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“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.

Chapter Two: Review of the Relevant Literature

Introduction

The impetus behind this review is that with the benefit of historical distance one can achieve two objectives: firstly, avoid the hyperbole of the worst of the auteurist influenced writers, and secondly, reap the benefit of overview, thus isolating the best points made amongst the body of criticism. However, it must be acknowledged that the existing critical literature emphasizes Coppola, the 'auteur'.

In order to clarify what is meant by the term 'auteur', I preface the chapter with a discussion of authorship and the development of the so-called "Auteur theory" in cinematic history. In order to provide a context for a subsequent discussion of points raised by a number of critics, I then outline the events leading up to the shooting of and release of *The Conversation*; in doing so I shall draw upon what is the most essential critical text, Peter Cowie's *Coppola* (1989). The development of this chapter shall then categorize three salient points of critique: Matters of Authorship, Issues of Style and Technique, and Considerations of Genre.

Matters of Authorship

As Pease points out, "author" is a broad and emotively charged term:

> In common usage the term "author" applies to a wide range of activities. It can refer to someone who starts up a game, or invents a machine, or asserts political freedom, or thinks up a formula, or writes a book. Depending on the activity and the application, the term can connote initiative, autonomy, inventiveness, creativity, authority, or originality. (105)

Early efforts to posit an authorial status for filmmakers were based on a linking of filmic art with literature. In a trenchant 1948 essay, French novelist/critic/filmmaker Alexandre Astruc argued that the cinema had developed into a means of expression analogous to written language, and that filmmakers could now "write" with the camera (qtd. in Caughie 15-16).

Astruc's essay proved influential with the critics of the *Cahiers* writing in the mid-1950s. Francois Truffaut's famous 1954 essay, "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema" (in Nichols, ed. 224-237), most clearly set forth the *Cahiers* position known as '*la politique des auteurs*'. Truffaut promoted a style of film production which would be independent of literary origins, one in which directors would exercise a greater degree of control over the screenplays they were able to film. Ultimately, Truffaut and other *Cahiers* critics (including Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, and Claude Chabrol) were calling for the centralization of the artistic responsibility for a film in the person of the director. As Helen Stoddart points out:

> Truffaut has two main gripes. The first problem was the over-emphasis in French cinema on the 'school of psychological realism', which was perpetuated through the second problem in what he labeled the 'the tradition of quality' of French cinema. This was the practice of making film adaptations of French literary classics as though film lacked artistic sophistication or cultural prestige in itself. (3)

Whilst their critical practice was aimed at the specificities of the cinematic medium and in opposition to the 'literary bias' inherent in the French Tradition of Quality, the auteurist idea would eventually assume a broader base around the filmmaking world.

The so-called "Auteur Theory" also provided a useful way to approach film history as a history of great directors. The theory as developed by American critic Andrew Sarris with his *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions* extended the critical task of separating the distinctive and worthwhile artists (the auteurs) from the majority of directors whose work, whilst perhaps interesting, lacked the coherence of a strong guiding personality. In the same vein Sarris maintained that one must acknowledge the ability of a director to manifest what he regarded as a central aspect of filmmaking: the much touted 'personal vision.' This aspect is historically contextualized within the French New Wave.

Leo Braudy's excellent "The Rise of the Auteur" opens with a concise analysis of the origins of auteurism (touching also upon the New Wave and 'personal vision'), and bears repeating at length:

> The defining characteristic of the New Wave, and its ambiguous legacy to all films made since 1958-61, was self-consciousness: of the act of making a film, of the individual film within the history of film, and of the director as the controlling creative force, the *auteur* of the film. Except for such carefully constructed celebrities as Eisenstein, Welles, and

> Hitchcock, the film director has previously been a kind of anonymous artist, hidden in the collectivity of technicians and scriptwriters, and fronted for by his actors and actresses, whose glossy surfaces simultaneously reflected and inspired the dreams of their audience. But the New Wave brought the film director to the public's immediate attention as a potential cultural hero, a Byronic adventurer whose fame, whether in Europe or the Hollywood studio system, was the reward for his assertion of personal vision against corporate repression and vacuity. (43)

With a few European directors being viewed as serious artists, Sarris, following the impetus of the writers of the French journal *Cahiers du Cinema*, extended this designation to those directors whose work was largely produced within the highly collaborative Hollywood studio system. Interestingly several *Cahiers* writers were themselves given to the exalting of certain American "studio directors." For instance, *Cahiers* critic Jean-Luc Godard established an eloquently argued case for the valourization of Howard Hawks, both as personality and in estimation of his (Hawks') oeuvre.

Central to the international dissemination of auteurism was Andrew Sarris, whose article "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" ushered in an explicitly American modification of the Cahiers approach. More self-consciously exhaustive and historical than the *Cahiers* critics, Sarris was also more idiosyncratically evaluative, ultimately creating a virtual periodic table of American directors, ranking them in groups based on his personal tastes. He justified this practice in his 1968 book:

> But why rank directors at all? Why all the categories and lists and assorted drudgeries? One reason is to establish a system of priorities for the film student. Another is the absence of the most elementary academic tradition in cinema. The drudgeries in the other, older arts are performed by professional drudges. Film scholarship remains largely an amateur undertaking [...] Ultimately the auteur theory is not so much a theory as an attitude, a table of contents that converts film history into directorial autobiography. (27-28)

Coppola's Beginnings

1968 was indeed a significant year in the development of Sarris's auteur theory. That year further represents a point in time when Francis Coppola, already an emerging artist, was approaching the age of thirty. Coppola was born in 1939 to a Catholic Italian-American family and raised in a parental environment where the arts (especially those of music and drama) were a significant part of the family tradition.

The influence of music in the family was particularly strong; Coppola's father, Carmine, was a flautist, his uncle an orchestral conductor (Cowie 11-12).

Coppola's reflection on his early exposure to opera is enlightening with regard to both his impressions of family life as a child and of the relations of image and sound:

> My mother's a bit of an immature kind of person, but with a lot of the magic that such people have. My father was very dashing – I'd see him in a tuxedo, with his silver flute, and girls singing around him. He'd take me [to the studio] and put me in the glass box so I could watch Toscanini, and there'd be a knob there that controlled the volume, and that just blew me away when I was a kid, when I realised that picture and sound were *not* connected (Coppola, qtd. in Cowie 7, emphasis original).

Coppola was initially discouraged from pursuing a career in the arts, because his father, as a musician, had experienced periods of pecuniary uncertainty and difficulty (Cowie 18). Instead Coppola was slated to become an engineer, and although he was obviously not to pursue this career option, Coppola's interest in electronics and technology had begun from an early age (Cowie 16-17). Furthermore, Coppola's interest in movies as a 'technology' had begun early in life, as Cowie explains:

> Technology obsessed Francis. He adored gadgets of every description, and at the age of ten was already experimenting with sound in his home movies. He edited pieces of film shot by his family, and liked to play the hero in them. (16)

As a youth, and through the influence of August, his elder brother, Coppola was introduced to the literary works of James Joyce, André Gide, and Aldous Huxley (Cowie 19). Whereas August was to pursue a career in academe (and ultimately gained a professorship), Francis moved into the sphere of the dramatic arts, theatre becoming his passion. Coppola had begun playwrighting by his mid-teens and was awarded a scholarship to study at Hofstra University's Theatre Arts Department. He was soon elected president of both the dramatic and musical organizations at Hofstra (Cowie 18-19).

Coppola's passion was to shift from the medium of theatre to that of the cinema, a shift indicated in the then seventeen-year-old's impressions of a viewing of Sergei Eisenstein's *Ten Days that Shook the World* (Cowie 20). Cowie's explication of the shift to the cinematic in the young Coppola bears repeating at length:

> Now he was a visitor to screenings at the Museum of Modern Art, and immersed himself in books on the theory and technique of motion pictures. Francis's own first effort was a short about a woman who loses her children during a day's excursion to the countryside. Eisenstein and Pudovkin had placed great stress on the psychological power of 'montage'. They cited the example of Kuleshov's experiment, intercutting the impassive face of a famous actor first with a bowl of steaming soup, and then with the image of an open coffin. Viewers claimed to have seen a look of hunger and happiness in the man's face when confronted with the soup, and an expression of profound grief when matched with the corpse in the casket. In Francis's unfinished short, the idea was that the mother would regard the lush beauty of the countryside in a wholly different way once she had awoken from a nap in the orchard and found her children missing. Suddenly things that had seemed so attractive assumed a threatening quality, like some harbinger of the jungle in *Apocalypse Now*. (20-21)

UCLA and Roger Corman

The year is 1960 and Coppola enters UCLA's Film Department. Running somewhat afoul of his contemporaries, he is soon writing and filming shorts. It was a time of both frustration and confidence-building for the youth who still felt the pull of the theatre, and was criticized in some quarters at the University as erring towards an overly theatrical style and attitude (Cowie 21-22). Coppola however convinced himself that he had "*much* more facility than anyone at UCLA. I could sit down and write a script!" (Coppola, qtd. in Cowie 23, emphasis original). One of Coppola's screenplays (which was to become the prototypical script for *The Rain People*) won the prestigious Samuel Goldwyn Award (Cowie 23).

Famed B-Movie director Roger Corman contacted the University with a view to hiring students as assistants in the editing and dubbing of some Soviet films for which the director had purchased the rights. Corman hired Coppola and the fruits of this association appear in Coppola's first feature, *Dementia 13,* a low-budget effort that demonstrated a degree of skill and thematic complexity in Coppola's writing and directing (Cowie 24-27). In terms of thematics, Cowie cites *Dementia 13* as manifesting "Coppola's obsession with the family as a source of strife and perverted loyalty" (27).

Coppola continued to hone his skills as a writer and director. The realities of raising finance in the world of filmmaking were also sinking in. Corman's studios were proving a valuable training ground for the independently minded but financially strapped aspiring director (Cowie 28-30).

The move from the Corman studios to take up a position as a contract writer for Seven Arts saw Coppola take a position somewhat below what he aspired to but one necessary to support both himself and his new bride. Ever the hard negotiator, and having the rights to the book (the novel by David Benedictus) in hand, Coppola convinced Seven Arts that he should both write and direct *You're A Big Boy Now*. The film represented a certain maturing of Coppola the director and further qualified as his thesis for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts at UCLA. The film was also selected for competition at Cannes, and was a modest success amongst reviewers. Coppola's referencing of Jean-Luc Godard, Terry Southern, and *Peanuts* was cited by Andrew Sarris in *The Village Voice* (Cowie 31-35).

You're a Big Boy Now was certainly a milestone for Coppola's burgeoning career. Cowie quotes Walter Murch (a one-time film student at USC), who regarded Coppola as a "legend in the film student community in LA because he was the one graduate who had gone out and made a feature film and used it to secure his degree, which was the secret dream of every film student" (37).

The screenplay for *Patton*, which Coppola wrote but did not direct, earned him an Academy Award in 1970, a further enhancement of his growing reputation. Part of that reputation extended to Coppola becoming regarded as an influence-seeker and controlling personality. Cowie suggests that his obsession with power is mirrored in the writing of the Patton character, the only character written with what Cowie considers any real depth in the film itself (36).

On the back-burner throughout this time was the screenplay for *The Conversation,* which was to be Coppola's "personal" film about eavesdropping and morality. Coppola was juggling assignments at this stage and on being offered the job of writing an "update" to the stage musical, *Finian's Rainbow*, he accepted, effectively shelving the script for *The Conversation* (Cowie 37). A rough (and somewhat incomplete) draft of the script for *The Conversation* had, however, been formulated late in 1967, to be completed late in 1969 (Johnson 129-130).

With *Finian's Rainbow*, Coppola invited his father Carmine to contribute to the score. Coppola's loyalty to family is subtended by what Cowie refers to as his

"loyalty to his own ethnic origins" and the "pro-immigrant bearing of his *Finian's Rainbow*" (39). For Cowie, the film demonstrated a "social conscience", further evidencing a growing technical proficiency and thematic maturity (41).

Coppola next wrote and directed *The Rain People*. Cowie notes that the film originated in Coppola's childhood at a time when his mother, following a marital disagreement, left the family home to stay in a motel (44).

Cinematically, the film represents a significant point in Coppola's directorial career, as Cowie explains:

> More than any other film, *The Rain People* shows the influence of European cinema on Coppola's style and thinking. The mysterious opening, the short, abrupt flashbacks, and then a burn-out to glaring white to mark the passage of time – all this is reminiscent of Bergman's *Persona* (released in the USA the previous year), while the brutal slivers of recollected action on the football field must be inspired by Lindsay Anderson's *This Sporting Life* (1963). Yet *The Rain People* is not derivative. It assimilates foreign influences and achieves a blank verse quality of its own. (45-46)

Cowie points out the near schizophrenic behaviour of Natalie (the protagonist). Natalie's behaviour was reinforced by the subjective camera work, and her shyness verges on paranoia. Furthermore, Cowie points out that her intense need for privacy parallels the needs of *The Conversation*'s protagonist, Harry Caul (46-47).

The preceding point of characterization is adumbrated by Robert K. Johnson in positing the notion of irony:

> In offering a realistic delineation of the human being—warts and all—Coppola employs a device he will use again, though not as subtly, in *The Conversation* and *The Godfather, Part II* –irony. Several times, the actions of the characters, actions motivated by a particular desire, lead to consequences antipodal to that desire. The characters are not helped, but bewildered by what they do. Irony, then, reinforces the realistic portrait of man by underscoring man's limitations. (83)

For Cowie, "they [the characters] are doomed, as Killer himself is doomed. Coppola's disenchanted version of 'middle America' coincides with that of Dennis Hopper in *Easy Rider*, a film being shot at about the same time" (49).

A New Studio, A New Way

The city of San Francisco was to be the site for Coppola's dream—to establish a studio facility where youth and ideals could interface with the tools and technology needed to get "alternative" films off the ground. The idea was that scripts were to be filmed relatively inexpensively and financed with the help of a conglomerate's seed money. Late in 1969, and with the help of a Warner-Seven Arts loan, Coppola set up his studio which he named American Zoetrope because of the double significance of the term. Etymologically, "Zoetrope" means "life movement" (from the Greek); it is also the name of an early mechanical device that produced a cinema-like effect (Cowie 52-53).

Both Coppola and Walter Murch were involved with friend and co-conspirator George Lucas in the filming of Lucas's *THX-1138*, which utilized the facilities at Zoetrope. The connection between the team was strong. Lucas, who was making a feature length version of his prize-winning student film, shared writing credits with Walter Murch, while Coppola helped with the production. By all accounts the studio's facilities and equipment were quite sophisticated, boasting state-of-the-art cameras, sound and editing suites (Cowie 54-56). The emphasis on sound is also a point noted by Cowie as is the fact that the exterior scenes of the film were shot on location in San Francisco (57).

THX-1138 as a whole is somewhat less than a success in Cowie's opinion:

> This terrifying, hermetic world suggested the dangers lurking in the wake of technological revolution. Ironically the very concept of American Zoetrope encouraged this single-minded focus on technological excellence. Coppola proved later with *The Conversation* that he could reconcile human dilemmas with the mysteries of newspeak. Lucas, in *American Graffiti* two years later, would direct as warm an evocation of the past as even the Beatles had accomplished in their songs. (58)

As Lewis notes, "though it was not what Warner Brothers wanted to hear, Coppola proclaimed to the press that American Zoetrope was a radically new, alternative studio concept" (14). Having accepted capital from Warners, Coppola pitched the near-complete *THX-1138* and scripts for *The Conversation* and *Apocalypse Now* (ibid.).

American Zoetrope, though, was beset with problems: Warners had withdrawn their support, and by 1972 Coppola faced a rather financially bleak period in his life. As the saying goes, he was "made an offer he couldn't refuse"—the directorial and co-screenwriter positions on an adaptation of the Mario Puzo novel *The Godfather*, a film to be released by the Paramount corporation. Corporate finance was now more essential than ever and *The Conversation* was pitched with two other films, all dependent as it were on the financial success of *The Godfather* (Lewis 14, 15).

The Godfather was of course a financial success and Coppola was able to raise the finance for *The Conversation*, despite attitudes amongst Paramount executives that the film would be unlikely to show a return on investment. Funds were reluctantly advanced on the strength of Coppola's success with *The Godfather* (Lewis 17). The executives were right: *The Conversation*, despite having won the *Palme d'or* at Cannes, actually performed poorly at the box-office (Lewis 18).

Coppola had formed The Directors Company along with Peter Bogdanovich and William Friedkin. The intention was that several films would be made under the company's auspices and with finance advanced from Paramount Pictures. However, *The Conversation* and Bogdanovich's *Paper Moon* were the only films to materialize before Paramount withdrew their support (Lewis 16; Blake 188-89).

Shooting of *The Conversation* began in December of 1972 on a modest budget ceiling of two million dollars. The "Zoetrope" studios (actually an old San Franciscan warehouse) provided many of the interior sets. Actor Gene Hackman was hired to play the lead character, Harry Caul. The character's surname was the result of Coppola's decision to retain what was actually the result of a typist's transcription error made while taking down the dictated script—"Call" became "Caul." Coppola noted the association of Harry's surname with the term for a membrane found (in rare instances) to be surrounding the face of an infant at birth (Cowie 83; Schumaker 135).

As Cowie notes, the characterization of Harry Caul was derived from the real-life surveillance expert, Hal Lipset (a well established operator in San Francisco, later famous for his analysis of the 'blank' eighteen minutes of Watergate tape); it also

had associations with the lonely, alienated man of the Herman Hesse novel *Steppenwolf* (the protagonist of which is named Harry Keller). Furthermore, the narrative includes elements of homage to famed director Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow Up*, with an additionally 'Hitchcockian' inflection to its thriller-based plot (83).

The Autobiographical: Or, Harry Coppola?

Johnson (132) has noted that Coppola might also have been consciously trying to reveal facets of his own personality through Harry Caul. Johnson cites actor Al Pacino, who once commented that "Francis is an emotional voyeur. He looks, he sees, he watches people's emotions. He can't help it" (Orth, qtd. in Johnson 132).

Blake refers to *The Conversation* as Coppola's "most personal film [and] his most Catholic" (189). According to Blake, the utilization of Catholic iconography, rituals, and other elements contribute to an "authentic atmosphere for the characters" (ibid). A point of differentiation, however, is that, in implicit contrast to the Italian-American ethnicity and connectedness of Coppola, Caul is disconnected from a specific ethnicity (184). Caul is lost in the "San Francisco milieu [that] reflects mainstream homogenous Anglo-American society. The Catholic elements in the film spring not from characters but from Coppola himself" (Blake 189).

Caul and Coppola are of course both Catholic: Harry is a rather dogmatic one despite his contradictions, such as his sleeping with a prostitute; Coppola, on the other hand, according to Blake, was given to a "third generation secularism", the sort of secularism that recognized moral ambiguities in the context of one's real-world existence (182). Coppola was also capable of an arguably more bare-faced transgression: Blake cites a well publicized extra-marital sexual liaison with a one time production assistant (181). Blake continues, however, to warn one against the complete dismissal of the question of Catholicism in the make-up of the director (182-185).

Harry is the perfectionist, insisting on a "nice fat recording". The term "dogged" is a necessary adjunct to Harry the perfectionist, a technician who would appear to go to any lengths to get the professional results he and his reputation demand. Coppola

was similarly known as one dogged in his determination, also with a reputation for perfectionism, a point oft-reported in the film community (Schumaker 112). The parallels do not end there: Kolker goes so far as to describe Caul as being "like a filmmaker, putting together bits and pieces to make a whole. But what he puts together is the wrong movie" (198).

Issues of Realism and Style

Denby takes up the issue of "style" and refers to "the benefits Coppola has derived from a relative aesthetic conservatism" (133). He maintains that through Coppola's adherence to realism and concern with matters of the spirit, the story has been rescued from art. Coppola did, in Denby's estimation, convey an emotional quality that was absent from Antonioni's *Blow Up*. Denby similarly warns of the danger of the film being dismissed amongst followers of, what he termed, the "inhuman chic" of an Antonioni-styled "art" film (ibid.).

For Denby, authorial intervention need not preclude a certain "realism", and the particular example of a restricted 'point of view' in the narration is noted by Denby thus:

> [...] Restricted viewpoint strategies direct our responses more coercively than 'open' constructions. The opening shot of *The Conversation*, which should become famous, closes off the big world, delivers us over to that segment that Coppola wants to explore; it's a continuous zoom which starts at an immense distance above Union Square and slowly moves closer, discarding irrelevancies and distractions from our view, until we finally discover Harry in the crowd, eavesdropping on the young couple. From thereafter we see nothing that Harry doesn't see or fantasise himself (133).

Further to the notion of authorial technique, Johnson refers to the motif of repetition and points out that: "he [Coppola] tried a new approach to character delineation... That this approach too went unrecognized, never mind unrewarded, annoyed him" (131).

In explaining his motivation for the use of repetition, Coppola further betrays a degree of frustration with one reviewer:

> I read a review of *The Conversation* that describes the two characters, the boy and the girl walking, as skimpily drawn. Well, here I am deliberately trying to not unveil their characters in a conventional way. I'm trying to give you an impression of their characters. The only film on those characters is the same dumb conversation. It's my attempt at trying to find another way to give character to an audience instead of just a classic playwright's way of giving you a little background and unveil traits and show you the contradictions. I'm just showing you the same moment over and over. I'm using repetition instead of exposition. The second I do it, someone says it's skimpy. (Coppola, qtd. in Johnson 131-132)

For Schatz, Coppola's authorial technique and intervention exhibits what he terms a "cine-modernism":

> As [the protagonist] Harry works at his editing bench assembling the audio tapes, Coppola and film editor Walter Murch continually cut away to visual flashbacks of the event…detective stories are self-reflexive by their very nature because they involve the reconstruction of past events in narrative terms. Here Coppola extends that logic into filmmaking itself, with Harry going over the "rushes," interpreting and cutting his material into a dramatic structure (253).

Braudy provides a synthesis of several points: While Braudy does not explicitly use the term "modernist" in relation to Coppola, it is apparent that he regards Coppola as a director with formalist concerns relating to "artifice—with genre plots, characters, and motifs that delve into the roots of popular forms—as well as with stylized sets, and an expressionistic use of colour …" (*Sacraments* 18).

Braudy productively argues against the Bazinian assumption of a consensus amongst the "fold" of "neo-realists", the allegedly unified front committed to "an aesthetic of reality" (Bazin's well-known phrase). Instead Braudy points to the directorial interventionism and (occasional) formal stylization (the torture scene is Braudy's given example) apparent in Rossellini's *Rome Open City* as an exemplar of the need to resist (Bazin's) blanket categorizations (*Sacraments* 18).

Braudy links back "by suggestion" the notion of directorial intervention, referring to Coppola as being one director who "[was] drawn to the implications of directorial imposition and tyranny: the director as aesthetic master of his material, shaping it to his will" (18). For Braudy, Coppola is a director who similarly acts to:

> [make] us aware […] of the perceptual variations on "reality" through which the film is constructed. It is an incantatory moment, a mode of suprarealistic perception that I would like to call a sacramentalizing of the real, not so that it be worshipped but so that its spiritual essence, whether diabolical or holy, inflect what is otherwise a discrete collection of objects in space. (18)

Braudy notes a key point of differentiation between Coppola and another European director, Michelangelo Antonioni. In comparing *The Conversation* to Antonioni's *Blow Up* (whose protagonist he does not see as a directorial surrogate), Braudy considers that in the Coppola film, "the crime is real and the mystery can be solved—if one interprets the data properly [...]. Much more than the photographer in *Blow Up*, he [Harry Caul] is a figure of the director, especially the director whose technical mastery has been his passport to success" (22).

Despite remarking on the similarities of style and approach between Coppola and a European director such as Rossellini, Braudy notes a crucial point of departure in the American's approach. Coppola evidences a "commitment to genre formats in plot and style" that contrasts with the European tradition (18).

Issues of Genre and Cycle

We know from Lev that several of what James Monaco terms "new versions of [*noir*] genre" films were released in the early to mid-Seventies (Lev 49; Monaco 281). Indeed Monaco, while exercising a judgment as to "quality", explains thus:

> While Coppola and Penn were experimenting with contemporary Angst-ridden private eyes in "The Conversation" and "Night Moves" (both with Gene Hackman), the most successful of the new versions of this old genre is probably Robert Benton's "The Late Show" (1977). (281)

As Rosenbaum notes, the so-called 'paranoid cycle' of the Seventies (including Pakula's *The Parallax View*, 1974, and *All the President*'s *Men*, 1976) had its roots predominantly in the thriller films of Fritz Lang (notably his *Dr. Mabuse* series) and in the fiction of Thomas Pynchon (8). In the case of Pynchon, Rosenbaum notes the influence of his *Gravity's Rainbow* (ibid.).

Inevitable evaluations were made in terms of judgements concerning the 'success' or otherwise of *The Conversation* as regards its relationship to genre. Robert K Johnson regards the film as "ultimately not a successful movie" (141). Those criticisms encompass issues of characterization, the variations in sound level experienced by theatre-goers on the film's original release, Caul's dream sequence, which Johnson maintains is contrived, and other points of implausibility. Johnson's comments on

"the mystery story" do however have a direct and explicit bearing on considerations of genre:

> When Caul becomes involved in the plot centered on the couple and the Director, so does the audience. The plot, however, is very weak [...] Normally a mystery story moves so rapidly the holes in the plot are obscured, undetected by the audience—at least until after the film ends. But Coppola's repeated inability to deal successfully with the film's pace recurs in *The Conversation.* The pace in this film is very slow. Sometimes, in terms of Caul's character and professional work, the pace must be slow. Nevertheless, dramatically justified or not, the slow pace allows the audience all too much time to ponder the flaws in the script while watching the film. (141-142)

Foster Hirsch suggests that *The Conversation* is an example of "a genuine nouveau *noir*" (169). Hirsch continues to make the intuitive point that, with reference to Harry's repeated playing back of the tapes "repetition and going in circles are endemic to the noir world the film sets up" (170).

As to the relation of *film noir* to genre,[1] I am sympathetic to Stanley Cavell's position that "[...] movie cycles, taken by certain movie theorists as in itself a mark of unscrupulous commercialism, is a possibility internal to the medium; one could even say, it is the best emblem of the fact that a medium had been created. For a cycle is a genre (prison movies, Civil War movies, horror movies, etc.); and a genre is a medium" (Cavell 298).

Cycles, following Belton, have a peculiar and particular historical specificity, a specificity with a tendency to follow observable trends of mutation with the passing of time and in changing social conditions (186-188). Belton further notes that it would of course be spurious to suggest however that the conventions of genre are not similarly subject to change and fluctuation (186).

One should argue to a dynamic interplay of all these factors: to include both the changing demands of industry and audiences, the demands of story-telling, and of the role of the 'auteur' as one of conscious motivator in the cinematic medium.

In returning to a consideration of cycle as a specific contextualizing factor, Peter Lev provides an useful analysis of the 'paranoia (and /or) conspiracy cycle.' This cycle is one within which *The Conversation* is commonly placed in critical discourse:

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[1] See Belton, 1994 for a detailed analysis of the relationship between genre and *film noir*.

> Conspiracy movies of the 1970s differ from disaster movies in providing a more detailed and pessimistic vision of contemporary malaise. These films use the detective or mystery genre to offer an investigation of what is wrong with contemporary America. The conspiracy film's social critique is often muted by or in conflict with genre requirements, but the willingness to critique such institutions as capitalism and government gives these films a liberal or Leftist slant. [...] Conspiracy films of 1974 (eg, *The Conversation, The Parallax View*, *Chinatown*) are unusual in American cinema in their withholding of a happy ending. The explanation may be that the moment of the Watergate hearings was so grim that a few Hollywood films departed from the recuperative, happy ending tradition. (49-50)

Chapter Four of this study will analyze *The Conversation* as an exemplar of the 'deviant text' and incorporate John Cawelti's notions of "generic transformation", (Cawelti, *Chinatown*).

Conclusion

It is apparent that *The Conversation* was the subject of some intelligent criticism. The Cowie text provides both well-researched background information and intuitive insights. However some criticism was neither quite as favourable as this writer would have expected nor indeed was it able to adequately equip viewers for their interpretive adventures. Among the salient points were: establishing the film in and within the contexts of 'auteur cinema' and the so-called 'paranoid cycle,' examining its dominant aesthetic, and offering viewers insight into the film's technical background.

Chapter Three: An Approach to Authorship

Introduction

Sarris's model, which located cinematic art in a select number of unique individuals, quickly became influential after the publication of his key work, *Notes*, in 1962. As Allen & Gomery point out, most film histories written between 1965 and 1980 were organized around some notion of auteurism (72). This Chapter, and *The Conversation* itself, stand as a corrective to what those writers refer to as a reliance on a "lone artist" or "great man" theory of art (110-111).

This chapter begins with a discussion of the untenable position of classical or Sarrisean 'auterist' based criticism in light of more contemporary critical theory. John Caughie summarizes the place of the author within film theory in arguing against the conception of the text as either "a pure 'inside' (producing itself, for an empty spectator, out of its own internal operations), or as a pure 'outside' (given by an originating source)." Rather he champions an "attempt to formulate the text, and its subjects, as a movement between the two, or as the involvement of the one in the other, destroying the purity of each" (206).

Burke's position, which emphasizes context, and is specifically concerned with situating the auteur in and within culture, is in line with the approach of the 'new auteurism.' Burke's preface summarises his position thus:

> Although the notion of art has come under attack, especially when it is treated as a privileged or "authentic" form of cultural expression and contrasted with mass culture, I have not eliminated the term from my vocabulary. For one thing...I do not see art as "pure," superior, or beyond cultural determination. For another, I think important distinctions continue to exist between art and popular culture in terms of modes of production, funding, distribution, advertising, exhibition, popular press criticism, academic legitimation, and reception. (xiii -xiv)

Both writers refer to the notion of "purity," a notion of which I will take as metaphorically structuring my later analysis under the terms of an "impure outside" and an "impure inside" as regards the text.

Sarris Comes Under Attack

As John Caughie's "Introduction" notes, serious revision of basic auteurist assumptions did not come about until the late 1960s. Chief among these alterations in the glorification of the director-as-author was the project known as auteur-structuralism. Practiced most notably by British critics Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Peter Wollen, and Jim Kitses, auteur-structuralism sought to move the study of directors away from the Romantic impressionism of Sarris and the Movie critics. To this end, these critics adopted a "scientific" approach, a strain of structuralism popularized through the works of Claude Levi-Strauss. Films were studied as cultural myths, and the critical task became one of uncovering the imbedded meanings unconsciously placed within the film by the director (Caughie 123-129).

Auteur-structuralism challenged previous conceptions of film authorship by emphasizing the unconscious nature of meaning production. However, the reliance on the analogy of film to myth (with an inimical negation of "style"), exemplifies an approach that will not be applied in this study. Peter Wollen writes that "Myths, as Levi-Strauss has pointed out, exist independently of style....the same is true of *auteur* film" (105).

For Wollen, then, the formal material of filmic construction-cinematography, editing, mise-en-scène, and so forth was a barrier to the critical understanding of an auteur's function as "catalyst"; the critic is called upon to dig beneath mere style to find the essential film within. In "Style, Grammar, and the Movies", Bill Nichols has noted: "Wollen goes so far as to eliminate style entirely from the terrain of significance or of interior meaning in the *auteur*" (615).

Wollen, in positing the director as 'unconscious catalyst,' adopted a theoretical position informed by concerns of myth and codification. His supplement to the 1972 reprint of *Signs and Meanings* was something of an historical turning point in critical approaches to authorship. As Helen Stoddart points out:

> The important advance secured by this significant footnote to auteur-structuralism was its placing of the director as a textual indeterminacy which then takes shape in the reading process. It was no-longer necessary, therefore, to refer to some predetermined, often self-pronounced, version of the director's intentions to validate a film's reading. (47)

Since the waning fortunes of auteur-structuralism, a redefinition of the concept of 'author' has made dealing with directors more complex than ever. Noel Carroll's assessment, that "Auteurism was not really much of a theory; it was actually a form of connoisseurship", carries an inherent warning (3).

In stepping back from the director-centred "connoisseurship" to which Carroll refers, further layers of complexity may be introduced. In due consideration of the role played by cultural factors, the examples set by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault are contributions to an understanding of authorship under the post-structuralist rubric. Most crucially, Barthes and Foucault each emphasized the author's position within a textual process which also includes the reader (Caughie 199-207).

For Barthes, the figure of the author is, literally, one of authority. In his article "The Death of the Author," Barthes argues that literature must be freed from the dominance of the authorial figure so that the diversity of meanings in a literary text may be more fully appreciated. Barthes writes:

> We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture....the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. (Caughie 211)

Barthes' article (and the provocative call for the author's "death") is a polemic aimed at provoking a critical re-definition of reading and writing practices. He argues that, to grant ultimate interpretative power to the reader, the author must be effectively removed from the process of the reading. This removal of the authorial presence, Barthes argues, is necessary since "To give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Caughie 212).

Barthes, then, "kills" the author in order to give birth to the reader, a reader who is now unbound from the authority of a coherent, originating source. With the author

removed, Barthes envisions a text for which "unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (ibid. 213).

Michel Foucault has noted that there are long-standing social functions which authors continue to fulfil. Most basically, Foucault argues, authors function as a means of classification, to differentiate one group of texts from another (Caughie 282-291).

Foucault describes the author as a function of discourse:

> The name of the author remains at the contours of texts—separating one from the other, defining their form, and characterizing their mode of existence...The author's name is not a function of a man's civil status , nor is it fictional; it is situated in the breach, among the discontinuities, which gives rise to new groups of discourse and their singular mode of existence. Consequently, we can say that in our culture, the name of an author is a variable that accompanies only certain texts to the exclusion of others...the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society. (ibid. 284)

The Impure Outside: The Distanced Creator

The metaphoric 'pendulum' shall swing at this juncture toward considerations of Coppola as both an "initiator" and "instigator". I turn to my previous invocation of Caughie, and his concerns that a text should not be considered as either "a 'pure inside' (producing itself, for an empty spectator, out of its own internal operations), or as a pure 'outside' (given by an originating source)" (206).

As documented in the preceding Chapter, Coppola embarked upon a journey in a desire to "create". That journey culminated of course in the shooting of *The Conversation*: but what of its starting or initiating point?

Heidegger's discussion of Nietzsche posits as one of "Five Statements on Art" that "art is the most perspicuous configuration of will to power (71). One knows from Heidegger's earlier discussion of Nietzsche that "will to power is the ultimate factum to which we come" (3). Art is also "the distinctive countermovement to nihilism," and further keeps us from the "true world' of the "supersensuous", whereby

"submission, capitulation, pity, mortification, and abasement become positive values" (71).

Having being motivated by a "creative impulse", Coppola did enlist the help of other persons as creative collaborators (a point to be examined later), and he of course utilized the tools and technology that were necessary to the production of the film.

The term "necessity" comes to mind when considering the implied "dilutions" of Coppola's impulses and choices that I have suggested here. The roles of others, both of those who would act as creative accomplices and of those who would control access to the technology required to shoot and market the film, invoke the Marxist terms, 'capital' and the 'division of labour'. As McMullen points out,

> Marxists are not alone in feeling that under capitalism whatever a person produces with his hands or brain is immediately made alien, somehow hostile, to him. Existentialists are not alone in their anguished conviction that every individual has got to create Man, without a blueprint. And nearly everyone is nagged by a hunch that he is forbidden to become, in a phrase of Ortega's, his "programmatic personage," his own vital design, his authentic "I"; nearly everyone is a sort of sane schizophrenic. (209-210)

There is another aspect to alienation that McFarland identifies: "alienation is notoriously congenial to artists. It helps them to create worlds within the world. It does part of their work for them" (210). As detailed in the preceding Chapter, Coppola persuaded the capitalists at Paramount Studios to fund his little venture on the strength of *The Godfather*'s success. He was rather a little more than a mere 'catalyst' as Wollen (1972) posits. However, as Corrigan maintains:

> Even Coppola's most artsy and individual film, *The Conversation*, demonstrates major industrial complications within auteurism, at least as it is applied to the control of the filmmaker. Walter Murch, who engineered the brilliant soundtrack and much of the editing of the movie, can claim, for many critics, the most important part in that film. (109)

Of course a creative partnership does not necessarily unmake an auteur (and due acknowledgement of collaboration is to be made at a later juncture). But what of the question of repetition? McFarland quotes Valéry thus:

> influence is clearly distinguishable from imitation, [for] what a man does either repeats or rejects what someone else has done—repeats it in another tone, refines or amplifies or simplifies it, loads it or overloads it with meaning, or else rebuts, overturns, destroys and denies it, but thereby assumes it and has invisibly used it (37).

These comments are remarkably prophetic when one considers that the motif of repetition reflects protagonist Harry Caul's proclivity to 'overload' the "meaning/s" allegedly contained on his tapes.

The Mode of Art Cinema: A (partial) Connection

The Conversation demonstrates what Bordwell (1979) terms tendencies of 'art cinema': "The art cinema motivates its narratives by two principles: realism and authorial expressivity," writes Bordwell (in Braudy & Cohen 1999, 781). Further, the "author" prefigures quite significantly in Bordwell's analysis of 'art cinema,' "[whereby it] foregrounds the author as a structure in the film's system. Not that the author becomes a biographical individual..., but rather the author becomes a formal component" (ibid. 719). Bordwell observes that "...the author is the textual force "who" communicates (what is the film *saying*?) and "who" expresses (what is the artist's *personal vision*?). Lacking identifiable stars and familiar genres, the art cinema uses a concept of authorship to unify the text" (ibid.).

Therein lies the rub: as the previous chapter's citation of Braudy's *Sacraments* indicates, Coppola did base the film on a recognizable genre (the 'Thriller,' a point to be taken up in the following chapter). Further, as Bordwell notes, "the credits for the film, as in *Persona* or *Blow Up*, can announce the power of the author to control what we see". Lead actor Gene Hackman was by 1974 a recognizable name, and he is not only credited with a rather conspicuous title line in the very opening sequence of the film, but as Harry Caul he is the literal subject of the probing camera movements that immediately draw the audience into the film.

Coppola is similarly credited, and it is my contention that these two names are contenders for the role of author in the audience's perceptions, both at this early stage and perhaps throughout the entire film. Of course this is a generalization, as indeed is the very notion of "audience". A central point is of course that one tends to make an *attribution* (and it is never a neutral one), as to the naming involved in Bordwell's "who communicates/who expresses" questions (as cited above). Such an attribution is influenced in some measure by industry and critical constructs that surround the release of a film. "Film is money"; after all is said and done, and as

earlier noted, Coppola had the sort of reputation by 1974 that would have seen him attributed with the relative "creative freedom" to which Bordwell refers (719).

My focus at this juncture is on Coppola (sidestepping somewhat the notion of 'personal vision'), and more specifically on the notion of 'device'. Bordwell is instructive as he identifies the pendulum swing towards the author in the use of several types of formal devices:

> Violations of classical conceptions of time and space…[as suggestive of] the subjective reality of complex characters. Plot manipulations of story order (especially flashbacks) remain anchored to character subjectivity as in *81/2* and *Hiroshima mon amour*. Manipulations of duration are justified realistically (e.g., the *temps morts* of early New Wave films) or psychologically (the jump cuts of *a bout de souffle* signalling a jittery lifestyle). By the same token, spatial representation will be motivated as documentary realism (e.g., location shooting, available light), as character revelation, or in extreme cases, as character subjectivity. (719)

Obviously *The Conversation* does not enter the territory of Godard's jump cuts (as in *a bout de souffle*), nor indeed the more radical devices of art cinema as outlined above. Indeed, according to Braudy's *Sacraments* (see Chapter 2), the film shows a strong respect for genre. However, there are examples of authorial device, as in the case of the camera work at the opening of the film and with regard to the 'dream sequence'.

I turn to the opening sequence with its wide pan and slow, clinical, and probing camera which seems to draw the audience in to its omniscient view, only then to subjectively zoom in on its "target" (and in doing so, implying that it is Harry/Hackman who is of significance). This sequence is suggestive of the very work done by Caul and his accomplices, i.e., of surveillance. However, there is an important qualifier here: what if that very clinical and precise piece of camera work were to be reflected back upon the user as it were of that (literal) device (i.e., the camera). If in view of the other connotation of "device" that I have invoked—as in the notion of authorial device, then the nature of that technical aspect is brought to mind—a technical feat with connotations of the detached, and quite "mechanical".

My point is that there is a particular applicability in such a reflexive turn. At the time of shooting of *The Conversation*, video assist (an apparatus providing a video screen

image in addition to what is seen through the camera's viewfinder) was in common use. Although I have been unable to ascertain whether Coppola actually used such a device in shooting this particular film, it is of greater interest to me that there is an implication of a "split" in views. This I maintain is metaphoric of the kind of "split" one perceives or experiences when one is confronted with the sort of mechanized "virtuosity" as is displayed in the opening sequence.

Geuens refers to the camera obscura and video assist as "... [providing] apparent objectivity and finality of the image." Further, Geuens cites Jonathan Crary (1991), who in relation to video assist, states that, "the observer...is there as a disembodied witness to a mechanical and transcendental re-presentation of the objectivity of the world". Geuens continues to state, "What is at stake here is the authority of an ideal observer, removed from the scene, someone who is no longer operating as a body-in-the-world sharing a space/time continuum with the actors. The latter, instead, are objectified, appropriated for the director's use" (23).

The latter example of the dream sequence as "authorial device" serves in part as a connection to *Film Noir* (which is to be explored in greater depth in Chapter 4). Krutnik points out, "The distorted mise-en-scène serves as a correlative of the hero's psychological destabilization [...] it operated [...] by invoking a dislocated perspective, where the 'reality principle' is swamped by the twisted logic of desire" (48-49).

One may note, however, that the way in which the dream sequence is rendered seems to have been "played straight". The sequence is more evocative in terms of conveying conventional notions of guilt and loss rather than the dislocation to which Krutnik refers. One is again confronted with the delicate balance of a text evidencing no great proclivity to render ruptures in its diegesis—a text which maintains both the sort of subtext of Catholic guilt that Braudy's *Sacraments* notes and a level of realism (such as that noted by Denby; see Chapter 2).

Whose Signs, Which Connection? : Intertextuality

We know from the preceding chapter that connections to Antonioni and Hitchcock were in all likelihood Coppola's idea. That chapter has also indicated that *The Conversation* is an "aural equivalent" of *Blow Up* and that the invocation of such an intertextual relationship stands as one of the more significant 'devices' employed by Coppola.

Allusion and quotation were a relatively common 'feature' of American films of the era. Kolker's *Algebraic Figures* is enlightening with respect to this phenomenon:

> The post-Fifties, post-French New Wave generation of American filmmakers, exploited the contradictions. They too looked to repetition and depended upon audience recognition, yet did not care to make their work completely transparent. They did not want to hide the genesis of their films or suppress the fact that films come not from life or an abstract convention of "reality" but from other films [...] they interrogated that aspect of commercial filmmaking that combines commercial necessity (repetition and imitation) with the work of the imagination (allusion and quotation) in order to provoke the audience into recognizing film history. (36)

In a re-consideration of the insertion of the "mime" at the opening of the film, Iampolski's citation of Michael Riffaterre refers to quotation as instigating a movement from mimesis to semiosis: "This is because the quote violates the link between sign and objective reality (the mimetic link), orienting the sign toward another text rather than a thing" (30). Riffaterre observes:

> This passage from mimesis to semiosis arises either from the superimposition of one code onto another, or from the superimposition of one code onto a structure that is different from what is properly its own [...] where the reader expends the effort required to draw on other texts and other codes, the quote acquires its motivation, thereby not only imbuing the text with additional meanings but also restoring the mimesis it has violated. (Riffaterre, qtd. in Iampolski 31)

The issue of motivation then is suggestive of a movement or connection from text to text or code to code. Following Bordwell, those 'codes' need not be some feature of a text as such, but can include both the author and the *activity* of that author of a text (*Mode* 719). However turning firstly to a consideration of a 'text to text' level, Kolker is instructive in stating that "at its very best the modernist act of allusion reveals form and structure through dialectical play. A new work, coherent in its own

structure, gains that coherence by absorbing and restructuring other works" (*Algebraic* 39).

The Conversation has indeed 'absorbed' *Blow Up* as an antecedent text (amongst others), and rather smoothly "borrows" the themes of mediation and the epistemological interrogation of the 'evidential' which are apparent in the Antonioni work.[2] Coppola's quotation (the "mime") is, I accept, and as the prevailing literature oft-acknowledges, an homage. The degree to which this works on a code-to-code level places of course an even greater demand on the audience: they must make those connections in recognizing the anterior text (*Blow Up*), and of course then on to Antonioni as subject of the referencing.

It is my contention that the quotation has several simultaneous implications: on the one hand, it sends a message that one is perhaps to be in for an "art" influenced cinematic experience (which again would presume some knowledge of Antonioni's work); and on the other, I believe that the significance of the mime is as a link in a sort of signifying chain which includes what is already implicit in the very opening camera movements, i.e., that one is in for a *technically* oriented film, and one that is very interested in media and mediation.

The parallels between *The Conversation* and *Blow Up* are well documented (see Chapter 2). Further analysis of commonalties relating to 'detection' is explored in Chapter 4, and a synopsis of plot is provided for both films as an appendix to this study. I wish only to emphasize at this juncture the shared interest in *technique* and technical manipulation. Such a shared interest is graphically displayed where Caul's manipulation of the audiotapes in the former text is a corollary of the photographer character's (played by David Hemmings) blowing up or enlargement of the photograph in the latter text.

The Hitchcock connection interests me less in a direct relation to intertextuality and more in relation to the 'Thriller' genre (which is to be explored in greater detail in the following chapter). However, a brief example is illustrative here. The sequence

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[2] For a useful analysis of this and the notion of alienation in *Blow Up*, see Kevin Z. Moore's "Eclipsing the Commonplace..."

where Harry checks the hotel room after earlier having bugged it is rendered with a somewhat ominous undertone, given that the soundtrack is reduced to silence, providing counterpoint to the moving camera. Suspense is built with the slow creeping pans and the continued absence of sound. Nothing it seems but a catastrophe of some kind will break the oppressive tone. Audiences familiar with Hitchcock's *Psycho* are, I would suggest, rather suspicious of what may be lurking behind the shower curtain at this point! As Harry approaches the toilet and flushes it, the soundtrack now breaks the silence and builds up to highlight the horror of the red nastiness overflowing from it.

The Plural Outside: Collaboration

Constraints of space permit only the acknowledgement of two of Coppola's collaborators, Walter Murch (sound/editing) and David Shire (score). As noted in the preceding chapter, Murch was, in addition to the duties of sound engineering, left to edit *The Conversation.*

Murch, whose *In the Blink of an Eye* evidences an interesting approach to film editing, explicates the process by which he settled on a 'rhythm' in the editing of the film:

> Something to consider [...] is the possibility that there may be a part of our waking reality where we actually do experience something like cuts, and where daylight images are somehow brought in closer, more discontinuous, juxtaposition than might otherwise seem the case...I began to get a glimmer of this on my first picture-editing job—*The Conversation*—when I kept finding that Gene Hackman...would blink very close to the point where I had decided to cut. (59)

Murch continues, "[Hackman] had assumed the character of Harry Caul, was thinking thoughts the way Harry would think them, and, therefore, was blinking in rhythm with those thoughts" (*Blink* 64). Murch notes that he cut to that rhythm (ibid.). It must be apparent that, with regard to both Murch and Hackman, one is dealing with two very skilled and intelligent persons.

With regard to sound, Murch, in an interview with Michael Jarrett, responds to having been asked how has he arrived at the distorted sounds at the beginning of the film thus:

> Even as early as 1973, there were shudderings of the world of digital sound. It hadn't hit yet, but we knew that people were experimenting with it. I thought, "It's slightly logical that Harry Caul would have a digital setup of some kind. In fact, the only way he would be able to do what he does- remove an overlay of drums and reveal a voice behind-is by some kind of digital subtraction...I found a synthesizer and sent the voices through it.. I processed them [and achieved] an approximate indication to me anyway, of a digital sound (Murch in Jarrett 4).

The contribution of David Shire to the musical score of the film must be similarly acknowledged as being quite remarkable. As a musician myself, I was compelled to purchase the soundtrack; the haunting solo piano pieces are for me a standout. The very strong "narrativity" is keenly felt—the single note evocation of isolation and loneliness in "Harry's Tune" for example.

The Paranoid Harry: Or The Cultural Connection

At one level, of course, Harry's obvious paranoia was a "creative decision", and under the terms of this study, a deliberate "device". One must acknowledge that Coppola wrote the screenplay for the film, and similarly acknowledge his 'source'—the real life surveillance operator, Hal Lipset.

Lipset, it is noted, acted as a technical consultant on *The Conversation* (Holt 6). Indeed Lipset is both given a credit and verbally referred to by Harry's assistant (played by John Cazale) in the film. Holt further notes that by the seventies, Lipset was "credited with ushering in a real-life James Bond era in which hidden bugs, wiretaps, and infinity transmitters threatened (or promised) to take over the world" (5).

Coppola's capturing of a surveillance operator's psyche, by way of characterization, is, as the prevailing literature cited in the preceding Chapter would suggest, quite effectively rendered. In view of this apparent "realistic portrayal", Horne is instructive in noting that Kracauer's "Theory of Film" concerns film rendering the "redemption of physical reality" and that "'Found stories' are regarded as inherently superior to fabricated ones" (Horne 49).

My purpose, however, is to introduce, what I term, a "cultural connection". The term "connection" is rather deliberate. Knight quotes from Don DeLillo's *Underworld* thus:

> Everything connected at some undisclosed point down the systems line. This caused a certain disquiet. But it was a splendid mystery in a way, a source of wonder, how a brief equation that you tentatively enter on your screen might alter the course of many lives, might cause the blood to rush through the body of a woman on a tram many thousands of miles away, and how do you define this kind of relationship? (DeLillo, qtd. in Knight 204)

In examining post-Enlightenment history, Braudy points out a weakening connection: "with the loss of belief in providential explanation, and with an increasing number of things in the world, the stage is temptingly set for either socially approved fictions or personal paranoias to fill the aching gap of ignorance. Enter, then, narrative [...] that is, as the discovery of conspiracy" (*Informant* 138).

But what of those things in the world, and what of our relationship to them? Mumford's usage of the term 'technics' is useful as he explains thus, "...technics [...] is not just a way of running to and fro and seeking out many inventions: it is a means of creating a human personality more capable of directing rationally its own life" (*Art & Technics* 55).

Mumford explains that "the machine has developed neurotic phenomena of its own; or, rather, our overattachment to the machine has brought about a neurotic condition in ourselves" (ibid.). Koestler echoes these comments: "*Mutandis mutandis,* can we invent a similar remedy for the schizophysiology of our nervous system, for the paranoid streak in man which made such an appalling mess of our history?" (330).

Steiner reads Heidegger and explicates thus, "Since Roman engineering and seventeeth-century rationalism, Western technology has not been a vocation but a provocation and imperialism. Man challenges nature, he harnesses it, he compels his will on wind and water, on mountain and woodland" (139).

The Conversation betrays a sort of ambivalence, or more accurately, it sounds a cautionary note with regard to technology. As the following Chapter shall prove, Harry Caul is rather 'over-connected' and is indeed over-reliant on his machines. At

this juncture, I believe that Mumford, in again providing an analysis of western history and the machine age, gives the perfect summation for *The Conversation* and as such deserves the (almost) last word:

> The displacement of the living and the organic took place rapidly with the early development of the machine. For the machine was a counterfeit of nature, nature analyzed, regulated, narrowed, controlled by the mind of men. The ultimate goal of its development was, however, not the mere conquest of nature but her resynthesis: *dismembered by thought, nature was put together again in new combinations*. (Mumford, *Technics* 52, emphasis added)

Conclusion

This Chapter has considered both the notions of 'device' and (strained) connection as regards issues of authorship. In other words, I have provided indicators that I trust would encourage the film spectator to 'pull back', to not get too involved with personalities and to be cognizant of film as foremost a technology. Of course the technological medium is not necessarily a cause for invoking negative criticism. Indeed, I identify what I consider to be, in part, the potential in the film to "comment" as it were on technology and the technocratic.

Chapter Four: Of Tragedy and Private Eyes

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is the application of the "contextualizing" facets of mode, genre and literary antecedents to *The Conversation*. I concur with Thomas Schatz's notion that *The Conversation* is a potential exemplar of a modernism at work in the 'New Hollywood' of the Seventies (*Old/New Hollywood* 217). However my concern here is to provide a greater level of contextualization to the relevant points of analysis.

I shall be considering Harry Caul as a 'failed detective'. Upon his failure lie three important and interrelated points: first, *The Conversation* reads like a "tragedy", thereby inviting analysis in light of Tuska's discussion of Greek Tragedy (*Dark* 7-42); second, I wish to expand on what Hirsch terms the film's status as "genuine nouveau noir" (*Detours* 169); and third, it represents a kind of modernism which is itself a deviation from the classic detective story. Such a deviation may be further read, following Cawelti's work on generic transformation, as a 'transformation' of the classical formulation of the detective genre (*Chinatown* 498-511).

Tragedy: Oedipus The King

The 'archetypal' detective figure was indeed Sophocles's Oedipus of *Oedipus the King*. As Martin Priestman points out, performances of *Oedipus Rex* originate in Athens, circa 430 BC, and its influence reverberates to this day. Priestman's discussion of the play traces its importance thus:

> [the play] has acquired a special importance to our culture for two reasons only, partly dependent on its merits as a play. The first is that it was the main model on which Aristotle based the generalizations of *The Poetics*, the founding work of Western literary theory. The second is that, as a text and not just as a story, it is the reference point for Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex, and hence a cornerstone of psychoanalysis. The fact that it also has a strong formal resemblance to a detective story makes it a natural focus of attention in a discussion of the relations between detective fiction and literature. (16)

Priestman qualifies the above quoted reference to the play's "formal resemblance to detective fiction" by quoting Aristotle's position on Tragedy: for Aristotle *Oedipus*

represented "the best kind of complex plot, which in turn is the best kind of plot for tragedy" (17). Priestman, however, cites two factors which he maintains are "necessary reminders of the differences between tragedy and detective fiction": the identity of the murderer (whereby the criminal is also the detective), and what he terms "the overall emotional effect" of the play (18).

In light of the protagonist's "fall through error" and the "induction of pity", Priestman maintains that a strenuous relationship exists between *Oedipus Rex* and detective fiction. Priestman posits that the play, through its protagonist, may, however, be regarded as somewhat of a bridge between tragedy and detective fiction (18). Priestman further provides excellent analysis:

> [Oedipus, the protagonist] ...combines in himself the three types of figure, which could conceivably claim to be the protagonists of detective fiction. And it is arguably this tripling of functions ('where three roads meet') that produces the famous pity and fear: pity for someone caught in a trap, and fear that the claim to disinterested detachment, made by Oedipus as detective and ourselves as spectators, may at any moment prove unfounded. (ibid.)

Certain parallels may be drawn between *Oedipus*, tragedy, and *The Conversation*—a film whose generic classification I shall term as a "tragic-detective story". In both a revisitation of, and extrapolating from David Denby's analysis of *The Conversation* (see Chapter 2), there is a potential for a spectatorial "pitying" of Harry Caul. Denby hints that, in spite of a largely problematic positioning of the spectator in terms of identification with Caul, there is at a specific juncture in the film a shift in identification, one that may well elicit a centering on Caul (133). I will take an inference from Denby's observation and suggest that such an elicitation is as a result of preceding narrative activities that I shall term Caul's "error", "entrapment" and "self-undoing"—notions through which I am drawing a deliberate parallel with Priestman's analysis of *Oedipus Rex*.

Denby's assertion is that an audience's feelings for Caul undergo such a change in perspective only at the point in the narrative where Caul is confronted with the blood welling up from the hotel toilet. Denby considers this Caul's "hideous moment of self-knowledge [...] the truth behind a lifetime of denial and evasion" (133). I do not consider it a leap of the imagination (particularly given the distinctly Freudian

overtones of Denby's prose), to again draw a parallel between at least some of the underlying thematic 'structures' of *Oedipus Rex* and those of *The Conversation*.

The Greek notion of *hybris* (or 'hubris' as it would appear to have been transposed) is an interesting one, especially given a contemporary climate of a seemingly blind faith in technology and in its avatars. To invoke the title of a famous B-Movie, the former "nerds" have, if the esteemed Bill Gates (President of Microsoft) is anything to go by, indeed exacted their revenge. *Hybris* was intrinsic to the Greek way of thinking, and, as Tuska explicates, "*Hybris* [...] is not knowing yourself, not recognizing that you are human, it is presuming that you are more than you are, more than human. This may bring about the *phthonos*, the jealousy of the gods" (5).

I am somewhat unwilling to suggest that Harry Caul, who indeed may have been "the best bugger on the West Coast", quite carries off (or internalizes) what Tuska defines as the "insolence" of *hybris* (ibid.). If Caul is the Nietszchean "Overman" at all, then he is one rather past his prime. If his burning desire for a "nice fat recording" is inflected with all the obsessiveness of Melville's Captain Ahab, then it is perhaps in his faith in technology alone that he evidences such a concept.

Caul, who builds his own amplifiers and other technical gadgetry, demonstrates such a faith in (and concomitant expertise in the use of) tools and technology. He is not unlike the Medieval alchemist, desiring to turn the iron of his magnetic tapes into gold (the $15,000 agreed upon with 'The Director' in this instance).

In returning this argument to Greek tragedy, Tuska introduces three further and interrelated concepts that I view as having a direct bearing on Harry Caul and *The Conversation*. These are the ideas of *ate*, *hamartia*, and *daimon*. The notion of *ate* "is to be regarded as infatuation, in more modern times mental possession by a fixed but erroneous idea" (9); the notion of *hamartia* entails "a mistake in perception which occasions an internal dissolution" (8), which is prompted by the gods through inspiring "one they wish to bring down" with a "fatal *ate*", and which in turn "occasion[s] a downfall" (9); the third idea of *daimon*, which occurs "in the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, as opposed to Euripides, [is] the means by which the gods introduce *ate* into the soul" (10).

Harry Caul's, downfall is occasioned by error, the obvious error being his misinterpretation of the meaning of the actual conversation between the Forrest and Williams characters. The role of the "law of the gods", which as Tuska maintains, was of such crucial import to Sophocles (18), is however ambiguous in the film to the point of exception. One could however perhaps accept the "Catholic readings" (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of Richard Blake's *Afterimage*...) of Harry's dilemma.

The film is however, in many respects a "Tragedy of Error"; it is one that raises issues of morality and action. Tuska is once again instructive on this point:

> Aristotle in the *Poetics* regarded Sophocles' plays, and the *Oedipus Rex* in particular, as paradigms for tragic drama. He distinguished between two types of tragedy, The Tragedy of Error, e.g., *Oedipus Rex*, and the Tragedy of Circumstances, e.g., *Troades*. For Aristotle, the Tragedy of Error has nothing to do with moral error, although it might. And in any case, the best tragedy is that composed according to the laws of cause and effect and *not* according to right and wrong. (10)

Most crucially, it is my contention that the film evidences Caul's tragic fall through error. In so doing, the process of cause and effect, itself a partial reflection of, in colloquial terms, such a 'nightmarish scenario', bears down rather oppressively on Caul, so oppressively in fact that one is tempted to regard Caul as himself a 'victim of circumstance'.

Indeed the conclusion of the film denies Caul his moment of enlightenment (achieved as it was by Oedipus in the action of self-blinding): this is I believe a clear example of the film making ironic play of the closure of *Oedipus Rex*. With Caul, the sense of pathos has no redeeming quality and indeed events have destructively turned full circle against him.

The Classical Detective Story

For most literary historians, 'true' literary detection does not begin with Oedipus, but with Poe and his *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1838). Critics have also widely recognized and documented the cultural and epistemological work performed by this "classical" or "ratiocinative" detective story, a form which rests at the intersection of two often-polarized discourses or "master-narratives": Enlightenment rationalism

and Romanticism. The confluence of the detective story and Enlightenment rationalism is a matter of record; indeed, the discourse of the Enlightenment may be said to have generated the form (Cawelti, *Adventure*131-135).

Historically speaking, as Panek points out, societal attitudes to the detective in Anglo-American culture were initially less than favourable. After Sir Robert Peel established the London police and detective forces in 1829 and 1842, respectively, democratic societies feared the plainclothesman as a potential tool for political repression (2-3). Panek concludes that, given such problems, "It is [...] the triumph of British and police officials and officers as well as writers who concerned themselves with crime and police work that by the end of the nineteenth century the detective became the standard hero in British popular fiction" (ibid.).

The image of the detective in American society was initially no more accepted than its British counterpart: Panek suggests that American detective fiction "lay fallow after Poe", that detective-figures appeared only infrequently in popular fictions, and then only as "characters who are dangerous, morally questionable or just socially embarrassing" (14).

Popular literature undoubtedly contributed to the recuperation of the detective in Anglo-American culture, but it did so under the auspices of the existent discourse of the Enlightenment (Priestman 146-147). By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the figure of the scientist was thoroughly entrenched in western thought and culture. Indeed the images of the 'scientist' and the 'detective' may be said to have coalesced (ibid.).

Poe's inaugural Dupin emerges as a brilliant amateur logician and mathematician; Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is similarly an empiricist hero who regards his investigations as "scientific exercise" (Panek 71). Emile Gabriau's detective Pere Tabaret effectively illustrates the almost parasitic dependence of the early detective story upon its discursive roots in Enlightenment faith in reason when Tabaret promises to "reconstruct all the scenes of an assassination, as a savant from a single bone reconstructs an antediluvian animal" (ibid.).

William V. Spanos has pointed out the rationalistic mechanics of early detective fiction:

> ...the problem-solution perspective of the "straightforward" Western man of action [...] is based [...] on a monolithic certainty of that immediate psychic or historical experience [and] is part of a comforting, even exciting and suspenseful well-made cosmic drama or novel—more particularly, a detective story; [a story] in the manner of Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morg*ue or Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. For just such a form as the detective story has its source in the comforting certainty that an acute "eye", private or otherwise, can solve the crime with resounding finality by inferring causal relationships between clues which point to it. (150)

Spanos's analysis is valuable on several fronts. On one hand, Spanos foregrounds the central trope of the Enlightenment discourse in general; the magnifying glass has become a metonym for detection, as has the "private eye" associated with it. On the other hand, the detective-eye can "solve the crime with resounding finality by inferring causal relationships between clues" (150.) This also broadly intersects with an Enlightenment epistemology which, for Michel Foucault, turns upon the act of seeing: "Over all [...] endeavours on the part of clinical thought to define its methods and scientific norms hovers the great myth of a pure Gaze that would be pure language: a speaking eye" (*Birth* 114).

In light of the preceding commentary concerning "the Enlightenment" in relation to classical detection, it is appropriate to consider the (seemingly ironic) historical commitment of classical detection to the Romanticism that was the obverse of the Enlightenment (Cawelti 10).

As Cawelti points out, Poe's Dupin, with his superlative powers of perception ostracizing him from the human community at large, is left to nocturnal walks or to brood in his shuttered apartments (*Adventure* 11). Cawelti goes on to describe Doyle's Sherlock Holmes as similarly marginalized, dependent, in arch-romantic fashion, upon cocaine for stimulus. Holmes is "...also a man of intuition, a dreamer and a drug-taker, who spends hours fiddling aimlessly on his violin" (ibid.). By way of drawing a parallel with Harry of *The Conversation*, one may speculate that his lonely, unaccompanied 'fiddlings' on the saxophone are symptomatic of both his isolation and depression: witness Caul's faltering technique and miscuing of the instrument at the conclusion of the film.

Although figures such as Dupin and Holmes, whatever their differences (rationalism/empiricism, inductive/deductive), do embody Enlightenment reasoning, they can also be read as alienated Byronic heroes (Thompson 47). Thompson further points out, "What is valorized in Poe's detective stories [...] is not rationalism per se, but a romanticized version or ideology of rationalism in which reason, or more properly 'analysis,' figures as the highest mode of apprehension" (ibid.).

As Thompson notes, the classical detective story contains the germs of subsequent versions. Its rationalist components certainly inspire both the scientifically oriented Dr. Thorndike stories of R. Austin Freeman, as well as the whole of the cerebral 'Golden Age', most notably represented by Agatha Christie. The 'transcendental' element of the classical detective also persisted, resurfacing in the explicitly Christian mysteries of G.K. Chesterton, Melville...and Dorothy Sayers (53).

Thompson further suggests that each of these discourses, Enlightenment, Romantic, and Christian, were radically challenged under modernism. Modernism replaced the variously integrated human figure with the alienated subject (135). Thompson suggests that Poe's primitive detective stories anticipated even this paradigm shift: "Poe's dominant literary technique is a protomodernism that constantly refers back to the enlarged consciousness of the alienated individual in which external reality is dissolved into intensified or even hyperactive mental states" (ibid.).

Hard-Boiled Fiction

One may consider that the alienation that marks both Poe's Dupin and Doyle's Sherlock Holmes does in some way foreshadow the more radical sense of isolation which is perhaps the defining characteristic of the twentieth century (Thompson 135). The emergence of the 'hard-boiled' variety of detective fiction suggests, as Thompson notes in relation to the characters of Dashiell Hammett, that "the possibility of mastering the city by means of a superior intelligence no longer exists; the city has now become dominant and threatens to crush the detective" (ibid.).

Cawelti notes three essential differences between the 'hard-boiled' and the classical detective formulae: firstly, the pervasiveness of the crime; secondly, the

"intimidation and temptation of the detective"; and thirdly, the degree of personal involvement of the detective (*Adventure* 143). Cawelti suggests that the classical detective acts as a sort of 'troubleshooter' who descends from a privileged position to restore order in an effortless way. On the other hand, the 'hardboiled' detective is, like Oedipus, characteristically enmeshed in the mystery he attempts to solve. Cawelti notes that "he becomes emotionally or morally committed to some of the persons involved, or [...] the crime poses some basic image of himself" (ibid.).

During the investigation the hard-boiled detective encounters resistance from several quarters—not only from the criminal/s but possibly also from his client and the authorities. In the face of this the detective not only struggles against the resistance involved in one particular incident but tends also to uncover a larger corruption endemic to society itself (Cawelti, *Adventure* 144). As Cawelti points out,

> In short, the hard-boiled detective is a traditional man of virtue in an amoral and corrupt world. His toughness and cynicism form a protective coloration protecting the essence of his character, which is honorable and noble. In a world where law is inefficient and susceptible to corruption, where the recognized social elite is too decadent and selfish to accomplish justice and protect the innocent, the private detective is forced to take over the basic moral functions of exposure, protection, judgement, and execution. (ibid.)

Cawelti goes on to note that, unlike his predecessor of the classical detective story, the hard-boiled detective inhabits the "bitter, godless universe of writers like Crane, Dreiser, and Hemingway" (*Adventure* 151). Indeed, the detective's quest for individual meaning is aligned with Hemingway's notion of a human consciousness which strives to establish "a clean well-lighted place" amid the chaotic and irrational world (ibid.).

The hard-boiled detective story is as is oft acknowledged the most significant literary antecedent of the film noir. As Belton notes "…the adjective 'noir' aptly conveys not only the films' antecedents in the *romans noirs* (black novels) of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain […] and others but also the essential nature of the *experience* which audiences have in watching these films" (186).

This so-called cycle of "dark cinema" is well defined by Tuska:

> The term *film noir* was coined in 1946 by Nino Frank, a cinéaste who derived it from Marcel Duhamel's *Serie Noire* books [...] As a film style it commenced in earnest in [three films]: *Stranger on the Third Floor* (RKO, 1940), Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (RKO, 1941), and H. Bruce Humberstone's *I Wake Up Screaming* (20th-Fox, 1941). However, while *Welles' Citizen Kane* was one of the founding pictures, it was not until *The Lady from Shanghai* (Columbia, 1948) that Welles produced what might well be taken as a prototype of the style. (xxi)

As Belton points out, one may look to audience experiences, but the issue of classification in relation to *film noir* (i.e., whether it is a genre, cycle or movement) is more problematic (187). A fuller analysis of this issue falls outside the scope of this study. However, Belton, who provides an excellent overview of both the critical debate and inherent problematics of definition, summarizes thus: "Film noir is not a genre, but every film noir is also a genre film [...]. But what makes these films 'noir' is the similar transgeneric attitude they take toward their particular genre – the *twist* they give to conventional genre type, forms, and patterns" (ibid.).

Echoing some of Belton's sentiments, Zizek notes that *film noir* is a "logic" that transcends generic boundaries. Here Zizek is instructive:

> ...is film noir an independent genre, or is it a kind of anamorphic distortion affecting different genres? From the very beginning, film noir was not limited to hard-boiled detective stories: reverberations of film noir motifs are easily discernable in comedies (*Arsenic and Old Lace*), [and], in westerns (*Pursued*) [...] etc. Do we have here a secondary impact of something that constitutes a genre of its own (the *noir* crime universe), or is the crime only one of the possible fields of application of a *noir* logic [?] ...my thesis is that the 'proper' detective *noir* ...realizes its notion only by fusion with another genre. (200)

Some debate also exists as to the dominant aesthetic of *film noir*. For example, critical positions are somewhat polarized in the instance of the following writers: Erickson, commenting on the influence of German Expressionism in Jules Dassin's *Night in the City* (1950), suggests that Expressionism is "one of the more subversive elements of classic *noir* films, [which] imposes a second reality, an 'under world night land' over the normal, affluent official face of American complacency, to reveal the rot and soullessness beneath the postwar success machine" (Erickson 203).

Richardson takes an opposing position—he emphasizes *noir*'s connection with realism, takes some pains with his (albeit brief) explanation of some Bazinian tenets, and suggests that "film noir took the camera out of the studio and moved it through the dirty streets and commerce-ridden main thoroughfares of various localities" (25).

Hirsch provides the most applicable approach in that he considers that the (German) 'Expressionist' aesthetic can co-exist with the 'Realist' (and he specifically names such an aesthetic as Italian Neo-Realism). Hirsch explicates thus "the German style [edges] toward nightmare, the Italian straining for documentary realism". Hirsch points out that "sometimes the two modes collide within the same film; more often the divergent styles result in two distinct sub-categories within the noir keyboard" (Hirsch, *Dark Side* 53).

At this juncture it is productive to briefly return one's attention to *The Conversation*. As cited in Chapter 2, Denby maintains that the film holds to standards of realism rather than going the way of an Expressionist aesthetic (132). I believe Denby to be largely correct in his judgement. However, as I have noted in the preceding Chapter, there is some evidence that points to an abundance of what I have termed 'authorial device'. Such a proclivity to device need not necessarily preclude the kind of "realism" that, in this instance, accords unity, coherence, and psychological depth to the text.

The Existential Connection

Turning to a discussion of *film noir*'s relation to 'philosophy', Porfirio suggests that the philosophical themes at work in American *film noir* were not directly influenced by French Existentialism (a movement still recognizable today given the continuing profile of Jean-Paul Sartre's writings). However, as Porfirio points out, "every *noir* hero is an alienated man". This trope of alienation, writes Porfirio, is manifested when "even members of the police or F.B.I. in the semi-documentary films are cut off from the camaraderie of their colleagues and forced to work undercover. The *noir* hero is most often 'a stranger in a hostile world'" (86).

The Conversation's Harry Caul is "the stranger", but this is by his own design rather than a kind of existential dilemma. A dilemma is, however, apparent in his professional life. Caul is something of a contradiction; he is simultaneously the "best bugger in the west" to a fair number of his contemporaries in the surveillance industry, and yet he obviously has (and of course keenly feels) a need for almost

complete anonymity in his daily activities. In other words, one is under the impression that Caul actually "likes" it this way.

Bauman, whose analysis of the phenomenon of the stranger in modernity is of particular interest, also enables me to co-opt his discussion of "doors" as to become a rather apt metaphor for Caul's "closedness":

> One cannot knock on a door unless one is outside; and it is the act of knocking on the door which alerts the residents to the fact that one who knocks is indeed outside. 'Being outside casts the stranger in the position of objectivity: his is an outside, detached and autonomous vantage-point from which the insiders (complete with their world-view, including their map of friends and enemies) may be looked upon, scrutinized, censored. (78)

Not Exactly "Hard-Boiled"[3]

For one thing, Caul is certainly no Sam Spade (*The Maltese Falcon,* Huston, 1941). Although Caul's commitment to a moral order is initially denied, he is certainly not the 'tough guy' character as represented by Spade (as if his inaction at being roughed up by the Corporate guards left one in any doubt about this). Roger Edenbaum points out that Spade's character "[is] representative of Hammett's 'daemonic' tough guy: ...He is free of sentiment, of the fear of death, of the temptations of money and sex. He is what Albert Camus calls a 'man without memory,' free of the burden of the past" (Edenbaum in Porfirio 84).

I refer to my previous citation of Tuska, who notes that the notion of *hamartia* in relation to Greek tragedy is "a mistake in perception which occasions an internal dissolution" (8). In relation to Caul, one may well ask, why a weakling for a hero? In response to that question, it is my contention that Caul has enough of a *film noir* anti-hero's malaise in him to guarantee this.

I wish, however, to note a point of key distinction: that the "dissolution", to which Tuska refers (as noted above), results from Caul's relation to both the classical detective (in which case he is both literally and ultimately a failure) and most

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[3] This is the phrase used by Coppola in relation to the characterization of Harry Caul and can be heard as part of an interview conducted for the short documentary, "Close Up on *The Conversation*" (Paramount Pictures, DVD, 1974, 2000).

crucially to technology. I shall turn to the influence of the *Nouveau Roman*, but at this juncture I wish to turn away from Caul for just a moment and re-consider two key figures in the representation as it were of "classical detection": Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin.

At this juncture I wish to focus specifically on a point raised by Spanos who, in relation to "classical detection", pointed out that the magnifying glass had become a metonym for detection (150). Following Spanos, the magnifying glass is similarly associated with Sherlock Holmes (ibid.).

Whittock provides a helpful analysis of the trope of metonymy whereby "the metonymic object brings a new matrix of thoughts and feelings into existence" (60). It is my contention that one ought to transpose that invocation of a metonymical relation, in this instance, to Caul's "reel to reel" tape machines. Those machines do for me, stand as a metonym for the surveillance industry, for the act of "bugging". At a purely denotative level of course the machines comprise of, in part, two large circular wheels. It may be a somewhat basic association, but, in general, a magnifying glass is of course similarly circular. Interestingly, any further association to a particular "figure" (as in Sherlock Holmes and his magnifying glass) doesn't translate or follow through. Is it perhaps because Caul is so anonymous in any case, or is it perhaps because the machines are simply "cold"?

Perhaps what is of greatest significance to me is that, as a musician who has been in the business (if one can call it that) for some years, I had on numerous occasions the need to use similar tape machines to record musical performances. The distinction between "bugging" and simply "recording" indeed forms part of the film's "morality play". One can perhaps take solace in trotting out something of a cliché in arguing the "neutrality" of technology—"it's what you do with it", so to speak.

Caul is, however, "lost" in his technology, which is in many respects the instrument of his dissolution (I again invoke "dissolution" as noted in Tuska's *Dark Cinema* 8). Given the alleged "certainty" (if not necessarily robustness) of the "classical detective", it is perhaps a little ironic that I invoke an allusion to a motif from Poe and consider it as instructive here. I refer to the motif of the "vortex", the

identification of which is included as part of Halliburton's excellent book-length discussion of Poe: "...one's descent into the vortex is gradual, notwithstanding the velocity of motion. One cannot go down very fast when one is also going round and round...the space within the annihilating vortex is a space-between..." (249).

Metaphorically speaking, I believe that Caul goes "round and round"; he is subsumed into the turning of the wheels of magnetic tape like the twisting motion of a vortex. Caul evidences no overt concern for the negative aspects of technology; his attitude is quite to the contrary. This point is obvious in the pride he places in his homemade equipment (the MOSFET amplifier etc.). Poe, however, most certainly did demonstrate such a concern. As Halliburton points out, "we are rarely conscious in Poe, of the human origins of a made thing; he makes us aware of its ...artificiality. Poe confronts and represents, as few authors before him, the alienated and alienating quality of the technological environment" (247).

Caught in a *Nouveau Roman*

The *Nouveau Roman* or "New Novel", as produced by writers such as Robbe-Grillet, has, as Smyth points out, "played a central role in the debates surrounding postmodernism" (54). Smyth writes:

> the sustained and systematic assault upon the assumptions of classic realism, vigorously pursued by the leading *nouveaux romanciers*, could almost be said to represent a manifesto of postmodern aims and aspirations; while the emphatic self-reflexivity of their novels is frequently cited as paradigmatic of radical textuality [...] However, the relationship between the *nouveau roman* and postmodernity is considerably more problematic than most accounts suggest. For instance, it is possible to contend that the *nouveau roman* may be more accurately described as modernist or late modernist. (ibid.)

I take heed of Smyth's warning as to the potential difficulties inherent in arriving at the 'most appropriate' of labels in terms of an aesthetic judgment. This study has tended to evoke a rather crude metaphor of *The Conversation*, playing as it were two poker games: having a stake in the classical and also a hand in the modernist. However, I am unconvinced that one could productively argue a "postmodern" aesthetic for the film.

The notion of the potential influence of what Smyth terms the *nouveau romancier*'s beliefs is, however, an instructive one. Smyth notes that "the formal components of the realist novel reflected the dominant ideology of bourgeois society [...]. It was therefore necessary to introduce narrative forms which would more accurately mirror the unintelligibility of the world: the problematic nature of reality had to be more suitably translated" (56).

As Smyth also notes, the new novelists felt that the experiments of the innovative writers such as Joyce, Kafka, and Faulkner had not been properly recognized (55). The new novelists' agenda included rather more ambitious aspirations, as Smyth points out:

> If we accept J.-F. Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as the subversion of metanarratives, then the nouveau roman can be said to have rejected the totalizing metanarrative of existentialism, even if only to have replaced it with a literary-historical metanarrative of it own. (57)

This study no doubt betrays a penchant for the 'existential', and I further believe that *The Conversation*'s Harry Caul does struggle in the face of the divide between existentialism and his Catholicism. The subject of postmodernism is introduced merely as a possible cultural influence as it were. However, the potential issue of the film demonstrating a critique of technology and *technique* (something which I have examined in the preceding chapter) would make an interesting subject for a separate analysis.

One Stake in Each Game: Transformation of Genre

As I have previously noted, Harry Caul has, as it were, a stake in the mode of the classical detective. However, Harry, in somehow misinterpreting the conversation itself, the fateful misreading of the crucial inflection on the word "us", does quite literally "get it wrong." As previously discussed, Harry does also embody a modernistic conception of the 'hero'.

To briefly examine these facets at the level of genre, Palmer is instructive in suggesting that

> If the "hero" literally fails entirely, then we are not in the presence of a thriller, it seems to me, but in the presence of a form that is breaking with the thriller tradition, as in Alan Sharpe ... If the hero succeeds, but we are left with a sense of unease, we are in the presence of a thriller, but a 'Negative Thriller', a variant that conforms in every other respect and in every fundamental way. (40-41)

The Conversation represents a "break away" (to paraphrase Palmer) from the conventional thriller. Following Cawelti, it shows a kind of "generic transformation", something that he sees in Polanski's 1974 film, *Chinatown*. *The Conversation* represents, to use Cawelti's term, a "de-mythologization" of the myths of heroism (507-08). This I maintain is evident in two key forms: first, as we have seen, Caul represents a comment on the hard-boiled heritage, and second, Caul introduces a modernistic conception of the detective hero (as influenced perhaps by the *nouveau roman*). Furthermore, the binary oppositions of private/public, method/machine, and conscience/expediency are indeed questioned and foregrounded.

Conclusion

This Chapter has sought to prove that it is with the benefit of due examination of both historical and contextual factors, including underpinnings in the field of literature and generic antecedents, that the goals of a more informed interpretation may be achieved. It is all too readily presumed in some circles that one may need only focus one's research in an isolated area when considering so-called 'auteur cinema'. As such, this Chapter has served as an adumbration to that which preceded it. The contextualizing facets of mode, literary antecedents, and (following Cawelti), generic transformation, provide a sense of balance in order to facilitate a greater depth of interpretation.

Chapter Five: A Reading

Introduction

This Chapter, by way of providing an interpretative reading of *The Conversation* will be structured to invoke the metaphor of "turning wheels". In a sense I am invoking a "turning" as implying a "straining" after connections.

I will consider the notion of "wheels within wheels" and invoke the rhetorical trope of the object correlative. I will argue that protagonist Harry Caul's increasing introspection as a sort of "turning inward", and advance the Chapter with a contextual examination of Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) in relation to *The Conversation*. Such a reading illuminates some salient points, particularly in the light of Foucault's notion of panopticism and modalities of male dominance as regards the gaze. The social context of paranoia as it informed the Hitchcock text is to be also discussed as a potential influence on the filmmaking process involved in *The Conversation*. The Chapter shall conclude with a discussion of the implications of what is known as the "cinematic apparatus", and speculate upon its likely implications for an historically defined audience experience.

Wheels within Wheels

It is appropriate to define first what is meant by an 'object correlative'. This trope is, as Trevor Whittock explicates, one whereby "a specific object becomes associated with a particular character" (62). The term is well illustrated by citing Whittock's reference to Hitchcock's *The Birds*, an example which further illustrates a tendency for a trope to overlap with another of a differing kind:

> Consider the five broken teacups seen by Mrs. Brenner (Jessica Tandy) ...when she finds the dead farmer. I suggest that these should be read both as a metonymy and as an object correlative. They function as a metonymy because they imply the damage done by the birds that have attacked the house, and they hint at some further unspeakable destruction. But because they correlate with Mrs. Brenner's tense fragility, glimpsed in her desperation of her endeavours to preserve a domestic and unchanging home life, the broken teacups also act as an object correlative for the deep-seated anxiety now surfacing in Mrs. Brenner. (62-63)

Turning away from cinema for a brief moment, Korb cites Northrop Frye (92) who provides both a succinct definition of, and furthermore names the source for the

notion of the object correlative as follows: "that kind of image described by Mr. Eliot ... [which] sets up an inward focus of emotion...and at the same time substitutes itself for an idea" (144). The reference here is of course to writer T.S Eliot whose works "The Waste Land" and "The Hollow Men" (1925) will no doubt be familiar to readers.

Korb, who writes about Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, points out that, in relation to Frye's work which names the white whale of the story an object correlative, there are "two directions of meaning involved, inward and outward" (145). For Korb, that inward meaning is one of feeling or emotion; the outward, on the other hand, concerns the broader implications of the white whale representing what he terms "the presence of an absence" (146).

As we know from Metz, cinema is indeed a "play" on the presentation of absences, and I shall further explore this point later in this Chapter. At this juncture the question is about Caul's obsession with obtaining a high quality recording. As established writers have pointed out (notably Denby, see Chapter Two), this is a matter of professionalism, and falls under the rubric of such codes. However, it is my contention that there is another level of connotation.

For Caul there is "nice fat recording", both as a product (as in a commodity) and as a mode/method of practice. A point to be conceded is that it seems almost spurious to ascribe "emotion" (Korb's "inward" meaning) to Harry Caul. However, one can certainly detect a degree of pride in his otherwise detached personality. Of course the characterization of Caul has further suggested that a level of paranoia be figured into this otherwise enigmatic and anonymous figure.

I contend that Caul's obsessive desire for quality in recording transcends the "givens" of professional codes and the like. This obsession, whilst no doubt entering the mix in the makeup of his paranoid personality, is Caul's central defence against a kind of nothingness. Caul, in producing the desired "nice fat recording" (and receiving a high level of monetary reward in return), conquers (at least in his perception) the white whale.

Of the white whale as object correlative, Korb writes:

> The mind thinks it controls by naming. Thus the white whale "is" *to* Ishmael, and *to* Ahab, and *to* each reader. But in itself it "is" itself, and it cannot itself be named, or structured or explained and categorized; nothingness floods through the interstices of any conceptual net designed to hold Moby Dick's essence. (147)

Despite Caul's professionalism, his adept "thievery" (as Denby would have it, again see Chapter Two of this study) and reconstruction of "the conversation", in short his attempts to control it, to master it, to exploit the "thingness" of it (to give it a name and a form), he is, of course, ultimately undone.

McCulloch quotes from Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*: "The structure at the basis of intentionality and of selfness is the negation, which is the internal relation of the For-itself to the thing. The For-itself constitutes itself outside in terms of the thing as the negation of that thing; thus its first relation with Being-In-Itself is negation" (7-8).

The Wheel Turns

The "ballroom" style of dance is so eloquently portrayed in Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1972). Kinder & Houston refer to this sequence in the following statement: "In *The Conformist* the contrast is between the tight, controlled machinations of Marcello and his Fascist accomplice and in the open, sweeping enchantment of the dance created by the two beautifully clad women" (188).

I draw upon this notion of the dance because it invokes, for those familiar with the Bertolucci text, an image of a circular movement in the style in which the characters practise it. Circular movement, it is my contention, is in some way "decentering" (or for those like myself who are seemingly incapable of dancing, it is downright disorienting!). Circular movement, which is used to structure Fellini's *8 1\2*, may also imply repetition. Hyman, with reference to Fellini's protagonist, explains thus:

> The cyclic structure of Guido's experience is announced at the outset of *8 1\2,* in the Crisis, Liberation and Fall, archetypally enacted in Guido's dream. In the sequence immediately following, the cycle is enacted in the real world…The pattern of crisis endlessly repeated soon becomes as alienating for the spectator as it is for Guido. (173)

The invocation of the circle, and in particular of an associated turning or rotational movement, would seem a rather obvious point. As with Alan J Pakula's *Klute* of two years hence, the camera tends to linger on the turning wheels/reels of Caul's tape machines. The preceding chapter has raised a point about splitting the meanings of this turning at a connotative level, and indeed offers a speculative reading by alternately invoking the metaphor of Poe's vortex and the trope of metonymy, i.e. Caul's reels substituting for the magnifying glass of Sherlock Holmes is an updated reference to "detection".

One may indeed read Caul's turning wheel/s as an object correlative. At one level of correlation, what is indeed literally rendered is that the reels/wheels function as being Caul's "tools of the trade", and the spectator can alternately or simultaneously read Caul the character, his use of these tools, and/or the 'prop value' of the reels as such as standing in metonymic relation to "the business'—the surveillance industry as it were.

Here is indeed an example of the overlapping of tropes to which Whittock has referred. One could take this one step further and consider the paranoid Harry Caul as standing for the surveillance industry, or at a broader level for society itself. The notion of a "paranoid/surveillance society" is to be discussed later in this Chapter.

Caul's reels do function as an object correlative. However, the 'true' extent of that co-relation is indeed submerged as part of the 'trickery' of the narration (a device that is commonly acknowledged as having being borrowed from the Hitchcockian mystery story). Moreover, I am concerned here with a doubling, to break the object and its correlative into two constitutive parts: here it is precisely their turning that provides a clue; they have a centre (an axle) on which they turn and also a periphery (the outside track that carries the tape). Effected is a movement or turning of a correlative between the reels/wheels and Caul's disoriented state of mind.

The spectator is given a further clue and it is an audible one (as such this is entirely in keeping with a mode of narration that relies on the soundtrack to convey a great deal of story information), that of the distortion that Caul is so obsessed with clearing or overcoming in his previously discussed quest for "a nice fat recording".

The object correlative "splits" to that which Whittock refers to as a "distortion metaphor" (63). Simply put, Caul mistakes the periphery for the core. He unwittingly succumbs to reading a figurative meaning *into* the voices, representative as they 'ought' to be of a referential meaning. The filmmaker's trick is of course that due to the restricted range of narration, the film spectator is both unaware of Caul's fundamental error and indeed of his over-reading of the figurative, that is until near the conclusion of the film where of course the "correct" inflection on the word "us" is rendered.

Caul, engaged with his machines in the overlaying and reconstruction of "the conversation", does himself overlay or re-construct a level of meaning. I contend that he goes as far as to re-write "the conversation" in order to write a new or revised denouement to an as yet unresolved traumatic moral dilemma.

For del Alamo, whose writing concerns "the art of memory" in medieval times, this art is referred to as being "like an inner writing" (4). When one considers the incident that is at the core of Caul's guilt, i.e. that his actions apparently contributed to the deaths of others, del Alamo makes a further prescient comment thus, "the term 'simulacrum' […] illustrates how enmeshed the concept of remembering is with the experience of the dead by the living: the word means both 'image', in mnemonics, and 'spectre' of the dead" (ibid.).

Caul has of course no use for the wax tablets and papyrus that concern del Alamo's study, but here precisely is the point: Caul is the user of a then (1970s) sophisticated level of technology. His editing skills and equipment owe more to twentieth-century Hollywood than to the age of tombs and ramparts. However, metaphorically speaking, Caul is 'put on the rack' (by which I refer to the medieval instrument of torture), wound up, or at the least caught up in the 'wizardry' of the technology.

Turning Point

Caul is, at the point in the narrative where he makes his confession, very much the "tortured soul". I consider Caul's confession a turning point beyond its obvious

causal functions. Foucault's *History* provides a valuable overview of the interrelations involved in confession as follows:

> The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence of (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile: a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems and purifies him: it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation. (61-62)

The "problem" for Caul is of course that the potential "release" of confession is not enough. This withdrawn man is compelled to act. Of course part of that activity involves Caul interfacing with his technology, extracting that last phrase to arrive at his albeit mistaken interpretation. I contend that Caul, as a figure so intimately associated with his technological apparatuses, and with the implications of "technique", is a man in a quandary; but it is again one that is beyond the obvious. In this respect I refer to a "turning point" that intimately involves the interfacing of Caul with technology.

This interface draws a useful parallel between the story of Caul and the story of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Here Sibony is instructive, pointing out that "Hamlet's neurosis is isolated, the basic inhibition that keeps him from acting, from knowing what he wants, caught up in desire for his mother, etc., etc.; his neurosis is illuminated either directly by the Oedipal Complex or in the distress of the subject in the face of the desire of the [Lacanian] Other, *forced to choose between being the phallus and being no one*" (61-62, emphasis mine).

This study will consider Caul's "desire" as having been inflected with sexual desire for the Cindy Williams character. However, at this juncture it is propitious to consider Sibony's phrase concerning the phallus. There is indeed a parallel to be drawn here: Caul is *caught between* "being the phallus and being no one". I refer here to the very "phallic" nature of Caul's technology. As a one-time musician I recall becoming familiar with similar reel to reel tape machines to those which Caul uses. The very nature of their construction, and in particular the naming of their

constitutive parts, "head," "capstan," "post," and so forth have rather obvious phallic overtones.

The irony is, rather, that Caul is most certainly not a "no one" (although he makes a convincing case for wishing to fade into the shadows). Moreover, he is known as the "best bugger on the West Coast" and so on. Caul as it will be remembered further takes a great deal of pride in his machines; we might say that a good measure of his subjectivity is bound up with/in them. There is, by the same token, an important qualifier here: where would Caul be if it were not for this technology? Perhaps more crucially, the issue is one of osmosis. I find it an almost inescapable conclusion that at the "point of turning" to which I have previously referred (i.e. the moral decision to act), Caul would have infinitely preferred to have had a "technological answer" to the dilemma before him.

Turning Inward

At this juncture the notion of "the gaze" is instructive. Writers such as Williams and Mulvey have made significant contributions and I shall return to this point later in the Chapter. A discussion concerning "the gaze" may seem somewhat out of place in relation to a film that emphasizes sound. However, I regard a contextualized reading of Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) to be of value and further that the notions of control, authority, and the panoptic are indeed of relevance to a reading of *The Conversation*. By way of introduction, and it is appropriate to cite Michel Foucault thus: "Disciplinary technologies [are] the set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into objects of knowledge" (*Discipline* 28).

Foucault's model for this system of power relations is of course the Panopticon, Bentham's imagined prison in which inmates are never certain whether they are being watched by their warders, and must assume they are consequently being watched and act accordingly. The panoptic operation of disciplinary technologies renders all of the social world open to view, making of society a vast self-monitoring

apparatus with "thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert" (*Discipline* 214).

As Mack writes, Bentham envisaged an England whose landscape would be dotted with Panpoticons; his "panoptic device" was not merely intended as a prison, but as a model for schools, factories, even entire "panoptic villages"—all of modern society was to come under a benign, regulating gaze (189-208).

Power, working through protocols of surveillance and codification, and within a behavioural dyad of deviance and normalcy, is circulated throughout the entire social body, with the result that "Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the [panoptic] machine" (Foucault, *Discipline* 202).

One may note that there is a sense of the "Everyman" about James Stewart's portrayal of Jefferies. His occupation as a photo-journalist does not however suggest the 'everyday' (the significance of his occupation is discussed at a later juncture). Nevertheless, Jefferies makes a prime candidate for my previous citation of Foucault as an "operat[or] of the panoptic machine". Furthermore Jefferies has a name for all the residents even though they are at a personal level (a "real" or natural level, if you will) unknown to him, such as "Miss Lonelyhearts" and so forth. One is reminded, as Korb writes, that it was "Ishmael [who] names Moby Dick in mockery of man's capacity to name the unnameable" (147).

Hitchcock's *Rear Window* evidences a set design with a strong resemblance to Bentham's Panopticon, that combination of visibility and enclosure. At the beginning of the film, Hitchcock carefully traces the spatial and behavioural co-ordinates of the set, establishing the positioning of the various apartments to one another and exposing the everyday routines to view.

The panoptic configuration of the apartment complex makes available to 'public' space the 'private' everyday actions of the residents, dressing, shaving, etc. At the centre of this Panopticon, figuratively, if not literally, is Jefferies, acting as guard or warden, monitoring the movements of his neighbours, and plotting the progress of their social lives.

Although the action of *Rear Window* is confined to one virtually enclosed set, the observing gaze is not; rather it is mobile, seemingly omnipresent and omni-directional. As Belton's *Space* notes:

> There is no space beyond the parameters of the set. The exception, which proves the rule, is the narrow section of the 'outside' world, which is seen through the alleyway next to the Sculptress's apartment. Though it suggests access to an 'elsewhere', through which we can see traffic and anonymous pedestrians, it is as *contained* a space as that of the courtyard. Indeed Miss Lonleyhearts' entry into that outside space—she goes into a bar across the street where she picks up a young man—reveals its essentially confining nature; it provides no escape for her but returns her to an even more desperate isolation. (83)

Disciplinary Apparatus to the Foreground

Chapter Four of this study has attempted to delineate some of the contrasting features of the 'classical' detective as compared to the 'postmodern'. I do not intend re-visiting generic concerns at great length except to focus here on the notion of disciplinary apparatus—a notion whereby Hitchcock's films may be productively compared with the classical detective story. Hereafter references to detective fiction will unless otherwise indicated be restricted to the classical.

In actuality Hitchcock went to some lengths to distinguish his work from detective fiction, or more broadly, the mystery genre. As Hitchcock told Truffaut, "I don't really approve of whodunits, they're rather like a jigsaw or crossword puzzle. No emotion. You simply wait to find out who committed the murder" (52). It could, however, be argued that Hitchcock's films do share with detective fiction a concern with society's social discipline.

In both Hitchcock and detective fiction we meet this social discipline head on: we see it in a way that encourages one to inspect closely its operations, even as it attempts quite overtly to legitimate those operations. In Hitchcock and detective fiction alike, the existing social order is generally ratified, and the forces that maintain that order, be they public (the police) or private (Hitchcock's amateur sleuths), are typically valorized.

As Moretti maintains, the rise of the detective story in late nineteenth-century England was a response to "the deep-seated anxiety of an expanding society: the fear

that development might liberate centrifugal energies and thus make effective social control impossible" (143). For Moretti, the city was the place where anxiety crystallised, because it is in the urban crush of people and activity that "everyone is the same" (ibid.). Moretti continues: "This problem emerges fully in the *metropolis*, where anonymity—that is impunity—potentially reigns and which is rapidly becoming a tangled and inaccessible hiding place" (143).

The corrective to the dangerous nonconformity that such anonymity might foster is, as Moretti points out, the association of individual difference with social deviance, so that, in society as in the detective story, individuality becomes a signifier of guilt (ibid.). Rather than being a threat, anonymity is thus made synonymous with conformity, the complex tangle of urban life enforcing a kind of self-regulation. For Moretti, "society expands and becomes more complicated: but it creates a framework of control, a network of relationships, that holds it more firmly together than ever before" (143). Moretti considers the detective story as embodying, even enacting, this network of control: it "knows, orders, and defines all the significant data of individual existence as part of social existence" (ibid.).

Significantly, in relation to Hitchcock, Moretti's preceding comment about knowledge and the ordering of data applies to certain features one finds in *Rear Window*: the social world is laid bare, fully exposed to the observing gaze. As to further similarities with detective fiction and in a re-visitation of the preceding discussion of the Panoptic, Moretti proffers Sherlock Holmes as archetypal detective, and further maintains that "every [Holmes] story reiterates Bentham's Panopticon ideal: the model prison that signals the metamorphosis of liberalism into total scrutability" (143).

Rear Window does however force one to acknowledge an important distinction within this similarity, in that the Panopticon one encounters there departs from Bentham's ideal in a significant way. As previously noted, Jefferies is figuratively, not literally, at the centre of *Rear Window*'s Panopticon—he observes his neighbours from a peripheral position in his apartment complex rather than from its hub.

One must, however, caution against the dismissal of the panoptic power that Jefferies enjoys. Indeed Foucault writes: "The efficiency of power, its constraining force has in a sense, passed over to the other side—to the side of its surface of application. He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power" (*Discipline* 202). This displacement of the gaze from centre to margin or the absence of a central vantage-point indicates the extent to which its deployment of disciplinary control mechanisms has been successful. One may consider that Panoptic surveillance is now so pervasive that those mechanisms have been effectively internalised. There is now no need for the representative guard tower at the heart of the panoptic machine.

I will concede that the preceding analysis of the pervasive panopticon and *Rear Window* perhaps overstates the case. The actual operations of the gaze in that film do not work quite so rigidly. Indeed one may note a curious paradox. As Zizek's *Looking Awry* notes of the Bentham/Foucault formulation, the gaze generates an ongoing insecurity in those who are observed:

> The horrifying efficacy of the Panopticon is due to the fact that the subjects [...] can never know for sure if they are actually observed from the all-seeing control tower—this very uncertainty intensifies the feeling of menace, of the impossibility of escape from the gaze of the Other. (92)

For Zizek, *Rear Window* presents us with an "ironic reversal" of the relationship between observer and observed that makes the former, rather than the latter, vulnerable and apprehensive, and ultimately *does* undermine panoptic control: "The inhabitants of the apartments across the yard are actually observed all the time by Stewart's watchful eye, but far from being terrorised, they simply ignore it and go on with their daily business. On the contrary, it is Stewart himself, the centre of the Panopticon, its all-pervasive eye, who is terrorised, constantly looking out the window, anxious not to miss some crucial detail" (ibid.).

Zizek's *Looking Awry* further maintains that Jefferies's rear window is not part of a visual apparatus that permits him to enact disciplinary control, but is instead a "fantasy window" through which he sees "fantasy figurations of what could happen to him and Grace Kelly" (92). And the final, most salient of these phantasmatic possibilities is that Jefferies, like Thorwald, could murder his lover.

One may indeed note that in relation to *The Conversation*, Caul's exhibits a fantasy-driven desire for the Cindy Williams character. Indeed this 'Young Woman', who significantly is never named in the diegesis (although one suspects that Caul has already named her in an attempt to ensnare her), is not unlike a mythical Siren. A Siren calling Caul (unintentional pun) with a voice we might say is 'so true'. With regard to her voice I refer to the fact that the Williams character sings with a 'true voice' or a voice that to my ear is both in key and can hold a melody (as is demonstrated early on with her singing a few lines of "Wake Up You Sleepyhead").

Returning to *Rear Window* and the gaze (and I maintain that there exists in *The Conversation* a level of equivalence between looking and hearing), the relationship between Jefferies and that which he sees as Zizek has outlined places the emphasis on the contention that Jefferies is compelled to observe Thorwald, and is, as Zizek notes, "anxious not to miss some crucial detail" (ibid.). Thorwald realises Jefferies's most repressed and unspeakable fantasies, and in so doing, allows the full enormity of those fantasies to be recognised and purged out. Indeed Wood writes that Jefferies becomes obsessed by Thorwald because he "represents, in an extreme and hideous form, the fulfilment of Jefferies' desire to be rid of Lisa" (66).

The pressing question is therefore, where does the film spectator figure in this? The presumption that Jefferies is a surrogate for the spectator does of course presume that the film viewer is male. This is a point productively contested by Modleski (see esp. 79). However, for the purposes of argument and in following that logic, Jefferies and spectator alike undergo catharsis. The further implication of such a reading is that Thorwald embodies submerged and denied male desire, and that his defeat signals the ability to confront and expel that desire.

One is still left with the troubling paradox that Zizek has located in the film's deployment of panoptic power. The apparent reversal of the power polarity one sees in *Rear Window*'s dynamic does pose real problems for a reading closely following Foucault. The pressing question is how one may reconcile Jefferies's "terrorisation" with Foucault's notion of power having "passed over to the other side", i.e. to the very space that Jefferies occupies.

I contend that the answer lies at least in part in the attempts Jefferies makes to control or contain the situation. In *Rear Window*, the separating out of individual from stereotype is crucial for the film's identification of the criminal. As Jefferies' suspicions grow, the object of his scrutiny becomes no longer just "the salesman", one of a number of neighbourhood "types" (such as "Miss Torso", "Miss Lonelyhearts," "the songwriter"), but the specific individual "Lars Thorwald". This move to the particular does, however, create a potentially problematic level of ambiguity. With the transition into individual identity, Thorwald joins the ranks of those with proper names, Scottie, Lisa, Stella, Doyle—all of whom are (or soon will be) working against him.

Potentially one is presented with the problem that rather than Thorwald being thrown into stark relief against a society of virtually interchangeable stereotypes, he would instead seem to be just one individual among many. The feature that perhaps most sets him apart is the "foreignness" of his name, Lars Thorwald. Thorwald undergoes a kind of transformation whereby he becomes (in a manner not unlike Norman of *Psycho*) something quite monstrous. His nocturnal 'creepiness' has vampiric undertones, though he is without the style or looks of Hammer's Christopher Lee as Dracula. His hulking clumsiness further adds shades of the Frankensteinian to the tone.

Turning to Culture and the '50s

American society during the Cold War was indeed a space of paranoia. Hofstadter whose work is pithily entitled *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, notes that

> There is a vital difference between the paranoid spokesman in politics and the clinical paranoiac: although they both tend to be overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression. The clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspirational world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically *against him*; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others. (4, emphasis original)

Mortimer and Lait note that Communism's virulence supposedly lay in its ability to elude ready identification—it could be anywhere, working through anyone. But the disciplinary technologies of the cold war worked to instantiate this invisible menace

in things which could be seen, and which were often considered strange and disturbing. Such concrete, palpable social phenomena as cultural homogenisation, the destabilisation of the family, the empowerment of women, the growing (albeit still quite limited) freedom in sexual practices and expression could be attacked and policed under the aegis of national security (44, 52).

Hofstadter is again instructive on what was commonly known in America as the "Communist Menace" and writes that "the sexual freedom attributed to him [the enemy], his lack of moral inhibition, his possession of especially effective techniques for fulfilling his desires, gives exponents of the paranoid style an opportunity to project and freely express unacceptable aspects of their own minds" (34).

One may consider that the methods of policing the socially non-normative were distinctly—almost explicitly—panoptic, utilizing a form of faceless but omnipresent gaze. In today's contemporary sphere, a time that Lyon has described as living under the "Electronic Panopticon", one has a distinct feeling of the "facelessness" and indeed technological sophistication of surveillance. Stepping back for a moment in referring to George Orwell's novel, *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1948), Lyon notes that

> Another significant feature of Orwell's 'Big Brother' surveillance is that it was imperceptible. Those under surveillance were unsure whether there was any time when they could relax. Like the Panopticon – and indeed as in other literary treatments of the surveillance theme, such as Franz Kafka's *The Castle* or Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* – this model of undetected surveillance keeps those watched subordinate by means of uncertainty. You simply comply, because you never know when 'they' might be watching. Information technology enables surveillance to be carried out in ways even less visible than those available in Orwell's, let alone Kafka's day. (60)

Stam and Pearson have noted certain affinities between *Rear Window*, released as it was in 1954, and the paranoid social and political sensibility of its immediate historical environment:

> *Rear Window* in some ways echoes the historical ambivalence of McCarthyite anticommunism. McCarthyism, after all, is the antithesis of neighbourliness; it treats every neighbour as a potential other, alien, spy. It fractures the social community for purposes of control. Jefferies is an anonymous accuser whose suspicions happen to be correct, but the object of his gaze might easily have been as innocent as Father Logan in *I Confess* or Christopher Emmanuel Balestrero in *The Wrong Man*, to cite two other fifties films with anti-McCarthyite resonances. (193)

Whilst the notion of 'accuser' is something that Harry Caul initially resisted, certainly the reference to an air of anonymity is particularly apt. In returning to *Rear Window*, one may confront Jefferies's paradoxical panoptic anxiety: for what is at work in the paranoid political environment surrounding the film is a kind of panoptic machine operated by terrorized guards or wardens. Foucault argued that through panoptic surveillance all of society is pervaded by disciplinary technologies, and he refers to "mobile attentions ever on the alert", which come to fill the entirety of social space (ibid.).

Elias Canetti, who discusses modern history's paradigmatic paranoiac, *Senatspräsident* Daniel Paul Schreber, writes that "the immensity of space draws him; he wants himself to be as wide as space, so that he can extend all over it" (435). The paranoiac attempts to remove potential danger from the space that surrounds him by extending himself into that space, filling it with himself, and thus displacing any potential threat. As Canetti points out, "This sense of personal place, or position, is of cardinal importance for the paranoiac; there is always an exalted position to defend or make secure" (436).

Canetti further draws a parallel with the operations concerned with the maintenance of political authority: "By the very nature of power, the same must be true of the ruler. His sense of power is in no way different from that of the paranoiac; he, if he can, surrounds himself with soldiers and shuts himself in fortresses" (436). Schreber's delusion is, as Canetti points out, "in fact a precise model of *political* power (441, emphasis original). In relation to *The Conversation,* one may observe that Caul indeed shuts himself way, and shares with Thorwald some of those previously noted "vampiric" qualities.

That paranoia has a fundamental role in *Rear Window* is apparent in the very premise of the narrative: the way in which the film's protagonists sift through information and assemble from it a coherent diegesis mirrors what Scholes terms "narrativity"—"the process by which a perceiver actively constructs a story from the fictional data provided by any narrative medium" (393). Scholes further points out that "Narrativity is a form of licensed and benign paranoia...The interpreter of a narrative

assumes a purposefulness in the activities of narration which, if it existed, the world would be truly destructive of individuality and personality as we know them" (396).

Of course in *Rear Window* the benignity of paranoia is called into question, and the coherence of the narrative placed in jeopardy by the sexual power that Lisa possesses. Linda Williams refers to the "impossible and threatening appetites that suggest a frightening potency precisely where the normal male would perceive a lack" (85).

In *Rear Window* a conflict is acted out which sees Jefferies struggle to de-feminize himself, to place himself in a position of specifically masculine agency by neutralising the power of the Other—here both Lisa and Thorwald are aspiring to a vision of spectacle and truth—a vision of dominance. As Zizek's *Looking Awry* points out, "*Rear Window* is ultimately the story of a subject who eludes a sexual relation by transforming his effective impotence into power by means of the gaze" (92).

Mulvey notes a tension between "Jefferies' voyeurism and activity... established through his work as a photo-journalist, a maker of stories and captor of images; his enforced inactivity, binding him to his seat as a spectator, puts him squarely in the phantasy position of the cinema audience" (814).

For Lisa, Jefferies's surveillance of his neighbours indicates mental disturbance, a pathology. This pathology is more than mere voyeurism; it is a kind of dangerous paranoia, a narrativity gone wrong.

In her discussion of the woman's film, Doane refers to the potential problematizing of the woman's status as object of the male gaze. Her discussion has real relevance for the specifics of the gaze in *Rear Window*:

> [A] certain despecularization takes place in these films [...] a deflection of scopophiliac energy in other directions, away from the female body... [the] very process of seeing is now invested with fear, anxiety, horror, precisely because it is objectless, free-floating. The aggressivity, which...is contained in the cinematic structuration of the look, is released or, more accurately, transformed into narrativised paranoia. (129)

It is appropriate at this juncture to cite Rose, whose excellent writing points out that "Paranoia could be said to be latent to the structure of cinematic specularity in itself, in that it represents the radical alterity of signification (the subject is spoken from elsewhere)" (145).

Spoken From Elsewhere: or the Apparatus

Taking inspiration from Rose's preceding point I wish, however, to turn from *Rear Window* and issues of sexual difference. It is opportune at this juncture to examine the notion of "speaking". Of course when one thinks of "speaking" one immediately associates this act with "the voice" or voices.

I shall first refer to this in the colloquial: one considers that a work of art may "speak" to one in a certain way. The invocation of "speaking" is of course a figurative one. On the other hand, in making such an attribution, one makes an "error" of sorts. One has removed the "voice" which surely must accompany any act of speech: at the very least one has unconsciously overlaid or allowed to overlap the "voice" of the artist with one's own in a sort of inner dialogue, a dialogue which negotiates the eventual arrival at "the meaning" of the art work.

The Conversation of course foregrounds the "separateness" and changeability of voices. The voices that Caul captures on tape are taken from the characters and then re-implanted on tape. Caul then of course proceeds to cut and re-assemble them. Indeed established writers have noted that Caul is rather like a film editor in this respect (see Chapter Two of this study).

The crucial point is, however that those voices have (and not withstanding a considerable investment of Caul's 'expertise') a causal narrational function, a function I consider to be analogous with what Doane refers to as the so-called "voice of truth" (or voice-over as a technique used in the documentary). The voice-over as an established form, its very 'disembodied' nature is a point taken up by Doane thus: "The voiceover commentary in the documentary, unlike the voice-off, the voiceover during a flashback, or the interior monologue, is, in effect, a *disembodied* voice" (*Voice* 341, emphasis original).

Doane points out that the voice-over

> As a form of direct address, … speaks without mediation to the audience, bypassing "characters" and establishing complicity between itself and the spectator – together they understand and thus place the image. It is precisely because the voice is not localisable, because it cannot be yoked to a body, that it is capable of interpreting the image, producing its truth. Disembodied, lacking any specification in space or time, the voiceover is, as Bonitzer points out, beyond criticism –it censors the questions "Who is Speaking?," "Where?," "In what time?," and "For Whom?" (ibid.)

Any comparison to the voice-over does in itself illustrate the layers of meaning, or more appropriately, the very "status" of the recorded conversation. Indeed that status is one of turning or oscillation. The recorded conversation, its "narrativity" in some way secure, undergoes, however, some rather radical changes in its relation to ground or referent. Indeed in a re-visitation of Doane's preceding point as to voiceover, the film, in several sequences, actively (re) "yokes" as it were the recorded audio of the voices back to the characters in "full body". At other points in the narrative, the audible voices are as it were "yoked" exclusively to and contained in the vessel that is Caul's tape machine.

These oscillations or manipulations serve to illustrate that while there is indeed a sense of the materiality (one is reminded that both magnetic tape and film are indeed "material") of these voices, they also evidence portability. Their modality (or their "claim to truth") is not cast in any doubt, that is except to note their radical re-contextualization when the feature of the "correct" inflection is introduced near the conclusion of the film.

The pressing question is therefore what of their modality, this "claim to truth"? For van Leeuwen this concept is related to one of perspective (the reader will note that *The Conversation*'s sound editor Walter Murch was much interested in perspective as related to sound; see Chapter Two of this study). Van Leeuwen's writing bears repeating here at length:

> Sound and image are distinctly different media. There is, for instance, no equivalent of the 'frontal' and 'side view' angle in sound. Sound is a wrap-around medium. But there are also similarities. Both can create relations between the subject they represent and the receiver they address, and in both this is related to distance, in two ways. The first is the way of *perspective*, which hierarchises elements […] by placing some in the foreground and some in the middle ground, and some in the background […] the second is the way of social distance, which creates relations of different degrees of formality between what is represented and the viewer or listener, such as intimacy (the very close shot, the whispered voice), informality

> (the close or medium close shot, the relaxed, casual voice), formality (the medium long shot, the louder, higher and tenser which 'projects' the image) (14-15).

The crucial point here is one of, what I shall term, "mistaken or misplaced intimacy" in terms of perspective and truth. Just as, at a sort of microcosmic level, van Leeuwen has pointed out the implications of a whispered voice, I contend that both with the re-implanting of the character's voices onto tape, (with that tape being an integral and necessary part of the vessels that are Caul's machines), and the repeated (re) playings of the conversation, those voices (and one will recall that Caul lacks the advantage of seeing the re-synchronised conversation sequences) are reduced to what I term, "intimate whispers".

In turning to Caul's appropriation (the initial 'disembodiment') and his consequent "recapturing" of those voices on tape, it may be said that Caul first *absents* those voices and then proceeds to *re-present* them in an endlessly repeatable form. In elaborating on Caul's metonymic relation to filmmaking, and in view of Coppola's background in theatre (these points are discussed in Chapter Two of this study), it is appropriate at this juncture to cite Metz who has pointed out that the cinema, unlike the theatre, is what he describes as

> The "other scene", which is precisely not so called, is the cinematic screen (closer to fantasy from the outset): what unfolds there may as before, be more or less fictional, but the unfolding itself is fictive: the actor, the "décor", the words one hears are all absent, everything is *recorded* (as a memory trace which is immediately so, without having been something else before) [...] for it is the signifier itself, and as a whole that is recorded, that is absence: a little rolled up perforated strip ... (249).

In common usage one speaks of a person's voice as having a certain "presence" that signifies something about that person's personality, strength, etc. With this point to *absenting*, Caul of course reduces (in the sense of what one commonly terms "reductivism") those "presences" to the flat surface of magnetic tape. This tape, once inserted into the reels of Caul's machines provides Caul with the function (and at a professional level, the "benefit") of both repetition and, in conjunction with his other gadgetry, of manipulation.

Such repeated playings invoke what van Leeuwen refers to "mechanical repetition": whereby artifice as such is a device that can be "exploited" (119). What Caul is

caught up in is what one may term the over-rendered, the "overdone". Caul's professional pride demands the best in (custom made) equipment and a "nice fat recording". A device (in the literal, meaning machine) is for Caul something both of pride and something to be indeed "exploited". What he succumbs to is analogous to (and includes a kind of aural equivalent to) what Kristeva terms the "*too visible*", the overworked-out if I may paraphrase here. One may indeed make a further point to the fact that the microphone and other associated surveillance machinery are over-represented in the diegesis. Indeed Kristeva's discussion of cinema and its beginnings is relevant here:

> From its very beginnings, cinema seems to follow [a] tendency of modern art in general, when it pursues, notably in Eisenstein, an obstinate project of incorporating [the] meticulous organization of space, rigorous positioning of each object, calculated intervention of every sound and every bit of dialogue—all were merely to add a "rhythmic," "plastic' dimension to the *too visible:* an enigma not to be made too immediately obvious into which is figured the filmmaker's anguish more profoundly than the referential image-sign would do. (237-38)

Caul is, therefore, simply unable to "read" the "correct" inflection of the word "us" (as is rendered for spectators near the conclusion of the film). This rendering of the "correct" inflection is of course in itself a "device" or technique. However, it is Caul's "mechanical repetitions", as van Leeuwen's term shall apply, that metaphorically "wash-out" the inflection.

An "organic repetition" (in contradistinction to the "mechanical") is that which van Leeuwen refers to as "naturally occurring" (119). One may draw an analogy between inflection and repetition, and observe that the fateful "correct" inflection is a sort of "organic repetition". To put it another way, the meaning of the word "us" is 'doubled'—rendering in natural usage the kind of "us" that with verbal inflection dramatically alters the meaning of the message or statement.

Of Turning and Speaking

At this juncture it is opportune to reiterate the 1970s context of *The Conversation's* release, and the fact that home video was then far from a widespread phenomenon. *The Conversation* is a film to be read in the light of due consideration of so-called 'apparatus theory" carrying as it does a concomitant notion of a spectator seated in a darkened theatre. Silverman cites Daniel Dayan who refers to the point when the film

viewer "discovers the frame—the first step in reading the film—the triumph of his former *possession* of the image fades out. The viewer discovers that the camera is hiding things...he discovers that he is only authorized to see what happens to be in the axis of the gaze of another spectator, who is ghostly or absent" (220-21).

Silverman continues to refer to the "speaking subject", which in citing Jean-Pierre Oudart may be defined as

> the speaking subject of the cinematic text... a subject which [...] finds its locus in a cluster of technological apparatuses (the camera, the tape recorder, etc.)...The speaking subject has everything, which the viewing subject, suddenly cognizant of the limitations on its vision, understands itself to be lacking. This sense of lack inspires in the subject the desire for "something else," a desire to see more. However, it is equally important that the presence of the speaking subject be hidden from the viewer. (221)

The Conversation actually foregrounds the aspects of the technological apparatus, technique, and interwoven human consciousness that go into mediation. It is true that there is none of the heavy-handed self-reflexivity of Jean-Luc Godard's *Tout va Bien* (1972), for instance, and I contend that this is precisely the point: *The Conversation* works at a level of mood or affect. One has noted the instability of Caul's panoptic-like operations and indeed the mutability of (even) the voice as regards truth, but there is an important corrective here. *The Conversation,* it must be recalled, offers closure; the 'true' rendering of the fateful plot device would appear to conclude the mystery reassuringly

However, to the 1970 s spectator, one is encouraged to "turn back one's head", metaphorically speaking. One knows from Metz that, in the darkened theatre,

> It is true that as he (the spectator) identifies with himself as look, the spectator can do no other than identify with the camera, too, which has looked before him at what he is now looking at and whose stationing (=framing) determines the vanishing point. During the projection the camera is absent, but it has also a representative consisting of another apparatus, called precisely a "projector." An apparatus the spectator has behind him, at the back of his head, which is precisely where fantasy locates the "focus" of all vision. (253)

Harry Caul is far from alone in feeling (if at an unconscious level) the anxiety of both the implications of an 'inverted panopticism' (as previously discussed in relation to Hitchcock's *Rear Window*), and further to a 'special' kind of anxiety. In taking a metaphor from the writing of Tausk, whose material refers to clinically

diagnosed schizophrenics, one may interrogate what may be termed 'machine anxiety'. Tausk's essay is entitled "The Influencing Machine" and he writes:

> The schizophrenic influencing machine is a machine of a mystical nature. The patients are able to give only vague hints of its construction. It consists of boxes, cranks, levers, wheels, buttons, wires, batteries and the like. Patients endeavour to discover the construction of the apparatus by means of their own technical knowledge [...] All the discoveries of mankind, however, are regarded as inadequate to explain the marvelous powers of this machine, by which patients feel themselves persecuted. (544)

I invoke the metaphor of an "influencing machine" in the realization that a qualifier must be immediately introduced. In attempting to "split" that metaphor between both Harry Caul and the film spectator, I am not of course suggesting that either Caul or indeed filmgoers are afflicted with schizophrenia. The notion of "influence" is, however, what interests me here. Again, Tausk bears repeating at length:

> ...the idea of the influencing machine originates in the need for causality inherent in man; and the same need for causality will probably also account for the persecutors who act not through the medium of an apparatus but merely by suggestion of telepathy. Clinical psychiatry explains the symptom of an influencing machine as analogous to the ideas of persecution in paranoia (which, it is known, the patient invents in order to justify his delusions of grandeur), and calls it "*paranoia somatica*". (545)

The preceding point regarding "the need for causality" is an interesting one, which I somewhat argumentatively submit as bearing a curious resemblance to the function of cinema (that familiar pattern of cause and effect that Bordwell among others have noted in the films of classic Hollywood). I suggest that Rose is indeed correct in noting that "The film can please or displease. Identification of the film with the oneiric process stalls, therefore, not on the mechanism of hallucination but on its associated effect. [...] the mechanism comes close to that of paranoia..." (145).

If causality is indeed a basic given in human experience, then surely the need for control is another. This is, to a great extent, the value of *The Conversation*: as a filmgoer I am presented with the unsettling implications of *over*-control, *over*-manipulation of, and meddling in, "reality". The motivating force behind these implications is the arrogance and expediency of one who seeks a particular result or end. I will concede, however, that an emphasis is firmly placed on the *transformative* possibilities in terms of individual and moral action. Of course the question is posed as to whether the outcome of such actions is to be necessarily that which is desired.

Conclusion

This chapter has, as is a common theme of this study, sought to contextualise an interpretation of the film. In this instance the chapter has offered a reading inflected with certain motifs introduced in order to examine oscillations or "turning points" in the narrative. Further contextualisation was sought in terms of a reading of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, and in particular the inverted Panoptic undertones and reflected cultural paranoia inherent in that text. The Chapter ends on a note of speculation as regards the historically specific film spectator and suggests that the film reflects upon both the medium of cinema and its technological underpinnings. Those underpinnings further reflect upon society in the broader sense.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Chapter Two of this study introduced readers to Cowie's *Coppola*, a text that is indeed both an excellent and essential "first step" on the way to better appreciating some of the unique conditions under which this film was made. In addition, other points were introduced, which include notions of an "auteur cinema", the so-called "paranoid cycle", and indeed a discussion of style and/as an aesthetic.

Chapter Three has sought to encourage the viewer to consider the notion that *intentionality*, to which I refer the "creative impulse", ought not presuppose the centrality of that personage to the structures of meaning in a film. Further the Chapter suggests that one take another look at the film's relationship to technology. It is my contention that with respect to *The Conversation*, the film is suggestive of a notion that technology has the potential to have both a "dislocating" and "distancing" effect.

The fourth Chapter had as its goal a "broadening" effect. Again it is intended to encourage readers and viewers to bear in mind history as an important aspect to be brought into interpretation. Here the facets of mode, literary antecedents, and generic transformation deepened the context of interpretation.

The fifth Chapter offers a reading of the film in depth and suggests that one may take a "position" as it were on the interrelated facets of technology, surveillance, and spectatorship. In short, the text is a thought-provoking one indeed, and this Chapter is my attempt to tease-out some of the perhaps less obvious potentialities of meaning.

The overall goal of this study has been to prove that one needs a somewhat lateral approach to interpretation. That one is, if one's course of action is to follow certain industry related trends, in danger of being encouraged to read a text too narrowly. The contribution of this study has been to suggest some alternatives to that scenario and to encourage both a broad and balanced approach to interpretation.

Appendix: Plot Summaries

The Conversation.: Set in contemporary (1970s) San Francisco, protagonist Harry Caul (played by Gene Hackman) is a surveillance expert. Harry will go to great lengths to remain anonymous and his behaviour is suggestive of a paranoid obsession with keeping to himself. As part of a current assignment, Harry and his team capture on tape a conversation between a young man and young woman. Initially Harry has nothing but a professional interest in getting "a nice fat recording". However, Harry, a Catholic, becomes increasingly involved at a moral level in what he suspects is a plot to kill the young couple. Harry becomes suspicious of his employer, the mysterious "Director" of the Corporation (played by Robert Duvall). However, due to a crucial mistake in interpreting the tapes, Harry has the wrong idea and the eventual murder victim turns out to be the Director himself.

Blow Up: Set in contemporary (1960s) London, protagonist Thomas (played by David Hemmings) is an affluent fashion photographer. Seemingly bored with his rather hedonistic but plastic life, Thomas comes upon something interesting while walking in the park one day: he stops to take pictures of a couple embracing, and upon developing the images, believes that he has photographed a murder. Jane (played by Vanessa Redgrave), the woman who was being photographed, demands the pictures be returned to her. Thomas pretends to give her the pictures, but in reality, he gives her a different roll of film. Thomas returns to the park and discovers a dead body lying in the shrubbery. The body is of the grey-haired man who was embracing Jane in Thomas's photograph. Thomas's photo reveals a man with a gun hiding nearby—or so we think…

Rear Window: Set in contemporary (1950s) Greenwich Village, protagonist Scottie Jefferies (James Stewart) is a photo-journalist and laid up, his leg in a cast. He fills in the time by taking an active interest in observing in great detail his neighbours in the apartment block in which he lives. Pestered by the irritating, the too-perfect Lisa (Grace Kelly), he eventually shares with her his binoculars and vantage point and discover clues to a murder. The mysterious Thorwald must be brought to account for the murder of his wife…

Selected Filmography

Alphaville (*Alphaville, Une Etrange Aventure de Lemmy Caution*). Dir. Jean-Luc Godard. Athos Film / Pathe Films, 1965.

The Anderson Tapes. Dir. Sidney Lumet. Columbia Pictures, 1971.

Blow Out. Dir. Brian De Palma. Filmways Pictures, 1981.

Blow Up. Dir. Michelangelo Antonioni. MGM, 1966.

The Conformist (AKA: *Il Conformista*). Dir. Bernardo Bertolucci. Mars Film/Paramount Pictures, 1970.

The Conversation. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount Pictures, 1974.

Enemy of the State. Dir. Tony Scott. Touchstone Pictures, 1998.

Le Gai Savior (*The Joy of Knowledge*). Dir. Jean-Luc Godard. Anouchka Films, 1969.

The Game. Dir. David Fincher. Polygram/Propaganda Films, 1997.

The Godfather. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount Pictures, 1972.

The Godfather, Part II. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Paramount Pictures, 1974.

Klute. Dir. Alan J. Pakula. Warner Bros., 1971.

Metropolis. Dir. Fritz Lang. Deutsche Universum Film AG, 1927.

Night Moves. Dir. Arthur Penn. Warner Bros., 1975.

The Parallax View. Dir. Alan J. Pakula. Paramount, 1974.

The Rain People. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Warner Bros.-Seven Arts, 1969.

Rear Window. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. Paramount Pictures, 1954.

The Testament of Dr. Mabuse, (AKA: *Das Testamant des Dr. Mabuse*). Dir. Fritz Lang. Nero Film / Osso Films, 1933.

The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse. Dir. Fritz Lang. Osso Films, 1960.

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