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COPPOLA, FRANCIS

AFTER "THE GODFATHER," FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA

URNS TO A PERSONAL FILM, "THE CONVERSATION"

After the success of "The Godfather" (which has become the highest grossing film in the entire history of motion pictures), director Francis Ford Coppola could have written his own figure on a blank check for any film he wanted to do.

He said "no" to any number of tempting offers from all the major studios, deciding that as a creative artist what was most important was to concentrate on a film that expressed best his own personal visions.

He turned to "The Conversation," a screenplay that he had first begun about six years ago, which dealt with a professional surveillance man who becomes trapped in the paranoia of his own world, thrust as a not-so-innocent bystander into a bizarre murder of passion.

He filmed "The Conversation," starring Gene Hackman, for The Directors Company (a group headed by Coppola, Peter Bogdanovich and William Friedkin) for Paramount Pictures release. Coppola describes it as "a sort of psychological horror film."

"The surveillance man has been trailing a young couple,"



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Coppola explains about "The Conversation," "but you don't know precisely what is happening until the end of the film. They have been monitored with long distance microphones. One of the points is that even the surveillance man who was assigned to record the young couple has no knowledge what his client wants."

The film begins with a young couple walking, engaged in what seems as trivial conversation (e.g. "what a nice day") with the audience unaware of any importance in them except that they are being recorded.

"So, by implication, you know there must be a reason for their conversation," Coppola adds. "In the course of the film, you see the young couple without hearing them, you hear them without seeing them. It's as though the whole existence of that couple is summed up in this one mundane walk around the park and somehow the surveillance man has developed this personal relationship to them."

Coppola has created his character as the best surveillance man in the business. "When people talk about eavesdropping, Harry (Gene Hackman) is the best. He's very secretive," Coppola notes, "as private a man as you could imagine. He lives alone. He has no personal relations with people."

The process of writing "The Conversation" became tricky, especially since Coppola had first evolved a rough draft six years ago. "I was writing the screenplay over a long period of time," Coppola recalls, "and I had the concepts in my head way before I was able to make it happen. I did many rewrites. I knew what the ending was and kept cutting in this conversation Harry has recorded. When



you have a three-minute scene which you are going to repeat eight times in the course of a movie, hopefully each time it will take on different meanings. The film constructs itself sort of like a composition of music in that it uses repetition, repeating the exact same footage several times.

"The scene hits you differently each time you look at it, but you know it's the exact same footage so it can't be different. Yet you notice different things. By my repeating the footage, and sometimes just repeating the conversation without showing the footage, I'm in a way asking the audience to put it together in different ways. There must be a cumulative effect because as the movie goes on, the audience and the audience's memory becomes a very essential part."

Coppola uses this device of intercutting because he is interested in "films where the audience invests its own emotions and really becomes a participant in the film."

Multiple cameras were used to record the couple walking through the park which opens the film. The cameras were in the park, on top of buildings, in trucks. "We try to give a sense of the eavesdropping," Coppola notes. "I'm making a movie about a professional eavesdropper. I'm eavesdropping on him. To achieve that, for the sequence with the young couple in the park, we used a long lens just trying to catch them moving in and out of other people in Union Square.

"But for Harry's scenes, when he is alone in his room, the camera

is totally fixed. He'll come in and walk out of frame. And if he walks out of frame for long enough, the camera will hold on the empty frame. And then, slowly, it'll just kind of move over to him, almost like a video monitor in a room, giving a sense of an invasion of this man's privacy."

That fiction imitates life has been made extremely clear with the developments in recent months of professional wiretapping and other eavesdropping devices that have been used in the highest levels of our government.

"There's a whole underground of professional eavesdroppers and security people," Coppola states. "It's been going on for years. I kind of got wind of it a long time back, and I did research on it. When I first starting writing 'The Conversation,' I had no idea that it would become so relevant to our personal lives."

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