

CINEMA'S PARANOID TENDENCIES

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Summary: Many theorists have championed absence within and without the filmic image as a site of cinematic radicality, but it is possible for absence to hide an obscure authority. When this occurs, filmic absence functions as a support for the development of paranoia. This essay explores how what's missing in the filmic image can become the vehicle for advancing a paranoid outlook and thereby countering the emancipatory potential inherent in cinematic absence.

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Absent Causes

The major film theorists, despite their intense disagreements, are almost unanimous in their belief in the potential radicality of cinematic absence. This could be absence existing within the visual field or outside it, absence where spectators expect presence or absence before presence. Cinema's deployment of absence marks the point at which it can arrest the dominance of the image and reveal a lack where we typically see fullness.¹ Confronted with absence in the would-be plenitude of the filmic image, spectators can see that there is a hole in the visual field where they expect to see a whole. For instance, Orson Welles creates an entire film around the absence of an object associated with the name *Rosebud*. Although *Citizen Kane* (1941) concludes with the revelation that this is the name of the childhood sled of protagonist Charles Foster Kane (Orson Welles), this revelation highlights the inadequacy of the object in comparison with the quest that the film sets up around it. In the films of Agnès Varda, absence typically comes at the end where one expects the fulfillment of a conclusion. In *Cléo de 5*

1. Far from believing that this celebration of absence is theoretically misguided or something to lament, I have myself played a part in it. See, for instance (McGowan, 2007).

à 7 (1962), protagonist Cléo (Corinne Marchand) awaits a cancer diagnosis from a doctor with whom she has an upcoming appointment. The film ends with the doctor missing the appointment and quickly driving off after offering Cléo a vague description of possible treatment. Here, the lack of a definitive answer stands as a gap within the film's narrative and visual structure. A hole such as this can suggest a failure in the functioning of social order itself, a point where the overriding social narrative doesn't explain everything. Just as spectators receive no clear verdict on Cléo's health status despite the expectation of it that the film sets up, they do not receive the answers to their own existence from capitalist society. Capitalism leaves subjects without a stable place in society and without a visible authority with which to get their bearings. But capitalist ideology promises that answers will be forthcoming with the purchase of the proper commodity. This is a promise that films such as Varda's refuse to countenance through their assertion of absence. In this way, cinematic absence challenges the ideological conception of the social order that conceives it as a complete whole, with a commodity that responds to every possible desire.

Political emancipation depends on grasping an opening within the social structure, seeing a possibility for acting that challenges the given possibilities that the society presents. This is why political thinkers from Karl Marx to Frantz Fanon to Chantal Mouffe focus so much on making economic, social, and political contradictions apparent.² When people recognize that the society's ideological narratives fall apart and cannot explain everything, they are able to experience contradictions as contradictions and thus see that the social order is at odds with itself. In this way, the feasibility of acting radically becomes apparent. Absence in the cinema represents a political and not just an aesthetic decision.

Absence in the filmic image can enable spectators to see how the social order is open to political change. But the image of completeness – evident in the plenitude of the filmic image – engages in a perpetual struggle to keep intimations of absence at bay. Nowhere is this political battle more pronounced than in the cinema. If cinema is a struggle between plenitude and absence, absence leans to the side of emancipation in the struggle, while the image of plenitude typically

2. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx claims that contradiction represents the path to radical social change. He writes, "the development of the contradictions of a given historical form of production is the only historical way in which it can be dissolved and then reconstructed on a new basis." (Marx, 1976 [1867], p. 619). Marx's own decision to write multiple volumes of economic analysis rather than to spend that time engaged in political activism indicates his belief in the power of revealing contradictions and making them visible to people as itself a radical act.

gives cinema its ideological function.³ The absence deployed in *Cléo de 5 à 7* contrasts with the tidy image of presence that concludes *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), where the rebels triumph, the Death Star is destroyed, and the imbalance in the force is rectified. *Star Wars* doesn't show us anything missing in its conclusion but instead bombards us with fulfillment. Against the dominance of the image's plenitude, cinema's ability to indicate an interruption in the reign of the image is reason to have hope for its political bearing.

What is revelatory about the theoretical celebration of absence is that it emanates from those who otherwise don't share the same theoretical turf. This celebration runs from formalist theorists to realist ones, from Marxists to liberals, from psychoanalytic theorists to postcolonial ones. For Sergei Eisenstein, the absence between shots speaks to a dialectical rupture. As he sees it, montage creates a dialectical shock through highlighting the disjunction between conjoined shots, a disjunction that depends on the gap that separates them.⁴ The point of absence jolts spectators out of their ideological complacency and allows them to see hitherto obscured political possibilities.

Even though Siegfried Kracauer is Eisenstein's opposite number theoretically – a theorist of realism rather than of formalism – he nonetheless shares a belief in the potentially revolutionary value of cinematic absence. According to Kracauer, absence bespeaks a fundamental openness to the future that characterizes cinematic political possibility.⁵ Unlike other arts, cinema points toward a different future through what it suggests without actually showing. What we don't see indicates a pure political possibility. While Kracauer and Eisenstein value different manifestations of cinematic absence, their consensus about the role that absence plays politically is nonetheless telling. But despite this united front championing the radicality of cinematic absence, it is my claim that the primacy of absence in and between the image also creates a tendency to paranoia, which represents what is perhaps the chief political danger of cinema.

3. There are exceptions to this generalization. As I will explore, paranoid thrillers use absence to suggest the functioning of a hidden authority, while filmmakers such as Spike Lee use the excesses of plenitude to distort the filmic image and reveal contradictions in this way.

4. What Eisenstein describes as the collision between shots in montage is only possible on the basis of the gap between them. He states, "montage is an idea that arises from the collision of independent shots—shots even opposite to one another." (Eisenstein, 1949, p. 49).

5. In *Theory of Film*, Kracauer writes, "The main thing [in film] is that the ending does not mark the end. A classical example of such a finale is the ever-recurring concluding shot of Chaplin's old comedies; we see the Tramp waddle away and we know that he is indestructible." (Kracauer, 1960, p. 269). Absence characterizes filmic endings, which gives them a utopian dimension missing in other art forms.

Cinematic absence functions as a site of disruption that cuts into the image of completeness. But it also has the capacity to spawn paranoia by wedding spectators to the idea of a hidden authority that calls the shots behind the scenes. One can theorize paranoia as the belief that there is a hidden authority pulling the strings in the social order, a figure or figures that do not suffer from the limitations of everyone else. The secret authority enjoys without suffering any lack and enjoys at the expense of all those that this authority manipulates. It is a figure of nonlacking or complete enjoyment. But what's most important about this figure is that it cannot be directly seen, which is why it can reside in cinematic absence.

The paranoid investment in a hidden authority represents one of the most important political threats of our time. The right-wing populists taking power around the world do so with the support of people who imagine them challenging the rule of secret authorities who have been, up to now, running our society. The fact that they imagine this hidden authority residing in nonauthoritative figures such as immigrants and other oppressed people doesn't mitigate the power of this paranoia. Paranoia about rule by hidden authorities leads multitudes to flock to right-wing leaders who promise to challenge those secretly running the world. Paranoia is the lifeblood of right-wing populism. And insofar as it functions as a site for the emergence of paranoid subjectivity, cinema risks playing the role of populism's enabler.

Cinematic absence leads to paranoia when a film suggests that a secret authority lies hidden behind the absence, beyond the realm of the image. In this sense, a political struggle in the cinema resides in the conflict between an insistence on the disruptiveness of absence and the attempt to use this absence to harken toward an invisible authority that is ultimately present somewhere within the absence. This tendency toward aligning cinematic absence with a hidden authority reaches its apogee in the paranoid thrillers of the 1970s, where what seems like Hollywood cinema's most political moment actually holds within it the promulgation of a new authority.

The foremost theorist of cinematic absence is undoubtedly Jean-Pierre Oudart. Oudart is the first to theorize the concept of cinematic suture, which he sees operating in the way that films initially confront spectators with an absent field and then fill this field in with the look of a figure present within the image. Suture occurs when this presence serves to obfuscate the existence of the absent field and thus the role of the camera in constituting the cinematic world. Mainstream cinema defines itself through the suturing operation that hides what Oudart calls

the "Absent One." In this vision, closing off the experience of absence – making absence invisible – is the fundamental ideological operation of the cinema.⁶

In his landmark essay 'Cinema and Suture', Oudart insists on the structuring role that the field of absence plays in the basic filmic shot. He claims, "Every filmic field is echoed by an absent field, the place of a character who is put there by the viewer's imaginary, and which we shall call the Absent One. At a certain moment of the reading all the objects of the filmic field combine together to form the signifier of its absence." (Oudart, 1978, p. 36). As Oudart sees it, the position of camera that constitutes the visual field also constitutes a field that is not – and cannot be – seen. This field of absence haunts every image of presence in the cinema.

The key to great filmmaking – filmmaking that avoids becoming ideological – is that it enables the spectator to confront the field of absence without subsuming it totally to a subsequent presence. By highlighting the role of the field of absence, films indicate that the world depicted in the image is necessarily incomplete and that other possibilities haunt this world. The great filmmaker never allows the spectator to forget that something always remains absent. Or as Oudart puts it, "a handful of great film-makers ... understand that the absent field is as important as the present field." (Oudart, 1978, p. 44). As long as a film hews closely to the absent field, it avoids falling into the trap of acting as a proving ground for ideological interpellation. By forcing the spectator into a confrontation with absence, a film such *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* (Robert Bresson, 1962), Oudart's primary example, exposes how even the most tyrannical authority – the Church condemning Joan of Arc – represents an incomplete authority. The film's depiction of Joan's defiance occurs through its effort to show the limits of the visual field and thus of all authority, even the ecclesiastical version. This authority might have the power to burn Joan of Arc to death, but it is nonetheless visible as lacking, as undermined by absences. Absence is the index of the film's radicality.

One can endorse Oudart's claim here and nonetheless see that the political role of absence is not so unequivocal as he imagines it to be. What none of the proponents of cinematic absence explore is its deleterious potential for the spectator when employed to obscure authority rather than undermine it. While the field of absence does mark

6. Oudart never brings up ideology. It falls to Daniel Dayan to develop the link between cinematic suture and ideology on the basis of what Oudart says in 'Cinema and Suture'. See (Dayan, 1974, pp. 22-31).

the radical edge of cinema – they are certainly correct about this – it also represents the point at which cinematic spectatorship risks fostering what I see as the paranoia that characterizes modern subjectivity. Paranoia represents a political danger in modern society, and cinema – the art that emerges in modernity – plays a role in nurturing it.

When thinking about the role of absence in cinema, we might reverse Friedrich Hölderlin's famous claim about the relationship between danger and a salutary power. In his poem *Patmos* Hölderlin writes, "where danger threatens / That which saves from it also grows."⁷ (Hölderlin, 1990 [1802], p. 245). Absence marks the most radical point of the cinema, the point at which cinema can reveal hidden political possibilities that appear nowhere else in the social structure. Think, for instance, of the way that Yasujiro Ozu creates an absent field in *Tokyo Story* (1953) in order to undermine the spectator's assumptions about familial relations. One watches the film with a constant recognition that one's vision is circumscribed. The effect of this pronounced absence is to force the spectator to view the absence as a part of the family itself. The absence indicates the fundamental antagonism between the family members, even among those who seem at first the most kind and agreeable. For Ozu, showing spectators what they can't see is a way of forcing them to confront the contradictions that beset the modern family and to see the limitations of this social form. The ideological assurance that the family form provides in capitalist society runs aground in Ozu's depiction of the absences within this form. And yet, while absence gives the cinema its most radical potential as an art, it is also the avenue through which films produce and nourish paranoia.

In other words, absence is the fundamental political site within the cinema. It provides cinema with its most radical moments – Ozu's refusal of shot / reverse shot, Eisenstein's dialectical montage, Varda's endings without resolution – while also opening cinema to its greatest danger – facilitating paranoid subjectivity. Absence in the cinema produces paranoia when it suggests a hidden force lurking unseen that actually controls the visual field. This control of the visual field is what distinguishes the radical deployment of absence from the paranoid. Absence takes on a paranoid valence when it suggests a hidden mastering presence that is itself not haunted by absence – a hidden authority that has a substantial status, an authority that is not itself

7. Martin Heidegger makes these two lines of poetry even more well-known by citing them as the concluding words to his essay 'The Question Concerning Technology'.

lacking. When absence functions radically, in contrast, it undermines every articulation of presence and marks the hole in whatever is present. Radical absence doesn't allow any authority to circumvent lack, whereas paranoid cinema places authority under the cover of absence in order to obscure its lack. On the basis of this distinction, we can examine how cinema can tip over into paranoia through the use of absence.

The success of paranoia in gaining adherents derives from its role in assuring people that a real substantial authority exists.⁸ Paranoia implies doubt about public figures of authority, but this doubt always has its basis in a more fundamental trust in a hidden authority operating behind the scenes. As Slavoj Žižek explains:

“When the paranoid subject clings to his distrust of the Other of the symbolic community, of ‘common opinion,’ he thereby implies the existence of an ‘Other of this Other,’ of a nondeceived agent who holds the reins. The paranoiac’s mistake does not consist in his radical disbelief, in his conviction that there is a universal deception—here he is quite right, the symbolic order is ultimately the order of a fundamental deception—but rather, in his belief in a hidden agent who manipulate this deception.” (Žižek, 1991, p. 81).

The paranoiac’s mistrust of authority itself is not a political problem. But the trust of the paranoiac in the Other of the Other represents the point at which paranoia goes awry and becomes misleading. It is also the point at which paranoia offers assurance to the subject amid all the deceptions that circulate in the social order.

This assurance is especially appealing in modernity, which emerges through the uprooting of every image of substantial authority. When René Descartes refuses to base his philosophy on scholastic authorities and decides to doubt everything, he exemplifies the attitude of modernity.⁹ When Hamlet insists on probing for himself rather than

8. The paranoiac refuses to accept the symbolic law as a structural position and criticizes the law for its empty content. There is a failure on the part of the paranoid subject to relate itself to the law as such. As Jacques Lacan puts it in his *Seminar VII*, “The paranoid doesn’t believe in that first stranger in relation to whom the subject is obliged to take his bearings.” (Lacan, 1992, p. 54). Instead of relating itself to the symbolic law, the paranoid subject organizes itself in relation to a hidden authority, the Other of the Other, in whom this subject has a total belief.

9. The way that Descartes formulates his radical doubt relative to all authorities itself reveals the tendency toward paranoia in modernity. When Descartes proposes doubt as a philosophical method, he decides to postulate a malicious demon bent on deceiving him at every turn. In the face of this malevolent force, Descartes asks himself what he can believe. His answer – the fact

accepting the word of his dead father at face value, he too embodies the modern spirit. Although authorities continue to exist in the modern world, they lose their substantial status and become subject to the doubt that both Descartes and Hamlet evince. In this universe without any secure authority, the subject must fend for itself. Paranoia comes to the rescue.

The key figure in paranoia is the missing substantial authority. Those not tuned into paranoid thinking cannot see how this figure actually plays a determinative role in the social order. This figure runs the show from a position of obscurity, a position that allows it to remain unnoticed except by the paranoid initiates. Through an ability to interpret the presence of the manipulating authority in the gaps of the social field, the paranoid subject grasps what others miss. This sort of interpretation preserves a substantial authority in the modern world by locating this authority outside the determinations that apply to everyone else. In a capitalist universe bereft of substantial authority, the paranoid subject finds an authority to believe in. Through the act of interpreting a hidden authority present in apparent absences, this subject manages to exist in capitalist modernity without the fundamental groundlessness that characterizes this epoch. At the same time, the paranoid subject allows itself to be manipulated by the populist leader who encourages the paranoid interpretation and promises a path that will counter this hidden authority figure.

At first glance, it seems as if populist leaders offer their followers present authorities, not hidden ones. They target immigrants, experts, racial others, and so on, usually making these attacks explicit. But authority itself nonetheless remains hidden behind the scenes in the populist leader's account. The description of the threat always remains vague – not specific immigrants but a horde of them, not certain media members but the mainstream ('lamestream') media in general. The vagueness of the threat enables the hidden authority to retain its substantial nonlacking status for the populist leaders and their followers. The outbreaks of populism that nourish the Right today are the direct collective manifestation of the paranoid subjectivity that sees a hidden authority manipulating the social field. Cinema plays a structural part in the development of this form of subjectivity. The point is not that people watch paranoid films and then go out to follow a populist leader but that these films take part in the same political form

of his own thinking – solves the problem, but at the same time, it leaves unanswered the question of why Descartes postulates a hidden manipulator in the first place. This is the result of the proclivity toward paranoia that besets even the most questioning thinkers in the modern world.

and contribute to this political constellation. Looking at them can help to unlock the structure of paranoid subjectivity and the reasons for its increasing appeal to so many.

The Politics of Paranoia

The paranoid thriller seems to be Hollywood at its most politically radical. It is thus not coincidental that this type of film reached its apex in the 1970s, a time of prominent actual conspiracies and the height of Hollywood's political engagement. Studio control waned, and directors had an opening to advance a political agenda unlike anything seen in American cinema up to that point. Although films like *The Parallax View* (Alan Pakula, 1974) and *All the President's Men* (Alan Pakula, 1976) come from the heart of the Hollywood system (Paramount and Warner Brothers), they nonetheless expose the hidden corrupt workings of authority and prompt the questioning of ideological explanations. These films would not have appeared during the classical period of Hollywood cinema or even a decade before they came out. Setting aside the size of their budgets, one could imagine these films made by a leftist filmmaking collective as part of an assault on the capitalist state and its ideological perpetuations.

The political bent to the mainstream paranoid thriller continues after its heyday in the 1970s. *The Matrix* (Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999), *The Bourne Identity* (Doug Liman, 2002), and even *Zootopia* (Byron Howard and Rich Moore, 2016) reveal that this type of filmmaking remains a vibrant part of the Hollywood tradition. The paranoid thriller is such an appealing type of film because it reveals the real power that operates beneath authority's public face. These films tell us not to accept the available ideological explanations and to question what authorities tell us. So far, so good. This ability to register the existence of a hidden power – or the duplicity of the public authority – marks the initial step of political engagement. If one takes everything that social authorities say as truth, one spends one's entire existence within an ideological bubble. One is Truman (Jim Carrey) at the beginning of *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998). The attentive spectator of the paranoid thriller does not remain a credulous subject. In this sense, these films accomplish what they set out to do.

But political engagement does not end with incredulity. Though suspicion about official explanations is a necessary condition for political engagement, it is not a sufficient one. One must also recognize that the lack in public authority characterizes authority as such.

Suspicion about public authority only goes so far. If it leads to the assumption that there is a hidden authority pulling the strings and running the society, this suspicion slips into paranoia. The sad fate of the paranoid thriller is that it fails to sustain the vision of a lacking authority. This is where the paranoid thriller goes awry. By positing a secret authority as the real site of power, this type of film implies the existence of a nonlacking authority and fosters the belief in this authority on the part of spectators.¹⁰

Authority in capitalist society is always invisible, as even Adam Smith admits.¹¹ The authority is not an individual subject or group of subjects but the capitalist structure itself, the commodity form that impresses itself on everyone and everything. Because capitalism does away with personified authorities (such as monarchs), it leads people to look hidden authorities who are really calling the shots and directing the capitalist system. But to search for such authorities is to fall victim to the fundamental capitalist deception – its presentation of the commodity form as a natural structure rather than as an authority in itself. If we believe that there is a hidden authority operative behind capitalist exchange, we miss the authoritative role that the commodity form plays. Looking for a hidden authority causes one to miss the invisibility of authority under capitalism.

When one believes in a hidden nonlacking authority, the political position of this authority ceases to matter at all. What matters is that a hidden authority runs the society without any possible check on its power. In the paranoid thriller, the decisions that determine politics are not themselves political decisions. They emanate from a secret authority that doesn't appear within the field of political contestation. The sphere of politics becomes nothing but a false front designed to

10. Fredric Jameson takes a much more sanguine view of the paranoid thrillers of the 1970s. He claims that these films depict the triumph of the collective over the individual and thus validate collectivist politics. In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, he writes, “the conspiracy wins, if it does (as in *The Parallax View*), not because it has some special form of ‘power’ that the victims lack, but simply because it is collective and the victims, taken one by one in their isolation, are not.” (Jameson, 1992, p. 66). While Jameson is right to see these films as testaments to the power of the collective, what he misses is that the collective power they suggest has its basis in an omnipotent and hidden authority, which aligns the films much more with fascism than with leftist collective action.

11. Adam Smith famously recognizes that the authority in capitalist society is no one person but an “invisible hand.” Describing the capitalist subject, he writes, “by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain; and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest, he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.” (Smith, 2008, p. 345).

obscure how authority really functions. The fundamental absence of the authority becomes the whole story. As a result, politics ceases to matter. The absent authority has so much power that there is nothing one can do as a political actor. Divine intervention – or that of a populist leader – is required.

The intrigue of the paranoid thriller does not concern the political position that the hidden authority advances. Though the agenda advanced by the secret authority is most often politically nefarious, this agenda has little importance in the structure of the film. The paranoid thriller focuses instead on exposing the fact of manipulation itself. For this type of film, the point is not that the cover-up is worse than the crime. It is that the cover-up is the crime. The existence of a secret plan or a hidden authority is the target of the film's critique, whether it be *The Parallax View*, *The Matrix*, or *The Bourne Identity*. The film arouses the spectator's desire around the form of the secret, not its political content.

The Authority of Absence

The paranoid thriller creates suspense through its manipulation of absence. *The Parallax View* is exemplary in this regard. The film begins with the assassination of a presidential candidate at the top of the Space Needle in Seattle. In the three years after the assassination, those who witnessed the event die off one by one. Noticing the trend, Lee Carter (Paula Prentiss), who was herself a witness, becomes scared and comes to her ex-boyfriend, journalist Joe Frady (Warren Beatty), for help. When she too ends up dead, Frady begins to investigate. This investigation leads him to uncover a conspiracy centered around the Parallax Corporation. When Frady comes too close to the inner workings of the conspiracy, he shares the fate of the other witnesses. The film ends with his death at the hands of the unknown authority responsible for the assassination and the other murders. Despite Frady's investigation, the conclusion of the film does not shed any light on the nature of the unknown authority for the spectator. Frady dies in the dark, and the spectator receives no enlightenment.

The key sequence in *The Parallax View* occurs when Frady goes undercover in an attempt to get to the heart of the conspiracy. He creates a false background for himself that makes him a prime candidate for recruitment by the Parallax Corporation, which is the entity that he believes responsible for the assassination and subsequent murders. After attracting the attention of the Parallax Corporation, Frady receives

an invitation to submit to an evaluation at the company's headquarters. We see Frady arrive at the building where the company is located and verify the room number on the building directory. The film cuts to black, as a voiceover instructs Frady about the test he will undergo. He sits in a chair and watches a series of words and images projected on a screen in front of him. When this montage concludes, the voice says only, "Please proceed to our offices. Thank you for your cooperation." The film fades to black.

After the montage sequence, we never see Frady actually go to the corporate offices and interact with anyone from the Parallax Corporation. Instead, while waiting for an elevator, he sees a man who was working as a waiter in the Space Needle when during the assassination, and he follows this man out of the building. The only manifestation of the authority of those perpetuating the conspiracy is the disembodied voice that we hear before and after the montage sequence. The series of shots involving this montage sequence are straightforward. We see a long shot of the chair in the middle of a large room that Frady walks toward and sits in, and then the film cuts to a view of the montage on the screen that Frady looks at. After the montage, the film again shows the long shot of Frady in the chair. Each of these shots creates a field of absence that the film never subsequently fills. There is no subsequent reverse shot that shows us who is looking at Frady.

While typically the lack of a reverse shot undermines the functioning of authority by emphasizing a blank space within authority's mastery, in this case the effect is exactly the opposite. The voice indicates that there is a presence lurking within this field of absence.¹² It is the presence of a hidden authority. The film suggests that there is a force there that controls the image – it directs the images in the montage sequence that Frady and the spectator look at – but there is no way for the spectator to grasp what this authority is or what it desires. Absence here doesn't undercut authority but insulates it from any critique.

To be clear, the film is not showing the invisible authority of the commodity form as it operates in capitalist society. The disembodied voice marks an absence in the visual field, but this voice is attached to

12. In *The Voice in Cinema*, Michel Chion gives a name to this disembodied voice that often appears in the cinema. It is the *acousmètre*. He states, "And the richest of voice-image relations, of course, isn't the arrangement that shows the person speaking, but rather the situation in which we don't see the person we hear, as his voice comes from the center of the image, the same source of all the film's other sounds. This is the cinema's invention of the *acousmètre*." (Chion, 1999 [1981], p. 9). For Chion, this disembodied voice triggers the spectator's desire and marks a radical point within the cinema. He doesn't trace its connection with paranoia, however.

a substantial authority for the spectator, that of the Parallax Corporation and whoever is behind it. *The Parallax View* doesn't expose the structure of capitalist authority that works without being subjectively embodied. Instead, it constantly tells us that there is a subjective authority that has a substantial status.

The fact that Frady never makes contact with anyone from the Parallax Corporation within the visual image magnifies the authority that this entity has in the filmic world. One watches this film with a sense that this conspiratorial organization controls everything. It seems to be able to follow Frady wherever he goes and to eliminate all threats that would expose it, no matter how protected they appear to be. The organization has this power within the filmic world because it remains wholly absent from the visual field.

The Parallax View ends with Frady being framed for the assassination of Senator George Hammond (Jim Davis). The frame itself indicates the incredible reach of the authorities responsible for the conspiracy. Frady arrives at the auditorium where Hammond is rehearsing a speech while following the man he spots in the building that houses the Parallax Corporation. How the conspirators could know that he would be at the rehearsal is itself mystifying. As a spectator, it seems to defy belief, since Frady only comes to the auditorium as the result of a contingent encounter. But this is precisely the point. The hidden authority of the Parallax Corporation has a seemingly infinite grasp and remains completely unknown to the public at large in the filmic world. Even Frady, who spends all his time investigating this entity, never really uncovers anything about it. As he dies near the end of the film, the depiction of his death underlines the absolute impenetrability of the organization responsible for the conspiracy.

In the sequence at the auditorium, someone shoots Hammond from somewhere above. People on the floor of the auditorium spot Frady in the rafters and assume that he is the guilty party. We see security guards search for him. When he thinks he has an opening to escape, he starts to run. As he runs to the bright white light of an open exit door, an unknown figure appears in the light as a silhouette and shoots Frady. This figure who kills Frady is a blank space in the filmic image. The extreme back light renders him completely featureless, except for a brief moment when he fires the gun. His features become visible for just an instant, but the time is too brief for the spectator to make out who this figure is. It is as if absence itself conspires to kill Frady at this moment.

The entire narrative structure of *The Parallax View* depends on what the film doesn't show. In the concluding image of the film, a panel announces its findings in the death of George Hammond. The spectator obviously cannot accept their statement that Frady acted alone in killing him, but no one watching the film has any concrete knowledge about the forces that did kill Hammond. The Parallax Corporation remains within the field of absence throughout the film. We never know what this organization is or what it wants. By keeping the authority directing the conspiracy hidden from the spectator, the paranoid thriller makes this authority absolute and thus impossible to challenge.¹³

A Substantial Other

The real source of power in the paranoid thriller is never the public authority itself. Society's leaders are always just a false front. Nor is it the invisible authority of the commodity form. Real authority is always hidden and yet substantial due to its hiddenness. Either this real authority remains unknown even at the end of the film (as in *The Conversation*), or the film's denouement publicly reveals this authority and ends its power (as in *The Pelican Brief*). But even when the film ends with the revelation of the secret power, part of this power always remains hidden. There is, in this sense, no paranoid thriller that ends happily.

By keeping the real authority hidden, the paranoid thriller envisions authority as ultimately substantial – as undivided and identical with itself. When we can see authority, it necessarily loses its substantial status. It becomes located in a subject or subjects and thus becomes vulnerable. Through their insistence on a hidden authority that survives all attempts at exposure, paranoid thrillers produce an inversion of the dialectical trajectory that Hegel depicts in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. According to Hegel, “everything turns on grasping and expressing the true, not only as *substance*, but equally as *subject*.” (Hegel, 1977 [1807], p. 10, translation modified). That is to say, there is no self-

13. The contrast with another thriller that depicts a conspiracy, *Michael Clayton* (Tony Gilroy, 2008), is instructive. *Michael Clayton* shows a corporation that defends itself against a lawsuit for its cancer-causing weedkiller by killing those who would blow the whistle on the fact that the company knowingly sold the product. Although he is part of a law firm defending this company, Michael Clayton (George Clooney) is able to act in defiance of this company by sacrificing his career as a lawyer and feigning his own death. The film presents the political act of thinkable because it shows the company's authority as present. Spectators see how the company operates to defend itself. Its authority is visible within the filmic image and thus evidently lacking. This gives *Michael Clayton* a political edge that the paranoid thrillers of the 1970s don't have. It is not a paranoid film.

identical substance because every substance suffers from the same self-division as the subject itself. We imagine that authority is substantial, but Hegel shows how it's not – and the *Phenomenology* recounts the successive toppling of all possible substantial authorities. Freedom, for Hegel, depends on one's belief in that there is no possible substantial authority, that every substantial form of authority is also a subject (and thus also lacking). The *Phenomenology* is an attempt at forging a remedy to paranoia, even though Hegel would not have diagnosed the problem in quite this way since he wrote before the discovery of psychoanalysis.

The paranoid thriller proceeds in the opposite direction than Hegel's *Phenomenology*. It takes the subjectivity of authority and substantializes it, showing a perfect self-identity lodged beneath the appearance of division. By locating authority as an absence in the filmic image, the paranoid thriller indicates that there is no way to apprehend this authority: it transcends the image and all attempts to gain a handle on its scope or the extent of the power it wields. The hidden authority in the paranoid thriller is almost always malevolent, but it knows clearly what it wants. This authority does not suffer from the burden of any self-division and thereby avoids the problem of the unconscious.

In order to convey the hidden authority as substantial, the paranoid thriller cannot fully expose it. The substantiality of authority depends on its invisibility, its location within the absent field of the film. Rather than showing authority undermined by absence, the paranoid thriller depicts it as absent. Whenever the paranoid film makes the hidden authority visible, its subjectivity becomes evident. In the act of identifying it, we recognize the authority's self-division and thus the possibility of contesting it politically. This is why paranoid thrillers never fully reveal the secret authority that they investigate. This is a tactic that they share with populist leaders: Donald Trump locks up immigrants at the border, but he always insinuates that there are more out there, that the secret of their authority remains elusive despite his efforts (even as it calls for his efforts). The persistence of the secret authority sustains the paranoia, which would flounder without something remaining hidden and unchecked.

This is true even in films that seem to show heroes triumphing over the hidden authority, such as *All the President's Men*. In this film, Bob Woodward (Robert Redford) and Carl Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman) successfully expose the conspiracy behind the Watergate break-in and thereby topple the Nixon administration. It's a true story of the successful toppling of authority, after all. The film ends with a series of

news bulletins that conclude with a notice that President Richard Nixon has resigned from his position as president. What stands out, however, is what the film doesn't show, what remains in the field of absence.

All the President's Men never depicts the culprits responsible for the heist in the visual field. While we do see stock footage of President Richard Nixon, the figures behind the conspiracy closely associated with him never appear. Spectators hear references to Charles Colson, Bob Haldeman, John Ehrlichman, and other shadowy figures, but they do not get to see them. Instead, the film allows spectators to see those who are informing the reporters about the conspiracy. One hears about its masterminds, but their absence from the visual field has the effect of substantializing them.

What's more, Woodward's meetings with the figure of Deep Throat (Hal Holbrook) bring this absence to the fore. The meetings take place at night in a parking garage. Woodward and Deep Throat speak in whispers in order to avoid being overheard. During the first meeting, as Woodward prepares to tell Deep Throat what he knows so far, he glances away from Deep Throat offscreen, as if checking to make sure that no one can overhear. This brief look suggests the existence of what is not seen and makes this absence part of the filmic image. One watches the exchange between Woodward and Deep Throat with a sense that an absent authority is also watching. When the distant sound of a man whistling emerges on the audio track, the film shows Woodward looking for the source of the whistle. But it dies out before Woodward pinpoints it. Each time that Woodward looks offscreen, he looks in opposite directions, suggesting that the authorities could be anywhere and are not localized in a particular position. As he looks, the film does not do what we would expect. It does not cut to an eyeline match shot to allow the spectators to see what Woodward sees. Instead, spectators experience something lurking offscreen without ever being able to see it. By highlighting the absent field in this way, *All the President's Men* substantializes the authority behind the conspiracy. Rather than providing a political opening, this type of deployment of absent – making it the site of a hidden authority – deforms politics into the structure of paranoia.

In the second meeting with Deep Throat, the vastness of the conspiracy becomes more evident. At one moment, Woodward recounts what Bernstein and he know. Deep Throat quickly interrupts him and asks with concern, "Did you change cabs?" This question hints at the ubiquity of the authorities that might be watching them. It prompts Woodward to look again, and this time the film cuts to a wider

shot of the two men, enabling spectators to see a larger portion of the parking garage. But the wide shot does not include where Woodward was looking. The film carefully preserves the absent field even as it suggests it through Deep Throat's question.

Subsequently, Deep Throat hints to Woodward about the vastness and effectiveness of the hidden authority structure. As Woodward describes what he knows, Deep Throat says, "You're missing the overall." He then tells Woodward about how the Republican authorities have been able to manipulate the political scene with stunning success – terminating the campaign of Edmund Muskie, whom they viewed as a threat, ensuring that George McGovern, an easier opponent, would be the nominee, and so on. Deep Throat adds, "The cover-up had little to do with Watergate. It was mainly to protect covert operations. It leads everywhere." Here, Deep Throat indicates a breadth to the conspiracy that spectators coming to *All the President's Men* would not have anticipated. Rather than focusing just on the Watergate break-in and its cover-up, Deep Throat tells Woodward (and the spectators) that this is just the tip of the iceberg, that the conspiracy was actually far vaster. The conspiracy stretches so far that no one could possibly gain a handle on it. One is left to imagine its infinite reach.

The third and final meeting with Deep Throat again occurs in the parking garage. But other aspects of the *mise-en-scène* undergo a dramatic change. Specifically, Alan Pakula lights this scene with much less light. As Woodward walks through the garage, we hear Deep Throat's voice call to him from offscreen. Following the voice, Woodward walks toward a dark opening and disappears into the blackness. The film cuts to him meeting Deep Throat. Unlike the lighting of the first two meetings, Deep Throat, who had previously been fully visible, remains side lit during the entire conversation, so that we can only see half his face. The darkness obscures Deep Throat as he reveals the primary culprits for the conspiracy to Woodward. This darkness serves to belie the completeness of the revelation, indicating that much will remain unknown at the point when it seems as if all is known.

During this meeting, Deep Throat informs Woodward that Bernstein's life and his life are in danger. After learning this, Woodward and Bernstein visit their editor Ben Bradlee (Jason Robards) late at night. They inform him about the ubiquitous surveillance. He responds, "Surveillance – who's doing it?" Woodward replies, "It's being done." Woodward's turn to the passive voice here explicitly doesn't name the authority figures responsible for spying on them. By

leaving this information blank, the film refuses to subjectivize them and instead grants them the status of substantial entities. This blank space within the filmic reality grants the ultimate power to the authorities responsible for the conspiracy: their power transcends what can be shown or even named. At this moment near the end of the film when Woodward and Bernstein are ready to uncover the conspiracy and topple the Nixon administration, *All the President's Men* suggests that no amount of investigation can ever undermine this hidden authority. While the film appears to depict the victory of two reporters over a massive right-wing conspiracy, it actually shows that the conspiracy is unassailable because of its substantiality.

The failing of *All the President's Men* does not lie in how vulnerable it shows the public authorities to be.¹⁴ It lies rather in the depiction of the invulnerability of hidden authorities. While the film does reveal how two ordinary reports can topple the President of the United States, it also suggests a hidden authority beyond that of Richard Nixon and beyond that which can be shown. The role of absence in *All the President's Men* carves out a space for authority that no one can access. This is exactly the sort of authority that paranoia demands.

Deeper and Deeper

The paranoid thriller sustains the hidden authority as hidden by establishing a deeper authority after each revelation of what was previously hidden. Authority in the paranoid thriller is like an onion without a center: one peels away layer after layer, only to find another series of layers. This logic reaches its acme in the series of Jason Bourne films. The sequels have a narratological necessity to them. Each film enables spectators to penetrate into a hidden program of the American intelligence services, but each film also hints at the existence of another program or programs that are hidden progressively deeper and deeper within the American government.

One could imagine the Bourne films going on infinitely because the secret authorities themselves go on infinitely. Just when one film in the series uncovers the nefarious program responsible for subverting the public trust, the film suggests another program that will require another film to uncover. The first film, *The Bourne Identity*, ends with the

14. This is Slavoj Žižek's critique of the film. Žižek claims, "Corruption is shown to reach the very top, yet the ideology of such works resides in their upbeat final message: what a great country ours must be, when a couple of ordinary guys like you and me can bring down the president, the mightiest man on Earth!" (Žižek, 2011).

revelation of the secret program entitled Treadstone, led by Alexander Conklin (Chris Cooper). Thanks to the events of the film, this hidden authority becomes exposed. Near the end of the film, we discover the real authority behind the program, Ward Abbot (Brian Cox), who has Conklin killed and shuts Treadstone down. Just as he does this, however, the film indicates that there is another even more lethal program called "Blackbriar." Importantly, we don't see any trace of Blackbriar within the film's visual field. We just hear Abbot make reference to it in the audio track.

The same dynamic appears in the fourth – and best – film of the series, *The Bourne Legacy* (Tony Gilroy, 2012). The film reveals a series of programs that follow Treadstone and Blackbriar, each more secret than the previous one. During the film, press attention threatens the Outcome program, so head of operations Eric Byer (Edward Norton) decides to shut the program down and kill everyone associated with it. This decision triggers the primary narrative trajectory of the film and indicates that the authority of these programs requires that they remain absolutely hidden. Byer eliminates all traces of the Outcome program in order to preserve other programs, including one called LARX. When the film ends, the two heroes from the Outcome program escape, but the extent of the secret authority and its other programs remains obscure. The publicizing of the hidden authority never goes far enough to root out fully the authority operating out of the public view.

Even the paranoid thrillers that show the victory of the hero over the conspirators nonetheless refuse to concede that the conspiracy has been completely eradicated. This is because the conspiracy depends on the substantiality of the hidden authority. In *The Pelican Brief*, the lurking substantial authority necessitates the exile of Darby Shaw (Julia Roberts) at the end of the film. Though she and reporter Gray Grantham (Denzel Washington) expose the conspiracy and prompt the arrest of the principals involved, they cannot be sure that Shaw is safe because they cannot be sure that they have finally uncovered the full extent of the conspiracy. Shaw must go into exile at an unnamed place in order to preserve the idea of the survival of the hidden authority. Shaw's exile enables the paranoia that the film nourishes to remain in place. The suggestion of a hidden authority calling the shots and manipulating the political arena remains in place, even as all of its visible manifestations disappear.

The ending of the paranoid thriller always leaves spectators with a doubt that they have penetrated into the real authority. Even the most conclusive endings are never completely conclusive. The need for this

doubt derives from the epistemology that informs these films. Insofar as they posit the substantiality of the authority that they expose, they cannot expose it fully. To do so would be to challenge the paranoid thinking that such films rely on.

Castrated Authorities

Freedom requires recognizing all authority as castrated. If an authority exists that is not lacking, it will have a determinative power over those subjected to it. The obedience of subjects will be written into the very structure of the authority. When confronted with a substantial authority, disobedience is not even a possibility. As long as authority is substantial and not lacking, there is no opening for freedom. This is why the depiction of an absence within an authority structure has such a radical effect.

Probably the greatest exponent of showing authority to be lacking in the cinema is Stanley Kubrick. When Kubrick depicts the allied command as lacking and completely at a loss in World War I in *Paths of Glory* (1957), he strikes a blow for freedom. In *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Kubrick takes this takedown of authority a step further and reveals the authority of a seeming flawless computer (HAL) as riven with desire (and thus absence). Even in *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), a film that hints at the existence of a secret network of powerful elites who stage elaborate orgiastic rituals, Kubrick makes sure to emphasize the lack in authority figures: even though their authority seems ubiquitous in this film, it is thoroughly sexualized and thus necessarily vulnerable.¹⁵ Kubrick's ability to show authority as lacking places his filmmaking on the side of emancipation and freedom. But this is not what we see in the paranoid thriller, which is perhaps why Kubrick, despite his exploration of so many different genres, never made one.

But it is possible to imagine a paranoid thriller that paradoxically avoids paranoia. In fact, we don't have to imagine but simply watch Steven Soderbergh's *No Sudden Move* (2021). This film depicts a reality-based conspiracy in the vein of *All the President's Men*. However, Soderbergh doesn't keep the ultimate figures of authority behind the conspiracy in the field of absence. He shows them, so that they all appear as lacking subjects. What's more, he makes clear that even the leader of the conspiracy who represents the American car

15. *Eyes Wide Shut* is much more an exploration of the fantasy life of the film's hero, Bill Harford (Tom Cruise), than it is an investigation of the secret authority of wealthy elites. It is even possible to read Harford's experience with the ritualistic orgy at a mansion as his own fantasy.

companies in their efforts to continue selling with impunity vehicles that pollute excessively is just a servant of capital. Mr. Big (Matt Damon) follows the logic of the commodity form, which the film shows is itself at the core of the conspiracy. Through this depiction, *No Sudden Move* turns the paranoid thriller off the path of paranoia and onto a critique of capitalism, which becomes apparent through its deployment of absence as that which points toward the invisible authority of capital. Mr. Big has no proper name in the film because he is nothing but the functionary of the capitalist system itself. Here it is the absence of a name within the filmic diegesis that points the paranoid thriller in a different direction.

For its part, the paranoid thriller erects a substantial, noncastrated authority by confining this authority to the absent field within the filmic world. As absent, it never becomes visibly lacking, in contrast to Mr. Big in *No Sudden Move*. In this sense, this genre reveals better than any other the political danger associated with absence in the cinema, which remains at once the site of cinema's potential radicality. Absence marks the point in a film in which spectators can see the limits of their vision. In the confrontation with filmic absence, they can see that they can't see everything. In so doing, they gain a unique insight into what ideology obfuscates. Everyday life gives us a social reality circumscribed by the power of ideology. Ideology prevents us from recognizing the contradictions that divide the social order and that point toward other political possibilities. When we confront absence in the cinema, we see that ideology doesn't have the answers that it promises.

Cinematic absence exposes social contradictions. But it does so only insofar as it does not suggest the existence of a hidden authority in the absent field. As long as absence besets authority rather than embodying it, it sustains its radical function in the cinema. But if what Jean-Pierre Oudart calls the Absent One becomes concretized as a hidden authority, cinema loses its potential for political radicality and becomes a breeding ground for paranoia. By injecting authority into the position of absence, cinema dramatically upends the political valence of absence. Cinema can allow us to see freedom in absence only as long as it keeps absence free from authority.

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