

THE  TIMES

# MAGAZINE

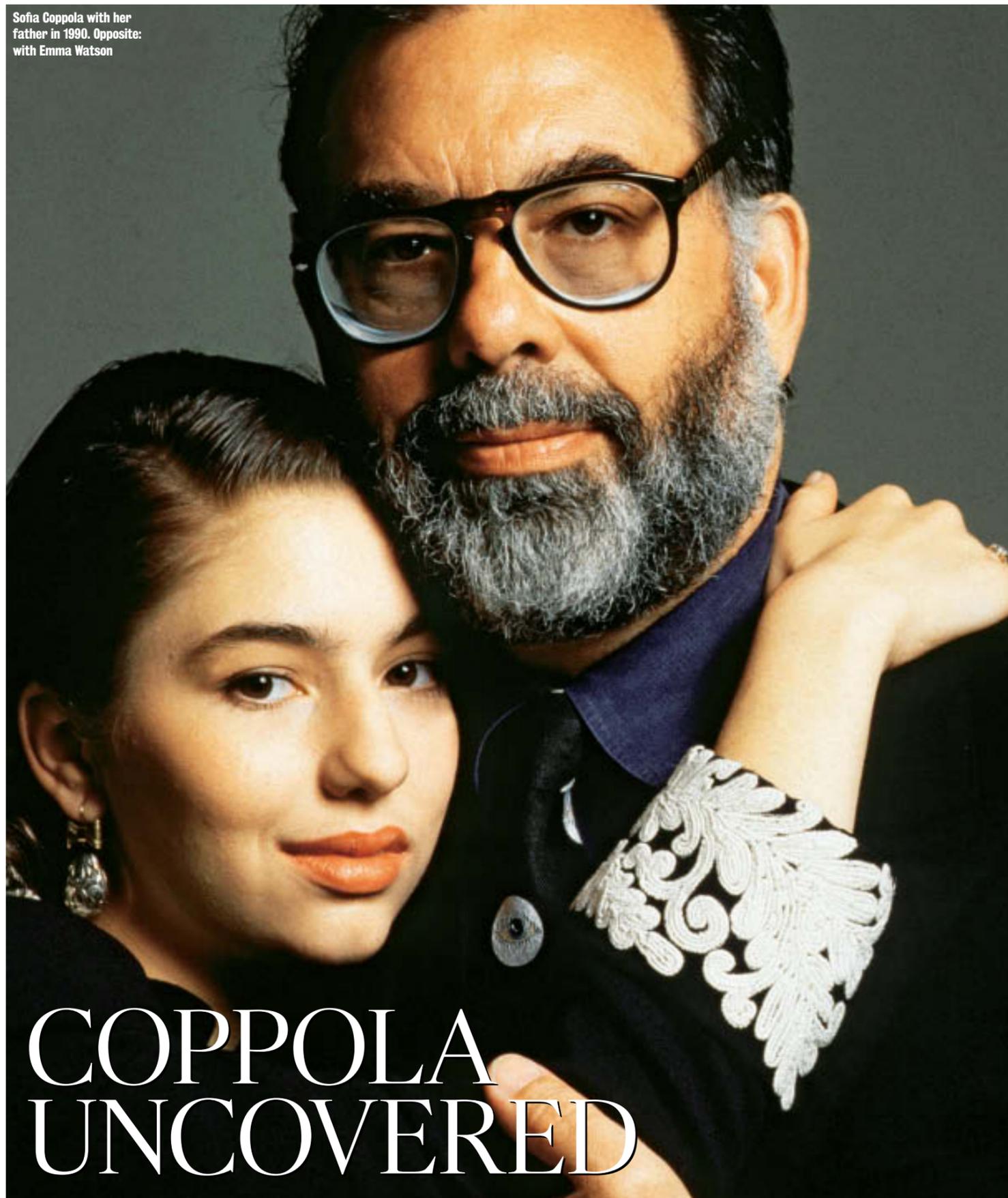
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DADDY'S  
GIRL  
THE PRIVATE  
WORLD OF  
SOFIA COPPOLA

I AM A  
MIGHTY  
SEX GOD  
Alan Titchmarsh  
(best in show)

TEEN CYBER  
BULLIES  
What goes on inside  
Britain's schools

Sofia Coppola with her father in 1990. Opposite: with Emma Watson



# COPPOLA UNCOVERED



Her father is the legendary director, her husband is a rock star, she is an Oscar-winning film-maker. Life seems so easy for Sofia Coppola. But in private, she tells Tim Teeman, she has experienced the public failure of her first marriage and the death of her brother



From left: with Marc Jacobs at New York Fashion Week in February; with second husband Thomas Mars, frontman of French band Phoenix

left Sofia Coppola's latest film, *The Bling Ring*, feeling deliriously happy about being older and squarer than Coppola's spoilt, vile characters. My mouth in a sour, cat's-bum pout, I tutted throughout the movie, a stylish drama about a group of Los Angeles teenagers who, in a free-wheeling spree between 2008 and 2009, robbed the homes of celebrities including Orlando Bloom, Lindsay Lohan, Megan Fox and Paris Hilton, netting \$3 million worth of goods. They made sure their homes were empty by poring over the gossip about their lives and, when finally arrested, relished their own celebrity. The film makes you yearn to ride a bike, whooping through the countryside, a million miles from these vapid dunderheads.

It's beautiful to look at, like all Coppola's films – think of the well-dressed aesthetics of *The Virgin Suicides* and *Lost in Translation* – yet its moral heart is as elusive and faint as a will-o'-the-wisp, even though the Oscar-winning Coppola said recently the teenagers “summed up everything that I think is declining in our culture... Kids are inundated with reality TV and tabloid culture so much that this just seems normal... It just seems like this trash culture is becoming acceptable as mainstream culture.”

Coppola's criticism has an added layer of

## 'It was really brutal. To be on the cover of a magazine with the headline "She Ruined Her Dad's Movie"'

sonorousness, given that everything *The Bling Ring* personifies – brattish acquisitiveness, wealth, a veneration of fame and notoriety – stands in opposition to her blue-chip Hollywood lineage: her father is *The Godfather* and *Apocalypse Now* director Francis Ford Coppola, her cousins include actors Nicolas Cage and Jason Schwartzman. Her aunt is Talia Shire, most famous for playing Adrian Balboa, the much-suffering wife of Sylvester Stallone's Rocky, and Connie Corleone in *The Godfather*. But if Coppola, 42, is disgusted with the “Bling Ring” and all their ignominious tale embodies, her film has a funny way of showing it. The clothes and cars the teenagers steal and covet are lavishly evoked, their crimes a lark. However, Coppola insists *The Bling Ring*, which premiered in May at the Cannes Film Festival, is a tabula rasa for us to “imprint” our judgments on to.

In a restaurant in Greenwich Village, New York, Coppola orders steak tartare and asparagus. She is slight, beautiful, with wavy, bobbed hair, wearing a vintage green jacket by her friend Marc Jacobs, who was her date

at this year's Met Ball (in 2002 she modelled as the “face” of his fragrance). She speaks in a listless monotone, with “That's private” such a favoured response she'd probably use it if I asked how she felt about the weather. If her movies reflect an un-pin-down-ability, they absolutely reflect their writer and director.

Her own very un-Bling Ring-ish childhood was spent not in Hollywood, but mostly a small town in the Napa Valley where her father, who is also a winemaker, named a wine after her, “which is fairly normal there”. The Sofia, the Coppola winery website states, was “born from a celebration of love... Our sparkling wine, as bright and effervescent as the woman who inspired it, the charming and stylish Sofia Rosé, along with the alluring Riesling, are a tribute to the romantic, ebullient spirit of women everywhere.” Perhaps she reserves this effervescence for family occasions only.

Her town was “normal, middle-class suburban, where everyone knew each other. Nobody had a designer bag.” She is an only ➔

daughter, which means she gets on well with her male-dominated film crews, she says. “But I’ve always had close girlfriends and I have a big girlie side. I like beautiful flowers, clothes and romantic stories.” Jacobs and Céline’s Phoebe Philo are her favourite designers. She and her girlfriends discuss cosmetics, although her beauty regime isn’t “extreme, and plastic surgery doesn’t appeal to me”. She grew up wanting to be a magazine editor, loved reading *The Face* and French *Vogue* – “very glamorous, my only link to the outside world” – and became shy and more self-conscious as a teenager.

As a little girl, Coppola was a “ham”, putting on shows for her family and bossing other kids around; her mother “traces a direct line” from that to her becoming a director. She had a privileged upbringing, but “I appreciate and value things and don’t take anything for granted. My dad always stressed that working hard was very important.” Coppola spent a lot of time on her father’s film sets: her first acting role was as a baby being christened in *The Godfather* and, aged 3 on the set of *The Godfather Part II*, she had her own director’s chair with her name on it. As a seven-year-old, she entertained herself during the fraught filming of *Apocalypse Now* in the Philippines jungle by drawing elaborate pictures of palm trees and helicopters and weaving the pictures together to form stories. She moved to New York as a teenager during filming of *The Cotton Club*, taking yellow cabs “and being here when Madonna was starting to be cool and she wasn’t in California yet”. Her father recalls her sitting on Andy Warhol’s lap.

Then, when Coppola had just turned 15, disaster struck. Her brother Gian-Carlo, then 22, was killed after being struck by a towline connecting two boats in an accident in Maryland. Griffin O’Neal, son of Ryan O’Neal and at the time filming *Gardens of Stone* directed by Coppola Sr, was piloting the boat both men were on and, it was reported, was trying to pass between the two boats connected by the towline. O’Neal ducked to avoid it; Gian-Carlo suffered massive head injuries. Subsequent reports said he had been decapitated. O’Neal was convicted of negligently operating a boat and was replaced in the film.

“I think it shapes who you are. It was a devastating time,” Coppola says. “I’m sure it did change me. I don’t know what I’d have been like otherwise. I don’t take life for



## ‘I wasn’t comfortable in my first marriage. You think it will make your relationship something else; it didn’t’

granted. It was obviously a very sad time. I was very close to him. Really close. It was definitely hard on our family. Somehow we got through. I had therapy at the time. I was pulled out of school. You’re in shock. I think it always stays with you. I still miss my brother and it’s been more than 20 years. It affects who you are. But everyone goes through tragedies and I don’t want to wallow. It makes you appreciate what you have because you don’t know...” Her voice tails off. “It makes you appreciate people.”

As a teenager, Coppola was an intern

at Chanel under Karl Lagerfeld (“I was intimidated and scared, but he was very friendly and kind”) and attended art school. If *The Bling Ring* implies Coppola views the world of celebrity and fetishised high fashion with some disdain, it should be noted that Coppola is a celebrated fashion template herself, a waifish epitome of cool as lionised by fashion-watchers as their celebrity victims were by the “Bling Ring”. There are many pictures of Coppola on Pinterest. She even helmed her own Japan-based fashion label, Milkfed.

Before directing, Coppola appeared in movies, mostly her father’s: “I’m more comfortable behind the camera. Being a performer is not my nature.” The critics agreed: she was panned for her performance as Mary Corleone in *The Godfather Part III* (1990), and named Worst Supporting Actress and Worst New Star at that year’s Golden Raspberry awards. “It was really brutal. I was 18 and it was hard to be so put down. To be on the cover of a magazine with the headline ‘She Ruined Her Dad’s Movie’ made me feel bad for embarrassing him. But I wasn’t devastated. It wasn’t my dream to be an actor.” She partied in Nineties Los Angeles. Was it a wild time? “I was never out of control; I never had a big drugs phase.”

Coppola’s first film, made in 1998, *Lick the Star*, was a 14-minute short.

She then heard that an adaptation of Jeffrey Eugenides’s novel *The Virgin Suicides* was being planned, a book she felt “very protective over and the way they were planning to do it didn’t sound right”. She took on the movie rights. Some accused her of nepotism. “I work really hard, but I’m definitely lucky to have the connection with the industry I do. I knew how to get a good sound designer. I definitely had advantages but was disadvantaged too that people could dismiss me.” She doesn’t feel a desperate need to counter these charges. “You can’t please everybody. I just get on with my work.”

The success of *Lost in Translation* (2003), with Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson as two lonely, dislocated souls in a hypnotic Tokyo, still shocks her. “I was writing a really personal story about my experience in Japan and what I was going through at the time. I thought it was really indulgent and nobody would care about it. I was really surprised people connected to it.” The film, which cost \$4 million to make, made \$120 million, winning Coppola the Oscar for Best Original Screenplay and a Best

Director nomination. Coppola's crumbling relationship with her first husband, the director Spike Jonze, was mirrored in the experience of Johansson's character.

"I was at that age where you're supposed to know what you're doing. I didn't, or who I was. I was trying to figure out what marriage was supposed to be. I wasn't comfortable in the marriage. We weren't connecting the way I thought you should be in a relationship." Why had she married Jonze? "Oh, I was in my twenties; we'd been together for six years." She was 22 when they got together, 28 when they married. "Maybe you think marriage is going to make your relationship into something else, but it didn't." Their divorce was "really difficult. You think marriage will be for ever. It was hard." Now, they're "friendly if we see each other but we're not involved in each other's lives or hanging out". Winning awards – the movie also scooped Golden Globes and Baftas – was "bittersweet... going through the divorce yet being fêted professionally".

Hollywood "is definitely a boys' club". Is it hostile to female directors? "Not for me. People are really encouraging of my work." Is

*Less Than Zero* (Bret Easton Ellis's 1985 novel): "that glamorous, decadent side of LA: lots of coke, going to nightclubs, the convertibles". Is the film celebrating the kids' behaviour or skewering their moral failings? "I was trying to do both and leave it open for the audience to feel what it wants. I didn't want to be preachy. I wanted to tell the story from the kids' point of view, so wanted it to be really seductive."

The teens "assumed they should be celebrities, with their obsession about brands and bling", Coppola says. So she's as repelled by them as me? "I don't want to say." Why? "I just don't want to be preachy, condemning anything." Surely she has views. "It's in the movie. I don't feel it's my role to say what the message is. People can take what they want from the movie. I think it's clear." So, what is it? "I'm trying to be an observer of the culture. I grew up with a different kind of culture and values."

Indeed, Coppola is "making a big effort" to insulate her two young daughters, Romy, 6, and Cosima, 3, from whatever it is she won't pass a view on. Coppola wants her children to "appreciate the value of things" so presumably she rejects all values "Bling Ring". "I don't

They love their celebrities' style and care about nothing but acquisition; the theft from the celebrities' homes is an extension of their sense of entitlement. "I'm more interested in visuals than words," says Coppola. "That's why dialogue in my movies is so sparse. In real life, people aren't clear about their feelings. I'm interested in expressing what is unsaid."

Alexis Neiers, one of the gang, said the film was "trashy and inaccurate". Coppola told the BBC, "It's not a documentary... I'm not too concerned with their reaction." However, if she is executing a dry satire on shallow lives and preoccupations, the film is flawed: the shallowness looks way too much fun. How does she feel about celebrity culture? "I'm aware of it; it's fun to look at once in a while, but it became so dominant in their lives it felt very out of balance. Reality TV didn't exist when we were growing up: this idea that anyone can be famous without working hard."

Coppola's quiet, arty outrage may win over some critics. However, there was a group of teenage girls at my screening who perceived the film as a fun game of dress-up. "Oh my God, that's so cool," one shouted as the young criminals let themselves into Paris Hilton's closet. "That's the bag," another shrieked as the gang laid their hands on a mega-expensive Birkin belonging to Lindsay Lohan. Emma Watson's nasty character – in the actress's break-out-from-*Harry-Potter* role – was deemed "so hot" and "like such a bitch", the only moral pronouncement the girls made. "I try not to glamorise their actions," Coppola says. "I don't show them as heroes. I was showing it could be fun but also too much." Hilton stars as herself (her hallway chairs feature cushions with her face on them). Coppola liked her, "much more than I'd expected to. She's very friendly, laid back and has a playful sense of humour about herself."

Coppola has a few close associates whose opinion she values, but she avoids reviews and negative critiques. "I'm too sensitive. If I'm happy with it, I like it. I don't want to hear people putting me up or down. I'd rather not care what other people think." One criticism of you is that your films prize style over substance, I say. "I think a film can look good and have depth. I don't think anyone likes to read their films lack substance." That's why she avoids critics? "Wouldn't you?" she retorts. Surely some criticism can make for better work, I say. "I don't avoid people," insists Coppola. "I don't live in a bubble." But she does and it's carefully constructed to allow Coppola to tell her kind of glossy, wry stories exactly the way she chooses. How we read her films – and her – Coppola leaves squarely, defiantly, up to us. ■

*The Bling Ring opens on July 5*

## I still miss my brother and it's been more than 20 years. You're in shock. It affects who you are'

Hollywood sexist? "I never thought about that. I just do my own thing. There have definitely been situations where I think it would have been different if I had been a guy." What were they? "I can't say." How did she deal with whatever these occasions were? "I don't engage with it." Is she a feminist? "I was raised by a feminist but I don't really describe myself as anything. I don't want to be political and I don't make political statements. Actions speak louder than words: it's important to be independent and strong." She writes and directs all her movies: writing is "the hardest part", but "I fill out what I need to fill out" later in the director's chair. Independence "means a lot"; she can't imagine writing or directing for anyone but herself. "I haven't worked much with big studios. It's important for me to have creative control."

Her *Marie Antoinette* (2006) was a rock-'n'-roll-drenched take on the French queen; *Somewhere* (2010), about a lounge actor shackled up at the Chateau Marmont, won her the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, the first American female director to win.

"It seemed like an absurd story and a movie immediately," Coppola says of the *Vanity Fair* article that inspired *The Bling Ring*. "It's always fun to read about teenagers getting into trouble." Her aesthetic inspiration was

want them to dress like hookers," she says sharply. But celebrity culture is creeping in: at a "graduation" for Romy's cookery class Coppola successfully argued against the teacher's wish that the event include a red carpet.

Coppola married her daughters' father, Thomas Mars, vocalist with the French band Phoenix, in 2011. "I didn't think I would want to marry again, but I didn't want to miss the experience of being married to the person I was most suited to." They moved from Paris to New York for the girls' schooling. "Motherhood definitely changes you, how you spend your time," says Coppola. "I used to write at night. I think motherhood makes you nicer, the soft humility you get when your kid is throwing up on you." Does she want more children? "If I didn't work. But I don't plan on having more."

The "Bling Ring" teenagers, immersed in celebrity culture and the internet so thoroughly they knew not only the addresses of their victims but when they were out of town, robbed them with the dead-eyed materialistic élan you'd expect from over-indulged brats who rave lunatically over what "Lindsay" is wearing. They are rude to, or alienated from, their parents; their work ethic extends to getting into the right nightclubs.