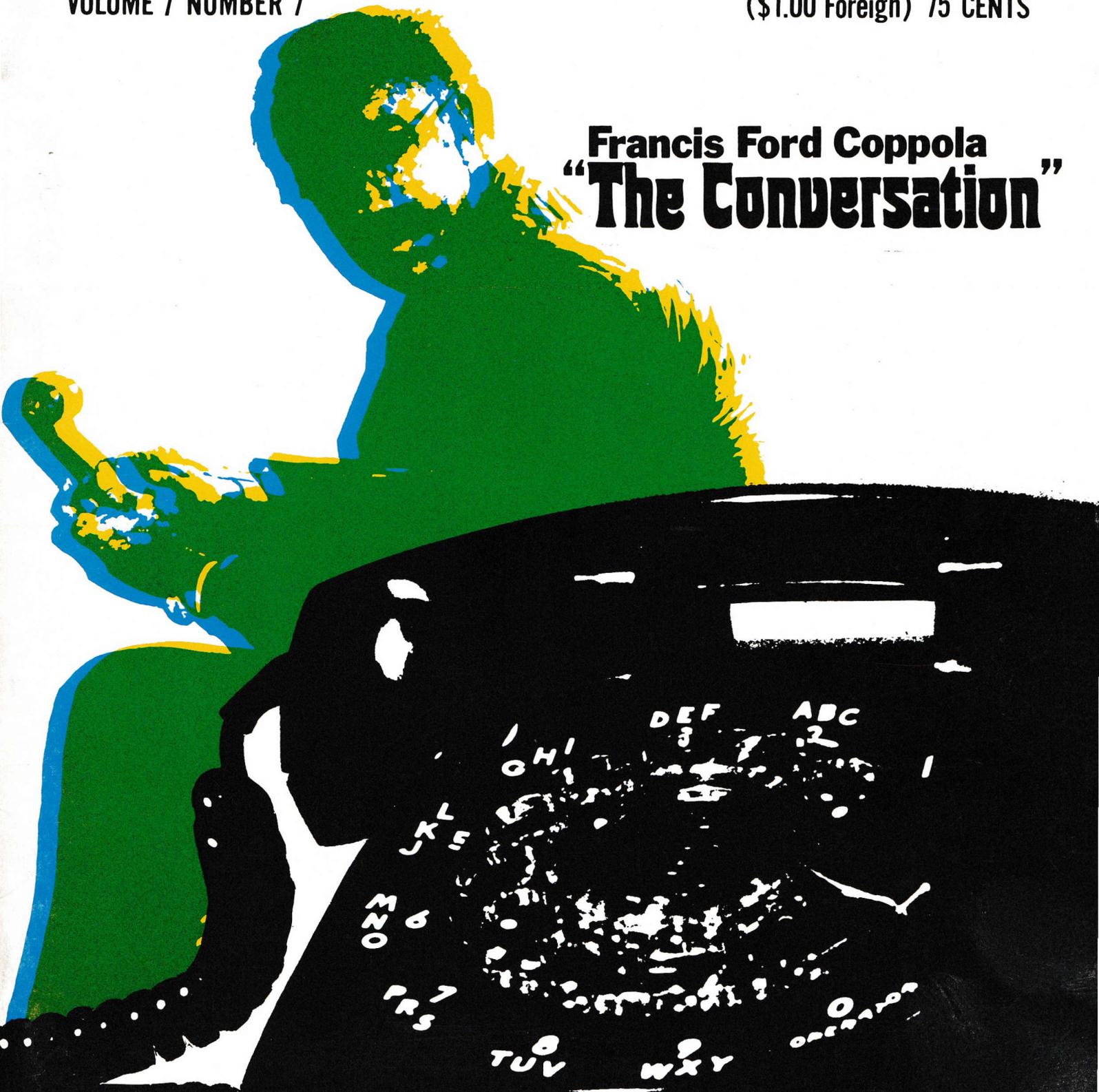


Filmmakers Newsletter

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Francis Ford Coppola
"The Conversation"



CHRIS NEWMAN:
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The Making Of THE CONVERSATION

An Interview With Francis Ford Coppola



“‘The Conversation’ was very ambitious, and I hung in not because it was going right, but because I couldn’t accept within myself the judgment that I couldn’t succeed in doing it. It’s a funny thing, but I just couldn’t let the project go.”

By Brian De Palma

BRIAN DE PALMA: How did the idea for *THE CONVERSATION* evolve and when?

FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA: The idea originated in a conversation between me and Irving Kirshner. We were talking about espionage, and he said that most people thought the safest way not to be bugged was to walk in a crowd, but he had heard that there were microphones which were capable of picking out specific voices in a crowd. And I thought, Wow, that’s a great motif for a film—and it started there, around 1966. I actually started working on it around 1967, but it was an on-again, off-again project which I was just never able to beat until 1969 when I did a first draft.

BDP: *THE CONVERSATION* is such a fantastic idea: being able to hear the same conversation six or seven times, and each time it takes on a slightly different meaning. It’s sort of like *BLOW UP* where you see a photograph at different times and read all kinds of different things into it as the picture goes on. Is that how you started the idea? That is, was it originally a conceptual idea?

FCC: I have to say that this project began differently from other things I’ve done, because instead of starting to write it out

of an emotional thing—the emotional identity of the people I knew—I started it as sort of a puzzle, which I’ve never done before and which I don’t think I’ll ever do again.

In other words, it started as a premise. I said, “I think I want to do a film about eavesdropping and privacy, and I want to make it about the guy who does it rather than about the people it’s being done to.” Then somewhere along the line I got the idea of using repetition, of exposing new levels of information not through exposition but by repetition. And not like *RASHOMON* where you present it in different ways each time—let them be the exact lines but have new meanings *in context*. In other words, as the film goes along, the audience goes with it because you are constantly giving them the same lines they’ve already heard, yet as they learn a little bit more about the situation they will interpret things differently. That was the original idea.

BDP: But you reveal information by the way you keep going over the tape and using different directional microphones. For instance, the street band covers up a whole bunch of lines and then you expose them.

FCC: That was a cheat from my original concept. I found that I had to reveal new

aspects of the conversation to do what I wanted to do. But originally my concept was that it would all be right there at the beginning. But that, I think, is impossible; I just couldn’t do it.

BDP: Do you approach your personal films—like *YOU’RE A BIG BOY NOW* or *THE RAIN PEOPLE* or *THE CONVERSATION*—any different than the way you do your bigger commercial films?

FCC: (after a long pause) I think maybe the smaller budget allows me to feel a little more relaxed and a little more willing to blow days and make stupid decisions. Usually the stupid decisions are some of the best things I do. Although I’ve gotten so immune to the process that now, even on *GODFATHER II* which is costing a lot, I’ll do something even though it may be crazy and jeopardize a lot of money.

So I think that, in a sense, the two poles of my so-called career are coming closer together, and what I hope to do in the future is make only personal films—but in such a way that even my big projects will be what you would call personal films.

BDP: Do you try to make certain kinds of films in order to develop areas of your talent on which you think you need work? After all, *THE CONVERSATION* is really a very different film from your others.



Hackman (with binoculars) and his associates are amused watching two girls through a one-way mirror.

FCC: Well, I have always liked the idea of tackling something. Like I did a play and an opera on the basis that every time you approach something that's a little tough and that you're a little frightened of, when you come out of it, even if you didn't completely beat it, you have still grown or changed at least an inch or two. If you do something that's tough just because you've never done it or thought about it before, then you have to come out a little different.

I got into **THE CONVERSATION** because I was reading Hesse and saw **BLOW UP** at the same time. And I'm very open about its relevance to **THE CONVERSATION** because I think the two films are actually very different. What's similar about them is obviously similar, and that's where it ends. But it was my admiration for the moods and the way those things happened in that film which made me say, "I want to do something like that." Every young director goes through that. But that's what started it going. And I was over my head in a sense and I knew it; I wasn't about to make another **STEPHENWOLF**. But those were the textures that started me off, so to speak. That's how I got into it. **BDP:** What's interesting to me is that although I had the feeling of a Hitchcock film where you begin with a conceptual idea rather than a character idea, it seems that ultimately you ended up doing both at the same time. Harry's character as it evolved throughout the film was quite interesting: his Catholic sensibility, his guilt about people being killed because of the information he gathered. Was that all there from the beginning?

FCC: No, I think you're right: this started with a concept and not a character. And that was a source of great difficulty for me. And one that I found unpleasant in that I could never feel anything for the character. But I think it's

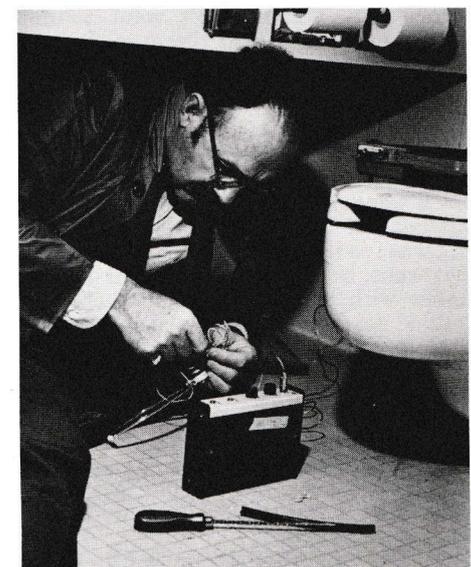
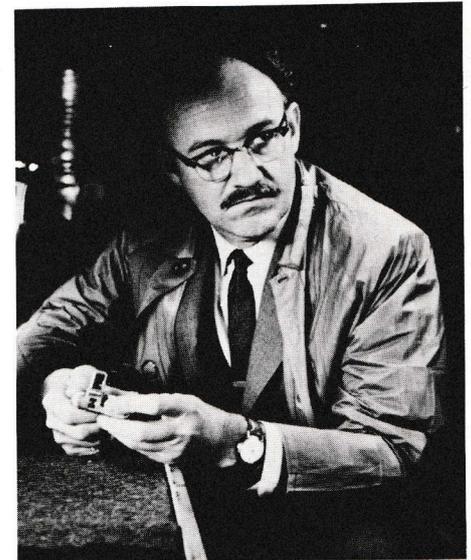
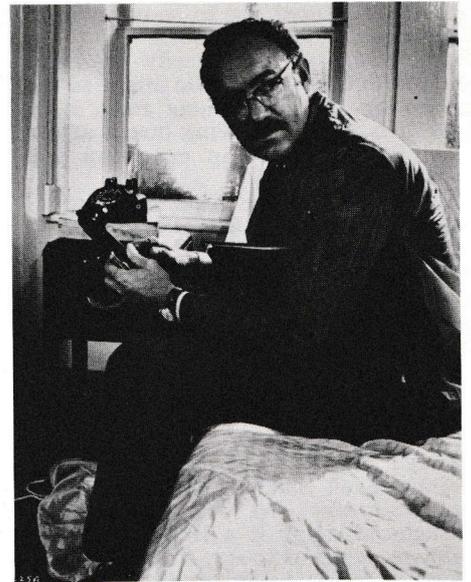
much easier for me to write characters, either what I can remember from people I've known or ones which are based somewhat on my own feelings. I could not relate to Harry; I could not be him. So I kept trying to enrich him—but starting from a total cipher, a kind of Harry Horner from "*Steppenwolf*," a middle European who lives alone in a rooming house. That kind of cliché. Realizing that I had to flesh the man out and make him real, I hoped the actor would help me.

Ultimately, though, I drew on my own past, and in the scene where he's in the park and tells all that stuff about his childhood and the polio—those are things that actually happened to me. That was almost a desperate attempt to give him a real character that I could relate to. But you're quite right; it started out as a puzzle.

BDP: That sort of Catholic sensibility and the guilt he felt for the information he conveyed—didn't that actually work against what he did? Why does *this* kind of man have *that* kind of job?

FCC: Well, I got into that for three reasons: First, it's kind of like **MARTY**: it's just something in my memory, so images of the Virgin Mary and confession just seem comfortable. Second, there is the irony of it: being a wiretapper, especially before 1968 when it was made illegal, was really a very hypocritical job. After all, he was doing one thing, which was really a terrible thing, yet it was all aboveboard—they even held conventions! But that also seemed very Catholic to me: to do one thing and yet believe another. And third was the image of confession, which may be, I think, the oldest form of eavesdropping.

So in a lot of ways I approached the film differently than I ever had before, and I don't know if I'd do it again. But one thing that I did say to myself was that I wanted to have every form of surveillance in this movie. Even the prostitute. That's confes-



Gene Hackman with the tools of the professional surveillance expert: the telephone, the camera, and the tape recorder.

sion. And I had even more that were cut out. But I wanted this to be an index of little surveillance techniques.

BDP: Did you consciously want to start with that voyeuristic image in the beginning, with that long zoom shot, and then use the viewing image at the end? Or was that an exception you made?

FCC: Right from the beginning I knew I wanted to shoot the actual conversation with long lenses to give a sense of surveillance. But after a while I decided that the long lenses have been used and over-used in films, and it would be sort of cliché.

But I wanted to find a visual way to give a sense of eavesdropping on Harry's personal life, which is to say that I as the filmmaker was an eavesdropper. And I decided not to do it with long lenses because I felt that was not only a cliché but also easy and overdone. Then I thought of doing it with a very static camera—which is to say, a camera which gave the impression that it didn't have an operator on it—so that the actor would walk out of frame, just as if it were an electronic camera.

BDP: For instance, when he sits down at his table: he steps out of frame and then comes back into frame.

FCC: But then to that we added the notion that if he stepped out of frame long enough, after a certain amount of seconds the camera would pan over to try to find him, as though it were a delayed reaction—a very impersonal kind of cold thing. Normally a camera operator is always adjusting. But I was trying to give a sense of the invasion of privacy in this man's room by a static camera. Then the ultimate development of that was the panning camera at the end which was meant to be like a supermarket TV camera.

But I was actually trying to lead up to that. For instance, in the first scene he comes home and makes a phone call to the landlady and while he's on the phone he takes off his pants. I wanted to do that because I wanted to do something that people do when they're totally alone to be comfortable—but I didn't want to do anything really vulgar because I just didn't want it in the film. So I did that other action to give what they call in the Actor's Studio a "private moment," and to start the theme of us comfortably peeking in on his private life. There were more scenes like that, but they were cut. One was a wonderful scene of him alone that was cut out because we were afraid the film was too slow. But I wish we hadn't. In that scene, he's in the kitchen cooking his dinner with his pants off and there's a muffled noise coming from the apartment above and he gets a chair and sticks his head in the closet and with a broom lifts the trapdoor to hear better what the people are arguing about. It's such a ridiculous image of this grown-up man who's a professional eavesdropper listening to the neighbors by the most primitive form. Afterwards, I thought, why did we cut it out?

BDP: Did you shoot any more film with the camera panning over when it finds he isn't there and then cut shots like that later?

FCC: No. I had thought on the set that

the device would be too manipulative and self-conscious, so I did it very infrequently in order not to appear like I was driving the idea into the ground. But it turned out that on film and in the context of the cut that it was not as noticeable a device as I had thought, so I could have done it more.

BDP: What about the technical aspects of THE CONVERSATION: equipment, budget, shooting time?

FCC: The picture was shot with conventional equipment. To shoot the park scene we had some six camera positions, and we did some of it with extremely long lenses. We just showed the principals to the cameramen and said, "Try to find them and keep them in focus." And then the actors kept walking around and around and it was literally done as though the situation was as it was. This was shot many times—for at least three or four days. And then toward the end, just to cover myself, I put some cameras down on the ground and did it a little more conventionally.

The picture was budgeted around \$1.6 million but it went about 3 over and came in at \$1.9 million. A lot of that happened because I was late—it was scheduled for 40 days but we came in, in 56 days, over two weeks late. Essentially I was caught between two worlds in that I wanted to make the film small and intimate and with friends, and I think, with the textures of this film, it would have been possible. And it was contemporary; it didn't involve period sets or costumes. But because I did *THE GODFATHER*, me doing a film with Hackman for a million plus was only scheduled for 40 days. And also, having just made *THE GODFATHER*, I found it very difficult to get anyone, from the unions on down, to allow me to do it. It just got fatter and fatter. Also, I wanted to have Dean Tavouleris as art director because he was someone I felt close to, and yet I couldn't expect him to work for less; he had to be paid a fair amount.

BDP: What about the sound?

FCC: It was all shot with radio mikes. We did it very much the way Harry was supposed to be doing it in the story.

It was total chaos. Half our crew was in all those shots. And you can see them! But there were a lot of cameras. It was really John Cassavetes' time: cameras photographing cameras.

BDP: Did you use the music to keep the pacing sort of singular and slow?

FCC: I chose a single instrument to give the notion of a guy alone, a kind of loneliness and simplicity. Just simple, a little lonely, and jazz-like. I would think that Harry's greatest thing was to be a great jazz soloist and play at some big jazz festival. That's his secret wish.

BDP: But the use of sound in the film is not naturalistic at all. Everything is louder; you're much more aware of certain noises, and you're consciously making people aware of certain sounds.

FCC: We felt that any man who sits for 9 hours at a time listening to things would be very conscious of sounds and relate to sound in a different way than a normal person. That's why I had him hear the murder. There's a scene that was cut out where he goes to a friend who's a cop and says, "I witnessed a murder." And the guy says, "Did you see it?" And he says, "I heard it." He never saw it, but to Harry

sounds are that alive. That's why we tried to have the track more from his point of view.

BDP: Did this present any special problems in mixing the movie?

FCC: The film was edited by Walter Murch, who in a way collaborated with me on the film as much as possible—especially since I was working on *THE GODFATHER*. He was cutting, and a lot of the editorial decisions are his. He also constructed the tracks and mixed it alone in our little Zoetrope studio.

BDP: But there were problems in the highs and lows of sound?

FCC: To keep the extremes from the highest sound to the lowest sound, he had the highest sound right at the peak of the optical track so that the lowest sound would be quite a bit different from that. Which means that the whole sound track is mixed unusually low and when it is projected, the older theaters have to play it high.

BDP: Did this film present a lot of problems in the editing because you were doing repetition all the time and it had to be handled carefully lest it become boring?

FCC: One of the big struggles with the film was that it was boring. And rather than people taking a repeated line and saying, "Oh, isn't that interesting; now it means that," many of them would just kind of tune out and say, "Oh, they're doing that again." It was a very delicate balance, and I still don't think the finished film quite did what I had originally hoped it would do.

BDP: When you put a rough cut together, in general what problems do you face?

FCC: That it doesn't work. Not at all. I know Bogdanovich's first cut works; but none of mine ever have. Except *FINIAN'S RAINBOW*, which just sort of fell together and was more or less it.

Usually, though, my films are raw and shapeless and lack focus and really seem like a disaster. Only with editing and re-positioning and a real last re-write do they start to shape up. But it's funny. It's like a horse I once knew of in a horse race. In every race it was always last until, in the last laps, it made progress—and in this particular case, won. My films don't always win, but they always look much worse than they end up. And it's the editorial process that starts it. But it may be good that it's that way.

BDP: Do you admire directors like Hitchcock who construct things so rigidly that the shooting process is just a matter of putting all the pieces together? Do you wish you had a little more of that?

FCC: Well, I realized after a while that I needed a little more of that to be able to get away with it and get people to sit through it. But although I find Hitchcock very enjoyable, I don't have awe for his work because I can see how it's built. What I have awe for is certain filmmakers who put things on the screen and when you look at it you don't know how it happened or how on earth anyone could have gotten that on film—whether through acting or just beautiful things happening. I always feel I know exactly how Hitchcock has done something, and the fact that he doesn't often have terrific

acting in his movies limits my reaction right there.

BDP: But do you admire his cinematic constructions?

FCC: Yes, I do admire them. But I find that I prefer something like *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN* or *THE WRONG MAN* to *NORTH BY NORTHWEST* and the more manipulative films. When you have both the cinematic constructions and the acting, then you're really awed by it!

BDP: Being a writer/director, how do you approach your material? That is, do you rehearse it a lot so that you get feedback from your actors to see if scenes work?

FCC: Yes, I think I'm very receptive to the actors' intuition. I provide the scene which is the basis, then if they can depart from it and make it better, I'll go with it. But if they depart from it and make it worse, then I go back to what I wrote.

BDP: Does that mean you have a rehearsal period when you just start working it out on the set as you shoot?

FCC: The rehearsal time for the last few films has happened on the set, but I'd rather have a chance to work in total relaxation because I believe that the best work—and it may be true of any art—comes out of relaxation because you are in a state where you can follow your intuitions. If you're tense and frightened and pressed, you tend to censor your ideas and do more "safe" and usual kinds of things. So I think relaxation is very important, and a rehearsal period where you just have the actors and are not under the pressure of daily production, with the crew waiting and stuff like that, is where you do better. I would hope in the future to set it up that way.

BDP: Do you like directing big scenes with a lot of extras, or do you find it's just a matter of putting embellishments on the kind of character scenes that you're really interested in?

FCC: I think I would like directing big scenes if I was ever really prepared for them. But I tend to always get caught with my pants down for them. You're just desperate to get through it and make it look like something; and you don't want to pile on those costly days.

I've never prepared a film well. Usually I just barely get the script done and go into production and it's "well, here it goes!" But I'm going to do a film—I think my next film—and write it myself and even do scenes or parts of it in this little theater that I have and just kind of relax with it and put it together very slowly.

BDP: Do you look at your past movies very much?

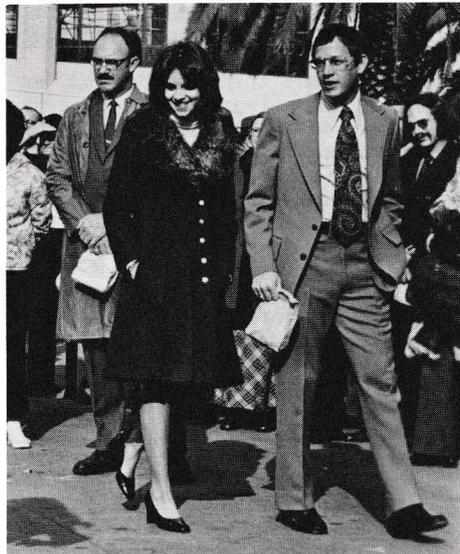
FCC: No, but I've always said that someday I'm going to go into a room and look at them alone. It has to be alone. If there's one other person, you have to look at what that person thinks.

BDP: In doing that, would you become aware of the things that interest you as a director and the things that bore you as a director?

FCC: Sure. At least I think I can tell as far as themes go. No matter what period, no matter where you are, there's always a show going on. So I figure that must interest me because I'm always sticking shows in. Right now we're shooting in a little theater, and there's a show going on.



TOP: Professional surveillance expert Gene Hackman (left) is distracted by mime Robert Shields as he is following a young couple for a millionaire client. BOTTOM: Cindy Williams has a secret rendezvous with Frederic Forrest (right) not knowing they are being trailed by Gene Hackman (behind Cindy).



So these motifs, these recurring themes, are your definition in some way.

BDP: But you don't rely on those things much in *THE CONVERSATION*.

FCC: No, I don't give myself a lot of breaks in *THE CONVERSATION* because there's not a lot in the movie that I feel viscerally about, except maybe technology, bugging the room, stuff like that.

BDP: Did you use all live locations?

FCC: Yes, if you consider that his workshop was just a warehouse but we dressed it to get the effect. We dressed it entirely so that it was a set within an actual location.

BDP: Why did you make it so un-specific, so much closer to Kafka than to, say, *Gulf & Western*?

FCC: I was afraid that the character of Harry was so essentially boring and non-

exotic that it would be easy to cross over into a thing where the audience was really more interested in the couple and their story than in him. And since that wasn't the point, I did whatever I could to make it seem like a citadel of power with almost Henry the VIIIth types of relationships without ever giving you a hint that you were meant to go into that story. I was frankly scared that if I was any more specific then everyone would be irritated that I was not making the movie about the couple.

BDP: But why didn't you at least make up a fictitious company name or something like that?

FCC: Because I felt that anyone who had been in one of those places, who had stepped into one of those impersonal lobbies and heard that sound in the elevators, would know exactly what I meant, so to say it was the Bank of America or Gulf & Western was unnecessary. I felt that by making it specific I would also somehow be making it smaller.

BDP: But surely you knew that when the secret was found out and you discovered that it was only a wife killing her husband instead of something like preventing an assassination or some cataclysmic event that it might disappoint people?

FCC: Yes, I was afraid that people would think there was more to it than there really was. And especially when Watergate happened, I was really frightened that people would expect it to be about spies and tapes and that sort of thing and then be very angry that it wasn't. But right from the beginning I wanted it to be something personal, not political, because somehow that is even more terrible to me. **BDP: What's really bothering Harry? What's the source of his deepest wounds? The thing that he's really trying to get at when he's tearing up the**

room, tearing himself up?

FCC: At the end? I was trying—and I didn't totally succeed—to have an image of dismantling, but to have a repeated image. If you notice carefully (and no one does) they're tearing a building down on his block. Well, they're stripping this building, and later in the film we see all the rooms bare, which is to me an eaves-dropping image—that is, seeing through the walls of buildings. At the end I wanted—of course with the premise that the best wiretapper in the world had been tapped by someone better—the tearing down of the room to kind of be synonymous with a kind of personal tearing down in order to try to come back more to what his roots were as a man.

BDP: What are his roots? What is it he's trying to get at?

FCC: I think his roots are roots of guilt. Ever since he was a little kid, everything that has happened he has in some way been responsible for.

BDP: Even when he was a child?

FCC: That's what the thing in the park was all about when he talks about punching a man in the stomach who dies a year later. I don't know, but I think that somewhere along the way he must have been one of those kids who's sort of a weirdo in high school. You know, the kind of technical freak who's president of the radio club. He was probably something like that.

BDP: You're not technically oriented like that in any way yourself, are you?

FCC: Sure. I always was. When I was a kid, I was one of those guys like I was just describing. In fact, my nickname was "Science." You know, "Hey, Science, come over here and tell him about induction coils." And I was president of the radio club.

When I was a kid I became attracted to the theater because it fulfilled the two poles of my life: one was stories, and the other was science. I was just as much attracted to the theater because of its technical aspects—light dimmers, sets, etc.

BDP: Is there a relation between that and the fact that Harry is a voyeur?

FCC: One part is the desire to be the best at something, to have an excellence. But the other is how I constructed the character: When I was kid about 13 or 14, I wasn't much of a hotshot, but there was a tremendous sense of power in putting microphones around to hear other people. There was a sense of being important and superior because I could tap a phone and no one knew. I even had a plan to put microphones in the radiators of all the rooms in the house so that I could tune in on what I was going to get for Christmas. And I would think that those kind of people, the unappreciated school weirdos, might turn into something like a Harry.

BDP: But he lives a vicarious life through other people.

FCC: I was trying to imply that with his obsession with Cindy in the movie. It's subtle, but I think it's clear to some people. He begins to replace Fred in a way by trying to get a very personal relationship with the girl. In the dream sequence in the park, in a way he has replaced the guy in their walk. So I was really trying to imply a kind of romantic magnetism.

But the idea of the dream sequence in

the park actually came out of another notion: I love the idea of a film editor who has cut a film for six months and in putting it together piece by piece he has seen the leading lady from every aspect and has fallen in love with her. (I once actually saw this happen.) Then one day he gets to meet her and she says, "Hi, how are you?" And he wants to say, "I know you. I know the way you walk and the way you talk." I loved the idea of just one party knowing the other so incredibly well. And I loved the idea of the guy following her and saying, "Listen, you don't know who I am but I know you and I know your problems and I love you." Which is what he ultimately wants to say.

And I had written that scene in a bus—one of those electric buses in San Francisco which are so neat. And I remember looking out of the window and seeing other electric buses going through the fog and it was such a beautiful, ghostly image that I decided I wanted a scene of him sitting next to her on an electric bus and saying, "I know you."

San Francisco gets very foggy, and I thought for sure that if we were shooting this film for 40 days we'd get one foggy day. Well, we never shot that scene because we never got the fog. So the last day, in desperation, we tried to make the fog and we got the scene you see in the picture. But when we tried to do the bus scene we just couldn't so we gave up and quit.

But it's a very surreal park, with its levels, and in the 40's many art films were staged there, so I don't feel that bad about it. The important thing was the idea of him trying to reach out: The notion of a man who's totally private, who has never even told anyone his phone number or anything about himself, running after this woman and saying, "I was born in 1939 and I weigh 182 lbs. and I do this, and . . ." To give so much information, like overkill, I thought would be pathetic.

BDP: And this scene originally came at the end of the movie?

FCC: Yes, but we had such a botch-up with the fog—the fog was too extreme because we manufactured it to block out the blue sky—that we were even going to cut it out totally. But I didn't want to lose him finally voicing something about himself, so then one of the editors came up with the idea of moving it up earlier and we liked it so we left it there.

BDP: Why did you make Cindy and Duval so far apart in age?

FCC: I guess, again, the notion of King Henry the VIIIth, the notion of a very powerful man. He's King Henry and she's the young queen and he's one of the courtiers. It was all meant to be a kind of political romance, the idea of her sleeping with the courtier and the consequences of the act. So it was the classic older, powerful, wealthy man and his younger, beautiful, possibly unfaithful wife.

I purposely chose a girl with an old/young face for the part because I wanted the audience to think that although she was young there was something troubling her or, in this case, someone oppressing her. But at the end you see the real twist and realize her face is showing hardness and ambition.

BDP: When you work something out on paper and then get it up on the

screen and see that it works, have you found that, making as many movies as you have, you can pretty precisely predict how you conceive something, either on paper or in your head, and how it's going to appear on the screen?

FCC: I haven't been able to up to now.

BDP: But as you make more films, don't you obviously become more experienced and able to realize your visions?

FCC: I now feel comfortable, and even enthusiastic, about starting another original screenplay. Because now, after this and after what I would call original sections of both GODFATHERS (sections that did not come from the book), I feel comfortable about being able to tackle something more ambitious. THE CONVERSATION was very ambitious, and I hung in not because it was going right, but because I couldn't accept within myself the judgment that I couldn't succeed in doing it. It's a funny thing, but I just couldn't let the project go.

BDP: What do you consider an ambitious risk for a director? Something like 2001, where you try to create a whole universe?

FCC: Something like 8½ or LA DOLCE VITA where you really launch into an enormous personal vision of things.

BDP: Then you're more interested in the personal than the fantastic?

FCC: I'm interested in future themes, but I'll try first of all to latch onto some powerful emotional undercurrent in people. What I liked about LAST TANGO IN PARIS was that it seemed to latch onto the emotional language of this man. And this got tapped directly. I believe that the emotional makeup of people is a system not unlike the circulatory system or the muscular system. And if you can make a film that not only lays bare that system but is itself constructed out of those things, it would be an incredible thing to witness and to feel.

Basically I want to write original film works—that is, not based on books. And that is a frightening prospect, even to me who has done it several times. But that's my big challenge; that's the big thing I'm after. People who think I'm successful are wrong in that I don't feel myself to be my definition of successful until I can take something, either out of my memory or my past or my ideas, and make it into a really effective motion picture.

THE CONVERSATION and THE RAIN PEOPLE were started almost as dares to myself. Starting and working on it for six months and still it doesn't work—well, it was a dare to myself to make it work! But from now on I don't think I will do it as a puzzle or a dare. It's like the difference between seducing a woman just to see if you can seduce her, or seducing her because you really want to. And I think that from now on I'm going to write something because I really want to write it, rather than proving to myself that I can get through an original screenplay.

So both THE RAIN PEOPLE and THE CONVERSATION were personal tests to see if I could do it—get through it and make it work. Now that I feel I can do it, the really exciting test which presents itself to me is whether I can do a really formidable original work.