

Radboud Universiteit



**The Mafia from Screen to Tourism:
Narratives and Tensions in The Godfather Tours in Sicily**

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Abstract

The Godfather tours in Sicily represent a peculiar form of gangster film tourism, in which the cinematic narrative meets historical reality in a region marked by an actual mafia presence. This study explores the interplay between the cinematic narrative of the mafia as conveyed in *The Godfather* film trilogy and the touristic narrative of *The Godfather* guided tours in Sicily. Its aim is to assess the implications of the tour storytelling for the critical understanding of the mafia as a real historical phenomenon. Through the analysis of pre-tour promotional materials, on-site narratives during tours, and post-tour visitor reviews, this research investigates whether *The Godfather* tours replicate the narratives and imaginaries about the mafia portrayed in the films, or try to communicate a more critical narrative which takes into account historical reality; whether they combine the cinematic and historical heritage to address the ethical implications of mafia portrayals in films; and whether they critically address the blurred boundaries and tensions between the fiction and reality of the mafia. Findings indicate that the tours predominantly replicate the cinematic imaginary and rely on this cinematic heritage, with limited engagement with the historical context, the ethical implications of the cinematic portrayal and the tensions between fiction and reality. Tour narratives do not provide tourists with adequate critical tools to understand the mafia as a real phenomenon; rather, they contribute to its romanticisation and to a form of heritage dissonance, as the prioritisation of cinematic fiction for the entertainment of tourists comes at the expenses of the real stories of those affected by the mafia in the region. This study concludes with a reflection on the potential of *The Godfather* tours to develop more critical and balanced narratives.

Keywords: The Godfather; mafia; Sicily; film-induced tourism; gangster film tourism

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«La mafia non è affatto invincibile; è un fatto umano e come tutti i fatti umani ha un inizio e avrà anche una fine.»

Giovanni Falcone

«Se la gioventù le negherà il consenso, anche l'onnipotente e misteriosa mafia svanirà come un incubo.»

Paolo Borsellino

Introduction

A bright, peaceful sunny day, the arid fields and prickly pear landscape of rural Sicily, a village bar with old men wearing their *coppola*¹ and playing cards, two young men clutching a *lupara*². And Michael Corleone sitting on a chair. This is one of the most iconic scenes from the film *The Godfather* by Francis Ford Coppola, based on the novel by Mario Puzo and released in 1972.

In the film, the place where Michael retreats to hide after gunning down the narcotics trader Virgil “The Turk” Sollozzo and the corrupt police captain McCluskey, is Corleone, a small inland town near Palermo, in Sicily, Italy. In the reality, the scenes were shot mainly in the two towns of Savoca and Forza d’Agrò, in the province of Messina, Sicily. These are two villages suspended in time, rich in buildings of great historical importance and surrounded by breathtaking landscapes, which have recently been included in the list of the *Borghi più Belli d’Italia* (Italy’s most Beautiful Villages). Yet it is not for these qualities that so many tourists from all over the world visit them every year. Tourists want to see the locations where *The Godfather* was filmed, sip a *granita* where the character of the *mafioso* Michael Corleone sat, and take a picture where the car of his innocent new bride was blown up by his enemies who were trying to kill him.

Tourism in the locations of *The Godfather* trilogy in Sicily falls under the broad umbrella category of film-induced tourism, namely tourism to destinations featured in films and television series, but also presents some characteristics of dark tourism, that is, the act of travelling to sites associated with death, suffering and macabre or violent events (Sharpley & Stone, 2009). Indeed, scenes of violence and death took place in these sites in the fictional story of the films, and on a broader scale the whole phenomenon of the mafia to which the Corleone family’s affairs are inextricably tied, carries inherent features of violence and death. In the very years in which the trilogy was filmed, with the films being released in 1972, 1974 and 1990 respectively, Sicily was marred by a bloody series of killings, fights between clans and oppressions on the local population attributable to the mafia, culminating in the fatal attacks on the two anti-mafia magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in 1992, which marked a turning point in the public perception of the mafia in Italy (Lupo, 2018).

In the experience of these locations, the line between filmic fiction and historical reality is therefore blurred. This study aims to explore the interplay and the tensions between the cinematic and touristic narratives of the towns of Savoca and Forza d’Agrò and other locations involved in *The*

¹ A cap with a small visor and a flat top, it has become a traditional and iconic headwear in southern Italy and particularly in Sicily.

² Sawed-off shotgun traditionally associated with the Sicilian mafia.

Godfather guided tours in Sicily, in order to reflect on the implications of the ongoing narratives for the understanding of the mafia also as an historical phenomenon.

Tourism has long been influenced by various media and cultural products serving as “markers” in MacCannell’s (1976) sense, that is, signs that shape tourists’ expectations and guide them towards specific sites, thus playing a significant role in influencing the imaginaries of travellers and motivating visits to certain locations (Long & Robinson, 2009; Beeton, 2016). As mentioned before, film-induced tourism refers to the phenomenon whereby tourists visit a destination as a result of the destination being featured on television, video, DVD or the cinema screen (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006). In scholarly research, a variety of terms has been proposed to label the concept, including the broader “screen-induced tourism” and “mediatised tourism”. For this study, I chose the term “film-induced tourism” as I deemed it the most suitable for the object of analysis. This form of tourism can range from visits to iconic filming locations, including both real places and manufactured sets, to fully immersive experiences inspired by fictional narratives. According to the distinction proposed by Beeton (2016), the locations analysed in this study are the target of “on-location” rather than “off-location” film-induced tourism, meaning that tourism is linked to a real landscape that assumes a central and evocative role in the storyline, almost like a character.

Within this broad category, gangster film tourism emerges as a subgenre, drawing tourists to places associated with crime as depicted in popular culture (Smith & Virág Tevely, 2023). Besides *The Godfather* tourism, other examples include tourism to the filming locations of *The Sopranos* television series in New York or of the *Gomorrah* film and television series in Naples.

However, gangster film tourism can also be studied as a subgenre of dark tourism, a concept first termed thanatourism by Foley and Lennon (1996) and introduced to describe travel to sites “inherently associated with death, whether or not death is seen to be a principle motivation, or even consciously seen as an element” (Seaton, 2009). Dark tourism encompasses a wide array of destinations, from battlefields and Holocaust memorials to slavery heritage sites, crime sites and cemeteries. In this field too there is a terminological debate, but in this study, I will use the term “dark tourism” because it is more straightforward in evoking the darkness not merely associated with death (*thanatos*) but with a range of human attitudes related to the mafia, such as criminality.

Gangster film tourism lies at the crossroads of these two tourism categories, blending entertainment with dark elements, and is therefore an interesting object of research. In this unique intersection, fictionalised portrayals of crime and violence influence the perception of real-world locations (Smith, 2023; Yao & Yang, 2024). To critically analyse these dynamics, this study will employ key concepts from both fields of film-induced and dark tourism.

Within this context, my research narrows down its focus to the mafia-themed film tourism in Sicily, the homeland of mafia. Gerardi (2024) argues that a region like Sicily is peculiar in that the violent character of the place is constant over time and is caused by an economic, social and political phenomenon closely linked to the area. The selection of *The Godfather* tours as case study is thus particularly compelling, given the intersection of cinematic narrative and historical reality, and the tension between entertainment-driven tourism and the opportunity of accurately portraying the real impact of the mafia in Sicily.

In Sicily, the mafia is called *Cosa Nostra* (Our Thing), but it is actually everybody's thing, spread all over the world with different facets and names. Addressing this topic is therefore both academically interesting and of utmost social relevance, because it offers an opportunity to not only advance the research in a niche of tourism studies, but also to expand the existing discourse on the cultural dimensions of the mafia and to potentially contribute to fostering dialogue about it.

Literature Review

Film-induced tourism and dark tourism, as established fields of academic interest, have been explored from multiple perspectives, while the literature specifically addressing gangster film tourism and mafia-themed tourism is still limited.

In particular, film-induced tourism has been researched drawing on diverse areas of knowledge, not only tourism studies but also the media sociology for the analysis of the processes of mediatisation of reality, behavioural psychology for visitor motivations and perceptions, communication and marketing for destination image management and branding, and cultural geography for the redefinition of the meaning of landscapes (Gavelli, 2020).

Scholars such as Beeton (2016) explore how films act as tourism drivers, sparking interest in destinations and often leading to substantial increases in visitor numbers. Oshriyeh and Capriello (2022) state that, rather than merely increasing destination exposure, films engage the viewer in a deeper emotional connection with the location through empathy with the storyline and characters. Building on this, Yao and Yang (2024) use the character arc theory to explore the appeal of villainous characters in film-induced tourism, mentioning *The Godfather* trilogy as a crucial contribution to cinematic exploration of charismatic leadership. Bolan, Boy and Bell (2011) investigate the concepts of authenticity and displacement, and argue that film-induced tourists seek some form of authenticity that makes sense to them and that they can relate back to the actual film. Gavelli (2020) suggests that not only a positive or romanticised portrayal in films can enhance the appeal of a location, but also

the representations of marginality and crime have sometimes proven effective in tourist promotion of places, citing mafia films for Sicily and the literary genre of Nordic noir for Scandinavian countries as examples. In the context of *The Godfather* films, the aesthetisation of Sicilian rural landscapes and the mafia presence contributed to a longstanding fascination with the region.

Academic inquiries on dark tourism mainly focus on drivers and behaviours of tourists, typologies of dark attractions and role of the media. The concept is first introduced by Foley and Lennon (1996), who also typify five kinds of travel behaviour; whereas Stone (2006) proposes a typology of dark tourism sites, grading them along a darkest-lightest spectrum. Seaton (2009) argues that dark tourism emerges from a long “thanatopic tradition” and was shaped by three key historical discourses: Christianity, antiquarianism and Romanticism. Tunbridge and Ashworth’s (1996) conceptual framework of dissonant heritage applied to “atrocities heritage” highlights an ethical challenge for the management of dark tourism sites, which, when commodified as tourist attractions, may result for some involved groups in the disinheritance and trivialisation of their past. Sharpley and Stone (2009) point out that at most dark tourism sites the boundaries between the educational or political message and their commercialisation as tourist products is blurred.

The motivations behind dark tourism range from a desire for education and reflection to morbid curiosity and thrill-seeking (Sharpley & Stone, 2009). Smith and Virág Tevely (2023) explore the motivations for consuming true and fictional crime and then visiting related locations, and note that true crime tourism entails seeking historical content and authentic representations, while fictional crime tourism is more a form of literary/film tourism focused on crimes than a type of dark tourism.

The literature devoted to representations of the Italian-American mafia in gangster films offers further insights. Scholars such as Larke (2003) and Renga (2019) identify some cultural myths surrounding the mafia, which act as a continuous discourse underlying a corpus of gangster films and contribute to the romanticisation of the phenomenon. Renga (2019) also highlights how the plots of mafia-themed films, both those dedicated to gangsters and to anti-mafia fighters, often blend reality and fiction, creating an image of the mafia that is simultaneously feared and admired. Ferrell, Hayward and Young (2008) focus on the emotional, aesthetic and performative dimensions of crime, reflecting on how its representations in popular culture shape public perceptions and even criminal behaviour itself.

Turning to the tourism field, Gerardi (2024) relates the romanticised narrative of the mafia in popular culture with a distorted perception of mafia-related locations as well. However, he also argues that, in considering such places as dark tourism sites, the romanticised storytelling acts as a coping strategy with otherwise destabilising events, also contributing to the sensemaking process about the phenomenon. Iandolo (2023), with reference to the case of Naples, observes how the “territorial

stigma” undergoes a process of commodification in the tourist narrative, meaning that negative characteristics are not obscured, but rather domesticated to the point of becoming distinguishing marks of the city and its perceived authenticity in the eyes of tourists. A recent study by Pagano and Sharpley (2024), founded on a corpus-based analysis of keywords in three English guidebooks to Sicily, labels the region as a dark tourism destination given its relationship with the mafia, but also highlights how the linguistic choices of the guidebooks place these darker aspects in the past by emphasising the history of the anti-mafia movements.

All mentioned studies on mafia representations refer to *The Godfather* trilogy as one of the most impactful examples, which had a major influence on both the gangster film genre and the perception of the Italian mafia and Sicily.

Research Questions

While the existing literature provides many valuable insights, some perspectives remain under-explored. Although it is widely acknowledged that cinematic narratives have shaped a romanticised perception of the mafia, to the best of my knowledge, there is no study specifically addressing how tour operators in territories with a real mafia presence reinforce or challenge this perception. Such topic begs for more academic attention and I aim to address this gap by exploring how guided tours in Sicilian locations associated with *The Godfather* navigate the tensions between the cinematic narrative and the historical reality, between capitalising on stereotypes and fostering a critical understanding of the mafia.

This study therefore provides a counterpoint to previous academic discussion on gangster film tourism, while also offering insights into the broader fields of film-induced and dark tourism, and contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the relation between tourism and the portrayal of the mafia.

My inquiry is guided by the following research questions:

RQ: Do *The Godfather* tours in Sicily replicate the narratives and imaginaries about the mafia portrayed in the films, or do they try to communicate a more critical narrative, taking into account historical reality?

Sub questions:

- Do the tours combine cinematic and historical heritage to address the ethical implications of mafia portrayals in films?

- Do the tours address the blurred boundaries and tensions between the fiction and reality of the mafia? And if so, how?

Theoretical Framework

Following a theoretical mapping of the fields of film-induced and dark tourism, my research will draw on the concepts of cultural myths and dissonant heritage to inform the critical analysis of the narratives of *The Godfather* films and related tours in Sicily.

In order to understand the portrayal of the mafia created by *The Godfather* trilogy, I will look at the cultural myths surrounding the phenomenon, referring to Barthes's (1957) theories and Larke's (2003) analysis. According to Barthes's assessment of mythologies in discourse, one function of myth is to participate in the formation of ideological constructs by "naturalising" concepts (Barthes, 2013). Specifically with regard to gangster films, Larke (2003) discusses the presence of mafia myths and argues that one of their functions is to give film narratives credibility as authentic portrayals.

The Godfather trilogy has significantly contributed to the mythologisation of the mafia and to the establishment of an enduring cultural narrative that has shaped collective perceptions of the phenomenon, and that is arguably also reflected in the film-induced tourism experiences. Tracing such mythologisation in the film narratives and then its influences in the local tourism narratives is crucial to comprehensively analysing the interplay between cinematic and historical perspectives in *The Godfather* tourism.

The framework of dissonant heritage, introduced by Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996), applies to the kind of heritage that carries conflicting interpretations. It is particularly relevant in dark tourism, where sites linked to difficult pasts or morally challenging histories are turned into tourist attractions (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996; Sharpley & Stone, 2009). Likewise, in the sites involved in *The Godfather* tours, a dissonance arises between tourism that capitalises on a largely fictional cinematic narrative that romanticises the mafia, and the historical past of the region, marked by the violence of a mafia that is anything but romantic. In this research, I will use this framework to analyse the conflicting relation between the two narrative sides and to address the ethical implications of exploiting stories of violence for touristic interests.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the narratives about the cinematic and real mafia in Sicily by tour guides in *The Godfather* tours. Given the focus on storytelling and discourse, a qualitative approach provides the most suitable methodological framework.

For the data collection and analysis, I employed a multi-method strategy, combining critical discourse analysis (CDA) and participant observation.

First, seven *The Godfather* guided group tours were selected for analysis based on criteria of popularity, determined by the number of ratings and reviews on travel platforms such as GetYourGuide and Tripadvisor; diversity in scope, ensuring a mix of luxury and cheap tours and slight variations in the activities included; accessibility, prioritising tours that provided detailed online descriptions of their itineraries (Table 1).

Table 1

Overview of *The Godfather* tours analysed.

	Duration	Data sources	Participant observation	Reviews
Dream Island	4 hours	Tour operator's website	No	No
Lemontour Catania	7 hours	GetYourGuide	No	Yes
Sicily Active	5 hours	Tour operator's website	No	No
Sicily Activities	5 hours	Tour operator's website, GetYourGuide, Tripadvisor	No	Yes
Sicily Excursions	NS	Tour operator's website	No	No
Sicily Grand Tour	7 hours	Tour operator's website, GetYourGuide, Tripadvisor	Yes	Yes
Taormina Deliziosa	5 hours	GetYourGuide, Tripadvisor	Yes	Yes

For each tour, I conducted a critical discourse analysis of the promotional materials available online, including both the websites of local tour operators, when present, and the listings on international platforms such as GetYourGuide and Tripadvisor. The analysis focused on how the experience is framed, the language used to describe the mafia as well as any visual marker that naturalise previously identified mafia myths, and the extent to which the narratives engage with the historical reality of the mafia in Sicily. Additionally, I analysed the visitor reviews of some of the tours, posted between March 2024 and March 2025, identifying recurring patterns in expectations and post-tour reflections. This step complemented the insights of how narratives are delivered to tourists and also allowed to draw some considerations on whether visitor reception align with or diverge from the intended tour framing.

To further expand my analysis, I participated in two of the tours and informally spoke to the guide of another tour, taking observational field notes. This firsthand experience provided deeper insights into how the tours replicate or challenge meanings, myths and stereotypes from the films, and how participants engage with them. The collected field data were then examined using critical discourse analysis to identify patterns in how *The Godfather* tours communicate their narratives.

Outline

To provide a comprehensive analysis ranging from *The Godfather* films' narrative to the touristic one, and to their interplay, this dissertation is structured in three chapters. The first chapter focuses on the cinematic narrative of the trilogy and analyses how the films construct and reinforce three dominant mafia myths, highlighting how they naturalise a romanticised imaginary about the mafia.

The second chapter shifts focus to the touristic storytelling and critically examines how the mafia myths are communicated in the context of *The Godfather* tours in Sicily. Through an analysis of promotional materials, on-site narratives and visitor reviews, I assess if the guided tours replicate the cinematic portrayal of the mafia or try to offer a more critical narrative.

The third chapter expands on the analysis by investigating whether the tours combine cinematic and historical heritage to address the ethical implications of the films' narrative, and whether they critically address the blurred boundaries between fiction and historical reality in the locations visited. In doing so, I also reflect on the ethical implications of the tours' narrative choices and on the potential heritage dissonance, and I outline possible pathways towards more critical storytelling in mafia-themed tourism.

Whereas the first chapter provide the fundamental groundwork on the object of this study, the second and third ones propose answers to the research question and sub questions based on the findings from the qualitative analysis. In the conclusion, I review the path followed and the conclusions reached, and hypothesise future research trajectories.

Chapter One

Cinematic Mythmaking: the Mafia According to *The Godfather*

In order to understand the interplay between the narratives about the mafia as conveyed in the films and in the guided tours in Sicily, it is first necessary to analyse them both separately. In this chapter, I will discuss three main myths about the mafia created or reinforced in *The Godfather* trilogy. I will briefly touch on how mythmaking operates in the narrative, and then, by unpacking the cinematic constructions of the mafia as Heritage, Loyalty and Justice, I will explore how, in practice, the films mythologise the mafia.

1.1 *The Godfather*: Mythologising the Mafia

The enduring influence of *The Godfather* trilogy on popular perceptions of the mafia can be attributed not only to its outstanding cinematic quality but also to its role in circulating powerful cultural myths. In Barthes's (1957) conceptualisation, myth operates by attributing a second layer of meaning to signs and making historically and ideologically loaded representations appear innocent and self-evident, as though they were natural and timeless. Given these characteristics, myth has "a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something, and it imposes it on us" (Barthes, 2013, p. 226). Larke (2003) draws on this concept to propose the existence of mafia myths in films and television, which he describes as narratives about the mafia that have been repeated across cultural media until they have been naturalised and assumed to be authentic.

Following Barthes's (1957) conceptualisation of myth and Larke's (2003) analysis of mafia myths in films, my hypothesis is that *The Godfather*'s cinematic portrayals engage in mythologising the mafia by framing it within a value system grounded in ethnicity, honour and loyalty to the family.

As highlighted by Larke (2003), Mario Puzo's 1969 book *The Godfather* was published at a time of heightened public interest and fascination with the mafia in the US, fuelled by consistent news coverage on and government investigations into the Italian-American mafia. Though primarily a work of fiction, the novel and the subsequent films incorporate references from both historical events and fictional conventions, which function not only as recognisable elements of the gangster film genre, but also as signifiers of mafia myths (Larke, 2003).

In this way, the narratives of *The Godfather* and of gangster films more broadly both draw credibility from mafia myths and contribute to reinforcing them. Mafia mythologies have indeed a

stabilising function and the power to deflect any inconsistencies within gangster narratives (Larke, 2003). By alluding to them, gangster film narratives can simplify complexity, render the mafia immediately intelligible to viewers, and ultimately turn a violent social phenomenon into a compelling story. As Larke (2003) observes, “popular concepts of the Mafia are so prevalent in recent American cultural history that their validity defies scrutiny. It is impossible to ascertain the truth; what remains and is perpetuated is myth” (p. 125).

In the following paragraphs, I will provide concrete support for these arguments, by analysing how the three mafia myths I have identified operate in *The Godfather* trilogy.

1.1.1 Sicilianity and the Mafia as Heritage

Within the narrative framework of *The Godfather*, Italian and particularly Sicilian ethnic identity is the one root that holds the Corleone family together and inextricably binds the destinies of its members to the mafia. As argued by Larke (2003), “ethnic identity is highlighted as the dominant signifier of heritage and unity” (p. 124).

For this study, inspired by Barthes’s (1957) analysis of *Romanité* in cinematic representations of ancient Romans, I coined the term Sicilianity (in French, *Sicilianité*), which differs from the bare concept of Sicilian ethnicity in that it refers to a constructed, symbolically loaded portrayal of Sicilian ethnicity. This sense of Sicilianity is expressed by a set of behavioural, visual and linguistic cues that recur throughout the trilogy and point to a myth of the mafia as heritage, a sort of ancestral Sicilian tradition handed down through generations and rooted in origins, blood and the native land.

The Corleone family’s power and legitimacy derive not just from the exercise of violence, but from their shared Sicilian heritage. The heritage of the mafia can be oppressive for members who seek, in vain, to break away from it, and instead nurturing for those who embrace it, offering them a sense of belonging that sets them apart from outsiders (Larke, 2003). By presenting the mafia as an inherited identity rather than a choice, this myth naturalises it as a coherent and timeless cultural system, rather than a mere criminal organisation. Drawing on this, *The Godfather* narrative appears rooted in cultural specificity and a credible example of how the mafia has developed in American society through the Sicilian community (Larke, 2003).

In fact, not only is Sicilian ethnicity essential to the identity of the *mafioso*, but also the mafia is presented as an unavoidable element of Italian-American identity, a tragic destiny of birth that cannot be escaped. At the beginning of *The Godfather*, Michael leads a life separate from his family and stays out of their criminal activities. As a veteran of the World War II, he is an honourable man who

has earned social respect even outside the family, and not only according to the Corleone's value system. Following the attack that leaves his father, Don Vito Corleone, dying, and which he finds out about in the newspapers – the ultimate expression of his detachment from his origins –, Michael is called back to the family. The lineage passed through bloodlines claims him for the place that has been waiting for him. Naturally, as if he were born for it and had always had the seed of the mafia within him, he grabs a gun and embraces the mafia code of honour that demands vengeance.

Acting according to this code is a behavioural cue of Sicilianity. These are unwritten laws, but to be part of the family means to know and embody them. Sometimes, they are explicitly traced back to the Sicilian identity: «No Sicilian can refuse a request on his daughter's wedding day», says Don Vito in the first film, elevating familial tradition to sacred obligation.

Another example is the *omertà*, the rule of silence that commands refraining from reporting other *mafiosi*, so that they are not punished by the laws of the state but by the vengeance of those they have offended. In *The Godfather Part II*, Michael is indicted to appear before a Senate Committee hearing on charges of organised criminal activity, after his former associate Frankie Pentangeli has promised to testify against him. On the day of the testimony, Michael shows up in the courtroom with Pentangeli's brother, who has flown in from Sicily. He is an old Don wearing traditional Sicilian clothes and who speaks no English. He doesn't utter a single word, but at the sight of him, Pentangeli retracts all his statements and the case against Michael collapses. Pentangeli's brother embodies Sicilian heritage; he is there to remind him that breaking the code of *omertà* would mean dishonouring his family name (Larke, 2003). This scene is pivotal in reinforcing not only the myth of the mafia as Sicilian heritage, but also the idea that the mafia is an unfathomable force, able to elude the law thanks to the codes that bind its members (Larke, 2003).

Sicilianity in *The Godfather* films is also conveyed through visual markers, some of which are based on stereotypes but are nevertheless effective in consolidating the characterisation of the Sicilian identity of the protagonists. The main characters have distinctly Italian or Italian-American features, an effect deliberately sought by director Coppola through his casting choices and reinforced by the hairstyles, Italian-tailored suits and hand gestures. Among the most striking details are Don Vito's distinctive moustache and the *coppola* worn by Michael when he goes to Sicily in the first film and by the young Don Vito in Part II.

The Italian language mixed with Sicilian dialect is used often during family meetings or encounters with other mafia families, and is a linguistic marker of Sicilianity. Remarkably, even when speaking English, the Corleones resort to Sicilian for expressions specific to the mafia language, referring to the codes of honour such as *vendetta*, *infamia*, *omertà*, or hierarchical roles such as *consigliere* or *picciotto*. This serves to further emphasise the link between Sicilian heritage and the mafia.

The use of Italian or Sicilian dialect is also a way of excluding outsiders, consistent with a narrative of the mafia as a closed system determined by ethnicity. For instance, there are frequent allusions to the character of Tom Hagen as an outsider due to his Irish-German origin, despite his fundamental role as Don Vito's trusted *consigliere* (legal adviser) and his status as almost an adopted son. This kind of exclusion is also evident in the relationship between Michael and his non-Sicilian wife Kay. Throughout the films, Kay remains an outsider to the family, both culturally and morally. In contrast, Michael's Sicilian wife Apollonia, though briefly present, is depicted as naturally compatible: silent, obedient and bound by his same unspoken codes since birth. This reinforces the idea that true belonging to the family is reserved for those who embody Sicilianity.

Finally, the scenes set in Sicily are key to building the Sicilian identity of the characters. In the first film, Michael's voluntary exile in Corleone is a moment of reconnection with his roots. In a process of finding a sense of identity (Boylan, in Renga, 2019) that will prepare him to take his place as head of the family, Michael adapts to the slow pace of rural Sicilian life. However, Michael also begins to develop certain traits that foreshadow his future role. When he asks Apollonia's father for her hand in marriage, he behaves like a Don for the first time, showing respect for traditions and family roles, but exuding in his gestures and words that aura of calm power and restrained violence that we had only seen in Don Vito until then. His awareness of his origins, gained through his immersion in Sicilian traditions, is at the same time an awareness of his destiny, the mafia.

Also in *The Godfather Part III*, Michael's return to Sicily is an attempt to reconnect with his roots in order to hold together his now fractured family. He tells his sister Costanza "Connie": «Let me show you Sicily, the real Sicily. Maybe you'll understand the family history». Sicily and Sicilianity are the place to which one always returns, the heart of the mafia heritage, simultaneously a source of cohesion and a tragic destiny.

1.1.2 Family, Patriarchy and the Mafia as Loyalty

Linked to ethnic heritage is the concept of family, one of the cornerstones for the plot and character development throughout the trilogy. The Corleones tend to keep their vocation going within the family, which is therefore a means of perpetuating the heritage of the mafia generation after generation (Larke, 2003).

Family bonds also function as the primary signifier through which the myth of the mafia as loyalty is constructed and naturalised. Loyalty here is not merely a personal virtue but an absolute moral code

rooted in kinship, presented as foundational and non-negotiable, particularly among men. The family is where such loyalty is demanded, performed, policed and ritualised.

The importance of loyalty to the family is maintained by focusing on the disastrous results of any lapses in unity (Larke, 2003). Every breach of loyalty is treated as an existential fracture in the entire moral order. Don Michael's power begins to crumble when, at the beginning of Part II, he picks Tom Hagen to be his deputy, rather than Fredo, his only remaining brother, his flesh and blood. At the end of the film, the breakdown of family loyalties becomes complete when Michael has Fredo killed. This event is a tragic point of no return that starts the erosion of the very family he claims to protect. Part III is focused on Michael's desperate attempts to rekindle connections with his Sicilian roots and rebuild the unity of his family, without which all strength is lost.

Since the mafia family is organised hierarchically around a dominant male father figure, the acceptance of patriarchal rules is also portrayed as essential for the family's own existence (Larke, 2003). Men are expected to enforce loyalty by doing anything to protect the integrity of the family, even at the cost of sacrificing individual interests, as Michael does in the first film when giving up his legitimate career. It is a matter of their respectability and moral integrity, as men, as Sicilians, as *mafiosi*. In the words of Don Vito, «a man who doesn't spend time with his family will never be a real man». On the other hand, the individual interests of women of the family are not taken into account. For them, loyalty means silence, unquestioning obedience and no claim to participate in decision-making. In the moral economy of the family, they are marginal figures, whose fate is utterly at the whim of the decisions of their fathers, brothers or husbands. The three main female characters in the trilogy, Connie, Kay and Mary, respectively Michael's sister, wife and daughter, are largely underexplored in terms of personality and, apart from rare moments when they attempt to assert themselves with little success, they suffer from the consequences of the family's mafia activities.

The myth of the mafia as loyalty functions to validate a world in which allegiance to the family overrides all other ethics and justifies violence and control. The myth's power lies in how it cloaks violence in protection and betrayal in tragedy, rendering mafia loyalty not only credible, but inevitable. In this way, it also contributes to painting a romantic portrait of the *mafioso* as a man of contradictions, a tender-hearted violent who is ruthless toward his enemies but devoted to his family (Renga, 2019). When Michael eliminates dozens of potential enemies in the final scene of the first film, his act is not framed as cruelty but as necessary for the greater good of the family.

Again, as in the myth of heritage, the mafia is presented as something intrinsic to what ties the characters together, transcending their will because it is inscribed in their belonging. To the point that Michael, when accused in the hearing in Part II of being «part of the Corleone criminal organisation»,

replies «Corleone family. We call it the family», making it clear that, in his view, crime and family are two sides of the same coin.

1.1.3 Vengeance and the Mafia as Justice

«For justice, we must go to Don Corleone». This is how a modest undertaker named Bonasera explains why he is asking the Godfather for a favour on his daughter's wedding day. With a strong Italian accent, Bonasera recounts that his daughter was beaten, but the two perpetrators were immediately released due to a suspended sentence, while she will be scarred for life. He had chosen to go to the police «like a good American», but he does not feel he has obtained justice from them. Don Vito reproaches him for involving the police and not turning to himself from the outset, and is outraged that Bonasera is offering him money, because taking on the case is simply a matter of justice. In assigning the task to his enforcers, Don Vito indicates that the two thugs should not be killed, because the punishment must be just, that is, proportionate to the offence. «We are not murderers, in spite of what this undertaker says».

That of the mafia as a dispenser of justice is another crucial myth embedded in *The Godfather* narrative and sustained through the signifier of vengeance. In the trilogy, violence is framed as a form of righteous retribution, meant to restore balance and punish threats to the established order. Such retributive logic becomes a moral code of its own, and an alternative justice system that seems more efficient than the institutional one. After all, the three films are filled with corrupt police officers, politicians and clergymen, or rival gangsters who act outside the code of honour of the mafia. In these cases, the Corleones' interventions appear morally justified, if not noble. One of their mottos is: «This is not personal, it's only business». They consider themselves business people, who do what must be done to maintain order. And if someone in the family breaks their word, vengeance by the offended party is expected and even respected.

This myth also operates to define boundaries between the criminal and ordinary society, and thus suggests that the mafia is not threatening the ordinary citizens (Larke, 2003). The films show a great deal of violence, but they also suggest that it is directed only at those who have done wrong or are involved in the mafia underworld, while honest citizens have nothing to fear (Larke, 2003).

The perception of justice is reinforced by the fact that vengeance is carefully planned, often ritualised and executed with solemn precision. The killings at the end of the first film, carried out at the same time as the baptism of Michael's godchild, are perhaps the most iconic example of this; they

are an act of deadly retribution performed in parallel with a sacred rite, with a liturgical aura common to both.

Besides the acts of vengeance, the Corleones are portrayed as men of honour, not driven by greed or hatred, but by a sense of what is right and wrong within their world. Don Vito refuses to enter the drug trafficking business stating: «I don't want it near schools, I don't want it near children. That's *infamia*». The idea that a gangster stands as a moral gatekeeper is paradoxical, but it draws credibility from the myth of the mafia as a force for justice, which naturalises and universalises moral standards that are instead contingent on a twisted context.

1.2 Conclusion

The Godfather trilogy plays a crucial role in constructing, reinforcing and circulating a mythologised vision of the mafia, one that blends violence and criminality with heritage, tradition, loyalty, honour and justice. Such mythologisation lies at the heart of a romanticised cinematic portrayal of the mafia as an identitarian system rooted in Sicilian ethnicity, family bonds and its own moral codes.

By exploring the myths of the mafia as Heritage, Loyalty and Justice, this chapter has illustrated how *The Godfather* films engage in mythmaking, while also offering a critical lens on the discursive strategies involved in the process. This lays the groundwork to assess, in the following chapter, the extent to which the narratives of *The Godfather* guided tours in Sicily replicate the cinematic mythology or try to leverage the history of the locations to communicate a more critical narrative.

Chapter Two

Touristic Storytelling: Narratives about the Mafia in *The Godfather* Tours

The previously discussed myths operate in *The Godfather* cinematic narrative by stripping the mafia of its historical and contextual specificity. Even the elements rooted in historical truth, primarily the Sicilian and Italian origins of the American mafia (Balsamo & Carpozi, 2019), are imbued with new meanings and romanticised. But what happens when this narrative moves off the screen and is taken to the place where it all began, Sicily, where there is the potential for an encounter with the historical reality of the mafia?

By critically examining promotional materials, on-site narratives and visitor reviews, the first section of this chapter aims to understand how cinematic myths are included in the tourism narratives before, during and after *The Godfather* tours. This analysis will enable me to answer the main research question in the second section of the chapter, in which I will determine whether the replication of *The Godfather*'s narratives or the communication of a narrative more adherent to historical reality prevails.

2.1 *The Godfather* Tours: Mediating Mafia Myths for Tourists

The Godfather tours could potentially act as mediators in the encounter between the cinematic narrative and the historical reality. Given the strong influence of cinematic narratives on the expectations and experiences of film-induced tourists (Beeton, 2016; Bolan et al., 2011), tour providers have to capitalise at least in part on the cinematic imaginary of the films to present the locations, as much as they may consider it romanticised and stereotypical. However, using this imagery familiar to tourists as a gateway, they could include not only fictional events but also real ones in their storytelling, thus restoring the historical and contextual specificity of the mafia and reducing the ideological power of myths.

The starting point is to recognise the influence that these myths have on tourists, whose gaze is shaped by their previous experience of the films (Long & Robinson, 2009), including their visual but also emotional characteristics. Indeed, in addition to the scenery, their dominant motivational drivers are the narrative and the characters (Bolan et al., 2011). Film-induced tourists seek a sense of connection with the story and wish to step into the fiction of the films, so they often expect the re-

enactment of cinematic narrative elements in the real-world locations where the films were shot (Beeton, 2016). For a tour provider, it is important to take into account these expectations.

At the same time, building on the previously determined premise that *The Godfather* tourism also has some features of dark tourism, it is equally crucial to consider that these tourists are visiting locations of both fictional and true crime, even if they are sometimes more or exclusively aware of the former. Taking into account both fiction and historical reality could reduce the heritage dissonance that may arise when cinematic mythologisation overshadows the historically grounded narrative. Conversely, uncritically replicating myths could reinforce the romanticisation on the mafia, and ignoring the historical heritage of the mafia in Sicily risks turning a traumatic past, and present, into pure entertainment.

In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the findings of my multi-method analysis, which combined critical discourse analysis and participant observation, on seven *The Godfather* tours, to outline how mafia myths conveyed by films are embedded in the tourist experience.

2.1.1 Before the Tours: Promotional Materials

The narrative for tourists begins with online promotional materials, which play a role in mediating expectations and setting the stage for the tour experience on-site. The way the tours are marketed provides a first impression on how the cinematic imaginaries of the mafia are mobilised, although this impression might sometimes be wholly or partly disregarded by the content of the actual tour.

My analysis included both the tour operators' websites and platforms such as GetYourGuide and Tripadvisor³. Drawing on Machin and Mayr's (2023) approach to critical discourse analysis, I examined lexical and narrative choices, visual elements and the presence or absence of certain topics, in order to identify whether the discursive strategies embed markers that refer to the mafia myths previously discussed. I organised my findings by highlighting the elements that reinforce or challenge the myths, and other evidence that is relevant to this study, providing examples from the promotional materials of tours and sometimes comparing them.

In the promotion of all tours, there is a strong emphasis on Sicilianity, conveyed by frequent appeals to the authenticity of the locations, in particular the villages of Savoca and Forza d'Agrò. In terms of wording, the tours are defined as "a real insight into Sicily, the locals, their culture and everyday way of life" (Sicily Grand Tour), an immersion "in the allure of Sicily" (Sicily Active) or "in the truest Sicily" (Sicily Excursions). Apart from this, though, there are few references to the

³ Some materials, originally written in Italian, were translated by the author.

historical or landscape features that make the area distinctive. None mention the fact that the two villages, whose real names are never used in the films, are the Corleone of the fiction. Some talk about a “plunge into the past” (Lemontour Catania) and “places where time has stopped” (Dream Island), evoking the imagery of the Sicilian scenes of *The Godfather*. Particularly noteworthy is Dream Island, which establishes an explicit link between Sicilianity and the mafia, defining Sicily as “a land where everything is a riot of lights, colours, flavours, traditions, legends, written rules and rules handed down, such as those of the mafia”. The mention of the mafia as heritage is aligned with the mythologisation of *The Godfather*.

Looking at the content of the tours, the services are almost identical for all providers, but two of them offer two extra experiences strongly linked to the concept of Sicilianity: a typical Sicilian pasta lunch (Sicily Activities) and a ride on the folkloric three-wheeled moto ape (Sicily Active).

An analysis of the visual content also reveals a degree of uniformity: almost all providers include photos of the places visited but without any particular markers of Sicilianity. The exception is Sicily Activities, which accompanies the tour description with the photograph shown in Figure 1, that has no clear correlation with *The Godfather* films or the tour locations, but which contains a series of visual elements iconic of Sicily, such as prickly pears, traditional clothing and the *coppola* worn by the terracotta statuette, and two vases recalling the aesthetics of Sicilian painted ceramics.

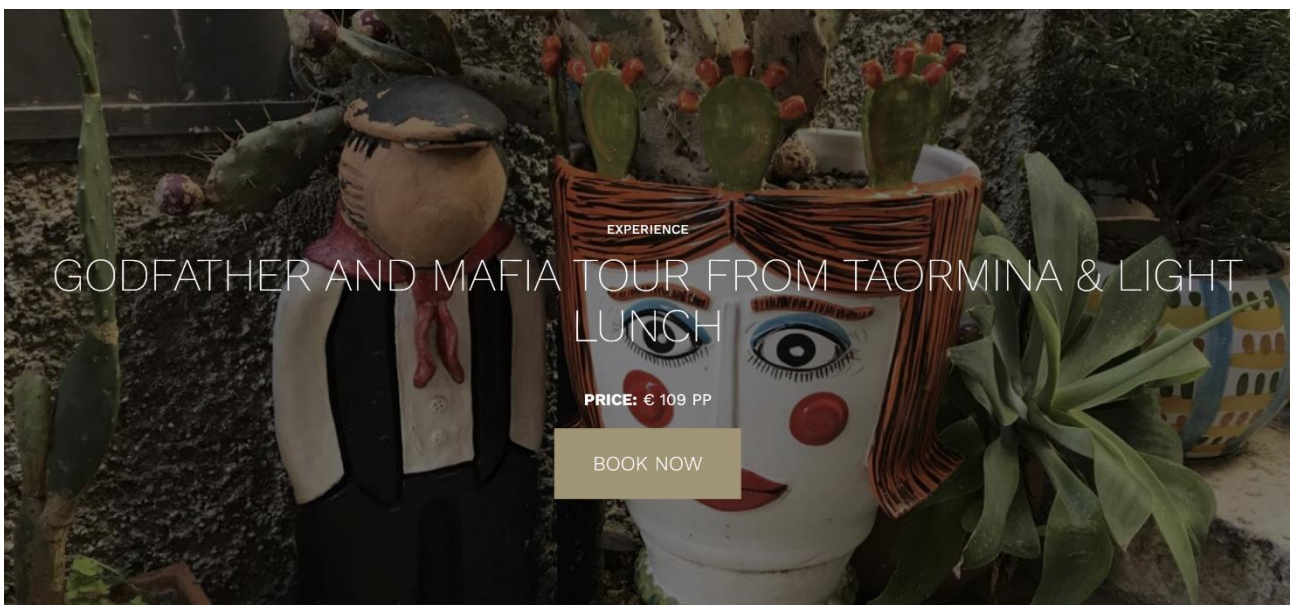


Figure 1

Header image from the webpage *Godfather and Mafia Tour from Taormina & Light Lunch*, depicting Sicilian visual icons such as prickly pears, a statuette with traditional clothing and ceramics vases.

Note. No image credit listed. Retrieved April 16, 2025, from

<https://www.sicilyactivities.com/experience-day-tours/godfather-mafia-tour-taormina/>

The Sicilianity evoked by these promotional materials appears very different from that in *The Godfather* films. It is more straightforward and folkloric, in short, touristic. However, the markers identified in the films and in these pre-tour narratives are part of a continuum in which film-induced tourists are first led as film viewers to give meaning to the story of the Corleone family in relation to their Sicilian ethnic identity and heritage, and then as tourists to see the distinctiveness of this heritage confirmed right at its roots, albeit through a different visual language. This observation is reinforced by the finding that all materials seem to be purposely aimed at an audience of film-induced tourists, marketing the tour experience as a “reliving” the scenes of *The Godfather*. Among the expressions used are: “Follow in the footsteps of Michael Corleone” (Sicily Grand Tour), “You will feel like a real character from *The Godfather*” (Sicily Excursions), “Step into the world of the infamous Corleone family” (Sicily Active). The latter is the only case in which a negative connotation is given to the protagonists of the film, through the adjective “infamous”, even if the invitation to enter their world remains.

Consistent with this narrative of immersion, some of the providers refer to fictional events from *The Godfather* set in the tour locations as if they had actually happened. “Visit the Church of San Nicolò/Santa Lucia, where Michael married Apollonia. Enjoy a drink or a lemon granita at Bar Vitelli, where Michael asked Mr Vitelli for his daughter’s hand in marriage” (Sicily Grand Tour). Conversely, other providers refer to the sites as “filming locations”.

The analysis also brings out some expressions that draw on the language of fans, with the word “iconic” being widely used by all providers. Sicily Active, more than the others, leverages the presence of numerous “memorabilia from the films” at the locations and defines the tour as “a must-visit for any *Godfather* fan”. Two providers suggest that the tour is a way to see behind the scenes of the film, precisely a “new lens” (Taormina Deliziosa) and an occasion to “unveil the secret of *The Godfather* estate in Sicily” (Sicily Active).

However, it seems that the historical reality of the mafia is almost entirely excluded from these discovery experiences. The only exception is the “*Godfather* and Mafia Tour” provided by Sicily Activities, which promises to complement the visit to the filming locations with an introduction to the Sicilian mafia. The website reads: “While taking the Walking tour, your guide will introduce you to the real history of the Sicilian Mafia, how it grew and spread very quickly throughout Italy. You will hear about the real structure (cupola), about its boss and about the Mafia clan wars to control the territory”. In all other promotional materials analysed, there are only vague allusions to the connection between *The Godfather* narrative and the reality of the mafia. Dream Island cites mafia traditions, as mentioned above, and also describes the tour as “a journey between cinema and reality”. Lemontour Catania writes: “Learn about the tales behind the great film and the equally captivating history of the

island that inspired this masterpiece”. The absence of references to the topic is very telling for the purposes of this study.

From the analysis of the materials available to tourists before the tours, I could draw some preliminary observations. The content is much more focused on the links with *The Godfather* trilogy than on the historical and landscape features of the locations visited, and tends to leverage the mafia imagery portrayed in the films, without complementing nor contrasting it with references to historical reality.

In the next paragraph, I will expand these observations by presenting the findings of the analysis of the on-site narratives, based on observational field notes collected during my participation in two guided tours and a phone call about another one.

2.1.2 During the Tours: On-Site Narratives

I carried out participant observation in two of the selected tours, namely those by Sicily Grand Tour and Taormina Deliziosa, and during an informative phone call with the tour guide of Sicily Activities, in spring 2025. During both the tours and the call, I acted like any other participant, without disclosing that I was conducting field research nor interfering in any way with the course of the tour. I was able to observe the narratives used by the guides in engaging with the sites and the interactions with tourists, as well as physical markers at locations. I will present my findings starting with some general remarks common to the three tours, before moving on to analyse how each of them communicate their narratives.

The three tours had an almost identical structure to each other and to the other tours involved in this study, according to the promotional materials. They all included pick-up of participants in Catania and/or Taormina by van and a walking tour in English with a local guide to the sites of interest from *The Godfather* in Savoca and Forza d’Agrò. In addition to these usual stops, Sicily Grand Tour also included a visit to the Castello degli Schiavi (Castle of the Slaves), which in the films is Villa Corleone and in the reality is the private residence of a local baron.

Most of the filming locations have remained, or have been maintained, almost unchanged from how they appear in the films, despite the passing of more than half a century. This is not a usual feature of film-induced tourism sites, since films rarely offer an authentic view of the place compared to the reality of what tourists will find there (Bolan et al., 2011). This gives the locations of *The Godfather* tours a feel of authenticity, which is leveraged both in the storytelling of the guides and by on-site markers such as pictures from film scenes depicting the characters in the locations.

Such is the case of Bar Vitelli in Savoca, which has remained the same as in the scene where Michael asks Apollonia’s father, the bar owner, for her hand in marriage. Interestingly, before filming, the location was not a bar but a historic building. To shoot the film, the simple black-lettered sign “Bar Vitelli” was painted and another metal sign with a beer brand was added. After filming, the place was actually turned into a bar and the two signs were preserved unaltered, as shown in Figure 2. The metal one was stolen two years ago and was immediately replaced with an identical replica. Today, tourists can sit in the outdoor seating area where Michael Corleone sat and order overpriced *crostoni* named after characters from the film. They can also visit a room inside the bar filled with photos from the film and the set, as well as memorabilia such as the original chair used by Al Pacino, the actor who played Michael.



Figure 2

The exterior of Bar Vitelli in Savoca, Sicily – an iconic filming location for *The Godfather*.
 Note. Editorial stock photo retrieved from <https://www.dreamstime.com/bar-film-godfather-vitelli-image107162845>

On the same street of the bar, other businesses live off its reflected fame. An ice cream parlour offers flavours named after the characters, and two souvenir shops sell magnets, mugs and t-shirts with *The Godfather*-themed designs, often mixing iconic elements from the film, such as the logo, the face of Don Vito Corleone and quotes, with elements symbolic of Sicily and therefore of

Sicilianity, such as the *trinacria*⁴, or of Italy in general, such as the Vespa, as shown in Figure 3. In the square in front of the bar, a statue of the director of the trilogy, Francis Ford Coppola, has recently been installed by a local artist.

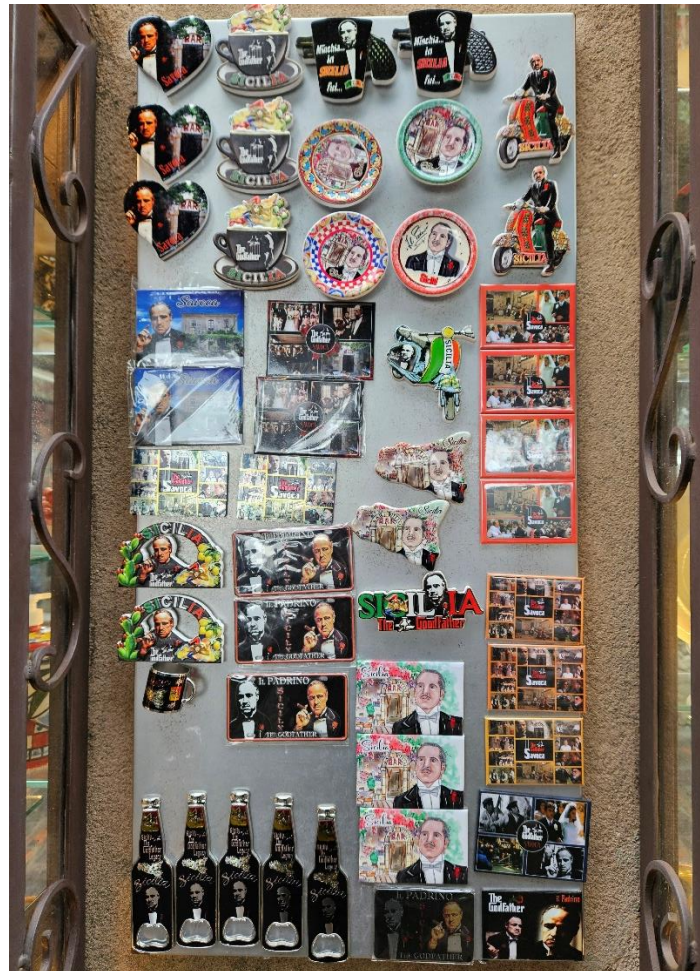


Figure 3

The Godfather-themed magnets outside a souvenir shop in Savoca, Sicily. Photograph taken by the author, 2025.

In a study on *The Godfather* in the touristic image of Savoca, Gambino (2016) points out that the town had to deal with the impact of film-induced tourism unexpectedly and without a systemic vision, rather than as the result of a destination management promotional effort, and this could be one reason why *The Godfather* tourism has so extensively affected the city's services.

The tours of Savoca then continue with a short climb to the Church of San Nicolò on top of the hill, the location of Michael's and Apollonia's (fictional) wedding. Inside the church, there is a large

⁴ The most prominent symbol of Sicily, depicting a woman's head with three curved legs emerging from it. It is also featured on the official coat of arms of the region on a yellow and red background, representing the cities of Palermo and Corleone.

sign about the film, summarising the plot and describing the wedding scene in particular, with text in Italian and English and pictures from the film. Next to it, on a television, the wedding scene is shown on a loop along with other promotional videos of events in the area. Also on display are the original costume worn by the priest, who was the actual priest of that church at the time, and the original Bible used for the wedding vows.

The next stop is Forza d'Agrò, where Michael's wedding reception in *The Godfather*, Vito Corleone's escape as a child in a mule-borne basket to flee the vengeance of the local boss in Part II, and Michael's and Kay's walk to show her Vito's childhood house in Part III, were filmed. In all cases, the setting is identified in the films as Corleone. Here, the locations are less recognisable, partly because they only appear on screen for a few seconds each. Next to the door of Vito's house, there's a picture of Michael and Kay, placed by the private owner of the place.

The Castello degli Schiavi has remained the same as in the films and has also retained some structural changes made for filming purposes, such as the widening of the entrance gate and the installation of a well in the centre of the courtyard. In one of the buildings overlooking the courtyard, a small exhibition has been set up with memorabilia and photos from the set, and visitors can watch a selection of scenes from *The Godfather* trilogy on a television. More memorabilia and a series of books and newspaper articles on the making of the films are also on display on the first floor of the castle. In the courtyard is a replica of the chair on which the elderly Michael dies in the final scene of the Part III, and on which now tourists pose for pictures.

In the following pages, I will explore how these locations have been described in the narratives of the three tours.

Sicily Grand Tour

Sicily Grand Tour is a tour operator which, at the time of data collection, had about twenty nature and history tours available. *The Godfather* one was not its only film-induced tour; there were also tours dedicated to the television series *The White Lotus* (second season) and *Il commissario Montalbano* (*Inspector Montalbano*), both shot and set in Sicily.

On the day of my participant observation, the tour had ten participants, comprising two Chileans, two Japanese, four Romanians and two Italians, including myself. We were accompanied by a driver and a guide, who is also the owner of Sicily Grand Tour. He told me that it is very rare to see Italian tourists on this tour.

The tour appeared from the outset to be strongly focused on the cinematic content. The guide was an avid fan of the trilogy and knew many technical details and curiosities. He also carried five large books on the making of the trilogy, which he used to present additional anecdotes.

A few minutes after the tour started, as we were heading to the first location, one of the participants asked a question about the “real mafia in Sicily”. The guide cut it short, replying that his was a film-themed tour, dedicated solely to *The Godfather* trilogy, and that the mafia had nothing to do with it. He also mentioned that this kind of tour was sometimes accused of glorifying the mafia, but that for him it was just based on passion for cinema and, if anything, it was a glorification of a cinematic masterpiece. Later, addressing me and the other Italian participant in Italian, he said that on every tour there is at least one person who asks about the “real mafia” and that he has always had the impression that foreigners’ knowledge of the subject is mostly based on stereotypes derived from novels and films. This brief interaction outside the storytelling of the tour revealed the guide’s intentions to exclude the historical reality of the mafia from the narrative, even in the face of explicit interest from tourists.

However, during the tour, some references to the mafia emerged in anecdotes about the production of the film. For instance, the guide said that, when filming *The Godfather*, Paramount Pictures had to make an agreement with the Italian-American Civil Rights League, founded and led by mafia boss Joe Colombo, so that the words “Mafia” and “*Cosa Nostra*” would never be mentioned in the film, in order not to damage the reputation of the Italian-American community. In fact, these words are only mentioned two or three times, and only in Parts II and III. He also said that there are several unconfirmed stories of threats and demands for *pizzo* (protection money) received by the crew. However, all these anecdotes involved the Italian-American mafia active in US cities, not the Sicilian mafia, and were never the starting point for a more detailed reflection on the dynamics of the mafia outside the context of the films.

Instead, the presence of Sicily and Sicilianity in the films was a central theme of the tour. The guide listed several markers of Sicilianity in the trilogy, first and foremost oranges, which always appear on screen before a murder is committed. The fruit, a symbol of Sicily, acts as a harbinger of death in the carefully crafted narrative of *The Godfather*. Perhaps the most iconic example is the scene in the first film in which Don Vito is attacked while buying fruit from a greengrocer, also a gesture that exudes Sicilianity, and when he is shot, several oranges roll onto the street. Another marker is the portrayal of the characters by the actors: Marlon Brando gave his voice an accent inspired by real-life Italian-American *mafiosi* to play Don Vito, while Robert De Niro spent four months in Sicily to learn the accent and gestures for his role as the young Don Vito.

In addition, the guide shed light on the meanings of some gestures that should be interpreted in the light of Sicilian traditions and codes of behaviour. For instance, when Mr Vitelli meets Michael at the bar, he has a relaxed posture and his suspenders are down, but when they start talking about his daughter, he straightens up and puts his suspenders on as a sign of formality. The guide also explained

the scene of Frankie Pentangeli's brother and mentioned the concept of *omertà*, although without going into further detail.

Notably, the only occasions when the contrast between the cinematic portrayal and reality came up in the storytelling were in relation to how the films framed the territory. The guide did not just point out how much the locations had remained the same as in the film, but placed a lot of emphasis on how they had been physically altered or selectively framed to convey an image of Sicily more consistent with the narrative of the films. I have already mentioned that the Bar Vitelli, with its retro aesthetic, was created specifically for the film and that almost all the Sicilian scenes were shot in locations other than those mentioned in the films. The guide explained that this was necessary because the real town of Corleone was too modern at the time of filming. The villages of Savoca and Forza d'Agrò were chosen for their aura of timelessness, which was not only more apt to represent the era in which the story takes place – the first film was filmed in 1972, but the events are set in 1946 – but also better suited to convey the image of an ancestral Sicily in contrast to the modern, corrupt New York. The focus on these staged aspects of *The Godfather* narrative, even if not directly related to the subject of the mafia, might be viewed as a veiled critical stance on the part of the guide. Though not mentioning myths, the guide indirectly points to their naturalising function in the trilogy when he talks about how locations were framed to make them look more consistent with an idea of Sicilianity that would be recognisable to most viewers. This highlights how the cinematic portrayal of *The Godfather* aims to create possibilities for identification, rather than alienation and criticism, while the tour, by revealing the backstories, undermines the foundations on which this identification is built.

During the tour, I also had the opportunity to observe and talk to the other participants. The two Chilean participants in particular were huge fans of the trilogy and said that they looked at *The Godfather* as a source of inspiration for business management and loyalty to the family. For them, the aspect of the mafia is marginal, an added layer in the cinematic narrative to make the story more appealing, but it is the values of the Corleone family that resonate the most. It was only during their trip to Sicily that they began to wonder which elements of historical reality counterpointed the story, but they felt that the subject of the mafia was taboo among Sicilians and, until then, they had not been able to explore it as deeply as they would have liked. The experience of these two participants reinforces both the hypothesis that the mythologisation of the mafia in *The Godfather* films leads to a perception of its value system as universal and separate from the mafia context, and the hypothesis that tours would have the potential to nuance this mythologisation with elements of historical reality.

Taormina Deliziosa

Taormina Deliziosa is a tour operator active in the Catania and Taormina area which, at the time of data collection, relied solely on platforms such as GetYourGuide and Tripadvisor to promote and market its services.

On the day of my participant observation, the tour had seven participants, comprising four Californians, one British and two Italians, including myself. We were accompanied by a guide, who is the owner of Taormina Deliziosa and was also driving the van. He too commented that it is very rare to see Italian participants on this particular tour.

Unlike the previous tour, this one embedded anecdotes about both the films and the reality of the Sicilian mafia in its storytelling, but the latter were presented in an extremely simplified, caricatured and at times inaccurate manner. During the stop at the church of San Nicolò, the guide took some time to recount the rise of the mafia in Sicily, tracing it back to control over water, a scarce resource in the region. Notably, however, he did not mention any specific time or place, nor any names or events. He gave a superficial introduction to the tactics of intimidation and violence that underpin the power of the mafia, placing considerable emphasis on the most story-worthy aspects, some of which are also present in the films as signifiers of myths, such as power based on loyalty to the family. The portrait that emerged was of a violent but clever mafia, through frequent references to its ability to evade the police, and respectful of codes of honour and traditions, in line with the portrayal of the films.

There was a strong entertainment and performance component in this storytelling. During the talk, the guide pointed to two of the Californian participants and assigned two of them the role of farmers and the other two the role of *mafiosi*, then proceeded to stage a very simplistic dialogue between the *mafiosi* extorting the *pizzo* and the oppressed farmers. Overall, the guide made extensive use of similar tactics to engage the group, such as asking frequent questions to test our knowledge, and even dropped a couple of jokes about the mafia.

Furthermore, exaggerations with no basis in reality were frequently used. For instance, according to the guide, the mafia never touched Taormina because it is a tourist destination and represents Sicily abroad, while in Catania there are shootouts in the streets and tourists could unwittingly find themselves sitting next to a mafia member in a café. The mafia here emerges as noble and smart for choosing to spare Taormina, and as a folkloric and slightly thrilling phenomenon that can be experienced in Catania. Both the scholarship on mafia history (Lupo, 2018) and recent news articles (Anselmo, 2025) refute the guide, as the Taormina area has been implicated in drug trafficking and extortion against tourism operators by two Etnean mafia clans.

Significantly, the guide recounted some trivia that were also included in the tour by Sicily Grand Tour, such as the symbolism of oranges in the trilogy and the agreement with the Italian-American Civil Rights League not to mention the mafia directly. However, he did so in a sensationalist way, placing more emphasis on the threats made by the mafia against the filmmakers, and insinuating that there had certainly been blackmail and maybe even murders that no one knew about.

The stereotyping did not only concern the mafia, but also Sicilian identity. In explaining some expressions in Sicilian dialect, the guide, a Sicilian man, drew on the most common stereotypes, such as that Sicilians are loud and do not speak Italian well.

In conclusion, in recounting some of the history of the Sicilian mafia, the guide certainly introduced a narrative focus on the peculiarities of the mafia in Sicily, but failed to place them in an accurate historical and social context, instead drawing on imaginaries and stereotypes similar to those portrayed in the films, if not even more misleading, and ultimately failing to contrast the cinematic narrative and its myths.

Sicily Activities

Sicily Activities was initially founded as a tour operator and has then developed as a destination management and travel design company. Their core business is now to design luxury trips all around Sicily and take care of the whole travel experience. However, they still organise also small group and private daily tours, such as “The Godfather and Mafia Tour from Taormina”, which is available only during the peak tourist season, from April to October. Interestingly, the tour has different titles on the GetYourGuide page – “Taormina: Godfather Vs Mafia Tour with Pasta Lunch” – and on the Tripadvisor page – “Godfather vs Mafia Tour & Pasta Lunch (Small Group or Private)” –, with that “Vs” giving a slightly different nuance.

Since I was unable to participate in the tour, I contacted one of the guides by phone and informally asked some open questions about it as a tourist interested in the activity. Although the guide always gives the tour in English, our conversation was conducted in Italian. As in the other two cases analysed, he was surprised to hear from an Italian tourist and commented that some of the tour content would probably seem obvious to me. I asked him what he meant and he told me that almost all foreign tourists join the tour with stereotyped expectations about Sicily, originating from books and films, and that he tries to dismantle them. For instance, he tries to tone down the romantic vision of the mafia boss which some people associate with Don Vito Corleone, contrasting it with the example of a real boss who came from Corleone, Salvatore “Totò” Riina, one of the most influential leaders of *Cosa Nostra*, known as “*La Belva*” (“The Beast”) for his brutality, and responsible for some of the

most heinous massacres in Italian mafia history, including the massacres of Capaci⁵ and via D'Amelio⁶. The guide is keen to point out to tourists how Riina and other real mafia bosses had none of the “ethical” scruples, for instance in sparing children, that characterise Don Vito in *The Godfather*. Another imagery that the guide is eager to debunk is that of the *mafioso* with the *coppola* and the *lupara*, which belongs to an archaic era of the mafia. However, he does not condemn the romanticisation in cinematic portrayals. On the contrary, he believes that romanticising facts is the essence of cinema, and that films must be separated from historical truth, “otherwise a masterpiece like *The Godfather* would have been just news reporting”.

Hence the decision to keep fiction and historical reality quite separate even during the tour. During the visit to the filming locations, the storytelling focuses only on the films. In this phase, even if participants ask about the mafia, the guide tends to postpone any explanation on the subject to a later time. In fact, he has a precise moment in mind, once the visit to Savoca is over, in the break before resuming the journey to Forza d'Agrò, when the participants are seated, perhaps with a coffee and a *cannolo*. It is then that he introduces the history of the mafia, as promised in the tour description. He starts from the 1960s-70s, the drug trade and infiltration of public contracts, the rise of the Corleonesi (a real-life Corleone clan), Totò Riina, the Maxi Trial (*Maxiprocesso*), the murders of Falcone and Borsellino and many other individuals that stood up to the mafia and whose memory still inspires the fight of the new generations. After Riina, the era of the bosses Provenzano and Messina Denaro, then Buscetta, the first “*pentito illustre*”⁷ (“illustrious turncoat”), and the difficulties in prosecuting the *mafiosi* due to the *omertà*. He concludes by saying that yes, to answer the question he is most often asked, the mafia, or rather the mafias, still exist, with different names in different regions of Italy and worldwide. However, now it survives in a less blatant form, and no, to answer another frequently asked question, there are no more shootings in the streets. Yet, it is still difficult to fight the mafia today because there are few job opportunities in Sicily and southern Italy in general, whereas *Cosa Nostra* offers young people easy money. Finally, he links back to *The Godfather* by inviting tourists

⁵ A bomb attack occurred on the 23rd of May 1992 near Capaci, Sicily, in which the anti-mafia magistrate Giovanni Falcone, his wife, magistrate Francesca Morvillo, and three escort agents, Vito Schifani, Rocco Dicillo and Antonio Montinaro, were killed. It is considered part of the broader strategy of bomb attacks against the Italian State enacted by *Cosa Nostra* in 1992-93, of which Totò Riina has been identified as one of the main mandators (Lupo, 2018).

⁶ A car bomb attack occurred on the 19th of July 1992 in Palermo, Sicily, in which the anti-mafia magistrate Paolo Borsellino and five escort agents, Agostino Catalano, Emanuela Loi, Vincenzo Li Muli, Walter Eddie Cosina and Claudio Traina, were killed. This too is part of the broader strategy of attacks of 1992-93. Borsellino, like Falcone, was on the front line in the fight against *Cosa Nostra* and particularly in the so-called Maxi Trial of Palermo that began in 1986 (Lupo, 2018).

⁷ Italian expression used colloquially to refer to a high-profile former mafia member or terrorist who chooses to collaborate with the justice system by revealing inner workings, names and crimes of the organisation, usually in exchange for shorter sentences or protection. Tommaso Buscetta, also known as “Don Masino”, was one of the most important collaborators of justice: thanks to his revelations, the Italian judicial system became aware for the first time of what *Cosa Nostra* really was, as until then it had been protected by an impenetrable *omertà* (Lupo, 2018).

to reflect on how the narrative of the novel and films is based on fictional and certainly fictionalised, but nevertheless plausible, events.

It is evident that this tour takes a different approach from the two previously analysed, in that it is promoted and conducted with the aim of pairing a historically grounded narrative with the fictional one, while taking care not to conflate the two (and in this sense the “Vs” in the tour title on GetYourGuide and Tripadvisor is misleading). The guide gave me the impression that he is aware of and takes seriously his role as a mediator in the tourist experience between film-induced expectations and the history of the area. In his words, he will never be one of those guides who leads the tour wearing a *coppola* and flattens his culture on stereotypes to please the tourists, but at the same time he understands that the participants in this tour come from watching *The Godfather* and have peculiar expectations to be met.

2.1.3 After the Tours: Visitor Reviews

As the final step of my analysis, I looked at visitor reviews posted between March 2024 and March 2025 on GetYourGuide and Tripadvisor for four of the tours involved in this study, namely those by Lemontour Catania, Sicily Activities, Sicily Grand Tour and Taormina Deliziosa⁸. For the other three tours, by Dream Island, Sicily Active and Sicily Excursions, there were no reviews available because their websites didn't offer the possibility to post them.

Since the aim was to identify recurring patterns in expectations and experiences, I organised my findings as I did in the analysis of the pre-tour promotional materials, around the elements across the reviews that provide insight for my research questions.

The most immediately observable information is that most of the reviewers are big fans of *The Godfather* trilogy. The expression “recommended if you are a (true) fan” is frequent, while others write that the tour was “on their bucket list” and they have been “looking forward to it for a long time”. Some say they were glad to find other “Godfather nerds” on the tour and that “it was great to discuss the filming areas and the movie music and plots with like-minded people”.

On the same note, many write that they have seen the trilogy many times and rewatched it again before joining the tour, and/or that the tour induced them to rewatch it afterwards, as exemplified by this excerpt: “Needless to say, the moment we got back to the Airbnb we immediately started to rewatch the trilogy!”. Some believe that the experience of the tour will also change the experience of

⁸ Some reviews, originally not written in English, were automatically translated by the platforms with Google Translate. The review excerpts in quotation marks have not been edited in any way, so they may contain typos.

the film from then on: “I can’t wait to watch the films again and again with a new appreciation”; “You will enjoy the movie more deeply when you watch it again in the future”. Interestingly, for these visitors, the film-induced tourism experience takes the shape of a ring, with the films being the starting and closing point.

Almost all of them refer to the events of the films as if they had actually taken place in the locations, and many mention that sense of immersion that the tour operators also leverage in their promotional materials: “It was great to be immersed in the world of *The Godfather*” and “It is really very moving to see them, to touch them with your feet, hands and eyes!”. Some call it a “surreal” experience, others give it a solemn tone by writing that they had the opportunity “to walk where the *Godfather* history has been forever chronicled”. Some, finally, recount that the guide or they themselves recreated the scenes in the locations.

It follows that, in most reviews, the focus is on the cinematic “iconicity” of the locations and only secondarily on the charm of the villages and historical information about the area. In the period under analysis, no one commented that the locations appeared different from what they expected and only one reviewer made the opposite remark, that both villages were “pretty much untouched over the years”. The few people who had participated in the tour without having seen the film, still showed appreciation for the “breathtaking sceneries” and also recommended the tour for “not fans”.

One of the most frequent adjectives to describe the tour is “informative”, followed by “entertaining”. The guides are mostly described as “knowledgeable” and “passionate”. Some visitors comment that their guides also provided insights into Sicilian history and culture, without detailing further. And here we get to the great absence. Out of hundreds of reviews analysed, the word “mafia” and derivatives were written less than ten times, and only in the reviews of Sicily Activities and Taormina Deliziosa.

With regard to Sicily Activities, the only operator to promote the tour as also being dedicated to the mafia, the participants were divided between those who were satisfied with the coverage of the subject, and those who felt that the tour lacked information about the mafia compared to its promise. This difference in perceptions is probably due to the different guides leading the tour. In some reviews, the mafia is called “the real mafia”, in an implicit contrast to the fictional mafia in *The Godfather*.

One of the reviews of Taormina Deliziosa is particularly noteworthy, as it reads: “The guide was able to put the movie story in perspective with the values found in Sicily. He will make you realise that the Trilogy is more than just about the mafia, it is about family, love, justice and more”. This seems to suggest not only that the tour endorsed the cinematic narrative and the universal topics it contains above the mere subject of the mafia, but also that the guide presented the romanticised

version of the mafia as rooted in Sicilian values and therefore as authentic. In any case, the participant's newly acquired awareness appears directed exclusively at the trilogy, with no mention to the historical reality.

Finally, some visitors make playful references taken from the cinematic portrayal of the mafia, celebrating their experience as “one tour you cannot refuse!”, referring to Don Vito's most iconic quote from the trilogy, “I'm going to make him an offer he can't refuse”. However, this line represents precisely the rotten essence of the mafia, which relies on threats and violence to get its way. Some reviewers recount that during the tour they addressed their guides as “Don” or “Tour Father”.

The analysis of visitor reviews was the final piece to trace patterns in the storytelling of *The Godfather* tours. Based on the collected observations, I will answer the main research question in the next section.

2.2 The Interplay between the Cinematic and Touristic Narratives: Replication or Critical Stance?

This study aimed to determine whether *The Godfather* tours in Sicily replicate the narratives and imaginaries about the mafia portrayed in the films, or they try to communicate a more critical narrative, taking into account historical reality.

The analysis of the promotional materials, on-site narratives and visitor reviews of seven *The Godfather* tours reveals that these touristic experiences predominantly replicate the cinematic narratives and imaginaries, without complementing nor contrasting them with a critical or historically grounded perspective. The tours are designed to appeal to cinematic nostalgia and to the film-induced tourists' fascination with *The Godfather* mythology, leveraging the aesthetic and narrative elements of the films, rather than the history and culture of the region, to give meaning to the locations visited and the fictional events that took place there. In doing so, tours do not assume the role of mediators in the encounter between the cinematic narrative and the historical reality, missing the opportunity to nuance the cinematic myths and restore the historical and contextual specificity of the mafia.

The tours do not make explicit recourse to the mafia myths identified in the trilogy, but relate to the cinematic storytelling by referring to fictional events as if they were real, reenacting film scenes and encouraging tourists to pose for pictures in iconic spots. In some instances, the tour description and the guides hint at the actual historical influence of the mafia in Sicily, but these occasional references are not followed by a deeper exploration of the subject.

A notable exception, however, is the tour provider Sicily Activities, which stands out for attempting to communicate a more critical narrative. Both its promotional materials and tour content show an effort to include the history of the Sicilian mafia in the narrative and, most importantly, to use it to provide a critical angle on the cinematic portrayal of the mafia.

Nevertheless, visitor reviews suggest that the primary takeaway for most participants remains cinematic escapism rather than historical awareness. Reviews celebrate the immersiveness of the experience and the thrill of following in the footsteps of the characters from the trilogy. Hardly any reviews mention having learned something new about the historical reality of the mafia or having further reflected on its societal impact, not even after the tour by Sicily Activities.

In conclusion, while some efforts towards a more critical narrative are present, *The Godfather* tours in Sicily mainly replicate the cinematic portrayal of the mafia, in line with the expectations of most tourists. The attempts at a critical stance lack the prominence needed to shift visitors' focus from their film-induced enthusiasm and engage them in the understanding of the historical mafia.

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter focused on the role of touristic storytelling in mediating the mafia myths and examined how *The Godfather* tours engage with cinematic and historical narratives, analysing pre-tour promotional materials, on-site narratives during tours, and post-tour visitor reviews. Based on the findings, I was able to answer the first research question of this study, concluding that in the tours a narrative prevails that is more adherent to the fictional portrayal of the mafia, with limited effort to take into account its historical reality.

The next chapter will further explore the tension between fiction and reality of the mafia, focusing on how tours navigate the boundaries between the two, discussing the ethical implications of their narrative choices, and assessing the potential for more critical storytelling.

Chapter Three

Between Fiction and Historical Reality: the Role and Position of *The Godfather* Tours

Building on the argument that *The Godfather* tours in Sicily largely replicate the cinematic narrative of the mafia with limited engagement in historical contextualisation or critical reflection, this chapter will deepen the analysis by addressing the two sub questions of this study: whether the tours combine cinematic and historical heritage to address the ethical implications of mafia portrayals in films, and whether they address the blurred boundaries and tensions between the fiction and reality of the mafia.

I will approach them as two interrelated parts of a broader inquiry into how *The Godfather* tours position themselves within the tension between myth and history, and what ethical issues arise from their storytelling. Specifically, I will first define the two narrative layers of cinematic and historical heritage, and proceed to assess if and how tours combine them. I will then move on to highlight how the tours engage with the blurred boundaries between fiction and reality. Finally, I will discuss the pathways toward more critical storytelling, reflecting on the role *The Godfather* tours could play in circulating a more nuanced understanding of the mafia.

3.1 The Two Sides to the Tour Narrative

By this point in the dissertation, the dualities that characterise *The Godfather* tours and make them such a challenging object of research may have become more evident. These tours lie at the crossroad of film-induced tourism and dark tourism, cinematic escapism and violent history. We have observed that the former, escapism, prevails over the latter, history, in the tours, yet the latter can never completely disappear. Whereas the tour narratives foreground the fictional mafia, the locations visited inevitably bring up the issue of the historical mafia, as a phenomenon intrinsic to the character of the place (Gerardi, 2024).

The tour narratives are therefore positioned within a dual narrative framework: one rooted in cinematic heritage, drawn from *The Godfather* trilogy and its cultural imprint, and the other in historical heritage, relating to the real impacts of the Sicilian mafia in the area. In this context, I use the term “heritage” to refer to the legacy and traceable presence of the two frameworks in the narratives communicated in the tours.

The following paragraphs will delve into the enduring influence of cinematic heritage and the imposing presence of historical heritage, highlighting both what is present and what is missing in the tour narratives, and, finally, into the ethical implications of heritage dissonance, in order to understand the potential harm of sidelining the historical reality of the mafia.

3.1.1 The Enduring Influence of Cinematic Heritage

The findings of the analysis show that *The Godfather* tours, from the promotional materials to the on-site storytelling, draw extensively upon the aesthetics and myths of the films to engage visitors. This reflects the broader cinematic heritage of *The Godfather*, which has shaped the touristic identity of the Sicilian locations involved. Over time, the trilogy has been embedded into the cultural and spatial landscape of Savoca and Forza d'Agrò, now recognised not for their local history, but for being featured in the films as cinematic stand-ins for Corleone. Through these cinematic references and the subsequent film-induced tourism practices, the cinematic heritage of the films has overwritten the territory's historical narrative, redefining how these locations are marketed and experienced.

Beyond destination image, the cinematic heritage of the trilogy also entails the circulation of a mythologised imagery of the mafia, in which violence and criminality are confused with loyalty and justice. In assessing the role and position of *The Godfather* tours, it is important to emphasise that they, in resorting to this heritage to construct their narratives, actively contribute to maintaining the influence of myths on the way both Sicily and the mafia are understood and consumed in tourism.

3.1.2 The Imposing Presence of Historical Heritage

Although *The Godfather* tours are mainly built around the cinematic heritage, they unfold in a region, Sicily, where the historical heritage of the mafia cannot be ignored. However, as shown by the findings, the historical dimension is largely marginalised, with the sole exception of the Sicily Activities tour, which devotes substantial space to it. References to the mafia's real-world impact are delivered superficially and treated as side notes to the narrative, often disconnected from the broader historical framework. Moreover, strikingly, most of the historical events mentioned in the tours concern the Italian-American mafia and its interference with the production of the films, despite the focus of the tour being the scenes shot in Sicily and the connection of the protagonists with the region.

This reveals that the tours fail to rely on the historical heritage to situate *The Godfather* narrative within the very phenomenon from which it takes its inspiration, and to explore its ties with Sicily. In recounting Michael's exile in Sicily and his evolution into a Don, what is missing is an account of what the mafia presence in a small rural community really means: corruption and infiltration of public services, and oppression of the local population through the extortion of protection money. In talking about the cinematic Corleone that gives the name to the protagonist family, what is missing is a reference to what really happened in the actual Corleone during the years in which the trilogy was filmed, namely the rise of the Corleonesi clan built on kidnappings and brutal murders, their innocent civilian victims, and a series of clashes between clans that later led to the second mafia war, one of the darkest periods in the recent history of Sicily (Lupo, 2018). In mentioning the scene of Pentangeli's brother and the concept of *omertà*, what is missing is the explanation that mafia silence is rooted in threat and fear, rather than honour and loyalty to the family, as the film suggests. Moreover, the emergence of anti-mafia movements in the form of civil and judicial resistance, which has shaped Sicilian civic identity since the 1990s, is rarely mentioned.

The historical heritage of the mafia holds a very different story from the cinematic heritage of *The Godfather* films, in both the Sicilian and Italian-American contexts (Balsamo & Carpozi, 2019). Whereas the cinematic narrative romanticises the mafia through myths, the historical one exposes its social and human cost. The quasi-absence of the historical counter-narrative in the tours results in a silencing of the history of the area visited and a narrative imbalance in favour of the mafia myths, and thus limits the possibility for tourists to develop a critical understanding of the mafia's legacy in Sicily.

3.1.3 The Ethical Implications of Dissonant Heritage

The Godfather tours operate at the intersection of cinematic and historical heritage, yet they rarely succeed in leveraging this position and combining these two dimensions in a meaningful way. This imbalance raises important ethical implications. As discussed earlier, the portrayal of the mafia in *The Godfather* is far removed from the historical reality of the mafia as an oppressive force. When the cinematic myths are uncritically replicated in the tour narratives and tourists are not provided with historical contextualisation to distinguish the real mafia from the films, the potentially harmful implications of the gap between fiction and reality are ignored. Consequently, the risk arises of further naturalising myths as authentic, romanticising the mafia, obscuring the suffering it has caused, and ultimately continuing to shape the image of Sicily in a distorted and stereotyped way.

Furthermore, *The Godfather* tours risk turning the mafia into a consumable spectacle, providing a kind of tourism in which the commercial appeal of fictionalised mafia eclipses the need for awareness of the mafia's real-world consequences. This dynamic can be problematised under the lens of dissonant heritage, as conceived by Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996) regarding dark tourism sites, which describes situations where different groups interpret heritage in conflicting ways or where the promotion of certain narratives marginalises others. In the case of *The Godfather* tours, the interpretative conflict over the twofold heritage virtually opposes the tourists and their expectations shaped by the cinematic narrative, and the communities that inhabit the locations and look at the mafia with historical and contextual awareness. Participant observation in the tours and the analysis of visitor reviews show that tourists are often apparently unaware that the filming locations of *The Godfather* are also places where real mafia presence has been historically felt. Tour operators and guides, as previously discussed, could potentially take on the role of mediators and reconcile the different heritage narratives, yet they opt for an unbalanced storytelling. By failing to integrate the historical dimension, they contribute to a dissonant form of heritage. The prioritisation of cinematic fiction for the entertainment of tourists, comes at the expenses of the real stories of those affected by the mafia violence, including victims and communities that have struggled to resist it.

Finally, *The Godfather* films and tours also appropriate the landscape of the locations, causing an alteration both in its physical appearance, during the filmmaking and afterwards to maintain it unchanged for tourism, and in the way it is narrated, in that both the natural and the built environment of the places are claimed as a stage for the cinematic narratives. The cinematic lens of the tours overlays fiction onto the sceneries, turning the landscape into part of a "timeless" Sicily and making it appear like a film rather than a real territory. In his study of American perceptions of Sicily as a tourist destination as experienced through film, Puleo (2015) notes that, in the case of *The Godfather* tourism, the rustic Bar Vitelli and the towns built on top of the mountains inspire positive feelings for Sicily. By co-opting the landscape only in the light of nostalgia for the cinematic scenery, the tours are overlooking part of the appeal of the sites.

The ethical implications that the tours could potentially address or perpetuate are therefore twofold: the unethicity of cinematic portrayals of the mafia that are not true to historical reality, and the unethicity of tourism that is uncritically based on them and ignores dissonant perspectives and other narrative layers such as landscape. The findings allow me to conclude that the tours do not effectively combine cinematic and historical heritage to address any of these implications.

In the next sections, I will elaborate on how, in practice, the tours address the blurred boundaries between fiction and reality, and lastly on how, in the future, they could play a meaningful role in reducing heritage dissonance by critically engaging with both layers of heritage.

3.2 Navigating Blurred Boundaries and Tensions

We have just separated and analysed in detail the two layers of heritage in *The Godfather* tours, however, it should be noted that there are overlaps between the two, as there is history in the fiction and there is an influence of fiction in the perception of the history, independently of tour narratives. *The Godfather* trilogy is indeed a work of fiction, yet it draws from references from the real Italian-American mafia, many of which are deeply linked to Sicilian history (Balsamo & Carpozi, 2019). In turn, fictionalised portrayals of crime and violence influence the perception of real-world locations in gangster film tourism (Smith & Virág Tevely, 2023; Yao & Yang, 2024). Hence, *The Godfather*, a global cinematic phenomenon, has powerfully influenced public perceptions and tourists' expectations about the mafia and Sicily.

As a result, the boundaries between fiction and historical reality are often blurred in *The Godfather* locations in Sicily, and the tours are in the position of navigating these two intertwined dimensions and the resulting tensions. However, rather than confronting such blurring, they tend to further conflate the two layers of fiction and reality. Scenes from the trilogy and fictional characters are referred to as if they were actual events and people, while the really existing connections between the history and the fictional elements are not addressed. The blurred boundaries are not actively questioned, but rather used as a convenient ambiguity to make the tour narrative more engaging. This may enhance the immersive experience for tourists, but it also normalises a narrative in which the cinematic mafia overwrites the historical one.

In the sole exception of the Sicily Activities tour, the historical framework is provided, but is kept separate from fiction in the tour structure. Therefore, an effort to bring *The Godfather* trilogy into dialogue with the Sicilian historical context and a direct addressing of the blurred boundaries are lacking. This tour heads in the direction of a more comprehensive narrative, but remains an outlier within the overall narrative offer of *The Godfather*-induced tourism in Sicily.

In conclusion, the tours do not effectively address the blurred boundaries and tensions between the fiction and reality of the mafia. Instead, they lean heavily on fiction while neglecting their role of highlighting its points of contact and contrast with historical reality.

3.3 Towards a More Critical Narrative

While this research has shown that *The Godfather* tours in Sicily largely replicate the cinematic narratives about the mafia almost without addressing its historical reality or the ethical implications of its mythologised portrayal, this does not mean that more critically engaged narratives are unattainable. On the contrary, the coexistence of cinematic and historical heritage that underpins *The Godfather* tourism offers a valuable opportunity for tour operators to develop nuanced storytelling approaches, ones that do not deny the appeal of cinematic nostalgia, but also contextualise the trilogy within the broader reality of the mafia in Sicily and abroad.

Retaining the cinematic narrative as the main focus and entry point, tours could use *The Godfather* as a springboard to introduce the historical narrative. This would mean not only pointing out the intersections between fiction and reality, but also discussing the differences between the myths and the reality of the mafia, as well as the ethical implications deriving from misrepresentation. For instance, tour guides could address the discrepancy between the cinematic *omertà* as loyalty and the actual one based on fear, or explain how the romanticised image of rural Sicily in the films contrasts with the climate of oppression that characterised many communities under the threat of mafia bosses. As emphasised by the Sicily Activities guide, it is important that the historical narrative is introduced as a complement and not as a confrontation, which could upset the avid fans of the trilogy, the main target audience of the tours. An informative approach could instead enhance the value of the tours, engaging participants on a more meaningful level.

In view of developing a more critical narrative, it would be crucial to include mentions to the anti-mafia movements and civil resistance of the Sicilian population. In *The Godfather* trilogy, the mafia is portrayed as invincible, unassailable from the outside. The policemen and politicians are corrupt, the civilian population is absent, the magistrates fail to prosecute the Corleone family due to *omertà*; the only threats come from within the mafia underworld, namely rival gangsters and the dissolution of family ties. Here again, the cinematic narrative does not reflect historical reality, which in Sicily has seen many failures of the institutions and victories of the mafia, but also many mafia setbacks, due to courageous individuals or associations that did not bow their heads (Lupo, 2018). *The Godfather* tours could turn the spotlight on the anti-mafia fight, as other local organisations such as Addiopizzo do.

Addiopizzo – which literally translates as “Goodbye protection money” – is a movement that promotes a grassroots cultural revolution against the mafia in Sicily, founded on individual and collective responsibility. Its main strategy is critical consumerism against protection money, a practice that engages consumers to support with their purchases those businesses that have openly stood up

against protection money. They also have a tour operator, Addiopizzo Travel, which promotes ethical tourism to discover the most significant places and stories of the anti-mafia movement, relying entirely on suppliers who have rebelled against the mafia and do not pay protection money, or even operate on land confiscated from *Cosa Nostra*. Their mission reads: “We want to show our visitors the real face of Sicily, above and beyond stereotypes and tourist traps. We want to restore dignity to our country and raise the profile of the people who are fighting for change.” (www.addiopizzotravel.it). Among the day tours offered, there is one dedicated to Corleone, which aims to show the city’s redemption from the mafia, both the historical one that has painfully marked its recent past, and the cinematographic one of *The Godfather* to which its name is inevitably linked.

This is a different tourist niche from and not comparable to *The Godfather* tours, yet the example of Addiopizzo shows that it is possible to narrate the mafia to tourists in a historically grounded way. By drawing inspiration from such an approach, *The Godfather* tours could take on a new role and evolve into experiences that not only celebrate cinema, but also authentically engage with the territory visited and honour its history, heritage and people. Tour operators could also apply for Addiopizzo certification or demand it from the suppliers they work with, to take a critical stance not only with storytelling, but with concrete action.

In conclusion, there is undoubtedly potential for *The Godfather* tourism to move beyond the replication of the cinematic narrative and contribute to a more ethically conscious and historically grounded form of storytelling.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the role and position of *The Godfather* tours at the intersection of fiction and historical reality, with the aim of answering the research sub questions of this study.

In the first section, I highlighted the dominance of cinematic heritage and the marginalisation of the historical legacy of Sicilian mafia in the tour narratives. The findings show that the tours do not combine these two layers to address the ethical implications of mafia portrayals in the trilogy, and that further ethical tensions such as heritage dissonance arise from their storytelling choices.

In the second part of the chapter, I addressed the question of whether and how tours manage the blurred boundaries between fiction and reality. The findings suggest that these boundaries are seldom examined; instead, they are used to maintain narrative ambiguity. This lack of critical engagement diminishes opportunities for deeper understanding of the mafia phenomenon.

In response to these issues, the final section reflected on pathways for developing more critical and ethical narratives. Drawing inspiration from the approach of the Sicilian organisation Addiopizzo, I argued that it is possible to retain the cinematic appeal of *The Godfather* while offering tourists an historically grounded view of the mafia's impact in the region.

Conclusion

This study explored the interplay between the cinematic narrative of the mafia as conveyed in *The Godfather* film trilogy and the touristic narrative of *The Godfather* guided tours in Sicily, with the aim of assessing the implications of the tour storytelling for the critical understanding of the mafia as a real historical phenomenon. In doing so, this study also aimed to address a gap in the literature regarding how tourism induced by mafia-themed films navigates the tensions between the cinematic portrayal and the historical reality in territories with an actual mafia presence, such as Sicily.

The study drew on theories from film-induced and dark tourism fields, and adopted a qualitative case study design. A critical discourse analysis was carried out on promotional materials and visitor reviews of seven *The Godfather* tours, complemented by participant observation in two of them.

The first chapter built on Barthes's (1957) theories on mythologies in discourse to define the concept of Sicilianity as a symbolically loaded portrayal of Sicilian ethnicity, and to identify three key myths about the mafia in *The Godfather* trilogy, namely the mafia as Heritage, Loyalty, and Justice. This analysis served to demonstrate that the cinematic portrayal romanticises the mafia, naturalising it as an identitarian system rooted in Sicilian ethnicity, family bonds and codes of honour, rather than in the violence, criminality and oppression that characterise the phenomenon in reality.

Building on the above, in the second chapter I investigated the extent to which *The Godfather* tours replicate such cinematic mythology or try to leverage the historical reality of the locations to construct a more critical narrative. The analysis of pre-tour promotional materials, on-site storytelling during tours, and post-tour visitor reviews, revealed that tour narratives predominantly replicate the cinematic imaginary, with limited effort to take into account the historical reality of the mafia. The locations are promoted solely in relation to their appearance in the films; film scenes shot there are re-enacted without acknowledging their contrasts with the reality of the mafia. Fictional events and characters are spoken of as real, whereas references to the actual history and impact of the mafia in the region are scarce and superficial. The consequences of this can be observed in the reviews of visitors, who have engaged with the places only through the lens of the trilogy, with little evidence of increased awareness of the historical reality of the mafia in the region.

This first finding led me to investigate in the third chapter the role and position of *The Godfather* tours at the intersection of fiction and reality. I observed that the tours do not effectively combine the cinematic and historical heritage frameworks to address the ethical implications of mafia portrayals in films. Their reliance on cinematic heritage leaves little space for historical contextualisation, despite the fact that the region visited has been marked by mafia violence and resistance. This gives rise to further ethical tensions, which I have problematised as a form of heritage dissonance, as the

mythologised portrayals of the mafia aimed at tourists exist alongside the historical trauma of local communities, but the latter ends up being marginalised in the unbalanced tour narratives.

Furthermore, I found that *The Godfather* tours do not address critically the blurred boundaries and tensions between the fiction and reality of the mafia. Instead, they sometimes instrumentalise them to blur the line between cinematic nostalgia and lived experience, in order to deepen immersion for tourists, but ultimately reinforcing the prevalence of the cinematic narrative and the dissonance.

While the dominant narrative approach is currently uncritical, the coexistence of cinematic and historical heritage in *The Godfather* tourism represents an opportunity for more critical storytelling. By acknowledging the ethical implications of the cinematic portrayals and integrating the history of the mafia and anti-mafia movements into their narratives, tour operators could keep tapping into the allure of the films while enriching the experience with critical reflection. The example of organisations such as Addiopizzo offer valuable inspiration in the evolution towards a model of tourism that neither romanticises nor ignores the mafia's existence, but confronts it with transparency.

On this hopeful note, this dissertation comes to an end. It provided a critical reading of how mythologised portrayals of the mafia are naturalised and circulated through *The Godfather* films and film-induced tourism, and demonstrated that this occurs at the expense of more historically grounded narratives. However, it also showed that *The Godfather* tours hold untapped potential to evolve into experiences that not only entertain and celebrate cinema, but also engage meaningfully with the lived reality of the locations visited and the gaps between the fiction and history of the mafia.

Limitations

The present study focused on a limited sample of *The Godfather* tours in Sicily. While these were selected to represent a variety of formats and providers, the findings cannot be generalised to the entirety of mafia-themed film-induced tourism in Italy or elsewhere. Moreover, the study relied primarily on publicly available sources, without incorporating interviews with tour guides, tour participants or local communities at the locations.

Suggestions for Further Research

Future research could therefore look into the diverse perspectives of stakeholders in *The Godfather* tourism, employing other qualitative methods such as interviews to gain insights into the

tourists' engagement with the narratives, or the perceived impact of this tourism on the image of Sicily. Moreover, comparative studies between *The Godfather* tours and other mafia-themed tourism experiences, such as the *Gomorra* tours in Naples, could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this kind of tourism and its relations with the historical reality of the different mafias.

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