



RE-RELEASES

The Conversation

The Conversation

Directed by: Francis Ford Coppola
©: Paramount Pictures Corporation
Presented by: Directors Company
Production Company: Coppola Company
Produced by: Francis Ford Coppola
Co-producer: Fred Roos
Associate Producer: Mona Skager
Production Manager: Clark Paylow
Administrative Assistants:
Randy Carter, Mona Houghton
Location Co-ordinator: Alex Tavoularis
Production Secretary: Pat Smith
Assistant Director: Chuck Myers
Script Supervisor: Nancy Toney
Casting: Jennifer Shull
Written by: Francis Ford Coppola
Director of Photography: Bill Butler
Director of Photography: Haskell Wexler *
Camera Operator: Ralph Gerling
Assistant Cameraman: Jim Glennon
Gaffers: Joe Dunnigan, Doug Finn
Key Grip: Keith Mason
Supervising Editor: Walter Murch
Editor: Richard Chew
Assistant Editor: Julie Zale
Production Designer: Dean Tavoularis
Set Decoration: Doug Von Koss
Property Master: Ted Moehnke
Costumer: Aggie Guerard Rodgers
Titles by: Wayne Fitzgerald
Music: David Shire
Production Recording: Art Rochester,
Nat Boxer, Mike Evje
Sound Montage/Re-recording: Walter Murch
Technical Advisers: Hal Lipset, Leo Jones,
Jim Bloom
Cast:
Gene Hackman (*Harry Caul*)
John Cazale (*Stan*)
Allen Garfield (*Bernie Moran*)
Frederic Forrest (*Mark*)
Cindy Williams (*Ann*)
Michael Higgins (*Paul*)
Elizabeth MacRae (*Meredith*)
Teri Garr (*Amy Fredericks*)
Harrison Ford (*Martin Stett*)
Mark Wheeler (*receptionist*)
Robert Shields (*the mime*)
Phoebe Alexander (*Lurleen*)
Robert Duvall (*the director*) *
Gio Coppola (*boy leaving confessional*) *
Richard Hackman (*confessional priest/bodyguard*) *
Al Nalbandian (*1st salesman at convention*) *
USA 1974©
114 mins
Digital 4K

* Uncredited

A Studiocanal release

The screening on Wed 10 July 18:20 features a Q&A with film editor and sound designer Walter Murch

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

I had been terrified by the whole Orwellian dimension of electronic spying and the invasion of privacy when I started *The Conversation*. I realised that a bugging expert was a special breed of man, not just a private eye playing with far-out gadgets, and I thought it would be fascinating to get inside the mind and experience of such a man. It's just a curious, not a prescient, coincidence that the picture should finally surface, so to speak, at the same time as the Watergate affair.

Francis Ford Coppola, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1973

In April 1974 when Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* opened and Gene Hackman's Harry Caul shuffled on to US screens wearing his perpetual plastic raincoat and his perpetual peevish frown, there had not yet been much evidence that this would be a particularly unusual year. Notable things happened – in February, Bruce Balick and Robert L. Brown identified Sagittarius A*, now known to be the super-massive black hole at the centre of our galaxy, and, in an imprecisely analogous development, John Boorman released *Zardoz*.

Conversely, the year's brightest box-office star, *Blazing Saddles*, had also already premiered at a drive-in in Burbank, which 250 invitees, including the principal cast, attended on horseback as an absurdist marketing gimmick. Psychopath Ted Bundy was amping up his killing spree across Washington and Oregon, as Lucille Ball was winding down her 23-year span of TV domination with the cancellation of *Here's Lucy*. Then, in March, seven former presidential aides were charged with conspiring in the bungled 1972 burglary of the Watergate Hotel, which one prosecutor later described as 'a Marx Brothers routine'. So sure, there had been first-quarter highs and lows in America, but not so many as to be unprecedented.

The Conversation would hardly change that, making a modest return on its modest budget. Far healthier were the receipts for *The Great Gatsby*, for which Coppola had written the screenplay back when he'd needed the money, before *The Godfather* (1972) became the highest-grossing film of all time and made him the Don of New Hollywood. Indeed, despite receiving the top prize in Cannes, *The Conversation* wasn't even the most impactful Coppola-directed movie of 1974, which was December's Oscar-winning *The Godfather Part II* (making Coppola the only filmmaker to win the Palme d'Or and Best Picture, for two different films from the same year.)

Even as one half of a staggering twofor, *The Conversation* is not unique; 1974 was positively lousy with double-ups, by Mel Brooks, Robert Altman, Sidney Lumet, Richard Fleischer and *Superfly* director Gordon Parks Jr. And other now canonised classics came in thick and fast, in all genres, at all budget levels. Spielberg, Demme, Cimino and Carpenter made their theatrical debuts; Polanski, Tobe Hooper, Scorsese, Peckinpah, Fosse, Bogdanovich, Pakula and Johns Waters and Cassavetes all made emphatic directorial statements. It was a Cambrian explosion of American filmmaking – but one that occurred maybe one day before the cataclysmic meteor strike that was 1975's *Jaws*, which as the first-ever summer blockbuster would irrevocably alter the trajectory of American cinema. No knock on *Jaws* – still and always greatness – but it is poignant to consider that even as Jake was forgetting about

NEW RELEASES

The Beast La Bête

From Fri 7 Jun

I Used to Be Funny

From Fri 14 Jun

Àma Gloria

From Fri 14 Jun

Green Border Zielona granica

From Fri 21 Jun

Bye Bye Tiberias Bye Bye Tibériade

From Fri 28 Jun + Q&A on Fri 28 Jun 18:00

Sleep Jam

From Fri 12 Jul

About Dry Grasses Kuru Otlar Üstüne

From Fri 26 Jul

RE-RELEASES

Rome, Open City Roma città aperta

Continues from 17 May

The Matrix (25th anniversary)

From 7 June

The Small Back Room

From 7 June

Network

From Fri 28 Jun

The Conversation

From Fri 5 Jul

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine.

Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk

SIGHT AND SOUND

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

Chinatown, Mabel was emerging from under the influence, and Leatherface was waving his chainsaw against a Texas sky, the shark was already in the water.

Nobody knew that then, any more than Coppola knew Nixon would resign, tripped up in his lies by tech that was eerily mirrored in *The Conversation*, a surveillance thriller concerned with the unknowability of absolute truth as recorded, and partially occluded, on magnetic tape. It was prescient indeed, but then so were the same year's *The Parallax View* and 1975's *Three Days of the Condor*, in terms of tapping into the pervasively paranoid Watergate zeitgeist.

What *The Conversation* has over its brethren is its beautiful banality. *Parallax* and *Condor* are fun, nervy panic attacks, but they're glamorous in a way *The Conversation* never is. They feature presidential candidates, dogged journalists and CIA operatives; and however ostensibly gritty their outlook, their stars wouldn't have been caught dead in Harry Caul's plastic mac, or with Harry Caul's professional primness or under the hotel bed covers that Harry Caul hides in when scared. Hackman, very likely the greatest American screen actor of his time, capable of titanic charm, gives his own favourite performance as a man with no discernible charisma, who gets pranked by a competitor, ripped off by a prostitute and has the supposedly unimpeachable security of his apartment breached and breached again. Even when Harry kisses the girlfriend (Teri Garr) whose rent he pays, he does it with the stiff lips of the terminally repressed, his rustling mac repelling intimacy as surely as it repels rain.

'When the new hybrid film is at its best,' wrote critic Manny Farber at the time '...there is the sense of the plot being off frame, happening next door.' This is literalised in *The Conversation*, in which Harry, by virtue of his job and personality (which are the same thing), is always somewhere other than the action, and it's emblematic of a mode of subtle, ambivalent, grown-up filmmaking that was about to get eaten by a great white. In *Jaws*, we are almost always in the room, or on the beach, or in the cabin where the plot is happening.

The post-Watergate, post-Vietnam era is often characterised as a time of national loss of innocence, national wising up. But at the movies, the reverse process occurred. Audiences after *Jaws* were encouraged to skew younger, more naïve, to be more easily contented with spectacular but simplistic narratives that perplex nobody and provoke nothing. I apologise if I romanticise 1974 until it's unidentifiable to those who lived through it. But prelapsarian nostalgia inevitably sets in when one recognises the year – and *The Conversation* – as the high watermark of a long-vanished period, when general movie audiences were imagined to be adults.

Jessica Kiang, *Sight and Sound*, May 2024