

## PAUL SCHRADER

John Milius is the sort of person other people talk about. If you haven't talked about him yet, you will. Sooner or later. That's his style.

At the age of 29, writer-director Milius is Hollywood's latest "enfant terrible." NEWSWEEK gave him star status, ESQUIRE dubbed him "Mr. Macho," and Pauline Kael found him representative of the film industry's "chic fascism" and "amorality." He is the new self-made myth, following in the footsteps of such colorful "enfant terribles" as Orson Wells and John Huston.

"What would you do," a studio executive asked, "if Lee Marvin wouldn't get up for morning call?" "I'd shoot him in the legs and photograph him from the waist up," Milius replied.

It's becoming increasingly difficult to go to a cocktail or dinner party without hearing the latest "Miliusism." He is the Oscar Levant of the THUNDERBOLT crowd, the darling of liberal chic, and his latest witticisms are passed from ear to ear with familiar expressions of mock shock. Just as John Dillinger received credit for crimes he did not commit, so John Milius is being credited for quotes he never uttered. (Not that Milius himself is above this: I caught him one night vociferously claiming to have originated the line, "When Milius drinks, everybody drinks... when Milius pays, everybody pays.")

In this era of bland faceless governmental heads, the world cries out for flamboyant personalities, even if they be Alice Cooper and Adolph Hitler. And whatever else he is, John Milius is a flamboyant personality.

When asked by a TV interviewer to comment on the "status of the screenwriter today," Milius replied with great fervor: "They steal our work, they trammel our ideas, they demean us as human beings, and what do we get for it? A fortune! That's what!"

Milius' reputation at the moment rests on two qualities: money and macho. He received 300G for the script of Judge Roy Bean, maintains a 50G gun collection and has been known to utter statements that would make Curtis LeMay wince. Naturally this makes Milius "choice copy," especially among macho-money oriented magazines like ESQUIRE. And although Milius isn't above exploiting these qualities for wide-eyed reporters (he's been known to wave a gun or two), they do not accurately represent either his personality or talent.

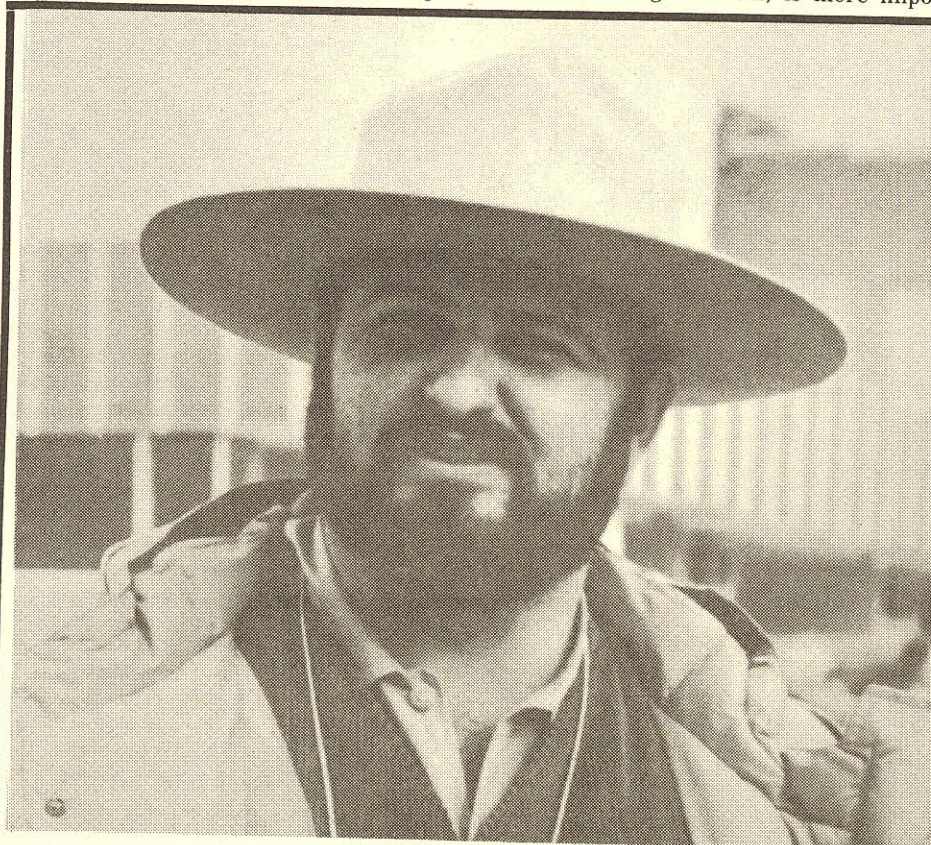
John Milius is instead the Master of Flash (and I hereby dub him as such — a much more appropriate title than Mr. Macho). Flash is the Art of the Moment: the flamboyant gesture, the well-chosen phrase, the deft hyperbole. Flash is that fleeting moment in an actor's life when every eye is fixed on him. Milius' infamous right-wingism is not so much the product of political commitment as it is of Flash: he knows what rattles the Hollywood liberal establishment. And when a interviewer is foolish enough to try to pierce Milius' right-wing act, he

only spurs Milius on to greater extravagances.

"Why, you're somewhere to the right of Louis XV," an interviewer said indignantly. "Louis XV my ass!" Milius exclaimed. "Attila the Hun! Rape and plunder, plunder and rape! That's what I believe in!"

Milius' scripts are paeans to Flash. His heroes are grand manipulators of the Moment: Evil Knevil mid-jump, Dirty Harry hanging from a windshield wiper,

apotheosis of Flash. It has not one, but five Flash heroes: John Dillinger (Warren Oates), Melvin Purvis (Ben Johnson), Baby Face Nelson (Richard Dreyfuss), Pretty Boy Floyd (Steve Kanaly) and Homer VanMeeter (Harry Dean Stanton). The theme of the film is not violence, gangsters or myth, but personal style and publicity-seeking. That moment of Flash, when the newspaper headlines and newsreel cameras are concentrating on them, is more impor-



## John Milius: Master of flash

Judge Roy Bean inventing the law as he goes, Jeremiah Johnson trekking 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 Knevil 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

tant to each of these men than life — or death. Each of their lives is aimed toward their final grand exit — and each vies 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 "Carnage." 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 maniac 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 firework after another, still Flashing. DILLINGER may lack the balance and perspective that make the lasting art, but it has far more energy and personality than a dozen such politely 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 has, for the most part, been venomously 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 hypocrisies. 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 unreceptive 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 would 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 on 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.