

The search for objective truth in the parallax view



In the realm of assassination drama, *The Parallax View* is in some ways an inversion of the similarly speculative plot of *The Manchurian Candidate*. In the latter film, Korean War soldiers are brainwashed by an external force (Communists) into fomenting instability in the United States through targeted assassinations. By contrast, the Parallax Corporation, as is revealed at the end of the film, recruits violent social misfits to unwillingly become patsies in the assassinations that Parallax conducts. Whereas the Communist agency of *The Manchurian Candidate* is shown to be capable of completely violating one's own mind, the Parallax Corporation covertly manipulates everything in one's life except one's mind. The external social forces — from the avuncular local Sheriff to the federal assassination commission — which impede or otherwise manipulate Frady's progress in the film (and the broader society which is ultimately satisfied in assigning the blame for the Senator's death on Frady) all function in much the same dramatic capacity as the more straightforward process of mental manipulation of the *Manchurian Candidate*. In short, *Parallax View* suggests that a man can be unwittingly "trained" and implicated in acts of terrorism in a fashion which is inverse to the familiar dystopic trope of brainwashing or otherwise mentally torturing a single human being, yet still entirely successful: namely, the manipulation both of the social circle of one specific man and of the broader perceptions of an entire society at large. Joe Frady is presented both as a very isolated person socially and, paradoxically, as someone who is very active in his society through his participation as an investigative journalist. Despite holding a steady job, Joe Frady lives like a transient, taking residence in a motel. The film offers no evidence of any familial relationships in Frady's life, other than an ex-wife who dies early in the film and a brief cameo by a

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girl who seems to have a semi-regular sexual relationship with Frady. As far as friendship goes, Frady seems to maintain some variety of professional “contacts,” mostly related to criminal leads (apparently invaluable to the local police) and law enforcement (namely the ex-FBI agent whose involvement with the agency has been completely wiped to the extent that he can no longer even claim to be a “former agent”). Essentially, the only real social anchor in Frady’s life is his relatively good-humored editor Bill, who becomes the only one aware that Frady is still alive after Frady is reported dead following the boat explosion. In contrast to members of the public seen in the film, Frady is a highly iconoclastic person, someone who is both standoffish and cynical. In public, the long-haired casually-dressed Frady is a taciturn loner: when the woman in the bar flirts with him, he is generally unresponsive to her come-ons. When the deputy begins to taunt Frady, Frady quietly tries to defuse the situation before resorting to violence:

DEPUTY: Can I buy you a drink, miss? You know, there, for a moment, I thought you were a man. But you aren’t, are you? FRADY: [meekly] No, I’m—I’m a girl. DEPUTY: Heh, heh. Why don’t you go over there and tell those people that, real loud? FRADY: Don’t touch me unless you love me. The female reporter who interviews Senator Carroll at the film’s outset beams over him, remarking, “You all look just as wonderful as you do in all your photographs, how do you manage that, always smiling?” By contrast, Frady elicits no such respect for establishment figures, as evinced by his outraged excoriation of the police officers who arrest him: “Look, why don’t you go out and bust up a keno game, do something worthwhile for Christ’s sakes, you two-bit vice squad, you’re not only dumb, you’re dirty.” As an investigative reporter willing to lock horns with any authority whose actions

he finds to be unjust, Frady is more beholden to the truth than anything else. While Frady operates on his hunches, which can be wrong — thinking he found the governor's bag man, when it was in reality the governor's nephew's bookie — his methodology can account for error. In the film's break into the second act, where Frady's ex-wife insists, correctly, that there's a conspiracy out to kill her and the other witnesses to Carroll's assassination, Frady is skeptical of the very idea, having already considered the case on his own: LEE: [produces a newspaper copy of photographs from the assassination] Just look. FRADY: Aw, come on, I looked at this 'til I was blue in the face three years ago. LEE: Since the assassination, six of these people have died in some kind of an accident. FRADY: Four. The film sets up an implicit contrast between those who would accept the findings of the commission report out of trust for the government and Frady himself, whose view on the assassination is framed more by his own reportorial instincts: FRADY: Has he ever indicated to you that he saw anything other than what was in the commission report? LEE: No. FRADY: Nothing. Did you see anything up there? LEE: No. FRADY: Well, neither did I. And believe me, I looked. We all looked. LEE: You mean, if you didn't see it, it's not there? FRADY: Look, I didn't say that. It's just that I know all about these accidents. Frady is certain that the commission report's finding accurately reflects the reality of what happened on the Space Needle; yet, as these last two lines indicate, Frady remains open to any possibility, presumably even an extraordinary one like the reality of the Parallax Corporation's work. Frady is thus established as a man open to such possibilities of vast conspiracies and illicit dealings on the part of individuals in power. And yet, based on his meticulous personal investigations and his presence at the assassination

itself, Frady can find no other reality than that the “ official story,” as expressed in the commission’s finding, is true. The audience does not know the particulars of the Carroll assassination or of the investigations which followed, other than that the official story is grossly incorrect, and that a second assassin was indeed present. While he does seek out the second assassin’s identity for a while, Frady does not spend the rest of the film dwelling on finding contradictions to certain points of the commission’s report, as one might imagine a conspiracy theorist would do. For all intents and purposes, then, the commission’s finding exists as an “ accurate” reflection of reality, one which is generally agreed upon by those present at the assassination, by those who have investigated the matter independently, and by society at large. The actual details of the commission’s findings do not come out in the film, and while the commission insists that it will release the details of its investigation, the manner in which the commission delivers its findings seems to express a hostility to further questioning: “ When you’ve had a chance to examine the evidence, you’ll have every opportunity to ask those questions which remain unanswered, if there are any. That is all. Thank you.” The only significant detail of the commission’s report is that it assigns blame to one assassin, Thomas Richard Linden. The actual assassination sequence, meanwhile, proves the existence of a second assassin to the audience at the outset of the film, and Frady’s continuing investigation into the matter does little more than to confirm this suspicion. In essence, the commission’s findings, based on “ four months of investigation” and “ nine weeks of hearings,” can be interpreted as being quite accurate except for the basic failure to realize the existence of the second assassin: thus, this depiction of reality in which the Parallax

Corporation has had no hand in the assassination of Senator Carroll is, on face value, presented as the truth. Besides the suspicions of those who witnessed the event, the concrete reality of the matter exists only in the minds of those who actively took part in the event. Thus the Parallax Corporation has succeeded in manipulating reality, or at least the characters' remembrance of it, itself. Frady, so certain that the commission's findings are gospel, is dubious of those who deny the official story: LEE: You mean you no longer believe there was another assassin involved in shooting Carroll? FRADY: That's right. But it was an explanation. People were crazy for any kind of explanation then. Every time you turned around, some nut was knocking off one of the best men in the country. Frady's fealty is toward truth, not toward the "crazy" behavior of those who disagree for the sake of disagreement. Essentially, those who are "crazy for any kind of explanation" are equally as wrong as the commission. It is only through the actual investigative experiences of Joe Frady — notwithstanding those events to which the audience alone is privy — that the truth is elicited in the world of the Parallax View. The audience is set up to agree with the view of the protagonist Joe Frady, not because he is played by an attractive, smart-alecky young Warren Beatty, but because he is presented as an even-handed pursuer of the truth, and because the audience actually sees that the official story is wrong (even if Frady is unaware, this establishes the dubiousness of the findings of the authorities). This point is significant, insofar as within the realm of the film, Frady himself loses public credibility after his death, when the commission writes him off as being in a "confused and distorted state of mind" — in other words, Frady might as well just be another conspiracy theorist nutcase. In the climactic end sequence of the

film, Frady, having been set up as the assassin, makes a frenetic dash for the exit from the rafters. The portal he runs after is a door bathed in consuming light, shown to the audience through a shaky motivated shot from a handheld camera from Frady's perspective. It is a clearly heroic struggle: the audience wants Joe Frady to make it out of the building, as he is this only one who knows the objective truth about the two assassinations he has witnessed and about the trail of murders by Parallax Corporation. Yet the events of the prior sequence cast serious doubts on Frady's potential capacity to influence future events if he were to get away. Frady has already been spotted by the police, and the shadowy, almost omnipotent figures of the Parallax Corporation are well aware of his influence. If Frady were to have escaped, he would in all reality be a wanted assassin; even if this were not the case, what capacity could Frady have to convince people of the "reality" of the events which he has both witnessed and become a party to? The entire affair begs the question of just who else had undergone a similar calamity to that which had befallen Frady, if anyone else had successfully made it through the Bright Door, only to be ridiculed as a conspiracy nut by the rest of society. Being killed, thus, might have been a lucky break for Frady, a man completely alone in society, who most likely would have suffered indignity and public humiliation had he reemerged to challenge the Parallax Corporation and the prevailing public knowledge through conventional avenues. The Parallax View presents a society where even well-intentioned institutions of society and of democracy are completely malfunctioning. The media as an independent watchdog agency commands little respect, dithering between fawning over a political figure (as in the beginning of the film) and being hassled by the police (as happens to Frady).

The local police are violent, incompetent, and corrupt, both in Frady's hometown and in the little fishing village where a violent man-child deputy is eager to pick fights with strangers and a corpulent sheriff is eager to do the bidding of a wealthy company (the local police there is actually so corrupt they even drop the pursuit of Frady, a suspected murderer, out of fear that it would draw attention to a local scandal). Frady's local police force is embarrassed when they follow Frady into the house of an innocent elderly couple and proceed to terrorize them simply because they thought Frady, as a journalist, was more capable of finding drug pushers than they were; having been duped, their inane response is to arrest him. On a federal level, the assassination commissions at best are incredibly misguided and at worst are deliberately-stonewalling functionaries for the Parallax Corporation. Even social elites are incapable of preventing their own demise: two well-respected senators are killed, and the same fate meets various well-connected wealthy individuals, even the ones who are well-aware of their marks and take precautions to evade assassins. Taken as a whole, The Parallax View's dim view of the state of American democracy was a response both to the political instability of the 1960s and 1970s and to the cinematic descriptions of this society which provided commentary in similar terms. On one level, this film was a response to the Warren Commission, to the conspiracy theories surrounding the plethora of dramatic assassinations of popular, progressive figures in America: John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, etc. But on a broader level, Pakula's work is an expression of the absolute faithlessness in the federal government. 1974, when this film was released, was a watershed time in American democracy: on the heels of a long, pointless war sparked by a string of fabrications came <https://assignbuster.com/the-search-for-objective-truth-in-the-parallax-view/>

the downfall of a Republican president caught in a vile series of explicit lies to the American public. Though the broad powers which constituted the “Imperial Presidency” persisted, the myth of an infallible American president finally lay dead on the steps of the Watergate Hotel. The American public was left with no reason to truly trust their government, especially not in matters of life and death: if they could lie about Vietnam, if they could lie about Watergate and the CIA, surely they could lie about the Kennedys too. The President of the United States had over the span of just one decade become both a victim and a villain, and the question became one of what external or internal force could orchestrate such domestic violence. What organization could be capable of killing a United States President, and for what aims? Just as the film never explains what the ultimate mission of Parallax Corporation was in killing so many people and quietly covering its tracks, American society in 1974 was left without any explanation for a string of violent assassinations other than that they were the machinations of crazed men with names like Lee Harvey Oswald, Sirhan Sirhan, and Arthur Bremer. On a more subtle level, *The Parallax View* offers an incredibly mature contemplation of the effects of mass media in society. Largely divorced from the broader plot of the film is the Parallax Corporation’s montage, which Frady watches alone upon his entrance into the Parallax program. The montage is shown subjectively to the audience: entirely from beginning to end, the audience is shown the montage as if those in the darkened theater were undergoing the same experience as Frady; for his part, Frady is never depicting reacting to the video. Within this sequence alone, there are echoes and reverberations of other important cinematic sequences from the period. The closest forebears for the Parallax View’s

montage are scenes in two speculative visions of a dystopic future: Walter Seltzer's *Soylent Green* (1973) and Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). In *Soylent Green*, the government operates euthanasia clinics where, in an overpopulated and underfed world, one can select one's own final "ceremony," a singular audio-visual experience. The set-up of *Soylent Green*'s euthanasia chamber is similar to that of Parallax Corporation's screening area. A patient lies on a bed from which he is immersed by large screens depicting pleasant scenes of nature — absent, in reality, due to overpopulation — accompanied by, in this case, symphonic classical music. The object of this montage is to mollify and ameliorate the moribund person who is lying supine, immersed in the entire display. The video is, in that respect, a deception, a complete fantasy which depicts places and images which have long passed into nonexistence — only the video remains. The video uses images to impart a completely false reality, a highly glamorous view of the natural world which had once existed. For even if the oceans, or the meadows, or the beaches really had looked so wonderful, the juxtaposition of such pleasant bucolic images trumps them up to the extent that it creates an entirely artificial beauty. The fashion in which these two montages are presented to the audience is a key distinction between the two films. *Soylent Green* never completely immerses the audience in the audio/visual experience in the manner in which *Parallax View* does. The audience is constantly aware of a human presence, of someone else experiencing the montage: in short, the audience isn't actively watching it, the audience is watching someone watch it — on an entirely different level, the audience also happens to be watching someone watch someone watch the montage! These layers of separation between the audience and the

montage insist that the viewer consider at least two active perspectives other than their own, thus obfuscating the direct effect of the imagery on the viewer. Unlike in the Parallax View, the audience here does not palpably experience what is being screened, and thus is not capable of knowing what it is like to be thus immersed. Much the same can be said of the “Ludovico technique” sequence of *A Clockwork Orange*. In this part of the film, the protagonist, Alex, has been arrested for a violent burglary, and undergoes an experimental rehabilitation procedure. Memorably, the straight-jacketed Alex is secured to a chair at the fore of an empty theater, his eyes held open by metal clasps. Alex narrates his experience: first, he views video of a group of men wearing hats like those worn by Musketeers senselessly beating up a man in “a very good professional piece of cine, like that was done in Hollywood.” Later, he watches the gang rape of a woman, and feels physically ill because of nausea-inducing drugs. In another sequence, Alex is forced to footage of the Nazi regime (a combination of newsreel footage and snippets of *Triumph of the Will*), part of which is shown subjectively to the audience, backed by a high-pitched rendition of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. The purpose of this Ludovico technique is to condition the subject against violence through a combination of violent imagery and illness-inducing medication. Alex is ultimately broken by the ordeal, and the audience’s temporary immersion in the Nazi sequence is ended by Alex’s screaming. While Frady is instructed to stay immobilized during the Parallax montage, unlike Alex, Frady is immobilized entirely by his own will. Frady is a willing participant in the subversion which follows, much like the audience itself which, like Frady, is being entirely subjected to an oddly manipulative piece of media beyond its control or understanding. At the scene’s outset,

Fraday appears in a darkened room and sits on a small chair in the background of the shot. The house lights briefly come up, showing the audience the elaborate visual display. The montage is introduced thus: Welcome to the testing room of the Parallax Corporation's Division of Human Engineering. You will now please cross to the chair. And you will sit down. Make yourself comfortable. Be sure to place each of your hands on the box on either side of the chair, making sure that each one of your fingers is on one of the white rectangles. Just sit back. Nothing is required of you except to observe the visual materials that are presented. Be sure to keep your fingers on the box at all times. All right. We hope you find the test a pleasant experience. What follows is a four and a half minute-long series of still photographs loosely categorized by these terms: " LOVE," " MOTHER," " FATHER," " ME," " HOME," COUNTRY," " GOD," " ENEMY," " HAPPINESS." (An appendix describing these photographs appears at the end of this essay.) At first, the categories seem logical: the " LOVE" heading is followed by photographs of couples, the " MOTHER" heading by women nursing children, etc. The material becomes troublesome under the first instance of the " ENEMY" heading, under which photos of Nazi rallies and Communist figures appear. The next heading is " HAPPINESS," which is described by stacks of coins, a bottle of scotch, a slice of steak, a nude woman, and a Rolls Royce. Already, these early sequences establish the propagandistic aspect of the video, where if the audience can accept, say, a young couple sitting on a couch as a proper signifier for " LOVE," then by following the inner logic of the montage, they can accept Fidel Castro as a metonym for " ENEMY," or money as a signifier for " HAPPINESS." The subversion cuts deeper when the headings " FATHER" and " MOTHER" reappear, now featuring Depression-era

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photographs of destitution and misery. "HAPPINESS" becomes a nude couple in a heart-shaped tub, a very large house, and the White House. "ME," originally associated with children and a baseball player, becomes a close-up of a dirty child's face, and then a young man behind bars — is this the vestige of an inner narrative, of a lower point in the cohesive "plot" of this montage? If it is, then that narrative becomes subverted by the desultory images subsequently presented. After some patriotic imagery, "ME" returns as pictures of wounded soldiers and men being tortured or killed by enemy troops. "FATHER" becomes what appears to be a black man looking anguished, and "ME" comes back as the fallen body of a white man being cradled. From there, the juxtapositions become progressively stranger, and progressively more violent. "COUNTRY" is a film audience wearing 3D glasses (perhaps putting a mirror up to movie-goers?), Nixon at a rally, women in swimsuits frolicking on a beach, an orgy, and the White House. Here, a commonly accepted metonym for the U. S., the White House, appears alongside the questionable personification of American power, Richard Nixon. An audience wearing 3D glasses appears absurdly contented with the political strife presented in rest of the montage. Next, "ENEMY" is a cheerleader, then a photo of Douglas MacArthur, then the Nixon rally photo with Nixon cropped out. "HAPPINESS" is a series of recycled photos of familial scenes with one couple having sex; "ME," next, is just a single photograph of a man sitting alone in a tiny room. Following that, the pictures speed up, and the associations become even more absurd and even more haunting. Depictions of police brutality and KKK lynchings become short "subplots." Challenging associations ensue through entirely filmic tricks: the Capitol Dome is shown in a cropped image; the next image reveals a KKK

rally in Washington, D. C. with the Capitol in the background. In another such association, a painting of George Washington is shown, then a photo of the painting hanging by an American flag, then at last the photo of the painting flanked by an American flag and a Nazi flag, with a man in front of a microphone giving the Nazi salute. Another subtle association: a photo of Hitler walking through a crowd of saluting Nazis is followed by a photo of John F. Kennedy pointing in a manner reminiscent of the Nazi salute.

Because the Parallax Corporation's political ambitions are so vague in the entire film, and because this montage is presented in such a direct fashion to the audience, the individual elements of the manipulative process behind the montage come to the fore. In my view, the montage illustrates the power and simplicity of metonymic associations as a function of propaganda in a highly satirical way. Nobody in the actual film audience is going to buy into these troubling, yet asinine associations; similarly, nobody's pre-held conceptions about the federal government would likely change by the historical appropriation of American patriotic imagery by white supremacists. The mechanisms of propagandistic manipulation suggested by the montage include, but are not limited to: the use of non-diegetic music to influence the " mood" of certain images, the creation of a false internal logic based on the assignment of signs and symbols (e. g., if " X" relates to one category thus, then " Y" must relate to a different category in the same way), the use of ambiguous material and the decontextualization of imagery as a way to strip the meaning of certain images and consequently replace it with a new definition, the employment of subtle trickery through the use of cropped images and reveals, and the presentation of all this in such a fast-paced manner that the audience has a difficult time extricating specific images and

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associations from the whole. On the broadest scale, the montage serves to suggest how media can be employed to obfuscate truth and reality. The Parallax Corporation functions and succeeds through the manipulation of social perceptions of reality, and this screening video they show new recruits is a pivotal example of how the company functions. The real film audience, already cynical about media and politics, is keenly aware of the game that the Parallax Corporation plays — and yet, to an extent, the audience, in its cynicism, implicitly accepts the existence of such structural manipulators of our society and of our political process. This is the crux of *The Parallax View*'s drama and tension: that a good man like Joe Frady could outsmart this vast conspiracy (as he quite nearly does). Frady's story is perhaps a microcosm of a broader hope that despite the existence of endemically corrupt and extraordinary powerful systems in America, good men can still infiltrate the halls of power and hope to expose wrongdoing and thus change society for the better. It is a fantastic dream.