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[contents](#) [great directors](#) [cteq annotations](#)
[top tens](#) [about us](#) [links](#) [archive](#) [search](#)

The Conversation

by Brenda Austin-Smith

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The Conversation (1974 USA 113mins)

Source: NLA/CAC **Prod. Co:** Paramount **Prod:** Francis Ford Coppola, Fred Roos **Dir, Scr:** Francis Ford Coppola **Phot:** Bill Butler **Ed:** Walter Murch, Richard Chew **Art Dir:** Dean Tavoularis **Mus:** David Shire

Cast: Gene Hackman, John Cazale, Allen Garfield, Frederic Forrest, Cindy Williams, Harrison Ford

"I don't have anything personal," says Harry Caul (Gene Hackman), protagonist of *The Conversation* to his landlady, ".nothing of value, except my keys." The comment, made over the telephone rather than face-to-face, confirms Harry Caul as a character pathologically obsessed with his own privacy, even as he spends his days as a wiretapping expert invading the sonic privacy of others. The immediate cultural context of *The Conversation* was Watergate, the release of the Nixon tapes, and growing social anxiety over surveillance. The film's release in the wake of the most significant U.S. political scandal of the late 20th century touched a nerve with viewers and critics, who read this densely plotted tale of corporate intrigue, murder, and paranoia as a dissertation on American society in the mid-'70s. Nominated for three Academy Awards, *The Conversation* lost out to another Coppola film, *The Godfather II*, though it won the Golden Palm at Cannes.

The Conversation has been described as an "Orwellian morality play" in

which the spy becomes the spied upon, and technology is used against the user. (1) In generic terms, the film is a psychological thriller that pays stylistic homage to Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) in its use of repetition and its parsing of sounds rather than images to create ambiguity, and to Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) in its depiction of a hotel murder. It is also a political/corporate conspiracy film with a convoluted story line involving secrets, responsibility, and betrayal. In fact, the obscurity of the film's plot and illogicality of its story (how far back, for example, has the film's final betrayal been planned, and by whom?) have garnered criticism from many viewers otherwise positively disposed to its accomplishments.

Despite its structural flaws, its derivative techniques, and its rather hackneyed conspiracy theme, *The Conversation* transcends these limitations in its provision of a character study of haunting, if disturbing, power. Harry Caul, a character Coppola himself feared would be impossible for viewers to sympathize with, is the film's central figure, a man so obsessed with making himself unavailable to others that he has almost completely eradicated his own personality. His last name spelled out carefully over the phone, links Harry to those born with a caul, and indeed, the film is replete with images of Harry wearing an old raincoat, behind plastic curtains, and obscured by a telephone booth. (2) Harry is a surveillance genius for whom other people's privacy is an obstacle to be overcome using equipment he builds himself. He is also a man suffering intensely from guilt: one of his previous assignments resulted in the death of an entire family. This revelation, as well as the film's depiction of Harry's Catholicism (we see him at confession, an analogue of the secular eavesdropping Harry practices), complicates his detachment from others by introducing the one element that functions as the "bug" Harry can neither disable nor escape: his own conscience.

Against his own advice to his assistant, Stanley, which is not to get involved in the lives of the people they spy on, Harry becomes engaged in the conversation he has recorded between Ann (Cindy Williams) and Mark (Frederic Forrest). A man for whom sound is corporeal ("All I want is a nice, fat recording," he says to Stanley), Harry is soon pre-occupied by the attribution of motive and meaning to bits of recorded talk. Soon he is caught in and by the very technologies he has hitherto mastered, which thematize the procedures of both filmmaking and film viewing. As Harry labours in his workshop to edit the conversation for the Director (Robert Duvall), he relies on a photo of the couple to anchor his editing of the tapes. Coaxing clarity from distorted sound (distortions produced by the radio mikes used in the film's production, and brilliantly edited by

Walter Murch), Harry mixes a sound track to a series of images of Ann and Mark walking around the square, watching a homeless man on a bench, and kissing good-bye.

But Harry has not actually been witness to all of these scenes, and eventually his own desire leads him to project onto the conversation the nuances of inflection and meaning that he seems merely to uncover. Isolated, lonely, but strangely vulnerable, Harry casts himself as silent, rather than white knight in a rescue drama in which he is not only ineffectual, but also betrayed by his romantic obsession with Ann and his vestigial sense of chivalry. In his creation of a narrative of Ann's oppression, persecution, and possible death, Harry acts as a film editor, marrying image track to sound track to produce a coherent story. And like the film viewer, Harry fills in narrative gaps and ambiguities, supplementing what is visible and audible with what he believes to be the truth.

In the end, Harry's romantic delusions betray him, even as his talents as a wiretapper are challenged by a superior force associated with Martin Stett (Harrison Ford), the Director's assistant. The shock and paranoia unleashed by his betrayal result in Harry's destruction of his apartment, a stripping down of surfaces clearly associated with his own abjection. Searching for a device that remains elusive, that in some sense he embodies, Harry Caul is at the point of madness by the film's conclusion. It is a madness brought on by extreme self-consciousness, with not even his faith to sustain him (he smashes the statue of the Virgin, as if it were Ann, while searching for the bug).

Coppola was correct in his assessment of Harry Caul; he is a chilling as well as pathetic character. But as *The Conversation* comes to a close, the camera panning like yet another piece of detached security equipment, there may at least be a trace of pity for Harry in the viewer's gaze.

This film screens at the [Melbourne Cinémathèque](#) on April 25 at 7:00 p.m. For more info, see [here](#).

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See also

[Notes on *The Conversation* by Megan Ratner](#)

Endnotes:

1. Dennis Turner, "The Subject of *The Conversation*," *Cinema Journal* 24.4, 1985, pp.4-22 
2. Palmer, James W. "The Conversation: Coppola's Biography of an Unborn Man," *Film Heritage*, 12.1, Fall 1976, pp.26-32 

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