



## **BORDERLINES FILM FESTIVAL**

### **THE CONVERSATION (12A)**

Director: Francis Ford Coppola

Starring: Gene Hackman, John Cazale, Allen Garfield, Harrison Ford

US, 1974, 1 hour 53 minutes, English

*The Conversation* was very much a personal project for Francis Ford Coppola and his American Zoetrope production company, one that he fitted in between making *The Godfather Parts 1 and 2* for Paramount. According to editor Walter Murch, the trigger was "a 1966 discussion on surveillance he had with director Irvin Kershner, Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow-Up* and a *Life* magazine article entitled 'Snooping Electronic Invasion of Privacy'". While writing the screenplay, a marginal character in David Lean's *Brief Encounter* – Stephen Lynn (Valentine Lyall) who surprises lovers Laura and Alec who have taken refuge in his flat – gave Coppola the idea of angling the story around a secondary character.

Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) is a largely unsympathetic character who is hired by the head of a big company to carry out surveillance of two young people. While cleaning up the recordings he has made, Caul comes across a statement that hints at criminal intent and becomes obsessed with unravelling the mystery. He is in every shot and we never find out much, let alone the complete truth, about the characters at the centre of the intrigue.

The drama of Watergate broke in the summer of 1972, as the film was in production, and Coppola resisted making the film specifically political. Ideological differences led to the dismissal of his cinematographer Haskell Wexler and, with pressure to work on *Godfather 2* mounting, 78 of the total of 397 scenes in the screenplay had yet to be shot. Disagreements with Gene Hackman, who was playing against type as the introverted, sax playing, plastic mac wearing Harry Caul, did not help.

The account of how the film was pieced together from the material available, whole episodes cut out and scenes rejigged to new positions within the narrative, is fascinating and can be read in the two Tetris chapters of Walter Murch's recent book, *Suddenly Something Clicked*. It's all the more extraordinary because most of this task was carried out by Murch, in Coppola's absence, in his first role as an editor. He talks about eventually switching off his brain and letting his hands do the editing. It worked and the film won the Pale d'Or at Cannes in 1974.

Notes compiled by Jo Comino (Marketing Manager)

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