

The Godfather, Sociopathic Villains and How Michael Corleone Is Definitely a Monster

I agree with Jason Mittell's argument in that two different shows can have completely different aesthetics and yet still be entirely successful. Each show can use its aesthetics like mise en scene, cinematography, lighting and shadows completely differently because every show individually has its own unique goals and audience that they are trying to appeal to. For instance, Mittell states that *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* are two shows that couldn't be any more different from one another and yet share many similar qualities. Both shows have a critical and successful reputation with both audiences and critics, both shows came from well-established and respected writers and both shows had five-seasons.

He goes on to explain that the artistic aesthetics of the show are quite different. *The Wire* is stylistically restrained with gritty, realistic storytelling while *Break Bad* is visually and edited much exaggerated. He states how *The Wire* presents a world where the characters and its institutions are locked in a larger system while *Breading Bad* is a profile of a man who psychotically changes over time pulling everyone in his life down into his descent. The creator called the transformation 'From Mr. Chips to Scarface' which I found interesting. He isn't arguing on which particular show is better because like certain films (*Casablanca* or *Blue Velvet* for example) you can't really compare, because each stylistic choice is specifically deliberate for that particular audience.

I completely agree that having a character go through pressure and emotional and psychological strain is absolutely necessary for a story. In having the audience develop a form of empathy for the character and to have them become fully developed into a full-fledged humanizing character makes the connection between the character and the audience all that much stronger. Soon as the audience develops a growing relationship with the character they naturally become sucked in even deeper, because now they have their emotions invested in the character and the unfolding story.

In John Cassavetes' film *Woman Under the Influence* Peter Falk plays a husband named Nick, and Gena Rowlands plays his wife Mabel. Mabel behaves strangely and it is obvious that she suffers from some form of mental illness. Cassavetes brilliantly stages the husband's emotional turmoil with dealing with his wife's mental stasis and throughout the film you watch the two of them verbally and at times even get psychically abusive with each other.

Even though Nick's physical outbursts and abuse is clearly wrong, his growth throughout the film makes his character not necessarily unlikable. This is a man who dearly loves his wife and yet he feels all his options in trying to help her have clearly failed. After Mabel has a complete mental breakdown she spends some time in a mental institution. When she finally gets out and is welcomed home with her own welcome home party it is ultimately made clear that Nick is as unstable and mentally ill as she is. He realizes that he doesn't like this new wife who has returned home from the hospital. She is now very distant and aloof, supposedly cured of her illness.

Nick wants the mentally ill wife back, along with all her odd strange character quirks. After another disturbing physical attack the two lovers embrace in each other's arms and the

audience comes to discover that these two unstable lovers are a perfect fit for one another. Throughout the story both characters struggle through emotional and physical pressure and we are there to witness all of it. We as the audience also come to gain empathy for these flawed and tortured souls who are clearly trying to express their love for one another but because of alcoholism, sexual frustration, anger, violence and self-doubt, it always seems to fail.

The readings also explore how characters can gradually change and that we need to create an allegiance with them which helps us grapple with the changes of a character. We become sympathetic to a specific character and we learn to share their thoughts, feelings and emotions throughout the show or film. For the characters of anti heroes there is a category called 'relative morality' in which an ethically questionable character is juxtaposed with more villain characteristics. Charisma is a form used for many anti-heroes, creating a sense of charm which makes the time spent with someone so despicable always interesting and even enjoyable. We as an audience are even at times rooting for them to prevail. That anti-hero's seem to become the most popular within pop culture like for instance Hannibal Lector, The Joker and Alex Delarge. Seeing their past history traumas make them more into a victim which gains some sympathy from the audience.

One of the categories of character change in the readings that interest me the most is character transformation, which is a gradual shift of morality which can cause long-term repercussions on the character and others around them. It seems like the most popular transition within stories is the bad character transforming into a good person (A Christmas Carol and Groundhog Day immediately come to mind). And yet what deeply fascinates me is when a good character slowly becomes bad. It's tried and failed miserably with the newer Star Wars films,

because the transformation of young Anakin Skywalker becoming Dark Vader was never at all convincing or believable. The one film that brilliantly achieves this effect is Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather part II*.

The reason why I know Coppola succeeded with the transition of the character of Michael Corleone is because many viewers still can't quite see Michael Corleone as an anti-hero. At the end of *Godfather Part II* Michael Corleone certainly became a monster, but this is understandable due to the great craftsmanship by director Francis Ford Coppola. He created a complex and conflicted character that starts out good and only slowly morphs into a monster through a long series of morality choices which slowly chip away at Michael's humanity ultimately leaving him a cold, empty out shell of a man that murders his own brother.

For most stories it's easy to make villains simply evil, unsympathetic, and easy to hate. To me this kind of thing frankly bores me. Life isn't black and white but a series of greys. In the beginning Michael was essentially a likable and even admirable war hero who first started out with lofty ideals but because of his unfortunate fate got sucked in deeper and deeper. Even throughout the beginning of *Part II* Michael held on to some kind of illusion that him being a don was only a temporary thing and he would one day break free of the crime and murder which took over his life. His transformation from good to bad is shown through slow gradual steps and because of this his character begins to represent the stories of a Shakespearian tragedy.

We as the audience begin to hate the monster Michael has become but we walked along with him for this long, we find it like Michael hard to turn back. The character of Michael Corleone represents to me the perfect anti-hero in which his character forces us to examine ourselves precisely because he isn't easy to hate. He's no different from the rest of us, he could

easily be our father, our brother, ourselves; which is why I think Michael Corleone is one of the most compelling anti-heroes in cinema history.