

The Conversation Film Summary

The Conversation by Francis Ford Coppola

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Conversation Film Summary.....	1
Contents.....	2
Context.....	3
Summary and Analysis.....	4
Characters.....	9
Themes.....	14
Style and Cinematography.....	16
Motifs.....	17
Symbols.....	19
Essay Questions.....	21

Context

The Conversation delves into the world of private security and privacy issues. Harry Caul is a securities expert who is hired by the Director to tape a private conversation in the middle of a busy square. Harry successfully tapes the conversation but is terrified when he believes that the Director plans to kill the young couple. Since the Director isn't available, Harry refuses to turn over the tapes, and this begins a new series of events.

Harry finds that he is being followed by Martin Stett, a man working for the Director. Finally, they send a woman to seduce Harry and steal the tapes. Afterward, Harry tries to confront the Director and even goes to a hotel to try to stop the murders he believes will happen. Finally, Harry discovers the truth behind the conversation, and he is warned by Martin that they will be watching him. Harry tries to find bugs in his apartment and by the end of the movie he seems to have lost his sanity.

One of Francis Ford Coppola's first films that he directed, rather than produced, was *The Godfather* (1971), which became one of the highest grossing films in theater history. With a Best Director nomination, an Oscar for writing the screenplay, and an Oscar for Best Picture, Coppola had made his name in the industry. Coppola also directed the other films in *The Godfather* series (1972), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *One From the Heart* (1982), *Jack* (1996), and *The Rainmaker* (1997).

One of Gene Hackman's first major roles that skyrocketed him to success: He was nominated for the Best Supporting Actor Award for the role of Buck Barrow in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). *I Never Sang For My Father* (1970) and *The French Connection* (1971) were also major successes for Hackman before *The Conversation*. Hackman has also appeared in such successful films as *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), *Superman* (1978), *Unforgiven* (1992), *Crimson Tide* (1995), and *The Quick and the Dead* (1995).

The Conversation was nominated for three Academy Awards: Best Picture for Francis Ford Coppola; Best Sound for Walter Murch and Art Rochester; and Best Writing, Original Screenplay for Francis Ford Coppola. At the Golden Globes, the film was also nominated for four awards: Best Director - Motion Picture for Francis Ford Coppola; Best Motion Picture - Drama; Best Motion Picture Actor - Drama for Gene Hackman; and Best Screenplay - Motion Picture for Francis Ford Coppola. Finally, the Cannes Film Festival awarded the film the Golden Palm for Francis Ford Coppola and the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury - Special Mention for Francis Ford Coppola.



Summary and Analysis

The Conversation begins in the middle of a busy square, where a band plays, and a man wanders around trying to avoid stepping on any cracks. The man follows another man through the streets. A sign on a building says City Paris, and a photographer is locking in on a couple from his position on top of a building. The couple goes behind a wall but they don't reappear. Instead, they enjoy the band, and then continue on their way. We can hear the couple's conversation fuzzily come through on some type of a transmitter.

Security Specialist Harry Caul, dressed in a suit and a transparent raincoat, follows the couple while they walk. After they see a homeless man on the street, the woman says that those men were once someone's child, and it makes her sad to see them living like this. Harry then knocks on the back of a van, climbs in, and talks to another man, Stan, who points out the photographer. Two women then use mirrors, which are actually windows, to apply lipstick, while another man takes photographs. Back to the couple, we see that the woman notices a cop with what appears to be a hearing aid, and she realizes they are being followed. They move closer to the band so that they can talk without being heard.

Paul, the cop, climbs into the van. The men in the van talk about the situation, and Harry tells Stan that he doesn't know who is interested in following and recording the couple. Harry doesn't care about the conversation, just the recording that he needs to get for the job to which he was assigned. Still watching the couple, the men in the van notice the man leave with a bag, while the woman heads in the other direction.

Later, at his home, Harry's neighbor wishes him a happy birthday. Harry has three locks on his door as well as an alarm that goes off when the door is opened. Harry calls the woman downstairs and asks how she knew it was his birthday. Harry is shocked by how the woman found out it was his birthday, and he decides that, from now on, he will have his mail sent to a P.O. Box without keys. Harry enters his apartment, and we see enjoy playing his saxophone alone in his apartment.

At work the next day, Harry talks to Stan about his speaking engagement for the next day while flipping through photographs of the couple from the previous day. Harry also listens to the recorded conversation between the young couple, whom he discovers are Mark and Ann. Harry spends time in his office trying to cut out the background noise so he can hear the conversation. Harry hears them talking about Christmas gifts, homeless people, walking in circles, and being innocent.

Harry goes to a pay phone and places a call to his employer. Harry wants to give the man who hired him the information he gained yesterday, but he is told that the man is gone. The person who answered the phone tells him to leave a number, but when he tells that person he has no phone number, he is told to meet his employer at 2:30 the next day. Harry asks about payment in full, and the man simply tells Harry that payment will be whatever was originally arranged.



Harry then visits his girlfriend, Amy Fredericks, and brings wine to toast his birthday. Sadly, she didn't even know that it was his birthday. Amy does know that Harry is very secretive about his life, so Amy wants to know if something special and personal will happen on his birthday. Amy wants to know Harry's secret. Amy once saw Harry hiding at the staircase, watching, and trying to find out more about her.

Amy begins singing a song that Harry had heard Ann speak about on his surveillance recording the day before. Harry becomes a little uncomfortable. Harry becomes even more suspicious when she continues asking questions about why he doesn't have a phone, but he convinces her not to ask any more questions. Finally, though, she tells him she doesn't want to wait for him anymore, and he rides the bus home, alone. Out the window, he sees a young couple kissing.

The next day, Harry goes to deliver the package to the Director personally. Harry is taken upstairs to wait. A man tries to give Harry \$15,000 cash and to convince Harry that the Director is out of town and had directed him to take the information instead. Harry is unsure, so he returns the money and takes the goods back. The man, Martin Stett, threatens Harry, but Harry walks out anyway.

Down the hall, several men watch him, and then get into an elevator while Stett watches. At the next stop, the elevator becomes crowded, and Harry recognizes Ann, the woman from the square, on the elevator.

When Harry returns to his office, he listens to the recordings again. The man asks who started the conversation, and she says that he started it but doesn't remember it. The woman then tells him that she told him a joke, and he begins to laugh. With the recording still playing in the background, Harry looks at the picture.

Stan tries to get Harry out of the office. On the recording, Ann asks whether they can do that, but he tells her that he's tired of drinking and mostly everything else, even her, though not that day. Stan is annoyed by the conversation that is playing, and Harry gets annoyed. Stan uses Jesus' name in vain, and Harry tells him to stop.

Harry informs Stan that his work is getting sloppy, and we hear Mark on the recording say "later in the week. Sunday maybe." and Ann agrees that Sunday was definite. Harry is obviously upset by the conversation he is hearing, and then we hear Mark tell Ann about a hotel meeting at 3:00.

Harry tells Stan that this is his business, and his interest has nothing to do with human nature. Fed up, Stan leaves.

Still listening to the recording, Harry then hears Ann say that she loves Mark and that she believes that someone has been recording her phone calls. Mark then says they are spending too much time together. The band drowns out the conversation. With a little work, though, Harry hears Mark say, "He'd kill us if he got the chance." Harry is disturbed by the conversation.



Leaving his office, Harry decides to go to church. In confession, Harry reveals that he hasn't confessed in three months, has taken the Lord's name in vain, taken newspapers without paying, entertained impure thoughts, and been involved in work that may be used to hurt young people. Harry indicates that this has happened before, and he's afraid it will happen again.

Later, at a trade show, Harry looks into some of the new surveillance technologies available. They have everything from cameras in clocks to eavesdropping equipment. One man is honored to meet Harry, and the man wants him to try their equipment for free. Harry refuses, because he builds all his own equipment. While trying out a new video camera, Harry recognizes Martin Stett standing behind him.

In one of the sessions, Paul meets Harry, and they go to lunch. On the way, Harry is introduced to William P. "Bernie" Moran. Bernie has wanted to talk to Harry, and the other man invites him to come with them for a drink.

While they wait, Bernie shows off his surveillance equipment by dialing his own home. The conversation we hear is between a man and a woman who reveal that the man asks about Bernie's location, and the woman admits that her husband is out at a conference. Stan leaves to mind the booth at the trade show, since he now works for Bernie. Harry decides to talk to Stan instead of following them. Stan has been working for Bernie for one day, and Harry asks Stan not to tell about any of his past. Harry asks him not to leave him now since a guy, Martin Stett, is following him. Stan agrees to stick by him. Harry then tells Stan that Bernie's invention is junk.

From the restaurant, Harry wants to call Amy, but information tells him that she's not listed. In the lobby, Martin Stett talks to Harry. Martin tells Harry that the Director will be there on Sunday to accept the tapes, and Harry says that he'll think about whether or not he will deliver them.

Bernie, Paul, and the others climb into a car with a bunch of girls. After a crazy driver passes them, Paul tails the driver, and then passes him. Everyone then goes back to Harry's shop, and Harry quickly puts up his private documents. Bernie salutes Harry as the "best bugger on the West coast." Apparently, Harry is famous in New York, and Bernie asks about the Welfare Fund job. Harry refuses to tell Bernie his secret.

Bernie admits that he tapped his first phone at the age of twelve. Then, Meredith drags Harry away. After she tells him about her marriage, Harry asks her a question. Harry asks, if she were in Amy's shoes, whether she would go back to the man. Meredith says that she would never know if he loved her.

Later that evening, Bernie tells Harry about his job, listening to a presidential candidate. Stan tells everyone that Harry once put a bug in a parakeet, and Bernie once again asks about the Welfare Fund job. Harry is uncomfortable with how much Bernie knows about his past.

Bernie goes on about the past job Harry performed, and he begins talking about how he knows the boat was bugged, because they wouldn't talk unless no other boats were



about. Three people were murdered after that job, and Harry says all he ever did was turn in the tapes. Supposedly, the President's accountant, wife, and son were all murdered. Soon after, Harry moved away from New York. Harry continues to try to avoid the conversation. Stan turns on some music from Harry's most recent job, and Harry immediately stops the music.

Bernie claims that he can figure out any of Harry's schemes, and he convinces Stan to give him details about the job. Bernie says that the job must have cost a fortune, and Harry brags about how impressive his job was. Bernie wants Harry to be his partner and sell Harry's inventions to the government. Harry refuses and blows off Bernie. Harry says he doesn't need anyone. Bernie shows that he caught Harry on tape earlier, while he and the girl were outside. Harry is embarrassed to discover that he was bugged. Harry tries to kick everyone out, and then Bernie swears. Stan tells Bernie not to swear. Bernie offers Harry a free product, but Harry refuses. Meredith decides to stay.

Meredith quickly becomes frustrated with Harry when he continues to listen to the recording of his latest job. We hear Ann on the tape, talking about what she would buy someone for Christmas, since the man she's talking about already has everything. Harry realizes that Ann is hinting that she is frightened. Meredith tells him he's just supposed to have fun, not have feelings about the job. Meredith begins to kiss him. While the conversation on the tape continues, Meredith begins to make love to Harry. Harry decides that he must destroy the tapes, so that no murders happen again.

Later, we see Harry and Meredith asleep in bed. Suddenly, we see the outlines of Mark and Ann, and then we see the scene change to a woman in the fog, running up some steps. In this scene, which may be a dream sequence, Harry is chasing her, and when he gets close, he introduces himself. The woman watches him from afar. Harry tells her that, as a boy, he was very sick and was almost unable to walk for the rest of his life. Harry would take hot baths for therapy, and one day, his mom went to answer the door and he began to slide into the water in the tub. Harry was sad to find he had survived. Then, he talks about how he had, as a child, hit a man in the stomach, and then that man died the next year. Finally, he tells her that she'll be killed. Harry is not afraid of death; instead he's terrified of murder.

In the next scene, we find Harry waking alone the next morning and searching his apartment for Meredith. Harry discovers that his tapes for the most recent job are missing. Harry then calls the Director's assistant to inquire about Martin Stett. The assistant hangs up, after saying that someone will call back. The man finally answers. The man on the line tells Harry that they now have the tapes in perfect condition. They were afraid that Harry might destroy the tapes, and they tell him that they've been watching him. Then, they suggest that he bring the photographs so that the Director can pay him in full.

Harry goes to the Director's office and hears the tapes being played on the other side of a door marked "Private." No one answers the knock, so Harry goes in while being followed by a Doberman. Harry sees Martin and the Director pacing the room and listening. On the wall hangs a picture of Ann. They tell Harry that the money is on the



table, and he sits down and places the photographs on the table so that he can count the money. Harry then sees the photograph of Ann and the Director happily sitting happily, and the Director asks him to count the money outside. Harry collects his things and hands the photographs to the Director.

Before leaving, Harry asks what the Director plans to do to her. The Director doesn't answer, and Martin follows Harry out. Harry then asks Martin what will happen. Harry throws the money on the ground outside, and the recordings continue to play through his mind. Harry then picks up the money from the ground, goes to the hotel, and tries to reserve room 773 of the hotel where the couple was supposed to meet. Harry asks for an adjoining room and tries the door at 773 to find it locked.

Entering the next room, Harry tries to find a hollow spot in the wall. Then, he stands outside on his balcony and tries to look around the partition. In the bathroom, Harry tries to find a way to listen in through a hole cut in the wall to the next room. Finally, Harry is able to listen in on the conversation. Harry hears a terrible argument next door. Outside the patio door, Harry sees a bloody woman against the door, and he hears screaming. Later, we hear a cartoon playing in the background that is similar to some of the previous conversations.

After Harry wakes up, he enters the couple's room next door, since everything is now completely silent. When he enters, he finds that the beds are made up, the shower is clean, and everything is fixed for the next visitors. When Harry flushes the toilet, though, it begins to overflow and bloody water quickly seeps out of the toilet. Harry hurries away and gets on a bus to see the Director. Before he makes it, two men corner him and force him to leave the building.

Outside the building, Harry sees a blue limousine with a license plate that says "CI." While Harry looks at the car, we see Mark and Ann fight their way through a crowd of reporters who are asking them about a car accident and company control. When Ann sees Harry, Harry realizes that Ann and Mark murdered the Director and faked a car crash. Suddenly, the entire conversation begins to make sense in a way Harry never suspected.

Harry goes home and plays his saxophone to relax. Harry's phone rings, but no one says anything on the other end of the line. The phone rings again, and Martin calls to tell Harry not to get involved any further, because they know that he knows. Then Martin says, "We'll be listening to you."

Harry searches his house for bugs and begins to pull things apart to find them, but he can't find them anywhere. Finally, he believes it's in a small statue of Mary which he hammers and breaks apart in desperation. After he also pulls up the flooring and more, we see a side picture of Mark and Ann and hear Harry playing his saxophone in the background while we see him alone in his ruined apartment.



Characters

Harry Caul, played by Gene Hackman

Description

Harry Caul is a securities specialist who has become famous in the industry for his success in many cases. We first meet him when he leads a case to record a conversation in the middle of a square. The job is especially difficult, but he is being paid a large sum of money and is able to catch all of the conversation.

While Harry tries to get the ambient noise out of the recording later, he begins to listen to and try to decipher the conversation. Harry is obsessive about many things, and he becomes totally focused on the recording. Finally, he thinks he has figured out the meaning and believes that the Director is going to kill the couple.

Harry tries to stop any murders from happening by going to the hotel where the couple is planning to meet, but he wakes up later that day to the sound of screams. Harry tries to go to the company's building but runs into the couple walking out with Martin and realizes that he misunderstood the plot: the couple and Martin were planning to kill the Director all along.

Analysis

Harry is an obsessive personality, who wants everything to be perfect. Harry is constantly trying to figure things out, and he becomes focused only on one or two things in his life. Because he separates himself from other people so completely, he is often left alone. For example, both Stan and Amy leave him, because he is unwilling to share either personal or business information with either one.

We watch while Harry tries to do the right thing by protecting the young couple from the Director. Sadly, he has the story all wrong, but he does make an effort to protect them. After he realizes that he was deceived, Harry considers what he should do, but then he receives a threatening call from Martin.

Throughout the film, we watch while Harry becomes more obsessed with the job, and after Martin's call, Harry seems to lose all touch with reality. Harry begins to tear his apartment apart in order to find the bug that has been used. When, finally, there is nowhere left to look and he has driven himself insane, Harry picks up his saxophone and begins to play a sad, solemn tune.



Stan, played by John Cazale

Description

Stan is Harry's faithful assistant. They have been working together for many years, and Stan knows more about Harry's business than anyone else, but even that leaves him with relatively little information.

Since Harry is so unwilling to share the secrets of his life and his work, Stan finally becomes frustrated with Harry's attitude and leaves to work with Bernie. At the securities convention, Harry tries to convince Stan to come back, and they begin to patch up their disagreement.

Analysis

Stan is a smart man, but he feels that he is being left in Harry's shadow. Although he is involved in the business, he is never completely able to understand the plans, since Harry won't share all of his secrets. Like many young men, Stan is impatient and decides to leave Harry. Harry's secrecy has hurt him again.

William P. "Bernie" Moran, played by Allen Garfield

Description

Bernie is a securities specialist whose expertise and skill rivals Harry's. Although Bernie has spent years learning about Harry and his techniques, he still has many questions for Harry about how he solved certain cases. Bernie irritates Harry by asking too many questions, and when Bernie shows that he caught Harry on tape, Harry becomes extremely angry and kicks everyone out of his apartment.

Analysis

Harry is married to his work and lives as though securities were his whole life. Harry keeps everything about himself and his business private, but Bernie stands in contrast to this. Bernie is very open about his techniques and is willing to talk with anyone about what he can do. Although Bernie is pompous and annoying, he does show the viewer that there is a different way to live life as a securities specialist.

Martin Stett, played by Harrison Ford

Description

Martin Stett is the Director's assistant. Martin is a cruel, cunning man. Harry does not trust Martin from the moment he meets him. Martin demands that Harry turn over the



tapes to him rather than to the Director, and when Harry refuses, Martin begins to follow him, even showing up at the securities convention.

Martin finally gets the tapes and delivers them to the Director. Harry walks in while they are listening to them and tries to talk to the Director. However, both the Director and Martin force Harry to leave. The last time we hear Martin, he is on the phone, warning Harry that they'll be listening, so that Harry doesn't reveal the plot to kill the Director.

Analysis

At first, Martin simply seems like an arrogant young man who wants to be in charge while the Director is absent. When Martin begins to follow Harry, though, we become even more suspicious that something else is happening. The more Harry hears the conversation, the more he believes that the Director and Martin are in on a plot to kill the couple.

When we see Martin and the couple amid the reporters, both the viewers and Harry realize that Martin is far more sinister than we had ever guessed. While pretending to help the Director, Martin has really been plotting his death with Mark and Ann. Martin threatens Harry, in the end, driving Harry to complete insanity when he tries to discover how his apartment has been bugged.

Mark, played by Frederic Forrest

Description

Mark is the man who is part of the couple that Harry is taping in the square. Mark and Ann seem to be lovers, and they both have stakes in the Director's company. The couple is involved in a plot to kill the Director and take control of the company.

Analysis

Mark is simply out to make Ann happy and to make as much money as possible in any way possible. Mark helps plan the Director's murder, so he and Ann can control the company.

Ann, played by Cindy Williams

Description

Ann is the woman in the conversation in the square. Ann is either married to or the daughter of the Director; critics have argued over that point for years. With the Director's death, though, Ann and Mark will control the company.



Analysis

Ann wants to make more money by taking control of the company, and the only way to do it is to kill the Director. Ann works with Mark to create and carry out the plot. Ann seems to have no remorse.

Paul, played by Michael Higgins

Description

Paul is one of the securities analysts who helps Harry tape the conversation in the square. We see him again at the party after the securities trade show. Paul is a good friend to both Harry and Stan.

Analysis

Paul is a smart securities analyst. Paul works well with Harry and has worked on several major jobs with him.

Meredith, played by Elizabeth MacRae

Description

Meredith is the woman that Harry meets through Bernie and Stan. Meredith seduces Harry, and then steals the tapes for Martin and the Director.

Analysis

Meredith is a conniving woman, but she treats Harry well until she steals the tapes. Meredith is basically the kind of woman who will do anything for money.

Amy Fredericks, played by Terri Garr

Description

Amy Fredericks is Harry's girlfriend. We only see her at the beginning of the film when he goes over to celebrate his birthday. Amy chooses to leave Harry, because of his secretive manner.



Analysis

Amy feels that she can no longer trust Harry, because he won't reveal anything about his life and work. Amy is finally tired of waiting for him to open up and decides to leave him.

The Director, played by Robert Duvall

Description

The Director pays Harry to make the recording of the conversation. Harry has never met the man, and we don't even see him except for a few minutes at the end of the film. Although Harry believes that the Director plans to kill the couple, the truth seems to be just the opposite. We watch while the couple murders the Director in the hotel at the end of the film.

Analysis

Opposed to Harry's assumptions, the Director is actually the one in danger from the couple. The couple has decided to kill him, so that they can take control of his company. The Director might have considered doing the same thing, had he known their plans, but they get to him first.

Themes

Invasion of Privacy

At a time when people were concerned about spies and the rapid growth of technology, *The Conversation* manipulated these fears into a compelling film about a security consultant and a terrible plot.

The Conversation, in some ways, is a warning against the power of technology. When things begin to get out of hand, Harry is unable to put a stop to events already set in motion. Harry has taped a conversation by invading the privacy of two people walking in a crowded square in order to make a large sum of money.

Harry learns that invading another's privacy not only makes a living, but it can also destroy a life. Harry becomes obsessed with trying to figure out the meaning of the cryptic conversations, and although he wants to undo the wrong he's done, he has no recourse but to give in. In the end, he understands the feelings of others when his own privacy is invaded.

Dangers of Interpretation

Interpretation is always subject to the limited understanding and knowledge of a person. Harry discovers that, each time he hears the conversation and more pieces of it, he comes to a new understanding of the exact meaning of it. Without talking to the Director, though, he has no way to find out for sure.

Harry's attempts to keep the tapes from the Director represent his efforts to keep something terrible from happening. Harry suspects a murder is being planned, but he doesn't know how to stop it. Eventually, he discovers that even his best interpretation was mistaken.

Harry discovers in the end that the Director was not planning to kill the couple, but they were actually planning to kill him. In his efforts to save the couple, Harry forgot to consider any other type of interpretation. Finally, he is driven mad by the event and the blackmail attempts by Martin and the couple.

Loss of Sanity

From the beginning, we realize that Harry Caul is an unusual, and possibly troubled, man. Harry is obsessive in his job and his life. Harry's secretive nature even causes him to lose the one woman he loves. Harry's inability to share anything about his life makes his entire existence dry and lonely.

While Harry becomes more and more obsessed with the conversation and the people, viewers begin to become concerned about his mental well-being. Harry cannot seem to think of anything else, and he is paranoid that others, such as Bernie, will discover too much about his work.

After the Director's death, Harry receives a call from Martin Stett, who warns Harry that they will be listening to be sure that Harry doesn't reveal the truth about the death. Harry completely loses his sanity at this point, while he rips his apartment apart in search of bugging devices. While he plays his saxophone sadly in the last moments of the film, we see a destroyed apartment that symbolizes a destroyed life.

Style and Cinematography

The Conversation relies heavily on suspense in order to keep the viewer's attention. From the first moments, the viewer is constantly asking questions: What is going on in this conversation? Who are these people? Who is the Director? Why is Martin Stett following Harry? These questions, and many more, seem to be answered at various points in the film, but we're always discovering some new angle that changes our previous assumptions.

The music in this film helps to tell the story, create the mood, and enhance the style. A talented musical team has put together one of the best soundtracks to enhance suspense that has ever been used in film. When shocking events come closer, and Harry becomes more confused, the music accurately reflects these events and feelings.

The cinematography is also excellent. The realism of the shots and the film sears life into the film. Viewers are easily pulled into this gritty, dirty story, with the gritty, real shots that come with the film.

Motifs

Recordings of the Conversation

While we learn the story of *The Conversation*, the recordings of the conversation play a major part in the telling of the story. From the first moments when the conversation is being taped, the viewer gets wrapped up, along with Harry, in trying to figure out the meaning of the couples' words.

Harry desperately tries to figure out what is going on, playing the recording over and over to get out any ambient noise. Harry finally gets the entire conversation coming through clearly and listens to it while making love to Meredith. The next morning, Harry believes he understands the meaning of the conversation, but the tapes have been stolen.

Finally, after Harry discovers that the Director was murdered, he plays the recording through his mind a final time. Harry realizes that the couple was not talking about being killed by the Director, but rather, they were talking about killing the Director. Everything has come full circle, we have learned the truth of the conversation, and, in so doing, we have come to know the characters involved.

The Security Industry

The security industry plays a major part in *The Conversation*. Harry is one of the best security specialists in the nation, and he has spent many years perfecting his techniques and tools. Everyone in the industry knows who he is, but no one, not even Amy and Stan, the two people closest to him, really know anything about his life or work.

We learn about the security industry from the beginning of the film, while we watch Harry and the others try to capture the conversation on tape. At the time the film was created, the public knew less about security products than we do now, so much of the film helps the viewer understand how things work.

The security industry also plays a role, since we learn more about Harry at the convention. Although we know, at first, that he is good at his job, we do not know until we meet Bernie and the others that he is one of the best in the country and the world. We also learn more about Harry's interactions with other people and his strong desire to keep both his personal and business matters to himself.

Music

Music is a major motif in this film. Many action and mystery films rely on music to help get the viewer prepared for what will be happening next. The music can help create

suspense or prime the viewer for a surprise. Music can also help reveal the feelings of the characters in different situations.

In *The Conversation*, music is primarily used to prime the viewer for suspense and surprise. We realize from the opening scene that something unusual is happening, simply from the music playing in the background. Later, when other events unfold, we are ready for the surprises and are held in suspense throughout the film with the help of the music.

We also learn about characters needs and emotions through music. When Harry and Meredith are together, different types of music play in the background than play at other points in the film. Also, Harry's saxophone music helps reveal his feelings. When he is sad and confused, he plays tunes that reveal these feelings, and at the end of the film, we feel his desperation through the music he plays.



Symbols

Caul's Name

Caul is actually the term for a transparent fetal membrane that is present at birth. The original name was supposed to be Call, but since there was a typo, the directors and writers decided to keep the name Caul and integrate it into the film.

The name is worked into the film in several ways. First, Harry wears a transparent rain coat over all his clothes. Most people only wear rain coats when it's raining, but Harry seems to wear his all the time. Along with many of his other quirks, he seems to be obsessive about wearing the jacket.

Also, when Harry confronts enemies, such as Bernie and Martin, he sometimes talks to them through transparent barriers. Unlike Harry, these things are transparent. Harry, on the other hand, does his very best to cover up who he is and how he does his work.

The Conversation

The conversation between Martin and Ann is symbolic of the plans. Throughout the film, the viewer is always trying to guess the meaning of what they say in the conversation. Most of what they say seems to be completely harmless, but there is an underlying threat with how urbane their words seem.

The conversation becomes an obsession for Harry, because he believes that the Director is planning to murder the couple. After he misinterprets the discussion, he becomes obsessed with putting a stop to the plans. Although he fails in his efforts, Harry does discover that the plans are not at all what he expected, because the couple is actually plotting to murder the Director.

Harry's Apartment

Harry's apartment is symbolic of his life and mental state. When we first see Harry's apartment, everything is in perfect order, and his phone is safely hidden in a drawer. Harry is in complete control of his life, and his business is successful.

After running into Martin and breaking up with Amy, Harry's life gets increasingly complicated. Harry desperately misses Amy, but cannot find her. Harry's apartment gets a little cluttered after this, especially after he runs into Martin again at the securities event.

Then, after hearing the murder and discovering that the couple and Martin were actually planning the murder of the Director, Harry's life gets even worse. Harry receives a call from Martin at the end of the film and is told that they'll be listening. Harry becomes

paranoid and begins searching for bugs in his apartment. Harry tears everything up and in the last scene of the film, we see a totally destroyed apartment, symbolic of a destroyed and paranoid life and mind.



Essay Questions

What is Harry Caul's line of work?

When the film begins, what is Harry doing?

Why does Amy decide to break up with Harry?

Why is Bernie so interested in Harry's success?

Harry won't hand the tapes over to Martin. Why?

What does Harry believe the Director's plan is?

After listening to the tapes several times, what does Harry decide to do?

How do the tapes disappear?

Where does Harry go after seeing the Director? What does he hear?

Later, what story does Harry put together?

What is Martin's final threat and how does Harry react?