"Hushed to a Whisper":
Of Veiled Device and Strained
Connection in Francis Coppola's
The Conversation.

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Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of *The Conversation*, a film directed by Francis Coppola and released by Paramount Pictures in 1974. The central theme underpinning this study is that a pattern of "unnatural connections" is evident both in and within the text itself and in the sphere of critical judgements contributing to issues of potential audience responses. The notion of "unnatural connection" is discussed in relation to the following terms, each crucial to a complete understanding of the text: authorial intentionality, in particular the relationship to creative collaboration, questions of mode and genre, tragedy and technology, issues of detection, and dilemmas of the existential. The thesis concludes with a speculative commentary on notions of disorientation, disciplinary apparatus, inversion, and spectator positioning.

"Paranoia is nothing less than the onset, the leading edge of the discovery that *everything is connected,* everything in Creation, a secondary illumination."

THOMAS PYNCHON - *Gravity's Rainbow.*

"*The Conversation* was very ambitious, and I hung in there not because it was going right, but because I couldn't accept within myself that I couldn't succeed in doing it."

FRANCIS COPPOLA

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This is the bit where help is acknowledged but that it is also acknowledged that any and all errors and misjudgements contained herein are entirely my own. I acknowledge also that at several points within this study there is, by way of quotation, the use of seemingly sexist language. Except where a reference to the male gender is specifically noted, readers should otherwise consider "man" as a reference to the more general, "humanity"—no gender bias is intended.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In the contemporary arena, the entertainment industry is of course much concerned with matters of market research and evaluations regarding the definition of "audience tastes." Depending on how one defines such terms, *The Conversation* (1974, Coppola, USA) may be neither an "accessible" nor "entertaining" film. This 'little film', itself heavily influenced by an earlier work, *Blow Up* (1966, Antonioni, UK/Italy) has, however, left its mark on cinematic history.

The Conversation has prompted two American-produced remakes, both of which remained quite faithful to the original: Brian De Palma's *Blow Out* (1981), starring John Travolta, and the more recent *Enemy of The State* (Scott, 1998). The latter film shows actor Gene Hackman reprising his role as "Harry," a surveillance expert. Indeed, a direct intertextual referencing also exists where, at a point mid-way through that film, "Harry", having partnered with the central protagonist (played by Will Smith), gives a summary of his background and is seen to produce a slide image of a photograph of himself as a younger man. The photograph is recognizably (for those of course who are familiar with the antecedent text) an image of "Harry Caul," the protagonist of *The Conversation.*

The Coppola film received accolades from its peers on its release in 1974; it won the *Palme d'Or* at Cannes, was nominated for an Academy Award, and was named Best Film by the National Board of Review for that year—a deserving work indeed and a film whose influence has continued to be heard in subsequent films. An example of such influence occurs in the early stages of the film *The Game* (1997, Fincher, USA), where there is a sequence that is a direct quotation and repetition of the 'plastic Madonna' sequence of *The Conversation*. This is the scene where Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) destroys a plastic miniature statue of the Madonna in a desperate search for a hidden microphone towards the conclusion of the film.

These preliminary remarks, which attempt to connect the film to contemporary times or texts, are intended to indicate a limit to my study. This study has, moreover, gone to some lengths to situate its points of analysis within historically specific contexts.

I am compelled to apologize for the "old-fashionedness" of some of the paradigms that underpin my methodology. I further believe that a separate study is warranted to incorporate some of the points of epistemological concern that are raised in *The Conversation* into an analysis of today's so-called "surveillance society".

This study is however concerned with acting as a corrective to the hyperbole some critics resort to in according Director Francis Coppola a myriad of seemingly supernatural powers for the ability to 'craft' such a work. Furthermore, it appears to me that inadequate contextualization has been attempted along several points of enquiry (each of which I will detail in their respective chapters). While I do not doubt Coppola's talents, I believe there are useful lines of analysis concerned with exploring what I term 'connections'. Given that I will also incorporate notions of 'device', these terms demand some preliminary explanation: I am using the former to suggest both relationships and interrelationships which shall incorporate a peculiarly cinematic and/or "psychic" aspect; and with regard to the latter, 'device' shall alternatively refer to actual machinery as such, and also to human activity or 'technique'.

With regard to considerations of technique as applied to the activity of filmmakers, I am indebted to Kristin Thompson's *Breaking the Glass Armor* (1988). This work, whilst not to a large extent informing my methodology on this occasion, did indeed introduce me to the notion of 'device' as regards the formalist analysis of film. With these preliminaries addressed, Chapter Two reviews the relevant critical literature. *The Conversation* exemplifies what is commonly known as 'auteur cinema'. Guided by Sarris's *Notes on the Auteur Theory* (1962), I argue that such evaluations commonly place an emphasis on the Director's "personal vision".

The Chapter is prefaced with a brief historical overview of Sarris's 'auteur theory' by way of providing both explication and context. Unsurprisingly, the bulk of the available critical literature concerning *The Conversation* betrays an 'auteurist' bias in the Sarrisean mode. My purpose is to critique that material. I shall also introduce to readers the best work: Peter Cowie's *Coppola* (1989).

Chapter Three discusses the issue of authorship and shall stand as a corrective to classical notions of auteurism by inflecting its discussion with the so-called 'new auteurism'. In this respect, I have been influenced by Frank Burke's *Fellini's Films* (1996) and Timothy Corrigan's work, *A Cinema Without Walls* (1991). However it is John Caughie's notion of "impurity" (which I translate as being by way of a 'strained connection') that informs my analysis to the greatest extent (*Theories of Authorship*). The guiding principle of this Chapter is that an act of authorship is predicated on an *intentionality*, which, in the reception of a text, need not predicate a *centrality* of either that act or subsequent creative acts or processes to the film's meaning.

Chapter Four deals with issues of culture and genre. In this chapter I examine the historical origins of what may be termed the 'investigatory' approach as providing the drive or basis for generic categorization: in particular the myth of Oedipus and the phenomenon of classical Greek tragedy come under scrutiny. I am indebted to the excellent work of Jon Tuska, whose *Dark Cinema* is an inspiration. I further discuss the influence of *Film Noir*, and in particular its relation to Existentialism. The Chapter concludes with a discussion of *The Conversation* and its relation to John Cawelti's notion of generic transformation ("Chinatown and Generic Transformation...").

Chapter Five, "A Reading," sets out to provide commentary on potentialities regarding textual motifs and metaphors with an ensuing discussion focused on notions of technology and audience mood or "affect". Included is a reading of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) in the interests of providing a kind of cinematic underpinning in terms of likely influence. Some of the features discussed are the notion of turning or disorientation, metaphoric associations to object correlative, disciplinary technologies, the inversion of the Panoptic, the influence of so-called "paranoid culture" of 1950s America, and issues concerning control and centrality.

The sixth and final chapter attempts to bring together my argument in what has proven to be a study which I compare to walking a "tight-rope". This is perhaps to be expected when one embarks on a project with a stated aim of providing notions of 'balance' and 'contextualization'. My analysis concludes on a note inflected both with caution and optimism.