



“I see celebrity culture as some kind of guilty-pleasure thing that you look at once in a while,” declares Sofia Coppola. “But now it’s become the dominating thing in our culture in America. It’s out of control.”

So out of control that Coppola has made a film about it and how its insidious influence spurred one gang of high-schoolers to target and raid the homes of LA’s rich and famous. It’s called *The Bling Ring*, and it feels appropriate to be meeting Coppola during a Cannes Film Festival characterised by jewellery heists and in a room dubbed the Movie Stars’ Lounge at the Carlton Hotel, although the name turns out to be specious (nothing screams “movie star” like a bare conference room carved up with moveable panels).

She’s wearing black pencil slacks and a buttoned-up stripy grey blouse with a white collar. Coppola’s a bit buttoned up herself, her father Francis’s loquaciousness not transmitting to his diffident daughter, even if his choice of career has. The writer-director, who is now 42, has always been a woman economical with words. She’s definitely not keen on over-explaining herself or her films and, while

► Turn to page 8

SOFIA PLAYS THE FAME GAME

As a daughter of movie aristocracy, life in the spotlight is old news to Sofia Coppola. So why was she drawn to a tale of teen burglars obsessed with celebrity culture? She talks to **Matt Mueller**

▶ Continued from page 6

never defensive, once she's drawn lines, she is unwilling to cross them. Would she, for instance, count herself a feminist?

"Oh, I don't talk about political things," she says. "But I'm happy I get to put out a feminine point of view." What advice would she give to the real-life Bling Ringers? "I don't want to dispense advice but my parents always emphasised the importance of hard work. That's something I try to instil in my daughters." What are her theories about the boom in celebrity culture? "I don't want to say. I just tried to make a movie that showed the experience of these kids and let the audience decide how they feel."

Based on true events, *The Bling Ring* follows a posse of five fame-hungry teenagers as they use Google and gossip sites to track the whereabouts of their celebrity prey and loot their residences to the tune of \$3m. Among their targets were Paris Hilton, Rachel Bilson, Lindsay Lohan and Orlando Bloom. Coppola was vaguely aware of the robberies although her interest was really piqued when she read Nancy Jo Sales's 2010 *Vanity Fair* article, "The Suspects Wore Louboutins". "It sounded like a movie to me," says Coppola, "and I thought, 'somebody must already be making a movie out of this story'."

Nobody was, so Coppola snapped up the rights, gaining access to Sales's extensive research and interview transcripts. What struck her most was the way these label-infatuated high-schoolers, most of them living comfortable lives, harboured no guilt for their actions and were primarily interested in the fame their larceny had brought them. It wasn't the stealing that thrilled them, it was the pretence that they were trying out the celebrity lifestyle. Coppola met two of the teen perpetrators, as well as the LAPD detective who helped bring them down (and whom she subsequently cast in the film, earning her criticism for potentially jeopardising the ongoing court cases). But she calls her version of the story "fiction", much of it sprung from her own imagination.

Coppola put together research kits for her cast, featuring surveillance footage of their real-life counterparts in action, and guided them to watch marathon sessions of *The Kardashians*, *The Hills*, *Fashion Police* and *Pretty Wild*, an E! reality show whose family are the inspirations for characters played by Emma Watson, Taissa Farmiga and Leslie Mann. Keen to cast actors who were the same age as the real Bling Ring, 16 and 17, Coppola's ensemble are inexperienced or newcomers. Watson stands out as the oldest and most experienced actress, not to mention a massive celebrity in her own right. She avidly pursued the role of Nicki, according to Coppola, even though the actress admits she was horrified by the character's vacuous personality and behaviour.

"I would only ever do this role with a director like Sofia," says Watson. "Because, however distasteful the character is and the things I have to do, I knew she wasn't going to exploit me." Even pole-dancing in Paris Hilton's party room? "I couldn't say I wasn't going to do that stuff. It was absolutely what those girls are all about: your body is your accessory. It's almost like an expensive handbag."

For added authenticity, Hilton allowed Coppola to shoot in her gaudy Hollywood home, complete with personal night club, stripper-pole dancefloor and rooms plastered with the hotel heiress's image.



Bling-driven thing: (above) Sofia Coppola (fourth left) with Emma Watson (third left) at the premiere of *'The Bling Ring'* in Cannes; (left) with daughters Romy (walking) and Cosima; (below) with father Francis Ford Coppola at Cannes in 1979

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Hilton, who also makes a non-speaking cameo in the film, was at the premiere and caught up with Coppola afterwards.

"I was curious to hear her point of view," says the director. "She really liked the movie and she said that she got emotional when she saw them in her house because it brought back that time for her." Did she draw any parallels between herself and Hilton, both the daughters of famous dynasties? "I don't really relate our backgrounds at all. To me, she's very exotic. I like her. She's a very warm person. But I didn't really think about any connections." Coppola was born in New York City and raised, when not on one of her father's far-flung film sets, on her parents' rambling Napa Valley estate. The youngest of three, and the only daughter, Sofia grew up in a male-dominated clan, surrounded by force-of-nature, egocentric personalities like her father, grandfather Carmine, uncle August, brothers Roman and

Giancarlo (who died in a speedboat accident when she was 14) and cousins Jason Schwartzman and Nicolas Cage. It possibly explains her soft-spoken reticence, and why she describes herself now as "being really into my feminine side and very girly". It's a side she gets to express

in her lifelong love of fashion, not least her long-running gig designing shoes and handbags for Louis Vuitton (ironically, exactly the sort of high-end goods that would be coveted by the Bling Ring).

She has always been dogged by the aroma of nepotism; her father did help to launch her directing career when he produced her 1999 debut *The Virgin Suicides*. But Coppola's film-making pursuits have been sporadic. *The Bling Ring* is only her fifth feature in 14 years, with *Lost In Translation* (2003), *Marie Antoinette* (2006) and *Somewhere* (2010) coming in between. While three possess Hollywood-themed narratives, marking her out with Bret Easton Ellis as an intelligent chronicler of LA life (although she surveys the less seedy side), she describes her creative process as: "Mysterious... It's not really specific to me. You have a feeling of something that interests you, and then you hope that other people are interested in it too." What preoccupies her mainly, she says, is seeking out filmic tales that explore "the dark side of something shiny". That description certainly applies to *The Bling Ring*, which was the opening film for this year's Un Certain Regard section in Cannes. You could practically hear the sharp intake of breath amongst festival cognoscenti when it was announced.

Wasn't it brave of Coppola to re-enter the bear pit after the hearty boing that greeted her last official excursion to the south of France with *Marie Antoinette*? Kirsten Dunst told me a couple of years ago, while making a triumphant return to the Croisette with Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*, that the rejection still stung. But Coppola seems to be made of sterner stuff than her slight, unobtrusive demeanour would indicate. Perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised. After all, she had to grow a thick skin early on when her role as Mary

Corleone in 1990's *The Godfather: Part III* came in for merciless abuse.

"I'm happy for people to have a reaction," said Coppola at *The Bling Ring* Cannes press conference, magnanimous about the Gallic vitriol towards her historical fantasia. "Some people loved it and some people hated it. I'm happy for people to engage with it and have an opinion."

Now raising two young daughters, six-year-old Romy and three-year-old Cosima, she agrees that it's harder to find stories she's willing to commit to than it was 10 years ago. "I don't want to waste time on things when I could be with my kids," she says. "I only want to do things that I'm really invested in." The children's father is Thomas Mars, lead singer for the French alternative rock band Phoenix, who has collaborated with Coppola on the soundtracks for all five of her films. The family split their time between New York and Paris, and Coppola married Mars in August 2011 at her family's restored palazzo in Bernalda, Italy (her second marriage after a four-year union with Spike Jonze).

"I wouldn't say I'm traditional because Thomas and I had two kids before we got married," she demurs. "I just thought it was a nice tradition to do for our kids, to just have a nice family gathering."

Does she picture a future in which Roma and Cosima enter the family business, and perhaps become the fourth generation of Coppolas to bring home an Oscar (Sofia's was for *Lost In Translation*'s screenplay)?

"Uh, not really," she says. "I want them to do whatever they want to do. But to me it would be more interesting if they did something else because everybody in my family's in the film business. I'm really curious to see how they turn out."

'The Bling Ring' is released in cinemas on 5 July

A CRITICAL VIEW

Tom Sutcliffe/If a book's any good, the best lines will linger. And you can quote me on that



"I wanted to write a book where nobody underlines anything on any of the pages," the writer James Salter

said in a recent interview with *Esquire* magazine about his novel *All That Is*. "I don't want it to rely on language or for the language to be conspicuous."

His ambition is ambiguous. There are two ways of achieving it, after all, one considerably harder than the other. Either you make the book seamlessly bland and uninflected, or you achieve such a steady state of excellence in the writing that no one sentence stands proud of the next. Salter explained – a little immodestly to be honest – that the ambition had come about because he "was constantly hearing people talking about their favourite passages" with his previous book.

Having read *All That Is* I found myself wondering whether what Salter was really objecting to was the conversion of his writing into "quotes" – that dismemberment from context which is a hazard for all writers, and which brings with it the faintest odour of the fortune cookie. It's one thing to have a line quoted as evidence of your prose style, after all, and quite another to have it served up as a free-standing quote – a truth about the world which doesn't require



Soundbite: novelist James Salter JULIEN CHATELIN/REX FEATURES

the substantiation of what went before or after.

One of my own favourites – at the risk of irritating Slater – occurs on the first page, where he describes dead soldiers "lolling in the surf, the nation's sons, some of them beautiful." The patriotic cliché includes everyone and then the last four words discriminate – in circumstances where discrimination seems almost like an affront. What could look possibly matter? And yet the human mind still distinguishes.

It's not the only quotable line in the book – but the odd unfinished nature of that last phrase, as if it was thinking of explaining itself but then decided against, withdraws some of the endstopped satisfaction of

the over-zeal quote. Which doesn't mean that Salter has achieved his ambition. What's really odd is that there are lines in the novel which seem almost designed to hook you to a stop like an aircraft carrier arrestor wire. Salter seems preoccupied with the

SOME LINES SEEM DESIGNED TO HOOK YOU LIKE AN AIRCRAFT CARRIER STOP WIRE

capacity of his central character's ejaculations – directly addressed twice in the book – and on the second occasion he uses this unexpected metaphor: "The silence was everywhere and he came like a drinking horse". So startling

is the line that its fame has gone before it. On Twitter someone even posted a YouTube video of a drinking horse so anyone interested could venture a more direct comparison.

There was debate about what exactly was meant. Drinking horses don't sip, so presumably the image aimed at something impressively copious. A sense of hydraulic vigour couldn't be entirely ruled out either, though a horse's gulping absorption of fluid seemed 180 degrees at odds with what was being described. I wondered for a while whether it was simply the unstoppability of the moment that attracted Salter to the metaphor. I don't have much experience of drinking horses, but I imagine if the animal is thirsty it's no easier to interrupt in mid-flow than an ecstatic climax.

My guess was that this wasn't one of those moments when a writer casts around for the perfect image and finds it but that Salter had seen a drinking horse at some point and thought to himself, "that looks oddly familiar... must use that one day". In a sense it was underlined already, by Salter himself.

I can't get it out of my head now, anyway, and can't look at the book without thinking of it underlined so forcefully that the next three pages are indented too.

The joke's on the National Gallery



Michael Landy's exhibition *Saints Alive* (right), which transforms National Gallery saints into clanking self-destructive automata, is probably the funniest exhibition ever staged in the Sunley Room. But I did find myself wondering whether its comedy would leave a permanent mark on the collection. After seeing Landy's St Francis, who whacks himself on the head with a crucifix when you drop a donation in the box he sits on, it's difficult to look at the original painting without a memory of slapstick. And I'll never be able to look at Carlo Crivelli's *Saint Lucy* in the same way again, having been alerted by Landy to the bizarre comedy of her pose. It's as good as the Muppets.

Fangs a lot to the film funders

"Remember. The revolution started here," said Stephen Woolley, introducing a gala screening of Neil Jordan's new vampire film *Byzantium* the other night. He wasn't actually referring to the film (excellent, by the way) but Jordan's success in persuading all the funders to show all their vanity cards on a single montage screen.

Instead of six of those swooshy CGI graphics that clutter up your pre-film anticipation, there's just one brief screen showing the logos of the production companies. And then the director gets to have a crack at your perceptions, refreshingly unpolluted by corporate showboating. I don't know how he did it – but I really hope the trend spreads.