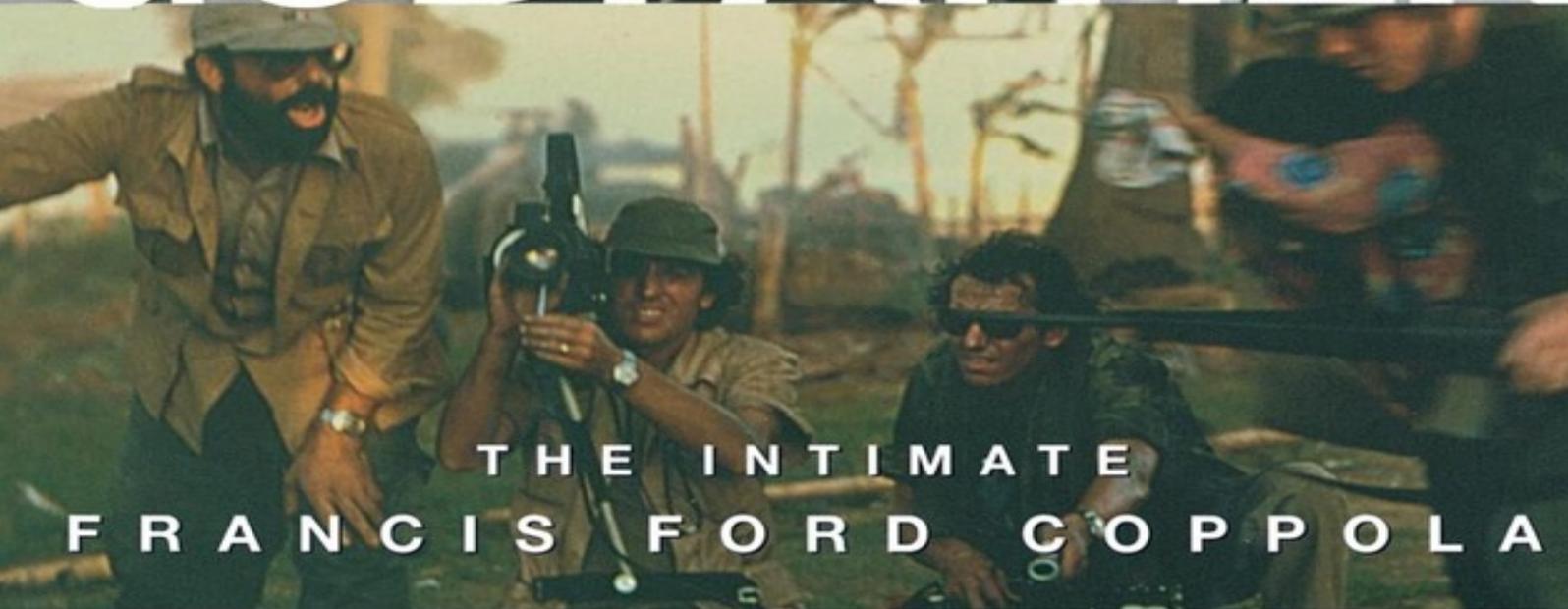


GODFATHER



THE INTIMATE
FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA

GENE D. PHILLIPS

GODFATHER

GODFATHER

The Intimate
Francis Ford Coppola

Gene D. Phillips

With a Foreword by
Walter Murch

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For
Stanley Kubrick,
the ultimate
Hollywood maverick

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Foreword

Collaborating with Coppola

Walter Murch,
film and sound editor

It disappeared long ago, but in 1972 the Window was still there, peering through milky cataracts of dust, thirty-five feet above the floor of Samuel Goldwyn's old Stage 7.1 never would have noticed it if Richard hadn't suddenly stopped in his tracks as we were taking a shortcut on our way back from lunch.

"That... was when Sound ... was King!" he said, gesturing dramatically into the upper darkness of Stage 7.

It took me a moment, but I finally saw what he was pointing to: something near the ceiling that resembled the observation window of a 1930s dirigible, nosing its way into the stage.

Goldwyn Studios, where Richard Portman and I were working on the mix of *The Godfather*, had originally been United Artists, built for Mary Pickford when she founded U.A. with Charles Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks, and D. W. Griffith in the early 1920s. By 1972, Stage 7 was functioning as an attic—stuffed with the mysterious lumbering shapes of disused equipment—but it was there that Samuel Goldwyn produced one of the earliest of his many musicals: *Whoopee* (1930), starring Eddie Cantor and choreographed by Busby Berkeley. And it was there that Goldwyn's director of sound, Gordon Sawyer, sat at the controls behind the Window, hands gliding across three Bakelite knobs, piloting his Dirigible of Sound into a new world ... a world in which Sound was King.

Down below, Eddie Cantor and the All-Singing, All-Dancing Goldwyn Girls had lived in terror of the distinguished Man Behind the Window—and not just the actors, but musicians, cameramen (Greg Toland among them), the director, the producer (Florenz Ziegfeld), even Sam Goldwyn himself. No one could contradict it if Mr. Sawyer, dissatisfied with the quality of the sound, leaned into his microphone and pronounced dispassionately but irrevocably the word "Cut!"

By 1972, forty-five years after his exhilarating coronation, King Sound seemed to be living in considerably reduced circumstances. No longer did the Man Behind the Window survey the scene from on high. Instead, the sound recordist was usually stuck in some dark corner with his equipment cart. The very idea of his demanding "Cut!" was inconceivable. Not only did none of those on the set fear his opinion, but they hardly consulted him and were frequently impatient when he did voice an opinion. Forty-five years seemed to have turned him from king to footman.

Was Richard's nostalgia misplaced? What had befallen the Window? And were sound's misfortunes all they appeared to be?

There is something about the liquidity and all-encompassing embrace of sound that might make it more accurate to speak of her as a queen rather than a king. But was she then perhaps a queen for whom the crown was a burden and who preferred to slip on a handmaiden's bonnet and scurry incognito through the back passageways of the palace, accomplishing her tasks anonymously?

Neither Richard Portman nor I had any inkling on that afternoon when he showed me the Window that the record-breaking success of *The Godfather* several months later would trigger a revival in the

fortunes of the film industry in general and of sound in particular.

Three years earlier, in 1969, I had been hired to create the sound effects for—and mix—*The Rain People*, a film written, directed, and produced by Francis Ford Coppola. He was a recent film school graduate, as was I, and we were both eager to make films professionally the way we had made them in school. Francis had felt that the sound on his previous film (*Tinian's Rainbow*) had bogged down the bureaucratic and technical inertia at the studios, and he didn't want to repeat the experience.

He also felt that if he stayed in Los Angeles he wouldn't be able to produce the inexpensive independent films he had in mind. So he and a fellow film student, George Lucas, and I, and our families, moved up to San Francisco to start American Zoetrope. The first item on the agenda was the mix of *The Rain People*, to be done in the unfinished basement of an old warehouse on Folsom Street.

Ten years earlier, this would have been unthinkable, but the invention of the transistor had changed things technically and economically to such an extent that it seemed natural for the thirty-year-old Francis to go to Germany and buy—almost off the shelf—mixing and editing equipment from K.E.M. in Hamburg and to hire me, a twenty-six-year-old, to use it.

Technically, the equipment was state of the art, and yet it cost a fourth of what comparable equipment would have cost five years earlier. This halving of price and doubling of quality is familiar to everyone now, after thirty years of microchips, but at the time it was astonishing. The frontier between professional and consumer electronics began to fade away.

In fact, it faded to the extent that it now became economically and technically possible for one person to do what several had done before, and that other frontier—between the creation and mixing of sound effects—also began to disappear.

From Zoetrope's beginning, the idea was to try to avoid the departmentalism that was sometimes the by-product of sound's technical complexity and that tended too often to pit mixers (who came mostly from engineering—direct descendants of the Man Behind the Window) against the people who created the sounds. It was as if there were two directors of photography on a film, one who lighted the scene and another who photographed it, and neither could do much about countermanding the other.

We felt that there was now no reason—given the equipment that was becoming available in 1969—that the person who designed the sound track shouldn't also be able to mix it and that the director would then be able to talk to one person, the sound designer, about the sound of the film the way he was able to talk to the production designer about the look of the film.

At any rate, it was against this background that the success of *The Godfather* led directly to the green-lighting of two Zoetrope productions: George Lucas's *American Graffiti* and Francis Coppola's *Conversation*—both with very different but equally adventuresome sound tracks where we were able to put our ideas to work.

Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* soon topped the box office of *The Godfather* and introduced the world at large to the music of John Williams. The success of *American Graffiti* led to *Star Wars* (with music by the same John Williams), which in turn topped *Jaws*. The seventy-millimeter Dolby release format of *Star Wars* revived and reinvented magnetic six-track sound and helped Dolby Cinema Sound obtain a crucial foothold in film postproduction and exhibition. The success of the two *Godfather* films would allow Francis to make *Apocalypse Now*, which broke further ground in originating, at the end of the 1970s, what has now become the standard film sound format: three channels of sound behind the screen, left and right surrounds behind the audience, and low-frequency enhancement.

The Window is long gone, and will not now return, but the autocratic temporal power that disappeared with it has been repaid a hundred—a thousand—times in creative power: the ability to freely reassociate image and sound in different contexts and combinations.

This reassociation of image and sound is the fundamental pillar upon which the creative use

sound rests and without which it would collapse. Sometimes it is done simply for convenience (~~walking on cornstarch, for instance, happens to record as a better footstep-in-snow than snow itself~~). But beyond any practical consideration, I believe this reassociation should stretch the relationship between sound to image wherever possible. It should strive to create a purposeful and fruitful tension between what is on the screen and what is kindled in the mind of the audience.

This metaphoric distance between the images of a film and the accompanying sounds is—and should be—continuously changing and flexible, and it often takes a fraction of a second (sometimes even several seconds) for the brain to make the right connections. For instance, the image of a light being turned on accompanied by a simple click is a basic association that is fused almost instantly and produces a relatively flat mental image.

Still fairly flat, but a level up in dimensionality is the image of a door closing accompanied by the right “slam”—this can indicate not only the material of the door and the space around it but also the emotional state of the person closing it. The sound for the door at the end of *The Godfather*, for instance, needed to give the audience more than the correct physical cues about the door. It was even more important to get a firm, irrevocable closing that resonated with and underscored Michael’s final line: “Never ask me about my business, Kay.”

That door sound was related to a specific image, and, as a result, it was “fused” by the audience fairly quickly. Sounds, however, that do not relate to the visuals in a direct way function at an even higher level of dimensionality and take proportionately longer to resolve. The rumbling and piercing metallic scream just before Michael Corleone kills Solozzo and McCluskey in a restaurant in *The Godfather* is not linked directly to anything seen on screen, and so the audience is made to wonder—least momentarily, if perhaps only subconsciously—“What is this?” The screech is from an elevated train rounding a sharp turn, so it is presumably coming from somewhere in the neighborhood (the scene takes place in the Bronx).

But precisely because it is so detached from the image, the metallic scream works as a clue to the state of Michael’s mind at the moment—the critical moment before he commits his first murder and his life turns an irrevocable corner. It is all the more effective because Michael’s face appears so calm and the sound is played so abnormally loud. This broadening tension between what we see and what we hear is brought to an abrupt end with the pistol shots that kill Solozzo and McCluskey: the distance between what we see and what we hear is suddenly collapsed at the moment that Michael’s destiny is fixed.

This moment is mirrored and inverted at the end of *Godfather III*. Instead of a calm face with a scream, we see a screaming face in silence. When Michael realizes that his daughter Mary has been shot, he tries several times to scream—but no sound comes out. In fact, Al Pacino was actually screaming, but the sound was removed in the editing. We are dealing here with an *absence* of sound, yet a fertile tension is created between what we see and what we would expect to hear, given the image. Finally, the scream bursts through, the tension is released, and the film—and the trilogy—comes over.

The elevated train in *The Godfather* was at least somewhere in the vicinity of the restaurant, even though it could not be seen. In the opening reel of *Apocalypse Now*, the jungle sounds that fill Willard’s hotel room come from nowhere on screen or in the “neighborhood,” and the only way to resolve the great disparity between what we are seeing and hearing is to imagine that these sounds are in Willard’s mind: that his body is in a hotel room in Saigon, but his mind is off in the jungle, where he dreams of returning. If the audience members can be brought to a point where they will bridge with their own imagination such an extreme distance between picture and sound, they will be rewarded with a correspondingly greater dimensionality of experience.

The risk, of course, is that the conceptual thread that connects image and sound can be stretched

too far, and the dimensionality will collapse: the moment of greatest dimension is always the moment of greatest tension.

The question remains in all of this, why we generally perceive the product of the fusion of image and sound in terms of the image. Why does sound usually enhance the image and not the other way around? In other words, why does King Sight still sit on his throne and Queen Sound haunt the corridors of the palace?

In his book *AudioVision*, Michael Chion describes an effect that he calls the acousmètre, which depends on delaying the fusion of sound and image to the extreme by supplying only the sound—most frequently a voice—and withholding the revelation of the sound's true source until nearly the end of the film. Only then, when the audience has used its imagination to the fullest, is the identity of the source revealed. The Wizard in *The Wizard of Oz* is one of a number of examples, along with the mother in *Psycho* and Hal in *2001* (and although Chion didn't mention it, Wolfman Jack in *American Graffiti* and Colonel Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*). The acousmètre is—for various reasons having to do with our perceptions—a uniquely cinematic device: the disembodied voice seems to come from everywhere and therefore to have no clearly defined limits to its power.

And yet ... there is an echo here of our earliest experience of the world: the revelation at birth that the song that sang to us from the very dawn of consciousness in the womb—a song that seemed to come from everywhere and to be part of us before we had any conception of what “us” meant—that this song is the voice of another and that she is now separate from us and we from her. We regret the loss of former unity—some say that our lives are a ceaseless quest to retrieve it—and yet we delight in seeing the face of our mother: the one is the price to be paid for the other.

This earliest, most powerful fusion of sound and image sets the tone for all that are to come.

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Chronology for Francis Ford Coppola

- 1939 Born April 7 in Detroit, Michigan, to Carmine and Italia Coppola.
- 1957 Attends Hofstra University on a drama scholarship.
- 1960 Earns a Bachelor of Arts degree at Hofstra and enters the film school of the University of California at Los Angeles, where he studies on campus for two years.
- 1962 Is hired by Roger Corman, an independent producer, and works on *Battle Beyond the Sun*, *The Young Racers*, and other films.
- 1963 Directs his first feature, *Dementia 13*, a low-budget movie made for Corman. The assistant art director is Eleanor Neil, whom Coppola marries after completing the movie.
- 1966 As scriptwriter for Seven Arts, an independent production unit, Coppola is given a screen credit for co-scripting *This Property Is Condemned* and *Is Paris Burning?*
- 1967 Directs *You're a Big Boy Now*, his first film for a major studio; it enables him to earn his Master of Arts degree at UCLA, which is conferred the following year.
- 1968 *Finians Rainbow*, a musical with Fred Astaire.
- 1969 *The Rain People* wins the Grand Prize and the Best Director Award at the San Sebastian International Film Festival. Inaugurates American Zoetrope, an independent production unit in San Francisco.
- 1970 *Patton*, for which he coauthors the screenplay, wins him his first Academy Award, for Best Screenplay.
- 1972 *The Godfather* wins him an Academy Award for coauthoring the screenplay of the film, which he also directed; the picture is also voted the Best Picture of the Year.
- 1974 *The Conversation* wins the Grand Prize at the Cannes International Film Festival. *The Great Gatsby*, the last picture for which he wrote a script without directing the film, is released. *The Godfather Part II* wins him Academy Awards for Best Director and for coauthoring the screenplay; the film becomes the only sequel up to that time to be voted Best Picture of the Year.
- 1979 *Apocalypse Now*, which had an unprecedented shooting period of 238 days, wins him his second Grand Prize at the Cannes International Film Festival; one of the first major films to deal with the Vietnam War.
- 1980 Inaugurates Zoetrope Studios in Hollywood.
- 1982 *One from the Heart*, a commercial failure, forces him to close his independent studio in Hollywood; he continues to run an independent production unit, American Zoetrope, in San Francisco, producing films for release by major studios in Hollywood.
- 1983 *The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish* are made back-to-back in Oklahoma.
- 1984 Assumes direction of *The Cotton Club*, a film with a troubled production history up to that point.
- 1985 "Rip Van Winkle," a telefilm, is first broadcast.
- 1986 *Peggy Sue Got Married* becomes a major hit.
- 1987 *The Gardens of Stone*, his second film set during the Vietnam War.
- 1988 *Tucker: The Man and His Dream*, after some false starts, is finally made.
- 1989 *New York Stories*, an anthology film with segments by Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen, and Coppola.

- 1990 *The Godfather Part III*, the final sequel to *The Godfather*.
- 1991 Fax Bahr and George Hickenlooper's feature-length documentary *Hearts of Darkness* about the making of *Apocalypse Now*.
- 1992 *Bram Stoker's Dracula* is a commercial success; Coppola receives a Golden Lion as a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Venice International Film Festival.
- 1995 The National Film Registry of the Library of Congress, which preserves films of enduring quality, includes *The Godfather*, *The Godfather Part II*, and *The Conversation* in its collection.
- 1996 *Jack*, a vehicle for Robin Williams.
- 1997 *The Rainmaker*, from the John Grisham novel.
- 1998 Recipient of the Life Achievement Award, the highest honor that can be bestowed by the Directors Guild of America. A jury orders Warner Brothers to pay him \$80 million for reneging on a deal to film *Pinocchio*—the largest victory by a filmmaker over a major studio up to that time.
- 1999 American Zoetrope, Coppola's production unit, releases *The Virgin Suicides*, written and directed by his daughter Sofia.
- 2000 Coppola edits (uncredited) the release version of *Supernova*, after the director, Walter Hill, departs the project.
- 2001 Theatrical release of *Apocalypse Now Redux*, with fifty minutes of additional footage added to the film as originally released. Release on DVD of *The Godfather Trilogy* with a documentary about the making of the three films.
- 2002 Gala tribute by the Film Society of Lincoln Center of New York for his lifetime achievement in the cinema, May 7. American Zoetrope releases *CQ*, written and directed by Coppola's son Roman. *Sight and Sound's* international poll of film directors and film critics chooses Coppola as one of the top ten directors of all time and *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part II* among the top ten films of all time.
- 2003 *Premiere* magazine conducts a nationwide poll for the one hundred greatest films, and *The Godfather Part II* leads the list in first place. The American Film Institute honors the best one hundred heroes and villains in cinema history with a TV special aired on June 3, including Michael Corleone in *Godfather II* as a legendary villain. The Motion Picture Academy sponsors a screening of *One from the Heart*, with Coppola leading discussion of the film. Francis Coppola serves as an executive producer for American Zoetrope on Sofia Coppola's second feature, *Lost in Translation*.
- 2004 A nationwide poll published by *Premiere* magazine lists *The Godfather* as one of the seventy-five most influential films of all time, because it raised the gangster film to the level of a cinematic epic.

Prologue

Artist in an Industry

Isn't Hollywood a dump—in the human sense of the word? A hideous town, full of the human spirit at a new low of debasement. This is no art, it's an industry.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

This isn't a business, it's a racket.

—Harry Cohn, producer

At 7:00 PM on the evening of May 7, 2002, Francis Ford Coppola took his place in a special ceremony overlooking the auditorium of Avery Fisher Hall in New York City's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. The occasion was a gala tribute sponsored by the Film Society of Lincoln Center honoring Coppola's lifetime achievement as a filmmaker. Several cinema artists associated with his career were on hand to pay tribute to him, and these same individuals will be cited throughout the book. But Coppola himself was the main attraction.

One of the reasons that Coppola's career is so fascinating is that, despite the wide diversity of genres in which he has worked, all of his films reflect in varying degrees the artistry of the director who made them all, as I shall endeavor to show in the course of this study. Coppola himself has declared that a good director does not make a group of separate films—rather each film that he makes is a series of installments in the same film. As he puts it, “Why do we continue to think in cinema that one makes one film, then another?... I prefer to think that my films are the same film. You know, if you take all of my films from first to last, it is all the same film.”¹

This is another way of saying that it is the director more than anyone else involved in the production of a film who leaves his personal stamp on a motion picture. Filmmaking, it is true, is a corporate effort, to which a whole host of individuals, from actors to technicians, must make their contribution. But it is the director who must create a unified work of art from all of these varied contributions.

Indeed, the premise of this book is precisely that the director alone can confer artistic unity on a motion picture. The director, after all, is the single controlling influence during the production of a motion picture. It is up to him to blend all of the varied contributions of cast and crew into a unified whole.

Only the director, then, can create a unified work of art out of the corporate effort that characterizes the making of a motion picture. In describing the central role of the director in the production of a movie, another critic has said that the director's function is that of quarterback, orchestra leader, trail boss, company commander, and, at times, lion tamer. When the role of the director is viewed in this fashion, moreover, as the guiding light of film production, it is clear that he is the true author of a film in much the same way that a writer is the author of a novel.

The auteur theory, which proposes that the director is the center of the filmmaking process, can be readily applied to European directors working in relatively small industries, such as those in Sweden or France, where they can with relative ease control every aspect of the production of a film from beginning to end. At first glance, however, it seems much less apparent that an American director like

Francis Coppola, working in a much larger and more complex industry, could gain a similar artistic control over his films.

On closer examination, however, it is clear that Coppola has been able with a fair degree of consistency to give his movies the imprint of his own personal vision and style in much the same fashion as his European colleagues have done, regardless of the diversity of genres in which he has worked. Indeed, one suspects that the “factory system” in Hollywood studios presented him with the challenge to his artistic creativity that sharpened his determination to turn out a succession of films over the years that he could in a real sense call his own.

Filmmaking, it is true, involves a whole host of individuals, from actors to technicians, who collaborate with the director on a movie. Yet genuine auteurs are directors who have nevertheless been able to impress their films with their personal trademark, regardless of the number of collaborators involved with them on a given picture, by systematically influencing every phase of the production process—from script to scoring—as Coppola has done.

Richard Schickel observes about film critics and scholars that, with few exceptions, “we are all auteurists now. The reason is self-evident: Directors are responsible for the movieness of movies. That is to say, they are in charge of all the things that are unique to film as an expressive form. As the senior officer present on any picture, the director gets most of the credit or blame for its success or failure.”²

In fact, Geoffrey Chown states in his book, *Hollywood Auteur: Francis Coppola*, that Coppola’s career demonstrates that the auteur theory is still a valid approach to film criticism. As he puts it while writing his book on Coppola he acquired “a new appreciation of the value of the auteur theory.”

Other commentators on Coppola’s films have willingly conferred auteur status on him. Chouh-Kleinhans calls Coppola one of the more celebrated examples of auteurism, given the manner in which his work has evolved from the 1970s onward. Although Coppola has worked within the commercial system, he has made a number of films that seem personally important to him “and that were highly regarded as cinematic art”—films that demonstrated both his “artistry and personal vision, from *The Godfather* to *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*.”⁴

Expanding on this point, Coppola biographer Michael Schumacher adds that Coppola is equally adept at creating small personal films like *The Conversation*, as well as huge productions like *Dracula*. Hence, he is “as close to being an auteur as could be found in American film.”⁵ As such, Coppola has helped to make possible the individualism and independence that are hallmarks of today’s new breed of directors. Consequently, Mast and Kawin conclude in their history of film that Coppola is “the single most important film figure of his generation.”⁶

Coppola himself personally agrees with the fundamental tenets of the auteur theory concerning the pivotal role of the director in the filmmaking process. “The auteur theory is fine,” he states, “but to exercise it you have to qualify, and the only way you can qualify is by having *earned* the right to have control.”⁷ Coppola has certainly earned that right.

The present study is designed to provide a complete critical study of Coppola’s career. Therefore, it focuses not only on his most celebrated achievements—like the *Godfather* movies, which together compose a supreme cinematic epic, and *Apocalypse Now*, a great antiwar film—but it gives equal time to Coppola’s other important pictures, which have not received the critical attention they deserve in previous studies of his work. These movies include *Peggy Sue Got Married*, a charming comedy-fantasy, and *The Rainmaker*, a superior courtroom drama. In addition, I have made an effort to reassess those Coppola films that have been accorded neither critical nor popular acceptance, such as *The Cotton Club* and *Tucker: The Man and His Dream*. Surely these neglected and underappreciated movies warrant the reconsideration offered here.

In surveying the previous books on Coppola, I am obliged to note that a number of them, like Schumacher's *Francis Ford Coppola* and Peter Cowie's *Coppola*, are biographies and thus offer relatively little critical insight into the director's movies. By the same token, books on individual films, like Harlan Lebo's *The Godfather Legacy* and Cowie's *The Apocalypse Now Book*, are mere production histories of the films in question. Moreover, the critical studies published in the 1970s and 1980s, such as Robert Johnson's *Francis Ford Coppola* and Chown's book, are obviously incomplete and out of date, since Coppola continued making movies throughout the 1990s.

My procedure has been to interview Coppola and others associated with his films, to read the screenplays and the director's production journals, and to weigh the evaluations of other commentators on his work with my own. In this manner I have sought to achieve a balanced consensus.

The present volume, then, represents an attempt to demonstrate, by analyzing all of his motion pictures, that Francis Coppola is a genuine cinematic artist who is also a popular entertainer. As a matter of fact, the very popularity of his movies is reason enough for some critics to write him off as a mere crowd pleaser rather than recognize him as an authentic artist of the cinema. That a director can be both is suggested by the fact that Coppola's finest films—for example, *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now*—are also among his most popular.

The following pages, in sum, pay tribute to a filmmaker who has been able through his resourcefulness to place on his films, not the stamp of the studio, but the stamp of his own directorial style. The present study is, therefore, intended not only for the cinema specialist but also for the filmgoers who have enjoyed Coppola's movies, in order to provide them with a context by which they can appreciate his work more fully.

Hollywood Immigrant

Point of Departure

The Early Films and Screenplays

I was convinced in the beginning that there must be some discoverable method of working in pictures, which would not be completely stultifying to whatever creative talent one might happen to possess. But like others before me, I discovered that this was a dream.

—Raymond Chandler

“Hollywood’s like Egypt,” the late producer David O. Selznick once remarked, “full of crumblin’ pyramids. It will just keep crumbling until finally the wind blows the last studio prop across the sand. There might have been good movies if there had been no movie industry. Hollywood might have become the center of a new human expression if it hadn’t been grabbed by a little group of bookkeepers and turned into a junk industry.”¹

These are bitter words indeed to come from the man responsible for producing films like *Go with the Wind* (1939). Nonetheless, Selznick has accurately expressed the perennial problem that has vexed motion picture makers since the movies developed from their humble beginnings into a full-scale industry: the problem of trying to make motion pictures that are personal, unified works of art. A director can truly call his own despite the fact that he is working in a complicated commercial industry. Yet many a filmmaker has succeeded in this hazardous enterprise, and Francis Ford Coppola is one of them.

“The trouble with American filmmaking is that producers don’t allow the risk of failure. If a good film can’t risk being a failure, it won’t be really good.” So said Francis Ford Coppola when he spoke with me at the Cannes Film Festival, one of the international festivals at which a movie of his had won a prize. Add to that the five Academy Awards he has received during his career and one can see that Coppola’s penchant for making films that, in his words, “depart somewhat from the ordinary Hollywood fare” has often paid off. When I talked with Coppola in Cannes, I noticed that his stocky build and full beard make him an imposing figure. Yet I found him cordial and cooperative when he shared with me some of his reflections about his movies. The festival, of course, attracts film directors from around the world, but Coppola was as unmistakably American as the Queens section of New York where he grew up and went to school. As a matter of fact, he has kept his New York accent over the years despite his living most of his adult life on the West Coast. The material I gleaned from our conversation can be found throughout this book.²

Early Years

Francis Ford Coppola was born in Detroit, Michigan, on April 7, 1939, to Carmine and Italia Coppola. He received his middle name because he was born in the capital of the American automobile industry in Henry Ford Hospital. Furthermore, his father was flautist and assistant conductor for the “Fo

Sunday Evening Hour” radio concerts. He has used his full name professionally for most of his career, although he temporarily suppressed his middle name in the early 1980s when he heard that people tend to dismiss as an upstart someone who calls himself by three names. (His director’s credit on *The Outsiders* reads “directed by Francis Coppola.”) But he eventually reinstated “Ford” at the behest of distributors who wanted him to keep his full name for consistency’s sake.

Young Francis was raised in a second-generation Italian American family. He was the second of three offspring, with an older brother, August, and a younger sister, Talia. He attended no less than twenty-two schools, necessitated by his father’s travels around the country at various times, including conducting the pit band for touring stage shows. But his childhood was spent mostly in Queens, and he thus has always considered his roots to be in New York.

Because his family moved around so much, Francis was all too often the new kid on the block. He was skinny and awkward and describes himself in those days as an ugly duckling, comparing himself to Ichabod Crane, the graceless, scrawny central character in Washington Irving’s *Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. (Perhaps he recalled this childhood memory when he served as executive producer on a film adaptation of *Sleepy Hollow* in 1999.)

While Francis was enrolled at New York City School P.S. 109 (the same school attended by the hero of *You’re a Big Boy Now*, his first Hollywood studio film), he suffered a great misfortune. In 1949, when he was nine, there was a polio epidemic in the New York area. After a Cub Scout outing in which the troop got caught in a deluge, Francis was dispatched to Jamaica Hospital in Queens with a stiff neck. The hospital did not have room for all of the polio cases, so there were racks of youngsters billeted in the corridors, he among them. The next day he tried to get out of bed only to fall on the floor. He could no longer move his arms and legs. Francis was paralyzed for a year, which he spent in his bedroom at home.

No other children came to visit, because polio was a contagious disease. But nearly half a century later, when he made *Jack*, a film about a freakish kid with no friends, he remembered when, as a polio victim, he longed to play with other children. Still, some of his relatives brought him presents to cheer him up. “I had a television, an 8 mm movie projector, a tape recorder, a ventriloquist’s dummy, and puppets,” he recalls; “I became a ventriloquist and a puppeteer. I watched television a lot.”³ After nine months, young Francis began to recover, and he went back to school.

The experience had been traumatic for Francis, who was left permanently with a slight limp. Indeed, the memory of this childhood episode surfaces in a monologue delivered by the hero of his film *The Conversation*, who remembers being paralyzed as a child. Significantly, the gadgets Francis had been given to occupy his time while he was quarantined continued to interest him, thereby beginning a lifelong preoccupation with technology. He cut together 8 mm home movies that his family had shot and invented stories out of them—tales in which he would always come out as the hero. Francis employed his tape recorder to add sound to these movies. He would then show his synchronized films to the neighborhood kids and charge admission. “I had a little movie company there on 212th Street in Queens,” he says.⁴

Coppola realizes in retrospect that these home movies were the genesis of his ambition to become a filmmaker, someone who could bring together scenery, lights, dramatic action, and music to tell a story on film. His interest in movies was further sparked by his brother August, who took him to matinees at a movie theater on Queens Boulevard. He loved adventure films with Errol Flynn and horror movies—like the Bela Lugosi classic *Dracula*, which he would remake some four decades later.

Talia Shire, his younger sister, recalls that, for her generation, Italian American parents wanted their sons to enter one of the professions, like law or medicine. Therefore, when Francis asked his mother for money to direct a home movie with a little Kodak camera, she refused. Francis recalled

going “to the janitor, who gave me a quarter to help me.”⁵

At age fifteen Francis won a scholarship to play the tuba in the band at the New York Military Academy at Cornwall-on-Hudson, where he transferred in his junior year of high school. Still the awkward, sickly adolescent, he hated what he termed the “phoney baloney” regime at the military school, with its overemphasis on sports, from which he was excluded because of his limp. Finally when the script and lyrics he wrote for a school musical were revised by the faculty without his consent, he angrily quit the academy. Francis knocked around New York City for a few days and experienced some little adventures that he would later recall when he was making *You’re a Big Boy Now*—in which the hero rambles around New York and gets into trouble. He transferred in due course to Great Neck High on Long Island, from which he graduated in 1956.

His heartfelt performance in the title role of Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac*, plus some plays he had written, secured for him a drama scholarship for Hofstra University, in Hempstead, New York, where he majored in Theater Arts. Since Coppola had not attended any one high school long enough to make friends, Hofstra was important for him in that he developed a circle of friends among the theater majors.

Two of his classmates, Ronald Colby and Robert Spiotta, would later be involved in producing some of his films. James Caan, who would appear in *The Godfather* and other Coppola pictures, was another classmate, as was Lainie Kazan, whom Coppola would cast in *One from the Heart*. Coppola participated in a variety of activities while attending Hofstra: He contributed short stories and one-act plays to *The Word*, the student magazine, thereby developing his skills as a creative writer. And he directed successful student productions of Eugene O’Neill’s one-acter, *Rope*, and Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Coppola’s productions were much admired for the technical proficiency with which he mounted them, and he finally won the Hofstra Award for outstanding service to the Hofstra Theater Arts Department, conferred on him by the chair of the department.

Nevertheless, he was still fascinated by cinema and founded the Hofstra Cinema Workshop, a club that screened 16 mm prints of classic films. After watching *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1928, a film about the Russian Revolution), *Ivan the Terrible* (1946), and other movies made by the legendary Russian director Sergei Eisenstein, Coppola wanted more than ever to be a movie director. “On Monday I was in the theater” he remembers. “On Tuesday I wanted to be a filmmaker.” Still he continued to devote himself to stage projects for the time being. “I was dying to make a film,” he explains, but he followed Eisenstein’s example by gaining experience in the theater before devoting himself to a film career.⁶ Coppola learned how to build and light sets, as well as how to direct actors for stage productions, because that is precisely how Eisenstein began. In due course he sold his car and purchase a 16 mm movie camera. He attempted to make a short film about a mother whose children disappear mysteriously during a trip to the country, but he possessed neither the experience nor the technical expertise to complete the project. Nevertheless, he had acquired a well-rounded experience in theater production while at Hofstra.

Hoping to gain the expertise necessary to be a bona fide filmmaker, Coppola enrolled in the master’s program in film at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) after his graduation from college in 1960. At the time that Coppola entered the graduate program in film at UCLA, attending a film school had not yet become fashionable on university campuses. Film was simply not considered a serious academic major. Indeed, the UCLA film school was housed in wooden Quonset huts left over from World War II, which were situated in a wooded area that was isolated from the rest of the campus and the rest of the student body. Most of the film students were older than Coppola, and he experienced none of the camaraderie that he fondly remembered from the Hofstra Theater Arts Department. Carroll Ballard, who would later direct *The Black Stallion* (1979) with Coppola as his producer, states that the atmosphere was “competitive and ego-driven” and hence not very congenial.

—many of the students pictured themselves as the next Stanley Kubrick.⁷

“All they knew,” adds Coppola, “was how to criticize the lazy ways of Hollywood film producers implying that they alone would be capable of making great motion pictures. Still, he made a few friends, including Steve Burum (who would photograph both *The Outsiders* and *Rumble Fish* for Coppola in the years ahead), Dennis Jakob (who subsequently served as a consultant on Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*), and Jack Hill (who worked with Coppola on his early low-budget films).

For the most part Coppola was disenchanted with the quality of the teaching and the limited filmmaking facilities at the UCLA film school: “We were given minuscule amounts of 8 mm film. We were put in a field and told to bring back a film.”⁸ Gradually, the students were taught to work with sound. They occasionally had access to a 16 mm camera and eventually to a Moviola to edit the footage they had shot. Furthermore, Coppola found the curriculum too close to that of a vocational training school. Since he had been schooled in the theater at Hofstra, he yearned to learn more about acting and directing, not just about the technical side of cinema.

Coppola did manage to put together a promising featurette while at UCLA, a slight comedy entitled *Aymonn the Terrible*. It included a reference to Eisenstein’s *Ten Days That Shook the World*, which contains a striking shot of a huge bust of the former czar. Coppola’s scenario centers on Aymonn, a narcissistic sculptor who creates a twelve-foot bust of himself. The picture was photographed in part by Steve Burum, who was considered the best cinematographer in the film program.

One of the faculty was former film director Dorothy Arzner (*Craig’s Wife*, 1936), the best-known woman director in Hollywood in the 1930s. She was impressed with Coppola’s student films and encouraged him to pursue a career as a commercial film director. Nonetheless, the notion of entering the movie business by way of one’s film school training was simply unheard of at the time. The common practice in the Hollywood studios was for an aspiring movie director to serve an apprenticeship in a film studio, where he would have to work his way up to the status of director by way of lesser jobs. So Coppola’s prospects for carving out a career as a Hollywood director were not very promising at that point.

Meanwhile, Coppola was perennially broke. He could barely exist on the ten-dollar-a-week allowance his father sent him, and he also had to pay his tuition. He finally saw some light at the end of the tunnel when some friends of his suggested that he make a nudie film. He wrote a script and shopped it around until he managed to raise two thousand dollars to shoot the picture. At age twenty-one Coppola was entering the film business on the very bottom rung of the ladder by making a short entitled *The Peeper*. It was the only chance he had, Coppola explains, to actually “fool around with a camera and cut a film.”⁹

The movie had a “cute” little premise, he recalls. Benjamin Jabowski, a would-be voyeur, hears about a photographer who is shooting pin-up pictures in the building next door to his apartment. The flimsy plotline deals with Ben’s efforts to sneak a peek at the photo sessions. But all of his attempts to do so backfire in a farcical fashion. For example, he laboriously hauls a gigantic telescope up to his room and focuses it on the window of the photographer’s studio across the way, but the lens is so powerful that all he glimpses is a belly button.

Undeterred, Ben then peeks at the girls through the skylight on the roof above the studio. But he becomes so distraught when the photographer catches him in the act that he falls through the skylight into the studio below. Slapstick episodes like this in the movie prompt Coppola to describe *The Peeper* as a sort of “Tom and Jerry” cartoon. Actually the film may be looked upon as implicitly foreshadowing *The Conversation*, which deals very seriously with another kind of eavesdropping—that of a professional surveillance technician.

Coppola constructed some simple, minimal sets in an abandoned department store in Venice, town near Los Angeles. The sets consisted of four flats with pictures hung on them. “I had so little money, that I had no place to sleep, except on the set,” he remembers. It was very depressing to shoot scenes with a girl cavorting on a bed during the day “and then have to sleep in the same bed at night.”¹⁰

When he sought a distributor to release *The Peeper*, Coppola found no takers for his soft-core slapstick flick. Finally he showed it to a smalltime distributor who already had a rather silly Western skin flick on hand called *The Wide Open Spaces*. This little item was about a drunken cowpoke who gets conked on the noggin by a rock. Afterward he sees naked girls instead of cows sauntering around the prairie. The company asked Coppola to intercut his film with theirs in order to have a saleable commodity. Coppola accordingly devised some new material in order to combine *The Peeper* with the topless Western. He then had to raise an additional three thousand dollars to shoot the new scenes. One of the backers balked at kicking in more funds for the new version of the film. According to Coppola’s classmate Frank Zuniga, who helped with the editing of the film, Coppola then slumped on the floor and began clutching his stomach as if he were having some sort of seizure. With that, the backer anted up more money for the project. This was not the last time that Coppola would manage to get an associate on a film to see things his way by what appeared to be a sudden attack of illness.¹¹

The plot gimmick that Coppola dreamed up to provide the narrative frame for the two stories he was knitting together into one film is built around a character from each film who shares his tale with the other. The resulting movie, eventually entitled *Tonight for Sure*, was first released in 1961. In it, two crusty codgers, Benjamin Jabowski (Karl Schanzer) and Samuel Hill (Donald Kenney), fancy themselves moral crusaders. They meet in a tawdry strip joint on Sunset Strip called the Harem Club where they plan to stage a protest about the lurid shows presented there.

Each of them recounts in flashback how he arrived at his present upstanding moral stance. They are really hypocrites who furtively ogle the strippers on stage with feigned disapproval while they are ostensibly plotting their protest demonstration against such lascivious shows. (One of the strippers is dressed as a cow girl and, thus, prefigures one of the Playboy Bunnies who is similarly attired while performing in a USO show in Vietnam in *Apocalypse Now*.) Coppola later described the expanded version of his original film as “an inane comedy, in which you saw a couple of boobs once in a while.”¹² Some commentators on Coppola’s work who have not seen *Tonight for Sure* have assumed that there is full frontal nudity on display in the film, which is certainly not the case. The picture qualifies as a “nudie” because of the succession of topless girls who parade through the movie. Consequently, it comes across as an extended version of a bawdy burlesque skit rather than a porn flick.

Although both the Cowie and Schumacher biographies of Coppola assert that *Tonight for Sure* is a black-and-white movie, all of the footage is in color (albeit muddy, dingy color), with the color photography for the Coppola segments shot mostly by his classmate Jack Hill. Carmine Coppola (listed in the credits as Carmen) supplied the jazzy score for the picture and would score other Coppola films in the future.

Coppola was so eager for screen credits at the beginning of his career that in the film’s opening credits he generously gave himself sole credit as director of the entire movie—although he estimated that only about half of the complete film was his work.

After completing *Tonight for Sure*, Coppola was commissioned to work on another skin flick. The producer had bought the American distribution rights to a 1958 German picture entitled *Mit Eve Beginnt Die Sünde* (*Sin Began with Eve*), which had already been dubbed into English. He commissioned Coppola to interpolate some nudie footage in color into the black-and-white film, in much the same

way he had amalgamated *The Peeper* and *The Wide Open Spaces* into a single film. The final film was retitled *The Bellboy and the Playgirls* (and not *The Belt Girls and the Playboy*, as Chaillet and Vince erroneously assert).

Since this was the only Coppola movie I had not seen at the time I interviewed him, I asked him about it. He answered that this picture got him a few days' work, "adding five three-minute nude sketches in color to a stupid German movie that had been shot in black-and-white," amounting to fifteen minutes of additional footage.

The Bellboy and the Playgirls was long thought to be lost after its initial release on the grindhouse circuit in 1962 and a subsequent brief exposure on videotape. So no previous commentator or critic of Coppola's work had apparently seen it. But one print of the film, owned by a private collector of Coppola memorabilia, surfaced recently, and I was able to view it. Having now seen the movie, I can attest that Coppola's recollections of it are faulty. Since Coppola's color footage is easily identifiable in the finished film, it is possible to state that the five Coppola sequences add up to nearly fifty minutes of screen time, thereby accounting for about half of the total ninety-four-minute running time of the finished product. This is about three times more footage than Coppola remembers.

At any rate, Al Locatelli once more designed the sets for the Coppola segments, and Jack Hill returned as cinematographer on the picture. The color sketches feature Playboy Bunny June Wilkinson. In one of them, Coppola recalls, there were five girls sitting at dressing tables in a hotel room in various stages of undress. During filming one of the girls took Coppola aside and confided, "I'm only seventeen, and my father is going to kill me." He replied, "Well, you can keep your bra on." Since the girls were hired and paid to do these scenes, the producer reprimanded Coppola for making this accommodation to one of the girls when he saw the completed footage.

Because this movie is virtually inaccessible today, I shall describe it in some detail as an example of Coppola's apprenticeship in the movie business. The original German film, directed by Fritz Umgelter, stars Willy Fritsch, an enduring actor in the German cinema for four decades. His career was winding down when he made *Mit Eva*. On the other hand, the career of Karen Dor, his co-star, was just taking off, and she would later appear in two James Bond films.

The plot of the German portions of the present film concerns Dinah (Karen Dor), a young actress who refuses to do a seduction scene during rehearsals for a stage play. She claims that she is too "old-fashioned" to appear in such a compromising scene on stage before a live audience. Gregor, the director (Willie Fritsch), endeavors to loosen her up and take away her inhibitions by telling her rancorous stories about sexual relations throughout the centuries. There is a flashback to ancient Greece in which a young maiden is advised by a Don Juan with a wink, "Men believe that wives are for procreation and mistresses are for recreation." Another flashback, to the Middle Ages, shows a lascivious knight seducing a damsel while her husband is away at the Crusades. Gregor eventually coaxes Dinah into going through with the love scene in the play.

Into the German film's tedious plot Coppola inserts a naughty storyline about George (Don Kenney), the bellboy from the Happy Holiday Hotel next door to the theater. George, addressing the camera, informs the viewer that he is taking a correspondence course in how to be popular with women. He is observing the rehearsals of Gregor's play from the catwalk in the rafters above the stage in order to learn how the young man in the play ingratiates himself with his unwilling girlfriend. He then goes back to the hotel and seeks to gain entrance to room 299—which is occupied by Madame Whimplepoole (June Wilkinson) and her Pink Lace Girls—in order to make time with the girls.

The madame assures George that she is a designer of exotic ladies' lingerie and that the scantily clad girls merely model the undies for retailers. In one of the doubles entendres with which Coppola has laced these scenes, Madame points to one of the girls wearing a diaphanous nightgown and declares, "This is one of our very best bedroom accessories." Similarly, George adds in a voice-over, "The

girls are hiding something, and I must uncover it.”

George is unconvinced by the madame’s explanation. Masquerading as a telephone repair man, he attempts to install surveillance equipment in room 299 (shades of Coppola’s later feature *The Conversation*). As in *Tonight for Sure*, this erotic romp at times slides into slapstick. At one point the girls, who are fed up with George’s obsession with them, stage a free-for-all in which they pelt George with dollops of cold cream from the jars on the dressing tables. The scene recalls the pie-throwing fights from the era of silent comedy. They finally manage to discourage George’s attentions by luring him to participate in a game of strip poker—after they have stacked the deck against him. So it is George who loses his clothes. He flees from room 299 in his shorts after wrapping himself in a window curtain.

At the fade-out the chastened George is watching the lovemaking on the theater stage below as he sits once more in the rafters. Once again addressing the camera, he says that he is aware that he has failed to become a Lothario—for now at least—but he is going to continue his correspondence course in how to be popular with women.

Fritz Umgelter’s stilted handling of the action in the German film makes for fairly stiff performances from his cast, and no amount of creative manipulation of the two story lines or Coppola’s part could salvage the film as a whole. Still Coppola provides plenty of door slamming and misunderstandings, after the manner of old-fashioned French farce, for his segments of the movie.

Coppola does not apologize for his exploitation films. “It was the only way for me to work with a camera and actually make a movie,” he explains. He may have gained experience by working on *The Bellboy and the Play girls*, but it did not enrich his bank account. In fact, Jack Hill received an exposure meter worth twenty-five dollars for his efforts, and Coppola himself did not get much more. He was still officially a student at the UCLA film school, and he was severely criticized by his classmates “for deciding to go into exploitation films,” as he puts it. “I was called a cop-out because I was willing to compromise.”¹³

Tonight for Sure was reissued in 1983, presumably to cash in on Coppola’s celebrity. *Variety* at the time dubbed the sixty-six-minute exercise in primitive filmmaking “disreputable” and “ridiculous,” adding that because of the absence of “below-the-belt frontal nudity” it would no doubt have received an R rating if it had been submitted for classification by the industry film censor at its re-release. In any event, it is not the stag movie its title seems to suggest. In fact, by today’s standards, the film has no more nudity than an R-rated commercial film is allowed, as *Variety* points out.

The next phase of Coppola’s apprenticeship as an aspiring young filmmaker began with his accepting employment from independent producer-director Roger Corman, known as the “King of the B’s” along Hollywood’s Poverty Row, which churned out low-budget pictures. These small-time studios were also known as “Gower Gulch” because some of them were located on Gower Street. Corman’s aim was to exploit the youth market, which still flocked to drive-ins to see his cheaply made, sensational, action-packed movies. Corman’s B pictures typically ran seventy-five minutes or less and were based on weak scripts. They were shot in two weeks or so without stars or even major accomplished actors in the casts, and they employed minimal, inexpensive sets and locations.

When Corman was looking for an assistant who would work for peanuts, he approached Dorothy Arzner, Coppola’s mentor at UCLA, for suggestions, and she immediately put Corman on to Coppola as her most promising student.

Coppola in turn phoned Corman’s office and was told by the office manager to send over some samples of his screenwriting efforts and that she would get back to him. He had recently been notified by the phone company that his phone was to be shut off because he had not paid the bill. He remembers sitting by the phone, praying, “Please don’t cut off!” In a stroke of luck, the lady called back with a job offer only a couple of hours before his phone was disconnected.¹⁴

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