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## **A Geopolitical Mapping of the Post-9/11 World:**

### **Exploring Conspiratorial Knowledge Through *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *The Manchurian Candidate***

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper looks to illustrate the prominent role of conspiracy theory and practice in the postmodern geographical imagination through a study of conspiracy film, paying particular attention to films produced after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 as a defining moment in current understandings of the complex and unpredictable nature of contemporary global society. This paper begins by considering the emergence of conspiracy theory as an object of inquiry through the changing ways in which it has been positioned within academic accounts, from representing a symptom of personal paranoia to providing an alternative epistemological position. I utilize this latter re-imagining of conspiracy theory as a way of exploring popular attitudes towards the contemporary geopolitical landscape, specifically through the political conspiracy narratives within *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), films that in different ways subvert taken for granted forms of knowledge and official truth claims associated with the current 'war on terror'. Through discursive analysis of these films, I illustrate how a geographical engagement with conspiracy theory can initiate important considerations of knowledge production, identity, and risk in contemporary global society. In doing so, I position conspiracy theory as a form of popular geopolitical imagining and consider the extent to which the alternative geopolitical narratives constructed through conspiracy theory may be seen to challenge hegemonic representations of global politics.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

A SCRIPPS HOWARD/OHIO UNIVERSITY POLL conducted in January 2006 revealed that more than a third of Americans suspect federal officials either assisted in the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 terrorist attacks (henceforth '9/11'), or took no action to stop them,

in their bid to justify military action in the Middle East (Newspolls 2006)<sup>1</sup>. Fifty-four percent of those questioned in the poll also said they were “personally, more angry at the federal government” than previously, the highest level recorded in an 11-year trend study. This poll, conducted within a context of general public disillusionment with the US government over the ongoing Iraq war and absence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction<sup>2</sup>, suggests American citizens may have begun to view the events of 9/11 more critically amidst growing doubts over the veracity of the Bush administration.

In the emotional and political turmoil following the events of 9/11 media reports proclaimed ‘everything had changed’ and ‘nothing would be the same’, imposing a temporal division between the pre-9/11 world and what was to follow. Yet, the Bush administration’s subsequent pursuit of the ‘war on terror’<sup>3</sup> threw these claims into question, with political theorist Marilyn Young (2003) arguing that American foreign policy in the wake of 9/11 is essentially a continuation of its pre-existing unilateralist position. Only now, she suggests, the Bush administration has been able to pursue policies designed to sustain America’s power and sovereignty with less opposition than may previously have been encountered. Whether 9/11 should be regarded as a transitional moment in world history or another stage in the continual reworking and re-presentation of established geopolitical narratives (Smith 2004; Harvey 2005), clearly it has generated awareness of the contingent nature of the contemporary geopolitical landscape, and of the place of the US within this globally networked space.

Simon Dalby (2004, 69) suggests how 9/11 shattered the visage of America’s relative isolation and immunity from terrorist attack, bringing with it a recognition of the place of the US within a global ‘risk society’ where “the consequences of political actions in distant places can be presented as having come back to haunt America”. This complexity was rejected by the Bush administration, however, in favour of a geopolitical scripting where national innocence was maintained through positioning the US as victim of an unprecedented act of violence and thus, military retaliation as a morally justified course of action. If, as Dittmer (2005) suggests, the American public initially accepted and embraced this geopolitical scripting which justified the pursuit of a global ‘war on terror’ through the binary logic of ‘us vs. them’ and ‘good vs. evil’, then subsequent events in Iraq have seemingly catalysed an increased public questioning of US government motives, and of the forms of knowledge presented to the public as ‘truth’; a trend reflected in a post-9/11 manifestation of *conspiracy theory* as a form of geopolitical critique in US society.

In this paper, I consider how conspiracy theory as an alternative epistemic space of knowledge production has been deployed as one form of response to the events of 9/11 and to the subsequent changes that have occurred in the geopolitical landscape. Engaging with the geographical subfield of critical geopolitics, I look to analyse two particular films involving political conspiracy narratives<sup>4</sup> and consider the geopolitical imaginations these films construct: these are Michael Moore’s documentary *Fahrenheit*

9/11 (2004) and the Hollywood blockbuster remake *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004).

For Ó Tuathail and Dalby (1998, 4-5), critical geopolitics is a plurality of representational practices “diffused throughout societies” producing different geopolitical imaginations as they are variously consumed. Thus, while political conspiracy theories can be generated through the geopolitical discourse of governments and political institutions, in this paper I choose to focus on ‘popular’ geopolitical manifestations of conspiracy, specifically those produced through spaces of film following 9/11. I position conspiracy theory as a popular site of knowledge production through which alternative understandings of global space and society are produced. In doing so, I seek to consider how these popular geopolitical imaginings may challenge or subvert hegemonic narratives inscribed through official government discourse. Here I engage with work by geographers currently exploring the connections between popular culture and the production of hegemonic cultural values and understandings, within the medium of film (Dodds 2003, 2006; Power and Crampton 2005) as well as through novels, magazines, cartoons and comics (Dodds 1996; Sharp 2000; Dittmer 2005).

The importance of popular culture in shaping and framing people’s understandings and responses to geopolitical events continues to be recognised and explored by geographers, particularly following the visual ‘spectacle’ of 9/11:

“As millions of people watched the horrific spectacle of the Twin Towers collapsing after the September 11 terrorist attacks, many eyewitnesses and survivors compared their dramatic experiences to a variety of Hollywood movies. In many ways Hollywood movies provided a language and imagery that commentators drew upon in making sense of the attacks and their geopolitical implications” (Power and Crampton 2005, 193)

This process of co-opting audio-visual language to explain the events of 9/11 blurs the distinction between real and representational space, demonstrating how film can become “...a constitutive element in the production of political landscapes” (ibid, 197). This chimes with recent interventions by geographers employing poststructuralist/antiessentialist approaches that challenge the ontological basis of this real/reel binary, through demonstrating the role of film in actively shaping our understandings of the world (Cresswell and Dixon 2002; Aitken and Dixon 2006).

Taken together, *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *The Manchurian Candidate* appear to form part of what film critics have called a “newly politicised Hollywood” (Wood 2006), stemming from the concerns of liberal filmmakers such as Michael Moore, and recently George Clooney, regarding the contemporary geopolitical climate and the exercise of US power. This has been witnessed in the release of a number of ‘more serious’ mainstream films, such as *The Constant Gardener*, *Munich*, *Goodnight, and Good Luck*, and *Syriana*, and compared to the anti-establishment mood surrounding the Vietnam War and Watergate in the 1970s which found expression through films such as *All The*

*Presidents Men*, *The Conversation*, and *Apocalypse Now*. It is problematic to say that these recent films represent a particular 'trend' in filmmaking, rather they may reflect a moment when political film has become commercially viable and therefore 'mainstream' through coinciding with a public demand, or perhaps willingness, to openly engage with 'big' issues in the wake of 9/11.

The films I have chosen to focus on in this paper both explore issues of knowledge production and power relations in contemporary society. Both films critique, in different ways, the role of the US government and the mainstream news media in supplying the public with reliable 'knowledge' in the wake of 9/11 and the build up to the 'war on terror'. The 'conspiracy theory' in both of these films can therefore be considered a discourse which promotes a particular way of viewing and knowing about the world, or "...what is appropriate and reasonable to be thought and practised" (Dixon and Jones 2004, 85). In analysing *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *The Manchurian Candidate* I consider how the conspiracy discourses invoked through these filmic narratives work to construct particular types of knowledge and 'truth claims', and how these may compete with and contest the forms of knowledge produced through institutions such as the government or mainstream media. Further, I examine how the US government's 'official' geopolitical discourse of the 'war on terror' is relocated or "distilled" (Appleton 2002) to the more localised scales of the American small-town in *Fahrenheit 9/11* and the body in *The Manchurian Candidate*, where it is contested through the everyday lives and micro-politics of individual American citizens. These are therefore not isolated scales of activity, but embedded in larger geopolitical discourses regarding national security and risk, and constructions of national identity and patriotism; issues which have become increasingly visible and contested across the globe following 9/11.

The remainder of this paper is divided into two main sections. The following considers how conspiracy theory has been variously understood as an object of academic inquiry within the context of conspiracy theory's shifting status within wider society, from being viewed as a symptom of individual paranoia to its adoption in the 1990s as a popular attitude towards global events. I argue that conspiracy theory has come to provide an alternative epistemic space through which people may construct popular understandings of the changing geopolitical landscape, and this is demonstrated in section three through readings of the political-conspiracy films *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *The Manchurian Candidate*, drawing attention to the alternative narratives they construct about 9/11 and the ongoing 'war on terror'.

### THE RE-IMAGINING OF CONSPIRACY THEORY

It seems that conspiracy theories are everywhere in our increasingly interconnected global society, "a paradoxical but central feature of today's social surface" (Bell and Bennion-Nixon 2001, 147) permeating everyday life and popular culture. While the growth of an identifiable 'conspiracy culture' in Western, and particularly American, society has

been theorised as a phenomenon of recent decades (e.g., Dean 1998 and Knight 2000) conspiracy theories have long played an important role in US history, employed by politicians to foster political support through the identification of subversive elements and 'dangerous others' threatening the American way of life:

"The identity of the emerging state was shaped by the continual fear of sinister enemies, both real and imagined, both external and internal...tales about subversive forces ranging from Catholics to Communists, and from the Masons to the militias" (Knight 2000, 2)

This use of conspiracy in maintaining a 'politics of fear' has traditionally been associated with the political right in America (Berlet and Lyons 2000), visible in the McCarthy era of the 1950s where public belief in an internal communist-conspiracy was systematically produced and maintained through bodies such as the House Un-American Activities Committee and supported by public groups such as the ultra-conservative John Birch Society<sup>5</sup>. This group were a focus of Hofstadter's (1966) analysis of the 'paranoid style' in American politics, supporting his view that conspiratorial thought was the exclusive domain of an extremist right.

This image of conspiracy theory as 'fringe' beliefs, united by their paranoid character and chiefly the preserve of right-wing militia groups has persisted to an extent in both academic and popular accounts (e.g. Showalter 1998). It has also been problematised; with Knight (2000) arguing that Hofstadter's appraisal is no longer sufficient in contemporary Western societies where conspiracy theories are increasingly recognized as valid and popular forms of expression. Indeed, following the revelations of Watergate in particular, both cynicism and skepticism regarding 'official accounts' presented by governments and/or security services are increasingly default public attitudes. Knight (2000) considers the growing cultural significance of conspiracy discourse in relation to widespread social and political trends in US society, suggesting how the relative stability and 'secure paranoia' provided by the Cold War gave way to a sense of widespread uncertainty, with conspiracy theorising an everyday attempt to make sense of this rapidly changing world. This is similarly reflected within geopolitical discourse where, within the last two decades, a variety of interrelated processes under the rubric of globalization have reworked and re-imagined the boundaries of the geopolitical landscape, establishing new levels of interconnectivity that transcend national borders (Ó Tuathail 1998).

Within this 'postmodern political world' (ibid) potential threats to both national and individual security have become less clearly defined, with the threatening 'other' now located both without and within the borders of the nation state. This was illustrated by the terrorist bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995 by Timothy McVeigh, a Gulf War veteran and "heartland hero", whose recasting as 'terrorist' served to destabilize secure narratives of national identity based around this inside/outside

imagining of the geopolitical landscape (Sparke 1998). Shifts in public perceptions of 'threat' brought about by Oklahoma were reflected in a number of subsequent Hollywood films such as *Arlington Road* (1999), where the threat of terrorism became located within suburban white America.

Fredric Jameson explicitly connects conspiracy theory to this geopolitical context of late capitalist society, arguing conspiracy theories provide a "...poor person's cognitive mapping" of the post-modern world (1988, 356) in their flawed attempt to understand and represent the enormity of "an increasing technologically sophisticated global network" (Harper 2008, 20). In Jameson's account, conspiracy theory diverts attention away from the true causes of oppression in society through constructing a mistakenly ideological form of knowledge. Developments in post-modern theory have, however, led to a growing volume of work attempting to articulate this relationship between the conspiratorial imagination and postmodernity in ways that challenge Jameson's totalising account.

An increasing academic engagement with 'conspiracy theory' emerged from the late 1990s, and mainly from cultural and American studies scholars (e.g. Knight 2000, 2002; Dean 1998; Fenster 1999) with little direct impact on geography (c.f. Sibley 1995; Ruddick 2004 on 'monstrous knowledges'). A number of theorists have directly taken issue with Jameson's theorisation, with Fran Mason (2002), for example, questioning his assertion that there is a 'truth' about society that we can ever rationally access through cognitive mapping. Indeed, in a number of accounts, conspiracy is considered less a sign of paranoia and more often an expression of a self-knowing, and in some cases ironic, stance towards the very possibilities of knowledge and truth in contemporary society; embodied in Mulder's search for 'truth' in the *X-Files* (Knight 2000; Bell and Bennion-Nixon 2001).

And yet, it would be reductionist to suggest this desire to confront apparently dominant narratives, coupled with a destabilized sense of belonging, justifies labelling conspiracy theory a thoroughly 'postmodern' form of knowledge. This is because conspiracy discourse has also been founded upon a history of fears over the sanctity of the individual bodily subject, manifest in contemporary narratives concerning alien abduction and experimentation, implants and mind control, and new forms of virus and pathogens. Indeed, in spite of characterisations of conspiracy as representative of the 'post-modern condition' in blurring the ontological certainty of 'truth', as a form of knowledge it can be highly conservative and reactionary. Conspiracy theories often seek to impose a modernist order through the demarcation of an identifiable 'other' acting against the interests of the self, and against whom the identity of the self is reaffirmed. This attempt at order is continually undermined, however, as there is always the inherent possibility of a further conspiracy at work; of betrayal and deceit, traitors and infiltrators.

This 'epistemology of suspicion' (Dean 2002) informs a perspective from which the world cannot be interpreted at face value nor comprehended based on surface appearance

alone, but is constituted through hidden depths of power and influence. In this way, conspiracy discourse establishes causality and intentionality amongst circumstances and events that might ordinarily be considered random, coincidental or accidental; where everything is significant of something else and therefore taken as evidence of a larger whole. These apparently dual modernist and post-modernist characteristics of conspiracy discourse make it “notoriously epistemologically ambiguous” (Harper 2008, 19); based on the production of knowledge but also constituted through a lack of knowledge, and posited as fringe beliefs yet often grounded in scientific or political discourse.

To sum up, conspiracy theory is concerned with how we come to know the world and with questioning or challenging the foundations upon which accepted forms of knowledge and ‘truth’ have been based. And yet, conspiracy is not an isolated site of knowledge production, but establishes itself as an epistemic space through its relationships with other bodies of knowledge such as mainstream science, the media, politics, as well as popular accounts of the paranormal, UFOism and folklore. Conspiracy is situated, contextual and highly subjective, as individual theorists weave narratives from these variety of influences and sources of information to create an explanatory chronology of events. It is this very subjectivity and partiality that some theorists see as conspiracy’s real political potential, with Dean (1998) celebrating paranoia as a form of popular dissent that breaks the reliance on ‘expert’ knowledge while Fenster (1999) also views conspiracy, through its challenging of government secrecy, as a democratic impulse towards openness and justice.

This would seem to coincide with a more visible engagement with conspiracy discourse by the political left in Western societies, incorporated into anti-globalisation debates emerging from the late 1990s and critiques of the current Bush administration following 9/11. Conspiracy theories alleging the involvement of the US government in the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon began to circulate on the Internet in the days and weeks after, and have increased in visibility and support in the preceding years through the internet-facilitated growth of the ‘9/11 Truth Movement’. This is a network of predominantly American citizens who campaign on the belief that the official government narrative of 9/11 is false and that further investigation is needed<sup>6</sup>.

This contemporary manifestation of conspiracy theory as a (geo)political critique of the Bush administration has been shaped by, and is very much specific to, the particular socio-political and technological context of post-9/11 America. In particular, the Internet has now provided individuals with instant access to an overwhelming network of information, opinion, rumour and knowledge through which to ‘evidence’ their conspiratorial claims, as well as fuelling the formation of new ones. With the mainstream media in the US generally supportive of the Bush administration’s post-9/11 agenda, citizens disseminating conspiratorial beliefs related to 9/11 have utilised participatory Internet technologies such as forums, web blogs, Internet radio and video-

sharing software to advance their claims to a potentially global audience. The success of this strategy is evidenced by 9/11 conspiracy film *Loose Change* which was independently made using a laptop and registered an estimated 10 million viewings within one year of being made freely accessible on Google Video (Sales 2006).

Thus, with new media technologies facilitating the dissemination of conspiracy theories which challenge the veracity of knowledge presented to the public by both the US government and mainstream news networks, it is interesting to consider how the 'mass media' of cinema can itself be utilised as a space through which to interrogate hegemonic truth claims. Questions of representation and knowledge production are further explored in the following section, through analysis of the political-conspiracy films *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *The Manchurian Candidate*.

#### FILMING CONSPIRACY THEORY AFTER SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the following wars in Afghanistan and Iraq could not fail to have an impact on the American and international film industries, with a rash of war films produced shortly after including *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001) and *We Were Soldiers* (2002). By 2004 George Bush was declaring "mission accomplished" in Iraq and a political mood dominated at the Cannes Film Festival of that year, showcasing films such as *The Motorcycle Diaries*, *Salvador Allende*, and Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* which won the grand jury prize. The same year also saw the release of the conspiracy thrillers *Spartan* and *The Manchurian Candidate* remake, films that in different ways question the ruthlessness of the political establishment.

*Fahrenheit 9/11* and *The Manchurian Candidate* both raise questions about the Bush administration's handling of 9/11 and its aftermath through different filmic genres, those of documentary film and political/conspiracy thriller, and in so doing, work to challenge some of the conventions of those respective genres. I will expand on this briefly as a means to introducing the films, before proceeding to discuss the narrative functioning of conspiracy and the alternative knowledge claims produced. Finally, I will consider the use of geographic scale in both films as a means through which to situate their respective critiques of the US government's hegemonic 'war on terror' discourse.

#### ***Fahrenheit 9/11* and *The Manchurian Candidate*: Blurring Fact into Fiction?**

*Fahrenheit 9/11* is an independent documentary, written and directed by Michael Moore, focusing on the Bush administration's handling of 9/11 and its aftermath, and with the central claim that the American public have been lied to by their own government. The film is organised along a narrative principle, as Moore tells the story of the Bush administration to date, focusing on the relationship of George W. Bush's business and political interests to the geopolitics of 9/11, and to issues of class and race in contemporary America. In doing so, he provides the audience with an explanatory history of those

events that differs from official narratives of 'American innocence' by seeking out connections and power relations between various global actors that preceded the 9/11 attacks. The film was heavily criticised upon release by right-wing commentators for its deliberate subversion of the perceived expectations of documentary film in constructing a politically biased account of its subject matter. Despite these criticisms, *Fahrenheit 9/11* proved to be a commercial success, with Mintz (2005) suggesting Michael Moore has become a central figure in a recent return to popularity of documentary film in the United States more broadly. *Fahrenheit 9/11* established numerous US box office records for a documentary film, including highest-grossing documentary in its opening weekend and the first ever documentary to cross the \$100 million mark<sup>7</sup>.

Moore previously wrote and directed the documentaries *Roger and Me* and *Bowling for Columbine*, though was perhaps most familiar to American audiences for the satirical, anti-corporate television programme *TV Nation* (See Alderman and Popke 2002). Already championed as a spokesman of the left-leaning American public, *Fahrenheit 9/11* presented a vastly personal and scathing attack on George Bush and his key players, a style of documentary filmmaking also displayed in his previous works (See Natter and Jones 1993)<sup>8</sup>. Toplin (2006) argues that in this regard, Moore is following in a well-established US documentary tradition beginning in the depression-era of opinionated and 'committed' filmmaking (see Fig. 1).

*The Manchurian Candidate* on the other hand, is primarily a fictional film, billed as a Hollywood blockbuster with an all-star cast, director, and budget to match. Director Jonathan Demme set out to make a paranoid, political thriller with his contemporary remake of the original 1962 film, focusing on the mental unravelling of his hero Ben Marco (Denzel Washington) as he tries to regain his own sanity and the 'true' version of history that's been hidden from him by elements within his own government. Viewed as a 'maverick' filmmaker within the Hollywood system, Demme has managed to combine both critical and commercial appeal in many of his films<sup>9</sup>, winning the Best Director Oscar for *The Silence of the Lambs*, and it is shades of that film's intense psychological tone that appear to have influenced *The Manchurian Candidate's* narrative structure and characterisation.



**Figure 1**  
*Michael Moore addressing a rally where he called George Bush "a deserter" and questioned his patriotism.*

*Image from Fahrenheit 9/11 DVD, Optimum Releasing 2004.*

The film draws on the generic conventions of a political/conspiracy thriller, yet also incorporates elements of science fiction in a storyline involving a high-level political conspiracy to establish a 'sleeper' in the White House, in the guise of false military hero Raymond Shaw (Liev Shreiber). Shaw, along with commanding officer Ben Marco and their unit, were captured during Operation Desert Storm in the first Gulf War, undergoing brain washing and the insertion of mind-control implants during their captivity. Shaw becomes the 'Manchurian Candidate', with the false testimony of his brainwashed colleagues boosting his subsequent political career through party nominations for a new vice-presidential candidate all the way to the Presidential election itself.

*The Manchurian Candidate* therefore relies on the audience 'playing along' with the conventions of a Hollywood film; suspending their disbelief and cynicism so as to enter the imaginative spaces the film constructs. At the same time, the film could be viewed as a subversive take on contemporary politics and direct indictment of the Bush administration. This is evident from the opening sequence where Wyclef Jean's contemporary cover of the anti-Vietnam War song *Fortunate Son* plays over shots of a group of young, ethnically mixed American soldiers in Iraq, to the final line "There's always casualties in war, sir", questioning the government's exploitation of American soldiers for commercial profit. While primarily a fictional narrative designed to entertain and make money, film critic Stephen Dalton suggests *The Manchurian Candidate* feels like current social commentary through references to "regime change", "no-bid contracts", and "civilian contractors", phrases used repeatedly in the media coverage of the war in Iraq (2004, 56).

Thus, it has been suggested that both of these films "...blur fact into fiction" (Dalton 2004, 55-56) in the way they utilise contemporary events, opinion, conjecture, and belief to form a narrative that pertains to construct an alternative vision or knowledge about the way society 'really' functions. I will now consider how these 'alternative visions' are produced through both films' respective conspiracy narratives.

### *Producing Conspiratorial Knowledge*

Scott (2000, 104) argues 1970s paranoia films such as *The Conversation* and *The Parallax View* "...truly left their audience gasping at the collapsing moral certainties surrounding the protagonists". In his analysis of the later film, Jameson (1992, 58) also comments on the 'postmodern' refusal of "some older 'positive' hero" which denies a heroic resolution to the conspiracy plot, suggesting the secretive forces operating in society may be too powerful to be resisted. However, two years later, *All the Presidents Men* (1976) was presenting a clearer moral imperative as it recreated the events that led *Washington Post* reporters to uncover the Watergate scandal. Interestingly, both *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *The Manchurian Candidate* appear to draw on this later form of what could be termed the 'heroic' conspiracy narrative, where a 'truth' is uncovered by the films' respective

protagonists; yet the extent to which this enables resistance against the conspiratorial perpetrators is less clear.

Michael Moore serves as the central protagonist in his own film, embodying the role of investigative journalist and campaigning political activist as *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s narrator and in front of camera in a number of key confrontational scenes. Moore uses the documentary format of *Fahrenheit 9/11* to lay out the evidence he believes proves that the Bush administration were involved in a conspiracy to use the events of 9/11 as a pretext for launching a long-planned war on Iraq so as to secure its lucrative oil wealth. Furthermore, it gained public consensus for the war by duping the US public into believing there existed a genuine threat of further terror attacks and the existence of weapons of mass destruction. The way Moore builds his argument follows the general logic of conspiracy discourse in that he circumvents standard cause/effect mechanisms to work out the conclusion, or who benefits, first, before then seeking out the causes for this a priori effect<sup>10</sup>. Thus, for the first half of the film Moore pieces together the information he believes proves that the US administration conspired against the American people, intercutting archive footage, new reports and interviews with various 'expert' sources in order to illustrate the connections between members of the Bush administration and their various business interests in companies such as Halliburton, whom he shows have benefited financially from the war in Iraq.

In this way, conspiracy theory in *Fahrenheit 9/11* is used to respond to the contemporary geopolitical landscape through undertaking a mapping of complexity; drawing connections between people and places across spaces and times to establish a network of relations, influence and power, "...linking the lives of ordinary people to the global machinations of oil-rich plutocrats and a superpower's imperial hubris" (Dear 2004, 925). This constructs a more contingent understanding of global politics, where the actions of State elites are entangled with, and directly influence, the everyday lives of citizens in a way which seems to challenge the macro-scale scripting of the 'war on terror'<sup>11</sup>. Thus, the second half of the film is conducted at a slower pace, with longer takes creating a more observational style, as Moore visits his hometown of Flint to speak to young African-American men targeted by army recruiters, as well as to bereaved mother Lila Lipscombe whose son was killed in Iraq.

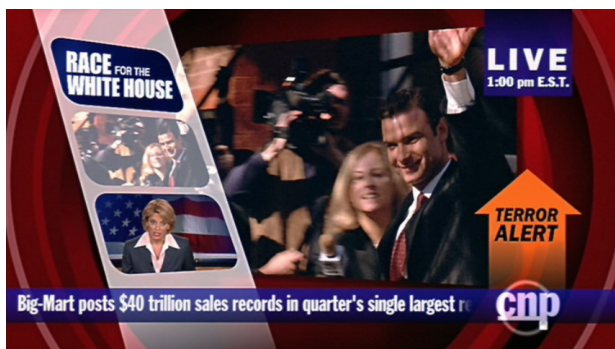
Similarly in *The Manchurian Candidate*, the film's narrative follows flawed protagonist Captain Ben Marco on a heroic quest for truth, embodying the role of detective in the same tradition as Michael Moore, as he pieces together information to establish a linear narrative history of events that will explain what really happened to him in Iraq. Marco embarks on a metaphorical and literal journey as he moves through the landscapes of Washington and New York, intruding on the privatised spaces of political and corporate power in his attempts to uncover the conspiracy at work.

John Frankheimer's original 1962 *Manchurian Candidate* was a Cold War satire playing on the paranoia surrounding both communist infiltration and right-wing

McCarthyite extremism in US society; deliberately leaving its audience unsure as to the target of its critique. Contemporary parallels have been drawn between this manipulation of public fears by the US State in the McCarthy-era and the post-9/11 domestic security policies of the Bush administration (Katz 2006). Yet Demme's remake eschews any sense of post-modern irony or uncertainty, focusing instead on the personal journey of his cinematic protagonist Ben Marco and his search for truth and clarity. In this sense, the remake seems to gesture more in style towards the 1970s post-Watergate conspiracy thrillers, reflecting a growing sense of public mistrust in the US government and their misuse of power for corporate gain.

*The Manchurian Candidate* also presents a more complex take on the contemporary geopolitical landscape through demonstrating how the Bush administration's pursuit of the 'war on terror' wasn't simply a response to 9/11, but motivated by pre-existing business interests. While the title of the original film referred to Manchuria in China, viewed at the time as the single greatest threat to world stability, the remake refers to a multinational corporation, Manchurian Global, which profits from war and influences the politics of the United States and thus the world. This has been seen as a direct reference to the companies Halliburton and The Carlyle Group and the influence they are able to exert at the top levels of government through figures such as Vice President Dick Cheney, a former chairman of Halliburton (Hoberman 2004). A line from the film refers to Raymond Shaw being "the first fully owned and operated vice-president in the United States," a direct allusion to Cheney that challenges the morality of his position.

This conflict of interests also extends to the role of the media within what has been termed the 'military-industrial-media complex', due to the close financial and social ties between large media corporations and both the military industry and Washington's foreign-policy establishment (Soloman 2005). These 'shared interests' were evident in the largely pro-war sentiment dominating the US mainstream media during the build up and invasion of Iraq in 2003, with difficult issues such as the role of US military and business interests in previously arming Saddam Hussein largely overlooked (ibid). In an interview about *The Manchurian Candidate*, director Jonathan Demme drew attention to this issue through criticising the level of debate in the US media in regard to the war in Iraq (cited in Thompson 2004). This is addressed in the film's conspiracy narrative through the representation of the media as an entertainment industry, constructing over the top media clips that discuss the presidential race in the same style as a sports event, debating the relative merits of the key players. These clips and sound bites are edited into the already complex and multi-layered narrative as part of the action, while an almost continuous background noise of media chatter and bulletins adds to the film's soundtrack (see Fig. 2). This pervasive power of the media in the lives of ordinary people is a discursive and visual feature of both *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*. In the former film this is explored through the character of Marco, seen alone in his



**Figure 2**

Media coverage of the 'Race for the White House' showing vice-presidential candidate Raymond Shaw (Liev Shreiber)

Image from *The Manchurian Candidate* DVD, Paramount Pictures 2004.

apartment watching TV as the camera shot focuses in on his face, bathed in light reflected from the screen, with the voices from the TV permeating Marco's consciousness as they talk of "the war on terror continuing for another year" and America's need to "take care of our own house".

In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Michael Moore also seeks to demonstrate the complicity of the mainstream media with the government in nurturing a 'climate of fear' regarding the risk of further terror attacks against the US homeland, and thus the need for domestic security legislation. Clips of news stories revealing potential terror attacks coming from sources as unlikely as ferries and model airplanes are edited together, stories that Congressman Jim McDermott is shown suggesting to Moore were central in "...creating an aura of endless threat" and legitimating the need to launch a war against Iraq. Once this need for war was established, Moore illustrates the media's generally unquestioning support for it, editing together further clips of biased and gung ho war reporting.

In this way, both films demonstrate how public belief in the necessity for the 'war on terror' to be waged both overseas and at home was discursively produced by the US government, and maintained through the complicity of the mainstream media; Michael Moore includes media footage showing George Bush and his aides repeating the same phrases related to the 'war on terror' over and over, while *The Manchurian Candidate* features characters delivering similar rhetoric-filled political speeches about protecting America from her enemies, words which become increasingly meaningless with each repetition. Thus, by demonstrating how this hegemonic discourse came to be constructed based on the manipulation of public fears its truth claims are denaturalised and opened up to scrutiny.

In *The Manchurian Candidate*, this critique of contemporary geopolitics is manifest through the obvious contemporary parallels yet is not directly voiced by the protagonist Marco, who remains entrenched within the cinematic conspiracy plot. In contrast, Michael Moore communicates to his audience from a 'knowing position', as one who is already aware of the conspiracy at work, allowing him to reflect satirically on the character of Bush and his administration in carrying out this deceit. For example, shots of Bush using the phrase "smoke him out" in reference to Osama Bin Laden are

intercut with a scene from a Western where a cowboy uses the same phrase as an allusion to Bush's character as gung-ho, reckless and aggressive. This plays into a wider (geo) political trope which Cohn (2007) describes as Bush ruling over a 'Cowboy Republic' from the head of his neo-conservative 'gang', abusing their position of power and flouting the law through an expansionist foreign policy of illegal occupation.

Humour is a strategy Moore uses throughout *Fahrenheit 9/11* to communicate his argument to a wider audience, deployed through his dual roles as narrator and humorous character within the film itself (Toplin 2006). This is crucial, as while challenging the ontological basis of official forms of knowledge, conspiracy theories seek to establish support for their own knowledge claims. Moore builds a body of alternative knowledge by continually questioning the actions of those in power and the explanations they offer: "What was going on here?", "Where did this money come from?" This raises the possibility of an alternative explanation, before then providing the information to apparently 'prove' it, and reveals one of the central contradictions in conspiracy theory. While eschewing the need to prove a theory to be ultimately 'true', conspiracy discourse draws on other bodies of knowledge such as science, politics, and 'expert' opinion in order to demonstrate the plausibility of its accounts of the world.

This reliance on expert knowledge could be seen to undermine conspiracy theory as a form of 'alternative' critique, and this is further demonstrated by Moore who, as the hero of his film, presents the 'truth' of the Bush administration's conspiring to his audience. While this may leave the audience more knowledgeable, it also reaffirms the agency of the US State by saying that it is powerful and, through implied intentionality, competent enough to have enacted a conspiracy against you. Similarly, in *The Manchurian Candidate*, the successful uncovering of the conspiracy plot by the film's protagonist presents its audience with an awareness of how corporate interests shape contemporary global politics. This may encourage more critical reflection on the contemporary geopolitical landscape, yet it offers no real sense of how this reality may be resisted or indeed, changed<sup>12</sup>.

This illustrates the potential difficulties of adopting conspiracy discourse as a form of political critique, as through their geopolitical mapping of global complexity these post-9/11 conspiracy narratives construct what appears to be an overwhelming vision of the influences shaping the lives of citizens both in the US, and across the world. Yet, as a means to making this 'totality' more comprehensible, both films look to distil geopolitical discourses of the 'war on terror' through scales of social activity more immediate to the fears and anxieties of US citizens, and through which connections between individual lives and global politics can be established.

### *Scaling Geopolitical Critique*

The small-town holds a distinct place in the American collective identity and geographical imagination as a spatial embodiment of traditional American values. It is

an image used in numerous films, notably *It's A Wonderful Life*, as well as to satirical effect in *Pleasantville*. Dittmer (2005, 634) suggests the small-town is associated with an idea of the American 'Heartland' and a sense of "territorialized nationalism", where a common connection to the nation is grounded in this imagined landscape. In *Fahrenheit 9/11* Michael Moore grounds sections of his narrative in this terrain and thus, similarly looks to engage with the mood of the nation at large.

Moore illustrates how the deterritorialized nature of the Al Qaeda network allowed the government and media to manipulate the US population into believing the possibility of terror attacks occurring at the small-town scale: "From Tappahannock to Rappahannock to every town and village in America, the people were afraid. And they turned to their leader to protect them. But, protect them from what?" Moore is able to suggest that the Bush administration has been 'un-American' in manipulating the residents of those small-towns, through destabilizing the secure notions of place-based identity and community grounded in this landscape.

Moore himself claims to be a patriot, someone who loves his country, and thus his motivation for making this film is to see that country restored to a former and better version of itself (see again Fig. 1). He deliberately positions himself as a 'man of the people', reinforced through his casual blue-collar appearance, in contrast to politicians he interviews, and through visiting patriotic families in his working-class hometown of Flint, Michigan. This patriotic discourse is targeted to nurture a sense of collective identity with the American audience watching, providing a contrast between this 'real' inherent patriotism of the American people and the manipulative use of nationalistic discourses by the American government in the wake of 9/11. In this way, patriotism is also reclaimed from its hegemonic scripting as unconditional support for the 'war on terror' and recast as a space from which to challenge the actions of a corrupt government.

In contrast to this focus on the 'Heartland', a number of the film's set pieces occur amongst the urban, symbolic landscape of Washington D.C.; shown to be populated by those making decisions that affect the lives of ordinary people yet distanced from the consequences. In one of the final scenes, Moore films grieving mother Lila Lipscombe visiting the exterior of the White House, referring to it as, "a place to put all my pain and all my anger and to release it" (see Fig. 3). This sets up a moral ordering of space, between the small-town, working class values of real places like Flint, embodied by Lila and her affective performance of grief, in contrast to the faceless buildings of Washington DC that represent power and corruption, and conspiracies past and present.

In *The Manchurian Candidate* this patriotic American 'public' appear as a passive, collective body subject to the political and media rhetoric fed to them, yet the character of Marco is the embodied public figure, "the individual body...connected into larger networks of meaning" (Cresswell 1999, 176). Marco is an already damaged man, diagnosed with acute paranoia and Gulf War syndrome following his military experiences, and now haunted by visions of an alternative past. Marco struggles to regain control over



**Figure 3**  
*Lila Lipscombe visiting the outside of the White House.*

*Image from Fahrenheit 9/11 DVD, Optimum Releasing 2004.*

his life and his memories, yet his mental state continues to deteriorate as he finds an implant imbedded in his shoulder and evidence he is being watched (see Fig. 4). Marco discovers the implant was inserted into him by scientists working for Manchurian Global, operating via a vocal trigger mechanism to induce him into a compliant and controllable mental state. This discovery forces Marco to find ways of reasserting his individual agency in order to uncover and resist the film's conspiracy plot, and in this way, the bodily scale becomes the battleground where the conspiracy is to be contested.

Risk associated with the bodily scale is a common discursive theme within conspiracy theory, and specifically Fran Mason suggests mind-control discourses such as that in *The Manchurian Candidate*, "...enact a cognitive mapping of real fears and anxieties in the age of corporations and multinational capital" (2002, 49), reflecting feelings of disempowerment in society and anxieties over issues such as identity theft and surveillance. Knight (2000) argues that the body is no longer a stable source of metaphors for national politics in view of the instability of the individual subject in contemporary global society. However, conspiratorial discourses reflecting 'body panic' do suggest a degree of connectedness between the individual body and the body politic.

If we read Marco as representative of the US body politic, then Demme uses his appearance of having been 'damaged' by his experiences in the Gulf War to suggest that the American national psyche has been permanently impacted upon by the collective experience of 9/11 and the 'war on terror'. The struggle over individual identity forms a



**Figure 4**  
*Ben Marco (Denzel Washington) finds a surveillance camera hidden in his apartment.*

*Image from The Manchurian Candidate DVD, Paramount Pictures 2004.*

central discursive theme of *The Manchurian Candidate* as Marco tries to establish dream from reality, a motif also seen in *Fahrenheit 9/11* through Michael Moore's opening line "Was it all just a dream?" Both films raise the issue of America's ability to recover from the 'nightmare' of the Bush administration and reclaim a positive sense of national identity, following what many see as the tarnishing of that identity globally by the ongoing war in Iraq and subsequent revelations of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. Similarly, the manipulation of Marco's individual body through implants to further Manchurian Global's conspiracy plot represents a critique of the way in which the US government and mainstream media have 'brainwashed' the US population into relative submissiveness following 9/11. Yet Marco also exhibits individual agency in his search for 'truth', constructing an alternative account of events based on subjective experience that disputes the official forms of knowledge he had previously been led to accept. Thus, while he may never fully recover from his past experiences, he fights to resist the controlling influence of corporate and political power over his own life. Is this the narrative trope of a Hollywood good guy battling the system or a rallying call to the American public, or perhaps both?

## CONCLUSIONS

I began this essay by proposing the terrorist attacks of 9/11 have generated a greater public awareness of the contingent nature of the contemporary geopolitical landscape. Conspiracy theory has provided one particular way in which to engage with this increasing sense of global connectivity, functioning as a *critical epistemic space* of knowledge production through which individuals may produce alternative accounts of contemporary events based on partial and situated knowledge, and which may in turn challenge dominant assumptions about the way society 'really' functions. With the ongoing 'war on terror' used to legitimate increased US government surveillance and control of the public sphere, new developments in Internet technologies have provided an outlet for these alternative and oppositional viewpoints to be expressed and widely disseminated. In addition, the films analysed in this paper illustrate how cinema as a mass media format can be used to reach a large audience with views and opinions that seek to contest hegemonic geopolitical representations reinforced within the mainstream media itself.

Film can act as today's cognitive maps of "meaning creation and identity formation" (Luckinbeal 2004, 247), with the popular geopolitical narratives of film providing the language and frames of reference for our understandings of contemporary global society. The tagline of recent conspiracy thriller *Syriana* stated, "Everything is connected"<sup>13</sup>, and similarly both *Fahrenheit 9/11* and *The Manchurian Candidate* construct alternative narrative accounts of 9/11 and the pursuit of the 'war on terror' which draw attention to the spatial and temporal networks of actors, finance, goods, and power relations bound up with these events. In doing so, they present a more complex understanding of the

geopolitical landscape that moves beyond the binary logic of the 'war on terror' scripting to demonstrate how the decisions made in the spaces of political and corporate power have far reaching consequences for a variety of actors across the globe. Within this more relational understanding of global space<sup>14</sup>, contemporary discourses of global terror, risk, identity, and knowledge are shown to be lived and contested at geographical scales from individual bodies and small-towns, to nation states, multinational organizations and across global society at large.

Conspiracy can therefore be seen as a form of knowledge that is not only *expressive* of the conditions of contemporary society, but also very much a part of the *construction* of that society, and through its manifestation in film can shape our geographical imaginations of the world around us.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>36% of respondents in the national survey of 1,010 adults said it is "very likely" or "somewhat likely" that federal officials either participated in the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon or took no action to stop them "because they wanted the United States to go to war in the Middle East."

<sup>2</sup>A Newsweek poll conducted in March 2006 gave President Bush a job approval rating of 36%, falling to 31% in November 2006, before registering only 28% job approval when polled again by Newsweek in May 2007, the lowest levels of confidence in the office of President since 1979.

<sup>3</sup>The phrase 'war on terror' was used by the Bush administration to define their post-September 11th strategy of combating the threat of terrorism. In April 2006 President Bush described this ongoing strategy as "...an ideological struggle with an enemy that despises freedom and pursues totalitarian aims"

<sup>4</sup>The 1970s saw a body of films reflecting Cold War based paranoia in the US and increasing anxieties related to the misuse of State Power, culminating in the Watergate Scandal of 1974 and a rash of conspiracy films such as *All the Presidents Men* (1976) and *The Parallax View* (1974). The conspiracy genre in film appeared to come of age, however, with the release of *Conspiracy Theory* in 1997, a film that marks the extent to which conspiracy has become a "self conscious phenomenon" (Knight, 2000) where the central character successfully uncovers a conspiracy plot, as ironically, one of his paranoid theories comes true. This playful post-modern take on conspiracy contrasts with the earlier body of 1970s films, where the central protagonists were increasingly powerless to resist or uncover the sinister forces at work.

<sup>5</sup>The John Birch Society were originally formed in 1958, positioning themselves as protectors of the freedoms guaranteed in the United States Constitution and thus opposed to the collectivism they saw promoted through communist and socialist ideologies. Spark (2001) notes similarities in the reactionary stance of right-wing militia groups in the 1990s in response to President Bush senior's talk of a post-Cold War 'New World Order,' perceived to be part of a 'globalist conspiracy' to incorporate America into an undesirable world state.

<sup>6</sup>This movement is not homogenous in its political views, ranging from left-wing peace activists to a strong strand of libertarianism, yet is united around a belief that members of the Bush

administration either had foreknowledge of, or were actively involved in orchestrating, the events of 9/11. Through ongoing protest activity, conferences, academic research, dedicated web sites, and the Internet-based release and dissemination of films such as *Loose Change* and *9/11 Mysteries*, the Truth Movement have developed and made public a body of knowledge to support their central claim that '9/11 was an inside job'. I have carried out research on the 9/11 Truth Movement for my PhD and presented several recent conferences papers on various aspects of this. For more details, please feel free to contact me via email at [ljjo0@aber.ac.uk](mailto:ljjo0@aber.ac.uk).

<sup>7</sup>See the Internet Movie database entry for *Fahrenheit 9/11* for detailed box office figures.

<sup>8</sup>This was discussed by Natter and Jones (1993) in relation to *Roger and Me* which had also been dismissed by critics on the grounds that it wasn't an 'objective documentary' due to the openly political stance to the subject matter. They argue, however, that this quality makes Moore's film more 'objective' than a "supposedly factual documentary" (Ibid, 150) that hides its biases behind a veneer of impartiality.

<sup>9</sup>Demme also directed AIDS-centred drama *Philadelphia* and adapted Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*

<sup>10</sup>Thanks to one of the anonymous Aether reviewers whose comments on a previous draft of this paper have helped me clarify this point.

<sup>11</sup>This is possibly more evident in the film *Syriana* (2006), directed by Stephen Gaghan, which is a complex conspiracy thriller with several interrelated plots concerning Middle-Eastern oil and demonstrating the human consequences of the pursuit of wealth and power.

<sup>12</sup>The film actually ends with an illustration of the malleability of knowledge, as the FBI doctor CCTV images which are then released through the media, implicating Manchurian Global in a political assassination and leading to the corporation's suggested downfall. So while a heroic resolution to the conspiracy plot is seemingly provided, this act raises further question to the issues already raised in the film over the reliability of forms of knowledge the public receives from 'official' sources such as the government, security services, science, and particularly the media.

<sup>13</sup>See note 10

<sup>14</sup>This popular spatial imagining draws some interesting parallels to be further explored with geographers utilising metaphors of networks and flows, and models of complexity, to imagine the functioning of global society as interconnected and relational (See Sheller, 2004; Urry, 2003).

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