

POST TRUTH, JUSTICE, AND THE FEMININE WAY

*An examination of justice and female agency in mainstream American
conspiracy films from the 1970s to present with the aim of developing
politically forceful narratives*

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ABSTRACT

The American conspiracy film is at a crossroads where, if it continues to apply 20th century paradigms and moral expectations onto 21st century narratives, the genre stands to lose its political force and relevance -- subsumed by a proliferating conspiracy culture.

This thesis draws on the relationship between conspiracy film and conspiracy history to identify a steady loss of political force from the 1970s into the 21st century as justice evolves from public-facing to private-facing, culminating in the genre's present 'lame duck' period. This paradigm of depleting political force does not apply to female-led conspiracy narratives, for whom strides in women's liberation off-screen translate to augmented female agency on-screen, leading to greater senses of justice and political force as they progress into the 21st century. My catalogue of over 100 data points indexing the patterns, motifs, characters, and characteristics of American conspiracy films over the last 50 years led directly to my original contributions of knowledge: my three-phased classification of justice in the genre and creation of discourse dedicated specifically to female conspiracy protagonists, along with the multitude of new terms introduced to analyse, qualify, and augment the political force of conspiracy films (i.e.: 'tradition 1 and 2 narratives', 'privatisation of the antagonist', 'corruption of the protagonist', 'utility of the team', etc.) By utilising a dual methodology of critical film analysis (contextualised amidst contemporaneous socio/historical/political events) this thesis examines *what happened* in the conspiracy genre, whilst employing practice as research through a hauntological lens in order to question, investigate, and propose: *what next?*

In doing so, three core elements of the conspiracy narrative (the Protagonist, Behemoth, and Mechanisms for Justice) are updated and fortified against solipsism and cynicism with practical techniques to employ; for when truth cannot be trusted, it is *justice* that will ignite conspiracy narratives' political force.

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And to all the conspiracy heroes and heroines who have inspired me to overcome, to speak up, and to seek justice.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and that I am the sole author. An early version of the first chapter was published (in print) as “The Privatisation of Justice in American Conspiracy Film” in *Film International* (2019, volume 17, issue 1). “Hauntological Screenwriting: Reflections on *Render*”, the creative analysis on my feature screenplay, has been submitted for consideration to the upcoming issue of *Journal of Screenwriting*. I have presented papers for all three of my chapters; most recently, my visual essay “Weapons of Mass Disruption” at *Global Concerns in Storytelling* (University of York Dept of Theatre, Film, Television and Interactive Media - Postgraduate Virtual Symposium 2020). This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged in the Bibliography.

INTRODUCTION

“If I am getting ready to speak at length about ghosts...

it is in the name of *justice*”

- Jaques Derrida, 1994

What becomes of a genre anchored by its faith in truth, justice, and liberty, when, today, the meaning of truth is open to interpretation and justice is in the eye of the beholder? The American conspiracy film, long dependent on its strong moral compass to glorify the democratic order, is at a crossroads where, in applying 20th century paradigms and expectations of right and wrong to 21st century narratives, it stands to lose all political force and relevance, subsumed in a proliferating conspiracy *culture*.

This thesis is situated in the aftermath of 2016 (in which the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the year was declared “post-truth”) and the following sharp transformation of the press, from what was once the conspiracy genre’s Watchdog for Democracy, into the ‘Fake News Media’. As academics and the public alike grapple with new relationships to our traditional modes of information, connection, and justice, this thesis has truly ridden abreast, and forms a part, of a new wave of scholarship and investigation dedicated to this 21st century status-quo of interconnectivity, social media, technological innovation, and political polarisation. Thus blending the boundary between entertainment, politics, and academia, this thesis poses the following research questions:

- How does the evolution in representations of justice in mainstream American conspiracy film affect the political force of these narratives?
- Do female-driven conspiracy films abide by the genre’s 3-phased evolution of justice that I propose and are they politically forceful?
- What distinct methods can contemporary conspiracy narratives implement to regain their political force?

At a time when the language of conspiracy has moved beyond entertainment and “has become a familiar feature of the political and cultural landscapes,” (Knight, 2000, p.1) this thesis investigates *conspiracy films* -- not merely the plot device that intersects many genres and multiple mediums, but a genre unto itself that:

- Is “about the unseen operations of the powerful few and the effect they have on the lives of the powerless masses,” (Donovan, 2011, p.13)
- “Foregrounds the abuse of power, the hidden manipulation of the political, economic or legal systems, the manipulation of the entire country and culture” (Donovan, 2011, p.13),
- Presents a protagonist who exhibits “agency panic”, defined by Timothy Melley as “an intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy” (2000, p.12).

The adjudication of conspiracy films’ ‘political force’ here is predicated on notions of justice; not laws, but a confluence of Derrida’s social responsibility¹, the requisite transparency of Rawls’ “justice as fairness”², and Plato’s theory of justice where individual justice is ascertained by an examination of community justice³. The portrayals of justice referred to when describing the political force of conspiracy films:

- Usually stem from an exposure of truth regarding an act or system of unfairness (i.e.: corruption, deceit, abuse of power, etc.) -- either to a singular person or to the public. The greater the exposure of this truth, the greater a film’s sense of justice.
- Include punishment for this corruption, deceit, or abuse of power. Whether this retribution is adequate or viable also affects how strong the film’s sense of justice is.

¹ “No justice... seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*... before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead” (Derrida, 1994, p.xviii).

² “This explains the propriety of the name ‘justice as fairness’: it conveys the idea that the principles of justice are agreed to in an initial situation that is fair” (Rawls, 1971, p.11)

³ “I suggest that we should begin by inquiring what justice means in a state. Then we can go on to look for its counterpart on a smaller scale in the individual” (*Republic*, 2.369a).

This thesis asserts that conspiracy films with strong, clear senses of justice (or injustice) have political force; that is: they contain narratives which demand attention or action to redress the unfair, corrupt, or abusive behaviour that these films reflect. This connection between the conspiracy genre and its social context coheres with Neale's argument that "genres are important socio-cultural phenomena and that they perform important socio-cultural functions" specifically as "vehicles of and for the exploration of ideas, ideals, cultural values and ideological dilemmas central to American society" (Neale, 2000, p.220). Neale's grouping of genre theories into "those which deal with the aesthetic composition and characteristics of genres, and those which deal with their social and cultural significance" (2000, p.207) correlates with the cataloguing of recurring motifs, situations, and characterisations found in the appendix 'Conspiracy Film Tropes' and the syntactic⁴ inquiry within each of this thesis' three chapters. Genre is a process, and "when a group's attitudes undergo some change, new formulas arise and existing formulas develop new themes and symbols" (Caweltie, 1976, p.34). Indeed, the purpose of this research is not only to investigate the building blocks of the conspiracy genre and how they are arranged, but to interrogate the growing chasm between audience's attitudes and relationships to these characters, behemoths, and mechanisms for justice in order to ascertain and finally (through the proposal of such new formulas, themes, and symbols) augment their political force.

The bedrock of mainstream American conspiracy film scholarship is Donovan's noteworthy *Conspiracy Films: A Tour of Dark Places in the American Conscious*; this decade-by-decade examination, of not only conspiracy narratives across film and television but the actual conspiracy theories that inspire these stories, traces the origin of conspiracy cinema to the 1930s, following it as it heats up Hollywood in the years succeeding the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy in 1963 -- long

⁴ Altman distinguishes between "generic definitions which depend on a list of common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets, and the like -- thus stressing the *semantic* elements which make up the genre -- and definitions which play up certain constitutive relationships between undesignated placeholders -- relationships which might be called the genre's fundamental *syntax*" (1987, p.95, emphasis added).

earmarked as the moment of America's "loss of innocence" (2011, p.24) -- and into the 21st century. This thesis draws upon Donovan's establishment of a clear relationship between the conspiracy genre and the socio-political events that take place around these conspiracy narratives, but begins its engagement with conspiracy film at the eradication of the Motion Picture Code⁵ in 1968 which marked a turning point in the genre by opening the floodgates for films that no longer required a self-censoring, patriotic standpoint against menacing 'foreigners' or communist 'others', but rather pointed the conspiratorial finger back at America itself. Whilst firmly situated within the historical framework that Donovan presents, this thesis deepens his approach by establishing justice as a key identifier in the evolution of the genre and expands upon it by creating discourse on conspiracy *heroines* -- for which (unlike the genre as a whole) there is no singular, guiding text. Informed by available literature on specific titles -- gendered readings of *The Stepford Wives* (1975), Borda's *Women Labor Activists in the Movies* for *Silkwood* (1983) and *North Country* (2005), and so on -- this thesis incorporates such studies with my own observations, contextualising them alongside women's liberation in America to create a previously unseen picture of female conspiracy protagonists and their ability to affect justice.

Jameson's usage of conspiracy as a form of cognitive mapping and his analysis of select conspiracy films is tangentially pertinent to this research as it identifies symptoms of a specific cultural moment, but his argument on an inability "to focus our own present, as though we have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience" (in Foster, 1983, p.117) became especially relevant when it came to the creative practice element. Where Jameson may not seek to view conspiracy films as a continuous, contemporaneous genre, nor as a medium with political force, this thesis is motivated by the understanding that "just as movies reflect the anxieties, beliefs, and values of the cultures that produce them, they also help to shape and solidify a culture's beliefs.

⁵ The Motion Picture Production Code was a number of moral guidelines set by the major motion picture studios of America; it was eventually abandoned once it became impossible to enforce and replaced with the MPAA Film Ratings System.

Sometimes the influence is trivial... sometimes the impact can be profound, leading to social or political reform, or the shaping of ideologies” (Lule, 2016, p.327). More than critical film analysis, this thesis actively proposes new methods by which the conspiracy genre can present politically forceful, mainstream cinematic narratives which reflect and even, perhaps, shape culture and politics. Politicising entertainment may have once seemed naive or inappropriate but, when a reality TV show host can be elected president of ‘the most powerful nation on earth’ -- can it not be said that entertainment has already been politicised?

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Before it was this thesis, it was just a *feeling*: that modern conspiracy films were somehow different... less powerful, less triumphant... Was it just misplaced nostalgia? Or was it something I could devise? It was this feeling that, before I could even begin to pose formidable research questions, drove me to ask of the conspiracy genre: *What happened?*

I did not know that traditional conspiracy films were public-facing; I did not know that the privatisation of neoliberal politics would trickle down in the late 1980s-90s, or that the trappings of conspiracy culture and the post-truth lexicon that were only beginning to emerge when I began this thesis were already crippling the political force of modern conspiracy narratives. I was unaware that justice would be the key to revealing these phases of the genre and eventually unlocking their political force. Academic discourse on a genre dedicated to dramatising *conspiracy* -- for some a tool to “discredit these believers by making them look like deranged, delusional fanatics”⁶ (Donovan, 2014, p.12) -- is slim; but I had the movies themselves -- and so I watched, and I observed.

My indexing of the patterns, motifs, characters, and characteristics of mainstream American conspiracy films over the last 50 years is now an

⁶ “When Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein published one of their reports on the illegal tapping at the Watergate Hotel, the White House sought to discredit the Washington Post by claiming that the newspaper was propagating ‘conspiracy theories’ as a means of discrediting political opponents” (Byford, 2011, p.30).

expansive catalogue of over 100 films and data points on the protagonists (gender, race, profession), themes/motifs (“follow the money”, “who is listening/watching?”), plot devices (someone dies/disappears, superior/confidant is actually a traitor), tropes (speaking in code, referencing a mysterious “they”) and even notes on representation (diverse supporting cast, persistent male seen as charming/attractive, female love interest dies or in danger). This document, ‘Conspiracy Film Tropes (1969-2020)’ informs and supports the genre-based assertions this thesis makes with quantitative data about conspiracy films where there previously was none. Being able to visually trace the appearance of new themes, characters and plot devices became the groundwork on which I could contextualise the socio/historical/political context that these films are embedded in -- whether it be Watergate, women’s liberation, or the search for WMDs.

Using my ‘Conspiracy Film Tropes’ document, my first chapter contextualises conspiracy films within the larger political system they inhabit and identifies the evolution of justice with a new metric: the *seen* and *unseen threat*, which distinguishes two major forces of the conspiracy narrative -- the protagonist’s motivation and the conspiracy at hand. My introduction of key terminology like *tradition 1* and *tradition 2* narratives to qualify the interaction between the seen and unseen threat allowed me to finally distinguish the evolution of political force in the conspiracy genre that so far I had only felt: that the neoliberal ideology that begins to emerge at the end of the 1980s correlates to a seen/unseen threat disjoint and a *privatisation* in the motives of the protagonist, leading to a loss of political force that continues even after the genre’s return to politically-minded, public-facing conspiracy narratives in the wake of 9/11.

But what about the women? In my second chapter I investigate whether this three-phased evolution of justice applies to female-led conspiracy films. In doing so, I discern not an evolution of justice, but of *agency* for conspiracy heroines and an endurance in these films’ political force due to female protagonists’ seen threats being representative of both private and public-facing struggles. Female-led conspiracy films do not exhibit a loss

of political force as the male majority does; instead, they become more politically forceful. As the women's liberation movement empowered women off-screen, so too does female agency develop and progress on-screen, allowing these characters to create powerful, public-facing justice.

If my first two chapters look at the past to question: *What happened?* it is in my third chapter that I embark into the unknown future of how conspiracy narratives can reinvigorate their political force by asking: *What next?* I begin with a recognition that conspiracy culture, now embedded in politics and entertainment, has changed audiences' relationships to the traditional mechanisms for justice, protagonists, and antagonistic behemoths that have been presented within the conspiracy genre for the last 50 years. Contemporary perceptions of truth, justice, and liberty are not only polarised but *pluralised*, sending the once steadfast moral compass of the conspiracy genre into a tailspin. But even without a strong sense of moral direction, the genre is not lost: the prevalence of conspiracy narratives in television drama and across myriad genres and mediums indicates its potency in the public consciousness -- the question becomes: how to not waste this scope with weak conspiracy narratives that lack political force? To this I propose six new techniques and a new, 21st century behemoth for contemporary conspiracies to reckon with. Where my chapters present a broad exploration of my research questions, my utilisation of case studies allows for an acute application of their corresponding concepts and terminology -- whether it be to demonstrate each of the genre's three phases of justice in my first chapter, to scrutinise two distinct forms of the conspiracy heroine in my second, or to verify the use and efficacy of my six techniques for contemporary conspiracy films in my third chapter.

As an appendix, I present corresponding video essays with each of my three chapters which, when viewed together, form a 'Visual Thesis'; its purpose is to demystify and make accessible this doctoral research whilst incorporating and utilising the visual and aural aspect of the genre's cinematic medium. Included is a documentary style 'script' for each visual essay with a transcription of the narration and visual descriptions of the

action; however, it is the richness of the soundtrack, framing, tone of voice, and emotions of the actors (and the ability to compare films side-by-side) that provides a more dimensional engagement than the paper scripts. At a time when in-person teaching and learning has been an at-risk activity due to COVID-19, the ability to distill substantial ideas into concise, engaging, digital resources is especially apropos.

Where the analysis of conspiracy films in my chapters, case studies, and essay films relies on an approach of reflecting back, my use of practice as research is a forward-facing method that tests the efficacy of the techniques and terminology I propose by using such observations as a *basis for creation* as opposed to a *basis for analysis*. My process here parallels Fisher's observation that "cultural time has folded back on itself, and the impression of linear development has given way to a strange simultaneity" (2014, p.9) where, in order to imagine a new conspiracy narrative I must look backward and ask: *What happened?* whilst simultaneously gazing forward to enquire: *What next?* The application of hauntology⁷, as a lens through which to view my creative practice in this respect is particularly pertinent as a means of grappling with the 'no longer' of traditional conspiracy narratives and the 'not yet' of unseen, politically forceful, contemporary conspiracy narratives.

The two creative practice elements included in this thesis are *Fissure* (short screenplay) and *Render* (feature screenplay). Situated after my first and second chapters, *Fissure* is the first assimilation of my academic research with my screenwriting experience. Created using markers from my 'Conspiracy Tropes' document, *Fissure* does more than simply reverse engineer a pastiche, it utilises the economy of the short screenplay medium to interrogate, evaluate, and explore the ideas and assertions made in those first two chapters. Specifically, it attempts to overcome the cynicism and solipsism of the privatised phase of the genre by creating a

⁷ "Derrida's aim is to formulate a general 'hauntology' (*hantologie*), in contrast to the traditional 'ontology' that thinks of being in terms of self-identical presence. What is important about the figure of the specter, then, is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is *no longer* or *not yet*" (Hägglund, 2008, p.82).

seen/unseen threat disjoint where the protagonist's public duty eventually overrides her personal/private objectives, and it employs a woman protagonist to interrogate the relevance of a contemporary, culturally approved rhetoric for femininity that continues to restrict conspiracy heroines' agency. In preparation for Chapter 3, *Fissure*'s final aim is to posit the question of justice within contemporary conspiracy culture: what could I learn from this screenplay about how traditional mechanisms for justice cope with post-truth? These aims, which I found initially straightforward to answer academically, would be continually revisited creatively as I found myself still reimagining *Fissure* even a year after its conception when revelations made in the creation of my visual essays and development of *Render* would ripple backwards and forwards like Fisher's "strange simultaneity" (2014, p.9). Where *Fissure* serves as a petri dish within which to trial the propositions of my first two chapters, *Render* is a feature-length conspiracy screenplay written to demonstrate, stress-test, and appraise the techniques and methods I propose in my third chapter. Its ambition is to serve as a contemporary genre model for a politically forceful tradition 1 conspiracy thriller by updating key genre elements within a story world that utilises conspiracy culture and a growing mediation of lived experience through technology. *Render* features a non-white, working-class female protagonist whose agency is restricted by forces of the unseen threat rather than a regressive, culturally approved rhetoric for femininity as identified in my second chapter, and seeks to overcome the genre's weakened political force by utilising the new techniques for Protagonist, Behemoth, and Mechanisms for Justice that I developed while writing *Fissure* and that I formally propose in my third chapter. Where *Fissure* highlighted the need for a dense interplay between these three key elements with a focus on character, *Render* struggled as a 21st century screenplay largely inspired by films made in the 20th. In subsequent rewrites, *Render* balances this hauntological tension by letting go of the 20th century indicators and making space to conjure the spectre of a technological near-future amidst our present conspiracy culture. *Render*'s theme, "ghosts", is especially apt in this sense as a metaphor for humans whose lives are becoming ever-more mediated through technology, and a reference to the hauntological process that engendered

the screenplay. Applying the concepts of my thesis to *Fissure* and *Render* were demonstrative as *creative practice*; but it was the rewriting and the analysing of my own work through which the process became *practice as research*, and it was the rediscovery of the connection between the personal and the political -- between plot and character, and between myself as the academic and myself as the screenwriter -- that ignites their political force.

CHAPTER 1

The privatisation of justice in American conspiracy film

From the public-facing, politically forceful discourse of the 1970s to now

A three-phased evolution in the representation of justice in conspiracy films begins in the 1970s when we enter into what I refer to as the traditional mode of conspiracy thriller narratives. This traditional style remains largely until the late 1980s, when a new trend emerges where “the term ‘conspiracy’ rarely signifies a small, secret plot anymore. Instead, it frequently refers to the workings of a large *organisation, technology, or system*, a powerful and obscure entity... ‘Conspiracy,’ in other words, has come to signify a broad array of social controls” (Melley, 2000, p.8). It is these social controls that mean what was once an enemy of the state, in conspiracy narratives from the late 1980s-90s, becomes an enemy of the *self*. In this transition from public-facing to private, individualistic narratives, I posit that the political force and sense of justice within such conspiracy films is drowned out in the narrative’s solipsism. “If genre theory tells us that a film genre’s function is to use its limited conventions to comment on a specific social problem, the conspiracy film deals with why we are so afraid today of losing control, of being manipulated by unseen cabals of amoral, even murderous, power brokers” (Donovan, 2011, p.13). In the late 1980s-90s, conspiracy films were dominated by a paranoia that was centred around identity. No longer were these films asking who the mysterious “they” was, but rather, “who am I?” and it was the protection and preservation of the private sphere which overruled the public good. The privatisation of the conspiracy narrative uproots traditional conspiracy films’ altruistic origins -- so much so that when a resurgence of public-facing conspiracy narratives emerged in the aftermath of 9/11⁸ and the US President George W. Bush Administration’s search for weapons of mass destruction, an honourable press and a lawful government were no longer viable mechanisms for justice. Couple this with the proliferation of news and social media in the latter half of the 2010’s to

⁸ 9/11 refers to the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Virginia, USA.

propagate a profusion of opinions, perspectives and 'alternative facts,' and the culture of paranoia previously reserved for conspiracy films seamlessly blends into public consciousness to create a contemporary *conspiracy culture*. In this way, privatised conspiracy narratives fail the genre by foregoing comment on larger political injustices in order to wrestle with the postmodern, personal struggles of the protagonist, either by personifying the conspiracy's system in the form of a single villainous mastermind or, in conspiracy films from 2005-onwards, by returning to traditional tropes of the genre without considering how they engage with conspiracy culture.

Phase 1 (1968 - 1988): Truth, Justice and the American Way

Public-Facing Narratives in Traditional Conspiracy Thrillers

In the wake of the JFK assassination in 1963, the removal of the Motion Picture Code in 1968, and the Watergate Scandal in 1972, a wave of suspicious, cynical and conspiracy-minded films infiltrated mainstream cinema: "a separate, unique class of film... reflecting that particularly late twentieth century fixation on abuses of power, wrongdoing in high places, paranoia and distrust," dealing "not only with the manipulation of laws, but with the conspirator's very manipulation of social mores, conventions and customs to ensure their position of unchallenged power and privilege" (Donovan, 2011, p.13). In the aftermath of the tumultuous 1960s, "American films of the seventies frequently insist that changes in the social order are beyond our control" (Mellen, 1977, p. 293); and yet, the notion that changes in the social order are possible, and encouraged, in the name of truth, justice, and the public good is precisely what fuelled conspiracy narratives from the Nixon⁹ years until the late 1980s. Mellen's assertions that "the quiescence of the American public after the revelations of Watergate exposed the corruption pervading government has encouraged filmmakers in their insistence that evil really stems from the poor" (1977, p.293) ignores that it was the prerogative of conspiracy thrillers of the

⁹ Richard Nixon was president of the United States from January 1969 to August 1974 when, confronted with the possibility of impeachment, he became the first US president to resign from office.

1970s to call out large, powerful, and wealthy institutions, often via the press. Conspiracy thriller plots overwhelmingly revered the pursuit of truth by (mostly) male protagonists at all costs and hailed the press as the protector of those values. Journalists became recurring, iconic heroes in the genre, glorifying the media's role as "watchdog of government" (Francke, 1995, p.110) by consistently presenting the press as an antidote to growing public distrust in the mid-1970s. If the rest of Hollywood in the 1970s was busy blaming immigrants and the poor the way conspiratorial plots before 1968 were blamed on foreign enemies¹⁰ "the post-JFK era focused its fears inward" (Donovan, 2011, p.23), with conspiracy narratives clearly holding the magnifying glass up to the American establishment.

This wave of paranoid films are a clear reaction to Vidal's "National Security State"¹¹; blending the 'paranoid style' with entertainment and creating a narrative space where "paranoia and conspiracy thinking may be a rational way of understanding the path of recent US history" (Baker, 2006, p.52). This is apparent in a string of conspiracy thrillers from the 1970s which directly or indirectly reflected events from their contemporary political landscape¹². However they respond to current events, traditional conspiracy thrillers from the 1970s to the late 1980s engage with paranoia through 'seen' and 'unseen' threats:

seen threat: this is the protagonist's primary objective¹³, bound up in the threats immediately posed to their person. For example: in *The Parallax View* (1974, dir. Alan J. Pakula), Joe Frady's seen threat is to

¹⁰ Inspired by WW2, the Cold War, and fueled by the Red Scare, American conspiracy films between the 1940s-60s saw the foreign 'other' as primary antagonists (i.e.: *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962, dir. John Frankenheimer).

¹¹ Vidal's "National Security State" includes "a whole series of developments... from the National Security Act of 1947, through internal FBI investigations of subversion, through the assassinations of the 1960s, to the Watergate affairs," (Baker, 2006, p.51).

¹² See Appendix: *Conspiracy Film Tropes: 1969-2020*

¹³ The seen threat resembles what many screenwriting manuals refer to as "character want": a superficial/external/active objective which contrasts with "character need", the internal/psychological or unconscious goal; though the relationships between seen/unseen threat and character want/need are dichotic, the relationship between character need and the unseen threat are not analogous.

find out who killed Senator Carroll. It is his primary motivation and the reason he comes into harm's way throughout the film.

unseen threat: this is the conspiracy at large, often defined by the need to cover up corruption, crimes, or can also be a network of surveillance unbeknownst to, and in conflict with, the protagonist. In *The Parallax View*, the unseen threat would be that the Parallax Corporation is actually an assassin farm.

Traditional conspiracy films from the 1970s until the late 1980s largely abide by what I term 'public-facing' narratives, where the success or failure of the protagonist's story is inextricably hinged to a political/public situation. This narrative style is consistently found in conspiracy thrillers from the 1970s to the mid-1980s¹⁴ where the protagonist's journey is entwined with the conspiracy, largely in one of two variations:

tradition 1: Where both the seen and unseen threats are addressed/solved/exposed to the benefit of the protagonist and the general public¹⁵. *3 Days of the Condor* (1975, dir. Sydney Pollack) abides by this trend: Joe Turner's primary motive is to stay alive; in order to do this, he must unravel the conspiracy, exposing the CIA's plan to seize oil fields in the Middle East in the process. The hero not only protects themselves, but has also brought truth, and/or justice, and/or safety, to the public sphere.

tradition 2: where, in solving or attempting to solve the seen threat, the protagonist perishes or loses everything worth living for to the power of the unseen threat¹⁶. In conspiracy thrillers whose endings did not address both the seen and unseen threat, the following

¹⁴ This does not take into consideration female-led conspiracy narratives; for further detail, see Chapter 2.

¹⁵ Tradition 1 public-facing conspiracy thrillers include: *Klute* (1971), *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), *3 Days of the Condor* (1975), *All the President's Men* (1976), *Capricorn 1* (1977), *The China Syndrome* (1979).

¹⁶ Tradition 2 public-facing conspiracy thrillers include: *The Anderson Tapes* (1971), *Chinatown* (1974), *The Parallax View* (1974), *The Conversation* (1974), *The Domino Principle* (1977), *Winter Kills* (1979).

alternative ending occurs which defines tradition 2 public-facing narratives: the hero's seen threat (primary motivation) is addressed, but they inevitably lose to the power of the conspiracy: the hero may finally know the truth, but he has perished in the pursuit of it and often plays right into the behemoth's hand, a la *The Parallax View* (1974). *Blowout* (1981, dir. Brian De Palma) follows the same trend: Jack finally knows the truth but, at the cost of Sally's life and the loss of any incriminating evidence, he finally has the perfect scream for his movie soundtrack -- the very reason he was witness to the conspiracy in the first place. In tradition 2 narratives there is a sense of gross injustice: although the seen threat/primary motivation is solved, the conspirators go unpunished and the system wins.

Justice is crucial in the traditional conspiracy thriller. In the case of tradition 1 narratives, a sense of morality is pervasive, with a clear triumph of truth in the public's interest. Even in tradition 2 conspiracy narratives, where the opposite is true, the downfall of the protagonist and the escape of the antagonist(s) is calamitous and works as a means of shocking the viewer: the injustice is outrageous and the failure of the protagonist crushing. No matter the outcome, traditional conspiracy narratives maintain their political force by projecting a clear sense of right and wrong whether or not the protagonist prevails.

Case Study: *All the President's Men* (1976)

A traditional, public-facing conspiracy narrative

Rounding off director Alan J. Pakula's 'paranoia trilogy'¹⁷, *All the President's Men* (1976) is an exemplary representation of the traditional, public-facing conspiracy film. Like many in the genre, the film is not only based on a novel, but is a portrayal of historic events (in this case: the Watergate Scandal) and bears not one, but two, white male protagonists who work as journalists. As two reporters seeking the truth at all costs, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein (played by Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman respectively) make for ideal conspiracy film heroes as they demonstrate the time-held perception of the media's role as watchdog for democracy and because their seen and unseen threats are tightly linked:

seen threat: Woodward and Bernstein's primary objective is to get their scoop, find the truth, write the story and share this truth with the public; this is also why their careers and lives may be under threat.

unseen threat: the Nixon administration's breaking, entering, and attempted wiretapping of the Democratic National Office as well as its subsequent cover ups and conspiracy to obstruct justice via secret slush funds, intimidation of witnesses, forgery of state department documents and eventual destruction of potentially incriminating evidence.

In order to substantiate their story to their editor, Woodward and Bernstein must investigate and eventually uncover the conspiracy to obstruct justice that became the Watergate Scandal. The film portrays our protagonists as a unit: two parts of the same journalistic force, which Hoffman and Redford conveyed by learning the other's lines as well as their own in order to make their dialogue spontaneous and fluid (*All the President's Men, Revisited*, 2013).

¹⁷ Alan J. Pakula's "paranoia trilogy" includes: *Klute* (1971), *The Parallax View* (1974), and *All the President's Men* (1976)



Hoffman and Redford playing the historic duo in All the President's Men (1976)

Although the strength of their chemistry adds to the mythology of the iconic pair of journalists responsible for exposing the Watergate Scandal, it has had the side effect of fading other historically relevant characters into the distant background -- especially women. This is consistent with the notion that in the 1970s, "Male stars [were] people manufactured... to appear as superior, overcoming women and lesser men by sheer determination and will, involving in varying permutations, competence, experience, rationality, and charm." (Mellen, 1977, p.3). In doing so, *All the President's Men* largely erases female involvement from its history -- either by ignoring Bernstein's first wife Carol Honsa, a fellow *Post* reporter, with whom he divorced in 1972, the year of Watergate's exposure, or by omitting the involvement of Katharine Graham, the publisher of the *Washington Post*, except when she was the butt of a crude remark¹⁸. Despite her notoriety as America's first female publisher of a major newspaper, *All the President's Men* sees no place for "one of America's most influential women" (Coleridge, 1993, p.12); her control over *The Post* is delegated to executive editor Benjamin Bradlee and other male editors.

¹⁸ See Appendix: Dialogue - *All the President's Men* 1



Bernstein, Woodward, Bradlee, Rosenfeld, and Simons, representing the Washington Post

Moreover, the majority of women in *All the President's Men* are simply heard and not seen: either speaking with only portions of their body present or as voices on the telephone. Women who are seen are presented as gatekeepers for the duo: as secretaries using their desks to guard important men or as women who must be pressured or seduced into providing information for the pair.



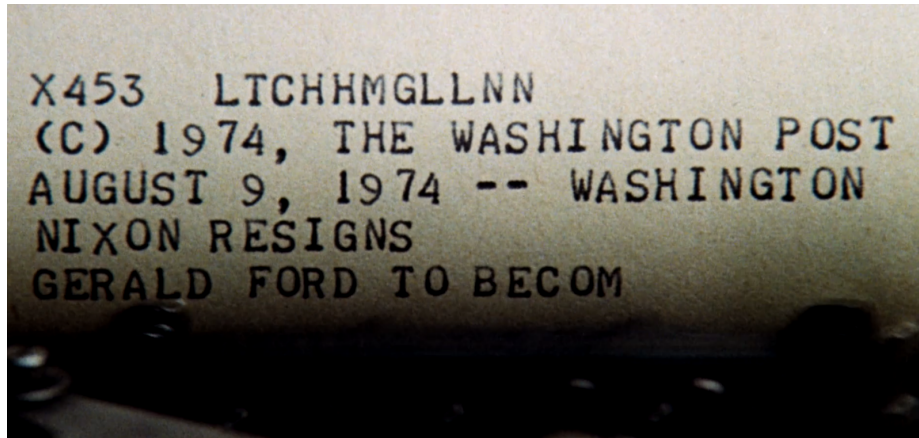
An unnamed secretary; she speaks but her face is not shown

While the decision to omit a significant female character such as Katharine Graham and present other women as devices to or appendages of men may very well have been in the effort to streamline an already complex political narrative, it cannot be ignored that these representations serve to uphold the hegemonic masculinity of a “regulatory fiction” (Cohan, 1997,

p.24) which “articulates various social relations of power as an issue of gender normality” (Baker, 2006, p.33) that pervades these traditional conspiracy stories. The positioning of Woodward and Bernstein as the lone heroes central to the filmic narrative of Watergate may have served to clarify the film’s sense of right and wrong, contributing to their mythology and the press’ reputation as watchdog for democracy, but it is at the cost of dulling and even erasing female involvement and female agency within these historical narratives.

Thematically, *All the President’s Men* covers surveillance, corruption, a sense of morality, as well as the notion that the public are being lied to, which can be seen as a response to and a reflection of the political climate in America in the mid-1970s. It complies with the usual conspiracy thriller trope of the hero accidentally stumbling onto the conspiracy as Woodward does, as well as the hero being unwillingly forced into action, as Bernstein is when forced to work with Woodward. Following a breadcrumb trail of clues with guidance from Deep Throat¹⁹ and then going on their own quest for information, the pair eventually get enough sources on record to publish. *All the President’s Men* differs from other conspiracy films at the time in that there is no on-screen violence: there are no murders, no unseen assassins, and no direct attempts on the protagonists’ lives. Although Deep Throat advises Woodward that his and Bernstein’s lives are in danger due to the gravity of their investigations, producer Redford and director Pakula chose to illustrate that “their weapon [was] the written word” by accentuating the sounds of telephones, typewriters and pen on paper, sometimes even in competition with the dialogue (*All the President’s Men, Revisited*, 2013).

¹⁹ “Deep Throat” was the name given to Woodward’s informant, a moniker which alluded to the deep background status of his information as well as the 1972 pornographic film of the same name.



Typewritten epilogue in the final scene; although not so visually dramatic, the sound of gunshots illustrates the film's theme of words as weapons

This technique is used throughout the film to embody the press as protector of the public's interests and is demonstrated brazenly in the film's opening and closing scenes where the punch of a typewriter mimics the sound of gunshots firing, perhaps further drawing connection to the themes of assassination that pervaded conspiracy thrillers at the time. Rather than thrills and spills, *All the President's Men* is dominated by the dogged persistence of two reporters as they navigate a verbose and slow-paced script, picking out tiny bits of information and then discussing them from character to character. Redford remembers: "There's nothing glamorous about what [Woodward and Bernstein] were doing and I thought it was important to portray the tedium, the hard work. The feelings about the film from a studio standpoint was [that it was] 'non-commercial': newspapers, typewriters, phones... 'Washington'" (*All the President's Men, Revisited*, 2013). These "non-commercial" elements are crucial to a conspiracy narrative which is based tightly on actual events, and serve the film's tone to exude paranoia (when Woodward and Bernstein type, rather than speak, to each other when they suspect Bernstein's apartment has been bugged) and a sense of helplessness (Woodward's long, single-cut telephone shots while he tries contact after contact for a lead): that the web of lies surrounding the cover up may not ever be broken down as Bradlee sends the duo back again and again for further sources and Deep Throat's equivocal, taunting clues. The film unfolds gradually with extensive verbal information and a pervading question of 'where is this all

going?’ The answer to which historic audiences knew well from experience but, for younger audiences less acquainted with the scandal because they didn't live through it, the film's appreciation for detail might be alienating rather than enveloping. Roger Ebert reviewed the film candidly with an observation that “*All the President's Men* is truer to the craft of journalism than to the art of storytelling, and that's its problem. The movie is as accurate about the processes used by investigative reporters as we have any right to expect, and yet process finally overwhelms narrative -- we're adrift in a sea of names, dates, telephone numbers, coincidences, lucky breaks, false leads, dogged footwork, denials, evasions, and sometimes even the truth” (1976). It would seem that complex conspiracies, especially those based on true events, are invariably a challenge to present in only so many minutes. Our saturation of information via the internet, social media and smart devices, combined with modern audiences who are used to films being “quicker, faster, [and] darker” (Cutting, 2011, p.569), may mean that translating the nuance and complexity of historic, public-facing conspiracy stories into mainstream, feature-length film is more challenging when taking into consideration our current conspiracy culture.

As history and the film would have it, the two Washington Post journalists do eventually lay bare their investigations into the White House's corruption, reaping justice in the form of nationwide publicity which eventually leads to President Nixon's resignation and indictments of others culpable within the administration. In terms of impact, *All the President's Men* was hugely successful, solidifying itself as a mainstream conspiracy thriller that suited the American movie-going public well as “a taut, solidly acted paean to the benefits of a free press and the dangers of unchecked power, made all the more effective by its origins in real-life events” (Rotten Tomatoes, 2017). As the “stuff of entertainment and political reflection” (Knight, 2000, p.44) it took some conspiracy films of the 1970s up to 8 or even 11 years²⁰ to exorcise the public distrust that sparked their stories;

²⁰ *The Parallax View* (1974), was produced 11 years after JFK's assassination, from which it is inspired; *Capricorn 1* (1977) was produced 8 years after the Moon landing.

yet *All The President's Men* hit the theatres only 4 years after Watergate was exposed and 2 years after the publication of Woodward and Bernstein's book of the same name -- a momentum which meant the narrative was fresh in the American public's conscious. At the time, Basil Patterson, Vice Chair of the Democratic National Committee, said, "There has been a national effort to exclude from our consciousness the painful, unpleasant, and unacceptable memories of the Watergate debacle. [*All the President's Men*] revives all the recollections and the emotions" (in Pileggi, 1976, p.58). Jimmy Carter ran at the Democratic primaries the year of *All the President's Men's* release with the slogan, "I'll never lie to you" and won by a slim margin²¹ over Gerald Ford, the incumbent president. Its true impact on the election is speculative at best, but as a public-facing, traditional conspiracy thriller with enduring political force, *All the President's Men* holds its own.

²¹ Jimmy Carter won the majority of the electoral and popular vote with a 50.1% margin to Ford's 48%.

Phase 2 (1988 - Present): “This is my life and I want it back!”

Foregoing Justice in the Privatisation of Conspiracy Narratives

From the late 1980s a shift develops in the way conspiracy narratives engage with the seen and unseen threat, beginning notably with *Little Nikita* (1988, dir. Richard Benjamin): the first conspiracy film to feature a Black protagonist, Roy Parmenter (Sidney Poitier), and also the first conspiracy film where the protagonist's needs for personal closure or public-facing justice are superseded by a private motive. The seen threat of figuring out who the Grant family are is addressed, but rather than risk breaking up the very nuclear and now-Americanised former Russian spy family, Parmenter actually assists in the cover up and escape of the two villains, Karpov and Scuba, into Mexico -- brushing the conspiracy under the rug. This also comes at a cost to himself: Parmenter sacrifices the possibility of justice for the murder of his former partner to protect Jeff (River Phoenix) and reunite him with his family. Parmenter joins the ranks of traditional male conspiracy protagonists with no family to speak of; the only significant women in the film are Mrs. Grant, Jeff's mother, and Jeff's guidance counselor, Verna, who doubles as Parmenter's romantic interest. In this way, *Little Nikita* resembles its traditional predecessors in its representation of a family-less hero and women whose agency is hinged on their association to men. Yet, beyond these similarities, Roy Parmenter is an unfamiliar protagonist whose quest for truth and justice is sidelined in favour of “‘family values’... one of the key political and social themes to effect the programs of the Reagan ideology” and “one that acknowledges the family as the final justification for any foreign interventions” (Jeffords, 1994, p.191). In this way, *Little Nikita* appears to have the first conspiracy thriller protagonist that chooses to neglect justice or exposure of the conspiracy in favour of private motives -- a clear departure from the genre's public-facing traditions, but a decision which reflects the late 1980s conservative American fixation on sanctity of the family.

This *privatised* narrative resembles tradition 2 public-facing narratives in that the seen threat is addressed while the unseen threat goes unpunished, except for a change in attitude: tackling the unseen threat is

no longer a matter of life or death to the protagonist. Even without justice for or exposure of the conspiracy at large, the protagonist does not 'lose' to the weight of the conspiracy, and his journey is able to end satisfactorily. Furthermore, often to achieve his primary motivation, the protagonist may even choose an outcome where the public may be put in danger or will never know the truth, posing a distinct contrast to the public-facing narratives of the 1970s. The following are indicators of what I term the 'privatisation' of conspiracy narratives:

seen/unseen threat disjoint: The hero can address his primary motivation without seeking justice for, or exposure of, the conspiracy at large²². For example: Mitch in *The Firm* (1993, dir. Sidney Pollack) refuses to give the FBI evidence against his firm's money laundering enterprise because it will mean the end of his career as a lawyer. Mitch's seen threat is to figure out how to remain a lawyer and get his life back to normal. Exposure of the unseen threat (that his firm works with the mob) is actually not in his interests at all.

privatisation of the protagonist: Where the seen or unseen threats are bound up in the identity of the protagonist²³. The protagonist must discover themselves in order to make sense of the conspiracy or uncovering the conspiracy is a means of giving the protagonist a sense of purpose in his or her life. In *The Truman Show* (1998, dir. Peter Weir), Truman Burbank doesn't know that his entire life has been a reality TV show; to uncover the conspiracy behind the show that has trapped him since birth, he has to discover himself and the true nature of his existence.

²² Conspiracy films which exhibit a seen/unseen threat disjoint include: *The Firm* (1993), *Chain Reaction* (1996), *Shadow Conspiracy* (1997), *Enemy of the State* (1998), *The Insider* (1999), *The Skulls* (2000).

²³ Conspiracy films which exhibit privatisation of the protagonist include: *Kafka* (1991), *Fight Club* (1996), *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), *Conspiracy Theory* (1997), *The Truman Show* (1998), *Minority Report* (2002), *The Bourne Identity* (2002).

privatisation of the antagonist: Where there is justice for and exposure of the unseen threat, the culpable organisation will often be figureheaded by a sole mastermind or boss character who serves to personify the abuse of power²⁴. Unlike its traditional predecessors, this narrative choice provides the illusion of justice in its clean resolution: the bad guy goes to jail or is killed, thus superficially solving the problem but ignoring the fact that the root of the unseen threat may be a systemic rather than an individual abuse of power. An example of this would be Gary Winston, the face of the N.U.R.V. organisation in *Antitrust* (2001, dir. Peter Howitt) or Agent Smith in *The Matrix* (1999, dir. The Wachowskis).

messiah characters: A messiah character is often presented as the 'chosen one' to save the public; they usually bear innate talents, qualities or skills that make them special compared to others²⁵. Although gripping for their mythological quality, the use of these characters largely removes the onus for change from the public's grasp, lulling audiences into political complacency as they wait for a hero. A prime example of this is Neo in *The Matrix*: a hacker whose fate is to save the sleeping masses from their simulated reality.

Peter Lev observes, "In the 1970s, a great deal of this social dialogue took place via the medium of film," but "instead of commenting on the problems of the age in a profusion of conflicting visions, the big-budget films [of the late 1990s] are about excitement, about thrills and chills, perhaps even about special effects and marketing" (2000, p.183). I'd like to take this argument one step further, beyond the distraction of thrills and chills or special effects to posit that the loss of political force in conspiracy thrillers from the late 1980s-onwards is due to the privatisation of their narratives: they may tackle similar themes to their traditional predecessors

²⁴ Conspiracy films which exhibit privatisation of the antagonist include: *JFK* (1991), *The Net* (1995), *The Matrix* (1999), *The Skulls* (2000), *Antitrust* (2001).

²⁵ Conspiracy films which exhibit messiah characters include: *The Matrix* (1999), *Antitrust* (2001), *Shooter* (2007).

and even touch on contemporary anxieties about privacy, technology and the internet, but their solipsistic focus on the protagonist's life -- on getting things 'back to normal' -- means that they lose the opportunity for strong, public-facing justice within the narrative and, actually, are counterproductive when it comes to political impact: they soften us to these potentially dangerous ideas instead of leaving us more vigilant.

Just as they did in the 1970s, conspiracy films from the 1980s-onwards reacted to the cultural landscape of their time, this time by focusing inward to reflect a growing preoccupation with the self while simultaneously painting greed as the driving force for antagonists as well as protagonists. David Denby, on 1980s action films, remarks: "In these movies, America is a failure, a disgrace -- a country run on the basis of expediency and profit" (1984, p.62). From the 1980s, themes of greed and profits over people would supersede the phenomenon of political assassination films, starting with *Rollover* (1981, dir. Alan J. Pakula), *Silkwood* (1983, dir. Mike Nichols), and then evolving into the greed-fuelled *Wall Street* (1987, dir. Oliver Stone) and anti-capitalist *They Live* (1988, dir. John Carpenter). This focus away from hard political ideology in the 1980s would lay the foundations for conspiracy films in the 1990s whose justice was structured on self preservation: of protecting one's own livelihood, property, and family, over the public good. Philip Roth observes that "the vision of self as inviolable, powerful... as the only real thing in an unreal environment" may be a reaction to a "distressing cultural and political predicament" which, "produces in the writer not only feelings of disgust, rage, and melancholy, but impotence, too, he is apt to lose heart and finally, like his neighbor, turn to other matters, or to other worlds; or to the self" (1961).



It rains only on Truman (Jim Carrey) in The Truman Show (1998)

The rise in these self-centred films coincides with the neoliberal dismantling and replacement of “public ownership and collective bargaining with deregulation and privatization, promoting the individual over the group in the very fabric of society” (Day, 2018) and reflects this idea that when the world becomes too challenging we ought not to fight outward, but rather focus inward and attempt to make sense of something we can control: ourselves. By the late 1990s, films like *The Truman Show* would be able to take the privatised narrative so far as to enshrine its protagonist’s very existence in conspiracy: “at its core, putting Truman in the centre of the story, the film is speaking about the same fears that fuel conspiracism”; it is Truman’s agency panic and sheer powerlessness which imply that “nothing that Truman Burbank experiences, from friendship to love, the joys and the frustrations of his life, all his emotions essentially, is really his own” (Donovan, 2011, p.181). Against the backdrop of the new millennium and the Y2K Problem²⁶, late 1990s conspiracy films centred on notions of identity within an emerging digital age as opposed to mere ideology: no longer was the question Who are ‘They’? but rather: Who am I?²⁷ “Amid the growing privatization of everyday life, the greatest

²⁶ The Year 2000 Problem (or Y2K Problem) was a series of anticipated computer bugs stemming from the numerological formatting of calendar dates when transitioning from the year 1999 to 2000. The paranoia surrounding the Y2K problem was used by multiple fringe and religious groups to spark doomsday fears and conspiracies about this supposed apocalyptic scenario.

²⁷ Conspiracy films which exhibit a shift in agency panic from the public to the private include: *The Net* (1995), *Fight Club* (1996), *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), *Conspiracy Theory* (1997), *Arlington Road* (1999), and *The Matrix* (1999).

danger to human freedom and democracy no longer appears to come from the power of the over-zealous state eager to stamp out individual freedom and critical inquiry in the interest of loyalty and patriotism,” (Giroux, 2001, p.1). Rather, “under the growing influence of the politics, ideology, and culture of neoliberalism... the individual has been ‘set free to construe her or his own fears, to baptize them with privately chosen names and to cope with them on her or his own’” (Bauman, 1999, p.63). Unlike public-facing traditional conspiracy films, privatised conspiracy films from the late 1980s onwards concern themselves with the identity of the protagonist and forego justice for all in favour of preserving one’s own private interests. Just 10 years after *Little Nikita*, *The Truman Show* marks a truly solipsistic, privatised conspiracy narrative, reflecting not only a shift in political ideology, but an evolution in personal fears and paranoias that would irrevocably change the political force of subsequent conspiracy narratives.

Case Study: *Enemy of the State* (1998)

A privatised conspiracy narrative

The narrative style of *Little Nikita* is echoed and expanded upon in *Enemy of the State* (1998, dir. Tony Scott) where the journey of Robert Dean (Will Smith) is fixed on simply returning his life back to normal. He has no interest in calling out Congress' cover up of the NSA's involvement in the assassination of a congressman or protesting the large-scale unseen threat of his country's pervasive/invasive surveillance state the way that his wife does throughout the film. In *Enemy of the State*, Robert Dean's seen and unseen threats are not linked:

seen threat: to return his life back to normal. To do this he must survive and then disprove the false evidence which the NSA has planted against him in order to reclaim his job and repair his relationship with his wife.

unseen threat: the NSA's sabotage of Robert Dean and the cover up of their assassination of US Congressman Phil Hammersley in order to pass legislation which would dramatically expand its power to surveil US citizens.

For nearly half the film, Dean does not know that the unfortunate events befalling him are because he possesses video evidence that incriminates the NSA and its director Thomas Reynolds (Jon Voight). As the audience and the antagonists know more than he does, Dean's unseen threat is very much 'unseen' to him. The hierarchy of knowledge in this case provides an added complexity to Dean's unseen threat that would pave the way for future conspiracy films where a sophistication of conspiratorial devices like false-flag²⁸ attacks and elaborate patsy operations would be utilised -- playing well to the genre's fixation with paranoia and helplessness.

²⁸ False-flag "would become an oft-used buzzword in the world of September 11 conspiracy theorists" defining a self-inflicted attack to accomplish ulterior motives (Donovan, 2011, p.163).

Film critics have drawn connection between *Enemy of the State* and *The Conversation* (1974, dir. Francis Ford Coppola), a traditional conspiracy thriller entrenched in surveillance (Ebert, 1998; Newman, 1999), but *Enemy of the State* departs drastically from the moralistic crisis of conscience experienced by Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) in *The Conversation*. Rather, Robert Dean's journey perfectly exemplifies the privatisation of the conspiracy narrative in that he is able to return his life back to normal without ever having to expose the NSA's assassination plot or its intentions to expand its surveillance powers. Dean's primary motivation isn't protecting the public; rather it is a self-centred desire to maintain the livelihood that he has worked hard to build -- a far cry from the altruistic protagonists of traditional 1970s conspiracy thrillers. It is this passing of the torch, as it were, from protagonists whose intentions are public-facing to those whose intentions are private, that is exemplified in the following exchange between Dean and Brill (Gene Hackman), the old guard/self-proclaimed conspirer:

Brill: *You're the threat now. Just like I was.*

Robert Dean: *Threat to whom? To them?*

Brill: *No. To your family, your friends, everybody you know, everybody you meet. That's why I went away and didn't come back. You've got to go away, Robert.*

Robert Dean: *No, I don't think so. This is my life, I worked hard for it and I want it back!*

Enemy of the State may deal with classic conspiracy themes like surveillance, assassination, and lying to the public, but the disconnect between the protagonist's seen and unseen threats leads to a failure in the film's overall sense of justice. Dean accidentally stumbles upon the NSA conspiracy when wildlife researcher Daniel Zavits, a high school acquaintance, drops a hard drive with incriminating video evidence into Dean's bag. Dean is mildly curious about Zavits' fate when he turns up dead trying to outrun some NSA thugs, but doesn't pursue the mystery; it is only when (as a means of finding Zavits' hard drive) the NSA disseminates false evidence to implicate Dean of working with the mob

and having an affair with an ex-girlfriend that Dean is unwillingly forced into action to clear his name. These activities illustrate what I term the ‘framing and shaming’ of the protagonist -- a tactic previously reserved for female protagonists in conspiracy films²⁹, but from the late 1980s onwards, it becomes common practice as a means of prodding the hero on with his quest. Dean’s journey takes place within what Giroux refers to as a “public sphere” which is “consistently removed from social consideration” so that “notions of the public good are replaced by an utterly privatized model of citizenship and the good life” (2001, p.2). In *Enemy of the State*, it would otherwise be plausible that Dean would willingly return the hard drive to the NSA if he only knew he had it; unfortunately, he only finds the hard drive *after* the NSA has started to disrupt his life and, by then, he feels threatened enough to retaliate.

Where Robert Dean departs from previous conspiracy protagonists in that he chooses to prioritise his own life, safety, and reputation over the wellbeing of the public, *Enemy of the State* does follow in the footsteps of traditional conspiracy thrillers in that women are still largely excluded in Dean’s solipsistic narrative.



“See something you like?” (*Enemy of the State*, 1998)

Key female characters in the film are: Dean’s wife, his ex-girlfriend, his son’s nanny, and a cast of bikini-clad lingerie saleswomen, all of whom are sexualised by men in the film³⁰. Dean’s wife, Carla (Regina King), may be

²⁹ See Appendix: *Conspiracy Film Tropes: 1969-2020*

³⁰ See Appendix: *Dialogue - Enemy of the State 1*

the most politically engaged character with passionate requests such as, “Baby, listen to this fascist gasbag!” but her rightfully paranoid warnings are patronised or met with jokes from her aloof husband³¹. This lack of agency is further exemplified in the women closest to Dean. When Carla experiences the NSA’s framing and shaming of her husband, her character transforms from the political voice of reason to the stereotypical unreasonable ‘wife as obstacle to hero’ trope³². Dean’s ex, Rachel Banks (Lisa Bonet), falls into the well-documented “Women in Refrigerators”³³ trope which has come to encompass the use of women who are killed, injured, raped or otherwise disempowered as a plot device to incite male action (Simone, 1999), and can be found throughout the conspiracy film genre³⁴. In *Enemy of the State*, Rachel Banks doesn’t die because she chose to put herself in danger; she dies so the NSA can frame Dean as her lover and murderer. In this way, Rachel’s death compels Dean to salvage his reputation -- her agency is sacrificed for his action. So although *Enemy of the State* exemplifies an evolution in conspiracy narratives from the public to the private, its representation of women and female agency hardly progresses further than its traditional predecessors.

If *Enemy of the State* were a traditional conspiracy thriller, the protagonist would likely have been the journalist who Edward Zavits calls with the incriminating evidence. Instead, the protagonist is Robert Dean, a lawyer, which marks a distinct shift away from the hero journalist-led narratives from decades prior. Unlike a reporter, whose primary motivation would have been to find and share the truth, a lawyer will have learned to be cautious with language, protective of himself and his client, and have developed an understanding that the truth may not always be in his interests. This migration in protagonist’s professions matches the evolving premise of conspiracy films from the 1990s-onwards where “agency has now been privatized and personal liberty atomized and removed from broader considerations about the ethical and political responsibility of

³¹ See Appendix: Dialogue - *Enemy of the State 2*

³² See Appendix: *Conspiracy Film Tropes: 1969-2020*

³³ “Women in Refrigerators” is a term which refers to an incident in the comic book *Green Lantern #54* where the hero comes home to find his girlfriend killed and stuffed into a refrigerator (Marz, 1994).

³⁴ See Appendix: *Conspiracy Film Tropes: 1969-2020*

citizens” (Giroux, 2001, p.1). The film concludes and the NSA is not brought to justice: rather, Congress covers up the mess to preserve the agency’s reputation. If Dean were a reporter this would be his next big story but, as a lawyer, he is content to return his life back to normal. Although some conspiracy films are notable for their prescience³⁵, most are reactionary, appearing as warning beacons or as calls to arms against an oppressive, conspiratorial system. It would seem that after the 2013 revelations exposed by whistleblower Edward Snowden³⁶ about the NSA’s PRISM and Boundless Informant programmes of surveillance via phone, email, and internet browsing data, that *Enemy of the State* -- a film whose representation of the NSA was often touted as exaggerated or ridiculous -- might have been onto something. Yet, by updating the profession of the protagonist in this film from one whose private interests trump his public concerns, the film loses its sense of political force by atomising the protagonist’s ethical responsibilities.



An example of the satellite surveillance portrayed in Enemy of the State (1998) which was deemed unrealistic at the time

³⁵ *The China Syndrome* was released 12 days before the Three Mile Island nuclear accident in 1979 and *The Truman Show* was released one year before the original Dutch Big Brother in 1999.

³⁶ Edward Snowden is a former CIA employee and former NSA contractor who revealed classified documents to journalists Glenn Greenwald, Laura Poitras and Ewen MacAskill in 2013 which revealed previously unknown details of invasive global surveillance on citizens without their knowledge by the USA in cooperation with Australia, the UK, and Canada.



Drone imagery showing object detection using artificial intelligence (Kaila, 2018).

Enemy of the State's loss of political force is further perpetuated not only by the visual representation of surveillance in the film, but also by how the lead characters react to being surveilled. Scott's "hyper-kinetic editing, the over-the-top camera angles, [and] insane plotting" (Horton, 2013) become part of this exaggerated visual language which links Dean's seen and unseen threats. The aerial surveillance images of Dean and Brill as they are being stalked by the NSA not only function as cinematographic establishing shots but also as point-of-view shots -- coming from the perspective of the surveillance state. Even when the film cuts to another angle, the impression that "Big Brother is watching you"³⁷ remains, adding to the film's sense of paranoia and agency panic. Yet, "within these scenes, the surveillant image and the surveilling agency are frequently the narrative touchstone, the fulcrum of the scene, as much if not more than the protagonist (who is rarely aligned with the surveillant gaze) and in this way, we see the further invitation to the film's spectators to identify themselves with both the system of surveillance and a globalizing visual logic, even as they are also identified with a character subjected to that system" (Zimmer, 2015, p.123). This identification with both the surveillance and the surveilled, of seeing both sides³⁸ -- rather than heightening public vigilance *against* encroachments of privacy -- actually

³⁷ "Big Brother is watching you" is the ubiquitous slogan of the totalitarian surveillance state in George Orwell's dystopian fiction novel *1984*.

³⁸ A modern, practical representation of the "both sides' argument was employed by [then-US President] Trump when he tried to equate people demonstrating against white supremacy with the neo-Nazis who had converged in Charlottesville, Virginia, to protest the removal of Confederate statues" (Kakutani, 2018).

encourages the public to entertain hyper-surveillance as an acceptable 'point of view'. In the final scene of the film we see Dean acquiesce to one last invasion of privacy, this time by Brill, as he flips through channels on the television and comes across a live stream of himself as he watches TV. Instead of outrage, fear, or surprise, Dean -- in the same way that he humorously reproaches his wife's political concerns -- makes a joke at the TV set, indicating that this final invasion of privacy is harmless and acceptable. Scenes like this are what led John Patterson to argue in *The Guardian* that Hollywood has in fact played a role in softening the public to curtailments of privacy by normalising representations of hyper-surveillance in films (2013), something which is compounded when the unseen threat may be exposed, but never brought to justice. Thomas Reynolds, *Enemy of the State's* antagonist, serves to represent this privatised, apathetic perspective by implying that there is nothing left to fight for when he says "The only privacy that's left is inside of your head!"³⁹. Robert Dean mimics Reynold's sense of greed and self-centeredness through his need to protect his own livelihood as opposed to the privacy of US citizens, apparent in his seen/unseen threat disjoint. This solipsistic worldview is characteristic "within the discourse of neoliberalism," where, along with privacy, "issues... have been either removed from the inventory of public discourse and public policy or factored into talk show spectacles that highlight private woes bearing little relationship either to public life or to potential remedies that demand collective action" (Giroux, 2001, p.2). The film represents this disparity in a closing cameo from talk show host Larry King where he poses the question:

***Larry King:** Where do we draw the line -- the line between protection of national security, obviously the government's need to obtain intelligence data, and the protection of civil liberties, particularly the sanctity of my home? You've got no right to come into my home!*

And in a frenzy of television static and satellite images, Tony Scott's thriller presents an answer to this question using a juxtaposition of domestic

³⁹ See Appendix: Dialogue - *Enemy of the State* 3

imagery and global imaging which stand for Dean's seen and unseen threats, respectively: "By establishing both a visual and narrative continuity between the personal and the political, the singular and the total, the house and the globe, all through devices of surveillance and mediation, the film indicates that it is... the task of the media consumer -- to establish one's place in the global system" (Zimmer, 2015, p.130). The answer to Larry King's question is that we will accept the shady dealings of the government, we will accept losses to our privacy and civil liberties, and we will accept a loss of justice... as long as we can preserve the sanctity of our homes and carve out a purpose within our own private spaces.



Dean at first disturbed and then amused by Brill's invasion of his privacy

Dean's knowing acceptance of infringements to his privacy supports the 'nothing to hide, nothing to fear' argument which Edward Snowden rebuts: "Arguing that you don't care about privacy because you have nothing to hide is like arguing that you don't care about free speech because you have nothing to say" (in Schrod, 2016). *Enemy of the State* and other

conspiracy films post-1988 may engage with traditional themes of the genre like surveillance or lying to the public, and even reflect contemporary anxieties over loss of privacy, invasive technology and the internet, but their normalisation of these concepts and their solipsistic focus on the protagonist's life -- on getting things 'back to normal' -- means that they not only lose their political force compared to the public-facing, justice-seeking conspiracy thrillers of the 1970s, but are potentially counterproductive by softening us to these ideas as necessary evils no longer worth our vigilance.

Phase 3 (2005 - Present): Lame Ducks

Justice Rendered Impotent in Contemporary Conspiracy Narratives

At the onset of the 21st century, a culmination of factors would unmistakably alter the fabric of conspiracy culture in the United States. The initial throes of postmodernity, which espoused the absence of a universal truth, had settled decades prior and, in 1998, US President Bill Clinton would justify succinctly that truth "depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is" (Federal News Service). Three years later, mobile phones would help frame the public's perception of September 11th, 2001: not only the deadliest act of terrorism on American soil to date, but one where civilian recordings brought a plurality of perspectives to the fore: "the immediate consequences were reflected in the huge surge of activity online and on the telephone... Such was the scale of the activity that, for a time, the networks broke down" (Silverstone, 2004, p.587). The mainstream media's portrayal of the threat of terrorism in the immediate aftermath and years following the attacks would fuel⁴⁰ rather than quell a culture of fear, paranoia, and anxiety in the public sphere -- emotions which have long been the trappings of Hollywood conspiracy thrillers. The

⁴⁰ After the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing (the deadliest terrorist attack perpetrated in America at the time) levels of worry about becoming a victim of terrorism dropped from a high of 42% (in the wake of the attack) to 24% five years later. In the wake of September 11th, 2001, levels of this same worry spiked at 58% but have still not yet returned to pre-9/11 levels, even 15 years after the attack (Mueller and Stuart, 2016).

use of “phrases such as ‘many sides’, ‘different perspectives’, ‘uncertainties’, [and] ‘multiple ways of knowing’” reflect a culture of doubt⁴¹ that creates fissures where relativist⁴² thinking breeds “truth decay”: a term which has “joined the post-truth lexicon that includes such now familiar phrases as ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’” (Kakutani, 2018). This phenomenon of protracting doubt, fear, and paranoia has less to do with the occurrence of such events and more with their surrounding narratives: “the events can create raw fear, but the storytelling makes it refined fear... When someone shares a link to Twitter, they are posting their reaction to it. Their reaction, not the headline, is where it gets metabolized,” (Shirky in Chang, 2017). This 21st Century phenomenon of reactions becoming headlines irrevocably alters the content of a news story from ‘the truth’ -- an absolute which can either be confirmed, denied, buried, or uncovered -- to ‘*your own truth*’ -- a subjective, which is irrefutable. As the power of social media intensifies, the value of the public’s, and even a US president’s, own truths have come to overpower the value of reality in an “extreme, bizarro-world apotheosis of many of the broader, intertwined attitudes undermining truth today, from the merging of news and politics with entertainment, to the toxic polarisation that’s overtaken American politics, to the growing populist contempt for expertise” (Kakutani, 2018). It is this recipe of fear, paranoia, and Rashomon⁴³-like subjectivity in mainstream and social media that I refer to as *conspiracy culture*: a post-truth scenario that includes a new “public tolerance of inaccurate and undefended allegations, non sequiturs in response to hard questions, and outright denials of facts” (Higgins, 2016, p.9). The burgeoning relevance of conspiracy culture has drawn the paranoid style out, beyond the political

⁴¹ Corporate interests’ use of doubt to discredit or obfuscate inconvenient science has been documented since the 1969 tobacco industry memo stating, “Doubt is our product, since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the mind of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy... If we are successful in establishing a controversy at the public level, there is an opportunity to put across the real facts about smoking and health” (Oreskes and Conway, 2010, p.34 and Brown & Williamson, 1969).

⁴² Relativism is defined as “the doctrine that knowledge, truth, and morality exist in relation to culture, society, or historical context, and are not absolute” (The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable).

⁴³ The Rashomon effect commonly refers to “differences in perspective found in multiple accounts of a single event” and is named after the 1950 film *Rashomon* (dir. Akira Kurosawa), in which four witnesses recount details of a murder in four mutually contradictory versions (Anderson, 2016, p.250).

realm and into the public consciousness -- projecting skepticism and cynicism towards our usual pillars of justice and especially the press. It is contemporary conspiracy films' inability to adequately grapple with conspiracy culture that has diminished their political force.

Similar to the way traditional conspiracy films surfaced after Watergate and the JFK assassination, there has been a resurgence of politically-minded conspiracy thrillers from 2005-onwards, post-9/11, and in the wake of the Bush Administration's search for WMDs. Films like *Syriana* (2005, dir. Antoine Fuqua), *Fair Game* (2010, dir. Doug Liman), and *Green Zone* (2010, dir. Paul Greengrass) grapple with true stories, current events, and contemporary politics, even to high praise, but their rehashing of traditional tropes of the genre do not engage with conspiracy culture, placing a viable sense of justice out of reach. Like the public-facing conspiracy films of the 1970s, these post-9/11 thrillers return focus to large corporations and the government; however, with increased globalisation, the introduction of false-flag operations, and a conspiracy culture dominated by fake news, "fake science (manufactured by climate change deniers and anti-vaxxers, who oppose vaccination), fake history (promoted by Holocaust revisionists and white supremacists), fake Americans on Facebook (created by Russian trolls), and fake followers and 'likes' on social media (generated by bots)" (Kakutani, 2018), the idealised consensus of modernity, morality, and truth, has broken down: the idea of a singular enemy or behemoth organisation to castigate becomes convoluted in a sea of alternative facts and opposing conspiracies.

The proliferation of privatised interests that were prioritised over the public good in conspiracy films from the 1990s-onwards has meant that the genre's moral compass -- previously centred on politics of the right or left -- has since been replaced by the selfish identifier of the 'haves and have nots', creating an amoral complexity to films which were once anchored by their strong sense of right and wrong. *Syriana*, a film which takes after its traditional predecessors with a wealth of verbal information and a politically-minded plot, rejects their moral paradigm by presenting a relativist take on a modern, layered conspiracy that "expose[s] a twisted

system in which no one's hands stay clean" (Tucker, 2005). Exchanges where characters, fueled by greed, proudly admit to ignoring an impotent legal system (often punctuated by the exasperated outbursts of men proclaiming "who gives a shit!" or "what does it matter?"⁴⁴ when their corrupt ways have been exposed) exemplify what Giroux describes as the consequences of neoliberalism: "not only a weakened state, but a growing sense of insecurity, cynicism, and political retreat on the part of the general public," where "the call for self-reliance betrays a weakened state... In this scenario, private interests trump social needs, and profit becomes more important than social justice" (Giroux, 1999, p.4). Despite returning their focus to politics, the message in these post-9/11 conspiracy films remains consistent with, and actually feeds off of, the privatised narratives of the late 1980s and 1990s: when in doubt, protect yourself. The pervasiveness of thematic selfishness and greed appears to even surpass political partisanship within contemporary conspiracy films in favour of the 'have and have-nots' mentality⁴⁵. In fact, those who don't buy into the greed narrative are portrayed as naive or idealistic. *Shooter*, an overtly anti-Bush conspiracy film⁴⁶, resembles *The Parallax View* and *The Package* (1989, dir. Andrew Davis) in its presentation of the patsy 'lone gunman' plot; yet, ex-Marine sniper Bob Lee Swagger (Mark Wahlberg) differs from both Joe Frady, who is "independent, aggressive, [with] a history of alcoholism", emitting a "'rebel' masculinity [that] ideally suits him to the role of the 'lone gunman'" (Baker, 2006, p.56), and Thomas Boyette, the willing (and highly paid) lone gunman in *The Package*. By contrast, Swagger may be exponentially more resourceful than his predecessors but his patriotism is portrayed as increasingly naive⁴⁷. It is Swagger's blind patriotism that leads him to trust Colonel Johnson's request to plan the assassination of the President in order to catch the real assassin. Swagger unconditionally trusts his government, and he is punished for it when he is framed for the crime. In conspiracy films from 2005-onwards, the protagonist's seen and unseen threats often return to the traditional, linked, paradigm but they

⁴⁴ See Appendix: Dialogue - *Syriana* 1

⁴⁵ See Appendix: Dialogue - *Shooter* 1

⁴⁶ And TV series (2016-18) based on the novel *Point of Impact* by Stephen Hunter.

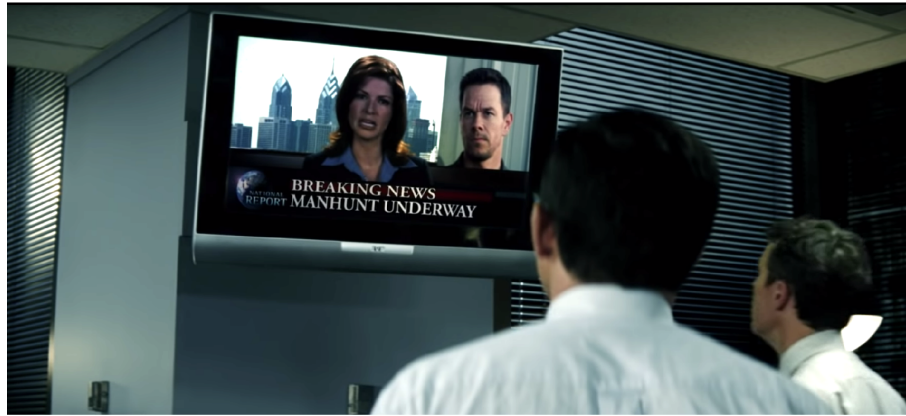
⁴⁷ See Appendix: Dialogue *Shooter* 2

have developed in complexity. In the case of *Shooter*, Bob Lee Swagger's seen and unseen threats are:

seen threat: to protect the US President; only when he is double-crossed and framed for the alleged attempt on the President's life does his seen threat change to clearing his name and tracking down the real assassin of the Ethiopian archbishop.

unseen threat: the plot to silence the Ethiopian archbishop (who will expose Colonel Johnson's destruction of an innocent village in Eritrea for Senator Meachum's pipeline) by framing his assassination as a botched attempt on the president's life.

Swagger's seen and unseen threats are inseparable and highly elaborate compared to traditional conspiracy films of the 1970s; where there once was one layer of conspiracy, there are now multiple -- fueled by the greed of many players, fracturing the genre's once clear and direct relationship to justice. Where self-preservation became so prevalent from the 1990s-onwards that conspiracy protagonists *joined* their antagonists and aligned in a mutual rejection of public mindedness, the portrayal of naively patriotic, soldier-heroes like Bob Lee Swagger in post-9/11 conspiracy films projects a forced altruism. After two decades of selfishness, this sudden attempt at reconnecting with public-spiritedness without stakes or characterisation makes contemporary conspiracy protagonists' pursuit of justice feel contrived. The cynical dissolution of morality extends even to the conspiracy genre's strongest mechanism for justice: the press, leaving films like *Syriana* to stipulate a nihilistic worldview where everyone is culpable, but nothing will change, or films like *Shooter* that forego intervention of the media entirely as it is likely an extension of an already corrupt system where truth can be sold to the highest bidder.



The media in Shooter (2007) utilised not as a mechanism for justice but to aid in the ‘framing and shaming’ of the protagonist

The next available mechanism for justice is the law, but frequently in these more recent conspiracy films the government is either portrayed as an impotent organisation whose hands are tied by checks and balances and questions of jurisdiction⁴⁸, or an institution that is just as corrupt as its opposition. This limitation of the government as a less-than-viable mechanism for justice presents in conspiracy thrillers throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, leading to a privatisation of justice where characters take retribution into their own hands⁴⁹. These films reproduce tradition 1 and 2 endings but feel vacuous in a contemporary setting, largely due to disjoints in public and private-facing intentions and how these are reflected in the films’ portrayals of justice. For example, *Shooter* received mixed reviews for the implausibility of its plot, included in which is a protagonist whose defining feature is his moral compass, but whose vigilantism and privatised sense of justice allows for a body count so high (he lays to waste a team of “24 good, hard men” in a single scene) that it starts to wear away at the logic of Swagger’s character. Traditional conspiracy films of the 1970s admonished the political conspiracies they peddled; contemporary conspiracy thrillers’ justice feels weak or violently inappropriate -- especially when the films themselves admit that it is greed, not a single person, corporation, or government that is the real enemy:

⁴⁸ See Appendix: Dialogue *Shooter* 3

⁴⁹ Conspiracy films where characters take justice into their own hands include: *Shooter* (2007), *The International* (2009), and *The November Man* (2014).

Michael Sandor: *You don't get it. There is no head to cut off. It's a conglomerate. If one of them betrays the principles of the accrual of money and power, the others betray him. What it is is human weakness. You can't kill that with a gun.* (Shooter, 2007)

This sense, that not only is there no head to cut off but, if there were, one would respawn and multiply in its place, sits very well, not only within the emotional crux of agency panic in conspiracy stories but also, amidst our contemporary information culture which has polarised political and social perspectives -- making right now a rich moment for conspiracy narratives. But how can the public unite against a single cause, or accept a single truth, when what was once a watchdog for democracy is now social media, a digital 'place' where recommendation engines not only create echo chambers under the premise of connecting like-minded users, but have customised news feeds to reinforce preconceptions so much so that "we are long past merely partisan filter bubbles and well into the realm of siloed communities that experience their own reality and operate with their own facts"? (DiResta in Kakutani, 2018). Truth decay has permeated the public consciousness so much so that "we can't trust anyone who is wealthy and influential, we can't trust our government, we can't trust our cultural institutions -- and often we can't even trust our neighbours, friends and loved ones" (Donovan, 2011, p.12) unless perhaps they exist within our own echo chambers. In this case, "within the prevailing discourse of neoliberalism that has taken hold of the public imagination, there is no vocabulary for political or social transformation; there is no collective vision" (Giroux, 1999, p.4). "The 'public' has been emptied of its own separate contents; it has been left with no agenda of its own -- it is now but an agglomeration of private troubles, worries and problems" (Bauman, 1999, p.65). And so, with no one real to trust but ourselves, we revert back to the solipsistic narrative of privatised conspiracy films, except that our traditional pillars of justice -- the media and the law -- now seen to be self-serving, are no longer effective. It appears that the tonic of conspiracy antagonists -- greed and self-preservation -- is what fuels our protagonists and the public as well, creating little hope for justice that extends beyond reconciling one's own identity amidst the chaos.

Now as paranoia, anxiety, and agency panic seem to be the public's emotional default, conspiracy narratives have the potential to be more relevant and compelling than they ever were; but for a genre that seeks to uncover the hidden truth behind abuse of power, what does it mean if truth can be known, but not believed, buried, or ignored? How can conspiracy films regain their political force when their morality and traditional mechanisms for justice have been disparaged, and truth -- the key to all conspiracy narratives -- cannot be trusted? If conspiracy films are to draw on today's societal fears (of which there are many) with politically forceful narratives, they must not ignore, but engage with conspiracy culture to overcome the cynicism and solipsism that pervades the genre and identify viable mechanisms for justice -- either by addressing the public's tainted relationship to the media and the law, or by seeking out new, community-based systems of justice.

Case Study: *Green Zone* (2010)

A repurposed traditional conspiracy thriller that fails to engage with conspiracy culture

For all intents and purposes, *Green Zone* (2010) fulfills the criteria of being a traditional, public-facing conspiracy thriller inspired by the novel *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (2006, Rajiv Chandrasekaran) which catalogued the post-invasion occupation of Iraq within the Green Zone of Baghdad. The film was released one year before the American withdrawal of troops from Iraq and 6 years after the CIA's 2004 Iraq Survey Group report unequivocally stated that Saddam Hussein had neither WMD stockpiles nor active capability for weapons production at the time of the war, meaning that it would come as little surprise to audiences when, in the film, idealistic US Army Chief Roy Miller (Matt Damon) unexpectedly stumbles across a conspiracy that the purported weapons of mass destruction being used to lead the United States' invasion of Iraq may not actually exist. As in traditional conspiracy films, Miller's seen and unseen threats are intrinsically linked:

seen threat: to find WMDs; however, Miller quickly deviates from this goal in order to find the source of the unreliable WMD intelligence, even if it means risking his life and disobeying orders. For Roy Miller, the reasons we go to war are more important than his soldiers' instructions to do so.

unseen threat: There are no WMDs. The Department of Defense is sending bogus intelligence under the guise of legitimate sources in order to justify an invasion of Iraq.

In the film, Army Chief Roy Miller is responsible for checking and securing sites that have been flagged as potential hiding places for Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, a task that leads him and his platoon to repeatedly raid vacant factories and combat local looters, only to return empty-handed time and time again. Eventually, Miller begins to

seriously question the validity of his intel.⁵⁰ It is the pursuit of this question which turns Miller's quest from an existential one to an ethical one, far beyond the scope of his duties as a soldier, and leaves him caught between the CIA and the Justice Department as he attempts to uncover the truth behind the Pentagon's justification for war.



Miller confronts Poundstone with the American Flag on his side

As a conspiracy protagonist, Roy Miller is altruistic and honorable; he resembles the diligent Woodward and Bernstein of *All the President's Men* and is in stark contrast with self-serving Robert Dean in *Enemy of the State*. Yet, where previous conspiracy heroes' professions actively fueled their journeys, Roy Miller's portrayal of a duty-bound soldier led into Iraq by the Bush Administration is betrayed by his decision to ignore orders in pursuit of the source of the bogus intel. In this way, director Paul Greengrass buys into the "popcorn-crunching conventions of a Hollywood potboiler" in that "only Matt Damon can save the world! And he has less than two hours to do it!" (Ozernoy, 2010). The caveat in this approach is that Roy Miller, like many other post-9/11 conspiracy protagonists, is a soldier. Where before conspiracy heroes were truth-seeking journalists, justice-bound cops, or shrewd lawyers, soldiers are trained to follow orders. Risking his life to embark single-handedly on a rogue mission to meet with a wanted Iraqi General simply 'because it matters' puts Miller in direct conflict "with a military culture that discourages service members from questioning whatever mission they are charged with carrying out"

⁵⁰ See Appendix: Dialogue *Green Zone* 1

(Scott, 2010). Miller not only rejects following orders when a soldier should, he goes against everything conspiracy films had just spent the last two decades promoting in their messages of solipsistic self-preservation: that the world is a mess, just take care of yourself and you'll be fine. A deeper examination of Roy leads to no substantiation of this counter-intuitive, altruistic urge; he is not spurred on by journalistic hunger and he is not out to clear his name or protect his family -- if he even has one. Instead, his character plays like a two-dimensional caricature of previous conspiracy heroes whose careers motivated their public or private-facing intentions.

The lack of dimensionality in *Green Zone*'s protagonist extends to the other characters in the film. Where *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* "captures the Coalition Provisional Authority's culture of incompetence, arrogance, and misplaced idealism; Greengrass reduces it to an ego-fueled catfight between the heroic and brawny Miller and his glib and wily nemesis, a bespectacled Pentagon lackey played by Greg Kinnear. If only it were that simple" (Ozernoy, 2010). It is clear that the characters in the film are meant to be stand-ins for players in the real Iraq war conflict: Bush-era Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's response to looting in Baghdad, "Freedom's untidy⁵¹," is echoed by the fictional Clark Poundstone's declaration of "Democracy is messy", but "the characters are all one-note: righteous Miller is righteous, his desperate Iraqi aide is desperate, and evil Pentagon dude is evil, posing occasionally in front of Bush/Cheney election posters to polish his pointy devil horns," (von Tunzelman, 2011). Freddy (Khalid Abdalla), the film's Iraqi everyman, may be compelling, but he is overshadowed by the white saviour⁵² narrative imposed by Roy Miller which, combined with its use of 'stand-in' characters, serves to give the film only a perfunctory engagement with a

⁵¹ "‘Freedom's untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things,’ Rumsfeld said... Looting, he added, was not uncommon for countries that experience significant social upheaval. ‘Stuff happens,’" (Loughlin, 2003).

⁵² "White saviour industrial complex" is a term coined by Nigerian-American novelist Teju Cole which refers to the "confluence of practices, processes, and institutions that reify historical inequities to ultimately validate white privilege" (Anderson, 2013, p.39). "Ultimately, people are rewarded from 'saving' those less fortunate and are able to completely disregard the policies they have supported that have created/maintained systems of oppression" (Aronson, 2017, p.36).

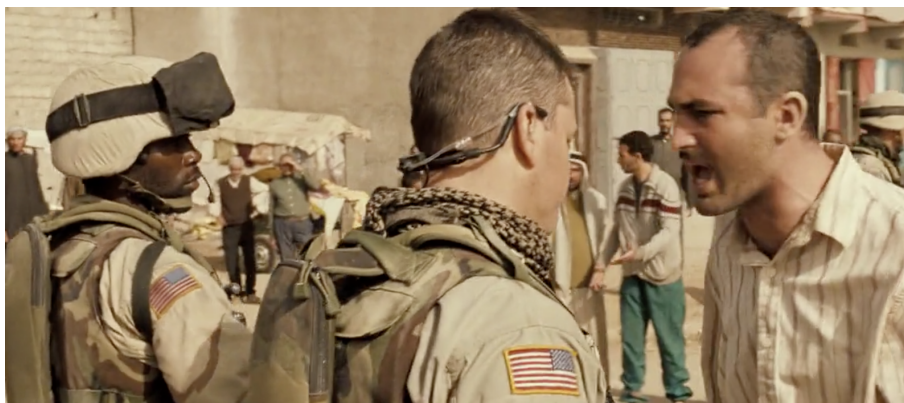
modern conspiracy story situated within a deeply complex political landscape.



Journalist Lawrie Dayne is cornered by Miller, who wants answers. Her position suggests vulnerability and weakness compared to Miller who, even in silhouette, dominates the frame

The only female character in the film, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Lawrie Dayne (Amy Ryan), likely represents Judith Miller, the former *New York Times* reporter made notorious for her series of exclusives focusing on the presence of WMDs that bolstered the Bush Administration's war efforts in Iraq, but that were ultimately proven wrong. As a reporter, Dayne would have been a provocative character study in a historically crucial role within the genre, yet "Dayne is presented as a victim of the campaign of lies," essentially diminishing her agency, "when, in reality, the American media -- and the *Times'* Miller, specifically -- was deliberately complicit in transmitting the official line and beating the drum for war, war, war" (Stimmen, 2010). *Green Zone's* ignorance of this historical reality, especially in the film's conclusion (which sees Miller send a mass email exposé to a list of media outlets) "only reinforces illusions in the ability of the media to communicate the truth when confronted with it. One can only wonder how many 'delete' buttons would be pressed in the real world" (Stimmen, 2010). Rather than portray Dayne as a modern, self-serving journalist whose exclusives not only embolden the Bush Administration's war effort but put her in the limelight as well (which would have engaged with conspiracy culture and contemporary perceptions of the media as a self-preserving, self-promoting entity), her character rests on tropes of

female passivity and gullibility: she takes the words of the men around her as gospel and is spurred into action only at their call, never checking for herself the validity of her sources or information. Miller's confrontation of her on this⁵³ is more forceful than the gentle prodding for information she attempts with Poundstone or Miller in her previous scenes. Dayne's behaviour might have been believable, compelling, and relevant if it were cast as a self-serving gesture to get her name on the exclusives, but instead she is portrayed as weak and incompetent in what has traditionally been the conspiracy genre's most crucial role.



Above: Miller orders his soldier off of Freddy. Below: Freddy faces off against the American soldiers while Miller remains calm

The film's shallow representations go beyond character and can even be applied to the themes of the film: "When Green Zone came out, it was accused of fuelling 'conspiracy theories' -- specifically, that the American government, intelligence services and/or military lied about WMD" (von

⁵³ See Appendix: Dialogue *Green Zone 2*

Tunzelman, 2011), but even as the film's allegations were proven to be accurate, the simplification of the story and its characters left the film without the political force it might have had. Take Miller's response to CIA agent Martin Brown (Brendan Gleeson) in the following exchange:

Miller: *We're both after the WMD right?*

Martin Brown: *... It's a little more complicated than that.*

Miller: *Well not to me it isn't.*

Brown's response to Miller encapsulates the film's presentation of the Iraq/WMD debacle and perhaps the Bush Administration's as well: "One of the charges against the Bush Administration was that it sought to encase Iraq in a narrative far too naïve and restrictive for any nation to bear; and, in its small way, *Green Zone*, a left-wing movie that looks and sounds like a right-wing one, suffers from the same delusion" (Lane, 2010). In the following exchange from the final scenes of *Green Zone*, Miller confronts Poundstone about the bogus WMD intelligence he proffered and again simplifies the arguments:

Miller: *When you peddled that shit in DC, did they know it was a lie? Or did they just never bother to ask?*

Clark Poundstone: *Okay, okay. Come on, none of this matters anymore. WMDs? This doesn't matter.*

Miller: [grabs Poundstone angrily and forcefully] *What the fuck you talking about? Of course it fucking matters! The reasons we go to war always matter! It's all that matters! It fucking matters!*

Miller's aggravated reply mimics the intense visual style of "hurtling hand-held camerawork and staccato editing" (Scott, 2010) that distinguished Greengrass' blockbusting *Bourne* trilogy which he admits to revisiting in *Green Zone*: "The world seemed very turbulent, and the [Bourne] movies sort of reflect that and they distill it and reflect it back as a kind of paranoid conspiracy thriller... So you come to [*Green Zone*] and you go: Well, let's see if we can take one step further into the real world and see if we can build a conspiracy thriller there that's got the same high energy and high octane... and a moral, noble hero with a moral agenda"

(2010). Similar to the way presenting a 'noble hero with a moral agenda' after 20 years of self-interested privatisation in the conspiracy genre makes *Green Zone*'s protagonist seem naive at best or implausible at worst, repurposing the same high octane, blockbuster-style cinematography makes the once-compelling visual technique feel shallow. Where Jason Bourne's action sequences came as revelations for and to his character, and added to the film's sense of paranoia, the same camera style that ought to resemble authentic, handheld camera footage in a war zone is ineffective because it doesn't match Miller's own emotional state: "What's strangely missing is the paranoia an officer might feel in his position: he's not the hunted man Jason Bourne was, possibly because it's beyond the film's remit to have the US military... targeting one of their own. Damon... is left to portray only a kind of righteous bafflement" (Robey, 2010). *Green Zone* may have made a conscious effort to display a clear sense of justice in 2010, but its lack of engagement with the genre's privatised phase and conspiracy culture lends the film no real political force.

As many contemporary conspiracy thrillers do, *Green Zone* attempts to replicate traditional conspiracy protagonists and mechanisms for justice, but at a time when public cynicism and conspiracy culture have changed the way these devices translate on screen. The final scene of the film, which features Miller sending his scathing report to expose the Department of Defense's deception via mass email to a list of major press outlets, should do as *All the President's Men* does by representing the media as a mechanism for justice and for truth but, in 2010, it misses the mark. The audience and the public are expected to side with Miller: he represents the idealistic, moralistic, traditional conspiracy hero and we want to believe that the reasons we go to war do matter. Yet, modern audiences saw America go to war all the same. Modern audiences know about the NSA's surveillance system, the Pentagon Papers⁵⁴, and the

⁵⁴ The Pentagon Papers revealed in 1971 that the American public had been grossly misled to believe the United States' political intentions and military involvement in Vietnam were positive and hopeful when in fact, they were dire.

Chilcot Report⁵⁵. Even in 2000, “the repeated pattern of denial, concealment and false revelation casts a shadow of suspicion on any official pronouncements” (Knight, p.26-27). Conspiracy culture dictates that audiences simply don’t believe in the media as watchdog for democracy anymore. In 1976, *All the President’s Men* could use the media as a mechanism for justice because history dictated that it would prevail. In 2010, *Green Zone*’s attempt to do the same falls flat because justice for the WMD debacle never came. Bush’s decision to invade Iraq without a United Nations mandate and no clear, timely intelligence of imminent threat by Saddam Hussein was upheld; he carried out a full two terms in office and, even with the Chilcot Report published in 2016, it was British Prime Minister Tony Blair who received the most flak, with calls to try him for war crimes (Pilkington, 2016). No such calls were made for George W. Bush. Audiences’ presently estranged relationship with the press, exacerbated by the prevalence of fake news and the proliferation of information via the internet and social media, has affected not just the way we perceive and trust what governments and news media dictate (Stelter, 2017), but has made the moralistic nature of traditional conspiracy film protagonists and traditional mechanisms for justice feel less believable today. Despite its \$100 million budget and \$40 million in advertising, *Green Zone* was largely considered a flop -- it grossed just over \$35 million with domestic US audiences and received mixed, highly partisan reviews. If *Green Zone* failed as a contemporary conspiracy film, it is not because it misrepresents the USA’s insistence on the existence of WMDs to justify its invasion of Iraq, but because it presented an unflinchingly altruistic protagonist when both neoliberal culture and the privatisation of the conspiracy genre promote cynical individualism and because its presentation of justice was wholly incongruous with the history the film is based on.

⁵⁵ The Chilcot Report is the result of a British public inquiry into its involvement in the Iraq War which states that, among other things, the intelligence regarding WMDs and the legal basis for war were “far from satisfactory” (Harding, 2016).

CHAPTER 2

The effect of female agency on justice in American conspiracy film

When the personal is political, even privatised justice is public-facing

When we think of the heroes in conspiracy films, perhaps we imagine the journalists of *All the President's Men* and *The Parallax View*, or the lawyers in *JFK* and *Enemy of the State...* maybe soldiers, or scientists. But do we imagine mothers? Wives? Do we see women as viable conspiracy heroes? When viewed as a percentage of conspiracy films per decade, those led by women have yet to make up more than 20% of Hollywood's overall output in the genre but, where justice is concerned, female-led conspiracy films function much in the same way as their traditional male counterparts, strongly abiding by public-facing, tradition 1 and tradition 2 narratives and tackling similar themes and subject matter. Surveillance, corruption, abuse of power, and the press as a strong mechanism for justice all feature heavily; but, unlike male-led conspiracy films, female-driven narratives do not adhere to the conspiracy genre's evolution from public to private. There is no privatisation, per se, of feminine conspiracy narratives because the heroine's grappling with the seen and unseen threat remains rooted in the personal whilst extending beyond just her to simultaneously reflect the public-facing demands and desires of women's liberation. Where the masculine evolution of justice in conspiracy film is linear and graduated -- with a progressive loss of political force -- the heroine's journey is whole, inclusive, where political force is retained through the agency of the protagonist.



Birthstone. (Painting, Deborah Koff-Chapin)

Starting with *Klute* (1971, dir. Alan J. Pakula), the first conspiracy film since the eradication of the Motion Picture Code to feature a female protagonist, I analyse how female agency -- as contextualised against culturally defined standards of femininity, motherhood, wifedom, and the American feminist movement -- affects the political force of mainstream American conspiracy narratives. For this purpose, agency will be defined as the capacity “individuals have to act independently of structural constraints... when these refer not to material or biological structures but to deeply ingrained patterns of social interaction” (Apter and Garnsey, 1994, p.20). As the roles, expectations, and culturally approved rhetoric for women have evolved since second-wave feminism, so too has female protagonists’ agency -- or capacity for independent action. However, the price of autonomy for female protagonists as they pursue justice in conspiracy films presents in one or all of the following gender-based obstacles:

- She will not be believed initially
- She will be patronised or experience sexist behaviour
- She will be objectified and/or
- She will be sexually harassed throughout her journey for justice
- She will have her sexual history or motherhood called into question
- She will have to balance her professional and family commitments
- She will be accused of being emotional or bitchy
- She will be domesticated by the end of the film

The above obstacles may be threatening, demoralising, and exhausting to the female protagonist but, from the 1990s-onward, rarely are they overwhelming enough to prevent the heroine from accomplishing her goals and exposing the conspiracy. Rather, the inherent conflict in the struggle of a woman’s quest for truth and/or justice in a society of ingrained male hegemony adds another layer of complexity to the conspiracy narrative and, in fact, raises the stakes of her accomplishments. Although comparatively disadvantaged to her male counterparts, either by the above obstacles or through social constraints, the female conspiracy protagonist has a few female-centric advantages to aid her in her quest:

- Her feminine wiles to persuade/manipulate men
- Her emotional capacity (often as a mother) allows people to trust her and is a source of motivation and altruism on her quest
- People underestimate her because she is a woman

Seen threats for female conspiracy film protagonists are defined similarly to those of male protagonists but are distinguished by an underlying crisis of womanhood: either the protagonists are trying to fit into the mould of femininity in domestic or personal situations, or they are seeking to prove their worth in a male-dominated workplace. In this way, these films express three key themes of the second-wave feminist movement: sexuality, family, and workplace dynamics. Female-driven conspiracy films from the 1970s-80s are dominated by tradition 2 endings, which reap their sense of injustice when the conspiracy goes unpunished or when the heroine perishes to the weight of the conspiracy. These films are undoubtedly politically forceful, but their reliance on tradition 2 endings speaks to a larger symptom of the struggle for women's liberation that contextualises these films: "In the movies, as in real life, it's still a man's world" (Giddis, 1977, p.36). For what overwhelmingly defines these traditional female-driven conspiracy films is not their sense of justice (as it does in male-led versions) but *injustice* as portrayed through a lack of female agency within them. Traditional female conspiracy protagonists are less active and less able than their male counterparts because they are bound by commitments to family or complicit within restrictive gendered standards which men were freed from.

The splintering of feminist ideology and introduction of conservative postfeminism in the 1990s meant that, even as the the third-wave sought to broaden the goals of feminism to challenge gender-role stereotypes and include women with diverse racial and cultural identities, female-driven conspiracy films, even presently, have yet to effectively embrace the intersectionality of third-wave feminism⁵⁶: we may see working-class,

⁵⁶ On the other hand, television has been a medium where, at least from the 2010s-onwards, more racially/culturally diverse female protagonists have existed. The first Black, lesbian superhero on television appeared on *Black Lightning* in

middle, and even upper-class protagonists, but in the last 50 years of conspiracy narratives (which include a handful of Black male protagonists) we have yet to see a female woman of colour lead a conspiracy film. In spite of the genre's predisposition for white protagonists, what is apparent in these third-wave female-driven conspiracy films was the introduction of women who exceeded the expectations of those around them but who would either be rewarded or violently punished for these transgressions. Female conspiracy protagonists after the 1980s continue to grapple with second-wave feminist issues, but now against conspiratorial backdrops representative of the fears and paranoias of 1990s-2000s notions of identity within a growing internet and digital culture. Later, post-9/11 distrust of the military and government would filter into these narratives just like their male counterparts; however, compared to traditional female conspiracy protagonists, these 21st century heroines are distinctly more active. Third-wave female conspiracy film protagonists display a growing sense of agency and self-awareness within these narratives -- a knowingness that "because in every form of media I see us/myself slapped, decapitated, laughed at, objectified, raped, trivialized, pushed, ignored, stereotyped, kicked, scorned, molested, silenced, invalidated, knifed, shot, choked, and killed..." (Hanna, 1991) that a woman who overcomes the conspiracy must be prevailing against all odds. Traditional endings effectively cease in third-wave female-driven conspiracy films; rather, the protagonist achieves *in spite* of her womanness -- femininity is at once a drawback but also her secret weapon.

Unlike the masculine, linear evolution of justice (and its associated loss of political force) within the conspiracy genre, the progression of women's agency (and their narratives' political force) in female-driven conspiracy films more closely resembles what Raymond Williams refers to as "the complex interrelations between movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific and effective dominance" (1977, p.121). The

2018, but whether she can be considered a conspiracy narrative protagonist is debatable.

recognition of these residual⁵⁷ and emergent⁵⁸ cultural movements is relevant as a means of contextualising female protagonists from the 1990s-onwards where, unlike their masculine counterparts, there is no distinct third phase of female-driven conspiracy films. Even in 2010, a female conspiracy protagonist can still be bound by the same constraints of motherhood that second-wave feminism sought to eschew⁵⁹, and while some of the first female conspiracy protagonists in the 1970s were neither wives nor mothers⁶⁰, in 1995 -- decades after the onset of second-wave feminism -- conspiracy narratives could still cling to the notion of prescribed domesticity for women's problems⁶¹. The prevalence of residual, regressive notions of womanhood and femininity within conspiracy films whilst representations of female agency continue to progress reflects more than "'stages' and 'variations' but the internal dynamic relations of any actual process" (Williams, 1977, p.121); in this case, they represent the varied coherence of feminist ideology on the public consciousness: for women, agency is not always a given. It is with this understanding that female agency on screen reflects "women's outlook to the structural constraints which they encounter" (Apter and Garnsey, 1994, p.20) and through using Vivian Gornick's definition of feminism as "not a movement, not a cause, not a revolution, but rather a profoundly new way of interpreting human experience... a vital piece of information at the centre of a new point of reference from which one both reinterprets the past and predicts the future" (1970), that I observe the political force of conspiracy heroines. It is through this this "pro-woman or gender lens" that I ask, "*Where have all the choices gone?*" (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000, p.97) in order to investigate how female protagonists' agency has influenced their ability to affect justice in conspiracy films from the 1970s to present.

⁵⁷ "The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present" (Williams, 1977, p.122).

⁵⁸ Emergent culture is "distinct from both the dominant and the residual... it is never only a matter of immediate practice; indeed it depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of form" (Williams, 1977, p.126).

⁵⁹ See Case Study: *The Whistleblower* (2010)

⁶⁰ Bree Daniel in *Klute* (1971) and Kimberly Wells in *The China Syndrome* (1979), both played by Jane Fonda, were neither wives nor mothers

⁶¹ See Case Study: *The Net* (1995)

Phase 1 (1971 - present): “There’s no girls in science class!”

Female conspiracy protagonists break barriers with second-wave feminism

While the male-led faction of the genre was busy sharpening its teeth on America’s preoccupation with assassinations and Watergate in the 1970s and 1980s, the few female-led conspiracy films released within the same timeframe reflected, in addition, a separate political struggle: women’s liberation. Second-wave feminism, which gained widespread publicity and momentum throughout the 1960s, was well underway, with issues of women’s sexuality, family life, and workplace dynamics becoming embedded in public discourse, leading to “the diffusion of feminist theory from smaller, loosely connected consciousness-raising and activist groups to mainstream American culture as a whole” (Silver, 2002, p.60). As was the prerogative of conspiracy thrillers from the 1970s to call out abuse of power by large, powerful, and wealthy institutions, female-led conspiracy films had an additional powerful institution to address: the patriarchy. In her pivotal book *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan refers to “The Problem That Has No Name”: a Kafkaesque moniker for the profound dissatisfaction women felt as they “lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife” (1963, p.18). In the words of former president of the New York Chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW), Jacqueline Ceballos, “I just had these feelings: something’s wrong, something’s wrong... And I just knew, it wasn’t him, it wasn’t me... it was society” (*She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry*, 2014). Unlike fictional male conspiracy protagonists, American women were waking up to their own real life conspiracy.

In female-led conspiracy films, the protagonist’s seen and unseen threats are inevitably related to, and often exacerbated by, her womanness, allowing her struggles to speak to a larger condition of (white, often middle-class) womanhood. This reflects what Heather Booth refers to as “the big insight of the women’s movement,” that “‘the personal is political.’ Problems that you felt were happening to you alone -- probably were your fault -- but if it’s happening to other people, then it’s a social problem and not just a personal problem” (*She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry*, 2014). In

this way, the privatisation found in male-lead conspiracy films from the late 1980s is actually *implicit* within female-driven conspiracy narratives from as early as the 1970s, whilst serving not to dilute, but rather *amplify* their political force. With the personal inherently bound up in the politics of female-driven conspiracy films, they do not evolve from public to private, but rather in terms of their heroine's agency, with "the cultural processing of mid-70s anxiety over [second-wave] feminism" (Helford, 2006, p.145) contextualising the extent of female protagonists' power in conspiracy films from the 1970s-80s. The inclusion of feminine politics to the unseen threat is apparent in *Silkwood* (1983, dir. Mike Nichols), a conspiracy biopic about the real-life Karen Silkwood, a plutonium worker turned union activist who died in a suspicious car accident -- allegedly, with evidence that would have compromised her employer. Along with teasing the American' public's appetite for conspiracy against a backdrop of nuclear power, *Silkwood* provides "a means for filmmakers to approach ideologically-weighted subjects -- such as feminism, liberalism, and working-class socialism -- within the commercial mainstream" (Borda, 2010, p.114). The film hits at the genre's usual themes of abuse of power and profits over people, whilst highlighting Silkwood's struggle as a divorced mother trying to balance her day job with seeing her children. The judgement Silkwood faces from her family and co-workers is palpable: rather than being praised for doing two jobs at once, she is criticised on both sides for not being enough as either a mother or a colleague. Only through her involvement in the union does Silkwood develop any real sense of self but, against the cultural standards for women in the 1970s, she is "a tainted heroine and outsider who, because of her insistence on liberation for herself and social justice for the working class, ultimately faces defeat" (Borda, 2010, p.102). Like male-led conspiracy films, female-driven conspiracy films also utilise the seen and unseen threat:

seen threat: the protagonist's primary objective, bound up in the threats immediately posed to her person; for female conspiracy protagonists, these are often related to her ability to comply or surpass the culturally approved rhetoric of womanhood at the time: either she is not good enough at being a woman or she must prove

herself in a male-dominated environment. For example: in *The Stepford Wives* (1975, dir. Bryan Forbes), Joanna Eberhart's seen threat is to make a go at living in Stepford by being a good mother and housewife. This actually isn't what Joanna wants, but she feels pressured to do so, and it is her transgressions against being a proper wife that make her a target for harm in the film.

unseen threat: in both male and female-driven conspiracy films this is the conspiracy at large, often defined by the need to cover up corruption, crimes, or can also be a network of surveillance unbeknownst to, and in conflict with, the protagonist. In *The Stepford Wives*, the unseen threat is that the wives of Stepford are actually being turned into subservient robots by the Stepford Men's Association.

Although female-led conspiracy films from the 1970s-80s still addressed larger political anxieties like nuclear power and profits over people, they were not dominated by tales of reporters seeking the truth, but of wives and mothers who often fell victim to their attempts at exposing injustice, culminating in more tradition 2 endings as opposed to the male standard of tradition 1. For example, the tradition 2 ending of *Silkwood* on one hand represents the power of the Kerr McGhee conspiracy, but also adds weight to the idea that living outside the norms of wifedom by having a day job, taking up lovers out of wedlock, or attempting to unionise, are all activities that lead to Silkwood's untimely death. At the root of these conspiracy stories is the notion of control: the heroine's ability to affect justice (as opposed to exemplifying injustice in a tradition 2 narrative) depends on her freedom. "As Joanna faces her defeat at [*The Stepford Wives*] climax, we witness the impossibility of equality, of change, and of women's access to power" (Helford, 2006, p.152). Justice in *Silkwood*, *The Stepford Wives*, and other female-driven conspiracy films, therefore, hinges on the protagonist's agency within the film: while Kimberly Wells, the relatively independent news anchor in *The China Syndrome* (1979, dir. James Bridges) is able to expose the injustice at the Ventana nuclear power plant, Joanna Eberhart (Katharine Ross), lured back into the Stepford Men's

Association by the disembodied voices of her children, is unable to escape from either her unseen threat or the patriarchy. Simultaneously public and private-facing, “Forbes replicates Friedan’s concern with housewives’ depression and nervous breakdowns in *The Stepford Wives* as Joanna and Bobbie constantly question their dislike of Stepford and, ultimately, their sanity... The implication, in the film, is that Stepford’s ‘feminine mystique’ erodes a woman's mental health even before she is physically destroyed” (Silver, 2002, p.112-113)⁶². These female-driven conspiracy narratives embody the second-wave feminist notion that the personal is political, and only achieve justice via tradition 1 endings in the rare instances where the heroine is allowed agency within the confines of 1970s-80s era notions of womanhood.



Joanna Eberhart, visually imprisoned by a staircase in the Stepford Men's Association in The Stepford Wives; one of the many examples of cage/prison imagery in the film

For career women, sexism in the workplace is also reflected in these conspiracy narratives, presenting the illusion of agency for women as they pursue truth and justice in male-dominated environments. As professional women not identified as mothers, Kimberly Wells of *The China Syndrome* and Lee Winters (also Jane Fonda) of *Rollover* (1981, dir. Alan J. Pakula)

⁶² Despite bringing second-wave rhetoric into the mainstream, Betty Friedan lambasted the film as “a rip-off of the women's movement”; writer Gael Greene “loved it,” saying “those men were like a lot of men I've known,” and screenwriter Eleanor Perry agreed: “The film presses buttons that make you furious—the fact that all the Stepford men wanted were big breasts, big bottoms, a clean house, fresh-perked coffee and sex. I thought sure Betty Friedan would stand up and say, ‘Yes, this is just the way that men treat women’” (Klemesrud, 1975, p.29).

are in positions of power compared to other contemporaneous female conspiracy protagonists but they must constantly prove their worthiness in male-dominated fields with men portrayed as necessary to their success in both films. Despite Wells's position as a news anchor for KXLA, the opening scene of *The China Syndrome* depicts who is actually in control :



Kimberly Wells prepares to go on air; the 2-sided mirror she holds to camera blocks her face.

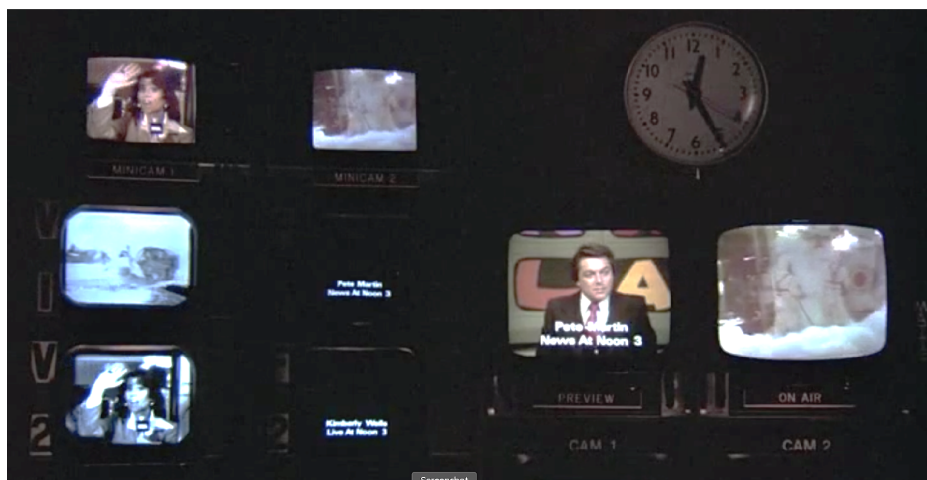
[Offscreen]

Male Producer 1: *The red hair was a good idea.*

Male Producer 2: *We talked about cutting it.*

Male Producer 1: *What did she say?*

Male Producer 2: *She'll do what we tell her.*



*"Hey, hey, fellas! Anybody listening to me?" Kimberly Wells lost in a checkerboard of television screens in *The China Syndrome**

Clearly unable to hear what the producers say, Wells' introduction illustrates that she is not only an object to her news team -- capable of being cut and coloured to their liking -- but that no one is even paying attention to her. Her calls for a countdown to air go unanswered, culminating in Wells' picture, lost in a checkerboard of television screens and her voice pleading, "Fellas! Anybody listening to me?" In the first minutes of the film, *The China Syndrome* establishes that Wells, a female news anchor who takes her job very seriously, isn't taken seriously at all by her colleagues. The mirror she holds up in this scene blocks her face and points directly back to camera, reflecting and replacing her with any (white, middle class) woman who dares venture into the phallogentric sphere of professional life.

Beyond objectification, Wells demonstrates the diplomatic tightrope that she (and other female professionals) had to balance between being principled and being employed. In the meeting where they are told that KXLA will not air their footage of the volatile Ventana reactor, Wells' hot-headed cameraman, Richard Adams (Michael Douglas), erupts in anger while Wells attempts to subdue him by kicking him under the table. Adams defiantly walks out and goes on to steal the footage from the station's vaults -- something that Wells, because she wants to keep her job, would never feel able to do. Her boss, Don Jacovich (Peter Donat) underlines Wells' lack of agency when he says, "She doesn't make policy, she's a performer". Wells' conscience is clearly torn, but when Adams criticises her for being, "a piece of talking furniture," she replies firmly, "I am not ashamed of having a good job, and I have every intention of keeping it and getting a better one... And if that means they've got me, then they've got me." Wells' sacrificing of her principles for the security of her career illustrates that, despite appearing to elude the confines of wifedom or motherhood, she still lacks the agency afforded to men in her career. This recognition of her private situation as something at odds with the public-facing conspiracy to cover up the volatile nuclear reactor is exactly the type of seen/unseen threat disjoint found in masculine phase 2 privatised narratives that normally weakens the film's political force but, in *The China Syndrome*, it does not. Where "much of male drama is about

external conflict, but with women it's more personal" (Seger, 2003, p.134), this second-wave feminist understanding that 'the personal is political' is a key motivator when incorporating and achieving justice within female-led conspiracy films. In this case, Wells' womanness makes her private and public-facing motives mutually *conducive* when they at first seemed mutually *exclusive*: to expose the conspiracy is to risk her life and her career, but when she does, it forces those around her to finally take her and her journalism seriously.

Lee Winters of *Rollover* is similarly perceived by the men around her to be out of her depth when she inherits her deceased husband's role as Chairman of his company, Winterchem. To prove herself as the new chairman, Winters becomes involved (romantically and financially) with a formidable banker named Hubbell Smith (Kris Kristofferson) in order to secure a deal with Arab investors, whom she later finds out were responsible for her husband's murder. Smith and Winters' financial deal goes bust and the Arabs pull their money not only from Smith's bank but others across America and the world, causing global panic and a major economic crisis. In this way, the film expresses fear and paranoia towards Arab influences on the global economy after the oil crises of the 1970s; however, the final scene in which Winters reconnects with Smith in the shadows of his now defunct investment firm and asks if he would like a "partner" (whether she means romantic or financial is left ambiguous) indicates either a presumption of domesticity, or suggests that Winters will be more successful beside a man than by herself. This imposition of dependence on men lingers even into the 1990s in *The Pelican Brief* (1993, dir. Alan J. Pakula), demonstrating the type of residual cultural process which Williams refers to. Darby Shaw (Julia Roberts) is a law student who writes an exposé (from which the film derives its name) on the recent murder of two supreme court justices. The press in this film is personified by Gray Grantham (Denzel Washington), a reporter who uses Shaw's Pelican Brief to break the story of corruption and assassination, eventually leading to indictments, resignations and a guilty-by-association President who will no longer be seeking re-election. At a time when male-led conspiracy films were in the midst of privatisation, *The Pelican Brief*

presents firm, public-facing justice. Although instrumental, women in conspiracy films are often sidelined -- as is Shaw in *The Pelican Brief* when her name is listed second, behind Grantham's, for an exposé she originated. For the few female-driven conspiracy films from the 1970s-80s that do not end with the protagonist perishing to the conspiracy, justice often comes at the cost of male dependence -- the residual impressions of which would persist in the following decades.

By incorporating ideas and attitudes promoted by the women's liberation movement, the conflict of individual conspiracy heroines comes to represent the systemic struggles of other (white, often middle-class) women; as an "interpretation of real events through the popular and persuasive media of film, the form actually functions as both entertainment *and* ideology" (Borda, 2010, p.114). As conduits for feminist ideology in mainstream film, early conspiracy heroines stood out for their intellect and determination in an era when "the only woman who's been allowed to be consistently independent, adventurous, and unmolested is Lassie, and they used all boy dogs to play that part" (Butler in Seger, 2003, p.158). At best, these films offered women a glimpse of what they might expect should they venture into the (male dominated) workplace: they would be objectified, they would not be taken seriously, they would have to work harder than their male counterparts, and only with the help of men (especially if they are romantically involved) would they be able to achieve their goals; at worst, the heroine dies trying, with an 'I told you so' prescription of domesticity. What sets female-driven conspiracy films of the second wave apart from the rest of the genre is not just their blending of the personal and political, but their bleak reflection that the genre's traditional mechanisms for justice weren't always accessible to its heroines; instead, they present injustice by confining these characters within patriarchal systems and equating these constraints with tradition 2 endings where the heroine perishes to the unseen threat.

Case Study: *Klute* (1971)

The Limitations of the Traditional Female Protagonist

The first in Alan J. Pakula's 'paranoia trilogy', *Klute* is a traditional conspiracy thriller which is "both emotionally stirring and intellectually provoking" as "the story of a woman and her battle not *for* love but *with* love," (Giddis, 1977, p.26, 34) which bore particular relevance for women in the early 1970s as they grappled with new relationship paradigms following the rise of second wave feminism. In this way, *Klute* exemplifies how conspiracy films have been one of the few mainstream narrative spaces with room for female characters who eschew "classical Hollywood's sensibilities of women, as love interests for men, and as women waiting to be rescued," or "are still supposed to prefer domestic lives over working outside the home" (Meade, 2014, p.34). "Until Jane Fonda's proactive, power-conscious, eponymous performance... only Hitchcockian female protagonists could be counted on for intellectual capability, dramaturgical skill and active curiosity, even if these qualities were camouflaged within the culturally approved rhetoric of home, love, marriage, and motherhood" (Pomerance, 2001, p.6). In this respect, *Klute's* protagonist Bree Daniel (Jane Fonda) does break barriers; however, the limitations of female agency within the larger political landscape for women in the early 1970s still bears down on Daniel's character through contemporaneous expectations of womanhood and femininity. Her seen and unseen threats are:

seen threat: Bree Daniel wants to regain control of her life. She believes that if she quits turning tricks she will no longer be stalked, but struggles to give up the quick and reliable money.

unseen threat: Peter Cable murdered Tom Gruneman after he witnessed Cable abuse a prostitute. Cable then murdered two other female witnesses and is stalking Bree to intimidate her into silence.

Daniel's personal journey away from her life as a call girl (the seen threat) is tied to Cable's demise and the revelation of his attempts to cover up his

murder of Gruneman (the unseen threat). *Klute* ends neatly with both seen and unseen threats being addressed interdependently, but whether this is achieved through a demonstration of Daniel's agency, or her acquiescence, is debatable. The character of Bree Daniel "must be contextualised within the emerging stereotype of the independent or liberated woman in the 1970s: sexually adventurous, independent, single, and financially self-sufficient" (Bolton, 2011, p.69). However, any representation of Daniel's independence is negated as a symptom of her life as a call girl and portrayed as empty, lonely, or unfulfilling, while any growth in her character is represented as a consequence of her domestication and association with John Klute, whom she submits to in the final scene of the film.

Where vices and addictions make for complex and interesting male protagonists, conspiracy heroines are held to the culturally approved rhetoric of their time: "If Bree is shrewd and independent, she is also a whore whose emotional disarray reflects the price of autonomy for women. Despite all, what she really needs is a protective, powerful man" (Mellen, 1977, p.327). This presents the crucial caveat to Bree's conspiratorial journey: her success is inextricably tied to the influence and protection of John Klute (Donald Sutherland), and, as such, renders her weak as a protagonist when it comes to affecting justice. Although it is to her that Cable reveals his guilt in the conspiracy and without her involvement that the mystery would not be solved, there would have been no *justice* (making it a clearcut example of a tradition 2 narrative) if not for Klute -- who saves her by throwing Cable out a window. Bree Daniel may be a compelling character, but it is this kind of passivity that makes her seem less and less like the protagonist of the film and more a crucial supporting role. Yet, she is billed before the eponymous Klute and her seen and unseen threats are linked; it is just that her physical safety and emotional growth are controlled by Klute, a man who serves to domesticate and possess her by the end of the film. Four years later, Joanna Eberhart in *The Stepford Wives* portrays something closer to autonomy; yet, like Daniel, her fate also hinges on the will of the men around her, a quality which limits the political force of early female conspiracy protagonists.



Above: Bree Daniel, shielded by Klute even as they are buying fruit. Below: Klute, leading her away moments later

Surveillance and paranoia -- when tied to Daniel's femininity -- further serve to threaten her agency. The duality of Daniel's voice as overtly sexual (in the surreptitious audio tapes to her male clients) or self-doubting narration (when she speaks to her female therapist) functions both as a trope of the conspiracy genre, but also as an arm of the the "phallographic order of pimps, police, and psychoanalysis that Bree has to struggle to survive" (Bolton, 2011, p.70). As a plot device, "the status of Bree's voice is perhaps the most striking weapon used against her, as it is repeatedly undermined and stolen," culminating in Cable's phone call to her apartment after he has ransacked it and ejaculated into her underwear: Daniel picks up the phone to hear her own voice -- a recording of her talking sensually to a client, "effectively putting the blame for her present situation squarely on her shoulders" (Bolton, 2011, p.70). This

victim-blaming takes place when “Bree is punished for her voice with her voice, which is also undermined as evidence of her state of mind” when she is “disempowered by the conflicting information presented through her actions and her voice: the suggestion is that Bree may not know what is ‘best’ for her, may not be able to control her own actions” (Bolton, 2011, p.71). In the end, “the powerful stereotype of the romantic love ending plus the ‘quality of credibility’ possessed by the image [of Daniel leaving with Klute] outweigh the direct testimony contained in Bree’s voice-off” (Bolton, 2011, p.71)⁶³. *Klute* may have political force, but the fact that justice is delivered by a man and not by the female protagonist illustrates Daniel’s lack of agency when viewed through the lens of second-wave feminism.

The unseen threat in *Klute* is unique in that Cable, rather than dispose of Daniel the way he does the other witnesses, actually hires John Klute to investigate Gruneman’s disappearance. Such self-destructive behaviour leads directly to his downfall. From a genre perspective, *Klute* qualifies as tradition 1, but when viewed from the perspective of female agency, Bree Daniel’s character is a woman confined and controlled by men. *Klute* heavily utilises the ‘unseen assassin/stalker in the shadows’ trope⁶⁴ to embody the antagonist, Cable, but links these behaviours with her perceived protector, Klute: “although his intentions are the opposite of her pursuer’s, his methods are the same” (Giddis, 1977, p.29). Not only is the stalker consistently shown in conjunction with Klute’s appearances, both men stalk, wiretap, and undermine Daniel; yet one is presented as an obsessed pervert, the other a romantic protector. Klute and Cable make up two “complementary faces of patriarchy” (Bolton, 2011, p.73) masked as two sides of herself: the loving and vulnerable or the manipulating and defensive Bree Daniel. In this way, *Klute* can be read as an allegory of a woman choosing between two sides of herself, except that the real Bree Daniel never chooses: Klute’s rescue of her -- from Cable and from New York City -- limits any real agency Daniel might come upon. The film’s resolution is ambiguous: the image of the couple leaving Daniel’s empty apartment together is belied by Daniel’s voiceover which indicates that she

⁶³ See Appendix: Dialogue - *Klute* 1

⁶⁴ See Appendix: Conspiracy Film Tropes 1969-2020

is unsure about a future of domesticity; however, the original screenplay presents a far more *forceful* removal of Daniel's agency by Klute⁶⁵. In either version, Daniel doesn't have the freedom or agency to choose her own fate. Daniel may not have perished to the force of Cable's conspiracy, but she still hasn't gained control over her life -- she's simply passed the reins on to Klute. This surrender on Daniel's part may be portrayed ambiguously through the discrepancy between her voice and the image of her leaving, but "the film's facile assumption that Bree should be the one to follow Klute into the sunset is revealing. After all, as Bree herself admits, what is there for her in Tuscarora? Certainly the chances of her realising herself there are almost nonexistent... The answer is that Klute's life is in Tuscarora; if Bree can't make a go of it there -- well, that's her failure" (Giddis, 1977, p.36). A prime indicator in the conspiracy genre that the hero has not overcome the unseen threat is agency panic, or powerlessness; in the case of Bree Daniel in *Klute*, she remains so, even with an apparently tradition 1 ending.

⁶⁵ See Appendix: Dialogue - *Klute 2*: Excerpt from Original screenplay

Phase 2 (1990 - present): Not just little ladies starting brouhahas

Conspiracy heroines as reflections of the third-wave and postfeminism

While female protagonists in the conspiracy genre reflected the grievances of second-wave feminism throughout the 1970s-80s, the fracturing of feminist ideology into postfeminism and the third-wave from the 1990s onwards meant that, while female conspiracy protagonists have developed comparatively more agency, real strides in representation, characterisation and, therefore, justice on screen have still yet to be made. By “uncritically declaring that gender equality exist[ed] in the 1990s” due to augmentations to the Equal Pay Act of 1963⁶⁶, the repeal of gender discriminatory laws⁶⁷ in the 1970s and 1980s, and the integration of women into traditionally male-dominated professions⁶⁸, American broadcasts fueled the idea that women’s liberation was now irrelevant, allowing “the notion of a postfeminist era [to] permeate[] the popular media” (Hall and Rodriguez, 2003, p.880, 878). The term “postfeminist” in the 1990s would come to characterise “a group of young, conservative feminists who explicitly define[d] themselves against and criticize[d] feminists of the second wave” (Heywood and Drake, 1997, p.1). Similar to the criticisms of second-wave feminism⁶⁹, postfeminism largely ignored the

⁶⁶ The Education Amendments of 1972 amended the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 to expand the coverage of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 so that it included white collar women.

⁶⁷ Key cases include:

- *Sprogis v. United Airlines* (1970) in which a federal court ruled in favour of a female flight attendant to assert that neither sex nor marital status were lawful qualifications to be a flight attendant.
- *Phillips v. Martin Marietta Corp.* (1971): a United States Supreme Court sex discrimination case that asserted an employer may not, in the absence of business necessity, refuse to hire women with pre-school-age children while hiring men with such children.
- *Kirchberg v. Feenstra* (1981), a Supreme Court case which ended legal subordination of a wife to her husband, finding the Louisiana Head and Master law unconstitutional.

⁶⁸ 1992 was declared “Year of the Woman” after four women were elected to the US Senate in one year.

⁶⁹ bell hooks specifically criticized the second-wave, arguing that “the racism and classism of white women’s liberationists was most apparent whenever they discussed work as the liberating force for women. In such discussions it was always the middle-class ‘housewife’ who was depicted as the victim of sexist oppression and not the poor black and non-black women who are most exploited by American economics” (hooks, 1981, p.146).

experience of women from poor or working-class backgrounds and women of colour, leading intersectional feminist activists and academics to refer to their continued efforts towards equality as ‘third-wave feminism’⁷⁰. In this respect, the late 20th/early 21st century female-led minority of conspiracy films aligns with the 1990s postfeminist model by featuring solely white protagonists who are rarely from poor or working-class backgrounds. Yet, there are appreciable aspects of the third-wave, with its roots in 1990s Riot grrrl⁷¹ culture, that did make their way into female-driven conspiracy films, such as “elements of second wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse, and power structures” whilst making use of the “pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures” (Heywood and Drake, 1997, p.3). Therefore, it is through a lens of both 1990s-era postfeminism and the third-wave that these films can be contextualised -- with an obvious gap acknowledged when it comes to the representation of women of colour and women from poor or working-class backgrounds within the genre⁷².

Born of the “Free to be... You and Me”⁷³ generation, third-wave feminists championed the integration of women into careers beyond the domestic sphere; likewise, female conspiracy protagonists from the 1990s-onwards have been graduate students, engineers, security officials, hackers, and working mothers in pursuit of justice. In spite of these strides in

⁷⁰ The term “third wave” was coined in 1992 by Rebecca Walker in a statement which reflects the movement’s focus on expanding feminism to include women of all races and classes and the abolishment of gender stereotypes, and its use of “desire and pleasure as well as anger to fuel struggles for justice” (Heywood and Drake, 1997, p.4): “Do not vote for them unless they work for us. Do not have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not nurture them if they don't prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives. I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the Third Wave” (Walker in Baumgardner and Richards, 2000, p.77).

⁷¹ Riot grrrl was an underground movement that began in the early 1990s in Washington state that combined feminist ideology with punk style and politics, and music which often expressed such issues as female empowerment, sexuality, rape, domestic abuse, racism, and the patriarchy.

⁷² Even in television, where there has been demonstrable room for more diverse characters, the representation of poor or working-class female protagonists within the conspiracy genre is still rare.

⁷³ “Free to Be... You and Me” was a children's record released in 1972 by Marlo Thoman in collaboration with the Ms. Foundation for Women and major artists such as Michael Jackson and Diana Ross; it was followed with a 1974 ABC special that encouraged individuality, tolerance, and the theme that anyone -- boy or girl -- can achieve anything.

characterisation, it is still rare for a female protagonist -- in any era -- to occupy the usual professions that male conspiracy heroes do: there are no female investigative reporters, lawyers, or soldiers, though there are female news anchors, law students, paralegals, and police officers. Moreover, female conspiracy protagonists' sex appeal remains a subtle requirement of the genre -- it wasn't until 2005 that a female conspiracy hero was not objectified or sexually harassed within the film⁷⁴.

Since the 1990s, female-led conspiracy films have exhibited an increase in tradition 1 endings: we see fewer female conspiracy protagonists dying at the hands of the conspiracy and, while justice in the male-dominated faction of the genre was becoming privatised at this time, justice in late 20th/early 21st century female-driven conspiracy films is relatively punitive and remains public-facing. This is likely due to a continued interdependence of the protagonists' seen and unseen threats:

seen threat: from the 1990s-onwards, the female conspiracy protagonist's seen threat becomes more fundamental, revolving less around being a model female (as housewife, mother or professional) and more on staying alive, surviving, or protecting her family -- all while continuing to entwine these personal stakes with a larger, political, unseen threat.

unseen threat: the seen/unseen threat disjoint exhibited in phase 2 of the genre does not reduce the political force of female-driven conspiracy narratives. Unseen threats from the 1990s-onwards still include cover-ups, corruption, crimes, and surveillance networks, with false-flag attacks becoming more prevalent towards the end of the 20th century.

Female-led conspiracy films in the 1990s co-opted genres and tropes previously reserved for men to interrogate feminine identity without the

⁷⁴ *Flight Plan* (2005) features Kyle Pratt (Jodie Foster), an aircraft engineer in her 40s who unravels a conspiracy to hijack and ransom a plane she designed when her daughter disappears onboard.

loss of justice exhibited elsewhere in the genre. *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996, dir. Renny Harlin) is a conspiracy action film about a corrupt CIA, centred around the self-discovery of Samantha Caine/Charly Baltimore (Geena Davis), an amnesiac stay-at-home-mom who realises she used to be an assassin. Produced in the wake of sci-fi/action films like *Alien* (1979, dir. Ridley Scott) and *Terminator 2* (1991, dir. James Cameron), *The Long Kiss Goodnight's* “resignification of gender... at the very least, makes the heterosexual mythology of woman as in need of rescue (and probable love interest) a much more complicated structure for the narrative to follow” (Geller, 2004, p.11), distinguishing Samantha Caine/Charly Baltimore from previous female conspiracy film characters. The film opens with Caine as Mrs. Claus in a small town parade, identifying her within patriarchal fiction and the narrative as the archetypal wife and homemaker; however, when a car accident leaves her concussed, her recovery bestows upon her violent, unexplainable skills and a newfound disinterest in her nuclear family.



Above: Samantha, a picture of domesticity as Mrs. Claus. Below: Charly the assassin, running against a tide of Santas in The Long Kiss Goodnight

Against a backdrop of terrorist threats on American soil, Caine's discovery of, and transition back to Charly Baltimore, her original self, represents the 1990s postfeminist perception of a warring between two realms of femininity: the homemaker and the hypersexual femme fatale -- an identity crisis which endows her with the ability to combat and expose the false-flag attack being planned by the CIA. The transition from housewife Samantha to Charly the assassin is represented through distinct performative shifts in her speech, dress, appearance, and body language: she cuts and bleaches her hair and is no longer afraid to swear or brandish her sexuality as she evolves into a formidable woman capable of affecting justice. "By exposing the gap between performance and identity with Charly's emergence, the film denaturalizes Samantha, exposing the ways her supposedly 'natural' womanliness is a performance" (Geller, 2004, p.22). This self-actualisation through Samantha/Charly's re-discovery of her original personality could represent the click⁷⁵ moment described by feminists, as it leads to her violent transgression of "the ideological anchor of an originary nuclear family" (Alexander, 1997, p.64). While third-wave feminism "was about embracing yourself, reclaiming formerly derogative terminology, and owning your sexuality but not being afraid to challenge the imagery that is out there" (Wolfe in Dahya, 2014), the final scene of *The Long Kiss Goodnight* illustrates how, despite pushing the boundaries set by previous conspiracy film protagonists, Baltimore's masquerade of hyperbolised versions of femininity is still only a reaction *within* the culturally approved rhetoric for femininity in the mid-1990s. Baltimore achieves public-facing justice through the indictment of ex-CIA boss Perkins, but is unable to express the same agency in her own life. In the final scene she reunites with her family, picnicking outside a farmhouse in the country. When her boyfriend offers, "I could just sit out here forever, couldn't you?" Baltimore responds with a long pause before slinging a steak knife into a nearby stump -- reminiscent of a knife throw she did when she first began her evolution from Samantha to Charly. The move

⁷⁵ In her article "The Housewife's Moment of Truth" Jane O'Reilly introduced the idea of the "Click!": "A moment of truth. The shock of recognition... because we have suddenly and shockingly perceived the basic disorder in what has been believed to be the natural order of things" (1971).

can be read two ways: either she is casting away her old life, represented by the knife, in favour of domesticity, or “the violence of the act... hints at Charly’s resistance to remaining in the white, nuclear-family arrangement despite its new rural setting” (Geller, 2004, p.24). While nowhere near as stark or perilous as the tradition 2 endings of *Silkwood* or *The Stepford Wives*, the resolution of *The Long Kiss Goodnight* resembles the closing scene of *Klute*: an ideologically ambiguous ending which signals an unwilling or unenthusiastic return to domesticity from a woman who once displayed full control over herself and her sexuality.

A female conspiracy protagonist who *does* exert control over herself and her sexuality while achieving justice firsthand is Erin Brockovich (Julia Roberts), whose real-life class action lawsuit against the Pacific Gas & Electric Company (PG&E) is dramatised in *Erin Brockovich* (2000, dir. Steven Soderbergh), a conspiracy film low on thrills, but which offers a glimpse of distinctly feminine agency panic through “a strong sense of women’s often uncomfortable negotiation of their public careers with their private lives” (Borda, 2010, p.182). While Brockovich’s hardships may exemplify feminism as “The Great Experiment that Failed” (Ebling, 1990, p.9) in that “it freed men from family responsibilities and burdened career women as single mothers” (Hall and Rodriguez, 2003, p.883), Brockovich’s femininity and motherhood are at once uniquely detrimental and advantageous. In conspiracy thrillers, “the most dominant male image of all shows the hero as unburdened by family life, the plot sometimes compliantly freeing him from domestic commitments... [like] Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford in *All the President’s Men* as they delve into the mysteries of Watergate free of all those family responsibilities, mortgages, dental bills, school fees, and summer camp selections which toe down nominally less masculine men” (Mellen, 1977, p.12). Whereas male protagonists in conspiracy films are allowed to chase after truth, pursue justice at any cost, and do so⁷⁶, the cost for female protagonists is real, and just as public-facing as the justice they seek.

⁷⁶ Examples of husband protagonists whose family lives do not interfere with their credibility include: *Capricorn 1* (1977), *The Star Chamber* (1983), *JFK* (1991), *The Firm* (1993), *Enemy of the State* (1998), *The Insider* (1999).



Erin Brockovich, bargaining with Ed after he fired her when he assumed she was off work “having fun”

Brockovich’s defiance of traditional expectations of womanhood opens her up to public criticism in the opening scene of the film where her sexual and romantic history is called into question in small claims court⁷⁷. She also isn’t invited to lunch⁷⁸ with the other women in the office because she’s not the “right kind” of girl -- likely due to her multiple divorces and provocative dress sense (the camera frequently lingers on Brockovich’s short skirts, low-cut tops, and push-up bras); yet, it is that same dress sense that later proves to be a unique asset when it comes to obtaining crucial files against PG&E:

Ed: *What makes you think you can just walk in there and find what we need?*

Erin: *They're called boobs, Ed.*

In 2000, Brockovich is granted enough agency to not only rebel against preconceived expectations of appropriate womanly behaviour but to use this femininity to her advantage. “Erin’s displays of female sexuality... are advanced as a means of feminist empowerment in the vein of third-wave feminism” (Borda, 2010, p.182) and especially “girlie culture”⁷⁹: she refuses to “rethink” her wardrobe as Ed suggests and she refuses to dilute her

⁷⁷ See Appendix: Dialogue - *Erin Brockovich* 1

⁷⁸ See Appendix: Dialogue - *Erin Brockovich* 2

⁷⁹ “Girlie culture” was a reaction “to the anti-feminine, anti-joy emphasis that they perceived as the legacy of Second Wave seriousness” (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000, p.81).

femininity or sexuality in order to be taken seriously; in the end, these refusals are instrumental in Brockovich's successful pursuit of justice for the victims in Hinckley. Brockovich's expressions of femininity are thus a challenge to objectification and a display of empowerment in the same mutually conducive way that the entwining of her home life and her work life may appear to be a burden to her pursuit of justice, but are a key motivating factor. When Ed later accuses her of getting too emotional by making her case against PG&E personal rather than professional, Brockovich exclaims, "Not personal? That's my work in there -- my sweat, my time away from my kids. If that's not personal, I don't know what is." It is this: that her personal difficulties are intrinsically bound to, and often can only be resolved by, her public action, that makes *Erin Brockovich* and other female-driven conspiracy narratives so compelling.

It would seem that female protagonists might be the panacea to the conspiracy genre's dwindling political force; but they are not. *The Interpreter* (2005, dir. Sydney Pollack) is a female-led conspiracy film that loses political force by succumbing to the same narrative pitfalls as its contemporaneous male counterparts. Silvia Broome (Nicole Kidman) is a UN interpreter who overhears a scheme to assassinate the liberator-turned genocidal dictator of Matobo (a fictional African republic), Dr. Zuwanie (Earl Cameron). Broome, daughter to a British mother and white African father, presents herself as a principled believer in diplomacy throughout the film and consistently recites traditional African platitudes about forgiveness⁸⁰, making her sudden attempt at vengeance -- when she attempts to assassinate Zuwanie herself for his role in the murder of her family -- not just unexpected, but contrived. Broome's character might have been a missed opportunity⁸¹ for the film to explore "the role of the United Nations in the face of shifting geopolitical alliances and ferocious ethnic conflicts" with clear links between Dr. Zuwanie and Robert Mugabe⁸², but "none of that complexity troubles the shiny surface of this film, which is mainly

⁸⁰ See Appendix: Dialogue - *The Interpreter* 1

⁸¹ Critic Robert Ebert notes Silvia Broome could plausibly have instead been cast as a Black South African, imbuing depth to the political plot: "I couldn't help wondering why her character had to be white" (2005a).

⁸² Robert Mugabe is the former Prime Minister of Zimbabwe

interested in the United Nations as a piece of architecture” (Scott, 2005). In this way, *The Interpreter*’s lack of political force resembles that of *Green Zone* or *Shooter*, where a complex plot has been boiled down too simply, or where the idealistic protagonist takes justice into their own hands. So although Broome’s ability to enact justice is for once not betrayed by a lack of agency on her part, unlike her male counterparts, she is still objectified⁸³ and portrayed as in need of protection.

Despite reflections of second-wave feminist sentiment echoing through female-driven conspiracy narratives, the recurring transformation of headstrong, independent women into submissive, domesticated wives or girlfriends by the film’s end dominated the genre until the late 1990s. Whether overt like the literal replacement of Joanna Eberhart with a robot housewife in *The Stepford Wives* or ambiguous like the closing scene in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, this lack of agency in the resolution of many female-driven conspiracy films isn’t a representation that women are “passively brainwashed by the patriarchy into marrying or looking as pretty as possible”; rather, for many of these heroines, their decision to join or rejoin domesticity exemplifies how “they were actively making the best choice they could given the circumstances of sexism” (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000, p.96). From the 1990s-onwards when male protagonists stopped being journalists or having careers where a sense of justice was bound up in their professional objectives, conspiracy films lost their political force with heroes who were no longer *compelled* to tell the truth; instead, simply stabilising their own lives took priority over the public’s safety and right to know the truth. Female conspiracy protagonists, on the other hand, are rarely journalists and more often mothers, wives, or girlfriends, who have careers and families to take care of and, as such, detaching their personal situation from the political (or the conspiracy) is rarely an option. Like their masculine counterparts, conspiracy thriller heroines often personify the archetypal underdog/outsider protagonist; yet, as women, this comes with a consequence: “the Hollywood emphasis on humanism takes on a new twist when the paradigm of the ‘outlaw hero’ becomes re-gendered and applied to *female* heroes. These women are

⁸³ See Appendix: Dialogue - *The Interpreter* 2 + 3

portrayed as very tainted heroes, that is, they are single mothers, they drink, smoke pot, pop pills, sleep around, they are sometimes bitchy and sometimes flirty, and appear to be of questionable moral character” (Borda 2010, p.118). From the 1990s-onwards, female conspiracy protagonists would still grapple with transgressing gender norms, but the prescriptive resolutions of traditional female-driven conspiracy films would begin to fade in favour of self-actualisation and strong punitive justice. Hence, justice in female-driven narratives is often clear and decisive, and is augmented as these films head into the present, evidenced not only by an absence of tradition 2 endings after 1983, but by allowing conspiracy heroines to enact their own justice (as opposed to requiring the help of a man), and by a growing complexity in the careers, characterisation, and motivations of female protagonists, as well as femininity being cast as an asset rather than a weakness. Although these strides have been made, female-driven conspiracy films have yet to incorporate third-wave feminism’s focus on intersectionality, with “the important differences between black and white women’s racialized experiences” (Silver, 2002, p.118) ignored or glossed over. Female protagonists in conspiracy films are unique in that they are at once marginalised and remarkably equipped to tackle the conspiracies they face, making them ideal leads in the genre, and yet they are notably absent; but, missing further is the presence of women of colour in leading roles. The commanding Lornette Mason (Angela Bassett) in *Strange Days* (1995, dir. Kathryn Bigelow) comes close as a woman of colour with agency in a prominent (though still supporting) role, but is failed by the narrative when, in the end, “power is retained in the (literal) hands of a white male, and a black woman, previously strong and independent, is reduced to a prone, beaten figure requiring his help” (Grant, 2001, p.196). Perhaps women are less likely to lead conspiracy thrillers because they are only seen to address ‘women’s issues’ like Joanna Eberhart, who actively interrogates and resists the domestic lifestyle of her new neighbours in *The Stepford Wives*. Yet, female protagonists in conspiracy thrillers don’t just address the patriarchy or the prison of domesticity: Kimberly Wells, Lee Winters, Karen Silkwood and Erin Brockovich’s pursuits address profits over people and corruption; Bree Daniel and Charly Baltimore question themes of identity; Angela

Bennett's journey exposes anxieties over the invasiveness and power of the internet; Darby Shaw, Silvia Broome, Judy Hopps, and Kathryn Bolkovac's stories deal with assassination and social justice. It is demonstrable that female protagonists aren't limited to telling just women's stories: they are able to call out large-scale abuse of power and expose government conspiracies just as, if not more effectively than men. If there were queer, trans, or non-white, non-western women protagonists, the scope of their stories would, likewise, not be restricted to their gender or their race; rather, the weaving of seen and unseen threats that deal with race, class, or sexuality open up a rich set of narrative possibilities where the personal and political, the public and the private, can continue to blend in a way that is politically forceful. Despite the genre's shortcomings in representation, the political force of female-led conspiracy films is palpable, and the connection between the personal, the political, agency and justice, makes the case for conspiracy protagonists that break the moulds we have so far seen on screen.

Case Study: *The Net* (1995)

A Female Conspiracy Heroine Who is Neither Wife Nor Mother

Riding on the burgeoning internet culture of the 1990s and pre-Y2K fears and paranoias, *The Net* (1995 dir. Irwin Winkler), presents Angela Bennett (Sandra Bullock), a systems analyst who accidentally stumbles on a cyberterrorist plot when she is sent a floppy disk containing a virus to diagnose. As a conspiracy film, *The Net* sidesteps traditional tropes of the genre like surveillance, assassination, and following the money⁸⁴; instead, it replaces traditional terrorism with cyberterrorism and uses the growing pervasiveness and intangibility of digital technology to explore notions of identity that were characteristic of 1990s-era conspiracy films. *Enemy of the State*, a privatised conspiracy film which was released 3 years later, mimics *The Net*'s plot in that neither protagonist realises they possess incriminating evidence until the conspirators turn their lives upside down in the hopes of intimidating them into relinquishing their respective floppy disks. The films differ, however, in that unlike *Enemy of the State*'s Robert Dean, Angela Bennett's seen and unseen threats are intrinsically linked and Dean has a family life at stake while Bennett does not -- the implications of which reflect certain negative attitudes towards single, autonomous women in the mid-1990s. Robert Dean's nagging wife and the sense that he needs to preserve his reputation *for his family* is an added burden to his quest; to have Bennett's lack of family would have given him freedom, but for Bennett, her lack of family is punishable. She is not freed in the way traditional male conspiracy heroes are freed of their family burdens; rather, her solitude and agency is exploited in such a way that makes her seen and unseen threats inextricable:

seen threat: to regain her identity and get her life back before she is killed by cyberterrorists. This is a reflection not only of pre-Y2K paranoias over a perceived lack of security online, but also of the idea that women are endangered without family or social ties.

⁸⁴ See Appendix: Conspiracy Film Tropes 1969-2020

unseen threat: cyberterrorists are working with internet security firm Gregg Microsystems, using the Gatekeeper Security antivirus to create unlimited backdoor access to private computers -- breaching public privacy and handing access directly to the cyberterrorists.

Unlike Dean, who can get his life back while Congress covers for the NSA, Bennett's only chance at addressing her seen threat (reclaiming her identity) is to expose the unseen threat: a cyberterrorist plot that threatens the privacy and internet security of citizens around the world. She says she only intended to save herself, but in doing so, she also "saves the world"⁸⁵. Along with overcoming a potential seen/unseen threat disjoint, *The Net* unmistakably diverges from male-led conspiracy films of the 1990s-2000s when the very qualities that provide agency and impetus to male conspiracy heroes adversely affect Angela Bennett. This disparity aligns with Irigaray's observation of "women in patriarchal discourse," who are "confined to the parameters allowed to them as lesser men" (in Bolton, 2011, p.2). Although Bennett has the agency to choose a lifestyle that conflicts with the notions of model womanhood at the time, she is still unable to exist without paying the consequence for those actions.



Angela Bennett's dinner plans: pizza for one and chat rooms

With no immediate family (her mother conveniently has severe Alzheimer's), Bennett leads a career-focused lifestyle with little human interaction. Her life revolves around her computer so much so that when

⁸⁵ See Appendix: Dialogue - *The Net* 1

she has her identity stolen -- her house sold from under her and records digitally altered -- she has no one to 'validate' her identity. In this way, Bennett's 'framing and shaming' moment is an opportunity to punish her for transgressing culturally approved expectations for women, even in the 1990s: she excels in her traditionally masculine IT job, she has no husband or children and isn't interested in maintaining friendships or romantic relationships; she even decides to holiday alone. If Bennett were a man, her independence and ambition would be irrelevant, if a little insular, but as a woman, these lifestyle choices become dangerous. On her holiday, a hacker named Devlin (Jeremy Northam) seduces and then tries to kill her on his boat. The film seems to ask: Could it be that Bennett's brief foray into promiscuity and solo traveling might be to blame for her predicament?



Bennett's framing and shaming moment; she is wrapped in a towel, much like she was after her one-night stand with Devlin

When she returns, Bennett's identity has been replaced. With no one to remember her, the audience is left to think *if only she had a husband and children -- a family to anchor her to society -- this identity disaster wouldn't be possible!* Instead of freeing her to pursue truth and justice, Bennett's lack of a relationship (or disinterest in pursuing one) opens her up to predatory solicitations from men. Her first two exchanges in the film (with men she has never met) demonstrate that, as a single woman, Angela is constantly vulnerable to the advances of men, their desires, and sense of

entitlement to her⁸⁶. These exchanges give credence to the perception that Angela's independence, rather than being empowering, is actually dangerous and exhausting. The mid-1990s representation of Angela Bennett, a solitary hacker whose masculine qualities have the opposite effect on her than they do male protagonists, may offer the possibility of a female protagonist who is neither wife nor mother, but the narrative's depiction of these choices as dangerous or detrimental shows a lingering distrust for independent female characters who break these moulds.

Despite the obstacles that her independence and anonymity pose to her seen threat, Angela Bennett still surpasses other conspiracy heroines when it comes to her agency and lack of dependence on male characters. Bennett may see herself as a nobody⁸⁷, but she single-handedly exposes the cyberterrorist threat much in the way a male conspiracy hero would. As part of her quest for clues, Bennett reaches out to her former psychiatrist and ex-lover, Alan Champion (Dennis Miller), who might be expected to occupy the male saviour/protector role; instead, Champion dies in the fray (as the female love interest often does), leaving Bennett to face the conspiracy on her own. In a finale resembling the climax of *Klute*, the antagonist, Devlin, is thrown off a balcony to his death -- though not by a man, but by Bennett herself. Justice is taken another step further with a television report in the final scene confirming that the CEO of Gregg Microsystems has been indicted for his involvement in the conspiracy thanks to Angela's report. Bennett achieves decisive, public-facing justice without losing her agency, reflecting a rejection of the "resilient cultural fascination with stories about headstrong, disobedient females and the quest to transform them into docile, submissive, domesticated wives" (Matrix, 2007, p.109). While *Enemy of the State* and *The Net* share common themes and express anxieties towards the coming technological age, it is Bennett's masculine qualities -- the same that traditional male conspiracy heroes are rewarded for -- that adversely affect her quest for truth, but can't keep her from justice.

⁸⁶ See Appendix: Dialogue - *The Net 2*

⁸⁷ See Appendix: Dialogue - *The Net 3*

Case Study: *The Whistleblower* (2010)

A relevant, public-facing update of the tradition 2 conspiracy narrative

The Whistleblower (2010, dir. Larysa Kondracki) is a modern conspiracy thriller that, like *Green Zone* which was released the same year, confronts a real-life political conspiracy using traditional tropes of the genre but differs in two significant ways: 1) it has a female protagonist and 2) despite using the press as a means of exposing the conspiracy, it maintains its political force by acknowledging a growing impotence and cynicism towards traditional mechanisms for justice. The film was released 10 years after the late 1990s scandal it represents and was thus able to leave comment on the effectiveness of the real-life justice portrayed at the end of film, giving audiences and reviewers a bitter dose of reality. The story follows Kathryn Bolkovac (Rachel Weisz), a single mother who, after accepting work as a United Nations International Police officer in Bosnia, discovers that the security company she works for is facilitating a sex trafficking ring while the UN turns a blind eye. In this way, *The Whistleblower* supplants the traditional 'you can't trust who you work for' conspiracy trope with a much larger 'Trust No One'⁸⁸ -- to engage with conspiracy culture's hyper-paranoid style. *The Whistleblower* appears to have a seen/unseen threat disjoint:

seen threat: Kathy Bolkovac takes an overseas position with DemocraSecurity as a UN International Police Officer in order to make enough money to move closer to her daughter back in the United States.

unseen threat: DemocraSecurity has been engaging with and even facilitating the trafficking of young women in Bosnia for sex trade and the UN will not step in.

⁸⁸ "I Want to Believe. Question Everything. Trust No One. The Truth is Out There" are all major conspiratorial metatexts of *The X-Files* (1993-2018) television series which have influenced and shaped contemporary conspiracy culture (Kelley-Romano, 2008, p.109).

Kathy Bolkovac's seen and unseen threats are not directly related, indicating that *The Whistleblower* should be a privatised narrative. The audience, and even Bolkovac herself, expects that once she has worked her 6 months in Bosnia and earned her \$100,000 tax-free salary, that she will return to the United States to be with her daughter. Yet, something makes Bolkovac's sense of justice and purpose supersede her duties as a mother: she does in two months what the International Police Task Force (IPTF) failed to do in four years by facilitating the first domestic violence conviction since the end of the war in Bosnia. Bolkovac's ensuing promotion to Head of Gender Affairs for the IPTF sets her on a path to witness first-hand the human toll of the sex trade and realise just how deeply corruption and sex trafficking is entrenched in DemocraSecurity. Bolkovac's decision to stay longer than her original six-month term in order to pursue public-facing justice, then, is a conscious abandonment of her private interests, showing a clear departure from the privatisation of male-led conspiracy films and a disconnect between the usual blending of personal and political in female-driven narratives. Bolkovac still wants to be a good mother, but her principles -- as opposed to any yearning to comply with cultural expectations of motherhood -- are her priority. Like the politically forceful male conspiracy protagonists of the 1970s-80s, Bolkovac's career is tied to her need to seek justice; she says herself: "I'm an American police officer. It doesn't matter who I work for, I wouldn't let anybody get away with this." Even after decades of privatisation within the conspiracy genre, Bolkovac's relinquishing of her private needs in favour of the public good is believable because her sense of right and wrong is tied deeply to her character's profession.

Despite Bolkovac's intentional departure from the usual female conspiracy protagonist's entanglement of personal and political motives, Bolkovac's female-ness is still apparent: either in the way her colleague Nick repeatedly and unprofessionally flirts with her⁸⁹ or when her motherhood is called into question by colleagues as a tactic to dissuade her from pursuing her suspicions about DemocraSecurity⁹⁰. By contrast, Roy Miller

⁸⁹ Appendix Dialogue - *The Whistleblower* 1 + 2

⁹⁰ Appendix Dialogue - *The Whistleblower* 3

of *Green Zone* is cast early on as a hero undistracted by loneliness or self-doubt, whose family (if they exist) we never meet; his motives as a man or as a father are never called into question because they aren't seen to be relevant. Bolkovac on the other hand is dimensional, complex and conflicted. Her pursuit of justice means sidelining her role as mother, something she laments to Jan (Nikolaj Lie Kaas), her love interest: "No. Your kids are proud. You go on this mission and you're a big hero. I go and I'm a bad mother... I can't believe I'm gonna disappoint them again." Bolkovac's dis-adherence to expectations of 'proper' femininity and motherhood are acknowledged and even preyed upon in the film, but she forgoes these judgements in favour of justice. Her success as a whistleblower, then, is not because of her woman-ness, but surely in spite of it. In this way, Kathy Bolkovac represents a progression beyond other female conspiracy protagonists whose agency is still bound up in the culturally approved rhetoric of femininity, wifedom, or motherhood.



On her first day as Gender Affairs at the IPTF, Kathy Bolkovac is flanked by men



Bolkovac takes one last glance at the exit

When it comes to her approach to justice, Bolkovac, like many conspiracy protagonists, attempts to expose her unseen threat through the press. Before she can go to the BBC with her evidence, though, Bolkovac is fired for sending an email exposé to a list of senior personnel. Where *Green Zone* ends with a heroic soundtrack and knowing looks from Miller and journalist Lawrie Dayne, *The Whistleblower* closes with a sombre Kathy Bolkovac speaking on BBC News and an epilogue that delivers a dose of reality to the narrative:

Following Kathryn Bolkovac's departure, a number of peacekeepers, including private contractors, were sent home. None faced criminal charges in their home countries.

The private contractor that fired Kathryn Bolkovac continues business with the US government, including contracts worth billions in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Kathryn Bolkovac lives in the Netherlands with Jan. She has been unable to regain employment in the international community.

By sharing the reality that even with a clear exposure of the scandal, very little punitive justice has ever taken place, *The Whistleblower* reflects both: the 'monster cannot be destroyed'⁹¹ trope of conspiracy narratives as well as a sense of "public 'impotence' in the face of the inexorably increasing power of the private sector" (Rosanvallon and Goldhammer, 2008, p.254). However, *The Whistleblower's* epilogue functions to position Bolkovac's story as only the first step -- leaving it up to the audience, the public, to demand more. In this way *The Whistleblower* incites a reaction similar to the devastating losses in *Silkwood* and other tradition 2 public-facing conspiracies; except that today, the protagonist doesn't need to perish for us to feel a sense of injustice. Handing the truth over to the press *knowing* that justice may never be carried out is the new version of a tradition 2 devastating reality which, for once, confronts conspiracy culture and contemporary cynicism towards traditional mechanisms for justice. In

⁹¹ See Appendix: Conspiracy Film Tropes 1969-2020

terms of its political force, *The Whistleblower* returned global discussion to issues and events which the UN was reluctant to revisit, leading to a special screening and panel discussion for members of the UN in 2011 followed by the profession of reforms. Despite this, director Larysa Kondracki iterates much like the epilogue of her film that, “Unfortunately, the widespread horror is already there. This is not going to be simple or a quick fix” (in Vulliamy, 2012). *The Whistleblower* may utilise the press, but its incorporation of a cynical reality and a sense of impotence towards traditional mechanisms for justice engages with the public’s present lack of faith in these institutions, updating the tradition 2 narrative to maintain its political force.

CHAPTER 3

Weapons of Mass Disruption

Re-introducing political, public-facing conspiracy narratives amidst conspiracy culture

For a genre dedicated to calling out abuse of power, its transformation -- from the traditional conspiracy thrillers of the 1970s to the privatised and eventual lame duck narratives of the late 20th and early 21st century -- comes not as a surprise, but at the cost of contemporary conspiracy films' political force. To propose ways that forthcoming conspiracy films may once again be politically forceful requires an element of prescience in what has long been a reactionary genre. In setting out the new frontier for conspiracy narratives, this chapter takes in one hand the genre's last 50 years -- where the nature of, and mechanisms for, justice in these films have been recast in the reflections of their corresponding cultural landscapes and "paranoia is revealed to be a rational processing of actuality" (Baker, 2006, p.52) -- and in the other hand draws from the cultural protagonists, behemoths, and mechanisms for justice of our present to conjure up new methods to engender political force. As contemporary conspiracy films have yet to truly reckon with the implications of post-truth and a technological, internet culture that "doesn't just reflect reality any more; it shapes it" (Diresta in Kakutani, 2018), what defines my research on this imminent phase of conspiracy thrillers is not so much what they are or what they do (because there are, as of yet, so few), but *how can they be better?*

Answering this question requires a differentiation between, and a recognition of, the new cultural landscape that 21st century conspiracy films are situated within and the phases that led to it. The traditional conspiracy narrative is black and white: there is a clear sense of right and wrong, and the protagonist exposes the unseen threat using the press, law enforcement, or the judiciary. In privatised conspiracy films, sanctity of the family, protecting one's livelihood, or self-discovery are portrayed as more

just, more important than a communal good; greed and self-preservation have come to be expected in protagonists and antagonists alike, introducing shades of grey to the genre's once clear-cut morality. In the years following 9/11, when political abuse of power re-entered the public consciousness, lame duck conspiracy films lost their political force by failing to reconcile the disparity between 20 years of solipsistic justice and growing public cynicism towards the press, law enforcement, and the judicial system. The message in these stories, to be careful of whom you trust and that there is more than meets the eye, exemplifies "this promise of a deeper inside view [which] is the hermeneutic content of the conspiracy thriller," (Jameson, 1992 p.15); but contemporary conspiracy films seem to be on the outside looking in. Once a record of triumph against corruption and abuse of power or a call to arms against rising public fears, the conspiracy genre is now drowned out by a *conspiracy culture* of paranoia, post-truth, and partisan hostility which has infiltrated politics, entertainment and the public sphere. Exhausted after decades of self-centered privatisation and enfeebled by growing disillusionment with its traditional tools for justice, contemporary conspiracy films are still relying on black and white, when they should be viewing and expressing these new 21st century threats no longer in shades of grey, but in colour.

This full-spectrum approach begins with the recognition that the lack of political force observed in the conspiracy genre since the early 2000s is largely due to a disconnect where (1) new behemothic presences have yet to be addressed, (2) altruistic motivations of protagonists no longer align with contemporary cynicism after the privatised phase of the genre, and (3) that traditional mechanisms for justice are still being applied when they have proven impotent or compromised in real life. The key then, to re-introducing politically forceful, public-facing narratives into the conspiracy genre is not just a structured examination of these three core elements (the Behemoth, Mechanisms for Justice, and the Protagonist) in recent history and in conspiracy narratives, but the ability to contextualise and update them within conspiracy culture -- culminating in the identification of specific techniques for conspiracy narratives to implement that will augment their political force.

Know Thy Enemy

Many-headed monsters and the new Behemoth of Big Technology

In conspiracy films, the unseen threat is often conceived by, or embodied in the form of, a conspiratorial behemoth: “a kind of disciplinary institution,” motivated by the desire “to control its inhabitants” (Baker, 2006, p.58). The government (in *All the President’s Men*), the Central Intelligence Agency (in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*), the National Security Agency (in *Enemy of the State*), and other large, often corporate-minded organisations are all behemoths which have been portrayed as threats in conspiracy narratives. In 2011, Donovan categorised these perpetrators in conspiracy films as:

- Big Government: where “bureaucracies or corrupt politicians usually turn out to be the most common masterminds behind vast, far-reaching conspiracies” (p.14)
- Big Business: with multinational corporations run by powerful businessmen fueled by greed
- Big Science: including cover-ups of “scientific research with the potential to alter the world (or destroy it)” (p.14)

The 21st century, however, has so far seen these behemoths merge with each other as well as splinter into adversarial factions, requiring their traditionally clear-cut impressions to be recast if they are to be presented effectively in conspiracy film. The public has witnessed how blurred or even feigned⁹² the lines can be between big government, big business, and big science, leaving conspiratorial accusations of unfairness and prejudice to be cast -- no longer from the usual two-sided forums -- but from a multiplicity of sides⁹³. “It is at the point where we give up and are

⁹² “Weeks after President Donald Trump nominated David Bernhardt, a former oil and agriculture industry lobbyist, to run the Interior Department, the agency [faced] a slew of new allegations” in an ethics complaint from the Campaign Legal Center, a Washington-DC based watchdog group, “that top officials violated federal ethics rules by keeping cozy ties to their former employers” (Tobias and Coleman, 2019).

⁹³ The rise of populism and identity politics have become prevalent, giving any event multiple narrative interpretations depending on bias and experience, but it is “the hyperpartisanship of [US] politics and sharp racial and cultural differences that seem to power the divide between the parties” (Drutman, 2020).

no longer able to remember which side the characters are on... that we have presumably grasped the deeper truth of the world system (certainly no one will have been astonished or enlightened to discover that the head of the CIA, the Vice President, the Secretary of State, or even the President himself, was secretly behind everything in the first place)” (Jameson, 1992, p.16). This convergence of unseen threats seems to coincide with what Jameson refers to as “a point of no return beyond which the human organism can no longer match the velocities or the demographics of the new world system” (1992, p.16). While it is beyond the scope of this research to diagnose and interrogate each new conspiratorial standpoint that may be digested into conspiracy film, it is possible and appropriate to acknowledge that the genre’s traditional behemoths now have simultaneously overlapping and conflicting interests. Agency panic, this sentiment that ‘the monster cannot be destroyed’, is targeted at singular behemoths in traditional conspiracy narratives, but now feels incomplete amidst a conspiracy culture and pluralising social climate that demand more complex behemoths -- specifically those that include systemic abuse of power as well as private plots motivated by greed. To address this, I introduce:

the many-headed monster: contemporary unseen threats will be complex and systemic, incorporating corruption, greed, and abuse of power. The antagonistic forces will range from singular figure heads to various pawns acting out of self-preservation.

The inclusion of the systemic here addresses the temptation to personify the behemoth as a lone ‘bad actor’ (privatisation of the antagonist) and opens up the possibility for conspiracy narratives to recognise racism, capitalism, and other ingrained forms of oppression as unseen threats. Furthermore, a new behemoth appears in response to “a second Gilded Age -- ushered in by semiconductors, software and the internet -- that has spawned a handful of giant hi-tech companies” (Reich, 2018): **Big Technology**. With 4.54 billion people using the internet worldwide, 3.8 billion of which are social media users, and 5.19 billion people now using

mobile phones, the average internet user spends “more than 100 days of connected time” per year (Kemp, 2020). The merging of Big Business with Big Science, unfettered by Big Government, and the unnerving reality that “we currently spend more than 40 percent of our waking lives using the internet” (Kemp, 2020), positions Big Technology as an unparalleled force, poised for behemoth status in conspiracy film.

At odds with this contemporary reliance and affinity towards digital and internet technology, the conspiracy genre has oft casted technology as the unseen threat: as early as 1995, *The Net* confronted notions of online identity, *The Truman Show* questioned privacy, agency and the pervasiveness of advertising in 1998, and in 2001 *Antitrust* portrays one of if not the first representations of what modern audiences would easily recognise as Googleplex and a charismatic CEO character of the Bill Gates/Steve Jobs variety. Today, however, “our enthusiasm and growing dependence on technology” has “left us vulnerable and caught unawares when the early promise of information technology took a darker turn” (Zuboff, 2018, p.47). Digital tools which were once utilised as forces for revolution, accessibility, and change are now primed for surveillance and social control, straining our traditional relationships to truth, power and privacy -- the fodder of conspiracy thrillers -- and giving Big Technology the quality of a double-edged sword. This relationship was hinted at in *Eagle Eye* (2008, dir. D. J. Caruso), a conspiracy thriller about a hyper-surveillant supercomputer that attempts to destroy the American executive branch, when Defense Secretary Callister (Michael Chiklis) voices, “The very measures we put into place to safeguard our liberty become threats to liberty itself”. However, the film only represents ARIIA, the supercomputer antagonist, as an evil force -- it is never used to safeguard liberties as it was originally intended or employed against itself (as a mechanism for justice), leaving the double-edged sword of Big Technology yet to be wielded in a way that renders it both behemoth *and* mechanism for justice.

When “large majorities of both [political] parties think that the opposing party rarely or never has the best interests of the country at heart, and that

it constitutes at least a somewhat serious threat to the country and its people” (Ladd, 2018), uniting a partisan audience against a common antagonistic force presents a distinct challenge to modern conspiracy films: what can the genre offer when the usual lines of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ might be drawn *within* a behemoth (i.e.: right and left wings of one party on top of the usual partisan politics) or are blurred by the nature of its capabilities (i.e.: technology which indiscriminately surveils criminals and civilians)? For contemporary conspiracy films the question is no longer *what is the behemoth*, but *how does it work*, and *for whom*?



A public exposé of Gary Winston (Tim Robbins), the Bill Gates-esque antagonist in Antitrust. Was this character assassination more effective in 2001 because the public did not yet depend on Big Technology the way it does in 2021?

Contemporary conspiracy thrillers have struggled to come to terms with the public’s simultaneous dependence on and distrust of behemoths and their figureheads. One such paradox is Jeff Bezos: for some he is “the saviour of one of America’s most important news organisations”⁹⁴; to others, he is the CEO and president of Amazon, the “anti-democratic corporate behemoth” accused of inhumane working conditions and brutal employee treatment⁹⁵ (Shephard, 2019). Amazon, the behemoth itself, has been the nucleus of public-facing controversies for decades: “from its monopolistic practices to tax avoidance, poor treatment of both white- and

⁹⁴ Jeff Bezos bought the historic *Washington Post* in 2013 for \$250 million

⁹⁵ “Amazon came under fire in 2011 when workers in an eastern Pennsylvania warehouse toiled in more than 100-degree heat with ambulances waiting outside, taking away laborers as they fell. After an investigation by the local newspaper, the company installed air-conditioning” (Kantor and Stretfield, 2015).

blue-collar workers, union-busting, environmental damage, and most recently, the year-long publicity stunt of HQ2, a bad-faith ploy to extract private data from US cities” (Jennings, 2018). Yet, polling by Georgetown University found that Amazon was more trusted by Americans than the government, the press, or colleges and universities (Ladd, 2018). The public’s penchant for cognitive dissonance in this respect is not unrelated to its reliance on these conglomerates or on Big Technology. As union leader, Squeeze (Steven Yeun), mutters in the anti-capitalist *Sorry to Bother You* (2018, dir. Boots Riley), “If you get shown a problem, but don’t see a way you can have control over it -- you just decide to get used to the problem.” This ‘problem’ that modern conspiracy films have not fully engaged with is the idea that in the latter half of the 2010s, ‘big science’ has actually joined forces with ‘big business’ into what social scientist Shoshana Zuboff identifies as “surveillance capitalism”: a term she coined in 2014 to explain this shifting of capitalism away from profits derived from products or speculation to “a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales” (Zuboff, 2018, p.1). The introduction of surveillance capitalism as the logic behind Big Technology emphasises its threat to “the sanctity of the individual and the ideals of social equality; the development of identity, autonomy, and moral reasoning,” as well as “the political integrity of societies; and the future of democratic sovereignty” (Zuboff, 2016). Surveillance capitalism endangers precisely the freedoms that conspiracy fiction seeks to protect, making it, and the conglomerates that employ it, ripe for representation within the genre.

It is not just the size or power of Google, Facebook, or Amazon that make them ideal models for contemporary behemoths; these tech giants have been navigating “the world’s largest ungoverned space” (Cohen and Schmidt, 2013, p.1) with a veiled, ‘ask for forgiveness, not permission’⁹⁶ approach which breeds fertile ground for the conspiratorial mindset. The

⁹⁶ At the congressional hearing regarding Facebook’s involvement with Cambridge Analytica and misinformation surrounding the 2016 US Presidential Election, US Representative Jan Schakowsky told Mark Zuckerberg (after listing a series of public apologies Zuckerberg made on behalf of Facebook since 2003): “You have a long history of growth and success, but you also have a long list of apologies,” suggesting “that self-regulation simply does not work” (in McGregor, 2018).

“Big Brother” of the 20th century has now become the “Big Other”⁹⁷: “a distributed and largely uncontested new expression of power... constituted by unexpected and often illegible mechanisms of extraction, commodification, and control” rooted within the internet (Zuboff, 2015, p.75). When Facebook has the power to offer nearly 700 thousand users up for a massive social experiment without their knowledge, and that experiment proves that “users’ emotional states can be transferred to others via emotional contagion, leading people to experience the same emotions without their awareness” (Kramer et al, 2014, p.8788) the line between conspiracy truth and conspiracy fiction becomes harder to discern, or even predict -- especially when the evolution of surveillance not only mirrors but outpaces the evolution of claims made by conspiracy films⁹⁸. So when it comes to exposing abuse of power, invasions of privacy, collusion, or corruption in these modern behemoths on screen, there is no real revelation: conspiratorial fiction pales in comparison to conspiratorial reality. The reach of modern-day technology into our private lives is no longer speculative material to be imagined in science fiction or paranoid conspiracy thrillers -- it is simply a fact of the matter which the public and audiences have so far remained ambivalent towards. If contemporary conspiracy films are to regain their political force, they must acknowledge the new behemoth of Big Technology, engage with the threat of surveillance capitalism, navigate our double-edged sword relationship with these forces, and make it astonishing enough for audiences to care.

⁹⁷ Zuboff’s “Big Other” does not relate to Lacan’s use of “big Other” in psychology.

⁹⁸ “Most Americans realize that there are two groups of people who are monitored regularly as they move about the country. The first group is monitored involuntarily by a court order requiring that a tracking device be attached to their ankle. The second group includes everyone else” (Nee in Jergler, 2013). These words are not stripped from the pages of “a dystopian novel, a Silicon Valley executive, or even an NSA official. These are the words of an auto insurance industry consultant intended as a defense of ‘automotive telematics’ and the astonishingly intrusive surveillance capabilities of the allegedly benign systems that are already in use” (Zuboff, 2016).

Know Thyself

Corrupt and charismatic conspiracy protagonists

21st century conspiracy protagonists suffer from a loss of political force largely by prioritising themselves over the public or, when they don't, by returning to altruistic motives not rooted in their character -- both symptoms of privatisation in the genre. Where the treatment of the unseen threat has been integral in identifying tradition 1 or tradition 2 narratives, an examination of the protagonists' seen threat is necessary in order to ascertain how contemporary conspiracy protagonists can be politically forceful within conspiracy culture. Where "being thrown into a position of great danger coupled with great moral opportunity would not be welcomed by most" (Smilansky, 2012, p.118), traditional conspiracy protagonists' professions indicated an ingrained commitment to truth, justice, and morality which they could believably risk their lives for. However, after decades of privatisation within the genre, the portrayal of characters who are inherently good, and who are never tempted to compromise their morals or succumb to corruption, no longer aligns with what audiences have grown accustomed to in real life, in the movies, and in their own lives: that when the world becomes too challenging we ought not to fight outward, but rather focus inward and attempt to make sense of something we can control: ourselves. Public-facing seen threats pursued by protagonists whose heroism isn't substantiated by their biography, personality, or profession, therefore, appear feigned and two-dimensional with little political force. The following technique seeks not to undo the privatised phase of conspiracy genre, but to incorporate it, making the protagonist's motivations believable and relatable to modern audiences:

corruption of the protagonist: when the protagonist's hands are dirtied by the conspiracy. Willingly or reluctantly, they have compromised their morals and accepted the corrupt nature of the unseen threat for personal gain, likely in the form of a private-facing seen threat. Alternatively, corruption of the protagonist can appear in the middle of the narrative when the protagonist's morals fail them.

Rather than preach perfection to an audience, corruption of the protagonist acknowledges that selfish decisions are understandable and expected in the 21st century; however, they must be forfeited if the narrative is to claim any sense of politically forceful morality. *The Ghost Writer* (2010, dir. Roman Polanski) visually and thematically mimics traditional conspiracy thrillers in what Peter Bradshaw dubs “a Manchurian Candidate for the 2010s” (2010) but even as its protagonist, the Ghost (Ewan McGregor), resembles traditional conspiracy heroes of the 1970s -- with no family, an innate sense of curiosity and a love of alcohol -- he differs in that his private-facing motivations are never usurped by a public-facing sense of right and wrong. The Ghost suspects that Adam Lang (Pierce Brosnan), the very Blair-esque former British prime minister whose memoir he is ghostwriting, was a puppet for the US government and complicit in facilitating war crimes; however, rather than risk his £250,000 writer’s fee to expose the truth, the Ghost turns a blind eye to the conspiracy and finishes Lang’s memoir. At his book launch, when the Ghost finally realises that it was not Adam Lang, but his wife, Ruth (Olivia Williams), who was the CIA operative, he still doesn’t notify the authorities or the press; rather, he sends a taunting note to Ruth as proof that he’s solved the puzzle. Before any mechanism for justice can be employed, the Ghost is killed in a hit-and-run outside the book launch, scattering the evidence of the Langs’ guilt to the wind.



The Ghost's final moments in The Ghost Writer (2010)



The Ghost's death, which occurs off-screen, reflects the inconsequentiality and hollowness of his name, his profession, and his ability to affect justice

The Ghost Writer loses its political force by the futility of its protagonist's actions: his discovery, because he did not seek public-facing justice, is of no consequence. The privatisation of the Ghost's actions, while plausible through a modern lens, turns what would otherwise be a classically-presented tradition 2 narrative into a self-centred pastiche with little impact. The following technique responds to this by suggesting an eventual dismissal of the privatised seen threat:

emergence of the inner voice: the moment where the protagonist can no longer rationalise their corruption. The line of morality that, upon seeing it crossed by the antagonist, they cannot follow, thus abandoning their private-facing seen threat. From this moment, the protagonist's motives⁹⁹ switch from private to public-facing. Emergence of the inner voice responds to outdated messiah characters, exemplifying that anyone, even a 'selfish' character, is capable of heroism should the situation call for it.

While corruption of the protagonist and the emergence of the inner voice address issues of privatisation within the conspiracy genre, these adjustments fail to take into consideration our larger conspiracy culture

⁹⁹ Comparison can be drawn between the emergence of the inner voice and what screenwriting manuals often refer to as "character need" or the unconscious dramatic goal; however, the emergence of the inner voice is unique in that it ties character need inextricably to the unseen threat.

and the changing relationships audiences might have towards journalists, lawyers, scientists, and the police -- the genre's usual conspiracy heroes. The media is no longer trusted as watchdog for democracy, the government is impotent or just as corrupt as its opposition, the people "have had enough of experts" (Gove in Mance, 2016), and the reputation of law enforcement as a militant, corrupt, racist institution has eclipsed the few 'good clean cops' that traditional conspiracy narratives once portrayed. Relying on such dated representations without acknowledging the severely polarised political landscape and conspiracy culture they are situated in now leads to a failure in these characters' ability to deliver effective justice. Whistleblowers like Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning appear to be real-life representations of the government employee-turned conspiracy protagonist (Snowden has an eponymous Hollywood biopic to his name), but both have faced or fled aggressive prosecution by the US Government under the Espionage Act. The fact that "perhaps even a decade before, a character like Joe Turner, heading off to the offices of *The New York Times* at the end of [*3 Days of The Condor*], would have been seen as a traitor" (Donovan, 2011, p.78) has come full circle: Joe Turner was a hero in 1975, but the same act of leaking government secrets to the media has been, and would be, prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law in the 21st century. Although journalists, lawyers, and whistleblowers are still abundantly relevant, they often appear in the form of left-wing, liberal icons which reduces their political force by alienating partisan audiences within a polarised political climate. To transcend this polarisation, tribalism, and the post-truth condition of conspiracy culture, contemporary conspiracy narratives will need more than just well-crafted protagonists to be widely politically forceful -- they'll need to strategically employ whole casts of characters.

Conspiracy culture and the post-truth condition relish in a pluralistic worldview which makes having the moral clarity of traditional conspiracy films where there are clear 'good guys', 'bad guys', and a singular truth, a challenge. Rather than concede to pluralism, contemporary conspiracy films must consider the interaction between "the message and the messenger... the right narrative and the right spokesperson to deliver it,

across myriad groups. When all these align, each person is able to converge on truth in their own way” (Hoggan and Litwin, 2016, p.46). If merely imagining interactions with a member of an outgroup can decrease negative attitudes about that group for a person¹⁰⁰, then cinema audiences’ engagement with protagonists whose experiences and perspectives differ from their own could be used to combat the fracturing nature of tribalism and post-truth culture, lending such narratives greater political force. Kahan suggests a narrative environment were “people can see people like them on both sides of the issues, and also people who are not like them on both sides” (in Hoggan and Litwin, 2016, p.46); the goal being, “to find a narrative that people relate to and embed a message that will lead to open-minded consideration” (Hoggan and Litwin, 2016, p.46). The following technique can be applied to all characters (not just protagonists) to help unify heterogeneous audiences behind a common cause in contemporary conspiracy narratives:

representation: characters will be representative of the communities they belong to and should not feed dated, irrelevant stereotypes. Where relevant, characterisation should confront and challenge conventions of identity (by race, gender, sexuality, class, etc.) by blending the personal and political with the character’s seen and unseen threat.

Zootopia (2016, dir. Byron Howard, Rich Moore), a family-friendly conspiracy film and “one of the smartest and most subversive movies” of 2016, utilises representation “in an unexpected package: that of a Disney animated film featuring adorable animals” and, in doing so, tackles “such weighty issues as racism, sexism, and governing through fear” (Riley, 2017). The protagonist, Judy Hopps (voiced by Ginnifer Goodwin), is a unique female conspiracy hero, namely, because she is a bunny. It is her bunny-ness, rather than her femininity, which marginalises her throughout the film, shifting the focus away from her female-ness and allowing her to exist in a new situation where sexism and racism, two hot-button issues,

¹⁰⁰ Crisp, R. J., and Turner, R. N. (2009). ‘Can imagined interactions produce positive perceptions?’, *American Psychologist*, 64, p.231-240.

do not exist; rather, they have been replaced with an accessible, less triggering status quo of 'predators vs. prey'. An example of *Zootopia*'s use of animal qualities to stand-in for racial or sexual slurs can be seen through its use of the word 'cute':

Clawhauser: *O. M. Goodness, they really did hire a bunny. Ho-whop!*

I gotta tell you, you're even cuter than I thought you'd be.

Judy Hopps: *Ooh, ah, you probably didn't know, but a bunny can call another bunny 'cute', but when other animals do it, that's a little...*

Clawhauser: *[Mortified] Hoo, I'm so sorry!*

Using a stereotype for rabbits (as opposed to gender, race, etc.) presents a situation where audiences of any identity can appreciate how one person's words may be hurtful and, in the same exchange, bears witness to a small form of justice when Clawhauser takes responsibility for his behaviour. *Zootopia* furthers its use of representation when significant male characters are allowed to express their emotions and non-traditionally masculine interests: Hopp's father cries when Judy leaves for Zootopia and her superior, Chief Bogo (voiced by Idris Elba), is caught playing with Gazelle the pop star's dance app on his phone by Clawhauser, a camp leopard, who, rather than shame him, is pleased for him. Not every conspiracy film can replace hot-button issues with cartoon animals, but *Zootopia*'s wide range of characters demonstrates that it is possible to unite an audience without igniting their biases -- a crucial task for forthcoming conspiracy narratives if they wish to remain politically forceful.

Where the formula for traditional conspiracy protagonists was once quite simple -- be a man, be a journalist, and do the right thing -- 21st century conspiracy narratives demand more of their protagonists. The incorporation of corruption of the protagonist, emergence of the inner voice, and representation are integral, actionable methods for crafting characters in contemporary conspiracy films that will add to their narratives' political force.

Weapons of Mass Disruption

Updating traditional mechanisms for justice

In the last 50 years, the conclusions of conspiracy films abide by tradition 1 and tradition 2 paradigms, consistently employing one, or a combination of, the genre's traditional mechanisms for justice: the press, law enforcement, and the judiciary. However, the introduction of vigilantism as a resolution in early 21st-century conspiracy films reflects a clear erosion of the public's trust and a new expectation of corruption where the usual mechanisms for justice are now seen to be impotent. "For one thing, people no longer found it shocking that those in power might be bad actors or that institutions, in the service of their own preservation, might routinely and reflexively work against the interests of individuals" (Glynn, 2019). This growing cynicism, combined with changing public relationships to the press, law enforcement, and the judiciary, are all major factors in why 21st century conspiracy films, when they employ these old methods for justice, have endings that feel shallow, weak, or out of touch. When "closure is, to be sure, one of the fundamental formal questions one wishes to ask of conspiratorial representations" (Jameson, 1992, p.31), forthcoming conspiracy narratives must learn how to employ effective mechanisms for justice within the context of conspiracy culture, Big Technology, and their cinematic medium. To begin, I examine four mechanisms for justice with a focus on their on-screen temporality:

MECHANISM FOR JUSTICE	FUNCTION	TEMPORALITY
The Press	To expose	Fast. The press is a rapid force within conspiracy narratives. Newspaper headlines and emergency broadcasts are dramatic and effective in promoting astonishment and outrage. Its velocity is its weakness, however: news can be buried. If used effectively, the press can be the catalyst that leads to the employment of longer-lasting justice.
Law Enforcement	To restrain, punish	Medium. Indictments and arrests are quick and dramatic on screen, but the time it takes to build a case, go to trial, win the trial, and attain an appropriate sentence can be years. Therefore, most representations of law enforcement are limited to showing the arrest or an epilogue scene or title card.
The Judiciary	To prevent	Slow. Trials and the process of defending or amending laws to prevent future abuse of power may represent enduring, public-facing justice and strong political force, but they are the least dramatic on screen, usually requiring flashbacks, cutaways, epilogue scenes, or title cards.
Vigilantism	To get even	Fast. instantaneous and dramatic; Vigilantism is an acute form of retribution where the hero takes justice into their own hands, often contrary to the hero's previous morality and with any real-life consequences for murderous retribution overlooked.

Although attractive for its high-drama and decisive retribution, vigilantism is a form of privatised justice that has no currency in public-facing conspiracy films. The press, once a dramatic and effective form of cinematic justice, when utilised in the 21st century, is not only distrusted, but fractured by a plethora of new media outlets. Echo chambers¹⁰¹, specifically, have contributed to the public's disillusionment with the genre's traditional mechanisms for justice, reflecting a splintering and polarising¹⁰² of social, political, and cultural opinions. The effect is a change in not whether or how the public trusts, but *in whom* the public trusts. Even journalism is not exempt from "citizens' levels of mistrust toward the media, as well as their perception of media bias," which "have increased in past years in most Western democracies" (Ardèvol-Abreu and Gil de Zúñiga, 2017, p.703). Considering the "common wisdom that Americans now receive their political news from highly polarized sources" (Hahl et. al 2018, p.23), this disillusionment may have less to do with the mainstream media as a whole, and more to do with a fracturing of the media bedrock that has taken place since the 24-hour news cycle was introduced by CNN in 1980. "In a post-fact era of fake news and filter bubbles, in which audiences cherry-pick the information and sources that match their own biases and dismiss the rest, the news media seems to have lost its power to shape public opinion" (Tanz, 2017). Rather, the multiplicity of news media sources available fuels polarisation, making what appears to be a loss of trust in the media actually a loss of trust for *the other* media. Whether it be *Fox News* or *The New York Times*, the public's trust of *their* news media source is near infallible and, as apparent in the Kavanaugh¹⁰³ hearings, the nomination of Justice Ruth Bader

¹⁰¹ "A mainstreaming ideological effect in which a group worldview is reinforced through continual circulation amongst like-minded people... For example, political blogs tend to link with those which reinforce their values and to be disconnected from dissident voices, undermining democratic debate. The feedback loop is amplified by algorithmic recommendation engines, so that individuals dwell within filter bubbles" (Chandler and Munday, 2016).

¹⁰² "In 1992, a high proportion of counties in the US were basically politically heterogeneous... if you threw a dart at a map of the US, you'd have a good chance of hitting a county that had a relatively balanced ratio of Democrats to Republicans"; since then, however, the political divide in the United States by region has deepened in an almost linear fashion (Geher, 2018).

¹⁰³ The confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh as a Supreme Court Justice in 2018 exemplified to some that "it is worse to be poor and innocent than rich and guilty," (Young, 2018) while at the same time, then-President Trump falsely stated that

Ginsberg’s successor to the Supreme Court¹⁰⁴, and the Black Lives Matter¹⁰⁵ movement, this fierce partisanship extends to the judiciary and law enforcement as well, in no small part “due to the rise of the internet, online news technologies, social media tools, and mobile applications” (Ardèvol-Abreu and Gil de Zúñiga, 2017, p.704). For conspiracy films, the ability to decide who to trust is crucial when it comes to implementing justice on screen; without proper engagement with the public’s fracturing relationship to traditional mechanisms for justice or the proposal of new ones, the genre stands to lose its relevance and ability to be politically forceful. The following new mechanisms for justice are proposed as contemporary extensions of their traditional counterparts:

TRADITIONAL MECHANISM FOR JUSTICE	CONTEMPORARY MECHANISM FOR JUSTICE
The Press	Citizen Journalism ¹⁰⁶ and the Fifth Estate ¹⁰⁷
Law Enforcement	Internet Policing/Call-out Culture
The Judiciary	Collective Action (Web Activism, Revolutions, Elections)
Vigilantism	Doxxing

Kavanaugh was “proven innocent” when the Senate hearing found him neither guilty nor innocent of the sexual assault allegations against him (Smith, 2018).

¹⁰⁴ “As a fig leaf to obscure the hypocrisy of voting on President Trump’s election-year nominee after refusing to vote on President Obama’s in early 2016, Republicans have claimed an historical norm that doesn’t exist” (Wheeler, 2020).

¹⁰⁵ BLM “is a chapter-based, member-led organization whose mission is to build local power and to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes” (Black Lives Matter, 2019).

¹⁰⁶ Citizen journalism is “an alternative and activist form of news gathering and reporting that functions outside mainstream media institutions, often as a response to shortcomings in the professional journalistic field, that uses similar journalistic practices but is driven by different objectives and ideals and relies on alternative sources of legitimacy than traditional or mainstream journalism” (Radysch, 2013, p.159).

¹⁰⁷ Although use of the term “Fifth Estate” dates back to the 1960s when it was used to reference written countercultural mediums, networked technologies have enhanced and unquified the phrase into its modern usage to indicate the power and viewpoints of bloggers and social media users.

Citizen journalism, the fifth estate, and internet-based call-out culture are all distinct features of a digitally connected, 21st century society and, because of their relative newness, have yet to feature heavily in mainstream film, let alone within the conspiracy genre. Built on user-generated content from networked individuals, the fifth estate is an emergent institution that has outgrown the press (known as the fourth estate) with users' new ability to access and share information from alternative sources, thereby opening "new ways of increasing the accountability of politicians, press, experts and other loci of power" (Dutton, 2009, p.3). "Early speculation into the influence of citizen journalism on society imbued the practice with an almost messianic ability to save both journalism and democracy by drawing on the public to generate and police the flow of information as trust in the mainstream media declined" (Carr, et al, p.453). While the fifth estate provides an accessible medium for an increasingly distrustful public to engage with, critics "contend that citizen journalists fail to live up to journalistic standards and provide, at best, questionable information... The overwhelming cacophony of voices on the Internet, for instance, can leave the individual at a loss to distinguish the trustworthy from the dross" (Carr et al, 452-3). Although more of a biographical techno-thriller than a conspiracy film, *The Fifth Estate* (2013, dir. Bill Condon) -- which traces the rise of Wikileaks¹⁰⁸ and the tumultuous relationship between its founder, Julian Assange (Benedict Cumberbatch) and technology activist Daniel Berg (Daniel Brühl) -- demonstrates the disruptive power of digital whistleblowing and establishes citizen journalism and the fifth estate as potential contemporary mechanisms for justice.

Where citizen journalism is an observational use of the fifth estate, call-out culture employs social media to actively police the words, opinions, and actions of others. In a modern revision to the panopticon¹⁰⁹, some

¹⁰⁸ "WikiLeaks is a multinational media organization and associated library" specialising in "the analysis and publication of large datasets of censored or otherwise restricted official materials involving war, spying and corruption. It has so far published more than 10 million documents and associated analyses" (Wikileaks, 2019).

¹⁰⁹ "A term first used by Jeremy Bentham in 1791 to describe his idea of an 'inspection house' to be used for surveillance purposes in public institutions such

sociologists “now argue that surveillance has taken on the form of a Synopticon in contemporary society, in which the many watch the few,” (Tucker, 2018, p.2). *Nerve* (2016, dir. Henry Joost, Ariel Schulman) is a techno-conspiracy thriller that, in portraying the synopticon of social media as the antagonist, posits the panopticon -- an authoritarian symbol -- as a modern, digital mechanism for justice. The protagonist, Vee Delmonico (Emma Roberts) is a repressed high school senior who gets dangerously involved in *Nerve*: an open-source dare game that provokes its players into doing ever more dangerous stunts. When players try to opt out, they become “prisoners of the game”, losing their money, friends, and even their lives trying to win. With no mastermind behind the programme, the *Nerve* game is a modern metaphor, representing the lengths young people go to for fame and notoriety online. *Nerve* is people-made and people-fueled, but without its users, the game becomes powerless. In its albeit flimsy¹¹⁰ ending, *Nerve* suggests a removal of users’ anonymity as a means of engendering accountability; the sentiment being: once users believe they will be held accountable for their actions, they vacate the game en masse, essentially destroying it (until another springs up¹¹¹). Although the film’s conclusion makes a valid observation that the internet and social media’s power rests in the hands of those who are seemingly controlled by it, the ending of *Nerve* more closely resembles an event “in the midst of the Libyan uprising in 2011,” when “Muammar Gaddafi’s regime used the country’s mobile phone network to send text messages that ordered people to go back to work” (Chenoweth, 2016). In real life, the removal of anonymity by the government’s unsolicited text warning is chilling; yet, in a Hollywood movie it is portrayed as a triumphant success.

as prisons, asylums, and workhouses. The panopticon was a circular construction of open single ‘cells’, built around a central inspection tower” in which the few watch the many (Scott, 2014).

¹¹⁰ “*Nerve* ends on a note that one can either take as a major sigh of relief or cop-out. I chose the latter, but to be honest, the ridiculous ending is *Nerve*’s one true moment of absolute ballsiness” (Henderson, 2016).

¹¹¹ *Nerve*’s final scene portrays Vee and Ian months later, unaware that they are being filmed by a surreptitious watcher, suggesting that a new game has re-spawned.



“We can't stop the game... There's no one to stop, just... anonymous people”

“... But what if they weren't anonymous?”

Re-identification as a new mechanism for justice in Nerve

A more extreme form of internet-based intimidation, “doxxing” -- or the practice of “publicly identify[ing] or publish[ing] private information about (someone) especially as a form of punishment or revenge” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) -- bears an unsettling resemblance to vigilante justice. “It’s an understandable response to the failure of traditional institutions (like real police forces) to adapt their work to the rapidly shifting needs and realities of the digital world” (Zolides in Grey Ellis, 2017), but when doxxing ranges from posting images of a protestor’s face from a public rally online to posting a target’s home address with calls to have them killed or raped¹¹², what may start as vigilante justice can swiftly deteriorate into abusive, violent behaviour. This duality of technology -- as a tool for positive disruptions to the status quo or intrusive, menacing control -- poses a distinct obstacle when it comes to proposing new mechanisms for justice that are reliable within the polarised political climate that contemporary conspiracy films must inhabit. The following term describes the reflexive nature that technological mechanisms for justice and behemoths ought to exhibit if they are to be politically forceful:

double-edged sword: where technological mechanisms for justice bear both a stabilising and disruptive nature. This may entail that the behemothic presence is utilised as a mechanism

¹¹² One such example is “Gamergate”: a 2014 online harassment campaign that targeted several women in the video game industry with rape and death threats.

for justice against itself, or that a mechanism for justice becomes an antagonistic force in the wrong hands. The double-edged sword recognises that these mechanisms for justice are, at their root, neutral, and that it is those who steer or direct them that determine whether they are used for great harm or great good.

Where *The Fifth Estate* advocates for privacy and anonymity¹¹³ to empower citizens, *Nerve* and *The Circle* (2017, dir. James Ponsoldt) promote the opposite: total identification for accountability. The duality of modern mechanisms for justice make them at once hopeful and terrifying: the visibility and impact of call-out culture, citizen journalism, and social media-influenced revolutions¹¹⁴ and elections¹¹⁵ shows their potential to be technologies of freedom or control: “the ability to reach a national audience now belongs to everyone. There is nothing to prevent fringe ideas and arguments from entering the informational bloodstream -- and nothing to stop them from spreading” (Tanz, 2017). While social media has the power to mobilise thousands and even millions of people in a digital and physical sense, globalisation and the advancement of internet technology means that “in the 21st century, power is easier to get, harder to use -- and easier to lose” (Naim, 2013, p.14). Social media has given us the power to disrupt, but “we still have no clear formula for bridging the gap from disruption to legitimacy” (Satell, 2014). Contemporary conspiracy narratives, like the public, have tools for disruption at their disposal, but closure takes time. The path to legitimacy is perhaps where collective action meets its traditional (and temporally ‘slow’) counterpart: the law.

¹¹³ See Appendix: Dialogue - *The Fifth Estate* 1

¹¹⁴ “Occupy Wall Street is a leaderless resistance movement” against economic inequality “that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%” (Occupy Wall St, 2019). The group uses “Arab Spring tactics”, referring to the chain of anti-government demonstrations, uprisings, and armed revolts across the Middle East in late 2010 in which social media played an integral role, but that left power vacuums in its wake.

¹¹⁵ The year 2016 saw two exceptionally disruptive elections: Brexit in the UK and the election of Donald J. Trump in the US, “both of which were unexpected and one might say ‘unwelcomed’ by learned, expert opinion” and, both of which have been touted to possess roots within the post-truth condition and to have utilised manipulation of the public via social media” (Fuller, 2018).

North Country (2005, dir. Niki Caro), is a slow-burning patriarchal conspiracy film inspired by the book *Class Action: The Story of Lois Jenson and the Landmark Case That Changed Sexual Harassment Law* (2002, Clara Bingham and Laura Leedy Gansler). It traces the journey of female miner Josey Aimes (Charlize Theron), a fictional character based on Lois Jenson¹¹⁶, as she builds a class action suit against her local iron mine for its misogynistic practices. The film's timeline is significantly condensed from Jenson's own experience, but is nevertheless a key instance of litigation being dramatised on screen as an effective mechanism for justice -- with one proviso: Josey Aimes could not achieve justice on her own. The class action lawsuit was a culmination of effort -- by her friend and lawyer, Bill White (Woody Harrelson), her friend and fellow-miner Glory Dodge (Frances McDormand) whose support galvanises the rest of the women miners to join the suit, and from her estranged father (Richard Jenkins) whose reconciliation ushers in support from the men in town. Positive representations of collective action like this challenge the idea that social disruption ought to be "heavily dependent on the involvement of people with a particular and rare set of social gifts" (Gladwell, 2000, p.33), and encourages a community-based, grassroots approach. The following technique indicates that new forms of justice should be achieved by more than the sole efforts of the protagonist:

utility of the team: in an age of rapidly disseminating technology, the amplified voices of the many are capable of greater change than solo, abstract heroism. Modern conspiracy protagonists will utilise the help, skills, and support of a team to combat the many-headed monster. Utility of the team offsets the need for messiah characters by returning the onus for change back into the hands of the community as opposed leaving the public to rely on a singular hero.

¹¹⁶ Jenson v. Eveleth Taconite Company was the first class-action sexual harassment lawsuit in the United States; it began in 1988 and was decided in 1997 with the judge ruling that the mine should have prevented the misconduct towards its female workers.



“What are you supposed to do when those with all the power are hurting those with none? You stand up and tell the truth.” Betty (Rusty Schwimmer) and Sherry (Michelle Monaghan) in *North Country* (2005)

Conspiracy films’ endings have long been the crucial moment where justice is served or injustice condemned; but for modern conspiracy narratives, this is precisely where they appear most weak; the permeation of technology and social media into our daily lives and the political sphere has disrupted our relationship to justice in a way that recent conspiracy films have yet to effectively overcome. The tendency of contemporary conspiracy films to have a compelling start (concept) but an inadequate finish (justice) is characteristic of what Jared Cohen, CEO of Jigsaw (formerly Google Ideas) observes of technology: “[It] will make revolutions start happening faster, but it’ll make them harder to finish. Technology can’t create leaders and cause institutions to appear” (in Isaacson, 2013). Similarly, modern conspiracy thrillers may pose relevant questions about our relationships to new behemoth presences but, so far, their messages (like those of *Nerve* and *The Circle*) are infirm, unconvincing and, ultimately, lack political force.

In providing methods to reignite the political force of contemporary conspiracy narratives this chapter does not presume what 21st century justice *must* look like (as no one mechanism for justice can now guarantee both the exposure of truth and retribution for abuse of power that political force is derived from). Rather, it asserts that conspiracy narratives that engage with the double-edged sword of Big Technology, that exhibit a many-headed monster and utilise corruption of the protagonist,

emergence of the inner voice, representation and utility of the team, will attain political force by addressing the morality and truth-distorting effects of conspiracy culture by acknowledging new forms of abuse of power and by creating relevant paths to justice in whatever form it takes. “In so many films that contain stories of cultural upheaval, the narrative impulse is to support what Edmund Burke described as ‘small c’ conservatism... which is to say that social change must not only be incremental, but carefully maintained within the institutional system, lest it gives way to chaos” (Crow, 2018). Few conspiracy films suggest that justice for a corrupt system must come from outside the system -- as in the violent upheaval portrayed in *Sorry to Bother You* -- but perhaps if we are “to imagine fixing the democracy-distorting effects of Facebook’s power,” and that of Big Technology, “[we] have to be able to see beyond its boundaries, to a world where how we learn, play, and socialise isn’t structured by... surveillance capitalism” (Micah, 2017). In the same way, forthcoming conspiracy films must see beyond the boundaries of justice as an *end* and aim for justice as a *means* to connect the personal, the communal, and the political; no longer can conspiracy films merely be reactionary and reflective, they must be prescient, imaginative, and inspiring.

Case Study: The Circle (2017)

A Big Technology conspiracy film with weak political force

Significant as an early attempt at representing surveillance capitalism on screen, *The Circle* (2017, dir. James Ponsoldt) loses its political force in an inadequate navigation of the double-edged sword of Big Technology and, in doing so, allies its protagonist to potentially anti-democratic ideals. The film follows Mae Holland (Emma Watson), a star employee at The Circle (read: Google or Facebook), who agrees to “go transparent” by having her life broadcast live, 24/7, to the world. In doing so, The Circle commodifies Mae’s behaviour in a 21st century Truman Show, but where *The Truman Show*’s astute use of product placement within the narrative allows the film to draw connection between materialism and notions of identity in the late 1990s, *The Circle* misses any such opportunity for commentary on surveillance capitalism and the commercialisation of behavior online; without engaging both sides of the double-edged sword of Big Technology, the message of *The Circle* (in film form at least¹¹⁷) is precarious. Mae’s seen and unseen threats are:

seen threat: Mae simply wants to “fulfil her potential”; earning enough money to support her father’s medical bills appears to be a secondary motivation in the film.

unseen threat: “SeeChange”, The Circle’s network of tiny, wireless spy cameras and sensors is set to catalogue the data and private experience of every user under the guise of “knowing is good, but knowing everything is better”

Holland appears to have a seen/unseen threat disjoint where recognition, exposure of, and retribution for The Circle’s intrusive practices would destroy Mae’s celebrity-status and threaten to leave her father’s medical bills unpaid. While this presents a viable corruption of the protagonist --

¹¹⁷ Mae Holland in the novel version benefits from internal focalisation, allowing her conflicted feelings to be expressed via third person narration, even when her actions belie her outward intentions. The film version lacks such clarity.

Holland certainly benefits from *The Circle*'s success -- there comes no emergence of the inner voice moment. Rather, Holland's initial misgivings about *The Circle*'s overzealous employee culture disappear over the course of the film as she willingly compromises her own, her friends', and her family's privacy in order to promote "transparency" with *The Circle*. *The Circle*'s fanatical technology strains Mae's relationship with her parents when she accidentally broadcasts them struggling to have sex (her father suffers from multiple sclerosis) and even costs her childhood friend Mercer (Ellar Coltrane) his life when he is forcibly tracked down and run off a bridge by an audience of Circlers. Yet Holland remains resolute in her role as *The Circle*'s poster child, even defending the technology, protesting, "The Circle didn't kill Mercer... It was a bad tool, a bad system... It can be fixed." The death of Mercer ought to galvanise her -- as estranged *Circle* co-founder Ty Lafitte hopes: "[Mercer]'s the martyr who will wake everyone up." Instead, Holland goes straight back to *The Circle* more determined than before to fulfill its mission of eliminating privacy once and for all.

The novel of the same name (which *The Circle* is based on) reads like a tradition 2 narrative: Holland becomes so indoctrinated in the company's hyper-surveillance culture that she double-crosses her friend, the altruistic co-founder of *The Circle*, foiling his plot to destroy the company. With its protagonist happily subsumed into the surveillance state, *The Circle*, as a novel, presents a cautionary tale about the public's willingness to sacrifice privacy for a presence online. The film version, however, takes liberties with the ending and instead presents a shallow triumph for Holland when she gives the company's co-founders a dose of their own medicine by making them "go transparent" too. Holland's desire for "transparency" -- a euphemism for the absence of privacy not just for *The Circle*'s leaders, but for everyone -- may seem well-intentioned, but not only fails to consider that solitude, anonymity, intimacy, and other privacy behaviours are integral for psychological health and developmental success¹¹⁸, but that

¹¹⁸ Privacy behaviours are described as "Solitude (freedom from observation by others), Intimacy (being alone with others, such as friends and family), Anonymity (being among others but without personal surveillance by them), and Reserve (unwillingness to disclose personal aspects of self to others)" and their functions

privacy, as “the choice of the individual to disclose or to reveal what he believes, what he thinks, what he possesses” (United States Supreme Court, 1967, p.1271) is a representation of free will that Holland passionately wants to do away with.

In contrast with *The Circle*'s “right to know” message, Zuboff argues for a “right to sanctuary” which “invokes claims to individual agency and personal autonomy as essential prerequisites to freedom of will and to the very concept of democratic order” (2018, p.54). “Those who would eviscerate sanctuary are keen to take the offensive... with the guilt-inducing question ‘What have you got to hide?’” (Zuboff, 2018, p.479). Holland echoes this offensive in the final scene as she marches through a crowd of Circlers like a folkloric revolutionary, illuminated by light from their smartphone screens. In absence of the film’s visual fanfare and triumphant soundtrack, Holland’s closing monologue¹¹⁹ reads more like the euphemisms of an authoritarian ruler masquerading as liberator than a conspiracy heroine. Holland’s anti-democratic ambitions could arguably position her as an antihero (as she is in the novel), but the film’s ending, which presents itself more as a victory than a warning, risks irresponsibly promoting a surveillance capitalist future -- one that disposes of free will -- as the new utopia.



“Privacy was a temporary thing, and now... it's over.”

include “(1) personal autonomy; (2) emotional release; (3) self-evaluation; and (4) limited and protected communication” (Pederson, 1997, p.148).

¹¹⁹ See Appendix: Dialogue - *The Circle* 1

As a contemporary conspiracy heroine, Holland is neither wife nor mother and, in the near-future imaginings of *The Circle*, she is not punished for these life choices, nor is romance or domesticity prescribed to her in the film, exemplifying a clear augmentation of her personal agency as far as female conspiracy protagonists go. Characters are not sexist towards her, she is not objectified, sexually harassed, nor does she have her sexual history called into question. In fact, the whole Circle lifestyle is overtly clinical when it comes to gender or sexuality: when Mae responds to her interviewer's unexpected come-on by telling him it is inappropriate, he simply agrees and moves on with the interview¹²⁰. *The Circle* avoids gendered stereotypes in favour of workplace devotion: where traditionally Holland's womanhood might be grounds to patronise her or question her ability to balance her professional commitments with family commitments, it appears that any semblance of dissatisfaction with Mae's behavior (personal or professional) stems from her ability to conform to the company's cult-like ethos. Despite her apparent liberation from the culturally approved rhetoric of femininity, Holland's characterisation resembles the incongruity of Sylvia Broome, the protagonist of *The Interpreter*, whose vengeful assassination attempt feels unjustified after spending the majority of the film reciting platitudes of forgiveness. Holland's moral ambiguity mirrors Broome's in that Holland's own words and actions often conflict not just with each other, but with how those around her perceive her¹²¹. Despite her progression as a female protagonist whose representation on screen isn't bound up in, or a reaction to, the culturally approved-rhetoric of femininity, Mae Holland lacks the characterisation and moral fortitude capable of lending the pursuit of her seen and unseen threats political force. *The Circle* may challenge the lack of women in the tech industry¹²² with its inclusion of Holland as the protagonist, but its predominantly white cast fails to represent the actual demographic of Silicon Valley (the apparent inspiration for the film's fictionalised setting) which, even as of 2015, was majority Asian (Simonson, 2015). There are a few minority roles -- namely Ty Lafitte

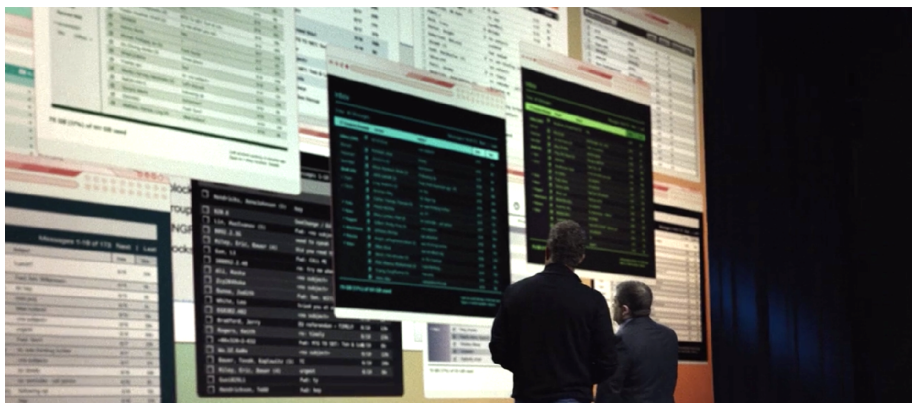
¹²⁰ See Appendix: Dialogue - *The Circle* 2

¹²¹ See Appendix: Dialogue - *The Circle* 3 + 4

¹²² A year after *The Circle*' release, women made up less than 20% of the tech workforce in the United States (Bose, 2018).

(John Boyega) -- but, overall, the film's casting is a significant missed opportunity to utilise representation as a way for heterogeneous audiences to engage with familiar and unfamiliar characters on both sides of the privacy argument.

The Circle may be the first modern conspiracy film to take on the spectre of surveillance capitalism, but its representation of this behemoth ignores the double-edged sword of Big Technology in favour of an ill-considered, all-encompassing, pro-surveillance stance. The film shows little hesitation in depicting The Circle and its two public figureheads as dishonest surveillance capitalists: Mercer cites the company's flirtation with antitrust laws, her friend and fellow-Circler, Annie (Karen Gillan) notes that "they ask for forgiveness and never for permission," and even Lafitte recognises the corporation's ability to catalogue, store, study, and monetise its users' data. Yet, *The Circle* does not qualify as a many-headed monster: although its TrueYou programme is vast in its near-omnipresence, the film relies on privatisation of the antagonist to personify the two nefarious figureheads of the company, Bailey and Stanton.



The closest The Circle's film audience comes to seeing Bailey and Stanton's nefarious plans: a backdrop of blurry spreadsheets

While surveillance capitalists' "operations are designed to be unknowable to us" (Zuboff, 2018, p.11), *The Circle's* inability to expose even a hint of the content in Bailey and Stanton's "super-secret scrambled code accounts, that nobody, not even their assistants or wives knew existed" leaves this behemoth feeling cliché and shallow. Holland's decision to

make Bailey and Stanton's previously top-secret content accessible to the public still excludes the film's actual audience; rather, viewers are left only with Lafitte's description: "it's worse than I could've imagined." This isn't evidence of a complex and systemic behemoth fueled by corruption, greed, and abuse of power. There is no range of antagonistic forces. The most compelling antagonist is Mae Holland: at best an anti-hero, at worst a pawn acting out of self-preservation; but, as a conspiracy protagonist, she should be conspiring *against* the behemoth, not empowering it.

Without a consistent moral compass, "the movie doesn't know what it's about; it keeps changing its mind and losing focus" (Leitch, 2017); instead, *The Circle* relies on the audience's own misgivings about technological privacy to fuel an arbitrary sense of justice with the press, law enforcement, and the judicial system -- the genre's traditional mechanisms for justice -- ignored in favour of *The Circle*'s vast omniscience. Coercing Bailey and Stanton to go transparent could be an act of vigilantism, but the film's conclusion implies that Holland's successful eradication of privacy extends to *everyone*, not just wrongdoers, and she does it nearly single-handedly. With only the help of Lafitte to "make every document in the company's history public," *The Circle* does not employ utility of the team. It is only Mae Holland's voice which is amplified as she espouses the same presumption of entitlement to human data that fuels real-life surveillance capitalists¹²³. Because she allies herself with the surveillance capitalist antagonists, Holland does not experience the overwhelming paranoia and unease that most conspiracy protagonists feel when faced with the unseen threat. Instead, Holland's solace in the 'nothing to hide, nothing to fear' attitude of going transparent denies her "reflexivity: reflection on and by oneself. The real psychological truth is: *If you've got nothing to hide, you are nothing*" (Zuboff, 2018, p.479). Holland's call for transparency doesn't make anyone honest, it makes them hollow -- like the justice she achieves.

The Circle was met by largely negative reviews with audience and film critics alike positing a multitude of reasons why the film disappoints;

¹²³See Appendix: Dialogue - *The Circle* 5

however, its disregard for the double-edged sword nature of Big Technology and ambivalence on whether The Circle's technology should be feared or aspired to is a crucial shortfall. Holland and her peers may "repeat the same half-formed conceits about privacy and transparency, the paradoxes of a society both liberated and constrained by boundless exposure," (Kohn, 2017) but her convergence with surveillance capitalism at the end of the film does little to reprimand the threat of The Circle and its effect on truth, power, and privacy in her world. In this way, and unlike *The Truman Show*, "*The Circle* never resolves its tone... On the one hand, it's an Orwellian drama about surveillance society; at the same time, it's a sincere workplace drama about young adulthood" with a weak attempt at *Silicon Valley*-esque satire "that shoe horns in some techno-babble for the sake of deepening its potential" (Kohn, 2017). Conspiracy films require a strong sense of morality and justice running through their core; without the emergence of her inner voice and a viable mechanism for justice, Holland's union with the behemoth forces her to use the double-edged sword of Big Technology to relinquish privacy instead of protecting it, making a devastating blow to this conspiracy film's political force.

Case study: *Sorry to Bother You* (2018)

A modern, politically forceful conspiracy film that avoids Big Technology

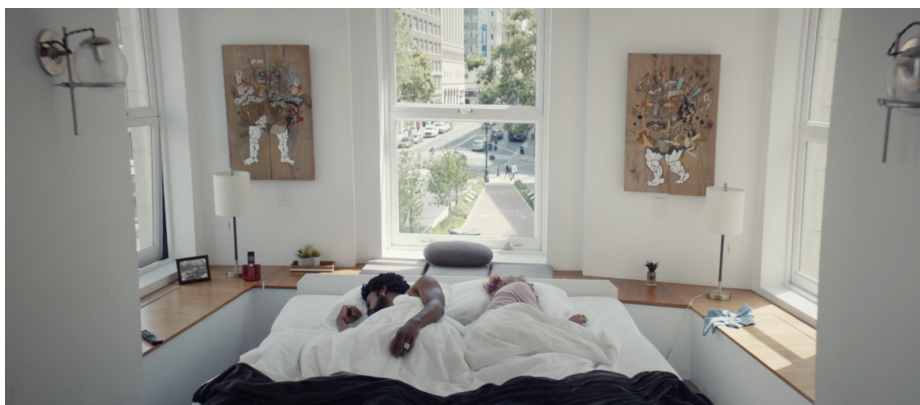
Sorry to Bother You (2018, dir. Boots Riley) is the surrealist, genre-bending story of telemarketer Cassius Green (Lakeith Stanfield) who, upon discovering his “White voice” skyrockets up the company ladder as a “power caller” and is thrust into a conspiracy involving WorryFree, Oakland’s largest employer of indentured, lifelong labour. Significant in that it forgoes traditional mechanisms for justice in favour of collective action and violent revolution, it won the 2018 Sundance Vanguard Award for its innovation and originality and has been hailed as “the most important, surreal, sci-fi movie in years” (Narcisse, 2018). Although critics have yet to brand *Sorry to Bother You* as a conspiracy film, its representations of the unseen operations by a powerful few on the powerless masses, its foreground of abuse of power and hidden manipulation of economic systems, and its presentation of a protagonist who exhibits agency panic qualify it as a contemporary, public-facing conspiracy narrative with a protagonist whose seen and unseen threats are not immediately linked:

seen threat: Four months behind on rent, living in his uncle’s garage and driving a broken down car, Cassius Green just wants to earn enough money to pay back his debts and get by.

unseen threat: RegalView, the telesales company Green works for, sells arms and indentured human labor for WorryFree, a company that secretly plans to turn their workforce into “equisapiens” -- horse-human hybrids who will be stronger and more obedient -- in order to increase profits.

Cassius “Cash” Green appears as a lethargic, cash-strapped millennial who is only “just surviving”: he puts 40 cents of gas into his broken down car and, in an amplified reflection of systemic working-class trials, faces the threat of homelessness on two fronts: the back rent he owes to his uncle Sergio (Terry Crews) for living in his garage could get Sergio evicted too if it’s not paid soon. The crafting of Green’s biography as someone

whose self worth is centred around what he can (not) afford is deliberate and relatable to millennial viewers who, in the UK, “have suffered a bigger reversal in financial fortunes than their counterparts in most other developed countries except Greece,” (Collinson, 2018) and who, in the US, have higher unemployment and lower home ownership rates than previous generations at the same age (Leatherby, 2017). Green fakes his resumé and gets a job at RegalView, the basement-level telesales company where he discovers his talent for extreme code-switching¹²⁴. By using his “White voice” -- what his colleague Langston (Danny Glover) refers to as “Sounding like you don’t have a care... it’s what they wish they sounded like. It’s what they think they’re supposed to sound like”¹²⁵ -- Green’s phone sales skyrocket, setting him on the path to promotion.



Before: Green, unemployed, wakes up in his garage studio with Detroit.

After: Green’s city apartment once he becomes a power caller.

¹²⁴ Code-switching is the “process of shifting from one linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another, depending on the social context or conversational setting (Morrison, 2017).

¹²⁵ See Appendix: Dialogue - *Sorry to Bother You* 1

Green's corruption of the protagonist -- exemplified when he abandons his co-workers' union and their campaign for a living wage in exchange for massive paychecks and "power caller" status -- is therefore an entirely conceivable reaction to his previously hand-to-mouth living situation. Contemporary audiences will likely empathise with Green's decision to 'sell out' as the private-facing reality of his hardships easily overpowers the moral compass of traditional, public-facing motivations. Green needs money to survive; what's a little moral compromise if he gets to live comfortably for once? "Whereas in most films, the narrative tension would center on whether Cash is justified in 'selling out' in order to pay his bills," the introduction of the RegalView workers' strike on the same day as Green's promotion "makes the film feel genuinely revolutionary" by re-focusing the conflict back on the strikers and Green, who crosses the picket each morning with the rest of the Power Callers (Gray, 2018). Any guilt Green or the audience may feel as he crosses his friends' picket line is overwhelmed by his private-facing need to take care of himself -- making him a plausible and sympathetic (if selfish) character in the wake of the privatised phase of the conspiracy genre.



"My success has nothing to do with you." Green faces his old team as a new power caller on the day of their first strike.

The question of whether one's private-facing need to survive outweighs the public-facing need to resist¹²⁶ forms the crux of *Sorry to Bother You* and paves the way for Green's emergence of the inner voice. Green's

¹²⁶ Lakeith Stanfield asks, "Where does the morality come into just trying to do what you have to do to survive?" (in Crow, 2018).

moral compass appears when he discovers WorryFree is developing a stronger and more obedient half-human, half-horse workforce -- and has already begun experimenting on employees. When CEO Steve Lift (Armie Hammer) offers Green \$100 million to become an “equisapien” himself (with the purpose of acting as a false revolutionary to keep employees submissive¹²⁷) he finally recognises that he is not an asset to WorryFree, he is a pawn -- no matter how well-paid. Until this point, Green had occupied the privatised model of a self- interested protagonist who was only out for himself; however, when Green becomes convinced that Lift’s “cocaine” may be turning him into an equisapien anyway, he decides to expose WorryFree, changing his actions from private to public-facing: he calls a newspaper to report his suspicions about WorryFree and takes a beating on the satirical show *I Got the S#@ Kicked Out Of Me!* just to share the video proof of equisapiens he captured on his phone. It is crucial to recognise that Green’s transition from private to public was not due to any altruistic urge -- it was born from Green’s own fear that he, himself, had been infected with the equisapien catalyst, a fact his girlfriend Detroit (Tessa Thompson) calls him out for¹²⁸. The incorporation of Green’s privatised interests (as opposed to presenting shallow altruism) strengthens his corruption of the protagonist and emergence of the inner voice, making his refusal of Lift’s \$100 million dollar offer both believable and politically forceful.



Not an asset, but a pawn: Green, 'on display' at Steve Lift's mansion party.

¹²⁷ See Appendix: Dialogue - *Sorry to Bother You 2*

¹²⁸ See Appendix: Dialogue - *Sorry to Bother You 3*

Get Out director Jordan Peele's description of a "social thriller" in which "the villain is not just one person or family, but an insidious idea at the root of society itself" (Pardee, 2018) ought to apply to conspiracy behemoths as well; in the case of *Sorry to Bother You*, the ultimate villain is capitalism. It fuels the unseen threat of WorryFree's secret plans to turn their workforce into equisapiens and underpins the thematic subplot of Black identity and its suppression as embodied by Green's White voice. The symptoms of capitalism come together with its actors and enablers: RegalView's managers, WorryFree's Power Callers, and Steve Lift to create a complex and systemic many-headed monster. Over and over, the film asks, "What if you found out you were living in silent solidarity with the most diabolical villains ever? Would you recognise it and would you do something about it?" (Pardee, 2018). By utilising multi-faceted forces of antagonism as opposed to relying on a singular 'bad guy', *Sorry to Bother You* presents a politically forceful confrontation of capitalism and wealth divide in the 21st century. Its presentation of rampant capitalism as a dramatic and seemingly insurmountable obstacle coincides with what Zuboff describes as part of the "dispossession cycle" of surveillance capitalism: "People habituate to the incursion with some combination of agreement, helplessness, and resignation... As populations grow numb, it becomes more difficult for individuals and groups to complain" (2018, p.140). Union Leader, Squeeze, acknowledges the 'monster cannot be destroyed' sentiment of classic conspiracy thrillers; but, in saying "You just decide to get used to the problem," he identifies a 21st century caveat: that agency panic, created by complex and systemic behemoths in society (and represented in film), leads to apathy on and off screen.

To address its many-headed monster, *Sorry to Bother You* acknowledges the media and law enforcement -- two of the conspiracy genre's traditional mechanisms for justice -- but forgoes them in favour of more collective, if violent, solutions. Law enforcement is represented as an arm of the corporations who use militant force to suppress pickets, protests, and riots, while the media is portrayed as largely impotent. Director Riley explains, "What some media is is a tenderizer that gets you malleable and ready for anything that's thrown your way. I think we needed to explain

what people are taking in as part of the explanation for what they're accepting” (2018). This stance echoes the argument that Hollywood movies have played a role in softening public perceptions of incursions to privacy by normalising representations of hyper-surveillance in film¹²⁹, and why the privatised phase and cynicism in the genre have proven so crippling to conspiracy films’ political force. The inability of Green’s video proof of the conspiracy to gain traction through broadcast media confronts conspiracy culture’s post-truth supposition that the media may no longer be a viable watchdog for democracy.



In exchange for airing his video, Green agrees to be covered in faeces on I got the S#@ Kicked out of Me. The video causes WorryFree’s stock to skyrocket.

Green’s solo heroics completely backfire, substantiating the complexities of the film’s many-headed monster and necessitating utility of the team as a mechanism for justice. Green’s distinct inability to affect justice on his own affirms that “although effective contest will require determined individuals, the individual alone cannot shoulder the burden of justice any more than an individual worker in the first years of the twentieth century could bear the burden of fighting for fair wages and working conditions” (Zuboff, 2018, p.485). Green’s team is made up of Squeeze and the RegalView union, Detroit and the activist/protest group Left Eye Faction, and a group of Equisapiens that he breaks out of Steve Lift’s mansion. Together, they engage in a violent showdown outside of WorryFree headquarters which culminates in their victory. Following their success, the

¹²⁹ Patterson, J. (2013). ‘How Hollywood softened us up for NSA surveillance’, *The Guardian*, 16 June.

film portrays what appears to be a possible tradition 1 ending: the RegalView union is strong, Green and Detroit have moved back into the garage (but with nicer furnishings) and the greed that Green previously displayed has been replaced with generosity (he gives away his Mercedes-Benz). This sense of peace and security ruptures when Green is suddenly revealed to have a horse nose protruding from his face, confirming that Lift had indeed drugged him with the equisapien catalyst. This dark twist is followed by a false ending and short credits before cutting back to a team of equisapiens led by Cassius Green (now full horse-man), outside Steve Lift's mansion, ready for more violence. The film's full ending, where "Riley observes the many ways in which capitalism (and the forces that uphold it) manipulates, controls and ultimately destroys the individual" (Pardee, 2018) by turning Green into an equisapien, presents more like a public-facing tradition 2 ending with the concession that one successful battle does not win a war. Although the film's tradition 2 ending may appear discouraging with its perpetuation of a narrative in which the hero is subsumed by the power of the conspiracy, the understanding that justice takes time is, in Riley's mind, a positive thing: "He doesn't only turn into an equisapien. He fights back. I think that it is a happy ending, but it's a different kind of happy ending. It's one that says nobody gets out of this clean and there's no way we can't be affected by this world. But the point is you keep fighting. And that's the happy ending" (2018). In this way, *Sorry to Bother You* updates the tradition 2 ending further by positioning utility of the team and collective action as paths to justice instead of optimistic fix-all solutions which ignore conspiracy culture.

Where the cinematic universe of *Sorry to Bother You* is "most associated with surreal white auteurs such as Wes Anderson, Michel Gondry and Spike Jonze," director Boots Riley has "repurposed it for an all-black cast and world in the same way that *Get Out* reignited the horror genre by bringing diversity into the room" (Pardee, 2018). More than simply reigniting a genre, the representation of non-white characters in *Sorry to Bother You*'s leading roles achieves two significant effects: theoretically, it coincides with the understanding that "capitalism as an economic

organisation in the United States is racially structured” (Brodkin, 2004, p.76) and practically, it allows audience members to see people who are like and unlike them on both sides of the film’s anti-capitalist message. The film takes a jab at those who still subscribe to the notion that “everyone has a fair and equal chance to succeed, that hard work is all it takes, and that justice is inherent” (Koepke, 2007, p.190) by presenting a protagonist who, as the member of an outgroup, must literally mask his vocal identity to increase his success. In *Sorry to Bother You*, “Riley has made the indignity of wage labor a part of the public conversation, including among a multiracial demographic that has been excluded from media narratives about the progressive movement” (Gray, 2018). This exploration of the way economic oppression, the exploitation and appropriation of Blackness, and the myths of labour reward are packaged and disguised in capitalist society is embodied through a cast of diverse and charismatic characters, lending the film significant political force.

Sorry to Bother You is no simple ‘rags to riches’ movie where the protagonist escapes destitution by buying into the meritocratic idea that hard work breeds success; neither does it rely on a single caricature of evil to play the antagonist. Rather, Boots Riley’s subversive, surrealist narrative criticises the system by juxtaposing excessive wealth with the prospect of a living wage achieved by solidarity through the union movement. Where pro-union conspiracy film “*Silkwood*’s emphasis on the individual struggle of the female heroine limits the film’[s] potential for the expression of a progressive political message,” (Borda, 2011, p.117) the narrative tension in *Sorry to Bother You* is centred on the workers’ struggle and how Green navigates his identity within it. A box office success, grossing approximately \$17.9 million worldwide compared to its \$3.2 million budget, “the movie is at times a mess, but a compelling one” (Sims, 2018). *Sorry to Bother You*’s ability to update the tradition 2 narrative model as a recent conspiracy film that indicts the whole system -- as opposed to a privatised version of it -- offers a bleak picture of the future but a galvanising message for cooperative justice.

CREATIVE PRACTICE + ANALYSIS

ON

FISSURE (short screenplay) + *RENDER* (feature screenplay)

FISSURE

Written by

Tracy Mathewson

1. EXT. CLEANAIR CORP - DAY

A news REPORTER framed within the monitor of a tripod-mounted camera stands in front of an industrial building.

REPORTER (O.S.)

I'm here outside CleanAir Corp, the first natural gas manufacturer to prove its emissions levels are safe and compliant with new environmental regulations.

Beyond the camera's frame is a line of angry PROTESTERS.

Hardly noticeable, GLENN (25) lumbers behind the reporter towards the protesters in a bulky coat.

REPORTER (CONT.)

While the rest of the country's oil and gas companies scramble to comply with the UK's strict Enviro Directive, CleanAir Corp published yesterday what some scientists have called "stunning and revolutionary" proof that fracking is cleaner than both petroleum and coal and can provide us with cheap, abundant and reliable shale energy -- all from within the UK's own borders.

Still walking, Glenn pulls her phone out. The screen reads: YOUR APPLICATION FOR PERMANENT RESIDENCE IS BEING PROCESSED.

2. EXT. PICKET LINE - CONT.

The protesters hold signs that read "FRACK OFF!" "NOT NEAR OUR CHILDREN" "POISONING OUR H2O" and "CleanAir = LIES!"

REPORTER (CONT.)

But some people aren't so happy about CleanAir's exemption from the fracking ban that has, until now, held oil and gas companies hostage, plummeting stocks and costing jobs.

Glenn tries to smile apologetically as she crosses the picket to enter CleanAir. A PROTESTER(1) eyes her angrily.

Glenn looks down to refresh the page on her phone.

3. EXT. CLEANAIR CORP - DAY

REPORTER (CONT.)

Today, pro-environmental groups
have joined with members of a local
school to protest the company's
proposed well that's set to border-

A yell from the picket distracts the reporter. She looks
back to camera and motions to follow the action.

4. EXT. PICKET LINE - CONT.

A SECURITY GUARD(1) restrains the Protester(1).

Glenn has fallen to the ground, stunned. She gently touches
the side of her face and winces: it's wet with blood.

The reporter tries to squeeze in. She faces her camera:

REPORTER

Just now a protester has *attacked*
a... Miss are you an employee? What
happened here?

The reporter's questions fade away. Glenn notices her hands
are empty - she looks around frantically:

Glenn's phone is on the floor, still open to the same
immigration page; the screen now cracked. She grabs it.

5. EXT. CLEANAIR CORP ENTRANCE - DAY

Glenn's hand takes a swipe card from a lanyard around her
neck and holds it to a reader. The gate unlocks and she
presses through, leaving the shouting crowd behind.

6. INT. CLEANAIR CORP EMISSIONS LAB - DAY

A lab cluttered with computers, testing equipment, cabinets
and whiteboards with pipeline diagrams and blueprints.

The lab door opens and Glenn pushes in; she limps straight
to a sink for a first aid kit.

Behind her, BILL (52) stands next to some equipment in a
dirty lab coat. Bill wipes his eyes. He looks exhausted.

(CONTINUED)

BILL
Christ, Glenn! What happened?

Bill rushes to her at the sink.

BILL (CONT.)
Sit down, sit down.

Bill brings a chair over and Glenn slumps into it. She holds back her hair while he cleans the wound on her forehead.

Glenn winces.

GLENN
Stoned by an eco warrior.

Bill puts down the plaster he was holding.

BILL
No. But you're - ! Oh this is unbelievable.
(beat)
I knew this would be bad.

Bill goes to his computer and taps some keys. Glenn picks up the plaster and bandages over her wound.

BILL (CONT.)
You must have read the report?

Glenn stands and rinses the remaining blood from her hair.

GLENN
... what about it?

BILL
They butchered our research!

Glenn turns the tap off. Quiet now, just the whirring of the lab machines. She unzips her bulky jacket, revealing a delicate bump: she's pregnant. Glenn turns to face him.

BILL (CONT.)
I've spent all night running the numbers on it.

Bill taps a nearby projector and it flickers on.

He takes a remote and clicks: a graph appears on screen, high on the left, then it plummets abruptly before re-emerging much lower, beneath a green horizontal line marked "Enviro Directive". Glenn looks up and swallows hard.

(CONTINUED)

GLENN
Running numbers? What's to run?

BILL
Just look:

Bill clicks the remote and the slide changes: the line labeled "emissions" increases, edging closer to the green.

BILL (CONT.)
You and I know fracking isn't just pumping slickwater through shale. But the report -

He clicks again and the emissions creep past the green line.

BILL (CONT.)
It doesn't cover land clearing. Or emissions from 18 months of industrial equipment, the thousands of trucks -

The emissions levels climb and climb.

GLENN
I'm sure there's a reason,

BILL
And the drilling, we hit the water table every time! Where's the toxicity risk in the report?

GLENN
I don't -

Bill turns to see Glenn, her head bandaged.

BILL
Sorry. Look at you.

GLENN
Can we go over this later? I just-

BILL
Of course. I just thought we should be on the same page before we meet Travers.

Glenn's demeanour changes.

GLENN
Travers? ... about what?

BILL

About this! And that knock on your head proves it's not just me who thinks this report is bollocks.

GLENN

Come on let's not rush to -

BILL

Glenn I don't understand, it was your formula they botched, haven't you read the - ?

GLENN

I know. I have.

(beat)

But if we don't comply with Enviro, we'll both be out of jobs.

Bill notices Glenn as if for the first time.

BILL

... Are you saying that *is* your formula?

GLENN

I'm saying I don't know many oil & gas engineers that still have salaries and I'd like to keep mine.

BILL

But that report's a lie, Glenn! Fracking's not what you say it is. Maybe with some more time,

GLENN

I don't have time, Bill!

(beat)

They have my residency application.

(beat)

I lose this job and CleanAir revokes my application. I'll get deported. Do you know how much it costs to have a baby in America? This is my *home*, I'm not going to give up everything over - what? A report? Some pages of text?

BILL

... That's what this is about?

(CONTINUED)

GLENN

I should get it back any day now
and when I do --

BILL

Have you thought about anyone but
yourself here?

Bill gestures to the projection screen.

BILL (CONT.)

They're putting that next to a
school Glenn! With children, don't
you care? Decades of it sucking gas
with pipelines, transport, storage,
waste...

GLENN

Stop it.

BILL

You stop it. It was *our* job to make
the process cleaner. Not change the
meaning of "clean" to ignore
everything that's dirty or
dangerous about it.

Glenn and Bill's computers ding with a notification.

GLENN

Bill, come on - please.

BILL

What about your baby, Glenn? Don't
they deserve clean air?

Bill checks the notification on his computer.

BILL

Water Treatment. 2 person call out.

GLENN

Bill please wait. I'll go with you
to meet Travers and explain the
whole thing but I just need this...
I just need you to wait.

BILL

In 25 years a lot of children will
be waking up with cancer because of
you.

(CONTINUED)

GLENN
Bill!

BILL
Prove me wrong.

A silent standoff. Glenn reaches for the lanyard around her neck and tosses it to Bill. He catches it, puzzled.

GLENN
For the call-out.

BILL
It says 2 persons. I need you.

GLENN
No you don't. You need my ID.
(beat)
If you needed *me* you wouldn't fuck
me like this.

BILL
Glenn.

Bill stares at her, appalled.

BILL (CONT.)
This is so much bigger than you.

Glenn clenches her jaw as Bill walks off. The sound of the lab door opening and shutting, leaving her alone.

She turns around, the lights of the projection now glaring at her. She walks to the projector and clicks it off.

She sits down and puts her hands over her eyes.

GLENN
Fuck.

Glenn doesn't move at all for a moment, then in a hurry she sits down at Bill's computer. She pulls a dollar-bill patterned lighter from her pocket.

Glenn flicks the lighter absently as she stares at Bill's computer screen, but it doesn't ignite.

Glenn's eyes, scanning. The sound of the lighter stops. A few mouse clicks.

Bill's computer screen shows a message box: ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO PERMANENTLY ERASE THESE ITEMS? She clicks yes.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

8.

Glenn puts her lighter back in her pocket, gets up and walks towards the door of the lab.

An EXPLOSION reverberates from down the corridor.

Glenn shudders backwards. She grabs the side of a desk to catch her balance, frozen.

The lights shut off and a fire alarm rips through the building. Dim emergency lighting flickers on.

Footsteps rush down the hall beside her lab. Someone shouts.

TECHNICIAN (O.S.)
Down there!!

7. INT. CLEANAIR CORP HALLWAY 1 - DAY

Glenn hesitates at the doorway of the lab and looks down the hall: a door marked with a flammable warning sign is closed but dented outward. Telltale black marks spread from the frame. A small group of lab TECHNICIANS circle tentatively.

TECHNICIAN
Someone was in there!

Glenn looks on, shocked. Heeled footsteps approach - TRAVERS (36) rushes in.

Travers sees Glenn; shock flickers across her face.

TRAVERS
Glenn! What happened? Where's Bill?

Glenn steps back from the doorway, horrified.

GLENN
I-- he's -- he--

Travers looks at the door, smoke pouring through the cracks.

8. EXT. SIDE ROAD - DAY

ROSS (49) sits in a car, cluttered with papers, test reports and a laptop, his phone to his ear.

ROSS
Literally I can see the building from here. The second he calls, I go. I'll have the proof in my hand and this front pager's yours.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

9.

In the distance, CleanAir Corp's fire alarm sounds.

ROSS (CONT.)

Of course I trust him. Was on the phone with him last night - he just wants to give the company a chance to respond before it all blows--

Ross takes the phone away from his ear slowly. An emergency vehicle flies past.

Ross hangs up the phone and starts the car.

9. INT. EMPTY MEETING ROOM - DAY

Glenn sits, frozen, her head in her hands. Travers kneels beside her with water in a plastic cup.

TRAVERS

Do you think you can tell me what happened now?

GLENN

I don't know... I was supposed to be in there but --

Glenn shudders.

TRAVERS

But what, Glenn?

GLENN

Shouldn't we have evacuated too?

Travers puts a hand on Glenn.

TRAVERS

Glenn, I want to support you but I need you to be honest with me. Why weren't you in Water Treatment?

Glenn's hand reaches for her lighter. She squeezes it.

TRAVERS (CONT.)

It's okay, you're not in any trouble. You can trust me.

Glenn releases the lighter.

GLENN

We fought. Bill thought my formula was wrong - not wrong... deceptive.

(CONTINUED)

TRAVERS
Deceptive?

GLENN
I'm gonna --

Glenn dashes for the door but it opens before she can get to it. CARTER (30) enters, dressed in a sharp white skirt and suit jacket, carrying a briefcase.

Glenn retreats to a wastebasket in the corner and throws up.

CARTER
(to Travers)
I've been looking for you.

Travers stands timidly. Carter makes herself comfortable.

TRAVERS
Glenn this is Amanda Carter,
CleanAir's in-house solicitor --

Glenn lifts her head from the wastebasket.

GLENN
I'm sorry, I need to go home.

Glenn heaves into the wastebasket one more time. Travers whispers something to Carter, who watches Glenn, unmoved.

Carter hands some tissues off the table to Glenn.

CARTER
... The police will be here any
minute and they're going to be
looking for answers. I can see that
you're in shock, Glenn. I'm here to
make sure you're not taken
advantage of.

Carter takes out a portfolio and flicks through it on the table next to the projector.

CARTER (CONT.)
I'm aware you're on a work visa?

Glenn stops wiping her mouth.

GLENN
Yes.

Carter walks back to her briefcase.

(CONTINUED)

CARTER
Travers tells me you had a *fight*
with Bill this morning?

Glenn follows Carter back to her chair.

GLENN
Not a fight, a disagreement, he --

CARTER
I don't care what you fought about,
I care what it looks like. And to
the police it's going to look like
motive.

GLENN
Motive?
(beat)
This wasn't an accident?

Carter almost looks surprised.

CARTER
I said I care what it *looks* like.
And to the police, it's going to
look suspicious.
(beat)
It would be easy for something like
this to jeopardise your residency
application... Do you understand?
(beat)
So let's keep your drama with Bill
out of it.

Glenn nods slowly. She looks pale, cold, and sweaty. The
sound of her lighter flicking. Flicking, but not lighting.

10. INT. EMPTY MEETING ROOM, CLEANAIR CORP - LATER

The flicking continues. MATHIS (42), a D.I., has replaced
Carter and now sits across from Glenn.

MATHIS
Ms. Lockwood I need you to answer
the question.

Glenn seems to be lost in thought. She opens her mouth but
nothing comes out.

MATHIS (CONT.)
You smoke?

Glenn puts the lighter back in her pocket.

(CONTINUED)

GLENN

Not anymore.

Mathis looks down at her notes. Carter is now visible, seated beside Glenn; Travers is gone.

Mathis looks at Glenn.

MATHIS

Before the blast, was there anything out of the ordinary about this morning?

GLENN

No.

MATHIS

No? You sure?

CARTER

Inspector, I'm going to have to ask where you're going with this.

MATHIS

Just curious if Ms. Lockwood remembers being attacked by a protester this morning.

Carter turns to Glenn.

GLENN

Of course. Of course I remember.

MATHIS

Saw it on the news. Security had their hands full today. Has anyone ever tailgated behind you before?

GLENN

Before? No, never.

MATHIS

(to Carter)

I'd appreciate any CCTV you have from this morning.

CARTER

Of course.

(beat)

I appreciate we'll be receiving a warrant then?

(CONTINUED)

Mathis and Carter lock eyes. Mathis reaches into her pocket and pulls out an evidence bag with Glenn's charred ID lanyard inside.

MATHIS

I believe this is yours.

Glenn doesn't speak.

MATHIS (CONT.)

Curious as to how your ID card was found *inside* Water Treatment when you were actually -

GLENN

Bill borrowed it to answer the call

Mathis makes a note.

MATHIS

Is that normal?

Glenn opens her mouth but Carter cuts in.

CARTER

Happens all the time, Inspector.

MATHIS

I'd appreciate it if you let her answer for herself, Ms. Carter.

(beat)

So Bill used both your IDs to make it appear as though you both were in the room.

(beat)

Do we have a record of who made the call in the first place?

CARTER

You're going to need that warrant, Inspector.

Mathis glares at Carter.

MATHIS

Have you or Mr. Hillerman ever been victims of harassment or violence by environmental activists before?

GLENN

Yes... it's not uncommon with the work we're in.

(CONTINUED)

MATHIS

And yet you still work here?

GLENN

I, can't get another job. I'm on a visa.

MATHIS

Do you have your papers?

Carter passes one of her files to Mathis. She scans them.

MATHIS

Not long to go, I see. Glad that's not an anchor baby.

11. EXT. CLEANAIR CORP HALLWAY - DAY

Glenn shuts the door to the meeting room behind her and heaves a few dry breaths. She wants to cry.

The sound of Glenn's footsteps echoing.

12. INT. CLEANAIR CORP HALLWAY 1 - DAY

Glenn lumbers down the dim, deserted corridor towards her lab. The specter of the blast still looms down the hall, now cordoned off with hazard tape.

Glenn is about to enter through the open door of her lab when a rustle from inside makes her freeze. She steps back.

13. INT. CLEANAIR CORP EMISSIONS LAB - DAY

Glenn peers around the corner into the darkened room. She watches a beam of light flick across an open filing cabinet.

Glenn slams the lights on, revealing a startled Ross leaning over a filing cabinet, torch in mouth.

Ross slowly takes the torch from his mouth, hands raised.

ROSS

My name is Charles Ross - I'm a friend of Bill Hillerman.

GLENN

(not moving)

Bill is dead.

Ross doesn't do anything for a moment. He points to the door

(CONTINUED)

ROSS
That... ?

GLENN
He was inside.

Ross' face crumbles: disbelief. Sadness. Desperation.

ROSS
His daughter's going to be crushed.
(beat)
He had something for me. I'm a
reporter with the -

GLENN
Ah, no, no. I'm sorry you can't -

She turns and heads to the telephone by the door.

ROSS
Bill thought CleanAir used a bogus
formula to pass the Enviro Regs -

Glenn's hand hovers over the phone. She turns to Ross.

GLENN
I don't know how you managed to get
in here, but you need to be trying
to figure out who murdered your
friend, not -

ROSS
Did you know about this?

GLENN
... No.

Glenn picks up the phone and presses the Security button.

GLENN (CONT.)
I'm reporting an unauthorised
person on site. R&D Level 2.

She hangs up.

ROSS
You know it's his granddaughter's
school, the one they're gonna frack
next to? They say it's safe now.
But that's a lie, isn't it?
(beat)
Please. Help me tell the truth.

Glenn looks towards the lab door.

(CONTINUED)

ROSS (CONT.)

If you know what Bill knew, your life could be in danger too.

GLENN

If Bill had proof fracking was so harmful, why would eco-terrorists want him dead?

ROSS

I didn't say eco-terrorists murdered Bill.

The door to the lab bursts open: two security GUARDS enter.

SECURITY GUARD 1

Don't move.

Ross puts his hands in the air while the security guard(2) pats him down: chest, trousers, then arms.

Glenn's phone buzzes in her pocket. She silences it.

SECURITY GUARD 1

(motioning to her phone)

Hand it over.

Glenn takes out her phone,

GLENN

Me? I work here.

The guard(1) steps closer to Glenn.

GLENN (CONT.)

Woah, I called you guys, what's -

Glenn looks at her phone. A push notification says ALERT: YOUR IMMIGRATION STATUS IS NO LONGER VALID

Glenn looks up: Travers has joined them in the lab.

GLENN (CONT.)

Oh - hey!

The security guard(1) grabs Glenn's phone. Travers doesn't stop him.

TRAVERS

Glenn I'm afraid you're no longer an employee of CleanAir Corp; I have to escort you from the building.

(CONTINUED)

GLENN

What.

TRAVERS

We've all just gone through a very traumatic event...

Glenn's legs almost buckle, she backs away but is met by the security guard(1).

TRAVERS (CONT.)

After what's happened to Bill I'm afraid CleanAir has decided to terminate your project. Without it, we no longer have grounds to sponsor your work visa.

GLENN

What? No, no, please.

The security guard begins patting Glenn down; he finds her lighter in her pocket: he looks at it, then puts it back.

TRAVERS

Glenn it's for your safety.

The security guard pats down one of Glenn's legs.

GLENN

My safety? Have you *seen* America?
(beat)
You're trying to get rid of me -

TRAVERS

You'll receive a handsome severance package -

Using her free leg, Glenn kicks the kneeling security guard(1), knocking him backwards.

GLENN

You got rid of Bill and you're getting rid of me too, is that it?

The second security guard restrains Glenn, knocking her to the floor. He pulls her right arm behind her back and twists it to immobilise her.

GLENN (CONT.)

Aargh!

Travers grabs the arm of security guard(2)

TRAVERS

She's pregnant you idiot!

(beat)

I'm afraid there's nothing I can do, Glenn.

(beat)

It's time to go home.

The first security guard escorts Ross out, the second pulls Glenn gently to her feet.

Glenn faces Travers as she is pushed towards the door.

GLENN

I lied for you.

Travers feigns a smile.

TRAVERS

No, Glenn. You lied for you.

14. INT. IMMIGRATION DETENTION CENTRE - DAY

A television hangs in the corner of a bland, windowless room, displaying the news. A news reporter dictates:

ANCHOR

A local engineer has been confirmed dead following a mysterious explosion 2 days ago from within CleanAir Corp, the first natural gas company to receive the go-ahead to resume fracking after complying with the new Enviro Directive.

Across the room from the TV, Glenn sits on a single bed wearing a loose sweatshirt and matching sweatpants. She holds a basic, disposable mobile phone and stares at the TV.

ANCHOR (CONT.)

The cause of the blast is still unconfirmed but authorities are said to be looking into the possibility of eco-terrorist groups given the level of violence and number of anti-fracking protests at CleanAir Corp this week.

Glenn looks at a number scrawled in pen across her arm. She dials. An automated voice sounds:

(CONTINUED)

PHONE VOICE

You have... 5 minutes of credit,
courtesy of Heathrow Immigration
Removal Centre.

The phone beeps and then begins ringing.

ROSS (O.S.)

... Charles Ross?

Glenn sits up in the bed.

GLENN

It's Glenn. From CleanAir.

15. INT. ROSS'S CAR - CONT.

Ross sits in his parked car surrounded by papers, some fast food rubbish and a laptop. He double checks his phone screen

ROSS

Glenn? This is a UK number, I
thought you'd be in America by now,

16. INT. IMMIGRATION DETENTION CENTRE - CONT.

GLENN

They can keep me here as long as
they like. Listen I've not got
long. I posted you something.

ROSS (O.S.)

Proper post? Hold on a sec,

Glenn closes her eyes and exhales.

17. INT. ROSS'S CAR - CONT.

Ross digs around through the junk in his car. Finally a stack of envelopes and parcels bound in a rubber band. He opens them to find a small yellow padded envelope.

ROSS (CONT.)

I'm assuming it's the one with no
return address.

GLENN (O.S.)

Open it.

Ross does: out falls Glenn's dollar bill lighter.

(CONTINUED)

ROSS
Thanks Glenn, I quit -

GLENN (O.S.)
Click the bottom.

Ross does and a USB drive head pops out.

ROSS
Oh...

GLENN
It's all there. Everything Bill
had.
(beat)
There's a memo too. They'll try to
bury it, but it exists.

ROSS
But Glenn -
(beat)
When this goes public... it's gonna
be you that takes the fall for it.

GLENN
... Yeah. I know.

Ross sits back, the USB lighter in his hand.

ROSS
This is gonna be big news, Glenn.

18. INT. IMMIGRATION DETENTION CENTRE - CONT.

Glenn watches the reporter gesticulate on the screen, images of ClairCorp flicker by. She looks down at her belly. Her jaw tightens.

GLENN
... Yeah, for 24 hours.

Glenn hangs up the phone.

On the TV in the corner of the room, the reporter's eyes go wide in mock concern for another story.

END.

ANALYSIS: *Fissure*

Situated after my first and second chapters, *Fissure* is the first artefact resulting from the blending of my academic work and my screenwriting experience. I had questioned whether this first creative practice element ought to merely demonstrate my understanding of the conspiracy genre: an exercise in ‘reverse engineering’ my own conspiracy narrative using data from my ‘Conspiracy Tropes’ document. Could I write a short, traditional conspiracy film featuring a white male hero journalist who stumbles on a conspiracy, follows a breadcrumb trail of clues, and exposes the unseen threat via the power of the free press?

I could. But what for? The purpose of this thesis has always been to not just illustrate *what happened* in the conspiracy genre, but to question, investigate, and propose: *what next?* Rather than use *Fissure* as a pastiche, a mere demonstration of conspiracy genre tropes, I decided to use the brevity of the short screenplay medium as a low-risk testing ground wherein I could evaluate the new ideas and assertions I made in my first two chapters. Specifically, I would:

- Attempt to overcome the cynicism and solipsism of the privatised phase of the genre that is identified in Chapter 1
- Employ a female protagonist as a means of interrogating the relevance of a contemporary, culturally approved rhetoric for femininity that restricts conspiracy heroines’ agency as presented in Chapter 2
- In preparation for Chapter 3: posit the question of justice within contemporary conspiracy culture -- can traditional mechanisms for justice cope with post-truth?

Inspired by the Volkswagen Emissions Scandal of 2015¹³⁰ and my own experience as an immigrant in the UK with the stresses and pressures that come with staying visa compliant, *Fissure* is the story of Glenn, an American immigrant engineer who works for CleanAir Corp, a fictional natural gas company that greenlights fracking in the UK after it miraculously complies with new, stringent emissions regulations. Glenn is the author of CleanAir's 'miracle report' and is responsible for doctoring its results so that CleanAir can resume business and continue sponsoring her soon-to-expire work visa; however, when this secret costs her colleague Bill his life, Glenn has to decide whether to keep quiet to stay in the country, or speak up and lose everything. Although small-scale, *Fissure* represents the "powerful few" and the "powerless masses" that Donovan identifies (2011, p.13) through CleanAir Corp and its effect on the lives of its employees and the public. *Fissure* foregrounds abuse of power by demonstrating the ease at which CleanAir murders its employee, Bill, and suddenly cancels Glenn's visa, and presents a protagonist who exhibits agency panic.

When preparing to write *Fissure*, I recognised that in lame duck conspiracy films the hero's relationship to their seen and unseen threat mimics that of traditional narratives. This glossing over of the seen/unseen threat disjoint from the privatised phase clearly contributed towards the triteness of contemporary conspiracy narratives (and their loss of political force); therefore, in order to overcome the cynicism of privatisation, I should not ignore, but subsume the seen/unseen threat disjoint whilst finding a way to empower the hero's public duty to outweigh their personal/private objectives. A seen/unseen threat disjoint is less common with conspiracy heroines, so I especially wanted to test this idea on a female protagonist. As such, Glenn begins the story very much a privatised protagonist seeking to address her primary motivation without pursuing justice for, or exposure of, the conspiracy at large:

¹³⁰ The Volkswagen Emissions Scandal of 2015 -- where Volkswagen was caught altering diesel emissions during lab testing to comply with US regulatory standards, emitting up to 40 times more nitrous oxide on the road -- affected 11 million cars worldwide. This real-world example of a corporation deceiving the public on the environmental impact of their product is the premise behind CleanAir Corp: the fracking company for whom Glenn has falsified emissions reports.

seen threat: Glenn wants to stay in the country. She fears that if CleanAir Corp is not allowed to resume fracking, she will lose her job, her work visa, and be deported back to America.

unseen threat: CleanAir Corp has released a 'miracle report' showing emissions levels well within the new, stringent environmental standards, allowing it to resume fracking. When one of their engineers decides to go public with this discovery, the company will stop at nothing to keep it a secret.

Like many 1990s-era male conspiracy protagonists, Glenn is complicit with the unseen threat: she is actively loyal to CleanAir Corp, even calling security on Ross, the journalist. But again, it wasn't enough to simply create a female conspiracy protagonist in the image of her privatised male counterparts; rather, *Fissure* actively sought to challenge the scenarios which have steadily weakened the political force of conspiracy films since their privatised phase:

- Protagonists displaying a strong sense of right and wrong only to take justice/vengeance into their own hands.
- Protagonists' altruism implausibly presented with no basis in character or plot
- Protagonists presented as messiah characters
- A loss of female agency due to prescribed expectations of womanhood/femininity

Rather than having a seen/unseen threat disjoint which was simply non-dependent like *Enemy of the State*, Glenn's seen and unseen threats are deliberately *in conflict* to amplify the distance between her private and public objectives. I didn't yet know how this would affect the narrative, but I wanted to write the most unintuitive, privatised scenario first in order to discover the most effective methods of treating its weakened political force. I had originally intended to produce the script in the hopes of getting audience feedback on this but, for a number of reasons, producing *Fissure* became impossible. With hindsight, I should have let go of the aim to

produce *Fissure* much earlier; at times, the tension between writing the script for production and writing the script as a piece of practical research distracted from my ability to maximise the script's experimental potential, specifically when it came to crafting Glenn's identity.

Fissure incorporates many of the usual conspiracy themes: profits over people, corruption, a false flag attack against an environmental/ecoterrorism backdrop, and it introduces the theme of immigration as a source of agency panic. Being a short film, it would have been easier to rely on privatisation of the antagonist to figurehead the unseen threat with a single character. However, a singular antagonist was deliberately avoided; rather, the antagonistic forces in *Fissure* are represented through a variety of characters and systemic forces with the implication that the power of CleanAir Corp and the UK Border Force extends beyond the finite world of the screenplay. Travers, the managing director of CleanAir Corp, at first appears to be the main antagonist, but the revelation of Carter as her superior indicates an even higher flow of power. The character of Mathis, the detective, is a character who could be an antagonist or ally to Glenn, but whose futile search for truth leaves her as just another pawn in the conspiracy. It was my development of multiple antagonistic forces in *Fissure* that led me to identify the 'many headed monster' technique introduced in my third chapter.

Abiding by the ubiquitous screenwriting adage, 'write what you know', *Fissure* drew its source material from my own life and initially presented an American protagonist who was neither wife nor mother. I noticed in Chapter 2 that while female conspiracy protagonists are more consistently politically forceful than men, their agency was almost always restricted by the culturally approved rhetorics for femininity that these women were bound by. Feminist scholar Prudence Chamberlain writes that fourth-wave feminism's purpose of combatting rape culture and sexual harassment is derived from an "incredulity that certain attitudes can still exist while acknowledging that the attitude is one that is rife within society" (2017, p.115). So often in female-driven conspiracy narratives we see women who react *against* these attitudes, but not *beyond* them. They are either

punished or championed for their transgressions and so it seems that female protagonists in conspiracy narratives must always serve to make a statement *about* femininity... when I wanted to see a woman on screen just *be*. Rather than continue to acknowledge (and, in presenting them on screen, *affirm*) these rife attitudes, I wanted *Fissure* to question whether such a narrow definition of femininity was even necessary. I needed to create a female conspiracy protagonist whose agency was not restricted by her womanness, but by the unseen threat, so I wrote Glenn not to express grievances against these “certain attitudes” that Chamberlain refers to, but to express what fourth-wave feminism seeks -- which is for women to simply have the freedom to *be* or: to have agency. As such:

- Glenn is not patronised in her male-dominated STEM career
- She is not ‘special’ or extraordinary for being a female engineer
- She is not sexually harassed or objectified
- Her attractiveness is not commented upon, visually or verbally
- Her femininity is not considered a specific weakness or advantage

Renouncing these usual forms of adversity (experienced by women swimming upstream in a male-dominated workplace) focused the conflict squarely on grappling with her seen and unseen threats, but revealed Glenn to be not much of a compelling or sympathetic character. Feedback on the script from potential producers took issue with Glenn’s blatant selfishness, specifically her prioritisation of her seen threat over the public’s need for the truth about her company’s corruption. Interesting that this kind of privatised behaviour is acceptable from male protagonists like Mitch McDeere (Tom Cruise) in *The Firm* (1993, dir. Sidney Pollack) and Jeffrey Wigand (Russel Crowe) in *The Insider* (1999, dir. Michael Mann), but when the protagonist is female, she is expected to be more likeable and ‘good’ in order for the script to be viewed as producible. Making Glenn altruistic from the start in the traditional vein of ‘good employee stumbles on bad corruption’ felt too much like a female Roy Miller of *Green Zone* and I was determined not to follow in the steps of lame duck conspiracy films with a two-dimensionally altruistic protagonist. After decades of privatisation within the genre, I felt that an *unwilling* transformation from private to public was a more contemporary route to heroism. Glenn’s

manipulation of company data to stay in the country is her private-facing starting point while her submission of evidence to Ross and eventual readiness to go on the record as his source show a public-facing change; these actions are the bases of what would later become my ‘corruption of the protagonist’ and ‘emergence of the inner voice’ techniques presented in Chapter 3. These narrative decisions ensure Glenn is not portrayed as a messiah character capable of saving the powerless masses, while grounding the transition of her private-facing priorities to public-facing action in both character and plot. I started writing *Fissure* in the spring of 2018, so was pleasantly surprised to see aspects of corruption of the protagonist and emergence of the inner voice in *Sorry to Bother You* which was released in UK theatres that December.

In their original form, Glenn’s stakes (what she stood to lose if deported) were low. I could not supplant the complex, emotional, existential stakes that I felt when faced with deportation in 2016 onto this character in less than 20 pages. I considered how motherhood in any conspiracy narrative adds to the protagonist’s stakes by giving her something to protect and fight for. A pregnancy is immediately visual, requiring little backstory, and I felt that the prohibitive cost of having a baby in America and the possibility of an English father in the picture provided plausible reasons for Glenn to want to stay, and would enhance audience sympathy for her, offsetting the problematic selfishness producers saw in her. Glenn became a mother-to-be, but I consciously avoided the usual conspiracy heroine-as-mother clichés:

- She is not automatically trusted or liked because she is pregnant
- Her child is not used to fuel her altruism (rather, the opposite)
- She is not pressured to be a ‘good mother’
- She does not have to choose between her job or her motherhood

Steering clear of these usual tropes reassured me that, even as a mother, a contemporary, culturally approved rhetoric for femininity need not constrain Glenn’s journey. While I was fixated on creating a protagonist who would represent empowerment and the abandonment of restrictive gender roles characteristic of fourth-wave feminism, like the rest of the

conspiracy genre, I too overlooked a crucial opportunity for intersectionality within the narrative by adding another cisgender, white, western female protagonist to the conspiracy film oeuvre. This was a moment when the prospect of producing *Fissure* distracted from my ability to maximise the script's learning/testing potential. We had secured the interest of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed 'name' actress to play Glenn who we thought would help us secure crucial funding to produce the film; this 'locking' of Glenn as one identity prevented me from exploring the possibility of a queer Glenn, a transgender, gay, or non-white Glenn even as I was proposing the inclusion of these characters as conspiracy protagonists in my second and third chapters.

Looking back, this is a failing of *Fissure*: Glenn resembles the "missed opportunity" of Silvia Broome in *The Interpreter* who, if cast as a Black South African, would have imbued depth to the political plot. Instead, the film turns "Nicole Kidman, apotheosis of all that is blond in Hollywood today, into the embodiment of African suffering" (Scott, 2005). It still doesn't sit right with me that a white, American woman should be the embodiment of immigrant strife in *Fissure*. If I were to re-draft *Fissure* now, I would embrace the case for Glenn to become the first refugee conspiracy protagonist, the first Muslim conspiracy protagonist, or the first openly gay conspiracy protagonist -- where her race, religion and/or sexuality serve to enhance her characterisation, amplify her stakes, and present a more politically forceful sense of justice. These potential changes to Glenn's identity would ripple on to the behemoth by making CleanAir Corp and the UK immigration system all the more sinister and oppressive -- sending Glenn back to a war-torn home country, or a home country where homosexuality would be criminalised -- and reconnects the film's representation of justice as something inextricable to Glenn, blending the private with the public as female-driven conspiracy films are known to, but without restricting her agency via a culturally approved rhetoric for femininity. This realisation that, even when I deliberately proposed the inclusion of non-traditional, non-white characters in my second chapter, I too could succumb to the conspiracy genre's long tradition of presenting predominantly white characters -- and to the detriment of the story's

political force -- made the concept of 'representation' a necessary inclusion to my third chapter so that diverse, representative stories would be recognised as integral to enhancing the political force of contemporary conspiracy stories.

My final objective for *Fissure* was to interrogate the relevance of the genre's traditional mechanisms for justice within the medium of a short screenplay. I recognised in my first chapter that the lack of political force in contemporary conspiracy films stems from a clinging to the press, law enforcement, and the judiciary as mechanisms for justice when recent history and conspiracy culture have developed a vast distrust and perception of impotence in these traditional institutions. To represent this cynicism, and as a means of engaging with conspiracy culture, I chose to portray these mechanisms for justice as characters which Glenn inherently distrusts: Ross as the press, Mathis as law enforcement, and Carter as the law. *Fissure* also leverages a relativist perspective against the characters' ability to expose the 'truth' about corruption, deceit and abuse of power -- specifically during the interrogation scene between Mathis, Carter and Glenn. Mathis represents the public-facing force which seeks an absolute truth while Glenn represents the private as she shields the truth to protect her own interests. Carter, Travers, and CleanAir Corp represent the relativist perspective by seeking to obfuscate the truth and sow doubt -- the more 'alternate facts' or theories they can provide, the easier it is for them to hide their corruption. Bill and Ross represent traditional, pro-justice, public-facing attitudes, with the death of Bill, the naive would-be whistleblower, written to represent the 'death' of such idealistic altruism. *Fissure* centres around themes of post-truth and cynical injustice, begging the following questions:

- If Ross and his newspaper break the story, will it be believed?
- Who is responsible for Bill's murder? Travers or CleanAir Corp?
- Even with proof of CleanAir Corp's fraud, will the government or other regulatory agencies effectively punish CleanAir Corp?

In reflecting on these questions, I noticed that Glenn didn't feature in any of them. It seemed strange to me that there was a disconnect between my

concerns on the portrayal of justice and the protagonist who pursues it. My final question addresses this contemporary sense of (in)justice:

- Is it *fair* that Glenn should take the fall for CleanAir Corp's fraud and Bill's murder?

The answer to this question might be clearer if the audience knew that justice would, in fact, be served; but, with no assurances of this and a palpable sense of cynicism from the protagonist, *Fissure* qualifies as a tradition 2 conspiracy narrative. Traditional mechanisms for justice like the press, law enforcement, and the judiciary, are of no help to Glenn, who loses to the power of the unseen threat. This is not to say that the story is without justice -- it just comes at a cost. Faced with deportation, Glenn sends her 'insurance' -- a USB hidden in a lighter with evidence of CleanAir Corp's corruption -- to Ross but, in order for it to go public, Glenn must take the fall; she will be blamed -- not just for the fraudulent report but for Bill's death. This tradition 2 ending is reminiscent of the conclusions of *Silkwood* or *The Stepford Wives* in its representation of a devastating reality, but what was once the patriarchy or a vast corporation is now the UK's 'hostile environment'¹³¹.

Fissure highlighted for me the significant interplay between the behemoth, protagonist, and mechanisms for justice where any failure in the authenticity or viability in one of these elements adversely affects the others, leading directly to a loss of political force, and vice versa. My development of *Fissure* created the framework of my third chapter in which I applied these realisations to a structured examination of behemoths, protagonists, and mechanisms for justice in recent history and conspiracy film and proposed a set of techniques designed to reignite the political force of conspiracy narratives. These developments, in turn, would go on to be implemented on a feature-length scale in *Render*.

¹³¹ Theresa May (then-Home Secretary) said in 2012, "The aim is to create here in Britain a really hostile environment for illegal migration" (in Kirkup and Winnett). "The hostile environment includes measures to limit access to work, housing, health care, bank accounts and more. It is characterised by a system of citizen-on-citizen immigration checks. The majority of these proposals became law via the Immigration Act 2014, and have since been tightened or expanded under the Immigration Act 2016" (Yeo, 2018).

RENDER

Written by

Tracy Mathewson

OVER BLACK

GINA (O.S.)
It kills me to do nothing.

INT. OFFICE - EVENING

A framed picture of two lanky brown-skinned girls on the steps of a pueblo in Taos, New Mexico. Late teens, identical twins in matching TAOS TIGERS baseball uniforms: wide smiles against the desert. One twin holds a shiny aluminium bat.

A busy desk, laptop, and a padded envelope addressed to MARLOW DANIELS. A pair of warm almond eyes, worried:

GINA
If anything happens to me...

GINA PARKER (27), one of the twins - now 10 years older than the photograph. Hair pulled into a tight bun. Her brow unfurls - the lines remain.

GINA (CONT'D)
We'll talk soon.

INT. MAYOR OF LONDON, RECEPTION - DAY

The envelope, tucked beneath Gina's arm. Almost imperceptibly she slips it into a tray marked POST.

EXT. LONDON BRIDGE TUBE STATION - EVENING

A jarring mix of commuters and fancy-dress ghouls funnel out of the crowded station. Must be Halloween. Gina steps out - her dark almond eyes darting, worried. Then, recognition: something across the road. She looks both ways, steps into the street and -

SLAM! A white hybrid pummels her to the pavement, skidding to a stop.

Screams from the crowd. A woman dressed as a sugar skull rushes to Gina's crumpled, bleeding body, dialing her phone. She wails. A man flings open the driver door but the seat is EMPTY. He throws his hands in disbelief: a driverless taxi.

As onlookers circle round, CRAIG (45), a man with a face no one will remember, kneels down. His hand furtively slips into Gina's purse, taking her mobile phone.

Gina's lifeless brown eyes stare across the street.

INT. LOUNGE, FRIARY ROAD FLAT - EVENING

A white-sheeted ghost pops up on a laptop screen - recording:

ALEX

BOO!!

In front of the laptop, the ghost removes her sheet, revealing Gina's olive-brown skin and thick dark hair: down and loose, dressed casual.

The light from the laptop brightens her eyes, but they're not Gina's - they belong to her twin: ALEX PARKER (27).

ALEX (CONT'D)

Who's watching me tonight?

A bar with live watcher ratings and reactions floats onscreen. Alex watches it rise.

ALEX (CONT'D)

Gooooo... Tonight I'm reacting to the new *infinite i10 watch*,

She flaunts the accessory to camera - like an Apple Watch but with a round, thin face.

ALEX (CONT'D)

So thin right? The i10 runs on *infinteE's* growing XG System using a built in magnetometer which...

A negative sound comes from Alex's computer - her ratings are dropping. She tries a different tactic:

ALEX (CONT'D)

... doesn't really matter! Let's check out customisation!

Alex begins flicking the watch face, changing its theme: analogue, digital, Mickey Mouse, etc.

ALEX (CONT'D)

There's a face here for everyone, or why not make it *a part of you*?

She swipes the watch face and it instantly blends in to her wrist, nearly disappearing.

ALEX (CONT'D)

Cool, huh?

Alex's ratings shoot up. She grabs a pair of wireless ear buds and puts them in her ears.

ALEX (CONT'D)
I'm just gonna show you how easy it
is to pair... oh, perfect,
someone's calling me - let's try
these out for real.

Alex swipes gently over her wrist

ALEX (CONT'D)
Hello?
(beat)
Yeah, this is... What?

Alex's "YouTube smile" begins to fade as she listens to the
voice on the other end. Alex's live ratings begin to falter.

ALEX (CONT'D)
... No...
(beat)
No, we hadn't spoken in -

Alex's ratings are collapsing. She notices and quickly blinks
back the tears welling behind her eyes. She strains a smile
and swipes next to an earbud, muting her end of the call.

ALEX (CONT'D)
The connectivity is great, guys -
crystal clear. Here's the profile,

She unclasps the watch and it changes back to its original
colour. Alex holds it up to camera. Her face struggles to
stay happy. She unmutes her call.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Okay... Thanks for letting me know.

She hangs up and takes the earbuds out, holding her head down
a moment. When she returns, her face is blotchy but composed.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Sorry about that guys! Anyway, the
new i10 watch is amazing and if
you're still undecided I'm too old
to trick or treat so I'll be in the
comments all night! See ya!

She ends the live video and her watch registers a few more
inCredits. Alex sits numbly on the floor, surrounded by an
empty product box, the laptop, and the white sheet.

She goes to pick up the mess but her chest heaves and she
crumbles.

The sound of the front door opening.

SMART HOME (V.O.)

Chris is home!

Alex shuts the laptop, swallowing her cry. CHRIS SMITH (29), a cleancut startup guy appears in the doorway behind her.

CHRIS

Alex I've got mates coming round in like - 30 minutes? I'm gonna need my laptop.

She has tears in her eyes but a controlled voice:

ALEX

I know, I just had to finish my review. I need more credits if I'm gonna move out.

Alex starts picking up the bits of packaging,

CHRIS

You're the one who's set on leaving - not me. I want this to work.

ALEX

Did you want it to work when you cheated on me?

Chris notices Alex's tear-stained cheeks.

CHRIS

Hey - woah, Alex, what's going on?

Chris reaches his hand out to her - she flinches it away.

CHRIS (CONT'D)

What'd I do now?

ALEX

Gina killed herself.

CHRIS

What. Your sister?

Alex wipes her tears and hands over the laptop.

CHRIS (CONT'D)

Woah, woah - Alex. I can tell *Paul* not to come round. You wanna talk?

ALEX

No. And I know it's not *Paul* who's coming round. I don't care.

EXT. BAR - NIGHT

A ghost sits at a booth behind tinted windows, staring at her phone. A throng of bloodied fancy-dressers party inside.

INT. BAR - CONTINUOUS

The ghost stares at the headline: MAYOR'S PA: SUICIDE BY CAR. A picture of Gina.

A placard on the table says OCTOBER 31ST - FREE ENTRY + SPOOKY COCKTAIL WITH FANCY DRESS. The ghost reaches for her spooky cocktail.

She takes the sheet off, sips the cocktail, still staring at her phone. Alex's eyes: hurt, regret... confusion?

A cha-ching sound interrupts from her watch: "i10 WATCH REVIEW has been shared 3 times! She taps for her inCredits balance: it's yellow still. Alex slumps.

INT. FRIARY ROAD FLAT, LOUNGE - NIGHT

Soft rose-gold light filters under Chris' door; the sound of a woman giggling.

Alex huddles on the couch with a blanket and her phone. A headline next to a risqué picture reads: "CAM GIRL SHARES WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE \$1700 A DAY"

Alex reads intently, brow furrowed.

INT. MAYOR OF LONDON, RECEPTION - EVENING (A FEW DAYS LATER)

Alex sits with an empty holdall and a black motorcycle helmet on the sofa beside her, wearing a blue, band-neck uniform beneath her leather jacket. She stares at her i10 watch: THE TRUTH THE GOVERNMENT DOESN'T WANT YOU TO SEE, EXPOSED!! The stats below the video say:

[shared 15.3k times]

Alex fixates on the number. On a nearby TV a reporter speaks:

REPORTER

The Data Tax Bill has been struck down in Parliament today in a big win for tech companies.

HANEN (O.S.)

My god you look just like her.

Alex looks up, swiping her wrist screen off. PETER HANEN (50) stands over her, gazing. A Mayor of London poster behind him with his face on it gazes through her.

INT. OFFICE - EVENING

Alex looks around her sister's office, it's been cleaned out. Hanen seems almost afraid to be near her.

HANEN

I didn't know Gina had a sister,
let alone a twin.

(beat)

Did you notice any - signs?

ALEX

Signs?

HANEN

That she was having... thoughts...

Alex grimaces. Hanen presents a file box - she looks inside.

ALEX

Where's her laptop? Her phone?

HANEN

The laptop belongs to the
government; the phone was lost in
the, accident...

(beat)

It would have been her birthday
today -

Hanen looks up, deeply uncomfortable,

HANEN (CONT'D)

... Happy birthday?

Alex has been emptying the items from the box into her holdall. She grunts.

ALEX

Yeah. Thanks.

EXT. LONDON HIGHWAY - EVENING

A black Triumph Street Triple ('11) powers over the Bricklayer's Arms flyover with Alex at the helm, her holdall strapped to the tail. The sky is a dark grey, decorated by massive digital billboards attached to towering estates. A podcast plays over Bluetooth:

JOE FAUXGAN (V.O.)

Let me get this right. You don't have a phone?

BILLY (V.O.)

I have lots of phones but none on my person.

JOE FAUXGAN (V.O.)

This from Billy Campbell, you guys, CEO of infinite, the biggest tech company in - !

A billboard shows BILLY CAMPBELL (36) in a roll neck holding his chin like a Steve Jobs commemorative. The caption reads: YOUR FUTURE IS... infinite!

INT. LOUNGE, FRIARY ROAD FLAT - EVENING

Now Billy Campbell (in a slightly different roll neck) is framed within Alex's phone: the podcast has become a video. Billy strokes his chin; he has an assuredness in his voice and an American accent that commands respect.

BILLY (V.O.)

I even cut network connectivity over my flat in London this year.

Alex sits on the sofa, staring at her holdall on the floor. The video continues on her phone.

BILLY (V.O.)

infinte is all about access and connection, but I want to be accessed on my terms. *It's my choice now.*

Alex mime-speaks that last phrase as she reaches into the holdall for the picture of her and Gina in their baseball uniforms. A tendernss begins to permeate Alex's eyes...

A notification from her watch interrupts her - the emotion is gone: inCredits back in the red. She winces.

Alex places the photo on a sideboard near the front door. She looks at it - embarrassed? Turns the picture to the wall.

INT. FRIARY ROAD FLAT, LOUNGE - LATER

Alex sits on the couch awkwardly in matching red bra and panties. Chris' laptop is open to a webpage decorated with a tile of live camgirl feeds: "Set up your inFans Account!"

Alex picks a bauble of dust from her bra strap and begins typing. Whatever it takes. Suddenly the front door opens -

SMART HOME (V.O.)
Chris is home!

The sound of a woman laughing. Alex looks up to see Chris in the doorway - startled. He reaches a hand backwards,

SMART HOME (V.O.)
... Welcome, Elaine!

ELAINE (28), a smartly dressed woman, nearly walks into Chris. She sees Alex, hugging a pillow on the couch - frozen

CHRIS
Is that my laptop?

Alex puts down the pillow, giving up

ALEX
... I thought maybe we could have a threesome?

ELAINE
(to Chris)
... You said you broke up.

CHRIS
We did.

Elaine makes a quick assessment of the situation.

ELAINE
I'm gonna go.

CHRIS
Elaine, honey, no - wait -

ELAINE
It's fine.
(to Alex)
I'm sorry.

Elaine shuts the door behind her. Chris stares, seething.

CHRIS
What the fuck was that Alex?!

Chris goes to follow Elaine.

ALEX
Guess you don't want to work things out anymore.

Chris spins back round,

CHRIS

No!! And you wanna know why?
Because I may have cheated but you
checked out a long time ago.

ALEX

Oh here we go -

CHRIS

No - you're here but you're not
really *here*! Who else *chooses* to
live with their ex?

ALEX

Oh well maybe if I was born with
startup cash *for my life* I could -

CHRIS

This isn't about money Alex -

ALEX

Everything is about money!! You
think I just need *courage* to leave
you?

CHRIS

Alex this is about you doing
something!!

Chris SWINGS his hand, catching the frame on the sideboard,
hurtling it to the ground. The room is suddenly silent.

The photograph of Alex and Gina lies broken on the floor.

Chris goes to pick it up.

ALEX

Don't touch it.

Chris raises his hands and backs away.

CHRIS

You've got a Masters in Computer
Engineering but you work in a data
centre and...

Chris looks at the laptop screen,

CHRIS (CONT'D)

Now you want to sell your body too?

ALEX

I'm doing what I can -

CHRIS

No, you gave up, Alex. Guess it runs in the family.

He leaves and slams the door.

Alex is perfectly still, can't even blink. Sliced with those last 10 words, somehow too numb to cry.

Finally, she closes her eyes, mouths the words "happy birthday"... When her eyes open again, the feeling is gone.

She turns the laptop back to herself: "Ready to create your inFANS account?" She presses cancel and closes the page, revealing a churnalism news site with a familiar headline: THE TRUTH THE GOVERNMENT DOESN'T WANT YOU TO SEE, EXPOSED!! Now shared 23k times.

An icon blinks below the article: GOT A SCOOP FOR US? WE PAY!

Alex stares for a moment: a crazy thought. Clicks.

Typing appears in a blog form on screen: EXPOSED!! MAYOR OF LONDON'S DIRTY DRUG HABIT!

Alex's face, assessing her headline. She retypes: MAYOR OF LONDON'S ~~DIRTY DRUG HABIT!~~ KINKY SEX HABITS!

A flurry of typing.

The twins' photo stares up at her from the glass on the floor

On screen Alex's cursor lingers over the "Author" box; autofill suggests "Chris Smith". She looks over at the photo.

Alex's hand, now reaching for the photo, gets nicked on a loose shard but doesn't feel it. She lifts the picture and a drop of blood slips from the tiny cut,

The soft "plip" as the droplet lands on a folded piece of paper she hadn't noticed before, lying amongst the glass. She opens it. Handwriting:

ACTUATION IMPERATIVE HAWTHORNE - 361942

A ping sound; then more stacking up. Alex checks her watch: #kinkymayor is trending. She goes back to Chris' laptop: "MAYOR OF LONDON'S KINKY SEX HABITS!" has been shared 5k times!

Alex's eyes light up.

INT. LOUNGE, FRIARY ROAD FLAT - 4 AM

Alex on the sofa, now clothed, typing furiously. Chris' laptop is going nuts with soft pinging sounds. The blood-stained note balances against the screen.

A pop-up cha-chings: "You've reached 10k shares!" Alex clicks, opening up a list of articles with wild titles.

Alex soaks up the numbers, fueled by them. She closes the pop-up, revealing a new post. She types: *Actuation Imperative: does that make it suicide? Or murder?*

INT. LOUNGE, FRIARY ROAD FLAT - NEXT MORNING

Alex has fallen asleep with Chris' laptop still open. She blinks and remembers what she was doing, checks her watch.

ALEX

Shit.

Alex runs her eyes over the laptop screen: "FREAK ACCIDENT OR COVER UP? PA'S SUICIDE LOOKS SUSPICIOUS"

She clicks submit, pockets the blood-stained note and shuts Chris' laptop, slipping it under the sofa cushion.

INT. INFINITE HOME DATA CENTRE - DAY

Alex walks through a large set of sliding doors into an expansive floor with gridlines marked out in 4'x4' squares and a person in each one.

Alex's watch makes an angry sound - she checks it: "clock-in 2 mins late". She rolls her eyes. Another beep: "Late Penalty = 5% inCredit deduction". Alex squeezes her fist.

As she walks onto the grid floor towards an empty square, the hazy bodies of workers clad in blue infinite uniforms come into view: some stand, emotionless, mouthing words - their disembodied voices almost discernible as we pass; others move within the grid, picking out faces and objects from door cam or CCTV footage projected in 360 degrees from a thin pedestal in the middle of each square.

MALE VOICE (V.O.)

OK infinite. Shopping list.

MALE VOICE (V.O.)

Add: oat milk, hummus, condoms - we're out of detergent

ALEX

Shopping list. Add. Oat milk. Hummus. Condoms... Detergent

Alex now stands in the middle of a square on the grid, the infinite logo visible on the stiff high band collar of her uniform. Her voice is emotionless, robotic, precise.

From the pedestal in front of her, a little beacon projects a speech to text programme as it types what she says.

INT. INFINITE HOME DATA CENTRE - LATER

Alex, still speaking - it could be minutes later, or hours in this purgatory; there's no windows to tell.

<p>HUSBAND (V.O.) (frantic) Mary! What are you doing?! Mary get down from there you'll hurt yourself!</p>	<p>ALEX ... Mary what are you doing Mary get down from there you'll hurt yourself.</p>
---	--

<p>WIFE (V.O.) I can't do this anymore -</p>	<p>ALEX (CONT'D) I can't ...</p>
--	--------------------------------------

Alex's throat tightens. The audio continues but she can't hear it.

The beacon turns yellow, distracting her. She flicks her watch over it.

INFINITE BREAK BUDDY (V.O.)
You are entitled to a 5 minute
break, would you like to take one?

ALEX
Yes.

INFINITE BREAK BUDDY (V.O.)
Okay. 5 minutes, starting now.

Alex slumps into the swivel chair in the corner of her square and takes a deep breath.

HANA (O.S.)
Just look at this guy's gait!

Alex turns to HANA (21) in a neighbouring square as she imitates the lopsided walk of a man in her grid-square.

HANA (CONT'D)
Who needs facial rec with a walk
like *that*?

Hana matches the man to his identity. Her light changes to yellow. She listens and then replies:

HANA (CONT'D)

Yes.

(to Alex)

You on Vox today?

ALEX

Mm-hm.

Hana slings her swivel chair next to Alex.

HANA

(in a robotic voice)

I hate Vox. Door Cam is fun though.

ALEX

Until you catch your boyfriend
coming home with someone else.

HANA

Whatever makes infinite's AI
faster, though, amiright?

Alex watches Hana recline, scrolling news on her watch.

HANA (CONT'D)

Oh my god he's doing a press
conference. Look.

Alex's watch buzzes: "from Hana: Mayor of London Responds to
Sexual Allegations"

ALEX

Woah.

(beat)

Hey - did you hear about the
driverless taxi... murder?

HANA

What? No? Send me the link.

Alex swipes into her watch for a share link but an error
message pops up: "404 - page not found"

HANA (CONT'D)

Look at these losers.

A pop-up blocks Alex's watch screen: "from Hana: Anti-Tech
Riots Bring Down Network in Docklands" she tries to swipe it
away but opens it instead, showing a clip of a woman, LATIANA
TURNER (21), leading thousands of protestors in a chant.

ALEX

What are they doing?

HANA
 Trying to like - kill technology?
 That one's called *Latiana* -

Alex closes the video in search of her article,

ALEX
 I'm not really into politics, my
 sister was a -

HANA
 That's what they're called: SISTER.
 (beat)
 And I read they're planning to
 attack infinite's AR launch this
 weekend, like terrorists!

Alex's watch now reads "You haven't posted yet - got a scoop for us? We pay!" Alex blanches, ignoring Hana.

HANA (CONT'D)
 There's no network in the Docklands
 now! If they try that shit here...

Alex's beacon flicks red but she's fiddling with her watch.

HANA (CONT'D)
 ... Mate.

Alex looks up and Hana nods to the red light.

EXT. INFINITE HOME DATA CENTRE - EVENING

A throng of blue-uniforms pushes through the doors out of the grey cube that is the infinite Data Centre toward a pair of shuttle buses waiting at the kerb.

A leather jacket sticks out from the blue: Alex walks from the crowd to her motorcycle, desperately checking her watch.

She gets on her bike and a conspicuous phone-sized screen with a map and infinite logo lights up.

INFINITE TRAVEL BUDDY (V.O.)
 Hey Alex, where do you want to go?

ALEX
 Home.

Alex starts the engine.

INFINITE TRAVEL BUDDY (V.O.)
Calculating route Home... Hey,
you're low on petrol - how about a
quick stop on the way?

ALEX
No. Call this number.

Alex taps her watch on the dash screen and speeds away.

EXT. LONDON HIGHWAY - EVENING

Alex rides over the Bricklayer's Arms flyover.

ALEX
(on phone)
But I posted it *today* -

CUSTOMER SERVICE REP (V.O.)
So our database is showing -

The screen on Alex's dash flashes red with a 30 in a circle.

INFINITE TRAVEL BUDDY (V.O.)	CUSTOMER SERVICE REP (V.O.)
Alex, slow down. The speed	Posts but it seems they've
limit is 30 in this area.	been flagged for revision.

ALEX
What does that mean.

CUSTOMER SERVICE REP (V.O.)
Revision and recovery is part of
our Premium Service. For a monthly
fee you get a wider reach and
priority placement for greater
audience engagement!

Alex brakes hard at a stoplight. A friendly voice interrupts:

INFINITE TRAVEL BUDDY (V.O.)
Alex, watch your braking.

INFINITE TRAVEL BUDDY (V.O.)	ALEX
Sudden braking could increase	Oh I see.
your insurance premium!	

ALEX (CONT'D)
My posts are heating up and now you
want a cut.

EXT. GARAGE - EVENING

Alex slams the garage door, shutting her motorcycle inside, maneuvered tightly between two other bikes.

CUSTOMER SERVICE REP (V.O.)
 Welcome to Premium! Before I
 complete your registration I just
 need confirmation from the account
 owner for billing purposes.

ALEX
 I confirm.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET - CONTINUOUS

Alex walks home, backpack in hand.

CUSTOMER SERVICE REP (V.O.)
 Actually I see your laptop is
 registered to a *Christopher Smith* -

ALEX
 (under her breath)
 Oh my god.
 (into the phone)
 Yes. It's his laptop, but I'm the
 account owner.

CUSTOMER SERVICE REP (V.O.)
 Do you have your own laptop?

ALEX
 No. Maybe if you'd let me get paid
 for my articles I could buy one -

CUSTOMER SERVICE REP (V.O.)
 I'm going to need Mr. Smith's
 authorisation in order to set up
 credit for your Premium account

ALEX
 Come on!

EXT. FRIARY ROAD FLAT - EVENING

Alex walks up the steps to the flat.

CUSTOMER SERVICE REP (V.O.)
 I'm afraid there's nothing I can do

Alex grabs her keys - the door is already ajar. She opens it.

ALEX
Can't you just bill from my
earnings?

INT. LOUNGE, FRIARY ROAD FLAT - CONTINUOUS

Alex steps across the threshold and freezes. The house
doesn't announce her arrival.

CUSTOMER SERVICE REP (V.O.)
As part of our commitment to
sharing perspectives from real
people, all Premium accounts must
be linked to a valid -

The lounge is in shreds. The whole place has been turned
over. Alex hangs up, filling the room with silence.

She walks tentatively into the flat. Lifts the sofa cushion
where she put Chris' laptop - it's gone.

ALEX
Chris?

Alex checks her watch for her inCredits balance - it's EMPTY.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Oh fuck. FUCK!

Alex races to Chris' room and freezes.

INT. FRIARY ROAD FLAT, CHRIS' ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Alex stands in the open doorway, her hand over her mouth.

On the bed lies Chris, face down, bleeding from his stomach.
He isn't moving.

ALEX
... OK infinite, call 999.

Silence. Alex looks around. The smart home is off. She flicks
the screen on her watch and slowly dials 9-9-9. It rings.

999 OPERATOR (V.O.)
Emergency, which service?

Alex kneels down low enough to see Chris' face. He's dead.

INT. FRIARY ROAD FLAT, KITCHEN - EVENING

Alex leans against the counter. A plainclothes police officer with a face Alex won't remember stands beside her with a tablet, making notes.

CRAIG

Mr. Smith was your... ex-boyfriend?

ALEX

Yes... what.

Craig looks at Alex. Calculating. She's too worried to notice

ALEX (CONT'D)

They emptied my credits; I don't even know what Chris was doing home

Craig lifts the tablet to take Alex's picture.

CRAIG

Face the camera please.

Alex instinctively follows the order. As Craig snaps the picture, emergency service lights flicker through the curtains. Craig looks out the window to see a uniformed officer get out of a police car.

CRAIG (CONT'D)

Excuse me,

Craig steps outside. Alex looks down at her watch; it flashes: 0 inCredits. She slips back to Chris' room.

INT. FRIARY ROAD FLAT, CHRIS' ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Alex frantically searches through Chris' drawers - just clothes and condoms. Looks over her shoulder: cops not back yet. Turns back and catches sight of Chris, his hand reaching helplessly over the edge of the bed. Alex slumps to the floor, overwhelmed.

At ground level, Alex notices Chris' phone under his wardrobe as if flung from his outstretched hand. Her eyes widen. She grabs it, slides the screen: inCredits are in the green.

MAE (O.S.)

What are you doing?

Startled, Alex whips around to see Detective Constable MARGARET MAE (43), a tall uniformed officer with a plump, discerning face staring at her. Alex holds up Chris' phone,

ALEX
I dropped my phone, I -

Alex mimics her initial shock.

MAE
You live here?

ALEX
Yes,

Mae indicates for Alex to follow her out of the room.

INT. FRIARY ROAD FLAT, KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Mae speaks, her back to Alex, as she approaches the fridge.

MAE
What time did you arrive home?

ALEX
I told your buddy, like... 6?

MAE
What buddy?

ALEX
The guy I've been talking to the
last 5 minutes?

Mae doesn't pay attention to human witnesses. She's focused on her digital witness: a panel next to the fridge labelled "Smart Home: by infinite"

She waves her police ID and the panel opens, revealing a tablet-sized screen. Mae flicks through pages of data.

MAE
Your name is?

ALEX
Alex Parker, like I said,

MAE
It says you arrived home at 3pm.

Mae has Alex's attention.

ALEX
I clocked out of work at 5:30 at
infinite. Like they'd let me out a
minute earlier, look -

Alex swipes her watch to her work hours; it says: "released: 2:30pm for dental appt" She turns her wrist away from Mae.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Gimme a sec, it's loading.

Alex searches Mae's face. Sees only suspicion. Mae indicates Chris' phone in Alex's jeans pocket.

MAE
Isn't *that* your phone?

Alex freezes. A pair of FORENSIC TECHS in bunny suits appear by the door with silver briefcases.

FORENSIC TECH 1
Ma'am?

Mae turns to them.

FORENSIC TECH 1 (CONT'D)
We alright to get started?

Mae heads towards Chris' bedroom with the forensic techs. Alex takes exactly one second to think and DASHES out the door. Mae whips around -

MAE
Hey - HEY!

EXT. FRIARY ROAD FLAT - CONTINUOUS

Alex, wide-eyed, sprints down her front steps - she COLLIDES with an OFFICER putting up crime scene tape, keeps going.

INT. KITCHEN, FRIARY ROAD FLAT - CONTINUOUS

Mae hurtles back into the flat where the crime scene techs are beginning to immerse themselves in the scene.

TECH
(from Chris' Room)
Not gonna chase her Ma'am?

MAE
I don't chase, I track.

Mae grunts as she returns to the Smart Panel and scrolls back up through the log. She picks up her mobile.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET - NIGHT

Alex walking fast. Takes 3 steps, stops and stares at her watch. Makes an about face. Turns back and walks another 5 steps. She 180's and starts walking back again.

INFINITE TRAVEL BUDDY (V.O.)
Take the next right onto Friary
Road, Alex.

ALEX
No, that's *my* house! Take me to
Hana's house.

INFINITE TRAVEL BUDDY (V.O.)
Switching destinations... Okay.
Take the next right onto Friary
Road

Alex peers over the corner to see Chris' flat, swarming with emergency vehicles and media vans. She ducks behind a car.

ALEX
What the fuck!

Hiding from view, Alex pulls Chris' phone out of her pocket. Of course she knows the password.

Opens his calendar. It's empty. She tries his messages.

ALEX (CONT'D)
What were you even doing home?

Alex is scrolling through his messages when her thumb freezes over her own name: a message from today. She clicks it:

ALEX: CAN U BE HOME EARLY TODAY?

WHAT FOR?

ALEX: I MISS U.

Alex's head jolts back. She squints at the phone. Taps her watch and starts flicking through her own messages - nothing recent. She exhales, but before her eyes leave the watch, a pair of messages appear on screen:

CAN U BE HOME EARLY TODAY?

CHRIS: WHAT FOR?

I MISS U.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Whaat!

Alex desperately shakes her wrist like an etch-a-sketch, but the phantom messages remain. A police car ZOOMS past, approaching the scene.

INT. POLICE CAR - CONTINUOUS

LEONARD POWELL (71) a white corpse in a commander's uniform sits in the back of the driverless vehicle.

He glances out the window as the Friary Road flat comes into view. Mae strides toward the car to meet him.

EXT. FRIARY ROAD FLAT - NIGHT

Mae stands by as the car door opens for him automatically.

MAE
Commander...

Powell and Mae walk back towards the flat.

POWELL
How's it looking Constable?

MAE
Suspect is on foot; I've ordered a track. We've got her.

POWELL
Then this is a good time to tell you: your PDP has been reviewed.

Mae looks at Powell: for a moment she appears at his mercy.

POWELL (CONT'D)
You passed.

MAE
I'm an SIO?

POWELL
As of this moment. Consider this your professional discussion.

At the top of the steps, Powell turns around and motions to the growing media and police presence.

POWELL (CONT'D)
All eyes are on you, now.
(beat)
You can toss the uniform back at the station, *Inspector*.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET - NIGHT

Alex walks quickly - she's making a call via bluetooth.

VOICEMAIL (V.O.)
*The person you are calling is
 unavailable. Please -*

Alex hangs up. Tries again.

VOICEMAIL (V.O.)
*The person you are calling is
 unavailable. Please leave a message
 after the tone.*

ALEX
 Come on!

The voicemail beeps. Alex exhales.

ALEX (CONT'D)
 Tate,

Alex stops walking, thinking what to say. She keeps going.

ALEX (CONT'D)
 You know what never mind.

Alex hangs up, helpless. She unclasps the i10 watch from her wrist and stares at it, lips pursed. She drops it and stomps,

RUPTURING the i10 watch under her motorcycle boot.

INT. PRIVATE CONTROL ROOM - CONT.

A hulking, diaphenous screen shows a zoomed in map of south London and an icon with Alex's face - the picture snapped by Craig. The icon flashes twice and then disappears.

Through the screen, MICAH (22), a young woman with a square jaw and choppy black hair, gestures -

MICAH
 Where'd she go?

Behind her, four WATCHERS wearing white band-collar shirts stare into their own grids, sifting through data and images, much like the data centre. One of them shrugs.

WATCHER 1
 We track the device, not the
 person.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET - NIGHT

Alex stares down at her crushed i10 watch on the sidewalk. She holds up Chris' phone and inhales. She's about to seal its fate too when a delapidated payphone next to her RINGS - Alex jumps out of her skin.

She stares at the payphone, frozen.

INT. PAYPHONE - NIGHT

Alex holds the phone tentatively to her ear...

TATE (V.O.)

Ale?

The tension in her body drops.

ALEX

Tate.

(beat)

Oh my god - listen, I need your -

TATE (V.O.)

And for a second I thought you were calling to apologise.

INT. PRIVATE CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Micah stares at her screen while the watchers scrub through nearby CCTV from the streets surrounding Alex.

MICAH

Does Craig have eyes on her?

Watcher 1 checks his feed.

WATCHER 1

He's held up... We could lose her.

MICAH

What AR games are live right now?

WATCHER 4

CityCache, infinite Go, Restaurant Run...

MICAH

Infinite Go.

(beat)

Show me her last coordinates?

Watcher 1 brings a map of the area onto the larger screen,

MICAH (CONT'D)
Put a game stop right there.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET - CONTINUOUS

CHARLIE (6), walks with his MOTHER (34) and BROTHER (1), holding a mobile phone. He gets a notification.

CHARLIE
A bounty!?

The boy dashes off excitedly, leaving his Mother and the pram

MOTHER
Charlie!

INT. PAYPHONE - CONTINUOUS

Alex holds the phone with two hands.

ALEX
I'm being serious, someone's messed with my profile. My credit is gone, I just need you to -

TATE (V.O.)
Ale, I don't do favours for people I don't know.

ALEX
Tate, you know me!

INT. INFINITE PRIVATE CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Micah and the watchers stare at little Charlie's camera feed on screen; the video bouncing and blurring as he runs.

INT. PAY PHONE - CONTINUOUS

TATE (V.O.)
You've got half a million CCTV cameras to protect you. What do you need me for?

The line goes dead. Alex stares desperately at the phone.

ALEX
That's why I gotta get out of here!

EXT. RESIDENTIAL STREET - NIGHT

Charlie whips round the corner, laughing and giggling.

INT. INFINITE PRIVATE CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

On screen, the payphone comes into view on Charlie's feed but is suddenly jerked away.

INT. CRAIG'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Craig watches as the Mother grabs her boy's arm next to the empty phone booth - his phone making cha-ching sounds.

MOTHER

Run off like that again and you're
dead!

Craig takes a drag on his e-cigarette and rolls up the window

INT. FRIARY ROAD FLAT, LOUNGE - NIGHT

Mae nods to Commander Powell out the window as his police vehicle pulls away. She answers her mobile.

MAE

Where's my Track, Patterson?

OFFICER KIT (V.O.)

Track on the girl is dead -

MAE

What about the bloke?

OFFICER KIT (V.O.)

Waiting for infinite, Ma'am.

MAE

You said 10 minutes - max!

OFFICER KIT (V.O.)

Still quicker than a warrant. Oh
and, we heard the news.

(beat)

Congratulations.

Mae notices something on the floor. She kneels down and picks up the photograph of Alex and Gina as teens, frameless and crumpled. She examines it.

MAE

Just get me that track.

INT. INFINITE PRIVATE CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT.

Micah's razor-thin phone buzzes: METROPOLITAN POLICE TRACK REQUEST - DO NOT IGNORE. She looks at Watcher 1.

MICAH

They're not getting her first.

WATCHER 2

Chris Smith's mobile just withdrew
£200 at an ATM in Peckham...
routing Craig now.

MICAH

Call him off. She'll dump the
mobile any second and be gone by
the time he gets there.

(beat)

Collate her location data for the
last year... I don't care where she
is - I want to see where she's
going *next*.

A map of London appears across the grid of Watchers with a repetitive impression from Alex's home to work, plus one obvious deviation.

MICAH (CONT'D)

What's that?

WATCHER 1

Speed change detected there:
driving to walking pace.

He looks up:

WATCHER 1 (CONT'D)

A garage.

EXT. HIGH STREET - NIGHT

Alex stuffs a wad of cash into her pocket as she walks down the high street. She approaches a set of adverts and they begin speaking to her:

CAR INSURANCE ADVERT (V.O.)

Hi Chris!

LEVI'S ADVERT (V.O.)
Chris are your Levi's wearing thin?
Your last purchase was 6 months
ago! Levi's last a *lifetime* but
we've just released our new...

Alex throws Chris' phone into the street where it's swiftly
run over by a driverless taxi.

EXT. FRIARY ROAD FLAT - NIGHT

Mae follows a gurney with a body bag out, turning back to
avoid the throng of REPORTERS and CAMERAMEN. Her phone buzzes
and she steps away from the crowd.

MAE
(to the call)
Talk to me Patterson.

OFFICER KIT (V.O.)
Bloke's phone is dead Ma'am.

Mae grimaces.

MAE
Do we have a profile on the girl,
Alex Parker?

OFFICER KIT (V.O.)
That's the funny thing.
(beat)
It's gone.

Mae notices MARLOW DANIELS (31), a reporter, lingering nearby

MAE
You just here to watch or are you
gonna to write something, Marlow?

MARLOW
Got something to say, Constable?

Mae looks down at her uniform with distaste, heads back to
the flat, ignoring Marlow.

MARLOW (CONT'D)
Come on Mae!

INT. KITCHEN, FRIARY ROAD FLAT - NIGHT

Mae flicks through the SmartPanel,

OFFICER KIT (V.O.)
You should have corrected her.

MAE
She's a journalist, she'll find out
soon enough.
(beat)
Gone you say...

OFFICER KIT (V.O.)
It's as if she never existed.

Mae looks at the photograph of Gina and Alex from her pocket.

MAE
Well, she did.

Mae snaps a picture of the photo on her phone.

MAE (CONT'D)
I'm sending you a photograph; see
if you get a hit on facial rec.

EXT. GARAGE - NIGHT

Light shines out from beneath the garage - shadows move:
someone inside.

Gravel crunching as Craig's boot edges closer,

A tool clangs inside. Craig's left hand grips the garage door
handle, his right reaches for the green HK45 Tactical pistol
holstered at his hip, its suppressor resting below his belt.

Craig PULLS the garage door open -

INT. GARAGE - CONTINUOUS

MAX
What the fuck!

MAX (28), a young guy in jeans and t-shirt, leans over his
green Kawasaki Ninja - he's replacing the cans.

Craig leaves his gun where it is. Grabs an ID wallet instead.

CRAIG
Police. Where's Alejandra Parker.

MAX
Woah woah - Alex? Not here.

Craig's icy stare, assessing. Another Kawasaki is wedged beside the tool bench and a shelf with motorcycle helmets. One shelf is conspicuously clear.

MAX (CONT'D)

We just share the garage, you know?
Saves on insurance.

CRAIG

That her shelf?

Max nods, swallows, backs up; his eyes flicking to a greasy rag on the side,

CRAIG (CONT'D)

Where'd she go?

MAX

Can't you guys track her?

Craig follows Max's eyeline and lifts the greasy rag, revealing the infinite tracker from Alex's dash. Max puts down his spanner.

MAX (CONT'D)

... It's illegal to take them off.

Craig steps closer to Max.

CRAIG

Where is she.

EXT. GARAGE - CONTINUOUS

Light casts sideways from the open garage door; the sound of one swift movement and the FWIP-FWIP of two suppressed gunshots. A shadow slumps to the ground.

INT. GARAGE - CONTINUOUS

Craig grunts, re-holstering his HK45. Turns to go but something sticks to his boot. He kneels down.

Max is crumpled on the floor behind him - dead. Craig removes a tear-off of black lx tape from his boot; examines it.

EXT. ROTHERHITHE TUNNEL - NIGHT

A loud, two-note rumble shudders against the walls of the tunnel: the Street Triple's twin exhausts pop and growl in the confines of the underpass.

Between the bike's handlebars the infinite tracker is gone; in its place a void of dangling wires. A flapping sound takes us to the tail of the bike where black LX tape flutters over her license plate: the P now a B and the 3 an 8.

Alex hugs down on her motorcycle as she accelerates between cars heading in either direction.

Through her helmet, Alex's eyes. A sputtering sound catches her attention. She glances down: petrol gauge, bright orange.

INT. INCIDENT ROOM, POLICE STATION - NIGHT

Mae, now in a pair of slacks, dress shirt and blazer, stands in front of a crime scene board: on one side are images of Chris, alive, and then dead. The other side is conspicuously empty - just the photo of Gina and Alex tacked to the middle.

MAE

She said she worked for infinite -
why don't I have their employee
records yet?

KIT PATTERSON (29), looks up from behind a laptop.

OFFICER KIT

Still waiting for approval.

MAE

Of all the nights to have a bloody
lag on this!

BELINDA MARQUEZ (34), a constable, peeks her head in.

BELINDA

Ma'am? The *deceased* made a
withdrawal from an ATM in Peckham
using his mobile -

Kit's laptop pings. He clicks and the footage appears on a drop down projector screen: Alex, leaving the ATM.

MAE

Gotcha.

(beat)

Patterson, capture this footage and
back it up on an external -

OFFICER KIT

External?

MAE

If she can wipe her profile she can
wipe a camera feed.

(to Belinda)

Get me Marlow Daniels. We're not
tracking a device anymore - we're
tracking a person.

Belinda goes out. Mae watches Kit zoom in on Alex at the atm.

OFFICER KIT

The press, Ma'am?

MAE

The public, Patterson. The *public*.

Belinda pops her head back in.

BELINDA

Line 2.

Mae picks up the phone.

EXT. FRIARY ROAD FLAT - CONTINUOUS

Marlow leans against a news van. The circus has died down.

MARLOW

So it's "Inspector" now?

EXT. LIMEHOUSE SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Alex's helmeted figure walks through the automatic sliding
doors of a petrol station. A sign on the glass says MOTORISTS
MUST REMOVE HELMETS FOR SERVICE.

INT. LIMEHOUSE SERVICE STATION - CONTINUOUS

Alex approaches the counter, cash in hand.

ALEX

Number 6.

The CASHIER (18) looks at the crisp, folded bills, then
raises his eyes to Alex's obscured face.

CASHIER

Um, your...

He motions to the helmet sign beside the register. Alex is about to comply when a NEWSFLASH on the mini-TV behind him starts playing the CCTV of her at the ATM in Peckham.

Alex's eyes go wide. Keeps her helmet on, holds out the cash.

The cashier won't touch it. His young voice cracks,

CASHIER (CONT'D)
I just started this job.

EXT. LIMEHOUSE SERVICE STATION - NIGHT

Alex, helmet on, walking back out the sliding doors. From inside, the cashier looks at the cash on the counter, watches her go with a puzzled, suspicious look. He glances at the TV, then reaches for his mobile and snaps a picture.

INT. INFINITE PRIVATE CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT

The watchers are scrubbing through road cam footage.

MICAH
There.

Watcher 1 pauses his video; rewinds, plays: Alex's Street Triple zooms between two red Skodas in Rotherhithe Tunnel.

MICAH (CONT'D)
Sort it would you?

Watcher 2 nods, making a few discreet gestures at his screen. The footage plays again: this time when the two red Skodas pass each other, Alex and her motorcycle have been erased.

INT. CRAIG'S CAR - NIGHT

Craig drives at a moderate speed, scanning the road. The car dash lights up: incoming call. He taps it:

MICAH (V.O.)
She's heading to the Docklands.

CRAIG
Makes sense,

MICAH (V.O.)
If you don't get eyes on her before-

CRAIG
I thought you were calling about
the news.

MICAH (V.O.)
What news.

A few rustles as Micah checks her newsfeed.

MICAH (V.O.)
Oh my god.
(beat)
Clean this up, now.

CRAIG
How clean?

MICAH (V.O.)
Get fucking rid of her.

Craig presses the dash and the call ends. He shifts gears,
speeding ahead.

EXT. N. WOOLWICH ROAD - NIGHT

Alex rides her motorcycle past the East India Dock Basin, a
swampy neglected wharf in the shadow of the Canary High
Rises. The sad lights of the Tate & Lyle Factory loom ahead.

EXT. LOWER LEA ROUNDABOUT - CONTINUOUS

Craig, not far behind.

INT. TATE'S FLAT - NIGHT

A pair of soft grey eyes in wire-rimmed glasses, illuminated
by the bluey tint of a nearby computer screen. In his hands,
TATE (29) turns over a structured, diaphanous face mask with
geometric shapes painted into it.

Tate places the mask over his face and looks at his webcam:

Tate's masked face on screen. He removes the mask and a
facial pattern appears over his features. He puts the mask on
and the dots and lines jumble and then disappear. He smiles.

A door phone buzzes, cutting the silence. He takes the mask
off and cautiously walks through his studio to answer it.

ALEX (V.O.)
It's me.

Tate exhales and looks around his flat: wires, books and computer equipment everywhere - the mask he's just been working on is laying exposed on his desk.

ALEX (V.O.)
Are you gonna let me in?

EXT. TATE'S FLAT - NIGHT

Alex leans against the wall beside a locked entry gate.

It buzzes and she turns - suddenly face to face with Tate. They look at each other...

TATE
Not here.

Tate raises the helmet in his hand and walks to her Triumph, parked against the kerb. Alex straddles the bike and does up her helmet. Tate puts his on, watching as she puts on her gloves and starts up the bike.

They don't notice the black Audi waiting across the street, or the dense cloud of smoke hanging in the air by its window.

INT. CRAIG'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Craig's shadow takes a long drag of vape, a clinical hiss as he inhales, watching the Street Triple speed off. He presses the ignition button and the car's near-silent engine starts.

EXT. REMOTE STREET, DOCKLANDS - NIGHT

The Street Triple, now with 2 riders, approaches a small junction. Tate's hand signals to turn right.

They pull up to an alley; Tate taps Alex's shoulder and slips off the back of the bike.

EXT. BACK ALLEY - NIGHT

Tate stands by, helmet off, watching her, his angular face catching the backstreet lighting. He gestures to a nondescript garage door leading down below a dry cleaners.

EXT. REMOTE STREET, DOCKLANDS - NIGHT

The black Audi creeps to a stop. The driver's window rolls down as Craig stares into the dark alley, taking a long drag of his e-cig.

INT. UNDERGROUND BAR - NIGHT

A brick-walled, low-ceilinged, basement haunt. Dim lighting, no windows, soft chatter.

A handful of people illuminated by the light off a TV glance up at a boxing match streaming live from Las Vegas.

Alex and Tate face each other in a high-backed booth near the rear of the bar. A pair of pints sits between them, untouched

TATE

So who's after you?

ALEX

I don't know. Maybe no one.

TATE

You ride to the Docklands with tape on your license plate for no one?

Alex takes a big sip of her drink, avoiding the question.

TATE (CONT'D)

I don't hear from you in *years* and now you're sat here in front of me like you've got blood on your hands?

Alex winces.

TATE (CONT'D)

I put us away. You're not ready to commit, you wanna focus on you - I'm not gonna argue with that. But here you are now, and -

ALEX

I'm not trying to get back together with you - I'm asking to use your computer.

TATE

Oh, I know, Ale. You're not here for me, you're just here for you.

This lands hard.

TATE (CONT'D)

... As if you're even here at all.

Alex stares at Tate. Finally, she looks down at her hands.

ALEX

Okay... You're right. Um...

(beat)

I was robbed.

(beat)

I was robbed today and, I uh, I feel like I've lost everything - almost everything. And the things that I did have -

Alex rubs her wrist where her i10 watch used to be,

ALEX (CONT'D)

I destroyed, and... I... thought of you - thought *that* you could help -

Alex looks up at Tate; he's watching her, taking her in.

ALEX (CONT'D)

Me.

(Beat)

I'm sorry I ghosted you -

She reaches to him - he moves his hand away.

TATE

You didn't just give up on me, Ale.
We were onto something.

They lock eyes. Alex opens her mouth but nothing comes out. Tate looks away, his eyes catching something behind Alex. A flicker of concern crosses his face.

Alex turns, following Tate's stare: a video of Alex from the ATM camera, spread across the TV followed by footage of Chris' bodybag being gurneyed out of the flat.

A picture of Chris, alive and smiling, next to a blurry freeze-frame of Alex: "MURDER SUSPECT AT LARGE"

Alex turns back to find Tate staring at her like a stranger.

ALEX

Tate -

Tate gets up from their booth and starts walking away.

Alex grabs his arm.

ALEX (CONT'D)

I didn't kill Chris, I came home
and he was *dead*,

TATE

Oh, you "came home" - so - you
lived together? So much for not
being able to commit, huh.

Alex steps in front of Tate, blocking him, speaking in a
quiet hurry - as if she were to stop, she might cry.

ALEX

I *swear* to you I am not lying.
Please, Tate. If I had anywhere
else to go to I wouldn't be here. I
just - I need to get on a clean
computer and then you can put me
away and forget about me all over
again. Please.

TATE

You make it sound so easy.
(beat)
I'm glad we lost touch, Alejandra.
That guy could have been me.

ALEX

He could never have been you.
(beat)
Forget it. Forget you ever saw me.

Alex brushes past Tate, grabs her helmet off the table as she
walks out.

Tate watches her go, then notices something in the booth.

EXT. BACK ALLEY - NIGHT

Alex straddling her bike; she zips up her leather jacket.

TATE (O.S.)

Ale!

INT. UNDERGROUND BAR - CONTINUOUS

Tate dashes up the stairs to the street.

EXT. BACK ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

Alex ignores him, slipping on her helmet. Angry.

She presses the ignition and rolls the throttle but the bike doesn't catch. Near tears, she tries it again.

EXT. REMOTE STREET, LIVERPOOL - CONTINUOUS

Craig watches Alex on her bike: Third time it catches. He leans back around the corner, out of sight.

EXT. BACK ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

Alex is about to put the bike in gear when she sees Tate at the door of the bar, holding up her belt bag. She puts the kickstand back down.

EXT. REMOTE STREET, LIVERPOOL - CONTINUOUS

Craig, waiting. The sound of the choke on Alex's bike as it loosens up: a fast crescendo that erupts in a heavy BLAST!

EXT. BACK ALLEY - NIGHT

Alex is HURTTLED towards the bar, landing HARD on the ground, her helmeted head ricocheting on the pavement - flames licking the back of her leather jacket - she doesn't move.

EXT. REMOTE STREET, LIVERPOOL - CONTINUOUS

Dark smoke and chunks of motorcycle tumble out of the alley.

Craig types a set of emojis into his phone: 🏍️🔥💀

INT. INCIDENT ROOM - NIGHT

Mae sits backwards on a chair, looking up at the lit board in the dark room, steam from her coffee rising against her cheek, staring intently at a CCTV freeze-frame of Alex.

The motion sensor lights flick back on - she blinks.

OFFICER KIT (O.S.)

You're gonna want to see this.

Mae joins Kit at his laptop.

OFFICER KIT (CONT'D)

Alright there Ma'am?

MAE

I've seen her face before.
Somewhere...

Kit pulls up an image of Alex at the service station.

OFFICER KIT

Cashier spotted her in Limehouse -
suspicious cause she paid in cash.

MAE

She's headed for the Docklands,

Kit pulls open a separate window: a CCTV heat map of South
East London with a void over the Docklands.

OFFICER KIT

No network coverage since SISTER
knocked out the grid. She'll be
there already if she's on a bike.

Mae exhales sharply, hand balled in a fist.

OFFICER KIT (CONT'D)

Don't you wanna know how she got
there?

Patterson highlights a few routes from Peckham to the
Docklands via Rotherhithe or Blackwall tunnel

OFFICER KIT (CONT'D)

There's only a few ways in. With
the stop at the service station;
approximate times of departure...

The route narrows down to one. Mae looks at Kit: this is
neither interesting, nor useful.

OFFICER KIT (CONT'D)

But she's not there. She's no
where. Not on this route, or any
CCTV on any of the routes leading
into the Docklands.

MAE

That's not possible.

OFFICER KIT

You're right. But check this - from
her 'most likely' route.

Kit opens a separate window and clicks 'Play'. A video runs:

Two red Skodas drive past each other in Rotherhithe Tunnel.

OFFICER KIT (CONT'D)

See it?

Mae does not look impressed.

OFFICER KIT (CONT'D)

Look closely...

Kit zooms in on the video: a flash of something reflected in one of the Skoda's windows.

MAE

There,

Kit pauses the video and flicks back frame by frame, zoomed in. For a few frames, Alex and her motorcycle are reflected in the window of the Skoda.

OFFICER KIT

That's a ghost. Of your suspect.

Mae is hooked.

Kit zooms out: the two Skodas pass each other; no motorcycle to be seen. Mae looks at Kit with an intensity he's unused to

MAE

Those traffic cams switched to infinite servers last year.

OFFICER KIT

Are you saying...

Mae pops her head out the door and shouts out:

MAE

Marquez!

INT. POLICE STATION - CONTINUOUS

Belinda raises her head from behind a cubicle.

MAE

Remember warrants?

Belinda nods.

MAE (CONT'D)

I need one for Infinite. Noon tomorrow. Kit's sending over the details now.

INT. INCIDENT ROOM, POLICE STATION - CONTINUOUS

Mae turns back to Kit.

MAE

It means she's got help.

EXT. BACK ALLEY - NIGHT

Tate scoops Alex up, padding down the flames on her jacket, frantically undoing her helmet,

TATE

Ale!

She's not conscious. The back of her leather jacket is singed but her bike gear seem to have softened the impact.

TATE (CONT'D)

Ale talk to me. You with me?

Alex coughs.

TATE (CONT'D)

Over here, you're ok. You ok?

ALEX

(stunned, disoriented)

Yeah, yeah.

Tate looks back at the wreckage.

TATE

It's not your boyfriend they're after.

ALEX

He was my ex -

Alex turns her head: a flaming skeleton where her motorcycle once was. A loud POP and the bike EXPLODES, shooting a ball of fire upwards.

Her voice cracks,

ALEX (CONT'D)

My girl...

EXT. BACK ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

Craig ducks behind a corner - begins typing a message into his phone: "Hold transfer". He pauses. Begins typing "unfinished" ...

A notification interrupts him: "XXXXXXXXX inCredits received. Message: Good Work"

Craig looks up to see Tate carrying Alex back down into the bar. Craig looks down at his phone.

Deletes the message.

INT. UNDERGROUND BAR - NIGHT

Alex's POV, supported on Tate's shoulder as they float through the bar: the TV in the corner is off, the chatter has stopped. People are staring but their faces are blurry,

Tate leads her down a dark hall, to a door...

INT. SISTER CLINIC - CONTINUOUS

Alex squints as Tate pulls aside a dark vinyl curtain revealing a bright white light.

Her eyes adjust: they're in a room of people sitting in pairs or small groups at tables. One person listening or speaking. Alex notices one COUPLE:

BOYFRIEND 2

He hasn't *touched* me since that sensor went in the bedroom!

BOYFRIEND 1

How else are we gonna afford the place?

Boyfriend 2 meets Alex's stare. Tate works on a laptop at a folding table. Alex slowly lowers herself into a seat.

TATE

Happy Birthday for yesterday.

Alex mumbles, her gaze drifting to a COUNSELLOR, who shows a refurbished mobile phone to a YOUNG MOTHER with a bruised face, while her young DAUGHTER looks on.

ALEX

What is this place?

Tate doesn't lift his eyes from the laptop.

TATE
Privacy Clinic.

ALEX
A what?

TATE
We help people. I work here.

Tate swivels the laptop towards her. She reads the text in Tate's search query: Her full name, birthday, university education...

TATE (CONT'D)
It's not the cops who are after you, Ale.

He clicks RETURN; the page loads: *NO RESULTS*. Alex blinks

ALEX
Wait, what?

Alex leans over the laptop, double checks, presses RETURN again: *NO RESULTS FOUND*

She sits back, staring at the screen.

ALEX (CONT'D)
My profile's gone, what does this mean.

TATE
It means whoever is after you doesn't want anyone *else* to find you.

Alex's numb shock has worn off - she's starting to jitter.

ALEX
It means I don't exist. How am I supposed to clear my name if I don't even exist?

TATE
Ale -

ALEX
No, what is this!? First my posts, then my money, now *me*?! My whole LIFE - my - my - my pictures, my memories... Gone!? What are they doing, holding them ransom??

TATE

Let's go.

ALEX

No - I wanna know who's fucking
with me!

Alex reaches for the laptop but is stung by a shooting pain
in her back - she sits back down. Tate looks at the high band-
collar uniform sticking up over her motorcycle jacket...

Alex traces his gazes, reaching a hand up to her collar,

ALEX (CONT'D)

Don't be ridiculous.

Tate is ridiculously serious.

ALEX (CONT'D)

You think someone at *infinite* - ?

TATE

Not *someone* at *infinite*. This *is*
infinite.

ALEX

No, that's - Why? What did I do?

TATE

I don't need to know why if I know
that they *can*. Let's go.

INT. BEAT UP CAR - EARLY MORNING

Alex leans her face against the window in the back seat, her
eyes barely stay open - the sun has just started to rise.

TATE (O.S.)

Stay back from the window

Tate looks back from the passenger seat,

TATE (CONT'D)

Facial rec.

ALEX

I thought the Docklands were safe,

TATE

You never know.

EXT. TATE'S FLAT - EARLY MORNING

Alex stands by in her burnt leathers, helmet by her side; she looks at it as Tate pats the top of the car and it pulls away

TATE

Come on.

Tate takes Alex's helmet and she follows him to the gate.

INT. TATE'S FLAT - EARLY MORNING

Tate enters his flat and goes to a tall shelf by his desk, leaving Alex at the door. She pulls off her bike jacket and takes the place in: the clutter, dim lighting, the impressive DIY computer set-up: multiple screens and CPUs, all running and whirring away softly.

Tate returns with a small, aged, shoebox.

TATE

There's some of it.

ALEX

Some of what?

Alex opens the box: an assortment of hard drives with different labels, a few photographs, the odd letter.

TATE

You. My memories - of you.

Alex looks at Tate - her expression not quite decipherable.

TATE (CONT'D)

You don't - I'm sorry, forget it.

Tate takes the box off her.

TATE (CONT'D)

I just... you're more than the data they have on you.

Alex puts her hand on the box. They meet eyes.

ALEX

I'm scared.

TATE

infinite's powerful, but right now it thinks you're dead. You're safer now than you've been all night.

EXT. AERIAL VIEW OF LONDON - MORNING

The infinite building - as long as the Shard is tall,
glistening in the middle of Kings Cross.

BILLY (O.S.)
Well, I'm in "the reality business"

INT. BILLY'S OFFICE, INFINITE - MORNING

A glass-walled room: clean, crisp - no visible technology.
The back of Marlow's head, sitting across from Billy
Campbell, CEO of infinite. He wears his roll neck uniform and
poses with one leg crossed over his knee.

BILLY
And *Augmented Reality guarantees a*
safe and secure way of living,

EXT. BLOCK OF FLATS, LONDON - NIGHT

A block of flats - an augmented reality overlay appears,

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

An ELDERLY MAN falls down; the AR interface zooms in on his
hip and an alert is sent to A&E.

BILLY (V.O.)
The same sensors that detect
unfamiliar movements and signs of
distress can trace every vehicle
driving in London...

EXT. LONDON ROAD - EVENING

The AR interface hovers over commuter traffic, re-directing
cars to thin the blockage.

BILLY (V.O.)
Can control traffic, direct crowds -

EXT. AERIAL VIEW OF LONDON - NIGHT

infinite's AR network: a breathing phantom over London.

BILLY (V.O.)
- in the event of an epidemic, a
large scale attack, or disaster.

Red clusters of AR dots appear and move; blinking and changing colour, forming an escape route.

MARLOW (V.O.)

It all sounds wonderful Mr. Campbell but, where do you draw the line between liberty and control?

INT. BILLY'S OFFICE, INFINITE - MORNING

Marlow looks down at her notes, avoiding eye contact as she continues,

MARLOW

What's to stop this data from being abused? Would we even know if it was?

Billy thrums his fingers against a desk, boring his eyes into Marlow. He smiles.

BILLY

What do you have to hide, Ms. Daniels?

Marlow looks up, her neck tenses.

BILLY (CONT'D)

The more we know, the better service infinite can offer. And everyone loves better service, don't they?

Marlow has managed to compose herself but fear still lingers in her smile,

MARLOW

Perhaps it's more a question of "Security vs. Privacy" than "Liberty vs. Control"...

Billy notices Micah check her phone - her face flinches.

BILLY

I don't think infinite is the question - I think it's the *answer*.

MARLOW

I'm sure our readers will agree. One last question - are you worried the cyberterrorist group SISTER might try to sabotage your launch?

Micah looks up to see Billy has been watching her. She puts the phone away. Billy returns his gaze to Marlow.

BILLY

The great thing about infinite is our ability to predict and prepare for anything. I can honestly say I'm not worried about it.

INT. HALLWAY, INFINITE - MORNING

Micah stands by the door to Billy's office as the camera team files out. Billy joins Micah.

BILLY

What's going on?

MICAH

A loose end. I'm dealing with it.

BILLY

The troll?

MICAH

She's been taken care of. We're rinsing her profile but the police want access.

Marlow stops to shake Billy's hand on her way out,

MARLOW

I appreciate the interview Mr. Campbell, and the opportunity to meet you finally.

BILLY

I'm just glad we managed to change your mind,

MARLOW

Excuse me?

BILLY

Only a few weeks ago you were very skeptical about infinite...

Billy's eyes seem to search Marlow's. She holds his stare.

MARLOW

Well, you know what it's like don't you. Anything for views... It's nothing personal. I'm sure you'll like today's piece though.

BILLY

I'm sure.

Billy watches Marlow walk off,

BILLY (CONT'D)

The police can wait.

MICAH

There's a warrant.

This gets to him.

BILLY

Give me your mobile.

Micah hands it over. He scrolls through it.

MICAH

What are you doing?

BILLY

I want law enforcement eating out
of my hand, not pulling on the
leash.

INT. TATE'S FLAT - MORNING

Behind his computer screens, Tate works on another mask,
using a thin paintbrush to finish its geometric pattern.

He takes his glasses off and rubs his eyes. Watches Alex in
her thermals: a ghost, sleeping peacefully on his bed. Next
to her is the box of "memories" - open, looked through.

Tate begins putting photos back inside. He lingers on a photo
of him and Alex: younger, fresher - happy.

INT. TATE'S FLAT - DAY

Alex opens her eyes and sits up. The memory box sits on
Tate's desk as he stares at his computer screen, concerned.

TATE

Your ex was a piece of work.

The screen reads: "MAYOR OF LONDON'S KINKY SEX HABITS!" -
"THE REAL REASON infinite CEO WON'T USE infinite TECH!"

ALEX

My posts - how did you?

TATE

Your posts? They're to his IP -

ALEX

I don't have my own laptop - what.

Tate turns in his chair, questioning Alex with his eyes. The headlines fill the screen beside him.

TATE

It's fake news, Ale. You wrote code when I knew you. None of this is even true, it's clickbait. It's fake news and your *fake news* got someone killed!

ALEX

Woah, don't give me some self-righteous -

Tate scrolls to one post: "WILL CYBERTERRORIST GROUP SISTER ATTACK infinite'S AR LAUNCH??"

TATE

You're a troll.

ALEX

It's pay per share, not pay per fact. I was trying to -

TATE

Is there anything you wouldn't you do for money?

Tate pulls up Alex's article "FREAK ACCIDENT OR COVER UP? PA'S SUICIDE LOOKS SUSPICIOUS"

TATE (CONT'D)

You use your dead sister for -

ALEX

Stop.

TATE

... Or you think it was murder?

Tate stares at Alex. There is some truth left in her.

ALEX

Gina wouldn't kill herself.

(beat)

She wouldn't give up like that. Not without a fight.

Tate hesitates before flicking open another window with a Reddit-style thread: *"Times reporter at scene of crime; doesn't report... why?"* He gestures for Alex to read,

Alex scrolls, skimming: *Mayor's PA Gina Parker... Marlow Daniels of the Times... Location data...*

TATE

You seen this before?

ALEX

She was meeting someone?

Tate shrugs.

TATE

Guess you're not the only one who believes Gina's death was a coverup

ALEX

This wouldn't be online if it were true.

TATE

InfiniteE doesn't own *this* internet.

Tate's door phone buzzes. He goes to it.

TATE (CONT'D)

(into his door phone)

Coming down,

ALEX

Who's that?

TATE

Believe it or not I had plans before you showed up.

Alex lets him go. Her eyes return to the computer screen: *She was meters away from the accident... Never reported on it. Marlow Daniels was there to meet Gina. She had to be.*

EXT. COURTYARD, TATE'S FLAT - CONTINUOUS

Tate positions a large crate into the back of a black van; someone else is loading down the side. Alex approaches,

ALEX

I need to borrow your motorcycle.

TATE

Sorry Ale,

ALEX

I taught you how to ride, I'm not gonna -

TATE

I sold it.

Alex crosses her arms. Looks at the van,

TATE (CONT'D)

I've arranged a series of lifts to get you somewhere off grid - Liverpool, Glasgow, you pick. Eventually, we'll get you a new profile.

ALEX

I'm not gonna go be somebody else.

TATE

So you'd rather be dead?

ALEX

I'm going talk to that reporter.

Latiana Turner, the woman from Hana's protest video, shuts the van door and appears beside Tate. Alex soaks this in.

Latiana eyes Tate as she heads back to his flat.

LATIANA

We're leaving in 5.

ALEX

(to Tate)

You work for SISTER?

Tate follows Latiana across the courtyard.

TATE

I work *with* SISTER.

(beat)

This is for you by the way.

Tate passes Alex an old Blackberry phone,

TATE (CONT'D)

Look, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have shown you those threads. You should be thinking about you right now, not -

ALEX

Like I don't think about her every
time I look in the mirror.

(beat)

I can't hide from her. And I can't
hide from this.

Latiana appears, another crate in hand.

LATIANA

I'll give you a lift if he won't.

INT. BACK OF TATE'S VAN - DAY

Alex sits in the back of the van, surrounded by suspicious-
looking crates. Tate sits across from her, arms crossed.

ALEX

You gonna tell me what's inside?

TATE

What do you think.

ALEX

I think we're headed to infinite's
AR Launch and the woman driving us
is a known cyberterrorist.

TATE

Does that scare you?

ALEX

No.

(beat)

The people calling her a terrorist
are the same ones calling me a
murderer.

INT. RECEPTION, INFINITE HEAD OFFICE - DAY

A headline flashes: "TODAY! *AUGMENTED REALITY*". Mae watches
the news screen in a glossy lobby, prickling. The screen
darkens to change image, revealing a small army behind her.

She checks her mobile: 12:30. The officers fidget impatiently

Mae approaches reception.

RECEPTIONIST

Sorry for the delay, there's been -

MAE

Let's go,

Mae motions and the officers flood the lobby,

BILLY (O.S.)

Detective Chief Inspector Mae,

Mae swivels to find Billy standing at the opening of the lift, her officers frozen around him in a combination of fear and admiration. Billy indicates them:

BILLY (CONT'D)

Let's call off the cavalry.

INT. LIFT - DAY

Billy and Mae; as the lift begins to rise, the glass walls reveal a sprawling view of London below.

BILLY

I thought I knew all the SIOs on the force...

(beat)

Is this your first case?

INT. HALLWAY, INFINITE - DAY

Billy leads Mae down a hall with glass walls and exposed co-working rooms: teams of people talk and display products.

BILLY

As you can probably see Inspector, I value transparency.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM, INFINITE - DAY

Mae looks around: floor to ceiling windows, clean light.

MAE

My murder suspect worked for your company. Her profile is missing.

BILLY

Oh, it's not missing.

Billy removes a silver USB from his pocket; holds it up.

BILLY (CONT'D)

The warrant your department sent over was embarrassingly acute.

(MORE)

BILLY (CONT'D)

This drive gives you cloud access to everything you need to know about your suspect... more than you've thought to ask for.

(beat)

Think of it as a glimpse of what's to come with Augmented Reality.

Mae takes the drive. She holds it up.

MAE

Do I owe you something now?

Billy shrugs with a bashful smile - he's turned on his charm.

BILLY

Not now. I just think we should be on the same team.

Mae raises her eyebrows as Billy escorts her to the door. Her phone buzzes - she checks it. Mae's mouth curls down.

INT. HALLWAY, INFINITE - CONTINUOUS

Billy continues walking, expecting Mae to follow.

MAE

Mr. Campbell does the name "Gina Parker" mean anything to you?

Billy stops walking. His voice belies the concern prickling across his face

BILLY

Say it again?

MAE

"Gina Parker"

The vein on Billy's temple pulses. They continue walking,

BILLY

No... I can do a search for you?

MAE

Don't bother. I couldn't get anything out of infinite last night so I had my boys run facial rec on our old network for Alex Parker... It's sluggish, but we got a hit.

Billy turns from Mae only to notice his expression is now visible to the teams working in the hall. He smiles, waves.

BILLY
She has an alias?

MAE
No, a twin. Struck down by one of
your driverless taxis - days ago.

Billy's mouth opens slightly.

BILLY
The suicide, yes... You're turning
into a ghost hunter, Inspector.

MAE
Excuse me?

BILLY
Alex Parker's motorcycle was found
crashed in the Docklands this
morning. Seems she lost control...
(beat)
The details are on the drive.

INT. BACK OF TATE'S VAN - DAY

The van comes to a stop. Tate reaches into a crate and pulls
out a pair of translucent geometric masks.

The rear door of the van opens; Latiana stands outside.

LATIANA
Let's move.

EXT. KINGS CROSS LOADING BAY - CONTINUOUS

Alex pulls her hair back tight at the base of her neck and
puts on her mask. Tate wears his. Alex catches her reflection
in the tinted window - she looks like Gina.

ALEX
Is this meant to hide my face?

TATE
From people, no; from computers,
yes.

Latiana hands a business card to Alex.

LATIANA
See you here after the set-up. You
got her track ok?

Alex looks at her phone: a tracking beacon pulses on a map.

ALEX

Does she know I'm ...?

LATIANA

That it's you specifically? No. But she knows she's being tracked. Everyone does.

EXT. AR LAUNCH PRESS AREA, KINGS CROSS - DAY

The press area is full of high-spec AR demonstrations: retail augmentation (trying on virtual clothes and eyewear), architecture and design projection, even surgery support.

Alex examines Latiana's business card: one side has an address, the other side says:

[SISTER]

Tate walks beside her, looking around. Despite their geometric masks, they blend in.

Alex notices a pair of TECHNO-ANARCHISTS in trench coats that bear a disorienting pattern of body parts. She turns to see Tate opening his duffle beside a lamp post,

ALEX

What are you doing?

TATE

Infinite's network uses millimeter waves, which are fast, but weak. It starts to rain, you lose line of sight - it's gone. But infrared...

ALEX

Is faster and more secure than radio...

Alex looks at what's inside the duffle for the first time: a wireless transmitter with a mounted infrared sensor dome.

ALEX (CONT'D)

Tate this is a li-fi transmitter.

TATE

It's *your* li-fi transmitter. You designed it.

Alex examines the device,

ALEX
SISTER has their own network on li-fi?

Tate nods. Takes the device and attaches it to a pulley which discreetly slides up the lamppost,

TATE
Completely free from infinite's control. We've been installing them for weeks.
(beat)
And it's set to rain tonight.

ALEX
Tate this was just a theory...

TATE
Our theory. I didn't give up on it.

Their eyes meet. Alex's phone beeps: the tracker is close.

EXT. VIP LOUNGE - DAY

Marlow pores over her tablet, disinterested in the goings on around her. A shadow approaches.

ALEX (O.S.)
Marlow?

Annoyed, Marlow glances up as Alex sits down. Her eyes flare - she's seeing a ghost.

MARLOW
I thought they killed you -

ALEX
Nearly. MARLOW (CONT'D)
Gina, I can't be seen -

ALEX (CONT'D)
... What'd you say?

Marlow suddenly takes in the situation. She RUNS.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Hey!!

EXT. AR LAUNCH PRESS AREA, KINGS CROSS - CONTINUOUS

Putting his equipment back in the duffle, Tate notices a commotion from the VIP Lounge.

EXT. KINGS CROSS GRANARY SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

Alex, weaving through the crowd approaching St Pancras station, Marlow just ahead. Her mask slips; she rips it off

INT. ST PANCRAS STATION - CONTINUOUS

Marlow cuts the queue at the ticket barriers,

Alex crashes into a COMMUTER and looks up: a TFL CCTV camera is aiming right at them. She hops over the barriers.

INT. ST PANCRAS STATION - CONTINUOUS

Throngs of commuters move in every direction. For a second, Alex loses sight of Marlow - then: she sees her, boarding a train on the Northbound platform.

INT. ST PANCRAS NORTHBOUND PLATFORM - DAY

Alex races to the train. The doors beep and begin to close. Just as Alex reaches the closing doors she's YANKED back -

TATE

Put this on.

Tate shoves her mask into her chest. The train pulls away.

ALEX

She thought I was Gina!!

TATE

Gina's dead. And you will be too for that stunt. We're blown.

INT. STAIRWELL - DAY

Micah climbs a lavish, spacious staircase.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE BILLY'S LONDON FLAT - DAY

Micah approaches a door with a metal box attached to the wall. Her right hand takes her thin black mobile from her pocket; her left reaches for her bluetooth ear bud.

Just as she's about to slip the devices into the metal box, her mobile buzzes. She checks it. Micah's eyes widen.

On screen is a facial rec alert with an image of Alex from the CCTV in King's Cross. Micah's temple twitches.

The door to the flat opens, surprising her. Billy waits on the other side with socked feet.

MICAH
Something's come up.

BILLY
We'll talk inside.

Micah attempts to walk in but Billy steps in front of her and indicates her mobile, then the metal box.

Micah's phone with the image of Alex onscreen slips into the box. She bares her now-empty hands.

INT. BILLY'S LONDON APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Micah steps inside. The walls are dark mint; the flat is pristinely decorated, like a celebrity home.

MICAH
I just got a notification that -

Billy shuts the door.

BILLY
You never told me Gina had a twin.

Micah stands still. Billy remains by the door; the usual calmness of his voice evaporates with every word:

BILLY (CONT'D)
I'm assuming you knew. It would be more embarrassing for you if you were just as surprised as I was, to find out from a cop!! That a woman you put on national news is twins with a woman *I had killed!*

Behind these doors is a very different Billy - his eyes wide, his voice uncontrolled; a hot redness creeps up his neck.

MICAH
Please, keep your voice down. There's something else -

BILLY
That's your problem, Micah. Maybe it's your age. You don't have *foresight.*

(MORE)

BILLY (CONT'D)

I bought all the fucking! flats!
next to this one so that when I
needed to shout!! As loud as I
like!! I could..! That's *foresight!*
And you don't seem to have it.

MICAH

The USB paints one picture: she
killed him, went on the run and
lost control of the motorcycle.

Billy calms down. He nearly laughs.

BILLY

This is the 21st century, Micah.
Everything can be known - the
truth, will haunt you -

MICAH

I don't have time for a
philosophical discussion -

Billy snaps open the drawer of a console table, gazing inside

BILLY

You do Micah.

Billy picks up a polished silver Colt King Cobra revolver
from the drawer and points it at her.

BILLY (CONT'D)

You've been getting a little big
for your boots,

MICAH

You can't kill me.

Billy waves to the window,

BILLY

No, out there, I can't. Cameras,
sensors, all bearing witness... But
here, here, I have made *privacy*.
It's what you think you have living
alone. But what you actually have,
with no friends, no next of kin, no
close relationships, *is no one to
notice when you're gone.*

(beat)

The moment I hired you Micah, I
knew that if I ever needed to, I
could kill you.

Billy palms a single bullet into the cylinder and spins it.

BILLY (CONT'D)
That's foresight.

MICAH
... And when the truth comes out?

BILLY
When the truth comes out I *bury* it.

He aims the gun at her and pulls the trigger. The hammer
CLICKS and Micah gasps, her knees buckle... she's alive.

The gun dangles from Billy's hand. He pops open the cylinder:
it's completely empty. In his other hand he reveals the
bullet - expertly palmed for this illusion.

BILLY (CONT'D)
You should know better than most
that I don't *guess*... I *make* the
future.
(beat)
Did you still have something to
tell me?

Micah swallows hard, wipes the sweat from her brow.

INT. INCIDENT ROOM, POLICE STATION - DAY

Mae is staring at the silver infinite USB sticking out from
Kit's laptop. She looks up at the crime scene board, now full
of images: screenshots of Alex doing product reviews, a few
others, and an image of her burnt out motorcycle.

Mae walks to the board, the projections of Alex's life
reflecting on her face, she looks at the photo of the twins.

POWELL (O.S.)
Case closed then?

Powell leans against the door, just passing.

MAE
I can't argue with data.

POWELL
And in less than 24 hours. This
bodes well, Inspector.

MAE
... It's too neat.

Powell stops. Returns,

MAE (CONT'D)

They're hiding something -

POWELL

infinite has handed over more information about this woman than you thought to ask for and you say they're *hiding* something? They bloody did your job for you!

(beat)

Quit playing cops and robbers and close it up.

Powell shuts the door behind him. Kit starts packing away his equipment. Belinda knocks, comes in

MAE

Don't bother Belinda, we're case closed.

BELINDA

You'll want to see this,

Belinda flicks the projector back on and an image of Max appears: slumped on the floor of his garage, blood dried on the ground - a pair of bullet holes in his chest.

INT. HALLWAY, POLICE STATION - DAY

Powell, walking. Mae chases after him,

MAE

There's a dead man in a garage shared by Alex Parker,

Powell pauses,

POWELL

Time of death?

MAE

Could be last night.

Powell continues walking,

POWELL

So she was on a spree. Good to know.

MAE

The man's got two bullet holes to his chest Sir - she's a girl, not a bloody assassin!

POWELL

She's a *dead* girl, actually. If you want to tack this on to your charge go ahead - two birds as they say.

Mae crosses her arms. So this is how it is.

MAE

Do you bend over that far for anyone with something to offer? Or is Billy Campbell special?

Powell whips back,

POWELL

Excuse me?

MAE

I close this case and you get infinite's computing power is that right? Well, it's a lazy cop that lets a *company* say who's criminal.

POWELL

You think I'm lazy? Do you remember how long probable cause used to take? You don't even know what it is - you call me *lazy*. You wouldn't last a day working against the grind of the weak, *impotent* law enforcement that saw murderers get off on technicalities or thieves never even chased. I have criminals *afraid* to commit crime now because they *know we'll see it* - but you're worried that it's infinite who's doing the work?

(beat)

If that power doesn't sit right with you, you're in the wrong profession.

Mae stands, motionless.

POWELL (CONT'D)

I'm declassing you as PC for the Launch - effective immediately.

MAE

Sir -

POWELL

You're an officer of the law, Mae. That doesn't grant you autonomy.

EXT. EUSTON ROAD - DAY

Tate, speed walking. Alex lags, trying to orient the tracking beacon on her phone. Tate snatches it from her hand -

ALEX

Hey!

TATE

You're not tracking her, we're going back to base

ALEX

She said "I thought they killed you"

Tate stops and looks at Alex.

The hiss of an electric car speeding up. In the reflection of a building Tate glimpses a taxi HURTLING straight at them.

TATE

MOVE!

Tate TACKLES Alex to the ground as the taxi careens past them, COLLIDING with another car. Horns BLARE.

ALEX

What was that?!!

TATE

That was how they killed your sister.

INT. PRIVATE CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Billy clenches his fist, mid-gesture. Micah stands behind, watching street-level views of the crash in 360 degrees.

WATCHER 1

I can't get a solid facial track - I'm gonna lose them.

BILLY

So use their gait profiles,

In Watcher 1's grid, a pair of walking avatars like those used at the Data Centre find Tate and Alex's images.

MICAH

Billy,

Billy turns to Micah.

MICAH (CONT'D)

They need you up top before -

WATCHER 1

They're on the bus.

Billy turns to see the ghostly overlays attach to Alex and Tate as they board a bus.

The feed switches to a pedestrian's cameraphone onboard,

BILLY

Tell Craig to finish what he started,

INT. GASTRO PUB - DAY

A black mobile phone sits at a pub table next to a fresh pint. It buzzes. A WAITER lays down a plate of steaming pub grub - it looks delicious. Craig checks his phone.

A screenshot of Alex and Tate boarding the bus and a tracking beacon appears. Craig puts the phone down, picks up his fork.

The fork nearly reaches his mouth when his phone buzzes again. He puts the fork down, turns his phone over to find his inCredits balance plummeting.

Craig's fork clatters to the floor, the plate of food abandoned.

INT. BUS - DAY

Tate and Alex on the bus - the people around them all fixated on their mobiles. Alex looks at the map on her phone.

BUS ANNOUNCEMENT

Mornington Crescent...

ALEX

I'm off here,

TATE

Ale, no wait. Please.

Tate grabs Alex's arm - they lock eyes.

Reluctantly, Tate lets go of Alex, watches her as she moves toward the middle exit of the bus. The bus comes to a halt.

TATE (CONT'D)

Fuck!

Tate pushes through, trying to catch up to her

EXT. MORNINGTON CRESCENT STATION - CONTINUOUS

Tate watches Alex dash across the street; he steps into the road, is nearly clipped by an oncoming CYCLIST.

CYCLIST

OI!

Tate jumps back, glimpsing Alex as she slips into the station

A black Audi stops in front of Tate, blocking his path. He's about to step around it when the rear door opens - the car is EMPTY. Tate looks around, confused,

A quick CRACK and Tate's vision goes dark.

INT. AR LAUNCH, OXFORD STREET - DAY

Oxford street is rammed with people - all looking down at their devices. Micah, eyes up, pushes through towards a media tent in the shape of a bubble, phone in hand.

INT. MEDIA BUBBLE - CONTINUOUS

Billy is chatting with a presenter. Micah catches his eye and motions to her phone. He joins her and takes the mobile.

CRAIG (V.O.)

Got one.

BILLY

One? Where's the girl?

INT. CRAIG'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Craig looks into his rearview: Tate lies unconscious in the back seat - his face is bruised.

CRAIG

She made it to the tube.

INT. TUFNELL PARK UNDERGROUND - DAY

Alex steps out of a tube carriage and walks the subway brick-lined tunnel. She sees a CCTV camera and looks down.

CRAIG (V.O.)
I've got her gait profile now; she
won't be hard to track.

Alex passes an ad for *infinite Home: Your Neighbourhood Watch*. Eyes to the floor, Alex drags one foot, letting her step fall into limp.

EXT. MEDIA BUBBLE - CONTINUOUS

Billy returns the mobile to Micah. Beyond them, Oxford Street is a sea of bodies and digital mirages.

MICAH
We've routed all foot traffic from
Kings Cross here. Clock is ticking.

BILLY
Beautiful.

INT. MARLOW'S FLAT - EVENING

The shadow of a person against a frosted glass door. The sound of the lock flicking. The door opens.

Marlow's silhouette hesitates before entering. She hits the light switch - nothing. Power is out.

She taps her *infinite* watch and it emits a cone of light in front of her. She steps in, shuts the door, reaching one hand into a nearby corner. Marlow gasps.

The cone of light fills the corner: it's empty.

ALEX (O.S.)
Looking for this?

The cone of light whips around, glinting off the shiny aluminium bat in Alex's hand. She admires it sentimentally.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Been a while since I've used one of
these...

MARLOW
What do you want.

ALEX
Throw me the watch.

Marlow doesn't move.

MARLOW
I know who you are.

ALEX
Gina was my sister.

MARLOW (CONT'D)
You murdered that man in
Peckham.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Then you better give me your watch
when I tell you to.

Marlow still doesn't move.

Alex takes a SWING at a table lamp - shattering it to pieces.

Marlow fumbles to get the watch off - she throws it to Alex
who catches it with one hand. She gazes at it.

ALEX (CONT'D)
You said Gina was killed. Why.

MARLOW
No, haven't you seen the headlines?
You're meant to be dead.

Marlow steps away from Alex, who raises the bat - ready.

ALEX
Don't move. Just so we're clear: I
cut your power. Your smart home,
which would normally sense
anomalies in your heart rate,
temperature, or be recording this
conversation... is dead. It won't
call the police for you, and it
won't call the hospital for you...

Alex lets the bat rise and fall into her palm as she speaks.

ALEX (CONT'D)
It's just you and me, and the
truth.
(beat)
Was my sister meeting you the day
she died.

MARLOW
Yes.

ALEX
Why.

MARLOW

Gina - your sister - had a story.
Corruption, manipulation...

ALEX

It wasn't suicide then.

Marlow shakes her head 'no'.

Alex clenches her jaw, knuckles white on the bat. It's dark, or Marlow might see the tears behind her eyes. Alex fights to keep her voice measured.

ALEX (CONT'D)

How do you know.

EXT. TOOLEY STREET CAFE - FLASHBACK

Gina, outside London Bridge Tube station - a look of recognition on her face as she crosses the road.

MARLOW (O.S.)

Because I saw it happen.

The view from the tube station: Marlow sits alone at a cafe table and looks up - suddenly: horror on her face.

INT. MARLOW'S FLAT - CONTINUOUS

Alex stands, gripping the baseball bat.

ALEX

Who did it.

MARLOW

... I don't know.

Another SWING - Marlow's side table splits in two.

MARLOW (CONT'D)

Don't make me answer that!

ALEX

I can see why Gina trusted you: a smart, investigative journalist, so committed to the truth... until a week ago.

(beat)

Since she died you've had nothing but good to say about infinite. So what is it?

(MORE)

ALEX (CONT'D)

Are you still committed to the truth? Or do you have something to hide?

Marlow moves toward a nearby desk. Alex raises the bat.

MARLOW

Easy...

Marlow takes a small envelope from a drawer - the one Gina had, addressed to MARLOW DANIELS. It's been opened.

MARLOW (CONT'D)

infinite killed your sister to keep the truth from coming out. The only reason I'm alive is because it still hasn't.

(beat)

Once you wrap your head around that the only choice you have left is to put your head down like me, or become a ghost, like your sister.

Marlow holds out the envelope for Alex. She takes it.

ALEX

We're already ghosts.

EXT. AR LAUNCH, OXFORD STREET - EVENING

A crowd of people gather around Selfridges, pointing their phones and devices at the window displays.

In a bystander's mobile screen we see what they see: a projection of Billy Campbell moving from window to window.

BILLY PROJECTION

Infinite's Augmented Reality uses your own device as a beacon - for an experience that *stays with you* -

INT. INTERNET CAFE, OXFORD STREET - EVENING

Alex sits in front of an old computer in a dingy internet cafe. She tips Gina's envelope - a tiny USB tumbles out.

Alex inserts it into the CPU. While it loads, she examines a coat on her shoulders - something she wasn't wearing before - the lining is stiff and crunchy, like a foil blanket.

The computer shines on Alex's face: Gina appears on screen - scared, determined. Alex puts on headphones,

GINA

If you're seeing this, Marlow, I
must be dead.

EXT. AR LAUNCH, OXFORD STREET - FLASH BACK MOMENTS BEFORE

A cluster of VR pods; jackets and brollies hang outside.

Alex limps heavily through the sea of people hunched over
their phones

GINA (V.O.)

But death in the 21st century isn't
violent, it's a *mentality* - that
losing your intimacy and freedom to
a company like infiniteE is
necessary and inevitable...

(beat)

But it was never our choice.

One of the anarchist's body-print trench coats hangs by the
entrance of one of the pods. Alex snags it and walks normally

GINA (V.O.)

infiniteE would never leave
something so important up to chance

INT. INTERNET CAFE, OXFORD STREET - EVENING

Gina's eyes stare deeply into the camera

GINA

Years ago, infiniteE pioneered
something called "guaranteed
outcomes" - simply put, it means
that with enough data points I can
not only predict what you'll do, I
can *adjust* it.

(beat)

Corruption and bribery are
childsplay when you have a monopoly
on the *decisions* of every
politician, shareholder, police
officer, and voter connected to
infiniteE's network. Billy calls it
Actuation Imperative. I call it -

EXT. OXFORD STREET - FLASH FORWARD MOMENTS AHEAD

Alex, in slow motion, dust swirling around her as she runs, masked, wearing the body-patterned trench coat. Behind her Selfridges is a gaping hole.

GINA (V.O.)

The end of tomorrow... because of it - our choices, our futures, are no longer ours.

Alex looks around: injured people call out for help, ambulance lights flare, but all we hear is the ringing in her ears and Gina's soft voice:

GINA (V.O.)

Who knows where you were last night? Who knows the last time you cried? Who knows what food you're hungry for - right now? infiniteE knows.

(beat)

infiniteE knows how many times your heart beats in a minute - but it doesn't know your heart.

INT. INTERNET CAFE, OXFORD STREET - EVENING, MOMENTS BEFORE

Alex faces Gina - mirror images of each other,

GINA

The imperative is embedded deep within infiniteE's servers - too large to fit on a single drive - but I have this.

Gina holds up a black, leather bound notebook. The pages inside are covered in handwriting.

GINA (CONT'D)

Billy is a technophobe at heart. His darkest ideas start off as pencil strokes - here. Consider it a playbook: blueprints for infiniteE's UK merger, even the Data Tax Bill that's currently being read in Parlaiment... He already knows it won't pass.

Gina pauses a moment.

GINA (CONT'D)

The moment I took this I put a target on my back. To get it now you'll need my sister -

An EXPLOSION nearby shakes the building. Dust falls from the ceiling - Alex's computer glitches. The video is frozen -

ALEX

Fuck!

She pulls the USB out of the computer and runs.

EXT. OXFORD STREET - EVENING

Alex running; Selfridges, chaos and the explosion behind her.

She fishes the SISTER card out of her pocket

EXT. TRAFALGAR SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

Mae is posted in a line of officers overseeing an AR "gym". Suddenly, a trio of emergency vehicles whip round Trafalgar Square, tearing through the calm hum of activity. Mae puts a hand on her MP7 rifle just as her walkie talkie gurgles:

POLICE OPERATOR (V.O.)

Multiple explosions on Oxford Street West and Kings Cross - bombs likely. Units remain posted, priority is to vacate the area.

People begin to lift their eyes to the smoke on the horizon; they check their phones. A slew of notifications flood in. Murmurs of concern and fear ripple through the crowd. Witness videos from the explosion begin to filter through people's screens: hands cover mouths, worried stares -

INT. LOWER HALLWAY, INFINITE - EVENING

Micah and Billy, walking down a cinderblock hall. Micah checks her phone and stops walking.

MICAH

... There was a second bomb?

(beat)

On Oxford Street, I thought we said

Billy finally stops, turns to her:

BILLY
I sense that you feel blindsided,
Micah; much like how I felt this
morning -

MICAH
This is punishment??

BILLY
No, it's nothing personal.

MICAH (CONT'D)
There are *people* on Oxford
Street! I cleared Kings Cross
on purpose!

Billy's face registers no remorse.

BILLY (CONT'D)
When you're viewing a product
demonstration, don't you want to
see the real thing?

EXT. CHINA TOWN RESTAURANT - EVENING

Alex stops running in front of an abandoned, dilapidated
Chinese restaurant. She looks at the SISTER card in her hand.

INT. CHINA TOWN RESTAURANT - CONTINUOUS

Alex steps inside the vacant buffet area and follows a soft
bustling sound down the stairs.

INT. SISTER BASE - CONTINUOUS

Alex opens a set of double doors: what was once a kitchen has
been gutted and rearranged as a control centre with an AR
grid similar to infinite's data centre, just smaller, and no
one wears uniforms. Latiana notices Alex and heads to her,

ALEX
What happened up there?!

LATIANA
False flag. They turn the gun on
themselves and people are already
blaming us.
(beat)
Where's Tate?

ALEX
He's not here?

Alex pulls out her Blackberry - dials.

INT. INTERROGATION ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Tate's phone rings in Micah's hand: ALE. She clicks to answer but a message pops up: FINGERPRINT NOT RECOGNISED (1/10)

Micah loosens Tate's hand from its binding and presses his finger to the phone: FINGERPRINT NOT RECOGNISED (2/10)

The ringing continues. Tate's face is bruised but the dried blood at the corner of his lip curls into a smile.

INT. SISTER BASE - CONTINUOUS

Alex shrugs at Latiana, hangs up the phone.

LATIANA

We lost the transmitter you rigged in Kings Cross and another one on Oxford Street in the blasts. Without Tate I don't know how we're gonna to get li-fi back up.

ALEX

Show me what you're working with

INT. INTERROGATION ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Billy enters the room and motions for Micah to leave. She relinquishes Tate's Blackberry but not before clipping Tate with a sharp right hook.

Indifferent, Billy sits down with the Blackberry:
1 ATTEMPT REMAINING UNTIL FORCE ERASE.

Tate glances up from his swelling eyelid. Behind his back, he's just loosened the binding around his remaining wrist

BILLY

I can tell you're smart.

(beat)

I relate to that.

Billy reaches around Tate's back and takes his free hand, holding it up gently...

BILLY (CONT'D)

10 attempts, 10 fingers... The odds are good.

Billy massages Tate's fingers, one by one. It's unsettling.

BILLY (CONT'D)
But you're smart. You don't leave
things to chance.

Billy isolates Tate's forefinger. As he massages it, a thin film begins to reveal itself.

BILLY (CONT'D)
Neither do I.

Billy pulls the thin film cover off of Tate's fingertip.

INT. SISTER BASE - EVENING

Alex stands in a grid square: alert, in control. She wades through a signal map with broken lines over Kings Cross and Oxford Street. To her right is a command log; she gestures into it, gradually re-routing and connecting signals around the damaged areas. Latiana watches from outside the grid.

ALEX
I'm amplifying your signal with
ambient light sources...

LATIANA
You can do that?

ALEX
That's the beauty of li-fi... How
are you gonna get people to switch?

Latiana inhales.

LATIANA
All we've got right now is word of
mouth. infinite sees and controls
every other way we can reach people

Alex thinks. Takes Gina's USB from her coat pocket,

ALEX
Can you load this up for me?

Latiana takes the USB and goes to a laptop outside the grid. Alex's phone buzzes: TATE. She answers,

ALEX (CONT'D)
Tate?

The phone screeches - Alex pulls it away from her ear. Her grid morphs: in front of her, Tate is slumped and bound

ALEX (CONT'D)

Tate!

She reaches - her hand goes straight through him - it's AR.

BILLY (O.S.)

Hello Alex.

Alex turns - Billy is standing behind her; his usual 5'7" frame now well over 6 feet.

INT. INTERROGATION ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Billy stands next to an AR beacon, watching Alex through Tate's phone; Tate sits motionless in the corner.

BILLY

Wow, I feel like I know you.

INT. SISTER BASE - CONTINUOUS

Alex tries to hang up her phone but the screen is frozen: TRANSMITTING. Billy's projection stands over Alex, watching,

AR BILLY

The way you sound, the way you move. I mean I - I do know you. Probably more than you know yourself.

ALEX

Tate!!

Tate is motionless. Alex faces Billy - an impervious figure

ALEX (CONT'D)

Let him go!!

AR BILLY

You have something of mine, Alex.

ALEX

... What?

(beat)

The *playbook*? I -

Alex looks over: Latiana is standing at the edge of the grid, questioning. Behind her, Gina's video plays on a laptop.

ALEX (CONT'D)
(gesturing to Tate)
How do I know that's real. That
he's alive.

AR BILLY
(to Tate)
Tate?

Tate doesn't move.

Latiana grabs HAILEY (19) from the next grid and points,

LATIANA
What's going on in there.

Hailey studies the situation,

HAILEY
Oh shit... he's using her phone as
a beacon.

INT. INTERROGATION ROOM - CONTINUOUS

BILLY
Tate, tell Alex you're alive.

TATE
Fuck you.

INT. SISTER BASE - CONTINUOUS

Alex watches as Tate shifts in his chair. Relief.

AR BILLY
That good enough for you?

ALEX
... I have your playbook.

Alex looks back at Gina's video playing on the laptop -
Latiana and Hailey no longer in view

ALEX (CONT'D)
I'll give it to you - for Tate.

Alex looks back: Billy and Tate are gone. Her grid is empty.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Hey!!

INT. LOWER HALLWAY, INFINITE - CONTINUOUS

Billy walks casually down a cinderblock hallway, Alex's voice ringing out over speaker on Tate's phone:

ALEX (V.O.)
You touch him, this goes public!

BILLY
And what do you think will happen
Alex? You think the press is going
to help you? Like it helped *Gina*?

Billy pushes through a door and walks in,

INT. INFINITE PRIVATE CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Billy raises his eyebrows and holds up the phone to Watcher 1 who nods. In front of him is a satellite map of London.

BILLY
Anyone with an ounce of power worth
having is already playing for me.
But let me ask you something...

Billy steps over to a beacon

INT. SISTER BASE - CONTINUOUS

Billy's AR projection appears suddenly in front of Alex - she stumbles backwards.

BILLY
How well did you know your twin?
Were you *close*?

INT. INFINITE PRIVATE CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Watcher 1's map zooms in: Greater London, Central London...

BILLY
I know you weren't. So you can put
aside any misplaced loyalty for her
when the data didn't even class you
as *related*!

INT. SISTER BASE - CONTINUOUS

Alex looks like she could burst.

AR BILLY

Maybe I knew Gina better than you.

(beat)

How do you think she got my
playbook?

ALEX

(almost a whisper)

I don't know.

Hailey is in the grid next to Alex with Latiana, scrubbing
through code and transmission protocols

HAILEY

No, no, no...

INT. PRIVATE CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Watcher 1's map zeroes in on Soho... Chinatown... it LOCKS on
one building. Billy glances backward and Watcher 1 makes the
phone gesture with his hand as he speaks into his headset.

INT. SISTER BASE - CONTINUOUS

HAILEY

They've locked on us...

Latiana races to the edge of Alex's grid. Inside, Billy's
eyes bore into Alex,

AR BILLY

I shared it with her. I got very
close to Gina. I trusted her.

Alex looks over: Latiana slices her hand across her neck:
STOP. Alex doesn't move.

LATIANA

(to Hailey)

Start getting people out of here -
Now.

Hailey runs. Billy circles around Alex as if she were prey

AR BILLY

And standing here, looking at you,
I see the woman I knew so well -
her eyes, her *body*... I see the
sad, pathetic bitch who thought she
was smarter than me,

Alex swings her arms but hits nothing -

ALEX

You don't know anything about her!

Billy's AR projection is calm, satisfied.

AR BILLY

I do. And you're no different.
You're nothing. Just a troll,
playing politics behind a computer
screen,

ALEX

I don't care about politics!

AR BILLY

You're right. You care about *money* -

The power suddenly goes out, then a clanging and a hiss.

LATIANA

Get down!!

Latiana lunges for Alex - they go tumbling as a loud CRACK erupts: tear gas and paint bombs spew out as a team of Counter-Terrorism Specialist Firearms Officers ambush them.

INT. PRIVATE CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Billy steps away from the beacon and turns to the large screen, now full of body cam footage from the CTFOSs.

BILLY

That's what I call a home run.

INT. SISTER BASE - CONTINUOUS

Alex and Latiana race to the edge of the room with a few others, eyes watering, shirts held over their noses and mouths. A door BLASTS open and a pair of CTSFOs intercept the group. Alex freezes - it's over.

Latiana grabs Alex, PULLING her backwards into a cloud of dust. Latiana fishes with her hand until she reaches a panel for a large dumbwaiter.

Alex and Latiana's feet, climbing up the rungs installed inside the dumbwaiter, dust filtering upward, the sound of arrests being made below.

INT. UPSTAIRS BAR - EVENING

Alex and Latiana slip out of the dumbwaiter and crouch down behind the bar. Alex peeks her eyes over the edge:

The front entrance is blocked off with CTSFOs; a fire exit down the back of the room seems relatively unguarded. Alex looks back to the entrance and sees a face she remembers: Craig.

Alex ducks back down quickly, her brow furrowing -

LATIANA

What - what's up?

ALEX

That guy out there... I've seen him before -

CTSFO OFFICER

FREEZE!

A CTSFO appears over Latiana, aiming his MP7 at Alex.

Latiana SPRINGS up and STRIKES the barrel of his gun with the heel of her hand - he instinctively pulls the trigger, sending a hail of bullets into the ceiling.

LATIANA

RUN!!

Alex runs for the fire exit as Latiana takes one flexed oblique kick straight for the CTSFO's knee - he howls!

Craig turns around: target locked.

INT. FIRE EXIT STAIRWELL - CONTINUOUS

Alex barrels through the door, Latiana not far behind.

LATIANA

To the roof!!

EXT. ROOF - EVENING

Alex and Latiana burst out onto the roof,

LATIANA

This way -

Latiana drops first down the edge the of the building using an old fire escape. Latiana looks back -

LATIANA (CONT'D)

Alex!!

Alex turns and comes face to face with Craig's FIST !

INT. LIFT, INIFINITE - EVENING

The walls of the lift disappear around Billy as a darkening sky emerges.

EXT. ROOF - CONTINUOUS

Alex's body careens along the roof from the force of Craig's blow. Latiana tries to climb back up the fire escape but can't reach.

Alex lifts her head - blood slips out of a cut over her eye. She blinks: Craig's body coming into view -

She tries to scramble away but he steps on her trench coat.

ALEX

No!!

Craig grabs her by her motorcycle belt bag - in a frenzy she clicks the quick release buckle, freeing herself. Dashes back to the stairwell door but FREEZES when she hears BANGING from CTSFOs pounding from the other side. She turns back:

In front of her is the roof ledge and Craig, stepping closer. Alex backs up into the corner, blood dripping into her eye.

Craig takes another step closer - almost within reach,

Alex SPRINGS forward with all her power, KNOCKING Craig back -

They tumble - Alex kicking and scratching, Craig trying to get a solid grip - rolling closer to the roof ledge - -

Craig sees Alex sliding dangerously close to the edge - he tries to stand when Alex GRABS his shirt, PULLING his shoulders over her -

Craig's eyes go wide as his shoulders TIP, carrying him head-first over the roof - his fingers grasp desperately at her but she slips from his grip - - -

Craig's body CRACKS against the pavement down below.

Alex's face, pressed hard against the edge of the roof - exhausted, bleeding.

Behind her, the roof door BLASTS open! CTSFOs pour out onto the roof

LATIANA

Alex!!

Alex grabs her trench coat from the ground and swings over the fire escape with Latiana.

EXT. KINGS CROSS GRANARY SQUARE - NIGHT

A crowd of onlookers gather at the fringes of the AR Press Area - blown inside out. Fear and horror on their faces: a powder keg of emotions that might erupt at any moment.

EXT. OXFORD STREET - NIGHT

Chaos. Police and emergency services try to make sense of the damage. Pedestrians everywhere. Anger, confusion, terror.

A HIPPIE in eco-friendly clothing walking through the mess is suddenly accosted by a BYSTANDER - he grabs her shoulders,

BYSTANDER

I bet you're happy now!! No technology?!!

Someone tries to pull off the bystander - gets mistaken for an attack. The bystander SWINGS, hitting someone else - and just like that, the powder keg erupts.

INT. INFINITE BOARD ROOM - NIGHT

The display behind Billy split-screens the escalating scenes from Kings Cross and Oxford Street. In front of him is a board room filled with concerned faces: city officials.

BILLY

I know we'd all rather this was a simulation. But I've called you here because there's no better time for me to show you the power of infinite's crisis response.

The display changes to a map of London with two clusters over Kings Cross and Oxford street - much like the AR visualisation from earlier.

BILLY (CONT'D)

What you have now is chaos. If you
will give me your permission to
show you: *control*

Mayor Hanen bows his head. Commissioner Powell is transfixed.

HANEN

I don't think we have a choice,

In turn, others at the table nod their assent. Billy nods; a
humble smile. He gestures to the display which has split into
a grid of drones-eye views, speeding across London.

EXT. CHINA TOWN SIDE STREET - NIGHT

Latiana and Alex walking briskly; the map on Latiana's phone
keeps glitching in and out.

ALEX

Did you get to the end of the
video?

LATIANA

Of your twin?

The heavy the sound of drones approaching. Alex whips off her
trench coat and kneels down -

ALEX

Under here!

A cluster of drones fly in the direction of Oxford Street.

DRONE VIEW - CONTINUOUS

One drone scans the side street, cycling through its sensors:
facial rec, gait patterns, heat signatures...

It zeroes in on an unknown shape, movement detected.

INT. INFINITE BOARD ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Behind Billy, the drone diagnoses the movement amongst a grid
of other feeds.

BILLY

Phase 1 we have Drone Enforcement
for perpetrators. Phase 2 we use
our familiar AR interface to handle
the public.

EXT. TRAFALGAR SQUARE

Mae stands shoulder to shoulder with other officers as they try to block off access to Oxford Street, bracing against a powerful crowd. A teenager screams,

TEENAGER

My friend is up there!! Let me through!

The sound of glass breaking. Someone yelling. Mae exchanges glances with the officer beside her - this isn't good.

A notification sound ripples through the crowd - a hush as people instinctively check phones: Information.

The pressure eases - people take direction from their mobiles. Mae and the officers look at each other, bewildered.

EXT. CHINA TOWN ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

The drone whirring continues. Alex and Latiana huddle under the trench coat

ALEX

What did my sister say about me in the video?

LATIANA

Shhh!

DRONE VIEW - CONTINUOUS

The drone focuses on the trench coat and scans but can't make sense of the patterns. It switches to heat signature...

EXT. CHINATOWN ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

The foil lining of Alex's coat crunches.

ALEX

Just give it to me then,

LATIANA

Give you what?

Alex stares at Latiana. Latiana looks at Alex seriously.

ALEX

You don't have it.

Alex starts to stand but Latiana grabs her wrist - HARD.

DRONE VIEW - CONTINUOUS

The trench coat shudders, but no heat signature is detected.

EXT. CHINATOWN ALLEY - CONTINUOUS

Alex stares at Latiana for what seems like ages, jaw clenched. The drone sound slowly drifts away.

Alex springs up and starts walking back the way they came,

LATIANA

Hey! HEY!

Alex whips around.

ALEX

I don't have Billy's playbook. I lied. And I can't get it without that USB and if I don't... I can't get Tate back.

LATIANA

What.

ALEX

I told him I'd trade.

LATIANA

The playbook that could break infinite wide open? Even if you *did* have it you can't just -

ALEX

You want me to leave Tate for dead?

LATIANA

No.

(beat)

I'm saying Tate wouldn't want you to give that book up either.

ALEX

This is my choice.

Alex takes off her trench coat and hands it over. Latiana looks at Alex: no mask, no coat.

LATIANA

You trying to commit suicide back there?

ALEX

I've died enough this week.

INT. INFINITE BOARD ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The formal meeting has concluded: officials are standing now, conversing, shaking hands.

Powell pats Billy on the back by the displays which now show control and organisation on the streets. Mayor Hanen shakes Billy's hand,

MAYOR HANEN

London thanks you, Mr. Campbell. If we didn't have AR here today -

Billy puts a hand on Mayor Hanen's arm,

BILLY

You might not have AR tomorrow. This was just a demonstration, Mr. Mayor.

HANEN

Yes... I'm sure the city has some incentive to offer you?

Billy smiles: Actuation Imperative.

INT. CLOSET - NIGHT

Marlow's hand flicking the switches back on her circuit breaker. The sound of her smart home coming back to life.

INT. MARLOW'S FLAT - NIGHT

Marlow steps out of the closet and the lights come on,

SMART HOME (V.O.)

Welcome home, Marlow

MARLOW

Shut up.

Marlow grabs the baseball bat off the ground, thinks about putting it behind the door - chucks it in the closet instead.

MARLOW (CONT'D)
Ok infinite. Dial the police.

INT. INFINITE BOARD ROOM - NIGHT

Powell conversing with Billy now; Micah checks her phone,

POWELL
I look forward to working together,
Micah whispers into Billy's ear.

INT. HALLWAY, INFINITE - CONTINUOUS

Billy nods politely as a pair of relieved officials filter past them. He turns to Micah,

BILLY
The reporter...

MICAH
I can't get through to Craig,

BILLY
No, we don't need him for this.
(beat)
Dox her.

INT. MARLOW'S FLAT - NIGHT

Marlow sits down at her desk and opens her laptop. A Twitter-esque newsfeed is bursting with images of her from the past 24 hours: CCTV screenshots of her and Alex in King's Cross, images of the gutted press area after the bomb...

Marlow's eyes widen, confused as she soaks up users' posts and comments: MARLOW DANIELS MEETS WITH MURDERER, TERRORIST ATTACK ENSUES - COINCIDENCE? Marlow is incredulous.

Her eyes follow the threads - racist rhetoric becoming more aggressive, violent. Grotesque photoshopped images of Marlow, pictures of nooses; she settles on a single comment:

MARLOW JEAN DANIELS, m.daniels@times.com, 121 LADY MARGARET ROAD, LONDON, N19 5ER, +44 7357 748 454...

MARLOW
Shit, shit...

A notification pings on Marlow's laptop: "YOU'VE BEEN DOXXED, BITCH". The sound of glass breaking: her front door.

EXT. TRAFALGAR SQUARE - NIGHT

Mae stands, relaxed with the other officers, overseeing the now-calm public receive instructions from their phones.

She notices a suspicious-looking YOUTH - hood up, glancing about the crowd. Mae lifts her mobile and uses an *infinite* + *MetPolice* app to tap into the person's phone:

Just the crisis instruction interface - nothing unusual.

Mae hears a laugh: a trio of YOUNG MEN deviating from the crowd, recording themselves. They don't look like thugs but something about them radiates dangerous energy.

Mae taps into one of their phones:

One of the men sticks his tongue out to the camera. The title of the video reads "SHE'LL GET WHAT SHE DESERVES" Mae clicks the accompanying link: Marlow Daniels - DOXXED.

Mae breaks the line of police, talking into her mobile,

MAE

Patterson; send an officer to Lady Margaret Road now. How fast can you get me a track on Marlow Daniels?

Mae stands in the middle of Trafalgar Square, bodies flowing around her...

KIT (V.O.)

... Immediately Ma'am. No delay on this one.

MAE

Give it to me.

EXT. SOHO SIDE STREET - NIGHT

Alex dashes through Soho, unmasked, no coat. She passes a street corner and Marlow's watch vibrates on her wrist: "Dropped Pin for Marlow"

ALEX

Fuck.

Alex puts the watch on Airplane Mode.

She looks up where the dropped pin indicated: an unassuming building with a glowing, cursive sign that reads HAWTHORNE.

Alex is drawn to it. She steps up to the building. It appears closed. An automated voice startles her:

HAWTHORNE (V.O.)
Welcome back, Ms. Parker.

Alex looks up to see a round, black, security camera staring down at her.

HAWTHORNE
Please enter your 6-digit security code.

Alex notices the keypad next to the door. She looks up again, then behind her. It's clear she's never been here before.

ALEX
Birthday?

Alex types in: 02-11-99. The keypad flashes red and makes a negative sound.

ALEX (CONT'D)
November second...

Alex re-types 11-02-99. The keypad flashes red.

HAWTHORNE
You have one more attempt. Please enter your 6-digit security code.

ALEX
What?

EXT. CHARING CROSS ROAD - CONTINUOUS

Mae follows the beacon into Soho; it blinks twice and then disappears - "Offline"

Mae walks faster toward the last registered location.

EXT. HAWTHORNE - CONTINUOUS

Alex takes a step down from the door and brings her hands to her face, winces at her bloodied eye. She looks at her face in the reflection of the darkened door.

ALEX
Gina, come on...

Behind her, the reflection of the HAWTHORNE sign glistens in a window opposite. Alex turns up to it. It shines brightly. Alex nearly chokes.

ALEX (CONT'D)

Oh my god.

For a moment it's as if Alex doesn't know what to do with her hands: thinking, wracking her brain for a memory... She shoves her hands into her jeans pocket - finds something.

The blood-stained note from Gina's photo, crumpled and worn:
ACTUATION IMPERATIVE HAWTHORNE - 361942
Alex stares at the numbers

The sound of 6 key strokes and the airlock release. The keypad is green and the door in front of her opens.

INT. HAWTHORNE LOBBY - CONTINUOUS

Alex steps into a deceptively large marble-designed lobby. The room is dim but for a thin line of light that appears on the floor. It lengthens, leading her down a maze-like corridor, disappearing behind her.

INT. SAFE DEPOSIT ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Alex follows the line of light into a room filled with safety deposit boxes.

The light climbs up a nearby wall and traces around the grid of doors until it circumscribes one in particular. There is a click and the box protrudes from the wall, waiting for Alex.

She hesitates.

Alex's eyes peer into the box: the playbook from Gina's video waits for her like a myth. She unwraps the leather,

Alex flipping through pages of names, dates, events; all hand-written. Sketches, equations, print-outs. It's a scrapbook of game theory, weighing out deaths, profits, deals...

INT. SISTER BASE - NIGHT

The base has been turned upside down. Micah walks through the mess, passing CTFOs and detainees, stopping next to Latiana's laptop which still shows Gina's face.

Micah palms the USB from the laptop and continues walking. Her phone buzzes.

BILLY (V.O.)
Have you found her?

INT. BILLY'S LONDON APARTMENT - NIGHT

Billy stands, gazing from a large window onto Trafalgar Square, holding an analogue telephone.

MICAH (V.O.)
Not yet.

Billy inhales.

BILLY
And Craig?

EXT. SISTER BASE - CONTINUOUS

Craig's crumpled body lies in a heap in the back alley behind the Chinese restaurant.

Micah stands over him and looks up.

MICAH
Unavailable.

BILLY (V.O.)
Find her Micah. And when you do,
send her to me.

INT. HAWTHORNE - NIGHT

Alex follows the light back, holding the playbook. She stares at a route on her watch to the infinite building in King's Cross.

Alex turns the corner and freezes.

EXT. HAWTHORNE - CONTINUOUS

Mae is standing with her walkie talkie and her MP7 rifle, looking straight into the building. Her eyes go wide in recognition,

Mae rushes the door. It doesn't open. Alex relaxes. Mae grabs an ID card from her pocket, waves it next to the keypad. It flashes green.

INT. HAWTHORNE CORRIDORS - CONTINUOUS

Alex slings her back against a pillar out of sight.

The sound of police-issue boots against marble. Mae steps tentatively, gun raised, torch on. Mae's voice echoes:

MAE

Alex Parker is that you?

Alex takes a slim glance around the corner: Mae is looking the other direction.

MAE (CONT'D)

Or did I just see a ghost?

A scurrying behind Mae. She whips around, wary of leaving the exit unattended.

MAE (CONT'D)

You're clever - faking that crash in the Docklands so you could bomb infinite today?

(beat)

Did Christopher find out your plans? Is that why you killed him? Or did you just kill him because he dumped you.

Alex pins herself against a row of safety deposit boxes,

ALEX

I didn't kill Chris -

MAE

Well!? What did Max do? or Marlow?

ALEX

What? -

Mae slings her mobile across the floor in Alex's direction - she stops it with her foot, picks it up: an image of Max, shot dead in his garage. Alex winces.

MAE

Keep scrolling,

Alex scrolls to find an image of Marlow, beaten, in hospital,

ALEX

What the fuck!

MAE

There's a trail of death here,
Alex, and it all starts with you.

Alex slips around the pillar and slumps to the floor,
scrolling through Contacts in Mae's phone to MY IDENTITY
CARD: MARGARET MAE - phone, address, etc.

ALEX

No, this is bigger than me.

Alex flips through the playbook, searching,

ALEX (CONT'D)

When was the last time you got
anywhere without infiniteE telling
you where to go and how to get
there? Do you choose *anything*
anymore? Or do you just take
infiniteE's recommendation?

(beat)

I don't think I know what it's like
to choose. To know the difference
between what infiniteE wanted for me
and what *I* wanted for me... Until
right now.

Mae catches Alex's reflection, edges closer,

ALEX (CONT'D)

I have infiniteE's playbook. In
Billy's own handwriting, proof of
his control and manipulation - of
elections, sales, stock prices,
events... We're not people in his
eyes, we're pawns. Gina found that
out the hard way.

MAE

Your twin?

ALEX

It wasn't a suicide.

Mae steps one boot in front of the other, silently,

MAE

If that's the truth, why don't you
give me the book, Alex? You can
trust me.

Alex looks at the book.

ALEX

Thing is, I do, Mae... But I'm
gonna need more than the truth to
get out of this alive.

Mae whips around the corner poised with her MP7, aiming where
Alex should be, but she's gone.

A flurry of footsteps - the door of Hawthorne swings closed.

Mae lowers her weapon. She looks down - her mobile is on the
floor, the screen open to a tracking beacon, moving away. She
has a choice: chase or track.

Mae chases.

INT. INFINITE PRIVATE CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT

Micah at the grid with the Watchers: they've got a gait match
for Alex - she's running.

WATCHER 1

We've got her - heading west -

MICAH

Nudge her back the way she came - I
need her going north.

EXT. SOHO SIDE STREET - CONTINUOUS

Alex sprints. She nears the end of a side street and nearly
comes face to face with a trio of drones.

Alex slides to a stop, ducking behind a large bin. She looks
down at her watch, then runs back the way she came.

INT. INFINITE PRIVATE CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

WATCHER 1

I see the book,

MICAH

Good. Get her moving.

Watcher 2 opens a crowd control app in-grid and begins
arranging a path out of Leicester Square.

EXT. LEICESTER SQUARE - NIGHT

Alex slows to a walk: bright lights and big crowds - it's rammed. She checks the route on her watch,

ALEX

Come on...

Alex looks up and a subtle parting in the crowd seems to appear - an easy way out. Alex hesitates for a moment but follows it,

EXT. LEICESTER SQUARE - NIGHT

Winded, Mae looks around - Alex is nowhere in sight. She checks the beacon on her mobile - it's still moving.

INT. INFINITE PRIVATE CONTROL ROOM - NIGHT

WATCHER 1

She's trying to get to King's Cross

Micah shakes her head at the screen,

MICAH

Keep nudging,

Watcher 2 prepares to direct a police van towards a nearby street.

EXT. SIDE STREETS, LONDON - CONTINUOUS

Alex walking swiftly, playbook in hand. She slows at a corner; the nose of a police van hovers at the opposite end.

INT. INFINITE PRIVATE CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

They watch as Alex jogs in the other direction,

INT. INTERROGATION ROOM - NIGHT

Tate, slumped over in his chair - unmoving.

Behind his back, his wrist is nearly white, squeezing through the loosened bind. It slips through.

Tate's eyes open.

EXT. CHARING CROSS ROAD - NIGHT

Latiana, runs, head down, in Alex's trench coat. A whistle, she stops. Hailey leans out a corner holding a mask for her,

LATIANA
How's the network,

HAILEY
It's there, just nobody's on it.

EXT. COCKSPUR APARTMENTS - NIGHT

Alex halts outside the entrance of a discreet, luxury-style apartment building. Part of the street is cordoned off. She tries to turn back but a drone hovers dangerously close - she's cornered.

Alex steps up to the apartment building for cover and nearly trips backward when the doors behind her slide open.

Alex checks the settings on her watch: "infinite: NO NETWORK CONNECTION". A thought crosses her face...

INT. INFINITE PRIVATE CONTROL ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Micah watches Alex explore the lobby of Billy's apartment.

MICAH
Send her up.

WATCHER 2
Losing eyes on her...

Micah reaches for her mobile.

EXT. COCKSPUR APARTMENTS - CONTINUOUS

The lift doors open. Alex steps inside. She unwraps the playbook: pages and pages...

EXT. COCKSPUR APARTMENTS, LONDON - NIGHT

Mae stares at her phone - the beacon has disappeared. She looks around: Alex is gone.

MAE
Dammit!

INT. BILLY'S LONDON APARTMENT - NIGHT

From the view of his high rise apartment, Billy Campbell watches the scene outside. The weather is starting to turn, soft echoes of thunder in the distance, but no rain just yet.

ALEX (O.S.)

"Accessible on your terms", right?

Billy smiles. He turns around slowly: Alex stands at the entrance, playbook in hand, the door shuts behind her.

BILLY

That's right. No network coverage here. My own private island,

ALEX

I'm right where you want me.

BILLY

And you have my book,

Alex raises it in her hand,

ALEX

Where's Tate.

INT. HALLWAY, INFINITE - NIGHT

Tate peers out cautiously, gingerly shutting the door behind him, heading for the door at the end of the hall marked "Emergency Exit"

INT. BILLY'S LONDON APARTMENT - NIGHT

Billy leans on the arm rest of a velvet chaise near the telephone table. He looks much smaller in person.

BILLY

It's neither of our concerns now.

INT. HALLWAY, INFINITE - NIGHT

A door next to Tate opens and he comes face to face with Watcher 3. Tate barely hesitates - he RAMS all his weight into the Watcher, propelling them both back into the room.

INT. SERVER ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The men tumble backwards - Watcher 3 is no match for Tate, who is a frenzy of punches and kicks.

Tate pauses - Watcher 3 doesn't move. Knocked out.

Tate gets up and is about to leave when he notices where he is. The whirring and white-blue light of infinite's server room surrounds him.

Footsteps. Tate hugs the wall next to the door as Micah passes down the hall. He looks at the unconscious Watcher and spies a palm pilot on the Watcher's belt.

INT. BILLY'S LONDON APARTMENT - NIGHT

Billy reclines,

BILLY

I asked Micah to dispose of him the second you got here.

ALEX

We had a deal -

BILLY

And you just waltzed in here with your one bargaining chip, so...

ALEX

You didn't give me a choice.

Billy raises a finger and smiles.

BILLY

But you *thought* I did.

ALEX

I haven't given it over just yet.

Billy puts a hand on the drawer where he keeps his gun.

BILLY

Well you will.

INT. SERVER ROOM - NIGHT

Inside the server room Tate's grey eyes soak up the "brain" of infinite. He looks down at the commands on the palm pilot:

"Accessing Li-Fi Network... Live feed detected... View?"

Tate clicks OK: on the palm pilot screen is a live feed of Billy, from his apartment. Interested, Tate clicks the volume up - Alex's voice becomes audible.

ALEX (V.O.)
 You never told me *why* you showed
 Gina this book. You said you showed
 her, but not *why*.

INT. BILLY'S LONDON APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

From the angle of Tate's viewer we see the faintest invisible outline of Marlow's watch, still on Alex's wrist, in camo mode. Billy raises his gun.

ALEX
 Were you trying to impress her?
 (beat)
 Now you're in front of me, I can
 see you better. You're not a
 spectre, you're just a man.

She levels her eyes to his - her face reflected in the mirror behind Billy.

INT. SERVER ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Tate frantically types commands into the server beside him,

TATE
 Oh, Ale -

EXT. CHARING CROSS ROAD - NIGHT

Latiana and Hailey walk swiftly, holding their phones out. Alex's voice plays on both their devices:

ALEX (V.O.)
 I bet you were afraid to talk to
 her. So you had your *data* get to
 know her for you. What did you see?

LATIANA
 Where's it coming from?

Suddenly, Alex's voice BOOMS out over Trafalgar Square - the women race around the corner to see Alex projected wide on infinite's massive AR Billboards,

ALEX (V.O.)

Early alarms. Long hours. Ambitious resumé. Consistent routine. High engagement. The data showed she was married to her work.

INT. SERVER ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Tate looks at the palm pilot: "Routing Li-Fi input... Output: AR Launch Master Feed". He looks pleased.

ALEX (V.O.)

Did you think your power over others would *turn her on*?

The sound of the door clicking. Tate turns and gets DECKED with a razor sharp elbow to the jaw - he goes reeling, the palm pilot clattering to the floor.

Micah stands over him, jaw set.

INT. BILLY'S LONDON APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Alex glances out the window - sees her feed projected large on the billboards in Trafalgar Square, then suddenly cut out.

She turns back to see Billy staring at her, a sinister heat creeping up his neck. Alex leans against a sideboard with a long metal table lamp, the playbook still in hand.

ALEX

You looked at a bunch of data points and you thought you *knew* Gina, but you never knew her heart. She wasn't ruthless, she was *compassionate*.

(beat)

I bet she was disgusted by you.

BILLY

Fuck you.

Billy cocks the gun,

ALEX

You took my life. You think you can kill me again?

Alex lets the leather cover flip open on the ledger and Billy looks over: the pages are gone - every one of them torn out.

Alex LUNGES for the gun!

EXT. TRAFALGAR SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

Latiana and Hailey cross the road into Trafalgar Square, eyes to the large billboards where adverts are playing again.

Suddenly the screens glitch and return to Alex's camera feed: it's blurry with movement - murmurs from the crowd as they try to keep up.

Suddenly the screens flicker, go dark, and then return to scrolling infinite adverts. Latiana and Hailey look at each other. Looks of confusion from the crowd.

INT. SERVER ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Tate, on the floor with the palm pilot - he's reached it.

INT. BILLY'S LONDON APARTMENT

Alex and Billy, tumbling on the floor - the gun lays just out of reach.

EXT. TRAFALGAR SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

The feed snaps back on: Alex pulls herself on the floor towards the gun. Hailey is typing away into her Blackberry,

HAILEY
I can't tell where she's
transmitting from -

Suddenly the camera is YANKED up - Billy throws Alex HARD against a sideboard. The public watches, rapt, as if it were a movie - not real at all.

INT. SERVER ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Micah throws a heavy KICK at Tate on the floor - his head goes flinging into a server. He stops moving.

Micah's hand picks up the palm pilot.

EXT. TRAFALGAR SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

The feed glitches out - back to adverts. People look around, waiting for something to happen.

LATIANA
Where'd she go?

Hailey gestures to Latiana's phone - the feed is still up

HAILEY

Still streaming for us - just not
infinite.

A few rain droplets fall on Hailey's hand. She notices them.

Latiana looks around at the crowd beginning to look for cover, as if they'd forgotten everything already.

LATIANA

It's here!! Use li-fi!

The people close to her look at Latiana like she's crazy.

INT. HALLWAY, INFINITE - NIGHT

Micah walks down the hall holding her mobile to her ear, followed by two SECURITY THUGS dragging Tate, unconscious.

The sound of ringing through Micah's mobile.

INT. BILLY'S LONDON APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Alex gasps for air beneath Billy's hands, gripping her neck, pressing her down into the sideboard. She holds up her watch hand, trying to capture the violence - but out the window the screens on Trafalgar Square have returned to adverts.

The sound of Billy's analogue telephone ringing...

Alex opens and closes her eyes, barely able to breathe - tears streaming down her face. Outside, Billy's image smiles at her from the billboards, advertising a sleek new infinite product: *Sell! Sell! Sell!*

Alex drops her hands.

EXT. TRAFALGAR SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

Rain falling heavier now. Latiana turns to leave,

HAILEY

Wait!

Behind them, the screens flicker... Someone gasps.

The view from Alex's watch is clearer now that she's stopped moving - Billy Campbell squeezing the life out of a woman.

BYSTANDER 1
What the hell is that?

BYSTANDER 2
It's Billy Campbell!

BYSTANDER 3
Is this *for real*?

INT. MICAH'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Micah drives, still holding her mobile. She pulls the car out of a garage near Kings Cross and SLAMS on the brakes:

Billy is projected on one of the remaining billboards from the launch, choking Alex to death.

EXT. TRAFALGAR SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

Latiana can't take her eyes off Alex.

HAILEY
The rain's disrupting infinite's
network - I hacked into the feeds!

LATIANA
She's not moving.

INT. BILLY'S LONDON APARTMENT

Alex's eyes squeeze shut as a wall of emotion breaks - noises choke out from her compressed throat. Her face isn't pained from strangulation, it's pained with *grief*.

Then, her eyes flutter and all she can hear is the rain pattering against the large windows, blending with the sound of...

EXT. TAOS HIGH SCHOOL STADIUM - FLASHBACK

A small crowd of parents and teens: clapping and chanting in the bleachers around a high school baseball diamond. Santa Fe Indians in the outfield, Taos Tigers in the dugout; TEENAGE ALEX is at bat.

The pitcher coils up and throws a fastball - Alex freezes.

UMPIRE
Striiike!

TEAMMATE

Come on Ale! Bases loaded!

In Alex's eyes, there is just fear. She scans the bases for her teammates in orange - two look unforgiving, but one is her own face looking back at her: Gina. Vibrant, determined. Gina's eyes meet Alex's. Her energy is infectious.

UMPIRE

Strike 2!

Groans from the bleachers,

Alex didn't even notice the ball whizz past. She searches for Gina. The pitcher coils back to sling another fast one. Gina mouths the word: SWING!

INT. BILLY'S LONDON APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Alex's fingers graze the long iron table lamp, she grips it, and with her last ounce of strength she SWINGS it across Billy Campbell's jaw, sending him backwards in a stupor. A crying WAIL erupts from Alex's throat as he releases his grip on her -

EXT. TRAFALGAR SQUARE - CONTINUOUS

The crowd erupts in a gasp. Latiana and Hailey look around: some people are switching to li-fi and getting the feed on their phones,

INT. BILLY'S LONDON APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Alex sits up, heaving, gasping for air.

Billy's home phone, still clanging. Bleeding from his jaw, he stands and picks it up, pointing his gun at her, crazed.

BILLY

(into phone, panting)

What.

Alex is sweaty, shaking, pale as if she were dead but for once her body is electric with *life*. As if every emotion she buried since Gina's death has finally risen to the surface.

INT. MICAH'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Micah grips the steering wheel, staring up at a billboard

MICAH

Look outside.

On the billboard, Billy is on the phone, gun outstretched. He turns,

INT. BILLY'S LONDON APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Billy looks out his window and sees himself: savage, bloody, chest rising and falling, gun outstretched. And thousands of people, staring.

He returns his gaze to Alex, her hands raised. She flicks her wrist and Marlow's watch becomes visible. In her eyes we see peace. In his eyes, there is something we've never seen before: desperation.

Billy turns the gun on himself,

ALEX

No!

A BLAST - police BURST through Billy's door - he fires the gun - Alex falls backwards - Clouds of dust and debris.

MAE (O.S.)

Police!! Freeze!

INT. MICAH'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Over her phone Micah can hear the commotion. She hangs up and floors it.

INT. BILLY'S LONDON APARTMENT - NIGHT

The dust is settling. Mae, a good few inches taller than Billy, restrains him. He yowls where the bullet misfired into his shoulder.

Mae hands control of Billy to another officer who escorts him out. She joins Alex by the sideboard,

ALEX

I thought you'd never get here,

Mae looks over to the burst down door where the folded pages of Billy's playbook are stuffed into his security box.

MAE

Why did you trust me.

ALEX

Your name wasn't in the book.

An officer attempts to remove Alex's watch for evidence,

ALEX (CONT'D)

Wait -

Mae holds up a hand to the officer. They watch as Alex reverse dials the last call on Billy's phone. She holds her watch up to the receiver - after each digit tone a number pops up on her wrist.

ALEX (CONT'D)

I need a computer.

INT. POLICE VEHICLE - NIGHT

Alex sits in the passenger seat, typing into the car's pull-out touch screen. Mae watches uneasily from the drivers side.

MAE

What are you doing?

On screen a phone number trace shows a fast-moving beacon on a map. Alex taps the screen into satellite mode, zooms in and snaps a picture of the car from behind: a black Audi, the license plate clearly visible.

Alex slips her i10 watch off and holds it out to Mae,

ALEX

You can have that now.

MAE

I've still got to arrest you.

Alex types the license plate into another window: it's a car insurance interface: *Direct Line*. A flurry of keystrokes and she's done. Alex nods to the beacon on screen,

ALEX

You're gonna want to send someone to that location.

Alex holds out her hands, Mae cuffs her.

INT. MICAH'S CAR - NIGHT

Micah, speeding under Euston Bridge. Suddenly, the electrics flicker and the car pulls over. Micah presses the gas, trying to steer but the car doesn't respond. The doors lock.

CAR BUDDY (V.O.)
This car has been seized by your
Direct Line insurance provider. Do
not attempt to leave.

Micah tries to force the doors - she's stuck. She smacks the window, furious.

EXT. EUSTON ROAD - NIGHT

Police lights shine on Micah's black Audi, parked on the side of the road. An officer escorts Micah from the driver's seat.

Another officer's hand opens the boot of the car, revealing Tate, bound and bruised but alive. He blinks gingerly.

BLACKBERRY SCREEN

Scrolling down a Twitter-esque newsfeed;

CEO OF infinite INDICTED AFTER LIVESTREAM ATTEMPTED MURDER,
DATA TAX BILL VOTE-SHAM? PARLIAMENT AGREES ON SECOND READING,
infinite NETWORK SUSPENDED PENDING INVESTIGATION ON SO-CALLED
'ACTUATION IMPERATIVE'

WHAT IS LI-FI? THE PRIVATE NETWORK THAT'S YOURS, FOR FREE

EXT. MET POLICE STATION - NEXT DAY

Tate leans against a lamp post, scrolling through his blackberry. The sound of a door opening;

ALEX (O.S.)
I thought I lost you.

He looks up to see Alex, her face bandaged, neck bruised, standing in the morning sun. They gaze at each other.

Tate slips his phone into his back pocket. He's also worse for wear, one arm in a sling. He smiles at her softly.

TATE
Well, I'm alive. You too, it seems.

Alex nods. He gestures to something in her hand: the crumpled photo of her and Gina in their baseball uniforms.

TATE (CONT'D)
Hey, one of your memories.

Alex looks at the photo. Her thumb traces Gina's face. Something in her voice catches.

ALEX
I wish she was here.

Tate looks at Alex as she puts the photo in her jacket.

BELINDA (O.S.)
Ms. Parker!

Tate and Alex look back towards the station - *what now*.

Belinda trots up to them, holding the infinite i10 watch, bagged from evidence.

BELINDA (CONT'D)
You forgot this.

Alex takes the baggie,

ALEX
Thanks.

A gently honk; Latiana's black van pulls up beside them, window down.

LATIANA
Want a ride?

ALEX
Where you headed?

LATIANA
Anywhere, you choose.

They get in. Alex looks down at her wrist.

As the van pulls away, something flings out the passenger window and cracks on the pavement: the infinite i10 watch.

- END -

ANALYSIS: *Render*

Where *Fissure* was a petri dish or 'scale model' within which I could trial the theoretical propositions I made in my first two chapters with little risk, the sheer size of *Render* made it significantly more challenging to write, but all the more rich and appropriate as a feature-length conspiracy thriller to infer upon. As the purpose of this thesis is to discern whether and how it is possible to re-introduce political, public-facing narratives in conspiracy film amidst a 21st century technological and conspiracy culture, this creative practice element was written to demonstrate, stress-test, and evaluate the efficacy of the techniques and methods I propose in my third chapter. Specifically, *Render* aims to:

- Serve as a genre model for a politically forceful tradition 1 conspiracy thriller by incorporating the tropes and attributes observed and identified in my first chapter, updating them within a 21st century story world that mimics conspiracy culture and a growing mediation of lived experience through technology
- Feature a non-white, working-class female protagonist whose agency is restricted by forces of the unseen threat and not a regressive, culturally approved rhetoric for femininity as proposed in my second chapter,
- Overcome the weakening of political force made by the privatisation of the conspiracy genre and its failure to engage with conspiracy culture by utilising the new techniques for Protagonist, Behemoth, and Mechanisms for Justice that I developed while writing *Fissure* and that are formally proposed in my third chapter.

The distinct challenge of writing *Render* was not in employing or applying the theoretical elements of my chapters onto a conspiracy narrative as I had done in my case studies and reference films throughout this thesis, it was in attempting to *project* a conspiratorial near-future and imagine what viable, contemporary justice might look like within it. Just as female-driven conspiracy narratives seemed only ever to be a reaction *within* the confines of expectations of femininity, my own imaginings of conspiracy and justice, like the failed 21st century 'lame duck' conspiracy films I

studied, were constrained within the 20th century paradigms of earlier conspiracy films. Where *Sorry to Bother You's* politically forceful, anti-capitalistic message didn't reach the realm of Big Technology and where *The Circle's* illustration of surveillance capitalism didn't acknowledge conspiracy culture or the double-edge sword nature of these large technological forces, I sought to do both with *Render* whilst invigorating the possibility of a viable, tradition 1 narrative with a sincere, triumphant, and hopeful ending. Where "the internet and mobile telecommunications technology have altered the texture of everyday experience beyond all recognition... perhaps *because* of all this, there's an increasing sense that culture has lost the ability to grasp and articulate the present" (Fisher, 2014, p.9). Early drafts of *Render* reflected my grappling with palpable 20th century paradigms and a 21st century (self) awareness that struggled to articulate the present. On the surface, *Render* is an amalgam of classic conspiracy/thriller plots:

- Assassination plot gone wrong for the woman who knew too much (*The Pelican Brief*)
- Hunted protagonist in possession of incriminating evidence (*The Net, Enemy of the State*)
- Protagonist on the run must solve the crime before law enforcement catches him (*The Fugitive*)

Someone dying or disappearing at the start of the film is a ubiquitous trope of the conspiracy genre¹³² and in the first twenty pages, *Render* kills two: the suicide of Parker's twin sister, Gina, is a foreshock to the seismic event of Parker finding her ex-boyfriend/housemate, Chris, stabbed to death -- with all the digital evidence pointing to her.

seen threat: Believing someone has hacked into her infinite profile (the interface that mediates all citizens' lives) and framed her for Chris' death, Parker is on the run and desperate to clear her name. However, she soon realises the reason she's in danger might have something to do with her sister's recent 'suicide'...

¹³² See Appendix: Conspiracy Film Tropes 1969-2020

unseen threat: colossal tech company infinitE has surreptitiously introduced ‘Actuation Imperative’ -- an algorithm that not only predicts the choices of its customers and users, but has the power to change their minds and actions without them knowing. It’s a programme that sells free will to the highest bidder. Parker’s sister, Gina, found out and was killed for trying to expose the truth.

Although not immediately apparent to Alex, her seen and unseen threats are intrinsically linked: there is no way for her to clear her name without exposing and disabling infinitE’s Actuation Imperative. This doesn’t preclude Alex from being selfish or self-centred at the start of the narrative, but it does ensure that her actions become public-facing for a viable tradition 1 ending.

The original inspiration for *Render* was not the stories of young people in Veles, Macedonia who earned thousands of dollars a day writing fake news pieces in advance of the 2016 presidential election¹³³, it was a dream I had. Perhaps fueled by the many times in the last four years that I have thought -- of real events -- ‘If I wrote this in a screenplay, no one would believe me,’ in my dream, I wrote *Render*: a fictional screenplay that purported a conspiracy so astonishing... it was actually true. And in my dream, the conspirators found my screenplay and began hunting me -- I had to escape London, the ‘most watched city in the world’¹³⁴ and expose the truth before it was too late. Unfortunately, I awoke before I could find out how my dream ended or remember what my astonishing conspiracy actually was, but the premise stuck with me, and this flawed concept -- of a protagonist with one foot in the 21st century (with side hustles, an IT job,

¹³³ “President Barack Obama himself spent a day in the final week of the campaign talking ‘almost obsessively’ about Veles and its ‘digital gold rush’” where young Macedonian “entrepreneurs” could earn up to \$4,000/month on fake news in a place where the average monthly salary is \$371 (Subramanian, 2017).

¹³⁴ Once referred to as “the most watched city in the world” (Evans, 2012) London is currently “the only city outside of China to feature in the top 10” most surveilled cities in the world with “627,727 cameras for a population of 9.3 million – equal to one camera for every 14 residents” (Keegan, 2020).

and a smart home) and the other foot nostalgically stuck in the 20th (working nights at a defunct cinema whilst secretly writing her own screenplay) became the starting point for *Render*.

The story's behemoth was necessarily a representation of Big Technology; even in early drafts, the fictional conglomerate infinitE was present as a reflection of the power and pervasiveness of companies like Facebook, Google, Apple, or Amazon. I was able to identify individual characters¹³⁵ within infinitE that would make up part of the **many-headed monster**, but I struggled to imagine what the unseen threat -- the underlying conspiracy -- really was. Conspiracy films are known for their reactionary quality, responding to and processing events which have already happened; I hoped this would mean that the astonishing conspiracy I was looking for was already in existence. And in fact, it was: but how does one dramatically portray the threats of surveillance capitalism when we are surrounded by it, dependent on it, every day? Again, this problem of articulating the present arose: if Zuboff can admit that the infraction of surveillance capitalism “no longer seems astonishing to us, or perhaps even worthy of note” (2018, p.78), how might I present this unseen threat as something dangerous and deserving of justice when the Watergate moments of the 21st century -- the Panama papers¹³⁶, the Cambridge Analytica scandal¹³⁷ -- seem to have been buried, with no trace of such cinema-worthy justice? I could rely on an ontological portrayal of the private-facing, emotional consequences of living in a surveillance capitalist society (Parker's ‘always on’/always transmitting home and work life ensure that she cannot even mourn her sister's death), but I would have to

¹³⁵ Key antagonistic characters include: main antagonist Billy Campbell (CEO and face of infinitE, who is responsible for Gina Parker's death and multiple false-flag attacks meant to ‘frame and shame’ Alex), Campbell's ‘right hand’, Micah, and her team of watchers (Parker's adversaries in the digital realm who predict and manipulate her actions), and Micah's hired muscle, Craig (who occupies the ‘unseen assassin/hitman/stalker in the shadows’ conspiracy trope).

¹³⁶ The Panama Papers were “a giant leak of more than 11.5 million financial and legal records [exposing] a system that enables crime, corruption and wrongdoing, hidden by secretive offshore companies” (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 2018).

¹³⁷ The Cambridge Analytica scandal refers to “revelations that digital consultants to the Trump campaign misused the data of millions of Facebook users [which] set off a furor on both sides of the Atlantic” (Confessore, 2018).

imagine *hauntological* justice -- “not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing” (Fisher, 2014, p.18). The theft of surveillance capitalism is not glaring or murderous, “there is no violence here, only the steady displacement of the will to will” (Zuboff, 2018, p.381) and the theft of free will is subtle. Initial drafts of the script forewent an engagement with this subtlety, only managing to represent surveillance capitalism as a backdrop with the unseen threat centreing more on the coverup of the conspiracy than the conspiracy itself:

Gina, Alex’s sister, is killed for trying to expose bribery of government officials by infinitE. In denial about her sister’s death, Alex writes a screenplay about it which (through some albeit narrative gymnastics) falls into the hands of infinitE, sending them on her trail.

Even in this early, convoluted form, *Render* portrays “a convergence of political circumstances and proactive strategies” (Zuboff, 2018, p.101), representing the pluralistic motivations and radical indifference¹³⁸ of Big Technology: the target on Parker’s back isn’t personal -- it’s simply the most efficient way for infinitE to continue frictionless operation¹³⁹. Initial representations of justice in these versions of the script stemmed from an exposure of the unseen threat through the usual routes: arrests or media exposure. I had even toyed with the possibility of democratic justice via a parliamentary vote or an election: mechanisms identified in my third chapter as politically forceful but which were, admittedly, still very much 20th century solutions.

¹³⁸ “We don’t care if you’re happy or sad. We just care that we can get the data. We don’t care if you have cancer if you’re getting married or if you’re planning a terrorist attack, we just care that we get the data. Radical indifference is about maximizing flows of data, not because these are evil people, but because this is the compulsion of this economic logic. Until we interrupt and outlaw that economic logic, we will have disinformation” (Zuboff in Powers, 2020).

¹³⁹ “Big Other does not care what we think, feel, or do as long as its millions, billions, and trillions of sensate, actuating, computational eyes and ears can observe, render, datafy, and instrumentalise the vast reservoirs of behavioural surplus that are generated in the galactic uproar of connection and communication” (Zuboff, 2018, p.377).

Just like Glenn in *Fissure*, in early drafts of *Render*, Alejandra Parker was a version of myself. And as in *Fissure*, I would eventually let her go, along with other vestiges of the 20th century that clouded *Render*'s rightful behemoth and mechanisms for justice. Removing myself from the protagonist by eliminating the screenplay plot element marked a turning point in Alejandra's character development where I began to see her as a distinctly 21st century conspiracy protagonist. *Render* now presents Alejandra Parker, a stuck-in-the-rut tech vlogger who discovers that she can quickly and easily supplement her income by writing clickbait conspiracies online. Parker is a contemporary, burnt-out millennial: she is not a journalist, a lawyer, a police officer or soldier; she is a working-class woman of colour whose knowledge of computer technology might qualify her as a 'hacker', but who is really an over-qualified grunt worker with multiple side hustles¹⁴⁰.

Parker's world is one where relinquishing privacy reaps financial rewards: she shares a flat with her ex-boyfriend Chris to save on rent and even toys with camgirling¹⁴¹ for more cash. Her life is insular and distracted: she has the illusion of connection through social media, but has few, if any, real friends. Here, "the boundaries between work and non-work are eroded" with Alex never missing "an opportunity to marketise [her] own subjectivity" (Fisher, 2014, p.179-180) in order to top up her constantly diminishing inCredits balance (the ubiquitous cryptocurrency sponsored by major tech provider infinitE). The task at hand is always: capital. She works for the behemoth (initially as a transcriber at an infinitE data factory) where her Master's degree in Computer Engineering is essentially wasted, like many millennials who "may be the most well-educated of the generations so far, but they also seem to be overqualified for the jobs they are doing" (Bachman, 2019). This lack of a singular professional identity for Parker is deliberate, and reflects a contemporary workforce whose job "title doesn't encompass the life [they] are living as a result of the job (or jobs) they are

¹⁴⁰ A side hustle is "a secondary business or job that brings in, or has potential to bring in, extra income" (Henley Business School, 2018, p.1). It is possible that by 2030, 50% of the UK's population could have a side hustle (Henley Business School, 2018, p.3).

¹⁴¹ A camgirl is "a woman who poses for a webcam especially as a form of paid adult entertainment" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

doing” (Shroeder, 2017) and allows Parker’s motives for the first half of the film to be entirely private-facing. Parker’s lucrative side hustle as a peddler of fake news is where her **corruption of the protagonist** takes root. Like the Macedonian teenagers in *Veles* who “didn’t care if Trump won or lost the White House” (Subramanian, 2017), Alejandra Parker profits from conspiracy culture at the cost of others’ reputations and at the cost of manipulating others’ perceived realities. In this way, protagonist Alejandra Parker initially shares in the “radical indifference” of antagonist Billy Campbell. Parker’s decision to return for the USB (which will lead her to Campbell’s playbook) indicates her **emergence of the inner voice**; from this moment on, Parker’s actions shift from private to public-facing as she emerges from hiding and forges into the lion’s den to save Tate by exposing Campbell and infinitE.

This new version, where the fake news that Parker peddles to ‘revise’ her sister’s suicide ends up being true, engages directly with the blurring of conspiracy ‘fact’ and conspiracy fiction that is characteristic of conspiracy culture whilst still hearkening back to my original inspiration. At the time, the unseen threat was still a network of corruption between law enforcement, government officials, and corporations. Was this astonishing? Or, in the 21st century, is corruption and bribery *expected*? The next development arose, surprisingly, after my decision to join Instagram. I was no stranger to social media, but I was unsettled by the absolutely transparent in-app advert experience where, moments or days after mentioning a problem or a product in conversation even near my phone or via text, an advert with a product or subscription addressing this barely-expressed desire would appear on my screen. The seamless connectivity of my Facebook, Gmail, Instagram, Amazon, Twitter, own private messages, and browsing history all seemed to be conspiring against any ability to control my spending habits... And it worked. I have bought from these adverts. And when these phantom products arrive -- products I never would have sought out, but that were irresistibly presented in front of me at a price I couldn’t turn down -- I have thought to myself, ‘Did I really *choose* this?’

Why bribe someone when you can use all the social information already at your disposal to present them with a choice you *know* they will take? This is actuation imperative, and these ‘guaranteed outcomes’ already exist¹⁴². The shifting of infinitE’s stance away from one of *collusion* to *manipulation* gave the behemoth more agency, more power, clarified who Billy Campbell was as an antagonist, and gave me the confidence to revise visual representations of Big Technology in my script. In subsequent drafts I updated infinitE’s data centre from the pastiche of a 20th century, Kafkaesque workplace¹⁴³, to a more imaginative, invasive, augmented reality theatre. I had also previously tried to differentiate the technologies used by SISTER and infinitE in an effort to make one more ethical; however, I later incorporated the **double-edged sword** aspect of Big Technology, allowing both SISTER, infinitE, and law enforcement to employ the same tools, but for different means, and often in competition.

Rather than representing the press as watchdog for democracy, *Render* engages with conspiracy culture by immediately establishing the press as an unreliable source. The character of Marlow Daniels is a response to *Green Zone*’s Lawrie Dayne as a modern, self-serving reporter who *can* be pressured to tow the corporate line and drop a story for her own survival. Law enforcement is presented as a power-hungry force that is not to be trusted. As a woman of colour, Parker understands the moment her digital alibi begins to crumble that her best option isn’t to stick around and chat -- she must run. DCI Mae does eventually become an ally to Parker by apprehending Campbell, but this isn’t due to any trust or protectiveness she has for Parker; rather, Mae’s decision to apprehend Campbell stems from the distrust and suspicion of him she developed when infinitE didn’t

¹⁴² Michael Moran, research director at Gartner, the world's leading research and advisory company “says that high-fidelity mastering of IoT data objects will serve as a key enabler in the transformation of business models from ‘guaranteed levels of performance’ to ‘guaranteed outcomes’” (Pettey, 2017). “The aim of this undertaking is not to impose behavioral norms, such as conformity or obedience, but rather to produce behaviour that reliably, definitively, and certainly leads to desired commercial results” (Zuboff, 2018, p. 203).

¹⁴³ The vast bureaucracy/office setting is a classic trope across genres meant to make the protagonist feel unimportant, anonymous, like a cog in the machine, and can be seen in *Brazil* (1985), *Fight Club* (1999), *The Circle* (2017), and *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), among many others.

immediately hand over its power of surveillance to her after Chris' murder. Parliament, as a mechanism for justice with the slowest temporality, is referenced at the start and end of the screenplay via the Data Tax Bill which was originally voted down but will be reconsidered along with new investigations into Campbell's/infiniT's corruption.

Act by act, I could feel *Render* achieving its aims: Alejandra Parker portrays a contemporary, non-white, working-class female protagonist where a regressive, culturally approved rhetoric for femininity is no longer relevant, and my narrative was finally engaging with conspiracy culture by utilising my techniques for the protagonist, behemoth, and mechanisms for justice. I was continuing to update outdated genre tropes, firmly situating my narrative in the 21st century but, for some reason, even after rejecting the conspiracy genre's traditional mechanisms for justice in favour of **utility of the team** and a combination of long and short-term retribution, the third act still felt weak -- haunted, even. "What haunts is the spectre of a world in which all the marvels of communicative technology could be combined with a sense of solidarity much stronger than anything social democracy could muster" (Fisher, 2014, p. 26). *Render's* original conclusion was a *traditional* tradition 1 ending (with an exposure of infiniT's abuse of power that was distinctly analogue) but I needed a tradition 1 ending for the 21st century: a triumphant solution to the injustice of surveillance capitalism. The problem was, I hadn't seen one yet. "Any progressive politics worthy of the name is founded on our ability to imagine a world better than the one we presently have. If capitalist realism represents the attempt to take our political imagination away from us, then hauntology can do the work to get it back" (Whyman, 2019). Where I was able to draw from real life in presenting surveillance capitalism as the unseen threat, I would need to use my imagination to propose a politically forceful mechanism for justice. This was a struggle. My talent as a writer comes not from my ability to conjure raw inspiration, but from my ability to *rewrite*. And to rewrite, it must first be written.

I had been drawing connections between the constrained thought¹⁴⁴ of capitalist realism and the agency panic/loss of free will that is the consequence of surveillance capitalism, and wondered if acid communism -- Mark Fisher's "unfinished philosophy" (Mills, 2019) and antidote to capitalist realism -- might offer some inspiration when it came to seeking justice in *Render*. For Fisher "acid" is not wholly psychedelic, but "an adjective, describing an attitude of improvisatory creativity and belief in the possibility of seeing the world differently in order to improve it" (Gilbert, 2017). Hauntology is still relevant here as "acid communism both refers to actual historical developments and to a virtual confluence that has not yet come together in actuality... The impress of 'a world which could be free' can be detected in the very structures of a capitalist realist world which makes freedom impossible" (Fisher, 2017, p.758). With the trust that an impress of new justice might be detectable somewhere in the structures of my work I revisited my third chapter, paying specific attention to new, technological mechanisms for justice.

In the ensuing rewrites, I would incorporate them, engaging their double-edged sword nature: the fifth estate allows Parker's conspiracy article to be seen and shared; the Reddit-style underbelly of online conspiracy literature leads Parker directly to Marlow, the missing piece of her puzzle. At the same time, this **double-edged sword** contributes to the misinformed 'crowd justice' responsible for Marlow's death after she has been doxxed. As mobile phone and police body cam footage is accepted as a way for the public (and especially people of colour) to hold accountable those in power¹⁴⁵, Parker is able to entrap Campbell publicly

¹⁴⁴ Under capitalist realism, "It is not that creatives choose profit, it is that they must choose profit, and given such coercion, they abandon the notion of any choice at all. Thus, we arrive at hauntology, where the pathology of capitalist realism leads to an inability to imagine the future: the future hasn't just been cancelled, it was never planned from the start" (Mills, 2019).

¹⁴⁵ "The spread of technology such as ubiquitous cell phone cameras means that the traditional strategies of the surveillers can be appropriated to check government power rather than to expand it. Surveillance is no longer the top-down concept implied by the preposition *sur*" (Fan, 2018, p.1236). Where Steve Mann uses "sousveillance" to describe the *undersight* (as opposed to oversight) of citizens recording the police (2013, p.1), Fan proposed "toutveillance", which captures "the multidirectional pervasiveness of recording, generating more audiovisual ways for groups from diverse positions to contest or control the narrative" (2017, p.908).

using her smartwatch camera as a form of citizen journalism. Further showing that surveillance can be an asset and an obstacle, Parker uses the same gps tracking technology that has been stifling her freedom and free will throughout the screenplay to lead DCI Mae to arrest Billy, halt Micah in her tracks and free Tate. Due to its long temporality and heuristic nature, collective action through web activism, a revolution, or an election was not dramatically viable within the screenplay medium; however, cancel culture (for Campbell after the public witnesses the livestream of his violent beating of Alex) is nodded to in the final scene. Although Li-Fi as a communication technology already exists, its use as an open-access, augmented reality system to replace infinitE's pay-to-play network comes from my imagination. As double-edged swords, both networks are, at their root, neutral; however, in the hands of SISTER, infinitE's compulsive economic logic is supplanted by one which is communistic in its respect of the sanctity of human privacy and free will over profit. Intellectually, I had addressed just about every form of justice I could think of within the confines of a feature length narrative, but I was still haunted -- by a version of *Render* I had yet to write.

I came to realise that it isn't plot or action that makes a satisfying ending -- it's character. And, just as I had realised in *Fissure*, my early expectations of justice were disconnected from character when I needed my protagonist and her pursuit of justice to be in alignment. I had been asking the wrong questions. I was asking, 'What does justice look like for surveillance capitalism?' when I should have been asking 'What does justice look like for Alex?' To find out, I needed to re-examine the theme of *Render*. In all my previous drafts I had been so focused on the academic that I had largely ignored the thematic. What was the theme of *Render*? Was it 'Justice'? 'Privacy'? 'Control'? None of these themes seemed to resonate with *Alejandra*.

I reread my screenplay, this time, paying specific attention to Alex: who she was, what she was like, how she changed... and, finally, I saw her: she was a ghost. I had referred to her as one from as early as my first draft of

Render, but had only just recognised ‘Ghosts’ as the theme of my screenplay. Suddenly, the three acts became crystalline:

Act 1: A Living Ghost

Act 2: Facing Your Ghosts

Act 3: Rising from the Dead - Living, Breathing, Fighting

Justice for Alex is not using a smartwatch or getting Billy Campbell cancelled, it’s being able to *choose*, to act, to fight -- to exercise free will or, “the will to will” (Zuboff, 2018, p.381). Without it, Parker -- and anyone else in a surveillance capitalist society -- is a ghost. This theme corresponded with almost poetic compatibility to my original aim of writing a protagonist whose agency is restricted by forces of the unseen threat: Alex’s free will isn’t taken away by some culturally approved rhetoric for femininity, but by surveillance capitalism; it is only right that her reclamation of this agency -- those lost futures -- gives all other justice significance within the narrative. In this case, the future is not “the direction of time” but a “psychological perception” (Berardi, 2011, p.18), where “what should haunt us is not the no longer of actually existing social democracy, but... these spectres -- the spectres of lost futures” (Fisher, 2014, p.27). This is the hauntological “end of tomorrow” of actuation imperative that Gina refers to that at once holds *Render* together thematically but also drove my persistent revisions of the story: “Haunting... is about refusing to give up the ghost or... the refusal of the ghost to give up on us” (Fisher, 2014, p.22). The screenplay’s application of classic conspiracy themes to Big Technology, its rejection of a singular, privatised antagonist, and proposal of updated (rather than outdated) mechanisms for justice with its representation of a working-class, woman of colour protagonist all coalesce to make *Render* distinctly *new*, but it is Alex’s reclamation of agency (just as the private struggles of early conspiracy heroines served to reflect and express the public grievances of women’s liberation) that represents the possibility and hope -- not just for women, but for the all the public -- to reclaim free will in a surveillance capitalist society that makes *Render* politically forceful.

CONCLUSION

If “those who rioted will come to constitute themselves
as a collective agent... we might be seeing
the reversal of this psychic privatisation”

- Mark Fisher, 2011

Conspiracy culture has been a reckoning to the conspiracy genre, where the rules and formulas that once endowed these narratives with triumph, hope, and power, have been rendered impotent. Born in the shadow of 2016, this thesis came of age during the Donald J. Trump presidency; a time when “the conspiracy theory as a form has been weaponized, and it is now very hard not to question its function, and its usefulness, in fiction” (Glynn, 2019). When conspiracy ‘fact’ begins to outpace conspiracy fiction’s ability to process these events, or conspiracy fiction revises these histories to prescribe outdated forms of justice, this genre -- which *could* be the perfect recipe of politics and entertainment to be politically forceful -- might become redundant. In the face of this juncture, this thesis has asserted that the evolution of justice in mainstream American conspiracy films has actually reduced the political force of these narratives, that female-driven conspiracy films are politically forceful whilst defying the genre’s three-phased evolution of justice, and it has proposed distinct methods to reignite the political force of forthcoming conspiracy narratives.

My first chapter identified a three-phased evolution in the representation of justice in mainstream American conspiracy films. The traditional phase ran from the 1970s until late 1980s, where archetypal conspiracy films responded to the growing distrust of the government following the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the Watergate Scandal with a glorification of the press as watchdog for democracy and striking demonstrations of justice (in tradition 1 narratives) or injustice (in tradition 2). “Movies of this period were fiction, and mostly popular entertainment, but they packed a considerable punch -- and not by stoking unrest or leveraging animosity, but rather by floating the modest idea that corruption

and greed can sometimes be exposed to the light” (Glynn, 2019). However, starting with *Little Nikita* in 1989 and continuing into the early 2000s, the genre enters the privatised phase where public-facing justice is superseded by the private motives of the protagonist. The traditional period’s entwining of the seen and unseen threat becomes less distinct and a new class of protagonist arises in response to the budding neoliberal worldview: self-protecting lawyers and businessmen. The 21st century ‘lame duck’ phase arose after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and in the aftermath of revelations that Saddam Hussein’s WMD stockpiles never existed, but what is missing from the reappearance of these public-facing, politically-minded plots is audiences’ *faith* in the mechanisms for justice these narratives propose. For many lame duck conspiracy films, “there is a weird absence of both dramatic heat and political light here; there is no vertiginous thrill in discovering wrongdoing” (Bradshaw, 2006). After more than a decade of privatisation, the shallow return of protagonists’ concerns to the public good (as opposed to themselves) and their reliance on traditional mechanisms for justice without incorporating the caveat of conspiracy culture renders these films a toothless pastiche of their traditional predecessors.

My second chapter recognised that the clearcut three-phased evolution of justice did not apply to the few female-led films of the genre. Where political force is retained throughout the privatised phase due to the second-wave feminist understanding of the intrinsic association between the personal and the political, it wanes when the heroine’s agency is eroded by a culturally approved rhetoric of femininity, wifedom, or motherhood. Early conspiracy heroines’ ability to affect justice consistently depended on their association with protective, powerful men, and the recurring prescription of domesticity or death as ‘justice’ was at odds with the ongoing fight for women’s liberation that was taking place offscreen. The development of female agency and its path to politically forceful justice is not a direct progression; rather, it more closely resembles Williams’ emergent and residual cultural movements where conspiracy heroines, as recently as Kathy Bolkovac in *The Whistleblower* (2010), still have their femininity and motherhood weaponised against them -- even as

representations of womanhood and femininity expand in the 21st century. In tracing the female journey in conspiracy films, chapter two acknowledged the undeniable whiteness of the genre and its present lack of women of colour protagonists, protagonists with non-traditional identities, and those from poor or working-class backgrounds; however, by examining the sustained political force of female-driven narratives it is possible to extrapolate that the political force derived from the connection between the personal, the political, agency and justice would also apply to LGBTQ+ protagonists, non-binary or gender non-conforming protagonists, protagonists who are not white, and those from poor or working-class backgrounds (to name just a few possible identities), making an encouraging case for the representation of these new voices as politically forceful characters and protagonists within conspiracy narratives.

The classification of three phases of justice in the conspiracy genre and the creation of discourse dedicated specifically to female conspiracy protagonists and their agency are my original contributions of knowledge to the field of film criticism and film analysis, as are the multitude of new terms introduced to analyse and qualify the political force of conspiracy films. My introduction of a 'Visual Thesis' in the form of three visual essays incorporates the visual and aural dimensionality of the genre whilst distilling the concepts and ideas of my three chapters in an accessible, digital medium that is compatible with internet-based teaching and learning. Finally, through my Conspiracy Tropes document, with its detailed and expansive dataset of in-depth classifications for conspiracy films, and a methodology of presenting a socio/political/historical context, situating conspiracy films within it, identifying useful terminology, and then implementing it using case studies, I have been able to show not just where the conspiracy genre has been -- as in my first two chapters -- but, in chapter three, *where it can go* if it is to once again be a powerful proponent of truth and justice.

Chapter three asked: for a genre that seeks to uncover the hidden truth behind abuse of power, what does it mean if truth can be known, but not believed? How can conspiracy films regain their political force when the

genre's traditional mechanisms for justice have been disparaged, and the truth -- the key to all conspiracy narratives -- cannot be trusted? When "conspiracy theory itself [has] become a devalued currency" (Glynn, 2019), new approaches to where and how conspiracy narratives derive their political force must be created. This thesis has diagnosed three core elements of the conspiracy narrative: the Protagonist, the Behemoth, and Mechanisms for Justice -- fortifying them against privatisation and conspiracy culture -- and identified the advent of a new, 21st century behemoth in Big Technology: an amalgam of Big Business, Big Government, and Big Science which reflects a pluralisation of corporate, political, and technological interests fueled by the logic of surveillance capitalism. The genre's once-clear moral compass is now masked and muddied and the iconic journalist, police officer, or lawyer protagonists are no longer relatable or trustworthy through the lens of conspiracy culture where traditional mechanisms for justice like the press and law enforcement are, for some, today's antagonists. This chapter presented further original contributions to the field with the proposal of updated, technological mechanisms for justice which recognise the behemothic threat of Big Technology and its double-edged sword nature, as well as a set of practical techniques created specifically to address the loss of political force caused by the cynicism and solipsism of the genre's privatisation and surrounding conspiracy culture.

While the scope of this research has been American conspiracy films from the 1970s until now, I have not restricted my application of this research to one nationality or one audience. My creative practice elements *Fissure* and *Render* are both set in England but feature American characters which, while reflecting the screenwriting adage 'write what you know', supports the applicability of my research beyond the source from which it was derived. While techniques like 'corruption of the protagonist' or 'utility of the team' may now be used in film analysis and film criticism as litmus tests for the efficacy of contemporary conspiracy narratives, they have been designed deliberately as tools for the creation of new, politically forceful narratives, developed over the course of writing my short

screenplay *Fissure* and employed in my feature screenplay *Render*. My application of hauntology¹⁴⁶ as a means of taking these screenplays from *creative practice*¹⁴⁷ to *practice as research*¹⁴⁸ allowed me to return to each script, reimagining and rewriting even as I progressed through my final chapter, visual essays, and especially when writing my creative analyses on each. This ability to simultaneously gaze backwards and project forwards (creatively and academically) meant that, rather than provide immediate answers, *Fissure* helped me to pose questions about the relationship between contemporary justice and character, and whose discoveries would resonate in both scripts. Where *Fissure* presents injustice via a tradition 2 ending, as a feature-length narrative, *Render* is able to more thoroughly engage with Big Technology as both behemoth and mechanism for justice, and has the time to build up to a tradition 1 ending; it also has the capacity to better implement representation, utility of the team, and a broader many-headed monster. Early drafts of both *Render* and *Fissure* suffered from a hollowness of sorts; their first drafts presented an over-reliance on plot as opposed to character which, upon reflection, was likely a representation of my own brain as it transitioned between that of the critical, analysing Academic to the creative, imaginative, Screenwriter. But those early drafts are also a representation of the danger in prescribing any panacea to the issue of political force: what was first forgotten, or ignored, in these early screenplay drafts was the *human*. Analysis of *Fissure*'s shortfalls meant that later drafts of *Render* could find a reconnection with the emotional, a rediscovery that the

¹⁴⁶ "Referring back to Hägglund's distinction of the *no longer* and the *not yet*, we can provisionally distinguish two directions in hauntology. The first is that which is (in actuality) *no longer*, but which *remains* effective as a virtuality... The second sense of hauntology refers to that which (in actuality) has *not yet* happened, but which is *already* effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behaviour)" (Fisher, 2014, p.19).

¹⁴⁷ "Creative practice [is] the training and specialised knowledge that creative practitioners have and the processes they engage in when they are making art" (Smith, 2009, p.5). One argument is "that creative work in itself is a form of research and generates detectable research outputs" (Smith, 2009, p.5).

¹⁴⁸ "Increasingly it seems that practice as research can best be interpreted in terms of a broader view of creative practice which includes not only the artwork but also the surrounding theorisation and documentation... The first argument emphasises creative practice in itself, while the second highlights the insights, conceptualisation and theorisation which can arise when artists reflect on and document their own creative practice" (Smith, 2009, p.5).

personal is political, and a recognition that this -- long before identifying the techniques of my third chapter -- has always been a reliable indicator of political force in conspiracy narratives, and continues to be so.

21st century conspiracy films are notorious for their complexity: they utilise false-flag attacks, demand a blurring of right and wrong, present ever more layers to power struggles, and now have to reckon with Big Technology and a conspiracy culture that threatens to eviscerate the media's role as watchdog for democracy... all in under two hours. This burgeoning expectation of tighter and tighter action without the verbose, expository dialogue that was characteristic of classics like *All the President's Men* makes for conspiracy films that are "brisk yet uninspired" (Russel, 2007). While the challenge of redeeming their political force may lead some to suggest "we've moved on" from conspiracy narratives and we ought to leave them "in the lurch" (Glynn, 2019), audiences' fascination with truth, power, and control remain. I do not question whether conspiracy narratives are still relevant or powerful (they are and they can be) but, as I present this thesis amidst a global pandemic -- that, whilst bringing the film industry briefly to its knees with "a near-total cessation of activity" (Pulver, 2020), demonstrated a sheer *need* for entertainment, as "Britons spent 40% of their waking hours watching TV during the height of the coronavirus pandemic" (Sweney, 2020) -- I recognise that the way we access entertainment is being relocated away from the cinema and onto streaming platforms at home. Presenting the findings of this thesis at a time when the mass closure of movie theatres due to global pandemic may make *cinema* inaccessible makes it an opportune moment to ask whether these findings might be relevant and applicable to television/streaming drama...

Speaking on *Westworld* (2016-), the series inspired by the 1973 conspiracy sci-fi of the same name, showrunner Jonathan Nolan explains, "The film's story was virtually limitless and so is television at this moment" (in D'Alessandro, 2016). Indeed, television is a uniquely empowering medium where "the presentation of resilience and resistance especially through character, can have an affective impact on the female viewer: to watch is to learn... it is also to take pleasure in and to feel the resilience we see in

television characters” (Gorton, 2020, p.1). In film form, *Westworld*'s engagement with the hosts' perspective is limited to a pixelated point-of-view shot from the park's Gunslinger (Yul Brenner); but, as a series, *Westworld* expands the film's relatively small cast to an ensemble of over 30 characters, utilising representation to provide audiences with the people who are like and unlike them on both sides of the issue that Kahan suggests as a means of leading to open-minded consideration (in Hoggan and Litwin, 2016, p.46). This narrative environment of television where “our relative connection to individuals can shift from episode to episode” (Mittell, 2015, p.129) has the potential to have an affective impact on all viewers (not just women) and is especially conducive to its political force by offering ample opportunity to engage with the double-edged sword relationships of new behemoths and mechanisms for justice.



Above: POV from the Gunslinger in *Westworld* (1973). Below: Protagonist, Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood), a host, in *Westworld* (2016-)

While there is not an equivalent ‘Conspiracy Tropes’ document for television, I do observe¹⁴⁹ a broader celebration of racially, culturally, sexually, and gender diverse key characters across television drama generally which contrasts the straight, white, male-dominated majority in conspiracy films. Furthermore, “television’s narrative complexity”, which “is predicated on specific facets of storytelling that seem uniquely suited to television series structure” (Mittell, 2015, p.18) could allow for cumulative acts of justice to be set in motion over many episodes, finally coming together at a finale and extending into a subsequent season. “Most successful television series typically lack the crucial element that has long been hailed as of supreme importance to a well-told story: an ending” (Mittell, p.33). A contemporary representation of justice that is neither black nor white, not always fair and hardly swift, fits less with the traditional, teleological approach to justice (which suits feature films well) and more with a heuristic approach that matches television’s infinite model of storytelling and the narrative complexity that has become its expectation and advantage. If, due not only to the pandemic but also the slow disappearance of mid-range budget features¹⁵⁰ “moviegoing as we’ve known it for 100 years now faces an existential crisis” (Gleiberman in Lang et. al, 2020), it may transpire that the small screen is not just a highly affective and effective medium for contemporary narratives but, perhaps, the most so when it comes to engendering political force.

While the scope of my research has been directed at mainstream, American conspiracy films released in the last 50 years with a view

¹⁴⁹ This is substantiated by UCLA’s 2019 Hollywood Diversity Report which confirms “the share of broadcast scripted shows with majority-minority casts skyrocketed from just 2% in 2011-12 to 19.8% in 2016-17” (Hunt and Tran, p.22) and a new study by Diamond, “a single online system used by the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5 and Sky to obtain consistent diversity data on programmes they commission” (*creativitydiversitynetwork.com*), which stipulates that “ethnic minorities and gay people are significantly over-represented”, with this ‘over-representation’ “particularly stark on drama programmes, where ethnic minority actors win more than a quarter (26.4 per cent) of parts” (Moore, 2020).

¹⁵⁰ “What happened is, when the middle ground fell out in the movie industry, those projects or filmmakers that were more interested in character-oriented stuff, or in more complicated subject matter, suddenly started turning to television... TV has really picked up the slack there” (Seidelman in Bailey, 2014).

towards conspiracy narratives of the near-future, I expect (and hope) that the themes, trends, and techniques that I have proposed herein will be applicable and advantageous to the analysis and development of conspiracy narratives across genres and mediums. If today “conspiracy theories are customized to achieve desired political outcomes and then injected into the news stream via social media,” (Glynn, 2019) then perhaps conspiracy *narratives* -- across film and television -- can be used to open minds, open conversations, and fill with empathy the chasms created by a polarised political climate. As the lines between politics and entertainment continue to blur, it seems more and more appropriate to ask that political entertainment be politically forceful, and that storytellers use their privilege and their platforms to create narratives that do not tranquilise public fervor, but empower it -- from the silver screen to the black mirror in the palms of our hands.

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APPENDIX: Dialogue

Extracts are listed in order of reference.

Chapter 1:

All the President's Men (1976)

1

Mitchell (V.O.): *all that crap, you're putting it in the paper? It's all been denied. You tell your publisher -- tell Katie Graham she's gonna get her tit caught in a big fat wringer if that's published. Good Christ! That's the most sickening thing I ever heard.*

Bernstein: *Sir, I'd like to ask you a few --*

Mitchell (V.O.): *-- what time is it?*

Bernstein: *11:30.*

Mitchell (V.O.): *Morning or night?*

Bernstein: *Night.*

Mitchell (V.O.): *Oh.*

And he hangs up.

Bradlee and Bernstein at Bernstein's desk. Bradlee is going over Bernstein's notes.

Bradlee: *He really made that remark about Mrs. Graham?*

(Bernstein nods) This is a family newspaper -- cut the words "her tit" and run it.

Enemy of the State (1998)

1

Fiedler: *Rachel F for you-know-what, Banks. God, would I love to have her ruin my life.*

Fiedler: **Please* let me follow the nanny. She doesn't shave her legs. Women like that are so... HOT.*

2

Carla is furious about the Privacy Bill being discussed on TV...

Carla Dean: *Don't you think you should be taking this a little more seriously?*

Robert Dean: *Honey, I think you're taking it seriously enough for both of us, and half the block.*

3

Thomas Reynolds: *Privacy's been dead for years because we can't risk it. The only privacy that's left is inside of your head. Maybe that's enough. You think we're the enemy of democracy, you and I? I think we're democracy's last hope.*

Syriana (2007)

1

Danny Dalton: *Corruption charges. Corruption?*

Corruption ain't nothing more than government intrusion into market efficiencies in the form of regulation. That's Milton Friedman. He got a goddamn Nobel prize. We have laws against it precisely so we can get away with it. Corruption is our protection. Corruption is what keeps us safe and warm. Corruption is why you and I are here in the white-hot center of things instead of fighting each other for scraps of meat out there in the streets. (beat) Corruption... is how we win.

[Danny D. winds down. Finally --]

Bennet: *You broke the law, Mr. Dalton.*

Danny Dalton: *Oh, who gives a shit!*

Shooter (2007)

1

Senator Charles F. Meachum: *It's not really as bad as it seems. It's all gonna be done in any case. You might as well be on the side that gets you well paid for your efforts.*

Swagger: *And what side are you on?*

Senator Charles F. Meachum: *There are no sides. There's no Sunnis and Shiites. There's no Democrats and Republicans. There's only haves and have-nots.*

2

Swagger: *I'm still enough of a sucker. You press that patriot button, I'll sit up in my chair and say, "Which way you want me to go, boss?" [beat] I mean, I ain't real proud of it, but I ain't ashamed, either.*

3

Colonel Isaac Johnson: *Look around you! This isn't the Horn of Africa! ...This is the land of the free and the home of the brave. And I'm free to go.*

Attorney General Russert: *Colonel, your moral compass is so fucked up, I'll be shocked if you manage to find your way back to the parking lot. Regardless of how I feel about this, these events occurred in another country, outside of our laws.*

Swagger: *So that's it? That's the best you can do?*

Attorney General Russert : *This isn't the World Court, Sergeant. I don't have the jurisdiction to detain the colonel for crimes he may or may not have committed on another continent. [softer, to Swagger] For the record, I don't like the way this turned out any more than you do. But this is the world we live in. And justice does not always prevail. It's not the Wild West, where you can clean up the streets with a gun... Even though sometimes that's exactly what's needed.*

Green Zone (2010)

1

Miller: *Jerry why the fuck do we keep coming up empty on all these sites? There has gotta be a reason.*

Sgt Wilkins: *Chief we're here to do a job and get home safe, that's all. The reasons don't matter.*

Miller: *They matter to me.*

2

[Dayne rummages through her room nervously]

Miller: *Well did you ever meet the guy? Know who he is?*

Dayne: *Of course I didn't meet him, he's an Iraqi internal for Chrissakes.*

Miller: *Then how do you know what he's saying is true?*

Dayne: *Cause I made contact through a reliable intermediary.*

Miller: *Reliable.*

Dayne: *Yes.*

Miller: *Have you ever been to any of Magellan's sites? You ever been to Diwaniyah? Tikrit?*

Dayne: *[clears her throat] No.*

Miller: *There's nothing there. Magellan's intel is bullshit. [beat] Who's the intermediary?*

Dayne: *No, I'm not discussing sources Miller.*

Miller: *Jesus Christ this is the reason we went to war!*

Chapter 2:

Klute (1971)

1

Bree: *I've explained to him what I have to do... and I think he understands...*

What could ever happen for us? I mean, we're so different. I know enough about myself to know that whatever... lies in store for me it's not going to be... setting up housekeeping with somebody in Tuscarora... and darning socks and doing all that...

I'd go out of my mind...

Well, I don't know. I mean, I don't know how I feel about him. It's so hard for me to say it! God!

Psychiatrist: *To say what?*

Bree: *I'm going to miss him... I have no idea what's going to happen. I just can't stay in the city, you know? Maybe I'll come back. You'll probably see me next week.*

2: Excerpt from Original screenplay

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CLOSER: BREE, KLUTE

He arrives in proximity to her. Then the following events in more or less the following order:

He looks at her inquiringly. She responds by sitting down, plunk, on the grubby front step of the Brownstone.

Having stood for some time -- during which she has offered only twitching motions of her hands -- he sets down the suitcase.

Having set down the suitcase, but derived no answer, he reaches out one arm and leans against the building front.

She nearly arrives at the level of statement. Fretfully, indecisively --

BREE

Oh heck --
(pause)
Oh heck --

Then, as a man not to be dallied with, he picks up the suitcase again. She looks at him strickenly, but it doesn't precipitate her into speech.

He puts it down again.

And then -- then, after all, goddamit, he reaches out, grabs her wrist, and simply hauls her along, suitcase in one hand, Bree in the other. As she yanks, shouts, struggles --

BREE

I haven't decided yet!
(beat)
I haven't decided yet!
(beat)
I haven't decided yet! --

THE END

Erin Brockovich (2000)

1

Defending lawyer: \$17,000 in debt? Is your ex-husband helping out?

Erin: Which one?

Defending lawyer: There's more than one?

Erin: [becomes defensive] Yeah, there's two. Why?

Defending lawyer: Right, no doubt. [pause] So, you must've been feeling pretty desperate that afternoon.

Erin: What's your point?

Defending lawyer: Broke, three kids, no job. A doctor in a Jaguar must've looked like a pretty good meal ticket.

2

Ed appears in the door, carrying the box of files.

Ed: Where's Anna?

Erin: Out to lunch with the girls.

Ed: Oh. Huh. (beat) Well, look, I have to open a file. Real estate thing. Pro-bono.

He plunks the box of papers & files on her desk. She stares at it, with no idea of how to go about it.

Erin: Oh. Okay.

Ed: You do know how to do that, don't you?

Erin: Yeah. I got it. No problem.

Ed: Good.

Ed heads out, but pauses before leaving.

Ed: You're a girl.

Erin: Excuse me?

Ed: How come you're not at lunch with the girls? You're a girl.

Erin: *I guess I'm not the right kind.*

Erin goes back to work. Ed starts out then stops.

Ed: *Look, you may want to - I mean, now that you're working here - you may want to rethink your... wardrobe a little...*

Later: Erin is at her desk, staring bewildered at the files from the box Ed gave her, which are now spread across her desktop. She sees Anna packing up her things to leave.

Erin: *Anna? With this real-estate stuff -- could you remind me, cause I'm a little confused about how exactly we do that. Why are there medical records and blood samples in real estate files?*

Anna: *(exasperated) Erin, you've been here long enough. If you don't know how to do your job by now, I am not about to do it for you*

The Interpreter (2005)

1

Broome: *Everyone who loses somebody wants revenge on someone, on God if they can't find anyone else. But in Africa, in Matobo, the Ku believe that the only way to end grief is to save a life. If someone is murdered, a year of mourning ends with a ritual that we call the Drowning Man Trial. There's an all-night party beside a river. At dawn, the killer is put in a boat. He's taken out on the water and he's dropped. He's bound so that he can't swim. The family of the dead then has to make a choice. They can let him drown or they can swim out and save him. The Ku believe that if the family lets the killer drown, they'll have justice but spend the rest of their lives in mourning. But if they save him, if they admit that life isn't always just... that very act can take away their sorrow.*

2

Keller: *Tell me about the interpreter.*

Police Chief Lee Wu: *Born here, but lived mostly in Africa and Europe. She studied music in Johannesburg and linguistics at the Sorbonne and various countries in Europe.*

Keller: *Parents?*

Police Chief Lee Wu: *British mother, white African father. Moved here five years ago.*

Interview couldn't have taken long. She's just what they want. She is the UN.

Woods: *Can she cook?*

Robb smirks

3

Christensen: *So what do we make of this interpreter? Is she making it up? Is she imagining things? ... Is she pretty?*

The Net (1995)

1

Jack: *[shoves Angela over] Get away from the computer. What did think you were trying to do?*

Save the world?

Angela: *No. Not the world. Just myself.*

Jack: *Ah, I'm afraid it's too late for that. The offer's been withdrawn.*

Angela: *Um, you might wanna look at the screen, because everything on that disk was just sent to the FBI. Everything.*

Jack: *So?*

Angela: *So... proof that the Gatekeeper program has a back door.*

Jack: *[convinced] My, my.*

Angela: *Proof that Bergstrom and Dale's murder were orchestrated by Gregg.*

2

Dale: (over the phone) You are a genius, Angela. I can't thank you enough.

Angela: You might think differently once you get my bill from Cathedral.

Dale: Whatever it is, it's worth it. I'd love to show you my appreciation. Take you out to dinner tonight, some drinks... Get you out of the house.

Angela: Oh, I'm very flattered and appreciative, but I--

Dale: You gotta eat.

Angela: Unfortunately, I already have dinner plans, so--

Dale: How about tomorrow? The next day?

Iceman: (on her computer screen) My sympathies exactly, Angel. Let's have a date and procreate.

Angela: Not me. In two days, I'm off on vacation. Just me, the beach and a book.

Iceman: I'm there, babe. Look no further.

Angela: Sorry. Not my type.

3

Angela: I just don't, I don't understand. Why me? Why me? I am nobody. I am nothing. They knew, they knew everything about me. They knew. They knew what I ate, they knew what I drank, they knew what movies that I watch, they knew, they knew, they knew what, where I was from, they knew what cigarettes I used to smoke, and, and, and everything they, they did, they must have watched on the, on the Internet, I don't know, watched my credit cards? Our whole lives are on the computer, and they knew, they knew that I could be vanished. They knew that nobody would care, that nobody would understand, and that you would, that it wouldn't matter anymore.

The Whistleblower (2010)

1

Nick: *Good having another American in the mix. Some people get pissed off, saying we're taking over. Makes my life easier. Especially when it's a good-looking woman reporting to me.*

Kathy: *Oh, I don't mean to burst your bubble, but I report to Madeleine Rees.*

2

Nick: *All the international personnel have immunity. They can't be prosecuted. But this is good work, Bolkavac, I think it might even deserve a dinner out with yours truly.*

Kathy: *Don't think I've earned that.*

3

Blakely: *So you keeping busy?*

Kathy: *Yeah.*

Blakely: *Your superiors, they tell me that you're working hard.*

Kathy: *I enjoy my work.*

Blakely: *You're dedicated, thorough.*

Kathy: *Thank you.*

Blakely: *Tough stuff, though, your area... Stressful. (beat) Do you ever worry about burnout?*

Kathy: *No. Never.*

Blakely: *You must miss your daughter... It's unusual, isn't it, that a judge would award custody to the father? I'd imagine there's almost some kind of a stigma around --*

Kathy: *What did you want to talk to me about?*

Blakely: *I'm sorry. I just wondered. Because we award special paid leave to folks who work in stressful departments. You know, parents especially, we really encourage it... You'd have some time to hang out with your daughter. Nice little jaunt around Europe, see the sights.*

Kathy: *I'm going to have to think about it.*

Chapter 3:

The Fifth Estate (2013)

1

Julian Assange: *If no one knows the whistleblower's identity he has nothing to fear. And if he has nothing to fear...*

Julian taps a laptop: WIKILEAKED DOCUMENTS appear on screen: a MILITARY CRACKDOWN in ZAMBIA... CORRUPTION IN SOMALIA... TOP SECRET U.S. DOCUMENTS on GUANTANAMO BAY.

Julian Assange: [continued] *As Oscar Wilde said, man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth.*

The Circle (2017)

1

Mae Holland: *There are no more secrets. Privacy was a temporary thing. And now it's over. We won't live in the shadows anymore. [The power goes out] Hey. Good timing. [chuckles]*

Cell phones beeping, indistinct chattering. The audience illuminates Mae with the light from their smartphone screens

Mae Holland: [continued] *Thank you. Thank you. I'm tired of hiding... These passwords and secret knocks, the difference between public and private. Aren't you all?*

2

Interviewer: *Would you like to go out with me?*

Mae Holland: *That's very inappropriate.*

Interviewer: *Good. Quality or convenience?*

Mae Holland: *Not mutually exclusive.*

3

Mae Holland: *It's exciting. A... momentous moment in the history of...*

Ty Lafitte: *Okay, what did you really think?*

Mae Holland: *[sighs] I thought it was a bit much.*

Ty Lafitte: *Just a little bit.*

4

Ty Lafitte: *[to Mae] I knew I could trust you when I met you. I don't know, I just thought to myself, this girl, she doesn't have a cynical bone in her body.*

5

A TED Talk-esque seminar at The Circle. Bailey and Holland stand in front of a large audience

Eamon Bailey: *Now does it feel right to have deprived them of seeing what you saw, Mae?*

Mae Holland: *It doesn't. It feels very wrong. It was selfish. When you deprive others of experiences like the ones I had, you're essentially stealing from them. Knowledge is a basic human right. Access to all possible human experience is a basic human right. [audience cheering, applauding]*

Sorry to Bother You (2018)

1

Langston: *Hey, youngblood.*

Cassius: *Ay, w'sup.*

Langston: *Lemme give you a tip. Use your White voice.*

Cassius: *My White voice?*

Langston: *Yeah.*

Cassius: *But, I don't have a White voice.*

Langston: *Come on, youngblood. You know what I mean. You have a White voice in there that you can use. Like when you get pulled over by the police.*

Cassius: *I use my same voice. For real. Like “Back the fuck up off the car and nobody gets hurt!”*

Langston: *Aight. I’m tryna give you some game. You wanna make money here? Read the script with a White voice.*

Cassius: *Ok. People say I talk White anyway though, so why isn’t it working?*

Langston: *Well, you don’t talk White enough. I’m not talkin’ bout Will Smith White- that’s not even White, that’s just proper. I’m talkin the real deal.*

Cassius: *(sounding very nasally while pinching nose) Hello, Mr. Kramer. I’m Cassius Green. Sorry to bother you*

Langston: *No. You got it wrong. It’s not about sounding all nasal. It’s about sounding like you don’t have a care. Like your bills are paid and you’re happy about your future and you’re about to jump in your Ferrari when you get off this call. Put some extra breath in there. Breezy, like you don’t need this money, like you never been fired, only laid off. It’s not what all White people sound like- there ain’t no real White voice, but it’s what they wish they sounded like. It’s what they think they’re supposed to sound like. Like this, youngblood. (overdub by a White actor) Hey! Mr. Kramer! This is Langston from Regalview. I didn’t catch you a bad time did I?*

2

Steve Lift calms Cassius by motioning him to breathe deeply with him, pseudo-yoga style. Cassius sits back down.

Steve Lift: *The proposal I was going to make was this: This new caliber of worker. They are bigger, stronger, and hopefully they don’t gripe as much. Soon, there will be millions of them.*

Cassius: *This is crazy.*

Steve Lift: *They’ll develop their own identity and customs. They may wish to rebel, organize. We need someone to represent WorryFree’s interests. Someone they can relate to.*

Cassius: *A manager- that’s a man-horse.*

Steve Lift: No. An Equisapiens Martin Luther King. One that we control. One that we create.

Cassius: You want to create a false leader of the horse-people-who actually works for you?

Steve Lift: Basically. Keeps shit simple.

Cassius: But, me? Why would you single me out?

Steve Lift: Cassius, you're amazing. You rose so quickly at Regalview. I need a man like you. Hungry. Not afraid to shank your friends if they get in the way. You're freaked out. Ready to say no. Go home. Think about it. After looking at what I'm offering you.

Steve hands Cassius a piece of paper that reads "I'm offering you \$100,000,000©"

3

Cassius and Detroit are laying on the floor after having sex.

Detroit: I just want you to know- I need to be clear- this can't happen again. We're not back together, Ok?

Cassius: Ok. I need you to know- I'm not going back. I can't be a Power Caller anymore. I can't work for WorryFree... And I need you, D.

Detroit: I think that's a great decision. But I still have problems with all this.

Cassius: But, now I'm --

Detroit: You happily sold slaves and scabbed against the strike. Only something happening to you turned you against them.

Cassius: Isn't that how we all make decisions? And I didn't

Detroit: No. It doesn't have to be.

Cassius: Look- I see myself in their eyes. WorryFree and Regalview. They see a pawn, a creature to manipulate. I'm not that dude anymore.

Detroit: Good. But that doesn't change what I said about us.

APPENDIX: Visual Thesis and Docuscripts

To watch the visual thesis please visit:

<https://vimeo.com/showcase/visualthesis>

Docuscript 1: Truth, Justice... and Protect Yourself

The privatisation of justice in American conspiracy film

AUDIO	VISUAL
<p>Depththroat: With a conspiracy like this, you build from the outer edges and you go step by step. If you shoot too high and miss, everybody feels more secure.</p> <p>Woodward: Yes we know that. And if we're wrong we're resigning. Were we wrong?</p>	<p><i>All the President's Men:</i> parking garage</p>
<p><i>Marionberry Jam - Allah Las</i></p>	<p>Title: <i>TRUTH, JUSTICE... AND PROTECT YOURSELF</i> <i>the privatisation of justice in American conspiracy film</i></p>
<p>VO: What is Conspiracy film?</p> <p>Not the conspiracies themselves, or the documentaries that investigate them, conspiracy films dramatise and respond to the fears and paranoias of the general public.</p>	<p>Nixon hearing footage Roswell UFO Museum Bob Lazar Documentary poster</p> <p><i>Andromeda Strain:</i> two hazmat suits observing a disease-ridden town.</p>

<p>They are about</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The effect of the unseen operations of the powerful few on the powerless masses • They “foreground the abuse of power • And present a protagonist who exhibits “agency panic”, or helplessness in the face of the conspiracy. 	<p><i>Andromeda Strain</i>: situation room.</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>“the unseen operations of the powerful few and the effect they have on the lives of the powerless masses,” (Donovan, 2011, p.13)</p> <p>“the abuse of power, the hidden manipulation of the political, economic or legal systems, the manipulation of the entire country and culture” (Donovan, 2011, p.13),</p> <p><i>Andromeda Strain</i>: Dr. Hall running, powerless</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>Presents a protagonist who exhibits “agency panic”, defined by Timothy Melley as “an intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy” (2000, p.12).</p>
<p>As mainstream manifestations of the ‘paranoid style’ that respond to contemporary events, conspiracy films create the space where paranoia and conspiracy thinking become a rational way of processing history</p>	<p><i>The Parallax View</i>: Space Needle, skyline</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>“paranoia and conspiracy thinking may be a rational way of understanding the path of recent US history” (Baker, 2006, p.52)</p>

<p>And while some films insist that changes in the social order are beyond our control</p> <p>The idea that positive change is possible, and encouraged, in the name of truth, justice, and the public good is precisely what fuelled early conspiracy narratives and is what they seek to do today, even if they're not as good at it as they used to be.</p>	<p><i>The Parallax View</i>: Assassination; Frady argues with Rintels</p> <p><i>All the President's Men</i>: Library of Congress</p> <p>White House at night</p> <p><i>The Parallax View</i>: Assassination; Frady continues</p> <p><i>The Parallax View</i>: Brainwashing room</p> <p><i>Snowden</i>: Snowden thinks FBI exteriors + interiors</p>
<p><i>Raspberry Jam - Allah Las</i></p> <p>VO: There are 2 essential parts of conspiracy narratives:</p> <p>The seen threat is the protagonist's immediate goal, like clearing their name or solving a murder.</p> <p>The unseen threat is: the conspiracy at large</p> <p>And based on how conspiracy films end, we can classify conspiracy narratives as tradition 1 or tradition 2</p>	<p><i>Andromeda Strain</i>: Dr. Leavitt and Dr. Dutton enter a silver room</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>seen threat: the protagonist's primary objective, bound up in the threats immediately posed to his/her person.</p> <p>Dr. Leavitt and Dr. Dutton place their hands on a machine.</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>unseen threat: the conspiracy at large, often defined by the need to cover up corruption or crimes</p> <p>Tradition 1</p> <p>Tradition 2</p>

<p>Tradition 1 is Triumphant and successful, with a sense of fairness restored</p> <p>Tradition 2 is Darker. The protagonist fails and injustice is crushing.</p>	<p><i>Capricorn One</i>: Caulfield and Brubaker return to Brubaker's funeral</p> <p>Text: tradition 1: Where both the seen and unseen threats are addressed to the benefit of the protagonist and the general public</p> <p><i>Blow Out</i>: Jack sits in the movie theatre; listening to Sally's screams</p> <p>Text tradition 2: where, in solving or attempting to solve the seen threat, the protagonist loses to the power of the conspiracy: the hero may finally know the truth, but he has perished in the pursuit of it</p>
<p>By contextualising the interactions of the seen and unseen threat and the appearance of tradition 1 and 2 narratives against the socio/historical landscape in America at the time these films were released,</p>	<p><i>Andromeda Strain</i>: Dr. Hall confers with Dr. Stone</p> <p><i>The Parallax View</i>: the politician and his wife greet reporters</p> <p>The judiciary committee</p> <p>Rintels speaks to Frady</p> <p><i>Andromeda Strain</i>: detailed plans of the levels and labs</p> <p>Title:</p>

<p>I have traced the evolution of Justice in conspiracy films in 3 distinct phases</p>	<p><i>THE EVOLUTION OF JUSTICE IN AMERICAN CONSPIRACY FILM</i></p>
<p>The first is overtly political, with great value attributed to notions of truth, justice and morality, apparent in a string of conspiracy thrillers from the 1970s which reflected and interrogated events directly from the political landscape¹⁵¹.</p> <p>These are “public-facing” narratives, With clear links between the seen + unseen threat where the protagonist’s success is hinged to a political, public-facing situation.</p>	<p><i>The Parallax View</i>: trying to catch the assassin atop the Space Needle</p> <p>Title: <i>Phase 1 (1968 -1988) Truth, Justice & the American Way</i></p> <p>Text: <i>Topaz</i> (1969) <i>Executive Action</i> (1973) <i>Chinatown</i> (1974) <i>The Parallax View</i> (1974) <i>The Conversation</i> (1974) <i>The Stepford Wives</i> (1975) <i>Three Days of the Condor</i> (1975) <i>Capricorn One</i> (1977) <i>Winter Kills</i> (1979)</p> <p><i>Capricorn One</i>: Brubaker’s funeral The moon landing soundstage Two pilots search for Brubaker The astronauts radio home Brubaker ambushes the pilots and jumps through a window Brubaker runs</p>

¹⁵¹ See Appendix: Conspiracy Film Tropes 1969-2020

<p>No matter the outcome, traditional conspiracy narratives maintain their political force by projecting an overt sense of right and wrong whether or not the protagonist prevails.</p>	
<p>Bradlee: Well what else besides the money, where's the goddamn story? Woodward: The money's the key to whatever this is. Bradlee: Says who?</p>	<p><i>All the President's Men</i>: Woodward and Bernstein in Bradlee's office</p>
<p><i>Ferus Gallery - Allah Las</i></p> <p>VO: <i>All the President's Men</i> is an exemplary representation of the traditional, public-facing conspiracy film based on the Watergate Scandal. The protagonists are journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein; two heroes who embody the media's 20th century role as "watchdog" for democracy</p>	<p><i>All the President's Men</i>: a hearing, Nixon shaking hands Watergate break-in Woodward and Bernstein in a doorway Woodward and Bernstein confer Woodward and Bernstein run through the press office</p>
<p>Woodward and Bernstein's seen and unseen threats are inevitably linked:</p> <p>Thematically, the film incorporates surveillance, corruption, a sense of morality, and the notion that the public are being lied to</p>	<p>The break-in Text: seen threat: Woodward and Bernstein's primary objective is to get their scoop, find the truth, write the story and share this truth with the public.</p>

<p>-- all a reflection of the American political climate in the mid-1970s,</p> <p>However, <i>All the President's Men</i> differs from other conspiracy films at the time in that there is no on-screen violence: no murders, no assassins, and no <i>direct</i> attempts on the protagonists' lives.</p> <p>Rather, producer Redford and director Pakula chose to illustrate that "their weapon [was] the written word" by accentuating the sounds of telephones, typewriters and pen on paper, throughout the film,</p>	<p>unseen threat:</p> <p>the Nixon administration's breaking, entering, and attempted wiretapping of the Democratic National Office as well as its subsequent cover ups and conspiracy to obstruct justice via secret slush funds, intimidation of witnesses, forgery of state department documents and eventual destruction of potentially incriminating evidence.</p> <p>1970s American protest footage</p> <p><i>All the President's Men</i>: Woodward visits Bernstein.</p> <p>Woodward types at a typewriter The typewriter: "Depththroat says our lives may be in danger" Bernstein types at the typewriter The typewriter again A rotary telephone Woodward at his desk Handwritten notes</p>
	<p><i>All the President's Men</i>: CU typewriter: "Tapes show Nixon approved cover-up..."</p>
<p><i>Holding Pattern</i> - Allah Las</p>	<p>CU typewriter: "Gerald Ford to become 38th president..."</p>

<p>VO: In the film's opening and closing the punch of a typewriter mimics the sound of gunshots firing, simultaneously drawing connection to the country's recent spate of assassinations and embodying the press as a force for justice.</p> <p>Rather than thrills and spills, <i>All the President's Men</i> glorifies the dogged persistence of the reporters;</p> <p>However, mythologising this iconic pair of journalists has had the side effect of erasing female involvement from the Watergate Scandal.</p> <p>One significant omission is Katharine Graham, the publisher of the Washington Post, whose influence is ascribed to Benjamin Bradlee and other male editors in the film.</p> <p>Her only appearance comes as the butt of a crude remark.</p>	<p>Footage of JFK in the motorcade</p> <p>Woodward and Bernstein working</p> <p>Woodward and Bernstein with two male editors</p> <p>Woodward and Bernstein in an elevator</p> <p>Footage + images of Katherine Graham</p> <p>Katherine Graham at a table with 18 other men</p> <p><i>All the President's Men</i>: Bradlee</p> <p>A room full of male editors</p>
<p>Voice on phone: You tell your publisher, tell Katie Graham she's gonna get her tit caught in a big ringer if that's published.</p>	<p>Bernstein on the phone, scribbling</p> <p>Bradlee speaks to Woodward and Bernstein</p>

<p>Bradlee: He really said that about Mrs. Graham... Well cut the words 'her tit' and print it.</p>	
<p><i>Holding Pattern - Allah Las</i></p> <p>VO: Other women are gatekeepers for the duo, or are simply heard and not seen.</p>	<p>A series of CUs on women at their doors</p> <p>A secretary</p> <p>A woman with her back turned;</p> <p>Woodward seems to ignore her</p>
<p>As a form of both entertainment and political reflection, <i>All the President's Men</i> suited the American movie-going public well as a mainstream conspiracy thriller based on real-life events that celebrated the power of the free press.</p>	<p>Woodward, Bernstein, Bradlee and another editor watch a television</p> <p>Woodward walks in the underground car park</p> <p>Woodward hangs up the phone</p> <p>A Washington Post newspaper; headline reads: Eagleton bows out of '72 Race; McGovern weighs replacement</p>
<p><i>Everybody Wants to Rule the World - Tears for Fears</i></p> <p>From the late 1980s the genre experiences a privatisation where the protagonist's private interests take priority over the public:</p> <p>Themes of greed and profits over people supersede the phenomenon of political assassination,</p>	<p><i>Wall Street:</i> New York cityscape; Bud Fox looks out</p> <p>Title:</p> <p><i>Phase 2 (1988- Present) "This is my life and I want it back!"</i></p> <p><i>They Live:</i> John Nada in black sunglasses</p> <p>B/W: a sign says CONSUME</p> <p>Nada takes off the sunglasses</p> <p>The sign says "Close Out SALE"</p> <p>Nada walks into a bank, armed with a shotgun, sunglasses on</p>

<p>with conspiracy films processing this new cultural landscape with justice that centres on</p> <p>self preservation: of protecting one's own livelihood, property, and family, over the public good.</p> <p>This new wave of films coincides with the late 80s conservative American fixation on sanctity of the family and the neoliberal promotion of the individual over the group,</p> <p>reflecting this idea that when the world becomes too challenging we ought not to fight outward, but rather focus inward and attempt to make sense of something we can control: ourselves.</p>	<p>B/W: the bank customers are alien humanoids</p> <p>The alien humanoid security guard shoots</p> <p>Nada shoots back</p> <p>Humanoids run and duck for cover</p> <p><i>The Firm:</i> Lambert pats Mitch McDeere on the shoulder</p> <p>McDeere holds out houskeys to Abby</p> <p>Abby and Mitch enter their new home</p> <p><i>JFK:</i> Garrison and his family look at his son's homework in the hall</p> <p><i>The Firm:</i> Two lawyers look out from an office suspiciously</p> <p><i>JFK:</i> Garrison at dinner; the white table cloth reflects off his glasses</p> <p>Garrison's eyes</p> <p>Garrison at home; his wife serves dinner</p> <p><i>The Firm:</i> Mitch sits at a shiny mahogany conference table, caresses it.</p> <p><i>Fight Club:</i> The Narrator is pulled into a giant chest; "Bob" strokes his hair</p> <p>The Narrator attempts to punch Tyler Durden</p> <p>Durden slams the Narrator into a car</p> <p>The Narrator approaches a group of masked men in white tuxedos</p>
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	Tyler Durden's head drops down; he drags his cigarette.
<p><i>Keep Pushing On - John Maus</i></p> <p>VO: In privatised conspiracy films, the seen threat is addressed but tackling the unseen threat is no longer a matter of life or death for the hero and in some cases, the conspiracy is never exposed, presenting a clear departure from the genre's public-facing traditions.</p> <p>Privatised conspiracy films can be identified by</p> <p>A disjoint between the protagonist's seen and the unseen threat,</p> <p>A focus on the identity of the protagonist rather than a public-facing conspiracy,</p> <p>The personification of systemic abuse of power as a single antagonist,</p>	<p><i>The Firm</i>: McDeere avoids a pair of policemen; bumps into his stalker</p> <p>Agent Tarrance finds an empty office with a File addressed to him</p> <p>Agents Tarrance and Richie stalk McDeere in a diner</p> <p>Text: SEEN/UNSEEN THREAT DISJOINT=</p> <p>Where the hero can address his primary motivation without seeking justice for, or exposure of, the conspiracy</p> <p><i>The Truman Show</i>: Truman looks over a shelf of books</p> <p>Text: PRIVATISATION OF THE PROTAGONIST =</p> <p>Where the seen or unseen threats focus on identity</p> <p><i>Antitrust</i>: Gary Winston speaks with projections behind him</p> <p>Text: PRIVATISATION OF THE ANTAGONIST =</p>

<p>and messiah characters</p> <p>Privatised conspiracy films bring contemporary anxieties about privacy, technology and the internet into the conspiracy genre,</p> <p>but their solipsistic focus on the protagonist's life -- on private control of the status quo -- poses a lost opportunity for public-facing justice within the narrative, and can actually be counterproductive when it comes to their political force.</p>	<p>Where the behemoth is figure-headed by a sole mastermind to personify abuse of power</p> <p><i>The Matrix</i>: Neo fights off Smith with one hand</p> <p>Text: MESSIAH CHARACTERS = the "chosen one", bearing innate talents, qualities or skills that fate them to be heroes</p> <p><i>Truman Show</i>: Truman stamps his car radio</p> <p>Internet + Satellite visualisations</p> <p><i>Antitrust</i>: Milo Hoffman looks up from his computer at Winston</p> <p><i>The Firm</i>: McDeer speaks to Abby - she ignores him</p> <p>McDeer whispers something into Abby's ear</p> <p><i>The Ghost Writer</i>: The Ghost underlines a passage; he looks at it with recognition</p>
<p>Brill: You're a threat now. Just like I was.</p> <p>Dean: A threat to whom? To them?</p> <p>Brill: To your family, to your friends. Everyone you know. Everyone you meet. That's why I went away and didn't come back. Gotta go away Robert.</p>	<p><i>Enemy of the State</i>: Brill and Dean converse in a quiet bar.</p>

<p>Dean: No. I don't think so. This is my life. I worked hard for it, and I want it back!</p>	
<p><i>Undercover - The Rolling Stones</i></p> <p><i>Enemy of the State is a privatised conspiracy narrative</i> about Robert Dean, a lawyer who accidentally receives evidence that the National Security Agency has murdered a US congressman for blocking anti-privacy legislation.</p>	<p>Brill and Dean run away from an explosion</p> <p>Overhead surveillance footage Dean at a payphone</p> <p>Dean in his office</p> <p>Dean's business card</p> <p>Zavits slips the hard drive into Dean's bag</p> <p>Reynolds in an office in the NSA</p> <p>A hitman strangles Congressman Hammersley and injects him with a syringe in the neck</p> <p>Zavits watches on his computer screen</p>
<p>Dean's seen and unseen threats are not linked:</p>	<p>Dean at a payphone</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>seen threat:</p> <p>to return his life back to normal.</p> <p>unseen threat:</p> <p>the NSA's cover up of their assassination of a US Congressman who was stopping hyper surveillance legislation from being passed</p>
<p>Film critics have drawn connection between <i>Enemy of the State</i></p>	<p>Inside Brill's lair</p> <p>Brill works at a wall of surveillance equipment</p>

<p>and <i>The Conversation</i>, a traditional conspiracy thriller entrenched in surveillance,</p> <p>but where <i>The conversation</i> presents a moralistic crisis of conscience,</p> <p>Robert Dean feels no need to expose</p> <p>the NSA's plot to expand its surveillance powers...</p> <p>Because he doesn't feel affected by it.</p>	<p><i>The Conversation</i>: Opening title Split Screen: Brill in <i>Enemy of the State</i> and Harry Caul in <i>The Conversation</i>; both played by Gene Hackman in horn-rimmed glasses</p> <p><i>The Conversation</i>: Harry opens a tool box</p> <p>Harry at a wall of surveillance equipment similar to the above</p> <p>A series of shots: Harry acts out in pain, fear, and anxiety</p> <p><i>Enemy of the State</i>: Robert Dean looking smug</p> <p>An NSA file</p> <p>Identify profiles on Dean and Rachel Banks</p> <p>Digital and satellite surveillance footage</p> <p>Brill takes Dean down in an elevator</p>
<p>If Robert Dean was a reporter, bringing the NSA to justice or exposing Congress' cover-up would have been a massive scoop but, as a lawyer, Dean is content to turn a blind eye, reflecting a privatisation in his agency</p>	<p>A reporter talks on the phone to Zavits who watches his recording of the assassination</p> <p>A group of lawyers meet with press outside the courthouse</p> <p>A newspaper with Dean's picture and headline: "Labour Lawyer cleared of all charges"</p> <p>Dean sits at home in front of the TV with his family at Christmas</p>

<p>and creating a hollow sense of justice.</p>	<p>Dean's wife Carla gripes at the TV</p>
<p><i>Enemy of the State</i> follows in the footsteps of its traditional predecessors in that women are reduced as appendages to the male protagonist and are sexualised by men in the film</p>	<p>Dean sneaks into Rachel's apartment Dean finds Rachel dead in her bathroom Carla opens her bathrobe, showing off her nice lingerie for Dean A lingerie model opens her bathrobe for Dean</p>
<p>Fiedler: Oh man, let me follow the nanny... She doesn't shave her legs. Jesus. Women like that are so hot!</p>	<p>Fiedler, in a surveillance van. Dean's Nanny, in her 60s, drives nervously</p>
<p><i>Undercover - The Rolling Stones</i></p> <p>VO: Dean's wife Carla may be the political voice of reason, but her concerns are patronised by her aloof husband.</p> <p>TV Presenter: When buildings start blowing up, people's priorities tend to change.</p> <p>Carla: Aw well there goes the 4th Amendment. Baby listen to this fascist gas bag!</p> <p>Dean: Uh-oh.</p> <p>Carla: You know, Bobby, you should take this more seriously.</p>	<p>Carla looks at Dean incredulously Dean shrugs her off; the television plays: Carla reacts to the TV; Dean joins her in the kitchen</p>

<p>Dean: Honey I think you're taking it serious enough for both of us.</p>	
<p><i>Undercover - The Rolling Stones</i></p> <p>VO: This aloofness from the protagonist, coupled with Tony Scott's portrayal of the surveillant image renders the film all bark and no bite:</p> <p>These hyper-kinetic establishing shots double as point-of-view shots from the perspective of the surveillance state, putting the audience in a position to identify with both the surveillance</p> <p>and the surveilled --</p> <p>and encourages us to entertain hyper surveillance as an acceptable "point of view" rather than heightening our vigilance to it.</p>	<p>Dean, looking aloof</p> <p>A team of operatives in a surveillance van</p> <p>Tracking device footage</p> <p>Imposter Brill holds out a tracker</p> <p>Satellite surveillance images,</p> <p>closing in on Robert Dean, running in a bathrobe</p> <p>Two operatives converse through headsets</p> <p>A wall of TV screens with CCTV</p> <p>Operatives track Dean</p> <p>Even more TV screens with CCTV</p> <p>Dean in a bathrobe, running in a tunnel, socked feet, traffic behind him</p> <p>An operative speaks into his headset</p> <p>Surveillant image of Dean running</p> <p>A car, almost crashing into Dean</p>
<p>Dean: Brill you are one sick man.</p>	<p>Dean clicks the remote for the TV; the programme changes to a live feed reflection of Dean himself. He stares, puzzled.</p> <p>Dean looks up at a smoke detector, waves</p> <p>TV Dean waves and looks up. He smiles.</p>

<p>Dean: Yeah, me too.</p>	<p>The television reads: "Wish you were here"</p>
<p><i>I love Sloane - Delroy Edwards</i></p> <p>Rather than display outrage or fear in the final scene, Dean laughs it off -- just like he does his wife's political concerns --</p> <p>showing that invasion of privacy is harmless and acceptable.</p> <p><i>Enemy of the State,</i></p> <p>a film whose representation of the NSA was decried</p> <p>as exaggerated</p> <p>or astonishing at the time,</p> <p>seems ineffectual now in the aftermath of Edward Snowden's revelations, or scandals like Cambridge Analytica and Google's Project Nightingale.</p>	<p>Digital identify information for Dean</p> <p>CU on Dean's face as it turns from confusion to amusement</p> <p>Carla points to Dean in the kitchen; his back is to her. He shrugs as he opens the fridge</p> <p>Dean waves at himself on the TV</p> <p>Aerial surveillance images; <i>Enemy of the State</i> title card</p> <p>Reynolds walks through the NSA</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>I saw a preview of the new movie 'Enemy of the State' and to my surprise found out the NSA were the "bad guys" in it</p> <p>NSA aerial footage</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>Unfortunately truth isn't always as riveting as fiction and creative license may mean that "the NSA" as portrayed in a given production, bears little resemblance to the place where we all work.</p> <p>Footage of Edward Snowden</p> <p>A computer</p> <p>Reflecting on someone's eyeglasses</p> <p>A megaphone drawn on a</p>

<p>Where most conspiracy films are notable for their prescience</p> <p>the privatisation of <i>Enemy of the State</i> and its representation of surveillance culture as harmless likely softened public attitudes toward curtailments of privacy, and the loss of liberties that conspiracy films traditionally sought to protect.</p>	<p>chalkboard</p> <p>Footage from CBS This Morning</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>Google Medical Reports Project</p> <p>Project Nightingale</p> <p>“... placing medical data in the digital cloud...”</p> <p>“... information had not been de-identified...”</p> <p>Aerial surveillance shots</p> <p>Still: <i>The China Syndrome</i></p> <p>Text:</p> <p>Three Mile Island accident was eerily foreshadowed by a Hollywood blockbuster days before”</p> <p><i>Enemy of the State</i>: Dean throws down a newspaper</p> <p>More aerial surveillance shots</p> <p>Assorted shots of CCTV cameras</p> <p>CCTV footage from real arrests</p>
<p><i>Looks Like That - Sneaks</i></p> <p>In the years following 9/11, we see</p>	<p>Grainy CCTV footage of an officer approaches a suspect lying face down on the ground, arms outstretched</p> <p><i>The Ghost Writer</i>: The ghost sits at an empty bar, the news playing on a TV behind him</p> <p>Title:</p> <p><i>Phase 3 (2005 - Present) “Lame Ducks”</i></p>

<p>a resurgence of politically-minded conspiracy thrillers that hope to portray a clear sense of right and wrong, but they lose political force by failing to reconcile with: privatisation, conspiracy culture, and</p> <p>a growing cynicism of the public towards the genre's traditional mechanisms for justice</p>	<p><i>Justice Rendered Impotent in Contemporary Conspiracy Narratives</i></p> <p>The Ghost turns around</p> <p>News of the military plays, showing two images of Middle Eastern men on screen</p> <p><i>Shooter</i>: Bob Lee Swagger opens a medal box, revealing a medal of valor</p> <p>A pack of police vehicles surround Swagger in his car</p> <p><i>The Truman Show</i>: Truman sits in the dark</p> <p>Fake News graphic</p> <p>Someone typing on their phone</p> <p>A subway carriage; anonymous people, phones out</p> <p>3-way Split Screen:</p> <p><i>All the President's Men</i>: Woodward and Bernstein converse with their editors</p> <p>A court hearing</p> <p><i>Serpico</i>: Serpico walks down a NYC street</p>
<p>At the onset of the 21st century, a culmination of factors would occur.</p> <p>Bill Clinton: It depends on what the meaning of the word "is" is...</p> <p>VO: In 2001 civilian recordings on mobile phones frame the public's</p>	<p>Static television graphic</p> <p>Footage from Bill Clinton's Grand Jury</p> <p>Footage from the 9/11 terrorist attacks: crowds running, buildings</p>

<p>perception of 9/11: bringing a plurality of perspectives to the fore</p> <p>And in the years following, the mainstream media's portrayal of the threat of terrorism would fuel rather than quell what has long been the trappings of Hollywood conspiracy thrillers: fear, paranoia, and anxiety</p> <p>Now, phrases such as</p> <p>'alternative facts',</p> <p>'fake news',</p> <p>and 'your own truth', reflect a culture of doubt that I refer to as conspiracy culture, and it is conspiracy films' inability to reconcile with it that has diminished their political force along with a disconnect between a singular cinematic enemy to castigate and the systemic injustices, the corruption and collusion the public sees in real life:</p>	<p>falling, emergency services, civilians crying, emotional, staring.</p> <p>CNN footage: "The War on Terror Will Go On"</p> <p>CG visualisation: "The last minutes of Osama Bin Laden". An army helicopter lands; troops infiltrate a safe house, climbing steps</p> <p><i>Conspiracy Theory</i>: torture scene, Jerry's eyelids are taped open</p> <p><i>The Conversation</i>: Harry looks paranoid</p> <p><i>Silkwood</i>: Karen Silkwood is hosed down for radiation</p> <p>Footage of Donald Trump</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>Alternative Facts</p> <p>Two reporters argue on CNN</p> <p>A graphic of Trump pointing a finger</p> <p>A computer screen; the cursor hits "Like"</p> <p>The cursor floats across social media icons: YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Google+</p> <p><i>The Parallax View</i>: Brainwashing room</p> <p><i>Syriana</i>: Jimmy Pope speaks</p> <p>Pope approaches a board with a large map</p> <p>Pope speaks to a conference table with 16 white men sat around it</p>
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<p>The Media is no longer trusted as watchdog for democracy, The government is either impotent or just as corrupt as its opposition.</p> <p>And the reputation of law enforcement as a militant, corrupt, racist institution has eclipsed the few</p> <p>“good clean cops” that traditional conspiracy narratives once portrayed.</p> <p>This has led to a privatisation of justice in film where characters take retribution into their own hands making</p> <p>justice feel weak</p> <p>or violently inappropriate.</p> <p>This amoral complexity to films which were once anchored by their strong sense of right and wrong, leaves them feeling shallow, hopeless.</p>	<p>Beat up sailboats plough through water</p> <p>Pope shakes hands under a sign with two company logos: Connex and Killen</p> <p>Bryan Woodman reports on a merger between Connex and Killen</p> <p>Graphic: news logos consumed by flames</p> <p><i>Shooter</i>: Nick Memphis approaches a flip chart, speaking to Alourdes Galindo.</p> <p>Nick flicks on a pair of TVs and points</p> <p>News footage:</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>Use of Police Force - videos in 101 Chicago case files released</p> <p>Police shoving suspects, pointing guns, using force</p> <p>Footage: A Black Lives Matter march</p> <p><i>Serpico</i>: Serpico runs</p> <p><i>Klute</i>: Klute stands to shake hands</p> <p><i>Little Nikita</i>: Roy Parmenter smiles in uniform</p> <p><i>Shooter</i>: a crony wipes blood off his face</p> <p>A dead man falls from the ceiling between Johnson and Meachum in a cabin</p> <p>Swagger in full stealth gear stalks beneath the cabin</p>
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	<p><i>Syriana</i>: Woodman comes home to his wife and children</p> <p><i>Shooter</i>: Swagger holds a gun out to Meachum; he fires</p> <p>A massive explosion engulfs the cabin; Swagger walks away</p> <p><i>The Parallax View</i>: Frady argues with his editors</p>
<p>Dalton: Corruption?! Corruption is government intrusion into market efficiencies in the form of regulation! That's Milton Friedman he got a god damn Nobel Prize! We have laws against it precisely so we <i>can</i> get away with it. Corruption is our protection! Corruption keeps us safe and warm! Corruption is why you and I are prancing around in here instead of fighting over scraps of meat out in the street! Corruption is why we <i>win</i>.</p>	<p><i>Syriana</i>: Danny Dalton yells at Bennet Holiday in the street</p>
<p><i>Looks Like That - Sneaks</i></p> <p>VO: Despite returning their focus to politics, phase 3 conspiracy films still seem to say:</p> <p>when in doubt, protect yourself.</p> <p>It appears that the tonic of conspiracy antagonists -- greed and self-preservation --</p>	<p><i>Fair Game</i>: military scenes</p> <p><i>The Ghost Writer</i>: The ghost speaks on the phone in a hall, paranoid</p> <p>He hangs up</p> <p><i>Sorry to Bother You</i>: Steve Lift snorts a massive line of cocaine</p> <p>He hands a note to Cassius Greene that says "I'm offering you \$100,000,000 :)"</p> <p>CU: Cassius Greene</p>

<p>now fuels our protagonists and the <i>public</i> as well.</p>	<p>Cassius, spilling champagne wildly</p>
<p>Poundstone: Ah, but what's the point, Miller? You think anybody's gonna listen to you?</p> <p>Miller: I know what you did.</p> <p>Poundstone: What'd you say?</p> <p>Miller: You made him up to get what you needed. Magellan. You made him up.</p> <p>Poundstone: I don't know what you're talking about Miller.</p> <p>Miller: When you peddled that shit in DC did they know it was a lie or did they just never bother to ask?</p> <p>Poundstone: Ok. Come on, none of this matters anymore. WMD, this doesn't matter.</p> <p>Miller: The fuck you talking about? It's all that fucking matters!</p>	<p><i>Green Zone:</i> Roy Miller confronts Poundstone</p>
<p><i>Mi Mujer - Nicolas Jaar</i></p> <p>VO: Released 6 years after the CIA unequivocally reported that Saddam Hussein</p> <p>had neither WMD stockpiles</p> <p>nor active capability for weapons production at the time of war,</p>	<p><i>Green Zone:</i> a convoy of hum-Vs in the desert</p> <p>Footage of Charles Duelfer's testimony that there was no evidence of WMD</p> <p>Footage of Saddam Hussein with a crowd of his followers</p> <p>Footage of John McCain during a press conference regarding the absence of WMDs</p> <p>Text: The War on Error</p>

<p><i>Green Zone</i> appears to be a traditional, public-facing conspiracy thriller about</p> <p>Roy Miller, an idealistic US Army Chief who stumbles across a conspiracy that the WMDs used to coax the US invasion of Iraq</p> <p>may not actually exist.</p>	<p>Footage of George Bush talking in front of a Navy Ship</p> <p>Text: Mission Accomplished</p> <p><i>Green Zone</i>: Soldiers sit in the back of a Hum-V</p> <p>Two soldiers' faces, a machine gun</p> <p>Soldiers throw bottles of water to civilians</p> <p>Capt. Roy Miller looks discerning</p> <p>Miller observes an empty storehouse</p> <p>Two Army officers present in front of a map to a large group of military personnel</p> <p>Miller looks at his intel</p> <p>Miller's intel: a source has confirmed WMDs</p>
<p>Miller's seen and unseen threat are linked:</p>	<p>Miller leads his team of soldiers into a building</p> <p>Text: seen threat: to find the WMDs; Miller quickly deviates from this goal in order to find the source of the unreliable WMD intelligence</p> <p>unseen threat: there are no WMDs. The Department of Defense is sending bogus</p>

	intelligence in order to justify the invasion of Iraq
<p>As a conspiracy protagonist, Roy Miller is altruistic and honorable; Yet, where previous conspiracy heroes' professions</p> <p>actively fueled their journeys as truth-seeking journalists,</p> <p>justice-bound cops, or</p> <p>shrewd lawyers,</p> <p><u>soldiers are trained to follow orders.</u></p> <p>Miller goes against everything a soldier would do <i>and</i> everything a privatised conspiracy protagonist would do</p> <p>by chasing the source of the WMD intel,</p> <p>but a deeper examination of Miller leads to no substantiation of this</p>	<p>Miller examines his intel</p> <p>Miller looks disapprovingly at the intel</p> <p><i>Three Days of the Condor</i>: Turner speaks into a payphone, paranoid</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>American Literary Historical Society</p> <p><i>All the President's Men</i>: Woodward and Bernstein confer with a wall of post-its and papers of information</p> <p><i>The Whistleblower</i>: Kathy Bolkovac, dressed in police uniform turns a corner</p> <p><i>JFK</i>: Garrison speaks passionately in a courtroom</p> <p><i>Green Zone</i>: Roy Miller lines up his scope; calls off the shot</p> <p>Miller walks into a bloodstained building</p> <p>A target lies murdered on the floor</p> <p>Miller sits at a his satellite laptop computer in his hotel room</p> <p>CUs on Miller's laptop screen:</p> <p>"Iraqi WMD Program still active" by Lawrie Dayne</p> <p>Articles written by Dayne</p> <p>Miller thinks in front of his laptop</p> <p>Miller looking concerned in the darkness</p> <p>Miller bursts into Martin Brown's</p>

<p>counter-intuitive, altruistic urge, making him feel two-dimensional. This lack of dimensionality extends to the other characters in the film:</p> <p>“Freddy”, the film’s Iraqi everyman, may be compelling but he is overshadowed by Miller’s white saviour narrative, allowing only a perfunctory engagement with a deeply complex political landscape.</p> <p>Wall Street Journal reporter Lawrie Dayne The only female character in the film, likely represents Judith Miller, the former New York Times reporter</p> <p>whose series of pro-WMD exclusives bolstered the Bush Administration’s war efforts, but that were ultimately proven false.</p> <p>As a reporter, Dayne would have been a provocative character</p>	<p>office; they confer</p> <p>Miller talks to Freddy in a side alley Freddy gesticulates wildly Miller tells the soldier who is holding Freddy on the ground to let up Miller looks at Freddy knowingly Freddy speaks passionately, gesticulating again Lawrie Dayne approaches Poundstone non-aggressively Poundstone ignores her Still: Judith Miller reporting in Iraq Footage: Judith Miller being interviewed on MSNBC Text: Attack on America A Reporter’s Journey: Miller on her controversial Iraq War reporting Footage: Rev. Al Sharpton speaks Text: War on Error <i>Green Zone</i>: Lawrie tries again to get a scoop from Poundstone Dayne at her desk Dayne speaking to Miller; she smiles Miller berating Dayne; she cowers. Miller crowds the frame, looks at her, judging</p>
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<p>study as a <i>self-serving</i> journalist; Instead, her character rests on tropes of female passivity and gullibility instead of engaging with conspiracy culture</p>	
<p>Greengrass admits to revisiting the intense visual style of his blockbusting <i>Bourne</i> trilogy in <i>Green Zone</i>, But, Where Bourne's action sequences came as revelations for and to his character, the same camera style that ought to resemble authentic, handheld camera footage in a war zone doesn't match Miller's own emotional state: Miller is not paranoid. He is not frenetic. And we're expected to relate to Miller: he represents the strong, moralistic conspiracy hero, and we are meant to believe that the reasons we go to war do matter.</p>	<p>Footage: Paul Greengrass talks about <i>Green Zone</i> <i>Bourne Supremacy</i>: Jason Bourne (also played by Matt Damon) hurtles into an agent Split Screen: Soldiers scale staircases in near-identical shots in <i>Bourne Supremacy</i> and <i>Green Zone</i> <i>Bourne Identity</i>: Bourne elegantly lays to rest more guards, not knowing where his fists will land next <i>Green Zone</i>: Miller is strangled by Briggs, bleeding from his nose Miller gets up, barely shaken Miller watches Freddy perceptively Miller shakes Brown's hand; they continue speaking</p>

<p>But modern audiences saw</p> <p>America go to war all the same.</p> <p>Modern audiences know about the</p> <p>NSA's surveillance system,</p> <p>the Pentagon Papers¹⁵²,</p> <p>and the Chilcot Report¹⁵³.</p> <p>They know the truth, but have yet to see justice.</p>	<p>Footage of a rocket at night</p> <p>George W Bush delivers his presidential address</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>CBS News America at War</p> <p>Edward Snowden speaks from a laptop at a conference</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>Washington Post "Independent Review Board says NSA data program is illegal and should end"</p> <p>Newspaper clipping: "Ellsberg to 'Sound Alarm'"</p> <p>Report Cover: "United States - Vietnam Relations 1945-1967"</p> <p>Footage of a conference "The Iraq War Inquiry"</p> <p>Footage of empty warehouses</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>Un Inspectors in Iraq found no chemical, nuclear, or biological weapons</p> <p>MI6 intelligence, including the 45-minute claim, turned out to be wrong</p> <p>Footage of an anti-Iraq war protest</p>
<p><i>Triumphant music plays</i></p>	<p><i>Green Zone:</i> Lawrie Dayne receives a mass email from Roy</p>

¹⁵² The Pentagon Papers revealed in 1971 that the American public has been misled regarding the United States' political intentions and military involvement in Vietnam.

¹⁵³ The Chilcot Report is the result of a British public inquiry into its involvement in the Iraq War which states that, among other things, the intelligence regarding WMDs and the legal basis for war were "far from satisfactory" (Harding, 2016).

	<p>Miller: "Let's get the story right this time. See attached"</p> <p>Dayne opens the attachment: "Falsification of WMD Intel the TRUTH about "Magellan"</p> <p>Danye sees the email has been sent to 50 other news outlets. She smiles and takes a deep breath.</p> <p>Roy walks out of the darkness and into the light</p>
<p>In 1976, <i>All the President's Men</i> could use the media as a mechanism for justice because history dictated that it would be triumphant.</p> <p>But in 2010, <i>Green Zone's</i> attempt to do the same falls flat because justice for the WMD debacle never came.</p>	<p>Miller rides away in his Hum-V, satisfied</p> <p>The convoy rides into the distance.</p>
<p><i>Deadly Valentine - Charlotte Gainsbourg</i></p> <p>For a genre dedicated to calling out abuse of power and protecting the interests of the public, its transformation from the traditional conspiracy thrillers of the 1970s to the privatised narratives of the late 80s/90s comes not as a surprise, but at a cost when it comes to the political force of modern conspiracy</p>	<p><i>Blow Out</i>: Jack cuts stills from a book of photographs</p> <p>Jack stares, focused</p> <p>The scissors slice a pair of photos</p> <p><i>Capricorn One</i>: Caulfield drives, the car bouncing into an alleyway</p> <p><i>Fight Club</i>: the Narrator runs down a stopped escalator in a robe and boxers</p> <p><i>Blow Out</i>: Jack uses the cut out photos as a tiny flip-book</p>

<p>thrillers.</p> <p>If conspiracy films seek to remain relevant as a source of political force the way they once were, they must not ignore, but engage with conspiracy culture to overcome the cynicism and solipsism that pervades the genre and identify viable mechanisms for justice -- either by addressing the public's tainted relationship to the media and the law, or by seeking out new, community-based systems of justice</p> <p>to overcome abuse of power.</p>	<p>The flip book shows a car crashing into a lake</p> <p><i>The Ghost Writer</i>: the pages of the Ghost's manuscript float in the wind after he is run over off screen</p> <p><i>The Firm</i>: Mitch McDeere runs furiously in a tuxedo</p> <p><i>Syriana</i>: Bob Barnes walks away from a car bomb explosion, unphased</p> <p><i>Shooter</i>: Nick examines a clock tower</p> <p><i>The Truman Show</i>: Truman looks up in the darkness, he's sitting alone on the beach</p> <p><i>Fair Game</i>: Congress floats in the distance</p> <p>Valerie Plame sits in the back of a taxi</p> <p>Valerie is photographed as she is sworn in</p> <p><i>Sorry to Bother You</i>: a group of protestors with coke cans attached to black wigs chants outside a building</p> <p>Cassius yells, shaking his wig</p> <p>SWAT teams threaten protestors, tear gas swells,</p> <p>Cassius is knocked out</p>
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Docucript 2: Truth, Justice, and her Feminine Wiles

When the personal is political, even privatised justice is public-facing

AUDIO	VISUAL
<p>Eberhart: I think... that the men are behind it.</p> <p>Psychiatrist: What men?</p> <p>Eberhart: All of them... Oh Jesus! It's so awful. If I'm wrong I'm insane. And if I'm right, it's worse than if I'm wrong!</p>	<p><i>The Stepford Wives:</i> Joanna Eberhart walks backward, cornered. She turns around and squints in disbelief.</p> <p>Another Joanna stands up from a dressing table; she wears a silken, see-through robe: her breasts are larger, she has no pubic hair.</p> <p>The other Joanna winds a stocking around her fingers...</p> <p>Joanna's eyes widen...</p> <p>The other Joanna steps closer, her eyes black</p>
<p><i>In the Lassa - Juana Molina</i></p>	<p>Joanna tries to step back but freezes</p> <p>Title: <i>TRUTH, JUSTICE, AND HER FEMININE WILES</i> <i>the effect of female agency on justice in American conspiracy film</i></p>
<p>VO: When we think of the heroes in conspiracy films, perhaps we imagine the journalists of <i>All the Presidents Men</i> and <i>The Parallax View</i>, or the lawyers in <i>JFK</i> and <i>Enemy of the State</i>...</p>	<p>Joanna closing a mirrored cabinet. She looks at herself... doubtfully</p> <p><i>All the President's Men:</i> Woodward and Bernstein look over a typewriter</p> <p><i>The Parallax View:</i> Frady talks over a newspaper</p> <p><i>JFK:</i> Garrison argues with a judge</p>

<p>Maybe soldiers, or scientists.</p> <p>But do we imagine mothers? Wives?</p> <p>Do we see women as viable conspiracy heroes?</p> <p>Only about 20% of mainstream conspiracy films are led by women</p> <p>And yet, where justice is concerned, female-led conspiracy films function much in the same way as their traditional male counterparts,</p> <p>But unlike male-led conspiracy films, female-driven narratives do not lose political force like the rest of the genre.</p>	<p><i>Enemy of the State</i>: Dean greets a client</p> <p><i>Green Zone</i>: Miller aims his rifle and shouts orders</p> <p><i>Chain Reaction</i>: Eddie Kasalivich examines a gizmo in an engineering lab</p> <p><i>Silkwood</i>: Karen Silkwood hugs her children</p> <p><i>The Pelican Brief</i>: Darby Shaw studies at a computer</p> <p>Darby appears in a doorway</p> <p><i>The Long Kiss Goodnight</i>: Charly Baltimore brandishes a knife</p> <p>Timothy aims his gun</p> <p>Charly slices a string of Christmas lights, is pulleyed up, and grabs a gun from a flaming body attached to the string of lights</p> <p>Against the backdrop of a happy family advertisement, Charly fires the gun at Timothy in the helicopter</p> <p>He falls to his death</p>
<p>In my visual essay “Truth, Justice... And Protect Yourself”</p>	<p><i>All the President’s Men</i>: Woodward walks alone in the underground car park</p> <p>Title: <i>TRUTH, JUSTICE... AND PROTECT YOURSELF</i> <i>the privatisation of justice in American conspiracy film</i></p>

<p>I outline 2 essential parts of Conspiracy narratives: the seen and unseen threat.</p> <p>And based on how conspiracy films end, I can classify conspiracy narratives as</p>	<p><i>Andromeda Strain</i>: Dr. Leavitt and Dr. Dutton enter a silver room</p> <p>Text: SEEN THREAT = the protagonist's primary objective, a result of the threats immediately posed to his/her person.</p> <p>UNSEEN THREAT = the conspiracy at large, often defined by the need to cover up corruption or crimes</p>
<p>tradition 1 or tradition 2</p> <p>And using the seen and unseen threat and the appearance of tradition 1 and tradition 2 narratives</p>	<p>Split Screen:</p> <p><i>Capricorn One</i>: Caulfield and Brubaker return to Brubaker's funeral</p> <p>Text: tradition 1: Where both the seen and unseen threats are addressed to the benefit of the protagonist and the general public</p> <p><i>Blow Out</i>: Jack sits in the movie theatre; listening to Sally's screams</p> <p>Text tradition 2: where, in solving or attempting to solve the seen threat, the protagonist loses to the power of the conspiracy: the hero may finally know the truth, but he has perished in the pursuit of it</p>

<p>I have traced the evolution of Justice in conspiracy films across 3 distinct phases:</p>	<p><i>Andromeda Strain</i>: detailed plans of the levels and labs</p> <p>Title: <i>THE EVOLUTION OF JUSTICE IN AMERICAN CONSPIRACY FILM</i></p>
<p>The first is overtly political, with great value attributed to notions of truth, justice and morality.</p> <p>These are “public-facing” narratives, With direct links between the seen + unseen threat where the protagonist’s success is hinged to a political, public-facing situation.</p>	<p><i>Parallax View</i>: trying to catch the assassin atop the Space Needle</p> <p>Title: <i>Phase 1 (1968 - 1988) Truth, Justice & the American Way</i></p> <p>Text:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the importance of TRUTH, JUSTICE + MORALITY - "public facing" narratives - direct links between SEEN + UNSEEN THREAT - protagonist's success is tied to the political
<p>From the late 1980s we experience a privatisation of the genre, where the protagonist’s interests take priority over the public good. the seen threat is addressed but the unseen threat goes unpunished --</p>	<p><i>Wall Street</i>: New York cityscape; Bud Fox looks out</p> <p>Title: <i>Phase 2 (1988- Present) "This is my life and I want it back!"</i></p> <p>Text:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "privatised" narratives - protagonist's interests take priority over the public <p><i>Enemy of the State</i>: Dean inhales in the midst of a back room showdown with the mob</p> <p>Text:</p>

<p>and in some cases, the conspiracy is never exposed.</p> <p>Prevalent themes here are self-preservation, identity and greed</p>	<p>- SEEN + UNSEEN THREAT disjoint</p> <p>A crony rushes in, gun drawn, shouting. Someone fires. The kitchen erupts with gunfire.</p> <p>Dean hides under a table</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>- SELF-PRESERVATION, IDENTITY, GREED</p>
<p>In the years following 9/11, conspiracy films</p> <p>return to their traditional roots but fail to reconcile with this privatisation and a a</p> <p>new conspiracy culture, creating a loss of political force.</p> <p>... At least, that is, for conspiracy films with male protagonists.</p>	<p>Footage from the 9/11 terrorist attacks: buildings falling, civilians staring.</p> <p>Title:</p> <p><i>Phase 3 (2005 - Present) "Lame Ducks"</i></p> <p><i>Justice Rendered Impotent in Modern Conspiracy Narratives</i></p> <p>Text:</p> <p>- a return to political narratives</p> <p>- justice feels hollow after privatised phase</p> <p><i>Green Zone</i>: Roy Miller lines up his scope; calls off the shot</p> <p>Graphic: news logos consumed by flames</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>- no engagement with CONSPIRACY CULTURE = a loss of political force</p> <p><i>Green Zone</i>: Miller gets up, spits blood.</p> <p>Miller in a Hum-V, looking determined</p>

<p><i>Turn off the Light - Nelly Furtado</i></p> <p>So does this 3-phased relationship to justice apply to conspiracy heroines?</p> <p>It doesn't.</p> <p>there is no privatisation of the female conspiracy narrative, and no loss of political force.</p> <p>Rather: the heroine's private struggles extend beyond just her; serving to reflect the public grievances of women's liberation; and when conspiracy heroines have more agency, their ability to affect public-facing justice is enhanced.</p>	<p><i>Rollover</i>: Lee Winters reclines on a couch in a pink dress</p> <p><i>The Pelican Brief</i>: Shaw reaches into a safe deposit box for an envelope</p> <p><i>Flightplan</i>: Kyle Pratt watches as Stephanis is led away in handcuffs</p> <p><i>North Country</i>: Josey Aimes blinks, her face is cut and bruised</p> <p>A group of girls receive communion</p> <p>Footage of Women's Liberation marches in the 1970s</p> <p><i>Flightplan</i>: Pratt walks forward and decks Stephanie in the aisle of an airplane. She runs</p>
<p>But for the conspiracy heroine, autonomy comes at a price:</p> <p>And this may be threatening, demoralising, and exhausting</p> <p>But she does have some female-centric advantages</p> <p>And from the 1990s onward, rarely are these overwhelming enough to prevent the heroine from exposing the unseen threat,</p>	<p><i>Rollover</i>: Winters turns on a lamp in her office, sits down at her desk and listens to a tape</p> <p>Text:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - She will not be believed - She will be patronised, objectified, sexually harassed - She will have her sexual history or motherhood called into question - She will have to balance her professional commitments with family commitments - She will be accused of being emotional or bitchy

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - She will be domesticated by the end of the film - Her feminine wiles to persuade/manipulate men - Her emotional capacity allows people to trust her - People underestimate her because she is a woman
<p>Where the evolution of justice in male-led conspiracy narratives is relatively graduated, The progression of female agency in conspiracy films more closely resembles Raymond Williams' residual¹⁵⁴ and emergent¹⁵⁵ cultural movements, Because while representations of female agency continue to progress, residual, regressive versions of womanhood and femininity remain on screen</p> <p>Using Vivian Fornick's definition of feminism as</p>	<p><i>They Live</i>: Nada and Frank work on a construction site, muscles exposed, sweaty <i>Flightplan</i>: Pratt looks up at the departure board Pratt looks down: something's missing Pratt, lost in a sea of people at the airport</p> <p><i>The Stepford Wives</i> (2004): a woman in lingerie walks robotically down stairs. She stops abruptly A hand presses a button on a remote that looks like a golden vibrator Joanna, Bobbie and Roger giggle as the woman walks backwards up the stairs and falls</p>

¹⁵⁴ "The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present" (Williams, 1977, p.122).
¹⁵⁵ Emergent culture: "distinct from both the dominant and the residual... it is never only a matter of immediate practice; indeed it depends crucially on finding new forms or adaptations of form" (Williams, 1977, p.126).

<p>a “way of interpreting human experience...”</p> <p>I investigate how female protagonists’ agency has influenced their ability to affect justice in conspiracy films from the 1970s until now.</p>	<p><i>Erin Brockovich</i>: Erin drives alone at night, deep in thought</p> <p>Text: “not a movement, not a cause, not a revolution, but rather a profoundly new way of interpreting human experience...”</p>
<p>Man: Your eyes? Let me see your hair. Take your hair -- your hat off... Yeah... Okay.</p> <p>Woman: Too pretty.</p> <p>Man: Too pretty.</p> <p>Woman: Too pretty.</p> <p>Man: She’s --</p> <p>Woman: Now that’s the colouring --</p> <p>Man: Kind of exotic. The colouring is great. Yeah, I dunno.</p> <p>Woman: It’s not quite it though,</p> <p>Man: No...</p>	<p><i>Klute</i>: a row of models, being assessed by two casting directors</p>
<p><i>Le goudron - Brigitte Fontaine</i></p> <p>VO: While the male-led faction was busy sharpening its teeth on America’s preoccupation with assassinations and Watergate in the 70s/80s, female-led conspiracy films reflected, in addition, a separate political struggle: women’s liberation.</p>	<p>Wide on the row of models and the casting directors</p> <p><i>Executive Action</i>: a man traces the path of Kennedy’s motorcade CU Kennedy waving from the car Freeze-frame: a red target over Kennedy’s face</p> <p><i>The Conversation</i>: the mouthpiece of a telephone is examined</p> <p><i>Klute</i>: Bree Daniel walks down through a business district</p>

<p>And, as was the prerogative of conspiracy thrillers from the 70s to call out abuse of power by large, powerful, institutions, female-led conspiracy films had an additional powerful institution to confront: the patriarchy.</p>	<p>Bree takes her shirt off in a hotel room</p> <p>Footage of Women’s Liberation marches in the 1970s</p> <p><i>The Stepford Wives</i>: Walter Eberhart leans in towards Joanna</p> <p><i>Capricorn One</i>: Brubaker grabs Dr. Kelloway by the lapels</p> <p><i>Silkwood</i>: Silkwood sits at a meeting with three other men</p>
<p>In female-led conspiracy films, the protagonist’s seen + unseen threat are inevitably related to, and often exacerbated by, her womanness,</p> <p>reflecting the second-wave feminist idea that</p> <p>‘the personal is political,’ making the privatisation of male-lead conspiracy films from late 1980s</p> <p><i>implicit</i> within female-driven conspiracy narratives from as early as the 1970s,</p> <p>In a way that doesn’t dilute, but rather amplifies their political force.</p>	<p><i>The China Syndrome</i>: Kimberly Wells walks down a corridor</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>SEEN + UNSEEN THREATS = for conspiracy heroines are exacerbated by her "woman-ness"</p> <p>She tries to open a door but it is locked; the men hear her on the other side.</p> <p><i>Silkwood</i>: Silkwood rushes to a bin where a bagged picture frame of her daughter has been tossed by two hazmat suits</p> <p><i>Klute</i>: Daniel and Klute wait in an elevator</p> <p>Daniel mouths the words “Fuck Off” to Klute</p> <p>She throws her audio tapes in the bin and walks off</p>

<p>It would seem that the inherent conflict of a woman's quest for justice in a society of ingrained male hegemony makes these narratives all the more compelling.</p>	<p><i>Silkwood</i>: Silkwood enters a lab. There are three men there. She speaks to them Silkwood talks in a telephone booth, cigarette in hand</p>
<p>Silkwood: Morgan! ... You scared me. Morgan: Meant to. Silkwood: I'm doin something good. Morgan: I know what you're doing. And you're the wrong person to be doing it.</p>	<p>Silkwood searches through files in a drawer. She is startled by Morgan</p>
<p>VO: <i>Silkwood</i> is a 1983 conspiracy biopic about the real-life Karen Silkwood, a plutonium worker turned union activist who died in a suspicious car accident before she could expose her employer's abuse. The film hits the usual conspiracy themes of abuse of power and profits over people, but exacerbates them via Silkwood's struggle as a divorced mother, trying to balance her day job with seeing her children. Only thru her union involvement does Silkwood display any real sense of self,</p>	<p>Silkwood enters a radiation detection chamber; the alarm goes off Silkwood being violently hosed down Silkwood walks into a room with three men Silkwood drives at night; something bright distracts her in her mirrors A bright light encompasses her Winston corners Silkwood into a red room Silkwood arrives late to a union meeting for the plant workers Thelma gives Silkwood a dirty look in the locker room Silkwood watches her husband take their children inside with his girlfriend</p>

<p>But against a massive company like Kerr-McGhee and the cultural standards for women in the 1970s, she ultimately faces defeat.</p> <p><i>Silkwood's</i> tradition 2 ending represents the power of the unseen threat, and adds weight to the idea that violating the norms of motherhood by having a day job, taking up lovers out of wedlock, or attempting to unionise are all activities that led to Silkwood's untimely death.</p> <p>At the root of these conspiracy stories is the notion of control, where the heroine's ability to affect justice depends on her ability to control herself.</p>	<p>Silkwood looks comfortable seated next to the men in the room, unintimidated</p> <p>Silkwood smokes a cigarette outside the plant; Thelma glares at her</p> <p>Silkwood drives alone at night She crashes her car</p> <p>Silkwood looks around the canteen; no friendly faces Drew, bare-chested, lowers his head towards Silkwood's waist...</p> <p>Silkwood sits in a meeting, surrounded by men</p> <p>Silkwood speaks confidently Silkwood is placed on a medical bed under observation. The lights go out; she looks scared Silkwood nods goodbye and walks to her car</p>
<p>In the 1970s and 80s, conspiracy films were one of few mainstream narrative spaces for female characters</p> <p>to eschew "classical Hollywood's sensibilities as love interests, models of domesticity,</p>	<p><i>The China Syndrome</i>: Inside the Ventana Nuclear Power Plant, Kimberly Wells and her camera team speak to staff</p> <p><i>How to Marry a Millionaire</i>: a group of women, including Marilyn Monroe dress up</p> <p><i>Breakfast at Tiffany's</i>: Holly and Paul kiss passionately in the rain</p>

<p>or women waiting to be rescued</p> <p>Bree Daniel, the protagonist of <i>KLUTE</i>, is a “liberated woman”</p> <p>But does she have agency?</p>	<p>1950s TV advert: mother and daughter make sandwiches</p> <p><i>North by Northwest</i>: Eve hangs off the side of Mt Rushmore</p> <p>Roger grabs her hand, pulling her up... and into bed in a sleeper carriage</p> <p><i>Klute</i>: Daniel walks forward, feather boa around her neck, makeup done, gazing into camera</p>
<p><i>En Dejlige Aften - Katrine Stockholm</i></p> <p>Daniel’s seen + unseen threats are resolved like most tradition 1 narratives,</p> <p>BUT whether this is via a demonstration of her own agency, or her acquiescence is debatable.</p> <p>Where vices + addictions make for complex and interesting male protagonists,</p> <p>Daniel’s lack of inhibition is negated as a symptom of her life</p>	<p>Daniel walks through an empty clothes factory dressed in an evening gown</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>seen threat:</p> <p>Bree Daniel wants to quit turning tricks to avoid her stalker, but can't resist the quick and reliable money.</p> <p>She wants to be in control of her life.</p> <p>unseen threat:</p> <p>Peter Cable murdered two female witnesses and is stalking Bree to intimidate her into silence about his murder of Tom Gruneman</p> <p><i>The Parallax View</i>: scotch being poured</p> <p><i>Fight Club</i>: the Narrator, bleeding profusely from his nose, pushes a cart, flanked by police</p> <p><i>Klute</i>: club scene - a sweaty, desperate Bree approaches a</p>

<p>as a call girl and portrayed as empty, lonely, or unfulfilling</p> <p>Any growth in Daniel's character is represented as a consequence of her domestication and association with John Klute, and this poses a crucial caveat to Bree's journey:</p> <p>On her own, Cable would have killed Bree, Making a clear cut tradition 2 narrative</p> <p>But, Klute saves her at the last second by throwing Cable out a window.</p> <p>Bree Daniel may be a compelling character, But her physical safety and emotional growth are controlled by Klute, a man, who serves to domesticate and possess her by the end of the film.</p>	<p>group of men, kisses one, then leaves him for the dance floor - she seems lost</p> <p>Bree sits, wiped out, with her pimp's hand on her head</p> <p>Bree watches Klute at the marketplace, they smile</p> <p>Klute's body blocks Brees from a vendor</p> <p>Klute leads Daniel by the hand down the street</p> <p>A hand plays an analogue tape recording</p> <p>Brees eyes flick up</p> <p>Cable's eyes flick up</p> <p>A flurry of movements as Cable strangles Bree</p> <p>Klute rushes in</p> <p>Cable's silhouette crashes through a window</p> <p>Daniel gestures to express herself in front of her psychiatrist</p> <p>Klute forces Daniel into a chair in her home, presses her head between her knees</p> <p>Klute sits in a chair and pets Daniel's head - she sits on the floor like a child</p>
<p>The theme of control continues in the opening scene of <i>The China Syndrome</i>...</p>	<p><i>The China Syndrome</i>: two TV screens: a male presenter smiles,</p>

<p>Producer 1: 40 seconds long let's hustle up</p> <p>Producer 2: There we go, camera 2 is clear.</p> <p>Producer 1: Okay, let's preview.</p> <p>Producer 2: Red hair was a good idea.</p> <p>Producer 3: We talked about cutting it.</p> <p>Producer 2: What did she say?</p> <p>Producer 2: We haven't talked to her about it but she'll do what we tell her.</p> <p>Producer 3: Good.</p> <p>Producer 1: Guys, how we doing?</p> <p>Wells: Studio B this is remote</p> <p>Producer 2: We're gonna come out of the last section tight you better tell --</p> <p>Wells: Studio B this is Kimberly how soon do we go live?</p> <p>Producer 1: Orange make sure he knows just time to say goodbye <i>[indistinct studio chatter]</i></p> <p>Wells: Hey. Hey... Fellas! Anybody listening to me? Hey!?</p>	<p>entranced, as camera zooms in on a belly dancer's bare midriff</p> <p>Colour bars interrupt</p> <p>Kimberly Wells holds a mirror over her face, checking her clothes and hair</p> <p>Kimberly removes the mirror and stares straight into camera, as if she's heard, but she cannot</p> <p>Wells checks her earpiece</p> <p>Wells' image, swallowed up in a sea of television screens</p>
<p><i>Oblivion - Grimes</i></p> <p>VO: Kimberly Wells is not only an object - to be cut + coloured to their liking,</p>	<p>Wells, still fiddling with her earpiece</p> <p>The two producers watch</p>

<p>no one takes her seriously. Her mirror blocks her face, reflecting + replacing her with any woman who dares venture into phallogentric, professional life. Where Wells is successful at achieving justice, The demise of Karen Silkwood, Joanna Eberhart and other tradition 2 conspiracy heroines Represents more than just plot, It represents the perceived “impossibility of equality, of change, and of women’s access to power” At best these films offer women a glimpse of the objectification, patronising, and marginalisation they would experience in the male dominated workplace, And at worst, the heroine dies trying, with an “I told you so” prescription of domesticity</p>	<p>Kimberly speaks to camera and smiles The producer smiles Replay: mirror sequence Wells passionately interviews, surrounded by men <i>Silkwood</i>: Silkwood driving alone at night <i>The Stepford Wives</i>: Eberhart mouths the word “Why?” A tall man holds a fire poker above her Joanna runs through a dark house with long shadows The tall man follows her, lightning cracks <i>The China Syndrome</i>: Wells smiles politely to the man who is speaking to her <i>Rollover</i>: A man speaks patronisingly to Winters <i>The China Syndrome</i>: Wells looks pained to see Richard’s outburst <i>Rollover</i>: four male investors stand and look to camera <i>Silkwood</i>: Silkwood waves goodbye as she drives away</p>
<p>Where female conspiracy protagonists in the 70s and 80s were a reflection of 2nd wave</p>	<p><i>Klute</i>: Klute holds the phone to Bree’s ear - she looks horrified</p>

<p>feminism, The fracturing of feminist ideology into “postfeminism” and the 3rd wave from the 90s-onwards meant that even as appreciable elements of</p> <p>Riot Grrrl culture took root and</p> <p>female conspiracy protagonists</p> <p>occupied a plethora of new professions on screen,</p> <p>they still align with the 90s postfeminist model by featuring white women protagonists who are rarely from</p> <p>poor or working-class backgrounds,</p> <p>Meaning real strides in representation,</p>	<p><i>The Long Kiss Goodnight</i>: Charly squeezes a bloody wrist from a rope binding underwater and reaches for the crotch of a dead man</p> <p>She pulls a gun from his trousers as she is wound back up to the surface by Luke</p> <p>One hand still bound to the watermill, Charly holds out the gun and fires, screaming</p> <p>Luke’s knee bursts</p> <p>The watermill stops moving</p> <p>Luke lies on the floor his chest full of bullet holes</p> <p>Charly breathes heavily, crazed, her white night slip is soaking wet</p> <p><i>The Net</i>: Angela Bennett talks to her computer</p> <p><i>The Interpreter</i>: Sylvia Broome speaks into a headset</p> <p><i>Zootopia</i>: Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde go splashing through a water chute</p> <p><i>The Interpreter</i>: Sylvia looks disturbed, her eyes welling up, she points a gun at Zuwanie</p> <p>She drops her hands</p> <p><i>Flightplan</i>: Pratt walks down a large staircase in an expensive-looking house</p> <p><i>The Long Kiss Goodnight</i>: Samantha Caine, dressed as Mrs.</p>
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<p>characterisation</p> <p>and therefore justice on screen have still yet to be made.</p>	<p>Claus waves from a float in a Christmas parade</p> <p><i>The Net</i>: Bennett lies on a cabana chair on the beach</p> <p><i>The Long Kiss Goodnight</i>: Charly/Samantha smiles next to her boyfriend in front of a barn</p>
<p>Produced in the wake of sci-fi/action films like <i>Alien</i> and <i>Terminator 2</i>,</p> <p><i>The Long Kiss Goodnight</i> is a conspiracy action film that uses tropes previously reserved for men to interrogate feminine identity</p> <p>when an amnesiac stay-at-home-mom realises she used to be an Assassin!</p>	<p><i>Aliens</i>: Ripley eyes up Mother. Her flamethrower goes nuts</p> <p><i>Terminator 2</i>: Sarah Connor's ripped arms as she does another chin up. She turns around</p> <p><i>The Long Kiss Goodnight</i>: Charly draws her sniper rifle to a window and aims</p> <p>She looks up over the scope</p> <p>Samantha balances a kitchen knife on one finger and catches a tomato with the other hand, throws it then impales it with a knife throw across the kitchen</p> <p>Her boyfriend and daughter looked at her nervously. Samantha shrugs</p>
<p>Against a backdrop of terrorist threats on American soil,</p> <p>The transition from housewife Samantha to</p> <p>Charly the assassin is</p> <p>marked by distinct performative shifts</p>	<p>A helicopter floats over the US/Canada border</p> <p>The border bridge explodes</p> <p>Samantha vacuuming at home, she throws a stuffed animal</p> <p>Charly throws a man's pointed gun to the side</p> <p>Throat-punches a thug and shoots with one hand whilst strangling another</p>

<p>which expose the ways her supposedly</p> <p>'natural' womanliness has been a performance</p> <p>And represents the 90s postfeminist perception of a warring between 2 realms of femininity:</p> <p>the homemaker and</p> <p>the hypersexual femme fatale. but despite pushing those boundaries, Samantha and Charly are both still reactions within them.</p>	<p>Samantha wipes the fog off a mirror, revealing her face</p> <p>A pair of hair scissors</p> <p>Hair dropping into a sink</p> <p>Pouring peroxide into a container</p> <p>Applying lipstick</p> <p>Charly closes the mirror - her new face: bleached hair, dark eyeshadow and pink lipstick fills the space that Samantha had been</p> <p>Samantha looks into a mirror - her reflection, bloody, grey and crazed, reaches out and slashes her neck</p> <p>Samantha snaps out of the dream, clutching her neck</p> <p>Samantha dances with her boyfriend at Christmas</p> <p>Charly takes a shot of Vodka, staring at Mitch</p> <p>Charly gets close to Mitch, staring at his lips</p> <p>Mitch holds out a photo of Charly's boyfriend and daughter</p> <p>Charly's reflection, looking at it</p> <p>Charly wades through a sea of Santas in a Christmas parade</p>
<p>Hal: Yeah, I could just sit out here forever... couldn't you?</p>	<p>Charly/Samantha and her boyfriend sit outside an idyllic cabin at sunset, eating.</p> <p>Charly/Samantha takes a sip of wine, tosses the knife gently in one hand, saying nothing.</p>

	She throws the knife straight into a tree stump
<p><i>En Dejlige Aften - Katrine Stockholm</i></p> <p>VO: The knife throw in the closing scene of the film can be read in two ways:</p> <p>either she is throwing away her old life in favour of domesticity, or “the violence of the act hints at Charly’s resistance to remaining in the white, nuclear-family arrangement”</p> <p>It’s not a tradition 2 ending like <i>Silkwood</i></p> <p>or <i>Stepford Wives</i>, the resolution of <i>The Long Kiss Goodnight</i> more closely resembles the closing scene of</p> <p><i>Klute</i>: an ideologically ambiguous ending which signals an unwilling or unenthusiastic return to domesticity from a woman who once displayed full control over herself and her sexuality.</p>	<p>The knife shivers</p> <p>Charly/Samantha inhales; her boyfriend looks at her, his expression not giving away much</p> <p>Charly/Samantha shrugs and smiles</p> <p>Hal shakes his head and Charly/Samantha walks away</p> <p><i>Silkwood</i>: Silkwood sits unconscious in her crashed car</p> <p><i>The Stepford Wives</i>: Joanna Eberhart, dressed all in white with a large hat, gloves and A-line dress walks blankly through the supermarket aisles</p> <p><i>Klute</i>: Klute stands in Daniel’s now-empty apartment holding a suitcase. Daniel opens her arms in a shrug, picks up a suitcase and they walk out</p>
<p>Male Lawyer: How did you do this?</p> <p>Brockovich: Well... um, seeing as how I have no brains or legal expertise and Ed here was losing all faith in the system, am I right?</p>	<p><i>Erin Brockovich</i>: two lawyers question Ed and Erin. Erin wears a bright pink crochet top with leopard push-up bra. She is in stark contrast with the others’ smart office wear.</p>

<p>Ed: Oh yeah completely, no faith, no faith!</p> <p>Brockovich: I just went out there and performed sexual favours. Six hundred and thirty-four blowjobs in five days...</p> <p>Brockovich: I'm really quite tired.</p>	<p>CU on female lawyer's face: frozen, serious</p> <p>Another lawyer puts her pencil down</p> <p>Erin turns to Ed.</p>
<p><i>No Man's Woman- Sinead O'Connor</i></p> <p>VO: A conspiracy heroine who doesn't relinquish her sexuality to achieve justice is Erin Brockovich, whose real-life class action lawsuit against the Pacific Gas & Electric Company is dramatised in <i>Erin Brockovich</i></p> <p>In a nod to 3rd wave "girlie culture" Brockovich's expressions of femininity are a challenge to objectification and a display of empowerment.</p> <p>Where "the dominant male image shows the hero as unburdened by family life, free of domestic commitments...</p> <p>It is this blending of the personal and the political that makes <i>Erin</i></p>	<p>Erin smokes a cigarette against a wall, puts it out on the ground with her high heel</p> <p>Footage: the real Erin Brockovich-Ellis</p> <p><i>Erin Brockovich</i>: three PG&E lawyers in court look over contemptuously</p> <p>Erin Brockovich's smile lights up her small office</p> <p>Erin smiles at an awkward office guy. He shrugs.</p> <p>She leans over, pressing up on her leopard print push-up bra...</p> <p><i>Chinatown</i>: Giddis slaps Evelyn Mulwray</p> <p><i>Wall Street</i>: Bud gets up in his bachelor pad with a woman lying in his bed. He sits at his desk in his boxers</p>

<p><i>Brockovich</i> and other female-driven conspiracy narratives so politically forceful.</p>	<p><i>Erin Brockovich</i>: Erin works a photocopier with a baby on her hip. She looks over at her kids who are helping her sort through files</p>
<p><i>Alice Jemima - Licorice</i></p> <p>Riding on the internet boom of the 1990s and its associated fears and paranoias, <i>The Net</i> presents Angela Bennett, a hacker</p> <p>who stumbles on a cyberterrorist plot when she is sent a floppy disk</p> <p>with a backdoor virus.</p> <p>The plot resembles Tony Scott's <i>Enemy of the State</i> which came out 3 years later but the films differ in that in <i>Enemy of the State</i>,</p> <p>Robert Dean foregoes justice to get his identity back, making it a privatised narrative:</p> <p>but Bennett's only chance at</p>	<p>Early 90s internet commercial: a group of kids points at a desktop computer</p> <p>Footage: inside a computer</p> <p>Digital countdown to 00 with sad faces</p> <p><i>The Net</i>: Angela Bennett smiles</p> <p>Bennett sits in front of two computers with a box of half-eaten pizza</p> <p>Bennett's computer screen: she's scanning for viruses</p> <p>Bennett talks to her computer</p> <p>Removes a floppy disk from an envelope: "weirdness here!! Call ASAP Dale"</p> <p>Bennett inserts the floppy disk</p> <p>A computer loading screen</p> <p><i>Enemy of the State</i>: title card</p> <p>Three techs chat in a cramped surveillance van</p> <p>A helicopter circles overhead</p> <p>Dean hangs off a balcony of a hotel, he looks up and jumps to the next balcony over, wearing a vest top and boxers</p>

<p>reclaiming her identity</p> <p>is to expose the unseen threat.</p> <p>If Bennett was a man,</p> <p>her lifestyle might be</p> <p><i>insular,</i></p> <p>but as a woman, the implications of these choices</p> <p>become <i>dangerous</i></p> <p>On her solo holiday, Bennet is seduced by a hacker</p> <p>who tries to kill her on their</p> <p>one night stand, lending credence to the idea that Bennett's brief foray into</p> <p>promiscuity and traveling alone might be to blame.</p>	<p>Fully clothed, Dean stands atop a skyscraper</p> <p><i>The Net</i>: two highway patrol officers race down hill in the rain They apprehend Bennett</p> <p>CU: computer screen "Ruth" and Bennett's face</p> <p>Bennett stands up from behind a computer, determined</p> <p>Overhead shot through Bennett's skylight of her working at home alone</p> <p>Computer screen: a pixelated shoot-em-up game</p> <p>Half-eaten anchovy pizza and a cup of M&Ms</p> <p>A digital log-fire on Bennett's computer screen</p> <p>Lying down, Bennett looks over, a blanket wrapped around her</p> <p>Devlin stares down, gun in hand</p> <p>He aims</p> <p>Devlin's eyes, crazed</p> <p>Bennett, now sitting up, blinks in disbelief</p> <p>On the beach, Bennett works on her laptop in a bikini. Devlin kneels down beside her</p> <p>Devlin launches himself at Bennett, they tumble</p> <p>Bennett burns Devlin's face with a cigarette, throwing him off her</p>
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<p>When she returns,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Her identity has been replaced; + Her house is sold, + Her records digitally altered <p>With no one to “validate” her identity, the audience is left to think:</p> <p>if only she had a husband or children -- a <i>family</i> to anchor her to society -- this wouldn't...</p> <p>this <i>couldn't</i> have happened. Despite this, Angela Bennett retains her agency without a male saviour.</p>	<p>Devlin and Bennett snuggle on the boat, bare chested and bare shouldered</p> <p>Devlin drives the yacht, Bennett beside him</p> <p>A bus passes behind Bennett; she touches her forehead</p> <p>A paper says “Ruth Marx”</p> <p>An officer looks down - Bennett stands in her now-empty house with a realtor and her neighbour and the officer. The realtor shrugs</p> <p>Computer screen: “Edit Records”</p> <p>An police information page shows Bennett's face with the name Ruth Marx and a list of prior arrests</p> <p>Bennett looks down at a phone and dials desperately</p> <p>A neon cross over a church with a sign that says “Women's Bingo”</p> <p>The doors open and a crowd of pensioners come out</p> <p>Bennett, hiding behind some bushes, lights up from nearby car headlights</p> <p>Bennett sits in a car while a man drives</p> <p>Bennett takes the wheel, crashing the car</p>
<p>In a finale resembling the climax of <i>Klute</i>,</p>	<p>Split Screen: <i>The Net</i>: Devlin runs down a gangway</p>

<p>the antagonist, Devlin,</p> <p>is thrown off a balcony to his death -- but not by a man this time...</p> <p>by Bennett herself.</p> <p>This solitary hacker whose masculine qualities have the opposite effect on her than they do male protagonists, may offer the <i>possibility</i> of a heroine who is neither wife nor mother, but the narrative's depiction of these choices as dangerous, and detrimental shows a lingering distrust of single, autonomous women who break these moulds.</p>	<p><i>Klute</i>: Klute runs through the empty warehouse</p> <p><i>The Net</i>: Devlin looks up, face drawn</p> <p><i>Klute</i>: Cable looks up, face drawn</p> <p><i>The Net</i>: Cable goes crashing out the window</p> <p><i>Klute</i>: Bennett knocks Devlin off the gangway</p> <p>The men fall</p> <p><i>The Net</i>: Bennett looks over the edge of the gangway, Devlin lies crumpled on a truck, dead</p> <p>Bennett's eyes tracking on a computer screen</p> <p>She moves the mouse</p> <p>Bennett, dressed as a firefighter</p> <p>Bennett in an orange prison jumpsuit</p> <p>A chat room between IceMan, Angel and Cyberbob</p> <p>Bennett wipes the fog off a bathroom mirror, revealing her reflection</p> <p>Devlin wrestles Bennett against a wall</p> <p>Bennett opens the door to her empty house</p> <p>Bennett sits up in a hospital gown</p> <p><i>The Pelican Brief</i>: Shaw looks out at a New Orleans fair: a sea of people</p>
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<p>Blakely: Your superiors, they tell me that you're working hard</p> <p>Bolkovac: I enjoy my work</p> <p>Blakely: Very dedicated, thorough</p> <p>Bolkovac: Thank you</p> <p>Blakely: Tough stuff though... Your area... It's stressful. You must miss your daughter. It's unusual isn't it that a judge would award custody to the father? I would imagine there's almost some kind of a stigma around that --</p> <p>Bolkovac: What did you want to talk to me about?</p> <p>Blakely: I just... wondered. Because we award special paid leave to folks who work in stressful departments. You know, parents especially. We really encourage it. You know you'd have some time to hang out with your daughter, nice little jaunt around Europe, see the sights.</p> <p>Bolkovac: Um... I'm gonna have to think about it.</p> <p>Blakely: You're not the maternal type?</p>	<p><i>The Whistleblower:</i> Bolkovac sits down, she looks chipper.</p> <p>Bolkovac begins to look uncomfortable</p> <p>Bolkovac laughs to herself</p>
<p><i>Born, Never Asked - Laurie Anderson</i></p> <p><i>The Whistleblower</i> is a modern conspiracy thriller whose heroine actually refuses her "duties" as a</p>	<p>Feet running through a forest</p> <p>Bolkovac says goodbye to her daughter</p>

<p>mother to pursue justice on a massive scale.</p> <p>The film is inspired by the real Kathy Bolkovac, a single mother who discovers the UN's facilitation of a sex trafficking ring in Bosnia.</p> <p><i>The Whistleblower</i> appears to have a seen/unseen threat disjoint where we expect that once Bolkovac has worked her 6 months in Bosnia and earned her 100 grand salary, that she will return to the US to be with her children</p> <p>But, Bolkovac's decision to stay and pursue justice is a conscious abandonment of her private interests, showing a departure from</p> <p>the privatisation of male-led conspiracy films and a disconnect between the usual</p> <p>blending of personal and political in female-driven narratives.</p> <p>Bolkovac wants to be a good mother, but her principles -- as opposed to the need to comply with a culturally approved definition of motherhood -- are her priority.</p>	<p>The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights</p> <p>Still: the real Kathy Bolkovac in police uniform</p> <p>Bolkovac in the film at her desk</p> <p>Bolkovac investigates an empty brothel at night</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>seen threat:</p> <p>Kathy Bolkovac works for DemocraSecurity as a UN International Police Officer in order to make enough money to move closer to her daughter back in the United States.</p> <p>unseen threat:</p> <p>DemocraSecurity has been facilitating the sex trafficking of young women in Bosnia and the UN will not intervene</p> <p>Bolkovac's silhouette as she looks out a window</p> <p>Bolkovac rides a bus full of UN special police officers</p> <p>She looks out the window</p> <p>She stands, listening, surrounded by male officers</p> <p>Silhouettes: Bolkovac and Jan kissing</p> <p>Laura Leviani speaks authoritatively to Bolkovac</p> <p>Bolkovac phones home</p>
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<p>And Bolkovac's dis-adherence to expectations of femininity and motherhood are preyed upon:</p>	<p>Bolkovac climbs a spiral walkway into an atrium at the UN, there are only men around her</p>
<p>Bolkovac: Ah, this is for you. I think Fred Murray is taking payoffs from brothels. And it's not prostitution. The girls were trafficked.</p> <p>Kaufman: All international personnel have immunity. They can't be prosecuted. Look, this is good work Bolkovac. Think it might even deserve a dinner out with yours truly.</p> <p>Bolkovac: Don't think I've earned that!</p>	<p>Bolkovac delivers news to Nick Kaufman at a UN post</p>
<p>VO: Bolkovac's success as a whistleblower then, is not <i>because</i> of her woman-ness, but surely in spite of it.</p> <p>In this way, Kathy Bolkovac represents real progression as a female conspiracy protagonist whose agency for once is not bound within a culturally approved rhetoric.</p>	<p><i>The Whistleblower:</i> Bolkovac on the BBC speaks to a reporter Bolkovac listens to a judge's verdict</p> <p>Bolkovac looks up Bolkovac sits down at a table full of male police officers Bolkovac sits in the police changing rooms</p>
<p><i>Baby Let Me Kiss You - Fern Kinney</i></p> <p>As conduits for feminist ideology in mainstream film, early conspiracy heroines stood out for their</p>	<p><i>Klute:</i> Bree Daniel undoes her glittery evening gown revealing a bare back</p> <p><i>Silkwood:</i> Silkwood steals some of her coworker's lunch and winks</p>

<p>intellect and determination in an era when “the only woman who’s been allowed to be consistently independent, adventurous, and unmolested is Lassie”</p> <p>Despite residual constraints of culturally approved gender norms, from the 90s-onwards</p> <p>prescriptive resolutions begin to fade in favour of self-actualisation and strong punitive justice, augmented as these films head into the present,</p> <p>And this is evidenced not only by an absence of tradition 2 endings after 1983, but by allowing conspiracy heroines to enact their own justice, and by a growing</p>	<p><i>The China Syndrome</i>: Kimberly Wells listens thoughtfully to Jack Godell</p> <p>Footage of Women’s Liberation marches in the 1970s</p> <p><i>Lassie Come Home</i>: Lassie nudges a door open</p> <p><i>The Long Kiss Goodnight</i>: Timothy and Luke stare at Samantha, in a white slip, bound to a water mill</p> <p><i>The Pelican Brief</i>: Callahan lies next to Darby Shaw; he is much older</p> <p>Darby sits at a conference table with Gray Grantham, his editor, and the FBI</p> <p>Mid CU: Darby and Gray sitting together</p> <p><i>Zootopia</i>: Judy Hopps looks around, happy</p> <p><i>Erin Brockovich</i>: Erin examines her settlement check: “Two Million and NO/100 XXX”</p> <p><i>North Country</i>: Sherry and Betty stand in the courtroom. Alice Aimes joins them</p> <p>Josey Aimes’ eyes water</p> <p><i>Flightplan</i>: Kyle carries her unconscious daughter into the lights of the emergency vehicles near the downed plane</p> <p><i>North Country</i>: a man joins Betty and Sherry</p>
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<p>complexity in the careers,</p> <p>characterisation,</p> <p>and motivations of female protagonists, as well as</p> <p>femininity being cast as an asset rather than a weakness.</p> <p>It seems that women are excellent, politically forceful heroes in the conspiracy genre -- so while female agency continues to advance and develop on and off screen, the personal is still political</p> <p>And the inclusion of queer, trans, or non-binary protagonists, protagonists of colour, and protagonists from poor, underprivileged, or working-class backgrounds</p>	<p>Josey watches as others join and take a stand</p> <p>The judge looks up at the courtroom</p> <p><i>The Net</i>: Bennett's eyes track her computer screen</p> <p><i>North Country</i>: the women stand together in miner's uniforms</p> <p><i>The Whistleblower</i>: Bolkovac walks with another officer</p> <p><i>The Interpreter</i>: Sylvia Broome rides a Vespa</p> <p>She stands, looking focused</p> <p><i>The Whistleblower</i>: Bolkovac holds out her hands</p> <p><i>Erin Brockovich</i>: Erin holds out her hands, she's wearing a tiara</p> <p><i>The Long Kiss Goodnight</i>: Charly kneels in a meat freezer. She squeezes a pee-pee doll's urine into a crack underneath the door</p> <p>Lights a match</p> <p>The flame carries to a group of oil drums</p> <p>An explosion rips through the house</p> <p>Graphic: a Black woman with purple hair lifts her hair</p> <p>People squeezing a pair of fingers apart</p> <p>A woman in a tuxedo, a bridal dress,</p> <p>Multicoloured people fill the screen making patterns</p>
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will only further enhance the political force of these narratives.	A pink chain breaks A pink figure stands atop a rising pedestal Fuel gauge goes from empty to full Newton's cradle in motion A pair of eyes blink
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Docucript 3: Weapons of Mass Disruption:

Reclaiming political force in modern conspiracy films (and other narratives)

AUDIO	VISUAL
<p>Narrator: You do your job and sometimes you find answers to questions that should never be asked...</p> <p>Or you find out what happens to people who ask them.</p> <p>Man: Hold it there, kittycat!</p>	<p><i>Chinatown:</i> a 1940s car rolls up Through a window, a silhouetted man strangles a woman Jake Giddis steps from the window Jake places a stopwatch under the tire of the car He climbs down a chain link fence and turns around</p>
<p><i>The Mother Lode - Thom Yorke</i></p>	<p>Title: <i>WEAPONS OF MASS DISRUPTION: reclaiming political force in modern conspiracy films (and other narratives)</i></p>
<p>VO: Mainstream conspiracy film, where it once was a record of triumph against corruption and abuse of power or a call to arms against rising public fears, is now drowned out by</p>	<p><i>All the President's Men:</i> Woodward types while Bernstein looks over his shoulder Typewriter: "Deep Throat says our lives may be in danger" Woodward and Bernstein look at each other <i>The China Syndrome:</i> Kimberly Wells speaks into her microphone passionately <i>Conspiracy Theory:</i> Typewriter: "Conspiracy Theory" Jerry looks through newspaper cutouts</p>

<p>conspiracy culture -- an umbrella-term I use to encompass the “post-truth” condition, paranoia, and partisan hostility that has infiltrated politics, entertainment and the public sphere.</p>	<p>Text: CONSPIRACY CULTURE = the “post-truth” condition, paranoia, partisan hostility (social polarisation) Jerry’s eyes taped open, he is strapped to a chair Graphic: two brains, red and blue, one with an elephant, the other with a donkey Footage of a Trump campaign rally Joe Exotic music video clip A Carole Baskin lookalike laughs Graphic: floating comments</p>
<p>Narrator: a lone law student has pieced together who did the killings</p> <p>Now, she has become a target</p>	<p><i>The Pelican Brief</i> trailer: Darby Shaw looks around nervously Hands typing on a keyboard Darby types in the law library A red ford mustang explodes Darby screams Darby walks, paranoid through a hospital corridor Static</p>
<p><i>I am that guy - Agar Agar</i></p> <p>VO: The conspiracy films I refer to are specifically, American, Mainstream films which indict abuse of power and the unseen threat of a powerful few</p>	<p><i>Capricorn One</i>: moon landing through a television screen NASA controls A moon landing soundstage <i>Wall Street</i>: Gordon Gekko speaks into a microphone as he walks through an auditorium full of stockholders A committee sits behind a long</p>

<p>against the powerless masses.</p> <p>At their height, conspiracy films portrayed the media as a “Watchdog for Democracy”, extolling the power of truth, with faith in its ability to create justice.</p>	<p>table at the top of the room</p> <p>The auditorium of people listen to Gecko speak</p> <p><i>Three Days of the Condor</i>: Turner speaks to Higgins outside The New York Times building</p> <p>Higgins looks back at Turner nervously</p> <p>Turner speaks assuredly</p>
<p>Higgins: How do you know they’ll print it?</p> <p>Turner: They’ll print it</p> <p>Higgins: How do you know?</p>	<p>Higgins stares at Turner</p> <p>Turner looks less confident</p> <p>Turner stares</p>
<p><i>I am that guy - Agar Agar</i></p> <p>VO: But since the early 2000s, these mainstream conspiracy films begin to lose that power, that political force, and this is largely due to a disconnect where (1) modern behemoth presences have yet to be addressed,</p> <p>(2) altruistic motivations of protagonists no longer align with modern cynicism, and</p> <p>(3) that traditional mechanisms for justice</p>	<p><i>The Recruit</i>: a clock says 6:00</p> <p>James Clayton wakes up in the dark</p> <p>Clayton practices Tai Chi in the grass with other CIA recruits</p> <p><i>Minority Report</i>: John Anderton uses gestures to wade through a VR interface of police material</p> <p><i>Green Zone</i>: Roy Miller smiles at Lawrie Dayne</p> <p><i>Shooter</i>: Bob Lee Swagger, dressed in an orange prison jumpsuit feints with his sniper rifle</p> <p>Colonel Isaac Johnson flinches</p> <p>Swagger raises his hands</p> <p><i>Fair Game</i>: Joe Wilson types</p> <p>Someone hands over a report in a government office</p> <p>The White House</p>

<p>are still being applied</p> <p>when they have proven impotent</p> <p>or compromised in real life.</p>	<p>Footage: Mark Zuckerberg testifying at a hearing</p> <p>“American Patriot Rally”</p> <p>Anti-Shutdown rally</p> <p>Footage of the Rodney King assault</p>
<p>Meachum: You got any plans after this? You have a rather unique skill set. I’d be interested in offering you a job.</p> <p>Swagger: Work? For you?</p> <p>Meachum: It’s not really as bad as it seems. It’s all got to be done and in any case you might as well be on the side that gets you well paid for your efforts!</p> <p>Memphis: And what side are you on?</p> <p>Meachum: There are no sides. There’s no Sunnis or Shiites, there’s no Democrats and Republicans, there’s only haves and have nots!</p>	<p><i>Shooter:</i> Swagger stands in the snow with Sarah and Meachum</p>
<p><i>Black Swan - Thom Yorke</i></p> <p>I illustrate in detail how and why modern conspiracy films have become less politically forceful in my article</p> <p>“The Privatisation of Justice in American Conspiracy Film” which was published in the journal <i>Film International</i> last year.</p>	<p><i>Enemy of the State:</i> Brill holds his fists up - Dean aims a shotgun at him</p> <p>They exchange words</p> <p>Brill shoves the shotgun out of his face and walks away</p> <p>Still: “The Privatization of Justice in American Conspiracy Film” in <i>Film International</i></p>

<p>Today, rather I will walk you through</p> <p>3 key components of conspiracy film:</p> <p>The Protagonist, The Behemoth, and Mechanisms for Justice, and I'll update them within contemporary conspiracy culture and identify new approaches for the genre in order for these films to regain their political force and remain relevant in the 21st century.</p>	<p><i>The Pelican Brief</i>: Darby walks through a marble-lined hallway</p> <p>Aerial view of Shaw walking through a geometric courtyard</p> <p>Text: 3 COMPONENTS OF CONSPIRACY FILM: THE PROTAGONIST THE BEHEMOTH MECHANISMS FOR JUSTICE</p> <p>Shaw gets up from a chair and is faced with two intimidating looking men</p> <p>She speaks confidently - they approach; she steps backwards</p>
<p><i>Numbers on the Boards - Pusha T</i></p> <p>In conspiracy film, the unseen threat is often conceived by, or embodied in the form of, a conspiratorial behemoth.</p> <p>In 2011, Donovan categorised these perpetrators in conspiracy films as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Big Government ● Big Business, and ● Big Science 	<p><i>The Recruit</i>: CIA students gather for a demonstration: a note disappears into a glass of water</p> <p>CU: an eye on a computer screen</p> <p>Vital signs on a computer</p> <p>Walter Burke sits in a chair on display, hooked up to the computer</p> <p><i>Fair Game</i>: the CIA logo on the floor</p> <p><i>The Recruit</i>: more CIA demonstrations</p> <p>Stealth operatives scale a building</p> <p>Text: DONOVAN'S 3 CATEGORIES OF CONSPIRACY FILM BIG GOVERNMENT</p>

<p>But recently we have seen these forces merge:</p> <p>Big Business joins</p> <p>Big Science,</p> <p>outpacing Big Government</p> <p>to form a new, distinctly 21st-century behemoth</p> <p>fuelled by surveillance capitalism:</p> <p>Big Technology.</p>	<p>BIG BUSINESS</p> <p>BIG SCIENCE</p> <p><i>All the President's Men</i>: a hearing</p> <p><i>Wall Street</i>: Bud, in the middle of a bustling trading floor</p> <p><i>Chain Reaction</i>: Dr. Lily Sinclair with goggles on, a laser beam</p> <p>Eddie Kasalivich holds up a gizmo in his workshop</p> <p><i>Wall Street</i>: Gordon Gecko raises his eyebrows</p> <p><i>Antitrust</i>: Milo walks through a VR splash of dollars</p> <p><i>The Ides of March</i>: Meyers walks towards a campaign stage</p> <p>Morris speaks at a podium</p> <p><i>The Net</i>: Bennett's fingers type on a keyboard</p> <p><i>The China Syndrome</i>: Godell walks into the nuclear power control centre, coffee in hand</p> <p>He sets the coffee down</p> <p>The mug begins to shake</p> <p>Godell looks nervous</p> <p><i>The Circle</i>: Mae Hollands walks with a crowd of people snapping selfies; social media text follows them on screen</p>
<p>Narrator: everything about us is encoded somewhere, on a complex network of information...</p>	<p><i>The Net</i> trailer: identity information on a computer screen</p> <p>Typing hands</p> <p>More digital information on screen</p> <p>Devlin hits on Angela</p>

<p>Devlin: computers are your life, aren't they?</p> <p>Bennett: Yes... The perfect hiding place.</p>	<p>Angela laughs, smiles</p> <p>A cursor clicks SAVE</p> <p>Aerial view of Bennet from her skylight, she is on her computer</p>
<p><i>Approach - Pye Corner Audio</i></p> <p>VO: Even as early as 1995,</p> <p>the conspiracy genre presented</p> <p>technology</p> <p>as a threat, but today,</p> <p>“our enthusiasm and growing dependence on technology” has “left us vulnerable and caught unawares when the early promise of information technology took a darker turn”</p> <p>Digital tools which were once utilised as forces for revolution, accessibility,</p>	<p><i>Antitrust:</i> Milo looks at his computer,</p> <p>Milo yells angrily</p> <p>Early 2000s Computer tet</p> <p><i>The Net:</i> Angela types away at her computer, half eaten pizza beside her</p> <p>She inserts a floppy disc</p> <p>Bennett looks concerned</p> <p><i>Antitrust:</i> Milo watching his computer</p> <p>Lisa Calighan speaks, she applies makeup in the mirror - it seems she is being watched</p> <p>Milo holds up an incriminating wire</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>“Our enthusiasm and growing dependence on technology... left us vulnerable and caught unawares when the early promise of information technology took a darker turn.”</p> <p>- Shoshana Zuboff, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism</p> <p><i>The Net:</i> more computer text</p> <p>Bennett is fixated on her computer</p> <p>Footage: a crowd of marchers</p>

<p>and change are now</p> <p>primed for surveillance and social control, straining our traditional relationships to truth,</p> <p>power</p> <p>and privacy --</p> <p>the fodder of conspiracy thrillers.</p> <p>This is why Modern conspiracy behemoths</p> <p>must be</p> <p>many-headed monsters:</p> <p>with complex and systemic threats</p> <p>ranging from singular figure heads</p>	<p>during the Arab Spring</p> <p>Stills from the Arab Spring -</p> <p>protestors hold signs with the words "Facebook"</p> <p>Graffiti: "Revolution Viva" and "Mort a la dictature"</p> <p><i>Enemy of the State</i>: Aerial surveillance images</p> <p><i>They Live</i>: B/W a supermarket aisle says: "NO THOUGHT" "STAY ASLEEP"</p> <p><i>Three Days of the Condor</i>: Turner speaks in a telephone booth</p> <p>A technician sits at a 1970s control desk in front of a giant map of the world</p> <p><i>Klute</i>: Klute listens to a tape recording</p> <p>Daniels rides a metal cage elevator up</p> <p><i>The Whistleblower</i>: A representative from DemocraSecurity speaks</p> <p>Bolkovac listens in a crowd of International Police Officers. They applaud</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>THE MANY-HEADED MONSTER</p> <p>modern threats will be complex and systemic,</p> <p>incorporating corruption, greed, and abuse of power.</p> <p><i>Three Days of the Condor</i>: a group of men in suits conspire around a</p>
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<p>to pawns acting out of self-preservation.</p> <p>And they must incorporate Big Technology</p> <p>and acknowledge it as a double-edged sword.</p>	<p>table</p> <p>Turner grabs Kathy - he points a gun to her stomach. She looks down at it</p> <p>Turner looks around</p> <p><i>The Circle</i>: Mae works at her computer typing - social media text appears on screen</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD: when the behemoth is used against itself as a mechanism for justice</p> <p>Mae walks down a long hall of servers</p>
<p>Narrator: an innocent bystander</p> <p>Dean: Why are they after me?</p> <p>NSA guy: Two targets, rooftop</p> <p>Brill: You have something they want</p> <p>Dean: I don't have anything!</p> <p>Caulfield: Something's wrong, something big. They know I'm onto it and they're trying to kill me.</p> <p>Editor: Who's "they"?</p> <p>Caulfield: I can't tell you</p> <p>Brubaker: We... are dead.</p>	<p><i>Enemy of the State</i>: Dean runs down a tunnel wearing a bathrobe</p> <p>Dean speaks to Brill on a rooftop</p> <p>Aerial/skyline views of the two men</p> <p>Dean looks around</p> <p>A digital satellite rendering</p> <p>Dean yells</p> <p><i>Capricorn One</i>: An airplane rushes over a car, the car's windshield exploding with bullet holes</p> <p>Calufield speaks passionately</p> <p>Caulfield is shot at</p> <p>Caulfield, still speaking in the office</p> <p>Brubaker and the other two astronauts, locked in a white room</p>

<p><i>The Soul of Morpheus and the Comet Man - Christian Tiger School</i></p> <p>VO: Where “being thrown into a position of great danger coupled with great moral opportunity would not be welcomed by most, traditional conspiracy protagonists often are, and often show commitments to truth, justice, and morality which they believably risk their lives for. But characters who are inherently good and who are never tempted to compromise their morals or succumb to corruption no longer</p>	<p><i>Enemy of the State</i>: Dean dodges an oncoming car Dean gets pistol whipped in the face Dean runs down stairs in the bathrobe <i>Enemy of the State</i>: Brill listens in Dean runs, he is being chased Dean jumps from one balcony to another in his underwear <i>Sorry to Bother You</i>: Cassius sits at his telemarketer desk, headset on, papers fly around him Mr. ____ stands proudly in front of a sign “Power callers tele-communicate internationally to vend strategic weapons” A missile fires behind him <i>Capricorn One</i>: Brubaker runs in his astronaut jumpsuit Caulfield waves from a small biplane Brubaker chases after the plane Brubaker grabs Dr. Kelloway by the lapels <i>Serpico</i>: Serpico, dressed in NYC cop uniform, listens to a suspect <i>The China Syndrome</i>: Godell waves his finger, yelling <i>Three Days of the Condor</i>: Turner runs down the street <i>The Stepford Wives</i>: the robot Joanna brushes her hair in front of a mirror</p>
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<p>aligns with what modern audiences have learned in real life, and in the movies: that when the world becomes too challenging we ought not to fight outward, but rather focus inward and attempt to make sense of something</p> <p>we can control: ourselves.</p>	<p>Joanna looks on, disgusted</p> <p>The robot turns to her</p> <p>Joanna winces</p> <p><i>Fight Club</i>: the Narrator stares at camera, seated on a commuter plane</p> <p>From the side, the camera swings, revealing Tyler Durden sitting beside him - their faces merging from one place</p> <p><i>The Stepford Wives</i>: Joanna's eyes widen</p> <p>The robot Joanna smiles</p>
<p><i>Islander - Portable Sunsets</i></p> <p>Rather than preach perfection to an audience, corruption of the protagonist is a technique which acknowledges that</p> <p>selfish decisions are understandable and expected in the 21st century by accepting private-facing motivations like self-preservation and self-discovery.</p>	<p><i>The Firm</i>: Mitch McDeere takes an oath with a group of newly qualified lawyers</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>corruption of the protagonist: when the protagonist's hands are dirtied by the conspiracy for personal gain, self-preservation, or self-discovery.</p> <p>Mitch looks up - something dark in his eyes</p> <p>Eddie Lomax shows Mitch his gun</p> <p>Mitch looks down at Eddie seated at his desk</p> <p>Eddie pockets some bullets</p> <p>Mitch, running in a suit -- frenzied</p> <p><i>The Truman Show</i>: Truman looks into a buttonhole camera</p> <p>Truman sits on a beach, alone</p>

<p>We relate to this, and so we will relate to selfish conspiracy protagonists</p> <p>more so than those who exhibit blind heroism.</p> <p>But this selfishness will be forfeited if the narrative is to claim any sense of modern morality.</p> <p>Emergence of the inner voice is this moment where the protagonist's motives switch -- they see past themselves and act for the greater good.</p>	<p>A cylinder of rain just the size of him pours down over him</p> <p>Truman gets up and moves - leaving the rain for a moment</p> <p><i>Green Zone</i>: Miller talks to Martin Brown</p> <p>Brown walks away</p> <p><i>The Truman Show</i>: Truman watches as the cylinder of rain follows him, re-centring over him again</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>emergence of the inner voice: the moment where the protagonist's motives switch from private to public-facing -- they see past themselves and act for the greater good.</p>
<p>Peters: With the rise of Donald Trump, Fox did become a destructive propaganda machine</p> <p>Carlson: CNN was not always nakedly partisan. It used to be a news network. It didn't always function as it does now, as a political campaign.</p>	<p>Footage: Anderson Cooper on CNN - "Col. Peters: Fox News has become a 'propaganda machine'"</p> <p>Tucker Carlson on Fox: "CNN has had a liberal agenda from the beginning"</p>
<p><i>Sweet Dreams - Angel Olson</i></p> <p>VO: One aspect of conspiracy culture is societal</p>	<p>Footage: Man drives through protesters in California</p>

<p>polarisation, which poses a distinct challenge where liberal conspiracy narratives don't draw in conservative audiences or vice versa and so may only be "preaching to the choir" when it comes to pointing out one side's perceived injustices.</p> <p>Representation seeks to address this by showing people who are alike and different on both sides of the issue.</p> <p>Casting ought to be representative of the communities characters belong to and not feed dated, irrelevant stereotypes.</p>	<p>Graphic: A pair of boxing gloves - CNN and Fox</p> <p><i>Green Zone</i>: Lawrie Dayne looks at her computer</p> <p>She talks to Miller</p> <p>Footage: a Trump Rally - a sea of red</p> <p>A Bernie Sanders Rally - a sea of blue</p> <p>Sanders speaks at a podium - he points aggressively</p> <p>Trump speaks at a podium - he points aggressively</p> <p>Footage: a panel of white television presenters look at a Black presenter as she speaks at the end of the table</p> <p><i>Zootopia</i>: a variety of animals in all shapes and sizes, on their way to work</p> <p>Text: representation: characters will be representative of the communities they belong to and should confront and challenge conventions of identity (by race, gender, class, etc.)</p> <p>Rooney Mara as Tiger Lily in <i>Pan</i></p> <p>Jake Gyllenhaal as Dastan in <i>The Prince of Persia</i></p> <p>Mickey Rooney as Mr. Yunioshi in <i>Breakfast at Tiffany's</i></p> <p><i>The Matrix</i>: Neo picks out a bullet, suspended in air</p>
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<p>I also suggest a drawing away from messiah characters and hero-syndrome with</p> <p>utility of the team.</p>	<p>He drops the bullet</p> <p>The bullets fall</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>utility of the team:</p> <p>the amplified voices of the many are more powerful than a single hero.</p>
<p>Squeeze: That felt good the other day, right?</p> <p>Crowd: Yes, yeah.</p> <p>Squeeze: That's good man</p> <p>Salvador: It's like I've known ya'll my whole life</p> <p>Squeeze: Don't forget that. Okay? Remember each others' faces.</p>	<p><i>Sorry to Bother You:</i> Squeeze and Salvador prep the union before their picket</p> <p>Cassius approaches in a suit</p>
<p><i>Sweet Dreams - Angel Olson</i></p> <p>VO: Modern conspiracy protagonists won't have to single-handedly save the world but will utilise the help, skills, and support of a team to combat the many-headed monster.</p>	<p>Cassius and Detroit look at her phone</p> <p>The call centre works chant at their desks and begin rising to their feet</p> <p><i>North Country:</i> Bill White speaks in the courtroom</p> <p>The women high five and cheer in a bar</p> <p>Josey walks down an aisle and is jeered at and taunted by the men on either side</p>
<p>Turner: This guy in Vermont, what's he gonna do when you don't show up?</p>	<p><i>Three Days of the Condor:</i> Turner speaks to Kathy in her apartment after he has abducted her.</p>

<p>Kathy: Probably call. Very soon now.</p> <p>Turner: Call? Or do I have to worry about him showing up here?</p> <p>Kathy: You're not entitled to personal questions. That gun gives you the right to rough me up it doesn't give you the right to ask me --</p> <p>Turner: Rough you up? Have I roughed you up?</p> <p>Kathy: Yes! What are you doing in my house!</p> <p>Turner: Have I? Have I raped you?</p> <p>Kathy: The night is young.</p> <p>Turner: You don't believe anything I've said, do you?</p>	<p>Turner stares.</p> <p>Kathy is stoic, firm.</p> <p>Turner is silent. Slowly, he sits down beside her. Calmly, gently.</p>
<p><i>Geometria del Universo - Colleen</i></p> <p>For conspiracy films, the ability to decide who to trust is crucial when it comes to implementing justice and generating political force on screen.</p> <p>For the last 50 years, conspiracy films consistently employed the genre's three pillars of justice</p>	<p>Kathy speaks to Turner</p> <p>Turner fights with the mailman in Kathy's apartment</p> <p><i>The Parallax View:</i> two men step away from a window</p> <p>Frady walks down a dark gangway towards the light</p> <p><i>All the President's Men:</i> Woodward grabs a paper from his typewriter and stands up</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>Three Pillars of Justice:</p>

<p>to redress the threat of the conspiracy;</p> <p>however, the recent introduction of vigilantism as</p> <p>a resolution in modern conspiracy films reflects an erosion of public trust in these traditional mechanisms for justice. The inclusion of Big Technology in real life, and in cinematic narratives has also created new, presently underrepresented Mechanisms For Justice,</p> <p>but these require careful implementation due to their</p>	<p>The Press</p> <p>Law Enforcement</p> <p>The Judicial System</p> <p><i>The Whistleblower</i>: Bolkovac, dressed in her police uniform, walks through a door and nods at a colleague</p> <p><i>The Pelican Brief</i>: the Supreme court at dusk</p> <p><i>Shooter</i>: Swagger turns around</p> <p>Private soldiers running</p> <p>Swagger hits a detonator</p> <p>A massive explosion</p> <p>Swagger, dressed in snow camo, adjusts the scope on his sniper</p> <p>Another sniper in the snow, visible through Swagger's scope. The sniper's head explodes</p> <p>Swagger, dressed in a prison jumpsuit and handcuffed, approaches his sniper on display</p> <p>He swings it up and aims</p> <p><i>Nerve</i>: a bunch of teens at a house party, phones out</p> <p>Sydney weaves through the partygoers</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>TECHNOLOGICAL MECHANISMS FOR JUSTICE</p> <p>Citizen Journalism and the Fifth Estate (the new press)</p> <p>Internet Policing/Call-out Culture (the new law enforcement)</p>
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<p>double-edged sword nature</p>	<p>Web Activism; Petitions (the new judiciary)</p> <p>Vee is standing outside a window, edging out onto a suspended ladder leading to the next building</p> <p>A flurry of digital imagery as we're sucked into a laptop</p>
<p>Narrator: Welcome to Nerve. A game like Truth or Dare minus the truth</p>	<p>Nerve trailer: "Truth"</p> <p>"Dare" - people do insane stunts</p> <p>Someone robbing a corner shop</p> <p>"Nerve: Watcher. Player"</p>
<p>VO: <i>Nerve</i> is a techno-conspiracy thriller that, in portraying the synopticon of social media as the antagonist,</p> <p>posits the panopticon -- an authoritarian symbol -- as a modern, digital mechanism for justice. <i>Nerve's</i> conclusion, which presents the removal of users' anonymity to create accountability</p> <p>closely resembles an event "in the midst of the Libyan uprising in 2011," when "Gaddafi's regime used the country's mobile phone network to send text messages that ordered people to go back to work" In real life, the removal of</p>	<p>Vee taps "Player"</p> <p>Digital identity graphics</p> <p>NYC skyline at night - graphics with ID tags float over the city</p> <p>Vee and Tommy read her dare</p> <p>Panopticon graphic</p> <p><i>Nerve</i>: a finger taps a pink laptop keyboard</p> <p>We zoom through a dimly lit teen hangout, out a window and down a wall to a phone:</p> <p>"Anon" changes to "Kyle P. Ramos"</p> <p>"You are an accessory to MURDER"</p> <p>Another hand: "Nico Stone You are an accessory to MURDER"</p> <p>ABC News Footage of Gaddafi: "Gadhafi cracks down"</p> <p>Chanting crowds in Libya, a bonfire</p>

<p>anonymity by the government's unsolicited text warning is chilling; yet, in a Hollywood movie it is portrayed as</p> <p>a triumphant success.</p> <p>This duality of technology -- as a tool for positive disruptions to the status quo or</p> <p>intrusive, menacing control -- poses a distinct obstacle when it comes to proposing modern mechanisms for justice that are</p> <p>reliable within a polarised political climate.</p> <p>It's crucial, then, that modern conspiracy films embrace the reflexive nature of technological mechanisms for justice and behemoths:</p> <p>technology in itself is neutral -- it is those who control it that determine whether it is used for great harm or great good.</p>	<p>Protestors hold out phones</p> <p>Phone footage of people chanting <i>Nerve</i>: a masked person "Caroline Morgan You are an accessory to MURDER"</p> <p>Tracking shot of phones in hands, all becoming de-anonymised</p> <p>Vee's mother, Sydney and Tommy all cry and cheer with relief</p> <p>Digital pipelines run through the city</p> <p>Ty swipes "Sign Out"</p> <p>Sydney, Tommy and Hacker Kween cheer excitedly over a laptop</p> <p>Hooded watchers and their phones flood out of a colosseum-like structure</p> <p><i>The Circle</i>: a SeeChange camera sits on a desk</p> <p>Bailey throws a SeeChange camera into an auditorium of Circlers</p> <p>Mae catches the camera</p> <p>She smiles</p> <p>Bailey points and speaks, Apple product launch/TED talk style</p> <p>Text:</p> <p>double-edged sword:</p> <p>where modern mechanisms for justice are both stabilising and disruptive in nature.</p> <p>The presentation behind Bailey changes to a raging fire</p>
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	The auditorium applauds
Tuba player: I see him!	<p><i>The Parallax View:</i> Frady walks in the rafters over the auditorium</p> <p>A tuba player points up</p> <p>Frady runs to the doorway full of light</p> <p>The silhouette of a gunman aims</p> <p>Frady's face: shock</p> <p>An explosion</p>
<p><i>Chances - KAYTRANADA, Shay Lia</i></p> <p>VO: Conspiracy films' endings have long been the crucial moment where justice is served or injustice condemned;</p> <p>but for modern conspiracy narratives, this is precisely where they appear most weak -- the permeation of Big Technology into our lives and politics has disrupted our relationship to justice in a way that modern conspiracy films have yet to really confront. The tendency of modern conspiracy films to have a compelling start but an inadequate finish is characteristic of what Jared Cohen observes of technology:</p>	<p>A grandstand of people holding large mosaic posters of US presidents: Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt</p> <p>A large hall set with tables covered in red, white and blue table cloths; the grandstand is far in the background</p> <p><i>The Circle:</i> Mae Holland speaks</p> <p>The lights go off</p> <p>From the auditorium, the light of hundreds of mobile phone screens rise up</p> <p>Hands hold up lit phones, standing Mae's face, smug, lit by the mobile lights</p> <p>A checkerboard of SeeChange feeds with Mae Holland in the middle</p> <p>Mae walks along the front of the stage - the audience in the dark, holding up their phones</p> <p>She beckons</p>

<p>“[It] will make revolutions start happening faster, but it'll make them harder to finish. Technology can't create leaders and cause institutions to appear”</p> <p>So where conspiracy films have lost their political force by focusing <i>inward</i>; perhaps once again, we should be looking outward, <i>beyond</i> the system, to find powerful, compelling justice.</p>	<p>Text:</p> <p>“[It] will make revolutions start happening faster, but it'll make them harder to finish. Technology can't create leaders and cause institutions to appear” - Jared Cohen, CEO of Jigsaw (formerly Google Ideas)</p> <p><i>All the President's Men</i>: a stack of library receipts fill the screen</p> <p>Woodward and Bernstein sort through receipts in the Library of Congress</p>
<p>Greene: I'm just out here survivin'</p>	<p><i>Sorry to Bother You</i> trailer: Cassius clicks his TV remote “Have a Cola and Smile Bitch”</p> <p>Protestors clash with riot police</p> <p>Cassius and Detroit in his beat up car, on his old bed</p> <p>Cassius drives through an Oakland slum in the daytime</p> <p>Cassius sits uncomfortable in a bar</p>
<p><i>Chances</i> - KAYTRANADA, Shay Lia</p> <p><i>Sorry to Bother You</i>, which makes no attempt to grapple with Big Technology,</p> <p>does suggest though that</p> <p>justice for a corrupt system must come from</p>	<p>Graphic: “Sorry to Bother You”</p> <p>Cassius walks to the gas station attendant and slips 40 cents under the pay window</p> <p>Stills: Boots Riley on a magazine cover, at a protest with a megaphone, on set next to a monitor</p> <p>A camera assistant clicks the clapperboard at the protest scene</p>

<p>outside the system in its portrayal of a violent upheaval at its conclusion.</p> <p>If this is the case, modern conspiracy films must engage with conspiracy culture, they must incorporate the double-edged sword of big technology as a threat and an asset, and they must promote characters who are not heroes, but real selfish people who find the courage to work together and do the right thing.</p> <p>It's not enough for modern conspiracy films to be reactionary and reflective; rather, they must push us forward, break boundaries, and inspire the movie-going public to imagine what modern relationships to truth, justice and freedom can be.</p>	<p><i>Sorry to Bother You</i>: Cassius, dressed in a suit, prepares to cross the picket</p> <p>Workers shout</p> <p>A riot police officer slams down his face shield</p> <p>Detroit's earrings: "MURDER" "KILL"</p> <p>She flaunts them</p> <p><i>All the President's Men</i>: Woodward and Bernstein sort through receipts in the Library of Congress, Text:</p> <p>How modern conspiracy films can reclaim their political force:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - engage with conspiracy culture - incorporate the double-edged sword of big technology as a behemoth and mechanism for justice - promote characters who are not heroes, but real people who find the courage to work together and do the right thing. <p>Woodward and Bernstein get smaller and smaller as the camera is pulled further and further away</p>
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CONSPIRACY FILM TROPES: 1969-2020

The catalogue begins on page 428 where each lettered column (along the horizontal axis) corresponds to a film (listed below) and each lettered row (along the vertical axis) designates a quality, trope, or plot point as stipulated on the following pages. This is not an exhaustive list.

FOR EXAMPLE: on page 437, column AK (*JFK*; 1991, dir. Oliver Stone) ticks rows AB and AO, exhibiting Assassination/The Lone Gunman and Questioning Patriotism, respectively.

Horizontal Axis

A	<i>Topaz</i> (1969) dir. Alfred Hitchcock	N	Pakula	AA	<i>The Star Chamber</i> (1983) dir. Peter Hyams
B	<i>Klute</i> (1971) dir. Alan J. Pakula	O	<i>Futureworld</i> (1976) dir. Richard T. Heffron	AB	<i>Blue Thunder</i> (1983) dir. John Badham
C	<i>The Andromeda Strain</i> (1971) dir. Robert Wise	P	<i>Capricorn 1</i> (1977) dir. Peter Hyams	AC	<i>Flashpoint</i> (1984) dir. William Tannen
D	<i>The Anderson Tapes</i> (1971) dir. Sidney Lumet	Q	<i>The Domino Principle</i> (1977) dir. Stanley Kramer	AD	<i>Dreamscape</i> (1984) dir. Joseph Ruben
E	<i>Executive Action</i> (1973) dir. David Miller	R	<i>Invasion of the Bodysnatchers</i> (1978) dir. Philip Kaufman	AE	<i>Wall Street</i> (1987) dir. Oliver Stone
F	<i>Serpico</i> (1973) dir. Sidney Lumet	S	<i>The China Syndrome</i> (1979) dir. James Bridges	AF	<i>Robocop</i> (1987) dir. Paul Verhoeven
G	<i>Soylent Green</i> (1973) dir. Richard Fleischer	T	<i>Parts: The Clonus Horror</i> (1979)	AG	<i>They Live</i> (1988) dir. John Carpenter
H	<i>Chinatown</i> (1974) dir. Roman Polanski	U	<i>Winter Kills</i> (1979) dir. William Richert	AH	<i>Little Nikita</i> (1988) dir. Richard Benjamin
I	<i>The Parallax View</i> (1974) dir. Alan J. Pakula	V	<i>The Formula</i> (1980) dir. John G. Avildsen	AI	<i>The Package</i> (1989) dir. Andrew Davis
J	<i>The Conversation</i> (1974) dir. Francis Ford Coppola	W	<i>Prince of the City</i> (1981) dir. Sidney Lumet	AJ	<i>Last of the Finest</i> (1990) dir. John Mackenzie
K	<i>The Stepford Wives</i> (1975) dir. Bryan Forbes	X	<i>Blow Out</i> (1981) dir. Brian De Palma	AK	<i>JFK</i> (1991) dir. Oliver Stone
L	<i>3 Days of the Condor</i> (1975) dir. Sydney Pollack	Y	<i>Rollover</i> (1981) dir. Alan J. Pakula	AL	<i>Kafka</i> (1991) dir. Steven Soderbergh
M	<i>All the President's Men</i> (1976) dir. Alan J. Pakula	Z	<i>Missing</i> (1982) dir. Costa-Gavras	AM	<i>The Firm</i> (1993) dir. Sidney Pollack
			<i>Silkwood</i> (1983) dir. Mike Nichols	AN	<i>The Pelican Brief</i> (1993) dir. Alan J. Pakula
				AO	<i>The Net</i> (1995) dir. Irwin Winkler
				AP	<i>The Arrival</i> (1996) dir. David Twohy

AQ *Chain Reaction* (1996) dir. Andrew Davis

Horizontal Axis (cont)

AR	<i>Fight Club</i> (1996) dir. David Fincher	BM	<i>The Bourne Identity</i> (2002) dir. Doug Liman	CI	<i>The Informant!</i> (2009) dir. Steven Soderbergh
AS	<i>The Long Kiss Goodnight</i> (1996) dir. Renny Harlin	BN	<i>I Witness</i> (2003) dir. Rowdy Herrington	CJ	<i>The Whistleblower</i> (2010) dir. Larysa Kondracki
AT	<i>Strange Days</i> (1996) Dir. Kathryn Bigelow	BO	<i>The Recruit</i> (2003) dir. Roger Donaldson	CK	<i>Fair Game</i> (2010) dir. Doug Liman
AU	<i>Conspiracy Theory</i> (1997) dir. Richard Donner	BP	<i>Paycheck</i> (2003) dir. John Woo	CL	<i>The Ghost Writer</i> (2010) dir. Roman Polanski
AV	<i>Shadow Conspiracy</i> (1997) dir. George P. Cosmatos	BQ	<i>The Stepford Wives</i> (2004) dir. Frank Oz	CM	<i>Green Zone</i> (2010) dir. Paul Greengrass
AW	<i>The Shadow Men</i> (1997) dir. Timothy Bond	BR	<i>Silver City</i> (2004) dir. John Sayles	CN	<i>Cars 2</i> (2011) dir. John Lasseter
AX	<i>Murder at 1600</i> (1997) dir. Dwight H. Little	BS	<i>The Manchurian Candidate</i> (2004) dir. Jonathan Demme	CO	<i>The Fifth Estate</i> (2013) dir. Bill Condon
AY	<i>Wag the Dog</i> (1997) dir. Barry Levinson	BT	<i>The Island</i> (2005) dir. Michael Bay	CP	<i>Ex Machina</i> (2014) dir. Alex Garland
AZ	<i>Enemy of the State</i> (1998) dir. Tony Scott	BU	<i>North Country</i> (2005) dir. Niki Caro	CQ	<i>November Man</i> (2014) dir. Roger Donaldson
BA	<i>Safe House</i> (1998) dir. Eric Steven Stahl	BV	<i>The Interpreter</i> (2005) dir. Sydney Pollack	CR	<i>Zootopia</i> (2016 dir. Byron Howard, Rich Moore)
BB	<i>The X Files</i> (1998) dir. Rob Bowman	BW	<i>Flight Plan</i> (2005) dir. Robert Schwentke	CS	<i>Nerve</i> (2016, dir. Henry Joost, Ariel Schulman)
BC	<i>The Truman Show</i> (1998) dir. Peter Weir	BX	<i>Syriana</i> (2005) dir. Stephen Gaghan	CT	<i>Snowden</i> (2016) dir. Oliver Stone
BD	<i>Dark City</i> (1998) dir. Alex Proyas	BY	<i>The Constant Gardener</i> (2005) dir. Fernando Meirelles	CU	<i>The Circle</i> (2017) dir. James Ponsoldt
BE	<i>The Insider</i> (1999) dir. Michael Mann	BZ	<i>The Da Vinci Code</i> (2006) dir. Ron Howard	CV	<i>The Post</i> (2017) dir. Steven Spielberg
BF	<i>Arlington Road</i> (1999) dir. Mark Pellington	CA	<i>The Sentinel</i> (2006) dir. Clark Johnson	CW	<i>Sorry to Bother You</i> (2018) dir. Boots Reilly
BG	<i>The Matrix</i> (1999) dir. the Wachowskis	CB	<i>Breach</i> (2007) dir. Billy Ray	CX	<i>Dark Waters</i> (2019) dir. Todd Haynes
BH	<i>The Skulls</i> (2000) dir. Rob Cohen	CC	<i>Shooter</i> (2007) dir. Antoine Fuqua		
BI	<i>Erin Brockovich</i> (2000) dir. Steven Soderbergh	CD	<i>Michael Clayton</i> (2007) dir. Tony Gilroy		
BJ	<i>From Hell</i> (2001) dir. Albert Hughes, Allen Hughes	CE	<i>Vantage Point</i> (2008) dir. Pete Travis		
BK	<i>Antitrust</i> (2001) dir. Peter Howitt	CF	<i>Eagle Eye</i> (2008) dir. D. J. Caruso		
BL	<i>Minority Report</i> (2002) dir. Steven Spielberg	CG	<i>State of Play</i> (2009) dir. Kevin Macdonald		
		CH	<i>The International</i> (2009) dir. Tom Tykwer		

Vertical Axis

Basis/Authorship

A	Based on novel or short story
B	Based on actual events
C	Inspired by actual events
D	Screenplay written/directed by same person
E	Screenplay written by woman/women

The Protagonist

F	White male
G	POC/non-white male
H	White female
I	POC/non-white female
J	Works for the Behemoth
K	Scientist
L	Journalist/works in the Media
M	Works in Intelligence or Surveillance
N	Gov't/Military/Law Enforcement background
O	Lawyer
P	Teacher
Q	Student
R	Hacker
S	Other Vocation (specified in footnote)

Thematic Breakdown of Seen and Unseen Threat

T	Surveillance
U	"Who is listening/watching?"

V	"You can't trust who you work for/with"
W	Moral: "Do the right thing"
X	"You could be next"
Y	Hoax/Cover-Up/Lying to the Public
Z	Nuclear Power Fears
AA	Technology as Enemy
AB	Assassination/"The Lone Gunman"
AC	The Intelligence Community/Spies
AD	"Big Oil"/Petrochemicals
AE	Corruption/"Follow the Money"
AF	Deal with the devil
AG	Profits over People
AH	Impersonation
AI	Foreign Others (Russians, Germans, Arabs, Cubans, Iraqis, etc.)
AJ	Nuclear War Fears
AK	Dreams
AL	Aliens/UFOS
AM	"The Enemy Next Door"
AN	"Your decisions are being controlled"
AO	Questioning Patriotism
AP	Anti-Utopian/Enlightenment Suppressed
AQ	Fear of digital/information technology
AR	Cyberterrorism
AS	Environmental
AT	"Can't Trust the Authorities"

AU	"Who am I?"
AV	Budget Cuts
AW	False Flag Attack
AX	"The futility of life"
AY	Questioning reality
AZ	"The Game is rigged"
BA	Race

Plot Points/Tropes - Act 1¹

BB	Someone dies or disappears
BC	Protagonist accidentally stumbles on/into conspiracy
BD	Protagonist unwillingly forced into action
BE	Protagonist recruited
BF	Protagonist follows conspiracy to make amends with past

Plot Points/Tropes - Act 2

BG	Unseen Threat presents
BH	Protagonist goes on a Quest for Clues
BI	Protagonist follows Breadcrumb Trail of clues
BJ	Attempts on Protagonist's life
BK	Witnesses disappearing/dying
BL	Evidence disappearing/destroyed

Vertical Axis (cont)

Plot Points/Tropes - Act 2 (cont.)

BM	Protagonist given “Red Pill/Blue Pill” choice
BN	Protagonist infiltrates the Behemoth
BO	Protagonist has crisis of conscience
BP	Protagonist framed/shamed
BQ	Protagonist is wanted/(wo)man on the run
BR	Exposure of Unseen Threat will benefit/save protagonist
BS	Exposure of Unseen Threat is not beneficial to Protagonist (they are implicated)
BT	Exposure of Unseen Threat will benefit others

Plot Points/Tropes - Act 3

BU	Protagonist plays into the Behemoth’s hand
BV	Superior/confidant is actually a traitor
BW	Protagonist meets the amoral antagonist
BX	Protagonist uses/attempts to use the Press against the Unseen Threat
BY	Protagonist uses Law Enforcement against the Unseen Threat
BZ	Protagonist uses to Judicial System against the Unseen Threat
CA	Protagonist uses strengths and smarts against Unseen Threat
CB	Unseen Threat is exposed/receives justice

CC	Seen Threat is solved/addressed
CD	Protagonist loses to the power of the conspiracy

Emotions/Tone

CE	Paranoia
CF	Anxiety
CG	Agency Panic (powerless over Self)
CH	“The monster cannot be destroyed” (powerless against Behemoth)
CI	Prolonged unease
CJ	Suspense
CK	Excitement

Character Tropes

CL	Behemoth
CM	A mysterious “they”
CN	Antagonist use of the non-denial denial ²
CO	Unseen Assassin/Hitman/Stalker in the Shadows
CP	A “deep throat” informant
CQ	An “inside man”
CR	Female/wife character is unsupportive
CS	Female character(s) sexualised, objectified, or sexually harassed

CT	Female character(s) patronised or in receipt of sexist behaviour
CU	Reluctant female coerced into cooperation; romance ensues
CV	Female love interest dies or in danger
CW	Protagonist’s friend/ally dies or in danger
CX	Persistent/coercive male seen as charming/attractive/acceptable
CY	# of named/significant female characters;
CZ	Of which are romantic interests
DA	# of named/significant POC characters;
DB	Of which are enemies or criminals
DC	Diverse supporting cast observed

Cinematic Tropes

DD	Big Action
DE	Slow Pace
DF	Lots of verbal information
DG	Communicating in code
DH	Foot chase
DI	Car/motorcycle chase
DJ	Large crowd scene
DK	Surveillance montage
DL	Conditioning montage
DM	Obvious placement of American flag

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V
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DA	1	1	1	2	0	1	3+	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	2	1	0	0	1	1
DB	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
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AC													•						•		•	
AD		•																•			•	
AE	•	•							•	•				•			•	•			•	
AF		•			•				•			•		•								
AG		•		•					•	•	•							•			•	•
AH												•	•					•	•	•		
AI		•	•				•					•	•	•	•				•			
AJ								•		•			•									
AK								•														•
AL											•		•							•		
AM												•					•					
AN							•			•	•					•						•
AO			•										•		•	•						
AP							•														•	

	W	X	Y	Z	AA	AB	AC	AD	AE	AF	AG	AH	AI	AJ	AK	AL	AM	AN	AO	AP	AQ	AR
AQ																			•			
AR																			•			
AS																		•		•	•	
AT			•			•	•			•				•	•	•			•	•	•	
AU									•	•							•					•
AV																						
AW						•																
AX																						•
AY																						•
AZ									•	•				•								•
BA						•	•		•					•								
BB	•	•	•		•	•				•		•	•		•	•		•	•		•	
BC	•	•		•			•				•	•	•			•			•	•	•	
BD			•						•								•	•				
BE						•			•	•												•
BF														•								

	W	X	Y	Z	AA	AB	AC	AD	AE	AF	AG	AH	AI	AJ	AK	AL	AM	AN	AO	AP	AQ	AR	
BG	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
BH			•	•		•					•		•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•
BI	•	•	•				•	•	•	•	•	•				•					•	•	
BJ		•		•	•	•				•	•		•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•		•
BK	•		•	•		•	•			•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		
BL	•			•		•					•				•	•			•	•			
BM					•									•									
BN					•			•			•					•			•	•			
BO					•				•					•									•
BP				•		•	•						•						•	•	•		
BQ							•			•								•	•	•	•		
BR	•	•	•	•		•	•			•				•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	
BS					•				•								•		•				•
BT	•			•		•		•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•			•
BU							•		•	•	•												•
BV						•	•		•					•			•						•

	W	X	Y	Z	AA	AB	AC	AD	AE	AF	AG	AH	AI	AJ	AK	AL	AM	AN	AO	AP	AQ	AR
BW	•			•		•	•		•	•			•	•			•			•	•	•
BX	•		•	•		•												•		•		
BY					•		•		•	•				•			•		•		•	•
BZ									•						•		•	•				
CA		•			•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•			•		•	•	•	•
CB		•			•	•		•	•	•	•		•					•	•	•		
CC	•	•	•		•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•		•
CD	•		•	•			•								•	•						•
CE	•	•	•	•		•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
CF		•		•														•	•			
CG	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
CH	•		•				•										•	•				
CI		•		•	•			•		•						•	•					
CJ	•	•				•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•
CK						•	•			•				•				•			•	
CL		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

	W	X	Y	Z	AA	AB	AC	AD	AE	AF	AG	AH	AI	AJ	AK	AL	AM	AN	AO	AP	AQ	AR
CM	•	•					•				•		•	•	•	•			•	•	•	
CN			•											•	•			•				
CO	•	•			•	•						•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•		
CP															•			•				
CQ		•								•		•					•				•	
CR															•		•			•		
CS	•	•	•			•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•			•		•			•
CT		•	•	•				•	•	•							•	•	•			•
CU	•										•											
CV	•	•											•	•		•	•			•	•	
CW	•					•	•	•			•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	
CX								•	•				•					•	•	•		
CY	1	2	3+	5	1	2	3	1	1	3	1	3	4	5	3	1	3	1	2	3	3	1
CZ	1	1	1	2	1	1	3	1	1	0	1	3	3	4	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	1
DA	0	2	0	0	4	8	3	0	0	4	1	2	1	3	0	0	2	1	1	3	3+	2
DB	0	2	0	0	4	5	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	3	1	0

	W	X	Y	Z	AA	AB	AC	AD	AE	AF	AG	AH	AI	AJ	AK	AL	AM	AN	AO	AP	AQ	AR
DC	no	no	yes	no	no	yes	no	no	no	yes	no	no	yes	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	yes	no
DD						⊙				⊙				⊙				⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
DE		⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙																	
DF		⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙								⊙	⊙	⊙					⊙
DG																		⊙			⊙	
DH	⊙				⊙	⊙		⊙					⊙			⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
DI	⊙					⊙		⊙		⊙				⊙								
DJ	⊙		⊙					⊙		⊙		⊙	⊙				⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	
DK																						
DL										⊙												
DM	⊙													⊙								
	AS	AT	AU	AV	AW	AX	AY	AZ	BA	BB	BC	BD	BE	BF	BG	BH	BI	BJ	BK	BL	BM	BN
A							⊙						⊙		⊙					⊙	⊙	
B																	⊙					
C		⊙ ³²			⊙ ³³						⊙		⊙	⊙ ³⁴		⊙ ³⁵		⊙				
D									⊙		⊙	⊙	⊙		⊙							

	AS	AT	AU	AV	AW	AX	AY	AZ	BA	BB	BC	BD	BE	BF	BG	BH	BI	BJ	BK	BL	BM	BN
E															•							
F		•	•	•	•		•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•
G						•		•														
H	•																•					
I																						
J											•								•	•	•	
K													•									
L							•															
M									•	•											•	
N		•		•		•			•	•								•		•		
O								•														
P														•								
Q																•						
R															•				•			
S	• ³⁶	• ³⁷	• ³⁸		• ³⁹		• ⁴⁰				• ⁴¹	• ⁴²					• ⁴³					• ⁴⁴
T				•		•	•	•	•		•					•			•	•		

	AS	AT	AU	AV	AW	AX	AY	AZ	BA	BB	BC	BD	BE	BF	BG	BH	BI	BJ	BK	BL	BM	BN
U	•	•	•	•		•		•		•	•		•	•					•		•	
V	•			•		•		•		•	•								•	•	•	•
W		•								•	•		•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•
X		•	•	•					•					•				•	•			•
Y			•	•	•	•	•	•		•		•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•
Z																						
AA		•													•					•		
AB			•	•				•	•													
AC	•		•		•					•											•	
AD								•														
AE													•						•	•		•
AF													•			•						
AG											•		•				•		•			•
AH	•				•				•		•	•			•					•		
AI	•					•	•															•
AJ																						

	AS	AT	AU	AV	AW	AX	AY	AZ	BA	BB	BC	BD	BE	BF	BG	BH	BI	BJ	BK	BL	BM	BN
AK	•				•										•			•				
AL					•					•		•										
AM														•								
AN			•												•					•		
AO														•								
AP																						
AQ				•							•				•					•	•	
AR																						
AS																						
AT		•	•		•					•	•		•		•				•	•		•
AU	•										•	•			•						•	
AV	•																					
AW	•																					
AX		•									•				•							
AY									•	•	•				•							
AZ							•				•			•	•	•						•

	AS	AT	AU	AV	AW	AX	AY	AZ	BA	BB	BC	BD	BE	BF	BG	BH	BI	BJ	BK	BL	BM	BN
BA		•															•	•				•
BB	•	•		•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•			•			•	•	•	•	•
BC	•	•	•	•		•		•		•	•			•								
BD					•			•				•	•		•					•		
BE							•			•					•	•		•	•		•	
BF										•										•		•
BG	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•
BH	•		•	•	•	•		•		•	•			•	•		•			•	•	•
BI	•	•						•		•	•	•	•	•		•		•	•		•	•
BJ	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•		•			•	•				•	•	•
BK		•	•	•		•		•		•	•	•		•		•		•	•		•	•
BL						•		•		•	•			•		•		•		•		
BM											•		•		•							
BN				•								•			•				•	•	•	
BO	•												•			•					•	
BP			•	•	•	•		•	•				•	•			•			•		

	AS	AT	AU	AV	AW	AX	AY	AZ	BA	BB	BC	BD	BE	BF	BG	BH	BI	BJ	BK	BL	BM	BN
BQ			•	•	•	•		•			•	•			•					•	•	
BR		•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•						•		
BS	•	•					•						•			•			•		•	
BT		•						•	•	•		•	•	•	•		•	•		•		•
BU											•			•		•			•	•		
BV	•	•				•			•		•				•			•	•	•		
BW		•		•				•	•	•	•			•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•
BX				•					•				•						•			
BY		•			•	•		•						•		•		•	•			•
BZ													•				•				•	
CA	•	•	•		•	•		•		•	•	•			•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
CB	•	•				•			•		•						•		•	•	•	•
CC	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•
CD														•				•				•
CE	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•
CF	•										•		•				•	•			•	

	AS	AT	AU	AV	AW	AX	AY	AZ	BA	BB	BC	BD	BE	BF	BG	BH	BI	BJ	BK	BL	BM	BN	
CG		•	•	•	•	•		•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	
CH			•					•		•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
CI		•										•	•	•	•			•	•	•			
CJ	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		•	•		•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•
CK	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		•					•	•			•	•	•		
CL			•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
CM		•	•	•	•			•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•		•			•		
CN				•			•			•			•	•			•				•	•	
CO		•	•	•		•									•			•		•	•		
CP										•													
CQ	•	•		•		•	•	•		•	•		•		•	•							•
CR		•				•		•	•		•		•	•					•				
CS	•	•	•			•	•	•	•						•	•	•	•	•		•	•	
CT	•	•		•		•	•		•						•	•	•	•					
CU			•																				
CV		•	•	•	•	•		•		•	•	•		•		•		•					

	AS	AT	AU	AV	AW	AX	AY	AZ	BA	BB	BC	BD	BE	BF	BG	BH	BI	BJ	BK	BL	BM	BN
CW	•	•	•		•	•		•		•					•	•			•			
CX		•	•														•					
CY	2	5	1	1	2	1	3	3	2	2	3	3	4	2	3	1	3+	3+	2	3	2	2
CZ	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	2	0	1	2	3	2	2	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	1
DA	1	5	0	0	2	1	4	3	0	0	0	2	4	1	3	2	0	0	2	1	1	4
DB	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3+
DC	no	yes	no	no	no	yes	no	no	no	no	no	no	yes	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	yes
DD	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		•		•			•	•				•	•	•
DE							•		•					•								
DF	•						•			•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•		
DG	•		•			•					•		•		•							
DH	•	•	•	•		•		•				•			•	•			•	•	•	•
DI	•	•		•	•	•					•			•						•	•	
DJ	•	•	•	•				•			•	•			•			•		•	•	•
DK				•							•										•	
DL												•			•							

	AS	AT	AU	AV	AW	AX	AY	AZ	BA	BB	BC	BD	BE	BF	BG	BH	BI	BJ	BK	BL	BM	BN
DM	•				•	•	•	•						•								
	BO	BP	BQ	BR	BS	BT	BU	BV	BW	BX	BY	BZ	CA	CB	CC	CD	CE	CF	CG	CH	CI	CJ
A		•	•		•					•	•	•	•		•						•	
B							•														•	
C				• ⁴⁵				•		•	• ⁴⁶							• ⁴⁷		• ⁴⁸		•
D																						
E																						
F	•	•		•		•				•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
G					•																	•
H			•				•	•	•													
I																						
J	•	•		•			•	•					•	•		•		•			•	•
K																					•	
L				•															•			
M										•										•		
N				•	•						•		•	•	•		•					•

	BO	BP	BQ	BR	BS	BT	BU	BV	BW	BX	BY	BZ	CA	CB	CC	CD	CE	CF	CG	CH	CI	CJ
O																•						
P												•										
Q																						
R	•																					
S			• ⁴⁹			• ⁵⁰	• ⁵¹	• ⁵²	• ⁵³									• ⁵⁴				
T	•				•	•				•			•	•	•	•		•		•	•	
U	•				•								•					•		•		•
V	•	•		•	•	•				•	•	•	•		•	•	•				•	•
W	•	•		•	•			•			•			•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•
X			•		•		•	•			•					•			•	•		
Y				•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•			•	•	•	•	•	•		
Z																						
AA						•			•									•				
AB					•										•		•			•		
AC	•					•				•			•	•	•			•				
AD								•		•												

	BO	BP	BQ	BR	BS	BT	BU	BV	BW	BX	BY	BZ	CA	CB	CC	CD	CE	CF	CG	CH	CI	CJ
AE		•		•	•					•	•				•	•			•	•	•	•
AF														•								
AG				•		•					•					•			•		•	•
AH			•			•											•					
AI				•				•	•	•	•		•	•			•					•
AJ																						
AK					•	•																
AL																						
AM	•		•											•								
AN		•			•													•				
AO				•	•			•		•	•				•							•
AP												•						•			•	
AQ														•				•				
AR																		•				
AS				•																		
AT									•		•				•		•					•

	BO	BP	BQ	BR	BS	BT	BU	BV	BW	BX	BY	BZ	CA	CB	CC	CD	CE	CF	CG	CH	CI	CJ
AU			•			•										•						
AV																						
AW								•				•			•							
AX						•								•		•						
AY	•				•	•			•													
AZ	•					•				•									•			
BA			•	•																		
BB				•	•	•		•	•		•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•		•
BC			•			•		•			•					•			•			•
BD							•		•				•					•			•	
BE	•	•		•								•		•	•							
BF					•										•							
BG	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
BH				•	•	•			•		•	•	•		•				•	•		
BI	•	•	•		•		•	•			•	•	•	•		•	•		•		•	•
BJ	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		•	•	•			•	•	•	•				

	BO	BP	BQ	BR	BS	BT	BU	BV	BW	BX	BY	BZ	CA	CB	CC	CD	CE	CF	CG	CH	CI	CJ	
BK		•	•	•	•						•					•	•	•	•	•		•	
BL					•				•		•	•	•		•					•		•	
BM	•										•												
BN	•		•							•													
BO	•	•											•			•							
BP	•			•			•		•			•	•		•								
BQ		•				•			•		•	•	•		•			•					
BR	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•			•	•	•		•	
BS																•					•		
BT		•	•	•	•		•	•			•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•
BU	•	•			•							•					•	•					
BV	•								•		•	•	•	•		•							
BW		•	•			•		•	•		•	•		•		•		•				•	
BX					•												•		•			•	
BY				•				•				•	•	•		•				•		•	
BZ							•																

	BO	BP	BQ	BR	BS	BT	BU	BV	BW	BX	BY	BZ	CA	CB	CC	CD	CE	CF	CG	CH	CI	CJ	
CA	•	•	•		•	•		•	•		•	•	•	•		•	•	•				•	
CB		•	•			•	•	•	•		•		•	•		•							•
CC		•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•				•		•			•
CD	•										•									•			
CE	•	•	•	•	•	•			•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•
CF					•		•	•	•														•
CG	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•		•	•	•			•	•	•	•	•	•		•
CH		•	•	•		•	•			•	•				•			•		•			•
CI			•		•		•	•	•	•	•				•	•							•
CJ	•	•	•		•	•		•	•			•		•	•					•	•		•
CK		•				•			•			•	•		•		•	•					
CL	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•			•
CM				•	•												•	•					
CN				•	•		•																•
CO								•				•	•		•	•				•	•		
CP													•										

	BO	BP	BQ	BR	BS	BT	BU	BV	BW	BX	BY	BZ	CA	CB	CC	CD	CE	CF	CG	CH	CI	CJ
CQ	•		•			•				•	•	•	•	•			•		•	•		•
CR										•				•								
CS			•			•	•	•					•		•							•
CT			•	•			•	•	•		•		•	•	•			•	•			•
CU						•		•										•				
CV		•			•	•					•				•							
CW				•		•		•	•						•	•						
CX																						
CY	2	2	3+	3+	3	1	3+	2	3	3	3	2	3+	3	2	3+	3+	3+	3+	2	3	3+
CZ	1	2	3+	3	1	1	3	1	0	1	2	1	3	2	1	1	0	1	2	0	1	1
DA	1	2	0	3+	3+	2	0	4	1	3+	3+	0	3	3	2	3+	3+	3+	3+	3	2	0
DB	0	1	0	2	2	1	0	1	0	n/a	3+	0	0	2	1	0	1	3+	0	0	0	0
DC	no	no	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	yes
DD		•				•		•	•				•		•		•	•		•		
DE				•	•		•			•						•						
DF				•	•					•	•	•			•	•			•	•		

	BO	BP	BQ	BR	BS	BT	BU	BV	BW	BX	BY	BZ	CA	CB	CC	CD	CE	CF	CG	CH	CI	CJ
DG	•							•				•	•	•	•							
DH	•	•				•			•			•	•		•		•	•		•		•
DI	•	•				•					•	•			•		•	•				
DJ		•			•	•					•		•		•		•	•		•		
DK													•					•				
DL			•		•	•																
DM			•	•	•								•	•	•			•	•			
	CK	CL	CM	CN	CO	CP	CQ	CR	CS	CT	CU	CV	CW									
A	•	•	•					•	•	•			•									
B	•		•						•		•		•									
C		•			• ⁵⁵					•												
D		•			•				•	•		•										
E								•			•											
F		•	•		•	•			•				•									
G												•										
H	•						•	•		•	•											

	CK	CL	CM	CN	CO	CP	CQ	CR	CS	CT	CU	CV	CW								
I																					
J	•		•						•	•		•									
K																					
L											•										
M	•					•			•												
N	•		•			•	•		•												
O													•								
P																					
Q								•													
R					•																
S		• ⁵⁶		• ⁵⁷						• ⁵⁸		• ⁵⁹									
T					•	•		•	•	•											
U								•	•	•											
V	•	•	•		•				•	•		•	•								
W	•				•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•								
X	•	•						•	•	•		•	•								

	CK	CL	CM	CN	CO	CP	CQ	CR	CS	CT	CU	CV	CW								
Y	•		•			•	•		•	•	•	•	•								
Z																					
AA					•			•	•												
AB						•			•												
AC	•	•	•	•		•			•												
AD				•																	
AE						•	•			•		•	•								
AF								•		•		•									
AG												•	•								
AH					•	•															
AI	•		•							•											
AJ	•		•																		
AK																					
AL																					
AM																					
AN					•			•													

	CK	CL	CM	CN	CO	CP	CQ	CR	CS	CT	CU	CV	CW								
AO	•		•						•		•										
AP				•																	
AQ								•	•	•											
AR									•												
AS				•									•								
AT									•			•	•								
AU					•			•		•		•									
AV																					
AW				•		•	•														
AX												•									
AY					•							•									
AZ					•			•				•									
BA							•					•									
BB		•		•		•	•														
BC	•		•	•				•				•									
BD	•					•		•													

	CK	CL	CM	CN	CO	CP	CQ	CR	CS	CT	CU	CV	CW								
BE					•				•	•			•								
BF																					
BG		•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•								
BH			•	•		•	•	•													
BI		•		•	•					•		•	•								
BJ		•	•	•		•	•	•													
BK		•	•	•		•	•														
BL			•				•														
BM					•					•	•	•									
BN					•			•		•		•									
BO								•		•		•									
BP	•											•									
BQ								•													
BR				•			•														
BS								•			•	•	•								
BT			•	•	•	•	•	•		•		•	•								

	CK	CL	CM	CN	CO	CP	CQ	CR	CS	CT	CU	CV	CW								
BU				•	•		•	•				•									
BV					•	•	•					•									
BW		•		•	•	•	•					•									
BX			•			•						•									
BY				•			•	•													
BZ	•												•								
CA				•		•	•	•				•									
CB			•	•		•	•	•	•			•	•								
CC	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•								
CD		•			•							•									
CE	•	•			•		•	•				•	•								
CF							•	•			•										
CG			•	•	•		•	•		•	•	•									
CH					•	•	•	•				•	•								
CI		•			•	•						•	•								
CJ			•	•	•	•	•	•													

	CK	CL	CM	CN	CO	CP	CQ	CR	CS	CT	CU	CV	CW								
CK			•	•		•	•	•				•									
CL	•		•	•	•	•		•		•	•	•	•								
CM				•				•		•											
CN	•												•								
CO		•				•							•								
CP			•																		
CQ		•	•			•			•	•	•	•									
CR													•								
CS				•	•	•	•														
CT					•	•	•				•		•								
CU								•													
CV				•	•	•		•													
CW			•	•		•	•			•			•								
CX																					
CY	1	2	1	3	2	3+	3	3+	2	3	3+	2	3+								
CZ	1	1	0	3	2	2	0	1	1	0	1	1	1								

	CK	CL	CM	CN	CO	CP	CQ	CR	CS	CT	CU	CV	CW								
DA	0	0	2	n/a	0	0	n/a	3+	3+	1	1	3+	1								
DB	0	0	1	n/a	0	0	n/a	0	1	0	0	0	0								
DC	no	no	no	n/a	n/a	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	yes	no								
DD			•	•		•	•	•													
DE		•											•								
DF		•	•		•	•				•	•		•								
DG																					
DH			•			•	•	•		•											
DI				•		•	•			•											
DJ			•	•		•					•	•									
DK								•													
DL												•									
DM						•					•										

ENDNOTES

1. Some plot points overlap; not restrictive to acts
2. The non-denial denial “made it into the pop-cultural lexicon in 1976, when Jason Robards... in the movie *All the President’s Men*, gruffly responded to administration statements like this: ‘All non-denial denials. They doubt our ancestors, but they won’t say the story isn’t accurate’” (Froomkin, 2014).
3. 1962 Sapphire Affair
4. JFK assassination
5. Real life Frank Serpico
6. Watergate
7. Based on real-life NYPD narcotics detective Robert Leuci
8. California water crisis
9. JFK assassination
10. Watergate
11. Pentagon Papers
12. Apollo 11 moon landing
13. JFK assassination
14. Prostitute
15. Thief
16. Photographer, Mother
17. Prisoner
18. Health Inspector
19. News Anchor
20. Overtly racist
21. Serpico is shot; then flash backwards
22. OCP corruption mimics the USA’s Iran Contra relationships
23. CIA funded Contra Rebels
24. Sound recordist
25. CEO/widow
26. Father
27. Plutonium worker
28. Stock broker
29. Drifter
30. Insurance broker
31. Automobile recall specialist
32. Lorena Bobbitt trial and 1992 riots following Rodney King verdict
33. Alien abduction accounts
34. Right wing militia movement, Ruby Ridge, Waco Siege and Oklahoma City Bombing
35. Yale University’s Skull and Bones student society
36. Mother, assassin
37. Black market video dealer
38. Taxi driver
39. Ad man, father
40. Spin doctor
41. Insurance salesman
42. None
43. Mother, legal clerk
44. Human rights investigator
45. The character of Dicky Pillager was inspired by George W Bush
46. A real life case in Kano, Nigeria
47. Boundless Informant, Patriot Act
48. Bank of Credit and Commerce International scandal of the 1980s
49. Reality TV producer, wife
50. Clone
51. Miner, mother
52. UN Interpreter
53. Aeronautics Engineer, mother
54. Copy guy
55. Google data harvesting; surveillance capitalism
56. Ghost writer
57. Tow truck
58. Customer Experience agent, influencer
59. Telemarketer/Power Caller