John Milius: Master of flash

Judge Roy Bean inventing the law as he goes, Jeremiah Johnson treking through the snow with only a human leg to eat on (a scene understandably cut from the script of JEREMIAH JOHNSON). Like Milius, these heroes are always on the stage. Each is caught in the moment, suspended like Evil Kneivel above thirty cars, with every eye turned raptly toward him.

Critics infer from Milius' love of frontiersmanship, guns and bravado that he is a neo-fascist, or, at best, a Bircher. But this is not true, because for Milius, Flash always takes precedence over politics - and sometimes even over morality. Milius admires the style of George Wallace, but he also respects the panache of Daniel Ellsberg. And, in all honesty, Milius would even pay tribute to the Flash of Charles Manson - even while throwing the gas chamber switch.

Interviewer: "Mr. Milius, what do you really want as an artist?" Milius: "Fast red cars, beautiful women, drugs and booze."

DILLINGER, Milius' first film as director as well as writer, is the tale of each of these men than life - or death. Each of their lives is aimed toward their final grand exit - and each one for a grander exit. "Better to die on your feet than live on your knees!" as Milius once said (albeit to a somewhat befuddled Writers Guild meeting). DILLINGER is the most manic, insane, unbalanced, immature film I have ever seen. It is also one of the best, most promising first films I have seen. DILLINGER could be retitled "Garbage." It is primarily a two-hour montage of bank holdups and shoot-outs. Whereas Arthur Penn, Don Seigel or Sam Peckinpah put two or three moments of poetically-executed violence in their films, John Milius, as if to show them, has put in two or three dozen. Four or five of these violence scenes in DILLINGER are as well directed as anything by Seigel or Peckinpah. The film is a total excess, an arrogant display of youthful talent. Like a manic fullback, Milius keeps charging long after the final gun has sounded. After an hour the film has passed the point where any of the deaths have any personal meaning; but there is Milius still throwing out one brilliant fireworks after another, still Flashing. DILLINGER may lack the balance and perspective that make the later art, but it has far more energy and personality than a dozen such pretentiously prestigious films as SCARECROW.

Interviewer: "Is that all you want, Mr. Milius, fast cars, women, drugs and booze?" Milius: "Cars and women? Who wants cars and women? I want tanks, jets, ordinance! Munitions, that's what I want!"

I would like to stand in the path of the current critical avalanche and put in a good word for Milius. DILLINGER may have, for the most part, been venously received, and this venom, for the most part, has been concentrated on Milius himself. True, Milius, through his statements and poses, has invited such an attack; but it is also true that critics are equally susceptible to trends, poses, prefab myths, shams and hypocracies. Critically, the release of DILLINGER timed; it was an excessively violent film in what now has become the summer of PAPER MOON and AMERICAN GRAFFITI. Add to this the fact that critics despise young arrogant artists as much as they love old sheepish senile ones, and you have, at best, an unresourceful climate whatever the merits of the film.

Because Milius is flamboyant, people assume he is immune to this sort of attack. That is not true. Great flamboyant artists are very easily brought down. Witness Orson Wells, Marlon Brando, Rip Torn. We covet their energy, resent their arrogance. We try to make them buffoons, and if they don't become buffoons, we ostracize them.

Flamboyant artists always run the risk of becoming court jesters, that is, they become talk-show guests. They are gradually demeaned by their own superabundance of talent, they play themselves cheap, doing what is fashionable rather than what is necessary. At his young age John Milius already shows signs of falling into this trap. I once heard him in the middle of his THUNDERBOLT-AWAKE AMERICAN OPINION spiel, saying to his rapt audience, "I really shouldn't do this, but you love it so," and then continuing. The danger Milius faces as an artist is the same he faces as a storyteller: he too often does what pleases immediately, he too often goes for Flash rather than style.

Flash is a rare quality and it has put Milius at the top at a young age. Sooner or later, though, if he is to survive as an artist, Milius will have to balance out his passions, broaden his artistic base and transform Flash into style. To do this Milius will have to reject many who would now make him a star but who really want only to exploit him, play him cheap and gaze knowingly as he burns out his talent in an orgy of Flash.

When does Flash become style? I wish I knew, but that is a question only John Milius can answer for himself.