

## THE CONVERSATION

In 1972, it was revealed to the public that Republican President Richard M. Nixon paid his aides and others to spy on the Democrats over a period of two years. Nixon's shady dealings were exposed when his men were arrested trying to bug the offices of the Democratic National Committee. This political scandal came to be known, infamously, as Watergate.

When Francis Ford Coppola's film *The Conversation* came out in 1974, Watergate was very much on the public's mind, and the film is deeply embroiled in the political turmoil of the era. The film concerns Harry Caul (Gene Hackman), a famous surveillance expert who is hired by a mysterious executive to record a conversation between two young people. As the plot progresses, Caul begins to fear that the tape might be used to harm the young people, and he becomes stricken with guilt over the consequences of his work.

The film's concern with the dual issues of guilt and surveillance harkens back to the Watergate scandal. President Nixon wanted to use the surveillance to harm the political careers of his opponents; like Nixon, Caul's employer in the film (presumably) wanted to use the surveillance to harm the two young people. Nixon knew that, given the right type of surveillance, he could destroy not just the political careers of

his Democratic opponents, but their personal lives as well. *The Conversation* is a commentary on this moral negligence, this complete disregard for human rights. Coppola reveals Caul's guilt and explores the repercussions of his actions through a number of specific elements, ultimately providing a commentary on the moral failings of the era.

Harry Caul is a man whose life is devoted to his surveillance work; essentially, he spies on other people for money and is expected to not get involved, to see his work merely as a job, as something he should not take responsibility for. Because of his occupation, Caul has little personal life, has few friends beyond business associates, and trusts no one. His "girlfriend" is in fact just a woman he sleeps with every once in a while, a woman who knows absolutely nothing about his work, his past, or his private life. As a surveillance expert, Caul knows how easy it is to be spied on; consequently, he is paranoid that his own words may be recorded and he makes every effort to lead an anonymous, almost nonexistent, life. During an early scene in his apartment, Caul opens a birthday card while speaking on the telephone. Looking closely, one can see that the birthday card displays the number 44, indicating Caul's age. But later, when his girlfriend asks him how old he is, Caul states that he is 42. This discrepancy aids in building the air of mystery that surrounds the character. The audience is kept at a

distance from Caul at all times, prevented from identifying with him on a human level. Thus, Caul can be seen as akin to one of Nixon's cronies: distant, anonymous, simply doing the dirty work of a higher power.

To achieve this sense of distance, Coppola frequently utilizes the technique of the wide shots. Caul is often seen at a distance from the camera, rarely seen in close-up. One of the strongest examples of this technique occurs early in the film, when Harry returns to his apartment. He enters his apartment and eventually begins talking on the phone. The camera lingers at an unusual distance from Harry during this scene – his entire body is seen onscreen – and for a rather long period of time. This type of framing works in conjunction with the long takes Coppola employs throughout the film. Many shots are held for an unusually long amount of time, especially when compared to modern Hollywood standards. It's almost as if the audience is seeing Caul from the perspective of a surveillance camera (which is appropriate, given his line of work), allowing Coppola to set up the motif of distance and detachment that pervades the rest of the film.

Coppola subtly plays with this technique. During one sequence in particular, a scene in which Harry interacts with his girlfriend, Coppola begins to utilize more close-ups. As his girlfriend begins to ask Harry intimate questions, Coppola

brings the camera in closer, making the audience expect him to open up to her. Instead, he gives her succinct and unrevealing answers, thus reinforcing his emotional detachment. Coppola then returns to using longer shots, having just teased the audience into expecting variation and new revelation of Caul's character. Instead of revelation, his distance from the audience increases, and emotional attachment to the character becomes nearly impossible.

Coppola complicates things by using a dream sequence. This dream sequence is the culmination of everything the film implies about Harry's inner turmoil. The viewer is given the impression that the various sound clips that run throughout the film are playing through Caul's head, but the audience never directly sees or hears his thoughts. Approximately mid-way through the film, Caul falls asleep listening to the tape of the conversation. The ensuing dream sequence reveals the interior of his mind. The scene itself is shot like a typical, almost cliché cinematic dream sequence, replete with fog. In the dream, Caul is following the young woman whom he thinks is about to be murdered. He begins speaking to her about his past, about personal events in his childhood, marking the first time the audience learns anything about Caul beyond the formalities of his occupation and his reputation in the surveillance world. Harry Caul is desperate to communicate with someone, even if it

occurs only in a dream. Finally, Harry warns her that she may be in danger of being murdered, but – separated by both distance and fog – the woman apparently does not hear Harry's words, suggesting that Caul is not merely unwilling to communicate, but also incapable of doing so. It is very telling that the only time Caul allows himself to open up is in his dreams, the only time he fully knows he cannot be watched.

Coppola suggests that the only "person" Caul is capable of communicating with is God. Consequently, Catholic religious motifs pop up throughout the film. Scenes dealing with Caul's religious beliefs are perhaps the film's most revealing. In one scene, he goes to confession and makes explicitly clear his fears that the tape will be used to harm the two young people by telling a priest. In Catholic tradition, a priest is seen as a mediator between man and God, and in order for God to forgive one's sins, he or she must confess said sins to a priest. The irony of course is that Caul is an expert on surveillance, an expert on what one can see or hear. God is neither of those things; the only thing Caul fully trusts is something he himself cannot photograph or record, something he must take fully in faith. Not to mention of course that Caul is indeed speaking to the deity through the mediation of another human being.

Sound montage plays a crucial role in the film. Throughout the movie, bits and pieces of the recorded conversation are

played. The viewer is given the impression that these clips are running through Caul's head, and that the viewer is allowed to eavesdrop on Harry's thoughts, just as he, a surveillance expert, eavesdrops on others for a living. One specific soundbyte that occurs a number of times is when the man in the conversation says, "He'd kill us if he got the chance." This leads Harry to believe that the two young people are going to be murdered by the man who hired Caul to record the conversation. This repeated bit of sound is in effect the sound of Caul's guilty conscience, the sound of Harry being driven mad with guilt. Caul understands that his work may often be used to hurt others, but this is the first time he finds himself feeling guilty because of it. President Nixon argued that he was innocent of any involvement in the Watergate scandal; he even maintained his innocence up until and beyond his resignation, claiming that he resigned only because it would be too difficult to work with Congress following the scandal. Nixon apparently felt no guilt for his actions, possibly considering spying on one's opponents to be an act that "comes along with the territory" of being a politician; on the other hand, Caul eventually descends into near madness on account of his actions. *The Conversation* runs parallel to the actions of the government, reflecting and commenting on the inability, or unwillingness, of the powers that be to take responsibility for their actions.

But how is it possible that Nixon felt no guilt for his actions? The film provides no answer to this question, but it does provide some interesting queries of its own that help shed light on the Watergate situation.

Throughout *The Conversation*, Harry, as well as the audience, is led to believe that the director of the corporation is planning to use the tape as evidence to lend credence to the murder of the two young people. Harry comes to believe this simply by using his senses. When he hears the young man say "He'd kill us if he had the chance," Caul immediately begins to fear that the young people are in danger and the tape's purpose is to do them harm. At the end of the film, however, Coppola throws a twist to the audience. It turns out that Caul's employer did not hire Harry so that he could kill the two young people. The employer's assistant, in fact, used the tapes to help the young people murder the employer himself. The young man is not, in fact, saying "He'd kill us if he got the chance," but "He'd kill us if he got the chance," implying that the executive would kill them if the opportunity presented itself; they're simply doing it to him before he does it to them. Caul's misunderstanding of the phrase's use completely changes the meaning of the conversation, and indeed our understanding of the film. While Caul's surveillance work is flawless, his senses are not. He is successful at recording the conversation, but

unsuccessful at understanding it. Nixon, in his unwillingness to find fault in his actions, failed or refused to grasp the concept that the five senses possessed by human beings have their limitations. People often say one thing and mean another, and they often exaggerate or say things they don't mean. The sentence "He'd kill us if he got the chance" could possibly mean that 'he'd' literally kill them if 'he' got the chance, or it could simply be a hyperbolic statement used to express the extent of 'his' anger. Still yet, it could mean exactly what it turns out to mean in the film. The problem is that surveillance in and of itself is purely objective; it merely records what is being said or done. It is not until people listen to/view the surveillance and interpret it does a piece of surveillance evidence gain meaning. Even then, this alleged meaning is subject to human interpretation. Evidence cannot speak for itself. Only through human interpretation can it speak, and human interpretation has been, is, and always will be subject to the bias and prejudice of each individual. Even a president, esteemed though he is, is subject to this basic human characteristic. Nixon would have interpreted this surveillance in a way that met his needs and used it to crush his political opposition, regardless of the real meaning of the Democrats' words.

This scene throws into question only the reliability of

human senses and the ways people interpret the words of others. Pure surveillance is completely objective and without "meaning"; it is up to humans to assign it its meaning. But how can one be sure exactly how "pure" a piece of evidence is? *The Conversation* raises this question. During a scene in which Harry tries to collect the payment for his work, the assistant director is playing the tape for the director. When the tape ends, we do not hear the aforementioned phrase, suggesting that the assistant doctored the tape to dupe his boss into showing up at a specific hotel room, the very place where he is later murdered. This scene, along with the revelation of the director's murder at the film's conclusion, lends a sinister undertone to the film, showing how easily evidence can be manipulated. This is key to understanding the complexity of the Nixon situation.

A philosophy that is commonly taught throughout primary school is that if you are not guilty of doing or saying anything wrong, then it shouldn't matter if someone is watching or listening to you. This, of course, is a cheap ploy by teachers to explain to inquisitive students why they have to watch the children during recess, but it may lend some insight into Nixon's actions. It is possible that Nixon himself followed this philosophy. Why should the Democrats be worried about having their conversations recorded unless what they are saying is harmful or dangerous? If nothing bad is being said then no harm

is done, and a taped record of these words would not be incriminating. This is quite possibly how Nixon justified his actions. Yet, how can one justify this when tampering with this type of recording is so easy? Words can be taken out of context and bits and pieces of sentences can be pasted together with such ease that having a record of a political enemies words becomes arbitrary: it matters not what they actually say when it's so easy to copy and paste their words so that you essentially speak for them. Nixon apparently expected the nation to believe that his involvement in the Watergate scandal was purely altruistic; to make sure the Commies hadn't infiltrated the government, or some other "patriotic" line of thinking. Nixon was looking out for the country's interests, not his own political interests.

Near the end of the film, Harry begins to believe he is being watched. He begins tearing up his apartment trying to find the hidden camera or microphone. Nothing is left undamaged — until, that is, Harry comes to his icon of the Virgin Mary. He picks it up, as if to break it, and then returns it to his shelf. Apparently, Caul would feel too guilty about breaking a representation of so holy a figure and refrains himself from doing so. Eventually, his paranoia wins out over his guilt and he demolishes the icon, hoping to find a microphone planted inside. Instead, he finds nothing. Harry Caul is a man whose

state of desperation is so great that he is willing to forsake even what he finds reverent and holy in order to help placate his paranoia. Harry Caul is the result of the Nixon administration's shady dealings. This, Coppola suggests, is what happens when a person or a society allows fear and paranoia to control their lives. Having been released near the very end of the Vietnam War, when American troops were being pulled out of the country having failed to stop the spread of Communism, *The Conversation* reflects a more widespread sense of guilt. The American public felt an overwhelming sense of grief knowing that their inability to stop the war led to the deaths of thousands of young Americans and millions of Southeast Asians. The American people allowed morally bankrupt leaders such as Nixon to openly deceive the public. Perhaps the two young people can be seen to represent the treacherous government, and the executive the American soldiers duped into giving their lives for an unnecessary cause. If this is the case, then Caul represents the American people. He is the American public, hands bloodied, guilty for failing to prevent the powerful from having free reign to do as they please, willing to forsake what they know is right at the behest of corrupt leaders and businessmen. This guilt stems not just from action, but also from inaction, the failure to perceive the truth of the situation. As such, *The Conversation* is a commentary on the political and social

dynamics of the era.

It is perhaps fitting to know that a year after the film was released, President Gerald Ford granted Nixon a full pardon for his crimes, continuing the cycle of moral neglect and lack of guilt that has continued in the political arena to this very day.