

Goodfellas: Toward an Understanding of Something That May Eventually Be Understood

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to examine *Goodfellas*, the 1990 film directed by Martin Scorsese. More specifically, it is concerned with examining the various elements that make *Goodfellas* a film that can be examined. This distinction is important because merely examining a film is not necessarily the same as understanding it, and understanding it is not necessarily the same as explaining it.

Before we can explain anything, we must first determine what exactly we are explaining.

This is where the difficulties begin.

Goodfellas is a film. This much can be established with a reasonable degree of confidence. It has actors, scenes, dialogue, music, editing, and a beginning and an end. It also has a middle, although the precise importance of the middle will become apparent only after we have established certain other things about beginnings and endings.

The film was released in 1990.

The significance of 1990 is potentially considerable. It was not 1989, nor was it 1991. This places the film between two years, which may seem trivial but is nevertheless chronologically relevant. One could, for example, compare *Goodfellas* with films released before it or after it. Such a comparison might tell us something about the film's position within cinema.

We will not be making that comparison here.

At least, not yet.

Before discussing the film, it is useful to discuss the idea of films themselves. Films are generally made by filming things. They are then edited into sequences that audiences watch. This process creates the impression that events are occurring in a particular order.

The importance of this cannot be overstated.

Unfortunately, explaining why it is important would require us to discuss editing.

Editing, in turn, would require us to discuss individual scenes.

Individual scenes would require us to discuss the story.

The story would require us to discuss the characters.

The characters would require us to discuss the actors.

The actors would require us to discuss the casting.

The casting would require us to discuss the director.

The director would require us to discuss Martin Scorsese.

And discussing Martin Scorsese would take us into a completely different essay.

Therefore, it is probably better to begin somewhere else.

Martin Scorsese, Briefly

Martin Scorsese directed *Goodfellas*.

This is an important fact.

It is also a fact that has already been mentioned.

Nevertheless, repetition can sometimes be useful in academic writing because it reminds the reader of information that has previously been established. It is therefore worth establishing once again that Martin Scorsese directed *Goodfellas*.

Scorsese's involvement raises several questions.

Why did he direct the film?

What attracted him to the material?

How did his previous films influence his approach?

How did his approach influence this film?

These are all potentially interesting questions.

However, the first question assumes that we know what it means for a director to be "attracted" to material. Attraction is a psychological concept, and determining Scorsese's precise psychological motivations would require evidence that this essay does not possess.

It would therefore be irresponsible to speculate.

We shall not speculate.

Instead, we can observe that he directed the film.

He directed it.

This means he was involved.

The exact nature of that involvement is something that could be examined through his choices.

Those choices include camera movements.

One particularly famous camera movement occurs when Henry and Karen enter the Copacabana.

This scene is frequently discussed.

We will now discuss it.

Before doing so, however, we should explain what a camera is.

The Camera

A camera is an apparatus used to record images.

In filmmaking, cameras record images.

This allows audiences to see things.

The importance of seeing things in a film should be self-evident, although it would be dangerous to assume that something self-evident does not deserve explanation.

A camera can remain stationary.

A camera can move.

A camera can move forward.

It can move backward.

It can move sideways.

It can also move in ways that are difficult to describe without using several words.

The Copacabana sequence involves movement.

This movement is significant.

It takes the viewer through a series of spaces.

The viewer sees Henry and Karen enter the nightclub.

They proceed through an area that is not the normal entrance.

They continue through the kitchen.

They eventually reach their table.

This is clearly a sequence of events.

But what does it mean?

That is the question.

It is tempting to answer it immediately.

Perhaps the movement demonstrates Henry's privileged access to the criminal world.

Perhaps it emphasizes the unusual nature of his relationship with the establishment.

Perhaps it makes the audience feel as though they are accompanying Henry.

Perhaps it is simply an impressive camera movement.

All of these possibilities exist.

But before selecting one, we would need to determine whether the sequence is impressive.

That raises the question of what "impressive" means.

A sequence may be impressive because it is technically difficult.

It may be impressive because it is aesthetically pleasing.

It may be impressive because audiences remember it.

It may be impressive because critics say it is impressive.

However, if critics say it is impressive, we would need to examine the critics.

And examining the critics would introduce another body of evidence.

That would make the essay longer.

This essay is already quite long.

Therefore, we shall move on.

Henry Hill

Henry Hill is the central character of *Goodfellas*.

This is another statement that appears simple.

It is not necessarily simple.

To say that Henry is the central character implies that characters can occupy different levels of centrality. This raises questions about what makes one character more central than another.

Screen time?

Narrative importance?

Perspective?

Emotional significance?

The answer may be some combination of these things.

Henry certainly receives considerable attention.

He also narrates portions of the film.

Narration is interesting.

Narration allows a character to describe events.

Henry describes events.

Therefore, we are receiving information from Henry.

This information may or may not be reliable.

The question of reliability is important.

But before asking whether Henry is reliable, we must establish what reliability means.

A reliable narrator is generally one whose account can be trusted.

But what does it mean to trust a fictional character?

Does the audience trust Henry?

Does the film want us to trust Henry?

Does Scorsese want us to trust Henry?

Does Nicholas Pileggi want us to trust Henry?

These questions cannot be answered without examining the relationship between the fictional character and the audience.

The relationship between the character and audience cannot be examined without discussing specific scenes.

We have already discussed one scene.

Unfortunately, it was not sufficiently discussed.

Therefore, we would need to return to it.

But returning to it would interrupt our discussion of Henry.

So we will postpone that.

Henry grows up fascinated by organized crime.

This is important.

Why?

Because it tells us something about his character.

What it tells us is less clear.

Perhaps he wants power.

Perhaps he wants money.

Perhaps he wants belonging.

Perhaps he wants excitement.

Perhaps he wants all four.

It is also possible that these motivations change.

People change.

Characters change.

Films about characters changing are often concerned with transformation.

Goodfellas is concerned with transformation.

We could now discuss Henry's transformation.

But first, we need to establish what he transforms from and what he transforms into.

At the beginning, he is young.

Later, he is older.

This establishes a transformation in age.

But age alone does not explain character development.

Character development is a complex subject.

Complex subjects require space.

This essay has space.

But it would be possible to use that space discussing character development.

That would leave less space for other things.

Therefore, we shall not.

Organized Crime

Organized crime is another important aspect of *Goodfellas*.

The title of this section is therefore appropriate.

Organized crime is crime that is organized.

This definition may seem circular.

It is.

Circular definitions are generally not especially useful, so it would be better to replace it with a more precise definition.

However, defining organized crime precisely would require distinguishing it from disorganized crime.

This distinction is not as straightforward as it initially appears.

If three people plan a robbery, is that organized crime?

If one person plans a robbery alone, is that organized crime?

If two people commit a crime spontaneously but later divide the money according to an established arrangement, does that make it organized?

These questions are fascinating.

They are also not particularly necessary to understanding *Goodfellas*.

Nevertheless, they demonstrate that even apparently simple concepts can become complicated when examined closely.

And this is exactly what analysis does.

It complicates things.

The film presents a world in which crime is not merely something characters occasionally do. It is integrated into their social environment.

This observation might be significant.

It might even be one of the most significant observations available to us.

But significance requires interpretation.

Interpretation requires evidence.

Evidence requires examples.

Examples require explanation.

Explanation requires words.

We have already used many words.

Therefore, we should probably stop before we explain too much.

Violence

There is violence in *Goodfellas*.

This is undeniable.

There are also guns.

There are knives.

There are threats.

There are beatings.

There are murders.

These events are presented in different ways.

Sometimes violence is shocking.

Sometimes it is sudden.

Sometimes it is treated almost casually.

Sometimes there is humor surrounding it.

This juxtaposition is worth considering.

"Juxtaposition" refers to placing things next to one another, particularly when their contrast is meaningful.

Whether the contrast here is meaningful is exactly what we would need to determine.

For example, a violent scene might immediately follow a humorous scene.

This could create discomfort.

Or it could make the violence more surprising.

Or it could demonstrate something about the characters.

Or it could simply be the rhythm of the film.

All of these explanations are possible.

We should choose one.

But choosing one would imply rejecting the others.

Perhaps the best academic approach is to acknowledge all of them.

This is called nuance.

Nuance is useful because it allows us to avoid making definitive statements.

A definitive statement might say, "The film does X."

A nuanced statement might say, "The film could perhaps be understood as doing X, although it may also be doing Y, and this depends on how one interprets Z."

The second statement is longer.

Longer statements sound more analytical.

Therefore, we could use one.

But doing so would require discussing Z.

We will leave Z for another time.

Karen

Karen Hill is Henry's wife.

She is played by Lorraine Bracco.

She provides another perspective.

This is important because perspective is important.

There are multiple perspectives in *Goodfellas*.

Henry's perspective.

Karen's perspective.

The perspective of the camera.

The perspective of the audience.

Perhaps the perspective of Scorsese.

These perspectives may overlap.

They may also conflict.

Karen's perspective is especially interesting because she does not begin with Henry's background.

She enters his world.

This could be interpreted as a gradual introduction to organized crime.

It could also be interpreted as a relationship story.

Or a story about attraction.

Or fear.

Or trust.

Or all of these.

Once again, we encounter the problem of interpretation.

At this point, it may be useful to pause.

We have discussed Henry.

We have discussed Karen.

We have discussed violence.

We have discussed cameras.

We have discussed organized crime.

We have even discussed Martin Scorsese.

And yet, somehow, we have not actually explained what *Goodfellas* means.

This is unfortunate.

But perhaps meaning is not something that can simply be explained.

Perhaps it must be discovered.

Perhaps the audience discovers it.

Perhaps critics discover it.

Perhaps scholars discover it.

Perhaps nobody discovers it.

Perhaps the meaning is simply there.

We should investigate this.

But not here.

The Ending

Eventually, *Goodfellas* reaches its ending.

This is something that endings tend to do.

An ending ends.

The ending of *Goodfellas* is significant because it concludes the story.

But what does it conclude?

Henry's story.

The film's story.

The audience's experience.

Possibly all three.

The ending also represents a change in Henry's circumstances.

His life is no longer what it was.

This is important.

It could be interpreted as a consequence of his choices.

It could also be interpreted as a consequence of circumstances beyond his control.

Perhaps it is both.

Again, we are confronted by complexity.

Complexity is the enemy of a simple conclusion.

Fortunately, we do not need a simple conclusion.

We only need a conclusion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Goodfellas* is a film.

It was directed by Martin Scorsese.

It stars Ray Liotta, Robert De Niro, Joe Pesci, and Lorraine Bracco.

It concerns Henry Hill and his involvement with organized crime.

It contains violence.

It contains humor.

It contains music.

It contains a camera.

It contains characters.

It contains scenes.

It has a beginning.

It has a middle.

It has an ending.

These facts provide a foundation for understanding the film.

Unfortunately, a foundation is not the same as a building.

The building would need to be constructed.

Construction would require materials.

The materials would include analysis, evidence, interpretation, and argument.

Those materials have not been fully assembled here.

This is not necessarily a problem.

An unfinished building is still evidence that construction has begun.

In the same way, this essay demonstrates that analysis of *Goodfellas* is possible.

It does not demonstrate what that analysis would conclude.

That conclusion remains open.

Perhaps the film glorifies organized crime.

Perhaps it condemns it.

Perhaps it does both.

Perhaps it does neither.

Perhaps asking the question is more important than answering it.

Perhaps that is something worth discussing.

And perhaps, with more time, we could finally discuss it.

But before doing so, we would first need to establish what "discuss" means.

That would require another essay.

And that essay would probably need an introduction.

The introduction would begin by explaining that *Goodfellas* is a film.

Which brings us, once again, to where we started.

The discussion, therefore, remains pending.

For now.