

Are you being  
watched?



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Director Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 masterpiece *The Conversation* (released in the same year as a film that many consider to be Coppola's magnum opus, *The Godfather Part II*), tells the story of Gene Hackman's Harry Caul, a surveillance specialist living in San Francisco, California. But when Caul and his team are tasked to record a seemingly normal couple in San Francisco's crowded Union Square, his life turns from incredibly isolated to downright strange. He and his crew successfully record the couple, but several words are ambiguous. Caul tries to unravel the mystery and is led down a dark and treacherous road. A road that leads him to (perhaps) witness a murder. As Caul delves deeper into the case, it becomes more and more apparent to the audience that he is paranoid – his girlfriend knows nothing about him, he claims to have no phone in his house and to use only a payphone, and he has a plethora of locks on his door. Nevertheless, Harry's paranoia reaches fever pitch when it is revealed at the end of the movie that someone has been watching and recording him (playing saxophone) in his apartment, his greatest fear in life. As Harry desperately tries to uncover what is recording him, he destroys his once-pristine apartment, tearing up floorboards, smashing walls in, and destroying an inordinate amount of personal property along the way – including a once sacred statue of the Virgin Mary. What makes this scene so powerful is not only Harry's crazed and highly entertaining actions, but its mise-en-scene, sound, cinematography, and editing.

Mise-en-scene wise, the fact that Harry's apartment (the set, an aspect of mise-en-scene) shifts from light to exceptionally dark shows us how Harry has transformed from less paranoid and more jovial to more dark and

disturbed. Also, Hackman's costuming in the scene changes from normal and undisturbed to disheveled and very sweaty as he works more and works harder, suggesting how frantic and crazed he has become after learning that he – a usually cautious and intelligent man – was being recorded by Harrison Ford's Martin Stett, the assistant director of the company Harry and his coworkers were hired by. This, as well as how his apartment went from very orderly to utterly destroyed, suggests that Harry's paranoia has gotten the best of him.

In terms of sound, that ending scene (and the film as a whole, for that matter) play masterfully with diegetic and non-diegetic sound. For reference, diegetic sound is sound that has a source within the film (for example, if two characters were driving down the road and listening to the radio, the sound the audience hears that comes from that radio would be diegetic). On the flip side, non-diegetic sound is sound that has no clear source within the film (for example, a film's soundtrack). We know the piano playing in the background (the film's soundtrack) is non-diegetic sound and the saxophone is diegetic; however, the strange buzzing and hammering noises have ambiguous sources – we don't know if they are diegetic or non-diegetic. Again, this plays into Harry's growing paranoia: is he really being watched or is he simply crazy? Was the director murdered or was it self defense? What exactly did the aforementioned couple say and what did they mean by it?

The film's cinematography and editing suggest the same thing. The film is lit so that Harry is in a dark, powerless place where he suspects anyone and everything, including his once-sacred stature of the Virgin Mary (sacred because he was portrayed as devoutly religious early in the film). As Harry

grows more and more frantic and crazed, the editing does the same thing. At the start of this scene, the editing is very calm and relaxed; as Harry grows more frantic it begins to become more rapid, not allowing the audience to breathe as they experience the same paranoia as Harry. Really, the films cinematography and editing represent how Harry's character has changed from the start of the film - from cautious to insane; from organized to disheveled; from normal-ish to strange.

At the end of the day, Harry's efforts may have been all for naught, as it is foreshadowed early in the film that a phone recording technology would play a major role in the movie. Was there a bug in Harry's apartment? Or was it Martin Stett recording him using the brand-new phone technology that Harry claimed would never work earlier in the film? We will never know. But we can use the films mise-en-scene, sound, cinematography, and editing to clue us in.