

most unalloyed pleasures, though it is distressing to see such errors as that of misplacing Anthony Corleone's debut in *Cavalleria rusticana* in Rome instead of Palermo.

The going gets rough when Santopietro ventures out into the interpretive territory to which his title lays claim. His overall thematic readings of the films are generally on safe ground, though they largely reiterate interpretations regarding the American Dream, criminality and politics, or Italian-American ethnicity already well-established (and often more successfully argued) in the voluminous existing literature. When Santopietro attempts, however, to define the broad cultural appeal of *The Godfather*, his work becomes troublingly inadequate. To begin with, his claims regarding audience reception of the Corleone saga are short on methodological rigor and interpretive nuance. "Lacking any direct immigrant experience themselves," Santopietro writes, "latter-day generations of Italian-Americans seem to perceive their past through the refracting lens of Hollywood, responding to the *Godfather* films as received wisdom" (78). Such mediation of ethnic identity may be true, as Santopietro avers, in his own case. But despite repeat assertions of what "[a]udiences responded to" (147) or what "audiences found eminently satisfying" (90) in the film and/or novel, Santopietro provides little evidence to substantiate his claims. (His habitual collapsing of film and novel, whose separate audiences cannot be imagined to neatly overlap, is especially problematic here.) Reference to contemporaneous media sources, existing scholarship, and fan discourse (not to mention employing audience surveys and reception theory) would have helped immensely.

The primary basis for Santopietro's claims about *The Godfather's* reception seems to be his own nostalgia-driven interpretation, which he routinely attributes to either the mass audience or the Italian-American audience in particular. In so doing, Santopietro strips *The Godfather* of its complexity. Drawing upon Richard Gambino's conception of *la via vecchia* (literally, the old way), Santopietro doggedly pursues a thesis that claims Vito Corleone's embodiment of traditional Italian values (in contrast to the Americanized Michael) held powerful appeal for Americans during the social upheaval of the 1970s. In so doing, Santopietro repeatedly dismisses the Don's murderous criminality in asides: "Just as a sense of connection and well-being resided in the comfort of food and a shared meal, so too was there comfort to be found in the enveloping, if potentially murderous, embrace of a godfather who took care of all problems" (89). Having preserved nostalgia by the rhetorical containment of cold-blooded killing in a parenthetical phrase, Santopietro thus dismisses the monstrous hypocrisy of the *mafioso*, whose claims to "honor" and "family" pervert core Italian values within a discourse and a set of rituals that mask Vito Corleone's venal self-aggrandizement. In so doing, Santopietro re-inscribes the false consciousness not only of the *mafioso* in his ludicrous defense of his "family values" but also of his naïve admirers, taken in by empty talk and grand gestures. If the casual viewer is seduced by the sunny spectacle of Connie's wedding and by the Don's affectations of gentility, it is up to *The Godfather's* critics to note what they mask. Even on the day of his daughter's marriage, the so-called paragon of Italian family values is working in his office, running a "family business" that will, of course, lead to the death of two sons and the tragic ruin of a third. The power of the films in particular is in their invitation to romanticize a world whose brutality they simultaneously expose, ultimately indicting the nostalgia upon which Santopietro's analysis unfortunately rests.

These characteristic weaknesses in Santopietro's argument make many of his claims feel ultimately unearned. Oddly enough, that feeling persists even in the most personal sections of the book. Santopietro's lengthy passages of family memoir are potentially compelling material; as the son of a WASP mother and an Italian-American father born to immigrant parents, he appears poised to tell a rich and valuable story. But his personal narrative feels sketchy at best. (Reviewing the book in the *New York Journal of Books* on May 12, 2012, George De Stefano suggests that Santopietro's "evasiveness" about his gay identity weakens his personal narrative, especially with regard to his considerations of masculinity. Surely many readers, including this gay Italian American, would have welcomed a franker discussion.) Even more, Santopietro's assertion that *The Godfather* "Italianized" a then-twenty-year old who up until that point "had never cared to be Italian" is discomfiting (7). His effort to hang his personal history (and his book) on *The Godfather* (and its marquee value) leaves us with the tale of an Italian American "Italianized" by a movie. The effects of such "Italianization" are, unsurprisingly, thin. A representative passage notes that the now fiftyish Santopietro has "embraced the Italian-ness" of his heritage by "sprinkl[ing] the phrases I've learned from *The Godfather* into my conversation" (27). When he claims that "nothing gives me greater pleasure than to use the word 'paesano' when describing a fellow Italian-American," ethnicity appears reduced to the performance of a few catch-phrases (in their American spellings), which are, in fact, liberally in evidence here, if not always adeptly employed. (Andy Garcia's Vincent Mancini is no "gavone," and neither is *la busta*—the envelope containing a cash gift for the bride and groom—a "gavonelike reminder of cash vulgarity" [172].)

Italianization also seems to mean engendering an interest in one's family history, as Santopietro credits *Godfather II* with inspiring a reconnection to his Italian-American ancestry. But an adult interest in an ethnic heritage ignored or reviled as a child (Santopietro claims that his Italian ethnicity "played next to no part in forming my self-identity," [12-13]) is conventional third-generation behavior, not distinctly "Italian." Nor is "theatricality" in the rituals surrounding death, many of which constitute, in their way, a form of theater in cultures across the globe. The interpretive task for Santopietro here is to define the specifically Italian (or, perhaps more to the point, Italian-American) theatricality at work in the family funereal rituals, a task he does not really assume in his recounting of family stories. These stories, moreover, too often highlight figures such as death-obsessed Aunt Angeline or Uncle Carmine, "the quint-essential paesano" (213), taking them into the realm of stereotype that Santopietro claims, admirably, to deplore but that he cannot, finally, seem to avoid.

In the wake of Thomas J. Ferraro's *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America* (New York University Press, 2005)—not to mention substantive work on Italian-American history and culture, the construction and performance of ethnicity, and the experience of third-generation Americans—ample materials exist to have facilitated a far more fruitful analysis of the intersections of the Corleone saga, the Italian-American experience, and Santopietro's family history. Santopietro's minimal engagement with this work (and his over-reliance on the worthy but by no means definitive *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* by Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale [HarperCollins, 1992]) critically undermines the contribution he might have made. In the end, *The Godfather Effect* may provide some pleasure for the novice reader, but

even he or she, I think, would find a more rewarding introduction to the Corleone family and their cultural legacy in the material with which Santopietro has done his seemingly earnest but ultimately cursory homework.

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Works Cited

De Stefano, George. 2012. Review of *The Godfather Effect: Changing Hollywood, America, and Me*. *New York Journal of Books*, May 12. <http://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/review/godfather-effect-changing-hollywood-america-and-me> (accessed July 30, 2012).