



MASTERPIECE #68

GOODFELLAS

Gangland, cruelty and capitalism: Scorsese gets the credit (crunch)...

1990, 18. Out: now, RRP £19.99 (Special Edition)

IT'S ABOUT VIOLENCE. IT'S ABOUT DRUGS.

It's about money. Most of all, *GoodFellas* is about greed. A throwaway line in the closing sequence addresses the theme: as the Feds round up those ratted-out by Henry Hill (Ray Liotta), a Mob foot-soldier snarls, "How about you guys go down to Wall Street and get some real fuckin' crooks?"

Martin Scorsese may yet explicitly address the moral degeneracy of white-collar criminals with in-development true tale *The Wolf Of Wall Street*, but he's already made the ultimate exploration of the boom 'n' bust lifestyle. As he commented upon the picture's release, "In organised crime the idea is not to go around killing people; it's to make a lot of money for the least amount of effort." Now, who does that remind you of?

GoodFellas may be set largely in the '60s and '70s, but it's energised by the excess of the 'Me Generation' decade — red braces, cocaine and conspicuous consumption. Upon its autumn 1990 release, America was in recession, Reagan retired and Thatcherism at its fag-end (Maggie quit shortly after). The economy would take an age to recover, before we binged again. If we've learnt one thing, it's that we never learn. Hill exalts in the boom and lives on the never-never. It's spectacular and instantly satisfying, but whatever you *have* to pay for. Business is business.

Of course, the Mob as metaphor for corporate life is nothing new. The Godfathers are a parable for the tainted American Dream, give the Mafia a mythic grandeur and are no less brilliant for being so beautiful. But if Coppola's is an operatic opus, Scorsese's is an excoriating exposé. As easy — and comforting — as it is to forget, this story is true. Written by Scorsese and crime reporter Nicholas Pileggi, based on his book *Wise Guy: Life In A Mafia Family*, it adheres horribly closely to the life of crook-turned-informer Hill — a point underscored by the date-specific captions that appear throughout (listen, too, to the Special Edition commentary with Hill and prosecutor Ed McDonald, who plays himself in the film). No director is as well set as Scorsese to tell the story, who couples virtuoso technique with a can't-be-faked familiarity with the personalities on display. Mean Streets understood the grubby existence of small-time hoods, the street-level hustle informed by the director's upbringing in Little Italy, New York. Nearly 30 years later, this is a sequel of sorts: slick but sick and relentlessly, ruthlessly clear-eyed. Scorsese had just dealt with doubt,

redemption and divinity in *The Last Temptation Of Christ*. Having explored the saviour, he focused on Satan and a testament to the truth of what Paul tells Timothy in the Bible: "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil."

The opening — with Billy Batts (Frank Vincent) gasping in a car boot, then knifed by pint-sized psycho Tommy DeVito (Joe Pesci) — is deliberately horrifying, a warning: don't be charmed by these guys. Henry, Tommy and Jimmy 'The Gent' Conway (Robert De Niro) are stained red by the brake-lights; there might as well be a sign that reads, "Welcome to Hades". Quickly, though, style and exuberance overpower fear and self-loathing. You can't help but be beguiled as the camera dollies in, the frame freezes and Hill's voiceover intones those immortal words: "As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster." Brass blares. Tony Bennett sings out. The seduction begins...



Henry (Ray Liotta) questions the wisdom of Morrie's (Chuck Low) wig...

AN EXCORIATING EXPOSÉ... SLICK BUT SICK AND RELENTLESSLY, RUTHLESSLY CLEAR-EYED.

As the young Henry (Christopher Serrone) is drawn into this world, so are we: no school, free cigarettes, tough guys treating you like a man; who wouldn't want to be a good fella? Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the Copacabana tracking shot — perhaps the most celebrated of '90s cinema — as Henry sires the sceptical Karen (Lorraine Bracco) into the club, skipping the queue, weaving through the runarounds, the kitchen, right to the front of the stage, where a table instantly appears for them. Technically, no doubt, it's astonishing (and it remains a crime that cinematographer Michael Ballhaus wasn't even *nominated* for an Oscar), but imitators would do well to remember that it serves a purpose beyond stylistic showboating: it nails a narrative point. As Paul Sorvino (heavy-lidded don Paulie) once said, "We find them absolutely impossible to resist, because they can do, it seems, whatever they want to do." Life without rules: amoral,

hedonistic, glorious... When Henry pistol-whips a preppy prick who has roughed up Karen — and Liotta is quite brilliant here, bristling with rage — it's hard not to grin. And it's easy to understand her thoughts, in voiceover: "I know there are women, like my best friends, who would have gotten out of there the minute their boyfriend gave them a gun to hide. But I didn't. I gotta admit the truth: it turned me on."

Even when evil becomes ever more apparent, as Jimmy offs everyone involved in the Lufthansa heist — the shots timed to the licks of Clapton's Layla (Piano Exit), which was played on set — the style is astonishing, enveloping, opening Scorsese up to accusations of glamorising gangsters. It probably explains why he lost out to Kevin Costner and the more stately *Dances With Wolves* at the Oscars (although it's worth remembering trade Bible *Variety* branded *GoodFellas* "colorful but dramatically unsatisfying"). But the genius of the

movie is that it takes no obvious moral view — it doesn't judge, hector or mollify: it stands back and lets you draw your own conclusions. And these change with each viewing, at each age. Watch it once, young enough, and it's the visual razzamatazz and profane or pseudo-wise one-liners that linger, puncturing many a pub conversation:

"What am I? A schmuck on wheels?"

"Fuck 'im in the ear. Fuck 'im in the other ear!"

"Never rat on your friends and always keep your mouth shut."

Watch it again, and again, and the focus shifts to curdled love and relationships gone awry. There are wonderful, intimate moments that speak to a lifetime of being together — as when Henry teases Tommy during the restaurant arson, "You need

help reaching anything?" — and gut-crunching beats of betrayal, as when a suited and spectacled Jimmy faces Henry over a café table and our antihero knows his days are numbered. Yes, it's a crime film, but it's more than that: it's about misplaced power, desire, gluttony, insatiable ambition and being let down. The ending still surprises, as Henry steps from the witness stand and speaks directly to you. Facing the reality of life without "the life", he's an empty, hollowed-out figure, full of regret — but not necessarily for the right reasons. "We were treated like movie stars with muscle," he says, fondly. "Today, everything is different. There's no action. I have to wait around like everyone else..." Caught between suburbia and Satan; anonymity and gory glory. Either way, he's lost. What goes up must come down. There's no boom without a bust, and some things, once lost, can never be recovered. In the words of Christ, "What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"