

CONSPIRACY THEORY AND CONSUMER PRACTICE:
COLLECTING AND THE PARALYSIS OF INTERPRETATION IN AMERICAN
FILM

By

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2006

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I begin with a word of thanks to my teachers and mentors. Phillip Wegner, Ed White, and Mark Fenster have given me unwarranted support for this project, and they have offered much in the way of constructive criticism for where this project can go from here. I also thank Susan Hegeman and David Leverenz of the University of Florida and Kevin Asman, Rebecca Resinski, and Alex Vernon of Hendrix College, whose work and pedagogy have influenced me throughout my undergraduate and master's training. My debt to each of these mentors is incalculable, and I give them the highest praise I could apply to any teacher or colleague: their passions and ideas continue to inspire me as I move through different stages of my education.

I must also thank my friends and colleagues who have helped shape this project. Principally, I express my gratitude for Joel Winkelman, who first taught me that the word "consume" is best used as an intransitive, for Evan Rogers, who is still trying to convince me that the moon landing was a hoax designed to intimidate the Soviets, and for Nicole LaRose and Michael Vastola, who have slowly converted me from the seductive dark arts of poststructuralism to the moral high ground of materialism. Finally, I owe my deepest thanks to Courtney Eason, who calmed me when the weight of these ideas wore me down.

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May 2006

Chair: Phillip E. Wegner
Major Department: English

The ubiquity of the conspiratorial worldview is nowhere more evident than in American film. Such films have helped the viewing public conceive of totality in the past, as in a spate of conspiratorial films that flourished after the Watergate scandal, and indeed they serve a similar function today, facilitating American filmgoers' cognitive mapping of the social totality after 9/11.

But though conspiracy theory nobly creates a space for this exercise in cognitive mapping, it also reinforces the market ideology of consumption. It does so by positing itself, the practice of conspiracy theorizing, as a consumer exercise that is to be habitualized. The problem with its relationship to consumption is that conspiracy theory, while often ostensibly challenging the status quo, tends through its formal attributes to cultivate a habit of negative critique and foster a behavior of complacent consumption that sustains the market paradigms of consumerism. This problem is not a moral one

about complicity in the system of commodity consumerism, but it is a pragmatic crisis, because this process of consumption risks sinking conspiracy theory into a cycle of deferral that I am calling the paralysis of interpretation.

John Sayles's *Silver City* (2004) exemplifies the conspiracy theorist's predicament. Its protagonist, Danny O'Brien, must engage in a process in which he collects information for his conspiratorial investigation, but his collecting defers any meaningful action throughout the film, leaving the conspirers untouched. Though O'Brien's conspiracy theorizing fails in its drive toward public exposure of the conspiracy, we can learn from his methodology of lyrical truth, which allows him to persist in his conspiratorial stance even when his collecting efforts encounter an information impasse.

Ultimately, this paralysis of interpretation is not just a problem for conspiracy theorists, but for critical theorists, as well. Practitioners of both fields need to recognize that the knowledge created by their theorizations is not enough to bring about social transformation. Instead, these theorists must recognize that the truly radical project is one that synthesizes knowledge with an action that has the potential to bring about change. This synthesis is the necessary next step for conspiracy theory if conspiracy theorizing will ever pose a significant challenge to the conspiracy that is contemporary life itself.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

If its prevalence were ever in doubt, conspiracy theory has reasserted itself in recent years as the standby means for Americans to structure the world around them. The rhetoric of conspiracy has pervaded explanations of President George W. Bush's elections in 2000 and 2004, the shadowy plots leading up to September 11th, and the United States' path to war in Iraq. But politics aside, the ubiquity of the conspiratorial worldview is nowhere more evident than in American film. As Richard Hofstadter famously attests, conspiracy theorizing reaches far back into American history, and more recent scholarship has focused on the preponderance of conspiratorial themes in contemporary film. In the opening chapter of *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Fredric Jameson catalogues and critiques the conspiratorial films of the 1970s and early 1980s, surveying Alan J. Pakula's *The Parallax View* (1974), *All the President's Men* (1976), and David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983). This spate of overtly conspiracy-themed films can easily be attributed to the fallout from Watergate and to renewed efforts to discern, perhaps even redefine, the relationships between the individual and the social in light of Nixon's cover-up.

The post 9/11 milieu hosts a similar resurgence in conspiratorial films, ranging from trenchant documentaries to formulaic movies to richly complicated films. Several of the documentaries—Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and Jeremy Earp's and Sut Jalley's *Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, Fear, and the Selling of American Empire* (2004), for example—deal explicitly with the putative conspiracies surrounding 9/11, but

many other documentaries and films incorporate conspiratorial narratives that ostensibly avoid the subject matter and trauma of the 9/11 attacks.¹ The post 9/11 surge in conspiratorial films is undeniable, and at a base level it can be explained by the need for the individual to understand his relation to what may seem like a new, more threatening kind of totality. Jameson calls this method of situating the individual within the social the process of cognitive mapping, and the impulse to provide this kind of social mapping radiates throughout the conspiratorial thematics of many post 9/11 films.

Critics of the conspiracy theory genre have justly considered conspiratorial literatures in terms of fantasy, agency, social totality, and political efficacy. Hofstadter marginalizes conspiracy theory and theorists by accusing them of making a “leap into fantasy,” which he explains is “the curious leap in imagination that is always made at some critical point in the recital of events” (37). Timothy Melley characterizes the literary impulse to portray conspiratorial narratives as representations of “agency panic,” which he describes as “an intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy, the conviction that one’s actions are being controlled by someone else or that one has been ‘constructed’ by powerful, external agents” (vii). Other scholars have seen conspiracy theory in a more positive, constructive light. Jameson argues that conspiratorial texts “constitute an unconscious, collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late twentieth century whose abominations are heightened by their concealment and their bureaucratic impersonality” (*Geopolitical Aesthetic* 3). Mark Fenster suggests that conspiracy theories carry a democratizing potential that he explains as “a utopian desire to understand and confront the contradictions and conflicts of contemporary capitalism” (116).

To this conversation I will add another dimension to the theorizing of conspiracy theory by arguing that it reinforces the market ideology of consumption. It does so by positing itself, the practice of conspiracy theorizing, as a consumer exercise that is to be habitualized. With references to contemporary American films and other literatures, I will map out these critiques of the conspiracy theory genre, and I will explore how conspiracy theories, while often ostensibly challenging the status quo, tend through their formal attributes to cultivate a habit of negative critique and foster a behavior of complacent consumption that sustains the market paradigms of consumerism. Ultimately, my argument is not a moral one that decries conspiracy theory for its relationship to commodity consumerism. Instead, my critique is pragmatic, outlining the process through which conspiracy theory risks sinking into a cycle of deferral that I am calling the paralysis of interpretation.

Notes

¹ The list of post 9/11 conspiratorial literatures is indeed extensive, but a quick survey will help highlight their ubiquity. Conspiratorial documentaries include Mark Achbar's *The Corporation* (2004), Robert Greenwald's *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* (2004), and Sam Green's and Bill Siegel's *The Weather Underground* (2003). Formulaic renderings of conspiratorial narratives include *National Treasure* (2004) and *The Interpreter* (2005). More complicated conspiratorial plots have appeared in Jonathan Demme's remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), in Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005), and in Fernando Meirelles's *The Constant Gardener* (2005). Outside of the film arena, readers have consumed Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) to the point that it became a media phenomenon, and fans of the novel await Ron Howard's film rendering, scheduled for release in spring of 2006.

CHAPTER 2 ON FORM

Any critique of a genre necessarily entails—or assumes—both a discussion of formal attributes and a periodization. For conspiracy theory, such a discussion is particularly vexed, in part because the nature of its content and form crosses so many of the traditional features of realism, modernism, and postmodernism. The practice of conspiracy theorizing, though it is found in Mason-scares in the American eighteenth century and is a theoretical concern for Marx, has been considered by many to be a symptom of postmodernity, perhaps even its quintessence. The faithfulness with which Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and others have represented conspiratorial thinking throughout their careers bolsters the positions of those who would root conspiracy theory firmly in the postmodern camp.

But conspiracy theorizing signals much more than postmodern paranoia. In his book *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, Mark Fenster argues against such a position, writing that “the conspiracy narrative needs to be recognized for what it is: a utopian desire to understand and confront the contradictions and conflicts of contemporary capitalism” (116). Fenster’s argument here is that conspiratorial narratives aim to discover and represent something like a grand narrative. Similarly, Jameson, outlining his theory of cognitive mapping, writes that conspiracy theory is “a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system” (“Cognitive Mapping” 286). Both Fenster and Jameson

identify the key motive behind conspiratorial literature: the exposure of totality and the construction of a grand narrative that awaits interpretation.

Thinking of conspiracy theory in terms of its insistence on a grand narrative thus seems to link it to modernism. Jameson grants that postmodernism accommodates an array of cultural productions, some of which may be residual impulses of modernism.¹ Conspiratorial literature allows us to see just such an interpenetration of these periods: a singular conspiracy theory, in its persistent assertions of a grand narrative, reflects a modernist impulse; a proliferation of conspiracy theories, or perhaps associated theories, make information increasingly harder to interpret.

Most scholars relegate periodizing discussions such as these to the content of conspiracy theory, thus confining the field of terms to modernism and postmodernism; what remains, however, is to investigate the periodization of the *form* taken by conspiratorial narratives. Carl Freedman, studying paranoia in the novels of Philip K. Dick, writes that “the great majority of [science fiction] inherits certain basic formal properties from the realist, as distinct from the modernist or post-modernist, novel: the typical SF text has a smoothly diachronic narrative line and offers its characters as mimetic representations of human beings” (20). This distinction between form and content is crucial to a discussion of narrative strategies in conspiratorial literature because it forces us to recognize that, no matter how uniquely conspiracy theory situates its content in the border spaces of modernism and postmodernism, its narrative form places it within the familiar terrain of realism. Even in the ubiquitous episodes of *The X-Files* where conspiratorial thematics meet purely fantasy subject matter—for example, the

nationwide cover-up of decades' worth of encounters with extraterrestrials—the realist narrative formulation does not lapse into postmodern self-reflection.

Linda Hutcheon, in her classic study *The Politics of Postmodernism*, explains the politics behind realist narratives: “representation that presumes the transparency of the medium and thus the direct and natural link between sign and referent or between word and world” (32). In other words, realism attempts to figure totality indisputably and seamlessly. The political exigencies of a conspiracy theory require just such a “transparency of the medium” in order for any particular narrative to present itself—no matter how illogical or fantastical it may be in extreme cases—and its evidence in a manner accessible to a large public. Jameson touches on the need for this transparency when he writes, “On the global scale, allegory allows the most random, minute, or isolated landscapes to function as a figurative machinery in which questions about the system and its control over the local ceaselessly rise and fall” (*TGA* 5). Accordingly, allegory offers a transparent, word-to-world realist narrative mechanism for providing a cognitive mapping’s representation of totality. If a conspiracy theory aspires to political utility, it cannot afford to indulge itself in fractured, overly complex narrative forms typical of high modernism or even literary postmodernism. Only with a realist narrative framework—and this is especially the case in film, which affects mimesis through its very representations of humans—can conspiracy theory aspire to relevance in the cultural marketplace.

The employment of word-to-world narrative strategies in conspiratorial literature also reflects a more orthodox historical periodization regarding the post 9/11 climate. If the events of 9/11 and the concomitant international actions have in fact spurred the

recent wave of conspiratorial films, one might associate those events with a need to respond to real, felt crises with literature that aspires to represent that totality. In other words, the all-too-real bloodshed in the U.S., Afghanistan, and Iraq—not to mention in innumerable 9/11-related skirmishes elsewhere—have demanded a shift from postmodern narratives to realist ones that can more effectively deliver representations of cognitive mapping. These cognitive mappings, especially in the hazy relations of globalization, are central to grasping domestic and international power relations, and conspiratorial literature is one avenue for circulating such mappings. As we will see, however, this penchant for mapping demands that the conspiracy theorist engage in the collection of information, a process that ultimately risks deferring any real of action.

Notes

¹ In his foreword to Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, Jameson refutes Lyotard's denial of grand narratives in postmodernism, choosing instead "to posit, not the disappearance of the great master-narratives, but their passage underground, as it were, their continuing but now *unconscious* effectivity as a way of 'thinking about' and acting in our current situation" (xii). Jameson projects this line of thought onto Lyotard's own writing when he suggests that Lyotard "has characterized postmodernism, not as that which follows modernism and its particular legitimation crisis, but rather as a cyclical moment that returns before the emergence of ever *new* modernisms in the stricter sense" (xvi).

CHAPTER 3 CONSUMPTION

Don DeLillo characterizes the practice of conspiracy theory as an exercise in *dietrologia*, a word that combines the Italian “*dietro*,” an adverb translated roughly as “behind,” with “*logia*,” a noun pertaining to the science or study of a given subject. He defines *dietrologia* as “the science of what is behind something. A suspicious event. The science of what is behind an event” (DeLillo, *Underworld* 280). As an enterprise modeling itself after science, conspiracy theory has a deep kinship with the practice of collecting—usually of data and other information relevant to the theory at hand.

This fundamental imperative to collect holds, whether we are considering the conspiracy theorist or his audience. Walter Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project* that “what is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind” (204). Benjamin, addressing this practice of decontextualization, adds that “this relation is the diametric opposite of any utility, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness” (204). This impulse to completeness reflects the conspiracy theorist’s fidelity to a totalizing project, but it often situates conspiracy theory in a consumerist position that struggles to preserve critical distance from the totality it purports to maintain. Jameson, in *Postmodernism*, demurs on this last subject, writing that “distance in general (including ‘critical distance’ in particular) has very precisely been abolished in the new space of postmodernism” (48). The rehabilitation of critical distance will be taken up in the last section of this essay.

Crucial to this discussion is the connection Benjamin finds between collecting and allegory: “in every collector hides an allegorist, and in every allegorist a collector. As far as the collector is concerned, his collection is never complete; for let him discover just a single piece missing, and everything he’s collected remains a patchwork, which is what things are for allegory from the beginning” (211). As we will see, the obstacles to completeness in a conspiratorial project pose a significant challenge to the political efficacy of its practice. Still, the pairing of collector and allegorist highlights the realist, word-to-world exigencies of conspiracy theory: what the conspiratorial collector gathers bears significance in that the “patchwork” assembled from his collection performs the service of cognitive mapping, thereby conveying a representation of relations on the social grid.

For the conspiracy theorist, the practice of collecting takes as its primary object information. Evan Watkins, in *Everyday Exchanges*, writes that conspiracy theorizing “is invariably represented as trafficking in the currency of information” (100). The conspiratorial collector—whether an author of conspiratorial literature, a character in conspiracy fiction, or a political practitioner of conspiracy theory—must research disparate sources and synthesize that information into a coherent, often realist, narrative.¹ This thorough research can bolster a non-fictional, historical conspiracy theory’s political impact and heighten the mimetic qualities of a literary work of conspiracy.

But the repetition of the collecting behavior, if taken to an extreme, risks a continual deferral of conclusion or closure. What’s worse, of course, is that this deferral of closure for the collection cycle negates the conspiracy theory’s potential for political influence. Such a deferral of closure is precisely what Benjamin introduces when he

explains that a collector cannot complete his collection and instead can only aspire to a “patchwork.” Take for example this description of Nicholas Branch, the historian whose job it is to compile a secret history of the Kennedy assassination for the CIA in Don DeLillo’s *Libra*: “Branch must study everything. He is in too deep to be selective. . . . The truth is he hasn’t written all that much. He has extensive and overlapping notes—notes in three-foot drifts, all these years of notes. But of actual finished prose, there is precious little. It is impossible to stop assembling data” (59). Branch’s efforts at mapping the Kennedy assassination fail because he can only assemble a “patchwork” of evidence, testimonies, and conjectures. Without closure for his account of the plot against the president, Branch cannot offer a compelling, conclusive, complete conspiracy theory that would prompt a response from the government or offer a sense of resolution to the American public. This inability to bring closure to the conspiratorial narrative is what I’m calling “the paralysis of interpretation.”

The result of this collecting of information, if it is successfully completed or if it only holds information in place while the conspiracy theorist investigates, often takes the organizational form of a map—either narratological or traditionally visual in nature. Jameson hails the activity of mapping—which he distinguishes from the production of maps—as a method of organizing information into a coherent, if reductive, representation of social relations, and he suggests that this representation take the form of allegory, as noted above. In film, scenes in which a character draws up such a map are crucial for recognizing the piecing together of a conspiratorial plot, and while a map is merely a representation of the more ambitious process of mapping, it offers the promise of engagement with the social. We can find examples of these visual mapping efforts in the

striking creations of the artist Mark Lombardi. Curator Robert Hobbs, whose essays introduce and accompany Lombardi's artwork in the volume *Mark Lombardi: Global Networks*, explains the artist's method of "narrative structures":

[Lombardi's] drawings are particularly timely now, since he usually created visual narratives that expose the worldwide interconnections among corporations, political structures, and ad hoc hierarchies that continue to be serious problems today. . . . To convey this, Lombardi created subtle tracteries of information pertaining to global financial deals and offshore banking that often resemble spider webs or portions of them. (19)

Each delicately simple pencil-on-paper drawing in the *Global Networks* exhibition organizes names, corporations, institutions, and events via "tracteries" that signal interrelationships. The subjects of Lombardi's mappings span financial networks of international businessmen, government scandals such as the Iran-Contra fiasco, and the corrupt connections of prominent politicians.² Often these representations turn to subjects of conspiracy, as in *BNL, Reagan, Bush, & Thatcher and the Arming of Iraq, ca. 1983-91*, which ties the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro to the American and British leaders in a conspiracy to provide weapons to Iraq (Lombardi 87-91). At the most fundamental level, we can view Lombardi's mapping art as an attempt to organize this collected information into a politically expedient representation of a matrix of power, one that realizes the completeness of its collector's vision.

But not all conspiracy theorists piece together their collected information as coherently as Mark Lombardi does with his concise mappings. Instead, many conspiracy theorists leave their collected findings in "patchwork" form, in disarray with loose ends untied and conclusions forestalled. Indeed, unmappable relations, or at least the conspiracy theorist's inability to map those relations coherently, are very often the starting point for works of conspiratorial literature. For example, in Jonathan Demme's

remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), Major Ben Marco (Denzel Washington) uncovers a cache of incoherently related information in the hotel room of Corporal Al Melvin (Jeffrey Wright). Melvin's information—sketches of images from recovered memories, newspaper clippings, photographs, and scrawled inscriptions—sprawls across his walls and the pages of his journal with no discernable organization to help Marco comprehend its underlying narrative.

Melvin and Marco have undergone the same brainwashing scheme, courtesy of the Manchurian Global corporation, and Marco struggles to piece together those events as they have recurred to him in dreams and flashes of recovered memory and in the images from Melvin's walls and journals. Melvin's failed attempt at mapping the conspiracy, though later redeemed by Marco's detective work, marks a fundamental necessity for the political impact of a conspiracy theory: representational organization of the collected materials. Marco's outline of the Manchurian conspiracy leaves no room for the fluidity of totality that Jameson advocates, but it does offer enough completeness for the appropriate agencies to disrupt the corporation's plot for the White House. Still, Marco's work fundamentally fails to register totality: the localized malfeasance of Manchurian Global is eliminated, but there is no mention of systemic reform—much less anything approaching systemic transformation—at the conclusion of the film. Marco's project bears out Jameson's assertion that conspiracy theory is a “degraded” form of cognitive mapping, because it privileges local ethics over totalizing politics and offers a reductive resolution to the systemic crisis for which Manchurian Global is but one example.

Once a representational organization is in place, the general audience of conspiratorial literature—and this always includes the conspiracy theorists themselves—

also engages in a practice of collecting. The audience's collecting, instead of focusing on specific bits of information, focuses on the conspiratorial narrative itself, and for this reason it very closely resembles traditional processes of commodity consumption. Indeed, Clare Birchall, in "The Commodification of Conspiracy Theory," argues that, as recent films have adopted the term "conspiracy" into their very titles, the notion of conspiracy theory "starts to signify a marketable category rather than a subterranean activity" (235). When conspiracy theory is fetishized to the point of becoming a standard commercial product, it not only risks its potential for critical distance, but it also enters into the field of rote consumption. Two issues are at play here. First, as we have established, the formal logic of conspiracy theory resembles consumerism because of its process of collecting, which risks enervating its ability to organize action. Second, conspiracy theory has become an easily marketable product, which impairs its critical distance. The issue of marketability doesn't necessarily strip conspiracy theory of its "subterranean" foundation, but if it leads broader audiences into the cycle of collecting, this marketability increases the risk that action will be deferred.

The repeated consumption of conspiracy theories, while offering the promise of agitating the viewing public into action, all too often reinforces the habitualization of the market ideology of consumerism. The viewer of conspiratorial film collects the assorted narratives, and, to return to Benjamin's terms, decontextualizes those narratives into a "completeness" of paranoid likeness. By this process, films on disparate subjects—take for example Jon Turteltaub's *National Treasure* (2004) and Sydney Pollack's *The Interpreter* (2005)—enter into a likeness that has nothing to do with their content, but that instead hinges on their shared conspiratorial sense. The conspiracies in these two

films share nothing in their content, but viewers could associate them in a bond of paranoid likeness. The collector's act of decontextualization has the effect of de-politicizing each narrative into an iteration of paranoia, and the specific allegations and information illustrated along the way disappear under the larger mantle of mere paranoia.

Timothy Melley, in *Empire of Conspiracy*, explores the consumerist attributes of conspiracy theory in terms of addiction. In a reading of William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, Melley observes that several of the characters are "control addicts," and he explains that "the more radical idea of an *addiction to control itself* liquidates the concept of control altogether" (165). Conspirators lose agency to their addiction to power, and it follows that conspiracy theorists and their audiences lose agency both to power-hungry cabals of conspirators and to their own consumerist addictions. The narrative of the individual addicted to exposing a conspiracy is common enough—Warren Beatty's Joseph Frady in *The Parallax View* and Denzel Washington's Ben Marco in *The Manchurian Candidate* both exemplify the lone conspiracy theorist's near-deranged fixation on uncovering and publicizing the conspiracy plot. What is less commonly recognized is that the methodical consumption of these narratives marks a similar fixation—here a fixation on repetitious consumption—on the part of theater-going audiences or the reading public.

In many ways, conspiracy theory becomes fetishized because it so readily lends itself to an abundance of interpretations, and even this proliferation of interpretation marks a consumerist impulse. Mark Fenster explains that "conspiracy theory demands continual interpretation in which there is *always* something more to know about an alleged conspiracy, the evidence of which is subjected to an investigative machine that

depends on the perpetual motion of signification” (77-78). Of course, such an interminable process of interpretation indefinitely suspends even a provisional conclusion or closure—again, Benjamin’s problematic of the collector’s “patchwork”—for the conspiratorial narrative, as the conspiracy theorist continuously pursues more information to strengthen his allegations.

We can observe one example of this phenomenon as the paralysis of interpretation entraps Dr. Bill Harford (Tom Cruise) in Stanley Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). Concerned that his trespass into a hedonistic masquerade ball may have resulted in the death of a young woman—was she killed in a perverse sacrifice, or did she really die from a drug overdose as the newspapers reported?—Harford investigates the cult-like group of debauchees, tries to ascertain the young woman’s identity, and questions his friends for whatever information they have regarding the nameless, faceless, Tristero-like sex organization. But the result of Harford’s detective work, despite its thoroughness, disappoints; after returning from interviewing his last informant, he promises to his wife “I’ll tell you everything. I’ll tell you everything.” Harford, unable to compile enough information to break the cycle of interpretation, leaves the circumstances of the young woman’s death forever veiled in mystery. Not only does the camera pull away from his explanation to his wife, but Harford takes no public action against what might be a murderous organization.

The paralysis of interpretation threatens to render conspiracy theorists trapped in a never-ending process of consumption, and in still other ways the conspiracy theorist’s interpretation complements consumer society. Rem Koolhaas, studying Salvador Dali’s “Paranoid-Critical Method,” observes that this brand of conspiracy theorizing “promises

that, through conceptual recycling, the worn, consumed contents of the world can be recharged or enriched like uranium, and that ever-new generations of false facts and fabricated evidences can be generated simply through the act of interpretation” (203). This process of “conceptual recycling” complicates the act of collecting that is inherent to the conspiracy theorist’s behavior. Through the decontextualization of information, the conspiracy theorist creates a new product that, as Birchall reminds us, is ready for sale on the market. Conspiracy theory, close kin if not synonym for “Paranoid-Critical Method,” repackages old information into a shiny, sexy new narrative, and this market-oriented recycling further strengthens the symbiotic relationship between conspiracy theory and consumer society. However, the Paranoid-Critical Method, in addition to its consumption-oriented “conceptual recycling,” creates opportunities for a productive radical critique, which we will explore later.

My study of this symbiotic relationship has, so far, characterized conspiracy theory as a critical gesture toward totality that enervates its own critical distance by reproducing consumer behaviors. Marx, detailing the consumption of material and labor in *Grundrisse*, writes that “the whole process therefore appears as *productive consumption*, i.e. as consumption which terminates neither in a *void*, nor in the mere subjectification of the objective, but which is, rather, again posited as an *object*” (300-01). “Productive consumption” precisely explains the logic of conspiracy theory, which rarely offers enough completeness or conclusion to terminate its cycle of interpretation and thereby posits itself as its own object, as a practice to be repeated and even habitualized. This critique, however, does not engage an alternate meaning of “productive”—the one pertaining to utility. Benjamin’s conspirator focuses on completeness to the point of

neglecting utility altogether, but a renewed concentration on utility, which is so closely related to action, perhaps offers the best method for all conspiracy theory—whether located in film, fiction, political rhetoric, or smoky back alleys—to reclaim its critical distance and trade in its position of negative critique for a positive one.

Notes

¹ Patrick O'Donnell describes the process of collection as indicative of the “overvoice,” which he explains as representing the “collation of coincidental tic and expression into communal grammar” (187). O'Donnell finds the overvoice in Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, writing that it signals “the insertion of Mailer's intention—more pointedly, his paranoid authorial presence—into events that otherwise would appear to be random” (187). The overvoice designates a useful term for considering how authors of conspiratorial literature and historical conspiracy theories organize their collected information into a coherent narrative. The form of the overvoice can vary, but the presence of some kind of organization is crucial to the viability of a conspiracy.

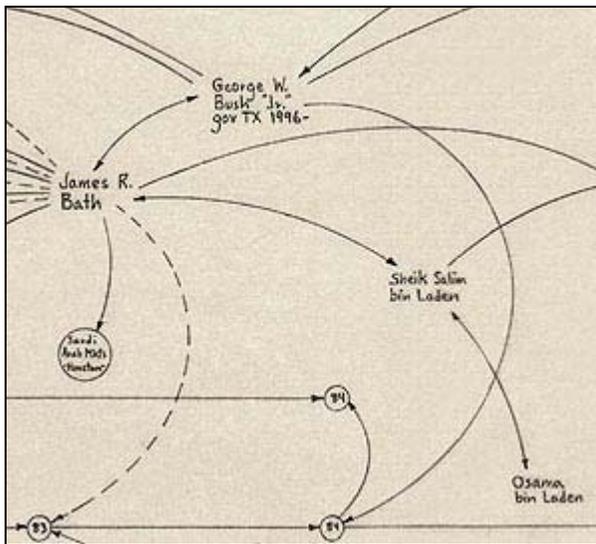


Figure 1. Detail of *George W. Bush, Harken Energy, and Jackson Stevens ca. 1979-90, 5th version*. Photo courtesy of *The Quarterly Williamsburg Art Review* (<http://www.wburg.com/0202/arts/lombardi.html>).

² Figure 1 is a sample of Lombardi's work. Hobbs explains that *George W. Bush, Harken Energy, and Jackson Stephens, ca. 1979-90* (24 ¹/₈ x 48 ¹/₄ in.) “focuses on the roles that cronyism and insider trading played in the fortunes of George W. Bush in the 1980s, before he became governor of Texas” (Lombardi 99). This representation of networked relationships is typical of Lombardi's method of conveying the information he has collected. Often the arrangement of these collections implies conspiracy, as in this

piece that links together domestic corporations and foreign politics to suggest a concerted effort to sustain George W. Bush's financial interests.

CHAPTER 4 PRODUCTION

Here I want to offer some brief remarks on this flip-side of conspiracy theory—its qualities of production—before moving to a reading. Many cultural studies scholars tend to view conspiracy theory’s productive traits negatively, or at best receive them hesitantly. Indeed, such scholarship mirrors the reservations that marginalize conspiracy theory and theorists in contemporary culture. Such scholarship and attitudes focus on the production of fantasy in conspiracy theory—which, to be sure, is a risk latent in any effort to map out secretive, perhaps even undecidable, relations—instead of considering its *productive* potential.

As noted in my introduction, Richard Hofstadter maintains that the paranoid style is characterized by a “leap into fantasy.” For Hofstadter, the term “conspiracy theorist” is derogatory because, he maintains, “the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than good” (5). Given his insistence that conspiracy theories necessarily draw fictive conclusions from a body of fact, this conclusion seems reasonable. But Hofstadter, writing before Watergate actualized so many fears about secrecy and corruption, wrongly dismisses conspiracy theory as completely marginal and irrelevant to the mainstream’s concerns. Evan Watkins echoes Hofstadter’s apprehension, though less stridently, when he writes that conspiracy theories have the unfortunate tendency of mistaking motive for general effect, thus propagating unfounded conclusions.¹ Perhaps more importantly, Hofstadter’s approach characterizes the dominant rhetoric regarding conspiracy

throughout popular culture, marginalizing conspiracy theorists by aligning them with *X-Files*-like fantasy.

Following Hofstadter, Koolhaas's analysis of the Paranoid-Critical Method (PCM) also seems to align conspiratorial thinking with the production of irreality. However, for Koolhaas such an irreality is constructive. He describes this method as a "delirium of interpretation": "Each fact, event, force, observation is caught in one system of speculation and 'understood' by the afflicted individual in such a way that it absolutely confirms and reinforces his thesis—that is, the initial delusion which is his point of departure. *The paranoid always hits the nail on the head, no matter where the hammer blows fall*" (Koolhaas 201). Koolhaas continues to explain that the PCM has two steps: first, it concocts a grandiose paranoid theory; and second, it manipulates the facts until they support one's position (202). This process inverts the sequence of thoughts in Hofstadter's "leap into fantasy," and on the surface it seems to confirm Hofstadter's assertion that conspiracy theory demands an underlying manufacture of an unreal, logically untenable belief. But for Koolhaas this "delirium of interpretation" is a crucial method of reinforcing one's consciousness of power and social relations.

Mark Fenster, more sympathetic to the aims of conspiracy theory than Hofstadter, explains conspiracy theory and production in terms of desire. He writes that "conspiracy theory is a *practice* of desire that *moves*" (Fenster 95). The movement of this desire, Fenster asserts, produces "not only a circular, seemingly endless desire and proliferation of conspiracy-related texts, but also affective intensities and flows, self-generating and forever flying through space and time" (95). The benefit of such a desire-production, though it may seem irrevocably self-reflexive and "circular," is that it holds a utopian

promise: the manufacture of conspiratorial literature becomes the means to an end—and for Fenster the end is the democratization of power relations—which can benefit a whole society. Unlike Hofstadter’s denunciations of conspiracy theory as a production of fantasy, Fenster’s focus on desire redirects that production to the field of productivity.

That Fenster, Koolhaas, and Watkins are in the minority of scholars who view conspiracy theory and theorizing as having the potential for a radical, even utopian impact reflects the ubiquity of scholarship that engages in negative critique. Indeed, my own scrutiny of the symbiosis between conspiracy theory and consumer society strikes the fashionable pose of the academic who asserts his primacy by emphasizing the failure of this or that theory, cultural practice, or artwork. What remains, then, is to restore to conspiracy theory the productive potential which Fenster, Koolhaas, and Watkins hint.

Notes

¹ In a passage examining claims that capital is a “motivated system” that conspires against the proletariat and Marx’s insistence on observing capitalism as a complicated system of social relations, Watkins writes that “conspiracy theories short-circuit this complex structural analysis by immediately assigning to capitalist owners the motivation of exploiting workers rather than of accumulating capital” (115).

CHAPTER 5
MINING CONSPIRACY IN *SILVER CITY*: A CASE STUDY IN LYRICAL TRUTH
AND THE PARALYSIS OF INTERPRETATION

When gubernatorial candidate Dickie Pilager (Chris Cooper) casts into Lake Arapahoe for one of his TV spots on the environment, he never expected that he would reel in a dead body. Nor would he have imagined that the circumstances surrounding the body's unceremonious dumping would implicate one of his largest campaign contributors in a migrant labor scandal. But this purely contingent event draws together the two figures—the candidate and the body of Lázaro Huerta—and creates a space for one enterprising detective, the former investigative reporter Danny O'Brien (Danny Huston), to begin to conceive of the shady links between Pilager and his corrupting financier, Wes Benteen (Kris Kristofferson). From here, Danny employs his reporter-detective skills to wax conspiratorial about the relationship between the Pilager family and Benteen, along the way illustrating the trademark characteristics that I have outlined for the conspiracy theorist: collecting information, striving toward a cognitive mapping of totality, and ultimately struggling with the paralysis of interpretation.

Ostensibly, John Sayles's *Silver City* (2004) takes its polemical aim at President George W. Bush. Trailers for the film highlight Cooper's performance of the clueless, ineloquent gubernatorial candidate, setting the film up as an extensive satire of the president who was running for re-election during the film's release. In this respect, Cooper's performance does not disappoint. In an impromptu press conference, Pilager speaks about his campaign agenda:

I'm not raising taxes. We can't just keep throwing the taxpayers' hard-earned money at these perceived—you know, some of them, I admit, are real—so-called social problems. We have to get our priorities straight. Education is a priority. Health care is a priority. Uh, our economy is a priority. The environmental—the whole environmental, uh, arena—that's a priority, big priority. Building new roads and maintaining the present—keeping the infrastructure in place, where it belongs—that's a priority.

Pilager's lack of elocution is so painful that his own father, Senator Judson Pilager, comments that his son is “a fucking disaster when he's off the script.” And if the parallels to contemporary politics weren't clear, the background of one shot in the film shows defaced posters of the younger Bush sporting horns and a trickster's goatee. Indeed, one of the film's crew members remarks that after observing the 2000 election scandal in Florida while filming *Sunshine State* (2002), Sayles dedicated himself to “kick[ing] George Bush's ass” (*Making of*).

Of course if we accept that the purpose of the film is to derail Bush's reelection campaign, we must surely classify it as a failure: as far as *Silver City* is concerned, the president made it through 2004 with his headquarters unharmed. But *Silver City's* inability to offer a political obstacle to the Bush campaign is mirrored in its protagonist's inability provide a clear link between Dickie Pilager and the money coming in from Wes Benteen's underhanded Bentel Corporation. The anxiety over extreme corporate lobbying power is reminiscent of the recent remake of *The Manchurian Candidate*, as Benteen has provided more than half of the funds in Pilager's campaign war chest in the hope that Pilager will support legislation to deregulate environmental and industrial standards that affect the interests of the Bentel Corporation's family of businesses—Benteen Ranch, Benteen Realty, Benteen Medical Associates, Gold Mine Communications, BENagra, and Bentel Stadium. This relationship is markedly less ham-

handed than Manchurian Global's efforts to control, literally and allegorically, the mind of a presidential candidate, and accordingly Danny O'Brien's conspiracy theory cannot aspire to the straightforwardness of Major Ben Marco's clear assessment of the relationship between corporate sponsor and puppet-politician.

The complexity of the conspiracy theory that Danny O'Brien pursues is largely due to the challenges of contingency. Of course, "contingency" has dual meanings here. One such meaning, adopted by Skip Willman in his formulation of "contingency theory," indicates marginalization. Willman's contingency theory refers to a concept of the social that "represents a new and widespread 'strategy of containment' in the effort to dispel the 'paranoid' fears raised by conspiracy theory" (22). A negative critique of conspiracy theory, contingency theory posits "a smoothly functioning social system subject to random deviations and deformations introduced by external corrupting forces" (Willman 28-29). In Willman's sense of the word, "contingency" refers to the conspiracy theorist becoming incidental to the real goings-on of society, and indeed Danny O'Brien's voice—like *Silver City* itself—is ultimately silenced by the very mechanism of marginalization found in Hofstadter's outline of the paranoid style. But in another sense, O'Brien's first struggle is to make sense of the contingency of the film's opening scene—the incidental snagging of Pilager's fishing hook on Lázaro Huerta's corpse. The challenge here is for O'Brien to establish that the incident is more than an aleatory gaffe on the campaign trail and to expose the intense meaning behind the event: Pilager himself is implicated, though unknowingly, in the cover-up of a migrant worker's death under dubious circumstances at the BENagra slaughterhouse.

This second challenge of contingency demands a significant degree of research from the conspiracy theorist. And, in a plot rather unorthodox for the genre, Sayles's conspiracy theorist starts off on the conspirator's payroll. Pilager's campaign advisor, the Karl Rove-like Chuck Raven (Richard Dreyfuss), suspects at the outset of the fishing incident that political foul play may be involved, confiding to a coroner, "There's also the remote possibility that this is not a coincidence. I don't think I'm being paranoid when I consider the possibility that one of our opponents had something to do with this." Of course, Raven could not have foreseen that the incident is not a coincidence, that one of his biggest allies, Benteen, was ultimately responsible for the body, and he turns to the help of an independent detective agency to investigate the possibility of political motives behind Lázaro Huerta's inconvenient resurrection. The case lands in Danny O'Brien's lap, and he is charged with confronting three of Pilager's political enemies—Cliff Castleton, Casey Lyle, and his own sister Madeline Pilager (Daryl Hannah)—to let them know that Chuck Raven has them under surveillance. But after a brief examination of Pilager's political connections, O'Brien shifts the focus of his investigation from Pilager's enemies to his shady connections to Benteen.

Here the process of collection begins in earnest, and it is no coincidence that O'Brien is warned of the Pilager-Benteen connection by Mitch Paine (Tim Roth), a guerrilla journalist whom O'Brien had befriended in his earlier days as a reporter. Paine runs an independent media outlet that O'Brien jokingly refers to as "kill-the-rich.com," and he immediately senses his old friend's new affiliations. When O'Brien seeks help with the list of names Raven has charged him with investigating, Paine pointedly asks, "You're working for them now, aren't you? Them that run the whole deal?" Paine is,

perhaps, the model conspiracy theorist, and after glossing on Castleton, Lyle, and Madeline Pilager, he introduces O'Brien to his pet project: the investigation of the Pilager family's relationship to Wes Benteen. Here O'Brien learns that Benteen had provided cargo planes for Oliver North during Iran-Contra, that more recently he has been bringing in large numbers illegal immigrants to fill a labor shortage during a union strike, never once having been inspected by Immigration Services, and that he bailed out Pilager for his investment in the Silver City Development site, which lost its value when it was discovered to sit upon an abandoned mine that was releasing toxic heavy metals into the water table. Paine's information takes the shape of a narrative that is geared primarily toward impugning Pilager and Benteen. Benjamin describes the process by which the collector inscribes meaning onto the collection: "All of these—the 'objective' data together with the other—come together, for the true collector, in every single one of his possessions, to form a whole magic encyclopedia, a world order, whose outline is the *fate* of its object" (207). Paine's narrative imagines the fate its objects—the revelation of a corrupt relationship between government and business—and O'Brien seizes on this narrative as the framework for his own investigation.

Paine provides O'Brien with a solid "magic encyclopedia" of the Pilager-Benteen connection, leaving him to discern its mediation by Lázaro Huerta, and O'Brien starts right away at the trademark work of the detective. With only a photograph of a tattoo on Lázaro Huerta's hand and a list of possible culprits, O'Brien sets out to uncover the man's identity and the circumstances under which his body emerged from Lake Arapahoe, dividing his time between background work on Lázaro Huerta and confronting Raven's three suspects. What began as an assignment to intimidate Castleton, Lyle, and

Madeline Pilager by signaling Chuck Raven's suspicions of them has now turned into a much more penetrating exercise in mining. As the investigation continues, O'Brien goes deeper and deeper into Lázaro Huerta's story—surely deeper than Raven had ever hoped or planned—discovering Vince Esparza's work as a *coyote* delivering illegal labor to BENagra's fields and slaughterhouses and Benteen Realty's construction sites. And as he delves further into Raven's list of suspects—in one case literally down into the earth following a miner's tour given by Casey Lyle—he uncovers more of Pilager's mercenary rise to power, including Raven's maniacal drive to befriend and influence the Pilager family as well as Benteen's reckless mining of the land he leased from Pilager that led to the contamination of the Silver City watershed. But when he reemerges from his mining campaign, the product of O'Brien's collecting efforts is much harder to measure and calculate than any silver or gold, and the next step for his conspiracy theory—the revelation of information in the service of political impact—remains a distant hope.

As we have seen in Mark Lombardi's tracteries and in Corporal Al Melvin's sketches in *The Manchurian Candidate* remake, mapping is a crucial step toward actualizing the political potential of a conspiracy theory, and indeed cognitive mapping is the very essence of conspiracy theory. It is important to remember that a map is only a figure of the broader process of cognitive mapping, but without the map's fundamental organization of the collected materials, the conspiracy theorist's efforts have little chance of affecting change. In *Silver City*, we see O'Brien drawing up such a map to think the conspiratorial relationship revealed by Lázaro Huerta's resurrection, literally sketching onto his living room wall the events and figures involved in the conspiracy he tries to

piece together, connecting them with arching directional arrows to designate the flow of their relationships in a matrix that is comparable to Lombardi's drawings.

O'Brien's walls have served similar mapping functions in his earlier reporting work, and this connect-the-dots scene illustrates his drive to discern surreptitious relationships. The scene in O'Brien's living room takes place as he is still piecing together his own narrative of Lázaro Huerta's relationship to Pilager and Benteen, adding names and directional arrows to the wall in an effort to break the veil of contingency that enshrouds the event at Lake Arapahoe.

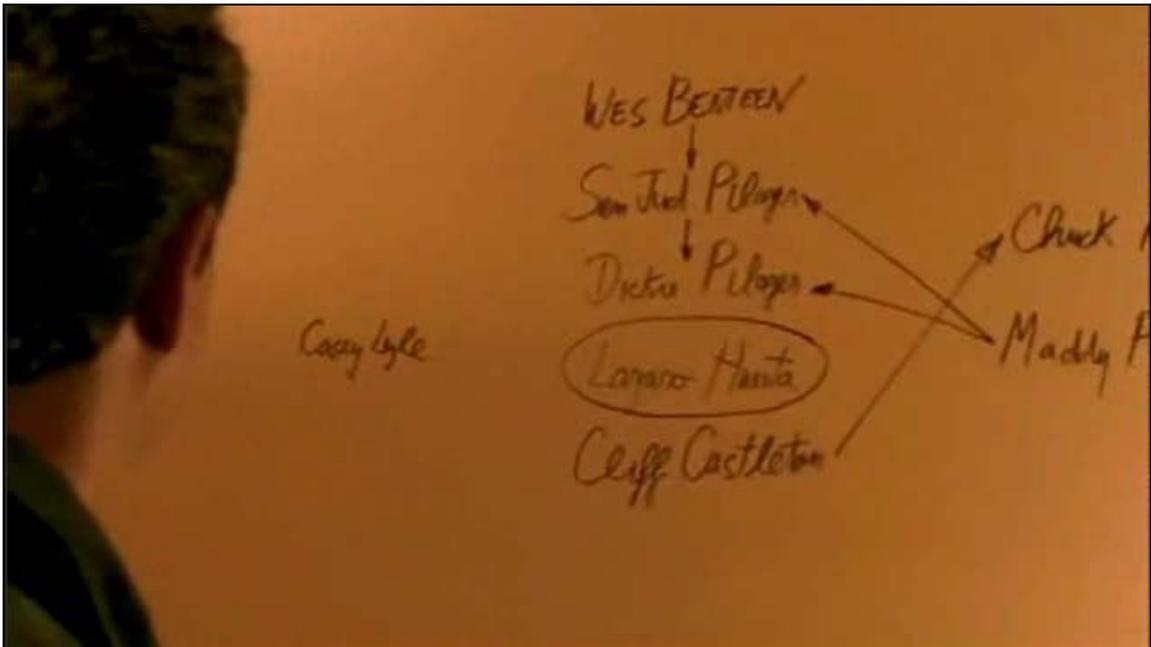


Figure 2. Danny O'Brien ruminates on the early stages of his cognitive mapping.

Crucially, he adds Vincent Esparza's name to the mix and links it to Benteen's. This representation of the conspiracy narrative helps O'Brien, as well as the film's audience, visualize the possible relationships that underlie Pilager's "pro-growth," anti-environment policies and their connections to Benteen through the very body of Lázaro Huerta. This intense focus on the particulars of the Pilager-Benteen conspiracy theory,

while critical to its potential to thwarting Pilager's gubernatorial aspirations, validates Jameson's assertion that conspiracy theory is a "degraded" form of cognitive mapping because it tends to prioritize representations of localized malfeasance over those of totality. As in the remake of *The Manchurian Candidate*, the problem of Danny O'Brien's cognitive mapping is really a problem of scale because it substitutes local totality and ethics for broad totality and politics.

It's worth noting here that while O'Brien's mapping effort may be a "degraded" form of cognitive mapping, the Sayles *oeuvre*, taken as a whole, demonstrates a fidelity to the project of mapping totality, illuminating many of the thematics that we find in *Silver City*. *Matewan*, Sayles's 1987 film about the 1920 struggles to unionize a West Virginia mining town, involves the exploitation of labor and the necessity of collective action in order to protect laborers. Union organizer Joe Kenehan (Chris Cooper) strains to keep the Mingo County laborers from internal discrimination—the workers' identities as Appalachian whites, Italian immigrants, and African Americans put them in a state of perilous discord—by constantly reminding them that "There ain't but two sides of this world: them that work and them that don't. You work. They don't." In *Lone Star*, his 1996 film about a father-son pair of law officers in a Texas border town, Sayles displays his interest in hybridity, mapping the lines between nations and cultures across spatial and human bodies. Otis Payne, the owner of a bar, has an exhibit of the Black Seminoles, a band of hybridized refugees who lived in the Everglades during Spain's rule of Florida; his personal collection of the Black Seminoles' artifacts stands in as a microcosm of the cultural and racial transfers that take place across the Mexican-American borders throughout the film. *Sunshine State*, his film about commercial and

residential development in two of Florida's coastal communities, represents the social and environmental perils of a system that privileges the economic profits of growth over more traditional values of continuity. In one scene, residents of the bourgeois Delrona Beach community hold a parade that reenacts the Spanish conquest of the land they now occupy, ironically noting the corporate sponsorship of their festival rites as if to acknowledge the connection of two imperial powers: the Spanish and the strip mall. These three fundamental themes—labor rights, immigrant rights, and development—converge in *Silver City* to demonstrate Sayles's totalizing vision that recognizes the themes' intimate relationships.

Regardless of its reluctance to conceive of totality, Danny O'Brien's conspiracy theory still faces the more immediate obstacle of the contingent nature of the Lake Arapahoe event. In other words, his mapping efforts do not yet prove a link between Pilager, Benteen, and Lázaro Huerta that is conclusive enough to bring Raven's campaign machine to its knees. Through no failure in his detective's collecting skills, O'Brien has arrived at an information impasse. Having interviewed each of Pilager's primary enemies and heard their stories of his treacherous incompetence, and having followed every lead on Lázaro Huerta to discover that he died in a slaughterhouse that flouted safety regulations because its illegal laborers couldn't address their needs through appropriate legal channels, Danny O'Brien finds himself knowing that Benteen's intentions for Pilager are depraved, but also knowing that he will likely never be able to prove it. O'Brien's impotence here defies the knowledge-as-power thematic that we will return to later in Richard Donner's *Conspiracy Theory* (1997), seemingly leaving him with two choices: he can continue collecting, risking the paralysis of interpretation, or he

can quit the investigation altogether, ensuring that the information would never be exposed.

Sayles does, however, share with the audience a scene that provides damning evidence of the corrupt lobbying relationship, although the scene, by its very nature, precludes O'Brien's access. The camera pans across a sweeping mountain vista, slowly focusing on the two men, sans entourage, riding horseback across an open field.

BENTEEN. Look at a map, they got the half the West under lock and key.

PILAGER. They?

BENTEEN. Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, national parks, the State...It's like a treasure chest waiting to be opened, only there's a 500-pound bureaucrat sitting on it.

PILAGER. Well, I'm a small government man.

BENTEEN. I know. That's why we chose you, son.

Benteen continues to lecture Pilager, who tries his best to keep up, on the virtues of privatization and designates him "one of the point men in the fight to liberate [natural] resources." This conversation concretely indicts the wicked lobbying arrangement between the two men. However, it is beyond O'Brien's powers of collection, leaving his mapping efforts unrealized. Without a record of this exchange, a record akin to Nixon's elusive White House tapes, O'Brien's conspiratorial narrative will remain inconclusive, unverifiable. He has to continue searching for a record of similar exchanges if his collection is to have meaning.

However, the film's conclusion remains hopeful, as O'Brien manages a curious negotiation of deferral here, neither persisting in the paralysis of interpretation nor resigning his collection to the garbage dump of dead conspiracy theories. Having been fired from the private investigation firm for digging deeper into the mines than his clients desired, O'Brien himself has no means to continue collecting data on Pilager and

Benteen. Indeed, he tells a friend that his first order of business as an unemployed man is “to repaint [his] living room,” signaling his abandonment of the mapping project. But he has found a way to impart his collection project to others in the hope that Benteen’s responsibility—and accordingly Pilager’s shady relationship to the Bentel Corporation—will be exposed to the public. In one of the closing scenes, we follow a staffer from Mitch Paine’s guerrilla journalism outfit into the office, where she finds an anonymous message wedged between the door and the doorframe. Over her shoulder we see a map of the Silver City development site, with directions to the open mine shaft where miners dumped toxic materials and Vincent Esparza dumped Lázaro Huerta’s body. “Weird. ‘Silver City,’” she says, reading the note’s contents. “Someone left us a treasure map.” Of course, this map is altogether different from the map on O’Brien’s living room wall, prioritizing spacial relationships over social ones, but nonetheless it will plant a seed in the alternative media, seizing on Paine’s earlier suggestion of a “trickle up” effect in which alternative media sources do the legwork on scandalous stories before the reports filter into mainstream outlets. Accordingly, O’Brien’s final movement on the case is not an act not of *deferral* of action, but of *deference* to another organization that might succeed where his collecting efforts failed.

Regardless of O’Brien’s ultimate failure to expose the profound implications of Lázaro Huerta’s death and resurrection, he does apprehend the truth that underlies the Lake Arapahoe event: he is precise in his *dietrologia*. In this way, he is a student of what Don DeLillo calls the “lyrically true,” that which is “unprovably true, remotely and inadmissibly true but not completely unhistorical, not without some nuance of authentic inner narrative” (*Underworld* 172). Lyrical truth, as we will see, expresses conviction in

the absence of substantial evidence. It is the mechanism that allows a conspiratorial-minded person to “know” that the moon landing was a hoax designed to embarrass the Soviets or that Hitler escaped Berlin to live the remainder of his life in peaceful anonymity in South America. Of course, these examples illustrate the Hofstadter-like qualities of conspiracy theory that lyrical truth can help create and sustain, but we can also imagine the usefulness of lyrical truth to our own exercises in conspiracy (or critical) theory when we encounter an impasse in information. In *Silver City*, lyrical truth bridges the information gaps that Danny O’Brien and Mitch Paine strive to overcome. The audience, having observed the horseback conversation between Pilager and Benteen, can verify the empirical truth of O’Brien’s conspiratorial narrative, but for O’Brien and his associates at Paine’s online news site, that truth remains only lyrical, detached from any viable concrete political application. After all, lyrical truth would bear little resistance to the scrutiny it would encounter if it were to be the primary method of substantiating a conspiracy theory because it relies on conviction instead of demonstrable evidence.

Lyrical truth operates as a mode of production. Like Koolhaas’s assessment of the Paranoid-Critical Method, the epistemology of lyrical truth demands that one begin with a general sense of the world and then interpret the world according to the paradigms of the preconceived lyrical truth. As we have seen, Koolhaas’s PCM produces a set of knowledge in accordance with one’s initial thesis, and this is no less true for lyrical truth. One key difference between the two methodologies, however, is that lyrical truth has no pretenses about verifiability. While the PCM contorts data to substantiate the paranoiac’s thesis, a lyrical truth confirms the thesis more loosely. To return to the example set on Danny O’Brien’s living room wall, lyrical truth does not connect the conspiratorial dots

with indisputable evidence, but rather it juxtaposes those dots in a way that *feels* right. Lyrical truth, then, is a matter of faith.

The declaration of faith that marks lyrical truth is a crucial step toward transferring conspiracy theory from a consumption-oriented enterprise to a proactively productive one. This shift toward a positive critique that forges a productive synthesis of knowledge and action is a radical departure from the complacent consumption of information that often leads to the paralysis of interpretation. Indeed, Jean Baudrillard, in *The Mirror of Production*, argues that “productivist discourse” must be appropriated from the discourse of the political economy and put to work “in the name of an authentic and radical productivity” (17). This “radical productivity” can be set in motion by what he calls the “the mirror of production,” a process which, like Lacan’s mirror stage, brings the individual to self-consciousness through his recognition of himself as embodying the transformative power of the “productivist discourse” (Baudrillard 19-20).

The productive power of lyrical truth lies in its ability to bridge gaps in information. Danny O’Brien’s commitment to lyrical truth allows him to circumvent his inability to observe the horseback exchange between Pilager and Benteen, thereby facilitating his power to *feel* the truth in the absence of the means to *prove* it. O’Brien may not have arrived at the consciousness of his own transformative power to produce, but nevertheless he employs that productive capacity toward assembling the yield of his information collection in a meaningful—and perhaps politically potent—formation. Though the very lyrical, and thus necessarily unprovable, nature of his collection undermines its menace as a conspiracy theory, O’Brien’s gathering of information succeeds in the standards of the collector. Benjamin concludes his study of collecting,

ruminating that “perhaps the most deeply hidden motive of the person who collects can be described this way: he takes up the struggle against dispersion. Right from the start, the great collector is struck by the confusion, by the scatter, in which the things of the world are found” (211). Moving, as we have seen, to tie the collector to the allegorist, Benjamin continues to explain that the allegorist “has given up the attempt to elucidate things through research into their properties and relations. He dislodges things from their context and, from the outset, relies on his profundity to illuminate their meaning” (211). It is precisely the profundity of lyrical truth that O’Brien relies on to animate his study in *dietrologia*, and in using this methodology, O’Brien becomes an allegorist just as much as a collector.

Though Danny O’Brien’s collecting efforts are stunted by an unfortunate information gap, we need not conclude that all conspiratorial collecting efforts necessarily end in a similar negotiation with the paralysis of interpretation. O’Brien’s inability to mine evidence of a malfeasant relationship between Pilager and Benteen damns to failure his efforts as a conspiratorial-minded politico. However, his successes in “the struggle against dispersion” demonstrate the benefits of his methodology of lyrical truth: in the absence of concrete evidence, we may still have faith in our convictions. Indeed, lyrical truth is a critical bridging mechanism that mediates the stages of production for a conspiracy theory: it marks the passage from an inchoate suspicion to a fully developed, politically potent indictment of conspiracy. *Silver City* concludes in this intermediate stage, leaving its audience with only the hope that Mitch Paine’s media outlet will complete the development of O’Brien’s conspiratorial collection.

As a brief exercise in contrast, we can look to Fernando Meirelles's *The Constant Gardener* (2005) for its illustration of the production of a conspiracy theory. The story begins with the deaths of two conspiracy theorists, Tessa Quayle (Rachel Weisz) and Arnold Bluhm (Hubert Koundé), who we later learn were investigating a pharmaceutical company for testing its tuberculosis drugs on poor and sick Africans. From this point forward we observe the awakening of Justin Quayle (Ralph Fiennes), Tessa's husband. Justin, a British diplomat assigned to Kenya, enters the film as a figure of the apathetic. He feels powerless to remedy the great suffering, poverty, and sickness that surround him, unaware of his wife's secret plans to expose the KDH pharmaceutical conglomerate's exploitation of unsuspecting test subjects. But after Tessa's murder, the seed of conspiratorial suspicion takes root in Justin's mind. Slowly he perceives a lyrical truth explaining her death, and he follows that lyrical truth to its concrete incarnation as a conspiracy theory as he tracks down the leads Tessa left behind. Ultimately he is killed for asking the same questions his wife did, but not before he has registered enough evidence to indict, even after his death, KDH's two conspiracies: to exploit African test subjects and to cover-up by way of murder Tessa, Arnold, and, indeed, Justin himself. *The Constant Gardener* displays the three steps of producing a viable conspiracy theory—inchoate suspicion, lyrical truth, and concrete conspiracy theory—whereas *Silver City* leaves that process incomplete.

However, regardless of the incompleteness of Danny O'Brien's conspiracy theory, his work demonstrates the necessity of lyrical truth in the collector's "struggle against dispersion." And the methodology of lyrical truth marks a crucial intersection of consumption and production. In conspiracy theory, it is the hinge that joins the process

of collecting to the process of assembling the collected materials into a meaningful formation. While the conspiracy theory may enter the market as a commodity for consumption, as Birchall has suggested, this lyrical truth also endows it with a productive capacity that holds the promise of breaking the conspiracy theorist's flirtation with the paralysis of interpretation.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION: TOWARD A POSITIVE CRITIQUE IN (CONSPIRACY) THEORY

I have made the focus of this paper the act and behavior of conspiracy theorizing, but the act of *conspiring* itself merits some attention here, especially in the context of cultural production and consumption and in the discourse of positive and negative critiques. Whereas conspiracy theorizing is an act of production toward its own consumption as a commodity, the act of conspiring is *productive* in that it often has significant consequences. The difference between the two is fundamentally the difference between positive and negative critique: conspiring is an act of engagement, of commitment; conspiracy theorizing is an act of deferral, of avoiding the risk—and potential gains—associated with forwarding and executing an agenda by stagnating within the paralysis of interpretation. In other words, conspiring is prescriptive, and conspiracy theorizing is descriptive, largely unwilling to engage the field it exposes in a proactive way.

We can take as an example of this productivity the conspiring of even so detestable a figure as Joe McCarthy. McCarthy's conspiracy—and, indeed, it was his conspiracy against the Left instead of a Communist conspiracy against the U.S. government—very effectively demonized sympathy for Communism. By discouraging people from considering the socialist paradigm to be a viable, civilized system, McCarthyism helped strengthen the position of capitalism in the post-war decades. Though the aims of McCarthy's conspiracy are irredeemably wicked and despicable, we cannot deny that his conspiring was productive—perhaps more productive than any of the many justifiably

negative critiques of his actions. Of course, I'm not proposing that Leftists should hold secret caucuses to plan the persecution of anyone who opposes progressive platforms, but rather I think we can learn from the productive stance of someone like McCarthy, who can remind us of the need to abandon the practice of (often reactive) negative critique. Indeed, the conspiratorial necessity of collective action is precisely the lesson Jameson draws from his reading of *The Parallax View*: "the conspiracy wins [...] not because it has some special form of 'power' that the victims lack, but simply because it is collective and the victims, taken one by one in their isolation, are not" (*TGA* 66).

Very generally, the practice of conspiracy theorizing limits itself to isolated, passive descriptions of conspiracy, and it endorses a dichotomy between description/interpretation and action, between deferral and productivity. What's worse is that conspiratorial literature very often indicates that such passive descriptions, the mere possession of secret knowledge about a conspiracy, will somehow, vaguely, bring that conspiracy to an end without any accompanying action. An example of this kind of knowledge-as-power thematic comes from Richard Donner's film *Conspiracy Theory*. Here, Jerry Fletcher (Mel Gibson) possesses knowledge of Dr. Jonas's (Patrick Stewart) secret government-funded mind control program, and Jerry's knowledge provokes such an excessive response from Jonas that Jonas's diabolical program collapses under the scrutiny of other government agencies. Indeed, the logic of *Conspiracy Theory* relies on the inferred link between passive knowledge and active exposure, which Eve Sedgwick illuminates: "whatever account it may give of its own motivation, paranoia is characterized by placing, in practice, and extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se—knowledge in the form of exposure" (138).

Of course, I would not presume to denigrate knowledge as an insignificant application of power, but the ultimate message of *Conspiracy Theory*—that the possession of knowledge is enough to bring about change—cultivates and justifies complacency. Such a deferral of action confines most examples of conspiracy theorizing to a state of non-productivity while the objects of the investigations, the conspirators themselves, more significantly affect the world around them.

What I am suggesting here is that the practice of conspiracy theorizing—and this applies to the methodologies of critical theory, too, as it represents a certain distinct enterprise in *dietrologia*¹—has great potential benefits to social progress. However, conspiracy theorizing will remain an ineffectual negative critique until it prescribes collective action. Perhaps one of the best recent examples of an appropriate relationship between description and action comes from Sam Green’s documentary *The Weather Underground* (2003). Green details the Weathermen’s beginnings, noting that they were deeply rooted in the social activism of the late 1960s—many were part of the leadership of the Students for a Democratic Society, and all wanted to call attention to the racism latent in U.S. policies concerning the Vietnam War—before they militarized and went underground to continue their bombing campaign to raise awareness of social injustice.

The Weathermen project had its share of flaws, which Green’s documentary dutifully uncovers. However, what is also highlighted in the film, but often left unexamined in both conservative and liberal critiques of the Weathermen, was the members’ courage to take risks in making a positive critique. Instead of languishing under the critical methodology of description/interpretation as most conspiracy theorizing does, the Weathermen applied their knowledge to more than mere description, thereby

breaking out of the paralysis of interpretation. What is most radical about the Weathermen project is not that it imposed violence on symbols of imperialism and racism, but that it synthesized its knowledge with an action that had the potential to bring about change. This synthesis of knowledge and action is greatly lacking on the Left, and it is the necessary next step for conspiracy theory if conspiracy theorizing will ever pose a significant challenge to the conspiracy that is contemporary life itself.

Notes

¹ In *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*, Slavoj Žižek writes that, especially on the Left, “the moment one shows the slightest inclination to engage in political projects that aim seriously to challenge the existing order, the answer is immediately: ‘Benevolent as it is, this will necessarily end in a new Gulag!’” (3-4). Later, he says that the effect of this deferral of action is that academics—and particularly those engaged in cultural studies—“shift from an engagement with real working-class culture to academic radical chic” (Žižek 226). To the negative critique inherent in this mode of critical theory, Žižek proposes a return to the Leninist model: “the Leninist stance was to take a leap, throwing oneself into the paradox of the situation, seizing the opportunity and intervening, even if the situation was ‘premature’” (114).

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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