

Marcel Ophuls: An Interview

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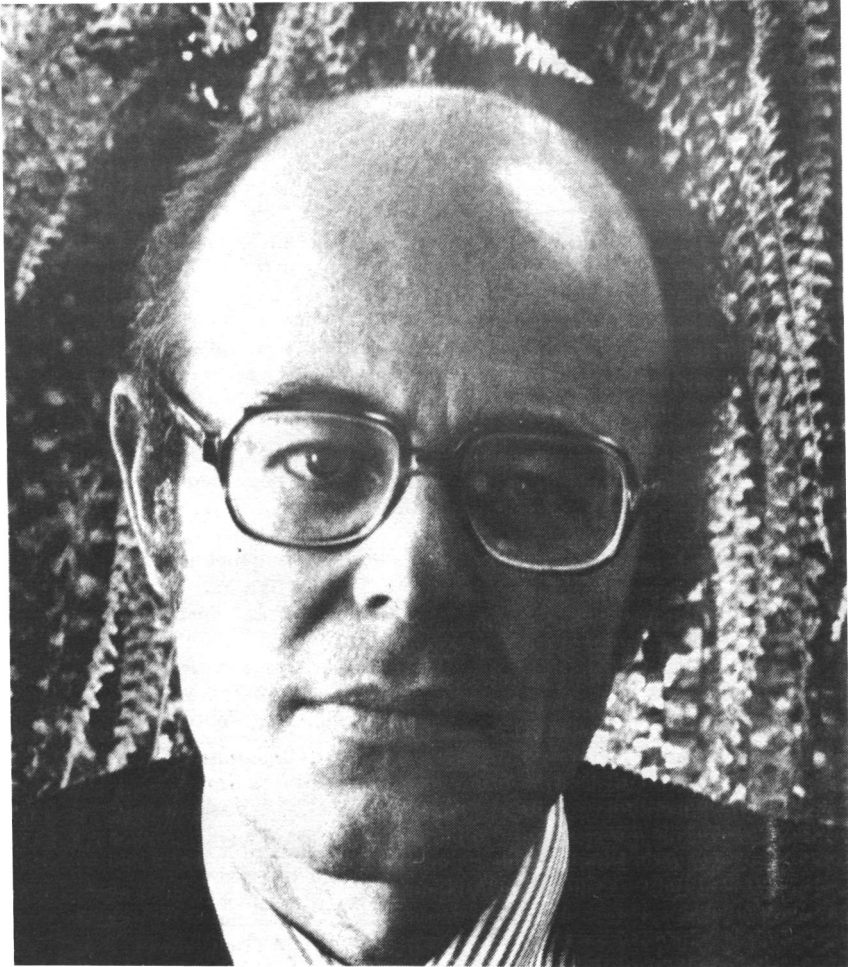
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Marcel Ophuls: An Interview

Michael Gallagher

*Marcel Ophuls, born in Germany at the time of Hitler's rise to power, was educated in France and the United States (where he graduated from Hollywood High). He began his career in 1950 as a film assistant working with such directors as John Huston, Anatole Litvak, and his father, Max Ophuls. After producing several shorts, his first feature-length film *Peau de Banane*, was released in 1963, starring Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jeanne Moreau. In the latter part of the 60s, Ophuls worked as a contract director for Zoom, a monthly news program of the French national television station and produced several film reports in France, the United States, and Germany.*

*In 1971 he made the epochal documentary *The Sorrow and the Pity*, a study of French conduct under the Nazi Occupation, which won an Academy Award nomination and a special award from the National Society of Film Critics. His next feature, employing the same interview technique, *A Sense of Loss* (1972), dealt with the tragedy of Northern Ireland. His most recent film, *The Memory of Justice* (1976), is a four-and-a-half-hour documentary that takes up the problem of justice in a world in which no one is free to cast the first stone. The film first focuses upon the Nuremberg Trials and then examines the consequences of the precedent set at Nuremberg in terms of events since then, notably the French in Algeria and the Americans in Vietnam. Like the two earlier films, it is imbued with the patient intelligence and concern for human dignity that have become Ophuls' hallmark.*



FC: *What is your guiding principle in organizing your material?*

MO: The name of the game is no structure! There is nothing beforehand—nothing. I not only refuse to write a script ahead of time, I will not have a script in my hand during the course of the filming. The technique is always fundamentally the same—interviews intercut with footage which is for the most part from the actual period being discussed—archival films, newsreels, documentaries, and the like, with no narration as such. The material itself—ninety hours of footage for *The Sorrow and the Pity* and some sixty to seventy for *The Memory of Justice*—compels a certain structure.

FC: *But you do make choices.*

MO: Of course I make choices. To interview someone and not someone else, to ask one question and not another, to include some footage and not other—all these are choices. And choices, of course, imply values, which I certainly do have. I believe in many things, including, by the way, the Ten Commandments.

FC: *So from the interaction of the material and your choices, a structure begins to take form?*

MO: Yes, there is a gradual buildup. In the first hour or so of *The Memory of Justice*, for example, you know considerably less than later. There is a deepening of awareness throughout. I believe in being open-ended, however. My method is in a sense my ideology.

FC: *At the press conference after the screening of The Memory of Justice at the New York Film Festival last year, some of the questions seemed to me to indicate that there were those who felt that you had equated American conduct in Vietnam with the worst excesses of the Nazis. A wrong-headed conclusion, of course, but did you ever think that it might be better if you spelled out your meaning to avoid misinterpretation in so serious a matter?*

MO: I have a stock response to that. The nuance is what's important. And to compare is not to equate. I don't like narrow analogies. There are those people, you see—and they are often overtly and consciously political—who believe that truth is very simple. And they feel an urgent need to convey it to what they consider "the masses." I'm not like that at all. As to the general reaction to the film here...well, it's too early to tell, but I think it might well parallel the French reaction to *The Sorrow and the Pity*.

FC: *Because it strikes so close to home for us?*

MO: Yes. It's hard to summon up detachment with regard to an event so recent and so tragic. You can predict the reaction of certain people depending upon their political beliefs and feelings.

FC: *Be it ever so gentle, your method has the effect of dismantling cliches. And that can cause a great deal of pain. For example, the fervent, unthinking kind of patriotism expounded by the young widow whose Marine husband died in Vietnam—you contrast her with a couple whose son also died there but who are utterly opposed to the war.*

MO: I feel very sorry about that lady. I seem to be putting her in a very bad light. That's not fair. She believes very strongly in her principles, and she deserves respect. And she does have an argument. It is all very well for the sophisticated white liberal to refuse to go. But how about the poor ghetto black who has to go in his place?

FC: *What do you think about the artist's role in society?*

MO: Well, I believe that politics does enter into everything, but I don't go along with what Sartre believes—or at least did believe at one time—that the artist has to be *engage*. Yes, almost everything we do is political—not that we have to be thinking about politics when we eat and drink and make love—but...what I'm opposed to is this *sweaty dedication*. I love Fred Astaire movies. I like to read P. G. Wodehouse. And as for artists who are performers, I think that they have even less of an obligation to be “political.” It's important that we have music in bad times.

FC: *But you wouldn't be in favor of, say, putting on a concert at the Nixon White House during the Christmas bombing?*

MO: No, that's quite a different matter. It's just that I think of myself as being part of show business, of being very much in that tradition.

FC: *Yet the inescapable lesson of The Memory of Justice, for example, is that one must get involved, at least at certain critical junctures—one must stick one's neck out and not just go on with the show.*

MO: Of course, of course. Look, this is what I feel very strongly: my films are about the celebration of heroism.

FC: *And why do you make such films?*

MO: Well, I enjoy doing so, and if you enjoy it, and you can carry it off, why deprive yourself. Balzac wrote to pay off his debts. He had a lot of them. We all do. Of course...you *do* have an obligation.

Plato would have put it another way. The title of The Memory of Justice comes from him. He believed that we have an uncertain, but, nonetheless, persistent memory of certain ideals that we once grasped perfectly in a life that preceded our present through-a-glass-darkly form of existence. These memories disturb us, they prevent us from settling down in a warm torpor, and they drive some of the more sensitive among us to great feats—such as making The Memory of Justice.