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Knowledge, Power, Paranoia: the History and Ideas of *The Conversation*

Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 film *The Conversation* has endured as a masterwork of cinema, blending a deliberate use of cinematic tactics and story construction to deliver a thought-provoking commentary on issues entering the public consciousness in the 1970s. In this essay *The Conversation* (1974) will be contextualized first in terms of the new consciousness and cynicism around the state and surveillance that emerged in the American public in the post-Watergate era, and second as a demonstration of the new understanding of power and "panopticism" that developed around this time with the publication of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975). *The Conversation* was produced during a unique period of American history, and enjoys continued relevance not only because of the public's interest in the morality of surveillance, but also because the film presents anxieties that persist into the present as public knowledge of surveillance grows.

The 1970s saw major changes in American attitudes towards government and society at large. The decade is sandwiched between the 1960s, which is remembered for its college campus rebellions and civil rights struggles, and the 1980s, which saw the rise of the new American conservative movement—two decades that seemingly present stronger archetypal images in the cultural memory. This archetypal memory, however, neglects the crucial changes that took place in the 1970s which would spark new questions on the individual and society as public trust reacted to world-altering events, shifting towards a new cynicism. The most impactful events for this development were the end of American involvement in Vietnam, and the Watergate Scandal,

where Americans came to learn the misdeeds of their highest public officials (Friedman 7). This period was also a unique time for the film industry: 1974 was on the precipice of Hollywood's "Blockbuster" era, which would be inaugurated with the release of *Jaws* in 1975; because *The Conversation* came just before this, it was spared additional scrutiny that studios might apply to in order to gear films towards profit maximalization (Cook 134). It would be a unique year viewed in hindsight, as "[t]he downbeat, cynical nature of so many of the year [1974]'s films, as well as their devotion to specific social and political concerns, made them unsuitable for blockbuster-scale mass consumption" (Cook 134). This unique social and economic environment for the production of films would contribute to *The Conversation*'s unique exploration of surveillance.

The Watergate scandal was a defining moment for America writ-large, dealing a heavy blow to public trust in institutions. Watergate's impacts on public consciousness would be far-reaching and "what is most noticeable about levels of political trust during the period from 1972 to 1982 … is how *little* trust in government recovered" (Damico at al. 394; emphasis added). The reaction was not limited only to trust in government, as subsequent studies found that in reaction to Watergate people also felt less confidence in mass media (Zimmer 745–6, 749). The social consequences would also extend to films being produced at the time:

> Even though the Watergate scandal did not reach its climax until the resignation of Richard Nixon from the presidency on 9 August [1974], the events of the break-in, cover-up, and subsequent investigation weighed heavily on American minds throughout the preceding year. (Cook, "Movies and Political Trauma" 116)

In this social and political climate, films that took a critical view of society or presented alternative and morally complex ethical questions would have new relevance; the questions

posed by *The Conversation* dealt with these themes, as well as the emerging technology which enabled spying in a manner previously not thought possible. Watergate induced a fear of the conspiracy, and the 1970s saw much development in the genre of the "conspiracy movie," which Fredric Jameson theorized could be explored "to test the incommensurability between an individual witness—the individual character of a still anthropomorphic narrative—and the collective conspiracy which must somehow be exposed or revealed through these individual efforts" (Jameson 10). Films like these in the early 1970s, around Watergate but before the commercialized Blockbuster era, featured "scruffy, outsider" protagonists that were "driven more by personal obsessions—one might even go so far as to say neuroses—than any sense of communal needs" (Friedman 21–22). For *The Conversation* it is the sense of cynicism that shows surveillance to be not just a practice, but an industry—peddling intrusive ability which is inflicted upon others and, ultimately for Harry Caul, inverted upon the self.

This cynicism is demonstrated in many scenes throughout the film, however two can be analyzed as particular examples of this attitude towards the nature of surveillance and the surveillance industry. The first establishes the nature of surveillance anecdotally, as well as Harry Caul's particular attitude towards it. As Harry and his team conduct the recording of a couple in the park—which will be replayed throughout the film as Harry recollects and analyzes it—he is hidden in a van with mirrored windows, out of which he can see but in which others cannot. Already the anecdote is clear, that Caul is enabled by this environment to observe others but not to be observed, an ability which is also granted by his advanced audio technology, but what is unique about Caul in this scene is his attitude towards the arrangement—arguably, he is less cynical than his compatriots. When two women approach the van and begin applying makeup facing the mirrored window, Stanley takes a perverse pleasure in the moment, snapping

photos of the unsuspecting girls (0:06:28). Harry, by contrast, does not engage with the women, though he looks out of the same window, enabled by the same physical arrangement yet focused on the job at hand—"Pay attention to your recordings" he says (0:06:37). This serves two functions, establishing the mechanism by which Harry and colleagues gain their advantage over others (seeing but being unseen), but also demonstrating the deep cynicism of the unseen, who may take pleasure in their hiddenness. This condition is fully laid bare by the display of the surveillance industry as a whole in the convention scenes, where Harry—who has been shown as steadfastly dedicated to his work, participating in surveillance but with a sense of responsibility—meets his foil, Bernie Moran, who peddles his inventions for profit, displaying a showmanship and disregard for the privacy that his technology violates. When Caul visits the conference, a sequence of shots shows industry men espousing the features of their new products for sale—telephone surveillance systems, door locks and alarms, hidden cameras and the like—all enthusiastically advertised (0:41:45–0:42:30). The mise-en-scène of Moran's booth, adorned with stage-style lights and mirrors, accompanied by a showgirl assistant, is a denial of Harry's previous "focus on your work" style, instead Moran announces his invention to the crowd in a theatrical demonstration, and confides to Caul his joy in the hollow commercialism: "it's good for the catalog suckers, eh?" (0:47:56). The portrayal of these characters and their industry reflects the most cynical emerging attitudes of the early 1970s, not only that unknown surveillance is taking place, but those who conduct it are taking a perverse pleasure in their abilities, and exploiting these abilities for profit.

In the end, after he and the audience experience the realization of the conspiracy, Harry receives a phone call that says "We know that you know, Mr. Caul. For your own sake don't get involved any further. We'll be listening to you," and then a recording of his saxophone as proof

that he is being listened to (1:47:20). In the sequence that follows, Harry destroys his own apartment, removing the walls and floorboards and appearing to search every possible place for a hidden device, but finding none. This scene can serve as an illustration of the perils of surveillance—issues that would emerge in scholarly discussion around this time—as an interaction of power and knowledge. To understand this interaction, one need only to ask: why does Harry destroy his apartment? One might answer, most simply, because someone was listening to him. Though, on closer examination, this denies the particularity of the protagonist, who previously surveilled others, but is now made vulnerable himself—the knowledge that was once his source of power is now reversed into a source of paranoia. It is only because Caul *knows* the ways one can be watched that the sensation of being watched is so impactful. Though the phone call demonstrates that this listening is actual (perhaps mirroring the kitschy phone technology demonstration at the earlier security convention), Caul's knowledge is so great that he performs a kind of self-surveillance greater than what has been demonstrated, destroying his home because he knows how these things may be hid anywhere. When the apartment is destroyed he finds no bug, but this is no solace—the opposite in fact, as the unverifiability means that unseen surveillance could be taking place at any time. These are the elements that constitute the *panopticism* of the film, where Caul now falls victim to his own knowledge.

Caul's final condition is one of *panopticism*. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) Michel Foucault describes interactions of power via surveillance in an exploration of the *Panopticon*—a circular prison designed by Jeremy Bentham so that prisoners may be constantly observed. Foucault recalls Bentham's principles for power, that it should be "visible and unverifiable;" visibility, so that a prisoner will know he is being watched, unverifiability so that he never knows when—"never know[ing] whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but … sure that he

may always be so" (Foucault 201). With this description, could it not be said that Caul has become the panopticonical prisoner? The phone call that he received made the power visible, yet his diligent search found it unverifiable. Caul understands the potential for a device to be hidden in any place, and this is what brings him to unscrew his lights, break his things, and rip up his floor. He performs this destruction on himself, and in this way his knowledge makes him assume responsibility for his own surveillance; he "inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault 202–3). The destruction sequence has far-reaching implications as the protagonist's position is inverted, the extent of the destruction reflects this totality: Harry, with only slight hesitation, destroys a statue of the Virgin Mary in his search for the bug (1:50:20). This illustrates two aspects of his cathartic moment: first the iconoclastic destruction of a cherished symbol, his religion, for the fear that it might be used as a weakness to hide the bug, and the second, more ironic meaning: the rebellion against surveillance inflicted upon himself—a surveillance which he inflicted upon others and knows so intimately—as a rebellion against a symbol of an omnipotent God, from which Harry can never escape and will always be surveilled. His condition is totalized, there is no intervention, yet the "power of mind over mind"—which he commanded earlier—now subjugates him in fear (Foucault 206).

The conclusion is a fitting one for the era, consistent with Cook's analysis of endings, "the fact that conspiracy and evil win the day seemed appropriate to a world living in the shadow of Watergate" (Cook 120; though Cook was originally remarking on *Chinatown* [1974], the sentiment appears equally applicable here). *The Conversation*'s appearance in the same decade as Watergate, which prominently exposed abuse of power through government foul play and gave way to an increased public awareness of espionage, made for a memorable intermingling of

themes. This is not to say that each of these noted events were causal mechanisms in the production of this film (that Watergate made *The Conversation* [or that *The Conversation* made *Discipline and Punish*, for that matter]), but rather that the changing anxieties of the public at this time, which stemmed from world events, were exemplified by this film. As knowledge of state surveillance and intrigue becomes more widespread, the knowledge of ways one *could* be surveilled alter the attitudes and behaviors of citizens to a greater degree than any surveillance itself. The mechanism of coercion, therefore, is contingent on the surveillance being no secret. Ultimately, *The Conversation* will be relevant so long as the public is conscious of surveillance, and is a simultaneous summation and contribution to the history that produced it.

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