

Lecture #3

UNIT TWO

I. Coppolla's *The Godfather*

As we said in the Course Description, no particular time will be reserved for discussion of this film; we will be making continual reference to it throughout the term.

The film expects its audience to understand that the Mafia is a loose affiliation of large groups of people each engaged not only in legitimate businesses but also in criminal enterprises, like prostitution, gambling, and (more latterly) drug-dealing. The groups do not engage in crimes of violence, like bank-robbing or burglary, but they may resort to violence from time to time, not only against each other but also against those members of the general public who patronize their illegitimate enterprises.

Two plays by Sophocles:

The poets who wrote the plays performed during the Dionysiac festival at Athens were not craftsmen but members of aristocratic households who competed for the honor of having their work performed. Works to be performed were chosen by a committee appointed by the assembly of citizens. Each poet had to submit three plays to be performed over the course of a single day; these might form a trilogy, in the manner of the *Oresteia*, or they might be unrelated works. Sophocles wrote three plays about Oedipus but they were each presented as part of a grouping of independent plays and they were written at different points in his lifetime. The *Antigone* was a work of his youth, the *Oedipus Rex* of his middle years and the *Oedipus at Colonnus*, which deals with the death and transfiguration of the aged Oedipus, was written near the end of Sophocles's life. The writing of the plays, therefore, does not follow the chronological order of the episodes that they represent (the *Antigone*, for example, the first to be written, takes place after Oedipus's death) and one cannot assume that the same characters were conceived in the same way in any plays in which they reappear. This is consonant with the way in which the body of myths upon which the plays were based was conceived in ancient times; as we have noted, there was no received version of the details in any story, and Sophocles may well have rethought the materials at different points in his lifetime.

In this connection, we should also note again a feature that results from the conventions of representation and performance. The chorus sings and dances; the intervening moments of action in play consists of dialogue sung in *recitativo*, once again like grand opera today. Accordingly, set speeches have something of the character of arias in grand opera. We should not look to them for the realistic exchange that characterizes actual conversation but rather for the kind of exchange that characterizes performance of a ritual—the sort of thing, for example, when recipients for medals of honor are presented to the dignitary who has been authorized to award them. To take a representative instance: mid-way in the *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus turns to his wife Jocasta and tells her about the details of his history relevant to the present situation. ("My father was the king of Corinth . . .") We should not suppose that it is important to worry why he has never told her these things during all their years of marriage. The speech is, of course, addressed to his wife, but its real target is the audience, who is completely familiar with the myth and knows how the story will come out overall, but needs to be informed about the play's "take" on the events preceding the action - the way in which the play understands the predicament of the hero and the details of the history leading up to it.

The events in the background of the *Oresteia* are briefly these: Agamemnon and Atreus were both descendants of the house of Pelops, whose children, Atreus and Thyestes, were rivals for the throne of Mycenae. Atreus defeated Thyestes and drove him into exile, then pretended to forgive him and called him back, giving a great feast in Thyestes's honor, at which, unknown to Thyestes, he was served up his sons as the main course. After the feast, Thyestes was imprisoned for life, but one of his sons, Aegisthus, had escaped the horrors of the feast, and when he came to manhood he rescued his father, vowing to honor his obligation to destroy the house of Atreus. His chance came after the death of Atreus, when Atreus's son, Agamemnon, acting at the behest of the Father of the gods, Zeus, gathered together the great expedition that sailed against Troy. Agamemnon was seeking revenge upon Troy for harboring Paris, the Trojan Prince, who had seduced Helen, the wife of Menelaus, Agamemnon's brother, and run off with her. (Whatever the Trojans thought of this deed, they were bound to defend Paris, just as Agamemnon was bound to revenge Helen's abduction and Atreus was bound to revenge the feast of Thyestes.) The siege of Troy took ten years, during which Atreus came to Mycenae, seduced Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, and with her plotted Agamemnon's destruction upon his return. Clytemnestra had her own motive to abet this deed: In order to get his army to Troy, Agamemnon had to appease the goddess Artemis, who had becalmed the fleet at Aulis and would not release the winds unless Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia. To pacify the goddess, Agamemnon persuaded Clytemnestra to send Iphigenia to Aulis, allegedly to be betrothed to the hero Achilles. Clytemnestra complied and Iphigenia was sacrificed. When the play opens, the ten years have passed. News arrives at dawn in the form of a beacon of light to announce that Troy had fallen that very night.