

THE CONVERSATION

Directed by Francis Ford Coppola
Produced by Francis Ford Coppola
Distributed by Paramount Pictures
Released in 1974

Harry Caul is an atypical screen protagonist, a shabbily attired brilliant loner who says little, lacks courage, and despite a strictly maintained, amoral dispassion about his work, feels guilty about its consequences. All through *The Conversation* he invests in the high technology that has brought him quiet fame while the people he shares a scintilla of his life with suffer his brutal silence and bitter scorn. Indeed, his is a life fully dedicated to the job, asking only for the privacy he so often denies others, now finally denied to him. Pitted against a two-faced enemy who cares even less about morality than Caul does, the fake-safe life he's built for himself gives way too fast for him to notice that his destruction was self-ordained.

Years of labor in a crumbling studio system were a boon to Francis Ford Coppola's career, but left him exasperated and guilt-ridden. Despite his many successes (including an Oscar for *Patton*) he still hungered to make intimate art-house cinema, and was afraid one day he would really sell out, no longer working with the Establishment, but becoming part of it. Struggling with the burdensome debt of his under-achieving production venture American Zoetrope, Coppola accepted the job of directing Paramount's *The Godfather*, initially conceived as a modest gangster film.

As a result, Coppola finally had the chance to make *The Conversation*. Flush with the profits generated by history's biggest box-office hit, the power was his to make whatever he chose: "I...want to make a film that tops [*The Godfather*] as a really moving human document. It's like some music I hear once in a while. I hear it and I think, 'Why can't I make a film that feels like that?' That's what I'm going to try to do."

Coppola wanted to make, in his words, a "Hitchcockian horror film" that went further than the thrillers of the past by focusing more on performance than design. A strong influence here was French director Henri-Georges Clouzot.

For material, Coppola returned to an idea that had been germinating in his mind since a 1966 conversation with director Irvin Kershner about surveillance. Kershner observed that a confidential matter is best discussed in a milling crowd. Slowly a story emerged dealing with the stinging conscience of a man long hidden by the anonymous reach of high technology; he must confront a sad legacy as he deals with the most demanding job of his career.

The first shot of the film reflects its artistic ambitions. High above Union Square, San Francisco, our perspective ever-so-slowly narrows on the denizens below, eventually finding Harry Caul and two unsettled objects of surveillance, much like the forced voyeurism inaugurating *Psycho*. In this scene Coppola tries a new approach to character delineation where instead of divulging background and traits, dropping clues as a playwright would, he relies on a single fragmented conversation in a busy lunchtime crowd. The director comments that movies "are all made the same way and the reason they're made the same way is because the

audiences want them that way. The films cost so much that to really veer from that way of telling a story you have to be independently wealthy to subsidize it."

The production budget was set for \$2 million, quite sufficient for a film with few special effects or big stars. However, the shoot was never smooth. Early on, cinematographer Haskell Wexler fought with Dean Tavoularis, the production designer. Coppola supported Tavoularis and Wexler had to leave. Bill Butler, who had worked on Coppola's *The Rain People*, stepped in behind the camera. Around the same time, actor Timothy Carey didn't work out and production was shut down until Alan Garfield could replace him in the role of big-talker Bernie Moran.

As shooting began to wind down, and with his thoughts turning to pre-production on *The Godfather Part II*, Coppola handed the project over to a brilliant young filmmaker, University of Southern California graduate Walter Murch. He was instructed to supervise the edit and handle the mix—make the big artistic decisions and the two of them would sort it out once Coppola could return to the project. It was a long one—shooting began in the fall of 1972 and the film wasn't released until April of 1974.

Walter Murch's incredible facility with sound can be observed many times over, haunting and perplexing the audience as tapes are played and overlaid throughout the film, with *The Conversation* the only source for the truth. Still, his most important contribution lay in a simple decision in the cutting room, delaying Caul's discovery of a critical exchange in the surveillance recording until after his first dealings with the enigmatic executive assistant played by Harrison Ford.

Composer David Shire was another crew member given atypical control. He began work on the film before it was shot, even attending a read-through of the script. Coppola gave him subjects to write on, each of which was only tangentially related to the film's story. Shire said, "He gave me these funny titles like, 'Harry Picks Up His Laundry'; 'Harry Goes to Thanksgiving Dinner at His Grandmother's'; 'Harry Goes to His High School Reunion.'

"So I wrote a bunch of pieces, and one of them had a melody in it which I kind of liked, and which Francis was intrigued by, and he said, 'Let's develop that some more.' And that became the theme for *The Conversation*."

The artistic success of this film (it secured the top prize at the Cannes Film Festival) is a direct result of the intense personal felling Coppola invested in the project. Like Harry Caul he was an electronics whiz who migrated to San Francisco. Coppola's childhood struggles with polio are voiced by the protagonist in a rare moment of self-revelation in the film. And the buried guilt of Roman Catholicism felt by the director is also given expression.

In every scene of the film, Harry Caul is there. We see the film entirely through his eyes and are granted no information apart from what he knows. As a result, distinguishing the facts from the fantasy can be rather difficult. For example, we never can really tell what happened in the hotel murder. First there is a premonition, then the murder (off-screen), followed by Harry's search of the room, and a later sequence where we see either what really happened, or what Harry assumes happened. As a result of these myriad perspectives on the crime, the audience is left strangely perplexed, especially on the initial viewing. And this is just how Harry feels—stunned and adrift.

Regarding the critical line of dialogue, "He'd kill us if he got the chance," are we hearing the tape or are we hearing Harry's impression of the tape? Does Mark ever emphasize the word 'us' at all? We never know; we are forced to identify with Harry—we sink or swim with him.

The Conversation supports many themes, many meanings. Harry Caul is a broken soul looking for love, expecting others to just give and give without expecting anything in return. With Amy he refuses to divulge any details of his life, despite her obvious affection for him. With Stan he will not share any of the technology he's developed, won't collaborate with his subordinate to make new equipment. He chastises him for a disappointing recording that Stan couldn't have made better just by monitoring more closely what each unit was picking up. Still, he wants Stan to obey his dictums, not asking any questions.

Caul, in addition to seeking love, also seeks a clear conscience. As best he can, he expunges the memory of the disastrous welfare-fund job, concurrently endeavoring to unravel the latest mess he finds himself in. He seeks to forestall further death and thus counteract the guilt he steadfastly denies. In the workshop party scene, with cages and opaque screens serving as visual reinforcement, Caul dismisses any moral culpability for past work. Similarly, in the church, as Caul struggles to discuss anything but the job that prompted his confession, the image blurs. This can be interpreted (in conjunction with the shift of Caul's voice) to mean that he never spoke of his fear, confusion, and guilt to the priest; we're hearing what he would say should he summon his courage and overcome his pathologically insular nature.

Returning to the inventive David Shire music, the composer was reluctant to embrace Coppola's concept of a piano-exclusive score. They arrived at a satisfying compromise, where the piano gradually becomes more distorted and processed as the conspiracy gathers speed and Caul finds he's in over his head. Tape-playback tricks in the style of musique concrete turn the piano notes into something otherworldly. In two scenes, a dream sequence and the hotel murder, these pseudo-synthetic elements are used to great effect, the first for atmosphere, the second for terror.

Shire uses approximately four motives throughout the score. Much of the music is based on semitone stepwise movement and dissonant diads from which notes spring away. The textures are thin and fluid—chords are often implied rather than objectively stated, and with the harmonies primarily modal or outright abstract, the music is elusive, intriguing. Depending on the scene, the same music can express boredom or danger. In dialogue scenes, Shire keeps the motion of the left-hand part going, inconspicuously, while the right hand waits for a lull in the exchange; it is smooth, unobtrusive scoring that hits the mark, perfectly capturing the emotions Harry locks away from others. And as Harry becomes more deeply involved in corporate intrigue and duplicity, the piano becomes distorted, filtered, far away.

The piano has something of a brittle sound and, played solo, it reflects Harry's lonely life. In addition, as he is a jazzman, it is an instrument with which he can readily identify.

A most unusual scoring situation occurs at the film's end. Harry, alone in his smashed apartment, plays his saxophone, and the music Shire brings in gives us a strange duet, a mixture of source and score of a type little heard in films before.

The concluding scenes of the film leave us with many unanswered questions. We know Mystery Corp. has a full dossier on Caul, and if they're able to unearth his telephone number, they likely possess the wherewithal to plant a bug as well. (If the landlady can get in, they probably can, too.) Yet, the idea of a conspiracy between Martin Stett and the murderous adulterers does not go far enough. To really tie the story together, William Moran, the jealous, arrogant, spiteful bugger, should help in this conspiracy to kill.

The key to understanding what happens at the film's end may come an hour earlier, at the surveillance convention. At one booth a disengaged man recites the advantages of the Spectre automatic recorder actuator. Caul seems pretty intrigued. He asks if it is anything like the Moran actuator. The Spectre man maintains that Moran copied him, and that he "won't even let him smell my equipment any more." Minutes later, in a fleeting aside to Paulie, the cop, Moran is more than intrigued—he claims they stole *his* invention. In Moran's demonstration at the convention, he states that the Moran S15 Harmonica Pack cannot be detected on the line because it has its own nickel-cadmium power source. (Indeed, at the film's conclusion, Caul finds nothing when he searches his phone.)

The difference between the two actuators is that the Spectre actuator only begins monitoring when the telephone receiver is lifted, shutting off once it is returned to the cradle, while the Moran actuator is triggered by a harmonica tone played in the course of dialing. Neither seems to fit the circumstances in which we find Caul at the film's conclusion. He answers the phone once, hangs up, responds to the next ringing, and hears a recording made seconds earlier. So is Spectre copying Moran, or is Moran appropriating a more advanced Spectre concept as his own, but keeping it off the market for his own surveillance use?

The key to duping Caul with the telephone is to not have any physical object in the phone. What they want is an electric signal sent through the phone line that engages the receiver even as it rests on the cradle. Thus, Stett could get his recording, while Caul is left helpless, finding nothing of evidence.

And that's it for Caul. As through a security camera panning back and forth, we witness the sorry end of this compelling story, the sad destruction of the apartment reflecting the inner unrest and devastation of the film's protagonist. He has been undone by the very beast he helped create, and we are left with the sad sense that one man's forever-threadbare life just unraveled to its end.