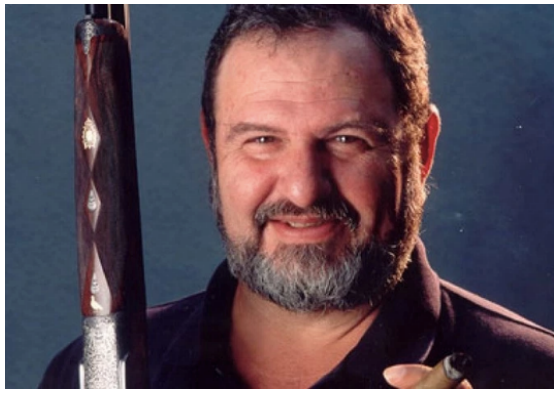
“I was never conscious of my screenplays having any acts. It’s all bullshit.” – John Milius



By Erik Bauer.

Stepping into John Milius’s Writers Building office at Warner Bros., I can’t help being struck by the different influences that have shaped his life—a “Bear” surfboard, model soldiers refighting the Spanish American War, Soviet military regalia, a poster from **Conan the Barbarian**, Cuban cigars, and guns, lots of guns. But most powerful of all are the volumes of John Milius’s produced screenplays, each bound in leather. This man has authored a real body of work. Not only as a director, but as a writer. Born in St. Louis, Milius moved to southern California when he was seven and found a true passion in surfing. “It was like a religion,” he once told interviewer George Hickenlooper. “We were all living at an intensity which couldn’t be substituted by any drug, or job, or even women.” Named “Yeti, the abominable snowman” by his beach/surfer friends, Milius hoped to become a career Army officer, but was rejected by the military because of an asthmatic condition. He entered film school never expecting to do anything more with his life than catch the big wave.

Emerging two years later as part of the USC Film School Mafia, Milius began writing an impressive body of screenplays including **Jeremiah Johnson, Dirty Harry** (uncredited), **Judge Roy Bean**, **Magnum Force**, and **Apocalypse Now**. Those screenplays gave him enough credibility to direct his scripts for **Dillinger, The Wind and the Lion, Big Wednesday, Conan the Barbarian** (co-written with Oliver Stone), **Red Dawn, Farewell to the King, Flight of the Intruder**, and **Rough Riders**. His screenplay for **Apocalypse Now** (credit shared with Coppola) would be nominated for an Academy Award. Milius has been considered “the hottest screenwriter in Hollywood” four times in his career. After selling his screenplay **The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean** for $300,000 (an almost unprecedented amount in 1971, especially for a writer whose asking price was $85,000), Milius told **Esquire**, “I make terrific deals. My hole card on this one was I didn’t particularly want to sell **Roy Bean** anyway. I had written it for my own pleasure.” But more interesting than the amount of money this script sold for was the emerging writer’s voice within it. Called “the gifted barbarian” by Andrew Sarris, Pauline Kael recognized Milius’s singular voice early in his career in scripts under two different directors (Sydney Pollack—**Jeremiah Johnson**, John Huston—**Judge Roy Bean**), and attacked his apparent fascination with “fascist” violence and his glorification of lawlessness. The recognition of his voice as a writer provided an early crack in the interpretive lens of the auteur theory and put a gun-toting face to the Hollywood writer of the early 1970s.

John Milius has a definite vision of the world that he expresses through his screenplays and films. His characters make a commitment to a moral code and then stand by themselves against the winds of society. Martial combat and violence with a purpose are honored as his characters become larger than life, touching myth. Aptly summing up his own anachronistic perspective, Milius says, “The world I admire was dead before I was born.” In rejecting “the hypocrisy of the Writers Guild,” Milius has placed himself among his characters as God’s lonely man in the Industry, and he reminds us that writers pay a high price for “going along to get along.” As Milius wrote in **Written By**, “I’ve suffered loss in my career for not being obedient. Believe me, the loss was little compared to the fear all you elite [writers] stomach every day. When the sun sets, I can sing ‘My Way’ with Elvis, Frank Sinatra, and Richard Nixon. What is your anthem?”

What did you learn about screenwriting in your two years of film school?

Well, I learned everything I need to know. I had a wonderful teacher, Irwin Blacker, and he was feared by everyone at the school because he took a very interesting position. He gave you the screenplay form, which I hated so much, and if you made one mistake on the form, you flunked the class. His attitude was that the least you can learn is the form. "I can't grade you on the content. I can't tell you whether this is a better story for you to write than that, you know? And I can't teach you how to write the content, but I can certainly demand that you do it in the proper form." He never talked about character arcs or anything like that; he simply talked about telling a good yarn, telling a good story. He said, "Do whatever you need to do. Be as radical and as outrageous as you can be. Take any kind of approach you want to take. Feel free to flash back, feel free to flash forward, feel free to flash back in the middle of a flashback. Feel free to use narration, all the tools are there for you to use." I used to tell a screenwriting class, "I could teach you all the basic techniques in fifteen minutes. After that, it's up to you."

I used **Moby Dick** as an example because I think Moby Dick is the best work of art ever made. My favorite work of art. I used to point out the dramatic entrance of characters, how they were threaded through.... Moby Dick was a perfect screenplay, a perfect example of the kind of drama that I was interested in. Another great influence on me was Kerouac, and a novel like **On the Road**, which has no tight, linear narrative, but sprawls, following this character. Moby Dick and On the Road are completely different kinds of novels, yet they're both extremely disciplined. Nothing happens by accident in either of those two books.

Would you say that your original screenplay for Apocalypse Now followed more of the Kerouac approach?

I don't know. You could say it's very much like Moby Dick, too. You start with this character who's given up on life, and suddenly they haul him out of his shower and take him to the ship. They tell him you're gonna hunt white whale at the end of the river. I don't know. I never thought of it that way.

I was kind of thinking along the lines of its flowing with the character.

Yeah. It's very influenced that way. But the basic idea is that this thing is out there that you're going to have to deal with, you know, that somewhere there's going to be Judgment Day, somewhere, you know, you're gonna meet Moby Dick.

How far did you get on that script in film school?

Not very far. I wrote two real scripts in film school, but when I came here and really started writing, I rewrote every bit of them. Neither of them were ever made, but I was able to option them. I had them rented out for like $5,000 a year.

You left film school with a new wife. How did you work at getting into the industry?

Well, I was just happy having any job at all. I was very lucky. I did very, very well from the beginning. I went to the first job I had, working for AIP for Larry Gordon, and I was amazed that I actually got paid to do this, I mean for something other than lifeguarding. Then I worked for Al Ruddy over at Paramount and I wrote a script called **The Texans**, which never got made and wasn't very good.

Was that an assignment?

No, I just thought it up.

But you got paid to write it.

Yeah, not very well. But it was enough. I didn't need a lot. And then after that I wrote another bad script. I didn't do a good job and I realized the reason I didn't do a good job was because in both cases I was influenced by the people who had hired me. They said put this in and put that in, and I went along with it. Every time I went along with something in my whole career it usually didn't work. Usually there's a price to pay. You think of selling out, but there is a price to pay. Usually what people want you to do is make it current.

To have "cultural resonance."

Yeah, "cultural resonance." And of course, that's always the worst shit. Cultural resonance is dated instantly. When I did **Big Wednesday** my first impressions were that I was going to do this coming-of-age story with Arthurian overtones about surfers that nobody took seriously, their troubled lives made larger than life by their experience with the sea. And that's what the movie is. It never strayed from that. There was a lot of pressure to make it more like Animal House, but the movie has a huge following now because it did have loftier ambitions. It wasn't just a story about somebody trying to ride the biggest wave or something. That's not enough.

What place does the use of myth have in screenwriting?

Well, people talk about it all the time…you know George Lucas talks about it all the time. He doesn't know how to use it at all. He doesn't understand myth at all. As illustrated by Phantom Menace. Writers who really understand myth don't use it consciously. There are very few things that are truly mythical. There's a lot of stuff that's famous, but very few things that are the stuff of myth and legend.

I'm thinking more of classical mythology. Do you think that can empower a script in a way?

Yeah, I think there's something there. See, myth is something where you feel an importance. The writer is relating something to an important story. If the hero has the heel of Achilles or something, then you might create a slight resonance to **The Iliad**—then in your gut you feel that this is important. I think the reason that The Iliad works is because nothing's real clear. You know, it's a story about war in which nobody is really sure what they're fighting for, which makes it like all wars. Therefore it becomes myth. The Mafia is myth. The Mafia is one of the great American myths. There are two truly great American myths, the myth of the Old West and the myth of the Mafia, and they're both the same story. They're about promise, about coming here with nothing, and the promise over the next horizon. They're the same story, told in different ways. One's told in the city, one's told in the country. That's why we love the Mafia. We never tire of the Mafia.

Are there any rituals that you put yourself through in your writing?

No, I just like to write at the end of the day because I like to think about it all day. And usually, I'll try to avoid thinking about it, I'll bullshit and talk to people all day long. I'll do various acts of procrastination and then as the sun starts to get low and the shadows lengthen, guilt wells up.

Do you still try to write six pages a day?

Yeah, at least six. If I feel like going for more, I go for more. But I write no less than six—in longhand.

Keep away from the computer.

Yeah, it's too easy to change things on the computer. You don't have to handfit it, you know. And basically, this is hand work. There is no way to make precision parts and put them together. Every screenplay is different so it must be made by hand.

Now, you were able to option two scripts right out of film school.

Yeah. I lived pretty well on $15,000 a year back then, so $5,000 was a third of my income. If I went up to Malibu and shot a deer that cut the income down even further. I think the first year I made about $25,000. The second year I made about $40,000 or $50,000. I mean, I was as rich as a rajah.

So, the early scripts that you wrote attracted attention in the industry, they got you some small assignments and decent options.

I never got any assignments. I never got assignments from them. I had an agent sending me to their offices—I guess what they call "pitching" today. I hate "pitch" because it's such an ugly term. It really describes the demeaning of the writer. Writers are treated like garbage, just stepped on and spit on. In my day, when I was hired as a young punk writer to write **Apocalypse Now** at Warner Bros., no one would dare think of hiring another writer. John Calley said, "This guy's a genius. Leave him alone. He's going to do this brilliant screenplay and most of all, he's cheap." Nobody knew what it was going to be. He didn't know whether I would turn out to be a good writer. But that's the way they treated writers then.

A lot of that probably goes back to the demystification of screenwriting through all the books and seminars and tapes…

It is mystical. All creative work is mystical. How dare they demystify it? How dare they think they can demystify it? Especially when they can't write. These guys who write these books, what's their great literary legacy to us? What have they done? They don't even write television episodes.
A writer's greatest fear now is not that he's going to be no good when he sits down to write. A writer's greatest fear is that he's going to be brilliant and that no one will read it, that no one can read it, that no one knows the difference because they read these stupid "How to write a screenplay" books. It's made people into idiots. In the old days the writer's greatest fear was always, this time out, it just isn't going to happen. I just won't have the stuff. Now the fear is that I'll have it, but those little jerks from Harvard Business School won't be able to understand it. Because these MBAs can follow instructions, they read these books and say your script has to have these characters and those turning points. They ask questions like, "Who are you rooting for at the end of the first act?" I was never conscious of my screenplays having any acts. I didn't know what a character arc was. It's all bullshit. Tell a story.
When I got in, you had to write all that stuff like "ext," "day," all the stuff that's necessary, and then writers actually wrote, "we see so and so coming down the hall, she is a beautiful woman in her thirties and by her walk we can tell she's a certain type…" I threw it all out. I said, "I don't want to write that. That doesn't tell you what the story's about." With **The Wind and the Lion**, the first line was "A gull screams, horses hooves spattered through the surf." I actually wrote it in

the past tense because it was in the past. But I wrote **Apocalypse Now** in an active tense because I wanted it to have a crisp, military feel to it. Plus, Vietnam was still going on when I wrote it. I remember fooling with the form a great deal then and I was respected for it. Today, you fool with it and they say, "Well this doesn't follow the form." They don't know what's good. They don't have any judgment. This isn't just sour grapes. Look at the crap that's made. I'll put my titles up against anything these jerks produce.

Have you had to change the way you think about your own writing to try to get it past some of these people?

Never compromise excellence. To write for someone else is the biggest mistake that any writer makes. You should be your biggest competitor, your biggest critic, your biggest fan, because you don't know what anybody else thinks. How arrogant it is to assume that you know the market, that you know what's popular today—only Steven Spielberg knows what's popular today. Only Steven Spielberg will ever know what's popular. So leave it to him. He's the only one in the history of man who has ever figured that out. Write what you want to see. Because if you don't, you're not going to have any true passion in it, and it's not going to be done with any true artistry.

So is it that passion that ultimately sells and makes people interested in a project?

Not necessarily. It's that passion that makes for good writing, but a lot of tricky writing, a lot of gimmicky writing sells. That doesn't mean it's good. Most of the people who talk about how wonderful they are, about their great reputations and their great careers as writers, and being able to write what sells, don't have very many credits. They may do rewrites and work occasionally, but they don't have a body of work or a voice because nobody cares. There's a million other people just like them.

In those initial scripts, were you developing your perspective, your voice as a writer?

The real breaking point where I knew—and it was almost overnight—that I had become a good writer with a voice was **Jeremiah Johnson**. When I started working on that, it was called **The Crow Killer** and I knew that material. I'd lived in the mountains, I had a trapline, I hunted, and I had a lot of experiences with characters up there. So, it was real easy to write that and there was a humor to it, a kind of bigger-than-life attitude. I was inspired by Carl Sandberg. I read a lot of his poetry and it's this kind of abrupt description— "a train is coming, thundering steel, where are you going? Wichita." That great kind of feeling that he had, that's what I was trying to do there. I remember there was a great poem about American braggarts. You know, American liars—"I am the ring-tailed cousin to the such and such that ate so and so and I can do this and I can do that better than Mike Fink the river man…" I just realized that this was the voice that the script had to have. It was as clear as a bell. I knew that writing was particular to me.

Sydney Pollack and Robert Redford didn't trust me very much at first, though. I wasn't really housebroken in those days. I was a wild surfer kid, you know, and they preferred their writers to be more intellectual. And so they would get the intellectual writers to try and rewrite it and they'd have to hire me back because none of those guys could write that dialogue. None of those guys understood that stuff. They didn't understand the mountains. They didn't understand what a mountain man was. I love mountain men. I'd love to write a mountain man story today.

Was that based on an historical figure?

Yeah. Though it changed a great deal. That was when I really realized I had the voice. And I think what gave me something there that I didn't have before is that I allowed a sense of humor to take

over, a sense of absurdity—that was the spirit of the thing. "I, Hatchet Jack, do leaveth my Barr rifle to whatever finds it. Lord hope it be a white man."

So you wrote Jeremiah Johnson, but then you weren't able to sell it.

No, I wrote it for nothing. I wrote it for $5,000. And then I was offered a deal to rewrite a Western script [Skin Game] for $17,000. But Francis [Ford Coppola] had this Zoetrope deal at Warner Bros. and asked me, "How much do you need to live on?" I said, "$15,000." He said, "Well, I'll get you $15,000 to do your Vietnam thing. You and George [Lucas]," because George was going to direct it. He offered that wonderful fork in the road where I could go do my own thing rather than just rewrite some piece of crap that would probably be rewritten by somebody else. That was the most important decision I made in my life as a writer. That sort of steered me onto the path of doing my own work and being a little more like a novelist. Today I see writers making the exact opposite decision, taking the $17,000 again and again.

Two grand more.

I see them always taking the two grand more because it'll help their careers, they'll get to work with a real big producer, they'll be in a big office, they will be working on a greenlit movie, and it's going to star someone who's hot. They always take that job, every time. Whereas I tackled an unpopular subject that no one was going to make a movie about where the chances were really slim that I could pull it off. There was no book, nothing but me and the blank page. And that was wonderful because I had followed my heart. One of the nicest times in my life was writing **Apocalypse Now**.

What kind of guidance did you get from Coppola or anyone else in writing it?

None. Francis was very good about that. Francis wanted us to be artists, like him. He didn't want to interfere with anybody. He wanted you to go out and write your scripts and if you couldn't do it, if you went to him and whined and said, "Gee, I need some help," he didn't have much regard for that. You know, he expected you to be independent and he was giving you a wonderful opportunity to be independent of anybody else. But people did go to him and complain and whine all the time. All the time.

Had you thought about Apocalypse Now at all in the interim?

Yeah, somewhat. I never think about any story too much. I sort of know where they're going and I know specific things are going to happen to them along the way, but I don't know when they go do this andwhen they go do that, because if you do know all that, for me anyway—I mean other people write it all down on little cards—I don't want to know what's going to go on. I want the people to surprise me each day. I have no idea how I'm going to make transitions from one scene to another. I have no idea where they're really going to go and the thing I just wrote.

How do you approach getting inside the heads of your characters?

You get to know them and perceive the way they'd say things and view things. Like he comes from New Jersey, so he's always going to call a girl a dame. You know? A dame, a broad, or a doxie.

Did you go back in then on Apocalypse Now and rethink what you had written?

I didn't need to because I had left it open. I knew what the beginning would be. I knew sort of what the end would be, and I knew certain things would happen in the middle. It was the same with **Apocalypse Now**. I knew where it was going to end, I knew Kurtz was at the end of the river, but I didn't know how we were going to get to him. I knew somewhere along the line there would be the first obstacle, this character Kharnage [Kilgore in the film] who was really like the Cyclops in **The Iliad**, and then there are the Sirens, who are **Playboy** bunnies. But basically I didn't know where I'd find them, or what would happen. When I was writing **Apocalypse Now** I wanted them to meet people and become involved in the war, but I could never think of anything that was appropriate. Every time I would get them into a firefight or an ambush or something it would degenerate into just another meaningless Vietnam war scene. They had to be thrown into the war at its most insane and most intense.

Did Coppola just tell you to go for it, pull out all the stops and realize your vision? Be out there as far as you can be?

Absolutely. Absolutely. You have to also discipline yourself to pull it in afterwards and make sense of it. But you've really got to go for it. The worst thing about today's films is the complete lack of ambition. I mean, look at all these independent films that should be interesting. Most of them are about a bad dope deal in the Valley. The rest of them are about a homosexual love affair that's misunderstood. There's really just not a lot of ambition there. I find the violent films to be particularly onerous. There's a lot of shooting and killing, and people turning on each other and they're kind of supposed to be the film noir of the '90s, but they're not. They're all about punks. Everybody gets killed and you sit there and say, "God, I'm glad that person got wasted," you know. "At least I got to see it."

Some brain on the wall.

Yeah, at least you got to see that guy get knifed and that bitch get shotgunned to death. You know, I got my money's worth.

So, did you do any rewrites on Apocalypse Now with Lucas after your draft was done?

No. People didn't do that in those days. They didn't sit there and interfere. They took things for what they were, and when Francis and I rewrote the script it was when it was being made. The script remained the same 'til Francis really decided to make the movie, and then we went in and reexamined everything. That was part of a process.

Do you think you've gotten enough credit for your writing on Apocalypse Now?

Oh, yeah. I get full credit for the movie. I mean, I get credit for writing the movie. And Francis gets the credit for directing, which he certainly deserves because no one could have—if I'd have made it or anybody would have made it, it would have never been as good as that. But I get the credit and it's a Milius movie. It's not a Coppola movie. A Coppola movie is **The Godfather**. He was the one who said very early on, "I will make this movie more like you than you are, you know? I made Mario Puzo's The Godfather more like Mario Puzo than he is." There's a thing that Francis did in this movie and in The Godfather, a sense of the theatrical. A sense of grand, epic storytelling that none of us could have done. So ultimately, he gets the full credit. I mean, I get credit as the writer, I get the credit like Mankiewicz did in writing **Citizen Kane**. But what is Citizen Kane without Orson Welles making it?

It just seems to me that the perception is out there, perhaps fanned by Bahr and Hickenlooper's documentary Hearts of Darkness, that Coppola was out there in the Philippines writing the script and essentially improvising what he didn't write.

No, I think I get enough credit. Hickenlooper's just trying to kiss Francis's ass all the time. When the movie first came out, Francis tried to hog all the credit, but not any more. He gives the credit to me and to everybody else, because everybody who worked on that movie suffered and has credit for it. It stained everybody's lives. We were messing with the war and war is sacred. There's something about that war. It's just, you know, obscene and sacred. You mess with it, you're going to get your life fucked with.

In the past you've called Apocalypse Now a young man's film. Do you think you could write its equal today?

I'd be different, you know. I'd be a lot different. Apocalypse had a certain outrageousness to it. It went headlong into things. The worst thing I could do now would be to try to do something like Apocalypse. You can't go back and recapture that power.

It seems to me a real tragedy that Hollywood has such a focus on youth and young writers in touch with today's culture, but they aren't looking for those kinds of powerful stories. They want Big Daddy II or something.

Well, those people are mostly not capable of delivering real power either. Youth today has a sense of rightful entitlement. They don't have ambition. They don't have a draft. They don't have a Vietnam. They don't have any of this. They're not going to face that kind of stuff, and they don't want any part of it. So they don't make it for themselves either. Their idea of great adventure is extreme sports, diving off bridges with bungee cords. They don't go off and do something real. There are no youth movements. There aren't any revolutions being fought today. They're all interested in getting their piece. You know, being where it's at. Being hip. Looking good. Getting that BMW.

You're sitting in an interesting position in the debate on violence in our society. As both a board member of the NRA and also a filmmaker—the liberals are shooting one way and the conservatives the other. And it would seem like you're in the crossroads there.

Or in the crossfire! Any way I move I get hit, but I'm used to that.

What are your thoughts on that issue?

I think that they're absolutely right about the films. I think there's nothing you can do about it except embarrass these people into not making these films that are cheap exploiters of violence. I think it's part of the decay of our society. You could look at the Roman games as something similar—they started out as admittedly brutal athletic contests, where people went to see great skill, and then they turned into sadism. And that's what's happening to us. There is no doubt that the approach to violence in most movies and in video games desensitizes children and turns them into heartless killers. A lot of that has to do also with the society the media has perpetrated: the cult of celebrity. I make violent films and I'll continue to make violent films. But my films have a strict code of morality, as strict as the Code of the Samurai. There are extreme consequences for action in my films. I mean, my characters pay terrible consequences for doing certain things. For example, **Jeremiah Johnson** goes through the Indian graveyard and he loses his family, he's cast

into the winds for the rest of his life. He may be a legend but he has no place to sleep. And, you know, there's a tremendous consequence for violence. There's a tremendous consequence for action of any kind, good or bad. That's what the world is. But in movies like **Eraser** or **Die Hard III** or even **Die Hard**, there's no consequences for actions. It's all bullshit.

It's clear from your past interviews that you've been concerned about this issue for quite some time.

Yeah. I think it's a cheapening of human life. These filmmakers deserve what they're getting. They deserve it much more than the gun lobby. We had all the laws. Those kids at Columbine broke the law.

What did you bring to the rewrite you did on Dirty Harry?

Oh, I brought the whole thing.

But you didn't get credit.

I should have gotten the full credit. That's another one of my great Writers Guild complaints—I didn't send in my letter for the arbitration. I didn't even know in those days that if you didn't consent to the agreed credits that you should send in something. And that's why I didn't get credit. I was off making **Judge Roy Bean**. Clint [Eastwood] always asked me, "Do you want to take your name off?" That's what he always thought. You know who else did a draft after me and probably should have gotten credit? Terry Malick.

With that film and Magnum Force, were you being pulled along in your storytelling by the public consciousness or did you feel that you were out there leading it a little bit?

No, I felt I was leading, definitely. Because that's what was fun about it, writing this outrageous story of Dirty Harry, you know, who breaks the law and is a criminal who's on our side. He will commit murder, if necessary, to get the job done, you know. And then you do the next one that's the reverse of that. You've got a whole bunch of young guys who are sort of a death squad who are going out and doing that and where do you draw the line, you know? So it was fun to do the flip side of that.

Do you think the character Dirty Harry was consistent through both movies?

Pretty much. The thing that I liked about him was he was God's lonely man. The way I conceived him was his only relationships were with hookers, and that he didn't have too many friends. He had partners, you know, who usually got killed. When he went to his apartment, there was nothing in his apartment except a couple of awards on the wall for meritorious service or something, some old food in the ice box, and a bed to sleep on, and maybe another room where there was a bench to clean his gun. That was all Harry had.

You've said that in Hollywood it's okay to fuck people over and to lie to them. How do you think someone should approach working in this industry?

It's okay to fuck people over and lie to them once you've established the ground rules. But you know, you must have a code of behavior, a code of honor. If you don't have a code of behavior, you will not be strong. You know, you don't have that code of behavior because there's an

absolute morality or because the other guys can even respect it. It's because if you don't have something to measure yourself by, you have no way of gaining strength. If everything is permissible, if it's situational ethics, there's no way to gain any strength of character. And it isn't for Hollywood. It's for you. It's so you can survive. They don't give a shit. It's just so you can survive and do good work. It won't get you anything. No one else will ever recognize it. They'll think it's a pain in the ass. But it gives you strength of character and you have to have strength of character to finish what you start.

You know, you can steal somebody's work, but sooner or later you have to face the blank page. And when you face the blank page, you'd better have the right stuff. As a writer, that's the most important thing. There's nothing else that I could say about writing that's as important as that. I mean, you can sit there and you can talk about technique, you can talk about feelings of people, you can talk about being smart, clever, you can talk about these guys like this guy Ron Bass who has all these people writing for him. All that shit means nothing because when you face the blank page, when you're sitting there and looking at the pad with those lines across it, you've got to have the stuff to call upon. And you have to build the stuff, little by little, out of something. Out of human experience, out of a lot of other things. That mad confidence has got to come from somewhere.

I like that. What does a screenwriter owe his audience beyond a satisfying tale?

A certain honesty. A screenwriter has to be able to put it on the line. I didn't have another agenda. I didn't do something because I thought it was going to make me rich. I didn't do something because I thought it was going to make me loved. I didn't do something because I thought it was going to be hip. I did the best I could and put out something that I believed in.

Not the code of society.

Absolutely not. I mean, the code of society is almost always wrong. You know, the code of society is the code of the lemming. The lemming or the Yuppie. The stinking bureaucrat.

You have a certain flamboyance. Do you think that helped you in building your career in Hollywood?

Yeah. I think that all the people who are successful in Hollywood have a flair for flamboyance. Francis certainly does, he's the most flamboyant of all. And I guess you could say Spielberg has a flamboyance in a way. If you don't have that kind of flair for being a showman, for being an entertainer, then you're not going to live with this business very well. But to be truly flamboyant you have to be about something.

It's interesting that you bring up Spielberg because many of his films have been about very little.

You mean like **The Lost World**… yeah, I don't like those movies and I've never really understood the success of those "roller-coaster ride" movies, but he's amazingly good at that. He's really skilled as a director. For example, **Saving Private Ryan** is filled with scenes that just don't work. But he makes them work.

You did some rewriting on that, didn't you?

I did a little bit of stuff on it. But Spielberg makes it work through the power of his skills and you've got to give him credit. I was absolutely stunned by how he was able to take things that on paper were just disastrous, even boring, and made them exciting. And, of course, the best parts of the film, where he really let himself loose, were the battles. No, I suppose it came from a real desire to do novels. Yeah, today is minimalist, isn't it? I don't know how they do it. Michael Blake does it, but it's very poetic the way he does it.

Well, he's a very good writer. That's the difference there. There are not a lot of writers anymore who have any kind of career longevity.

That's true. That's what I've been saying. I've got twenty-three, twenty-four credits. I'm probably the last writer that'll ever have twenty-four credits. Because the system is such that it just isn't going to happen anymore.

Do you find the anonymity of rewrite work exasperating?

I don't even think about it. You take the job because it's money and then hopefully within the job you get to do a couple of scenes where you can really, you know, you can do good riff. Like a musician, you get a couple of good riffs and it feels good, and then you just take the money and go off to another gig.

Can you think of any writers who are building a body of work that's discernible as their own?

Paul Thomas Anderson.

The writer/director.

Writers… no. None at all. Many writers in this business are afraid to just write, to do different things. Because the business is such a prestige-oriented, posturing enterprise, people feel that everything they write has got to be special. The idea is that every time I write I should be in terror because of how good I'm supposed to be. Instead, my attitude that is I should go out and write more.

Does writing and directing a movie on cable give you currency in the Industry?

None at all. Absolutely zero. Nobody in the business saw **Rough Riders**, and I don't really care. I'm nearing the end of my career, so I don't really give a shit. You know, I've got enough to get me through, and I'm more concerned with the work I do, whether or not I get to tell a sacred story of the Marine Corps, whether I get to tell the Curtis LeMay story.

You've rewritten a lot of screenplays by other writers for the films you've directed. How do you go about making the material your own?

You have to find something in it that you really like.

Because something like Red Dawn, which is very much your movie, was written by…

An original writer…and he was very nice throughout the whole process and then he slammed the movie when it came out. So I just wrote him out of the human race.

Was that just a script that you had a chance to see and it…

No, they came to me from MGM and said, "We want you to direct this. So I brought the writer in and said, "This isn't going to be easy for you to take because, you know, you're kind of full of yourself, but I'm going to take this and I'm going to make it into my movie. And you're just going to have to sit back and watch, and it may not be too pleasant. My advice is to take the money you have and spend it on a young girl. Enjoy getting laid and write another script. Because this isn't going to be fun to watch."

Did you change his script significantly?

A lot, yeah. His script was kind of like Lord of the Flies, and I kept some of that, but my script was about the resistance. And my script was tinged by the time, too. We made it really outrageous, infinitely more outrageous than his vision. And to this day, it holds up, because people ask, "What's that movie about?" And I say that movie's not about the Russians, it's about the federal government.

A little subversion there [laughs]. Have you ever worked "in the room" with another writer on a script?

Years and years ago when I did The Devil's 8 [with Willard Huyck]. And then I work with young writers. I give them ideas sometimes if I'm overseeing a project, but I haven't seen very many writers who ever can really deliver.

What's the best atmosphere for a writer to work in?

Well, I think Francis was right. I think that you've got to say to the guy, "Go out and do your best and I'll be here to help you. You can bounce stuff off, but I'm not going to be here to pick you up. I'm not going to be here to tell you what to do." Because the minute you start telling them what to do, you've lost. [John] Huston told me something that was very interesting. He said, "You have a very strong personality and you can impose that on other people." He said, "You can destroy people right and left by imposing your personality on them, because you just have a dominant personality." He said, "I have a dominant personality and I destroy actors all the time. And I enjoy it because I'm a sadist. But it's not a good thing to do to get the best creative work out of people." As he got older he became less tolerant, you know? And as he said, he was a sadist. He enjoyed torturing people, you know, and so that's what he entertained himself with sometimes.

Is there enough mentoring done in Hollywood?

No. Hollywood is a very lonely place. It's such a competitive environment. I started out with a bunch of friends who went to school with me, but it became a very competitive place. Who has got the biggest grosses, who gets the biggest salary, who is on the "A" list, who's hot and who's not? So much so there is no dialogue among artists. We're totally out there like the mountain men, looking up every little crevice to see if there's somebody waiting with a rifle.

The Writers Guild should encourage more of a community among writers.

Everybody hates the Writers Guild, me most of all. The Writers Guild has treated me throughout my career as a non-person, deliberately denying me credit. They can see me as some sort of right-wing character that's a threat to western civilization, a threat to good liberal western civilization anyway. And I know that. I know that for a fact. They were always sort of that way. I probably did my part. I probably shoved it in their faces, you know. And I do love the fact that I'm not an intellectual. I mean, people ask, "Where did you go to school?" I didn't go to Harvard, you know. I went to USC. I remember on **The Wind and the Lion**, Candy Bergen said, "I can't believe that just some surfer wrote this." I said, "Smile when you say that."

You would think the Writers Guild would want to encourage writers who have a voice, who are out there saying something original.

I would think that the Writers Guild should take me, first of all, and say, "This is an endangered species. We should do everything we can to save and protect John Milius, the Yeti. There is only one Yeti and we should save and protect him. We should form a committee to save and protect John Milius."

Well, they might form a committee. I mean, they're big on that…You've said that you've felt blacklisted from the Industry. Do you still feel that way?

Like I say, I'm the only Yeti they've got. I'm still at large.

Are you still a dangerous man?

I don't know. I'm getting old. But I'm still a Yeti.

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