Title: The Privatisation of Justice within the American Conspiracy Film:
From the public-facing, politically forceful discourse of the 1970s to present
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Abstract: The transformation of the conspiracy film genre -- from the traditional thrillers of the 1970s to the privatised narratives of the late-1980s/90s comes not as a surprise, but at a cost when it comes to the political force of modern conspiracy thrillers. In the course of 50 years, the nature of, and mechanisms for, justice in these films have been recast in paranoid reflections of their corresponding cultural landscapes. Phase 1 is overtly political, with great value attributed to notions of truth, justice and morality. Phase 2 becomes deeply personal, with sanctity of the family, protecting one's livelihood or reaching self-discovery taking priority over the public good. In the years following 9/11, when political abuses of power re-entered the public consciousness, conspiracy films attempt to return to their politically forceful roots but have yet to reconcile the 20 years of solipsistic, self-preserving and greed-fueled narratives with the growing cynicism of the public towards conspiracy films' iconic pillars of justice: the media and the law.

Keywords: Conspiracy film; Justice; America; *All the President's Men*; *Enemy of the State*; *Green Zone*

Full text:

Introduction

Conspiracy films have appeared since the 1930s, heating up Hollywood in the years following the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy -- long earmarked as the moment of America's "loss of innocence"; however, the eradication of the Motion Picture Code[1] in 1968 marked the opening of the floodgates for films which no longer required a self-censoring, patriotic standpoint against menacing "foreigners" or communist "others", but rather pointed the conspiratorial finger back at America itself. From this moment I suggest a three-phased evolution in the representation of justice within conspiracy films as they progress from the 1970s into the 21st Century using conspiracy narratives' engagement with their protagonist's "seen" and "unseen" threats (subsequently defined) and their associated conspiracy culture.

At a time where the language of conspiracy has moved beyond entertainment and "has become a familiar feature of the political and cultural landscapes," (Knight, 2000, p.1) it is crucial that I define what is meant by the conspiracy thriller genre for this purpose. In this case, I am investigating conspiracy theory films -- not merely the plot device which intersects many genres and multiple mediums, but a genre unto itself that:

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

As there are multiple theories of and categories for justice which vary from culture to culture, it is also crucial that I define what is meant by the portrayal of justice in conspiracy films, which I use when

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

describing their political force. Influenced by Plato's theory of justice where social justice is worth more than individual justice and John Rawls' principles of justice as fairness, the portrayal of justice within the conspiracy films I refer to and expand upon:

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

I posit that conspiracy films with strong, clear senses of justice (or injustice) are more politically forceful; that is: they contain narratives which demand attention or action to redress the unfair, corrupt behaviour within the government, corporations, public, or current affairs which these films reflect upon.

The three-phased evolution in the representation of justice within conspiracy films I suggest begins in the 1970s when we enter into what I shall be referring to as the traditional mode of conspiracy thriller narratives. This traditional style remains largely until the late 1980s, when a new trend emerges where "the term 'conspiracy' rarely signifies a small, secret plot anymore. Instead, it frequently refers to the workings of a large *organisation, technology, or system,* a powerful and obscure entity... 'Conspiracy,' in other words, has come to signify a broad array of social controls" (Melley, 2000, p.8). It is these social controls that mean what was once the enemy of the state, in conspiracy narratives from the late 1980s-90s, becomes an enemy of the self. In this transition from public-facing to private individualistic narratives, I posit that the political force and sense of justice within such conspiracy films is drowned out in the narrative's solipsism. "If genre theory tells us that a film genre's function is to use its limited conventions to comment on a specific social problem, the conspiracy film deals with why we are so afraid today of losing control, of being manipulated by unseen cabals of amoral, even murderous, power brokers" (Donovan, 2011, p.13). In the late 1980s-90s, conspiracy films were dominated by a paranoia that was centred around identity. No longer where these films asking who the mysterious "they" was, but rather, "who am I?" and it was the protection and preservation of the private sphere which overruled the public good. The privatisation of the conspiracy narrative serves to uproot traditional conspiracy films' altruistic origins -- so much so that when a resurgence of public-facing conspiracy narratives emerged in the aftermath of 9/11[2] and US President George W. Bush Administration's search for weapons of mass destruction, an honourable press and a lawful government were no longer viable mechanisms for justice. Couple this with the proliferation of news and social media in the latter half of the 2010's to propagate a profusion of opinions, perspectives and "alternative facts," and the culture of paranoia previously reserved conspiracy films seamlessly blends into public consciousness to create our contemporary conspiracy culture. In this way, privatised conspiracy narratives fail the genre in that they forego comment on larger political injustices in order to wrestle with the postmodern, personal struggles of the protagonist, either by personifying the conspiracy's system in the form of a villainous mastermind or, in conspiracy films from 2005-onwards, by returning to traditional tropes of the genre without considering how they engage with our modern conspiracy culture.

Phase 1 (1968-1988) Truth, Justice & the American Way: Public-Facing Narratives in Traditional Conspiracy Thrillers

In the wake of the JFK assassination in 1963, the removal of the Motion Picture Code in 1968, and the Watergate Scandal in 1972, a wave of suspicious, cynical and conspiracy-minded films infiltrated mainstream cinema: "a separate, unique class of film... reflecting that particularly late twentieth century fixation on abuses of power, wrongdoing in high places, paranoia and distrust," dealing "not only with the

[2] 9/11 refers to the September 11th 2001 terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Virginia, USA

manipulation of laws, but with the conspirator's very manipulation of social mores, conventions and customs to ensure their position of unchallenged power and privilege." (Donovan, 2011, p.13). In the aftermath of the tumultuous 1960s, "American films of the seventies frequently insist that changes in the social order are beyond our control" (Mellen, 1977, p. 293); and yet, the notion that changes in the social order are possible, and encouraged, in the name of truth, justice, and the public good is precisely what fuelled conspiracy narratives from the Nixon[3] years until the late 1980s. Likewise, Mellen's assertions that "the quiescence of the American public after the revelations of Watergate exposed the corruption pervading government has encouraged filmmakers in their insistence that evil really stems from the poor" (1977, p.293) is myopic; in fact it was the prerogative of conspiracy thrillers of the 1970s to call out large, powerful, and wealthy institutions, often via the press. Conspiracy thriller plots overwhelmingly revered the pursuit of truth by (mostly) male protagonists at all costs and hailed the press as the protector of those values, making journalists a recurring profession for traditional heros in a genre which glorifies the media's role as "watchdog" for democracy by consistently presenting it as an antidote to the underlying sentiment of public distrust in the government in the mid 1970s (Francke, 1995). If the rest of Hollywood in the 1970s was busy blaming immigrants and the poor the way Americans previously blamed conspiratorial plots on their foreign enemies, "the post-JFK era focused its fears inward" (Donovan, 2011, p.23), with conspiracy narratives of the 1970s clearly holding the magnifying glass back towards the US establishment.

This wave of paranoid films could be seen as a rational reaction to, and means of understanding, what Vidal refers to as "The National Security State": "a whole series of developments… from the National Security Act of 1947, through internal FBI investigations of subversion, through the assassinations of the 1960s, to the Watergate affairs," (1993; Baker, 2006, p.51). As historical manifestations of the 'paranoid style' respond, in some way, to contemporary events, conspiracy films create the space where "paranoia and conspiracy thinking may be a rational way of understanding the path of recent US history" (Baker, 2006, p.52). This is apparent in a string of conspiracy thrillers from the 1970s which directly or indirectly reflected and interrogated events from their contemporary political landscape. Whether they respond to current events or not, traditional conspiracy thrillers from the 1970s to the late-1980s engage with paranoia in one of two ways via what I refer to as the "seen" or "unseen" threats as defined below:

> **seen threat:** this is the protagonist's primary objective, bound up in the threats immediately posed to his/her person. For example: in *The Parallax View* (1974, dir. Alan J. Pakula), Joe Frady's seen threat is to find out who killed Senator Carroll. It is his primary motivation, but is also the reason he comes into harm's way throughout the film.
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> **unseen threat:** this is the conspiracy at large, often defined by the need to cover up corruption, crimes, or can also be a network of surveillance unbeknownst to, and in conflict with, the protagonist. In *The Parallax View*, the unseen threat would be that the Parallax Corporation is actually an assassin farm.

Traditional conspiracy films from the 1970s until the late-1980s largely abide by what I term the "public-facing narrative", where the success or failure of the protagonist's story is inextricably hinged to a political/public situation. This narrative style is consistently found in conspiracy thrillers from the 1970s to the mid-1980s[4] where the protagonist's journey is entwined with the conspiracy, largely in one of two variations, defined as "tradition 1" and "tradition 2" below.

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

[4] This does not take into consideration female-led conspiracy narratives, which largely exhibit public-facing narratives, even up to the present.

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

tradition 2: where, in solving or attempting to solve the seen threat, the protagonist perishes or loses everything worth living for to the power of the unseen threat. In conspiracy thrillers whose endings did not address both the seen and unseen threat, the following alternative ending occurs which defines tradition 2 public-facing narratives: the hero's seen threat (primary motivation) is addressed, but he/she inevitably loses to the power of the conspiracy: the hero may finally know the truth, but he has perished in the pursuit of it, and often plays right into the behemoth's hand, a la *Parallax View* (1974). *Blowout* (1981, dir. Brian De Palma) follows the same trend: Jack finally knows the truth, at the cost of Sally's life and the loss of any incriminating evidence; he finally has the perfect scream for his movie soundtrack -- the very reason he was witness to the conspiracy in the first place. In tradition 2 narratives there is a sense of gross injustice here: although the seen threat/primary motivation is solved, the conspirators go unpunished and the system wins.

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

Case Study:
***All the President's Men* (1976) as a traditional, public-facing conspiracy narrative**

Rounding off director Alan J. Pakula's "paranoia trilogy"[5], *All the President's Men* (1976) is an exemplary representation of the traditional, public-facing conspiracy film. Like many in the genre, the film is not only based on a novel, but is a portrayal of historic events (in this case: the Watergate Scandal) and bears not one, but two, white male protagonists who work as journalists. As two reporters seeking the truth at all costs, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein (played by Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman respectively,) make for ideal conspiracy film heroes as they demonstrate the time-held perception of the media's role as "watchdog" for democracy (Francke, 1995) and because their seen and unseen threats are inevitably linked:

seen threat: Woodward and Bernstein's primary objective is to get their scoop, find the truth, write the story and share this truth with the public.

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

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

In order to substantiate their story to their editor, Woodward and Bernstein must investigate and eventually uncover the conspiracy to obstruct justice that became the Watergate Scandal. In doing this, our protagonists are portrayed as a unit: two parts of the same journalistic force, conveyed through Hoffman and Redford's acting as they learned each other's lines as well as their own in order to make their dialogue spontaneous and fluid (*All the President's Men, Revisited*, 2013). Although the strength of their chemistry adds to the mythology of the iconic pair of journalists responsible for exposing the Watergate Scandal, it has had the side effect of fading other historically relevant characters into the distant background -- especially women. This is consistent with the notion that in the 1970s, "Male stars [were] people manufactured… to appear as superior, overcoming women and lesser men by sheer determination and will, involving in varying permutations, competence, experience, rationality, and charm." (Mellen, 1977, p.3). In doing so, *All the President's Men* largely erases female involvement from its history -- either by ignoring Bernstein's first wife, a fellow *Post* reporter, with whom he divorced in 1972, the year of Watergate's exposure, or by omitting the involvement of Katharine Graham, the publisher of the Washington Post, except when she was the butt of a crude remark[6]. Despite her notoriety as America's first female publisher of a major newspaper, *All the President's Men* sees no place for "one of America's most influential women" (Coleridge, 1993, p.12); her control over The Post is delegated to executive editor Benjamin Bradlee and other male editors. Moreover, the majority of women in *All the President's Men* are simply heard and not seen: either speaking with only portions of their body present or as voices on the telephone. Women who are seen are presented as gatekeepers for the duo: as secretaries using their desks to guard important men or as women who must be pressured or seduced into providing information for the pair. While the decision to omit a significant female character such as Katharine Graham and present other females as devices to or appendages of men may very well have been in the effort to streamline an already complex political narrative, it cannot be ignored that these representations serve to uphold the hegemonic masculinity of "a 'regulatory fiction' of normality" which "articulates various social relations of power as an issue of gender normality" (Baker, 2006, p.33; Cohan, 1997, p.24, 35)" which pervades these traditional conspiracy stories. The positioning of Woodward and Bernstein as the lone heroes central to the filmic narrative of Watergate may have served to clarify the film's sense of right and wrong, contributing to their mythology and the press' reputation as watchdog for democracy, but it is at the cost of dulling and even erasing female involvement and female agency within these historical narratives.

Thematically, *All the President's Men* covers surveillance, corruption, a sense of morality, as well as the notion that the public are being lied to, which can be seen as a response to and a reflection of the political climate in America in the mid-1970s. It complies with the usual conspiracy thriller trope of the hero accidentally stumbling onto the conspiracy as Woodward does, as well as the hero being unwillingly forced into action, as Bernstein is when forced to work with Woodward. Following a breadcrumb trail of clues with guidance from Deep Throat and then going on their own quest for information, the pair eventually get enough sources on record to publish. *All the President's Men* differs from other conspiracy films at the time in that there is no on-screen violence: there are no murders, no unseen assassins, and no direct attempts on the protagonists' lives. Although Deep Throat advises Woodward that his and Bernstein's lives are in danger due to the gravity of their investigations, producer Redford and director Pakula chose to illustrate that "their weapon [was] the written word" by accentuating the sounds of telephones, typewriters and pen on paper, sometimes even in competition with the dialogue (*All the President's Men, Revisited*, 2013). This technique is used throughout the film to embody the press as protector of the public's interests and is demonstrated brazenly in the film's opening and closing scenes where the punch of a typewriter mimics the sound of gunshots firing, perhaps further drawing connection to the themes of assassination that pervaded conspiracy thrillers at the time. Rather than thrills and spills, *All the President's Men* is dominated by the dogged persistence of the reporters as they navigate a verbose and slow-paced script, picking out tiny tidbits of information and then discussing them from character to character. Redford remembers: "There's nothing

[6] See Annex: Dialogue (*All the President's Men*) 1

glamorous about what [Woodward and Bernstein] were doing and I thought it was important to portray the tedium, the hard work. The feelings about the film from a studio standpoint was [that it was] 'non-commercial': newspapers, typewriters, phones... 'Washington'" (*All the President's Men, Revisited*, 2013). These "non-commercial" elements are crucial to a conspiracy narrative which is based tightly on actual events, and serve the film's tone to exude paranoia (when Woodward and Bernstein type, rather than speak, to each other when they suspect Bernstein's apartment has been bugged) and a sense of helplessness (Woodward's long, single-cut telephone shots while he tries contact after contact for a lead): that the web of lies surrounding the cover up may not ever be broken down as Bradlee sends the duo back again and again for further sources and Deep Throat's[7] equivocal, almost taunting clues. The film unfolds gradually with extensive verbal information and a pervading question of "where is this going?" The answer to which historic audiences knew well from experience but, for modern audiences less acquainted with the scandal because they didn't live through it, the film's appreciation for detail might be alienating rather than enveloping. Roger Ebert reviewed the film candidly in 1976 with an observation that "*All the President's Men* is truer to the craft of journalism than to the art of storytelling, and that's its problem. The movie is as accurate about the processes used by investigative reporters as we have any right to expect, and yet process finally overwhelms narrative -- we're adrift in a sea of names, dates, telephone numbers, coincidences, lucky breaks, false leads, dogged footwork, denials, evasions, and sometimes even the truth" (1976). It would seem that complex conspiracies, especially those based on true events, are invariably a challenge to present in only so many minutes. Our saturation of information via the internet, social media and smart devices, combined with modern audiences who are used to films that are becoming "quicker, faster, [and] darker" (Cutting, 2011, p.569), could mean that translating the nuance and complexity of historic, public-facing conspiracy stories into mainstream film is more challenging when taking into consideration our current conspiracy culture.

As history and the film would have it, the two Washington Post journalists do eventually lay bare their investigations into the White House's corruption, reaping justice in the form of nationwide publicity which would eventually lead to President Nixon's resignation and indictments of others culpable within the administration. In terms of impact, *All the President's Men* was hugely successful, solidifying itself as a mainstream conspiracy thriller that suited the American movie-going public well as "a taut, solidly acted paean to the benefits of a free press and the dangers of unchecked power, made all the more effective by its origins in real-life events" (Critics' Consensus, Rotten Tomatoes). As the "stuff of entertainment and political reflection" (Knight, 2000, p.44) it took some conspiracy films of the 1970s up to 11 years[8] to exorcise the public distrust that sparked their stories; yet *All The President's Men* hit the theatres only 4 years after Watergate was exposed and 2 years after the publication of Woodward and Bernstein's book of the same name -- a momentum which meant the narrative was fresh in the American public's conscious. At the time, Basil Patterson, Vice Chair of the Democratic National Committee, said, "there has been a national effort to exclude from our consciousness the painful, unpleasant, and unacceptable memories of the Watergate debacle. [*All the President's Men*] revives all the recollections and the emotions" (cited in Pileggi, 1976, p.58). Jimmy Carter ran at the Democratic primaries the year of *All the President's Men*'s release with the slogan, "I'll never lie to you" and won by a slim margin[9] over Gerald Ford, the incumbent president. Its true impact on the election is speculative at best, but as a public-facing, traditional conspiracy thriller with enduring political force, *All the President's Men* holds its own.

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[7] "Deep Throat" was the name given to Woodward's informant, a moniker which alluded to the deep background status of his information as well as the 1972 pornographic film of the same name.

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

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

Phase 2 (1988 - Present) "This is my life and I want it back!":
Foregoing Justice in the Privatisation of Conspiracy Narratives

From the late-1980s a shift develops in the way conspiracy narratives engage with the seen and unseen threat, beginning notably with *Little Nikita* (1988, dir. Richard Benjamin): the first conspiracy film to feature a black protagonist, Roy Parmenter (Sidney Poitier), and also the first where the protagonist's needs for personal closure or public-facing justice are superseded by a private motive. The seen threat of figuring out who the Grant family is is addressed, but rather than risk breaking up the very nuclear and now-Americanised former Russian spy family, Parmenter actually assists in the cover up and escape of the two villains, Karpov and Scuba, into Mexico, essentially brushing the conspiracy under the rug. This also comes at a cost to himself: Parmenter sacrifices the possibility of justice for the murder of his former partner to protect Jeff (River Phoenix) and reunite him with his family. Parmenter joins the ranks of traditional male conspiracy protagonists with no family to speak of; the only significant women in the film are Mrs. Grant, Jeff's mother, and Jeff's guidance counselor, Verna McLaughlin, who happens to be Parmenter's romantic interest. In this way, *Little Nikita* resembles its traditional predecessors in its representation of a family-less hero and women whose agency is hinged on their association to men. Yet, beyond these similarities, Roy Parmenter is an unfamiliar, selfless, protagonist whose quest for truth and justice -- for the first time in a conspiracy thriller since the 1970s -- is sidelined in favour of "'family values,' the only 'secure legacy of the Reagan[10] ideology'" (Tomasulo, 1995, p.48). In this way, *Little Nikita* appears to be the first conspiracy thriller protagonist that chooses to neglect justice or exposure of the conspiracy in favour of private motives -- a clear departure from the genre's publicly-facing traditions, but a decision which reflects the late-1980s conservative American fixation on sanctity of the family.

This privatised narrative is similar to tradition 2 of the public-facing narrative in that the seen threat is addressed while the unseen threat goes unpunished, except that tackling the unseen threat is no longer a matter of life or death to the protagonist. Even without justice for or exposure of the conspiracy at large, the protagonist does not "lose" to the weight of the conspiracy, and his journey is able to end satisfactorily. Furthermore, often to achieve his primary motivation, the protagonist may even choose an outcome where the public may be put in danger or will never know the truth -- a distinct contrast to the public-facing narratives of the 1970s. The following are indicators of what I am terming "privatisation" of the conspiracy narrative:

> **seen/unseen threat disjoint:** The hero can address his primary motivation without seeking justice for, or exposure of, the conspiracy at large. For example: Mitch in *The Firm* (1993, dir. Sidney Pollack) refuses to give the FBI evidence against his firm's money laundering enterprise because it will mean the end of his career as a lawyer. Mitch's seen threat is figuring out how to remain a lawyer and get his life back to normal. Exposure of the unseen threat (that his firm works with the mob) is actually not in his interests at all.
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> **privatisation of the protagonist:** Where the seen or unseen threats are bound up in the identity of the protagonist. The protagonist must discover themselves in order to make sense of the conspiracy at large, or uncovering the conspiracy is a means of giving the protagonist a sense of purpose in his or her life. In *The Truman Show* (1998, dir. Peter Weir), Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey) doesn't know that his entire life has been a reality TV show; to uncover the conspiracy behind the show that has trapped him since birth, he has to discover himself and the true nature of his existence.

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[10] US President Ronald Reagan served from 1981-1989 and pursued conservative domestic policies which promoted free market-ideology, morality, and traditional family values.

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

messiah characters: A messiah character is often presented as the "chosen one" to save the public; not necessarily bound by biblical narratives, they usually bear innate talents, qualities or skills that make them special compared to others. Although gripping for their mythological quality, the use of these characters largely remove the onus for change from the public's grasp when it comes to calling out corruption and abuse of power. A prime example of this is Neo in *The Matrix*: a hacker whose fate is to save the sleeping masses from their simulated reality -- the effect of which might actually lull an audience into political complacency as they wait for a hero rather than taking responsibility for their own activism.

Peter Lev observes, "in the 1970s, a great deal of this social dialogue took place via the medium of film," but "instead of commenting on the problems of the age in a profusion of conflicting visions, the big-budget films [of the late 1990s] are about excitement, about thrills and chills, perhaps even about special effects and marketing" (2000, p.183). I'd like to take this argument one step further, beyond the distraction of thrills and chills or special effects to posit that the loss of political force in conspiracy thrillers from the late 1980s-onwards is due to the privatisation of their narratives: they may tackle similar themes to their traditional predecessors and even touch on contemporary anxieties about privacy, technology and the internet, but their solipsistic focus on the protagonist's life -- on getting things "back to normal" -- means that they lose any opportunity for justice within the narrative, and actually, are counterproductive when it comes to political impact: they soften us to these potentially dangerous ideas rather than leave us more vigilant to them.

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

the individual over the group in the very fabric of society" (Day, 2018) and reflects this idea that when the world becomes too challenging we ought not to fight outward, but rather focus inward and attempt to make sense of something we can control: ourselves. By the late 1990s, films like *The Truman Show* would be able to take the privatised narrative so far as to enshrine its protagonist's very existence in conspiracy: "at its core, putting Truman in the centre of the story, the film is speaking about the same fears that fuel conspiracism," it is Truman's agency panic and sheer powerlessness that implies "nothing that Truman Burbank experiences, from friendship to love, the joys and the frustrations of his life, all his emotions essentially, is really his own" (Donovan, 2011, p.181). Just 10 years after *Little Nikita*, *The Truman Show* marks a truly solipsistic, privatised conspiracy narrative, reflecting not only a shift in political ideology, but an evolution in personal fears and paranoias.

In advance of the Y2K Problem[11], these late-1990s conspiracy films centred on notions of identity within the digital age as opposed to ideology: no longer is the question Who are "They"? but rather: Who am I? As Giroux explains, "Amid the growing privatization of everyday life, the greatest danger to human freedom and democracy no longer appears to come from the power of the over-zealous state eager to stamp out individual freedom and critical inquiry in the interest of loyalty and patriotism," but rather "under the growing influence of the politics, ideology, and culture of neoliberalism... the individual has been 'set free to construe her or his own fears, to baptize them with privately chosen names and to cope with them on her or his own'" (2001, p.1; Bauman, 1999, p.63). Rather than addressing the unseen threat like traditional conspiracy films, conspiracy films from the late-1980s onwards concerned themselves with the identity of the protagonist -- foregoing justice for all in favour of preserving one's own private interests.

Case Study:
***Enemy of the State* (1998) as a privatised conspiracy narrative**

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

> **seen threat:** to return his life back to normal. To do this he must survive and then disprove the false evidence which the NSA has planted against him in order to reclaim his job and repair his relationship with his wife.
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> **unseen threat:** the sabotage of Robert Dean and the NSA's cover up of their assassination of US Congressman Phil Hammersley in order to pass legislation which would dramatically expand its power to surveil US citizens, endangering their freedoms and privacy.

For nearly half the film, Dean does not know that these events befall him because he possesses evidence which incriminates the NSA and its director Thomas Reynolds (Jon Voight). As the audience and the antagonists know more than he does, Dean's unseen threat is very much "unseen" to him. The hierarchy of

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

knowledge[12] in this case contributes an added complexity to Dean's unseen threat that would pave the way for a sophistication of conspiratorial devices like false-flag[13] attacks and elaborate patsy[14] operations -- playing well to the genre's established fixation with feelings of paranoia and helplessness.

Film critics have drawn connection between *Enemy of the State* and *The Conversation* (1974, dir. Francis Ford Coppola), a traditional conspiracy thriller entrenched in surveillance (Ebert, 1998; Newman, 1999), but *Enemy of the State* departs drastically from the moralistic crisis of conscience experienced by Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) in *The Conversation.* Rather, Robert Dean's journey perfectly exemplifies the privatisation of the conspiracy narrative in that he is able to return his life back to normal without ever having to expose the NSA's assassination plot or its intentions to expand its surveillance powers. It is this passing of the torch, as it were, from protagonists whose intentions are public-facing to those whose intentions are private, that is exemplified in the following exchange between Dean and Brill (Gene Hackman), the old guard/self-proclaimed conspirer:

> ***Brill:*** *You're the threat now. Just like I was.*
> ***Robert Dean:*** *Threat to whom? To them?*
> ***Brill:*** *No. To your family, your friends, everybody you know, everybody you meet. That's why I went away and didn't come back. You've got to go away, Robert.*
> ***Robert Dean:*** *No, I don't think so. This is my life, I worked hard for it and I want it back!*

Dean's primary motivation isn't protecting his immediate community; rather it is a self-centred desire to maintain the livelihood that he worked hard to build -- a far cry from the altruistic protagonists of traditional 1970s conspiracy thrillers.

Enemy of the State may deal with classic conspiracy themes like surveillance, assassination, and lying to the public, but the disconnect between the protagonist's seen and unseen threats leads to a failure in the film's overall sense of justice. Dean accidentally stumbles upon the NSA conspiracy when wildlife researcher Daniel Zavits, a high school acquaintance, drops a hard drive with incriminating video evidence into Dean's bag. Dean is mildly curious about Zavits' fate when he turns up dead trying to outrun some NSA thugs, but doesn't pursue the mystery; it is only when, as a means of finding Zavits' hard drive, the NSA disseminates false evidence to implicate Dean of working with the mob and having an affair with an ex-girlfriend that he is unwillingly forced into action to clear his name. These activities illustrate what I term the "framing and shaming" of the protagonist -- a tactic previously reserved mainly for female protagonists in conspiracy films, but from the late 1980s onwards, it becomes common practice as a means of prodding the hero on with his quest. Dean's journey takes place within what Giroux refers to as a "public sphere" which is "consistently removed from social consideration" so that "notions of the public good are replaced by an utterly privatized model of citizenship and the good life" (2001, p.2). In *Enemy of the State,* it would otherwise be completely plausible that Dean might simply return the hard drive to the NSA, if he only knew he had it. Unfortunately, he only finds the hard drive *after* the NSA has started to disrupt his life and by then he feels threatened enough to retaliate.

Where Robert Dean departs from previous conspiracy protagonists in that he chooses to prioritise his own life, safety, and reputation over the wellbeing of the public, *Enemy of the State* does follow in the footsteps of traditional conspiracy thrillers in that women are still largely excluded in Dean's solipsistic narrative. Key female characters in the film are: Dean's wife, his ex-girlfriend, his son's nanny, and a cast of bikini-clad

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[12] "Hierarchy of knowledge" is a term used by screenwriter and academic Simon Van Der Borgh
[13] False-flag "would become an oft-used buzzword in the world of September 11 conspiracy theorists" to define a self-inflicted attack to accomplish ulterior motives (Donovan, 2011, p.163).
[14] Where the archetypal lone gunman is not the true antagonist but is set up as the fall guy by conspiring forces.

lingerie saleswomen, all of whom are sexualised by men in the film[15]. Dean's wife Carla (Regina King), is in fact totally politically engaged and attempts to get her aloof husband to pay attention, resorting to politely aggressive requests such as, "Baby, listen to this fascist gasbag!" All the while, Dean patronises her passionate and rightfully paranoid warnings by making jokes about them.[16] This lack of agency is further exemplified in the women closest to Dean. When Carla is exposed to the NSA's framing and shaming of her husband, her character transforms from the political voice of reason to the stereotypical "unreasonable wife or girlfriend as obstacle to the protagonist" trope. Dean's ex, Rachel Banks (Lisa Bonet), falls into the well-documented "Women in Refrigerators"[17] trope which has come to encompass the use of of women who are killed, injured, raped or otherwise disempowered as a plot device to incite male action (Simone, 1999), and can be found throughout the conspiracy film genre. In *Enemy of the State*, Rachel Banks doesn't die because she chose to put herself in danger; she dies so the NSA can frame Dean as her lover and murderer. In this way, Rachel's death compels Dean to salvage his reputation -- her agency is sacrificed for his vindication. So although *Enemy of the State* exemplifies a progression in conspiracy narratives from the public to the private, its representation of women and female agency goes little further than its traditional predecessors.

If *Enemy of the State* were a traditional conspiracy thriller, the protagonist would likely have been the journalist who Edward Zavits calls with the incriminating evidence. Instead, the protagonist is Robert Dean, a lawyer, which marks a distinct shift away from the hero journalist-led narratives from decades prior. Unlike a reporter, whose primary motivation would have been to find and share the truth, a lawyer will have learned to be cautious with language, protective of his own interests, and have developed an understanding that the truth may not always be in his interests. This migration in protagonist's professions matches conspiracy films from the 1990s-onwards where "agency has now been privatized and personal liberty atomized and removed from broader considerations about the ethical and political responsibility of citizens" (Giroux, 2001, p.1). The film concludes and the NSA is not brought to justice: rather, Congress covers up the mess to preserve the agency's reputation; if Dean were a reporter this would be his next big story but, as a lawyer, he is content to return his life back to normal. Although some conspiracy films are notable for their prescience[18], most are reactionary, appearing as warning beacons or as calls to arms against an oppressive, conspiratorial system. It would seem that after the 2013 revelations exposed by whistleblower Edward Snowden[19] about the NSA's "PRISM" and "Boundless Informant" programmes of surveillance via phone, email, and internet browsing data, that *Enemy of the State* -- a film whose representation of the NSA was often touted as exaggerated or ridiculous -- might have been onto something. Yet, by updating the profession of the protagonist in this film from one whose private interests trump his public concerns, the film loses its sense of political force by atomising the protagonist's ethical responsibilities.

Enemy of the State's loss of political force is further perpetuated not only by the visual representation of surveillance in the film, but also by how the lead characters react to being surveilled. Scott's "hyper-kinetic editing, the over-the-top camera angles, [and] insane plotting" (Horton, 2013) become part of his exaggerated visual language which links Dean's seen and unseen threats. The aerial surveillance images of Dean and Brill

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[15] See Annex: Dialogue (*Enemy of the State)* 1
[16] See Annex: Dialogue (*Enemy of the State*) 2
[17] "Women in Refrigerators" is a term which refers to an incident in the comic book *Green Lantern #54* where the hero comes home to find his girlfriend has been killed and stuffed into a refrigerator (Marz, 1994).
[18] *The China Syndrome* was released 12 days before the Three Mile Island nuclear accident in 1979 and *The Truman Show* was released two full years before the first American Big Brother# season in 2000.
[19] Edward Snowden is a former CIA employee and former NSA contractor who revealed classified documents to journalists Glenn Greenwald, Laura Poitras and Ewen MacAskill in 2013 which revealed previously unknown details of invasive global surveillance on citizens without their knowledge by the USA, in cooperation with Australia, the UK and Canada.

as they are being stalked by the NSA not only function as cinematographic establishing shots but also as point-of-view shots -- coming from the perspective of the surveillance state. Even when the film cuts to another angle, the impression that "Big Brother is watching you"[20]remains, adding to the film's sense of paranoia and agency panic. Yet, "within these scenes, the surveillant image and the surveilling agency are frequently the narrative touchstone, the fulcrum of the scene, as much if not more than the protagonist (who is rarely aligned with the surveillant gaze) and in this way, we see the further invitation to the film's spectators to identify themselves with both the system of surveillance and a globalizing visual logic, even as they are also identified with a character subjected to that system" (Zimmer, 2015, p.123). This identification with both the surveillance and the surveilled, of seeing both sides[21] -- rather than heighten public vigilance against encroachments of privacy -- actually encourages the public to entertain hyper surveillance as an acceptable "point of view". In the final scene of the film we see Dean acquiesce to one last invasion of privacy, this time by Brill, as he flips through channels on the television and comes across a live stream of himself as he watches TV. Instead of outrage, fear, or surprise, Dean -- in the same way that he humorously reproaches his wife's political concerns -- makes a joke at the TV set, indicating that this final invasion of privacy is harmless and acceptable. Scenes like this are what lead John Patterson to argue in The Guardian that Hollywood has in fact played a role in softening the public to curtailments of privacy by normalising representations of hyper-surveillance in films (2013), something which is compounded when the unseen threat may be exposed, but is never brought to justice. Thomas Reynolds, Enemy of the State's antagonist, serves to represent this privatised, apathetic perspective by implying that there is nothing left to fight for when he says "The only privacy that's left is inside of your head"[22]. Robert Dean mimics Reynold's sense of greed and self-centeredness through his need to protect his own livelihood as opposed to the privacy of US citizens, apparent through a disjoint in Dean's seen and unseen threats. This solipsistic worldview is characteristic "within the discourse of neoliberalism," where, along with privacy, "issues… have been either removed from the inventory of public discourse and public policy or factored into talk show spectacles that highlight private woes bearing little relationship either to public life or to potential remedies that demand collective action" (Giroux, 2001, p.2). The film acknowledges this disparity in a closing cameo from talk show host Larry King where he poses the question:

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

And in a frenzy of television static and satellite images, Tony Scott's thriller presents an answer to this question using a juxtaposition of domestic imagery and global imaging which stand for Dean's seen and unseen threats, respectively: "By establishing both a visual and narrative continuity between the personal and the political, the singular and the total, the house and the globe, all through devices of surveillance and mediation, the film indicates that it is... the task of the media consumer—to establish one's place in the global system" (Zimmer, 2015, p.130). The answer to Larry King's question is that we will accept the shady dealings of the government, we will accept losses to our privacy and civil liberties, and we will accept a loss of justice as long as we can preserve the sanctity of our homes and carve out a purpose within our own personal, private spaces. Dean's knowing acceptance of infringements to his privacy supports the "nothing to hide, nothing to fear" argument which Edward Snowden rebuts: "Arguing that you don't care about privacy because you have nothing to hide is like arguing that you don't care about free speech because you have

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[20] "Big Brother is watching you" is the ubiquitous slogan of the totalitarian surveillance state in the dystopian fiction novel '1984' by George Orwell.

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

[22] See Annex: Dialogue (*Enemy of the State*) 3

nothing to say" (cited in Schrodt, 2016). *Enemy of the State* and other conspiracy films post-1988 may engage with traditional themes of the genre like surveillance or lying to the public, and even reflect contemporary anxieties towards loss of privacy, invasive technology and the internet, but their normalisation of these concepts and their solipsistic focus on the protagonist's life -- on getting things "back to normal" -- means that they lose any opportunity for justice within the narrative compared to the public-facing, justice-seeking conspiracy thrillers of the 1970s and are potentially counterproductive when it comes to political impact by softening us to these ideas as necessary evils not worth our vigilance.

Phase 3 (2005-Present) "What does it matter?": Justice Rendered Impotent in Modern Conspiracy Narratives

At the onset of the 21st century, a culmination of factors would unmistakably alter the fabric of conspiracy culture in the United States. The initial throes of postmodernity, which espoused the absence of a universal truth, had settled decades prior and, in 1998, US President Bill Clinton would justify succinctly that truth "depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is" (cited in Federal News Service). Three years later, mobile phones would help frame the public's perception of September 11th, 2001: not only the deadliest act of terrorism on American soil to date, but one where civilian recordings brought a plurality of perspectives to the fore: "the immediate consequences were reflected in the huge surge of activity online and on the telephone... Such was the scale of the activity that, for a time, the networks broke down." (Silverstone, 2004, p.587). The mainstream media's portrayal of the threat of terrorism in the immediate aftermath and years following the attacks would fuel[23] rather than quell a culture of fear, paranoia, and anxiety in the public sphere -- emotions which have long been the trappings of Hollywood conspiracy thrillers. The use of "phrases such as 'many sides', 'different perspectives', 'uncertainties', [and] 'multiple ways of knowing'" reflect a culture of doubt[24] that creates fissures where relativist[25] thinking breeds "truth decay": a term which has "joined the post-truth lexicon that includes such now familiar phrases as 'fake news' and 'alternative facts'" (Kakutani, 2018). This phenomenon of protracting doubt, fear, and paranoia has less to do with the occurrence of such events and more with their surrounding narratives: "the events can create raw fear, but the storytelling makes it refined fear… When someone shares a link to Twitter, they are posting their reaction to it. Their reaction, not the headline, is where it gets metabolized," (Shirky, cited in Chang, 2017). This 21st Century phenomenon of reactions becoming headlines irrevocably alters the content of a news story from an absolute -- a truth which can either be confirmed, denied, buried or uncovered -- to an opinion which is irrefutable. As the power of social media intensifies, the value of the public's, and even the current US president's, personal truths has come to overpower the value of reality in an "extreme, bizarro-world apotheosis of many of the broader, intertwined attitudes undermining truth today, from the merging of news and politics with entertainment, to the toxic polarisation that's overtaken American politics, to the growing

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

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

[25] Relativism is defined as "the doctrine that knowledge, truth, and morality exist in relation to culture, society, or historical context, and are not absolute." (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018)

populist contempt for expertise" (Kakutani, 2018). It is this recipe of fear, paranoia, and Rashomon[26]-like subjectivity in mainstream and social media that I refer to as our contemporary conspiracy culture: a post-truth climate where "public tolerance of inaccurate and undefended allegations, non sequiturs in response to hard questions, and outright denials of facts is shockingly high" (Higgins, 2016, p.9), and it is modern conspiracy films' inability to adequately grapple with this conspiracy culture that has diminished their political force.

Similar to the traditional conspiracy films that surfaced after Watergate and the JFK assassination, there has been a resurgence of politically-minded conspiracy thrillers from about 2005-onwards, post-9/11, and in the wake of the Bush administration's search for WMDs. Films like *Syriana* (2005, dir. Antoine Fuqua), *Fair Game* (2010, dir. Doug Liman), and *Green Zone* (2010, dir. Paul Greengrass) grapple with true stories, current events, and contemporary politics, even to high praise, but their rehashing of the traditional tropes of the genre without engaging with modern conspiracy culture fails these contemporary conspiracy stories, placing a viable sense of justice just out of reach. Like the public-facing conspiracy films of the 1970s, these post-9/11 thrillers return focus to large corporations and the government; however, with increased globalisation, the introduction of false-flag operations, and a conspiracy culture dominated by fake news, "fake science (manufactured by climate change deniers and anti-vaxxers, who oppose vaccination), fake history (promoted by Holocaust revisionists and white supremacists), fake Americans on Facebook (created by Russian trolls), and fake followers and 'likes' on social media (generated by bots)" (Kakutani, 2018), the idealised consensus of modernity, morality, and truth, has broken down: the idea of a singular enemy or behemothic organisation to castigate becomes convoluted in a sea of "alternative facts" and opposing conspiracies.

The proliferation of privatised interests that were prioritised over the larger public good in conspiracy films from the 1990s-onwards has meant that the moral compass previously centred behind politics of the right or left has since been replaced by the selfish identifier of the "haves and have nots," creating an amoral complexity to films which were once anchored by their strong sense of right and wrong. *Syriana*, a film which takes after its traditional predecessors with a wealth of verbal information and a politically-minded plot, departs from their moral paradigm by presenting a relativist take on a modern layered conspiracy that "expose[s] a twisted system in which no one's hands stay clean" (Tucker, 2005). Exchanges where characters, fueled by greed, proudly admit to ignoring an impotent legal system (often punctuated by the exasperated outbursts of men proclaiming "who gives a shit!" or "what does it matter?"[27] when their corrupt ways have been exposed) exemplify what Giroux describes as the consequences of neoliberalism: "not only a weakened state, but a growing sense of insecurity, cynicism, and political retreat on the part of the general public," where "the call for self-reliance betrays a weakened state... In this scenario, private interests trump social needs, and profit becomes more important than social justice." (Giroux, 1999, p.4). Despite returning their focus to politics, the message in these post-9/11 conspiracy films remains consistent with, and actually feeds off, the privatised narratives of the late-1980s and 1990s: when in doubt, protect yourself. The pervasiveness of thematic selfishness and greed appears to even surpass political partisanship within modern conspiracy films in favour of the "haves and have-nots" mentality[28]. In fact, those who don't buy into the greed narrative are portrayed as naive or idealistic. *Shooter*, an overtly anti-Bush conspiracy film[29], resembles *Parallax View* and *The Package* (1989, dir. Andrew Davis) in its presentation of the patsy "lone gunman" plot; yet, ex-Marine sniper Bob Lee Swagger (Mark Wahlberg) differs from both Joe Frady, who is

[26] The Rashomon effect commonly refers to "differences in perspective found in multiple accounts of a single event" and is named after the 1950 film *Rashomon* (dir. Akira Kurosawa), in which four witnesses recount details of a murder in four mutually contradictory versions (Anderson, 2016, p.250).
[27] See Annex: Dialogue (*Syriana*) 1
[28] See Annex: Dialogue (*Shooter*) 1
[29] Also now a TV series (2016-present) based on the 2007 film and the novel *Point of Impact* by Stephen Hunter.

"independent, aggressive, [with] a history of alcoholism" and a "'rebel' masculinity [that] ideally suits him to the role of the 'lone gunman'" (Baker, 2006, p.56), and Thomas Boyette, the willing (and highly paid) lone gunman in *The Package*. By contrast, Swagger may be exponentially more resourceful than his predecessors but his patriotism is portrayed as increasingly naive[30]. It is Swagger's blind patriotism that leads him to trust Colonel Isaac Johnson's request to plan the assassination of the President in order to catch the "real" assassin. Swagger unconditionally trusts the government, and he is punished for it when he is framed for the crime. In modern conspiracy films, the protagonist's seen and unseen threats often return to the traditional, linked, paradigm but they have developed in complexity. In the case of *Shooter*, Bob Lee Swagger's seen and unseen threats are:

> **seen threat:** to protect the US President; only when he is double-crossed and framed for what appears to be an attempt on the President's life does his seen threat change to clearing his name and tracking down the real assassin of the Ethiopian archbishop.
>
> **unseen threat:** the plot to make the assassination of the Ethiopian archbishop look like a botched attempt on the president's life, silencing him before he can expose Colonel Johnson's destruction of an innocent village in Eritrea for Senator Meachum's pipeline.

Swagger's seen and unseen threats are inseparable and highly elaborate compared to the traditional conspiracies of the 1970s; where there once was one layer of conspiracy, there are now multiple layers, fueled by the greed of many players, and it is here that the portrayal of naively patriotic soldier-hero characters like Bob Lee Swagger feels contrived. Where conspiracy protagonists from the 1990s-onwards have joined their antagonists in being selfish, conspicuously altruistic protagonists in post-9/11 conspiracy films are in stark contrast with the antagonising forces of greed and self preservation. After two decades of selfishness, this sudden attempt at reconnecting with public-spiritedness without the stakes or characterisation traditional conspiracy thrillers had makes modern conspiracy protagonists' pursuit of justice less convincing.

Along with representing those motivated by the public good as naive, the nature of our evolving conspiracy culture has exhausted conspiracy films' traditional mechanisms for justice, contributing to a weakened political force in modern conspiracy narratives. Our current post-truth climate, combined with "the willing engagement of mainstream media to perpetuate partisan and polarizing information" (Mihailidis, 2017, p.441), means that in 2018, the press is no longer a watchdog for democracy. Modern audiences have developed an increasingly strained relationship with the press via a proliferation of "fake news" and partisan information via the internet and social media which has affected not just the way we view and trust what we are told by our governments and news media (Stelter, 2017) but has actually made presenting the media as a means of exacting justice in films seem less believable now. Combined with the dissolution of these films' moral compasses, our dissolving relationship with truth as prescribed by the media has knocked off one of the conspiracy genre's greatest pillars of justice: the press, leaving films like *Syriana* to stipulate a nihilistic worldview where everyone is culpable, but nothing will change, or films like *Shooter* that forego intervention of the media entirely as it is likely an extension of an already corrupt system where truth can be sold to the highest bidder. The next available mechanism for justice is the law, but frequently in these modern conspiracy films the government is either portrayed as an impotent organisation whose hands are tied by checks and balances and questions of jurisdiction[31], or an institution that is just as corrupt as its opposition. This limitation of the government as a viable mechanism for justice as presented in conspiracy thrillers throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s leads to a privatisation of justice where characters take retribution

[30] See Annex: Dialogue (*Shooter*) 2
[31] See Annex: Dialogue (*Shooter*) 3

into their own hands. These films reproduce tradition 1 and 2 endings but feel vacuous in a modern setting, largely due to disjoints in public and private-facing intentions and how these are reflected in the films' portrayals of justice. For example, *Shooter* received mixed reviews for the implausibility of its plot but it also doesn't sit well as a film whose protagonist's defining feature is his moral compass when his vigilantism and privatised sense of justice allows for a body count so high (he lays to waste a team of "24 good, hard men" in a single scene) that it starts to wear away at the logic of Swagger's character. Traditional conspiracy films of the 1970s admonished the political conspiracies they peddled; in modern conspiracy thrillers, justice feels weak or violently inappropriate -- especially when the films themselves admit that it is greed, not a single person, corporation, or government that is the real enemy:

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

This sense, that not only is there no head to cut off but, if there were, one would respawn and multiply in its place, sits well not only within the emotional crux of agency panic within conspiracy stories but also amidst an information culture which has polarised political and social perspectives. How can the public unite against a single cause, or accept a single truth, when social media and recommendation engines have not only created echo chambers under the premise of connecting like-minded users, but have customised news feeds to reinforce preconceptions so much so that "we are long past merely partisan filter bubbles and well into the realm of siloed communities that experience their own reality and operate with their own facts"? (DiResta, cited in Kakutani, 2018). Truth decay has permeated the public consciousness so much so that "we can't trust anyone who is wealthy and influential, we can't trust our government, we can't trust our cultural institutions -- and often we can't even trust our neighbours, friends and loved ones" (Donovan, 2011, p.12) -- unless perhaps they exist within our own echo chambers. And so, with no one real to trust but ourselves, we revert back to the solipsistic narrative of privatised conspiracy films, and our traditional pillars of justice -- the media and the law -- now seen to be self-serving, are no longer effective. It appears that the tonic of conspiracy antagonists -- greed and self-preservation -- is what fuels our protagonists and the public as well, creating little hope for justice that extends beyond reconciling one's own identity amidst the corruption. In this case, "within the prevailing discourse of neoliberalism that has taken hold of the public imagination, there is no vocabulary for political or social transformation; there is no collective vision" (Giroux, 1999, p.4). "The 'public' has been emptied of its own separate contents; it has been left with no agenda of its own -- it is now but an agglomeration of private troubles, worries and problems" (Bauman, 1999, p.65). If conspiracy films seek to remain relevant as a source of political force the way that they once were, they must not ignore, but engage with our modern conspiracy culture to overcome the cynicism and solipsism that pervades the genre and identify viable mechanisms for justice -- either by addressing the public's tainted relationship to the media and the law, or by seeking out new, community-based systems of justice which are stronger than the seemingly impotent checks and balances of modern government.

Case Study:
***Green Zone* (2010) as a repurposed traditional conspiracy thriller that lacks engagement with modern conspiracy culture**

For all intents and purposes, *Green Zone* (2010) fulfills the criteria of being a traditional, public-facing conspiracy thriller, inspired by the novel *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* (2006, Rajiv Chandrasekaran) which catalogued the post-invasion occupation of Iraq within the Green Zone of Baghdad. The film was released one year before the American withdrawal of troops from Iraq and 6 years after the CIA's 2004 Iraq

Survey Group report unequivocally stated that Saddam Hussein had neither WMD stockpiles nor active capability for weapons production at the time of the war, meaning that it would come as little surprise to audiences when, in the film, idealistic US Army Chief Roy Miller (Matt Damon) unexpectedly stumbles across a conspiracy that the purported weapons of mass destruction being used to lead the United States' invasion of Iraq may not actually exist. As in traditional and modern conspiracy films, Miller's seen and unseen threats are intrinsically linked:

> **seen threat:** to find the source of the unreliable WMD intelligence, even if it means risking his life and disobeying orders. For Roy Miller, the reasons we go to war are more important than his soldiers' instructions to do so.
>
> **unseen threat:** There are no WMDs. The Department of Defense is sending bogus intelligence under the guise of legitimate sources in order to justify an invasion of Iraq.

In the film, Army Chief Roy Miller is responsible for checking and securing sites that have been flagged as potential hiding places for Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, a task that leads him and his platoon to repeatedly raid vacant factories and combat local looters, only to return empty-handed time and time again. Eventually, Miller begins to seriously question the validity of his intel.[32] It is the pursuit of this question which turns Miller's quest from an existential one to an ethical one, far beyond the scope of his duties as a soldier, and leaves him caught between the CIA and the Justice Department as he attempts to uncover the truth behind the Pentagon's justification for war.

As a conspiracy protagonist, Roy Miller is altruistic and honorable; he resembles the diligent Woodward and Bernstein of *All the President's Men* and is in stark contrasts with self-serving Robert Dean in *Enemy of the State*. Yet, where previous conspiracy heroes' professions actively fueled their journeys, Roy Miller's portrayal of a duty-bound soldier lead into Iraq by the Bush administration is betrayed by his decision to ignore orders in pursuit of the source of his bogus intel. In this way, director Paul Greengrass buys into the "popcorn-crunching conventions of a Hollywood potboiler" in that "only Matt Damon can save the world! And he has less than two hours to do it!" (Ozernoy, 2010). The caveat in this approach is that Roy Miller, like many other post-9/11 conspiracy protagonists, is a soldier. Where before conspiracy heroes were truth-seeking journalists, justice-bound cops, or shrewd lawyers, soldiers are trained to follow orders. Risking his life to embark single-handedly on a rogue mission to meet with a wanted Iraqi General simply "because it matters" puts Miller in direct conflict "with a military culture that discourages service members from questioning whatever mission they are charged with carrying out" (Scott, 2010). Instead of following orders the way a soldier should, Miller goes against everything conspiracy films had just spent the last two decades promoting in their messages of solipsistic self-preservation: that the world is a mess, just take care of yourself and you'll be fine. A deeper examination of Roy leads to no substantiation of this counter-intuitive, altruistic urge; he is not spurred on by journalistic hunger and he is not out to clear his name or protect his family -- if he even has one. Instead, his character plays like a two-dimensional caricature of previous conspiracy heroes whose careers motivated their public or private-facing intentions.

The lack of dimensionality in *Green Zone*'s protagonist extends to the other characters in the film. Where *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* "captures the Coalition Provisional Authority's culture of incompetence, arrogance, and misplaced idealism; Greengrass reduces it to an ego-fueled catfight between the heroic and brawny Miller and his glib and wily nemesis, a bespectacled Pentagon lackey played by Greg Kinnear. If only it were that simple" (Ozernoy, 2010). It is clear that the characters in the film are meant to be stand-ins for players in the real Iraq war conflict: Bush-era Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's response to

[32] See Annex: Dialogue (*Green Zone*) 1

looting in Baghdad, "Freedom's untidy[33]," is echoed by the fictional Clark Poundstone's declaration of "Democracy is messy", but "the characters are all one-note: righteous Miller is righteous, his desperate Iraqi aide is desperate, and evil Pentagon dude is evil, posing occasionally in front of Bush/Cheney election posters to polish his pointy devil horns," (von Tunzelman, 2011). "Freddy", the film's Iraqi everyman, may be compelling but he is overshadowed by the white saviour[34] narrative imposed by Roy Miller which, combined with its use of "stand-in" characters, serves to give the film only a perfunctory engagement with a modern conspiracy story situated within a deeply complex political landscape.

The only female character in the film, Wall Street Journal reporter Lawrie Dayne (Amy Ryan), likely represents Judith Miller, the former New York Times reporter made notorious for her series of exclusives focusing on the presence of WMDs that bolstered the Bush Administration's war efforts in Iraq, but that were ultimately proven wrong. As a reporter, Dayne would have been a provocative character study as a historically crucial role within the genre, yet "Dayne is presented as a victim of the campaign of lies," essentially diminishing her agency, "when, in reality, the American media—and the Times' Miller, specifically—was deliberately complicit in transmitting the official line and beating the drum for war, war, war" (Stimmen, 2010). *Green Zone*'s ignorance of this historical reality, especially in the film's conclusion (which sees Miller send an email exposé to a mass of of media outlets) "only reinforces illusions in the ability of the media to communicate the truth when confronted with it. One can only wonder how many 'delete' buttons would be pressed in the real world" (Stimmen, 2010). Rather than portray Dayne as a modern self-serving journalist whose exclusives not only embolden the Bush Administration's war effort but put her in the limelight as well (which would have engaged with modern conspiracy culture and contemporary perceptions of the media as a self-preserving, self-promoting entity), her character rests on tropes of female passivity and gullibility: she takes the words of the men around her as gospel and is spurred into action only at their call, never checking for herself the validity of her sources or information. Miller's confrontation of her on this[35] is more forceful than the gentle prodding for information she attempts with Poundstone or Miller in her previous scenes. Dayne's behaviour might have been believable, compelling, and modern if it were cast as a self-serving gesture to get her name on the exclusives, but instead she is portrayed as weak and incompetent in one of the conspiracy genre's historically crucial roles.

The film's shallow representations go beyond character and can even be applied to the themes of the film: "When Green Zone came out, it was accused of fuelling 'conspiracy theories' -- specifically, that the American government, intelligence services and/or military lied about WMD" (von Tunzelman, 2011), but even as the film's allegations were proven to be accurate in time, the simplification of the story and its characters has left the film without the political force it might have had. Take Miller's response to CIA agent Martin Brown (Brendan Gleeson) in the following exchange:

> ***Miller:*** *We're both after the WMD right?*
> ***Martin Brown:*** *... It's a little more complicated than that.*
> ***Miller:*** *Well not to me it isn't.*

---

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

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

[35] See Annex: Dialogue (*Green Zone*) 2

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

> ***Miller:*** *When you peddled that shit in DC, did they know it was a lie? Or did they just never bother to ask?*
> ***Clark Poundstone:*** *Okay, okay. Come on, none of this matters anymore. WMDs? This doesn't matter.*
> ***Miller:*** [grabs Poundstone angrily and forcefully] *What the fuck you talking about? Of course it fucking matters! The reasons we go to war always matter! It's all that matters! It fucking matters!*

Miller's aggravated reply mimics the intense visual style of "hurtling hand-held camerawork and staccato editing" (Scott, 2010) that distinguished Greengrass' blockbusting *Bourne* trilogy which he admits to revisiting in *Green Zone*: "The world seemed very turbulent, and the [Bourne] movies sort of reflect that and they distill it and reflect it back as a kind of paranoid conspiracy thriller… So you come to [*Green Zone*] and you go: Well, let's see if we can take one step further into the real world and see if we can build a conspiracy thriller there that's got the same high energy and high octane… and a moral, noble hero with a moral agenda" (cited in Weintraub, 2010). However similar to the way presenting a 'noble hero with a moral agenda' after 20 years of self-interested privatisation within the conspiracy genre makes *Green Zone*'s protagonist less believable, using the same high octane, blockbuster-style cinematography merely repurposes a once-compelling visual technique to a lesser effect. Where Jason Bourne's action sequences came as revelations for and to his character and added to the film's sense of paranoia, the same camera style that ought to resemble authentic, handheld camera footage in a war zone is ineffective because it doesn't match Miller's own emotional state: "What's strangely missing is the paranoia an officer might feel in his position: he's not the hunted man Jason Bourne was, possibly because it's beyond the film's remit to have the US military... targeting one of their own. Damon... is left to portray only a kind of righteous bafflement," (Robey, 2010). *Green Zone* is a film that made a conscious effort to display a clear sense of justice as a modern conspiracy film, but its lack of engagement with our modern conspiracy culture by not updating traditional tropes of the genre and repeating Greengrass' aggressive filmic style lends the film no real political force.

As many modern conspiracy thrillers do, *Green Zone* attempts to replicate traditional conspiracy protagonists and mechanisms for justice, but at a time when public cynicism and our current conspiracy culture have changed the way these devices translate on screen. The final scene of the film, which features Miller sending his scathing report of deception via mass email to a list of major press outlets to expose the Department of Defense's ill-doings, should do as *All the President's Men* does by representing the media as a mechanism for justice and for truth, but in 2010, it misses the mark. The audience and the public are expected to side with Miller: he represents the idealistic, moralistic, traditional conspiracy hero, and we want to believe that the reasons we go to war do matter. Yet, modern audiences saw America go to war all the same. Modern audiences know about the NSA's surveillance system, the Pentagon Papers[36], and the Chilcot Report[37]. Even in 2000, "the repeated pattern of denial, concealment and false revelation casts a shadow of suspicion on any official pronouncements" (Knight, p.26-27). Current conspiracy culture dictates that modern audiences

[36] The Pentagon Papers revealed in 1971 that the American public has been misled regarding the United States' political intentions and military involvement in Vietnam.
[37] The Chilcot Report is the result of a British public inquiry into its involvement in the Iraq War which states that, among other things, the intelligence regarding WMDs and the legal basis for war were "far from satisfactory" (Harding, 2016).

simply don't believe in the media as the watchdog for democracy anymore. In 1976, *All the President's Men* could use the media as a mechanism for justice because history dictated that it would be triumphant. In 2010, *Green Zone*'s attempt to do the same falls flat because justice for the WMD debacle never came. Bush's decision to invade Iraq without a United Nations mandate and no clear, timely intelligence of imminent threat by Saddam Hussein was upheld; he carried out a full two terms in office and, even with the Chilcot Report published in 2016, it was British Prime Minister Tony Blair who received the most flak, with calls to try him for war crimes (Pilkington, 2016). No such calls were made for George W. Bush. Modern audiences' estranged relationship with the press, exacerbated by the prevalence of fake news and the proliferation of information via the internet and social media, has affected not just the way we perceive and trust what governments and news media dictate (Stelter, 2017), but has made the nature of traditional conspiracy film protagonists and traditional mechanisms for justice feel less believable today. Despite its $100 million budget and $40 million in advertising, *Green Zone* was largely considered a flop -- it grossed just over $35 million with domestic US audiences and received mixed, highly partisan reviews. If *Green Zone* failed as a modern conspiracy film, it is not because it misrepresents the USA's insistence on the existence of WMDs to justify its invasion of Iraq, but because it attempts to use traditional tropes of the genre without considering how they engage with our current conspiracy culture.

Conclusion

For a genre dedicated to calling out abuses of power and protecting the interests of the public, its transformation from the traditional conspiracy thrillers of the 1970s to the privatised narratives of the late-1980s/90s comes not as a surprise, but at a cost when it comes to the political force of modern conspiracy thrillers. In the course of 50 years, the nature of, and mechanisms for, justice in these films have been recast in the reflections of their corresponding cultural landscapes where "paranoia is revealed to be a rational processing of actuality" (Baker, 2006, p.52). Phase 1 is overtly political, with great value attributed to notions of truth, justice and morality. Phase 2 becomes deeply personal, with sanctity of the family, protecting one's livelihood or reaching self-discovery taking priority over the public good. In the years following 9/11, when political abuses of power re-entered the public consciousness, conspiracy films attempt to return to their politically forceful roots but have yet to reconcile the 20 years of solipsistic, self-preserving and greed-fueled narratives with the growing cynicism of the public towards conspiracy films' iconic pillars of justice: the media and the law. Moreover, modern conspiracy films have yet to truly reckon with our post-truth problem and an internet culture that "doesn't just reflect reality any more; it shapes it" (Diresta, cited in Kakutani, 2018). What defines this third phase of modern conspiracy thrillers from 2005-onwards is not so much what they are or what they do, but the question of how can they be better? How can modern conspiracy thrillers address the genre's proven lack of representation when it comes to female leads and agency? And, crucially, is it possible to re-introduce political, public-facing narratives back into mainstream film, taking into consideration our current conspiracy culture where the deliberate obfuscation of facts and events is not only fair game on the political playing field, but is becoming part of the rule book? For a genre that seeks to uncover the hidden truth behind abuses of power, what does it mean if truth -- the key to all conspiracy narratives -- can be uncovered, but not trusted?

<u>Annex: Dialogue</u>

All the President's Men (1976)

1

> ***Mitchell (V.O.):*** *all that crap, you're putting it in the paper? It's all been denied. You tell your publisher -- tell Katie Graham she's gonna get her tit caught in a big fat wringer if that's published. Good Christ!*

That's the most sickening thing I ever heard.
Bernstein: *Sir, I'd like to ask you a few --*
Mitchell (V.O.): *-- what time is it?*
Bernstein: *11:30.*
Mitchell (V.O.): *Morning or night?*
Bernstein: *Night.*
Mitchell (V.O.): *Oh.*

And he hangs up.
Bradlee and Bernstein at Bernstein's desk. Bradlee is going over Bernstein's notes.

Bradlee: *He really made that remark about Mrs. Graham?* (Bernstein nods) *This is a family newspaper -- cut the words "her tit" and run it.*

Enemy of the State (1998)

1

Fiedler*: Rachel F for you-know-what, Banks. God, would I love to have her ruin my life.*

Fiedler*: *Please* let me follow the nanny. She doesn't shave her legs.*
Women like that are so... HOT.

2

Carla is furious about the Privacy Bill being discussed on TV to Robert.

Carla Dean: *Don't you think you should be taking this a little more seriously?*
Robert Dean: *Honey, I think you're taking it seriously enough for both of us, and half the block.*

3

Thomas Reynolds: *Privacy's been dead for years because we can't risk it. The only privacy that's left is inside of your head. Maybe that's enough. You think we're the enemy of democracy, you and I? I think we're democracy's last hope.*

Syriana (2007)

1

Danny Dalton: *Corruption charges. Corruption? Corruption ain't nothing more than government intrusion into market efficiencies in the form of regulation. That's Milton Friedman. He got a goddamn Nobel prize. We have laws against it precisely so we can get away with it. Corruption is our protection. Corruption is what keeps us safe and warm. Corruption is why you and I are here in the white-hot center of things instead of fighting each other for scraps of meat out there in the streets.* (beat) *Corruption... is how we win.*
[Danny D. winds down. Finally --]
Bennet: *You broke the law, Mr. Dalton.*
Danny Dalton: *Oh, who gives a shit!*

Shooter (2007)

1

Senator Charles F. Meachum: *It's not really as bad as it seems. It's all gonna be done in any case. You might as well be on the side that gets you well paid for your efforts.*
Swagger: *And what side are you on?*

Senator Charles F. Meachum: *There are no sides. There's no Sunnis and Shiites. There's no Democrats and Republicans. There's only haves and have-nots.*

2

Swagger: *I'm still enough of a sucker. You press that patriot button, I'll sit up in my chair and say, "Which way you want me to go, boss?"* [beat] *I mean, I ain't real proud of it, but I ain't ashamed, either.*

3

Colonel Isaac Johnson: *Look around you! This isn't the Horn of Africa! ...This is the land of the free and the home of the brave. And I'm free to go.*
Attorney General Russert: *Colonel, your moral compass is so fucked up, I'll be shocked if you manage to find your way back to the parking lot. Regardless of how I feel about this, these events occurred in another country, outside of our laws.*
Swagger: *So that's it? That's the best you can do?*
Attorney General Russert : *This isn't the World Court, Sergeant. I don't have the jurisdiction to detain the colonel for crimes he may or may not have committed on another continent.* [softer, to Swagger] *For the record, I don't like the way this turned out any more than you do. But this is the world we live in. And justice does not always prevail. It's not the Wild West, where you can clean up the streets with a gun... Even though sometimes that's exactly what's needed.*

Green Zone (2010)

1

Miller: *Jerry why the fuck do we keep coming up empty on all these sites? There has gotta be a reason.*
Sgt Wilkins: *Chief we're here to do a job and get home safe, that's all. The reasons don't matter.*
Miller: *They matter to me.*

2

[Dayne rummages through her room nervously]
Miller: *Well did you ever meet the guy? Know who he is?*
Dayne: *Of course I didn't meet him, he's an Iraqi internal for Chrissakes.*
Miller: *Then how do you know what he's saying is true?*
Dayne: *Cause I made contact through a reliable intermediary.*
Miller: *Reliable.*
Dayne: *Yes.*
Miller: *Have you ever been to any of Magellan's sites? You ever been to Diwaniyah? Tikrit?*
Dayne: [clears her throat] *No.*
Miller: *There's nothing there. Magellan's intel is bullshit.* [beat] *Who's the intermediary?*
Dayne: *No, I'm not discussing sources Miller.*
Miller: *Jesus Christ this is the reason we went to war!*

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