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## Overheard and Misheard: The Paranoid Unreliable Narrator of The Conversation

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Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* hit theaters in 1974 at the climax of the Watergate crisis among mounting distrust of authority and the emergence of surveillance technologies that would render personal privacy a thing of the past. But rather than portraying a tale of epic political espionage, *The Conversation* is a character study of an individual consumed by his fear of the death of privacy. Each of the film's major formal elements ultimately seek to trap the audience in the world of Harry Caul: the paranoia, the desperate need for privacy, the isolation. Through careful sound and visual design, the film keeps its audience at the level of its characters and implicates them in the fear that pushes the protagonist to overturn his life.

As a film about audio surveillance, special attention was given to *The Conversation's* sound design. Sound designer Walter Murch worked on such projects as *The*



*Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), and received a double Oscar in Editing and Sound for *The English Patient* (Anthony Minghella, 1996). Part of what makes *The Conversation's* sound so compelling is the use of what one might call “metaphoric sound” (Greene). To create the effect of the audience experiencing the world through Harry Caul's eyes

and ears, Murch injects ambiguity into what the audience can hear. An example of this is in the hotel murder scene, where Caul sets up surveillance in an adjoining room, able only to hear what's happening next door. The buildup to the murder is quiet and tense as Caul worries about what's about to happen. He overhears his tape being played, and the consequences of his

recordings come crashing down when he hears a scream and rushes to the balcony to see a bloody hand on the frosted glass dividing the rooms. Music rushes in and creates instant panic and horror as the loudest sound in the whole scene. The murder is only heard, not seen, and the crucial information that Caul is missing by not seeing is shared by the audience. Caul's eventual realization of the reality of the couple's intentions is cleverly simulated with a manipulation of



the recording of the titular conversation. During the shoot, it was initially recorded with radio mics, but due to interference, Fred Forrest and Cindy Williams had to do ADR for the conversation in three separate takes. On the third

take, Forrest gave a different delivery of the line "He'd kill us if he had the chance," emphasizing the word "us" instead of "kill." Much later in production, Murch realized that this alternate reading of the line completely changes the nature of the conversation from a couple fearing for their lives to one that was planning their own murder. Throughout the film, Harry Caul's obsessive re-listens and re-edits of the tapes use one of the initial takes as he convinces himself that the couple is in danger. It is only when he discovers that The Director is the one that has been killed that the alternate take is used to show that he had misunderstood the entire situation all along. There is no dramatic irony; the audience has no way of knowing before Harry does, and is kept firmly in the shoes of an unreliable narrator. This ambiguous, metaphorical sound design, in turn, lends itself to make the audience "intimately aware of the emotional states of the characters" (Greene).

If sound traps the audience in Caul's head, the film's visuals show them the world he's

experiencing. The settings in the film are bleak, corporate, and impersonal, much like how Harry Caul is trying to justify the moral ambiguity of his profession as “just doing his job”. Scenes are often shot from a separate room, framed by walls and doorways, looking in to the space of the characters as if the audience were themselves performing surveillance on them. This voyeuristic effect adds a subtle credibility to the intense paranoia experienced by the protagonist. It feels like Caul is being watched because he is, as the subject of a film.

Much as the sound is used to abstractly reflect the experience of Harry Caul, much of the imagery in the film similarly signals his mental state. As the genuine danger of Caul’s situation ramps up, his paranoia goes from unhealthy to potentially psyche-destroying. In his dream sequence, the world is obscured entirely in mist as



he chases the woman he thinks is about to be killed as a result of his actions. He talks candidly about his past and his feelings as this dream becomes a release valve for his pent-up emotional struggles. But he’s never lived in this space before, and the mist literally clouds what Harry is attempting to judge. In his desperation to address his guilt, he is unable to see the big picture. Shortly after, the aforementioned hotel scene’s horrific imagery is a realization of all of Harry’s paranoia as genuine fears. A bloody handprint on the glass and a toilet overflowing with blood are strangely over-the-top images for a film of this tone, and yet it matches the internal cataclysm that the protagonist goes through in this moment. The guilt and fear that Caul had pushed down and clogged for so long is bubbling up, and he is not equipped to handle it as a “failure to come to terms with the enigma of the world that surrounds him and the moral implications of his

actions in this world” (Patzig). In the aftermath of the film, Harry plays his saxophone, one of the few ways he can self-express, when he gets a call playing back a recording of what he had just played. With such an intimate part of his life violated and his obsessive vigilance turning out to be fruitless, Caul rips apart his apartment, removing furniture and personal effects, even pulling up his floorboards in a hysterical search for the bug. Unable to find this invasion of his much-valued privacy, Harry plays the film out on chilling strains from his horn as the camera pans back and forth like a closed-circuit security camera.

Harry Caul is very much an extreme extension of the distrust the filmmakers saw arising



in American society in the 1970s. Rather than portraying some grand political espionage, *The Conversation* works more as a “general statement about the state of the individual in a complex, postmodern society. Through the study of Caul's

character, it captures the atmosphere of insecurity in 1970s' America in the face of not just one scandal but rather a fundamental decline of confidence in authorities” (Vaidhyanathan). While fear and paranoia waxes and wanes with the scandals of an era, the issues that cause them don't go away. Among the mounting privacy concerns of the Information Age, the prescient fears portrayed in this film are now more relevant than ever.

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