assimilation. The two minute and sixteen seconds revolve around a car ride in which Clemenza and Rocco carry out Paulie's murder. As a narrative unit, the scene's three-part trajectory traces the car's trip from departure to destination – from Clemenza's driveway to Paulie's massacre. With Sicilian natives and an automobile, a symbol inextricably linked with American ideals, the drive alludes to an immigrant's journey from homeland to promised land. Building upon this connection, the scene's perspective, setting, composition, structure, sound, and cinematography impart a series of insightful but disturbing realities regarding the American dream – a dream destined to become a nightmare.

An hour into Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972) is a scene that captures one of the film's central themes: the cost of American assimilation (00:56:00–00:58:16). Two minutes and sixteen seconds revolve around a car ride in which Peter Clemenza (Richard S. Castellano) and Alex Rocco (Moe Greene) perform Paulie Gatto's (John Martino) murder since he betrayed the Corleone family. As a narrative unit, the sequence's three-part trajectory traces the car's trip from departure to destination: from Clemenza's driveway to Paulie's death. With Sicilian natives and an automobile, a symbol inextricably linked with American idealism, the drive alludes to an immigrant's journey from homeland to promised land. Building upon this connection, the scene's perspective, setting, composition, structure, sound, and cinematography impart a series of insightful but disturbing realities regarding the American Dream—it is a dream destined to become a nightmare.

The first forty-five seconds of the scene depicts a family and a home, much like how immigration begins with a heritage

and a homeland. The scene opens with an eye-level shot from across the street looking at the shiny car parked in Clemenza's driveway. For the first few seconds, everything in the frame is still except for two boys squealing as one pushes the other in a toy car. As the sole visual and audible subjects on screen, the children encourage us to consider their significance. The play car's juxtaposition with the real car presents a parallel between the boys and men, as if to say that sons will follow their father's pursuit of the American Dream (Fig. 1).

In this way, Coppola implies that the impact of immigration is multigenerational and inevitable. The scene then cuts to a shot filmed from behind Clemenza that features him facing his wife (Ardell Sheridan) while they converse near the doorway. The camera tilts up to capture the top half of the wife who occupies centre-screen, towering over her husband standing on a lower step. Scale shows her to be in a position of power, but the setting renders her powers as restricted to the household (Fig. 2).

Even after Clemenza exits the frame, his wife remains in front of their home. She smiles while watching her husband leave for work, happy that he has opportunity though she does not. In her final contribution to the scene, she reminds



**Fig. 1** | Clemenza's driveway, *The Godfather*, 00:56:00. Paramount Pictures, 1972.



**Fig. 2** | Clemenza and his wife, *The Godfather*, 00:56:05. Paramount Pictures, 1972.



**Fig. 3** | Paulie's last drive, *The Godfather*, 00:56:25. Paramount Pictures, 1972.



**Fig. 4** | Midtown Tunnel, *The Godfather*, 00:56:52. Paramount Pictures, 1972.

Clemenza, “Don’t forget the cannoli” (00:56:11). Given the importance of the cannoli in Italian culture, her line can be understood as a warning against losing touch with tradition. Moreover, just as it indicates an affliction faced by immigrant children, the scene comments on the constraints placed on immigrant women. While women can assert power at home, they are prevented from pursuing the American Dream other than through their husbands. Consequently, women remain connected to their country of origin, which may allow for a more secure sense of self; however, as exemplified in the famous cannoli line, it also makes women responsible for maintaining their family’s cultural ties.

As the scene continues, the camera and therefore the audience accompany Clemenza in leaving home to execute his boss’s orders. A medium shot is maintained although the camera is now stationed inside Paulie’s car, close to the passenger seat Clemenza occupies (Fig. 3). Dynamic lighting illustrates the scene’s duality and divide.

Sunlight from the windows partially illuminates the car’s dark interior, including half of Clemenza and Paulie’s faces; alone in the back seat, Rocco is entirely obscured by shadows. Here, light signifies the men’s two-faced nature: Paulie feigns his loyalty to the Corleone family; Clemenza pretends he is not planning to kill Paulie. The contrast can additionally be interpreted as a visual manifestation of their dual identities as both Italian and American. Colour further suggests such identities to exist in conflict with each other rather than in cohesion. The black car’s juxtaposition against the green yard reinforces the barrier separating the professional criminals from the children playing. Rather than representing Clemenza’s disregard for his sons, these barriers demonstrate his devotion to their safety. To ensure that the barriers remain intact, he instructs Paulie to “watch out for the kids when you’re backing out” (00:56:38). Despite previously dismissing his wife’s inquiries about the length of his absence, Clemenza embarks on his business with family at the forefront of his mind. Through the shot’s cinematography and portrayal of Clemenza, Coppola suggests that immigrants pursue the American Dream not for themselves but for their family for they are driven by the desire to provide their children with a better future.

The sequence’s second section, consisting of Clemenza, Paulie, and Rocco’s car ride, offers insight into the process of assimilation. The use of slow transitions presents the passage of time in a pace that builds suspense; this use of dramatic irony and symbolic imagery establishes an ominous element. For instance, a shot of the car leaving Clemenza’s house dissolves into a darker setting (00:56:50), as if the distance from his family corresponds to the lack of light, moving from the familiar to the foreign (Fig. 4).

The increased distance between the camera and the car adds to the scene’s mystery—we cannot see the men, but we hear them through a voiceover. Clemenza tells Paulie to search for “mattresses” (00:56:28) or safehouses, misleading him so he is distracted and unsuspecting. Their deceitful dialogue is

echoed in the scene's darkness before it dissolves into a long shot of the car in a city street (Fig. 5).

Unaware of the irony, Paulie exclaims, "They told me they exterminate them," referring to the mattresses. In response, Rocco snickers as Clemenza replies, "Watch out we don't exterminate you!" (00:57:04–00:57:08). This foreshadowing is rendered even more eerie as the car is flanked by a Red Cross banner on the left and an American flag on the right. The image then dissolves into an open road (00:57:08). As the men approach the outskirts of the city, they start cracking scatological jokes in Italian, reverting to childish humor. The difference between their childhood in Italy and their life in America lies in intention: the once innocent jokes aimed at lighthearted laughter now aim to deceive and to manipulate as a prelude to murder.

The third and final section of the sequence focuses on the car's destination and its implicit implications for American assimilation. The camera captures the car's profile from afar as Paulie pulls over for Clemenza "to take a leak" (00:57:19). Seconds later, the camera closes in on a medium shot of Clemenza exiting the vehicle and proceeds to follow him as he approaches the field. He relieves himself while the camera turns to the car from a distance and two gunshots are fired: Rocco has killed Paulie. The jarring juxtaposition of Clemenza urinating while Paulie is slaughtered paints murder to be perfunctory and primal. Further, the distance between the car and Clemenza (and the camera) underscores the impersonal nature of the cold-blooded crime. Also present in this long shot is the Statue of Liberty from across the field, bearing witness to the cruel consequences caused by the very ideals it embodies (Fig. 6).

The camera then offers a medium close-up of Clemenza for the third gunshot, followed by music for the first time in the scene. Instead of instilling a sense of intimacy, *The Godfather's* score highlights the insignificance of Paulie's murder since the song is not specific to this scene but is also played throughout the film. It is only when Clemenza returns to the car that through the windshield we see a bloody, lifeless Paulie slumped over the steering wheel (Fig. 7).

Clemenza remains unfazed and reacts only by ordering Rocco to "Leave the gun—take the cannoli" (00:58:03–00:58:06). The line's coupling of leaving the gun and taking the cannoli emphasizes the emergence of another tradition: a criminal one. Rather than referring to a nostalgic dessert, this assimilated custom includes homicide. Later, Clemenza teaches this custom of "dropping the gun" to Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) before he murders Captain McClusky (Sterling Hayden) and Virgil Sollozzo (Al Lettieri). The scene ends with Clemenza and Rocco stepping out of the frame, abandoning the scene of the crime. Alone on screen in the closing shot, the car and the corpse symbolize the death of the American Dream (Fig. 8). The association between cars and corpses recurs in the film in relation to Sonny Corleone (James Caan) (Fig. 9) and to Michael's Italian girlfriend, Apollonia Vitelli-Corleone (Simonetta Stefanelli) (Fig. 10).



Fig. 5 | A city street, *The Godfather*, 00:57:03. Paramount Pictures, 1972.



Fig. 6 | The field of freedom, *The Godfather*, 00:57:25. Paramount Pictures, 1972.



Fig. 7 | The aftermath of Paulie's murder, *The Godfather* 00:58:10. Paramount Pictures, 1972.



Fig. 8 | The death of the American Dream, *The Godfather* 00:58:15. Paramount Pictures, 1972.

Throughout the scene, Coppola uses his camera to expose the expensive car as a flashy façade and the American Dream as a dangerous fantasy. The scene's visual treatment of the characters conveys an inevitable cycle imposed upon immigrant



families that culminates in a tragic fate: stifled mothers and morally compromised fathers sacrifice themselves to create a promising future for their children, specifically their sons, only for them to follow in their fathers' footsteps. In this way, the scene serves as a microcosm of *The Godfather*. Don Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando) devoted his life to providing his youngest son Michael with the opportunity to become an American titan based on honest success. In fact, what Don Corleone least wanted was for Michael to lead a life of crime like his father. Tragically, Don Corleone sees this fear come to fruition as the film unfolds. ■



**Fig. 9** | The death of Sonny, *The Godfather*, 01:57:33. Paramount Pictures, 1972.



**Fig. 10** | The death of Apollonia, *The Godfather*, 02:05:57. Paramount Pictures, 1972.

---

## WORKS CITED

*The Godfather*. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, Paramount Pictures, 1972.