

## The Conversation [12A]

1974 USA 113 mins

UK re-release **5 July 2024**

Director **Francis Ford Coppola**

Screenplay **Francis Ford Coppola**

Cinematography **Bill Butler; Haskell Wexler**

Music **David Shire**

Cast **Gene Hackman** (Harry R. Caul); **John Cazale** (Stanley "Stan" Ross); **Allen Garfield** (William P. "Bernie" Moran); **Cindy Williams** (Ann); **Frederic Forrest** (Mark); **Harrison Ford** (Martin Stett); **Teri Garr** (Amy Fredericks); **Robert Duvall** (The Director)

The Conversation is one of Francis Ford Coppola's masterpieces. Coppola, most recognised and appreciated for The Godfather parts I and II alongside Apocalypse Now, has a largely underrated back catalogue of which The Conversation is near the top. Released amid what many consider to be Coppola's prime, The Conversation is timely, bleak and brilliantly captured. There are few better times to return to this '70s classic, with this year marking its 50th anniversary alongside the upcoming release of Coppola's new film Megalopolis. Coppola's style has changed drastically throughout his career, seeing him create perhaps the darkest war film of all time as well as a family comedy starring Robin Williams, but The Conversation is an intense, taut neo-noir thriller.

Its lead character Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) is a surveillance expert who is asked to record a young couple who, at first sight, seem to be having an affair together. When Caul tries to deliver his tape of the couple's public conversation, Caul is rattled and decides to keep the tapes. He becomes increasingly paranoid about surveillance and obsesses about the true meaning of some of the more cryptic moments in the titular conversation. Coppola's film is less focused on plot events than it is on creating atmosphere. The film's pacing is slow and, to some, may feel meandering.

Beneath that is a constantly bubbling tension. Hackman's performance, which is one of the absolute finest of his incredible career, is subdued and understated throughout, but his quiet communication of Caul's fear and obsession is fantastic. It's a very restrained performance in a film that, typically, would employ a much louder, showy performance to communicate such intense emotions.

Fitting in with the late '60s and early '70s trend within American cinema of portraying fears regarding abuse of power, information, technology and surveillance, *The Conversation* also fits well with the likes of *Seconds* (1966) and *Medium Cool* (1969). In fact, *Medium Cool* director Haskell Wexler is one of two cinematographers here, capturing an urban America that is sanitised, lifeless and uneasy. There is no peace or privacy other than within the extreme loneliness of Harry Caul. All else is noisy, eerie and dangerous. The jagged sound design, from the loneliness of the score to the discordant, abrasive jolts in the soundscape, helps to further place the viewer in Caul's deeply uncomfortable, paranoid mindset. It enhances the atmosphere of Coppola's film tenfold, clicking into place alongside great set design, eerily slow pacing and Hackman's subtle but staggering performance. *The Conversation*, at 50 years old, remains an enduring and challenging film. It is incredibly dark and deeply uncomfortable with its reflections on intensifying surveillance and a lack of trust in others. Steadily building towards a great climactic reveal, *The Conversation*'s ending is chilling — a perfect summary of its core theme of surveillance and (perhaps necessary) paranoia.

**Reece Beckett**, *Filmhounds*, July 2024 (abridged)

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Monday 30<sup>th</sup> September: *Paradise is Burning* (15)

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