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THE CONVERSATION

# Francis Coppola & Gay Talese

*COPPOLA AND TALESE, Italian-Americans of the same generation, both grew up in the East and are today at the top of their respective professions. Yet the contrast between them is striking. One is stocky, the other is knife-thin. One sat down to this conversation in an open shirt and rumpled pants, the other came meticulously pressed, never removing his tie or jacket. One is expansive, aggressive, an attacker in debate; the other is calm, steely, a quiet strategist. Their meeting took place on an April weekend: Saturday's session was held in the living room of Coppola's bungalow on the lot of Zoetrope Studios, Sunday's in the director's nearby home. Coppola's wife, Eleanor, was present for part of the second day. Throughout the conversation, Coppola smoked cigars and an occasional cigarette and sipped a diet soda. Talese consumed nothing. The talk was marked by relentless courtesy, except for the censorship exchange, which was incendiary.* ~ Lee Eisenberg

**GAY TALESE:** How do you feel about the picture you've just finished?

**FRANCIS COPPOLA:** Well, *One from the Heart* is interesting to me because I think it represents a new direction in my work that I'd like to pursue in the next ten years. Stylistically, and in its use of film language, it's different from anything I've done before—anything *anyone's* done before. On one level it's a thrust into a new technology and way of working; on another, it's an examination of love and jealousy themes. I see myself becoming more of a film composer. All my future films will be musical—with songs and dances, and more fluid imagery.

*One from the Heart* is very simple. Like, you know, once upon a time in a city where

PHOTOGRAPH OF COPPOLA (LEFT) AND TALESE (RIGHT) • NORMAN SEEFF

you didn't know what was real, there was a girl, and she worked in a travel agency but she had never been anywhere. And there was a boy and he worked in a junkyard. The story is told through songs. Tom Waits and Crystal Gayle enter into a musical dialogue that tells the story. She represents the feminine and he represents the masculine. Everything in the movie represents either the feminine or the masculine. It's all set in Las Vegas, the world of fantasy and reality. I wanted to do something very simple.

**G.T.:** But what you've been noted for in the last decade is the grand epic.

**F.C.:** Consider *One from the Heart* as a sketch for the grand epic I'll shoot in a few years. It'll work on a trillion levels—more like a tapestry than film as we know it.

What I'm trying to do now in Los Angeles is create a film studio that really makes sense—not a place where lawyers and businessmen make deals with independent artists. Rather, a family or a large repertory company engaged in making movies.

In the old days you could have said the MGM films were this and the Warner Bros. films were that. All that's been lost. I believe that the time has come for the new technology to give rise to a studio based on the repertory principle—a place where you have writers and actors and art designers and special-effects people and photographers, all of whom agree to come to work under the highest possible standards and with real discipline.

**G.T.:** Would the same actors, writers, directors work on all the movies?

**F.C.:** Well, in new combinations. Things would evolve: some actor would be having lunch with some writer and they would cook up a project, and in two months something might develop.

**G.T.:** An extended cultural family or something like that?

**F.C.:** Well, what is a ballet company or a symphony orchestra?

**G.T.:** You have tried in your pictures to use the same people again and again. Duvall, Brando...

**F.C.:** Any decent director tries to keep the people that...

**G.T.:** Bergman and Fellini, for example.

**F.C.:** But no one in modern times has tried it with a company that turns out eight or ten pictures a year.

**G.T.:** As Fellini uses Mastroianni to convey the emotions Fellini feels, do you have an actor who is a Coppola character?
**F.C.:** As of now I haven't really identified with characters in my films. But in a future project I've been planning, there is such a character, and I have been thinking about who might play the part.
**G.T.:** Who?
**F.C.:** I've thought a bit about Dustin Hoffman. Not that he in any way looks like me. He is just someone I could see in the role of a person who does what I do.
**G.T.:** Francis, since you have helped so many people become professionally successful, were you disappointed in the failure of some of these to come forward to help you when *One from the Heart* was in financial trouble—if indeed you needed the help that I read you did?
**F.C.:** No. I knew that I couldn't expect help from a lot of people.
**G.T.:** Why not?
**F.C.:** Because I think most people regard money as a vital element of life. You hold on to it and don't jeopardize it. My attitude toward money is that it is just something to be used. But many others really think *seriously* about loaning money. It's really just their own limitation.
**G.T.:** Did you know that before, or is that something you learned in these past months?
**F.C.:** I've learned it over the last twenty years of my active career. People are hampered by money. It does not free them. It does not encourage them to go on and try new things. It makes them more conservative.

I remember in my own family, when I was a child, you know when Uncle So-and-So needed fifty dollars and Aunt So-and-So didn't think she should give it. Consequently, I recognize that very few people could say to me, "Hey, I'll loan you half a million dollars on the strength of your name." That's probably the safest loan they could have made; in fact, someone did loan me half a million dollars on my name. But that person was an exceptional individual.
**G.T.:** Was that person your friend George Lucas, whom you helped get started in the film business?
**F.C.:** No. I never asked George Lucas for anything.
**G.T.:** Why not?
**F.C.:** It's not in his nature, you know. It really isn't. When we were kids building Zoetrope, we needed a copier. George's dad was a 3M representative, and I asked George if we could get a 3M machine at cost. George said, "My father would never do that." George comes from a conservative northern California family where money is kind of serious business. Children are like their fathers for the most part. But I've never really held it against him in any way.
**G.T.:** Wouldn't you expect one's charitable nature to expand at a time of another's distress?
**F.C.:** I just know the people I can go to and the people I can't. I could go to Billy Friedkin and ask him to loan me a million dollars and he would. But that's his nature.
**G.T.:** How about Marlon Brando? You resurrected him from what had become a rather dormant career.
**F.C.:** Marlon, you know, supports a lot of causes and is generous on a modest level. But we're talking pretty big amounts of money, a half a million or a million dollars. In any case, the issue of money was *never* the big issue here. The *press* created that issue.
**G.T.:** But lack of money almost terminated your ability to finish *One from the Heart.*
**F.C.:** I don't think it really did. We had maybe one scary week, but what I did was sit down and say, "Lookit, I got this movie and if I can bluff my way through two weeks I'm going to have so much of the movie done the question will be, who would step forward to stop me? Once I had it going, and it was a potential something—to the bank a potential asset, to the industry a new film—I knew that it would take a lot of energy to stop me. That's exactly what happened. We bluffed our way. We started production without the money. After two weeks we had enough of a movie completed to be in forward drive.

You know, the press does one thing that is extremely irritating: it comes to a story already knowing the story it wants to write. Reporters may be confronted with twenty interesting things, but they'll take only that part they are looking for. So that when we announced *One from the Heart* at a press conference, we talked about technology, about methods, about talent and cast. We told them about apprentices and senior filmmakers all united on a project. But all they wanted to know about was the problem with the money.

My answer to them was, I *always* have money problems. And I always get through that part. That's the *easy* part. The hard part is the artistic part, the real stuff, you know? But the press is interested in a flashy story.
**G.T.:** But there are people, among them Michael Cimino, who can't get their pictures shown because of money issues.
**F.C.:** Cimino had it shown.
**G.T.:** Well, wasn't it the cost that made it impossible for him to do what he wanted to with *Heaven's Gate*? Wasn't the rug pulled out from under him?
**F.C.:** I don't think so. I think what happened with *Heaven's Gate* has to do with bigger, more fundamental questions about making a movie today. Traditionally what happens is the director embarks on an adventure, and he's basically frightened of the so-called studio because he knows that the people he's dealing with are not the kind of people with whom he wants to sit around and discuss what he's really going for. So what he does is use his strength as a viable director to get all the rights: right of final cut, right of final this, right of final that. As a result the studio is without much control. The director goes out and starts making his film. Realizing his life is going to be affected with one throw of the dice, the director starts protecting himself by trying to make it beautiful, spectacular, and one of a kind—almost without regard for what were the original priorities of the piece.
**G.T.:** Writing books and directing movies are very different activities. There isn't much money in book publishing compared with the world of a Coppola or a Cimino or a Friedkin. Directors live magnificently: so many extraordinary material possessions—automobiles and mansions and property all over. The writer, on the other hand, is not supposed to be rich. He is probably looked upon with more compassion if he dies poor.
**F.C.:** I don't think directors live any better or worse than writers—Marty Scorsese and Cimino and others don't live incredible lives. Scorsese lives modestly in an apartment. He can go to Europe, but so can you. *I* don't have a bank account in my own name, by the way.

***TALESE: Directors live magnificently: so many possessions—automobiles and mansions all over. But the writer is not supposed to be rich.***

***COPPOLA: Directors don't live any better or worse than writers. Scorsese lives modestly in an apartment. He can go to Europe, but so can you.***

**G.T.:** Well, you don't really need one.
**F.C.:** No, I don't. But the big money I made was not made in the movie business. Yes, I made a great fortune, I mean a *great* fortune, but it was made in real estate.
**G.T.:** Yet I assume the money originally came from films.
**F.C.:** I made $6 million, maybe $7 million, off *The Godfather*. I made another $3 or $4 million off *Godfather II*, another $3 or $4 million on *American Graffiti*, and another couple on *Apocalypse Now*. So I've made $10 or $15 million from the movie business. At the same time I was always spending it, you know, putting it places.

I was advised to invest in an old-age trailer park, which I did, but I thought, "God, I don't want to invest in something I can't visit, or that I don't think is beautiful." I bought things I thought were beautiful. I saw a little building and said, "Oh, I've got to have that, it's so pretty." I had to have a film company, so I bought one. My money multiplied. I made a lot more than I thought I was going to. Everything I touched tripled and quadrupled.
**G.T.:** But the impression we've had in the press recently, as you filmed *One from the Heart,* is that you're a man in distress, unable to meet his payroll.
**F.C.:** I could be worth $100 million dollars. That doesn't mean I can meet my payroll. The key word is *liquidity*. It's one thing to be wealthy and quite another to be liquid. Shy of George Lucas, I may be the wealthiest filmmaker. But I'm not liquid.
**G.T.:** Did you ever as a young man have a need for money but were unable to get it?
**F.C.:** As a kid I never knew where the family stood. One minute we had a little bit of money, the next, my father was saying he couldn't afford the mortgage. It was tempestuous. Money seemed to be a pain in the neck. Today, if you gave me a billion dollars, I'd have it spent in a year. But it'd be worth $10 billion a year later. Money is a tool, a tool of influence. It's a way that I can get you to come over here and play with me. I can't *talk* you into it, I've got to have influence.
**G.T.:** I actually think the newspapers did you a favor by stressing your financial problems this last year. They made you a more sympathetic character. Here's a man who, like much of the audience, has financial difficulties.
**F.C.:** I have more respect for the public than to think it wants to muck around in the problems we have.
**G.T.:** Then how do you account for the success of gossip magazines?
**F.C.:** There are always going to be people who are going to turn to popcorn entertainment. But that doesn't mean that the greater body of people don't want to be stimulated on a higher level.
**G.T.:** I wish you were right. But I'm not so sure the audience wants what you say. Look at the top-rated shows on television.
**F.C.:** They're all awful.
**G.T.:** *All* awful. Now, why?
**F.C.:** Who decides what is put on television?
**G.T.:** The audience decides. Are the rating systems not valid? I couldn't tell you if they are. Are they?
**F.C.:** I think that the rating systems are open to interpretation and the interpretation is done by managers who are not concerned with anything but a balance sheet that looks good. I feel that the people who are deciding what to give the public are giving it the lowest possible level to keep their economic thing going. What company really looks three years into the future and says, "Ladies and Gentlemen of the company, we're going to have this great company. We're going to work real hard and it doesn't matter what happens this year. We're looking at three years from now." American business doesn't run this way. The great innovators and industrial captains who made the nation powerful were a different caliber of people.
**G.T.:** Wasn't this nation founded...
**F.C.:** By inventors.
**G.T.:** It was founded by inventors and explorers, and by the patrons and great industrialists who underwrote them; and most of this latter group were not idealists but were hard-driving profiteers who were interested in the bottom line. People like Harriman and Rockefeller, they were tough, cruel, the worst...
**F.C.:** Henry Ford, as much of a rat as he may have been, still put out something special.
**G.T.:** A mass-market automobile.
**F.C.:** But it was engineered like a watch.
**G.T.:** I wouldn't say that.
**F.C.:** The Model T Ford...
**G.T.:** It was cheap. It was sold cheap. He gave it to you in one color, black, and that was it.
**F.C.:** But the Model T Ford was a masterpiece of design. Ford really gave something to the public. He gave them...
**G.T.:** A simple item.
**F.C.:** Who says a great piece of work can't be simple? I have a Model T Ford. Every time I look at it I say, "Oh, look what he did."

Once in a while someone will say, "They don't make cars like they used to." Or, "*The Twilight Zone* was good—how come there are no good television shows?" The truth of the matter is we are all being dragged down together.

Our motion picture business was the finest in the world, with the finest painters, craftsmen, special-effects men, and disciplined actors. In the last twenty-five years we have destroyed it. It's true.
**G.T.:** How can you say it's true when you are here, able to do what you want in this country, earning millions from films that many people call art?
**F.C.:** The great motion picture industry, the great crafts, the great traditions have been systematically dismantled while no one noticed. And they were dismantled for the same reason that everything is dismantled: to make something a more *reliable business.* There really *is no* film business in Hollywood. All Hollywood is today is a gigantic television industry.
**G.T.:** Aren't you worried that the new video processes at your studio are further steps in the direction of diluting that craft?
**F.C.:** That's like saying movable type dilutes the art of writing. I think electronic cinema is going to make art less expensive to make, available to more people. I think in two years there won't be any film shot. Gay, do you write on a typewriter or use a pencil?
**G.T.:** Pencil. And I type it later. But the difference is that I work entirely alone and I think one of the magnificent things about being a filmmaker is you do not work alone.
**F.C.:** You do and you don't. The *real* work is done alone.
**G.T.:** When you were a boy, you spent a great deal of time alone. You were ill with polio for a year or so. Wasn't that year very useful in retrospect?
**F.C.:** I think any tough time you go through, any real crisis when you break down, then survive, leaves you in a far different place from where you were.

***TALESE:***
***I think the papers did you a favor by stressing your financial problems this last year. They made you a more sympathetic character.***

***COPPOLA:***
***I have more respect for the public than to think it wants to muck around in my problems. People want to be stimulated on a higher level.***

**G.T.:** This happened when you were thirteen?
**F.C.:** No, I was nine.
**G.T.:** How bad was it?
**F.C.:** It was the polio epidemic of 1949, a terrifying time for all parents. Kids were catching it right and left.
**G.T.:** Were you in New York at this time?
**F.C.:** I was on Long Island. One day I went to school, and the next thing I knew, they sent me home with a stiff neck. Then an ambulance came and took me to Jamaica Hospital, where there were racks and racks of kids in hallways and in the bathrooms—they didn't have room for all the cases. It was a nightmare being surrounded by ten thousand crying kids. One day, when no one was around, I got up, then fell to the floor. I realized I couldn't use my arms or legs anymore.

***COPPOLA: I wanted to be a baseball player, but I became paralyzed with polio. People brought presents—a TV, a movie projector, a tape recorder.***

My parents, of course, were hysterical. I was taken to this doctor who said I was paralyzed. He told me that I was not going to be able to walk again and that I had to be a soldier. They took me home and put me in the bedroom. They pinned me to the bed sheet so I wouldn't fall out. It was then that I realized what was going on. I had always wanted to be a baseball player. But I was paralyzed for a year and spent the time in my bedroom. A lot of people came and brought me presents. I had a television, a little sixteen-millimeter movie projector, a tape recorder, a ventriloquist's dummy, and an autographed picture of Jerry Mahoney and Paul Winchell. I became a ventriloquist and a puppeteer. I watched television a lot. Then, after about nine months I said to my brother, "Hey, Augie, look at this," and I lifted my arm a little bit. I was starting to recover. Generally, I feel that people who have been traumatized tend to develop levels and wrinkles that really add something to them.
**G.T.:** I also spent a good part of my boyhood alone. The town I come from, Ocean City, New Jersey, was festive and bright in the summertime. In the winter, for eight months at least, it was depressing.
**F.C.:** You lived there in the winter, too?
**G.T.:** Yes.
**F.C.:** That's a funny kind of twilight existence.
**G.T.:** It is. It's like being a prisoner on an island resort. I failed in school most of the time, a parochial school dominated by Irish Catholic priests and nuns. I hated it. When I was thirteen, I became involved with the student newspaper. After school I would write articles about school activities. That's where my journalism started. Writing was an escape from myself, an excuse to talk to people. You can be shy, as I was, but you can still approach strangers and ask them questions. That's still what motivates me in my books. I want to learn about people, also to write about people who are misunderstood, ignored, unexplored, or controversial—a Mafia don, a massage-parlor hooker, a riveting gang on a construction project, a newspaper obituary writer, a subway coin collector.

When I wrote about newspapermen in *The Kingdom and the Power*, I told stories about men who communicate through the printed word. When you examine such men, you see that they're very human and very flawed—though they rarely acknowledge their weaknesses because they are used to judging and not being judged.
**F.C.:** Are you confident about your abilities?
**G.T.:** Yes. I like what I do, and each of my books has been challenging and very different from the one preceding it, although all have focused on subjects that are conspicuous in mid-twentieth-century America. *The Bridge* was about nepotism and machismo in the ironworkers' union. *The Kingdom and the Power* told a tale of several editors' private cravings for power. *Honor Thy Father* was about a son in the underworld seeking respectability. And *Thy Neighbor's Wife* was a look at America's sex industry—those elusive corporations that employ hundreds of willing women to fulfill the fantasies of married men, men who rarely admit openly to such passions.

***TALESE: I failed in school most of the time, hated it. Writing was an escape from myself, an excuse to talk to people. That's still what motivates me.***

Sometimes I've thought of writing fiction, but nonfiction seems to challenge me more. As for trying a play, I'm afraid that I'd lose my words and scenes to the dictates of a director. For the same reason, I don't think I'd care to try a screenplay. I don't know that I could direct a movie ...
**F.C.:** Yes, you could.
**G.T.:** Well, maybe I'm not that interested. Have you ever tried a novel or a short story?
**F.C.:** When I was fifteen I finished sixty pages of a novel.
**G.T.:** How does who you are, and what you do, come together in your work?
**F.C.:** I think I changed my mind about all that about three years ago, after *Apocalypse*. Before that time I was very concerned with wanting to do it well. After that I simply decided not to worry about it, just work as hard as I could. If something wasn't perfect, it wasn't because I couldn't do it perfectly. Now I don't even feel close to *Apocalypse* or *The Godfather*. As far as how successfully I've approached my private and professional lives, I haven't been too good at that. In fact, I look forward to having a more stimulating personal life. I've decided to live in New York for a while, beginning this fall, to have the opportunity to be around people in different fields who can answer questions about a lot of things I'm interested in. I'm very anxious to get out of the emergency syndrome of the movies.
**G.T.:** How did *Apocalypse* change you?
**F.C.:** It was really tough. There were times in the filming when I thought I was going to die, literally, from the inability to move the problems I had. I would go to bed at four in the morning in a cold sweat. When it was all over I realized I was in a different place entirely. I didn't see things the same way. I gave up caring whether I was talented or not, whether I was going to win an Oscar, whether I was going to be rich or poor.
**G.T.:** So you're not running as scared as you were before?
**F.C.:** I was never running scared. I was in a perilous personal situation, yes. But then I asked myself, "What's the worst that could possibly happen to me?" I have a lot of different talents. I figured I could always make a nice living.
**G.T.:** The worst that could have happened was what happened to Cimino.
**F.C.:** He took it bad, too.
**G.T.:** Francis, how do you feel about the Carol Burnett settlement?
**F.C.:** I was extremely happy that someone took action against irresponsible journalism.
**G.T.:** Yes, but the award of $1.6 million was horrendously high.
**F.C.:** I thought it was less than generous.
**G.T.:** I feel my life as a nonfiction writer is more in legal jeopardy now than before the jury and judge delivered that verdict.
**F.C.:** I think the *National Enquirer* deserved it.
**G.T.:** The *Enquirer* is certainly not a re-

sponsible publication and I do not justify careless reporting. But the $1.6 million award was excessive in view of what was actually written about her. The item, which the *Enquirer* retracted soon after it published it, suggested that Carol Burnett was part of a "boisterous" evening in a Washington restaurant.

**F.C.:** Hey, we're talking about irresponsibility! How can you defend someone who writes an article with deliberately erroneous facts that cause hardship?

**G.T.:** Carol Burnett *says* it caused great hardship. What did it say, really? It said that she had had a boisterous evening. What damage was done to justify a $1.6 million award? Did the gossip item hurt her career? Clearly it did not.

**F.C.:** *The story wasn't true.* Right now the press is a lot of wildcatters hurting people, saying things that are not true. The pity, by the way...

**G.T.:** Well, wildcatters named Woodward and Bernstein...

**F.C.:** Watergate isn't the issue.

**G.T.:** But a press monitored by the government would never have been allowed to print those Watergate articles.

**F.C.:** How about a self-administered board of ethics that provides that if a journalist does something unethical he can be disbarred?

**G.T.:** You've come out of a business that had censorship in one form or another during most of the 1930s...

**F.C.:** We *still* have censorship. But it's self-imposed censorship.

**G.T.:** When you were starting out you made films that today would be called "soft porn."

**F.C.:** I made two little shorts.

**G.T.:** I haven't seen either of them, but might they have once been considered pornographic?

**F.C.:** In the Forties they might have been. Sure.

**G.T.:** Then suppose some priest in Jamaica, Queens, had censored you, or you were blacklisted by Legion of Decency–type vigilantes—you could have been prevented from ever making films. You might have never gotten to do *Apocalypse*. Do you condone that kind of censorship power?

**F.C.:** Gay, I'm not saying that some church ought to be able to tell the press what to say. I'm saying this: Does something so powerful and influential as the press have the right to practice its work irrespective...

**G.T.:** No, of course not. But I'm also saying that that $1.6 million award is an invitation for irresponsible lawyers and public figures to try to make money off the press and thus jeopardize the lives of many serious and careful writers, among them myself. Every actress, actor, politician, or anyone who thinks he's been maligned, is going to feel he can sue and make a fortune because of that Burnett ruling.

One way to solve this is to have the British legal system, wherein anyone who brings irresponsible libel action must, if they lose, pay all legal costs for both parties. This will discourage "nuisance" suits and also protect those who are truly harmed by an irresponsible press.

**F.C.:** Let me say just one thing. I have never read anything about myself that has been totally accurate. Now if *that's* the case, what about all the other stuff I'm reading? The press is going to get its ass kicked. The press is out of control. The press is the millstone around this country's neck. It does not tell the truth. It does not push for change.

**G.T.:** The press is not a monolithic force.

**F.C.:** But it is not a *positive* force. It is not a force for honesty, ethics, or truth. It is a bullshit racket.

**G.T.:** It certainly wasn't in its examination of the Nixon years. It certainly wasn't in Vietnam. *Apocalypse* exposes a scandalous war that the press exposed many years before your film was made.

**F.C.:** How about *Time* magazine in Vietnam?

**G.T.:** Well, what about *The New York Times*? What about David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan?

**F.C.:** Am I saying that there aren't fine journalists?

**G.T.:** And Malcolm Browne...

**F.C.:** Those are great men. But the press as a whole is not. Halberstam. Talk to Halberstam about the press. He'll tell you. The press has got every person in this country so depressed, so miserable by its constantly reporting the depressing stuff, the murders. I've never seen such a bunch of depressed people as are walking around our streets. They're not getting it from *me*. I feel very positive about life. They're getting it from the press.

**G.T.:** Suppose the violence you portrayed so abundantly in *The Godfather*, for example, prompted someone to get an ice pick and stick it in the hand of someone he didn't like—which was a specific scene in your film. Suppose...

**F.C.:** At least what I did reflected somewhat the truth as I understood it.

**G.T.:** Indeed...

**F.C.:** I'm talking here about articles that are lies and for which we have no recourse.

**G.T.:** But suppose the judge said that this violent film called *The Godfather*...

**F.C.:** We're not talking about the same thing, Gay.

**G.T.:** I'm talking about censorship.

**F.C.:** I'm talking about professional responsibility.

**G.T.:** Suppose your films were deemed unfit for...

**F.C.:** Then they won't be shown.

**G.T.:** And will we be a better society for it?

**F.C.:** We would be a better society if the press reflected the truth.

**G.T.:** The "truth" is so hard to define.

**F.C.:** Oh, they don't even *try*. You know what they're like. We're not talking about people like Halberstam. I'm talking about people who come in *prepared* to lie.

**G.T.:** What should we do about it? Punish these people in the great Puritan tradition?

**F.C.:** Set up a self-imposed board of ethics run by journalists.

**G.T.:** I think we have that.

**F.C.:** To whom do I write when someone puts something in the paper that I can *prove* is wrong? Who can prevent this reporter from practicing his profession—like a doctor who malpractices?

**G.T.:** Do you know what it's like to be sued?

**F.C.:** Hey, I've been sued more than you have!

**G.T.:** Have you had to pay for it out of your pocket?

**F.C.:** Always. I have never won a lawsuit in my life. Not that I've lost them. It's just that you spend so much money defending yourself you've lost anyway.

**G.T.:** Exactly, and one result of this litigious society might be prior restraint on the part of writers and artists, self-censorship, fear of offending—and finally, a state in which constitutional freedom is subjected to the standards of the Moral Majority.

**F.C.:** People don't have the right to mess

***COPPOLA: The press is going to get its ass kicked.... Some reporters don't even try to tell the truth. They come in prepared to lie.***

***TALESE: What should we do about it? Punish these people in the great Puritan tradition?... The watchdog you want will be the worst kind of person.***

around with other people's lives. It seems to me that the *Enquirer* often prints things that aren't true. We allow a business that picks on people because they're in public life, invents things about them, screws up their personal lives, embarrasses them, hurts them, and it's okay because of the First Amendment, because of Nixon? I think that having Nixon in power would be better than a rampant press.

**G.T.:** The worst thing about defending freedom of expression is that people who do the defending have to defend the worst. The worst conveyer of expression in the print media may be the *Enquirer*.

**F.C.:** Then let's put them out of business.

**G.T.:** And who will be next?

**F.C.:** I'll make a prediction. I'll guarantee you within five years you'll have more press censorship than you ever imagined. I guarantee you. And it will happen primarily because the industry dragged its feet and it didn't police its own garbage.

**G.T.:** The watchdog you want will be the worst kind of person. He'll be the failure, a bureaucrat who couldn't make it ...

**F.C.:** You are so cynical about people.

**G.T.:** I'm not cynical. I'm a realist.

**F.C.:** It seems to me that when we talk about what we allow ourselves to think, you limit it.

**G.T.:** In what way?

**F.C.:** You look up and say, "That's not possible." Why do you limit yourself?

**G.T.:** I think that perhaps I am skeptical of people with strong convictions, wary of contentment, complacency. It is said of some people that they have rats in their stomach. I think that applies to me, and I want those rats to stay alive. I want to keep growing past the last two or three books, which I believe represent my best efforts. I want my next one to push my talent further.

**F.C.:** Why do you always make it clear you work only in nonfiction?

**G.T.:** I believe nonfiction can be an art form. I believe that if reality is pursued thoroughly, if the depth of human nature is that accurately reflected in writing, it is fantastic. It's remarkable.

**F.C.:** You've also expressed reluctance to work with other people. You say you could never write a play.

**G.T.:** I'm a primitive in a way. I want to do it all myself. I feel I am a craftsman who has to use Old World skills. I take enormous pride in understanding accurately, not just the facts, but the deeper truths that are illuminated by the facts. I want to write precisely about people, to leave a record of what life was like so that people will have a view of history that will supplement traditional historians' recollections of this part of the twentieth century.

If I were to delegate to other people the task of research, of going to the library, of interviewing people, I don't think my books would be special. I have to see things for myself. In researching *Honor Thy Father*, I asked Joe Bonanno to describe the street in Sicily where he was born and reared. I was only going to use three paragraphs on this particular street. Still, I thought, I have to see it for myself. So I flew to Sicily to see this street, which, as it turned out, was not too much different from what he had described. But in seeing it myself and being sure of it, I was able to put the whole scene through my mind and write it freely because I was *sure*.

**TALESE: *I'm proud of the work I did ten, twenty years ago. If I hadn't taken that kind of care, the work wouldn't have lasted.***

**F.C.:** But don't you think that an assistant who doesn't make any qualitative judgments can just get you the documents? The energy you save by not going through file cabinets you could spend on making even more of your material.

**G.T.:** No one who reads this would disagree with you. But what I do works for me, because by being there, by putting my hands on the papers, the people, the stones, that place and those elements become part of my experience. I'm proud of the work I did ten, twenty years ago, and I believe that if I had not taken that kind of care, the work wouldn't have lasted.

**F.C.:** Yeah. But talking to you I get the feeling that there are other gardens you want to run around in—and that you're scared to.

**G.T.:** Why? Each book is a different garden.

**F.C.:** But when you talk, I get the feeling you'd like to write a play, or you'd like to write something else, but there's some voice that says, no, don't.

**G.T.:** What I want to write about most are private lives. I want to write about what people really are, not just what they appear to be. That's a theme in all of my work.

**F.C.:** Don't you think that if you'd approach something totally different—say, fiction or a dramatic form—when you finished it and went back to your main thing you'd have found that you had gained something?

**G.T.:** Oh, I think if I tried to do something else, yes, I would gain. You would gain if you worked around airplanes and tried to fly a 747.

**F.C.:** I would like that.

**G.T.:** I just prefer to do my work in book form. With a book, I'm totally in control, the way you are with a picture. You're totally in control of the set.

**F.C.:** Oh, no, no, no. Believe me, a film director is just kind of a ringleader. Can I ask you one last question?

**G.T.:** Yes.

**F.C.:** If you could have anything you wanted, if I could give you one wish, what would you want?

**G.T.:** Health. To live to be seventy-five and be healthy.

**F.C.:** You'd use the wish on *that*? I know a lot of healthy, miserable people.

**G.T.:** Well, what would yours be?

**F.C.:** If I had one wish? Oh, I guess it would be some Faustian thing. You know, total knowledge or something.

**G.T.:** Many people think they have that.

**F.C.:** Who?

**G.T.:** Many who are wrong.

**F.C.:** When I was a kid, I thought it would be to have a Cadillac convertible and a Sunbeam Alpine and a Ford Thunderbird and a Pontiac—to have all those cars.

**G.T.:** What frightens you, Francis?

**F.C.:** Losing someone I love. Would you say the same?

**COPPOLA: *Yeah. But talking to you I get the feeling that there are other gardens you want to run around in—and that you're scared to.***

**G.T.:** Yes, I would. I've had little experience with death. That frightens me a bit. Both of my parents are close to eighty. Unlike most of my friends, who've known death in their families, I haven't.

**F.C.:** Me neither. No one ever died. Except my grandmother.

**G.T.:** I thought about dying a lot this year, and thought it wouldn't be bad because I'd achieved something in my work. In fact, I thought this would be a nice time to go, because I'm not leaving anything incomplete. Since you're such a dramatist, would you like to have a dramatic death? Would you like to choose and direct your death?

**F.C.:** Yes. Like Yukio Mishima. He wrote the last of his four-book epic, took over military headquarters, and killed himself in a classic way—all on the same day. I mean, *that* was an exit.