**Analysis of the Adaptation from the Literary Original of *The Godfather* to the Film**

**Abstract**

Since its release in 1972, the film *The Godfather* has become a classic on the silver screen in the hearts of people around the world, and Mario Puzo has also become famous because of it. Both the *The Godfather* novel and the film were once extremely popular and sought after. Besides being intoxicated by its epic portrayal of the mafia in the language of the camera and its philosophical plot, it is also worth paying attention to its literary original. By repeatedly reading and comparing the differences between the film and the novel, as well as the adaptation process by the director Coppola, the epic world of "The Godfather" is presented in two different art forms. In comparison, this article focuses on aspects such as the process of character creation, the sublimation of artistic charm and value in different art forms. Literature and film, as two different forms of expression, play different roles in social culture and bear different missions and cultural meanings. Despite their different mission orientations, they both lead to a high level of overall artistic aesthetic characteristics and beauty. In this article, visual and cultural semiotic methods are used to provide thematic analysis of *The Godfather* text and the film adaptation and making a comparison between them. The hypothesis of the research argues that the literary text of *The Godfather* is uniquely presenting visual and cultural symbolism with its film adaptation.

**Keywords**: Coppola; *The Godfather*; Film; Novel; Semiotics; Culture

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background of the Study

The film adaptation technique is not merely the translation but reinterpretation of the original literary text to create a new, cinematic experience. Film adaptation is quite autonomous due to the change of its medium in the sense of used discourses and ideologies, along with a lot of filters, including studio style, charismatic stars or fashion statements to reimagine the novel (Pinar, 2019). The adaptation of literary text to film makes the material audible, visible, and perceptible. The *Godfather* trilogy as a film has gained a deeper social and cultural recognition. From a comprehensive perspective, the plot of the film has been adapted differently from the original novel, and at the same time, the plot of the original has been expanded, presenting a more three-dimensional world than the literature.

## 1.2 Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of the research paper is to analyse the adaptation technique of literary text to the film *The Godfather*. The research tries to convey a symbolic and semiotic interpretation of the literary text to the film named *The Godfather.*

The objectives of the study include:

* To compare the character symbolism and dramatic effect in literature and the film trilogy *The Godfather*
* To show the imagery codes attached to the text and the film adaptation.
* To understand the research significance of film and television sociology reflecting the Godfather culture guided by cultural codes.

## 1.3 Research Questions

1. How can the character symbolism and the dramatic effects in The *Godfather* film trilogy be compared with literature?
2. What are the imagery codes and expressions employed in *The Godfather* novel and film adaptation?
3. How do film and television sociology reflect the Godfather culture by using cultural codes?

## 1.4 Significance of the Research

The film adaptation of Mario Puzo’s pathbreaking crime novel *The Godfather* and its sequels are significant in exploring the life of the Mafia. First, when talking about the image of the mafia, the godfather, and Italian Americans in Western society during World War I and World War II, many mafia culture films after *The Godfather* have presented using symbols and similar images, proving its influence on later works. However, no film can beat the popularity of *The Godfather*. The well-known deeds of the Sicilian mafia are closely related to the *Godfather* film. The Mafia is an underground government organization closely linked to the economy, politics, and people's livelihood. A large number of them flooded into the United States through smuggling and other means, took root in New York, and were active throughout the United States from the early 19th century to the 1920s. They manipulated the gambling industry, the porn industry, drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and engaged in professional criminal activities such as kidnapping, murder, and robbery. There are various gangs within the Mafia, and the leaders exercise a family-style rule over their gangs. It is worth mentioning that similar criminal organizations in Japan, such as the Osaka-kai, also have clear organizational divisions and even set up relief organizations, which can be regarded as a "shadow society." This mafia culture of modern American society presented through the novel expands its reach and impact with its film adaptation. The visual and cultural codes the film adaptation uses to explore symbolic, social, and cultural codes involved in the text. The study is important and relevant in the future film industry because the it provides an analytical knowledge on the adaptation technique which can help the filmmakers to understand the factors taken into consideration in the adaptation process.

## 1.5 Methodology

The semiotics research method will be used in the paper to decode the symbolic meanings attached to the visual and cultural representation in the film. In this article, methods such as the New Criticism of European and American literature and traditional Chinese annotation are used to interpret the original text, and scattered knowledge from semiotics (referring to Metz's film semiotics) and film sociology are employed to understand the entire adaptation process. Semiotics a kind of method that construct reality by using both imagery and language from the text (Aiello, 2020). Thus, the meaning has been constructed through the use of semiotics method. The visual and cultural semiotics analysis will be made in the study to compare the text and its film adaptation.

# 2.0 Literature Review

## 2.1 Comparing the novel and the movie *The Godfather* for understanding the character symbolism and the dramatic effects

There is a difference between film and literary mediums, depending on the dramatic effects and priorities. The first film directly shows Vito's career is booming, while the second film is all about Michael, Vito's early days of starting a family and building a career. Two events are posited side by side to compare the character of Don played once by Vito succeeded by Michael and their different characteristic traits. Mario Puzo described the dance in the film and in the novel like this: On this great and happy day, the day his daughter was getting married, Don Vito Corleone stood at the door of his Long Beach home to receive the guests (Puzo, 1922). He knew everyone, and he trusted everyone. Many people owed their comfortable lives to the Don. In this intimate occasion, they could call him 'Godfather' to his face. Even the people in charge of the hospitality at the celebration were all friends. The bartender was his old buddy, and his gift was all the wine for the wedding banquet and his own proficient skills. The waiters were friends of Don Corleone's sons. The food on the garden dining table was cooked by the Don's wife and her friends. The garden was an acre in size, decorated with lanterns and festoons, full of joy, and the decorations were done by the bride's close friends.

In terms of the film, Michael and Don, as the godfathers of two generations, can be defined in the following way if a defining method is used for these two roles: The older generation of mafia who first came to the United States, represented by Don, paid a lot for making a living and the stability of the family. With the development of the times and society, Michael, the leader of the Corleone family who has become a symbol of Italian Americans, needs to resolve cultural conflicts and contradictions, ideological conflicts and contradictions, and business conflicts (the transition between legal and illegal family businesses). The images of these two people have clearly emerged. Compared with the first generation, the successor, from the perspective of the audience, is more cold-blooded and brutal. A series of actions, such as ordering the killing of his elder brother and alienating the military advisor Tom, reflect his character traits. Michael kills his elder brother Fredo due to his betrayal, which shows Freudian destructive impulses. According to Kli (2018), Freud recognized two drives, including eros, which implies love, life and creativity, and Thanatos, which implies aggression and destruction. This shows that these instinctual drives cause people to do creative as well as destructive things. Freud believed that people's primitive impulses usually cannot enter the conscious mind because the rational, conscious self does not accept them. This death drive of Michael pushes him to murder his own brother. He becomes the victim of his unconscious psyche. In Kant's philosophy (without talking about the will and transcendentalism), it is divided into things in themselves (Die Dinge selbst), but it can be interpreted as an irrational mental phenomenon, such as dreams, nervous symptoms, and slips of the tongue.

## 2.2 Use of imagery codes and expressions in the literature and film adaptation

The innovative adaptation methods first used in the film and the novel of *The Godfather* lie in the application of montage. Montage is a kind of video editing technique to bridge the gaps of time (Furstenau, 2018). This shows that montage juxtaposes two different images at the same time for comparison and contrast between two events. The two narrative threads are interwoven to provide some new meanings and ideas. In the Western literary world of the 19th century, writers, including Gustave Flaubert and Charles Dickens, began to attempt to cut and combine images and scenes in their novel creations. In the 20th century, writers such as James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway used the composition style and structure of montage as part of the unique rhetorical methods of language and vocabulary, such as symbolism, metaphor, and synesthesia, to vividly present the objective world and people's inner worlds. These literary practices directly influenced the early films guided by literature**.** In terms of literary theory, the focus of creating characters is necessarily different from that of writing a Homeric epic-style or Beowulf-style family epic. This adaptation method focuses on establishing the image of the entire Corleone family in the minds of the audience in the first film in a leader-style way of creation; that is, one person represents the family.

## 2.3 The cultural codes implied in the film and television sociology reflecting the Godfather culture

Considering it a sociological study, the author includes the social occupation of the film crew in the research. The social landscape and background of *The Godfather* (taking the first film as an example) are roughly set after the 1920s, which was the period of the Great Depression in the United States. The turbulent social background provides a more reasonable context for both the film and the novel. The novel also mentions the migration of the entire Sicilian population to the United States, as well as the landscape of Sicily and its long-inherited background (Puzo, 1922). The story plot of the rise of the mafia and the rampant criminal activities of mafia organizations also exacerbated the economic crises in the United States and Europe at that time. It is understandable to interpret this phenomenon from the perspective of post-structuralism. The government was preoccupied with its own crises, and since the Renaissance, Western society, which has advocated self-rights and "self-rescue," naturally chose the concept of self-rescue in such a crisis. Young people, men, and women flocked to the mafia to support their families and gain social status.

The most important adaptation element in the film shows the traditional Sicilian wedding. From the perspective of social culture, the wedding is regarded as a symbol of culture, which reflects the unique cultural traditions of the married couple and their ethnic community, including the music, tableware, ingredients, and so on at the wedding. Roland Barthes asserts in her modern mythology theory that the linguistic communication process is used to create symbolic worlds by influencing the image of social and cultural reality (Strelnik, 2020). This shows that the signifier and the signified constitute an expression system, but this expression system itself may also be a signifier, and it will have a deeper meaning in terms of cultural significance. If the music in the film according to the plot is regarded as a film symbol, and summed up, it is the symbol of the "Godfather culture" mentioned in the following second part. Therefore, signifier is the musical instrument played, the harmony, the source of the music appearance, and the music style, and the signified represents the corresponding subsets in the ideological field, such as emotions.

# 3.0 Research Methodology

The study initiates different methods for achieving the primary research goals. Research methodology analyses how research can be carried out scientifically by systematically understanding the research problems (Patel & Patel, 2019). The present study scientifically and practically employs methods to get justified research findings. The study develops a qualitative semiotics method based on visual and cultural codes for analyzing the film adaptation technique. Christian Metz’s film semiology is an analytical method for complex signifying systems, which is a resistance against understanding linguistic notions (Weste, 2019). The language of the camera is one of the important ways to express meaning in film semiotics. It also focuses on gathering objective facts to understand such a mafia culture from the perspective of the research fields and methods of film and television sociology. Film and television sociology emphasizes the use of semiotics methods to study film and television works themselves, the audience, and social responses (treating film and television as a basis for cultural research). The semiotics method has been applied in the research to do thematic analysis. Throughout the research, the study maintains plagiarism-free content and follows the academic integrity of the university.

# 4.0 Findings

## 4.1 Comparing the Dramatic Effects and Character Symbols Embodied in Literature and Film and Briefly Discussing Their Artistic Value

Francis Ford Coppola’s film adaptation *The Godfather* is a faithful cinematic interpretation of the original novel of the same name by Mario Puzo. In the novel, what can be seen at the beginning is the court story of Bonasera, while the film opens with the same character but in the corner office of the Godfather on the wedding day of his daughter Connie (Gefen & Weissbrod, 2021). This shows that Coppola discards the court settings and instead focuses on the Godfather’s chamber to showcase the power, tradition and culture of the mafia king. This visual semiotic analysis of creating suspense is a great attraction for the audience. The appearance of the godfather, which is introduced through this person, is also a commonly used technique in traditional Chinese novels similar to the appearance of Wang Xifeng in the third chapter of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, where her image is created by hearing her voice before seeing her.

The inclusion of a cat in Vito Corleone, the Grandfather, implies another use of semiotic method which was absent in the novel itself. As Bonasera shows less respect to the Don, the inclusion of the cat shows that Vito trusts the cat more than Bonasera (David, 2020). This shows how Coppola introduces some symbolic images and situations to easily grab the audience’s attention and make the implied meanings clear. The dark lighting, combined with a long monologue of Bonasera describing the experience of his daughter, is a great innovation in Coppola's adaptation. According to Najjar (2019), the use of light and dark showcases conflicts between good and evil in the movie. This indicates that the movie makes the bold use visual semiotics in the film *The Godfather* to dramatize human psychology. In the film adaptation, an over-the-shoulder shot with dark lighting is chosen as the opening, and the shooting of the characters and the environment in the garden is added later. As a faithful adaptation of the novel, a cumulative montage of many characters, such as Johnny Fontane, has been added to the film but shortened (YouTube Movies, 1972). While in the movie, Kay remains loyal for her husband Michael, in the film she is emotionally broken. Looking at the novel and the film as a whole, Turi Giuliano, whom Mario Puzo spent a lot of ink on in the novel, is not involved in the film. This also shows Coppola's clarity: characters that have nothing to do with the Corleone family will not be given screen time.

## 4.2 On the Imagery Code Expressions in the Process of Literary and Film Adaptation

Decoding imagery code expressionsis important to analyze the process of film adaptation technique. According to Jadoon (2020), Roland Barthes, in his book *S/Z,* categorized codes into five groups, such as preaortic, hermeneutic, cultural, semantic and symbolic codes interpret the literary text and the film. While the cultural code exists in a non-material form, scattered throughout the artistic work, and serves both symbolic and non-symbolic functions, hermeneutic code, known as "foreshadowing" or a subtle thread, runs through the story over a long distance. A foreshadowing is laid for the death of the character Sonny in the shared plot, which is particularly evident in the novel. The characteristic description of Sonny gives the impression that Sonny is not capable of becoming the next Don. As Michael kisses Fredo on the lips at a New Year’s Eve party, it encodes the kiss of death (Chouana, 2024). This lip kiss implies that Fredo is the next target of Michael, the boss, marked for his betrayal. This hermeneutic code is visually important while watching the film. Coppola has used explicit imagery in his film adaptation to make the storyline stronger. In the film, the value conflict between Michael and paternal authority is not directly depicted. Instead, a dialogue scene in which Sonny represents the father's image is used to showcase the value opposition. However, in the third *The Godfather* film, a direct conflict regarding the career choice of Michael's son is presented, and the character of Kay is added to expand Michael's possible dramatic actions, which also demonstrate the different choices Michael as a parent in different eras, making the drama more contradictory.

*The Godfather* uses comparative montage and cross montage to show the life trajectories of Michael and Vito. According to Gefen & Weissbrod (2021), while Michael promises to take care of a child if he is fatherless, his mafia group commits heinous murders shown in the film using the montage technique. This shows that the imagery codes are used in a better way in the film to juxtapose the events. In a scene, the immigrants coming to the boat and seeing the Statue of Liberty show their expectation for a better life in America (Chouana, 2024). This proves that a lot of people like Don Corleone are coming to America to live a lavish life with the Statue of Liberty. However, when Don Corleone first arrives in the United States, he is forced to come to join the mafia industry to save himself and his family, which shows the corrupt side of the American dream, promising equal opportunities and accomplishments for every citizen. Therefore, the use of imagery codes makes the film adaptation more established than its literary presentation.

## 4.3 Discussing the Research Value of Film and Television Sociology Reflected in the Godfather Culture Guided by Cultural Codes

The word family is mentioned many times in the dialogue of the *The Godfather* film. But for Michael, in order to preserve the overall interests of the family, he does not hesitate to kill family members (the traitors). The setting of this dramatic behavior puts Michael in the contradiction of what is commonly called putting justice above family loyalty. The playwright here puts characters in a difficult situation to trigger an outburst. However, the reason why a person is a person is that his emotions are inviolable. The character of Michael, for example, finally chooses to hand over the position to the third-generation godfather in the third film because of his experience in Sicily, which means that his attempt to save the family has failed. The appearance of Michael is completely different from that of his father, Don Corleone, as their identities are different at this time. One is the leader of a criminal empire, and the other is an excellent college student and a veteran. This is a typical example of the film using symbolic pictures and scenes to express characters and meanings. In the film, white and black, light and darkness, cheerfulness and silence are all signifiers, and their signifies may be justice and evil, positive and negative. The language of the camera is one of the important ways to express meaning in film semiotics. Although the film is not in a natural language and cannot conventionally express an exact meaning, the audience can determine the existence of this symbol system through the story combined with the scenes. For example, space, time, color, etc., all have specific meanings. This is one of the most obvious places where the images of the two are opposed in the three films. More importantly, this kind of visual symbol often combines with its ideological background to give birth to the meaning of deep symbols.

Coordinating with the narrative of the film, the sound and the picture are intertwined. Typical Italian cultural attitude and melancholy are revealed through the waltz made by Niono Rita. For example, at the beginning of the third film, the music style of the coronation banquet adopts the style of a grand Roman and religious mass, and the sound effect is magnificent and noble. In the second film, when using cross montage to recall the scene where Vito killed Fanucci and then held the baby Michael in his arms, the mood is bitter and depressed, but those who are attentive can surely hear the faint, unfinished and gradually rising notes later, which represent the rise of Vito's career. Until the end of the film, the theme song sounds again, with a touch of sadness. If the Corleone family is studied from the perspective of the social division of labor, the leader assigns tasks to the subordinates on a one-to-one basis, with a clear organization. Also, fully considering the confidentiality of criminal activities, this led to the scene in the second film where Michael had a reasonable one-to-one authentication method in court, presenting the situation that solving the problem of just one witness could resolve the accusation. This can also be seen as internalizing the narrative of the organizational structure in the novel during the adaptation process and highlighting the one-to-one structure in the film.

# 5.0 Discussion

The script of *The Godfather* as a film drama is more dramatic than the novel. The main reason for this lies in the setup stage: removing the irrelevant character of Gian, adding Michael's children (which also indicates one of the themes, family), deepening the change of the historical background, that is, the so-called "thickness of the drama", and making the conflicts between characters more intense (such as the conflicts between Kay and Michael, Michael and his children, etc.). Using a montage to show Michael's mental journey to the audience indicates that his unconscious mind is still filled with guilt for his actions, and he tries to save the situation with his own hands during his lifetime. According to the theory of the levels of mental consciousness, namely the unconscious, preconscious, and conscious, Michael realizes that his actions of sacrificing the small for the big are correct and beneficial to the family, which is his conscious mind. His preconscious mind may involve a series of consequences of such dramatic behaviors, and in the part that he cannot be aware of, that is, in his unconscious mind that he cannot perceive, he is grieved by the death of his blood relatives at his own hands. Analyzing from the perspective of personality traits or his original family (Michael's original family was complete), his behavior is not difficult to understand, just like a fallen leaf returning to its root.

Finally, the word "Godfather" is originally a common term in Christianity. Its original meanings mainly have two aspects: "First, in Christianity, it refers to the theologians who had authority in formulating or expounding doctrines from the 2nd to the 13th century AD; second, it refers to the male guardians of new converts during the baptism in some Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant denominations." The advent of the film *The Godfather* presented new meanings of the word "godfather". With the global popularity of the novel and the film, this meaning was quickly recognized. Later, this meaning was further generalized to refer to the leaders of criminal gangs. The extended meaning of "godfather" is "a leader or initiator who holds an important position or has great influence in an organization." The meaning of "godfather" has been further extended and is often used to describe the founder of a certain field or the most influential and powerful authority figure in that field, such as "the Godfather of Rock 'n' Roll, Cui Jian," "the Godfather of Studying Abroad, Yu Minhong," "the Godfather of Apple, Steve Jobs," and so on. Under popular culture, this is the change of the Godfather culture brought to the whole society regardless of the art form.

The imagery codes are very crucial to analyse the film adaptation techniques. The imagery codes of the American dream are also presented with the character of Vito, who comes to America to fulfil his dream. However, he can become able to satisfy his material dream while becoming ignorant of moral components (Chouana, 2024). This shows that the corruption of the American dream strengthened the mafia culture in 20th-century America. In the film, montage is used as a strong imagery presentation to outlet for Michael's catharsis. He repeatedly dreams of his bride in Sicily and the scene of his brother being killed on the ship at sunset by the sea. Coppola also uses this montage editing technique to juxtapose the ceremonies happening in the Church and the murders taking place at the same time in various locations. The value opposition of symbolic codes can be seen everywhere in the film. The author chooses to discuss the Statue of Liberty, which represents the United States, and the statues that appear during the local St. Carlo religious festival, as well as the conflict between Michael and his father Don in the novel regarding Michael's career choice.

In the novel, it is written about Sonny, "Sonny could never be the great man his father was, but Lucy didn't care. Sonny Corleone had strength and courage. He was generous, and his heart was as impressive as his huge means. However, he lacked his father's humility. His temper was violent and intense, leading to his repeated misjudgments. Although he was a good helper in his father's business, few people believed that he could succeed his father". The original description gives the impression that Sonny was not capable of becoming the next Don. It is common knowledge that few characters in a mafia family can live their lives peacefully. There are many hermeneutic hints throughout the film and the text that indicate Sonny's temperament ultimately leads to his downfall. However, when considered as a hermeneutic code and read through as a whole, the film adaptation, as a visual tool, shows the tragic process of Sonny's death*.* This weakens the foreshadowing of Sonny's death in the novel, but intensifies the depiction of his death. As a result, the plot here is more closely related to Michael, who is about to become the godfather. The approach of weakening the defining evaluation of Sonny and intensifying the violent act of his death undoubtedly deepens the emotional impact on the audience and, in turn, reflects the astonishing artistic charm of the film itself.

The cultural semiotics encompasses all aspects of the social landscape depicted in the novel, including the dialogues of the mafia, slang in the language, and its stylistic features, as well as various elements such as the music in the film. Taken together, the author refers to this as the "Godfather culture" constructed for us by Coppola, Mario Puzo, and others within this epic of the mafia. The immigrants embraced the values of modern American society and retained their unique Italian cultural identities. The American flag is a symbol of the United States, but the first-generation Italian immigrants, such as Don, while waving the American flag, lived in Italian communities, sang Italian songs, watched Italian plays, celebrated traditional Italian festivals, and wore traditional Italian clothing. Like other ethnic groups, they came to the United States from other places and integrated, sharing both commonalities and distinct characteristics, thus contributing to the formation of the United States as a cultural melting pot today. By abandoning the clichéd form of the leader being responsible for multiple people in a gathering, it embodies a more reasonable organizational structure. This organizational structure is reasonable, and its social division of labor and efficiency are higher than the ordinary model. The division of labor in the pattern of Vito (Tom) — Clemenza and other leaders — messengers — subordinates is said to be welcomed by real mafia organizations, which shows the effectiveness of social and cultural transmission. On the other hand, the music score of the first *The Godfather* is the basis of the music style of the entire *The Godfather* trilogy.

From the perspective of audio-visual techniques, the music element is not only synchronized with the picture and unified in audio-visual, but it also provides an independent musical supplement to the picture, achieving audio-visual parallelism. The music can render the emotions of the characters in the work or depict their inner feelings, achieving effects that language cannot reach. Here, an analysis of the music is also made: Italian folk songs with Sicilian style, with delicate rhythms and often accompanied by layered and exquisite harmonies. The music style and emotional tone are reflected as interchangeable. The scene of the violin and cello playing together often reminds people of the lights on the streets of New York. However, the traditional Sicilian musical instruments, the mandolin and the ocarina, which are rich in regional characteristics, reduce the depression. In the original soundtrack of the *The Godfather* film, "The Love Theme" has long been a popular mood music around the world; "Michael's Theme" uses passionate orchestral music to highlight the tragic life of the second son of the godfather; "The Godfather Waltz" is the most wonderful and charming when it is matched with the scene of the father and daughter dancing in each other's arms. Apart from the social nature of the banquet itself and the hidden murderous intentions, the grand cello and clarinet can already attract bursts of applause. This is a film score with a strong classical style, and many of its tracks are filled with the Sicilian style of Italy, perhaps also to commemorate the origin of the development of the mafia from Sicily. It is worth mentioning that the music with the flavor of Sicily is also used in Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*.

# 6.0 Conclusion

Returning to the original literary work, *The Godfather* begins with a quote from Balzac: "Behind every great fortune, there is a crime." and "Behind every great work of art, there are countless talents and unremitting efforts." After comprehensively analyzing the adaptation process from the aspects of drama and film audio-visual elements for the two art forms, and finally attempting to interpret it sociologically based on the "Godfather culture," it is found that this term, which originally had a religious connotation, has evolved into a mysterious and convincing spiritual impression with the styles of Vito and Michael, and it shines brightly in the history of film and social culture.

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