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Towards a narrative definition of the American political thriller film

Abstract

The Hollywood political thriller is a film genre of unique relevance in the United States, often acting as a reflection of the fears and anxieties of its historical times. At the same time, however, the definition of its identity and boundaries still leaves room for further specification, perhaps due to the frequent consideration of the political thriller as part of the broader categories of either thriller narratives or political films. By revising the available literature and filmography and analyzing the narrative features of the classical political thriller, this article proposes a deeper definition of the genre that takes into account the nature of the broader 'thriller' category of films springing from a specific mode of crime fiction that focuses on a victim or threatened individual as its protagonist, depicts and conveys intense emotional states, portrays an unbalanced and highly existentialist worldview, and travels into the extraordinary while at the same time holding on to very concrete expectations of verisimilitude. The political thriller specifies this broader form of narration and links it to dramatic conflicts of political nature, investigative plots, reactive characters, historically grounded antagonists, a proximity to the sociopolitical history of the United States, and a certain iconography relating to institutional power. By establishing the main narrative traits of the political thriller, this definition hopes to lay the foundations for a better understanding of the genre, its history, and its seeming renaissance at the onset of the 21st Century.

Keywords
Political thriller, film genre, Hollywood film, United States history, film narrative analysis

1. Introduction

The political thriller is a relevant genre both as a specific form of thriller narratives in film and television, as well as a particular kind of political text. Besides, the political thriller in Hollywood appears as an important cultural artifact, displaying a close connection between its narratives and the current events at any given point in the history of the United

States. These three aspects —the "thriller" narrative mode, political content in film or television texts, and their proximity with the historical environment— have a unique relationship of mutuality. Coyne has pointed out that both thrillers and political films are "essentially fluid" categories in the sense that they allow for a great variety of texts within their scope, while at the same time sharing an inclination to establish a dialogue with "the temper of the times, effortlessly absorbing contemporary political themes and issues" (Coyne, 2008: 9-10).

It is true, however, that there is notable difficulty in attempting to build a characterization of what the political thriller is as a genre, in good measure because of the preexisting disagreement on the notion of thriller itself. The concept of thriller as an overarching, broader category has been indeed traditionally unclear, or at least, its definitions have varied between authors, its boundaries often blurred, overlapped, and hybridized with other genres. As an example, if one consults the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) at any given time, and lists all films under the "thriller" category by largest box office performance in the U.S., the results show a surprising heterogeneity in the genre, which points to the difficulty in attempting to define or systematize it.[1]

Many authors have attempted to define the thriller from various points of view: most preeminent among them is the genre approach (Derry, 1998; Rubin, 1999), but there are also relevant works from media and cultural studies (Cobley, 2000; Mesce, 2007) as well as psychology and emotions, particularly in analyzing suspense (Gow, 1968; Löker, 2005). Furthermore, political thrillers, given their very designation, have attracted attention from authors who have focused on the broader label of "political film" (Coyne, 2008; Giglio, 2010; Scott, 2011). While such a label is certainly constructive for scholars studying the impact of politics in popular culture and vice versa, it still leaves room to approach the political thriller from the perspective of its generic content and form, as a unity of myth, conventions, and iconography, with its own language and narrative standards. The label "political film" inevitably includes narratives that deal with politics without further specification, regardless of whether they do so as dramas, comedies, or even action-adventure films.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to propose a definition of the political thriller genre from the perspective of narrative content, identifying its own generic language and dramatic identity traits, and claiming a proper "set of conventions and shared characteristics that have historically evolved into a distinct, widely recognized type of composition" (Rubin, 1999: 3). The political thriller, however, is a transnational construct, and European cinema has undoubtedly played an important role in its development. In fact, the earliest roots of the genre can be found in the "thrill and spills of political intrigue and spying" (Scott, 2011: 121) of films like Fritz Lang's *Spione* (1928) or Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934) or *The 39 Steps* (1935), among others.

This article, however, takes as its main scope what we consider to be the predominant body of works, namely, that of the Hollywood industry. This prevalence is not just industrial, since the subject matter, conflicts, and characters of the political thriller, as we shall see, connect in a direct and unique way with U.S. history and culture. Furthermore, even though American film is generally configured by the standards of "classical Hollywood narrative" or style (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010: 102), some of the works in the genre stand out for their tendency to challenge their audiences, causing confusion and distress in the viewers, and keeping them in the dark with regards to narrative information. Paradigmatic of this

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[1] Just the top ten titles include a superhero movie (*The Dark Knight Rises*, 2012), several sci-fi adventures (i.e. *Jurassic Park*, 1993), two crime-related action movies (*Fast & Furious 6*, 2013, and the comedic *Beverly Hills Cop*, 1984), a psychological horror film (*The Sixth Sense*, 1999), and a disaster movie (*Twister*, 1996). Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com), data retrieved on March 17, 2015.

phenomenon is *The Parallax View* (1974), received with mixed reviews at the time of its release, mainly due to its unusual ending in which "knowledge is still denied [and] the viewer is left frustrated" (Ryan & Kellner, 1988: 99).

From a temporal standpoint, this article chooses to focus firstly on works that are considered to be classics of the genre, most of them made during the1970s. Events such as the Kennedy assassination in 1963, the escalation of the Vietnam war, and the 1972 Watergate scandal created layers of discontent that accumulated in the public's psyche, giving rise to a unique era of disenchantment, loss of innocence, and cynicism (Anderson, 2007: 69) as well as moral ambiguity and narrative pessimism (Mesce, 2007: 100). We will also refer to a certain cycle of 1990s films that partakes in this plenitude of the political thriller —albeit with a tendency towards more closure and happy endings—, but we will not cross the line of 9/11. The relevant shifts that have taken place in the contemporary entertainment industry (new distribution platforms, another "golden age" of television, greater genre hybridization, etc.) make it advisable to focus this study on works of the genre made before entering the 21st Century, hoping it will be instructive for subsequent analyses of post-9/11 political thrillers.

Another precision we feel is necessary to make is that of the specificity of the politics present on screen. Authors Christensen and Haas (2005: 7-8) distinguish between "pure political movies" versus other types of less politically conscious film texts according to the degree of their "political content," which includes the "depiction of some aspect of political reality," and their "political intent," referring to narratives that "seek to judge, prescribe, and/or persuade" about specific politics. Scott agrees with them in such distinction, speaking of "movies that offer politics with a capital rather than a small 'p'" (Scott, 2011: 12). As it will be seen throughout this article, the definition of political thriller we are about to propose does not demand the identification of concrete political identities or agendas, while on the other hand, it does require that political causes be a major dramatic motivation of the plot.

2. The thriller

In order to understand and better approach a definition of the political thriller, it is incumbent to first explore the notion of the thriller in general, which, as mentioned, is a rather problematic endeavor. This is mainly due to two seemingly contradictory problems: on the one hand, distinct and clearly dissimilar films are equally considered as thrillers, while at the same time, films that share in the common qualities of the thriller are also considered to belong in different genres. The earlier can be clearly appreciated by opening the historical scope of the genre —little is the common ground between the gangster films of the 1930s and the 1990s action thrillers—, while the latter becomes manifest in examining the endless sub-types of thrillers (horror, psychological, action, etc.)

Further obstacles are presented by authors who deny the thriller its status of genre altogether. Very much like Paul Schrader's controversial statement about film noir not being a genre because of it being defined "by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood" (Schrader, 1972: 8), some critics have supported the notion that thriller is not a generic category but rather a narrative style. Thus, Rubin (1999: 4) speaks of a "thrilleresque quality" that "attaches itself easily to such genres as spy, horror, and various subsets of the crime film." But then he also recognizes that "the concept of thriller falls somewhere between a genre proper and a descriptive quality that is attached to other, more clearly defined genres" (Rubin, 1999: 4). Nevertheless, it is obvious that crime, slasher, and spy movies —to name a few— are, by their very nature, thrillers. Thus, it might be clearer to look at the thriller as "an 'umbrella' genre comprised of an evolving complex of (sub-)genres" (Derry, 1988: 62). In other words, the thriller is a broad label that can always be accompanied by a

specification of the genre functioning as an "adjective," as it were, of the wider category: psychological, supernatural, legal, etc.

As it is shown in the following paragraphs, and in accordance with the available literature on thriller films, we propose five approaches to limit —to "fence in," as it were— the grounds of the thriller genre: 1) it is a work of crime fiction or a variation of such, that tends to center on the victim of a crime as its protagonist; 2) it presents in the characters, and causes and exploits in the audience, intense emotional estates; 3) it presents a world tipped off its balance, unstable, and ambiguous; 4) such world remains, however, realistic, ordinary, and functioning according to the parameters of real life; and 5) the characters inhabiting this world encounter the extraordinary and find themselves disoriented, having to learn how to navigate environments that are new to them.

First, in studying the thriller as a work of crime fiction, Derry (1988: 57) makes use of Edgar Allan Poe's "triangle of detective fiction" to present the three ever-present archetypes of any work of crime: The Detective, the Criminal, and the Victim. Narratives focusing on the criminal, Derry argues, usually constitute gangster films, capers, or heists; while stories centered on the detective give rise to police procedurals, hard-boiled detective films, or the more classical detective tales in the vein of Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*. The third point of the triangle, however, the victim, has been less exploited by classical genres, and that is where the thriller finds its space as a modern form, in accordance with Stuart Kaminsky's accurate observation that in a thriller, "identification is not with the man in control, but with the pursued" (Derry, 1988: 18). Consequently, the thriller narrative relies heavily on the confrontation between the hero and a threat, which often times presents itself as a conspiracy (Palmer, 1979: 53). As we will see, political thrillers emphasize this struggle; but at the same time, they have a unique ability to unite the narrative tropes of overcoming a threat by *unmasking* it, which entails the use of investigative means, proper —if not exclusive— of the detective genre.

Secondly, thrillers must achieve a rather obvious goal: To thrill, that is, to cause intense emotional states on the viewer. And not just any feeling, as thrillers must give precedence to the visceral over the sensitive, exploiting states such as suspense, fright, exhilaration, excitement, or speed, so as to create the sensation of "being carried away" (Rubin, 1999: 7).This is possible because the protagonist of the thriller is placed in a "situation of great crisis" (Harper, 1974: 3), attempting to regain control and therefore subject to states of fear, anxiety, and even paranoia, as the political thriller well demonstrates in its depiction of characters being followed, chased, or under constant surveillance. The transfer of such uneasiness onto the audience is all but natural because of the viewers' ordinary alignment with the protagonist, which places them in a threatened, vulnerable position.

This emotional "overload", as Rubin puts it, is also linked to the third defining element of the thriller: the depiction of a world gone awry, taken over by the modern, senseless chaos of a life without meaning and a social community without reliable moral standards. Such an off-balance, ambiguous state forcefully engenders, in both characters and audiences alike, an inescapable feeling of vulnerability. This sense of exposure to dangers is reinforced, in turn, by characters that have lost touch with their roots and are alienated, trying to navigate dangerous waters while "cut off from [their] previously secure bearings of community, habit, tradition, and religious assurance" (Rubin, 1999: 11). As will become apparent below, political thriller narratives are particularly keen on conveying this sense of unbalance.

This world threatening to collapse into chaos remains, however, within the boundaries of the daily, ordinary, urban reality. The thriller is a genre grounded in our shared perception of a realistic setting. Its characters are human beings subject to the same limitations and prone to the same weaknesses as the viewers, and the world, society, and institutions respond to them in ways that are at once familiar and ordinary. The uniqueness

of the thriller lies precisely in how the extraordinary, the unusual, and the improbable enter the ordinary world and force the characters to react and adapt. As Scott has pointed out, political thrillers often present us with "underworld communities that never bother the surface life of much of the rest of the population," as a kind of "alternative world that lives beyond the reach and comprehension of normal existence" (2011: 151). That is, of course, until such existence is disrupted by the intrusion of a threat.

Lastly, it is this juxtaposition of the ordinary and the extraordinary that pitches the characters of the thriller into unfamiliar situations where they are initially and temporarily unable to find their bearings. Learning, therefore, becomes an essential element of the dramatic arc of the thriller, particularly when it comes to acquiring the ability to discern who to trust and who to suspect. This is a character archetype traditionally known as the "fish-out-of-water," and its arc includes discovering the new "rules of the world" (Selbo, 2014: 177-178), which change early in the narrative as a consequence of a disruption caused by a threatening force. Its potential resides in the obvious need of the character to transform itself so as to be able to navigate new contexts and face new obstacles, which nevertheless does not always guarantee his success. Such is the case of Joe Frady in *The Parallax View*, whose arc never manages to level off with an enemy that remains superior, thus leading to his eventual demise.

In synthesis, the thriller is a genre that deals with a crime story from the point of view of a victim or, more broadly, a threatened character, and that takes its audience on a rollercoaster ride of intense emotions emerging from the collision between the ordinary world and extraordinary circumstances, which submit the protagonist to a new set of rules he or she has to learn in order to survive.

3. The political thriller

Based on the commonly accepted fact that the main dramatic conflict of a narrative is usually its most defining element as a generic iteration, the political thriller, then, must be a work of crime fiction with all the aforementioned characteristics, and whose central conflict is political in nature. Politics, therefore, cannot be just the backdrop or setting, but have to be inherently associated to the criminal source of conflict that creates the dramatic premise of the film (Giglio, 2010: 116). As Hennebelle (1979: 28-31) points out, even though some films may deal with politics on screen, if they only do so "as an illusory device to give weight to what are, in effect, conventional detective stories", then they cannot be considered to be political thrillers. This political motivation of the dramatic conflict leads Derry to define the genre's archetypical narrative as "a plot to assassinate a political figure or a revelation of the essential conspiratorial nature of governments and their crimes against their people" (Derry, 1988: 103), which also places the notion of conspiracy at the heart of the political thriller, as one of the quintessential fears in modern America (Cobley, 2000: 6).

This definition fits in what we consider to be the first fully formed political thriller in the history of American film: *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962). This is a defining work for the political thriller as we know it today because it anticipated some elements that would later become landmark features of the genre: paranoia (Coyne, 2008: 154; Scott, 2011: 129), fear of unseen powers at play (Marcus, 2002: 72), the already mentioned conspiracy at the center of Government, and an unusual sense of distrust and pessimism. In Coyne's words, "[t]he edgy paranoia that had tugged at Bennet Marco's subconscious in *The Manchurian Candidate* became the dominant ethos of the 1970s political film" (2008: 168).

Based on the novel by Richard Condon, and eerily prescient of the Kennedy assassination shortly thereafter, the film presents a foreign threat —Communism— infiltrating the core of American society, and conflating with its most radical elements in a conspiracy to assassinate a presidential candidate, and replace him with a radical, right-

wing, McCarthy-like senator who turns out to be the puppet of his manipulative, domineering wife, a KGB agent. The film therefore implies an innate distrust of the politician —or a certain type of politician, at least— as well as of the citizenship, which becomes dominated by fear to the extent that it is willing to hand its sovereign power to a lunatic. This pessimistic worldview found in *The Manchurian Candidate* will become a constant of the political thriller, corresponding with the darkest periods of the Cold War years and the later times of institutional corruption and social unrest in the American 1970s (Christensen & Haas, 2005: 163).

Derry differentiates yet another narrative paradigm, which he calls "the innocent-on-the-run thriller," defined as a plot "organized around an innocent victim's coincidental entry into the midst of global intrigue" (Derry, 1988: 270). This narrative premise is presented as different from that of the political thriller based on the fact that its threatening force is not explicitly associated to specific politics. Nevertheless, most of the films of this kind display an "intrigue" that is inherently political, or related to power, or to a fairly realistic plot for world domination, and therefore it seems reasonable to consider them as part of the same genre.

These films generally focus on the dilemma between trust and distrust, and the protagonist's quest for a liberating truth, which can only be attained by confiding in other characters and exposing oneself to the risk of betrayal. Such is the journey undertaken by the protagonist of *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), who becomes the target of a rogue cell inside the CIA after accidentally discovering their secret plans of invasion of the Middle East so as to secure U.S. oil reserves. The film, therefore leaves few doubts about the political quality of the villain: this CIA group acts out of the need to protect the economic and geopolitical interests of the United States, and does not hesitate to silence anyone who might get in the way. Thus, *Three Days of the Condor* becomes a stark criticism of American exceptionalism and a warning against the dangers of an excessively powerful state.

Taking as a framework these two descriptions of the political thriller's dramatic conflict (uncovering assassination plans or other conspiracies; and/or escaping the murderous response to having coincidentally unmasked a conspiracy), there are several narrative elements of the political thriller that that will allow for a more detailed definition of the genre.

3.1. *"Need-to-know narratives"*

Political thrillers are "need-to-know narratives" (Russin & Downs, 2000: 213-217) in that the main dramatic question or main tension of the story revolves around the hero's search for the truth, that is, for information, for knowledge. Therefore, political thrillers are at their core investigative narratives in which the protagonist must face physical and moral threats so as to retrieve a hidden truth and hand it over to the people. Accordingly, the villain or antagonist of the political thriller must always seek to hide the truth and conceal it, creating an "appearances/reality dialectic" (Casper, 2011: 317) by which nothing is really what it seems and by which the narrative keeps throwing characters and audience into dead-end alleys that underscore the power of the system to cover up its misdoings. In this pursuit of the truth, the quest for survival is equally important, and in fact often times one becomes a necessary means for the other.

This combination of search and hunt determines the "labyrinthine structure" of the political thriller, in which a hero descends "into a complicated, mazelike world" (Rubin, 1999: 24) that, as Rubin argues, resembles the story itself, as the audience enters it for the pleasure of being entrapped. This labyrinthine structure becomes manifest in terms of narration by way of a "dual plot approach" (Duncan, 2008: 71) that confronts what the protagonist —and with him/her, the viewers— believe is going on in the investigation, versus

the reality of what is actually happening underneath the thickest layers of the conspiracy. *The Groundstar Conspiracy* (1972), thus, features a "false plot" by presenting an amnesiac protagonist trying to escape accusations of terrorism (as well as brutal torture), only to reveal he had volunteered to subject himself to induced amnesia and plastic surgery as a means to draw out the true conspirators. In Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), again, the "false plot" misleads the protagonist and hurls him into an obsessive investigation, whose outcome is not finding the truth, but rather, sinking into a deep state of paranoia. These paranoia films of the 1970s thus place greater emphasis on the confrontation of the individual against the system, exploring the effects of such collision on both of them, while critically evaluating the effectiveness of individual agency.

3.2. *The challenge of active agency*

Because in political thrillers characters are often puppets at the mercy of the hidden forces of economic and political power, it is common to encounter protagonists[2] that appear —in consonance with the general traits of the thriller genre— weighed-down, isolated, and underprepared for the task at hand, their abilities being "inadequate or at least incommensurate [...] with the forces that their enemies can marshal" (Fenster, 1999: 113). Their emotional baggage is usually more hindering than enabling and their attitude is almost always more reactive than active. Thus, the protagonist of *Marathon Man* (1976) is deeply traumatized by the death of his father, who committed suicide after becoming targeted by an anti-Communist witch-hunt in the dark years of McCarthyism. This emotional handicap makes the characters of the political thriller generally passive, pushed around by circumstance, and confused, which "shatters any hopes for the feasibility of meaningful individual action and highlights the precariousness and futility of human agency in the midst of multiple and unpredictable forces" (Azcona, 2010: 133).

In most cases, the inciting incident —that is, the event that sets the story in motion by removing order and balance from the protagonist's ordinary world— is merely coincidental, thus underscoring the wantonness of the world inhabited by the characters as well as the futility of any attempt to make sense of it. In *The Parallax View*, reporter Joe Frady confronts a major conspiracy just because he happened to witness its murderous beginnings in the course of his journalistic work. In *Three Days of the Condor* an also unlikely hero happens to be out of his office buying lunch when armed men break in and kill everyone of his colleagues. In *Capricorn One* (1978), the three protagonists' lives are endangered when their fake mission to Mars fails as their spaceship happens to blow up while reentering the atmosphere, forcing them to "stay dead" so as not to uncover the false, Government-sponsored propaganda of which they have been an essential part.[3] And in *The China Syndrome* (1979), another reporter —this one in TV—visits a nuclear power plant when an emergency shutdown happens to occur, prompting an investigation that leads her all the

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[2] The hero of the political thriller nearly always fits the prototype of the male, white American. Notwithstanding the fact that such has been the general Hollywood standard until very recently, there are three historically pertinent factors that can help understand such consistency by looking at the neighboring genres from which the political thriller borrows many of its conventions: first, the gangster genre at whose center we find the "urban male of immigrant stock" (Gianos, 1998: 79); second, film noir, a body of narratives in which "men inhabited a world they did not understand and could not deal with" (Gianos, 1998: 130); and lastly, the spy film, with a protagonist that has been "invariably male" (Casper, 2007: 299). Exceptions can certainly be found, such as *The China Syndrome* (1979), *Silkwood* (1983), or *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), but it is not until the 2000s when female characters become increasingly present in Hollywood thrillers, such as *The Interpreter* (2005), *Nothing But The Truth* (2008), *Fair Game* (2010), *SALT* (2010), or *The Whistleblower* (2011) in film; and *Homeland* (2011–), *Scandal* (2012–), or *State of Affairs* (2014-2015) in television.

[3] It seems relevant to point out that *Capricorn One* is to a certain extent an exceptional title in our filmography because of its premise and visual style, which places it near the realm of science-fiction.

way to a major corporate cover-up in relation with nuclear energy. This feeling of uncertainty and lack of control inflicts in the characters a paranoid state of mind that becomes a great obstacle for them to pursue their dramatic goal, while playing to the audience's desire to explain or contextualize historical events and concerns that appear to them as incomprehensible (Giglio, 2010: 135).

The fact that the world of the political thriller is governed by forces larger than the individual, the community, and sometimes even the state, decrees a certain reduction of effective agency on the side of the protagonist. This is manifested in non-professional characters confronting complex investigations, or professionals whose skill set or rank are inferior to what the investigation demands. They may be students —*Marathon Man*, *The Pelican Brief* (1993)—, reporters —*The Parallax View, All The President's Men*—, or even intelligence professionals —*Three Days of the Condor*—, but always in a position of inferiority with regards to knowledge. As it happens in a large amount of political films (thrillers or otherwise), the traditional struggle of the American hero may even become senseless, because of a modern world in which individual action is futile. Besides, the protagonist of these more pessimistic political thrillers may encounter the challenge of dehumanization as a consequence of his struggle against corruption. As Casper points out in reference to *Three Days of the Condor*, it is "the impossibility of trust, leading to suspicion of others, paranoia, and isolation" that forces the protagonist into a state where he "loses all sense of trust of his fellow human beings and winds up increasingly alone and frightened" (Casper, 2011: 317). In this disorienting journey, the protagonist often finds a love interest that is relevant to the character's arc in at least one of two ways: she may propel the character's motivation to take action against the threat —which can also give rise to a dramatic transformation whereby the hero learns to trust—, or she may betray his confidence and even hand him over to the villains. *Three Days of the Condor* follows the first pattern, later echoed in films of the 1990s cycle such as *The Pelican Brief* and *Conspiracy Theory* (1997), while *Marathon Man* is a clear example of the second.

Besides the individual's ability to effect a change in the world, the dramatic stakes of the character may also involve the outcome of his domestic universe: his ordeal and the tension it entails can cause an eroding effect in the protagonist's personal life —familial, romantic, if there is any— as his obsession to find the truth increases hand-in-hand with the proximity of the threat. Thus, Jim Garrison pushes his wife to her emotional limits in *JFK* (1991), Nathaniel Serling falls back into alcoholism in *Courage Under Fire* (1996), and Jeffrey Wigand is abandoned by his wife and children in *The Insider* (1999).

3.3. *Enemies of America*

While protagonists in the political thriller display significant weaknesses in how they are manipulated, emotionally crippled, and at risk of becoming dehumanized, antagonists appear to be much less defined from the perspective of characterization, but more generally associated with certain political and institutional powers. In the films of the thirties, the villains are anarchists, spies, or agents from Central European countries; in the films of the forties, the villains become Nazis; in *North By Northwest* and the films of the Cold War era, the villains become Communists; in the 1969 (sic) *House Of Cards*, the villains are right-wing Frenchmen; and in the thrillers of the seventies like *Three Days Of Condor*, the villains include even agencies of the United States government (Derry, 1988: 275).

And if one were to look into the more recent history, the trend continues: in the 1980s, a number of political thrillers criticize the U.S. involvement in operations to destabilize (or overthrow completely) left-wing regimes in Latin America, such as *Missing* (1982), *Under Fire* (1983), and *Salvador* (1986). Later in the decade, as well as into the 1990s, the conspiracy films that linked back to the seventies coexisted with some de-politicized thrillers that leaned

more towards the action-adventure genre by employing politics as a mere excuse for physical violence. As shown in the Jack Ryan series, these films feature former USSR officials —*The Hunt for Red October* (1990)—, IRA activists —*Patriot Games* (1992)—, and Latin American drug lords —*Clear and Present Danger* (1994)—. Eventually, terrorism became the archetypal villain most movies resorted to, especially in the form of Middle Eastern, Muslim fundamentalists, as in *True Lies* (1994) or *Executive Decision* (1996). These action thrillers can hardly be considered political —let alone with a capital "p" as suggested by Scott— since they merely make use of dramatic premises with political undertones to then unfold a plot along the conventions of action-adventure films. Politics in these films offer a superficial motivation for the antagonist, but are not given any further consideration.

Another key element in configuring the political thriller antagonist is the commonplace device of the "enemy within," that is, a concealed, infiltrated enemy that aims at overthrowing the political system of the U.S. from the inside. In that sense, *The Manchurian Candidate* established a canon in how it made the foreign threat of Communism seem less dangerous than the domestic threat of irrational fear: when the enemy is unknown, paranoia flourishes. Thus the 1970s exploited this fear by presenting domestic conspiracies in which the enemy is not just "within" but part of the political and economic system; while at the same, it is deliberately kept in the dark. Its identity is highly anonymous, its intentions obscure, and its political colors blurred. Apart from exceptions like *All The President's Men*, in which villains are clearly identified, most films of this era purposefully avoid fully revealing who their antagonists are. This provides a sense of the measureless magnitude of the enemy, which in turn contributes to a general state of paranoia and the aforementioned irrational fear.

From the Cold War years also emerges another type of antagonist that has become a trademark of political thrillers: the "self-proclaimed patriot," bent on saving the country from itself, generally by violating the Constitution or several fundamental rights, or outright disposing of the lives of a few thousand Americans. These films are generally cautionary tales about the dangers of radical measures, in the vein of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), albeit in different tone and genre. *The Manchurian Candidate* had already issued a severe warning about the dangers of McCarthy-like, Manichean stances. In like manner, *Advise & Consent* (1962) strongly criticized the attitude of politicians for whom the end justifies any means. And shortly after, *Seven Days In May* (1964) depicted the conspiracy plotted by a radical, right-wing general trying to take over the U.S. government in response to the president's willingness to sign a nuclear disarmament treaty with the USSR. The conspiring general and self-proclaimed patriot, thus, ironically attempts to defend the U.S. from the Soviet threat by violating its very foundations.

Later on, following a similar rationale, many political thrillers of the 1970s deal with cover ups from the Government or corporations, justified by reasoning that letting the truth be known would only be more harmful to the political, economic, or defense interests of the country. Thus, in *Three Days of the Condor* the CIA assassinates American citizens justified by the need to protect secrets that could later on save the lives of American citizens; while in *Twilight's Last Gleaming* (1977) the Government is faced with the decision to disclose proof that the continuation of the Vietnam war was unnecessary and that the death of thousands of American servicemen and women was only a gesture to prove the relentlessness and determination of the U.S. before the Communist bloc.

3.4. *Based on actual events*

This closeness between political thrillers and their historical times also provides interesting clues about the dramatic premises of choice in the genre. Very much like war films, political

thrillers tend to avoid the construction of dystopian or fantasy story worlds and instead take as a starting point for their narratives certain historical events that have left a significant imprint in the history of the U.S. Political thrillers establish this kind of dialogue in at least three ways: 1) films based on actual events; 2) fashioned narratives that reference actual events and institutions in a more veiled manner; and 3) fictional storylines that reference not actual events but rather an atmosphere of concern or anxiety over a political or social issue.

With regard to the first group, *All The President's Men* is an obvious example. The film faithfully follows the narrative presented by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in their book of the same title, which detailed the exposé of the Watergate scandal and the Nixon administration's malpractices. On the second group, there are films like *The Parallax View*, which establishes a clear parallelism with the conspiracy theories surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy by having the narrative kill off, one by one, all the eyewitnesses of the film's opening scene's assassination. Similarly, *Winter Kills* (1979), a much more outlandish and satirical take on the subject, constantly resembles the Kennedy saga of politicians and industrialists in the protagonist's familial background. And among the films of the third group, as it has been pointed out, we find *The China Syndrome* as it tapped into the uneasiness surrounding the safety of nuclear power plants after a few real-life incidents (and then turned out to become eerily prophetic when, twelve days after its release, an actual nuclear meltdown accident took place at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania.)

It is this proximity between reality and fiction —partially required, of course, by the strict conventions of verisimilitude in the thriller—that points toward a general mood of pessimism or negative realism pervading a large amount of works within the political thriller genre. Exceptions to this rule also abound, which is easily understandable if one recalls that all these films, while innovative and original, still remain in the playground of the Hollywood tradition, but most of the classic works in the genre, especially through the 1960s and 1970s, tend towards negative, pessimistic resolutions. This is not only due to the thriller's tendency to "concur —or at least relate to— pre-existing beliefs about how the world is" (Cobley, 2000: 191) by not awarding "happy endings" that reality outside the movies would rarely concede, but rather, it is a strong ideological criticism of the corruption of the political system in America (Hill & Church Gibson, 2000: 113). A good segment of the history of the political thriller portrays a disenchanted, when not outright cynical view of power and institutions, while maintaining faith in the efforts of an honest individual.

Political thrillers of the 1960s depict situations in which "[d]ecent men are faced with difficult, often cruel choices, but the Republic is dependent on such men" (Coyne, 2008: 151), because the system is not corrupt per se, but only it becomes so when dishonest, greedy men pervert its nature. Entering the 1970s, however, the public conscience accumulated the weight of events such as the assassinations of Kennedy and King, the Vietnam war, and the Watergate scandal, which "contributed to a pervasive loss of faith in America's leaders and institutions" eventually manifesting itself in films that, "for the first time, openly and overwhelmingly indicted powerful, persistent, and often faceless institutionalized menaces to US democracy" (Coyne, 2008: 30). The implicit meaning of these narratives is that the system has grown so powerful and untouchable that not even the individual, monomythic American hero can overcome it.

The shift in the national spirit brought about by the Reagan presidency made this ideological criticism in the political thriller fade away throughout the 1980s, with a few exceptions related to critical assessments of U.S. foreign policy (*Under Fire*, *Salvador*, *Missing*). Other than that, the general mood leaned towards escapism and, as a consequence, "the political conspiracy film would wait nearly a decade to re-emerge" (Scott, 2011: 146). In the 1990s a revival of the genre indeed seems to take place with a series of tribute films that

looked back at the seventies' paranoia and pessimism. This could be construed as a manifestation of what Furedi (1997) calls a "culture of fear" at the end of the century over concerns related to technology and privacy —*Sneakers* (1992), *Enemy of the State*—, energy corporations and violations of environmental legislation —*The Pelican Brief*—, the effects of the Gulf War in the military and the politics of Armed Forces' reputation —*Courage Under Fire*—, and the growing threat of terrorism and Islamist radicalism in particular, as in the eerily prescient *The Siege* (1998). Perhaps influenced by the return of certain tropes and conventions, two films emerge in 1997 that, without specific reference to historical events, bring conspiracy into the epicenter of American politics: both *Murder at 1600* and *Shadow Conspiracy* deal with assassinations that take place in the White House or directly affect White House staff, and explore deception and political conspiracy right at the heart of American institutional power.

3.5. *Iconography*

Rubin (1999: 5) states that the iconography of thrillers in general is "weak or nonexistent", as opposed to other, more visually recognizable genres such as the western or the gangster film. Nevertheless, political thrillers tend to display a number of elements that can be readily associated to their core dramatic conflicts: images of national monuments like the Lincoln Memorial, political institutions such as the Capitol, intelligence and security agencies (Langley, the Pentagon), and official symbols of those institutions, like the Seal of the President of the United States, and of course, the Star-Spangled Banner.

It is not unusual for political thrillers to display all these elements in rapid succession through their opening credits. Thus, for instance, *Seven Days in May* opens with the Constitution of the United States rolling down the screen as a series of thick, black lines disrupt the image only to reveal, a few seconds later, the emblem of the Commander-in-chief. These graphic elements provide a strong sense of proximity that grounds the narrative in a diegesis very close to the viewer's reality. The use of these images has been seen by Scott as a trademark of the American political film that ideologically reinforces "the mythology at the heart of American democracy" (Scott, 2011: 24). The political thriller naturally shares in this iconography, but at the same time questions the validity or healthiness of such icons. The fact that the point of view of these narratives is placed in a naïve protagonist threatened by institutional power, acts as a reminder for the need of purification of those institutions.

In the same vein, names of places and specific dates in time are also employed both as a tool for reinforcing verisimilitude and/or as a way to ground the narration in a precise historical context: "often printed in on-screen titles," together with "actors portraying historical personages or characters loosely based on historical personages," as well as "a sense of exposé journalism, historically real locations, [voice-over] narration, and a printed prologue which lays in a historical framework or an epilogue which projects a historical future" (Derry, 1988: 105) are all common elements of the political thriller. Very characteristic of this intent is *All The President's Men*, which opens with an extreme close-up shot of a blank sheet of paper as the type-hammers of a manual typewriter print on it the date, "June 1, 1972." Such brief opening provides the viewer with a sense of historicity as well as a subtle tone of exposé journalism that will frame the entire narrative.

By sharing certain generic codes with other, neighboring types of narratives such as the spy film, the political thriller benefits from the depiction of surveillance equipment such as photo cameras and disguised microphones, interrogation rooms, etc. These are essential elements of the investigative plot, since they are ultimately tools for obtaining information or evidence. In terms of setting, the political thriller makes use of urban architecture as an alienating, oppressive space by presenting buildings of bureaucratic offices from the outside

as imposing, unassailable fortresses, and from the inside as dizzying labyrinths in which all sense of orientation is lost, reinforcing the loneliness and powerlessness of the hero. *The Parallax View*, for instance, takes this approach by way of a modern, almost inhuman architecture —as in the demise of one of the assassins, who falls off the rooftop of Seattle's Space Needle— or in the small size of the protagonist's figure as he breaks into the Parallax corporation, located in an also futuristic-looking, pristine-white building against whose backdrop he seems to be just a speck of dust. Additionally, the film innovates by infusing with paranoia settings that have been traditionally associated with a more innocent lifestyle, outside the influence of political conspiracy: the action thus moves to rural environments and small towns where, against all probability, conspirators are also operating. Furthermore, the entire action of the film takes place in Seattle and its naturally beautiful surroundings of the Washington State, one of the furthest possible locations from the epicenter of American politics, Washington DC (although, meaningfully, one that shares its name.)

4. Conclusion

The political thriller emerges as a modern genre in Hollywood largely as a consequence of the political and social climate of the United States at a time full of fears associated to the various threats of the Cold War scenario. While it remains a generic manifestation of the wider narrative system of Hollywood film, its often-controversial subjects allow the political thriller to include original features in its narratives, occasionally even challenging time-honored standards. That is the case, for instance, of certain pessimism-infused premises and complex plotlines that convey a strong feeling of disorientation and bewilderment to the viewers. Notwithstanding the fact that thrillers are a very flexible form of narration that overlaps with many other varieties of stories, the political thriller remains identifiable not only by the elements of conspiracy and paranoia present in them, but also —as it has been shown— by its own narrative standards.

At the heart of the political thriller lies a conflict that confronts an individual with the system, the ordinary citizen against the institutions, the human being against the inhumanity of political and/or corporate power. Governments and companies are presented as forces bent on protecting their interests at any cost, to the extent of eliminating any opposition, even when such policy involves murder. It is a power, therefore, that does not contemplate the value of the individual or any sense of morality. The plot is usually of investigative nature, often relating to a political assassination or organized around the efforts to prevent one, but always jumpstarted by the disruption of the ordinary world of the character by an external threat. The genre thus examines —and often times outright questions— the effectiveness of individual agency, as the protagonist does not always find out the truth, or if he does, an effect that changes the (unjust) order of things is not guaranteed. Once the protagonist commits to the restoration of his world gone off-balance, the plot develops in a labyrinthine fashion, following the intricate entanglements of conspiracies, either in government or private corporations, or in a collusion of both. Because such instances of corruption belong in the real world —as proven by history time and time again—, and also because of the demand for verisimilitude intrinsically present in thriller narratives, many political thrillers resort to actual events as a basis for their dramatic premises, with a greater or lesser degree of explicitness in their reference to those events, as explained above.

The natural direction in which to continue the study of the political thriller inevitably will lead to examining the impact that 9/11 and the ensuing War On Terror has had on the genre. This is particularly relevant when considering that in the eighties, in a period of "revival" of the American patriotic spirit, the political thriller genre seems to fade to the

background of Hollywood filmmaking, perhaps not unlike the entertainment industry's initial reaction to 9/11. The new geopolitical situation, however, together with new anxieties and social fears of an increasingly polarized America, and the appearance of several complex, politically engaging films (*Syriana*, *Rendition, Body Of Lies, State Of Play*, all made between 2005 and 2009) and television shows (*24, Rubicon, Person Of Interest, House of Cards*) poses the question of whether the political thriller is coming back with renewed strength and new critical insights for the geopolitical scenario at the onset of the 21st Century. In this respect, Pollard wondered whether these recent years would "come to be known as an age of paranoia" similar to the 1970s in some respects (Morgan, 2009: 206). The definition and description of the political thriller presented in this article hopes to be a helpful basis to understanding the new manifestations of the genre, and comprehend the roots from which they emerge. As Kellner puts it, "political thrillers often catch the fears, paranoia, and fantasies of their era" (Kellner, 2010: 165) and there are very few arguments to deny the fact that, after September 11, 2001, the world does live in a unique era.

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Selected Filmography

Title	Year	Director	Writer	Based On (If Any)
The Manchurian Candidate	1962	John Frankenheimer	George Axelrod	Novel by Richard Condon
Advise And Consent	1962	Otto Preminger	Wendell Mayes	Novel by Allen Drury
Seven Days In May	1964	John Frankenheimer	Rod Serling	Novel by Fletcher Knebel and Charles W. Bailey II
Fail-Safe	1964	Sidney Lumet	Walter Bernstein	Novel by Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler
The Groundstar Conspiracy	1972	Lamont Johnson	Douglas Heyes	Novel by Leslie P. Davies
The Day Of The Dolphin	1973	Mike Nichols	Buck Henry	Novel by Robert Merle
The Parallax View	1974	Alan J. Pakula	David Giler & Lorenzo Semple Jr.	Novel by Loren Singer
The Conversation	1974	Francis Ford Coppola	Francis Ford Coppola	
Three Days Of The Condor	1975	Sydney Pollack	Lorenzo Semple Jr. & David Rayfiel	Novel by James Grady
All The President's Men	1976	Alan J. Pakula	William Goldman	Book by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward
Marathon Man	1976	John Schlesinger	William Goldman	Novel by William Goldman
Capricorn One	1977	Peter Hyams	Peter Hyams	
The Boys From Brazil	1978	Franklin J. Schaffner	Heywood Gould	Novel by Ira Levin
The China Syndrome	1979	James Bridges	James Bridges, Mike Gray & T.S. Cook	
Winter Kills	1979	William Richert	William Richert	Novel by Richard Condon
Missing	1982	Costa-Gavras	Costa-Gavras & Donald Stewart	Book by Thomas Hauser

Under Fire	1983	Roger Spottiswoode	Clayton Frohman & Ron Shelton	
Power	1986	Sidney Lumet	David Himmelstein	
Salvador	1986	Oliver Stone	Oliver Stone & Rick Boyle	
No Way Out	1987	Roger Donaldson	Robert Garland	Novel by Kenneth Fearing
JFK	1991	Oliver Stone	Oliver Stone & Zachary Sklar	Books by Jim Garrison and Jim Marrs
Sneakers	1992	Phil Alden Robinson	Phil Alden Robinson, Lawrence Lasker & Walter F. Parkes	
The Pelican Brief	1993	Alan J. Pakula	Alan J. Pakula	Novel by John Grisham
Courage Under Fire	1996	Edward Zwick	Patrick Sheane Duncan	
The Shadow Conspiracy	1997	George P. Cosmatos	Adi Hasak & Ric Gibbs	
Murder At 1600	1997	Dwight Little	Wayne Beach & David Hodgin	
Absolute Power	1997	Clint Eastwood	William Goldman	Novel by David Baldacci
Conspiracy Theory	1997	Richard Donner	Brian Helgeland	
Enemy Of The State	1998	Tony Scott	David Marconi	
The Siege	1998	Edward Zwick	Lawrence Wright, Menno Meyjes & Edward Zwick	
The Insider	1999	Michael Mann	Eric Roth & Michael Mann	Article by Marie Brenner