



Francis Ford Coppola

the intellectual man of the american cinema

by **Manuela Cipri**

Francis Ford Coppola

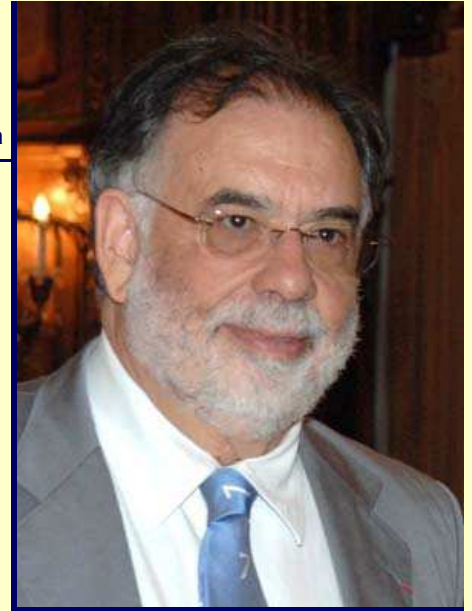
Recently Francis Ford Coppola has been awarded, among the others, the prize “Le cattedrali letterarie dell’Europa” from the Italian association Eureka. The legendary director really appreciated it as he has been feeling a strong attraction to dramatic literature since he was a young boy. Four times winner of the Academy Awards, he is one of the legends of the world’s cinematography, we can recall among his masterpieces *The Godfather* (1972) with the magnificent Marlon Brandon and the young Al Pacino, *The Conversation* (1974), *The Godfather: Part II* (1974), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *One from the Heart* (1982), *The Cotton Club* (1984), *The Godfather: Part III* (1990), *The Rainmaker* (1997), *Apocalypse Now Redux* (2001), *Youth Without Youth* (2007).

During the ceremony, Francis F. Coppola answered some of our questions.

What do you think about the next elections in your Country, the United States of America, what do you expect for the future, maybe a change and what kind of change?

The United States are entirely made up of people coming from other countries, all of them have their origins from outside the U.S. and this nation could develop thanks to all these great immigrations. Everybody had the possibility to develop their ideas. Let’s consider, for instance, Amadeo Giannini, a man of Italian origins, whose parents left Genoa to reach San Francisco, where their son established the Bank of Italy, which later became the Bank of America, one of the most important economic structures in the world. There are lots and lots of this kind of stories

about immigrants who went to the U.S. and accomplished great success. So, in order to answer your question, yes, I have high hopes and I believe that there should always be hope because there is always this continuous flow of immigrants which, in some way, keeps enriching our Nation. In fact, the people who emigrate cherish a dream and this means jobs, the founding of new enterprises and new jobs for other people. Nowadays we have a very good example: the candidate to the White House, comes from an half Kenyan and half American family; the fact that the nephew of an African farmer has been elected President of the world’s greatest economic power, proves us that the United States are a great democracy. During all my career I have always had a dual personality, halved about what I wanted to do with my future. On one side I had the idea of becoming a director, becoming famous and rich too, just like Hollywood directors, while on the other side I was affected by my brother, I was well aware of the importance of literature. After all, I wanted to become a writer who creates works which rise from his mind, dramas or those beautiful novels of the past. Nowadays people don’t think about which novel or literary masterpiece will be published, they think about the author, about best sellers, even if they have little literary value. When I was young I watched European and Japanese movies. In the ‘50s there were great Italian directors and there was also a great French cinematography. During that period we, the young people, admired Akira Kurosawa so much that we wrote to the Nobel Prize committee asking them to award him with the Prize in Literature.



They answered it was not the audience who chose the winner of the Prize, it was and still is, the committee.

I was really disappointed by the answer and by the fact that nobody has ever nominated Akira Kurosawa for the Nobel Prize only because cinema is not accounted as literature.

Playwrights deserve to receive these kind of prizes because they write works of literature.

At that moment I understood cinema is a kind of literature which on one side allowed me to fulfil my childhood dream of becoming a director and on the other side it allowed me to follow the inclination my brother gave me. I wanted to become a playwright, as an undergraduate my main subject was theatre, I admired Tennessee Williams who was my favourite author. I still remember one afternoon when I saw on a billboard the screening of a movie titled *Ten Days that Shook the World*, I didn’t know what it was about but I decided to go and see it. I was enlightened by that movie and when I got out of the cinema I understood I wanted to become a director. I had realized that cinema was literature and that breakthrough allowed me to match the two souls inside of me.

When I was 29 years old I happened to



● Translation by Giovanna Gallo

make *The Godfather* and suddenly all my ideas, all my expectations, such as the one of becoming a film maker, a playwright, were lost because by that time I became rich and famous and I could not devote myself to the realization of screenplays.

Since when I was 29, when I made *The Godfather*, up to now that I'm 69 years old, I was able to realize only a few original screenplays. One of them is *The conversation*, and other two screenplays, but nothing more because when you achieve success you cannot do what you want anymore and you cannot handle your time as you did before because in a way you have to chase success, you have to recreate it.

Actually, about *The Godfather*, I just wanted to make the first one and not all the three of them.

Today, at the age of 69, I find myself in Argentina where I'm realizing my third screenplay and fulfilling the dream I had when I was 18. At my age I consider myself as a retired man, I write screenplays and make good wine in order to earn money with my small winery.

Nowadays people don't think about movies as works of art anymore, they look at them as an easy way to earn money. Even in the movies we are submitted to selling, gain and exploitation of our works.

I believe I was really lucky because I worked in those years when cinema still had that magic that is fading more and more nowadays.

Somebody asks me to write for the theatre, but even if I've been making movies for the last 40 years I still have a young man enthusiasm when I work. Cinema is a great magic, it's not easy to draw away from it. Perhaps the best movies ever, were realized during the first years of cinema, during the period of the silent movies from 1919 to 1927, when no film maker could tell a director what he should or could do, everybody was free to express their creativity, so they were encouraged to test their ideas. I really admire those who want to become directors, inspired by their enthusiasm, because that is what I felt when I began this job.

What kind of English do you prefer

to use for your works? Plain English, American English or International English?

I can tell you I like languages a lot, I believe them to be very precious and important. The people who watched my last movie noticed that my work is focused on this subject. I want to preserve a pure language, meaning by this that I hate when somebody writes *TKS* on your mobile, to thank you, instead of writing *thanks*. I know our language is changing, but I also know that English, and it's the same for every other language, it's rich and full of many beautiful words that can be used. I am and I can consider myself a purist.

Earlier you mentioned your movie *The conversation*, which was realized close to the Watergate scandal. I would like to know if you've been influenced by that happening when you wrote that screenplay with such a bitterly open ending and if you would present it again.

I must confess that when I wrote the screenplay for *The conversation* I didn't know anything about Watergate. I didn't know about the wiretapping on which the scandal was based; somebody told me about some news item on that event only when the movie was finished. If a person wants to feel free, he has to write things that come directly from his heart, he doesn't have to worry about what *the Studios* want in order to make money; thus, an artist, a writer or a script writer can be able to understand what is happening or what is going to happen in the world. The artist's aim is that of seeing with different eyes what is going to happen and I think that cinema is the right way to do it.

What are art and culture for you?

I believe culture and art enlighten people, they let us understand the world we live in. I believe art should, in a certain way, cast light on the world that is becoming harder and harder to understand: art should ease this task. There are many

fields where art must enlighten reality, from marriage, to politics, to topicality. Art must allow us to understand better and this is definitely one of its aims. In those regimes where one person is not allowed to do whatever he wants, one is blocked and obliged to make movies only to earn money.

What's your favourite movie?

Although cinema it's a very young art as it is only one hundred years old, it has been so prolific that I could mention at least one hundred movies I liked that are the best result of film production. When I was very young I liked a lot of movies of that period, but I liked most *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

If you should write again the "Apocalypse Now" script, how would you write it and where would you set it?

Many times they asked me what I would do today; if I should make a movie about the war in Iraq or in Afghanistan. I think I would make a movie based on peace. It would be a movie on a family, which tries to survive as best as possible to problems and adversities of life. In the end, nothing wrong happens to this family, whose members get married, celebrate their feasts, profess their religion. Should I make a movie on war, I'd make it really peaceable.

What do you advise young people to do if they want to become directors and they don't have the means to realize this dream?

At first, I would advise them to get married and have children. One thing I would suggest too, would be to write one-acts, with ten or fifteen pages scripts, with only two actors. Thus beginning by producing something simple and cheap. This will teach young people what cinema and acting are and how to make a movie. Nowadays there are many directors who know nothing about writing and don't understand anything about acting.