

The Conversation

By Peter Keough

"The B List: The National Society of Film Critics on the Low-Budget Beauties, Genre-Bending Mavericks, and Cult Classics We Love"

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How does "The Conversation" qualify as a B movie? Traditionally, the term B movie refers to those cheap, readily accessible, generally lurid exploitation films from pulpy genres designed to fill the second billing for the main feature. "The Conversation," meanwhile, defies genre, frustrates narrative expectations, and challenges and sometimes alienates viewers. It is subtle, complex, stark, fuguelike, self-conscious, and utterly ambitious. It was, however, cheap, or at least it was initially. Otherwise, it would seem to be the opposite of a B movie.

Francis Ford Coppola would be the one to know, having spent the first three years or so of his career making B movies, getting his first directorial credits with films like the German-produced "The Bellboy and the Playgirls" (perhaps it sounds better in German: *Mit Eva fing die Sünde an*), made in 3-D in 1962 ("In COLOR plus the new depth perception ... it puts the girls right in your lap!"), and the legendary "Dementia 13" for Roger Corman in 1963.

But in 1972, when "The Conversation" went into production, Francis Ford Coppola was the most powerful filmmaker in Hollywood. "The Godfather" was making more money than any picture since "Gone With the Wind" and had won three Oscars, including one for best picture. The film's success intoxicated Coppola with dreams of artistic grandeur, but the process of making it had struck him as frustrating and demeaning. Making a big-budget film for a mass audience, adapting another writer's best-selling potboiler, working under the neurotic oversight of an oppressive corporate studio like Paramount — this did not fulfill his dream of being an auteur. "The Godfather" ranked number two, just below the perennial "Citizen Kane," on the American Film Institute's list of the one hundred greatest Hollywood movies of all time — was not exactly a B movie, but it was a kind of work for hire, perhaps an immensely more successful "Finian's Rainbow." But it did allow Coppola to make a film worthy of his talent and artistic vision — a film like "The Conversation."

That probably wasn't how Paramount regarded "The Conversation," however. For them it was a necessary



*Gene Hackman, Cindy Williams and Frederic Forrest
Courtesy Library of Congress*

investment (budgeted at around \$1 million) to placate their genius director and make sure he followed through with the sequel to the astoundingly lucrative "Godfather." In a sense, "The Conversation" was a new kind of B picture, one that would catch on in subsequent decades: a cheaply made auteurist indulgence made to stroke a talented, independent-minded director's ego in the gap between genuine money-making features.

This new kind of B picture, then, was an intensely personal expression of the filmmaker's soul. As such, it would include homages, in this case to Michelangelo Antonioni's "Blow Up," which Coppola acknowledges as an inspiration. Despite that pervasive influence (one scene in particular is a dishearteningly direct rip-off), "The Conversation," certainly when seen in retrospect and in the context of Coppola's subsequent career, is so personal as to be almost solipsistically self-reflexive.

It starts with a technical tour de force by the filmmaker that also depicts the technical tour de force being performed by the film's protagonist. Harry Caul (played with nuanced nerdiness by Gene Hackman), the best undercover surveillance expert on the West Coast, has taken on the seemingly impossible assignment of recording the conversation of a couple walking around San Francisco's Union Square during a crowded lunch hour. Caul's method of solving the problem unreels in the film's first eight minutes; more important, though, this sequence demonstrates Coppola's own expertise in recording Caul's pro-

ject, a logistics challenge requiring six cameras, four camera crews, and piles of sound equipment (good-bye budget, and good-bye also cinematographer Haskell Wexler).

A long, excruciatingly slow crane shot, calling to mind similar bravura shots by Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, Robert Altman, and, of course, Antonioni, descends into the square, focusing finally on hangdog Caul in his perpetual plastic raincoat being trailed and imitated by an obnoxious mime. Cuts disclose an agent aiming what looks like a sniper rifle, the crosshairs finding the targeted couple. It's a shotgun mike, and with that and Caul's other eavesdropping devices — a guy with a mike in a shopping bag and another long-distance recorder in a hotel window — the surveillance team picks up random sonic squiggles, snatches of a band playing "When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin' Along," and non-sequitur bits of seemingly inane dialogue. These spill into a bewildering audio collage, a puzzle that Caul, and the audience, must piece together.

And, presumably, Coppola also. At this point a lot of the script was up in the air and, like Caul, Coppola was faced with a bunch of tantalizing leads and disconnected directions that eluded final form. When Caul returns to his cavernous Zoetrope-like factory-floor office and runs his recordings through a bank of reel-to-reels trying to orchestrate them into a coherent transcript, it probably echoes similar efforts by Coppola, or likely "sound designer" Walter Murch, doing the same in the editing room with the movie. As Caul obsessively repeats bits of the conversation over and over again, together with flashbacks to the actual scene, the pieces cohere into a narrative, one drawing Caul, against his better judgment, more and more into an emotional involvement with his subject. For Caul is happy being a gun for hire. He doesn't want to know what the conversation is about, or who the couple conducting are, or what the motives are of the mysterious businessmen who are paying him well to get the work done. He wants his satisfaction to be limited to technical prowess — the finesse, ingenuity, and panache with which he fulfills the task given him, however daunting.

Caul, then, is a threadbare version of Coppola himself. A brilliant cinematic technician, able to pull off the seem-

ingly impossible task of taking on a trashy best seller, overwhelming egos ranging from Marlon Brando to Robert Evans; and the innumerable practical, moral, and aesthetic decisions, challenges obstacles, and booby traps of a major studio production; and turning them into a box-office gold mine, and, incidentally, a revered work of art. The secret, apparently, is not to think too much about it, just apply oneself to the job at hand.

Sound advice, but it ultimately fails Caul, and Coppola as well. As Caul's preoccupation with detail and secrecy and his fetishistic sexual nature (the shot of him in bed still in his raincoat embracing Teri Garr wearing white socks has to be the saddest love scene in movies) indicate, Caul's an obsessive-compulsive with a guilty streak as big as Union Square. Certain moments in the conversation — the man's plaintive "he'd kill us if he had a chance," the woman reflecting "he was once somebody's baby boy" while gazing at a wino lying on a bench who bears more than a passing resemblance to Caul himself — unnerve him. They remind him of another assignment in which he astounded his peers by his solution to a daunting challenge and where he didn't question who he was doing it for or why and, well, what happened afterwards wasn't Harry's fault.

But, true professional that he is, Harry takes his finished tape to his client, and for truly professional reasons, refuses to hand them over because the conditions of the contract were not being exactly filled. And then he refuses because his conscience and his interpretation of the narrative presented by the tapes refuse to allow him to. And then it's too late, and Caul is left in futile search of the heart of darkness in the solitude of his stark apartment, a microcosm of the green vastness in which Coppola would lose himself in his ultimate B-movie, "Apocalypse Now."

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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