

ASSASSIN NATION:
THEORIZING THE CONSPIRACY FILM IN THE EARLY 21ST CENTURY

by

R. COLIN TAIT

Hons. Bachelor of Arts, The University of Toronto, 2005

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS :

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Film Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

August 2007

© R. Colin Tait, 2007

ABSTRACT

Assassin Nation: Theorizing the Conspiracy Film in the Early Twenty-First Century argues that the conspiracy films of the 1970s – which depicted or alluded to the highly politicized events of Watergate, the world oil crisis, and the devaluing of the US currency – can be used as a template for understanding and addressing the political events and the films of the last twenty years. I argue that similar narrative, iconographic and syntactical tropes may be found in two subsequent cycles of films in the 1990s and in the post-9/11 period. In order to establish my claim of the conspiracy film as a genre with at least three cycles, I call upon the work of Fredric Jameson, Rick Altman, Richard Hofstadter and Peter Knight.

Chapter One outlines the historical phenomenon of the conspiracy film over the past three decades and formulates a methodology for coping with the genre's cyclical reappearances. Chapter Two argues that the conspiracy film's inaugural appearance is not only inherently linked to the crisis of leadership that the Nixon administration presented. Furthermore, the genre reflects the rise of postmodernism in popular American Cinema and the last gasp of the American political film embodied by works such as *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) and *The Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula, 1974). Chapter Three presents the genre's ongoing commodification, considering its transformation from a highly-politicized form to a commercial product by way of its intersection with the Hollywood Blockbuster system in the 1990s. Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) is taken as the zero-moment of this phenomenon, which ranges through *The X-Files* (1993-2001), to *Zoolander* (Ben Stiller, 2001). Chapter Four highlights the conspiracy genre's continuing evolution by juxtaposing the narrative form of the nineties with the documentary films of that era and by elaborating the narrative, iconographic and syntactical changes which occur from this fusion of "fictional" and "nonfictional" elements. Michael Moore's oeuvre – *Roger and Me* (1989) to *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) – provides template for this movement. Finally, Chapter Five considers the eruption of seemingly political films in the post-9/11 era by synthesizing all this material – postmodern and genre theory, historical overviews, textual analysis of films in addition to industrial overviews of the Hollywood system – and by considering the political films that emerged in this highly turbulent time. Here, I measure the cycle's contemporary trajectory beginning with Jonathan Demme's *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), through to *Syriana* (Fernando Mereilles, 2005) to the genre's mainstream influence in films such as *Shooter* (Antoine Fuqua, 2007) and *The Transformers* (Michael Bay, 2007).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Preface.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Dedication.....	vi
CHAPTER I Conspiracy Nation, Genre and Imagined Communities.....	1
CHAPTER II Totality as Conspiracy, or, Periodizing the Seventies.....	23
CHAPTER III “The Truth is Out There”: Conspiracy as Commodity.....	55
CHAPTER IV The Corporate Conspiracy Documentary Genre.....	89
CHAPTER V The Contemporary Conspiracy Genre.....	111
CHAPTER VI Conclusion and Recommendations for further work.....	131
Filmography.....	139
Works Cited.....	143

PREFACE

Several years ago, when writing a paper on David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, I was lucky enough to have stumbled upon Fredric Jameson's essay "Totality as Conspiracy." The work's central premise – that our attempt to map the totality of the social sphere through the representational form of film results in a fragmented, paranoid vision which limits our ability to depict the public sphere in any meaningful way – is perhaps even more resonant in contemporary North American film and politics than it was twenty years ago. In Jameson's view, what he dubs "the conspiracy text" constitutes an effort to change all this, as it allows the contemporary subject to circumnavigate his way through the architectonics of his society. This has always seemed an important theoretical trope to me, and has been one that I could not resist using throughout the past several years in just about every academic setting I could.

Jameson's essay makes an extremely strong case for "the conspiracy film" which he constituted as a short lived genre of the 1970s, but whose methodology can easily be carried through to make sense of films beyond his initial field of analysis. Genre theory, particularly Rick Altman's syntactical-semantic approach, as well as industry analysis can aid in supplementing this task, especially when considering films of the later cycles. I sincerely believe that this effort, examining the constitution of a particular genre as it moves through several decades, can greatly aid critics and theorists who attempt to measure the value of politics in film, as the conspiracy film has always acted not only as a litmus test for the eruption of a "political" moment, but also as a tool for mapping its contours.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One is rarely provided a forum to acknowledge those who have been influential to their ongoing development. There are definitely some individuals who I need to thank, and without whom I would quite simply not be writing anything, let alone a thesis. Mostly, I have been incredibly fortunate to have had great teachers throughout my lifetime. This extends especially to my second attempt at a University career, where Professors Manuela Gieri and Charlie Keil literally pushed me towards graduate work when I had no idea what it entailed. I continue to hope that their faith in me is not misguided. I would also like to thank Christopher Lockett, whose work on conspiracy films pointed me in some extremely important directions and who was more than happy to share his ideas with me about the 90s cycle.

I would be remiss if I did not thank the incredible faculty at UBC, who were kind enough to have accepted me into the program and who presented me with incomparable opportunities as a graduate student. The immersion in theory at the hands of Lisa Coulthard pushed me way farther than I thought I could go, and Ernest Mathijs taught me the important lesson of writing simply for complicated things and complicated for simple things. Finally, my advisor Brian McIlroy, has always seemed to know precisely how to “manage” me from the moment I applied to the school. All of their tutelage has been incredible, and this great program is testament to their hard work through the years. I should thank my excellent colleagues, Brenda, Tara, David and Renee, as well as Christine, who helped convince me to come, and Andrew who I will see far too much of in the coming years. Finally, I should thank the many friends, Dave, Chris, Alissa, Andrew, my Dad and Sarah for their emotional support, as well as the kindly people at SSHRC whose financial support allowed me to think my way through all this material.

DEDICATION

For Sarah.

May this be only one great thing amongst the many we've accomplished together.

Chapter 1 Introduction: Conspiracy Nation, Genre and Imagined Communities

Let's call a meeting to analyze the blur. Let's devote our lives to understanding this moment, separating the elements of each crowded second. We will build theories that gleam like jade idols, intriguing systems of assumption, four-faced, graceful... There is much here that is holy, an aberration in the heartland of the real. Let's regain our grip on things.

- Don DeLillo, *Libra*.

That crazy bastard may be the only sane one left...

- Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*

My larger project has always involved a critique of politics within the contemporary American film, particularly the degree that we can take these films seriously as political documents. *Assassin Nation: Theorizing the Conspiracy Film in the Early Twenty-First Century*, is the natural extension of this work, synthesizing a wide range of essays that I have written which all addressed the ultimate politicization, commodification, and often enough the politicized-commodification of products emerging from Hollywood. I am not entirely convinced that we can take all claims of the inherently political nature of film seriously, or, if we do, these claims must be measured against the twin backdrops of the cultural sphere and the overall markets from which these films emerged. We also need to admit to ourselves that the political film, if and when it emerges, is quickly subsumed into the larger sphere of the Hollywood system, resulting in an increasingly complex relationship between industry, economy, history and entertainment. In this precise sense, the political film needs to be measured against the postmodern logic of Hollywood, which not only relates its oppositional stance through the lens of nostalgia, but renders these documents post-political rather than political per se.

By isolating the Conspiracy Film Genre and comparing its historical manifestations throughout the course of its cyclical reappearances we can get excellent results regarding the presence or absence of politics in the contemporary American film. I have successfully utilized this approach in relation to heist films (“Competing Forms of Capital in *Ocean’s 11*”), zombie films (“Zombie Revolution at the Gates”), and hostage dramas (“Politics, Class and Allegory in Spike Lee’s *Inside Man*”), and this thesis is my first attempt at a fully systematized expression of this methodology. In my view, the isolation and analysis of single generic film forms is an excellent first step to considering the political resonance of film cycles. As genres generally emerge in specific historical circumstances, tracing these eruptions within these particular coordinates can help film scholars identify generic patterns while tracking the iconographic, syntactical and narrative changes between cycles. I would add that we must be careful to consider the course of an entire genre, to be willing to compare cycles to one another, and to realistically view films inter-generically and intra-cyclically.

The contemporary conspiracy film emerges in the turbulent years leading up to the 2004 United States presidential election. This series of films not only reflected their chaotic *zeitgeist* but must also be seen as a response to this highly-politicized climate. A myriad of factors led to this volatile political situation, beginning with the contentious results of the 2000 U.S. Presidential Election (which were ultimately decided by the Supreme Court ruling in favour of George W. Bush) through to the horrible events of the World Trade Center attacks and the consequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The films that motivated this study are all set in the post-9/11 landscape and all reflect the historical concerns of their conception. In short, they are all bound by their political purpose. Central to this cycle is Michael Moore’s documentary film

Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004) which is a film clearly designed to incite change and is the highest-grossing documentary of all time. Steven Soderbergh's hybrid docu-drama *K-Street* (2003) records the events leading up to the 2004 democratic primaries and blends footage of real-life figures along with their fictional counterparts. John Sayles' *Silver City* (2004) depicts the adventures of a hapless gubernatorial candidate, Dickie Pillager, whose mannerisms and speech patterns are clearly modeled after President George W. Bush's. Jonathan Demme's remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004) restages the Cold War classic during the contemporary political lead-up to the election and supplants the Red Chinese enemy with a corporate one. Sydney Pollack follows up his earlier work in *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) with his tale of urban terrorism and assassination in *The Interpreter* (2005). Fernando Mereilles' *The Constant Gardener* (2005) depicts the path of understanding that befalls a minor diplomat when he uncovers a horrible plot enacted by pharmaceutical companies. Finally, Steven Gaghan's *Syriana* (2005) attempts to trace the ill-effects of oil companies, governments and nations as these issues are mirrored in the phenomenon of global terrorism.

While each of these films may seem like disparate texts, each has a great deal to tell us about our contemporary reality as they all feature protagonists who search for answers. In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Michael Moore boldly confronts the figures he believes are responsible for the World Trade Center attacks and traces an alternate history to the standard account. In *K-Street*, Steven Soderbergh uses setting and a documentary-style to record the events surrounding the Valerie Palme Affair and the downward spiral of all the figures involved in this scandal.¹ *Silver City* tells the story of an investigator hired to hide and spin the information surrounding candidate Dickie Pillager's campaign and his involvement in a larger 'plot.' *The Manchurian*

Candidate recalls John Frankenheimer's 1962 original but is set against the background of the two Gulf Wars. Both *The Interpreter* and *The Constant Gardener* bring African politics into the picture and to varying degrees express Western corporate culpability in these regions. Finally, *Syriana* brings these discourses together, depicting a comprehensive portrait of oil corporations, terrorism and the ties between wealth and poverty.

On a more formal level, the films share a similar narrative trajectory. Specifically, they depict a protagonist who stumbles on to something that is larger than himself, and spends the course of the film trying to make sense of this new, often fatal, information. A clear example of this phenomenon is found in Mereilles' *The Constant Gardener*, where diplomat Justin Quayle (Ralph Fiennes) attempts to find the cause of his wife Tessa's death, but instead manages to uncover its true cause. As Quayle investigates, it becomes apparent that Tessa's death was in no way random despite its appearances to the contrary, and that he has uncovered a much bigger government and corporate plot that he will end up exposing. Unfortunately, as with Tessa, this knowledge ultimately leads to his own demise.

The narrative pattern that I have just traced is roughly the same in all of the films that I have named, though they do have variations within their structures. In addition, they are all extremely partisan, more than slightly paranoid documents, and all aim at depicting (and possibly realigning) the contemporary American political situation by providing an alternate discourse in the public sphere. Central to their political message is their shared hatred of corporate culture. We can view this essential shift within the two versions of *The Manchurian Candidate* where instead of the protagonist confronting a *communist menace*, he confronts a

corporate one. The setting of *K-Street* is also emblematic of this shift, as it depicts a “bi-partisan” lobby group in Washington who attempt to influence policy makers with incentives to aid private enterprise. Finally, *Silver City* is named after the housing development that the Pillager family is attempting to build by using their influence in government to quickly pave through policy. These films exhibit a great deal of scorn for the link between corporate governance and government collusion and must be seen as another element that binds them together. Indeed, in all the examples I have named the lines between government, foreign policy and corporations are all indistinguishable from one another.

Though all of these movies purport to have an *implicit* political message, it is difficult to gauge whether this enterprise encapsulated a particular movement, particularly in light of the fact that they were all made by separate producers, directors, and studios. In short, any attempt to assess the ‘political’ value of these films is doomed to failure, not only when considering the election’s outcome but also the fact that Bush’s second successive victory resoundingly proved the ‘legitimacy’ of this president. What is possible (and therefore possible to prove) is that these films all sought to incite political introspection (and likely to promote change) particularly within the site of contemporary America, and more specifically, in the months leading up to the 2004 election. It is much more likely that the consideration of their formal and narrative concerns and their limited ‘eruption’ leads us to the conclusion that they constitute a genre cycle.

The attempt to explain the phenomenon of these films also entails the attempt to locate a proper tool to analyze them. I assert that these films not only constitute a singular genre, the

Conspiracy Film, but that these particular films represent the latest resurgence of this genre cycle. It follows that it is only by tracing the genre's reappearances throughout its short history that a comprehensive reasoning of the Conspiracy Film can take place. In this vein, this thesis and the endeavor that it represents will be not only to find historical precedents that will explain this most recent incarnation, but how previous films (and cycles) can aid us in explaining the contemporary historical situation.

To find a model for this latest incarnation we need look no further than the "political thriller" category of 1970s. It is possible to see a similar pattern of narrative, syntactic and iconographic features concerns in these films in addition to their similar anti-corporate and anti-government themes.² Beginning with the original *Manchurian Candidate*, we can see a similar spate of films that are the model (or original cycle) of The Conspiracy Film. Set against the backdrop of the Vietnam War, The Watergate Scandals and the Cold War, these films expressed an aesthetic reaction to the issues of their contemporary reality. For the purposes of this study, I will consider the following films of the initial cycle in order to establish the patterns of syntax, iconography and plot that are generic staples of this film form. They include the aforementioned *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), *The Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula, 1974), *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), *Three Days of the Condor* (Sydney Pollock, 1975) *All the President's Men* (Alan J. Pakula, 1976), and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976). Investigating the traceable phenomena of the 1970s cycle to the current crop of films should yield favorable results regarding the nature of this genre's behavior and further conclusions can be reached. Among these claims includes the premise that The Conspiracy Film, as a predominantly *American* film form, appears in particular historical,

political and socioeconomic conditions. In this sense, the films negotiate extremely turbulent political situations by allegorically relating issues of recent/current events to their spectators. In addition to Rick Altman's methodology regarding genre, I will also rely on his parenthetical comments relating to the theorizing of the film form. Altman claims that the discourses surrounding film genres are similar to those of nations: in short, both are effectively "Imagined Communities." In the case of the American character of these films, it follows Richard Hofstadter's foundational account that the notion of conspiracy is embedded within the history of The United States, and hence my title "Assassin Nation."³ The Conspiracy film genre is an offshoot of the detective/crime film, but with a larger focus. Instead of investigating a single crime (i.e. who murdered who), the protagonist in these films is charged with the task of mapping the emerging social totality itself: one that is only explainable to the contemporary viewer as a system of unseen forces, monetary transactions, and more often than not, political assassinations. In this sense, the form differs from *film noir* because it directly focuses on the government and corporate sources of crime rather than from a single villain or *femme fatale*.

Certain other methodological considerations must be accounted for before embarking on this enterprise. Among these assumptions include the assertion that genres are indeed flexible and dynamic entities. This idea follows Rick Altman's methodology as found in his important study *Film/Genre* (1999). Altman traces the underlying assumptions of genre theory and counters them by considering industrial factors relating to the production of films. In his formulation of "The Producer's Game," Altman asserts that film genres are formed by taking elements from a successful film and transplanting them to another until the audience demand wanes. This theory accounts for the industrial conception of various film genres in addition to

their evolution and cyclical (dis)appearances. In these most basic terms, a series of films appears simply because other examples of the film form are popular. Rather than lending credence to the idea of genre 'flare out,' this explanation accounts for its box-office appeal. It is reasonable to assume that when there is no longer any money to be made from the particular genre, it simply stops being made altogether.⁴ This line of reasoning accounts for a genre's cyclical reappearances and the measure of a particular film's resonance. The idea of a political film is central to my formulation and will return throughout the course of this thesis as I attempt to measure the degree that a film can be considered political. In the case of the Conspiracy Film, the term political often reflects the form's oppositional stance to government and corporate bodies. What is at stake is the degree to which a film's politics is either reflective of the concerns of its era (i.e. a genuine reaction against the increasing surveillance and bureaucratization of society) or whether this becomes the selling point that brings audiences into theaters.

I will supplement Altman's initial conceptions of genre cycles by asserting that a genre resurges within particular historical coordinates. An early example of this phenomenon exists in the early gangster films, whose stories were initially "ripped from the headlines" in order to transmit them directly to the spectator for their consumption. The Conspiracy Film follows a similar trajectory as well, and the initial topical/historical kernel ("politics," "scandal," or "assassination") is transplanted to the cinema where it is either popularized or discarded. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in Pakula's *Parallax View*, which juxtaposes its title sequence with a "Warren Commission"-type hearing about a political assassination. What is at stake in this scene is the degree to which the historical detail, in this case the JFK assassination, is absorbed into a narrative/cinematic form. Once again, the events of the contemporary setting

are “ripped from the headlines” and translated allegorically into the film, a concept that I will return to later.

Altman’s theoretical formulation is greatly aided by utilizing Fredric Jameson’s claims regarding the initial genre cycle, which he deals with in his important essay “Totality as Conspiracy” (1992). Jameson states that these foundational films represented a distinct trend within the specific historical coordinates of the 1970s and reflected particular political issues including the Watergate scandal, the oil crisis and the increasing corporatization of American society. For Jameson, the role of the protagonist in the 1970s cycle is central as this character acts as a focalizer for the audience. This journey parallels the attempts of the contemporary subject to navigate through the new architectonics of his changing world. According to Jameson, these new circumstances included the change between economic modes and specifically the change from “Imperialist” to “Late” Capital. Contrary to the typical detective/mystery narrative, the protagonist of the conspiracy text is not formally a detective at all, but rather someone who assumes this role after stumbling upon a bigger plot.⁵

This pattern plays itself out in the foundational films, where the protagonists who set out to decode the new society include a taxi driver (*Taxi Driver*), reporters (*The Parallax View*, *All the President’s Men*) a “reader” (*Three Days of the Condor*) and an audio surveillance expert (*The Conversation*). To use Jameson’s example, Joe Frady in *The Parallax View* begins the film as a cocky reporter and ultimately ends up implicated in the plot he attempts to find answers to. In this fashion, Jameson characterizes the overall trajectory of what he dubs the “social detective” (the protagonist of the Conspiracy Film) as following the pattern of innocent to

detective to killer to victim.⁶ To return to *Parallax*, we can see that this is precisely what occurs to Frady, as his quest leads him to the offices of Parallax Corporation, whose 'business' it is to recruit and train assassins for the government. Herein we see the pattern from innocent to detective (implicated in the desire to search in itself) then to murderer (as trained by the Parallax group) and finally to victim when he is implicated in the assassination of the senator at the end of the movie. The prevalence of the idea of assassination/assassinations/assassin must be recognized as the predominant background of the various films and each features this idea/imagery throughout.

The idea of crime, in Jameson's view, is hereby transformed from the event between individuals to the social/collective level. "Crime" for Jameson is defined in much larger terms and includes the local/postmodern and geopolitical levels. Here Jameson states: "This form, [the conspiracy text] therefore, in which an individual somehow confronts crime and scandal of collective dimensions and consequences, cannot be transferred to the representations of global postmodernity without deep internal and structural modifications" (Jameson 1992: 38). These modifications include the aforementioned change in the role of the contemporary detective, who not only needs to sort out the film's central mystery, but decode an even larger problem, which Jameson charges is the mapping of the social totality itself.

I would like to add a third pole to these theoretical templates of genre and the specifically textual qualities of Jameson's "conspiracy text," and here I will return to the allegorical dimension that was alluded to earlier. While allegory figures largely in Fredric Jameson's theories, here I will present my variation as measured through Walter Benjamin's writings rather

than rely on Jameson's notion that allegory stems from the absence of Utopia. While many writers have attempted to frame the idea of the ontological value of cinema, Benjamin comes closest to describing its essential nature. In his famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," he formulates a procedure through which we can judge the mechanics of film. Central to this idea is the notion of the "aura" where the original object's status becomes abstracted, resulting in a 'loss' from the original's venerated (and unique) status. My purpose for including Benjamin involves the degree to which the medium-specific qualities of film necessarily abstract the historical/material value of what it records. In other words, contrary to Gilles Deleuze's assumption that the 'reality' captured through film equals the 'time-image' or crystalline rendition of a specific space and time (history), I would like to modify this formulation by stating that film ultimately renders the ontological value of film equal. What happens in a film that purports to be fact (documentary) or fiction (narrative film) is ultimately the same. In this sense, everything that is recorded becomes 'allegorical' as it is necessarily mediated by the presence of the camera, the historical moment that it records, and its reconstitution by an editor.

This material, dealing with the allegorical nature of film will figure later into my discussion of the 'value' of the conspiracy text, particularly the infusion of the conspiracy narrative into the contemporary site of the documentary form. Following Altman's assertion about the degree to which genre is topical (in that it is 'ripped from the headlines') we can see that the marketable and the historical values of film are essentially the same. In other words, *All the President's Men* becomes the official *historical* record of the events of the Watergate scandal, while at the same time representing the *allegory* of the event by the abstraction of

actors, filming and releasing strategies. This phenomenon extends to the contemporary cycle as well, as the topical nature of these films (and their historical timeliness) speaks to the ripening of the societal reflection and simultaneous possibilities for marketing. This is also my rationale for using precisely the same language when referring to both documentary and fiction film, as the notion of allegory renders both forms as equivalent. What the Conspiracy Film represents, then, is a genre that expresses an allegorical rendition of the present reality, translated through the film text.

Having located my foundational frameworks in the works of Altman, Jameson and Benjamin, I am now free to consider the larger issue of the contemporary manifestation of the conspiracy film genre. Since there is no real scholarship which deals specifically with the conspiracy genre as a film genre that exists past Jameson's 1992 essay (and this material only deals with films leading up to the early 1980s) I will be faced with the task of reassembling these theoretical frameworks for the contemporary reader/theorist. It should also be clear that this thesis aims at a post-Jamesonian analysis by bringing his respective theories (i.e. postmodernism, the conspiracy text, cognitive mapping) beyond the 1990s and by applying them to the contemporary cultural sphere with extremely new and interesting results. This thesis must juggle several tasks simultaneously. A case for the Conspiracy genre must be made at the outset, combined with the assertion that the genre resurges, therefore embodying several cycles. My formulation that there is a second cycle which dominates the 1990s is essential to this line of reasoning. I will consider films ranging from the early 1990s, beginning with Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1992) to Tony Scott's *Enemy of the State* (1998) and ending my discussion with *Zoolander* (Ben Stiller, 2001). If I can prove that these films constitute a second cycle, then it stands to reason

that a third version of the cycle (which the films of 2003-2006 belong to) will embody and resist certain generic conventions, while at the same time bringing its own, specifically temporal (or ontological) concerns to its contemporary rendition. In short, it is only by thoroughly investigating the two previous manifestations that we can reach substantial conclusions about the third.

Finally, two particular expressions of dialogue from the first and second film cycles are extremely important intertextual cues as they come to inform the logic of the third generic cycle. These examples come from *All the President's Men* and *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991) respectively. The first line comes from the unseen face of *President's* "Deep Throat" who urges Woodward and Bernstein to "follow the money," which leads them to uncover President Richard Nixon's shady dealings in the Watergate scandal. The second expression comes from Stone's *JFK* where District Attorney Jim Garrison's (Kevin Costner) final monologue asserts that the absence of proof to the contrary is proof of a larger conspiracy.⁷ These two pieces of dialogue from two canonical texts of the larger genre cycles (in the 1970s and 1990s respectively) inform the foundational film of the third cycle, *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Michael Moore's documentary embodies these two principles and absorbs them into the fabric of its narrative by asserting at the outset that , a) the absence of proof to the contrary is proof of the presence of a conspiracy (*JFK*, 1992) and, b) by simply 'following the money' (*All the President's Men*, 1976) Moore can figure out the parties responsible for perpetrating it. Despite the earnestness on the part of the filmmaker, this is where the conspiracy text largely loses its stable footing. It is by following this syllogism that allows the "conspiracy theorist" to engage in wild speculation as to what the conspiracy is, and is used to validate claims ranging from government involvement in the 9/11 attacks

(*Fahrenheit 9/11*) to the assertion that the U.S. military fired a cruise missile at the Pentagon (*Loose Change*, Dylan Avery, 2006).

The attempt to write a thesis on The Conspiracy Film means engaging in an enterprise fraught with many pitfalls, contradictions and assumptions. Among these pitfalls includes the temptation to engage in wild speculation about the state of the world, the contradictions which lie in the basic tension between the genre's form and content, and that these assumptions rely on the basic premise that the conspiracy film is a real phenomenon. To address these concerns from the outset, I not only maintain that the conspiracy film genre exists, but that this statement is radically different from "a conspiracy exists." This distinction is a crucial first step in any methodological reasoning of the genre and differentiates this endeavor from mere speculation to a fruitful research project. One final step must be taken before embarking on this enterprise, and this means foregrounding the differences between form and content. Though this idea relates fully to the aforementioned differences between what is inside and outside the film, it also asserts that we maintain a certain critical distance from our objects of study, and take them seriously only insofar as they exhibit certain tendencies that can be isolated, analyzed and put back into relation with similar objects of study.

As opposed to studies such as Timothy Melley's "Empire of Conspiracy", Peter Knight's "Conspiracy Culture," Ray Pratt's "Projecting Paranoia" and Jameson's "Totality as Conspiracy" – which find their objects of paranoid study within the larger cultures of literature, television and to a lesser degree, films of the 1990s – to my knowledge this is the first study of its kind which

makes a case for the construction of a conspiracy genre within the auspices of film and genre specific theory. In my view, these authors are hindered by the fact that a third cycle (which thus characterizes fully-fledged genre) had not yet emerged, forcing them to scatter their resources amongst many different mediums. It is only with the benefit of hindsight that we can seriously recast the 90s cycle as primarily participating in a determinate market, despite the fact that at the time they seemed extremely important. This is something that was not largely accounted for in these authors' works. I have purposely stayed away from all literary references, save for the occasional quote, as Melley, Knight and many others have all dealt with this material sufficiently. I maintain that a film-specific study can not only supplement and correct the earlier oversights that these sources contain but can result in gains for the field of film studies as a whole.

My study will therefore take a threefold path: first, I will utilize existing genre theory to assess and scrutinize Jameson's construction of the conspiracy text; second, I will trace the historical path that the genre has taken since Jameson's initial writings on the subject, thus bringing Jameson's methodology into the present; and third, I will draw conclusions by judging the films in relation to each other and gauging the subtle shifts within the form. Ultimately, it is my aim to utilize the conspiracy text not only as a litmus test of the nature of genre generally, but as a tool that can inform later work regarding the inherent relationship between genre cycles and culture itself.

Methodology

In order to exhaustively investigate the Conspiracy Film, it is necessary to situate and deal with its manifestations in chronological order. This will entail locating, isolating and examining its earliest cycle and proceeding to later cycles to test the utility of this earlier work. Chapter One, "Conspiracy as Totality, or, Periodizing the Seventies," will establish a suitable theoretical framework that deals with the conspiracy text in a productive manner. I will juxtapose Jameson's explication of this "subgenre" in his essay "Totality as Conspiracy" to Rick Altman's theory of genre transformation in "Are Genres Stable?" This will allow me to settle once and for all whether a case can be made for its constitution as a proper genre and, if so, whether a semantic distinction from "conspiracy text" to "conspiracy genre" is necessary. I will also attempt to define key terms and explain aesthetic norms related to the genre, drawing largely from Jameson's elaboration of the conspiracy text throughout his essay. The purpose of this work will be to situate the genre firmly within its historical coordinates, so that the films that Jameson discusses may be used as a specific expression of the time and place (the 1970s) where it originated from. Here, terms such as "The Social Detective" (the protagonist of the conspiracy text), "cognitive mapping" (the navigation of the protagonist through the new architectonics of the rise of corporate capital), in addition to narrative intrinsic norms (including what Jameson describes as the movement from detective to killer to victim) will be defined, explored, and reasoned with. Once these theoretical and aesthetic norms have been established, it will be possible to discuss either a) the example that Jameson utilizes to demonstrate his theory (the obvious choice being *The Parallax View*), or more appropriately, b) the "cycle" of films that Jameson discusses. This framework will enable me to carefully scrutinize the genre's

reappearances in later decades, and also to consider whether the initial cycle's political thrust has been retained, transformed, or discarded altogether in its subsequent manifestations.

In Chapter Two "The Truth is Out There: Conspiracy and Commodity," I will investigate the resurgence of the conspiracy genre within the context of the mid-to late 1990s. Here, I will propose that a new cycle begins with Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK* and moves through to its most commodified (or mannerist) form in *MIB* (*Men in Black*, Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997). I will necessarily emphasize Rick Altman's elaboration of genre cycles – particularly his description of "the producer's game" – where a successful genre film will engender imitation from studio heads who seek to capitalize on the success of the original. I maintain that this cycle originates from the success of *JFK*, and that we can trace the transformation of this film model (the conspiracy as such) through demands of the market and its permutations of form. I believe that *JFK* is an anomalous film, and that the larger mechanism of the Hollywood industry stripped the film of its popular elements, and turned them into a veritable market. A necessary step is that we take the political content of *JFK* at face value. I will then trace how this political value – namely that the 'plot' may lie in the hands of one or more government branches – is gradually transformed into a series of commodified markets. These markets include, but are not limited to, the narrative displacement of responsibility from government and corporate agencies to "alien invaders" (*The X-Files*, *Men in Black*).

The 1990s also presents a series of remakes of the original cycle, heralded by several Tony Scott/Jerry Bruckheimer collaborations. These films can either be considered as *homages* to films from the original cycle (*The Conversation/Enemy of the State*, *Three Days of the*

Condor/Spy Game respectively) or as emulations of the form that have themselves been emptied of their political content. This twinning effect will be used to consider several other canonical texts of the original cycle. I will examine the similarities between *Chinatown* and *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (Robert Zemeckis, 1988), *Taxi Driver* and *Conspiracy Theory* (Richard Donner, 1997) and *The Parallax View* and *Zoolander*. What is at stake is similar to my claims about the course of *JFK*. In short, what these films represent is the absolute emptying out of all the political content of the earlier cycle and which is then transformed into ridiculously excessive theories. Here the foundational myth of Los Angeles, the ‘water conspiracy’ of *Chinatown*, is transformed in favour of the assertion that ‘Toon-town’ was paved over in order to make way for incoming freeways. *Conspiracy Theory* literalizes all of the issues that remained implicit in *Taxi Driver*. In other words, Travis Bickle’s (Robert DeNiro) paranoid assertions about the state of the world are actually true in Mel Gibson’s reprise of this role. Finally, *Zoolander* borrows the formal plot of *The Parallax View* but sets the brainwashing of its protagonist Derek Zoolander in the world of high fashion. This evolution has serious repercussions for the degree to which a viewer can take a conspiracy film seriously, as considerations ranging from the open questioning of history through to the veracity of any claims are so wildly abstracted that it becomes impossible to take any claim, legitimate or otherwise, seriously.

In Chapter Four, “The Corporate Conspiracy Documentary Genre,” I will explore the relationship and cross-pollination of the conspiracy text with contemporary documentary, where practitioners like Michael Moore seem to echo “Deep Throat’s” urgings to “follow the money.” I will also discuss films that seem to emulate the Oliver Stone/Jim Garrison dictum, where the absence of proof on the part of one or more parties indicates a conspiracy on the part of the

government. This strain of logic permeates later examples of documentary, including *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (Alex Gibney, 2005) *The Corporation* (Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott, 2003) and *Loose Change* (Dylan Avery, 2006). In addition, the contemporary documentary obsesses with details surrounding the government/corporate permeability and largely asserts that a ‘conspiracy’ binds these two institutions. What is at stake is the notion of allegory within the site of contemporary documentary practice, and I will demonstrate how this concept flattens the ontological value of both documentary and fiction film. Finally, I will isolate and define new generic features that the documentary brings to the discussion, including the genre’s new emphasis on the corporate CEO and the centrality of this figure to the ongoing evolution of the genre. This intersection will also test the manner that *political content* (which all but disappeared in the 90s cycle) returns either through the emulation of form (the postmodern exercise of pastiche) or within content (the bold assertions of the documentary film).

In Chapter Five, “The Contemporary Conspiracy Genre,” I bring all of these considerations together by returning to the questions that began this endeavor. Having created a framework borne of my historical, industrial and theoretical analysis of the genre, I can analyze the contemporary cycle by interpreting it in relation to its volatile political climate. Building my canon of films beginning with Jonathan Demme’s 2004 remake of *The Manchurian Candidate*, I will trace this new cycle from this landmark, through John Sayles’ *Silver City*, and finally, to Steven Gaghan’s *Syriana*. Central to this analysis will be the real-life issues leading up to the 2004 Presidential Election (of the United States), and the seemingly political engagement that these films engendered. On the other hand, I must also acknowledge that these films may themselves only constitute yet another facet of the ubiquity of global capital, and therefore only

represent another market out of many. Therefore, I will also consider *Déjà vu* (Tony Scott, 2007), *The Number 23* (Joel Schumacher, 2007) and *Shooter* (Antoine Fuqua, 2007) to determine whether these films express political or commodified renditions of the form. The return (or absence) of political content within the genre within this later phase is the key to understanding the cyclical reappearances and disappearances of conspiracy film. In tandem with my thorough analysis, I will be able to make further substantial/substantive claims regarding politics, genre cycles and history. I anticipate that by comprehensively investigating these manifestations in relation to one another I can clearly gauge the circumstances under which the conspiracy film as a cycle emerges and thus apply these findings to genres and subgenres as well.

Before beginning, it seems necessary both to acknowledge that there has been a great deal of interest in this subject as of this writing, and that a number of authors have recently sought to explain the contemporary obsession with both “conspiracy” and “paranoia” respectively, particularly within the site of American narrative film.⁸ This study differs from these works not only by the very nature of its methodology, which will employ both diachronic and synchronic analyses to put these films in relation *to themselves*, but will also analyze the historical relationship between each cycle. I want to be clear that I am not interested in revisiting the ontological value of “conspiracy *theory*” but rather am seeking to reinforce the worth of “the conspiracy *text*” as a valuable tool for reading culture; particularly if it can be proven that it has something valuable to teach us about the nature of economic cycles and the relationship between film, politics and history. I should also state that these distinctions between theory and form, between objective knowledge and conjecture, between symptom and cause, will surely present me with a difficult road to follow complete with many temptations along the way: not to digress,

but also not to constitute Master narratives that will explain it all for us. This “totalizing vision,” or construction of a “man behind the curtain” who will explain it all is precisely what this thesis hopes to resist, by revealing the manifestations of conspiracy texts as “symptomatic” rather than explanatory, and their existence as proofs for the desire for answers, rather than concrete documents in and of themselves.

Chapter 1 Notes

¹ The Valerie Palme Affair is now more frequently known as the “Scooter Libby Trial.” It is also interesting to consider another figure of the real-life “K-Street Project,” Jack Abramoff, was found guilty of ‘Conspiracy’ in 2006.

² For my purposes I will call this era “the seventies” despite the fact that several errant films (*The Manchurian Candidate*, 1962) and *Videodrome* (1983) fall outside the period of this study.

³ See Richard Hofstadter’s essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” for a detailed account of this idea.

⁴ See Rick Altman, “Are Genres Stable?” in *Film/Genre* (49-62).

⁵ See Žižek (1993).

⁶ As Jameson remarks, “Oddly enough, the opposite structure – in which a whole collectivity plays detective to the solution of what remains an individual victim and criminal...” (1992: 38)

⁷ GARRISON (Kevin Costner) - “But rather than admit to a conspiracy or investigate further, the Warren Commission chose to endorse the theory put forth by an ambitious junior counselor, Arlen Specter, one of the grossest lies ever forced on the American people. We’ve come to know it as the ‘Magic Bullet Theory.’ This single-bullet explanation is the foundation of the Warren Commission’s claim of a lone assassin. Once you conclude the magic bullet could not create all seven of those wounds, you’d have to conclude that there was a fourth shot and a second rifle. And if there was a second rifleman, then by definition, there had to be a conspiracy.”

⁸ In this regard, see Ray Pratt (2001) and Patrick O’Donnell (2000) for examples of this analysis.

Chapter 2 –Totality as Conspiracy (or Periodizing the Seventies)

See, when I saw Bobby [Kennedy] lying there on the floor, arms stretched out, his eyes staring, I knew then I'd be president. His death paved the way, didn't it? Vietnam, the Kennedys, cleared a path, just for me. Over their bodies.

- Anthony Hopkins as Richard M. Nixon in *Nixon*

"All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer to death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are targets of the plot."

Is this true? Why did I say that? What does it mean?

- Jack Gladney in *White Noise*

Film genres are generally understood to be bound by common iconography, syntax and related narratives. In the case of the conspiracy film, persistent iconography includes assassins with their high-powered scopes, narratives include highly-convoluted plots which are seemingly open-ended, and the film language that results of this unholy marriage is wholly inflected with paranoia. It is worth considering that before there was officially a conspiracy genre there was the "paranoid style." In "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" Richard Hofstadter maintains that American history has always included conspiracy at its heart:

The distinguishing thing about the paranoid style is not that its exponents see conspiracies or plots here and there in history, but that they regard a "vast" or "gigantic" conspiracy as *the motive force* in historical events. History *is* a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is not the usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all out crusade. The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of this conspiracy in apocalyptic terms – he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values (Hofstadter 29).

While Hofstadter implies that the relationship between fact and fiction, between paranoid fantasy and paranoid reality results in the 'paranoid style,' since this essay appears in the 1960s it is obviously prone to some historically contingent problems, particularly in relation to films of this era. Though films of the postwar period are often characterized as 'paranoid' or alternatively, "paranoid thrillers," it is not until the 1970s that we can consider them a fully-fledged genre

cycle. This is to say that the specific films of this period open up a space for us to bind them by their common features, and thus unify them by way of their constitution as a singular genre. What has transformed in the intervening twenty years since is an America that became increasingly fragmented, resulting in its ultimate reconstitution as a legitimately paranoid social space. Unforeseen historical issues, ranging through the Cold War, political assassinations, the Vietnam War, the World Oil Crisis, and the Watergate scandal contributed to the vast changes that took place in American society, the result of which is a multifaceted arena which is infinitely more complicated than Hofstadter's original conception of it. At the same time, the social body was reconstituted into a central market, which Fredric Jameson asserts resulted in "a more purely consumer stage on what is for the first time a global scale" (Jameson 1992a: 35). This fragmentation/unification is central to early theories of postmodernity where society is reconstructed as a series of "interconnected nodes" (Lyotard), a "hyperspace" (Jameson), a "Society of Spectacle" (Debord) and where the only choice of the contemporary capitalist subject is to react to it in nothing less than a "schizophrenic" manner (Deleuze and Guattari). The conspiracy film is emblematic of these changes and visualizes these ideas in combination with narrative and cinematic manners. According to Stephen Paul Miller, the 1970s were instrumental to splintering public space while simultaneously institutionalizing surveillance by way of Lyotard's nodes and Foucauldian panopticism. In addition, the decade actualized the paranoid style within the White House through the central figure of Richard Nixon. As Miller argues:

The decade began with Nixon spying on Ellsberg "spying" on Johnson – with a culture and counterculture fearful of one another's external surveillance, and it ended with virtually all aspects of American culture adapting themselves to a barely questioned corporate reality. It was almost as if Nixon's overt surveillance and self-surveillance were ingested by the nation as a whole during Watergate and shortly thereafter internalized (Miller 1).

Hofstadter's paranoid "motive force of history," was therefore absorbed into the systemic formulation of the seventies, which subsequently informed the politically-inflected cinema of this

turbulent era. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner describe the situation by stating: “to study the films of this era is to study a culture in decline, trying to come to terms with severe economic, political, and social crises.” These films seek “to adjust to a world in which the United States had much less power, both economically and politically” (Ryan and Kellner 6). Conspiracy films, then, may contain the key to understanding the shifting patterns of American economic and political spheres – perhaps representing the last gasp of oppositional modes – while at the same time the films digest Hofstadter’s paranoid style into their formal and narrative traits. They offer a vision of their contemporary realities by depicting a space that is increasingly corporatized and emptied out of its political value. In short, these films narrate *and* depict these changing social spaces, making them important documents which capture this emerging reality as it is occurring. Fredric Jameson asserts that the conspiracy genre “may also be taken to constitute an unconscious, collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us” in a world increasingly characterized by “concealment” and “bureaucratic impersonality.” In this view, “[c]onspiracy film takes a wild stab at the heart of all that, in a situation where it is the intent and the gesture that counts” (Jameson 1992b: 3).

Before we can interpret the 1970s, we need to acknowledge the 1960s and their profound influence on the later decade, in addition to its films. While *The Manchurian Candidate* (John Frankenheimer, 1962) stands well outside the epistemological boundaries of the 1970s conspiracy film, it is nevertheless essential that we consider it as a genealogical precursor. The movie is a unidirectional entity which points backwards to the realities of the Cold War espionage novel, exemplified by works such as John Le Carré’s *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* and eerily forward to the series of political assassinations of the 1960s, beginning with President John F. Kennedy (1963), Medger Evers (1963), Malcolm X (1965), Martin Luther King Jr. (1968), Robert

F. Kennedy (1968) and Fred Hampton (1970). All of these political mainstays of the 1960s progressive movements were killed in public spaces, facilitating their universalization and inclusion within the emerging mass-media sphere. *The Manchurian Candidate's* story of brainwashing, espionage and political assassination, as described by J. Hoberman is, therefore, "an idea...willing itself into history" while simultaneously offering "a retrospective survey of Cold War concerns" that ranged from "TV image-building to Communist infiltration of the government" (Hoberman 73). The film is oddly prescient of upcoming traumas to the collective American psyche, while at the same time synthesizing previous traumas – such as the House of Un-American Activities Committee and the Cold War – into its narrative framework.

While the film's eerie predictions of the many upcoming political assassinations is a trait that is well considered by critics, what is often overlooked is its setting: the political campaign for red-baiting Republican candidate Johnny Eislín (James Gregory). *The Manchurian Candidate* also looks to its past in order to stage its narrative, choosing the years between 1952 and 1955 to significantly engage the issue of the Red Scare and the rise of McCarthyism in the United States. Here, the film deliberately mines the real-life actions of Senator Joe McCarthy and his protégé, the young Richard Nixon for its premise, as Eislín is an amalgam of these figures who became politically visible by accusing prominent American citizens of being Communists (like the "Hollywood Ten") or traitors (as in the Alger Hiss case). This is echoed in Eislín's single political 'policy,' where he storms into rooms full of cameras and accuses government agencies of housing "card-carrying Communists." The significance of this plotline is wholly related to the manner that the film's "paranoid style" exploits the American/Communist binaries. The film thus embodies Miller's description of the Cold War rhetoric, which informs *The Manchurian Candidate's* ultimate meaning:

How American one is can be determined by one's opposition to what is un-American. Thus, it is not enough that one not be a Communist. One must avoid any appearance of being "soft on Communism." Any such perceived indication or lack of intensity of support for this intangible nationalism can become the cornerstone of an opponent's political campaign. It is no accident that Nixon first springs upon the national scene as perhaps the most aggressively self-conscious "American" congressional committee in our history, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, named after what it claims to oppose (Miller 307).

The practicality of this passage in relation to the film is the manner that *The Manchurian Candidate* exploits and subverts this false binary (American/Un-American) by surrounding Eislín with the iconography of Abraham Lincoln. The ultimate irony is that though Eislín is being tailored to run for the vice-presidency based on his anti-Communist (and therefore "American") credentials, at the same time he is a major cog in a vast Communist plot.

Domestic paranoia in American film is nothing new. This is especially true of a series of films that seemed innocuous in their day, but are now wholly considered as Cold War allegories which taught a generation to fear a Communist menace. *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) is the prime example of this critical practice and presumably represents the overarching fear of a Communist takeover. What this interpretation misses is the opportunity to view the films differently. In *Body Snatchers*, the collapse of local commerce in small-town America, embodied by roadside stands and small hardware stores, is juxtaposed with massive collective efforts to disseminate pods, which can just as easily be seen as reflecting the fears of the increasing corporatization and industrialization of society. What is different about *The Manchurian Candidate's* specific brand of paranoia, however, is the manner that this issue mutates from an external threat to an internal one. *Candidate's* menace is motivated through the cooperation of American and Communist forces for their personal and professional gain. In this vein, Mrs. Eislín (Angela Lansbury) chillingly sacrifices her son for political reward. The film is important because it simultaneously straddles the precipice of Cold War paranoia – the external

Communist threat of *Body Snatchers* and *Them!* (Gordon Douglas, 1954) – while anticipating the changes to the domestic, political, economic, bureaucratic and artistic features of the coming era.

Finally, the shift from finding Communist menaces abroad at any cost, to combating them internally is central to any reading of this era because it indicates the degree to which space, both narrative and actual, is ruptured in the effort to combat countercultural movements in the sixties. Despite it being highly illegal to spy on its own citizenry, the American government employed Cold War tactics domestically ushering in, as Frank J. Donner dubs it, the “Hooverism” of the American domestic sphere.¹ This term implies the prevalent wiretapping of prominent citizens in the name of anti-Communist efforts during the Cold War and which reconstituted society, refashioning it as completely paranoid.² Ray Pratt describes this phenomenon thusly: “During the cold war, the FBI and various civilian and military intelligence agencies carried out complex programs of surveillance and harassment of radicals, including Communists, union organizers, entertainment figures, educators and journalists.” He continues, stating that these prominent figures included Martin Luther King and John Lennon, along with antiwar activists and politicians (Pratt 3). Simultaneously, in Jameson’s view, the sixties were a moment where capital enlarged on a global scale which consequently “produced an immense freeing or unbinding of social energies, a prodigious release of untheorized new forces” (Jameson 1984: 208). Here, Jameson describes the transition of twentieth century American capital from its Fordist roots which reifies its CEO, to global capital which is characterized by the reification of anonymous middle-management figures. According to Timothy Melley, the fictional content of this era reflects “how this elegiac narrative” of the CEO “invites an imaginative transfer of agency to the corporation as a totality” (Melley 59). For Jameson, this

“totality” is precisely what the conspiracy film attempts to locate and depict, for “it is ultimately always of the social totality itself that is a question of representation,” (Jameson 1992b: 4). According to him, this representation occurs by way of generic and subgeneric film forms, wherein, “[f]rom the generic standpoint, what interests us here is the way in which the former genres (thrillers, spy films, social exposes, science fiction and so on) now conflate in a movement that re-enacts the dedifferentiation of the social levels, and by way of their own allegorization.” In this sense, “the new post-generic genre films are allegories of each other, and to the impossible representation of social totality itself” (5). By way of its mass-cultural and subgeneric nature, the conspiracy film re-maps the social strata (including new class structures such as Herbert Marcuse’s “One-Dimensional Man”) by generating narrative, aesthetic and syntactic generic forms. The conspiracy film thus presents a parallel world, complete with impersonalized and random figures that act as allegorical stand-ins for the new complexities of its era.

While Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* (1966) may not be a conspiracy text in the strict sense, its cryptic absences of narrative cause and effect in addition to disappearing bodies begs for its inclusion as a genealogical precursor to the conspiracy film. *Blow-Up*’s central tension oscillates between these twin pillars of the sixties: the increasing surveillance of society alongside a demonstration of its expanded freedoms. Set in “Swinging London” of 1966, the film presents an analogue to *The Manchurian Candidate* by demonstrating the fragmentation of public and private space within the film’s diegesis. The film is also set against the backdrop of protest and excess, presenting the two parallel courses of the sixties by creating a self-destructive and self-interrogating document of the decade. When Thomas (David Hemmings) takes random pictures of a couple in a park, he has no idea that he has witnessed a murder. The film’s central

sequence consists of Thomas developing and enlarging the negatives of this park encounter and hidden within the frames is the evidence of the crime, which resembles Walter Benjamin's early descriptions of photography which resemble "scenes of crime" (Benjamin 226). In this case Benjamin's words are literally true, and the very act of taking pictures reveals its medium-specific quality of capturing death.

Blow-Up is also the perfect public record of the contradictory nature of the sixties, as the film begins and ends with countercultural expressions of protest while at the same time depicting the prodigious expansion of mass-cultural industries (rock, fashion). The enlargement sequence's inverse scene involves a rock concert where the rock band The Yardbirds play to a passive audience. It is only when guitarist Jimmy Page's amplifier begins to sputter with feedback that the tension of the film explodes. In this sense, when Page smashes his guitar and the crowd goes wild to retrieve the pieces that he throws into the audience, their reaction becomes the substitution of the non-event (the concert) for the event (the murder) which is completely unseen by the film viewer and can only be reconstructed by way of Thomas' technological reconstruction of it. The pseudo-event thus takes the place of a real event. Ultimately, the film's central tension between the virtuality and actuality of a crime finds its expression in the removal of the dead body from the film's diegesis.

When Thomas returns to the scene of the crime, all the evidence has been removed, and he has only his belief that it was there in the first place. This is reflected in the film's final scene, where Thomas picks up the imaginary tennis ball from a mimed tennis game and throws it back. It is made clear by the film's soundtrack that something is happening but it takes some investment on the part of Thomas (and by proxy, the audience) in order to decipher (or believe in) what it is. In this sense, the modernist currency that Antonioni's film trades in – the breakdown of signifiers,

the lapsed cause and effect, bizarrely meaningless encounters – represents a prelude to the upcoming postmodern encounter of the seventies by way of the conspiracy text. In Jameson's view it follows that "[t]he 60s were in that sense an immense and inflationary issuing of a superstructural credit; a universal abandonment of the referential gold standard; an extraordinary printing up of even more devalued signifiers." By "the end of the sixties, with the world economic crisis, all the infrastructural bills then come slowly come due once more..." (Jameson 1984: 208). Thus, Antonioni's film anticipates the breakdown of "devalued signifiers" by piling one upon the other until they are rendered meaningless. At the same time, the film stylistically enacts the paranoid story that *The Manchurian Candidate* narrativizes. In both cases, the films pave the way for their synthesis in a single generic form: the upcoming constitution of the conspiracy genre.

It is also worth considering the legacy of the sixties as they led into the 1970s. A useful theoretical construction would be to assert that the decade actually ends in the year 1973, a year that is traditionally associated with many of the most significant events in the period. Miller takes this formulation a step further, dubbing this early portion of the decade the "post-sixties" (Miller 17). It seems appropriate to mark the definitive end of the "60s" in the general area of 1972-1974. These years mark the deflation of countercultural and political movements worldwide, the long withdrawal from Vietnam and the beginning of worldwide recession in addition to the resignation of Nixon. In Miller's view, the seventies mark the harsh return of "reality" to the unreality of the earlier period. For Jameson this return is primarily expressed in the worldwide economic transition to Late (or multinational) Capital. In his reading of Ernest Mandel's *Late Capital*, Jameson concludes that "what is decisive in the present context is his notion that, with the worldwide recession of 1973-74, the dynamics of this 'long wave' are spent" (Jameson 1984:

206). In this sense, “with the eclipse of culture as an autonomous space or sphere, culture itself falls into the world, and the result is not disappearance but its prodigious expansion, to the point where culture becomes coterminous with social life in general.” Ultimately, “all the levels become ‘acculturated’ and in the society of the spectacle, the image, or the simulacrum, everything at length has become cultural, from the superstructures down into the mechanisms of the infrastructure itself” (201). In other words, “the seventies” were inevitable, as they came to replace the enormous “cultural credit” – by way of its political movements, counterculture, and economy – with the devalued currency of an impoverished new era. Perhaps we interpret, as Jean Baudrillard does, the string of assassinations as markers of a public spectacle in and of themselves and the last gasp of a modernist sensibility. More importantly, they may represent the final expression of purely “political” content. In his view, “the Kennedys were murdered because they still had a political dimension” (Baudrillard 19). Jameson takes this event to mean something altogether different, but with a similar outcome. For him the Kennedy assassination ushered in the aura of a festival, which was propagated through communicational technologies in the following manner, “[t]he assassination of John F. Kennedy was a unique event, not least because it was a unique collective (and media, communicational) experience, which trained people to read such events in a new way” (Jameson 1991: 355). On the other hand, “what ensured the well-nigh permanent association of assassination in general with this particular historical one was the media,” which “bound together an enormous collectivity over several days” (Jameson 1992b: 47). Thus, the expression of a public politics, as seen in the public’s mournful responses to these events (including its “Utopian” impulse) and the remnants of the worldwide protest culture – was absorbed in the larger logic of the system via media technologies and their corporate ownership. All of these issues, ranging from the civil rights and women’s rights movements, essentially

paved the way for all of these marginalized identity formations to effectively enter the market as consumers. He explains, stating:

The values of the civil rights movement and the women's movement and the anti-authoritarian egalitarianism of the student's movement are thus preeminently cooptable because they are already – as ideals – inscribed in the very ideology of capitalism itself; and we must take into account the possibilities of these ideals are part of the internal logic of the system, which has a fundamental interest in social equality to the degree to which it needs to transform as many of its subjects or its citizens into identical consumers interchangeable with everybody else. (Jameson 1992a: 36).

In this very real sense, the sixties only served to solidify and redistribute the overall logic of the market, which found and recognized new avenues through the expansion of countercultural movements, becoming “global” for the very first time by way of the identification that these movements provided. Thus, 1973 can be seen as our first moment of the seventies, and perhaps posit that this is the zero-moment of postmodernism, which admittedly raises its own set of problems.

While the discussion of postmodernism has become a stain in contemporary studies of film and literature, there remain compelling and necessary reasons to continue to discuss this issue. To view postmodernism in simple economic terms means recognizing the degree to which it is still the dominant mode of contemporary artistic practice, particularly when considering the works of mass culture. Most Marxist critics (ranging from David Harvey, Giovanni Arrighi, Ernest Mandel and Antonio Negri) agree that from the 1970s onward the economic story of the United States is one of decline and severe crisis and that this is reflected in the films of this turbulent era. Giovanni Arrighi describes the problem in the following manner:

The coming crisis of the US regime was signaled between 1968 and 1973 in three distinct and closely related spheres. Militarily, the US army got into ever more serious troubles in Vietnam; financially, the US Federal Reserve found it difficult and then impossible to preserve the mode of production and regulation of world money established at Bretton Woods; and ideologically, the US government's

anti-communist crusade began losing legitimacy both at home and abroad. The crisis deteriorated quickly, and by 1973 the US government had retreated on all fronts (Arrighi 300-1).

The abandonment of the gold standard and the rise of the United States as a country that served as the predominant manufacturing center to its prime supplier of service economy goods, must also be accounted for as this phenomenon relates directly to the study of film. Since movies are the prime example of service economy goods it is worth considering to what degree “that economics has come to overlap with culture,” and further, how, “everything, including commodity production and high and speculative finance, has become cultural” (Jameson 1998: 73). It follows that mass culture, especially generic films, will be more in tune with the demands of the market, as they reflect the desires of enterprise (producers giving audiences what they think they want to see) in addition to carving out a niche in the market by audiences seeing what producers think they want to see. In short, we can consider the conspiracy film as an emerging genre which expresses the new realities of postmodernity by analyzing its specifically generic features. More importantly, we must see it as a genre which synthesizes all of these socio-historical issues and attempts to capitalize on its immediate appeal, by way of repeating the successful formulaic elements of the previous films.

Rick Altman’s revisionist account of genre theory is especially useful here, insofar as it allows us to read the economic patterns that are inherent in the conspiracy genre’s inaugural formulation. What is useful at this point is to recall that though it is difficult to discern “whether or not genrification was ever a fully scientific categorizing process, free from commercial and political interests” it is possible to assert “the constitution of *film* cycles and genres is a never-ceasing process, closely tied to the capitalist need for product differentiation” (Altman 64). The evolution of the genre – ranging from the aforementioned

paranoid horror films *They! And Body Snatchers*, in addition to the single films *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Blow Up* – all anticipate the Conspiracy genre in various ways, but which, with the coming of postmodernism blooms in a specific and historically contingent manner. At the same time, these films all provide a highly authentic portrait of the era that they purport to capture, making them extremely important documents of the politics of their times.

Altman's account of genre evolution relies on two basic principles, which oscillate between what he calls "The Critic's Game" and "The Producer's Game." In the critic's game, a genre is formed *post facto*, where a critic or scholar will approach a series of films in order to put them together in a manner which suits their agenda. In Altman's reasoning, this exercise is often counterproductive, as it rarely takes into account the historical and industrial factors that lead into a genre's constitution. The producer's game, however, provides the means to measure the genre's historical appearances and disappearances within specific coordinates. Altman succinctly explains the constitution of genres (via the industrial model) with the following formula.

1. From box-office information, identify a successful film.
2. Analyze the film in order to discover what made it successful.
3. Make another film stressing the assumed formula for success.
4. Check box-office information on the new film and reassess the success formula accordingly.
5. Use the revised formula as the basis for another film.
6. Continue the process indefinitely (Altman 38).

Producers are constantly altering and emulating the generic form in order to maximize its box-office potential. This factor ultimately accounts for the genre's cyclical appearances and disappearances within different eras and when audience demand wanes, the genre disappears altogether. In addition, Altman's theory provides a rationale which explains the recurrent

iconography, syntax and narrative concerns of a genre by positing that producers merely attempt to “reconfigure previous films” and “thus define genres in a manner which suits their institutional needs” (48). At the same time, it is worth exploring whether the conspiracy genre met with an audience demand which would explain the films’ overt political content while also accounting for their overall popularity. Ryan and Kellner explain a genre’s timeliness by asserting that societal issues make their way into the form by way of cinema’s close ties to “social ideology.” For them, this “means that genre films are among the most fragile forms, the most vulnerable to the effects of social change” (Ryan and Kellner 76). They also explain that the studios in the early seventies had to respond to their severe economic crises by making films that “had to respond to popular fantasies and fears” (51). In other words, the studios were forced to make films that actually reflected the collective cultural milieu rather than films that were apolitical. It may be that the popularity of the conspiracy genre was borne out of a representational need to depict the American crisis of confidence that played out the anxieties of the American populace. In this manner,

...the films enact the collapse of representational security which was itself a factor in that turn of events, and they representationally construct institutional solutions. Audiences made representations of crisis popular because disasters on the level of communally held representations had occurred which disturbed the security that derives from such representations. The films transcode the crisis of representation, the undermining of confidence of security...[t]he narrative of crisis in these films, therefore, is itself an enactment of what would occur historically (65).

There is no better form, representationally, narratively, formally, stylistically or generically which reflects this crisis of confidence than the conspiracy film. This is true of both Altman’s system and Ryan and Kellner’s approach, as the industry moves to accommodate the new economic demand by giving audiences what they are in the mood for, then giving them more of the same.

The most significant stumbling block of genre theory has always been the issue of genre evolution. Critics as diverse as John Cawelti, Will Wright, and Thomas Schatz have all attempted to fashion a solution to the questions of how and why film genres disappear/reappear and to explain the internal dynamism that changes elements of one film to another. It is therefore worth countering the historical/industrial account with a theoretical one, as a genre's internal dynamism is always a difficult concept to negotiate, particularly when attempting to define it. It is worth recalling that Schatz maintains that genres have their own evolutionary paths, moving from initial, settled and mannerist phases respectively. What is often lost in the application of this formula to genre evolution is the manner in which this dynamic is solely applied to the *entire* genre, rather than its constituent parts or cycles. In the case of the conspiracy film, it is therefore worth considering; (a) to what extent its cyclical appearances and disappearances are historically contingent, i.e., does history warrant the genre?; (b) what iconographic, syntactic and narrative hallmarks does the genre contain, and how do they evolve?; (c) whether the small stable of conspiracy films constitute a 'proper' genre or whether they merely constitute a film cycle?; and (d) if all of these questions can be answered, is it possible that the individual genre cycles possess their own initial, settled and mannerist phases?

1974 is a banner year for the formulation of the first cycle of conspiracy films, with release of three of its canonical texts: *Chinatown*, *The Conversation* and *The Parallax View*. All of these films are tied by their obsessional devotion to surveillance technology and follow a similar narrative pattern. It is also possible to assert that these films all contain, for the first time, the full-blown expression of the conspiracy genre by way of their execution of iconography, narrative and syntax. In all of these films, the protagonist stumbles upon a mystery which

eclipses their understanding of the world and effectively undermines their conception of “crime.” It is no coincidence that these films come in the wake of the Watergate scandals, reflecting a public’s lost faith in its leadership. Accompanying this scandal includes the infamous Nixon tapes, with their missing eighteen minutes of dialogue, which inflect/infects these movies by their attempts to reconstruct events with the film soundtrack rather than by traditional visual and narrative means. Miller refers to the “celebrated eighteen-and-a-half-minute tape gap” as “the most concise trope” for this affective tendency, and calls this phenomenon the manifestation of the “absent presences” of the tapes (Miller 331). Watergate becomes the final nail in the coffin of the American political and domestic sphere, summarizing everything bad that came out of the Cold War leading into the seventies, in addition to shattering the social and political spheres beyond repair. Miller refers to Watergate as “uncanny,” maintaining that it embodied everything that had been going on in the government for some time, yet it “completely redesigned the political landscape.” He continues, stating that, “[i]t was almost as if Nixon took the country down with him in terms both of political corruption that undermined effective attention to the national economy and of an undermining of a trust in the government that would allow us to handle domestic problems” (274). Jameson comments on the representational dilemma that the tapes provide, stating, “[i]n more political terms, the Nixon tapes may offer some (conspiratorial) equivalent to the ‘photographic realism’” suggesting “not merely a unity of place and action, but also a strongly representational drive.” Ultimately, “what the reader really longs for is to be present at the scene; to see to hear, to find out the secret truth” (Jameson 1992b: 49). For Jameson, this “secret truth” is most often rendered audibly, or by the technological recreation of the flawed totality by way of the movie camera.

Miller's "undermining of trust" added to "political corruption" finds its way into the inaugural film of the cycle, Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*. What is clear from the film's introduction is its concern with the *noir* form it emulates (as exemplified by the initial black and white image of the film's opening) but also the way in which this past is inflected with a contemporary perspective. As the camera slowly pulls back from the photograph of a woman being taken from behind by another man, the sides of the frame slowly enlarges to reveal that the world of the photo and the world outside of it is in colour, a notable shift in mode from the early hard-boiled detective film. The visual content of the photo sets the stage for the rest of the film, as it infuses the past with iconography that would have never gotten past the censorship of its day. The imagery of surveillance, from this initial set of photographs, to the constant shots of protagonist Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) observing and the camera emulating this observance – a superimposed binocular shot, the constant imposition of car windshields, and the reflection of captured images against the lens of a camera – links it to Antonioni's earlier film in addition to the decade's understandable obsession with surveillance.

In addition to the visuals of the film, *Chinatown* is best remembered for its narrative content which undermines the conventions of the detective films by way of its resistance to a closed narrative. Rather than the protagonist "solving the case" what occurs instead is an ever-expanding web of corruption, the magnitude of which is nearly impossible to comprehend, let alone "solve." What occurs in Gittes' investigation of the strange events surrounding water commissioner Hollis Mulwray's death is not a typical journey, but rather reflects the incomprehensibility of the emerging social totality. Jameson considers the transformation of the conspiracy protagonist's agency, noting that he is no longer an "individual detective with a specific brief," but rather that he is, "someone who blunders into all of this just as anyone might

have done” (Jameson 1992b: 34). This narrative transmutation extends further to plots that no longer contain “an individual victim, but everybody” and further, “not an individual villain, but an omnipresent network” (*ibid.*). For Jameson, these changes ultimately reflect a historically contingent reformulation from the traditional “criminal detective” to what he calls “the social detective” (37). In this sense,

...the social detective – whether generically still a policeman or a private investigator...will either be an intellectual in the formal sense from the outset, or will gradually find himself occupying the intellectual’s structural position by virtue of the premium placed on knowledge or the cognitive by the form itself...In any case, it will be the more general positioning of the intellectual in the social structure which endows the individual protagonist with collective resonance, which transforms policeman or journalist, photographer or even media figure, into a vehicle for judgements on society and revelations of its hidden nature, just as it refocuses the various individual or empirical events and actors into a representative pattern symptomatic of the social order as a whole (Jameson 1992b: 38-9).

Further complicating this transformation is the suffusion of public space with the elements of crime which parallels the private enterprise of commerce. *Chinatown* thus reveals that the central ‘sin’ of Noah Cross’ (John Huston) incestuous relationship with his daughter (and granddaughter) is only one of many public and private sins upon which the city of Los Angeles (and by proxy, America) is founded on. The collusion and collision of public and private begins here, and extends forward to the 1970s where Polanski can re-stage present events in the past to view the era through the lens of the 70s where they are rendered both safer at the distance and paradoxically more powerful. When villain Noah Cross gets away with his heinous crime(s) at the end of the film at the expense of Jake’s ineffectual investigation and the death of his lover, we must measure the change in tenor from the traditional closed narrative (the solution to the crime) to an open one which expresses omnipresence of crime in *Chinatown*. The film’s last expression, “Relax Jake, it’s only Chinatown,” and Gittes’ reluctance to deal with the basic helplessness he faces when dealing with crime, amply reflects and brings voice to the concerns of the era, where one could easily say the same of the White House, America, or the state of the

world. As Peter Lev states, “Chinatown” is “additionally a zone of the city beyond police or government control.” In this sense, “Chinatown” is a synecdoche for the larger loss of control of the American public (Lev 57). “It’s only Chinatown” can apply to the general sense of malaise of the American public during this era, while at the same time suggesting that all of the good intentions (as exemplified by Gittes’ actual desire to fix the situation) amount to nothing in the long run. Finally, *Chinatown* expresses the nascent iconography of the conspiracy genre (which it shares with the noir/detective mode, replete with anonymous business types), the syntax of surveillance techniques, and an open-ended narrative which refuses to provide us with any closure whatsoever.

While *Chinatown* reconfigures narrative agency while employing the visual tropes of surveillance, *The Conversation* reconstructs the syntactical elements of the genre on the level of the soundtrack. Released in the same year as *Chinatown*, Coppola’s film features protagonist Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) – who is a wire tapper and audio surveillance specialist – as he struggles to reconstruct a plot that he has captured with his recording equipment. The film’s narrative presents its central mystery aesthetically and formally as well, as its brilliant opening sequence serves as a cue for the audience, along with Caul, to decipher its central mystery. The omnipresence of the film’s soundtrack dictates the film’s emphasis on surveillance technology, mimicking Miller’s “central trope” of the seventies, and certainly presents its central allusion. As *The Conversation* falls just after Nixon’s resignation after the events of Watergate, it is worth considering the film’s central aim to restore the “present absences” – exemplified in the missing eighteen minutes of the Nixon tapes – within the recording of a conversation. Caul moves from his position of “I don’t care what they’re saying, I just want to get a fat sound” to urgently needing answers to the plot he has uncovered. The eighteen minute gap is enough for us to read

whatever we care to into the absence, or, in Miller's view, "[i]f Johnson brought the credibility gap into prominence and consciousness, Nixon gave expression to that gap as eighteen and a half minutes of tantalizing if frustrating static. He enabled us to hear and read into the gap and the presidency what we wished" (Miller 263). Coppola's film allows us to do both; it formally restructures the recording of absences, allowing the audience to "get a fat sound" while at the same time filling these absences with nefarious plots involving business executives, scandalous affairs, and murder. While following a similar narrative trajectory to *Chinatown*, *The Conversation* takes this theme a step farther by diegetically depicting the omnipresence of this societal corruption, or the presence of a larger plot, on the level of the film's soundtrack. This profound sensation of careful observance and paranoid space can be measured by a second and third viewing of the film. The film is inflected with paranoia from the very beginning, and Harry's involvement in the plot only actualizes this phenomenon in the narrative. In short, the movie only fulfills for Harry what he always believed to be true. When his landlord 'breaks in' to his apartment, or when his girlfriend asks him personal questions, they merely foreshadow what Harry already knows about the paranoid dimension of the contemporary social sphere. In other words, *The Conversation* depicts what is implied within *Chinatown's* plot, but diegetically embeds "Chinatown" as the signifier at the end of the movie throughout the entirety of audible social space. The films' endings echo each other, as the lonely crane shot of Chinatown relates to the slow pans of Caul's trashed apartment, where he has ripped up his floorboards and furniture in order to see how deep the surveillance of his life has become. Slavoj Žižek's description of the world echoes this sentiment, stating that the problem is not that Harry, along with "ufologists and conspiracy theorists regress to a paranoid attitude unable to accept (social) reality," but rather, "that this reality itself is becoming paranoid" (Žižek 219). *The Conversation* explicitly links

itself to Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, but the major difference is that the metaphor of sound as omnipresent is a better linkage to the overall depiction of paranoid space, particularly in the shadow of the Watergate scandal.

The Parallax View takes this movement a step further by not only depicting a social space that is constantly watched but that makes the association between surveillance and death explicit. Pakula's film summarizes all of the issues that I have outlined in *Chinatown* and *The Conversation* (increased domestic surveillance, the series of political assassinations to the collusion of public and corporate space) but does so in a bizarrely excessive conflation of narrative, audio and panoramic visuals to depict the business of the mysterious "Parallax Corporation." The presence of this body and its 'business' of training assassins results in the most paranoid of all the films of this cycle, and bears witness not only to the abstraction of the contemporary subject, but also to the extent of the psychological trauma engendered by the events of the sixties. Everyone that Joe Frady comes into contact with in this film is either blown-up, poisoned, drowned or shot. This film's most explicit use of this rule comes in the form of a jarring cut, where Frady speaks to his ex-lover in one scene, and in the next shot her corpse lies on a morgue table for Frady to identify. This reflects Jameson's conception of a disappearing "public" which he maintains is gradually replaced by the "collectivity" of the corporation. Death not only occurs to the people on the list of witnesses from the earliest assassination in the film, but to prominent politicians with a chance of reforming the system. *The Parallax View* provides us with a protagonist whose mobility allows for circumnavigation. In this sense, the detective figure is charged with mapping the new social totality and "architectonics" by nature of this journey. Frady's investigation affords the viewer to effectively 'see' the various abstracting forces in the film, and allows them to distinguish

this rogues' gallery of figures (corporate agency men, tribunals, assassins and empty spaces) within this new society. In this sense, Jameson characterizes this film as projecting through its formal tendencies (cinemascope epic shots of huge open spaces and the small figures that move through them) as "confronting this formal problem head on," in an effort to "give figuration to the equivalent of a civil war within an 'advanced' capitalist society," whose "contradictions no longer express themselves in that fashion" (Jameson 1992b 56).

Just as *The Conversation* referred back to *Blow-Up*, *The Parallax View* relates back to *The Manchurian Candidate* by way of its central 'brainwashing' sequence. This sequence, which begins in a darkened room and actually implicates the spectator in the subject's "gaze," is a virtual slideshow of the *Pax Americana*, replete with shots of mom, apple pie and the American flag. As Lev describes it,

[t]he montage involves still images under the headings "Love," "Mother," "Father," "Me," "Home," "Country," "God," and "Enemy." It begins with conventional imagery but soon moves to more violent and disturbed shots – e.g., "Dad" as threatening, "Mom," and "Me," as abused, "Country," as Hitler giving a speech. This sequence is not discussed or explained, but Frady evidently passes the test, for he is offered a job. Although the montage is simplistic, it does implicate film in the process of "training" violent, amoral human beings (54).

As the slideshow continues, these images become confused and are disturbingly juxtaposed in a jumbled manner. They mix images of hippies, Nixon, and the comic book figure of Thor, along with shots of orgiastic excess. The explication of this sequence, in its opposition to the calm tea-house setting of *The Manchurian Candidate* makes the transmutation of the Cold War menace to the domestic sphere wholly explicit, as the garbled imagery only consists of American iconography. Jameson is careful to note that among these differences include the pure products of American consumption (Jameson 1992b: 61-3).

Finally, *The Parallax View* introduces a new direction in the formulation of the conspiracy genre, and this includes the modification of the narrative trajectory of Jameson's

“social detective.” Not only is Frady charged with navigating his way through the open spaces of Late Capital, but his trajectory character arc moves from detective, to murderer, to victim:

The conspiratorial thriller, at any rate, begins by borrowing the usefully conventional actantial patterns of the sub-genres, such as the detective story, with its rotation around the triangle formed by detective, victim and murderer. Once the narrative scheme has become reified – that is to say, once it has become recognized and ratified as a genre in its own right – we are generally willing to overlook the formally embarrassing manner of the incommensurability of the detective’s narrative and the narrative of the murder and the victim, which, taking place virtually in another world and a different dimension, that of the past, must now be reconstructed within this one. To oversimplify, we may suggest that the detective is individual and the murder itself – as it were a partnership or joint venture between the victim and perpetrator – is collective (Jameson 1992b: 33).

While this trajectory is modified throughout the various films of the genre, the polarities of detective/killer/victim remain stable throughout, and can be seen in the various endings of all three of these films, where Gittes’ investigation involves him to the point that he is hurt by the plot in the end by having him return to Chinatown. Caul is ultimately victimized by the technology he favours and the people that he works for, while Frady is killed by the organization he infiltrates, resulting in his sentencing as the ‘lone gunman’ in the latest of assassinations.

These films all represent the initial thrust of an emerging genre but are largely bound by their seemingly coincidental emergence in the wake of Watergate. At the same time, it is possible to assert that as inaugural films the relationships between iconography, syntax and narrative may be loosely bound, but are eventually populated with more consistency, therefore warranting their consideration as a ‘proper’ genre. Bearing Altman’s *Producer’s Game* in mind, we can also note that all of these films came out of Paramount Pictures, a fact which reinforces Altman’s theories of the links between particular genres and particular studios. We can also see how the consistent tropes of the genre come to inform the later films of the cycle, which include *Three Days of the Condor* and *All the President’s Men*. While

both of these films still express a great deal of paranoid logic, they both come slightly closer to relating a closed narrative by casting off some of their more “embarrassing” qualities.

In *Three Days of the Condor*, the protagonist Joe Turner (Robert Redford) works in a C.I.A. agency which deals specifically with reading books to detect the presence of secret codes. When Turner uncovers a plot to develop war games in the Middle East, a squad of killers is dispatched to assassinate everyone who works in his office. Turner “blunders” away to get tuna sandwiches and returns to find all of his colleagues murdered. Turner fully embodies Jameson’s description of the “social detective” by way of the fact that he is not traditionally suited to the role – he is a prime example of one of Jameson’s “intellectual” protagonists – but also by the way he attempts to solve the problem at hand. His amateur tactics afford him the ability to evade the agencies that are out to kill him by adopting the methods of the characters he reads about in books.

Condor continues the generic work of *The Parallax View* by essentially depicting a protagonist who moves through different kinds of spaces, in order to ultimately produce a semblance of order. In *Condor*, this movement occurs by way of the actual journeys of characters, from New York City, to Brooklyn, to Washington, D.C. to Langley, Virginia. This circuit approximates the closed system of the U.S. Intelligence community. The fact that the C.I.A. houses its New York offices in the newly built World Trade Center Towers is testament to the transformation of social space refracted in the film’s assertion that the commercial and intelligence interests are the same, as they exist in the same social and commercial plane. The C.I.A., similar to the Parallax Corporation, is housed in a typical office building, thus visually demonstrating for the viewer the “commerce” of intelligence. In

this sense, *Condor* offers “promise of a deeper inside view is the hermeneutic content of the conspiracy thriller in general” (15). Thus, in Pollack’s movie,

the representational confirmation that telephone cables and lines and their interchanges follow us everywhere, doubling the streets and buildings of the visible social world with a secondary secret underground world, is a vivid, if paranoid cognitive map, redeemed for once only by the possibility of turning the tables, when the hero is able to tap into the circuits and bug the buggers, abolishing space with his own kind of simultaneity by scrambling all the symptoms and producing his own messages from all corners of the map at the same time (*ibid.*).

It is through Turner’s movement through this secondary series of spaces that he inhabits the ultimate metaphor of the new system when he confronts the C.I.A. from within the phone system itself.

Three Days of the Condor explicitly depicts a world where spying has gone amok, going as far as to propose that it is the ‘the secret underground world,’ – the commercial and intelligence infrastructures – that are actually in control of American foreign policy. This proposition is reflected in Turner’s confrontation with Applewood, where he figures out that he had been reading invasion plans for the Middle East all along. His cry of “Oil fields! Oil! That’s it, isn’t it? This whole damn thing is about oil – isn’t it? Wasn’t it?” is echoed in the film’s last scene, which makes the relationship between domestic consumption and the need for aggressive intelligence explicit. As C.I.A. director Higgins says: “It’s simple economics. Today it’s oil, in ten or fifteen years it will be food, plutonium... They won’t want us to ask them, they’ll just want us to get it for them.” This confrontation, where Turner mails the story of the C.I.A.’s double-dealings to *The New York Times* is also ambiguous, which links it to the other films of the cycle. Despite the fact that Turner more effectively “solves” the crime at the end of the film, this knowledge ultimately ends up nowhere or in the void of “Chinatown” which continues to be the chief metaphor of this era’s stasis. The film freezes the image of Turner walking away from Higgins, after asserting that the world would effectively change

after people found out about what would occur, but nevertheless it remains exactly the same. Jameson remarks on the absolute presence of the ambiguous ending when he states, that the problem is inherently related to the representation of totality itself (Jameson 1992b: 31). In this sense, “closure...has itself become of questionable value, if not a meaningless concept.” He re-casts the function of the “ending” into what he dubs a “closure-effect” which is paralleled by his metaphor of mapping (*ibid.*). In addition to visually representing the new societal spaces, the film uses Turner as a focalizer who attempts to ‘map’ the space by literally drawing connections on paper which links all of these forces together. This visualization of the narrative, and the criminal activities link it to Pakula’s *All the President’s Men*.

All the President’s Men is the first film of this series to literalize the Watergate narrative, but does so in an extremely interesting fashion. The film is not so much concerned with Nixon himself but rather, the investigation of the crime in the first place. Further, it presents the preliminary steps towards an investigation and ends while Nixon is still in office. Despite the Watergate break-in being the impetus of the film’s narrative, most of the major players are excised from the movie. Jameson contextualizes *All the President’s Men* within what he calls Pakula’s ‘paranoid trilogy,’ stating,

Indeed, virtually the most interesting formal feature of Pakula’s achievement here lies in its evasion of the traditional category of the costume drama or narrowly ‘political’ film or sub-generic Washington ‘expose’. ‘Nixon’ here remains an absence: a technical stroke of little interest that at one blow produces and solves a quantitatively new form problem, and which, by cutting across the traditional opposition between public and private, has virtually, in Pakula’s most successful films, become his trademark (52).

Once again, it is the film’s ‘structured absences’ – including its execution of rhetorical flourishes like ‘non-denial-denials’ – that allies itself with its conspiracy text predecessors by concentrating on the efforts of “social detectives” Woodward (Robert Redford) and Bernstein

(Dustin Hoffman) who structure the imagining of the Watergate crime. For Jameson the film's importance lies with the various manners in which social space, including parking lots, the architecture of government offices and the famous Watergate hotel all express certain truths which reflect the new social totality. Jameson therefore links the project that Pakula performs in *All the President's Men* with that of Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant* (1926) or Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project*. In other words, "we can most adequately represent the contemporary by way of what is already out of style, or in the process of historical obsolescence" (*ibid.*). In terms of the film's aesthetic, Pakula once again employs cinematographer Gordon Willis as his visual stylist, so the film further employs the syntactical strategy that characterizes *The Parallax View*. In this fashion, it is the recognizable but refashioned public areas of the nation's capital that are captured by Willis' camera, but these spaces are generally rendered from extreme distances, echoing the magnitude of the reporters' battle against the system, and reflecting the 'totality/fragmentation' of institutional and commercial zones. The best example of this phenomenon occurs as the reporters go over their list of people who will talk to them on record. The scene begins with a medium-long shot which focuses on their car, then gradually pulls back to reveal their general movement within the grid of the whole city. The juxtaposition of their figures against the massive backgrounds is a constant formal and narrative strategy, and these scenes are overlaid with the consistent tone of their voices, even as they recede into the backdrop. Additionally, Willis exploits extreme deep-focus cinematography in *The Washington Post* offices, resulting in an extremely long space where something (usually a significant political action, etc...) occurs in the background, and where crowds of reporters gather around a T.V. to watch the newsworthy events. A striking example of this visual strategy occurs when Woodward begins to make an

initial set of phone calls initiating his investigation. This scene, rendered in rack focus with Redford in the foreground, oscillates between this camera set-up and extreme close ups of Woodward's note taking. Here, it is possible for the spectator to effectively "map" the situation along with the reporter, who imposes order for the viewer by allowing them to be privy to his thought process. This sequence of writing is also rendered in a series of different of pens, which order Woodward's thoughts and effectively 'editorialize/personalize' his commentary by peppering his straight reportage with his expressions like he "knows her", "he's lying" amongst other comments.

Though *All the President's Men* is best remembered for literalizing the 'present absence' of the Watergate scandal, at the same time it is notable that Nixon is absent within the plot itself. Jameson says that "villainy is peculiarly problematic in *All the President's Men*, and it is its essential absence which is most disturbing" (Jameson 1992a: 69), he continues, stating, "[e]ven 'Nixon' does not name this absence, about which it is never really even clear whether there is anything there at all" (*ibid.*). Nixon is only 'present' in his television appearances which bracket the film. In addition, the presence of spooks and whistleblowers throughout the narrative relates to the enduring legacy of domestic intelligence, which both strove to preserve and undermine the presidency from opposite ends of the spectrum. Most importantly, the film (as a conspiracy text) provides a new means to cognitively map the government totality through the expression which comes from 'Deep Throat' to "follow the money." This strategy is ultimately what affords the investigators to find the answers they're looking for and informs the legacy of subsequent conspiracy texts in later cycles. This is particularly true of "Deep Throat" who becomes an iconographic fixture in later cycles.

If *Chinatown*, *The Conversation* and *The Parallax View* all represent the initial stages of the conspiracy film and *Three Days of the Condor* and *All the President's Men* are examples of the "settled" phase of the genre, it is worth mentioning where the seventies cycle ends up, by briefly discussing a later example, such as Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, as a mannerist film of the cycle. The baroque form presents the viewer with several variations on the themes of assassination and iconography, but the protagonist as social detective and the work of his "mapping" remains, albeit in a transformed manner. In this sense, it is worth examining how *Taxi Driver* internalizes Jameson's narrative axis (of detective, victim and assassin) by way of the subjectivity of Travis Bickle. Bickle's trajectory is similar to Frady's narrative arc in *The Parallax View* – he is obviously the outsider figure that Jameson describes – but also seems set on the path to become an assassin without rhyme or reason. The setting of the film is similar to that of *Chinatown* but projects the realities of the inner-city which help define Bickle's rationale. According to Travis, New York City is the site of all evil and he repeatedly describes it as a sewer that begs to be flushed down the toilet. At the same time, the film enacts a mapping of the cityscape by way of Travis' various journeys through the city. In other words, the film more effectively traverses the new social space and effects the depiction of the new realism that Jameson decides is part of the mission of the conspiracy text. In terms of the larger conspiracy, it remains unspoken in the film which makes it that much more potent force. Once again, the usefulness of the signifier "Chinatown" warrants consideration here, as the social space contains the remnants of Jameson's description of a "revolutionary war" which depicts the "second-tier" world of pimps, prostitutes and inner-city space.

Finally, the film exploits the binary between politician and assassin. What is absent from most analyses of this film is the manner in which this aborted assassination plot, where Travis describes his life as “leading up to this moment” is only averted by way of the massive secret service presence on site. Otherwise it is pretty clear that he would have killed candidate Charles Palantine instead of liberating the young prostitute Iris (Jodie Foster). It is possible to assert, therefore, that without the presence of an external narrative which dictates why Travis wants to kill Palantine, it is clear that this narrative is internalized by Travis. The subjective view between Travis and his various weapons is also important, and speaks to the literal embodiment that the internalization of the assassin role has engendered in the mannerist cycle. Bickle is obviously living out the world of post-traumatic stress. He is a wounded Vietnam veteran, begins the film not able to sleep, pops pills all the time and occasionally holds his war wound in pain. In short, it may be that the absence of justification for the assassination may be all the evidence we need for the presence of a plot. Though Travis is obviously transformed in as profoundly a manner as Raymond Shaw or Joe Frady, one of the most interesting things about the film is how little detail it provides us with. Aside from the ramblings in Travis’ diary, we have little information as to his rationale, besides the profound effect that the social totality and his encounter with it (or lack thereof) enacts on his person. That the film begins and ends on close-ups on Travis’ eyes, looking back and forth, is testament to the greater focalization of the story and the way in which the assassination plot is internalized and subjectivized in the mannerist phase of the genre.

While it is likely that these films all attempt to “cognitively map” the new spaces and subjectivities of the postmodern era, it is still possible to assert that they still attempt to

express something resolutely 'political' by way of their attempt to reason the new features of their era. In this sense, what began as a summary of the sixties becomes a portrait of the new features of the seventies. In this manner, it is possible to assert that the conspiracy film possesses an inherent political value borne of the interrelationship between public history, economic happenstance and industrial tinkering. In short, this brief cycle of films adequately and legitimately reflected the fears of a society who squandered a great deal of capital and suddenly had to pay its debts. The idea of a "plot" and the protagonist's movement through it by way of Jameson's concept of "cognitive mapping" aids us in refiguring and imagining what the new social space might look like, not only by way of our confrontation with it, but ultimately through its onscreen depiction. The inherent "political" value of this cycle will become an even bigger question throughout the course of this work, as these films, along with the seventies, exhibit an uncanny presence in later cycles and indeed, contemporary culture itself.

Chapter 2 Notes

¹ In this respect, see “The Lengthened Shadow of a Man,” Frank Donner’s discussion of J. Edgar Hoover’s influence over American society in *The Age of Surveillance* 79-104.

² According to recently declassified documents, these efforts by the CIA were referred to as “Operation Chaos” and included “domestic surveillance...that went on for almost seven years under Presidents Johnson and Nixon. Mr. Helms created a Special Operations Group to conduct the spying. A squad of C.I.A. officers grew their hair long, learned the jargon of the New Left, and went off to infiltrate peace groups in the United States and Europe. Mazetti and Weiner, “Files on Illegal Spying Show C.I.A. Skeletons From Cold War,” *New York Times*, June 27, 2007.

Chapter Three: "The Truth is Out There": Conspiracy as Commodity

Deep Throat: Mister Mulder, why are those like yourself, who believe in the existence of extraterrestrial life on Earth, not entirely dissuaded by all the evidence to the contrary?

Mulder: Because, all the evidence to the contrary is not entirely dissuasive.

Deep Throat: Precisely.

Mulder: They're here, aren't they?

Deep Throat: Agent Mulder, they've been here for a long, long time.

- *The X-Files, Episode 1 – "Deep Throat"*

Writer: Does political scare you?

Griffin Mill: Political doesn't scare me. Radical political scares me. Political political scares me.

Writer: This is politely politically radical, but it's funny.

Mill: It's a funny political thing.

Writer: And it's a thriller, too, all at once.

Mill: It's a cynical, political thriller comedy...So it's a psychic, political, thriller comedy with a heart.

Writer: With a heart, not unlike Ghost meets Manchurian Candidate.

- *Conversation from Robert Altman's The Player*

If the films of the 1970s sowed the seeds for the postmodern depiction of social and political space, then the 1990s fully embodied this postmodern aesthetic. While postmodernism is largely associated with the well-rehearsed tropes such as pastiche, intertextuality and irony – simultaneously reflecting the dominant mode of Late Capital – a fully-rendered demonstration of the link between the postmodern aesthetic and the reconfiguration of Hollywood studios from the 1970s onward has not yet been sufficiently fleshed out (King 139). By this I mean to say that the implementation of theory alongside an industrial analysis of Hollywood blockbusters is an endeavor that is largely viewed as incompatible by the majority of critics on the one hand and most theorists on the other. However, to sufficiently analyze the conspiracy films of the 1990s, it is precisely this hybridized method that is necessary in order to understand the monumental shifts in aesthetic, industrial and economic changes within the decade.

Since 1975 onward is generally agreed upon as the moment of transition to what Thomas Schatz calls, "The New Hollywood," we should elaborate on the extremely significant industrial shifts which occur to Hollywood's internal logic, particularly its increasing evolution towards the blockbuster film. Returning to our earlier date of 1974-5, these years mark a major point of transition between the "Old Hollywood" and the "New." It is no coincidence this date corresponds with my larger discussion of shifting economic modes, from Imperialist to Late Capital, or from Modernism to Postmodernism. Here, we should see Hollywood's restructuring from a studio-based system to a conglomerate based system as distinctly in tune with the overall logic of the American market. The industry's overall losses in 1971-2 thus reflect Jameson's characterization of "bills coming due." The short-lived conspiracy film cycle responded to the crisis of an industry that is estimated to have lost 600 million dollars between 1969-71 (Schatz 22). The only remedy to this solution at this time were modestly budgeted films which over-performed, in turn creating the "American Film Renaissance" which saved the industry. Among these films included the 70s conspiracy genre (summarized in the last chapter), in addition to surprise hits like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1969), and *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) (Schatz 22-3). The original cycle, then, stood on the cusp between eras and more importantly, between economic modes. This not only explains its cultural resonance, but also its emergence as a generic Hollywood product in the vein of Ryan and Kellner's description as form that was sensitive to its cultural milieu and a product for its time.

With the coming of *Jaws*, (Steven Spielberg, 1975) the systemic logic of Hollywood changed in favour of the blockbuster. As Schatz explains,

If any single film marked the arrival of the New Hollywood, it was *Jaws*, the Spielberg-directed thriller that recalibrated the profit potential of the Hollywood hit, and redefined its status as a marketable commodity and cultural phenomenon as well. The film brought an emphatic end to Hollywood's five-year recession, while ushering in an era of high-cost, high-tech, high-speed thrillers. The release of *Jaws* also happened to coincide with developments both inside and outside the movie industry in the mid-1970s which, while having little or nothing to do with that particular film, were equally important to the emergent New Hollywood (24).

These developments included the restructuring of the movie industry from studio-based to conglomerate-based, which basically meant that Hollywood was not immune to the increasing corporatization of global capital. The success of *Jaws*, which ended up profiting over one hundred million dollars at the box-office over a six-month period (Gomery 74) ushered in new synergistic marketing strategies, including the studios' alliance with TV-based advertising for the first time. The emergence of other blockbusters, such as the hugely successful *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* franchises, ushered in a new successful money-making model which shifted the fortunes of Hollywood permanently. According to Jameson, these films ultimately become "product[s] in their own right" and "the market" that the blockbuster represents "has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself" (Jameson 1991: x). These products are front-loaded and designed to maximize thrill potential for the audiences, often resulting in a combination of generic elements and the triumph of "plot over characters" (Schatz 29), in addition to employing an array of special effects and rapid editing patterns. Schatz pinpoints the evolving (de-evolving?) natures of the film form when he discusses the differences between *The Godfather* and *Star Wars*. Here, he states, "we see films that are increasingly plot-driven, increasingly visceral, kinetic, and fast-paced, increasingly reliant on special effects, increasingly 'fantastic' (and thus *apolitical*), and increasingly targeted towards younger audiences" (*ibid.* – my emphasis). The 1980s, then, increasingly systematized and streamlined the blockbuster's earning potential, in turn creating ancillary markets for

increased consumption by way of home video and other product lines – toys, lunchboxes, novel spin-offs – all of which filtered profits to a film's home conglomerate.

By the 1990s, these tendencies became well-established trends, and included front-end loading in theatres, where box-office receipts became the only sign of a successful film, and the timid tendencies of studios to release safe commodities which retell familiar plots, star familiar faces, and mine existing films for proven material (such as older films) to maximize the studios' investments. Corporate "synergy" is the new buzzword, anticipating the many different avenues that a corporation can market the same product through its ancillary industries. With this industrial background planted solidly in our minds, it is worth considering that although the films of the 1990s are largely scattered and diverse products which express a corporate ethos, they still depict conflicting visions of the America that they stem from. On the one hand, they project an America that had largely solved its problems and could continue to assert its worldwide economic, industrial and cultural clout, while on the other, these films express a darker, internalized view of their domestic situation by way of the various generic and subgeneric films of this era. The 90s Thriller is the most interesting of these categories, as it defined the darker projected social malaise that reflected the underside of the turn of the century. The first of these categories expresses a characteristic nostalgia as films and filmmakers look to their past in order to restage events. This phenomenon is best expressed in films such as *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (Stone, 1989). Oliver Stone's films leading into the 1990s explored the under-examined material of the Vietnam War from the safe distance of the present; they embodied a trend that continued into the 1990s cycle, one which expressed an extreme fixation with the recent past. The dominant filmmakers of the previous era, directors like Coppola, Pakula and Pollack all ended up making "Domestic Thrillers," and helped to define

what I call “the evil lawyer subgenre,” all of which were films inspired by the wildly popular novels of John Grisham. Generally speaking, these works deal with the “one good man” who is forced to remedy the evils of the new firm that he works at. From here, the protagonist finds the internal threat at his new job, but the “agency men” of the earlier era are replaced by greedy corporate lawyers rather than anonymous corporate men. *The Firm* (Pollack, 1993) stands as the chief example of this trend. Pakula’s films of this era include the Harrison Ford vehicle, *Presumed Innocent* (1990), *The Pelican Brief* (1992) and the domestic paranoia film *Consenting Adults* (1992). Pakula’s last film, *The Devil’s Own* (1997), is the most excessive of these films before his death, where the evil lawyer becomes evil incarnate, Al Pacino as the devil himself.

Paranoia remains a dominant trope in all of these films, where the surrounding cultural milieu seems to be conspiring against the protagonist, who asserts himself against the overwhelming new economic and societal forces which deprive him of his agency and autonomy. This characteristic paranoia is exemplified in the Michael Douglas vehicle *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher, 1993) where the protagonist has internalized the downsizing of L.A.’s aerospace agency and rampages against his loss by walking through the city with a shotgun, baseball bat and an attitude. Michael Douglas seems to warrant ownership on this single subgenre as the actor moves from one disempowered male protagonist to another, beginning with *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987), moving to *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) and to *Disclosure* (Barry Levinson, 1994). Douglas’ star-driven subgenre cycle in the 1990s dominates the era as well, as his character types are all presented with extremely similar (if not identical) paranoid situations where he must rail out against in an appropriately paranoid fashion. This distinctive paranoia is thus dominated by the white male protagonist’s thematic loss of agency and his ‘theory’ that external forces (ranging from women executives, downsizing and

white male protagonists internal corporate dynamics) are still responsible. This is the thesis put forward by Marita Sturken, who suggests that the nineties brand of paranoia is partly due to a crisis of masculinity, which “the 90s Michael Douglas genre” would certainly seem to validate.

[T]he 1990s saw a fascination in popular culture with paranoid narratives, including such television shows as *The X-Files*, *Dark Skies*, and *Millenium*, the historical films of Oliver Stone, and more recent cyberfilms such as *The Matrix* (1999); the continuing credence in a government cover-up of the crash of an alien space ship in Roswell, New Mexico, in 1946; the rise of conservative and right-wing conspiracy groups in the United States; and a preoccupation with narratives of millennial apocalypse and natural disaster. This new version of paranoia, which is distinct in many ways from the 1950s paranoia that centered on the external threat of communism, is inextricably tied to contemporary discourse about race and identity, and the emergence of the white male as a figure in crisis (Sturken 204).

Sturken’s analysis of the male protagonist in crisis plays out within most films of the nineties, with the Douglas vehicle *Fatal Attraction* standing as the chief exemplar of this trend. This failure of agency, as Sturken explains, is further externalized by the alien invasion subgenre, which includes diverse texts like *The X-Files* (1993-2001), *The Arrival* (David Twohy, 1996), *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996) and *Men In Black* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997). Hollywood even goes so far as to remake the entire 70s cycle anew but largely removes the potency of their paranoia in order to express the aesthetic concerns of the postmodern era with the commercial needs of the blockbuster film. Thus, in the 1990s *Chinatown*, *The Conversation*, *Three Days of the Condor*, *Taxi Driver*, and *The Parallax View* become star vehicles and the special-effects ridden spectacles *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, *Enemy of the State*, *Spy Game*, *Conspiracy Theory* and *The Game* respectively. These films are the best demonstration of the transition between conspiracy film cycles, as they all take the dominant iconography, syntax and narrative of the genre and absorb them into the overarching umbrella of the blockbuster form.

This particular conspiracy film cycle is best viewed by isolating its three major tendencies. The first trend involves fleshing out “the alien invasion narrative,” the second involves remaking the initial conspiracy cycle and replacing its political content with chase

sequences designed to make their stars look good. Finally, the 90s cycle enters its mannerist phase by making out-and-out comedies, including *Wag the Dog* (Barry Levinson, 1997) *Dick* (Andrew Fleming, 1999), and *Zoolander* (Ben Stiller, 2001).¹

Huge changes dominate the world in the 1990s as the collapse of Communism and its external threat, the first intervention in Iraq in the Gulf War, domestic turmoil in L.A.'s inner-city, expressed in the Rodney King riots, the O.J Simpson trial, a worldwide recession not to mention the scandalous impeachment trial that dominated Bill Clinton's second-term presidency. Domestic terrorist incidents, including the Oklahoma City bombing, the first World Trade Center attacks, the Unabomber, in addition to raids on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco Texas compound these events and resulted in a backlash against "Big Government." Political correctness is also hallmark of this era, as is the changing landscape of media ownership, where multimedia conglomerates increasingly dominated and absorbed more industries within their jurisdictions, and which reshaped the media industries in a manner eclipsing the vertical integration of the 1930s studios. These changes clearly coincide with Jameson's description of postmodernism where he states that this mode of consumer capitalism, of which Hollywood is the chief example, constitutes the "purest form of capital yet to have emerged," coinciding with the "prodigious expansion into hitherto uncommodified areas" (Jameson 1991: 36). The rise of ancillary markets and the dominance of new video technology, and DVDs in particular, must also frame this discussion, as it marked the first time that movies shifted from being an ethereal and 'experiential commodity' to something that could be owned and watched repeatedly. Movies, and more often than not, their stars, advertised themselves in this era and stood for a diverse set of marketable products which all tied into the conduit that a film provided for their home conglomerate.

If the 1970s represented the last gasp of a countercultural movement that was embodied in its films, the 1980s and 1990s thus represented the complete triumph of the market. In terms of film culture, the 1990s mark the heyday of the blockbuster film, ushered in by the works of Steven Spielberg and George Lucas in the late 1970s and 1980s. In order to guarantee a steady stream of profits, the Hollywood film is more often than not dominated by a star, who may bring their persona-specific traits to a particular film, and therefore blur the movie's genre category. Films of this era are purely postmodern and represent what Jameson dubs "the waning of affect" and the crisis imposed by a breakdown of signifiers. This relates directly to the conception of stars, who Jameson describes as "themselves commodified and turned into their own images" (11).

In order to still "mean" something, these works must essentially mimic and inhabit older forms in order to still mean something and to communicate with audiences. Most often, this is achieved by the execution of pastiche, wherein "the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past," effecting "the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in an imaginary museum of a now global culture" (17-18). The explanation for these effects is purely economic and is dictated by the manner in which film, as the chief mass-cultural institution, embodies and is representative of the economic mode of Late Capital. As such, a movie of the 1990s attempted to be all things to all people. A postmodern film genre, then, becomes the ultimate figuration of the market, as studios and producers attempt to pinpoint demographic groups (which are the domesticated versions of countercultural movements in the seventies) while designing and selling a product directly for them. This demographic data accounts for Wheeler Winston Dixon's description of the 1990s cinema's "apparent facelessness." Dixon agrees with Jameson, stating that these films evoke the past, but it is a past

that applies a “new series of values imposed on the source material” (Dixon 2000: 5).

Additionally, this vision represents the “triumphs of style over substance” wherein “even the most minor physical detail is given the weight of a major stylistic makeover” (7). This “triumph of style over substance” in mainstream film is best exemplified in the new stylistic features of the blockbuster, which increasingly incorporates rapid editing styles and narration, and extremely slick production values to re-present films of earlier eras, while at the same time depriving them of their specifically resonant traits. At the same time, it is possible to assert that the blockbuster film still “means” something and exhibits certain tendencies that are symptomatic of its era, if only to say that these films may only be exhibiting the logic of the system that they stem from. As Jon Lewis states, “[a]ny attempt to evaluate or otherwise intellectually account for these films seems to begin and end with a larger Hollywood story regarding recovery, conglomeration, multinationalization, and vertical and horizontal integration (a.k.a. synergy)” (Lewis 61). In other words, even films that purport to be about something else, (conspiracy, air force pilots, good cops and bad cops) end up telling the story of Hollywood’s corporate synergy by way of their presence as a nodal point for more consumption.

From the 1970s-1990s severe industrial changes included the outright purchase of most studios by multinational corporations where studios become one company out of many (such as the case of the Sony/Universal deals and the landmark AOL-Time-Warner merger). As such, it is rarely the individual studio heads who dictate decisions. This phenomenon is best depicted in Robert Altman’s *The Player* (1992), which stands in a long tradition of films about making films. *The Player* cannibalizes as many cinematic forms as possible, as demonstrated through its slightly longer emulation of Orson Welles’ tracking shot in *Touch of Evil* in its opening sequence. Robert Altman’s film is important because it fictionalizes the degree to which

filmmaking has been co-opted by executives and managers rather than writers and directors in the 1990s, a sentiment that is reflected in the film studio's empty slogan, "Movies: Now more than ever." In this film (and the era it depicts) all green-lit projects must star either Julia Roberts or Bruce Willis, and all movies end up resembling each other because they recombine the raw materials of earlier films. Films become/became a product of money, a conduit for money and a representation of money in this same closed circuit. This film, then, fully resembles Gilles Deleuze's description of the cinema, where he tells us,

The cinema as art lives in a direct relation with a permanent plot, an international conspiracy which conditions it from within, as the most intimate and most indispensable enemy. This conspiracy is that of money; what defines industrial art is not mechanical reproduction but the internalized relationship with money...Money is the obverse of all the images that the cinema shows and sets in place, so that films are about money are already, if implicitly, films within the film or about the film. This is the true state of things, it is not the goal of cinema...but...in a constitutive relation between the film in the process of being made and money as the totality of the film (Deleuze 75).

Though the common name for Deleuze's "conspiracy" is "self-reflexivity" in postmodern theory, what his statement more adequately reflects is the cinema's pure connection to monetary systems, binding all of these issues conceptually. The rising tendency for product placement in movies is but one example of this relationship, and is best demonstrated in a brief sequence in *Wayne's World* (Penelope Spheeris, 1992). Here, the film actually stops momentarily in order for its protagonists to advertise products directly to the film's viewers. Hollywood films represent money in its purest form, subsuming all other concerns into the internal dynamism of its own 'plotting.' The 1990s film situation can be seen as the ultimate triumph of globalized trade and neoliberal finance practices, as the blockbuster films' blankness and 'readability' make for easy digestion within the new world situation, which is dominated by an increasing need to sell the Hollywood products overseas, *ad infinitum*. In other words, the situation is likely as Douglas Gomery describes it, where he states that the blockbuster "may seem a single product, but in reality it stands at the core of the mighty vertically-integrated media conglomerates which define

our cultural world as we begin the twenty-first century” (Gomery 81). The blockbuster best exemplifies this tendency as it becomes but one stop amongst many on the corporate ladder. A film like *Star Wars* opened new possibilities for the market, ushering in ancillary industries, such as toy lines, lunchboxes, and underwear. The most overlooked contribution of the franchise is its internal dynamism which resembles Jameson’s description of the market’s quest for “hitherto uncommodified areas.” Films thus become advertisements for themselves, perpetuating further films by elevating their stars and directors in the constant exchange of money and movies, and by creating new ancillary industries along the way. At the same time this corporate synergy – replete with new vertically integrated structures and the resurgence of conspiratorial thinking in film – may actually be inspired by a genuine desire to represent the emerging totality which increasingly resembles a convoluted and paranoid form. In this sense, it may resemble what Peter Knight characterizes, when he states, “[w]hatever else it might have become, conspiracy theory is an integral part of the infotainment culture at the turn of the millennium, hovering somewhere between committed belief and the culture of consumption” (Knight 45).

Furthermore, this transformation allows the viewer to participate in the conspiracy culture by purchasing his way into the market, rather than devoting himself with committed belief. This has specific ramifications for the structural form of the genre, as it dictates the manner in which conspiracy is made easily digestible to a spectator by making it exceedingly more palatable than the last time it came around.

Returning to the specifics of the conspiracy cycle, the major difference is that whereas the seventies films attempt to represent the “structured absences” of their era, in the 1990s these absences become *overtly narrated presences*. The unifying trait of each of the 90s films, including such diverse texts as *JFK*, *The X-Files*, *Enemy of the State* and *Who Framed Roger*

Rabbit?, resides in the manner by which they all seek to *explain*, no matter how implausible these explanations may seem. This phenomenon relates directly back to Hofstadter's conception of the paranoid style, where the simultaneous existence of competing conspiracy theories is not only possible, but the *preferred method* of the paranoid spokesman. The typical procedure, "is to start with such defensible assumptions and with a careful accumulation of facts, or at least what appear to be facts, and to marshal these facts toward an overwhelming 'proof' of the particular conspiracy that is to be established" (Hofstadter 36). The next step involves taking this array of factors and making the "imaginative leap" which leads the conspiracy theorist to his own interpretation of the historical events. In this sense, the method of the paranoid style is tied to the meticulous accumulation and application of these details, which move "from the undeniable to the unbelievable" (37-8).

Hofstadter could easily be describing Oliver Stone, who marshals and presents a dizzying array of facts and figures, alongside with restaged action in order to pierce the Warren Commission's account of the Kennedy assassination in his film *JFK*. This is especially true of the film's opening sequence, which recounts, within its first ten minutes, a historical recap of the previous ten years of America's history. Beginning with Dwight D. Eisenhower's famous speech about the dangers of the military-industrial complex and ending with a staged re-enactment of the Kennedy shooting, the sequence also using medium specific (cinematic) qualities in order to rearrange these facts, resulting in a "historical edit" which reflects the opinion of the filmmaker. Some of these editorial inflections include statements relating to the 'heroism' of Kennedy and the myth surrounding him. One of the first descriptions that alter the record relates to Jackie Kennedy, who is referred to as "his beautiful and elegant wife," an odd statement within a 'historical montage' to be certain.² The film bombards the viewer with this dazzling array of

facts, figures and recreated material, solidifying the perception of the conspiracy by ultimately drawing the conclusion that the absence of proof to the contrary is the same as the existence of a vast conspiracy.

While it is possible to go through Stone's film piece-by-piece and examine the way that it executes this narrative strategy, it is fair to say that the logic of the opening sequence provides us with a key to understanding the operations of the entire film. Just as the rearrangement, inflection, and editorializing of history marks the overwhelming tone of the sequence, Stone also embeds several of his own episodes within this prologue which intentionally redirect the viewer in several interesting ways. The first of these takes place as a prostitute is thrown out of a car and lies in a hospital bed. Here the sequence departs from its initial strategy of showing clips accompanied by narration, relying instead on a staged recreation of a historically contentious event. The insertion of explicit language, when the prostitute says "these are serious *fucking* people," further inflects the "facts" of the paranoid style, particularly leading into the sequence's final third, the assassination itself. Stone intercuts actual footage of the parade route with stylistically aged and recreated footage to recreate the scene of the crime, and adds several details that will be central to his 'case' at the end of the film. All this material essentially re-maps the event for the spectator, anchoring them to characters who move through the actual spaces of Dealy Plaza, albeit in a highly editorialized fashion.

JFK also provides a protagonist who similarly "blunders" into an unseen network that is far beyond his original conception of the world. In this case, New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) heroically attempts to locate the source of the conspiracy and takes the viewer along for this incredible journey. What is remarkable about this film is the amount of dialogue in it. If Alan Pakula described his *All the President's Men* as the most "verbal film

that's ever been made" (Pakula, qtd. in Jameson 1992b: 70) Stone's film takes this dialogue a step further, executing speeches that last minutes without interruption, which are only broken by dramatic re-enactments which accompany these verbose interludes. These occur every several minutes in the film as an extremely complex speech comes every time a new discovery is made in the plot. Garrison is Jameson's "social detective" taken a step further, acting as a public prosecutor charged with solving the case that will restructure the social totality rather than be overwhelmed by it. Though he performs the same basic narrative function as protagonists of the 70s cycle, Garrison's forceful activity distinguishes him from his predecessors and transforms the narrative agency to something more similar to a traditional "closed" narrative. At the same time, Garrison, along with Stone, stand in the very locations where the real events took place effecting a circumnavigation of sorts, and inflecting the past with new visual and narrative information by way of this fusion between real and fictional elements. At any rate, Stone provides an extremely effective exposition of the event along with demonstrations of what could and could not have happened by repeatedly surveying the actual space and inflecting it with the virtual. The best example of this technique takes place when Garrison and his aide stand in the book depository where Oswald purportedly shot Kennedy three times. First, Lou Ivon (Jay O. Saunders) attempts to get off three shots in 5.7 seconds, awkwardly bringing back the bolt action of the rifle, and then he passes it back to Garrison, who attempts the action himself. It is an effective demonstration which counters the facts of the Warren Commission's report that Stone provides for the viewer. This fictional action is overlaid with dialogue which focalizes and presents images of a counter-narrative to the official story told in the Warren Report, but once again the viewer is only presented with the specific facts that Stone chooses to present. The film also revives the iconographic "Deep Throat" informer character who first made his appearance in

All the President's Men. Garrison is contacted by an ex-pentagon general, who calls himself "X," (Donald Sutherland) who provides him with an insider's view of the events within the country's shadow government. X makes some serious accusations about the military industrial complex as the source of international (and by proxy) "Black Ops." At the same time, the tenor of X's speech, in contrast to the original Deep Throat's appearances is telling, as is the quality of the information that he provides. Rather than prompting Garrison to simply "follow the money," (which he also does) X provides an official/unofficial narrative that serves to further inflect the collection of facts, greatly altering the structured absences of the earlier era. The scene, which lasts over fifteen minutes, is testament to the new direction that the genre will follow and informs the later examples of conspiracy films as well.

At the same time, it bears repeating that Kennedy's assassination "has inspired more conspiracy thinking in America than any other event in American history" (Knight 76). While the film certainly warranted a great deal of controversy regarding some of its more overtly contentious material, it is possible, and perhaps necessary, to imagine that Oliver Stone's presentation of a *JFK* counter-narrative is certainly still a political gesture and consistent with his previous films *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*. We should also note that the film expresses its plot safely in the past, and exhibits many of the tendencies that have come to be associated with postmodernism. In other words, the film teems with nostalgia and reconstitutes its plot with heavily edited segments and pastiche. At the same time, we can view this film as the zero-moment of the nineties cycle, which sought to capitalize on the specific recipe of success that the film engendered and perhaps recreate some of its key elements. Here, we should recall that the film officially ushered in what I will call the "conspiracy market," which is indicated by *The New York Times* Bestseller list on which "nearly half of the books...in early 1992 were about

the case, and nearly all of them promoted conspiracy theories of one kind or another” (Knight 76). Most importantly, this film spawned a virtual industry of related products, ranging from the publication of thousands of books, a series of documentaries, and likely *The X-Files*. The second result of conspiracy theory’s acceptance is that it becomes embedded in the popular culture, additionally making its entrance into the Oxford English Dictionary in 1997 (Knight 16).

Speaking directly to its popular usage in the nineties, Knight suggests that “the very notion of a conspiracy theory as a form of deluded historical explanation has been recognized, labeled, theorized, discussed, embraced, parodied and finally incorporated into common usage,” (*ibid.*).

As Ray Pratt explains,

Oliver Stone’s version of the Kennedy Assassination certainly did not create nor even affect the skeptical views of the majority of the American public about “official” explanations of the JFK killing. In fact, 80 percent of those responding to variants of the question “Do you feel Lee Harvey Oswald had accomplices, or did he do it [shoot President Kennedy] alone?” believed it was a conspiracy...Clearly, Stone’s film was *projected into* a market already predisposed to believe in its imagery of conspiracy, on that viewed the particular event and its aftermath as part of a more basic cynicism about the relation of the government to its people (Pratt 31).

Pratt correctly pinpoints the impetus of the film, which merely explains what the 70s cycle would not. In short, it names and popularizes what people already believed and gives them a means of enfranchisement by way of their purchase in the new conspiracy market. In other words, as Knight states, “consumers of conspiracy don’t really believe what they buy, but neither do they really disbelieve it either” (48). This emotional investment is entirely unnecessary from the perspective of the market and the transition from ‘paranoid narratives’ to ‘conspiracy theory,’ thus becomes a marker of the overall domestication to the commodification of the phenomenon, and once it has been appropriately named, it can then be sold.

Though Chris Carter’s series *The X-Files* is certainly more of an artefact from television studies, its immediate release soon after *JFK* (in 1993) can be seen as new evidence of the public

interest in this kind of material in addition to its role in expanding the market. While scholars and researchers have attempted to graft a political reading onto what is likely a resurgence of these texts, going as far to posit that *The X-Files* is evidence of “the desire to find the hidden radical agenda” (21), what is much more likely is the fact that what occurred was merely a resurgence of Rick Altman’s producer’s game. Rather than representing an overt political desire on the part of the studios and creative personnel to undermine systems of government (a claim that is made by several sources), or to reflect the cultural milieu of the 90s moment, (as Pratt has claimed as well) I think it is much more credible to assert that producers merely sought to recreate the overall success that these two works engendered. All of these texts, then, were extremely popular and capitalized on the successes of each previous work. *The X-Files* demonstrates this phenomenon occurring in the longer term, by its spanning over the entire decade and by spawning its own series of related industries, from series guidebooks, to action figures, to novels, to spin-offs (*The Lone Gunmen*, Chris Carter, 2001), and finally to its own feature film. That the series is a long-term television serial is also important, as it speaks to the manner in which it reproduces itself with each episode (as I proposed that *Star Wars* did), and ensures its popularity by providing answers, but never providing narrative closure.

The X-Files is also an interesting text for my analysis, but not for the reasons that have traditionally been associated with it (as in the case of reflection-style theory), but rather for the absolute *absence* of a coherent political agenda. This is what ultimately links it to Stone’s *JFK* and fixes it as an emblem of Hofstadter’s paranoid style, particularly by way of its overt narration of America’s absent histories. An episode-by-episode guide might be of interest, but only insofar as the series’ narrative arc never completely explained, but merely piles more answers on top of each other. The series provides answers, but there are too many of them. “The

show feeds off and feeds into its audience's sophisticated and world-weary familiarity with sociological and psychological accounts of conspiracy minded beliefs," but does so "by holding out the promise of such symptomatic readings, only to have them revert, half-ironically, to a far more literal-minded faith in the conspiratorial explanation" (Knight 50). The series often presents two conflicting explanations for its ongoing existence, and oscillates between the cynicism and rationality of Special Agent Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson), and the absolute faith that is possessed by Special Agent Fox Mulder (David Duchovny). In my view, Mulder and Scully's collection of facts and experiences over the course of the series merely abstract the genuinely political elements of American history and the possibility of government culpability in one or more of the dreaded historical events in the past fifty to sixty years. Further, it actually ascribes culpability of all of these events to a single figure, "The Cigarette Smoking Man." As Knight remarks:

"Cancer Man" (as Mulder calls him) is a blueprint for the arch conspirator pulling the strings of history. He works within the bureaucracy of the government's intelligence agencies, but his power extends beyond their control. We even see him individually directing the major events in the minutiae of history. He personally fires the shot that kills President Kennedy, in addition to ordering the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy; in the recent past, we see him giving instructions regarding the Anita Hill hearings, the Rodney King trial, and even ordering that the Buffalo Bills never make it to the Superbowl (Knight 219).

The Cigarette Smoking Man has a further effect of 'domesticating' these events, and by giving them a face and figure to graft them onto the series ultimately deprives them of their historical resonance and political value. Like the "lone gunman theory" of the Warren Commission, these new explanations deflect from domestic matters (ideas of class, race, countercultural ideals, poverty, political assassination, etc...) in favour of alien abduction narratives and the presence of the supernatural, which are easy to sell to an audience because they are harmless in their implausibility precisely because they are so implausible. *The X-Files* relies on the overt narration of these 70s "absent presences" rendered by way of

Hofstadter's Paranoid Style. Though the series' fantastic leaps are abundant in every episode, the disjunctive syllogism of this exchange is typical of these leaps of logic.

MULDER: "I think there's a huge conspiracy here Scully. They've got a U.F.O. here. I'm sure of it, and they'll do anything to keep it a secret...because what if it were true?"

SCULLY- "If...If...then you're talking about a scandal of national proportions.

MULDER - "No Scully, you're not thinking big enough. If it were true, it would be confirmation of the existence of extraterrestrial life." (*The X-Files*, Episode 1: "Deep Throat").

What this exchange ultimately represents is the clear shift in focus from the government/corporate culpability in the JFK assassination, as posited by Stone, to the somewhat inconsequential assertion that the government scandal is engendered by their possession of the true facts behind the presence of aliens in America. The ultimately determining distance between these two claims is that one expresses a genuinely political interest, while another is significantly less substantial and easily palatable to the consumers which constitute the show's audience. The series even resurrects the iconographic fixtures of the original cycle in order to do this, employing Woodward and Bernstein's ally "Deep Throat" (along with a series of other shadowy informant figures) who constantly make the connections between government complicity in the aliens cover-up which has the effect of recasting the historical record for the protagonists and for the audience.³

Once it was clear that these works represented a significant market, and producers realized that it was possible to make a great deal of money by peddling these ideas, the conspiracy film makes a huge resurgence and moves in two parallel directions. First, the conspiracy genre continues to excise its political content in favour of less plausible explications, while at the same time providing more and more narrativized presences. This phenomenon is reflected in the turn of phrase "conspiracy theory" which is not only coined in the nineties but becomes standard nomenclature here as well. The key document of this movement is the self-perpetuating *The X-*

Files, but is related to a whole resurgence of alien invasion/abduction narratives which implicate the government or posit the government as their central site of origin. These works range from the immensely popular *Independence Day*, to the more particular *The Arrival* (which validates Area 51 and that the government covered up the landing of aliens in Nevada in 1947), and on to a series of documentaries, which purported to tell the real story of “Aliens in America.” This movement finds its most fruitful expression in the *Men In Black* series, which essentially merges the government and alien conspiracies (as exemplified by the phenomenon of “men in black” – figures who are charged with specifically covering up the evidence of alien life on Earth) to dress Will Smith in Ray Ban shades and an Armani suit, while fighting off the evil aliens.⁴ Finally, the *X-Files: Fight the Future* (Rob Bowman, 1998) is a large scale intervention into the cinematic expression of the conspiracy film genre, which serves as a fine example of the trends that I have outlined.

The film’s setting in the post-Waco and Oklahoma City bombing – in short, legitimately “political” eruptions of domestic dissatisfaction which were mishandled by government agencies – once again charges Agents Mulder and Scully to solve the case. In this film, the Oklahoma City bombing is not motivated by any domestic dissatisfaction, but by a secret government organization (ironically, FEMA) for the purposes of covering up the presence of an alien-human hybrid. This is perhaps one of the grossest interpretations of recent events by the series’ creator Chris Carter, but it serves as proof of the transformation of the genre and the absolute emptying of political material which the series purports to present. In other words, the series/movie absorb the “political” generic features of the earlier cycle, occupying its empty husk by exploiting its iconography (faceless corporate men and informers) syntax (shadowy spaces) and its narrative (a protagonist charged with figuring out the answers). Most importantly, the fact that the series and

its imitators trade in answers (that there is an explanation behind the Kennedy assassination and that aliens are responsible, etc) marks a significant change in the conspiracy genre's overall form from something that attempts to depict the problem of "unrepresentability" and rather explains it by explicitly depicting these events and ascribing them to particular figures. Despite the fact that the series expresses an open-ended story, this is very different than saying that the series has an open-ended narrative. As an example of a typical television series, *The X-Files* still formally expresses certain formal traits that dictate that it conforms to the norms of the medium. The series' open-endedness still demands that it conform to the format of series television, by accounting for commercial breaks and other industrial considerations. In other words, the series expresses its "open-endedness" narratively, but each episode still provides the viewer with closure. This is an important consideration, as it relates back to the manner in which the series is seemingly concerned with the expression of a never-ceasing narrative, yet must still express it within the confines of the rigid structure of U.S. series television. We should also recall that part of *The X-Files*' appeal also lay in the sexual tension between stars Gillian Anderson and David Duchovny, and that *The X-Files* movie, in addition to bringing special effects and large-scale cinematic traits to the series, also provides the viewers (and fans of the show) with a big-screen kiss between the leads, which provides a modicum of Hollywood convention to the movie by allowing the protagonist to essentially "get the girl."

The second path that the conspiracy genre takes in the nineties consists of a series of films that are outright remakes of earlier films and which feature actors reprising their earlier roles but as minor characters. In this sense, they resemble Jameson's observation of contemporary film, where, the word "remake" is, "anachronistic to the degree to which our awareness of the pre-existence of other versions...is now an essential part of the film's structure." In other words, we

are now, “in ‘intertextuality’ as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect” and “as the operator of a new connotation of ‘past-ness’ and pseudohistorical depth,” and finally where “the history of aesthetic styles displaces ‘real’ history” (Jameson 1991: 20). The cycle’s blockbuster status, in addition to the array of effects at their disposal warrants their new consideration as pure Hollywood products, rather than documents which contain any real political value. Several of these films utilize the setting of the seventies genre and recast them with completely new and often ludicrous settings. *Chinatown* becomes *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* *The Conversation* becomes a star vehicle for Will Smith in *Enemy of the State*. The same is true of *Three Days of the Condor* and *Spy Game*, which should be noted are both produced by the team of Jerry Bruckheimer and Tony Scott for Touchstone/Disney and emphasizes Brad Pitt’s role over Robert Redford’s. This is especially true of Robert Zemeckis’ *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* which also emerges from Disney and Spielberg’s Amblin Entertainment and is an outright remake of Roman Polanski’s earlier film *Chinatown*. The film begins with a similar shift in mode that I discussed earlier in *Chinatown* where the move from an earlier form (in the case of Polanski’s film it is the move from black and white photography to colour within the frame) and in *Roger Rabbit* it is the shift between cartoon and real world with a similar expansion of the movie frame’s borders. *Roger Rabbit*’s imitation of many key scenes of Polanski’s classic is truly stunning, as the film exploits the various iconographic, narrative and syntactical tropes that we have come to associate with *Chinatown*, but subverts them for comedic and tonal means. Here, the scene where Curly confronts pictures of his wife being taken from behind by another man is replaced with pictures taken by detective Eddie Valiant (Bob Hoskins) of Roger Rabbit’s wife ‘playing paddy-cake,’ with Marvin Acme and rendered in the same black and white medium. The film’s central premise is the same as well, as the plot involves nefarious business forces attempting to pave

over “toon-town” in order to make way for highways and strip malls. Here, the figures of Hollis Mulwray (the famous L.A. water commissioner) is replaced by the murdered Marvin Acme (owner of Acme novelties and toys), and the detective becomes an unwitting pawn in the game between Judge Doom (Christopher Lloyd) and his gang of weasels who are behind the whole plot to eliminate Toon-town entirely in order to further their corporate aims.⁵

While the film obviously mimics many features of *Chinatown* – to the degree that its alternative title could easily be *Toontown* – there are some very obvious changes that take place in the interim. The most significant of these is the film’s happy ending. Though it is rendered in a note-perfect recreation of the mise-en-scene and cinematographic properties of the earlier film, the film ends happily with all of the cartoon characters coming out and singing and Valiant reconciling with his fear and hatred of “toons.” In addition, the film’s last scene utilizes Polanski’s characteristic crane shot, but recasts it with final touches amidst the assembled cartoons singing. Finally, *Roger Rabbit*’s final utterance – Porky Pig ending the film with his trademark “That’s all folks!” – clearly resolves the generic issue of closure by definitively ending the film once and for all and by providing all the characters with what they want at the end. Doom’s death at the end of the film also effectively ends the ‘conspiracy’ of the plot by ending it then and there and defines the way that the narrative problem of the film is solved by functionally defeating evil. The happy ending, then, is especially problematic for the consideration of the conspiracy film, as the film resolves what was formerly open-ended and difficult to reconcile. This resolution becomes a new fixture of the 1990s cycle, and even *JFK* ends with title cards proclaiming what ended up happening to the various characters in the film in addition to Garrison’s implied reconciliation with his wife and friend in its final courtroom scene.

The new happy ending continues to the Will Smith star vehicle *Enemy of the State* as well, which not only presents itself as an erstwhile sequel to Coppola's *The Conversation*, but provides its protagonist Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) with the happy ending he didn't receive in the earlier cycle. I want to be clear that the characters are not precisely the same, but operate in a manner which borrows the cultural capital of the earlier film in order to link them together. In this sense, Gene Hackman's appearance in the film is as important as all of its other elements, as it indicates the degree to which a particular set of historical circumstances has been sundered in order to provide a backdrop for the explosive qualities of a star vehicle. Ray Pratt comments on Hackman's reappearance as he states,

While he has a new name, he could literally be "Harry Caul," the role he played in Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 techno-paranoia film *The Conversation*. He has almost exactly the same workshop in a similar old warehouse. His ID photos are identical to those of Harry Caul. Emerging from the Watergate era past of illicit corporate and government surveillance, he has changed with the times, knowingly telling Smith about how the government can listen in on any conversation, gain all types of information, and observe anyone anywhere (Pratt 7-8).

Where Ray Pratt sees the film as an example of what he dubs "visionary paranoia" the film's origin (from the directing producing team of Tony Scott and Jerry Bruckheimer, the names behind *Crimson Tide*, 1995, *Days of Thunder*, 1990, *Beverly Hills Cop II*, 1987, and most importantly, *Top Gun*, 1986) is extremely problematic in this regard, as it is presented by two of the *least* politically-inclined filmmakers of our contemporary era. It is much more likely that this film is an example of what Wheeler Winston Dixon refers to as "strip mining" of the cinematic past, warranting the consideration of this film as "a pre-sold remake" that had come to represent the Hollywood of the 1990s, which is run, according to Dixon, by "accountants, agents and marketing experts, devoid of creativity or passion," intent on "recreating the past" at "the expense of creating anything new" (Dixon 363). The Scott/Bruckheimer team are an example of the "high-concept" blockbuster, which is emblematic of what Altman describes as the

“Hollywood Cocktail.” According to Altman, studios increasingly use market research in order to test specific markets and to open up new demographics within the same film. In this sense, “[o]nce keyed to primary consumer needs, products are now designed to match purchasing habits, as discovered and defined by audience research departments” (Altman 132). From here, the studios incorporate as many generic elements as possible in order to appeal to the largest possible audience to hit as many demographics as possible. Equally important to the film is its employment of Will Smith as its central presence. As with my earlier discussion of “the 90s Michael Douglas genre,” Smith’s presence literally forces the film to adapt to his established star persona, which Geoff King has described as, “charming, witty, stylish in a goofy kind of way, cheeky, sexy though clean-cut, sometimes mock outraged and...essentially very safe” (King 163). This is a far cry from Coppola’s protagonist Caul, who is misanthropic and eminently unlikable, but is nevertheless a compelling character. According to King, the trick for the star “is to retain a central core of persona traits, while allowing space for some variation, if only for the deployment of familiar elements” (164).

Enemy of the State, then, exhibits the postmodern rendition of Altman’s producer’s game, which combines the successful *generic* elements of the Will Smith film – the persona developed over his years in television and his large screen appearances in *Bad Boys* (Michael Bay, 1995), *Independence Day*, and *Men in Black* – alongside generic elements sundered from the conspiracy film. In this sense, *Enemy of the State* combines the recipe of the 70s conspiracy film with the “signifiers of ‘Will Smith-ness’” (170). The game resembles my opening quote, (which Altman also refers to) where writers and studios strive to incorporate recent successful films with older elements in order to repeat the recipes of success in all films (in other words, “*The Manchurian Candidate* meets *Ghost*”). This technique is typical of the Scott/Bruckheimer oeuvre. What

occurs in *Enemy of the State*, is that Smith's independently-minded labour lawyer is framed and pursued by nefarious government forces who kill a senator in order to pass a privacy/telecommunications bill (read: domestic surveillance). The film is built around Smith's persona, and allows him a vehicle for the star to practice his wisecracking star persona (in a mode resembling the *Beverly Hills Cop* films, 1984-94, whose recipe consists of equal parts action, and equal parts wisecracking), in between chase and explosion scenes. Though Gene Hackman's character eventually arrives in the film, his appearance is merely "strip-mined" for the appearance of resonant political material, and rather than acting as a narrative political "agent," he merely ends up fulfilling his role as the "white buddy" (albeit with some severely paranoid quirks) in the buddy action film genre. This is true of the film's (poor) homage to *The Conversation*'s famous opening sequence, where Caul and his team record the initial conversation and this is rendered by a series of telephoto lenses. Though Brill is initially extremely prickly, peppering his every sentence with "Fuck" to convey his character's seriousness, he eventually warms to Smith, and their relationship quickly changes from animosity to friendship over a piece of pie in a diner.

At the very end of the film, after many violent chases and explosions, Brill retires to a beach where he sends word to Smith that he is doing well. The film's "use" of Brill effectively solves the problems that ended *The Conversation*, and by proxy, all the problems that the 70s cycle presented to film culture. In other words, the 90s conspiracy cycle, exemplified in *Enemy of the State* counters the problems that the 70s cycle presented first by emulating their forms, then by occupying their characters, and finally resolving their inherent conflicts. Instead, the 90s allows these (often misanthropic and sad-sack) protagonists in situations where cartoons sing at them (rather than retreat after their lover was killed), or where they sit with their cats on sunny

beaches (instead of ripping up their apartments in search of bugs). In Christopher Sharrett's view of 90s cinema, what he dubs "allusionism" is central to the consideration of *Enemy of the State* and the films of the 90s cycle. In this respect:

Allusionism continues to be a central strategy by which the commercial entertainment industry conceals its exhaustion and attempts to protect its legitimacy, suggesting to the spectator that we are all in on the joke, that the cinema apparatus needs to be exposed, that genre conventions need to be ripped apart is central to rebuilding enlightened false consciousness. The emphasis on allusionism is also central to the conservative agenda of the new cinema (Sharrett 328).

Enemy of the State, then, is a prime example of both the "allusionism" and "strip mining" which occurs within this cycle, particularly when considering the film's essential backdrop of a "shadowy government" which ends up reconfiguring the genre to include one central figure who is responsible for all the illegal wiretapping rather than a system. This operates in a similar fashion to *The X-Files* singling out the "Cigarette Smoking Man," as it ascribes social ills to a single guilty figure and reins in the idea of crime – from societal and omnipresent in the 70s cycle – to the conventional view which posits that a single evil person is behind it all. To paraphrase Garrison in Stone's film, it reasserts that a gunman acting alone is alone, but if he collaborates with others there is a conspiracy. In this sense, by attributing crime to a single individual it actually reverses the overall logic of the conspiracy film by allowing the audience to see the single responsible party who is ultimately punished for his actions. Furthermore, this villain doesn't get away with it, which directly counters all the work of the earlier cycle. *Enemy of the State* not only vilifies the work of NSA director Thomas Brian Reynolds (Jon Voight) who is entirely reprehensible and whose inappropriate use of the entire country's surveillance technology in no way reflects on the systemic logic that characterized the earlier cycle. Rather, Reynolds, as with *Doom*, gets his comeuppance when he dies and the film reestablishes the order of things.

The absorption of the conspiracy film conventions for the purposes of the star text carries over to Tony Scott's next film, *Spy Game* (2001). While it is possible to assert that this movie more likely belongs to the 'spy' genre rather than the conspiracy film, ultimately this distinction is inconsequential as it more fully resembles a romantic drama set with a political backdrop. Here, Altman's "Hollywood Cocktail" recipe is extremely useful as the film exhibits four major plots within its structure. The first of these is the father/son buddy-flick, where Nathan Muir (Robert Redford) teaches Tom Bishop (Brad Pitt) the ins and outs of the business of spying. The second consists of a series of missions performed by Pitt (with Redford's help) in the various global hotspots in the secret history of the C.I.A. In this respect, the film engages in a historical recasting of the past with its glamorous stars in order to ultimately frame the larger story. The film is also framed by a larger movement, as Pitt's capture on Redford's last day means that Redford must find a way to save his protégé from a black op in China, as a repayment for his good service, their friendship and the ultimate romantic plot that centers the film. In this way, all of these events and narrative threads are ultimately designed to place Pitt in romantic situations rather than actually caring about any of the aforementioned plots. This is revealed in the film's conclusion, where Pitt became a rogue agent not for any political motivation, but rather because he wanted to save his girlfriend who had been taken prisoner by the Chinese. Significantly, all the film's rising political action – the serious tension between America and China in light of this international incident, the looming threat of talks or the breakdown between them, the possibility of Redford being imprisoned himself or the serious moral consequences of American intervention in places like East Germany, the Middle East or Vietnam – is thrown out the window after the couple is reunited. Similar to Scott's earlier film *Enemy of the State*, the film ultimately mines the cultural capital of the seventies genre in order to pose as a political film.

This is characterized by the film's employment/deployment of Redford, in similar circumstances to *Three Days of the Condor*. In this sense, the film acts as a similar "sequel" to *Enemy of the State* and provides Redford's "Condor" with a happy and successful ending, which results in the closure that he lacked in the earlier film. Though this may seem a fairly contentious point, the film takes great pains to dress Redford's character in the same clothing as *Condor*, including the terrible big glasses that Turner wore in the previous film and the blue sweater/collar shirt ensemble that Turner spent the course of that movie wearing. As with *Enemy of the State*, it is as if the previous films never ended, and Turner began working for the C.I.A. in order to ultimately mentor Brad Pitt's character. Finally, the film allows Turner/Muir to retire gracefully after bringing the couple together and outwitting his employers at the agency.

Richard Donner's *Conspiracy Theory* rounds out the exploitation of the 70s conspiracy tropes by echoing the trajectory of Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. This film is perhaps the best example of everything I've been talking about thus far, as it presents the audience with a star vehicle (Mel Gibson and Julia Roberts in a romantic situation, perhaps echoing the investigatory "chemistry" found in *The X-Files*) but also provides the viewer with resolution at the end. Here Gibson plays Jerry, a cabbie who works his way through the new streets of New York City. Rather than the "mean streets" of Scorsese's New York (marked by characteristic strip clubs and prostitutes of 1970s 42nd Street), all of these spaces are pristine (Times Square, SoHo) and everyone is (mostly) white. By comparing both films' opening sequences we can see a fundamental shift from the obvious social commentary of Scorsese's film to Donner's highly commercialized space. Additionally, *Conspiracy Theory* best exemplifies what I have dubbed the "narrated presences" as the title sequence presents the viewer with extremely verbose dialogue which counters Travis Bickle's silence. Gibson's Jerry annoyingly rattles on, naming every

contemporary conspiracy theory, ranging from the Kennedy assassination, to the presence of fluoride in the water to the alien abduction stories. Knight describes Jerry as “a cartoon version of a paranoid misfit” (52). From this explicit commentary it should come as no surprise that Jerry ends up actually being an agent who was trained to become one of these killers by a secret government program called MK-Ultra. In other words, what is unsaid in Scorsese’s film and what allows the viewer to speculate as to what is going on with Travis Bickle is explained here in extremely (and annoyingly) explicit details. It is as though we can see the pitch of this film being made in Griffin Mill’s office, where a writer pitches it as “*Taxi Driver* meets *Love Story*,” of course starring Julia Roberts as the love interest. In his comparison between *The Parallax View* and Donner’s film, Knight describes the inherent differences that change between decades:

The irony in the world of the film, of course, is that some of Fletcher’s conspiracy rantings turn out to be true, but that irony never really becomes a political call to arms. The film hovers somewhere between a self-conscious parody of conspiracy culture and a half-serious engagement with it. A quarter of a century earlier, the film’s clinching revelation (that Fletcher is a victim of a government, mind-control assassin program gone wrong) might have been shocking. But by 1997 it is on the one hand merely the plot device that brings him closer to Julia Roberts, and, on the other, something that is exposed with little comment because it is more or less to be expected merely a conventional part of the thriller’s scenery (Knight 52-3).

Finally, the film expresses the same traits as all the others that I have listed thus far, and completes this short cycle by adding the happy ending as well. It is as if Travis were to get together with his love interest Betsy (Cybill Shepherd) who he stalks and for whom he carries a torch. What occurs in this film is that it allows Gibson to gain the girl in the end, despite the obvious fact of their lacking chemistry. By using these films as examples, it should be obvious that the mainstreaming of conspiracy culture is complete, but that this is not representative as an overwhelming desire by the public to question the overall cultural milieu but rather speaks to the effective marketing on the part of the studios and their successful exploitation of said market. Indeed, as I have demonstrated, all of these films are actually star vehicles which effectively

solve the problems that their predecessors possessed and which reconcile these relationships with happy endings for all involved.

These new narrative trademarks find their way into the mannerist phase of the cycle, which infuses the conspiracy film with pure comedy. Of these films we should include *Dick*, *Zoolander* and *Wag the Dog*, which all use the conspiracy film as the source material for their films. *Dick* restages *All the President's Men*, by posing the question of Deep Throat's identity at the beginning and then restaging the action from there. Instead of becoming a political parody of the serious events of the time, *Dick* proposes that Deep Throat and the information that he provided actually came from the source of two extremely airheaded girls, who not only witness the events, but also influence the course of history. This conceit, however, is much more likely pre-sold as a star vehicle for Kirsten Dunst and (then) star Michelle Williams (of *Dawson's Creek* fame). The film also embodies the corporate synergy of the postmodern/corporate era by letting the film's soundtrack substitute for 'meaning' in the film (or to convey its 'pastness'). For example, the film begins to the tune of the Jackson Five's "ABC" which serves as indication that the film takes place in the seventies. The soundtrack thus serves as a constant force of connotation to inspire what Roland Barthes might have called "1970s-ness" (Barthes 27). Additionally, *Dick* ultimately expresses itself as a pure product by bringing together actors from various TV franchises. Here, the film imports Will Ferrell, Jim Breuer and Ana Gasteyer from *Saturday Night Live*, Bruce McCullough and Dave Foley from *Kids in the Hall* and Harry Shearer from *The Simpsons* in order to present a cross-market of several different, yet contemporary comic sources. In other words, the film expresses its past-ness through the contemporary expressions of the present (its stars, who is hot, etc...). In this sense, even though the film is a shallow take on the events of Watergate and the resignation of Richard Nixon, what

occurs in the film's happy ending (complete with a remade version of the film's central song, a remake of ABBA's "Dancing Queen" remade by contemporary, but now forgotten band, Sixpence None the Richer, overlaid to a shot of Williams and Dunst roller-skating in skimpy outfits) is that we lose the compelling information that was provided by the 70s cycle's structured absences, but what we get instead is a fairly concise portrait of how the products of the new Hollywood film operate, and in doing so, how they can still tell us something substantial about our era while at the same time remaining politically neutral.

This is the logic that *Zoolander* expresses. This film, which we could claim is merely a remake of *The Parallax View* set in the New York fashion world is, on the one hand, precisely that, but on the other hand, wears all of its corporate and industry connotations on its sleeve. This is clear from the film's title sequences, which move from Paramount, to MTV films, to the newest of these corporations, VH1 films. That all of these entities are owned by Viacom, one of the largest media conglomerates is not mentioned explicitly, but instead becomes the diegetic expression of its ancillary divisions. One of the film's first scenes depicts the real events of New York Fashion Week in 2000, which is simultaneously a send-up to the event and a serious depiction of it and culminating, tellingly at the VH1 Fashion awards. Here, "real" stars ranging from Natalie Portman, Donald Trump and Lenny Kravitz all comment on how great a model Derek Zoolander is and how this fictional character has changed the world of fashion. This narrative information is supplemented by a rapid-fire array of Zoolander's work for famous advertisers and designers. With the film's introduction of rival protagonists, Derek Zoolander (Ben Stiller) and Hansel (Owen Wilson) by way of their various ads for real companies like 'The Gap,' 'Evian,' 'Feria,' 'Tommy Hilfiger,' provides us with a paradoxical representation of the permeability of the contemporary revolving doors of advertising, narrative filmmaking and

stardom, as the film reflexively 'sends up' the fashion industry and advertising by way of its emulation of its forms, while at the same time still serving to reaffirm (and advertise) all of the products and ultimately affirming its corporate brand, Viacom.

Zoolander also provides a concise summary of all the rest of the issues that I have been discussing in this chapter, as it essentially performs the same function that I maintain took place in the alien invasion cycle. Here, the film foregrounds a legitimately political issue – child-exploitation in the third-world and the fashion industry's involvement in the creation of sweat-shop labour. The beginning of the film tells us that the new popular Prime Minister of Malaysia is going to pass laws banning child exploitation and thus kick out the fashion industry's advantages. Soon after this announcement, the film shifts to a shadowy warehouse, where the silhouetted figures of well-dressed people with European accents discuss killing the Malaysian Prime Minister in order to keep their prices down. The third scene in this sequence provides the transition to New York Fashion week and the introduction of Zoolander, who will obviously end up being the assassin that they ask for.

Finally, the film's intertextual use of Hollywood's plots – the aforementioned *Parallax View* for one, but also seemingly unmotivated homages to *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *The Godfather Part II* – should make us question precisely what is going on in the film. This is particularly true of its assassination/investigation plot, where Matilda (Christine Taylor), an investigative journalist for *Time* magazine, uncovers the plot in a very similar manner to the search of Woodward and Bernstein. She is further (intertextually) influenced by an informer figure played by David Duchovny, whose revelation of the historical use of fashion models as assassins brings together the original work of *All the President's Men*, *JFK's* excessive narration/explanation. Here, Duchovny explains that since John Wilkes Booth assassinated

Lincoln because he was the world's first model/actor, and Lincoln wanted to free the slaves, thus raising the costs of the fashion industry). Furthermore, Duchovny is himself a signifier within the canon of conspiracy films, so his presence within the narrative as an iconographic representation should bring us pause and allow us to gauge this series of reflexive moves within a single scene.⁶ However, instead of telling the protagonists to “[f]ollow the money,” Duchovny’s character appropriately changes them to “Pull the sweater” and the “whole thing will unravel.”

Clearly, the films of the 1990s represented and conveyed distinctive changes from the previous era that I have outlined. These new features involved the transformation of the genre by way of the blockbuster film and further changes which catered to the needs of star personas. Form-specific alterations included tacking on a happy ending to these films and further externalizing the previous genre’s political obsessions in favour of audience-friendly explanations which are usually rooted to a single figure. These changing features will necessarily be accounted for in my ongoing examination of the genre’s next cycle, but first parallel developments, such as the rise of conspiratorial thinking in documentary film and nostalgia for the original series, must be dealt with accordingly.

Chapter 3 Notes

¹ I would also go as far as to state that *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (Jay Roach, 1997) finds its inspiration in Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, as the closing sequence reveals. Here, as Austin photographs a woman, he imitates David Hemmings' distinctive acting in the scene, barking strange orders at her, obviously emulating one of the film's most famous scenes.

² This arrangement of facts occurs on the visual plane as well, and the vignette resembles a combination of 'found-footage' films, exemplified by Emile de Antonio's *In the Year of the Pig* (1968) or Jayne Loader and Kevin Rafferty's *Atomic Cafe* (1982), Voice-of-God narration documentary and Bruce Connor's experimental film, *Report* (1967), which rearranges the news footage of the assassination with the sound of the reporting to make interesting and ironic connections.

³ The series takes this intertextuality a step further by replacing "Deep Throat" with a variation of Oliver Stone's "X" soon after.

⁴ For an excellent discussion of Will Smith's specific relationship to the blockbuster, the star's embodiment of the corporate synergy and stardom in *Men In Black* see Geoff King, "Stardom in the Willenium," in *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*, ed. Thomas Austin and Martin Barker. London: Arnold, 2003.

⁵ It should be noted too that one of Doom's weasel henchmen bears an odd (intentional?) resemblance to Polanski's switchblade-wielding character in *Chinatown*.

⁶ For an excellent discussion of the film's genealogy and relationship to the conspiracy film genre, see Jason Dick, "Zoolander as a Parable and Parody of the Classic Conspiracy Narrative in Contemporary Western Culture" in *Mediations: Volume 1, Number 1*. <http://www.fims.uwo.ca/mit/mediations/pdfs/Mediations-Essay03-Zoolander.pdf>. 2004.

Chapter Four: The Corporate Conspiracy Documentary Genre

I continued to follow Roger all over the country. From Detroit, to Chicago, to Washington DC, to New York City. I followed a trail of three-martini-lunches in pursuit of the chairman.

- Michael Moore in *Roger and Me*

The mind plays tricks on you. You play tricks back! It's like you're unraveling a big cable-knit sweater that someone keeps knitting and knitting and knitting and knitting and knitting and knitting and knitting...

- Pee-Wee Herman, in *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*

Post-war filmmakers gave us the documentary, Rob Reiner gave us the mockumentary and Moore initiated a third genre, the crockumentary.

- John-Luc Godard, quoted at the Cannes Film Festival, 2004

While blockbusters dominated the 1990s, they were certainly not the only game in town. From 1988 onward, the documentary film made a dramatic reappearance within the popular cultural sphere. Many factors led to this form's resurgence; foremost among them was its populist politics, and the way that it supplemented the low tenor of reporting within the mainstream media. The former fifth estate was a casualty of deregulation movements in the Reagan, Bush and Clinton years, and the quality of news was brutally transformed in a manner similar to Hollywood's mutation in the 1990s. The rising appeal of the documentary, then, recounted facts that had largely been absent from the public sphere. At the same time, it is possible that this resurgence was partly due to several over-performing films at the box-office, which instantly created a space for the documentary within the dominant market. The releases of Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) and Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989) are case studies which not only transformed the documentary's conventions but which also mirrored the generic arc of the conspiracy film. As Moore's films earnestly attempt to make connections between economic systems, the government and individuals, it is clear that they specifically express a paranoid logic, particularly when considering that his subject matter – social space –

has already been reconstituted as paranoid. In short, Moore's films and conspiracy films are inexorably linked by their attempt to map Jameson's totality, regardless of the impossibility of this task. We can follow Jameson by repeating that "conspiracy theory (and its garish narrative manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt," to "think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" (Jameson 1991: 38). We can also see the documentary's resurgence as one facet of the independent film moment, which followed the inroads of independent production by embodying its best traits – low-cost and high-return of investment – while at the same time taking advantage of the larger number of screens and the dominance of the new home video market. Independent film is significant because, like the seventies, the films and their makers opened up a 'middle-tier' which straddled the chasm between the major studios and independent production.¹ The political resonance of these films can also be seen as legitimate, insofar as they attempted to document the changing realities of a shifting economies, but also the way that they attempt to establish mapping strategies in order for their populist audiences to understand these changes. In this sense, these films can be viewed in a similar vein to Peter Knight's conspiracy market, where their easy consumption (by way of their populist politics and digestible narratives) provide the viewer the option to take or leave the information these films conveyed by way of their easy purchase. In other words, "[p]aranoia paradoxically becomes both ubiquitous and redundant when everything finally is connected," and importantly, when "tied up into the global capitalist market" (Knight 75). Michael Moore's camera captures the overall zeitgeist of an economy that was shifting away from factory work, towards the more flexible post-Fordist model in addition to documenting the working class' sentiments toward these changes. Despite the immediacy of their imagery and rhetorical strategies, these films express Hofstadter's paranoid style by making massive leaps of logic, by providing pat answers to

extremely complicated issues, and by making connections that may or may not be there. We should pay careful attention to the links between Hofstadter's description of the paranoid style and Moore's films, while noting what he calls "the demi-intellectual" appeal of this enterprise in addition to its obsessive accumulation of evidence (Hofstadter 36). I want to be clear that these facts taken independently are not in question; rather, it is the manner of their reassemblage that poses a problem and which characterizes the cinematic paranoid style. Let us recall that it is the meticulous collection of minutiae presented as evidence which constitutes the essential ingredients of paranoid style, which prepares "for the big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable" (39). There is no more appropriate description for the documentary films of this cycle than Hofstadter's, as the medium-specific character of documentary films – i.e. the collection of disparate facts and their reconstitution into a narrative arc – are equivalent endeavors in the new form that I will call the corporate conspiracy documentary genre.

Because the audiences for these films occupy a very specific marketing demographic, I will ask very different sets of questions than those that are asked by traditional documentary theorists. Traditional theoretical claims are dominated by documentary's ontological status – the form's relationship to truth – and its mediation between reality and fiction. I want to dispose of this question from the outset and maintain that though documentary and narrative films are ultimately different, their relationship to "truth" is always mediated by either a greater or lesser relationship with history, reality and fiction. This is as true of narrative film, which can and does act allegorically – as in the case of the 70s cycle which "truthfully" told the facts of the Watergate scandal – while at the same time acting as historical windows through which the past is captured on celluloid. This same theory can be robustly aided by considering Umberto Eco's essay, "Fictional Protocols," where he flattens the distinction between fiction and reality by

asserting that “narrative” (and for my purposes the narrativization of documentary) is unavoidable and that every narrative, whether based on real life events or not, contains elements of “fictionality” (Eco 119). For Eco, the question is not one of truth, but a comparison between “real” and “artificial” styles of narrative. Eco is careful to note that sometimes fiction (or artificial narrative) comes to replace the “real” narrative as the official record, and vice versa, which is an extremely provocative and useful statement for the course of this present investigation (*ibid.*). In this precise sense, both documentary and fiction film’s ontologies are rendered equivalent as allegory particularly when they depict historical events as in the case of Pakula’s *All the President’s Men*, which is the “artificial” treatment of a “real” event, but which nevertheless functions as the public record of the Watergate scandal. It is possible, therefore, to ask the same genre-specific questions about this period of documentary filmmaking as one would for a narrative film. This method is particularly appropriate to films which constitute the “New Documentary” (as posited by Stella Bruzzi and others) as the form was increasingly reliant on the trademarks of narrative (and indeed Hollywood) filmmaking practices which included the creation of its own system of generic features, stars, and iconographic, syntactic, and narrative trademarks.² More often than not, these features conformed to the narrative hallmarks of the conspiracy film which I have outlined so far in this thesis.

Michael Moore, whom Godard charges with the invention of the “schlock-documentary” is central to this analysis, but not in ways that people have generally dealt with him. For my part, I am not particularly interested in the relative “truth” of Moore’s films. I am also slightly kinder in my perception of Moore than Godard, as my preference is to situate Moore as the forefather of the corporate conspiracy documentary genre rather than as Godard’s “Schlock-Documentarian.” Regardless of which opinion one holds – and there are many – the filmmaker has indisputably

made a remarkable impact on the production, exhibition and form of documentary in the past 15-20 years by absorbing what are basically narrative filmmaking traits and applying them to the documentary film. These features include the absorption of coherent narrative patterns – the insertion of a protagonist and antagonist – the execution of the “paranoid style” into its generic framework and the creation of a Michael Moore directorial brand which continues to influence today’s documentary film. We can also see Moore’s kinship with Oliver Stone, as their commonalities include the attempt to over-explain narrative absences by reciting as many facts as possible. While provocative and effective upon initial viewings, textual analysis of Moore’s films can deconstruct these references and aid in constructing a derivative subgenre. Comparing his documentaries to narrative films allows us to measure his past references, extratextual influences and how when combined, these factors operate intratextually. Over the course of Moore’s evolving paranoid style, his focus shifts from the vilification of big government to the vilification of big corporations, to the vilification of both forces simultaneously through the formation of what I will call the ‘President/CEO.’ This phenomenon includes the personification of the market trends (in the shadow of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the “downsizing” of the industrial economy of the United States) to individuals who Moore charges as ultimately responsible for these changes. This is a huge difference between the “unrepresentability” of the earlier era, as Moore paranoiacally “over-represents” these issues by placing the blame on people rather than institutional logic. This “figuration” influences many of the subsequent documentaries released in this period, whose eventual outcome is twofold. Films like *Roger and Me*, *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (Alex Gibney, 2005), and *The Corporation* (Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott, 2004), all pathologize the logic of the market and assign blame to individuals rather than the institutions that they represent. In the case of *The*

Corporation, this logic is extended to diagnose the corporation's "personality" as psychotic and with this clinical formulation lays guilt solely at the literalized feet of these institutions. This phenomenon is a far cry from the situational mode of the seventies that I explained earlier, becoming a key modification to the conspiracy films' evolution. Just as "Deep Throat" and "X" were absorbed into the iconographic/syntactical features of the genre, the "corporation as individual" becomes a new telltale signature of the conspiracy film, to the extent that it becomes a competing icon with the 'assassin' of the earlier cycles.

The documentary conspiracy subgenre, then, depicts these new corporate structures which in turn infiltrate fictional narrative films. While it may seem extreme to assign the responsibility for this transformation squarely on the shoulders of Moore, it *is* fair to say that he is the most visible and largely the most responsible figure for the documentary's resurgence. It is also fair to attribute the documentary film's anti-corporate stance within Moore's jurisdiction, as it is largely the desire for an alternative view that comprises the market that led to Moore's success.

Moore's 1989 documentary *Roger and Me* is the grounding moment for these new trends, introducing new generic features to the conspiracy film. The film remains an enduring counterpoint to the films that Hollywood at this time, one which wears its threadbare aesthetics on its sleeve in a manner that would likely have Jerry Bruckheimer and Tony Scott hyperventilating. At the same time, the film ushers in an entirely new 'subgenre' of the documentary, which borrows hallmarks of its competition in Hollywood. Moore's films establish him as a 'star' in very much the same way that Will Smith, Mel Gibson or Julia Roberts became household names in the 1990s. Additionally, Moore's star status transforms the generic constitution of the documentary to the point where a filmmaker essentially becomes a central feature of the film.³ Moore essentially created an ancillary market for himself, complete with tie-

ins and a cottage industry of populist books including *Downsize This!* (1996), *Stupid White Men* (2001), *Dude, Where's My Country?* (2003), *The Official Fahrenheit 9/11 Reader* (2004), and *Will They Ever Trust us Again?* (2004), all of which occupied *The New York Times Bestseller* list with each subsequent publishing.⁴ In this fashion, Moore's 'star' status settles to the point where it becomes a central feature of the documentary genre, replete with genre-altering tendencies that resemble those of Will Smith to name but one example. Furthermore, these tendencies are borrowed from mainstream narrative film, expressing their ties with these populist documentaries by way of their specific brand of narrative action, and inserting a protagonist into the center of the story. Finally, this new 'brand' of documentary filmmaking influences other films, which, when considered generically, can tell us extremely interesting things about the genre of the Corporate Conspiracy Documentary Genre and its evolution not only as a form, but as a market in its own right. With these suppositions in mind *Fahrenheit 9/11*, then, can be seen as the 'Star Wars' of countercultural movements, complete with its own set of distinctive products, tie-ins and other merchandising opportunities.

Beginning with a textual analysis of *Roger and Me*, the first thing to note is the way that Moore inserts himself as the central character in the film. This personification is an extremely important detail and may account for the film's popularity as a personal (or antagonistic) relationship between General Motors' C.E.O. Roger Smith and the affable filmmaker. The film creates the 'myth' of Moore from the outset, as the audience is privileged to see pictures from Moore's childhood and his personal relationship to the dying town of Flint, Michigan. The second new syntactical feature that the film provides is its personification of the "villain" of the film, who is once again "played by" Smith. The establishment of these binaries, between Moore as populist hero and Smith as elitist villain is the main register within which *Roger and Me*

operates; chilling depictions of the real poverty in Flint are juxtaposed to Smith's wealthy lifestyle.

The recreation of the "villain" within the genre is a specifically new feature, but relates to my discussion in the earlier chapter of genres shifting to account for historical change. Here, the corporate tyrant is singly responsible for all of the poverty and misfortune that occurs in Flint, and the film makes this relationship explicit not only by its continued use of juxtapositions between rich and poor but, more importantly, between Moore (as protagonist) and Smith (as antagonist). This cinematic use of editing counters the early seventies cycle as well, by way of its attributing Smith as the central and specific cause which explains away the unseen network of "organization men" in the 70s cycle. This individual is tied to market forces, in very much the same manner that "Capitalists" were used in the early films of Sergei Eisenstein (in a film such as *Strike*, 1925). Here, the CEO is the equivalent figure, standing for all manner of evil that befalls the residents of Flint. Moore uses film language in order to clearly make this connection, as is demonstrated in a scene involving Smith's Christmas speaking engagement, cut against a family being evicted from their home. While no proof is offered that Smith is directly involved in this 'transaction' and there is no evidence that the woman and her family ever worked for GM, Moore still offers this as material that relates to Smith's evil nature. In the subsequent scene, where Moore questions Smith, Moore provocatively implies that the woman's eviction lies in Smith's hands. When Smith rightly responds that "General Motors didn't evict them," this still does not absolve him from his villainy. Indeed, according to the film's use of montage, Smith is guilty by way of the explicit cuts which bind the two scenes. The film uses Smith as a real-life figure upon which Moore can furnish his complaints, additionally using film language to create a Barthesian "empty sign" for the audience to perceive Smith as the personification of Free Trade,

Neoliberalism, and Capitalism. Smith's constant absence, exemplified by the film's poster where Moore stands in front of an empty chair with a microphone in his hand, manages to combine the "structured absences" and "narrated presences" by inserting whatever information Moore wants to transmit into Smith's many silences. This is a constant method of Moore's, as it allows him to make connections between ideas and people that do not necessarily fit, but the effect of this lack of denial (or non-non-denial-denial) is manipulated cinematically in order to imply guilt. The guilt of the corporate President/CEO becomes a generic feature of the conspiratorial repertoire, not only in Moore's films, but in films of the next narrative cycle. This strategy also expresses the paranoid style's construction of "the enemy" who is described as "the perfect model of malice, a kind of amoral superman: sinister, ubiquitous, powerful, cruel..." (Hofstadter 31-2). This has important ramifications for the long-term evolution of the genre, and becomes typical of the rhetorical strategies of Moore's films, and others as well.

In 1994 Moore briefly helmed the TV show for NBC, *TV Nation*, which essentially staged Moore in miniature situations to those which characterized *Roger and Me*. Here, Moore employed stunts such as the recurring episode "Crackers the Corporate Crime Chicken," where a man dressed in a giant chicken super-hero costume confronted (with Moore in tow as his handler) CEOs for their corporate malfeasance. This is also especially important, as these episodes and the narrative trope of David (Crackers, Moore) vs. the corporate Goliath essentially "fixes" the generic features and makes them recur. Again, recalling Altman's "producer's game" we should also consider that although Moore wears more diverse clothing in *Roger and Me* than in any of his other films (with the exception of *Sicko*, where he has treated himself to a 'slick' makeover), including suits with patches on the elbows, and appears in scenes without his trademark big glasses and trucker cap, in his subsequent appearances these are precisely the

features that become iconographic mainstays within the Michael Moore conspiracy documentary subgenre.

By the time that Moore makes *The Big One* in 1997 (with a tagline which reads “Protecting the Earth from the scum of corporate America”) the “meaning” of Moore is essentially fixed. Consisting of Moore’s book tour to promote *Downsize This!*, the film provides great insight into the creation of the Moore “brand,” as it essentially documents Moore using the stops on his book tour to engage in his characteristic stunts. The film features a nearly uncomfortable exposition of the Moore “character,” who peppers the book-signings with what seems to be stand-up comedy. True to its era, the film essentially operates in a manner similar to the contemporaneous Hollywood film as the expression of corporate synergy and here, the many brand-new baseball caps change with every scene and only endorse corporate products that Moore presumably approves of (like Warner Brothers, The NBA, The Chicago Bulls, The Detroit Tigers, etc...). In this respect, it is possible to view the film’s constant references to products, CEOs and Moore as all participating in Moore’s earlier dichotomy, where slick corporate downsizers are essentially evil, while Moore and his onscreen personification are essentially good. This narrative trope, or generic fixture, more often than not resembles Naomi Klein’s description of the “superbrand” where, “corporate sponsors and the culture they brand have fused together to create a third culture: a self-enclosed universe of brand-name people, brand-name products and brand-name media” (Klein 60). The film thus consists of Moore rehearsing this dichotomy, while stopping by a plant or a factory that is closing, and by opposing his brand against others. His strategy is to put a person from middle-management on the spot with his accusations and let the camera roll until he is eventually kicked out. Once again, this lack of presence does not pose a problem for Moore,

who acts personally insulted when the CEO of the corporation doesn't come running when Moore comes calling.

The film's pivotal scene involves Moore's meeting with Nike CEO Phil Knight, who, despite being named as Moore's #3 corporate criminal in his book, really wants to meet Moore. As with his earlier films, Moore bombards the figure with lots of questions about his business practices, and even offers to pay for a trip to Indonesia to visit his factories. When Knight reveals that he has never seen the factories or even visited them, Moore has his "gotcha" moment, and Knight comes off looking like a big idiot. Moore's confrontation with Knight reveals an important quality to the CEOs and various figures that he rails against, namely their ignorance which puts these films in line with *All the President's Men*, where Deep Throat tells the reporters that "these guys aren't very smart." When Knight goes on to tell Moore that Americans don't want to be in the business of manufacturing shoes, Moore's long-take reveals the extreme disconnect between these figures and the rest of the world, and how very clueless they are about the realities of the everyday citizen. Moore also effectively does his part to aid in the depiction of Jameson's "totality," as his film not only effects a "mapping" of the country, but provides a map of the new corporate/ government reality (and perhaps its "synergy"). This is reflected in Moore's accusations which relate to "corporate welfare bums" where he highlights the disparate nature between the social welfare system and the corporate welfare system. Corporations, in his view, are privileged by massive government subsidies which eclipse those of the social system, and as chief corporate donors to presidential campaigns, they ensure that the relationship between these two systems remains permeable along with exercising their undue influence over democratically elected officials. Moore's filmmaking, then, resembles Jameson's description of conspiracy theory as the "poor man's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age" which attempts

to represent the “degraded figure of the total logic of late capital,” a “desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system” and whose “failure” is marked by “its slippage into sheer theme and content” (Jameson 1988: 356). This is precisely what occurs in Moore’s films. Moore’s “paranoid style” thus connects the dots in a manner which may not be precisely true, but in a manner of speaking, feels true. In this respect, it may be useful to state that what occurs in a Michael Moore film, and the genre that they subsequently aid in expanding, is an allegorical rendition of the documentary/narrative form, in a manner that engages Jameson’s rendition of allegory. Here, a film such as *All the President’s Men* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* can be considered as possessing equal ontological value, as they both attempt to restructure ‘totality’ through the use of narrative. Jameson’s early exposition of cognitive mapping, in his essay on Sydney Lumet’s *Dog Day Afternoon*, may prove a fruitful vein of analytic material here, as this formulation originally attempted to compare acting styles within a single film and measure their distance from the Hollywood star system. The interaction between actors, their “figurability,” may help to institute a theory which affords the comparison of ‘brands’ within the profilmic space, which could aid the viewer to make sense of their contemporary reality.⁵

Bowling for Columbine (2002) follows the narrative trope of Michael Moore’s anti-corporate films, but largely places the filmmaker in the background, in lieu of investigating the film’s subject matter. At the same time, the film’s release in the wake of the 9/11 attacks results in a highly-critical and highly-politicized document, complete with a miniature montage which outlines American government culpability in terrible events around the world, including the overthrow of Chile’s democratically-elected Salvador Allende in favour of brutal dictator Auguste Pinochet, and the funding of Osama bin Laden and Afghani nationalists to fight the Communists in Afghanistan. This sequence is a note-perfect rendition of the paranoid style,

which hastily makes these connections and relates them back to the issue of gun-violence in America. This same logic is applied to the industrial make-up of Littleton, Colorado, and the filmmaker takes great pains to make the connections between industrial violence and domestic violence explicit, with varying results. Steven Heath and Andrew Potter rightly describe these tendencies in *Columbine*, as they state:

At this point, Moore feels the need to retell the entire history of the United States, from the pilgrims to the present age. We hear about the history of slavery, lynchings and the KKK, the Spanish-American War, CIA-sponsored coups in South America, the invasion of Grenada, right through to the NATO bombing of Serbia. The "culture of fear," in the end, has its origins in a deep-seated fear of blacks, reflecting the slave owner's fear of the slave rebellion, amplified by the military-industrial complex, America's paranoid pursuit of nuclear hegemony, and right-wing talk television. This is also, in some way, connected to unemployment and poverty (Heath and Potter 141).

Moore's insistence that there is a connection between all of these factors marks the ascendance of the paranoid style within the documentary form. Again, we should recall that Stone's *JFK* utilizes the same logic to indemnify Clay Shaw, where "the absence of proof" is equivalent to the "presence of a conspiracy." The stylistic and narrative features of Moore's preceding films, particularly the vilification of individuals for their culpability for creating poverty makes for the most uncomfortable moments in the film, as Moore's style does not always gel with the footage that he captures. Moore confronts people who are more likely corporate shills than directly responsible for the social ills that Moore accuses them of. The fairer of these targets is NRA spokesperson Charlton Heston, who, in typical fashion, ends up looking and sounding like an idiot when led off of his series of talking points. More awkward is Moore's brief encounter with Dick Clark, who he accuses of being responsible for the gun death of a small child because the child's mother worked two jobs, one of which was associated with Clark's massive empire.

When viewed through the lens of the paranoid style, the filmmaker's excessive assemblage of details performs two basic functions. The first of these is to essentially map, and make

connections between the totality of corporate and public space, while the second pertains to the personification of the corporate bodies, by essentially connecting them with their CEOs. This tactic, and the anti-corporate documentary form expresses various degrees of corporate culpability for the ills of society. These issues should be framed within the history of the anti-globalization movement, which came to a head in 1999s "Battle of Seattle." The protest, which seemingly brought all the Leftist causes together in a single place, essentially ends the "effectiveness" of the American protest movement by the government's imposition of new "protest zones" far and away from the World Trade Organization and G8 Summits, so that the same virulent protests could never take place again. At the same time it is safe to say that, as in the seventies, the composition of anti-corporate radicals were "identified" as a certain kind of consumer, which could explain the shift in tone from anti-consumer movement, to a certain demographic. This phenomenon is reflected in the new series of anti-corporate bestsellers, including Naomi Klein's *No Logo*, as well as books from Moore, Noam Chomsky and Al Franken. It is my assertion that these works and their popularity are facets of a larger market that comes to inflect and is sold directly to specific consumers through their umbrella movements of the "culture jamming" movement. This phenomenon is characteristic of the types of films emerge from this era, including *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (Mark Achbar, 1992), *The Corporation* (Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott, 2003) and *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* (Robert Greenwald, 2004). All of these films occupy a central space in popular Leftist spheres, to the degree that each of the figures come as shorthand references for each other. The best example of this phenomenon is found in *The Corporation*, where Chomsky, Klein, Moore, along with populist "philosophers" like Mark Kingwell all express their respective theories of the ills of the world. In this sense, the film acts as an

intertextual hub – exemplified by the many web links listed in the film’s closing sequence – in addition to its link to Russ Kick’s series of “Disinformation Guides”; all which have their own “devilish brand” logo which they share with *The Corporation*.

The Corporation ultimately expresses the same sorts of logic that Moore’s films do (in addition to employing Moore as one of the film’s talking heads) and presents a great deal of information which is both excessive and relevant. By presenting a pathology of the corporation as a psychotic entity, the film also follows Moore’s strategy of personification, which ultimately places blame on the humanized version of the institution. While it is not precisely my place to judge the relative truths of the claims found within this film, I can speak to the film’s specific use of documentary aesthetics. Because a film is not a book, issues of adaptation ultimately limit the verification of any film’s claims, just as a movie version of this thesis would have to be supplemented by a companion volume, or its original source material. We can, however, speak to how the film documentary – and the corporate conspiracy documentary genre – becomes the ideal germinating site for the paranoid style, particularly because it is the documentary’s specific mandate to assemble an array of facts and then to reassemble them in what is incidentally a paranoid structure. The talking-head format of *The Corporation*, which places experts and eyewitnesses on the same level of expertise, flattens the validity of everyone’s claims – either accepting them all unequivocally as ‘experts’ or by relegating them all as crackpots. This results in a simultaneously coherent, yet schizophrenic narrative account. The coherence relates to the consistency of the narrative, as experts are called and case studies are presented but the schizophrenia comes when each witness is given equal import. In this manner, the expertise of a trader who says that 9/11 was good for business is put on the same plane as Milton Friedman, the world’s foremost living economic theorist. While all of the facts of the film may indeed be

accurate, their presentation in a rapid-fire array of case studies, examples and eyewitness accounts, ultimately results in their reassemblage as “conspiracy theory” rather than as a coherent narrative. The best example of this in the film takes place in the section devoted to corporate collusion with Nazi Germany leading into World War Two. While the facts of this historical phenomenon are not under debate, their reassemblage in this passage jars with the film’s methodology here. In other words, the film moves from a “talking head” passage where Moore is talking about Ford, Coca-Cola and J.P. Morgan’s investment in Nazi Germany to an episode about IBM’s complicity in the Holocaust record-keeping practices. According to Hofstadter, these logical leaps lie at the heart of the paranoid style that I have been describing. Independently, these claims may all be true, but in Hofstadter’s view it is their reassemblage, and indeed the desire to do so that constitutes the paranoid style. In other words, the work that *The Corporation* does is similar to Garrison’s assemblage of facts in the trial of *JFK*. Ultimately, by attempting to explain everything – in the case of *JFK*, by putting Clay Shaw on the stand in order to find *someone* guilty – a closer look reveals that these reassemblages (the connections between corporate culpability, ethics and Nazi Germany...) are wholly incomplete, yet these connections are offered as proof of a larger conspiracy. It is the tendency of this film to over-explain and to link all corporations together within a single psychotic entity which paradoxically makes the film convincing, while at the same time unraveling the coherence of the argument.

While it is still possible to assert that the films of the corporate conspiracy documentary genre pose a necessary intervention in the social sphere by posing an alternative view to the mainstream media, particularly in light of the highly politicized-social sphere and the series of events which led to this situation, we should also say that the films of this series also come to resemble each other by way of their inherent ‘paranoid’ narrative structures and the similarity

with which they convey their information. *Outfoxed* and *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* are two of the better quality films to emerge from this era, and provide an alternative view to the under-reported phenomenon of the global corporate meltdowns, resulting in charges of ‘Conspiracy to Commit Fraud’ accounting scandals in the case of Enron executives Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling, and in charges of ‘media bias’ leveled at Rupert Murdoch’s empire.⁶ Though both films begin in a straightforward manner, they predictably veer into conspiratorial territory by way of their connecting facts between contemporary American history and the ramifications of these events. It is not enough that the executives of Enron are responsible for terrible accounting practices and guilty of defrauding investors of billions of dollars, they must also be responsible for undermining the confidence of then California Governor Gray Davis, organizing the recall vote that ousted him, and for getting Arnold Schwarzenegger elected to his position.⁷ It is not enough for Rupert Murdoch to send inter-office memos which tell his staff how to report, he must also be wholly responsible for the shift in electoral fortunes of Al Gore in the 2000 election. I want to be clear that I am not interested in testing the validity of these claims, which is a seemingly impossible task; rather, I am interested in the profilmic moment when these narratives make the leap between their transmission of facts to the transmission of speculation. In both instances, it is when the films tell us of the larger effects that stem from these root causes – in the case of *Enron*, the recitation of California’s energy crisis results in an implied coalition between Kenneth Lay, George W. Bush and Arnold Schwarzenegger – to undermine the elected government and how these facts are reinterpreted in order to construct the new paranoid narratives.

These are precisely the two sets of claims that Moore makes in his next film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which takes these two elements (that corporations, and specifically Rupert Murdoch) and

shady government factions are wholly responsible for the electoral misfortunes of Al Gore by calling the election in favour of Bush, and this becomes the cornerstone of the new generic features of the documentary film, which shift radically in the brutal passage between the corporate scandal era of the turn of the century, to the post 9/11 landscape. Moore takes no time in running to conspiracy mode, stating first that voting irregularities in Florida and the imposition of Fox News and the Supreme Court led directly to George W. Bush's election. In the film's most famous sequence, which takes place as President Bush sits in a classroom reading a book with children during the attacks, Moore imposes a train of thought on Bush, which directly implicates him in the attack on the World Trade Center. Moore's voice-over says, "which one of them screwed me?" over which a series of likely (but not proven) candidates, is overlaid. In this instance, Bush becomes the center of both an implied and explicit narrative as well as an implied and explicit *conspiracy*. Explicit because of the amount of detail that Moore provides via his voice-over, and implied because of the profilmic relationships that Moore puts him in by way of editing. Even if the viewer is able to discount the film's narrative overlay, it is impossible for him to deny the various montages which place Bush (and his aides) in a series of compromising positions. Finally, Moore speaks directly for Bush, when he answers his own question, with "I bet it was the Saudis." From here the movie moves in all sorts of disparate directions, from the Carlyle group to the House of Saud, to the bin Laden family, to Bush's military and business history, the presence of an external conspiracy. Moore connects these disparate facts to conclude that the Saudis run the country, thus executing Moore's central paranoid leap from logical argument to strict conjecture. Rather than discussing the validity of this claim, I am more keenly interested in the way that this claim operates inter-generically, and how *Fahrenheit 9/11* operates as a hub which summarizes all the previous material and germinates new generic features. Chief

among these is the outright guilt of the President/CEO, who inflects the genre with his new central presence within the narrative of these films. Once again, we should state that while Nixon was an absence inherent in the 70s cycle, Bush (as President/CEO) is an overbearing presence in these films, dominating the fictional narrative films of the coming cycle as well.

We should also note that the film's status as the largest-grossing documentary of all time certainly creates a great deal of cultural import, especially within the overall logic of the market. On top of *Fahrenheit's* cultural resonance, we would do well to remember that this is also the film that was the "final straw" for Harvey and Bob Weinstein, and their failure to get Miramax's parent company, Disney, to back the film is one of the most significant alterations of the contemporary Hollywood landscape in recent years, resulting in the Weinstein brothers dislodging themselves from this profitable partnership as a direct result. *Fahrenheit* spawned its own set of imitators, including a series of straight to DVD releases which included *9/11: The Road to Tyranny* (Alex Jones, 2002), *The Great Conspiracy: The 9/11 News Special You Never Saw* (Barrie Zwicker, 2005), *Martial Law 9/11: The Rise of the Police State* (Alex Jones, 2005), *9/11: Press for Truth* (Ray Nowelsiewski, 2006), and the internet sensation, *Loose Change* (Dylan Avery, 2006). Like Moore's film, these documents all place culpability for the terrible events squarely at the feet of the Bush administration and its coalition with multinational business interests and foreign dictators. The last film of this series is especially interesting for our purposes, as it goes so far as to claim that the World Trade Center collapse was a "planned demolition," in order to retrieve the gold reserves housed in the vaults of the buildings and that the US military fired a missile at the Pentagon. At the bottom of all of these claims is the assertion that the Bush administration planned the event in order to declare war, thus providing lots of money for their military contractor friends, in addition to many other wild speculations.

This story, whether “fictional” or not, accomplishes a similar effect to the rhetoric (and market) surrounding the JFK assassination, complete with its own set of shadowy figures which all become generic fixtures of this new cottage industry.

At this point, I think that it is important that we recall Eco’s work on “real” and “fictional” narratives, particularly as they relate to the real and fictional accounts of the 9/11 conspiracy theory, as posited by Moore and others. In his recitation of the history of the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” which he calls “a disconcerting story which was always clearly fictional- because it was founded on explicit quotations from fictional sources-yet which many people have unfortunately taken to be true history” (Eco 131), Eco traces how the “fictional” story that the Jews are in charge of everything and which claims that Jewish elders drink human blood among other ridiculous assertions is disseminated over time and comes to be taken as gospel. Interestingly enough, Eco posits that the actual investigation of the truth claims that the treatise involves only serves to further the “validity” of the narrative claims by giving them credence. A pivotal moment for Eco involves Nasta Webster’s book on Secret Societies, who claims that the rendering of the Jewish conspiracy involves a genuine program for revolution. Eco summarizes her position, stating that it resembles a syllogistic echo chamber, “since the protocols resemble the story [she] told, they confirm it,” and in the opposite vein, “the *Protocols* confirm the story” [she has] “concocted from them; therefore they are true” (139). Eco poses an important question following this explication, namely:

How should we deal with intrusions of fiction into life, now that we have seen the historical impact that this phenomenon can have. I do not wish to propose that my walks in the fictional woods are remedy for the great tragedies of our time. Nonetheless, these walks have enabled us to understand the mechanisms by which fiction can shape life...Reflecting on these complex relationships between reader and story, fiction and life, can constitute a form of therapy against the sleep of reason, which generates monsters (*ibid.*)

This intersection between real life and its narrativized counterpart poses an interesting problem, but one that can be dealt with by locating and dealing with its specific features *generically*, by measuring the marketing possibilities of these generic features and by posing questions based on these findings. In this vein, it is possible to see that the enduring legacy of this documentary moment becomes a staging ground through which/by which these new narrative features are disseminated and taken as truth. These features include the transformation of the conspiracy genre's central villain from the assassin to the President/CEO/villain, the recreation of specific new permutations of conspiracy networks (the military-industrial complex, the Saudis, the Bush administration) which are taken at face value and are spread through the burgeoning underground and mainstream market in a manner which essentially validates them by spreading these messages through the newly furnished conspiracy market. The fact that this market hasn't yet expired, and that the genre cycle continues to live a fruitful (and profitable) life, is testament to the enduring logic of the market and the known quantities of audience demand. This is true from the other side of the political spectrum as well, as the market for these products becomes a ping-pong match between competing conspiracy theories (the myth of the liberal media is one among many) which not only emulate the Hofstadter's paranoid style, but do so in such a way that the market sustains them. Additionally, these new features are carried over to the new cycle of conspiracy films, albeit in their "proper" narrative film form.

Chapter 4 Notes

¹ See Geoff King's elaboration on the industrial development of Indie film in *American Independent Cinema* (11-58).

² See Bruzzi, "The Performative Documentary" in *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (153-180).

³ The films of Nick Broomfield are an excellent example of this phenomenon, as is Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* (2004).

⁴ It is also fair to say that Moore helped to spawn the anti-Michael Moore industry as well, with movies like *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Alan Peterson, 2004), *Manufacturing Dissent* (Rick Caine and Debbie Melnyk, 2007) and books like *Michael Moore is a Big Fat Stupid White Man* (David T. Hardy).

⁵ See Jameson, "Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: *Dog Day Afternoon* as a Political Film," in *Signatures of the Visible*, 35-54 (with special attention paid to 50-54).

⁶ For an interesting counter-argument regarding America's corporate meltdown, see *Social Text's* "Corporate Corruption Issue" where various authors tackle the subject with a rigor that is impossible within the context of this present work.

⁷ We should also note that *Enron* essentially mimics the narrative recitation of Pakula's *All the President's Men*, albeit in a "documentary" form, complete with whistleblowers, document shredding and a cadre of villains and underlings.

Chapter Five: The Contemporary Conspiracy Film

Donald Kaufman: I'm putting in a chase sequence. So the killer flees on horseback with the girl, the cop's after them on a motorcycle and it's like a battle between motors and horses, like technology vs. horse.

Charlie Kaufman: And they're still all one person, right?

- Donald Kaufman to his brother Charlie in *Adaptation*

That's the way it works with corporate murder. Boss gets wind of something, calls in his head of security who talks to someone, who talks to a friend of someone. Finishes up on an answering machine in a rented office with a couple of sensitive gentlemen in a blue pick-up truck – and we'll never know who was responsible for the hit.

- Tim Donohue in *The Constant Gardener*

The assassin always dies, baby. It's necessary for the national healing.

- Elenor Prentiss Shaw to her son Raymond in *The Manchurian Candidate*

In the political fever leading up to the U.S. Presidential election of 2004, Hollywood released a series of films that reflected the overall mood of roughly half its population. *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Jonathan Demme's remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* and John Sayles' *Silver City* were all films that attempted to incite change, to explain the contemporary cultural milieu and to arm their viewers with depictions of the scandals, wrongdoings and missteps of the Bush administration. Like the seventies cycle and Stone's *JFK*, not only should we characterize these films as resolutely political, but we should also acknowledge that these films were expressly designed to make a difference at the voting booth. *Silver City's* poster design reflects its overt political sentiment as its slogan reads simply: "Vote Early. Vote Often" even though this sentence has nothing to do with the content of the film. For his part, Michael Moore organized voter registration booths outside screenings of his film. These films can also be seen, in the Jamesonian sense, as an effort to remap the contemporary sphere and to "connect the dots"

between historical events such as the World Trade Center attacks, the series of corporate meltdowns which occurred previous to the 9/11 attacks, and the apparent merging between business and government interests that seemingly coalesced at the White House's doorstep. The false lead-up to war is but one example of these events, as are the no-bid contracts awarded to Vice President Dick Cheney's former employers at Halliburton.

That all of these factors reek of impropriety is not in question, but their reconstitution into paranoid narratives steers these works towards the conspiracy film genre and indeed marks the resurgence of a third narrative film cycle. As I ended my discussion with the documentary form, I highlighted the conspiratorial nature of the "fictional narratives" within it, which extends to these newer films. To this I will add that their fragmented and complicated narratives may be partly caused by the fact that many of their claims at the time were largely unproven. The same is true today, but with a little bit of historical distance, we can see more clearly that these claims were at least partially true, particularly regarding the Bush administration's ineptitude in handling the Iraq war in addition to the public relations disaster that Hurricane Katrina caused for them. On the other hand, from the vantage point of 2004, the films' respective claims still remained unsettled in the public mind, and the opinion was that these films more accurately expressed "conspiracy theory," rather than the strict reportage of facts.

The films of the contemporary conspiracy cycle correspond to three major phases. The first of these entered the public arena in the months preceding the election, and are all documents which attempt to mobilize viewers' political will against the Bush administration. At the same time, we can question their ability to achieve the change that they aimed for by gauging the public's response to these films and measure this against the genre's cyclical patterns. It is

certainly possible to claim that these films reflected the cultural zeitgeist and presumably changed some minds, but we must also be prepared to realistically acknowledge that they were likely marketed to specifically “liberal” demographics – characterized by Jeff Nunberg’s description of “Tax-raising, Latte-Drinking, Sushi-Eating, Volvo-Driving, *New York Times* Reading, Body-Piercing, Hollywood-Loving, Left-Wing Freakshow.” Furthermore, our in-depth knowledge of Hollywood’s systemic logic allows us to assert that these audiences and, more specifically, their consumers, could essentially take or leave the films’ claims when they left the theatre.

Nevertheless, these films still represent the staging ground for the latest epiphenomenon of an emerging conspiracy film cycle. However, we must acknowledge that the cycle is not only narratively transformed in the 1990s, but also reworked through its intersection with documentary. This involves taking stock of the mutations within the genre’s iconography, syntax and narrative elements in new, cycle-specific manners. While the protagonists are still investigators of sorts who stumbles upon a larger mystery (and indeed, conspiracy), they are usually set against a central villain, whose “evil empire” extends directly from his person. The President/CEO of the documentary cycle, then, becomes a stable presence within the contemporary conspiracy genre and is more often than not a direct representation of American President George W. Bush. The films also resurrect the assassination trope that had been largely abandoned in favour of other narrative features in the 1990s cycle, while retaining the happy rather than the open ending of the 1970s films. In this vein, the assassin/detective/victim’s narrative closure usually takes the form of a romantic ending, which is another major difference between genre cycles.

The paranoid logic of all of these films is undeniable, and the films singlehandedly resurrect the original 70s cycle in order to convey their overall message. In my view, this is a properly postmodern phenomenon, as the nostalgia for a legitimate, untarnished and original form of protest is measured by the films' (and perhaps our era's) inability to create anything new. This premise accounts for *Fahrenheit 9/11's* echoing *All the President's Men's* narrative and syntactical features, for *Silver City's* resemblance to *Chinatown* and for *The Manchurian Candidate's* directly remaking John Frankenheimer's earlier film. Following Jameson, we can see that these "nostalgia films" project the need to "restructure the whole issue of pastiche" – embodied by the films' copying earlier works – and also their need to "project it on a collective and social level." In other words, it is the attempt to depict the present as history that creates this specific crisis of representation. Jameson approaches this issue by characterizing the postmodern representation of "the past" by "stylistic connotation" (Jameson 1991: 19). This phenomenon – the profilmic execution of style – extends to our present work as well, as the films' attempt to make sense of the world can only be conveyed by way of its imitation of earlier politically-resonant forms. In this manner, *Fahrenheit 9/11's* absorption of the conspiracy films' traits must be viewed as an attempt to refashion the connotative implications of the 70s conspiracy film in a properly postmodern mode – one which reflects its "conspir-icity." By rehearsing the earlier tropes of the inaugural cycle, these films can also be said to "stand for" (in the Barthesian sense) a whole host of seemingly politically-resonant issues. These features are inflected by Barthes' theory of connotation and denotation, where an image, or in our case, a film, is subject to "editorializing" on the part of its purveyor, operates as a series of shorthand gestures which easily identify and organize a whole system of mythology and which relate intertextually between the films of all the cycles (Barthes 22-26). Just as evoking the phrase "9/11" conjures up

a series of connotations involving trauma, terrorism and domestic safety, one need only to mention “Halliburton” to bring up a parallel host of related issues, including impressions of corporate scandals, Dick Cheney and government kick-backs. This is the main register that the contemporary conspiracy films operate as they attempt to intervene in the contemporary socio-political sphere. The main result is a conflicted mess of competing information within the form, as the generic syntax expresses these connotative binaries, while earnestly attempting to depict the increasing connectedness of a globalized world. Furthermore, the films must compete with their status as products of the Hollywood system, which ultimately complicates their final “meaning.”

On the other hand, the similar tenor of the historical situations between the 1970s and today – an increasingly centralized government that is out of step with its people and for which scandalous activity is seemingly its *raison d’etre* – could well have provided the circumstances that the cycle reconstituted itself under, perhaps allowing us to posit that the conspiracy film emerges in particular historical coordinates. This would also explain the centrality of the Presidential figure, as Nixon and Bush evoke similar emotional reactions within their respective historical settings. Bush’s presidency itself is characterized by its parallels to the Nixon administration, including turmoil in the Middle East, an oil crisis and the familiar stench of government impropriety. Thus, this generic resurgence could well be interpreted as a response from the culture to the historical circumstances, provided that we agree with Ryan and Kellner’s view of the politics of genre film, where genre is more sensitively tied to the culture that it emerges from (Ryan and Kellner 76). Nostalgia for the seventies is characteristic of the cycle’s canonical films, *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *The Manchurian Candidate*, but also extends to other films

that purport to be political as well. Steven Spielberg's *Munich* (2005) and Niels Mueller's *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* (2004) are two such examples of this phenomenon, which fetishize the 1970s not only by emulating its films and restaging dramas within this decade, but also by positing within their narratives that the 1970s is the era when it "all went wrong." There can be no doubt that each of these films refer directly back to the initial cycle, as if a crisis of representation, figured in its emulation of earlier forms, presents a sort of temporal fugue for the contemporary filmmaker. It is as if these directors, striving to ensure the political meaning of their films, can only project it by way of copying the relative successes – and indeed the forms – of the 1970s conspiracy cycle. That the genre had largely lost its inherent political value (as I demonstrated in my chapter devoted to the 1990s cycle) is beside the point. This sudden eruption of "political" material also affords us the opportunity to measure the cultural response to these films by relating them to the previous cycles. In this sense, we can see that Jameson's characterization of the conspiracy films' inherent purpose – to make "wild stabs of meaning" (Jameson 1992b: 3) – ultimately fails to account for is the way that the genre's cyclical nature empties out its earlier political resonance. Furthermore, if we do characterize the cycle's early films in strictly "political" terms, we must also trace how Hollywood studios recognize these trends and capitalize on them. This ensures that copycat films will be released within the cycle's short life, ensuring its success within the cultural moment and continuing until this market is completely spent.

This phenomenon may also relate to what Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter describe as "cool hunting." In their critique of the relationship between market behaviour and consumption of "countercultural products," Heath and Potter restructure the top-down approach between

successful marketing (in the form of corporate advertising) which posits that corporations dictate what people want to see and therefore what they want to consume. In their view, nothing could be farther from the truth, as companies employ “cool-hunters” to identify new, largely countercultural trends, in addition to finding the means to imitate them. The case of the conspiracy film, then, may resemble the situation that Heath and Potter describe when they assert that “[w]hile companies may be able to intervene in the cycle of cool, they cannot initiate it themselves” (Heath and Potter 189). This theory can supplement Rick Altman’s “Producer’s Game.” By combining these views with our understanding of the Hollywood blockbuster’s behaviour in the 1990s, we are able to see that the new Hollywood structure is not responsible for dictating content, but merely for identifying trends and following the successes of these “cool” models. In this sense, the countercultural material that these films stage, including their shorthand attempts at rehearsing their anti-corporate, anti-government stances, may merely represent a means through which Hollywood can recognize a marketable genre and run with it. When linked to Altman’s theory, we can see that the coolness of the countercultural ideal and of the conspiracy film possess parallel value. Following this logic allows us to see that Jameson’s formulations about the early form are only partially true. While the initial films are successful in their attempts to depict the cultural sphere, once domesticated, they are rendered decreasingly political and increasingly marketable. We have seen this pattern emerge throughout the course of this thesis and, the post-9/11 cycle is no exception to it. On the other hand, this cycle still exhibits unique traits, including a redoubling of the scale of the conspiracy, in addition to the means – a narrative that presents other spaces of the world, and the travel between these spaces – with which to represent it. The post-9/11 cycle, then, moves beyond the domestic sphere and

incorporates the geopolitical frame within its structure, in addition to synthesizing all of the elements of the previous cycles.

There are three major phases of films of the post 9/11 conspiracy film genre which correspond to pre-election, post-election and its commodified rendition. It is no coincidence that these films exhibit the traditional internal dynamism of genre cycles, relating to classic, settled and mannerist phases respectively. The first films attempt to map the totality by asserting, generally speaking, that all roads lead to George W. Bush. The second set of films present a more multifaceted, globalized approach to the problem, as demonstrated by films such as *The Constant Gardener* (Fernando Mereilles, 2005), *The Interpreter* (Sydney Pollack, 2005) and *Syriana* (Steven Gaghan, 2005). The issues of global poverty and corporate monopolies stand at the fore of these films, in addition to assertions that these corporations bribe, control and kill anyone who gets in the way of their business practices. The mannerist phase is rendered politically harmless, and satirically resembles expressions of the 1990s cycle (*Men In Black*, *Independence Day* and *Zoolander*) as expressed in films such as *Déjà Vu* (Tony Scott, 2007), *Shooter* (Antoine Fuqua, 2007) and to a lesser degree, *The Number 23* (Joel Schumacher, 2007). Though these films incorporate recent historical events like the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (in *Déjà Vu*) and the findings of the 9/11 commission (in *Shooter*), these events merely serve as staging grounds for the more fantastic (and marketable) claims of the mannerist phase, refashioning these traumas into plot devices that have no cultural meaning outside of their frames. It is also interesting to see the genre's endurance in this cycle as it continues to express its cultural resonance, or at the least, the mainstreaming of conspiracy narratives within the plots of films such as *The Bourne Trilogy* (Doug Liman, Paul Greengrass 2002-2007), *Transformers*

(Michael Bay, 2007) and *The Simpsons Movie* (James L. Brooks, 2007). From the present of this writing (August 2007), it is clear that in both its narrative and documentary renditions, the conspiracy film genre expresses no immediate signs of cessation, and has inhabited the popular consciousness in a manner which resembles Peter Knight's earlier conspiracy market (Knight 48).

Returning to the initial films of this cycle – *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Silver City* and *K-Street* – we see that they attempt to confront the “problem” of the Bush administration head-on in several different ways. As we have already seen, Moore's film is the most “classically” conspiratorial of all these works, and is a manic attempt to connect every dot, provided that they all lead to the Bush administration. *K-Street*, Steven Soderbergh's hybridized docu-drama is an extremely interesting document, staging real-life figures, such as Democratic Pundit James Carville and Republican mainstay Mary Matalin, in a fictional narrative involving a bipartisan lobby firm in Washington. Incidentally, Soderbergh's camera captures the drama in Washington as it occurs, including the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger as governor of California, the meltdown of Howard Dean as a frontrunner for the Democratic Presidential bid, and the leak scandal that is now dubbed “The Valerie Plame Affair.” The participation of Mary Matalin in the project, who is an actual member of the White House Iraq study group, and is implicated in the Valerie Plame leak scandal, is literally documented in the middle of the events, which are dramatically re-enacted for the purposes of the series' narrative. Additionally, when the lobby group is indicted for laundering Saudi money through their offices, this essentially aids in re-mapping the contemporary social reality by circumnavigating through the corridors of

power in the government and their corporate handlers. That the series takes place and makes special efforts to ‘document’ the spaces of Washington, D.C. relates *K-Street* back to Gordon Willis’ camerawork in *All the President’s Men* and Pakula’s trope of “following the money” to make sense of the world. Finally, the series takes all of this conspiratorial information, internal investigations, the generic features of detective/victim/assassin, and reconfigures them to place the culpability of all these events at the doorstep of a single rogue businessman, Richard Bergstrom (Elliott Gould).

Big Business is also a central concern of Jonathan Demme’s 2004 remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* which contemporizes its source material in interesting and historically-contingent manners. The film, set in the present day, rehearses the new generic features by restaging John Frankenheimer’s 1962 classic by incorporating the corporate conspiracy trope into its overall structure. Here, Demme restages the Communist plot – the earlier coalition between Red Chinese and the Soviet Union – to reflect the anti-corporate cultural milieu. The new villain “Manchurian Global,” we are told, is not only the largest multinational corporation in the world but a company whose holdings extend to their “ownership” of the U.S. Senate. The film also revives the central figure of the assassin, who follows the path that Jameson set out for him, namely from detective, to assassin to victim, but with significant structural modifications. Ben Marco (Denzel Washington, standing in for Frank Sinatra) plays this central role, but the candidate himself, Raymond Prentiss Shaw (Liev Schrieber) occupies the space the Red-Baiting Johnny Eislín character formerly held. Additionally, Shaw is no longer programmed to be the assassin, but rather to become the president while Marco becomes the erstwhile assassin. The film also expresses a self-reflexive distance from the original film, complete with an awareness

of the devalued currency of conspiracy theory. An example of this occurs when Marco is attempts to put together the pieces of the "plot" in the New York City's public library; he sits beside an aged and heavier (not to mention living) Elvis Presley, incorporating one of the wilder conspiratorial claims that have circulated in the past forty years into its diegesis. That Shaw and Marco have been genetically reprogrammed by Manchurian Global to act as assassins by microchips installed in their heads is testament to the film's acknowledgement of its generic ancestry and restructures brainwashing narratives by way of *The Parallax View*. Most compelling is the manner that the film restages the contemporary political realities in the backdrop of the film, by first asserting that it is "today," (the lead-up to the actual 2004 presidential election) by staging a "virtual" election which tellingly hinges on the wedge issue of war and terrorism. The constant media feed which runs in the film's background performs the paranoid function of over-narrating its plot, by way of its constancy and its continued presence throughout the film. This phenomenon relates to the film's consistent use of sound bridges, where information that runs on the television or on radio feeds overlays most actions that Marco is performing on screen. Here, the viewer is constantly, if subtly, reminded of the constancy of Manchurian Global's influence. These announcements, which range from quarterly earnings reports, to the company's receiving no-bid contracts to restructure countries at war, in addition to their providing privatized troops to America to facilitate its savings, combines the genre's former tripartite fixtures, detective, killer and victim, but puts them to work in a ubiquitous corporate reality. At the same time, it is clear that Manchurian Global is an amalgam of The Carlyle Group and Halliburton. This is expressed in a pivotal scene when Marco brings his findings to Senator Tom Jordan (Jon Voight) who describes the company and its relationship to a global conspiracy when he states: "Among the shareholders of Manchurian Global, were they ever to publish a list,

which they won't, you'll find former presidents, deposed kings, trust-fund terrorists, fallen communist dictators, Ayatollahs, warlords and retired Prime Ministers." This statement could easily have been lifted out of the "fictional narrative" of Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, centralizing all of these figures in a single corporate body, the Carlyle Group, which is the corporate hub between the Saudis and the Bush family. The film clearly attempts to allegorize the systemic logic of power in the conspiracy narrative by its protagonist's navigation through the emerging power structures of his reality. This is the paranoid narrative at its most poignant, and the film markets this paranoia in a very similar manner to *Enemy of the State* whose tagline reads "[i]t's not paranoia if they're really after you." Here, Demme's film is even more concise, stating simply that: "Everything is under control."

The allegory of the corporate network extends to John Sayles' film *Silver City*, which originates from Sayles' disappointment in the Gore-Bush election (Sayles). Set in a Colorado gubernatorial race of 2004, the film's central feature is a dead-on imitation of George W. Bush as rendered by Chris Cooper, who plays the role of candidate Dickie Pillager. This impression sparks easy comparisons between the two figures and can be seen as the film's bridge between fiction and reality. The film's central investigator, Danny (Danny Huston), is hired to cover up a scandal by visiting the various figures in Pillager's life who would want to scandalize him. The film's detective trope falls soundly in line with Polanski's *Chinatown* as the cynical protagonist discovers a plot involving corporate and government collusion, the diversion of water flows, and an open ending where the bad guys mostly win. The film also has an uneasy relationship to humour, and it is not clear whether its sardonic tone is meant to express postmodern cynicism or an earnest attempt at promoting change. Regardless, the film rehearses a note-perfect rendition of

the conspiracy form that I have outlined – a protagonist who stumbles upon a network of government and business impropriety – in addition to representing the dilemma of illegal Mexican migrant labour in the United States. In characteristic style, Sayles presents this story in a network, with Danny acting as the film’s focalizer. Danny’s circumnavigation is best exemplified by his habit of drawing the connections of the network on the wall of his apartment, providing the viewer with a ‘map’ of the plot as it unfolds in addition to linking the film to the representational strategies of *All the President’s Men*.

The network narrative is central to the next phase of the cycle, but in the case of *Syriana*, *The Interpreter* and *The Constant Gardener* this feature is carried forward on a predominantly a global scale, relating to the dilemma of the figuration of multinational capital. These films all attempt, in extremely sophisticated fashions, to represent the new social space which is increasingly characterized by a burgeoning global consciousness. The dominance of “Big” corporations – in the case of *The Constant Gardener* “Big Pharma,” and in *Syriana* “Big Oil” – guarantees their categorization as conspiracy films, but also links them to a series of network narrative films that were prevalent in Hollywood’s crop of movies in 2005-06.¹

The Constant Gardener’s central setting in Kenya is an extremely interesting feature for our purposes as the film’s location shooting allows the viewer to make important connections between types of spaces and indeed, whole other countries as well. This produces an effect similar to Jameson’s description of the earlier cycle, which expresses “a kind of realism” (Jameson 1992b: 33). The film’s plot hinges on a love story between minor British diplomat Justin Quayle (Ralph Fiennes) and his wife Tessa (Rachel Weisz). When Tessa is brutally murdered, Justin attempts to make sense of her death by retracing the events that led to it. Quayle

uncovers a government and corporate scandal that Tessa threatened to expose and which she was killed for. Justin traces Tessa's pathways and goes even further by presenting the viewer with a narrative resolution. The main target of this film is the coalition between the world's largest pharmaceutical company, KDH, and its African subsidiary called "Three Bees." The plot (and conspiracy) involves Three Bees administering drug trials to the African populace and testing a tuberculosis drug called dipraxin on unwitting and poverty-stricken AIDS victims. This scandal involves a coalition between the major figures of the African diplomatic corps, and the diplomats' obvious impropriety by representing the interests of their government on the one hand, and the major pharmaceutical corporations on the other, where they sit on the board as executives. This plot echoes the films I have looked at thus far, but their multinational constitution – a story that spans from London, to Kenya, to Dusseldorf and back again – resembles the originality of the conspiracy film in its attempt to reflect, in Jameson's terms, a "geopolitical aesthetic" (Jameson 1992b). At the same time, their absorption of a paranoid narrative – the coalition between and figuration of the ultimately evil character Sir Bernard Pelligrin (Bill Nighy) who stands here as the film's resident President/CEO – embodies the characteristic problems in the attempt to depict the social and global totality, whose space we have seen, is already inherently paranoid. That the film actually shows the unwitting victims of multinational commerce, however, is a different feature as well and extends to the next film of the series, dealing directly with the influence of multinational corporations and, ultimately, their global consequences. This feature is shared by Steven Gaghan's film *Syriana* which, if anything else, represents an earnest attempt to map the contours of a contemporary reality borne from our society's addiction to oil.

That *Syriana* provides us with not one, but five protagonists – each of them charged with mapping the contours of his specific cultural sphere – in addition to a series of corresponding villains, testifies to the film’s postmodern “schizophrenia.” When combined with the paranoid logic of the conspiracy film’s features, the result is an extremely paranoid-schizophrenic view of the world. In this sense, the film not only resembles the postmodern traits and a “breakdown of a signifying chain,” but that this also relates to the “experience of pure material signifiers” which Jameson pinpoints as characteristic of the era (Jameson 1991: 27). In this specific manner, the film exploits the series of shorthand connotative markers that I explained earlier – negative signifiers such as “poverty,” “terrorism,” “oil,” “corporations,” and “government,” – and throws them together in the attempt to produce a political effect. Additionally, the film seemingly has no outside. Each of the protagonists are equally “blank” – we have no access to their emotional states – yet at the same they are all given equal weight within the narrative. Here, American spy Bob Barnes (George Clooney) attempts to trace the loss of a missile that went missing in an arms deal gone awry, Bennett Holliday (Jeffrey Wright) attempts to plug holes in the corporate wrongdoings of his corporate handlers, the Connex-Killen oil company, Bryan Woodman (Matt Damon) attempts to restructure the economy of an unnamed Middle Eastern country as its economic advisor, and a young Pakistani boy, Wasim, must attempt to find meaning in his life after losing his job at an oil refinery. The film’s narrative involves making the connections between corporate malfeasance, the CIA’s attempts to destabilize the region for the purposes of oil consumption, the effects of regional poverty and its connection to terrorism. There are some basic things that can be said about the film, particularly the way that it inherits the generic features of the conspiracy film. Indeed, the centrality of multinational commerce, the film’s accusation that the US government’s complicity ensures that this film provides a rich vein of

generic material to be analyzed with respect to the era that it emerges from and despite, or perhaps because of its complicated narrative, this remains a fruitful enterprise. The film's central assassination, where the incoming Emir of the unnamed country dies at the hands of an American cruise missile that the CIA launches at him, replays these generic signatures, but does so in such a way that it is nearly incomprehensible to the average viewer. On the one hand, the film is unsuccessful in its attempt to map the totality of government, corporate and multinational structures, but on the other, this may actually be the point. In this sense, the film may be the best evidence of Jameson's assertion that the attempt to map totality is doomed to failure, and that this can only be refashioned within the structure of "conspiracy theory." At the same time, it must be noted that this film, with its employment of big name actors such as George Clooney (for which he won the Oscar for Best Supporting actor) and Matt Damon, may render its political claims moot. In this sense we can see that the presence of stars, whether disguised under beards and added pounds (in the case of Clooney) may only ripen my claim that this film, though it attempts to be "political," may only represent another avenue for its ultimate commodification as a conventional Hollywood product.

This is precisely what the final third of this cycle reflects, as its films ultimately depict the toothless nature of the conspiracy genre's mannerist phase. Here, big-name actors are mobilized in interesting ways in films that mine the contemporary culture for material that is ultimately ingested and commodified within its forms. The first of these films, the Tony Scott/Jerry Bruckheimer collaboration *Déjà Vu*, stages its action in New Orleans in the post-Katrina setting. In the film's opening sequence, a terrorist attack on a passenger ferry, rocks the screen with its huge explosion. In the subsequent investigation, Detective Doug Carlin (Denzel

Washington) arrives on the scene and finds his major clue in the form of a woman's dead body. When Carlin is recruited by an elite force which tries to reassemble the mystery by observing the events from a device which allows them to see back seven days in the past, the film takes an extremely interesting (or if you prefer, absurd) turn. The film clearly depoliticizes the political resonance of the post-Katrina New Orleans, in addition to the issue of terrorism with the fantastic nature of its narrative, which ultimately ends up with Washington traveling back in time in order to fix the problem before it occurs. The film's central villain, Carol Oerstadt (Jim Caviezel) could have easily emerged from the nineties cycle, as his actions more clearly resemble the right-wing patriot/madman, than the corporate bully. Here, we can look to the nineties cycle, and to the *The X-Files* in particular in order to make sense of the film's narrative, syntactical and iconographic features. Additionally, we should not underestimate the prominence of the Scott/Bruckheimer team, as they could be said to be more influential in the commercialization of the conspiracy text than anyone else in the 1990s. That the film's plot provides the opportunity for Washington to perform high-speed car chases among other violent acts, and that the newfangled monitoring device also allows the audience to see the leading lady (and murder victim) traipse about in various states of undress should not be lost on us, as these are predominantly features of the blockbuster film.

The Number 23 rehearses a similar narrative, but one that is self-enclosed and subjective. In this film dogcatcher Walter Sparrow (Jim Carrey) happens upon a book that tells the story of a man that is obsessed with the number 23 and whose life Sparrow increasingly believes resembles his own. According to the book, it is this number governs all laws of the universe rather than external factors like government or corporate conspiracies. Importantly, the film's paranoid logic

is self-enclosed and irrelevant, which speaks to the late cycle's absorption of some of the films' popular traits for exploitation within the marketplace. *Shooter*, meanwhile, transparently lifts its plot from the 70s and 90s cycles, by recombining *Three Days of the Condor* with *Spy Game*. Here, former U.S. Marine sniper Bob Lee Swagger (Mark Wahlberg) is set up as the fall-guy for a conspiracy to kill the president of the United States. Though the film appears to belong to the conspiracy genre (Bob Lee has a copy of the 9/11 commission report on his desk) the film really operates as an excuse for Swagger to enact his revenge on the forces that plotted against him. This is a huge difference between film forms, one which places *Shooter* more soundly with in line with the action genre (complete with Wahlberg as its central star) rather than in the conspiracy film category. That Swagger is able to exact his revenge and shoot, blow up and kill all the bad guys that conspired against him in the second half of the film also presents a variation, or at the very least, a mannerist interpretation of the genre. This mainstreaming of the conspiracy narrative bleeds into other blockbuster films as well. At the heart of *The Transformers* (Michael Bay, 2007) lies the premise that the Hoover Dam was constructed to hide the presence of a giant robot discovered years ago in a manner that resembles *Independence Day* to a "T". *The Simpsons Movie* rehearses the trope of government and corporate complicity when "President Schwarzenegger," at the urging of his Environmental Advisor, covers the town of Springfield in a gigantic dome designed and maintained by his company. Finally, *The Bourne Trilogy* traces the subjective path of a former government assassin (Matt Damon) who attempts to recover his memory so that he can live an ordinary life.

The mainstreaming of the conspiracy network has further ramifications within the contemporary culture as well. Just as the Lone Gunman theory has largely been dismissed by the

public in favour of less stable historical claims, and the wilder claims of the 1990s went so far, in academic circles, as to assert that “the gulf war did not exist,” the serious conspiracy of our era remains that the United States government had something to do with the attacks of September 11th, 2001. That this myth is disseminated by way of the conspiracy film genre warrants its consideration of a genre-specific study, which must also be measured by the historical and critical contexts that previous cycles emerged within. In this sense, the contemporary conspiracy film cycle, in all its phases, may yet tell us something about our socio-political sphere by way of its earnest attempts to map the new and sometimes frightening contours of the increasingly globalized world.

Chapter Five Notes

¹ To these films we should add *Fast Food Nation* (Richard Linklater, 2006), *Crash* (Paul Haggis, 2005), and *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006).

Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Research

Throughout the course of this thesis, I have sought to contextualize the conspiracy film within what have been primarily generic, theoretical, industrial and historical parameters. This enterprise has involved investigating the genre's cyclical appearances within specific historical coordinates, while at the same time accounting for its evolution in the past thirty years. In this vein, I have sought to find suitable frameworks which appropriately situate the genre's political resonance throughout the course of its short life span. In Chapter Two I attempted to situate important theoretical issues – including postmodernism, postmodernity, Late Capital, and Jameson's concept of totality – against the cultural backdrop that the conspiracy film emerged from. This necessarily included considering the influence of the Watergate scandal, and indeed the “meaning” of then President Richard Nixon within the social sphere, in addition to examining the legacy of the 1960s on the cultural moment that films like *Chinatown*, *The Conversation*, *The Parallax View*, *All the President's Men*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Videodrome* captured within their cinematic frames. This discussion included reasoning the absorption of countercultural movements into the overall logic of the market, in addition to explaining the increasing surveillance of government and market forces on the American people as factors that ultimately accounted for the 70s cycle's extreme resonance. Additionally, I posited that these films' influence may have been partly due to their constitution at the vanguard of the postmodern film moment, which would account for their continuing presence as an intertextual reference for today's directors, and also the nostalgia for the “realism” that these films possessed. In Chapter Two I also sought to find appropriate theoretical models to perform this work with, and elaborated on Fredric Jameson's essay “Totality as Conspiracy” amidst other Jamesonian

concepts such as “totality” to “cognitive mapping” while keeping in mind his explanation of factors leading into postmodernism. This work was greatly supplemented by Stephen Paul Miller’s excellent poststructuralist “reading” of the 1970s, *The Seventies Now*, in addition to Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner’s political account of the genre films of this era. Finally, I utilized Richard Hofstadter’s essay “The Paranoid Style of American Politics,” as a bridge between the conspiracy films of the 1970s and my consideration of the 1990s.

In Chapter Three, my analysis took the opposite course, by attempting to counter the theory of the previous chapter by providing the reader with an intensive portrait of the industrial constitution of the 1990s film scene. The central issue of this discussion included accounting for the changes in “authenticity” between the 70s films and their Hollywood counterparts and to seek out reasons why this may have occurred. With my discussion of the Hollywood blockbuster, I sought to provide an industrial frame for the 1990s cycle by accounting for the fundamental issues of Hollywood’s restructuring within this era. I argued the “political” value of the 90s films, and their ultimate ability to convey “political” meaning were radically transformed within this era. Using Oliver Stone’s *JFK* as an example, I examined the issue of film politics within generic parameters, and argued that while Stone’s film may have been initially resonant, the inherent logic of the Hollywood system ultimately transformed and commodified these political claims within the internal dynamism of a new genre cycle. Chris Carter’s series, *The X-Files* is the chief example of this trend, where real questions regarding the nature of the U.S. government structures are refashioned into questions which ultimately relate to paranormal and extraterrestrial explanations. In this vein, *The X-Files* was viewed as an extraordinarily important series of works, one which simultaneously followed the phenomenal success of *JFK* and its influence on popular culture, while at the same time opening up and participating in what

is best described as a “conspiracy market.” The transformation of agency within this period, I argued, is also important, as it marked the change between allegations of possible government malfeasance in domestic affairs, to the externalization of these narratives as exemplified in the “evil lawyer” and “Michael Douglas” subgenres. In this sense, the popularity of films (and series) which proposed that the government was complicit in hiding the presence of aliens eclipsed the possibilities that this same government may have been involved in unflattering decisions regarding foreign and domestic policy, including a role in the Kennedy assassination. That these claims were rendered moot in the 1990s speaks to the overall logic of market forces, and to the systemic power of the Hollywood system to depoliticize, rather than politicize these issues. Additionally, the paranoia that is characteristic of the early cycle is replaced here with a fully-rendered version of Patrick Hofstadter’s “Paranoid Style.” This paranoid narrative, expressed by its need to explain everything, replaced the 70s films’ ambiguous endings with closed structures that usually end happily. My discussion of 1990s remakes explains how this phenomenon expressed itself in the latter part of the decade, as Hollywood essentially sundered films like *The Conversation* and *Taxi Driver* of their original resonance by inserting star driven narratives and romances within the newly developed “conspiracy market.” Finally, my discussion of the cycle’s mannerist period clearly demonstrated how this market exploits the earlier films, which are reduced to a series of shorthand gestures, and which are primarily utilized for comic effect. Finally, I asserted that these 90s films may still be meaningful but only insofar as they inherently express the logic of the Hollywood system, including the necessity of stars to drive their marketability and ancillary industries in addition to relying on existent material in order to convey their narratives.

In Chapter Four I used Michael Moore as an example of how the narrative features of the 1970s conspiracy film came to inhabit the resurgence of the documentary form in the 1990s and led to the present day narrative film. Central to this consideration is Moore's insertion of his "character" into the form, and how this creates a whole set of structural changes, not only to the documentary, but to the later films of the conspiracy genre. Foremost, the absorption of the paranoid style into the formal features of the non-fiction film resulted in a hybridized new entity which was essentially a "fictional non-fiction film." The new centrality of what I called the President/CEO gradually replaces the assassin in the earlier genre, and is a figure that Moore charges with guilt for the changes that occur to American society, including, but not limited to personal responsibility for the shift in the Manufacturing to a "Service" economy and the increased poverty in primarily manufacturing centers, such as automakers. Additionally, I demonstrated how Moore's character is set against the CEO in a manner that expresses binaries of good and evil, people versus companies, while at the same time attempting to expose the contemporary collusion between government and "big" businesses. Most importantly, I sought to elaborate how these new features relate to the iconographic, narrative and syntactical features which emerged in the last cycle.

In Chapter Five I accounted for the contemporary conspiracy film cycle's politically-conflicted nature. On the one hand, films like *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Syriana* and others genuinely express the desire to effect political change, while on the other hand, they can only convey these messages through their associations with earlier film forms such as those which emerged in the seventies. Furthermore, these films must market themselves to specific demographics which were developed by the independent film moment of the nineties, and were subsequently absorbed into the larger market by the studios' development of these avenues. The films of this cycle also

had to deal with the conspiracy genre's internal dynamism, which we can say allows these films to be politically resonant for only an instant before the market is flooded with films which "mainstream" their larger claims, while copying their internal coherence. This is ultimately why I ended my discussion with films like *Shooter* and *Deja Vu*, as these films only use American domestic politics as staging grounds to excuse their star-driven narratives. In this sense, we must view the contemporary conspiracy film cycle as the perfect synthesis between the politically-resonant films of the 1970s and the 1990s blockbuster, while at the same time accounting for its anti-corporate inheritance by way of its intersection with contemporary documentary film.

At the same time, this thesis has necessarily fallen prey to several problems during the course of this writing. The first of these is obviously related to the issue of breadth. In the negotiation between the nearly seventy films that this project deals with, several important films were necessarily and voluntarily omitted for the purposes of my argument's internal coherence. Among these casualties included the later films of the seventies cycle, including *Capricorn One* (Peter Hyams, 1978), *Winter Kills* (Richard Richert, 1979), and *Blow-Out* (Brian De Palma, 1981). In the nineties cycle, I was forced to use *The X-Files* as only one example among the many texts that I analyzed, but since it was not solely my purpose to examine its cultural import (which is a thesis in and of itself) I believe that the many books and articles devoted to the subject should serve as adequate reference for this subject matter. In the documentary section, it was necessary for me to make informed choices about what I should and shouldn't include, a result of which led Andrew Jarecki's excellent film *Why We Fight* (2005) to be omitted. I was also forced, for the purposes of clarity, to ignore a whole series of films which straddle the lines between conspiracy films and other genres, including many "thrillers" of the 1990s which would elsewhere serve as worthy fodder for complex investigatory material, particularly regarding the

John Grisham film subgenre. Additionally, it is my sincere hope that I have done some justice to the complexities of Fredric Jameson's writings, not only his overall thesis on postmodernism but particularly his essay "Totality as Conspiracy," which is an important and multifaceted work, and likely deserves its own analysis elsewhere and in more capable hands.

What I have achieved during the course of this thesis has been a systematized approach to the issue of the conspiracy film. As Rick Altman suggests, types of films disappear and reappear throughout the course of film history, and these phenomena do not necessarily always constitute a genre cycle, or even a proper genre. I believe that I have made a solid case for the proper constitution of the conspiracy film genre not only by accounting for its cyclical reappearances throughout its short history, but also by examining the narrative, syntactical and iconographic features that are unique to the respective cycles. It is my opinion that examining the internal dynamism of genre cycles as they move from classic, to settled to mannerist forms intracyclically is a useful theoretical construction, as it allows a film scholar the means to comprehensively examine the relative patterns that these generic expressions exhibit, while at the same time accounting for societal, industrial and historical factors which may influence the genre's particular eruption. Additionally, it is my belief that our knowledge of the specific nature of the conspiracy genre can aid us in examining the political value of contemporary films, and, armed with our conclusions regarding cultural factors that lead to the genre's phenomenal expressions, we can learn realistic lessons about our aspirations for film in general and politics in particular. I maintain that the conspiracy genre attempts to tell us something about the contours of our contemporary reality, but that it does so in such a way that it must ultimately express the logic of the system that it stems from, namely that of Late Capital. We may see, however, that the form in itself is the most properly "postmodern" of genres, and expresses the new

architectonics of a continuously changing multinational era by way of its changing iconographic, syntactical and narrative features.

Finally, it is my hope that this enterprise has not cynically demeaned what are obviously earnest efforts on the part of many individuals who obviously have a stake in trying to make the world a better place. I do not question their politics, but have merely sought to question, with my full array of skills as a film scholar, the effectiveness of these enterprises while additionally analyzing the forms they convey their messages with.

Recommendations for Further Study

The legacy of the 1970s as it influences contemporary film, I believe, is the most pressing question that this study raises. While I have attempted to apply the logic of this seemingly “authentically political” cinematic period to the study of a single genre, I believe that there is still a great deal of work to be done in this particular area. Related to this issue, the full elaboration of postmodernism within the industrial and historical frame of Hollywood from the 1970s onward is a project that largely seems to have been abandoned in the effort to cope with “post-9/11” films. Such a study might include revisiting the popular films of the 1980s and 1990s and accounting for the individual genres unique to these eras. The scholarship surrounding these eras, the 80s and 90s in particular, is widely scattered amongst critical sources, which are largely contained in compilation volumes that analyze films that have long since faded from the cultural sphere. The question of documentary film’s ontology, which I believe I raised within the course of this thesis, is another area which I believe must be thoroughly reasoned, and which a hybrid text such as Soderbergh’s *K-Street* or Michael Winterbottom’s increasingly interesting oeuvre

may help to explain. Some of these issues I hope to deal with in the coming years, but others are welcome to pursue them in my stead.

Finally, I believe that now is an extremely important time to study film, whether generically, theoretically, or historically, as film studies affords us the tools to cope with the increasing prominence of visual culture. It is my hope that we can bypass the politicization that has inhabited the field for the past thirty years and which has largely precluded many of our best minds rolling up their sleeves and getting important new work done. Close textual analysis would seem to be the key to the future success of this ongoing project, with films coming first and ancillary issues coming soon after. There is more than enough work to be done at this point for approaches of all stripes as the magnitude of the yearly releases of films worldwide (1000 +) leaves us all enough room, I think, for everyone to do their specific thing while still leaving lots to be done in the future.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 9/11: Loose Change* (dir. Dylan Avery, 2006).
- 9/11: Press for Truth* (dir. Ray Nowelsiewski, 2006).
- 9/11: The Road to Tyranny* (dir. Alex Jones, 2002).
- All the President's Men* (dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1976).
- Arrival, The* (dir. David Twohy, 1996).
- Assassination of Richard Nixon, The* (dir. Niels Mueller, 2004).
- Atomic Cafe* (dir. Jane Loader and Kevin Rafferty, 1982).
- Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (dir. Jay Roach, 1997).
- Beverly Hills Cop II* (dir. Tony Scott, 1987).
- Big One, The* (dir. Michael Moore, 1997).
- Blow-Out* (dir. Brian De Palma, 1981).
- Blow-Up* (dir. Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966).
- Born on the Fourth of July* (dir. Oliver Stone, 1989).
- Bowling for Columbine* (dir. Michael Moore, 2002).
- Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (dir. George Roy Hill, 1969).
- Chinatown* (dir. Roman Polanski, 1974).
- Consenting Adults* (dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1992).
- Conspiracy Theory* (dir. Richard Donner, 1997).
- Constant Gardener, The* (dir. Fernando Mereilles, 2005).
- Conversation, The* (dir. Francis Ford Coppolla, 1974).
- Corporation, The* (dir. Jennifer Abbott and Mark Achbar, 2003).
- Crimson Tide*, (dir. Tony Scott, 1995).
- Days of Thunder* (dir. Tony Scott, 1990).
- Déjà Vu* (dir. Tony Scott, 2007).
- Devil's Own, The* (dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1997).
- Dick* (dir. Andrew Fleming, 1999).

Disclosure (dir. Barry Levinson, 1994).

Dog Day Afternoon (dir. Sydney Lumet, 1975).

Enemy of the State (dir. Tony Scott, 1998).

Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room (dir. Alex Gibney, 2005).

Fahrenheit 9/11 (dir. Michael Moore, 2004).

Fahrenheit 9/11 (dir. Alan Peterson, 2004).

Falling Down (dir. Joel Schumacher, 1993).

Fast Food Nation (dir. Richard Linklater, 2006).

Fatal Attraction (dir. Adrian Lyne, 1987).

Firm, The (dir. Sydney Pollack, 1993).

Game, The (dir. David Fincher, 1997).

Godfather, The (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1972).

Independence Day (dir. Roland Emmerich, 1996).

In the Year of the Pig (dir. Emile de Antonio, 1968).

Interpreter, The (dir. Sydney Pollack, 2005).

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (dir. Don Siegel, 1956).

Jaws (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1975).

JFK (dir. Oliver Stone, 1991).

K-Street (dir. Steven Soderbergh, 2003).

Klute (dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1971).

The Lone Gunmen (TV series, Chris Carter, 2001).

Manchurian Candidate, The (dir. John Frankenheimer, 1962).

Manchurian Candidate, The (dir. Johnathan Demme, 2004).

Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media (dir. Mark Achbar, 1992).

Manufacturing Dissent (dir. Rick Caine and Debbie Melnyk, 2007).

Martial Law 9/11: The Rise of the Police State (dir. Alex Jones, 2005).

Matrix, The (dir. Wachowski Brothers, 1999).

Men In Black (dir. Barry Sonnenfeld, 1997).
Mulholland Drive (dir. David Lynch, 2001).
Munich (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2005).
Number 23, The (dir. Joel Schumacher, 2007).
Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism (dir. Robert Greenwald, 2004).
Parallax View, The (dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1974).
Pi (dir. Darren Aronofsky, 1998).
Pelican Brief, The (dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1992).
Platoon (dir. Oliver Stone, 1986).
Player, The (dir. Robert Altman, 1992).
Presumed Innocent (dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1990).
Report (dir. Bruce Connor, 1967).
Roger and Me (dir. Michael Moore, 1989).
Shooter (dir. Antoine Fuqua, 2007).
Sicko (dir. Michael Moore, 2007).
Silver City (dir. John Sayles, 2004).
Strike (dir. Sergei Eisenstein, 1925).
Spy Game (dir. Tony Scott, 2001).
Star Wars I-III (dir. George Lucas, 1999-2005).
Super Size Me (dir. Morgan Spurlock, 2004).
Syriana (dir. Steven Gaghan, 2005).
Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese, 1976).
The Great Conspiracy: The 9/11 News Special You Never Saw (dir. Barrie Zwicker, 2005).
Three Days of the Condor (dir. Sydney Pollack, 1975).
Them! (dir. Gordon Douglas, 1954).
The Simpsons Movie (dir. James L. Brooks, 2007).
The Thin Blue Line (dir. Errol Morris, 1988).

Top Gun (dir. Tony Scott, 1986).

Transformers (dir. Michael Bay, 2007).

TV Nation, (TV series, dir. Michael Moore, 1994).

Usual Suspects, The (dir. Bryan Singer, 1995).

V for Vendetta (dir. James McTeigue, 2006).

Videodrome (dir. David Cronenberg, 1983).

Wag the Dog (dir. Barry Levinson, 1997).

Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price (dir. Robert Greenwald, 2005).

Wayne's World (dir. Penelope Spheeris, 1992).

Who Framed Roger Rabbit? (dir. Robert Zemeckis, 1988).

Who Killed the Electric Car? (dir. Chris Payne, 2006).

Why We Fight (dir. Andrew Jarecki, 2005).

X-Files, The (TV series, dir. Chris Carter 1993-2002).

X-Files: Fight the Future (dir. Rob Bowman, 1998).

Zoolander (dir. Ben Stiller, 2001).

Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 2000.
- Altman, Rick, *Film/Genre*. London: BFI Publishing Inc., 1999.
- Barthes, Roland, "The Rhetoric of the Image" in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985: 21-40.
- Baudrillard, Jean, "The Procession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra & Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994: 1-42.
- Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969: 217-251.
- Bruzzi, Stella, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Surley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.
- Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. London: Continuum, 1989.
- Dick, Jason, "Zoolander as a Parable and Parody of the Classic Conspiracy Narrative in Contemporary Western Culture" in *Mediations: Volume 1, Number 1*.
<http://www.fims.uwo.ca/mit/mediations/pdfs/Mediations-Essay03-Zoolander.pdf>. 2004.
- Dixon, Wheeler Winston, "Introduction: The New Genre Cinema," in *Film Genre 2000*. ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon. New York: State University of New York Press, 2000: 1-12.
- . "Twenty-Five Reasons Why It's All Over" in *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Cinema in the Nineties*. ed. John Lewis. New York: New York University Press, 2001: 356-66.
- Donner, Frank J., *The Age of Surveillance: The Aims and Methods of America's Political Intelligence System*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980.
- Eco, Umberto, "Fictional Protocols," in *Six Walks in Fictional Wood*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Foucault, Michel, "On Panopticism," in *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1977.
- Gomery, Douglas, "The Hollywood Blockbuster: Industrial Analysis and Practice," in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer. London: Routledge, 2003: 72-98.

- Heath, Joseph and Andrew Potter, *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't Be Jammed*. Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2004.
- Hoberman, J., *The Dream Life: Movies, Media and the Mythology of the Sixties*. New York: The New Press, 2003.
- Hofstadter, Richard, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965.
- Jameson, Fredric, "Periodizing the 60s," in *The 60s Without Apology*, ed. by Sohnya Sayres, Anders Stephanson, et. al. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984: 178-209
- . "Cognitive Mapping," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988: 356.
- . *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.
- . "Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture: *Dog Day Afternoon* as a Political Film." *Signatures of the Visible*. New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1992: 35-54.
- . "Totality as Conspiracy" in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992: 1-84.
- . *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern*. London: Verso, 1998.
- King, Geoff, *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- . "Stardom in the Willenium," in *Contemporary Hollywood Stardom*, ed. Thomas Austin and Martin Barker. London: Arnold, 2003.
- . *American Independent Cinema*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- Klein, Naomi, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2000.
- Knight, Peter, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to The X-Files*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Lewis, John, "Following the Money in America's Sunniest Corporate Town: Some Notes on the Political Economy of the Hollywood Blockbuster," in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer. London: Routledge, 2003: 61-71.
- Lev, Peter. *American Films of the 70s: Conflicting Visions*. Texas: University of Texas Press, 2000.

- Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979.
- Marcuse, Herbert, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.
- Mazetti and Weiner, "Files on Illegal Spying Show C.I.A. Skeletons From Cold War," *The New York Times*, June 27, 2007.
- Melley, Timothy. *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000.
- Miller, Steven Paul, *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance*. Texas: Duke University Press, 1999.
- O'Donnell, Patrick. *Latent Destinies: Cultural Paranoia and Contemporary U.S. Narrative*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000.
- Pratt, Ray, *Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film*. Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2001.
- Ryan, Michael and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*. Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1990.
- Sharett, Christopher, "End of Story: The Collapse of Myth in Postmodern Narrative Film," in *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Cinema in the Nineties*. ed. John Lewis. New York: New York University Press, 2001: 319-331.
- Schatz, Thomas, "The New Hollywood," in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer. London: Routledge, 2003: 15-44.
- Sturken, Marita, "Affliction: When Male Paranoid Narratives Fail" *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Cinema in the Nineties*. ed. John Lewis. New York: New York University Press, 2001: 203-209.
- Žižek, Slavoj, "Why is Reality Always Multiple?" *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991: 195-233.
- . "'The Thing That Thinks': The Kantian Background of the Noir Subject" in *Shades of Noir*. ed. Joan Copjec. London: Verso, 1993: 199-226.