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The Culture of Conspiracy: Evolving Media Technology and Its Relationship to

Conspiracy Theories

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by

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Conspiracy theorists often use media technology to create and distribute their ideas to a wider audience. In doing so, these theorists also use the same technology to manipulate the images they are using, thus changing the way the photographs or film stills were meant to be received originally. In changing these aspects of the object, the conspiracy theorist is creating an entirely new narrative based on their personal values. Throughout this paper I will refer to this idea as the “culture of conspiracy” and use it to discuss how technologies such as photoshop, DVD players, and manipulative rhetoric are used to create theories that completely change the intent of a film or image. The paper is broken down into four case studies: The Zapruder film, Michaelangelo Antonioni’s 1966 film *Blow Up*. The 2012 Stanley Kubrick documentary *Room 237*, and the [/r/findbostonbombers](#) Reddit thread that was used to identify the Boston Marathon Bombers. Through a historiography of these events I will trace the culture of conspiracy and how it has evolved with the changes in media technology over time.

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Introduction

On November 22nd, 1963 Abraham Zapruder accidentally recorded the death of the 35th president of the United States. As he watched the motorcade drive through Dallas, a reel of film filled with images of his family came to include a murder. At this moment, Zapruder's 414 PD Bell and Howell Camera became the vessel for one of the most viewed and copiously analyzed reels of film in American media history. One cannot make it through a book or article about conspiracy theories without finding JFK's murder mentioned at least once. The momentum behind many theories and arguments about the assassination comes from this 8mm roll of film. It is an object that set the stage for the culture of conspiracy theories and the theorists who give themselves the authority to make such claims. People from all walks of life have poured over the 486 frames of the assassination. Some have been scholars; others screenwriters like Oliver Stone. A large and effective part of this demographic is also made up of people sitting at their computers at home or at work with extra time on their hands. Over time all types of people have worked together to convey conspiracy arguments about various historical events and elements of popular culture. Conspiracy theories have evolved in the way that they are created and distributed. The development of media technology has only made it easier to speculate about various pieces of film and images. For the purposes of this argument I will work to discuss the ways that images and technology are used to fuel a concept that I will refer to as the culture of conspiracy. This culture uses various media technologies to create and distribute conspiracy theories in a powerful way. Their tools extend to rhetoric, image manipulation, and distribution formats such as documentaries that allow for momentum within this culture. What molds this collective is their desire to add to this culture of conspiracy, one that has elevated its cultural visibility in the years since JFK's assassination. Aiding this thriving environment are objects like

the Zapruder film, artifacts that allow for discrete inspection of powerful historical moments.

One could look at an object of conspiracy such as the Zapruder film as a catalyst. The film in particular spurred one of the largest and most drawn out sets of conspiracy theories to date. Since the 1960s the film has become an integral part of the conspiracy narrative, not just for JFK, but also to encourage others to seek conspiracy in different facets of American culture. In what follows I will begin with the Zapruder film and then bring in several other examples of conspiracy theories to trace the historical narrative of this culture of conspiracy in relation to the types of media technologies that are used to create and distribute these ideas. This historiography of cultural events and their technological manipulation is important to this concept of the culture of conspiracy. This culture focuses on those who manipulate the moving image in order to make a larger claim all their own based on a single image or even several slowed down frames of a film. The word “conspiracy” has changed and gained “emotional baggage”¹ due to the rhetoric that surrounds and changes the meanings conveyed by the term. Conspiracy is a term that is a common occurrence in politics, law, and economics. It is present in day-to-day American culture, especially for those who consume news from various networks. Attaching the word theory to conspiracy elevates the term into a more shadowy and fear-inducing concept. This transformation has elevated a word that is meant to explain occurrences in everyday life into a concept that encourages a culture of skepticism and suspicion. The culture of conspiracy feeds into this elevation of rhetoric, creating an environment in which the event in question can be manipulated to fit different arguments that stretch the fabric of reality.

Many historical and sociological scholars write on the concept of the conspiracy theory, and Michael Barkun in particular has laid out the various types of theories and their defining

¹David R. Wrone. *The Zapruder Film: Reframing JFK's Assassination*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003). 2

qualities. Barkun defines the conspiracy theory primarily as “an attempt to delineate and explain evil.”² Barkun argues that the theorist is often someone who feels they are doing the world a service by finding a conspiracy that has been hidden by an antagonistic force. He writes frequently about the conspiracy theorist as this type of self-appointed hero, and his argument is helpful to hash out the idea of this culture of conspiracy in that he presents the type of person who argues for the use of the objects presented in this paper to make larger claims about sociohistorical events. This desire to find evidence of a truth elevates photography and film from images to powerful truth-telling devices. It has only become easier for a member of the general public to generate and distribute a conspiracy theory. As technology progresses, the line between curiosity and scrutiny has become more and more blurred throughout the culture of conspiracy theories. Films that were once only accessible in the cinema are now available on disc for viewers to play and pause to their heart's content, turning the viewing experience into an interactive hunt for evidence. The culture of conspiracy integrates both found historical footage and fiction films to make claims about what is reality and what is fiction. Some theories are distributed through writing, while others have the momentum to be integrated into larger scale documentaries. Online forums further contribute to this participation, as photos inundated with circles and arrows point to a possible conspiracy are circulated across twitter, Facebook, and other social media sites. Subreddits such as /r/findbostonbombers created an environment in which average citizens were encouraged to sleuth and analyze images released by the FBI in connection with the Boston marathon Bombings. Social media in general offers a platform to distribute these theories to a larger audience through the form of “likes” and “shares”. Thanks to

² Michael Barkun. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (*Comparative Studies in Religion and Society*). (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013) 3

these instant outlets for distribution, the culture of conspiracy has become a widely circulated narrative. It is easy to pull up Facebook and find at least one person who has posted some sort of conspiracy narrative on the newsfeed. In a world where fake news dominates this shared domain, the average viewer spends a majority of their time speculating about the information they are taking in. To understand how we have made it to this point, one can trace a history of this culture by examining the technological objects that have allowed for the absolute inspection of historical and cultural events.

According to Barkun there are three types of conspiracy theories, and the two labeled systemic and superconspiracies are beyond the scope of this paper. The systemic conspiracy theory deals with the idea of a conspiracy that wants to have a broad, sweeping effect, such as the takeover of an entire country or mass destruction of the globe. Superconspiracies according to Barkun are the largest type of conspiracy and this term deals with theories that are linked together over time to result in a larger event. These theories can be connected and traced throughout a historical period of time in order to convey meaning. In a way, the culture of conspiracy itself functions similarly to a superconspiracy, in that the events I will trace are brought together by the way in which images are manipulated to suit a particular person's argument. However, this paper will focus on event conspiracies, which are limited to a discrete set of events with a well-defined objective. Aiding the culture of conspiracy are some of the major technological inventions that have made this type of analysis accessible. From the Zapruder film the analysis will move to the concept of the photographic image and the myth of photographic truth, which will be explored through Michaelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow Up*. The film's themes of conspiracy, analysis, and the rhetoric of photography as a truth telling medium are important to the concept of media and its influence. Then, the focus will shift to a

discussion of how more modern advancements in media technology have allowed viewers to exercise much more control the experience of watching films, with the result being an environment in which a viewer can use zoomed in still images from a film to make larger claims about the integrity of the director and his motives. By analyzing Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* and the subsequent conspiracy theory documentary *Room 237* one can see the distinct ways in which controlling the viewing of a film gives the viewer a feeling of power over the content. In this authority comes the ability to confidently make conspiracy theories based on the film. Finally, to come to contemporary media and its influence on these theories, the Boston Bombing Reddit controversy will be examined. The importance of the Internet and social media in regards to this development and subsequent conspiracies will be taken into account as an analysis of current media technology. The overarching thread that connects these moments together is the way media objects are used and altered to convey a point, a type of manipulation that is central to this cultural of conspiracy and the generation of the conspiracy theory.

The obsession with extracting information from a sociohistorical event relies heavily on the examination of primary documents, in these cases often photographs and films. Two of the cases being studied here use film, while one is predominantly the examination of photographs and one is a film about said examination. In each case, there is an important distinction between the moving image and the still image. Often time conspiracy theorists in these case studies use still images out of a moving picture to articulate an idea, while neglecting the rest of the movie as a whole. The damage done here is that by dissecting the film itself, the theorist can project their own preconceived meaning into the image without necessarily taking into account that the image is not a singular moment. One can tie this desire to the idea that they likely put a lot of

stake in the myth of photographic truth,³ a term coined by Roland Barthes in his essay “The Rhetoric of the Image.” Though rather than seeing the indexicality of photography and film as something mythic, those who conspire in this way go beyond that rhetoric, turning these images into playgrounds for their theories. Another desire of such theorists is to select out particular images from a film in order to scrutinize their individual elements. For film theorist Andre Bazin, this type of examination damages the integrity and structure of the object. Bazin writes about the concept of montage, something that is being degraded by the way individual film stills are taken out of the context of their larger narrative role. An analysis of Andre Bazin by David Company states: “deprive a frame of its place in that order and any amount of latent signification is made manifest. The extracted photograph is anarchic, untamed with a surfeit of radically open meanings.”⁴ Therefore, in taking these pieces of a film and using them as a foundation of an argument, the conspiracy theorist can create anything they want out of a still image without necessarily taking into account the entirety of the montage. The still and moving image can both be easily manipulated due to the dynamic nature of the respective mediums. The culture of conspiracy centers on the ways that these types of images are altered in order to convey an argument through a combination of image manipulation tactics and rhetorical devices that are used in their distribution as conspiracy theories.

⁴ David Company. *The Cinematic*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007) 13

⁴ David Company. *The Cinematic*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007) 13

The Zapruder Film: Foundations of a Conspiracy Culture

It is important to start in the historical moment of JFK's assassination, because the Zapruder film is arguably one of the most conspiracy-promoting objects that exist in American culture. After about thirty-five years of dispute, "the nation finally acquired ownership (but not the copyright) of perhaps the most famous home movie of all time."⁵ Before this wide distribution, the film was only shown in pieces, with the first instance being published by Life Magazine in 1963. In the issue dedicated to JFK's life and death, several of the frames of Zapruder's film were published, but only ones that focused on Jackie Kennedy climbing across the back of the Lincoln they were seated in during the motorcade. Frames that include the actual moment of assassination were kept from the public for quite some time. Life Magazine was given the rights to print images of the film, while Zapruder kept all motion picture rights at the time, but later relinquished the rest of the rights to Life magazine.⁶ Two additional copies were made and given to the secret service and later the Warren Commission. Eventually the film was shown as a full length experience on national television during a 1975 episode of Goodnight America.⁷ Since then, the film has been variously reproduced, bootlegged, and distributed legally and illegally. The actual physical film was the victim of a long dispute of the right to ownership, which ended in being acquired by the Special Media Archives Services Division of the National Archives and Records Administration.⁸

⁵ Wrone 1

⁶ Wrone 34

⁷ Vincent Bugliosi. *Reclaiming History: the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007) 371

⁸ Wrone 1

Of those who analyze and study the Zapruder film for the sake of questioning its authenticity, there are two distinct sides: the conspiracy advocate and the commission defender.⁹ The biggest issue with the JFK assassination is that there is still no official factual timeline of his death. The idea that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone and was responsible for the death of JFK is in fact only a theory. Even those on the Warren commission who are dedicated to protecting the facts of the case are considered “theorists” for this reason.¹⁰ For many analysts official or otherwise, the Zapruder film is considered the “Rosetta stone of solving the assassination mystery.”¹¹ Due to the public demand for creating a foundation to try to understand a national tragedy, the film has become more available over time. Life ended up with the original reel, and subsequently damaged several frames of the film. Additionally, in the original film “four frames were removed, and large splices appear,” information that was not conveyed to the public until years later.¹² This discovery became a huge catalyst that fueled the conspiracy and skepticism surrounding the assassination. After a certain point, “there was such mistrust of the government and resentment of *LIFE* that any inconsistency having to do with the film could get pulled into the gravitational force of various conspiracy theories.”¹³ Between distributions of the original and the four copies, the film has become available to the public. The wide distribution of the object had of course only enhanced speculation about the truth of the event itself. Releasing the film to such a mass audience without a firm grasp on what actually happened to JFK has only encouraged speculation on behalf of spectators who choose to interact with the film.

⁹ Wrone, 98

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Alexandra Zapruder. *Twenty Six Seconds: A Personal History of the Zapruder Film*. (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016) 95.

¹³ Ibid, 95

Today, the entirety of the film is easily accessible on the Internet. With a quick Google search one can immediately access the film, from a breakdown of individual frames to entire videos of the film played at original speed or slowed down. This easy access combines itself with the important ability to play and pause, so that the viewer can select specific frames while watching the film, and use the movement bar to slide the video footage around however they seem fit. Viewer control is abundant, which is the most important component of creating a conspiracy. The person's ability to analyze and draw conclusions from source material is key to structuring an argument, and this ability to force the images to adhere to viewer control distorts the original footage. This physical manipulation of the moving image is problematic, and according to David Company, "in its assembly of shots, cinematic montage emphasized the partial, fragmentary nature of a single image."¹⁴ The disruption of montage opens up a singular image to modes of interpretation that extend beyond what it was intended to actually mean. When applying this to a film which is completely historical documentation, the desire to input some sort of symbolic meaning or metaphorical representation irreparably turns the document into an open forum for people to interpret and change the film. Even the FBI originally interpreted the film by analyzing the individual frames to obtain meaning and some sort of trajectory.¹⁵ Most interestingly, the film is often slowed down or analyzed in a series of still images to determine the movement that occurred after JFK was shot, which is integral to understanding where the shooter was positioned at the time of the event. This extremely ironic act of looking at a frozen image to obtain a sense of movement completely alters the way in which the film is understood.

¹⁴ Company 13

¹⁵ Wrone 39

The act of analyzing a film in pieces turns it into an entirely different form of rhetoric. Film theorist Laura Mulvey, who writes on the intersection of the still and the moving image, explores the ways that time effects the understanding of a fragment of a film. She quotes philosopher Raymond Bellour in her as he explains: “as soon as you stop the film, you begin to add time to the image. You start to reflect differently on the film, on cinema.”¹⁶ This ability to freeze the image has become an extremely prevalent part of 21st century viewing practices, as the viewer uses their newfound control over the image to sometimes manipulate its meanings. In an essay on stillness within the moving image, Laura Mulvey further writes “with the arrival of new technologies giving the spectator control of the viewing process, this kind of radical break can be experienced by anyone with the simple touch of a button.”¹⁷ By breaking the film down to its individual celluloid frames, it is easy to forget you are looking at an entire film. In doing this time is added to each individual frame, allotting for possibilities that do not necessarily exist when the images are moving at 24 frames per second. In many of the cases analyzed in this paper, the desire to separate a single frame from its content is readily apparent. This is a technique that the conspiracy theorists use in order to project their own thoughts and opinions onto the film as a whole while actually neglecting parts of the entire composition. As a result, their narrative is simultaneously strengthened and weakened. On the former hand, the image the viewer is presented with fits the theorist’s narrative quite nicely, but on the latter the image is only a part of a whole, and the theory could possibly be dismantled if the viewer were presented with even just a few seconds of the moving image. In the case of the Zapruder flim, the

¹⁶ Laura Mulvey referencing Raymond Bellour. *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). 186

¹⁷ Laura Mulvey. “Stillness in the Moving Image: Ways of Visualizing Time and Its Passing” from *The Cinematic* by David Company. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007) 137

technique of analyzing film stills has been used to produce both a coherent answer for the assassination, and in order to promote speculation against various theories.

Alexandra Zapruder, granddaughter of Abraham Zapruder, wrote an extensively researched book on the film that her grandfather made, and in her own words “on November 24th 1963 “the Dallas FBI agents remained at Kodak for an hour or two, watching the film over and over again using an 8mm projector that allowed freeze frame stopping to analyze it, trying to determine what it showed.”¹⁸ The desire to slow the film and even remove movement altogether difficult, because it can be damaging to the validity of the truth telling dimension. The grey area exists when the desire to push an agenda onto the object is greater than understanding the object for its parts of the whole. It is a dangerous position, because obsessing over a particular segment in the film can lead to outrageous claims that do not reflect the entirety of the reel as a whole. This type of desire to obtain meaning from a particular handful of frames has led to several specific claims about the Zapruder film. The theory of a second shooter is one of the many more prominent ideas about JFK’s assassination that has been obtained from looking at a small amount of frames to determine the direction of JFK’s head. To generate this idea, the viewer needs to watch the film at a slowed down rate in order to precisely view JFK’s movements as he is struck. Today, that type of technology is readily available for the average viewer. In the 1960s, play and pause technology was not readily available, so those who had access to the film worked from cell to cell to piece things together. As Alexandra Zapruder noted, FBI agents had access to this film and the ability to view it in pieces. The second shooter theory came out much later, once the film was made widely accessible and the average viewer had the power to go over the frames at a slower speed. Because of the availability of this type of technology theories can be generated

¹⁸ Zapruder 90.

more quickly and with more authority, as spectatorship has become more of a privileged position of power than an experience of viewing presented information. Therefore, the analysis of individual film stills became an important attribute surrounding the Zapruder film and its subsequent use for these theories.

JFK conspiracy theories have been the source of great entertainment value; the most notable being the 1991 Oliver Stone film that presented the theory of a second shooter in a fictional format that tried to adhere to the qualities of a documentary. The film, along with many other films about conspiracy falls into a category that cultural historian Bjørn Sørensen has dubbed the “conspiracy documentary”.¹⁹ This is a specific type of documentary in which films adhere to a historical or documentary style tendency while conveying their own agenda and working to uncover the “truth” of a situation. For the general public, the theories often become something of a thrilling mystery to enjoy and follow along with. The desire to learn alongside the theories turns the film into an adventure, thus presenting a historical event and within a skeptical framework. The construct of the narrative is also an important part of its success, feeding the idea that conspiracy theorists are the good truth tellers overcoming the evil governmental power. As a result, their ideas read more like good versus evil thrillers, an approachable rhetoric that can be followed and enjoyed by a large part of the population. The conspiracy theory in its display is “best recognized as putting forth a particular narrative logic that organizes disparate events within a mechanistic, tragic framework.”²⁰ So, in regards to the many JFK conspiracies, the approachable and well-known subject matter draws the viewer into the “story” as they see it. By

¹⁹ Bjørn Sørensen, “Digital Diffusion of Delusions” in *New Documentary Ecologies: Emerging Platforms, Practices and Discourses* by Kate Nash (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014). 201

²⁰ Mark Fenster. *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and power in American Culture*. (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 111.

situating the film to start immediately after the death of JFK, the director binds the viewer to a shocking historical moment. The resulting phenomena is one in which the viewer is drawn into the contents and begins to believe them regardless of the facts that are equally available to them.

The distribution of conspiracy via media becomes the most lucrative way to present ideas to a general public. It is apparent that “although they do not usually yield extreme results... the culture of conspiracy theory nevertheless seems to be deeply prevalent in popular culture.”²¹ This is why films like Oliver Stone’s *JFK* are able to gain momentous popularity and draw in a large number of viewers. The goal of the film aligns itself with many of the tendencies of the documentary “with the explicit aim to *persuade* the viewer about this truth by *analyzing* and *interrogating* the facts pertaining to this event.”²² By sticking to a format that offers loose historical information, the viewer is drawn into a familiar story. Once this trust is established, the director can now run with the content and help the viewer to see things the way the conspirator does. The truth is established through a selection of images and clips combined with a discussion from varying sources that seem trustworthy. In the case of documentaries, this often includes scholars or government officials. Oliver Stone’s film follows a similar style by incorporating a real court case, officials, and other elements of government that convey the rhetoric of trust to the viewer. As a result, the fictional medium starts to feel as if it is a historical retelling, solidifying the film’s status as a theatrical conspiracy documentary. Furthermore, the film reinforces the desire of the theorist to feel empowered for subscribing to this kind of belief.

JFK is an example of a fairly successful attempt at creating a theory out of the original Zapruder film and presenting it to a wide audience. Oliver Stone proves that the viewer too can become an analyst and look for messages to interpret. In doing so, the film elevates itself to a

²¹ Sørenssen 201.

²² Ibid 212. Emphasis in the original

teaching tool as well as a source of general entertainment. According to Barbara Kilinger, this viewer empowerment is not uncommon in the digital age: “When media industries portray filmmakers as all-knowing and all-seeing manipulators of such detail, they define the viewer in a complementary fashion. As a savvy decoder of a text’s mysteries, the viewer becomes something of an authority – an intrepid explorer who has discovered a terra incognita and mapped every path.”²³ In this way, Oliver Stone is transferring his authorship and abilities over to the viewer. His film essentially saying that the viewer also has the tools to make these judgments and assumptions. He encourages the audience to go back to the Zapruder film and pour over its contents, to try to see the same things he found. Furthermore, he provides the framework of how to be skeptical about things that seem to be set in stone. The overarching theme of the film is that Stone took something that was supposedly solved and threw the case open through his use of analysis as portrayed by his on-screen characters. They mimic the job of the conspiracy theorist, and their confidence in presenting information is transferred over to the viewer, who looks to the characters as truth tellers trying to overcome the evil that is covering up reality. Stone’s compelling narrative and desire to overthrow a cover up draw the viewer in and teach them to also question reality. So, although some elements of the film are in fact real, the narrative and actions of the characters blur the line between reality and fiction while also encouraging the viewer to follow along and insert themselves into the web of conspiracy.

The JFK assassination is still discussed and even disputed, making the film into one of the earliest objects that helped to promote conspiracy. Zapruder’s film has become a symbol of conspiracy culture, a documented artifact that has birthed theories, arguments, and discussions surrounding the death of JFK. Most importantly, it has been the source of countless viewings that

²³ Barbara Klinger. *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) 161.

are used to create theories, and the ways in which it has been analyzed are sometimes damaging to the reality that the film captures. By viewing the film as still images, viewers have been able to inject meaning into frames that are ripped from their own continuity. As a result, the film as a whole suffers from a lack of coherence. The rhetoric used to examine these pieces changes, and “as the indexical moment suddenly finds visibility in the slow or stilled image, so spectatorship finds new forms.”²⁴ This, combined with the distribution of theories introduces an alternative reality to the audience being targeted. The ability to analyze an image detached from its full context has become an integral part of the culture of conspiracy. The Zapruder film stills set this concept in motion, and over time technology has evolved to further aid this desire to separate the still image from its reality in order to uncover some sort of evil force.

²⁴ Mulvey and Company 134

***Blow Up* and the Myth of Photographic Truth in the Conspiracy Narrative**

By 1966, three years after JFK was assassinated, the Zapruder film established itself as the primary source for investigators and conspiracy theorists alike to determine who assassinated the president. This was the year that Michaelangelo Antonioni released his Grand Prix Winning film *Blow Up*. The film follows protagonist Thomas as he accidentally photographs a murder. Thomas goes to great lengths to determine whether or not the murder is real, or just a product of paranoia and conveniently placed shapes in the lens of his camera. Alexandra Zapruder, writes this about the film in her research about her grandfather:

a particular scene asks the same questions that many could ask about the Zapruder film. Is there a difference between visual representation and visual truth? We can see that something has happened – but we do not know who the actors are, what exactly occurred, or why. We are witnesses to something whose visual representation does not bring clear answers or universal consensus. Instead, we have fragments of information and sequential moments in time that can be stitched together to create a narrative explanation, but it is subject to interpretation, and what one person sees is not what another person seems.²⁵

Zapruder goes on to explain that the function of the photograph is to document a moment in time, but not necessarily to offer the viewer knowledge and an understanding of an event. Like her grandfather's film reel, a photograph cannot absolutely answer such questions of absolute truth and reality.

To this day we do not know who assassinated JFK, and the Zapruder film is a glaring reminder of what we cannot obtain: closure. It is a conspiracy that is still consistently revisited

²⁵ Zapruder 167-68

by both scholars and everyday citizens, some of whom were not even alive at the time of his death. The film has left a legacy; it has become an open book that is immediately accessible from any smartphone, tablet, or computer. The shock and trauma that the event caused has kept the film in the public eye for decades. However, the film as an object is inherently limited by its ability to capture the moment at hand. The static and moving images convey only the visual and auditory. Beyond these qualities the image is open to interpretation, the murky area in which the spectator can project their ideas and fears onto the object. By doing so, the spectator turns the objective images into a subjective viewing and distribution. This exact subjective scrutiny has fueled the culture of conspiracy. This population's ideals hinge on the desire to extract meaning from the image or film. The problem is that in actuality the film cannot speak beyond its record, and Antonioni's movie takes this idea as its central theme. In the film *Blow Up* the protagonist is a photographer. One day when he decides to venture outside of the studio and take pictures in a local park he ends up accidentally photographing a woman whom we are lead to believe is responsible for having significant other murdered. Thomas obsesses over the images he has made with his camera, enlarging them over and over again to produce an image of the dead body. When all he can produce is a grey blob that may or may not even be human, Thomas searches for some sense of absolute truth, only to come up with nothing at the end and give up. His indecisive language throughout the film, combined with surreal elements such as a travelling group of mimes, create a filmic environment in which even the viewer cannot distinguish reality from the surreal. The images that Thomas creates and the narrative of the rest of the film call into question concepts of photographic truth and the complicated nature of reality in Antonioni's narrative.

Thomas's internal and external conflicts stem from the idea that a photograph is meant to be able to tell the truth of what it has captured. Historically photographic images have often been

treated as an absolute truth, with writers such as Fox Talbot writing testaments to the way in which the camera can capture an image of absolute reality.²⁶ Over time this concept has become distorted and disputed, forcing viewers and theorists of photography to write differently about the supposed truth telling quality of an image. For Roland Barthes, the concept of truth in a photographic image is not necessarily foundational. As discussed previously, in “The Rhetoric of the Image” he writes about the way in which the supposed truth of an image is nonexistent, and that the reality of the situation is that images can easily be manipulated through both the capabilities of photographic technology and also through the human mind’s narrative qualities. Barthes shows that photographs do not necessarily show absolute truth just because they document a real event. Thomas deals with a fundamental limitation in the photographic image as he grapples with its stillness as an object. The most famous component of the film is the series of scenes in which Thomas discovers the murder while printing images from a roll of film he shot outside the studio. His process is aggressive, he menaces over the negatives with a magnifying glass, and the tight camera brings the viewer in to mimic his gaze. The viewer is brought through the individual negatives like a short filmstrip. The breaks in between images as Thomas moves the magnifying glass remind the viewer that they are viewing still images, but the camera’s movement turns the still images into a filmic experience. This movement creates the illusion of narrative for the viewer as Thomas uses the disjointed images to create his own narrative of what happened with the woman and her lover. His paranoia upon viewing what he thinks is a body furthers this desire to construct a narrative, and the viewer follows this trajectory. The viewer also knows about interactions that extend beyond the images, and because of this their view of the negatives is damaged by their omnipresence. The viewer pieces a narrative together with

²⁶ Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*. (Chicago: KWS Publishers, in association with National Media Museum) 2011.

Thomas, using his movements as an explanation for what has happened, The viewer buys into Thomas's narrative, and his actions help to form a sort of conspiracy theory about the murder he may have photographed. The jerking of the magnifying glass furthers a creeping sensation of paranoia, and as he rests on the last frame, the blurry blob in the background becomes a suspicious piece of Antonioni's puzzle. This entire sequence of developing negatives sets up the concept of a conspiracy in the film, bringing the viewer along into this narrative through Thomas's actions.

These scenes in which Thomas develops the film can be analyzed through the lens of Roland Barthes's myth of photographic truth and the dismantling of the ideology of reality in photography. Thomas stretches the capabilities of film and paper to its absolute limits in his quest to figure out what his image contains. Thomas becomes obsessive, and the viewer watches the image devolve from full photo to pieces of grainy blobs that he believes represent the murdered man. His advanced scrutiny of this image reflects a passage from Barthes's *Camera Lucida*:

to scrutinize means to turn the photograph over, to enter into the paper's depth, to reach its other side (what is hidden is for us Westerners more "true" than what is visible) . Alas, however hard I look, I discover nothing: if I enlarge, I see nothing but the grain of the paper: I undo the image for the sake of its substance; and if I do not enlarge, if I content myself with scrutinizing, I obtain this sole knowledge, long since possessed at first glance: that this indeed has been: the turn of the screw had produced nothing.²⁷

At the end of this advanced session of enlarging, Thomas's negative never absolutely shows an image of the dead man. What we are meant to believe is the body really only ever becomes a

²⁷ Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida, Reflections on Photography*. (New York City: Hill & Wang, 1980) 100

large grey blob that could be looked at as either body or mass shape. The audience is forced to stay with him throughout each enlargement, watching as his paranoia increases with each close up. The viewer starts to share his thoughts and buy into his murder narrative the more they watch him obsessively scrutinize the film negatives. Like Barthes, he doesn't actually produce a clear image, but he attempts to reach the underlying symbolic contents of the photographic paper in order to prove his hypothesis. By treating the individual stills as a moving narrative Thomas has subsequently projected his fears and assumptions upon an object that may or may not be a body. He scrutinizes these individual frames in a similar way to how Alexandra Zapruder describes the FBI agents looking through her grandfather's film. Thomas's attention to detail however is fueled by a sense of paranoia due to the fact that the woman in these images followed him home to get the film from him. Her obsession with obtaining the photos injects another level of meaning into the narrative and the viewer's assumptions about what these images factually contain. These assumptions have thus overlaid the viewer's desired "truth" onto the image, thus creating an environment in which there is no defined reality as to whether or not there is a dead body.

Now that Thomas has decided for himself that he may have photographed a murder, he looks to seek some sort of qualifying truth in the event. The only way in which he is able to solve the mystery of the image is to return to the original scene, where he discovers the dead body. As a photographer, his initial urge is to document the man in order to obtain closure in his search for truth. An image of the body itself would close the film, but Antonioni forces the narrative surrounding this dead body to remain vague to form his larger commentary on image and representation. The viewer follows Thomas through this obsessive journey, and the film's trajectory causes the viewer to grapple with his discovery. Antonioni's portrayal of time in the

film is extremely disjointed, and it creates a surreal space for Thomas. The viewer has difficulty tracking his environment, and as a result the encounter with the dead body is hard to really take as absolute truth. Thomas sees the body, goes to a party, and interacts with several people throughout the night. When he finally gets back to his apartment, his images and the negatives are gone. The surreal quality of his engagements with the world takes away the important grounding of reality. This scene calls into question all of the images that Thomas previously created and enlarged, forcing the viewer to watch the narrative of truth telling unravel. All he has left is one photograph with the blurred mass that he believes is the dead man's body. His language remains equally conflicted, as he tries to explain to people that he witnessed a murder, but cannot actually say that he did. Thomas witnessed a "murder" through a constructed narrative that he pieced together from still images. In reality, he saw nothing but images of a woman and then a dead body. When asked what he saw by friends, he replies simply: "nothing" or "I didn't see."²⁸ His excitement to tell those around him about the body immediately fades into self-questioning. In fact, his language is often superficial and deconstructed, resulting in the viewer inserting their assumptions into what he is viewing, further complicating the narrative and enveloping the audience in a constructed reality based only on images. In the film's denouement Thomas completely dismantles the tension that the images have built up, deflating the narrative and leaving the viewer questioning the reality of the film's environment.

The film's ending furthers this speculation of reality. After losing the negatives and prints of the murder, Thomas returns to the scene of the crime in daylight with a camera. The body has now vanished, and he is forced to completely abandon his narrative about the murder. The viewer becomes equally thrown into turbulence, unable to string the narrative together into a

²⁸ Michaelangelo Antonioni. *Blow Up*. (California: Warner Home Video, 2004) 1:29:30 – 1:30:00

solid closure. Exacerbating the blurred lines of reality are the mimes that appear in and out of the film at sporadic times. The mimes are harmless characters, but their presence continues to drive the thematic instability that Thomas experiences while he grapples with the alleged murder he has become involved in. At the end of the film Thomas runs into the mimes as they play a game of mimed tennis. The camera focuses for some time on their game, and when the “ball” flies out of the court, Thomas picks it up and throws it back. This act holds a tremendous amount of weight in Antonioni’s narrative. Here, Thomas is completely shattering his concept of reality and participating in a mimed action, thus undoing much of the narrative he built up to gain the trust of the viewer. Throughout the film the mimes represent an unhinged aspect of the narrative, they constantly make the viewer question the reality of the filmic environment. The film’s ending leaves the viewer at a crossroads and entirely dismantles the credibility of the story. Antonioni uses the film to lead the viewer through a series of issues dealing with the truth that may be found in an image and its effect on our greater sense of what is “real.” Film theorist Adam Lowenstein takes up Barthes’s conversation about this concept of photographic truth in his book about interactive spectatorship. *Blow Up* functions a lot like an interactive film, in which the viewer is invited to collaborate with the characters in their discoveries and actions. The viewer often spends time looking with Thomas in this way. In viewing a photograph alongside Thomas, Lowenstein feels that this type of interaction teaches us “the photograph can only reveal what the viewer has already brought to his or her encounter with it, so it cannot teach us anything we do not already know.”²⁹ This why the mimes and other components of the film so aggressively contort the viewer’s understanding of the content in the photographs that are examined. Influenced by Thomas’s actions, as well as the structure of the film and its questionable reality,

²⁹ Adam Lowenstein. *Dreaming of Cinema: Spectatorship, Surrealism, and the Age of Digital Media*. (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2015) 13

the viewer is tossed into a blurred world in which it becomes difficult to distinguish reality from fiction.

Barthes idea that photography does not necessarily portray an absolute truth is accurately conveyed throughout *Blow Up*. Antonioni's film constructs an environment in which reality is extremely blurred and subjective. His commentary on extracting truth from an image simultaneously conveys the danger of pushing a personal narrative onto a still photograph. The depth of this theme incorporates a form of interactive spectatorship, as Antonioni beckons the viewer to collaborate with his protagonist. The film's storyline and the question of the dead body are elements that relate to the culture of conspiracy, in which a person takes images and injects them with meaning to serve their own desires. For the viewer who wants the thrill of a murder, they can believe what Thomas saw, and vice versa for those who feel that the film was merely trying to toy with reality. By commenting on the treatment of a still image through the medium of film, Antonioni has created an important piece of speculative work. The viewer establishes a sense of trust with Thomas, and Antonioni structures the film to create an environment in which the viewer has a curated view of who Thomas is. As a result the viewer becomes attached to him and inherits his viewpoints and opinions. What it boils down to is the danger of influencing spectatorship. In regards to *Blow Up* as a film specifically, philosophy scholar Gregory Currie writes:

The difference between the photograph and the cinematic image is merely that the film image is capable of revealing *more* things the photographer did not expect, for the film records movement as well as the things a still photograph records."³⁰

³⁰ Gregory Currie "Visible Traces: Documentary and the Contents of Photographs." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Summer, 1999) 288.

By nesting an examination of still images within a film, Antonioni disorients the audience. The way he positions the viewer alludes to exactly the difference that Currie is highlighting. The photograph alone would not cause the viewer to string together the events; rather it is the events leading up to the development of Thomas's film roll that make the images into a powerful narrative on a murder. Antonioni's well-crafted film enlarges the disorienting effect that the moving image has on understanding the photographic object.

***Room 237* as a Conspiracy Documentary**

As we have seen in the previous cases, the uncoupling of a still image from its moving narrative framework can completely change the way that the theme and meaning of the object are received by a wider audience. The various cultures of conspiracy that exist in response to events and concepts seem to use this type of analysis to distribute their claims about events. In using this formula of image and discussion, the conspiracy documentary has become an important way of distributing these claims in a neatly framed setting. As I previously mentioned, the conspiracy documentary is a term coined by Bjorn Sørensen that is used to describe films that convey conspiracy theories through use of narration, story, and the documentary style format. While these types of documentaries usually respond to historical events such as 9/11, recently there has been a documentary made that discusses filmmaker Stanley Kubrick and his film *The Shining*. The 2012 documentary *Room 237* brings together several different narrators, including a historian, musician, theater performer, and several other people who just generally enjoy Kubrick's films and feel that they have made some sort of discoveries regarding his work. Their desire to discuss and display their interpretations of the film stems from a sense of distrust with Kubrick and his hidden meanings in his movies. Their speculation is conflated with access to media technology, which they discuss clearly as a tool that has allowed each narrator to better analyze *The Shining*. The narrators in this film use a combination of their preferred methods of analysis, which include slowed down clips, static images, and analysis of dialogue, and they combine this with their own rhetoric too create a film that accuses Stanley Kubrick of embedding hidden meanings into *The Shining*, with some of these meanings relating to bigger events such as the moon landing. To bring the viewer on board with these claims, the narrators speak and present themselves in a way that seems to give them authority over the content of the film,

causing the viewer to become immersed in their claims about Kubrick's films without necessarily getting the full story of *The Shining* with these theories.

Room 237 can be compared to the model of the conspiracy documentary in the way that it takes Kubrick's film out of its historical moment and tries to uncover hidden meaning. The documentary here tries to show that Kubrick had ulterior motives in his creation of *The Shining*, and this team of narrators is working to show the viewer how the film is actually meant to be portrayed in their eyes through their theories. In *Room 237* the narrators explore a variety of claims about *The Shining*, treating it as an apology for the moon landing, a response to Native American Genocide, and even as a response to the Holocaust. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on the piece in which Juli Kearns discusses the idea Jack Torrence is meant to represent Stanley Kubrick as a metaphorical Minotaur in the film. Several of the film's interviewees scrutinize even the smallest painting in the corner of a scene, or slow the film down to one frame per second to analyze the location of characters during camera transitions. Their ultimate goal is to uncover Kubrick's motives and finally understand his film, but they do so in such an obsessive way that their judgment seems clouded by their analysis. Throughout the film the narrators remind the viewer of their dedication to the cause, stating that "you have to be a fanatic to find all of this," or comforting the viewer by explaining that the things they have uncovered "might seem arbitrary" to the untrained eye.³¹ The narrators appear to be using this language as an attempt to draw the viewer into this documentary and their ideas by sharing bits of personal experience to create a bond.

The director of the documentary uses cinematic techniques to establish trust with the viewer and situate an environment in which the audience will digest these claims. The narrators

³¹ Rodney Ascher. *Room 237* (New York: IFC, 2012).

are not necessarily scholars; rather, they are self-proclaimed Kubrick fans trying to dismantle the hidden constructs in the film. Their names are only shown once throughout the film as they are introduced in separate voice-overs. After their names come up across the screen they are never distinguished again. The dialogue becomes disconnected and the rest of their comments are played over clips from *The Shining*. This detachment from the person allows their voices to become more authoritative, as they guide us through the analysis from the perspective of a faceless higher authority. The employment of these tactics also creates an environment in which the viewer is fed the conspiracy narrative in a visually engaging way without the narrator's physical presence interrupting the dynamic. In his article on conspiracy documentaries, cultural historian Bjørn Sørensen discusses this tactic in more detail, discussing how these types of films are often “dominated by the use of expository narrative techniques of mainstream ‘history films’ (Discovery Channel, The History Channel, etc) based on an established verbal discourse with images functioning as illustrations and/or proof of what is being said in the voice over. Rhetorically, this is a way of utilizing the trust instilled... while at the same time latching on to popular ideas about objectivity and truthfulness of mainstream documentary.”³² By ascribing to a familiar layout, the film easily fits into the documentary style familiar to a wide audience. A style that has previously established trust with reputable sources can easily be maneuvered to convey conspiracy narratives because of the use of media technology and rhetoric to elevate these theories into believable concepts. Their rhetoric is authoritative and also sometimes forgiving to the viewer. This theme of language as a tool to further the distribution of the conspiracy continues into the two examples from *Room 237* that deal with the moon landing and the Minotaur.

³² Sørensen 214.

For Juli Kearns *The Shining* clearly portrays Jack Torrance as a Minotaur trying to find his way through a symbolic maze. She spends time discussing the famous maze from the film, but focuses mostly on one small discrete object in a different scene. Kearns begins her argument with a personal anecdote about transitioning from watching the film in theaters, to VCR, and eventually to DVD. Her excitement about the film builds as she discusses this trajectory, because for Kearns it is exciting to finally be able to “really sit down and take a good look at it”³³ with the film while being able to pause on specific frames. Her excitement about the possibilities of the home theater are exactly what media theorist Barbara Klinger writes about in her book *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*. Klinger writes about people like Kearns who are particularly excited about the possibilities of getting to spend time and re-watch films in the home, while fast forwarding to their favorite parts and pausing on important scenes. Klinger explains: “familiarity enables views to experience both comfort and mastery. Foreknowledge of the story alters the narrative experience by lessening the tension associated with suspense. Viewers can be more relaxed, shifting their priorities to a knowing anticipation of events to come.”³⁴ Kearns seems to be experiencing this type of familiarity with the film, and because of her relationship with it she exudes a confidence when discussing her theories about the Minotaur. Using the technique of the other narrators, to convey a comforting word to the viewer, Kearns explains “the casual viewer isn’t going to see so many things in Kubrick’s films.”³⁵ The culture of conspiracy comes into play heavily here, with the repeated viewing process of the narrator evolving into an obsessive ritual of analysis in order to uncover and

³³ *Room 237* 44:15 – 44:17

³⁴ Klinger 154.

³⁵ *Room 237* 27:42 – 27:46.

convey a larger meaning in regards to Kubrick's work. Kearns's introduction to her theory in the film displays the viewing process that has allowed her to feel confident in her claims.

For Kearns, the ability to focus on a still image from the film holds the key to the theory she puts forth in *Room 237*. With the freedom of repeated screenings comes the ability to control the viewing experience with the remote control. The DVD and VCR both feature a "pause" feature, and the DVD player has even more features including the ability to play a film back in slow motion. These pieces of media technology are arguably the most important tool used in the various *Room 237* conspiracy theories. Used in combination with repetitive viewing of the film, the DVD player features can become an integral tool for the culture of conspiracy. According to Klinger, the narrator in this *Room 237* scene gains momentum from repeated viewings and "along the way, the repeated text becomes a launching pad for experiences of mastery, solace, and observant engagement."³⁶ Kearns uses this function to point out a scene in which a poster of a man skiing has caught her attention. The scene she refers to is the first appearance of the infamous twin sisters from *The Shining*. Upon an introductory screening of the film, the characters might distract the viewer, but like Klinger explains Kearns's repeated viewings have given her the time to move beyond the shocking part of the scene and explore the rest of the environment around the characters. The scene in the film only lasts a few seconds, but Kearns is able to pause on the scene with her DVD player, and even zoom in on the corner in which she is trying to look. In doing this she distorts the image of the poster because of the capabilities of the zoom feature, but for her this distortion looks like a Minotaur, and she builds a narrative around this concept. Kearns argues that the skier's cap and positioning look a lot like a Minotaur, and she even uses another effect that is common in the culture of conspiracy: drawing arrows on the

³⁶ Klinger 156.

screen to ring the viewer's attention to her reference. In combining these techniques and using her expansive dialogue that brings the viewer in to relate to her, Kearns is able to establish her conspiracy narrative within the documentary.

The meticulously designed atmosphere combined with the use of media tools has helped to elevate *Room 237* to its status as a conspiracy documentary. The film itself has received positive reviews and sustained placement on streaming websites such as Netflix. The elevation of these narrators into respected theorists is aided by their manipulation of *The Shining* through digital tools. By enlarging frames, slowing them down, and drawing over them, the narrators have embraced technology in aid of their conspiracy theories. This 2013 analysis of a movie from 1980 provides new ways of interpreting Kubrick's intentions. However these ideas tow the line between interpretation and distortion, a problematic result of the ability to take frames of the film out of its original moving context. This desire to extract an influenced form of truth from the object is an important cause of the conspiracy theorist. The culture of conspiracy finds solace in this ability to impose an agenda on the object, and by extracting the object from its full context it becomes easier to do so. The evolution of technology to allow for this extraction has become the most important part of creating the narrative. The evolution from theater to VHS and on to DVD has greatly influenced the accessibility of objects to scrutinize. Conspiracy theorists now have the ability to create these narratives from the comfort of their home with complete access to materials. The positing and use of media technology has only elevated the ability to distribute these theories in ways that can attract a wider audience through the use of streaming sites and social media campaigns.

/r/findbostonbombers and The Future Trajectory of Conspiracy Culture

The future of conspiracy theories is propelled largely by the accessibility of the Internet. The function of the World Wide Web in these narratives is primarily to act as a source of distribution and collaboration among theorists. It is impossible to fully plot the trajectory of conspiracy theories in the future, but for now one can look back at a recent event in which the Internet played a key role the snowball effect of a massive conspiracy. The Boston Bombing, a terrorist attack which occurred on April 15th 2013 became one of the most highly profiled instances of conspiracy unfolding in real time on the Internet. When closed circuit television photos were released of the possible bombing suspects Reddit users jumped into action, evolving into what many journalists have begun to call “digilantes.” In the forum /r/findbostonbombers many Reddit users gathered together to figure out how to identify the men in these photos. What came about was a wide range of conspiracy theories wrapped up in the forum, complete with images that were altered and drawn on in order to convey particular points about the suspects.

To understand why this release of photographs went out of control, photographer and writer Oliver David gave a talk at the *International Center of Photography* in 2015. In the discussion, he explained the importance of having a narrative attached to a photograph, and what can go wrong when the viewer is not given said narrative:

The Boston Marathon bombing marks a watershed moment in this relationship between narrative and image. A huge volume of photographs, from spectators, journalists and CCTV cameras were available almost in real time. These images were received before any attempt at narrativising, or making sense of what had happened, could be attempted

by the media. Within this absence of narrative, the ambiguity of photographic imagery became readily apparent; a photograph shows something but could mean anything.³⁷

With the invention of social media came the ability to post instantly, and by cutting down on time these posts often lose a form of structure or narrative that is needed to make sense of the whole picture. Oftentimes images like this are presented by journalists, with accompanying textual support to give the audience some idea of the situation being depicted. In the case of the Boston Bombing images came in too quickly to be interpreted and were thus thrown at the audience with no explanations, causing emotional chaos as a response while people struggled to make sense and meaning out of the still images.

Without a guiding narrative to obtain meaning, many Internet users distinguished their own interpretations of the situation and posted them to social media platforms. The still frames that were obtained by social media posters and users of the Boston Bombing found their way into many online forums, Reddit being the most infamous due to the misidentification of the suspect. The images were changed from their original state. Many theorists drew on the image with arrows, directing viewer attention to their curated narration of what they thought people were doing in the images. They also wrote small cues to spur critical thinking. One example from David's lecture is an image of a crowd with a man standing off to the side. The theorist here has drawn a sort of angle to convey where this man is looking, and has written "1: alone, 2: brown, 3: backpack, 4: not watching."³⁸ These broad descriptors and the drawing to articulate his sight line turn an unassuming man into a suspect that the viewer finds threatening without really

³⁷ "Conspiracy Theory 2.0: Photographic practices on conspiracy theory websites following the Boston Marathon bombing." *International Center of Photography*. Published September 17th 2015.
<https://www.icp.org/perspective/conspiracy-theory-20-0>

³⁸ *ibid*

understanding why. As David goes on to explain, “None of these things are unapparent from looking at the un-annotated photograph. However the image then becomes overdetermined by these annotations.”³⁹ Like the narrators in *Room 237* or theorists who overlay the direction that JFK’s head went when the bullet hit him, people are using even further updated technology to push the viewer to the theorist’s determined conclusions. Many images like this exist, often posted to social media with accompanying links to conspiracy theories about the attacks.

The types of images discussed above were plentiful in the subreddit */r/findbostonbombers*, which ultimately led to the misidentification of a suspect. While the online manhunt was taking place, Alexis Madrigal, columnist for *The Atlantic* had this to say about the problematic nature of this rag-tag militia style search for the truth: “But they are not real cops. They are well-meaning people who have not considered the moral weight of what they're doing. This is vigilantism, and it's only the illusion that what we do online is not as significant as what we do offline that allows this to go on. Imagine if people were standing around in Boston pointing fingers at people in photographs and (roughly) accusing them of terrorism.”⁴⁰ And just as she explained, there were many ethical issues about this search, problems that caused dire consequences for Sunil Tripathi, the misidentified bombing suspect whose family became the victims of a social media firestorm. Tripathi had gone missing a month before the attacks, and the same social media platforms his family members used to plead for his safe return were used aggressively against them in an online witch hunt for Tripathi as “suspect 2” throughout many online conspiracy and vigilante forums. His brother recounts the evolution of the attack as “What

³⁹ *ibid*

⁴⁰ Alexis Madrigal. “Hey Reddit, Enough Boston Bombing Vigilantism *The Atlantic*, Published April 17th 2013, Accessed December 8th 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/04/hey-reddit-enough-boston-bombing-vigilantism/275062>

started off as people saying, 'This image and your brother look the same' became, 'This image is your brother' became, 'How are you providing a cover for your brother to do this?'"⁴¹ On the same day as the misidentification, the real suspects were apprehended. Tripathi was later found dead by means of suicide.

The harrowing ordeal caused by these forums has caused widespread controversy about what is referred to as “crowdsourced investigation” and the dangers of exposing untrained viewers to photographs that need to be analyzed, such as the photos of the bombing. The Boston Bombing is a recent type of event, but it has a lot to teach about the underlying dangers of conspiracy theorists and the ways in which they provide evidence to make their claims. As has been demonstrated throughout the course of this paper, the desire to take an image out of its context, moving or a still image, can inhibit the understanding of a preconceived narrative. This slicing of narrative in order to create a new theory is a primary way that conspiracy theorists work to uncover their respective truths. Combined with cinematic techniques while distributing the claims, these narrators and analysts create an environment in which they can isolate a piece of their object, force their own ideas on the viewer through the use of technological effects, and subsequently distribute a theory attached to a fractured image, a part separated from the whole.

Much of what is articulated in the culture of conspiracy has to do with the interruption of montage, whether it be in film or in a story that is narrated through still images. When people watch a film, they don't always have to see all of the action that happens leading up to a moment. As explained by film theorist Sergei Eisenstein in his book *Film Form*, “the concept of the moving (time-consuming) image arises from the superimposition-or counterpoint-of two

⁴¹ Neal Broffman. *Help Us Find Sunil Tripathi*. 2015.

differing immobile images.”⁴² For Eisenstein, the interactions between scenes depend on the viewer’s ability to make assumptions that are constrained by the narrative of the film. When an image of a gun being fired cuts to an image of someone falling in Eisenstein’s example, the viewer can fill in the blanks and assume that the person was shot. This is montage, and by using the assumptions of the viewer, conspiracy theorists create their own disjointed concepts into a supposed reality based on the viewer’s ability to piece single pieces together. The culture of conspiracy works to separate these images from their montage context, causing the viewer to assume concepts based on the conspiracy theorist’s narrative because the images being presented are separated from their filmic environment, Montage, or lack thereof, is a key element of the Boston Bombing, and a theme that ties together many of the films and objects discussed in this essay. Conspiracy Theories are easily creatable and accessible by the general public; there is no formal training required to instigate some sort of claim against an event. As conveyed in the incidents following the Boston Bombing, the idea of becoming a hero through use of the Internet was enticing enough for thousands of Reddit users to create their own individual versions of conspiracy in relation to the photos being distributed. The chance to be a hero drove these theorists, just as it has many other conspiracy creators who look to uncover a universal truth through their research and image manipulation. The chronological case studies displayed in this essay are meant to convey the way that media technology has made these theories easier to generate, and even more easy to distribute to a wide audience.

The future of the culture of conspiracy takes a large part of its momentum from the speed and distribution abilities of the Internet, and the prominence of social media. These increases in technology and visibility, combined with the general distrust of mainstream media and the desire

⁴² Sergei Eisenstein. *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. (New York: Harcourt, 1969) 55.

to uncover the truth by the general public will only add this culture's growth in the coming years. Most recently this phenomenon has shifted over to an obsession with news media biases and understanding the "facts" in regards to political affairs. The phenomenon of "Fake News" is a clearly conspiracy ridden concept that has erupted out of the major usage of social media in combination with a desire to manipulate images and ideas to convey truth. The way that people can manipulate photographs and film stills is expanding to a manipulation of rhetoric, and the fake news concept is a clear examination of those capabilities. For the culture of conspiracy, this means that members of this type of collective will continue on their track of uncovering the "truth" through manipulation of media and technology to convey their arguments. Through these four case studies I have traced the way that the culture of conspiracy uses media to create their message. As fake news gains momentum even more new theories will likely be created, and older conspiracies will continue to be looked at through a new lens thanks to the evolution in technological image manipulation.

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