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Viewpoint, misdirection, and sound design in film: *The Conversation*

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Abstract

Stories can and often do build surprises by encouraging audiences to attribute certain assertions, presuppositions, and evaluations to an “objective” or base-level perspective, only to reveal later on that these elements should be attributed only to the mistaken or deceptive viewpoint of a particular character. This paper presents a comparison of sound design and viewpoint phenomena in Francis Ford Coppola’s film *The Conversation* (1974) with similar narrative twists in prose and with other perspective shifts in film. It shows how viewpoint blends, shifts, and distinctions between the “viewpointed” and “non-viewpointed” status of elements in the visual and auditory stream in film can work together to create this kind of re-evaluation surprise, and discusses how these are and are not analogous to similar effects in prose. © 2017 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Both linguistics and literary studies have a long tradition of comparing resources for reporting speech, thought, and perception across different media, genres, modalities, and settings. These comparisons often take a special interest in phenomena where the exact status of the representation involved is unstable, difficult to classify, or otherwise somehow “mixed.”

Free indirect discourse, for instance, is relatively rare in conversation—rare enough that for some time, many scholars (e.g. [Lips, 1926](#); [Banfield, 1982](#); [von Roncador, 1988](#)) thought it didn’t exist outside written discourse at all. That has turned out not to be the case. As [Fludernik \(1993:83–90, *inter alia*\)](#), for one, has shown at length, free indirect discourse does indeed appear in oral narratives, as well as in journalism, literary representations of dialog for stage, verse, and elsewhere. Meanwhile, speakers often produce gestures that express a different viewpoint than the one(s) expressed in their speech; what’s more, they also can produce *dual viewpoint* gestures ([McNeill, 1992](#); [Parrill, 2009](#)) that themselves express multiple perspectives on a scene or event at the same time. Signed languages, too, offer a variety of resources for presenting multiple perspectives in a single utterance, as seen for instance in body partitioning ([Dudis, 2004](#)) and fused perspective constructions ([Perniss and Özyürek, 2008](#)). Generally, the more we look, and the wider the range of data we consider, the more clear it becomes that constructions evoking multiple viewpoints at once are ubiquitous across genres and modalities ([Dancygier et al., 2016](#)).

Additionally, mixed and ambiguous viewpoint constructions have proved an extremely rich and productive resource for storytellers who want to produce certain kinds of surprises. This paper takes up a particularly narrative viewpoint

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phenomenon: story twists that hinge on the re-analysis of what, or whose, viewpoint should be associated with a given element in the narrative. Stories can and often do (see, e.g., Emmott and Alexander, 2010, 2014; Pallarés-García, 2012, 2014; Tobin, 2009, 2014) construct surprises by encouraging audiences to attribute certain assertions, presuppositions, and evaluations to an “objective” or base-level perspective, only to reveal later on that these elements should be attributed only to the mistaken or deceptive viewpoint of a particular character. This happens commonly in written narratives, but also in drama and film.

We will look in detail at one distinctive instance of this viewpoint gambit as enacted in film: the set-up and climactic twist of Francis Ford Coppola’s 1974 *The Conversation*. This film is noteworthy for its virtuoso management of multiple viewpoints across and between sound editing and the visual stream. It also famously includes one specially daring bit of editorial sleight of hand, which will be the primary focus of the present analysis.

The Conversation tells the story of a surveillance expert working on a particularly difficult piece of audio reconstruction. For the first third of the film, the crucial snippet is indecipherable. We see and hear the process of juxtaposing and combining the information from different tapes, until their words emerge from the muddle. Later, in the film’s final moments, the expert realizes that he was mistaken in his interpretation, and we hear (as he does) a new version of the recording.

In this last “replaying,” one section of the original, oft-repeated recording is not just altered but replaced. The new version places stress on different words than the original, producing different implications about the speaker’s intentions. How the film manages that switch, the risks it poses to cooperativity, and its closest neighbors in prose and cinema, are the focus of the present analysis. What we will see is that while the mixed/ambiguous status and its discourse functions have many important parallels to free indirect discourse, the material particulars of how the filmic versions are constructed are not negligible.

In looking in detail at these mixed viewpoint representations in *The Conversation*, we can learn more about:

- Medium-specific strategies for manipulating reader attention and depth of processing (Sanford and Emmott, 2012) through foregrounding and backgrounding, and how these intersect with viewpoint in different modalities;
- Mixed viewpoint representations involving both the visual and the auditory stream: in film, these can be decoupled from one another to create a number of striking effects;
- The importance of embodied viewpoint as a resource for building narrative and discourse coherence; and
- Issues of inconsistency, unreliability, and uncooperative narration (Grice, 1975; Kukkonen, 2013) that arise around these viewpoint manipulations.

2. *The Conversation*: plot summary

A San Francisco business executive has hired Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) to spy on the executive’s wife. As events unfold, Caul becomes both increasingly obsessed with uncovering the truth about his client and increasingly paranoid about his own vulnerability to surveillance. Caul’s inner turmoil and the external mystery both play out through his compulsive attentions to the product of his work: the tapes of the eponymous conversation.

The film opens with a complex set piece in which Caul and his team use an array of microphones to record a pair of lovers—Ann (Cindy Williams) and Mark (Frederic Forrest)—as they walk slowly around San Francisco’s busy, noisy Union Square. Later, as Caul compiles the recordings, elements of this scene are replayed for the audience many times. We come to know the crucial parts very well, and one moment best of all: a point at which the words are at first almost completely drowned out by music and other noise. Caul plays and adjusts and replays and refines the recording of this moment (as we look and listen on) until it is clear: Mark is saying “He’d *kill* us if he got the chance.” Caul concludes that his client, Ann’s husband, has commissioned the surveillance to get proof that Mark and Ann are having an affair, and that their lives are in danger as a result.

Caul, already consumed with guilt over a past wiretap job that ended in murder, becomes desperate to protect the lovers. He refuses to turn the tapes over to his employer and goes on his own mission to try, somehow, to save Mark and Ann. But ultimately it turns out that the conspiracy was not a plot by Ann’s husband, “the Director,” to kill the couple. Instead it was their plan to murder *him*. As Caul realizes, too late, what has happened, we again hear Mark’s taped line. In this final iteration, however, it’s changed: “He’d *kill us* if he got the chance.” This is a different recording from the one we’ve heard before—not a cleaned-up version of the same clip, but an entirely new one, with a different line reading.

The film’s editor and sound designer, Walter Murch, explains in an interview (Koppelman, 2005:38–39) how it was done: during production, Forrest and Williams recorded additional takes of their lines from the Union Square scene in a quiet room, in case anything was unusably unclear in the original footage. In that session, Forrest flubbed one take. He delivered the line not as directed, with the prosody that suggested the couple was in danger, but with the emphasis on “us”. At the time, Murch set the material aside as a mistake. But later, when audiences for test screenings were having trouble understanding the film’s plot, he pulled the clip from his archive. This version of the line perfectly encapsulated the interpretation that Caul has missed; as Murch describes it, “the implied conclusion, ‘Therefore we have to kill him.’”

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