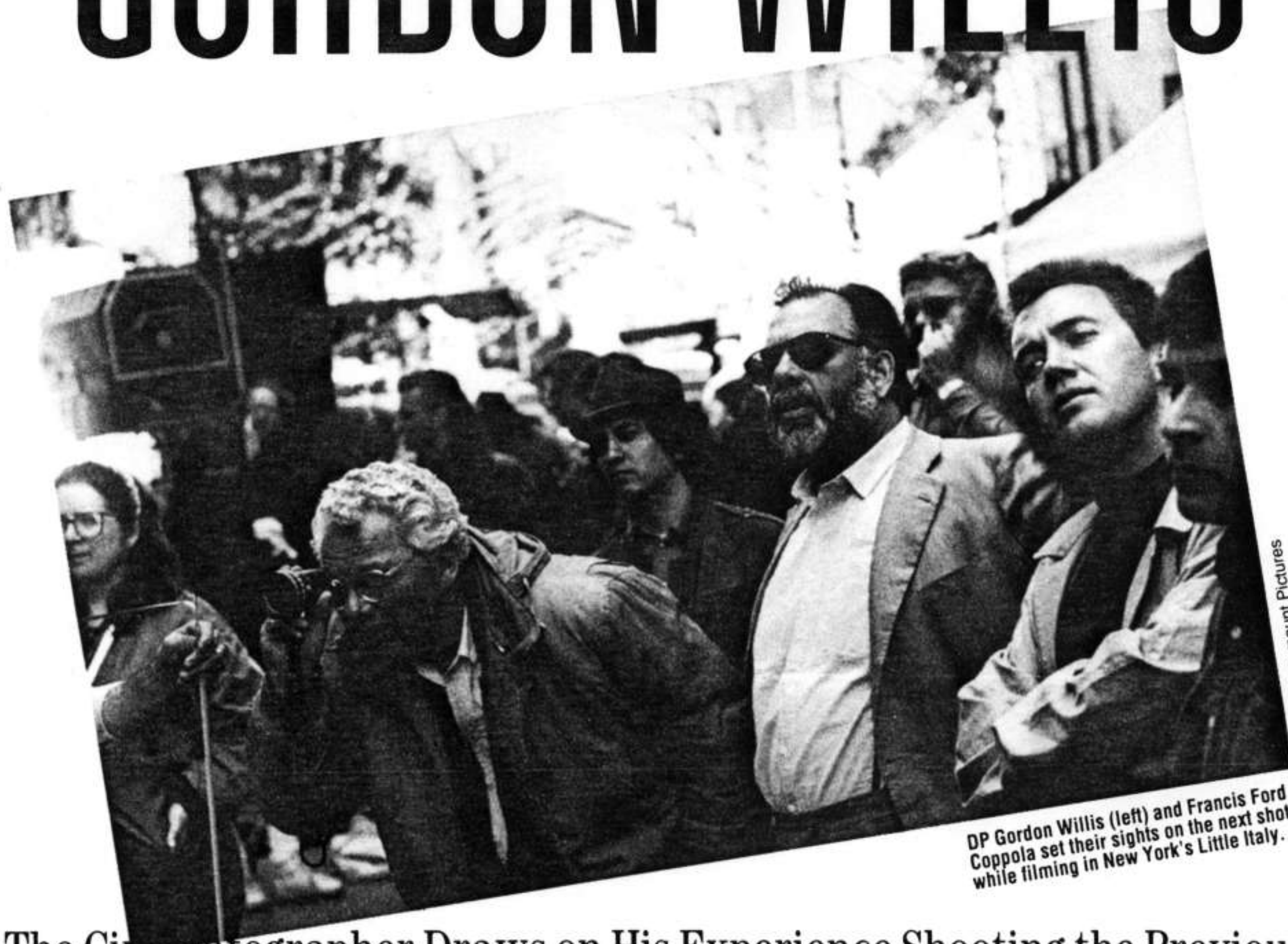


Document Citation

Title	Gordon Willis: the cinematographer draws on his experience shooting the previous Godfather films to lense Francis Ford Coppola's The Godfather, Part III
Author(s)	Iain Blair
Source	<i>Film & Video</i>
Date	1990 Dec
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	38, 40, 42, 57
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	Willis, Gordon (1931), Queens, New York, United States
Film Subjects	The Godfather: part III, Coppola, Francis Ford, 1990

GORDON WILLIS



DP Gordon Willis (left) and Francis Ford Coppola set their sights on the next shot while filming in New York's Little Italy.

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The Cinematographer Draws on His Experience Shooting the Previous *Godfather* Films to Lense Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather, Part III*

When *The Godfather, Part III* is finally released on December 25, it will complete the most celebrated film trilogy in history as it details the final act in the lives of the legendary Corleone family. Once again starring Al Pacino, Diane Keaton and Talia Shire, the epic film picks up the story 20 years after the events that concluded *The Godfather, Part II*. *Part III* also reunites many of the filmmakers who made the first two pictures, including director Francis Ford Coppola and director of photography Gordon Willis, ASC.

Since last teaming with Coppola on *Part II*, Willis has shot eight films for Woody Allen, including *Manhattan*, *Annie Hall*, *Zelig* (for which he received an Academy Award nomination) and *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, as well as the ac-

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claimed *All The President's Men*, *Klute*, *Bright Lights*, *Big City*, and *Presumed Innocent*. "Naturally I jumped at the opportunity to shoot *Part III*," states Willis. "Obviously, it's a very special project, and the chance to work with Francis again, as well as with production designer Dean Tavoularis and all the others, makes it even more special."

"Having said that, I think we were all aware of what we had to live up to in terms of the first two films," he adds. "*Part III* had to be as good, if not better, and it also had to be very much its own film, yet flow naturally from the other two."

Principal photography on the film

began in Rome on November 27, 1989, at Cinecittà Studios. For the next six weeks the production occupied the studio's four largest soundstages, where a number of massive sets, including Michael Corleone's New York apartment and an Atlantic City suite, were built under the supervision of Tavoularis, an Oscar winner for his work on *The Godfather, Part II*. The production then moved out of the studio and onto locations in and around Rome, at a 330-year-old church in Viterbo, and at the 16th century Villa Farnese in Caprarola. Then it was on to Sicily, where the crew filmed at locations around Palermo and Taormina. "In fact," reports Willis, "we revisited some of the same locations we'd used in *Godfather I* and *II* to help preserve a sense of continuity." Principal photography was completed

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over a period of several weeks in the New York area, including sequences at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel, St. Patrick's Cathedral and a street fair shot in Little Italy with more than 200 extras.

With an estimated budget of \$50 million — and an audience expectation that can be second to none — there's a lot riding on the Paramount Pictures project, and it's no secret that the colossally complex and demanding production eventually ran many weeks behind schedule. In fact, shooting finally wrapped toward the end of September, according to Willis, and as of press time, there were some serious doubts as to whether the film would make its advertised Christmas release date. (It's already missed its originally scheduled Thanksgiving release.)

In spite of the problems, Willis is confident that *The Godfather, Part III* will look as good as its predecessors. "Francis and I spent a lot of time discussing the look of the film, and we've tried to maintain the same visual structure we used on the first two films," the DP explains. "By that, I mean using the cinematography to make a point and counterpoint, to contrast dark-

ness and lightness. It's a very emotionally rich way of lighting and shooting that is entirely appropriate to this story and these characters.

"I think that the major challenge of shooting *Godfather III* was preserving a sense of continuity with the first two parts," he adds. "We had to make sure that the visuals and the story flowed naturally from where we left off. The general style of shooting and structure are very similar, and we tried to make it as seamless as possible.

"The other major challenge is keeping that sense of continuity within this picture, because when you're shooting for a long period of time — in this case, over a year — it's hard to hold the visual structure and look together. Of course, you're also faced with a 17-year gap between *Part II* and *Part III* and all the advances in cinematography that have been made in that time," he points out. "There've been many changes in lenses, film stock — even camera design — with everything being much faster today, and that generally works in your favor. But from a color and structure and lighting standpoint, we've tried to weave the look of the film into that of the first two."

Willis approached shooting in the same way he dealt with the first two films. "There were very few overtly dramatic camera moves in those films, and we set out to maintain that sort of look and pace," he reports. "It's shot in a very traditional, tableau style, where the camera allows the story to unfold and doesn't race all over the place trying to upset that balance with showy swoops and dives."

The DP states that while reuniting with Coppola was highly enjoyable, it also proved to be a long, demanding experience. "Long, because it took us about a year to finish *Part II*, and we set out to do *Part III* much faster, but it ended up taking almost as long," he explains. "And it was demanding because Francis is such a perfectionist and we just kept shooting until we got it exactly right. It was also a very strange project in terms of déjà vu: Here were all these same people together again, doing what we'd first done some 20 years before."

According to Willis, shooting with Coppola follows a fairly set pattern. The director storyboards every scene, and then discusses it with the DP. "The storyboards illustrate his ideas for a scene, but we don't then necessarily have to follow the storyboard," Willis notes. "We'll look at the location and discuss the possibilities, and together we'll lay out the shot. That's always done on the set at that time, and if there are 10 shots to be done in a scene, we'll lay down all 10 of them.

"The storyboards basically serve him

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Willis confers with a camera operator.

better than they serve me. They're more to help him formulate his ideas, and I don't look at them too much. I just listen to what he has to say, and then we'll take it from there and see what works best at that time."

Technical advances made since *Parts I and II* have helped speed up the mechanical side of filmmaking, stresses Willis. "It's easy to forget how much has changed since even the early '70s. We now have HMIs instead of arcs, and we have much faster color negative today. Generally, a lot of equipment is lighter and easier to use, and that really helps when you're moving around on location for months on end."

The advent of HMIs has especially speeded up lighting. "Now you don't have to stop and trim. And if this picture had only been about photography, we could have probably wrapped the whole project in a few weeks."

In terms of the lighting, Willis again went for the same overall approach he used on the original pictures. "We basically used a lot of the overhead lighting that we'd developed in the first movie, principally in dealing with how to best light Marlon Brando," he states. "We found then that overhead lighting was the way to make Brando's character work best, and coincidentally out of that, a whole lighting style for the movie developed. So we basically refined that."

Faster color negative films also made shooting *Part III* easier than its predecessors. Willis shot the entire picture using Eastman 5296 film, as well as 5247 for exteriors and some daylight interiors. "The Eastman stock [5247] has a true speed rated at 500. It isn't over-rated, although I didn't shoot it at 500; I shot it at

400 because I wanted the negative to have a richer, deeper look. A lot of people tend to overrate negatives, and I don't know where they get these numbers from."

When asked how much footage was actually shot on *Godfather III*, Willis laughs. "To be honest, I really don't know," he maintains, "although I'd guess it was in the millions of feet."

The DP used three main Panavision lenses on the shoot — a 40mm, 50mm and 75mm. Wider lenses would occasionally be used for a particular shot. "It's a set of lenses that I've used for some time now, and they're the best I've found in their format," comments Willis. "I guess my favorite lens in general is a 40mm, because it allows you to see a lot up there on the screen without pushing the perspective around, and it feels very comfortable for me."

"My philosophy of and approach to shooting is not at all complicated. My ideas may be complicated, but the execution of them tends to be very simple. So from a technical point of view, I'm very even-tempered — I like to eliminate rather than add. So my approach was that *Godfather III* is a prime-lens picture, and that's how I worked. There was the rare exception where I used a 5:1 zoom to make adjustments, [but] I used no other fancy lenses at all."

Godfather III was shot on Panavision cameras. "We used one main camera, but went up to five cameras for some of the more complex sequences," reports Willis. "We also used Super 1.85, so each camera had to be specially fitted out. That posed a few problems when we were filming in Italy, as you can't get hold of

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equipment that readily there, so all the cameras were rented out of Samuelson's in London, fitted out there, and then shipped to Italy, where we kept them for the duration of the shoot."

In keeping with his simple, classic approach, Willis used no cranes "or fancy pieces of equipment" to shoot. "I wanted to keep the camera unobtrusive at all times. If you forget it's even there, then I've done my job."

Asked to name the most difficult sequence to light and shoot, the DP cites a location scene at the Teatro Massimo opera house in Palermo. "We shot both interior and exterior, and we worked for many, many nights on the steps outside, which was particularly demanding," he reports. "For a start, it was night; you were never on level ground because of the steps; there were several quite wide shots; and the whole front of the house had to be lit in a fashion that looked interesting without looking 'lit,' so to speak."

Willis solved the problems by utilizing the building's Roman columns in an unusual manner. "It seemed rather obvious and pedestrian to light them and then play the scenes out in front of them," he recalls. "So we looked around and found two large recesses beside the front doors, and positioned [the lights] behind the columns, with old-fashioned lamps in them. So I fired those up and we ended up with a beautiful, burnt amber-yellow color that silhouetted the columns. In addition, we then used tungsten for the scenes in front, and the combination of warm and cold hues is spectacular, I think."

"I'm very pleased with what I've seen," sums up Willis, "and very proud. My greatest hope now is that Francis has enough time to finish the movie properly. The footage is definitely there, but pulling it all together into a coherent whole is a mammoth task, and it takes time. Unfortunately, everyone's running out of time, but I'm confident that the results will more than live up to people's expectations."

■ By Iain Blair