

Play it Again (and Again), Sam: The Tape Recorder in Film (Part Two on Walter Murch)

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Abstract

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The second installment of my summer series, “Play it Again (and Again), Sam: The Tape Recorder in Film” continues to unspool chronologically, this time focusing on the recorder’s key role in two films indelibly imprinted by legendary editor [Walter Murch](#): *Touch of Evil* (1958) and *The Conversation* (1974). **[If you missed my first installment, June’s piece on Noir, you can catch up to speed right [here](#)].**

Most famous for his work on *American Graffiti* (1973), *The Godfather: Part II* (1974), *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *The English Patient* (1996), Murch was one of the first folks catapulted into the critical pantheon of sound studies. Not only is his sound (and image) editing intuitive and innovative, but he is one of the only sound editors to speak and write extensively about his creative process. His collaborative book with [Michael Ondaatje](#), a transcription of their extensive and wide-ranging discussions entitled *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film* (2002), is stunning in its depth, breadth, and accessibility: an intellectual trifecta. It is the kind of summer beach reading that is both gripping *and* brag-worthy.

In *The Conversations*, Murch describes the excitement of being age 10 and discovering the tape recorder for the first time, especially how

“That passion, which was a kind of delirious drunkenness with what the tape recorder could do, completely possessed me” (6).

In homage to “that passion,” the next two films on my “Top 6” list of the appearance of the tape recorder in film show how Murch’s oeuvre carefully and affectionately represents not only the early drunken experiences with the machine’s heady possibilities, but also the lingering technological hangover in the 1970s, not just for Murch but for the U.S. writ large.



"Mixed Tape" by Thristian (2008)

For those keeping track, [the first two films on my list are](#): 1. *Double Indemnity* (1944) and 2. *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), with a little Mike Hammer for good measure with *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). And, before you get comfy on the couch, don't forget our third and final installment, on the 1980s, coming **August 15th**.

3. *Touch of Evil* (Universal, 1958, Dir. Orson Welles):



by presspublish

And how, you ask did Walter Murch possibly have any part in editing 1958's *Touch of Evil*, given that he was all of 15 years old? Murch didn't get his hands on the film until 40 years later, when

film preservationist and scholar [Rick Schmidlin](#) tracked down the complete version of Orson Welles's single-spaced, 58 page production memo to Universal's studio heads, telling them how to fix the mess they had made of his movie. Welles had been pulled from his film as he worked laboriously on the rough cut and the studio completely re-edited the movie, even filming additional scenes. Once *Touch of Evil* was finished, Universal allowed Welles one shot at the film in a private screening room, with no pauses or rewinds, and the astonishingly detailed (and restrained) memo is the result of that screening. Unfortunately for Welles, Universal completely ignored Welles, releasing the studio re-cut of this late-noir gem as a B-movie. Welles never again directed a major film and his memo was thought to have been placed directly into the circular file until [Jonathan Rosenbaum](#) published [selections from it in *Film Quarterly* in 1992](#). [For full details and a link to the lost memo, check out Lawrence French's [web essay](#)].

Once Schmidlin tracked down the entire piece, he was determined to re-cut *Touch of Evil* according to Welles's written directions. Here Schmidlin discusses how Murch became involved:

"When I was given the green light to re-edit Orson Welles's Touch of Evil, based on his memo, it didn't take a rocket scientist to know who I wanted to re-edit this film. I got Walter's phone number through a friend and called him at home. I said, Walter, this is Rick Schmidlin. You don't know me, but I'm producing a re-edit of Orson Welles's Touch of Evil and I can't think of any intellect that could match Orson Welles's better than yours. Would you be interested? Walter said, Mmmm. Send me the memo and I'll take a look" (The Conversations, 182).

Murch was able to make all 50 of Welles's suggested changes and then some; he unearthed an additional 9-page sound memo after tracking down the 89-year-old former head of post-production at Universal, Ernie Nims, who had stashed it in his attic. [Tim Tully's "The Sounds of Evil" from Filmsound.org](#) provides a detailed description of Murch's editorial process and the end result, which manages to be both subtle and dramatic. Film people actually like (and increasingly, prefer) the 1998 re-release, which speaks volumes about Murch's work (and Welles's prescience). I refer to Murch's version in the thoughts that follow.



Quinlan vs. Vargas (Screen Capture by AWWWS)

So *Touch of Evil* features Charlton Heston in brownface doing his best to look like [Vicente Fernandez](#); I am not going to deny (or defend) this casting disaster. However, I will say that this 1958 story of U.S. police corruption on the nation's borders has reinvigorated after last week's revelations of the FBI's "[Fast and Furious](#)" importation of illegal firearms into Mexico. Our current era of the "Global War on Terror" has produced, imagined, and inflamed an insatiable sense of national vulnerability that demands "illegal alien" scapegoats (peep [John McCain's recent assertion that "substantial evidence" exists](#) that Mexicans crossing the border started [Arizona's recent spate of wildfires](#)). However, the GWOT had its precedent; America's post-WWII Cold War anxieties ended any semblance of a "[Good Neighbor Policy](#)" long before films like *Touch of Evil* portrayed the border as a lawless, indefensible place where wealthy, pleasure seeking white men can be killed in bomb blasts and white police corrupted by easy money and hard-line policing. As protagonist Miguel Vargas (Heston) tells his American bride Susie (Janet Leigh), "This isn't the real Mexico, you know that! All border towns bring out the worst in their country." Although no one ever says it aloud, by film's end it is clear that Welles intended this barb to cut both sides of the border.

The plot of *Touch of Evil* pits Vargas, a straight-arrow Mexican drug official on his honeymoon, against the celebrated but hard-drinking and crooked-as-they-come American police captain Hank Quinlan (played by an especially sweaty Orson Welles). Both are working the same case—a car-bomb kills a rich man and his mistress as they cross the border to the U.S.—but from decidedly different angles. Quinlan, in bed with Mexican gangster "Uncle" Joe Grandi (Akim Tamiroff) plants evidence on the investigation's hastily drummed-up prime suspect, Manelo Sanchez (Victor Millan). Vargas knows it, and sets about trying to prove Quinlan's guilt to the skeptical and increasingly hostile American police force, led by Sergeant Pete Menzies (Joseph Calleia), even if it means postponing his honeymoon *and* his trip to Mexico City to testify against the Grandi crime family. Quinlan would prefer that he *never* gets there, if you catch my drift, and he arranges for the kidnapping of Vargas's wife, among other cruelties.



*Not the Optimum Recording Conditions:
Scene of the Climax of "Touch of Evil"*

Vargas, compassionate and honor-bound even as he is grimly world-weary—"There are plenty of soldiers who don't like war," he tells the Americans when they question his commitment to the job

—decides to use the tape recorder as a weapon of truth in his dirty war against Quinlan, “a potent weapon” according to Murch (194). While it is difficult to discuss specifics about the recorder’s prominence in the film without spoiler alerting all over the place, I will say that the machine heightens the tension of the cat-and-mouse game Vargas is forced to play with Quinlan, especially because the technology of the moment did not allow for distant long-range audio surveillance, like we will later see in *The Conversation*. The intimacy he shares with Quinlan, shadowing him closely to stay in range of the radio-mic without being seen or heard, unnerves Vargas and he displaces his discomfort onto the recorder: “I hate this machine, spying, creeping.” However, as the bodies ultimately fall where they may, Vargas’s tape emerges as the lone certainty and lasting proof against the sordid, shifting, (and exceedingly sweaty) janus-faced juggernaut that is Hank Quinlan. Absent the recorder’s stark evidence to untangle the truth, all that remains is chaos: the dangerous and mixed-up dominant border imaginary of the 1950s U.S.



https://youtu.be/qarsXV_d4cA

4. *The Conversation* (Paramount, 1974, Directed by Francis Ford Coppola):

“In that denouement of *Touch of Evil*, Welles worked out something that’s very close to my heart because it’s so similar to the beginning of *The Conversation*—namely, to make the resolution of the story depend on different shadings and perspectives of sound”—Walter Murch, *The Conversations* (194)



Universal 5000 (Screen Capture from The Conversation by pablosanz)

What is especially interesting to me about having Murch's editorial touch on *Touch of Evil* is not only that the climax features the tape recorder, but also that this scene is echoed (and almost entirely undone) in the plot of *The Conversation*. One of Murch's first feature films, *The Conversation* was edited by hand, a process similar to what audiences actually see onscreen in the film (Murch did not use AVID until 1996's *The English Patient* and he is rather aptly credited for "sound montage" in *The Conversation*). I know many sound peeps are already hip to *The Conversation* thanks to Murch's experimental work and the plot's tense emphasis on the importance—and the fraught ambiguity—of sound and listening, but I want to add a new technological wrinkle via the tape recorder.

Released in April 1974, *The Conversation* is prescient in regards to the paranoid atmosphere around the tape recorder in the early 1970s. That same month, the House Judiciary Committee subpoenaed the "White House Tapes," obtained through years of secret surveillance with phone taps and lavalier bugs, that contained damning evidence linking then-President Richard Nixon to the Watergate break-ins. After first attempting to edit the tapes, Nixon resigned just four months later, days after the full transcripts were released. The recorder's secretly-obtained evidence proved indisputable against any of Nixon's public pronouncements of innocence and post-Watergate its listening ears were seemingly everywhere: "Do you see him? The man with the hearing aid like Charles?" says Ann (Cindy Williams) through frozen lips in *The Conversation*'s tense opening scene, "right there with the shopping bag? He's been following us all around and he's been following us close."



The Microphone as Weapon: Long-range surveillance in The Conversation (Screen capture by pablosanz)

Akin to [John Cage](#)'s forays into the [anechoic chamber](#)—which opened up new realms of previously ignored and unheard sounds to the artist—evidence produced by various recorders confirmed that there were audible shadow worlds operating underneath power's prettier public face. In addition to such unnerving domestic politics, the use of the tape recorder in *The Conversation* also mirrored shifting Cold War policies. No longer a blunt tool of coercion as it was in *Blackboard Jungle* or a technology of intimacy like in *Touch of Evil*, the tape recorder is instead an anonymous precision instrument of consent, performing its work in the hidden underbelly of windowless vans, grimy warehouses, and bland, spartan apartments, all key settings in *The Conversation*.



Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) in The Conversation (screen capture by pablosanz)

At the film's center is “the best bugger on the West Coast” Harry Caul (Gene Hackman), a surveillance expert who feels that he is more machine than man, an analog [Bartleby the Scrivener](#). “I don’t care what they’re talking about,” he growls about his human subjects, “I just want a nice, *fat* recording.” While hard at work splicing and cleaning up some surveillance tapes, Caul overhears a simple phrase that will eventually be his undoing: “he’d kill us if he got the chance.” Chasing him through fitful dreams and into confessional booths, the haunting phrase causes Caul to doubt his mission. He begins asking uncomfortable questions—who is paying him? To what end?—and goes on the hunt, obsessively rewinding the tape again and again trying to make some sense out of the voices he has captured as if their recorded traces were technological tea leaves. However, the faith he places in the tape recorder and in its ability to isolate, clean up, and amplify the truth is his ultimate undoing, causing him to ignore the human flaws of his own listening ear.



https://youtu.be/VD_CAJHIIQE

And in a supporting role. . .

Admittedly, this film has nothing to do with Walter Murch (that I know of), but I wanted to end with some lighter fare and a **perfect preview for Part Three of “Play it Again (and Again), Sam” coming on August 15th, which focuses on 1980s films.**



Ferris

Bueller's Day Off (Paramount, 1986, Director John Hughes): There have been some great recent analyses of the silver anniversary of this John Hughes flick—I especially dug Alan Siegel's "[Get Over 'Ferris Bueller' Everyone](#)" for *The Atlantic*—but all of these posts missed a critical attraction of the film: Ferris's ease with new technology (part of the 1980's "[invisible knapsack](#)" of race and class privilege). Let's give credit where credit is due: the tool that enabled Ferris Bueller (Matthew

Broderick) to have his fabled day off was, in fact, the tape recorder. First, Ferris's crew rigs up microcassette messages between Sloane Peterson (Mia Sara) and Cameron Frye's (Alan Ruck) answering machines to throw the sniveling Principal Rooney (Jeffrey Jones) off their trail: one weepily attests to the death of Sloane's grandmother, while the other purports to be the funeral home. And who can forget the mannequin rigged up to a tape loop of snorts and snores designed to fool Ferris's mom (Cindy Pickett) into thinking that he is deep in sickness-induced slumber.

Personal recording technology was part and parcel of Ferris Bueller's über-privileged white suburban teen resistance to the conveyor belt of contemporary American life. Before the kids at school took up a collection to "Save Ferris," Bueller was already using the recorder to save himself.

<https://youtu.be/R-P6p86px6U>

