In the closing moments of the 1970s, President Jimmy Carter urged the people of the United States to oppose the rising forces of “fragmentation and self-interest” that threatened to extinguish a cohesive American identity. Carter’s diagnosis of a “crisis of confidence” came in the wake of the Vietnam War and Watergate, two events that had eroded the public’s trust in authority, undermined national character, and so created a “longing for meaning” that would redefine American values. For Carter, as for us, the decade appears as a period of stagnation, in sharp contrast the “passion, grandeur, and tragedy” that characterized the Sixties, as Bailey and Farber argue in America in the Seventies (1). Yet this view does not do justice to the momentous reconsiderations—of government, relationships, and self—that have come to characterize Americans’ self-understanding. Disgusted over the Watergate revelations of governmental corruption and deceit, Americans turned to personal identity and ambition as sources of meaning, and, rejecting the model of American identity as a melting pot, withdrew into increasingly homogenous communities that transformed America into a mosaic of translucent social prisms. Francis Ford Coppola’s 1972 film The Godfather charts this transformation of American identity from the unity of the melting pot to the fragmentation of prisms through the film’s portrayal of characters in a world of corruption and distrust.

If before the Seventies, Americans saw themselves as a glorious melting pot overflowing with assimilated cultures, the crises of the Seventies prompted a turn to processes of internal reflection as Americans recreated their identities. Bailey and Farber chronicle how Americans revisited spiritualism by “renewing their Christian faith,” relieved their crises through self-help books, and explored new personal boundaries through drug use and extramarital sex (5). Similarly, Capozzola argues that, instead of acclimating to previous versions of American identity, individuals in the Seventies entered the private realm of the family and the community and adopted quests “for [ethnic] roots” to “express American patriotism from an ambivalent, sideways angle” (38-39). The Godfather suggests that this pursuit of individual identity, a mission rooted in family, ethnic belonging, and self-help movements, leads to the formation of social prisms. Faced with the prospect that a single pot of cultural soup that mixed together diverse identities might not effectively describe American identity, the American people congealed the stew into newly separated social prisms that distinguish and isolate individuals and groups from the rest of the pot.

The mafia world depicted in The Godfather exemplifies one of the most isolated prisms of the United States in the political and socioeconomic climate of the time. The Godfather’s tale of the Corleones, an Italian-American mafia family in New York, mirrors the segmentation and localization of American society and links it to the decline of popular support for the United States government in the Seventies. The chaos, paranoia, and corruption that underlie Coppola’s film reflect the rampant turmoil and injustice of the 1970s. The film follows the youngest son of the Corleone family, Michael, on his journey from a young, well-adjusted Italian-American male to the head of one of the most powerful Italian-American mafias. His change allegorizes that of the American public between the Sixties and Seventies—an intense shift from patriotism and shared values to cynicism and self-identification.
Coppola introduces Michael in the first scene of the film, the wedding of Connie Corleone, the only daughter of the family. In this scene, Michael wears a United States military uniform, in marked contrast to the typical business attire that the members of the mafia sport. The uniform emphasizes Michael’s military background, his status as a war hero, and casts him as a symbol for American pride and the ideals of the early Sixties—a man who has chosen a normal American lifestyle, complete with an all-American sweetheart, over his family ties.

If Michael exemplifies the national and civic ideals of the 1960s, his family’s allegiances are much less overt. Mafia business saturates the wedding—the guests include mob leaders and other people who wish to benefit from Don Vito Corleone, Michael’s father, and his power; even the baker who made the wedding cake asks for the Don’s help. Yet even though Michael pointedly ignores and distances himself from his family’s underhanded business—and is, in turn, excluded from it—he does not exclusively reflect patriotism identity and fortitude. In the context of the Seventies, his uniform symbolizes the war and failure in Vietnam and so presages a newly developed ambiguity of American identity. He never wears the uniform again in the movie, marking the start of his transformation as he relinquishes his arguably muddled American image.

In Long Time Gone, Bloom argues that the Sixties “interconnect[ed]” “the political, the cultural, and the social,” such that “the personal became political, and the cultural and political seemed to be two parts of a whole” (8). Yet, at a national level, this very integration of culture and politics spurred the dramatic response against the government in the 1970s. The public had lived in a world where to defend American ideals was to fight against external sources—particularly communism abroad—not one’s own leaders. The revelations of governmental failure and duplicity shattered the idea of personal security. The Vietnam War that began in the mid-Fifties drove the dramatic decrease in public support for the administration, as antagonism toward the war effort sucked away American patriotism. The majority of Gallup poll responses supported America’s involvement in the Vietnam War in August 1965, with 61% of polled Americans in favor of the war. The approval rating quickly declined, and by May 1971, the amount of public support had reached 28% of polled Americans (Mintz and McNeil). Armed service officials denounced the war policy; one lieutenant stated, “When the law becomes a crime… am I to condone it? My answer is no” (qtd. in Franklin). The New York Times reported that many young men whom the government had drafted deserted and fled the country (Wilner 32). Students joined together in dissent and disaster when a Kent State University protest on May 4, 1970 ended with National Guardsmen killing four students and wounding nine others, an event that further increased bitterness toward the national administration (Miller 51). By 1972, the Watergate scandal magnified the already widespread distrust of the federal government. As the Watergate hearings revealed the extent of Nixon’s crimes, the people were “shocked at the pure use of power for cold political ends,” recognizing that they had been “so naïve about government” prior to the trials (qtd. in Summers and Ganesan).

The Godfather reflects this dynamic. Amerigo Bonasera, an Italian immigrant who appears in the first scene of The Godfather, emblematizes the consequences of this recognition when he tells Vito that he had “believe[d] in America,” but that his trust vanished when two young American men “went free” with only a suspended sentence after they were tried at court for beating his daughter “like an animal.” He explains that he has come to Vito “for justice,” indicating that the American legal system has, in his eyes, failed to provide such integrity. Amerigo’s name, Italian for “good night, America,” further highlights the man’s separation from the nation. By turning to a man of local power for justice when he loses con-
fidence in his American identity, Amerigo epitomizes the turn to locally grounded identities. Similar to Nixon’s America, in the world of The Godfather, corruption accompanies conventional forces of law. Police captain Mark McCluskey’s involvement in the crime business illustrates this alliance. Bound by his position to the task of serving the American people, Captain McCluskey neglects that responsibility when he collaborates with the antagonist of the movie, Virgil Sollozzo. His crooked behavior demonstrates why normal civilians stopped believing in official American authority.

*The Godfather* thematizes the public’s fall away from the government, and suggests that Americans re-examined and re-discovered their respective places in the nation by means of the practices surveillance and self-surveillance. In *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance*, historian Stephen Paul Miller defines self-surveillance as “the self-monitoring and self-regimenting” of “an object, an institution, an area, a group, or a person” and states that “self-surveillance [was a] dominant trait… of seventies culture” that “sometimes reinforce[d] identifications put into place by external surveillance.” External surveillance, the “monitoring” of individuals, incites self-surveillance as a reaction to observatory eyes (Miller 2). Nixon’s scrutiny of average Americans caused the public to internalize the idea of constant observation and, intentionally or not, to begin a cycle of national voyeurism; the Watergate scandal resulted in a loss of respect for personal and public boundaries. As Farber writes, “After Watergate, the mass media stopped turning a respectful eye away from the stray presidential slip, awkward moment, or human foible as had been done for decades” (13). The American public looked at the President with a critical eye after Watergate; they saw Nixon’s actions as an attack on American ideals and maintained their threatened values through self-surveillance, “reinvent[ing] themselves and form[ing] new institutions and new communities” — social prisms consisting of their personal interest groups that upheld and protected their principles (7). Americans increasingly called a single national identity into question—or rather, completely challenged the idea that a complete national identity still existed. Miller indicates that demographic identification “flourished in the Seventies” as “Americans were broken up into urban professional singles, young suburban housewives, retired senior citizens, and so on” (41). Copozzola points out that even the Bicentennial celebration in 1976 with “more than sixty thousand separate events” arising “across the country” attested to such fragmentation (39). It took place during a time of “a host of political scandals,” “economic downturn,” and cynical sentiment, so what should have been a celebration of national pride and survival instead “operate[d] as a retreat into the private realm of the family and the community and a rejection of the divisiveness of [Nixon’s administration]” (30, 38). The scattered Bicentennial celebrations exhibited the shift from a national society to one of self-interest.

In *The Godfather*, external and self-surveillance underlie the mafia members’ game of *Spy vs. Spy*. As the wedding scene progresses, Vito clandestinely oversees the festivities from his office, keeping watch on both his family and his fellow mafia members. Later, Sollozzo traps Tom Hagen, the Corleone’s adopted son and lawyer, indicating that the drug dealer had observed the lawyer’s movements in order to force him into a meeting. Vito catches sight of two men walking toward him as he purchases fruit, and he recognizes the potential danger seconds before the assassins pull out their guns. While Vito and Sollozzo understand the importance of surveying their enemies, Michael’s lack of awareness about what he sees and how and when he is seen emphasizes the distance between him and the mafia.

In the beginning of the movie, Michael assures Kay that the criminal lifestyle belongs to his family, not him. He exudes a sense of normality into the Corleone mafia dynamic when he drags a
laughing and carefree Kay into the family picture during the wedding. Kay, with her questions, characterizes the naivety and innocence that the mafia world lacks. When the two of them go shopping, they lack the paranoia of external surveillance as they walk down an open street. Their lifestyle is a sharp contrast from the mafia life—just before this scene, Vito discusses the drug trade with Sollozzo. Immediately following, the scene cuts to one of Vito’s men putting on a bulletproof vest, anticipating a dangerous mission. The juxtaposition of these scenes emphasizes Michael’s distance from organized crime; his disregard for potential danger attests to his original inattention to external surveillance in the mafia world.

Michael’s ignorance of surveillance changes decisively when Sollozzo attacks his father. Just as it had for the American public of the Seventies, the endangerment of Michael’s personal identity provokes his rebirth. When he calls Sonny after the assault, his brother tells him to “Come home, Kid,” to return to his place in the family. Michael rejoins the household and strengthens his position in the mob realm, his father’s critical state impressing upon him his own vulnerability and susceptibility to Sollozzo as well as enlightening him on the eyes that are watching his family’s movements. By recognizing Sollozzo’s surveillance on his family and leaving behind his oblivion, Michael embodies the American public after Watergate—a man who detects the external surveillance, rises to protect himself and his family, and creates a social prism in which he can fulfill this mission.

Yet this prism excludes those who do not belong—those who belong to Michael’s old identity. The scene in which Michael calls Sonny takes place in a telephone booth, visually foreshadowing Michael and Kay’s troubles: Michael stands in the rectangular prism, focused on his family affairs, while Kay peers into the telephone booth from beyond the transparent barrier. This physical separation emphasizes the contrast of their lifestyles and resembles the outcome of Michael and Kay’s relationship: though Kay can see Michael in the booth, she cannot hear him; likewise, in the future, though Kay is Michael’s wife and the center of his personal life, she does not understand his business affairs. Michael’s new enlightenment and Kay’s continued oblivion separate the two on different sides of the prism.

Michael’s detachment from Kay begins as he constructs his new social prism. The dinner scene between the two radiates with uneasiness, its atmosphere dense and conversation stifled; Michael quickly leaves, refusing Kay’s request to accompany him to the hospital. The tension in this scene and Michael’s ultimate denial of Kay’s companionship indicates the imminence of Michael’s commitment to his family and subsequent rejection of his “civilian” life, including his girlfriend.

When Michael goes to the hospital, he quickly perceives the imminence of danger; he acts rapidly to save Vito, exerting his own form of surveillance when he scans the hallway for strangers. He confronts Enzo, an Italian immigrant indebted to Vito, and, with the firm authority of an experienced mafia leader, orders him to wait outside. Michael’s level-headedness in this dangerous situation displays his switch from civilian life to mafia life. Once Enzo leaves, Michael returns to his father, and in a short whisper to a barely conscious Vito, he joins the family business, declaring that he is “with [his father] now.” The result of this declaration appears instantaneously; Michael reunites with Enzo outside and tells him without hesitation, “Put your hand in your pocket like you have a gun.” When hired assassins emerge at the hospital, Michael tricks them into leaving. Michael’s skillful execution of his impromptu scheme illustrates his new identity as a mafia man. Afterward, Enzo attempts to light a cigarette, but his civilian nerves overtake him, his hands shaking too much to handle the lighter. Michael takes the cigarette lighter from Enzo and
produces a flame on his first attempt. After Enzo accepts the flame, Michael looks down at his hands: they do not tremble at all. This specific edit emphasizes the action of looking down, revealing that Michael not only recognizes external surveillance, but also has begun to survey himself. This moment confirms Michael’s acceptance of the family’s criminal lifestyle—a cycle of surveillance and self-surveillance. In response to the dangers of external scrutiny, he no longer identifies as a normal American civilian but as a part of the dangerous family business he had rejected for so long. For his father, Michael leaves behind the life of an American war hero and a normal citizen. Michael’s later schemes to kill Sollozzo and McCluskey and to influence the media depend on his close observational skills and foresight; the successful implementation of these plans illuminate how he has fully adapted to his life in his family’s prism. With the formation of his sense of surveillance, Michael’s prism consolidates, and his new identity, one of control and manipulation, emerges.

The establishment of societal prisms had a profound impact on American identity by making obsolete the “melting pot” metaphor that had labeled the United States population since the start of mass immigration and replacing it with the idea of a social mosaic. The pieces of colored glass that form a mosaic possess their individual qualities, never blending with the other parts. In the 1970s, America left behind its collective identity as a melting pot of cultures and, through the construction of small individual prisms all over the nation, assembled an American mosaic of different factional identities. The prisms differed from the melting pot ideology because each prism reflected a hybrid culture. Like the glass shards that form a mosaic, the translucent quality of a prism eliminates completely solid colors; within each social prism flourished a hybrid culture that the melting pot system had stifled. The mosaic allowed for a diversified American identity—one that allowed for multiple hybrid cultures to arise rather than the single national culture of the melting pot. Michael Corleone’s character and loyalty change reflects this national transformation of the Seventies as he rejects the conformist image of an American civilian to create a localized vision of himself that allows for the complexity of his identity.

Some might argue that the Seventies do not as much attest to the formation of a new cultural mosaic as it reveals a retreat into already existing identities: since Michael already had his roots in the mafia—since he was born into the family—when he gives up his identity as an American war hero to become a mafia don, he simply falls back onto his original identity as an Italian. Yet Michael does not truly belong to Italy. When he is exiled to Sicily after killing Sollozzo and McCluskey, he relies upon Italian translators, calling himself “a stranger to this country.” On the other hand, he is also not the idealized American of the time when he joins his family business. The formation of identities in the cultural mosaic ultimately relies on Michael’s decision. Rather than making a forced decision to return to the family realm, Michael turns away from his national identity through conscious choice. While his older brother, Sonny, inherits his role in the mafia by birth, thereby belonging to the melting pot because his personal identity blends with the others, Michael’s mafia identity develops through the surveillance of his family. Michael then, like the American people of the Seventies, has the choice to register or ignore the surveillance; by selecting the former, Michael combines his original American identity with his new, externally produced persona, creating a hybrid culture in a prism. The adamant determination that the people of the Seventies possessed to establish their own identities and escape from a single national identity eliminated the melting pot analogy and set into place the American cultural mosaic that, to this day, defines diversity in the United States.

*The Godfather* takes place in “a world where emotional ties are strong, loyalties are somewhat
more flexible at times, and tempers are short” (Murphy). This world reflects America in the Seventies. As loyalties toward the American government fluctuated, local emotional ties grew and flourished. The Seventies sustained social prisms; hence “The Godfather seems to take place entirely inside a huge, smoky, plastic dome, through which the Corleones see our real world only dimly” (Canby). American individuals of the decade also viewed the country from within a localized community; the lack of faith in the government caused the creation of new, focused identifications based on self-surveillance, a regimented devotion to personal ideals. The national government’s betrayal of American trust led to a decade of local distinction and stunted growth as personal interest outweighed American progress. Michael claims that his actions in the mafia are “not personal” but “strictly business.” Perhaps the decade was all business when it came to government chicanery and mafia ruthlessness, but for both the American public and Michael Corleone, they confronted their respective situations in ways that appeared, in the words of the film, “very, very personal.”

Works Cited