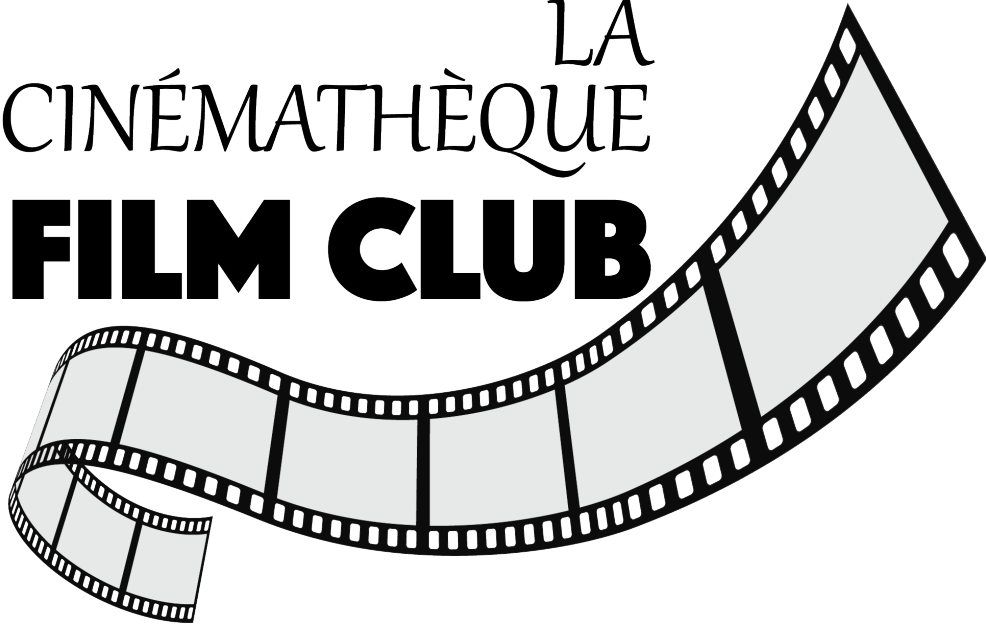


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Cannes Palme d'Or Winners
2018-2019

Francis Ford Coppola
b.1939

The Conversation
1974

The Conversation

Roger Ebert • February 4, 2001

Article sourced from RogerEbert.com: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-the-conversation-1974>



4/4 Stars

His colleagues in the surveillance industry think Harry Caul is such a genius that we realize with a little shock how bad he is at his job. Here is a man who is paid to eavesdrop on a conversation in a public place. He succeeds, but then allows the tapes to be stolen. His triple-locked apartment is so insecure that the landlord is able to enter it and leave a birthday present. His mail is opened and read. He thinks his phone is unlisted, but both the landlord and a client have it. At a trade show, he allows his chief competitor to fool him with a mike hidden in a freebie ballpoint. His mistress tells him: “Once I saw you up by the staircase, hiding and watching for a whole hour.”

Harry, the subject of Francis Ford Coppola’s “The Conversation” (1974), is not only bad at his job, but also deeply unhappy about it. Once his snooping may have led to the deaths of a woman and child. Now he fears that his new tapes will lead to another murder. In the confessional, he warms up by telling the priest that he has taken the Lord’s name in vain and stolen some newspapers from a rack. Then he says: “I’ve been involved in some work that I think will be used to hurt these two young people. It’s happened to me before. People were hurt because of my work, and I’m afraid it could happen again and I’m . . . I was in no way responsible. I’m not responsible. For these and all my sins of my past life, I am heartily sorry.”

If he’s not responsible, why is he sorry? Harry, played by Gene Hackman in one of the key performances of a great career, tries to distance himself from his work. But even Meredith (Elizabeth MacRae), the hooker he brings home from a convention, can see how worried he is. “Forget it, Harry. It’s only a trick – a job. You’re not supposed to think anything about it. Just supposed to do it.” She’s talking for herself as well. When he wakes, it’s to discover that she has taken her own advice and stolen the tapes.

Coppola, who wrote and directed, considers this film his most personal project. He was working two years after the Watergate break-in, amid the ruins of the Vietnam effort, telling the story of a man who places too much reliance on high technology and has nightmares about his personal responsibility. Harry Caul is a

microcosm of America at that time: not a bad man, trying to do his job, haunted by a guilty conscience, feeling tarnished by his work.

The movie works on that moral level, and also as a taut, intelligent thriller. It opens with a virtuoso telephoto shot, showing a San Francisco plaza filled with people. Faraway music mixes with electronic sounds. There is a slow zoom in to the back of Caul's head, and then the camera follows him. Other shots show a man with a shotgun microphone, on top of a nearby building, holding in his cross hairs a young couple (Cindy Williams and Frederic Forrest) who are the subject of the investigation. Eventually we go inside a van packed with electronic gear, where Stan (John Cazale), Harry's assistant, is waiting.

"Who's interested in these people, anyway?" Stan asks. One of Harry's crosses is that Stan is irreverent about their work, which to Harry is a sacred calling. Later we find out who's interested: Harry has been hired by the director of a large corporation (Robert Duvall), although at first he deals only with the man's assistant (Harrison Ford). It becomes clear that Ann, the young woman, is the director's wife, and Mark, the young man, is her lover. But what will happen next? "He'd kill us if he had the chance," says Mark. Will he? Harry plays the tapes back and forth, juggling a bank of three tape recorders, in a scene Coppola says was partly inspired by the photographer trying to coax the truth out of his prints in Michelangelo Antonioni's "Blow-Up." Snatches of conversation advance and recede, maddeningly mixed with a band in the plaza that's playing "Red, Red Robin." Harry is impatient with Stan, impatient with everyone. At home, he's shocked to find that his landlord entered his apartment, knows it is his birthday, and knows how old he is. On the phone, the landlord explains he needs his own key for an emergency. "I'd be perfectly happy if all my personal things burnt up in a fire," Harry tells him, "because I don't have anything personal. Nothing of value—only my key." He visits his mistress Amy (Teri Garr). She knows it's him from the way he thinks he comes quietly through the door. She asks him to share something personal with her.

"I don't have any secrets," he says.

"I'm a secret," she says.

The best supporting performance is by Allen Garfield, as Moran, Harry's successful competitor. At a trade show, Harry discovers that Stan has left him and gone to work for Moran. Yet he recklessly invites Moran, Stan and a crowd back to his office, an area behind steel mesh in an otherwise empty warehouse. He is humiliated to discover Moran bugged him, and of course later that night is betrayed by the hooker. A nightmare gives key information: As a child, Harry was paralyzed on one side, and nearly drowned during a bath. The word "Caul" has two meanings, both relevant: It is a spider's web, and the membrane that encloses a fetus. If it is found on a child's head after birth, we learn, "it is supposed to protect against drowning."

From his troubled childhood, Harry has grown up into a lonely man. He lives alone, has no entertainment except playing his saxophone with jazz records (again trying to make a recording more complete). No woman has any influence over him, that's for sure, or he wouldn't be seen in that crappy plastic raincoat, the kind that folds up into a travel pouch. His Catholicism is rooted not in faith and hope, but in shame. Searching his apartment for a hidden bug, he rips everything apart, but hesitates at a statue of the Virgin Mary.

As pure thriller, the movie works best during a scene where Harry checks into a hotel room next door to a rendezvous between Mark and Ann. Listening through the wall, he hears a struggle and perhaps a murder. His

reaction is to hide in terror under the covers. Much later, when he enters the room, it's spick-and-span. But when he flushes the toilet, it overflows with bright red blood.

Much has been written about that scene. Is it real or imagined? The new DVD of "The Conversation" has commentary tracks by both Coppola and Walter Murch, the editor and sound wizard, but neither addresses that question. Coppola says the scene was suggested by the shower scene in "Psycho," and for Murch, the guilty evidence welling up reminds him of his adolescent shame when he tried to flush some porno magazines and they came floating back at just the wrong time. I think the scene is meant to be real. Later, the quick cuts of what might have happened in the room are, I think, Harry's speculations.

"The Conversation" comes from another time and place than today's thrillers, which are so often simple-minded. This movie is a sadly observant character study, about a man who has removed himself from life, thinks he can observe it dispassionately at an electronic remove, and finds that all of his barriers are worthless. The cinematography (opening scene by Haskell Wexler, the rest by Bill Butler) is deliberately planned from a voyeuristic point of view; we are always looking but imperfectly seeing. Here is a man who seeks the truth, and it always remains hidden. He plays the conversation over and over, but does Mark say, "He'd kill us if he had the chance," or "He'd kill us if he had the chance"?

Selected Filmography as Director

- **Distant Vision** (2016)
- **Twixt** (2011)
- **Tetro** (2009)
- **Youth Without Youth** (2007)
- **Un Matin partout dans le monde** (2000)
TV short
- **The Rainmaker** (1997)
- **Jack** (1996)
- **Bram Stoker's Dracula** (1992)
- **The Godfather: Part III** (1990)
- "Life Without Zoe" segment of **New York Stories** (1989)
- **Tucker: the Man and His Dream** (1988)
- **Gardens of Stone** (1987)
- **Peggy Sue Got Married** (1986)
- **Captain EO** (1986) short
- **The Cotton Club** (1984)
- **Rumble Fish** (1983)
- **The Outsiders** (1983)
- **One from the Heart** (1981)
- **Apocalypse Now** (1979)
- **The Godfather Saga** (1977) TV miniseries
- **The Godfather: Part II** (1974)
- **The Conversation** (1974)
- **The Godfather** (1972)
- **The Rain People** (1969)
- **Finian's Rainbow** (1968)
- **You're a Big Boy Now** (1966)
- **Dementia 13** (1963)
- **Tonight for Sure** (1962)
- **The Bellboy and the Playgirls** (1962)

The Conversation

Brenda Austin-Smith • April 2001

Article sourced from Senses of Cinema: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2001/cteq/conversation-2/>

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

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

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.