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Agency in the Conspiracy Thriller

Abstract

Do conspiracy thrillers contribute to the denial of agency in contemporary culture thereby rendering paranoia as its dominant 'structure of feeling'? Are they irrational oversimplifications or do they call attention to the complexities of the new global order? This paper examines recent conspiracy thrillers in terms of changing representations of agency. I argue that contemporary conspiracy thrillers testify to a growing uncertainty about issues of causality, responsibility, and agency, and to the routinization of conspiracy.

Fueled by the Watergate scandal, post-Vietnam disillusionment, and public skepticism toward the Warren Commission report, the 70s conspiracy thriller located conspiracy within government and corporate establishments, turning the focus of paranoia inward, toward America's own institutions. Films like *The Manchurian Candidate, Klute, The Parallax View, All The President's Men,* and *Three Days of the Condor* provided "textual resolutions for inadequately explained socio-historical traumas,"[1] thematizing the individual's powerlessness in the face of ubiquitous institutional control. The surveillance society thrillers of the 90s (*Wag the Dog, The Game, The Truman Show, The Matrix, The Thirteenth Floor, Pleasantville*) responded to the paranoia engendered by a media-saturated reality. Recent conspiracy thrillers (*Vantage Point, The Da Vinci Code, Angels and Demons, The International, Inception*, *Salt, Breach, The Insider, The Constant Gardener, Syriana*) testify to a growing uncertainty about issues of causality, responsibility, and agency, as well as to the routinization of conspiracy. As Peter Knight has argued, contemporary paranoia is "less an isolated reaction to an occasional abuse of power than the logical by-product of a routinized state of affairs....of seemingly benign corporate processes such as the gathering of consumer profiles via credit card purchases, website visits etc."[2] The 'cultural turn' transformed what were previously considered psychopathologies—e.g. multiple personality and paranoia—into cultural phenomena.[3] As I have argued elsewhere,[4] doubling and multiple personality left the confines of the 19th century illness model and gradually acquired a more general, philosophical, cultural or metaphorical meaning: over the last several decades Hollywood has been 'borrowing' the symptomatic language of doubling and multiple personality—characterized by trauma, memory loss, and blackouts—to create what appears to be a new genre of films structured around multiple—stolen, assumed or mistaken—realities, identities or temporalities. Similarly, while clinical paranoia used to be an irrational response, cultural paranoia is increasingly seen either as inherent in the very structure of the new global economy or as a rational response, a 'social practice' through which the disempowered subject attempts to position himself with respect to the social/political world (Pratt 36).[5] Contemporary geopolitical conspiracy thrillers 'borrow' the symptomatic language of clinical paranoia to dramatize a new type of conspiracy, 'structural conspiracy': 'conspiracy without conspiracy.'

There have been various attempts to explain the dominance of conspiracy in contemporary culture. In *Paranoia and Modernity* John Farrell argues that the dominant post-

war French critical discourse (Sartre, Althusser, Lacan. Foucault)[6], which described "forms of agency, teleology, or intentionality—discourse, capital, power—[as] at once all-encompassing and alien, totally intimate yet totally other," naturalized paranoia and cemented the view that we are "the victims of social relations of an unfathomable and inescapable manipulative power" (4). Post-war French intellectuals, following on the trails of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud, "carried the suspicion of society to new depths: for Sartre, the 'gaze' of others imposes a fundamental experience of alienation; for Althusser, the discourse of responsibility is a primary instance of ideology; for Lacan, language itself is the source of our unnatural submission to the Father; and for Foucault, an unlocatable and alien power infiltrates every particle of our social being" (Farrell 4). In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* Jameson examines "the figuration of conspiracy as an [unconscious] attempt...to think a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves" (1-2). Insofar as the conspiratorial text represents an unconscious, collective effort to cognitively orient ourselves in the present period of late capitalism, it points to our failure to think totality (the social/collective and the epistemological totality). "In the widespread paralysis of the collective or social imaginary," writes Jameson, conspiracy has acquired new significance as "a narrative structure capable of reuniting the minimal basic components: a potentially infinite network [the collective] along with a plausible explanation of its invisibility" [the epistemological] (9). He reads the centrality of conspiracy in late capitalist culture as a response to (as well as a symptom of) our growing inability to grasp totality, to reconcile our experience of a globalized world, in which everything seems connected, with our inability to understand that world via our traditional, now obsolete, notions of causality and agency, i.e. our failure at cognitive mapping.[7] It is in trying to fulfill this double function of conveying the collective and the epistemological that the allegorical structure of conspiracy poses new 'representational dilemmas.' Conspiracy theory provides "a compensatory sense of historical location—"cognitive mapping"—that is missing from everyday life (20). This accounts for the heightened sense of space—and the importance of architecture—in conspiracy thrillers: the inability of the subject to position himself in the economic system of late capitalism becomes displaced or manifested in the heightened spatiality of the conspiracy text.[8]

Recent conspiracy thrillers continue to embody the heightened spatiality of the 70s thrillers although the hermeneutic content is differently spatialized: compare the cavernous telephone central in *Three Days of the Condor*, which provides visual confirmation "that telephone cables and lines and their interchanges follow us everywhere, doubling the streets and buildings of the visible social world with a secondary secret underground world" (Jameson 15), or the dark walkways raised above the convention hall in the famous last sequence of *The Parallax View*, to the kinds of spaces proliferating in recent conspiracy texts: in *The International* the transparent bank headquarters or the Guggenheim museum, a circular structure that denies invisibility both to the agents of the conspiracy and to the hero bent on exposing it; in *The Interpreter*, the UN Headquarters, in which the political assassination can be staged from any of the interpreter booths surrounding the main platform. The simultaneously expanding and shrinking world we live in is no longer visualized in clear spatial terms (e.g. above and below) or in terms of the invisible/visible (e.g. *exposing* the secret conspiracy). The visual and narrative *visibility* of the conspiracy in recent films, which points to a denial or displacement of agency, has given rise to a new type of conspiracy, 'conspiracy without conspiracy'. 'Exposing' the conspiracy no longer involves *understanding* but rather *decoding* the truth: ethical and political

understanding take a back seat to technical expertise, whether it's the expertise to decipher 'codes' (*The Da Vinci Code, Angels and Demons*), translate words (*The Interpreter*), isolate inconsistencies in the visual design of one's dream (*Inception*), identify the uses of different types of surveillance technology (*Enemy of the State*), or identify differences between different recordings of the same event (*Vantage Point*).

As long as conspiracy was construed in terms of invisibility and concealment, its exposure remained a possibility; however, visibility/transparency has rendered the old notion of conspiracy obsolete. If *The International* embodies the principle of visibility/transparency in the prominent image of the transparent headquarters of the International Bank of Business and Credit (IBBC), *Inception* offers us its mental equivalent in the protagonist's transparent mental life: not only does he enjoy full access both to his conscious and subconscious life, but others can 'tour' his subconscious just as he can 'tour' theirs. The visibility/transparency of conspiracy in recent films manifests in three ways: 1) actantial promiscuity, 2) the multiplication of conspiracies within conspiracies, and 3) structural promiscuity (conspiracy without conspiracy).

1. Actantial promiscuity

According to Jameson, our failure to convey the new relationship of the individual to the social world under the conditions of late capitalism is reflected in the persistence of anachronistic technologies obviously incommensurable with the new post-industrial landscape of which the 70s thrillers were already a part: the regression to a relatively old-fashioned, archaic technology in *All the President's Men*, the telephone, suggests that we have not found appropriate forms of representation to convey the new relationship of the individual to the social world. We find a similar regression to anachronistic technology—reflecting perhaps a similar inability to imagine the subject's relationship to the social world—in the ultra-slick thriller *The International*. Architecturally the film moves from the ultra-modern (Berlin), through the ultra-modern in combination with fin de siècle overbearing elegance (Milan), to classical modern and run down (New York, the Guggenheim, the police precinct and city streets) to the ancient (Istanbul, the Grand Bazaar). The classic modern (the Guggenheim) and the other modern buildings (the bank etc) emphasize the visual contrast between the overbearing multinational conglomerate and the disempowered individual.[9] In the words of the director, this is a claustrophobic world, clean, sharp, perfectly in focus, seemingly indestructible, designed to meet the interests of those that design this world, not the people living in it. The film ends on the rooftops of the Grand Bazaar, historically the biggest marketplace in the world, without a single ruler, and the opposite of its present equivalent, the single private bank ruling the entire world. The IBBC headquarters (filmed in Autostadt Voklswagen) are housed in an imposing building made entirely of glass, transparent but at the same time invisible as it reflects everything around it: it recedes precisely in exposing itself to us. It seems like unlimited space but it's limited: the bank is transparent but its transparency is fake. It creates the illusion that its machinations are legal, that its conspiracies are authorized precisely because they are not hidden. Within the old model of secure paranoia, the very fact that something is hidden, that there is a secret, presupposes a point of view from which the secret can be exposed. In Tykwer's new model of conspiracy, however, the distinction between visible and invisible has vanished and with it the possibility of a place from which one can oppose the system. If everything is visible, transparent, there can be no secrets, no conspiracy, nothing to 'expose'.

For Jameson, the fundamental problem of "the new globalizing representations" is the "incommensurability" between the individual subject and the "collective web of the hidden social order" (33): the problem of the conspiracy thriller is in representing these two incommensurables, the individual and the social. If the thriller seeks to convince us that in the late capitalist state conspiracies are already with us, that they are real, the problem of agency becomes paramount. Jameson resorts to Greimas's narrative semiotics, specifically to the notion of an actantial function, which does not correspond to an individual character in the narrative: "For several 'real' or named characters might conceivably share a single actantial agency (that of the villain, for example), while on the other hand, a given official character on the surface of the narrative text might under certain circumstances move from one actantial position to a wholly different one" (33). The conspiracy thriller borrows "the usefully conventional actantial patterns of the sub-genres, such as the detective story, with its rotation around the triangle formed by detective, victim, and murderer" while the conspiratorial plot must find a way to bring together the two incommensurable orders: the individual detective and the social/the collective (the detective is an individual and the murder is collective, a kind of "joint venture between the victim and the perpetrator" (33). The conspiracy plot brings these two opposing poles by means of mirrors, speed and rotation (33) i.e. creating mirror effects (e.g. double agents) and rotating the character, who remains 'the same' while his actantial function keeps shifting (from detective to victim to murderer to all of the above). By means of the rotation method the individual is no longer an individual; he becomes socialized: "what is wanted is as absolute a collectivization of the individual as possible: no longer an individual victim, but everybody; no longer an individual villain, but an omnipresent network; no longer an individual detective with a specific brief but rather someone who blunders into all of this just as anyone might have done" (34). The rotation of actantial functions among the same characters makes the attribution of agency difficult (hence 'conspiracy without conspiracy') though impossible to deny (hence the 'victimless conspiracy'): "Perhaps, indeed, it is this deeper narrative structure—rather than any clinical reality of 'state of consciousness'—that defines the ideologeme that currently bears the name of paranoia in the popular mind. Such a structure does not efface the category of the individual character. ...Rather, it transcends that category by retaining it and yet subjecting it to a momentum of structural displacements whereby the physical actors remain somehow 'the same' while their actantial functions shift ceaselessly beneath them" (34). Characters supposedly representing opposing forces in the narrative take turns fulfilling the same actantial function: the conspirator is also the victim of conspiracy, and the hero seeking to expose the conspiracy is inevitably implicated in it. For instance, in *The Parallax View* Frady's pathological character "is functional and is systematically looped back into the narrative...everything that equips him to penetrate the organization also makes him vulnerable to the latter's manipulation" (59). Frady's motivation "is overdetermined by the 'crime' [he is investigating]. In some immense postmodern Hegelianism the same structures contaminate the fields of the subject and the object alike, making them infinitely substitutable and susceptible to endless transformation into each other" (60-61).

Let us look at some recent examples of actantial promiscuity, beginning with *Salt* (2010). Salt's personal history is a never-ending game of assuming different identities. Her training to become a spy is so successful that instead of becoming a Russian who pretends to be an American she becomes an American who pretends to be a Russian pretending to be an American. Salt's incessant switching of identities in the course of the film is not just a genre effect to keep us guessing until the end: she herself doesn't know who she is and where her allegiances lie.

Even her last 'switch"—from a Russian spy (back?) to an American one—does not have a sense of finality to it. No clear explanation is given why she suddenly switches sides: in fact, her prolonged and determined struggle to get a hold of the American president can be read, simultaneously, in two opposite ways: she really means to kill him but at the last moment, when she realizes the other 'CIA' agent will launch nuclear missiles on Russia she suddenly switches sides, OR she switches sides a lot earlier (when she sees Orlov kill her husband) and then follows up with the plan pretending that she is still working for the Russians but actually infiltrating the White House to prevent the murder of the American president.

Throughout the film she rotates between politically and ethically opposed actantial functions: depending on whether she identifies as a Russian or American spy, she alternates between the role of a victim and an assassin, and sometimes seems to occupy both at the same time. Since her identity is reversible and interchangeable, it's impossible to judge her actions from a political or ethical point of view: the meaning of her actions is not inherent in them but depends on whether we perceive her, at any given moment, as a victim or as an assassin. Since she is always in the mode of pretending to be, pretending to pretend, pretending not to pretend, or not pretending to pretend, her actions become meaningful only in retrospect, but by the time she catches up to the retrospective explanation of her past actions she has already moved on and assumed another identity so the explanation no longer holds true. Salt's actions cannot be attributed to her: she is nothing but an infinite oscillation between mutually exclusive actantial functions. This constant flipping back and forth between 'is she' or 'isn't she' (Russian/American) is 'resolved' with a final external reversal: we are to believe that she cannot be a Russian spy simply because her colleague, another CIA agent, is exposed as "the real" Russian spy. The ending brings home the political and ethical irrelevance of her shifting actantial functions, and thus of the conspiracy on which the whole film was premised.

Enemy of the State (1998) opens with the murder of a Congressman who opposes a Telecommunications Security and Privacy Act that a certain NSA official wants to pass. Will Smith plays Dean, an upright and happily married lawyer who winds up being targeted, chased and spied on by ruthless forces within the NSA because an inadvertent witness to the murder slips the only piece of evidence of the murder in Dean's bag. *Enemy of the State* asks: how do you negotiate the rights of citizens to national security with their civil liberty rights, and what if defending the former happens at the price of violating the latter? While the film appears to critique surveillance society, the 'innocent citizen' who accidentally becomes 'an enemy of the state' uncovers the NSA conspiracy with the help of an ex-NSA surveillance expert, using the same surveillance technology he condemned as violating his civil rights. The investigation does not demand an act of understanding or reflection but depends on finding an expert who uses the same code upon which the conspiracy rests. The same is true of *Breach* (2007) in which exposing the conspirator depends on using his methods: the protagonist is forced to become a double agent in order to expose a spy within the FBI.

Closure is one of the fundamental problems raised by the conspiratorial text; one of the ways in which films secure a 'closure-effect' is by space and spatiality (Jameson 31). Jameson's analysis of *Videodrome* (1983) demonstrates how the plot leads us through different urban spaces, hoping to cover the entire urban landscape, touching all the points: this "spatial closure is formally necessary precisely because the narrative itself cannot know any closure or completion of this kind" (32). Covering all points of the urban landscape creates the impression that all intangible connections (the conspiracy, the totality) have been made visible/tangible. The more

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exhaustive or heightened the spatiality of a film—as it is, for example, in the travelogue conspiracy thriller—the more desperate the need to create an impression that closure has been attained though only on the spatial rather than narrative level. The travelogue thriller *The International* (2009) follows Salinger, an Interpol agent, and an American attorney, as they investigate corruption within the IBBC (International Bank of Business and Credit), a fictional merchant bank that serves organized crime and corrupt governments as a banker and arms broker. Although Salinger works for Interpol, he is presented as a lone crusader dissatisfied with the bureaucratization of intelligence and law enforcement. Salinger's investigation leads him to one of IBBC's employees, a former hardliner communist in the Stasi. Salinger wonders why such a man, who fought the evils of capitalism for thirty years, decided to spend his last days working for IBBC which embodies everything he fought against. The man explains that the very institution Salinger works for guarantees the bank's safety simply because everyone is involved: CIA, the Colombia drug cartels, Russian organized crime, the governments of China, Germany, the US etc, all of whom need a bank like IBBC in order to function at all. Conspiracy, the film makes clear, makes operational all other institutions, including the one for which the hero works. Different social institutions—the bank, Interpol, and other intelligence and law enforcement institutions—share the same structure i.e. they are all corporations. Even the buildings that house them are structurally similar, imposing and impersonal: the IBBC headquarters is visually indistinguishable from the all-glass headquarters of the District Attorney's office in New York. If Salinger wants to bring the bank down he cannot do it from within the boundaries of his system of justice: he has to act as a vigilante and take the law in his own hands rather than depend on orders from the D.A. office. Just as he is about to murder the chairman of the bank, however, Salinger is 'saved' from a difficult ethical dilemma by another assassin who kills the bank chairman for him. Salinger's critique of the system, like Frady's in *The Parallax View*, is thus co-opted by the system: he is on the verge of becoming an assassin indistinguishable from the assassins employed by the conspiratorial power he is fighting to expose.[10]

2. The multiplication of conspiracies within conspiracies

Vantage Point (2008) centers on an assassination plot on the US president during an international summit on global terrorism in Salamanca. The film follows the same event—the assassination attempt—from several different vantage points. The first sections are consistently shot from different vantage points, while the last one is decidedly omniscient. The film's premise is that the only reason we don't understand what is going on is because we have a partial point of view, but as soon as we see the full picture—which the film provides by means of the different vantage points structure—we will understand everything. The first vantage point from which the story is told is that of the media (a TV station covering the event), the second that of the president's loyal bodyguard, the third that of an undercover member of the local police force, the fourth that of an American tourist videotaping the event, the fifth that of the US president himself. The real story remains somewhat vague despite the accumulation of multiple vantage points. Several weeks earlier the Americans have found out about a bomb a local brigade is smuggling in from Morocco. When the Americans capture the men, the local brigade seeks revenge. The presidents' advisors try to persuade him to attack one of the brigade's 'terrorist' camps in Morocco but he refuses to call in a strike. Our first impression is that the government is conspiring against the president to force him to go back on his anti-terrorist plans and attack Morocco. However, we gradually find out that the assassination was staged i.e. that the

conspiracy we suspected is fake, merely a cover for 'the real conspiracy'. The displacement of agency, the eclipse of political responsibility, and the impossibility of attributing a deed to a doer are dramatized in the president's fake assassination, which is, tellingly enough, carried out by no one: the head of the terrorist operation activates the gun 'killing' the president's double with a remote control thereby creating *the illusion* of a single shooter. Despite the multiplication of vantage points, which create the illusion of multiple conspiracies within conspiracies, the film is ultimately structured around an absence: a conspiracy without a victim and without a perpetrator.

Many recent thrillers follow the same model: in *The Interpeter* (2005) a conspiracy turns out to be fake, in *Salt* the American spy only looks like a Soviet one (or vice versa), in *Inception* (2010) your dream only looks like your own while it's actually designed by someone else, in *The Da Vinci Code* (2006) Opus Dei only looks like a conspiracy of assassins while the real assassins belong to another secret group within Opus Dei, and in *Breach* Eric O'Neil only looks like a spy while in fact he is a spy (Eric pretends to be a spy like Hansen, while in reality he is an agent, but he is indeed a spy because he is hired to spy on Hansen). Old style paranoia projects intentionality and agency where there is none: the paranoid believes random events to be actually causally related and permeated with an intention. He considers himself powerless and projects all power outside him. However, the proliferation of conspiracies within conspiracies serves to deflect power so that intentionality and accountability cannot be attributed to any particular individual or collective agent. The multiplication of conspiracies distorts the hermeneutics of suspicion: rather than distinguishing the truth from a lie, the protagonist must now distinguish 'the real lie' (the inner conspiracy, the conspiracy within the conspiracy) from the 'false lie' (the outer conspiracy) which is paradoxically redeemed, retroactively, as 'truth'.

In *The Da Vinci Code* a murder inside the Louvre and clues in Da Vinci paintings lead to the discovery of a religious mystery protected by a secret society for two thousand years, a mystery that "could shake the very foundations of Christianity." *The Da Vinci Code* appears, on the surface, to be rooted in the old version of paranoia understood in terms of transparency and invisibility. When symbologist Dr. Langdon asks, in the course of a university lecture, "How do we penetrate centuries of historical distortion to find original truth?" the film expects us to think of conspiracy in terms of the concealment of truth. The conspiracy at the center of the film is of a religious nature, though its larger political and social implications are easy to gauge. However, Dr. Langdon's investigation of the religious conspiracy at the center of the story is nothing like the investigations in earlier conspiracy thrillers. Here uncovering the conspiracy is not a matter of uncovering the intentions or plans of a secret group or organization; instead, investigation takes the form of historical reconstruction through the *interpretation of representations* (works of art). Langdon is engaged in a doubly mediated quest for truth: a reinterpretation of history through a reinterpretation of works of art. He is not investigating reality; he is investigating a code, a symbolic language (painting) in order to reinterpret another code, another symbolic language (religion). The detective assumes the role of a historian: he revisits historical records with a view to re-reading them. Unlike earlier thrillers, in which the detective was engaged in reading events as they happen, Langdon's relationship to the conspiracy he is trying to expose is mediated by works of art. Exposing the conspiracy now includes another, meta-level as it is no longer a matter of reading reality but of re-reading, re-interpreting and correcting prior readings: the detective is re-reading re-presentations of history, because he lacks an immediate access to history/reality/experience. Although the search for the correct interpretation of signs has larger political implications—having to do with gender inequalities, the nature of faith, and the

authority of the Church—the film foregrounds the act of interpretation itself: the focus is on reading signs rather than reading intentions and motives. Accordingly, the two 'social detectives' in the film are no longer investigative journalists (as in *The Three Days of the Condor* or *All the Presidents' Men*) whose first obligation is to the public, but rather two experts, a symbologist and a cryptographer, highly specialized in the interpretation of a hermetic world of symbols.

The conspiracy is set up in terms of a struggle between science and superstition, between the secular and the sacred. Unlike those they are investigating—and those that pursue them—the social detectives are scientists and sceptics: the cryptographer explicitly states she does not believe in God, while Langdon refers to the story of the knight templars and the Holy Grail as 'myths'. However, their secular quest for truth, which initially justifies itself as a critical dismantling of the grand narrative of faith ends up reaffirming what it was supposed to reject. When the truth of the conspiracy is finally exposed the foundations of Christianity are not shattered but, on the contrary, strengthened: the symbologist, supposedly the voice of reason and science, expresses hope that their findings will lead to the rebirth of faith rather than to its extinguishment. Thus the hero, who sets out to expose the conspiracy upon which Christianity was built, ends up legitimizing Christianity as a grand narrative on even stronger grounds by creating the illusion that those grounds have been re-examined rationally. Langdon relies on reason and secular scepticism to reinvent faith: his critique is eventually co-opted by the grand narrative—the conspiracy—to provide the illusion of rational, empirical grounds for faith. Throughout the film Langdon observes that "the mind sees what it chooses to see." This is how he explains why most people fail to notice Mary Magdalene in Da Vinci's *Last Supper*. This is a more or less accurate description of how the paranoid mind works: it projects meaning and intention where there is none. This kind of projective understanding describes *both* the act of revealing the truth of the representation (seeing Mary Magdalene in the painting, making what used to be invisible visible) *and* the act of misinterpretation (the reason why no one saw her in the painting is that we are all blinded by long-standing conventions and authoritative historical accounts). Thus concealing the truth and revealing the truth are rooted in the same kind of paranoid understanding of the world: seeing connections where there are none, seeing what the mind chooses (wants) to see. The ultimate demonstration of the defeat of secular reason in the face of the resurrected grand narrative of Christianity is the image of Langdon, kneeling like one of the Knight Templars, on top of the tomb of Mary Magdalene, buried under, what else, the Louvre. Instead of questioning the authority of the Church on earth, the social detective questions merely the fiction upon which that authority rests: it is a matter of distinguishing between the right/real fiction and the wrong/false fiction, between the real story (Christ is human) and the false story (Christ is divine), rather than questioning whose interests such fictions serve in the first place. The paranoia driving the story is not motivated by the fear that what we believe might be a lie but rather by the fear that there might be nothing to believe in. The investigation into the mysteries of religious doctrine is not meant to threaten the source of the Church's power on earth but precisely to avoid a crisis of faith. Having spent the entire film looking for empirical evidence for Jesus's humanity, Langdon asks at the end, "Why does it have to be human or divine?" What matters is what one believes, even in the absence of empirical evidence (evidence that the cryptographer is Jesus's last living descendant). The potential 'crisis of faith' the church faced, as a result of the uncovering of the conspiracy against the Priory, is, in the end, of no consequence. It doesn't matter if the church's power on earth is based on a lie or on empirical evidence. In *The Da Vinci Code*, as in *Salt* and *Inception*, the premise of the story—

that there is a meaningful distinction to be made between Soviet and American spies (politics), between real and simulated experiences (ontology), between human and divine (religion)—is in the end dismissed as irrelevant.

Although the story focuses on religious conspiracies, it also suggests that other institutions (the police, financial and art institutions) are also implicated: the police detective pursuing the protagonists is himself a member of Opus Dei; the Priory's secrets are kept in a vault at a Swiss bank; the final resting place of Mary Magdalene is hidden underneath one of the world's most significant art institutions, the Louvre. The law, the bank, and the art museum are all implicated in concealing or revealing the 'truth' about Jesus's mortality: the law conceals it, financial institutions provide access to it, representations (works of art) reveal it. It is this 'division of labour' that makes it possible for the social detectives to assert their agency at the end: the law suppresses the truth so that it seems the individual agent is powerless to reveal it; however, truth is located on the side of representations (it is a matter of correctly interpreting representations/art works), which serves to reinvest the subject with the illusion of power.

The proliferation of conspiracies within conspiracies serves to deflect power so that intentionality and accountability cannot be attributed to any particular individual or collective agent. At first the Church is the sole source of conspiratorial power. However, in the course of their investigation the detectives uncover two opposing factions within the Church, Opus Dei and the Priory: now the story distracts us from the notion of the Church as conspiring against (or manipulating) everyone and instead focuses on Opus Dei's conspiracy against the Priory. We are distracted a second time when the detectives discover that the men actually responsible for the murder of members of the Priori do not belong to Opus Dei but to another secret group within Opus Dei, the Council of Shadows. Thus the film shifts the emphasis from investigating the institution of the Church to investigating the conspiracies internal to the institution. The Church is presented as a victim to multiple internal conspiracies rather than as the source of conspiracy itself. The institution shifts between two different actantial functions: it is both the conspirator and the victim of conspiracy. The same applies to the individual: Langdon is the detective uncovering the conspiracy but he is also a conspirator himself inasmuch as he shares the language of the conspiracy he is trying to uncover. It is only because he knows how to read the Church's symbolic language that he is able to uncover the conspiracy 'written' in that very same language. The internal fragmentation of the conspiracy (the church) into opposing factions creates the impression that the church does not enjoy absolute power. The church now appears as both wanting to conceal and wanting to reveal its secret: conspiracy is re-imagined as undermining or deconstructing itself, as concealing in revealing and revealing in concealing. Indeed, the film perniciously suggests that conspiracy automatically—inevitably—exposes itself.

In *Angels and Demons* (2009) the sequel to *Da Vinci Code*, the investigation takes place against the glossy background of another glossy tourist attraction, in this case Rome rather than Paris. The investigation of the conspiracy is, once again, presented not as a matter of uncovering the motives of the various parties involved but as a kind of game: the social detectives follow the clues and, thanks to their expert knowledge of the secret 'code'—illuminati ambigrams—they cannot but get to the truth. While 70s paranoia thrillers are structured around the gradual uncovering of secret groups or organizations, in the Dan Brown film adaptations the existence of secret societies is posited from the very beginning as part of the exposition: they have always existed and continue to exist now even though we believe them to have vanished. Conspiracy is then used to re-enchant a bleak, secular world. The conspiracy becomes emplotted: it is not

construed in terms of unknown, secret motives, agendas or powers, but merely in terms of history. Thus, what is secretive or conspiratorial about the Illuminati is not that we do not know that they exist or what they want (Langdon provides a quick historical account answering these questions early in the film); the only secretive or conspiratorial thing about them is their sudden anachronistic re-appearance against the glossy background of a rational, secular world. As we saw, *The Da Vinci Code* erases the distinction between faith and reason on which the story is presumably based: a secular detective investigates matters of faith only to prove himself the greatest believer. Similarly, in the sequel the church is supposed to be the main source of conspiracy (it conspires against the general public by intentionally keeping secret certain scientific findings) but in the end scientists and atheists (the symbologist and the female physicist) work together with the church to uncover *a second conspiracy within the church* (the camerlengo resurrects the Illuminati hoping to force the Church into a more conservative, hardliner position with respect to science). This strategy of uncovering a second conspiracy within the institution that is supposed to be the main conspirator (church, bank etc.) conceals the culpability of the church and, in a perverse way, legitimizes it by presenting it as *itself a victim of conspiracy*.

Both Dan Brown adaptations posit the existence of secret societies—and thus conspiracies—from the beginning, which accounts for their failure to produce any kind of epistemological, political, ontological or ethical restlessness in the viewer. Once a supposedly secret conspiracy is posited as real, it does not have to be revealed: the films may create the illusion that unconcealment is going on while in reality the secret exposes itself from the beginning (and is verified by an expert) only to re-conceal itself again. Unveiling the conspiracy is just a matter of learning how to read the signs correctly: understanding is reduced to deciphering a code, which is visible to everyone (in paintings, cathedrals, churches etc.) but accessible only to the social detective-as-expert.

In *Inception* DiCaprio plays Dom Cobb, a corporate espionage thief, whose work consists of secretly extracting valuable commercial information from the unconscious mind of his targets while they are asleep and dreaming. Following his wife's suicide, for which he was the main suspect, Cobb is forced to leave his home and children. Cobb is offered a chance to take back his old life in exchange for an almost impossible task: 'inception', the planting of an idea into a target's subconscious. Gradually we piece together Cobb's past life: we learn that his wife Moll and he were working on designing their own dream-world. He planted in her mind the idea that her world is not real and the idea 'stuck' with her even after they came back to reality: she was convinced her dream was reality and reality was a dream. What remains constant in both worlds—reality and dream—is the character's doubt: since the character doubts both ontologically different worlds, the distinction between them is erased. *Inception* ends on the same purposefully ambiguous note as *Salt*: the incessant spinning of Tom's totem suggests he might still be dreaming, just as Salt's true nature/allegiance remains ultimately obscured. Here conspiracy theory slides into something else: the question is no longer "is there an intention behind what appear to be random events" but rather "is the event real or dreamed"? Nevertheless, since the film's premise has to do with planting ideas, the question of agency is once again raised: how do we attribute a particular act to a particular agent? How do we know the real origin of someone's actions given that new technologies have opened up a gap between thoughts and actions? If a thought is not mine, can the action I perform in response to the thought still be considered mine?

Cobb's team conspires against Robert Fischer by planting an idea in his mind; more importantly, however, *Cobb's subconscious conspires against him* by refusing to be repressed and haunting his every dream, including the dream worlds he designs for others. The typical paranoid imagines, erroneously, that everything around him is related to him, whereas in Cobb's case everything—including other people's dreams—IS, indeed, about him. While in 'conventional' paranoia the question is whether there might be a secret meaning behind events, *Inception* seems to take this one step further: can meaning be anything but secret, can things in the public world, the world that we share with others, have meaning that is not coloured by the self's most private, subconscious desires and fears?

One of the most fascinating episodes in the film is the one in which Cobb instructs Ariadne how to design a dream. The architect is called 'the dreamer': he builds the world and then brings in the subject who populates it with projections of his/her subconscious. The dreamer also designs a special 'safe', which the subject's mind automatically fills with the most secret, private information. Cobb's team then breaks in and steals the contents of the safe. The premise is that the team cannot go directly into the subject's mind and uncover its innermost secrets: they first have to create a 'place' (the safe). This implies that there would be no access to the secret, and no secret perhaps, if the dreamer/architect did not first design a 'place' for it. Unless they are located somewhere, secrets don't exist. The dreamer creates the unconscious: if the dreamer did not design a safe, presumably the subject's mind wouldn't feel the need to hide something secret in it. The act of 'inception' thus functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy: the dreamer (who is, significantly, *not* the dreaming subject) creates the space of the unconscious and the dreaming subject's mind automatically splits into subconscious and conscious. Paradoxically, the dream is no longer positioned as 'unconscious' in contrast to waking reality; instead, the dream *is* reality, a constructed reality within which there is a deeper secret, the subconscious, which exposes itself precisely in wanting to hide itself (in the safe). This is possible only if the subject actually knows he is dreaming, if is aware that everything in his dream is visible and is motivated by this awareness to create another hiding place, 'the safe'.

Thus, precisely because Cobb's subconscious conspires against him by continually returning to haunt him and refusing to be repressed, Cobb maintains full control over his entire mental life, conscious, subconscious and unconscious. There is nothing in his mental life to which he has no access, of which he is unaware, or which he has forgotten. He is an expert at implanting ideas in other people's minds—i.e. surveying, monitoring and manipulating their inner life—namely because he is so good at surveying himself. It is because he functions as his own best surveillance camera that he knows he cannot trust himself to design other people's dreams for fear of polluting them with his own subconscious. And yet, despite his absolute transparency to himself, his awareness of the different levels of his mental life, in the end the only guarantee that he is not the victim of a conspiracy—his own subconscious and unconscious wishes, desires and fears conspiring against him—is an external object, a token, which he himself chooses but which presumably establishes the reality or unreality of events independently of him.

The paradoxical architecture of the dream visualizes the collapse of the private into the public: the infinite staircase (Penrose steps) folds upon itself in an infinite loop, a circumscribed infinity that is infinite not because it extends infinitely but precisely because it collapses onto itself: space without distance (hence the image of two enormous glass doors on a Paris bridge, which, when closed, produce a series of infinite reflections of whatever happens to stand

between them). The architecture of the dream reveals the reversibility of the infinite and the finite in the private realm, which parallels the reversibility of the visible and the invisible in the public realm: they both point to the disappearance of the secret and thus of the very possibility of unconcealment.

3. Structural promiscuity

Parallel to the rotation of the character, who appears to remain the same even as he shifts between different, often opposite, actantial functions, is a rotation of various social structures which appear to remain different even as their basic form remains the same, the corporation. The corporation format now exists independently of a specific organization: business, politics, religion, pharmaceutical companies are all structured in the same way. This results in the denial of agency and in the denial of—the inability to locate—responsibility. Just as mutually exclusive (politically and ethically) actions can be attributed to a single character simultaneously (since the character rotates between different actantial functions), the same corporation form, which has itself become synonymous with conspiracy, describes any type of social structure.

While 70s conspiracy thrillers still presuppose a secret conspiratorial power endowed with agency, a conspiracy that the lone hero will at least try to expose and either succeed or fail, in hyperlink conspiracy thrillers like *Traffic* (2000) and *Syriana* (2005) the conspiracy is no longer a secret power but part of the very structure of contemporary international, global relations/politics. The notion of a secret provides a high degree of epistemological certainty: it does not preclude the possibility of knowing or uncovering the truth. On the contrary, since in a globalized world not all aspects of a phenomenon are immediately available or visible, what remains hidden remains so only because a total view is impossible, not because there are some sinister secret powers purposefully trying to harm us. Thus, while in earlier conspiracy films the problem the protagonist faced was the lack of access to information, the contemporary con thriller protagonist has the opposite problem: an overabundance of information and a proliferation of connections. Paranoia is no longer an irrational projection of connections between things that are not really connected because now the paranoid's projected connections have become real: there are no insignificant or irrelevant details, to which he attributes undue significance, and the connections between things are no longer imaginary because all things are, indeed, interconnected. When everything can be considered, simultaneously, both a cause and effect of something else, the result is not a greater understanding of the world but the further withdrawal of the world into ethical, political, psychological and epistemological obscurity. As Peter Knight points out, "'Everything Is Connected' can function as the operating principle not just for conspiracy theory, but also for epidemiology, ecology, risk theory, systems theory, complexity theory, theories of globalization...and...intertextuality" (205). Conspiracy now describes the very structure of the global economy, which some economists consider as a form of self-organizing complex system that is both unpredictable and uncontrollable (213). Traditional models of causality do not hold for complex, self-organized systems: "There is no longer an obvious correlation between cause and effect: small causes can produce large effects, and conversely, large causes can have little effect on the overall system at all. ...Precisely because everything is connected it is impossible to work out how one thing leads to another" (214). Complex systems are uncontrollable: "The remarkable thing about distributed systems is not that no one is in charge as that they act as if there were a plotting intelligence behind their behaviour" (215): 'conspiracy without conspiracy'.

In a world where everything is connected, it becomes harder to diagram the precise directions of influence and connections, or to isolate events from one another and point out their specific causes and effects. The geopolitical thriller *Syriana* is a case in point: the film tries to map the complex links that bind oil companies, law firms and Middle Eastern regimes by exploring the   political, economic, legal, and social effects of the oil industry as they are experienced by a CIA operative, an energy analyst, a Washington attorney, and a young unemployed Pakistani migrant worker in an Arab country in the Persian Gulf. Similarly, *The Insider* (1999) and *The Constant Gardener* (2005) dramatize the imbrication of politics, journalism and health care with business interests i.e., the corporatization (routinization) of conspiracy. Once different kinds of political, economic and social bodies share the same corporate form, conspiracy no longer refers to a secret intention to do harm; instead, "the contemporary discourse of conspiracy gives narrative expression to the possibility of conspiracy without conspiring, with the congruence of vested interests that can only be described as conspiratorial, even when we know that there probably been no deliberate plotting" (Knight 32).

Conclusion

According to Anthony Vidler, affective states that become dominant at a particular point in history reflect the culture of the time: melancholy was the privileged affective state in the Romantic period, multiple personality or hysteria (originally MP was not distinguished from hysteria) in the latter half of the 19th century, schizophrenia and depression in the 20th century.[11] Indeed, *Inception*'s reworking of the conspiracy thriller genre seems to point to a qualitatively new type of paranoia. While the older type of paranoia asked "What is the real, secret motive behind this action or event?" i.e. in question was not the autonomy of the doer but only his ability to interpret correctly the significance of events/actions, the question around which *Inception* revolves is "Are my actions/thoughts really my own?" i.e. in question is the autonomy or agency of the subject rather than the correct or incorrect meaning/interpretation of his actions. *Inception* takes the co-optation of the private by the public to its paradoxical extreme, the infinite expansion of one's private realm: the idea that any meaning 'out there' is bound to be coloured by one's own subconscious means the ultimate extinction of the private. If others' dreams are coloured by my subconscious, the self has become absolutely porous. We all share the same dream, the same subconscious:[12] paranoia slides closer to schizophrenia.

We could perhaps understand the generic transformation within the conspiracy thriller—the slide from paranoia to schizophrenia—through Ian Hacking's notion of the 'looping effect' inherent in every discourse. In *Rewriting the Soul* (1995) Hacking contends that the first multiple personality 'epidemic' was precipitated by the emergence of the 'new sciences of memory' (psychology and psychiatry) in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In particular, he attributes the rise of an epidemic to the 'looping effect' inherent in every discourse: an epidemic is precipitated by a significant transformation in an object of discourse in response to the evolution of the *discourse* itself. Because the object of discourse is placed under new descriptions that were not originally available, the object as such is, however slightly, modified. For instance, in the case of multiple personality the 'looping effect' refers to the way in which the discourse of the multiple contributed to the 'production' (the 'making up') of multiples, who, in turn, 'learned' to behave in ways conforming to the discourse that had produced them. The increasing vagueness and instability of diagnostic criteria in the second half of the 19th century

eventually created the conditions under which it became possible for an increasing number of people to be diagnosed as multiples.

Looking at the last couple of decades, it seems to me that, rather than encouraging the distanced, 'surveillant' or 'regulatory' looking theorized by Lisa Cartwright, contemporary public culture and science both contribute to the ongoing elimination of the distinction between mental health and mental illness. Indeed, recent technological innovations have made mental malfunctions available to anyone interested in experiencing virtually what it is like to be a schizophrenic, for example. In 2007 drug makers, psychologists and psychiatrists gathered at Janssen Pharmaceutica headquarters in Titusville, New Jersey, to create a new type of virtual reality experience, *Mindstorm*, a 3-D virtual reality simulator that allows viewers to experience an average day in the life of a schizophrenic. It is difficult to miss the uncanny confluence between the recent cinematic epidemic of the multiple—the growing number of films envisioning multiple realities, identities or temporalities—and the steadily growing experimental research on memory and amnesia, which is then 'publicized' by the next 'memory blockbuster'. For instance, researchers at Harvard and McGill University have been working on an amnesia drug that blocks or deletes bad memories. In a study published in *The Journal of Psychiatric Research*, the drug propranolol was used, along with therapy, to 'dampen' memories of trauma victims. That this was the premise of the 2004 film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* does not strike me as coincidental.

Do conspiracy thrillers contribute to the denial of agency in contemporary culture thereby rendering paranoia as its dominant structure of feeling? Are they irrational oversimplifications or do they call attention to the complexities of the new global order and offer alternative ways of understanding it? Mark Fenster criticizes conspiracy theory, first, for failing as a political practice because "it does not offer an effective political plan once the plot has been uncovered" and, second, for relying "on an all-American ideology of rugged individualism" (qtd. in Knight 21). On the other hand, Jodi Dean welcomes the conspiracy text and its attending paranoia "as a sign of healthy populist dissent" (Knight 22).[13] In *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture* Allan Hepburn[14] argues that it is precisely through destabilizing traditional notions of causality, agency, responsibility and identity that conspiracy texts engage our political imaginary. If "narratives of intrigue are plotted to satisfy the desire to know as that desire relates to ethics and politics" (19), then, Hepburn claims, ignorance—and its manifestation, paranoia—functions as a resistance to ideology. Precisely through his ignorance the 'detective' investigating the conspiracy, and the viewer identifying with the detective, resists ideology since he doesn't know enough but he is forced to act nevertheless. Ignorance and paranoia—acting without knowing the consequences of one's actions[15], and acting in response to the paranoid belief that every external act or event hides a secret motive or intent—are, for Hepburn, "indispensable in the making of political subjects" (23). I wonder, however, what happens when the connections the paranoid subject projects between things become real, when all things are, indeed, interconnected. How do we make sense of a world in which there is no more room for projected or imaginary connections, a transparent world that remains opaque precisely because of its transparency? If conspiracy used to be the poor man's cognitive map of an increasingly complex world, what happens when the world becomes indistinguishable from the map?

Notes

[1] David Boyd and R. Barton Palmer, ed. *After Hitchcock: Influence, Imitation and Intertextuality* (Austin: U of Texas Press, 2006), 85.

[2] Peter Knight, ed. *Conspiracy Culture: American Paranoia from Kennedy to the X-files* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 35.

[3] In fact, as early as 1907 Emil Kraepelin approached mental illness as a social metaphor: "L'étude de la folie ne nous devoile pas seulement une quantité de lois generales; elle nous ouvre encore des apercus profonds sur l'histoire du développement de l'esprit humain, que nous envisagions l'individu en soi ou la race tout entière; elle ne donne enfin la clef grâce à laquelle nous serons en état de comprendre les nombreuses manifestations intellectuelle, morales, religieuses et artistique de notre vie sociale." Emil Kraepelin, *Introduction à la psychiatrie Clinique* (Paris: Vigot Freres, Editeurs, 1907), 6. Microfische. Bibliothèque National de France.

[4] "Multiple Personality and the Discourse of the Multiple in Hollywood Cinema," *The European Journal of American Culture*, volume 29, number 2 (2010)

[5] Ray Pratt, *Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film* (Lawrence, KS: U Press of Kansas, 2001).

[6] John Farrell, *Paranoia and Modernity: Cervantes to Rousseau* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2006).

[7] Jameson borrows the term 'cognitive mapping' from the geographer Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* (MIT Press, 1960) to describe the phenomenon by which people make sense of their urban surroundings.

[8] Peter Knight has critiqued Jameson's theory as being "too determinate" or "too powerful": in the person's poor cognitive mapping Jameson "always finds a repressed understanding of economics" (20) i.e. Jameson seems to imply that there is indeed a plot—in the narrative sense—to be uncovered (e.g. the 'bank conspiracy' in *The International*). Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: American Paranoia from Kennedy to the X-files* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

[9] The IBBC and DA office headquarters are visually contrasted with the anachronistic, dingy, homey 70s-style offices of the NYPD, where detectives continue to work in old fashioned ways: in their shabby offices, cluttered with paper files, there isn't a computer in sight.

[10] The conspirators themselves (the IBBC employees and board of directors) are not represented as evil but simply as pragmatic businessmen doing their job.

[11] See A. Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).

[12] The ongoing process of globalization has clearly contributed to this reconceptualization of self and community: the notion of the Internet as a global memory bank shared by everyone has already become a cliché.

[13] Based on her reading of Habermas's analysis of the emergence of the public sphere, she claims that "secrecy is the necessary flipside of there being a public realm at all" and that, at present, "the very idea that the public has a right to know, that public rule depends on access to information, on full disclosure, puts the secret at the heart of the public" (qtd. in Knight 29).

[14] Allan Hepburn. *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2005).

[15] This seems to me to embody a somewhat romantic belief in acting blindly but ethically correctly: think of Jason Bourne who, although he loses his memory, somehow manages to act ethically and exonerate himself of his past.