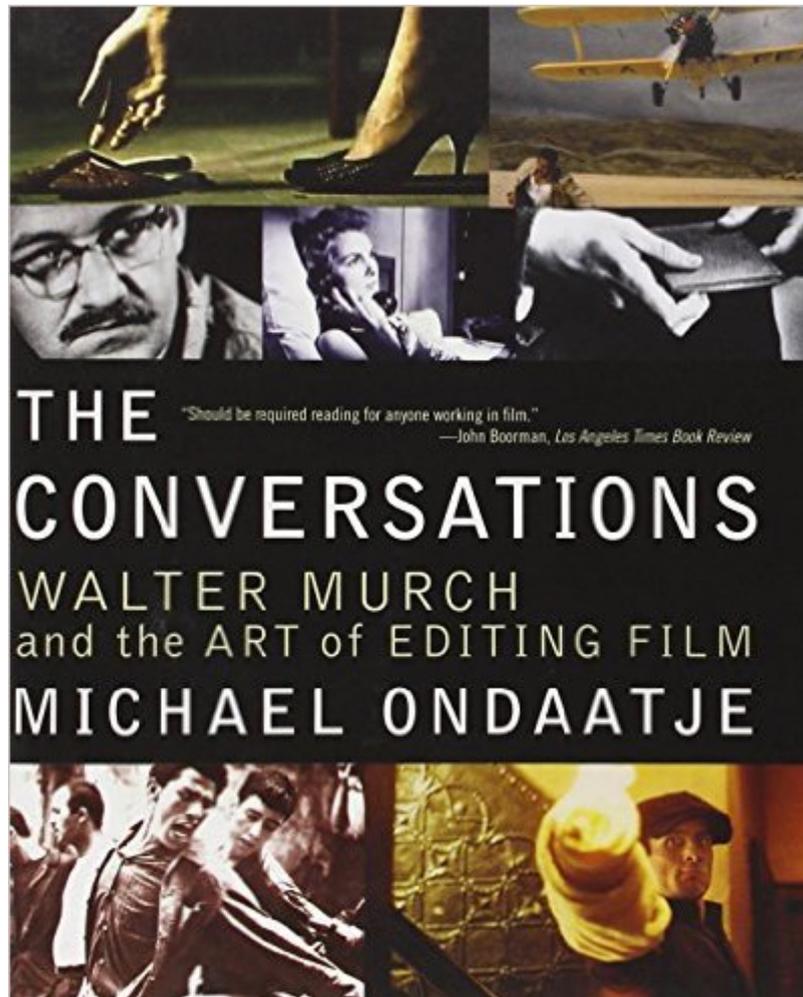


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# The Conversations: Walter Murch And The Art Of Editing Film



## Synopsis

The Conversations is a treasure, essential for any lover or student of film, and a rare, intimate glimpse into the worlds of two accomplished artists who share a great passion for film and storytelling, and whose knowledge and love of the crafts of writing and film shine through. It was on the set of the movie adaptation of his Booker Prize-winning novel, *The English Patient*, that Michael Ondaatje met the master film and sound editor Walter Murch, and the two began a remarkable personal conversation about the making of films and books in our time that continued over two years. From those conversations stemmed this enlightened, affectionate book -- a mine of wonderful, surprising observations and information about editing, writing and literature, music and sound, the I-Ching, dreams, art and history. *The Conversations* is filled with stories about how some of the most important movies of the last thirty years were made and about the people who brought them to the screen. It traces the artistic growth of Murch, as well as his friends and contemporaries -- including directors such as Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Fred Zinneman and Anthony Minghella -- from the creation of the independent, anti-Hollywood Zoetrope by a handful of brilliant, bearded young men to the recent triumph of *Apocalypse Now Redux*. Among the films Murch has worked on are *American Graffiti*, *The Conversation*, the remake of *A Touch of Evil*, *Julia*, *Apocalypse Now*, *The Godfather* (all three), *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and *The English Patient*. • Walter Murch is a true oddity in Hollywood. A genuine intellectual and renaissance man who appears wise and private at the centre of various temporary storms to do with film making and his whole generation of filmmakers. He knows, probably, where a lot of the bodies are buried. •

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

... Someone once said, "Film editing is a wonderful arcane art, like mosaics. I love to watch it being done, but editors hate to be watched." Just as editors like to work away from the gaze of would-be supervisors, we in the audience are often not aware of the important work of these people behind the scenes. How many times have you seen a review comment on the editing, and if it praise or belittles the way the film is cut, how often is the responsible editor named? In his new book "The Conversations," author Michael Ondaatje has transcribed a series of talks with Walter Murch, considered by many to be without peer in the profession. The 59-year-old Renaissance man, as involved in trying to prove the Titus-Bode theory on the spatial intervals between planets and a translator of Italian poetry, has been instrumental in creating the sounds and the cuts of films such as "American Graffiti," "The Conversation," "The Godfather I, II, III," "Julia," "Apocalypse Now," and "The English Patient." In introducing this seminal work on Walter Murch, Ondaatje informs us that Murch, like other editors, is concerned with a film's pace, of course, but even more with the moral tone of a work which has to do with speed, background noise, even how the antagonist may turn away from a conversation. Recall how many films have the editor cut away from a character before he finishes speaking. This could be because the editor encourages the audience to think only about the face value of what the character has said. If on the other hand the editor allows the audience to see from the expression in the actor's eyes that he is probably not telling the truth, he will linger on the character after he finishes speaking. Words and sounds are not all. Murch at times pulls all the sound out of the scene so that there is complete silence. This often means that something terrible is about to happen. And when sounds take place outside the room (as in the street sounds when Michael Corleone commits his first murder in "The Godfather"), we get the feeling that we are inside a cave-like room. Murch tosses in his personal theories about the nature of viewing a movie, among the most insightful being this paradox: "One of the things about watching a video is that it never feels private. I'm always conscious of others in the room, so I become self-conscious during an erotic scene. But it never feels that way in a cinema, even at a comedy with people laughing around me." On a note more technical than philosophical he states, "...as a sustained action scene averages out to 14 new camera positions a minute." When I used to take a class of tech high school students on a field trip to a Broadway show, I found that they were more interested in discussing the big sound-mixing machine in the back of the orchestra than in chatting about the way Hamlet's vacillations were dealt with on the stage. "The Conversations" won't tell you how to work the

editing machines, but Ondaatje does give you solid insight into the world of the editing profession in a reader-friendly, flowing style.

Like the reviewer below, I was skeptical of the Q&A format - an approach that often tends to elicit fairly superficial dialog in the realm of film (with some notable exceptions, including the classic Hitchcock/Truffaut book). This is fine for a magazine article, but potentially painful for 300+ pages. That said, this book really surprised me - and within only a few pages I was totally hooked. Ondaatje manages to spur on a delightful conversation filled with some very profound insights on editing, filmmaking, and the creative process itself (with many interesting detours along the way). I think this book can be enjoyed by both amateur film enthusiast and cynical cinephile alike. To be honest, I found the book to be a better articulation of Murch's ideas than his own "In the Blink of an Eye" -- though I would still recommend that as a secondary text to *Conversations*. I would also suggest that anyone reading this try to see Murch's major works first: *The Conversation*, *Apocalypse Now*, the *Godfather I & II*, and *The English Patient* - as they are all referred to in fairly significant detail throughout the book, and it will make for a more enjoyable read if you're familiar with them.

The film editor is the great unsung hero of the filmmaking process. After all, during the annual Oscar ceremony, the award for Best Film Editing seems to be hidden away between bad production numbers and some indecipherable technical award. As directors like Francis Ford Coppola and Anthony Minghella constantly receive praise for their creative visions, it is obviously the film editor's onerous task to make sense of that vision and capture the key moments and sounds that define it. Film editor and sound designer par excellence, Walter Murch, is the subject of this endlessly fascinating book, which chronicles a series of five extensive conversations he had with Michael Ondaatje, author of *The English Patient*. They met on the set of that film, one of many fine films Murch has edited, and Ondaatje was so struck by his personality and methods that he decided to write this book. In fact, Ondaatje was bowled over by how Murch could draw lines connecting the most disparate things in the cosmos: philosophy, technology, science, music, literature, art, languages, sound theory. Murch can locate the impulse of a film in the symphonies of Beethoven or in the way he views painting and architecture. He knows of what he speaks as his track record is very impressive - *Apocalypse Now*, all three parts of *The Godfather*, *American Graffiti*, *Julia*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and the list goes on. This intriguing book also explores the dynamic relationship between film editing and writing, which means Ondaatje is in a unique position to provide insight into his own methods. It becomes clear that

Murch's descriptions of his editing offer Ondaatje new ways of understanding his own work as a novelist, and much of the pleasure derived from the book comes from Ondaatje's self-discovery process. Murch convincingly presents himself as both a physicist and a mathematician of cinema and suggests that we are in a prehistoric period, and that over time, we will eventually develop a system of notation for film much like musical notes. He sees it as his own destiny to uncover the underlying mathematics of cinema. Of course, Ondaatje provides perspectives of the filmmakers with whom Murch has worked extensively, providing accounts of Murch's importance in Hollywood by such figures as Coppola and George Lucas. Some films understandably get more attention than others. There is a lot of discourse on "The Conversation" and "Apocalypse Now", including the Redux version, as well as the "Godfather" trilogy, including his re-edit to make it one giant epic. Lots of revelations come out in these discussions. For example, one can now finally understand that Robert Duvall's absence (due to pay demands) is to blame for the lackluster "Godfather Part III" since the initial vision was to focus on the death of Tom Hagen, much as it was on the killings of Sonny in Part I and Fredo in Part II. He also has some interesting insight in the recutting and remixing of Orson Welles' "Touch of Evil". But he goes well beyond his own films, as he cites and discusses films of great influence to him like "King Kong" and Eisenstein's "Alexander Nevsky". An obvious intellectual with a nimble mind for data collection and synthesis, Murch has managed to combine technological and engineering know-how with artistic inventiveness. Not surprisingly, he is also a bit of an eccentric, a Renaissance man slightly out of step with his time. This book will greatly appeal to film buffs as it offers a real insight into how some of our most iconic films of the last quarter century were made. This is a pure delight chock full of interesting photos, probably the best such interactive collaboration since Francois Truffaut interviewed Alfred Hitchcock.

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