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Wisdom from Francis Ford Coppola



I learned something significant today from this [wonderful 99% interview of Francis Ford Coppola](#) at the 99%.

As you know, for the past year or so I've been playing around with the notion that an essential - - even critical -- element in any successful creative endeavor is the existence of a crisp [point of view](#) to guide decision making along the way. A point of view is statement of what something must be, and in that declaration lies an exhaustive list of everything which it cannot be. A point of view allows for consistent choices to be made, which lead to coherent, strong end results. When something is criticized for feeling like it was created by a committee, it's not so much the committee per se which is at fault, so much as the absence of any unifying principle to guide the actions of individuals in the name of creating a sum total which is truly remarkable. In terms of outcomes, having a strong point of view is the difference between the music of an ensemble led by Charlie Hunter and the stuff you'd hear in an elevator. There's nothing wrong with group creativity, but it needs to have a point of reference for goodness navigation.

Which brings me back to the Coppola interview. While I've never made a motion picture, I always watch the credits, and I'm always amazed at how even a film with a modest production budget can employ so many people. How can they all know what to do? What good looks like? How to make the myriad brilliant decisions that lead to something being truly remarkable? Here's what Coppola says, and it's totally about point of view:

When you make a movie, always try to discover what the theme of the movie is in one or two words. Every time I made a film, I always knew what I thought the theme was, the core, in one word. In "The Godfather," it was succession. In "The Conversation," it was privacy. In "Apocalypse," it was morality.

The reason it's important to have this is because most of the time what a director really does is make decisions. All day long: Do you want it to be long hair or short hair? Do you want a dress



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or pants? Do you want a beard or no beard? There are many times when you don't know the answer. Knowing what the theme is always helps you.

I remember in "The Conversation," they brought all these coats to me, and they said: Do you want him to look like a detective, Humphrey Bogart? Do you want him to look like a blah blah blah. I didn't know, and said the theme is 'privacy' and chose the plastic coat you could see through. So knowing the theme helps you make a decision when you're not sure which way to go.

One word. I love the idea of boiling the point of view down to one word. An exhaustive written treatment of the point of view would be read by few, internalized by even fewer. But a single word? Think of the last US presidential election, and you can see the power of a single word to communicate an entire political platform: *Hope*. And because creative endeavors ever love constraints, the specificity of a single word will engender mountains more creativity than a list of ten or a hundred or a thousand. Transparent plastic rain coats don't just happen, you know.