Megalopolis: Filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola's weak, terribly confused fable about modern-day America

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Filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola's *Megalopolis* is a confused, shallow mess. It intends to be a broad statement about contemporary American life, culture and politics, but it fails in any meaningful sense along those lines.

The film presents itself as a "fable" set in New Rome, i.e., present-day New York City. It makes reference through various characters' names in particular to the Catilinarian conspiracy, in 63 B.C., during the waning years of the Roman Republic.

Cesar Catilina (Adam Driver) is an architect and a visionary, at odds with the corrupt political establishment personified by New Rome's mayor, Franklyn Cicero (Giancarlo Esposito), and his powerful cronies. Catilina has won the Nobel Prize for inventing "megalon," a revolutionary building material. He also has the ability to stop time, and lives and works in aesthetic splendor in the upper reaches of the Chrysler Building, Manhattan's famed Art Deco skyscraper.

Catilina proposes to rebuild New Rome as Megalopolis, a supposedly utopian community, with his new material, while Cicero has the tired old idea of opening a casino to generate tax revenue. Catilina meets and eventually falls in love with Julia (Nathalie Emmanuel), the mayor's well-meaning socialite daughter, who worries about "injustice" and "suffering."

Meanwhile, the almost unforgivably named Wow Platinum (Aubrey Plaza), Catilina's former mistress, aligns herself with his cousin, Clodio Pulcher (Shia LaBeouf), in a plot, which has both economic and political overtones. Pulcher's populist campaign against Catilina and his Megalopolis plan as an expensive folly takes on an increasingly fascistic character. He and Wow, now married to the much older Hamilton Crassus (Jon Voight), the richest man in New Rome, conspire to take over control of the latter's bank.

After rioters run amok in the city, Catilina and Cicero join forces. Crassus makes short work of Wow and Clodio, retaining his fortune. Catilina convinces the populace of his vision, and Clodio meets a fate similar to Mussolini's. Crassus finances the Megalopolis project. Catilina and Julia produce a child, Sunny Hope, also equipped with special powers, and generally reconciliation and redemption reign.

In an exchange presumably indicating something about Coppola's own general approach to the world's problems, a journalist-interviewer observes to Catilina that "you said that as we jump into the future, we should do so unafraid," and adds, "but what if when we do jump into the future there is something to be afraid of?"

Driver-Catilina responds:

> Well, there's nothing to be afraid of if you love, or have loved. It's an unstoppable force. It's unbreakable. It has no limits. It's within us, it's around us, it's stretched throughout time. It's nothing you can touch, yet it guides every decision that we make. But we do have the obligation to each other to ask questions of one another. What can we do? Is this society, is this way we're living, the only one that's available to us? And when we ask these questions, when there's a dialogue about them: that basically is a utopia.

In the first place, this earth-shaking "utopia" does not envision any change in *economic* realities, it is set firmly on the ground of capitalism.

Megalopolis, having tasked itself with confronting a complex society's immensely complex dilemmas, reduces itself to lazy, self-indulgent banalities worthy of the 1970s' "counterculture." Pyrotechnics aside, the film is lengthy and dull. Catilina's "soliloquies" are especially insufferable, including one of his final brief interludes of introspection during which he gazes broodingly out on the city and intones, "There's still so much to accomplish, but is there time?"

Fables can be revealing and illuminating, bringing out truths in generalized, clarifying form, but *Megalopolis* is crude and poorly done. Its misshapen character has much to do with being wrong about the big questions of the day, about the nature of the epoch in which we live.

Coppola's ambitions have always tended to fall short of his achievements, but here the gap has reached truly dangerous proportions.

This may seem a harsh judgment, but the miserable character of the new film needs to be accounted for. After all, Coppola has demonstrated obvious gifts in the past. The film's weakness (even breakdown) in nearly every aspect—script, staging, overall look and "feel," acting (in large part), dramatic coherence, social insight—is so severe that it suggests the problems are objective, longstanding, social ones rather than individual difficulties. Something dramatic, "life-altering" has happened to the artistic layer that creates this type of film (and the critics who admire it).

With the benefit of hindsight, it now seems clear that the period in which Coppola made valuable or partially valuable films was relatively brief, from 1971 to 1977, the years during which the production of *The Godfather*, *The Conversation*, *The Godfather Part II* and *Apocalypse Now* (filmed in 1976-77, although not released until 1979) took place. He has created little of lasting importance since then.

The writer-director (born 1939) is representative of a generation, radicalized and even inspired—artistically and intellectual raised up, so to speak—for a time during the explosive early 1970s, but which several decades ago reconciled itself to the essential foundations of American society. Its current public anxieties and often noisy, energy-consuming thrashing about largely concern its own continued ability to function "freely" (and prosperously) in a decaying and threatening world.

It is not for nothing that *Megalopolis* has been greeted by the *New York Times*' Manohla Dargis, for example, who describes it as "a personal statement on an epic scale."

Dargis even momentarily sets aside her feminism in order to applaud *Megalopolis* as "a great-man story about an architect … who dreams of a better world." She continues:

> What Catilina dreams of is a "perfect school-city," in which people can achieve their better selves. It's an exalted aspiration, as seemingly boundless but also as sheltering as the blue sky, and one that invokes a long line of lofty dreamers and master builders. There are predictable obstacles, mostly other people, small-minded types without vision, idealism or maybe just faith.

The "people" referred to here are "people" like Dargis and Coppola, not the common riff raff, who only make their presence felt in the film as easily manipulated fodder for right-wing demagogues.

Coppola has legitimate fears about the danger of fascism and dictatorship, but his response is conditioned by years and years of wealth, complacency and misguided thinking. The latter has been influenced by an unhealthy combination of bohemian self-indulgence, quasi-mysticism and extreme "entrepreneurial" individualism.

Megalopolis is not a political document, but it manages nonetheless to propose a good number of the false solutions to the "Trump problem" and the January 6 coup attempt presently circulating in and around liberal and "left" upper middle class circles: palace coup, "reaching across the aisle," reconciliation through "love" and tolerance, and more.

The eclectic references to Shakespeare, Ibsen, Ayn Rand and more, along with various passages from ancient Roman authors and thinkers, are no help. They only underscore the unserious and jumbled approach to substantive issues.

In the 1970s, like numerous other American filmmakers at the time, Coppola could call on his vague but genuinely oppositional views (and anger) and his ability to improvise in a variety of artistic circumstances to produce moments of interest and drama.

The Godfather series pointed to the connection between big business, official politics and crime. Even then, however, critic Andrew Sarris, hardly a wild-eyed radical, argued that Coppola had wasted a good deal of time and effort on secondary matters. Sarris expressed the conviction that

> *The Godfather* could have been a more profound film if Coppola had shown more interest (and perhaps more courage) in those sections of the book which treated crime as an extension of capitalism and as the *sine qua non* of showbiz. Much of the time spent boringly in Sicily might have been devoted to the skimming operations in Las Vegas, and to the corporate skullduggery in Hollywood. …
>
> Coppola has taken great pains to make *The Godfather* seem like a period piece. Antique cars, ill-fitting clothes…, floppy hats, vintage tabloid front pages featuring dead gangsters of a bygone era all contribute to Coppola's deliberate distancing tactics. Worst of all is the sentimental distinction between the good-bad guys and the bad-bad guys on the pseudoprophetic issue of narcotics distribution.

Apocalypse Now had certain very strong features. Upon its re-release (in an extended version) in 2001, we commented that the film

> symbolizes the "insanity of the war in Vietnam," which one has heard so much about, than the degree to which the violence endemic in American society was projected into Vietnam. … One has an uneasy feeling that every time a group of Americans forms, violence will erupt.

Coppola himself, to his credit, insisted to one of his performers, that the "movie had to implicate America" (Sam Wasson, *The Path to Paradise: A Francis Ford Coppola Story*).

At its most valuable, we suggested, *Apocalypse Now* is

> a concrete and passionate condemnation of American conduct in Vietnam and, by extension, a devastating picture of the society capable of perpetrating such a monstrous series of crimes. At its murkiest and least coherent, the film is a trite meditation, worthy of a third-year English major, on the supposedly bifurcated human soul.

Unhappily, those murkiest and least coherent, and most self-aggrandizing, elements have largely taken over. Dargis is not wrong when she suggests, approvingly that "it's easy to see *Megalopolis* … in autobiographical terms." Coppola has a grandiose vision of his own life and various "catastrophic setbacks," including bankruptcies and other issues.

It's also *too* "easy to see" that Coppola has himself in mind when a character in an earlier draft of the script, available online, refers to the central protagonist as "Talented, yes—a genius, possibly." Another suggests in the same draft, "His projects are always distinguished by a sense of innovation and beauty that changes the way we see."

No doubt Coppola means to satirize Catilina's elitism to a degree but only to a degree, when he has his central characters deliver the following dialogue:

> Cesar Catilina (incredulously): *You* wanna help me?
> Julia Cicero: Yeah. And, well, I ... well, I want to learn.
> Cesar Catilina: And you think one year of ... medical school entitles you to plow through the riches of my Emersonian mind?
> …
> Julia Cicero: You have no idea about me! You think I am nothing, just a socialite?
> Cesar Catilina: No, not nothing, but I reserve my time for people who can think. About science. And literature, and ... architecture and art. You find me cruel, selfish and unfeeling? I am. I work without caring what happens to either of us. So go back to the clu-u-u-ub, bear it all, and stalk the kind of people that you enjoy.

The film speaks largely, as the *Times*' reaction indicates, to the delusions and illusions of petty-bourgeois layers prepared to overlook the work's artistic failure in their eagerness to embrace its central theme: salvation lies with a persecuted, tortured intellectual "genius" retaining his prominence on the world stage and directing its future evolution.

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