***Vantage Point***

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**Abstract**

This essay is concerned with complex narrative in the poorly reviewed puzzle film, *Vantage Point*. Taking a semiotic approach, it suggests that the readings of the film provide evidence regarding the moments when complex narration is deemed to fail. Attempting to unravel the plot and relating the film to genres and contemporary cycles, the essay emphasizes how the political project of the narration in the film can be revealed. It suggests that berating the film for a lack of relativity and ambiguity misses the point, as does analysis that ultimately reduces the film to its reception at one historical moment.

The consensus on *Vantage Point* seems to be that it is a 2-star movie. Reviewers at the time that the film was released, plus subsequently for TV listings magazines and elsewhere, generally consider *Vantage Point* to be a failed film undeserving of a 5-, 4- or even 3-star accolade according to the demotic calibration of cinematic quality. Making an observation on this apparent consensus, however, might seem a strange way to open an essay where the task in hand is to consider this puzzle film’s narrative and the way that it exemplifies complex storytelling. Nevertheless, there is good reason in what follows for making a note about the film’s reputation. Firstly, the demotic rating – though widespread, appearing in the assessments of professional reviewers for publications as well as the legions of bloggers - is rather unjust. Arguably, the narrative is expertly constructed and innovative. Secondly, the film contributes to more than one corpus or cycle of contemporary narratives with common purposes – not just the puzzle or complex film, but also the overlapping category of films devoted to re-playing or negotiating the trauma of 9/11. Thirdly, one key component of the film’s narrative betrays its ultimately conservative political project, although it is not mentioned in reviews of the film. Fourthly, the issue of the complexity of the narration is at the heart of the discourses which have thus far established the film’s reputation, offering up a potentially dominant way of apprehending the narrative. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the approach in the current essay necessitates consideration of the film’s reputation in assessing the nature of the narrative’s complexity. A cognitivist approach to the complexity of a narrative in a film tends to stress how a film is ‘incomplete’ until the spectator implements ‘schemata’ to render the film as a coherent mental representation (Buckland 2009a, 7). A semiotic approach, while allied to a cognitive perspective in focusing on how a spectator is likely to read a narrative, is concerned with the semiotic resources that are brought to bear on reading. As such, it considers a narrative, complex or otherwise, to consist of a multi-ply tissue of readings (Lotman 1974, 1982) implying certain audiences, certain probable readings, as well as the possibility of aporia in readings, but without imagining that there is always a ‘text itself’ which awaits liberation from the webs of relations in which it is suspended.

**Complex storytelling**

Complex storytelling, of course, is not new, in the same way that the narrative devices often manifest in postmodern fiction have their own, centuries-old precursors (Cobley 2013: Chapter 6). Likewise, puzzle narratives and convoluted plots are not necessarily phenomena indigenous to the present. Nor is it true to say that complexity and convoluted plots are both marked only by their movement into the mainstream in recent years. In one of the canonical inaugural texts of cultural studies, Hall and Whannel (1964, 125-7) note that what marks hugely popular contemporary detective narratives on television is the almost unmanageable density of their plots, suggesting that their audiences are made up of viewers who are not only competent in the genre but also not unintelligent. In the thriller genre in particular, some key mainstream films of the last forty years have experimented with such staples of complex storytelling as unreliable narrators, specific focalizations, prolepses and analepses. *Blow Up* (1966), *The Conversation* (1974) and *Blow Out* (1981) have provided inspiration in this respect. These kinds of movies embody, significantly, narratives of *witnessing* and points of view. One precursor of such ‘witnessing narratives’ which acts like a brand leader is, of course, *Rear Window* (1954). Sometimes these thrillers have close relatives in relatively un-complex narratives in paranoid surveillance thrillers, the benchmark for which was set over the last decade by *Enemy of the State* (1998) (see Cobley 2010). In other film genres complex staples have served other specific generic purposes, for example, the constant problematising of what is real in the horror *syuzhet* as opposed to what is imagination or dream - *Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (1987) is a well-known example – or what is memory and what is an artificial implant for science fiction characters – *Total Recall* (1990) is an obvious exemplar.

These are important points to take into account in relation to *Vantage Point*. Firstly, the film-makers state that they conceived the film with reference to 1970s paranoid thrillers such as *The Parallax View* (1974) and *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) as well as *The French Connection* (1971) and have clearly extended the problematisation of viewpoints in those films (see Travis 2009). Secondly,one of the central questions elicited by the *Vantage Point* regards the moment when the devices of complex storytelling are found to be stale, conventional and merely ‘generic’. For critics, audiences and theorists alike, complexity of narration is not ‘enough’ to guarantee attention. Nor is it sufficient in ensuring a film’s vision or political project. The critical response to *Vantage Point* demonstrates this quite clearly. The complexity of the narration in this film was fairly obvious to audiences, to the extent that many reviewers simply labelled the movie’s core narrative device a “gimmick”. Nevertheless, before discussing that, some exposition, along with spoilers, is required here.

In *Vantage Point*, the plot – or what, after Ricoeur and St. Augustine, one might more theoretically call the ‘chain of causality’ in narrative (Cobley 2013) – concerns an international summit held in Salamanca, Spain (actually filmed in Mexico) and attended by the President of the United States (William Hurt). A “local group” of Moroccan- and/or “Mujahideen”-connected terrorists - according to, belligerent presidential aide, McCullough [Bruce McGill] - led by Suarez (Saïd Taghmaoui) along with collaborators, have a daring plan which will be carried out at the summit. At the plaza event where President Ashton is due to speak, along with the town’s mayor, to the press and the assembled crowd, the terrorists intend to have the President shot by a ‘sniper’ and then create chaos by exploding a bomb. The bomb is to be carried into the plaza by the jealous boyfriend of one of the conspirators, a Spanish undercover cop, Enrique (Eduardo Noriega) who does not suspect that his girlfriend, Veronica (Ayelet Zurer), is a terrorist. The ‘sniper’ is a remote-controlled rifle pointing out of a window above the plaza. In fact, the man ascending the podium to represent the United States who then gets shot is not the President but an actor who stands in as his double. As the ‘President’ is shot in the plaza, there is also an explosion on the lower floors of the President’s hotel, in a different part of the town. This causes chaos for the security services but also allows the kidnapping of the real President (also William Hurt) who is drugged and bundled into an ambulance, even as his double is making a journey to hospital in a similar vehicle.

Thus far, this account of what goes on in *Vantage Point* has been deliberately bare. Indeed, it is so bereft of causality and motivation as to be a set of story events of the kind that are isolated in analysis and sometimes, after the Russian Formalists, given the name of *fabula*. However, in all narratives, complex or otherwise, story events are inseparable from principles of organisation which constitutes *fabula*’s partner, *syuzhet* or, if the phenomenon is being stated more strongly with reference to causality, *plot*. In *Vantage Point*, motivation is partly provided by the characters and offstage events. The terrorists’ plan is supposedly motivated in retaliation for a US special forces operation in Morocco which uncovered a dirty bomb plot and took the plotters prisoner. The hawks in the Administration want the President to authorize an air strike on the terrorist *leaders* who are together in Morocco, rather than the local cell involved in the current attack. This an action that the President is unwilling to take because Morocco is a friend of the USA and he is also suspicious of his hawkish advisers. In turn, though, the hawks imagine that they can have the air strike ordered while the real President is in the sticky position of having his double incapacitated in an ambulance, rendering the real President unable to assume the Commander-in-Chief role.

As regards the other characters, motivation is also strong. The local terrorist plan is activated by Javier (Edgar Ramirez), a Spanish special forces agent who is blackmailed into carrying out the kidnap of the (real) President because his brother is being held by gunpoint by Suarez’ group. Javier is set on his mission by Veronica, who is seen in conversation with Javier by the jealous cop Enrique. As the President(’s double) is shot, the US Secret Service operatives jump into action. One of these, Barnes (Dennis Quaid) has already taken a bullet for the President in an assassination twelve months prior to the summit and is on his first day back on duty in Salamanca. A second secret service agent, Taylor (Matthew Fox), is, in fact, a double-agent who is working for the Moroccan terrorists. Once the (real) President has been kidnapped, Barnes takes centre stage in his pursuit (partly by car chase) of the terrorists and his attempt to rescue the (real) President. The other chase which is central to the film, but seems to be a mere adjunct to the plot, concerns an American tourist, Howard Lewis (Forest Whitaker), who, in between calling his estranged wife and children, captures some of the plaza events on the camcorder he has taken on his holiday. Lewis has spoken briefly with a 6- or 7-year old child, Anna (Alicia Zapien), before the terrorist attack and then seeks to rescue her when she is separated from her mother during the melee that ensues from the explosions.

For anyone who has seen *Vantage Point*, the summary above, even with the motivation of the characters signalled, will verge upon the unrecognizable. This is not because the summary is inaccurate – indeed, it presents the events in chronological order rather than impressionistically - but because the plot and the story are, as with all narratives, dependent on the specific devices used in their narration. It is clear in *Vantage Point* that the already complex plot makes more sense in terms of its narration as a series of different viewpoints. So, the first part of the movie consists of the immediate build-up and the President’s assassination in the plaza narrated from five different vantage points: a position close to that of television news anchor Rex Brooks (Sigourney Weaver), another one close to that of Barnes, another close to Enrique, one near to Lewis and a final one near to the (real) President. At the moment of the assassination in each of the first four vantage points, the action ‘rewinds’ with the key events in that vantage point briefly played backwards before a digital clock appears onscreen (almost in the style of the television series, *24*) to reveal the same time moving slowly forward again, a few seconds towards 12:00 in each case, as the next vantage point is played out. The poster for the film announces “Eight strangers. Eight points of view. One truth” but, strictly, this is not accurate since three of the viewpoints in the narration are broader than those focused on the moment of the assassination and they sometimes involve more than one character. Rather, the final three character positions provide an additional set of vantage points on events *following* the attack: the kidnap (Javier); the co-ordination of the attack and the flight in the ambulance (Suarez - and, partly, Veronica, but actually beginning close to the innocent child, Anna); Taylor and Javier’s escape attempt and the shooting of Enrique (Javier and Taylor and, earlier, Lewis and, later, Barnes), plus an anomalous brief fourth which is mentioned below.

**Genres and cycles**

So far, what has been stated, despite laying bare some of the mechanisms of the narration, has been description rather than analysis. This is because it is necessary to unravel the plot and narration and to be clear in analysis about what the narrative of the puzzle actually does. Some readings of the film, in rushing to judgment, fail to do this. Moreover, the status of the film in relation to complex storytelling depends on whether the narrative devices are viewed as meaningful or merely ‘tricksy’. The distinction of tricksy/meaningful, of course, entails comparison of *Vantage Point* to other cycles and genres, particularly where it stands in relation to such beacons of the contemporary complex narrative film as *Memento* (2000) or *Minority Report* (2002). *Vantage Point*, for all its paraphernalia of complex narration, can also be appreciated in the same ways as other, straightforwardly narrated, paranoid thrillers as adumbrated earlier. The obvious conspiracy emerges with the plan of Suarez and his blackmailing of Javier to act as his agent; but there is also the paranoia-inducing conspiracy in which Taylor has used the seemingly fragile Barnes as a sap during the plaza attack, as well as the hawkish agenda behind the guidance of the liberal President Ashton by his aides. To recognize and expose each of these requires a specific ‘vantage point’ which, in ‘conventional’ thrillers, is usually revealed towards the end of the movie by the central character from whom information has previously been withheld in the narration. In *Vantage Point*, there is a telling difference: information is withheld from various characters rather than just the ‘hero’ or central consciousness, and it is withheld, especially, from the audience.

Withholding information from the audience is a common trope in the complexly narrated puzzle film and is associated with the audience’s questioning of events as they are filtered through protagonists’ consciousness(es). In this way, it follows that withheld information constitutes a further demand on the spectator to construct a film’s *syuzhet*. However, in terms of genre – and, especially, the contemporary thriller – the act of withholding information in the narration has a further dimension. There can be little coincidence in the release of two films in close temporal proximity to *Vantage Point* which represent a cycle of contemporary movies devoted to the problems of witnessing. Both *Déjà vu* (2006) and *Passengers* (2008) dramatize the dilemma of remembering and working through (and, to a certain extent, completing the Freudian triad, *repeating*) a major public trauma. Although not directly about the 9/11 attacks – and, in the case of the terrorist attack in *Déjà vu*, echoing also the natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina – it is clear that these films replay the sheer shock of the aircraft crashing into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, as well as the dilemmas of memory and rational reconstruction involved in comprehension before it is possible to begin to come to terms with what happened. *Vantage Point*, in this respect, shares a great deal with these two films and, by extension, such narratives as *World Trade Center* (2006), *United 93* (2006) and even *Cloverfield* (2008), through the way that it figures the assault on the plaza as initially chaotic and almost unfathomable until a deeper truth can be discerned beyond the web of witness accounts. If one was to extend the connection beyond 9/11 to other traumas, then one would have to mention *Vantage Point* director Pete Travis’ *Omagh* (2004) as well as *United 93* director Paul Greengrass’s *Bloody Sunday* (2002) and even the comical *Four Lions* (2007). The main way in which *Vantage Point* differs from *Déjà vu* and *Passengers*, though, is generically – *Vantage Point*’s ‘rewinds’ adhere to the puzzle as it features in the regime of verisimilitude that characterises the thriller. That is, the film eschews ‘other-worldly’ events in favour of ‘realism’ and a commitment to that which is broadly probable in the known world. It uses complex narration to dramatize quotidian psychological experiences of memory and perception rather than in the service of complementing the fantastic (time travel in *Déjà vu*) or the supernatural (dead people coming to terms with the fact that they did not survive a trauma in *Passengers*).

**When complexity is not enough**

*Vantage Point*, as a puzzle film, therefore lies between or overlaps with the cycle of films devoted to re-playing or negotiating the trauma of 9/11, the genre of the paranoid thriller and, in particular, the narrative theme of ‘witnessing’ which is the core of the former and has sometimes been the seat of narrative innovation in the latter. Yet, it seems that the liminal existence of this film is the dominant contributor to its failure for the majority of commentators. Analysis of the storytelling, then, requires some assessment, using whatever valuable information is available, on whether the film’s narrative techniques were judged to be successful or not and what the foundations for this judgment might have been. As has been noted, comment on the film at the time of its release was dominated by negative judgments: the website *Rotten Tomatoes* contains links to a seemingly endless array of professional, semi-professional and non-professional voices expressing discontent with the film. The complexity of the narration is actually the crux of the matter, even when the complaints are about character and political motivations. For critics, the film is a “triumph of form over content” (Mackie 2008), “making so many impossible demands on us to suspend disbelief that the audience should demand combat pay” (Travers 2008).

Typically, *Vantage Point* was compared to other films, particularly on the issue of the complexity of its narrative. Some of these were contemporary movies such as those of Quentin Tarantino and Sidney Lumet’s *Before The Devil Knows You’re Dead* (2007) (see Grierson 2008); some saw the film as akin to *Groundhog Day* (1993) (see, for example, Gilchrist 2008); but, above all, the key reference point was the “grandaddy of multi-viewpoint cinema” (Robey 2008, 18) *Rashomon* (1950). Judgments such as “Rashomon through a sniper scope” (*Total Film* 2008) come as no surprise, although the only sniper in the film is actually an electronic one. What is important is that the Kurosawa ‘masterpiece’ is generally used as a club to beat *Vantage Point* for the latter’s supposedly unblurred vision of reality. “[T]there’s no real ambiguity (so stop with the careless comparisons to Kurosawa’s *Rashomon*)” says the review of the DVD on Amazon.co.uk (Jameson n.d.). The *Daily Telegraph* expands by stating that *Rashomon* has

a story obfuscated by unreliable narrators and this [*Vantage Point*]is one whose characters just miss things. No one’s fabricating a false version. No one has much of an agenda, or leaves their lens cap on at a crucial moment. The movie hands witness status solely to the obliging (Robey 2008, 18).

The irreverent blog, *The Daily Raider*, raises similar issues in a more demotic strain:

Every fucking review of *Vantage Point* invariably mentions the Kurosawa classic, either by saying ‘influenced by *Rashomon*’ (if the review is positive [apart from French (2008), no positive review doing this has been found for the current essay]) or by saying ‘ripped off from *Rashomon*’ (if the review is negative). It’s not really the case. Sure, there are superficial similarities, but the key component of each differs. In *Rashomon*, there is no objective reality. We only rely on accounts provided by various people. It’s up for the viewer to decide. *Vantage Point*, contrastingly, has an objective reality. Though the viewer is led astray with red herrings and ‘everything you know is wrong’ twists, eventually we learn the truth. There’s no ambiguity in what happened; the entire plot unravels. Whereas Kurosawa’s picture uses the unconventional method with purpose, *Vantage Point*’s usage is a mere gimmick. Simply a ‘how do we make a completely boring, stupid film somewhat memorable’ thing. So stop comparing it to *Rashomon*. They’re not the same (Doom and Malice n.d.).

The *New York Times* was more specific still: it claimed *Rashomon* offers its version of the same incident “brilliantly” whereas with *Vantage Point* “we get so many versions and viewpoints that a preview audience started to complain audibly each time the clock was reset, though this probably had less to do with the fractured storytelling than its lack of brilliance” (Dargis 2008). The review also adds that in *Rashomon* there are far fewer versions of events: just five, including that of the filmmaker, “a vantage point that’s missing from this newer work” (Dargis 2008; cf. Gilchrist 2008). Clearly, this comparison rests on insufficient attention to *Vantage Point* and is naïve in respect of cinematic narration; but it still results in a self-confident judgment on when complex narration is ‘good’ and when it is ‘bad’.

What is apparent is that some audiences seem to have responded with irritation to *Vantage Point’s* rewinds, viewpoints and cliffhangers: “a three-steps-forward-two-steps-back feel that eventually becomes rather annoying” (Arendt 2008) or “annoyingly constrictive” (*Total Film* 2008). The film’s editor, Stuart Baird, an experienced and distinguished craftsman, makes it clear that he repeatedly used a staple of conventional cinematic narration – the cliffhanger – in his work on the film (*An Inside Perspective* 2009). Yet this cuts no ice for some audiences: “*Vantage Point* is ridiculous because it wants to keep us in the dark like children, concealing a conspiracy plot that’s batty anyway”, complains the *Daily Telegraph* (Robey 2008, 18), while IGN suggests that the *New York* *Times*’ point about the preview audience is more widespread because “each time the film ‘rewinds’ to the beginning, audiences will likely be less interested in learning ‘the truth’ than in leaving the theatre” (Gilchrist 2008). *Variety* suggests that tedium sets in after thirty minutes of the film “not because the instant-replay structure couldn’t work in theory, but because its audience-baiting tactics are so transparent (having a character whisper ‘Oh my god’ when something shocking transpires offscreen loses its punch the third or fourth time)” (Chang 2008). One problem for audiences might be that there are too many characters for the complex narration to work. In *Memento*, for example, which is also rife with cliffhangers and repetition (if not rewindings of the same event), the audience’s response can be stabilised by the fact that the film’s focalization involves just one character. In respect of *Vantage Point*, there is negative feeling about the proliferation of characters and, certainly, what is perceived as insubstantial motivation. The central character of Barnes is repeatedly seen as a Secret Service agent modelled on Clint Eastwood’s *In The Line Of Fire* (1993) character (Grierson 2008) “minus the complexity” (Travers 2008). Unsurprisingly, in a low-level analysis of the politics of representation, the terrorists and the ‘foreign’ characters are repeatedly seen as mere cyphers who undermine the complex narration. The character of Howard Lewis is also criticised for being a simple plot device and, in one of the most sympathetic of commentaries, is summed up as no more than a “sad-faced everyman” (Jeffries 2008, 7). The irritation with the rewinds and the discontent with the drawing of the characters is an indication of where the audience’s tolerance threshold for complex narration meets the demand of realist verisimilitude, the latter of which, as has been indicated, tends to arise in particular from the thriller genre. Nevertheless, this is not to say that this threshold and this demand are not open to contestation.

**Beyond realism**

Positive assessments of *Vantage Point* are rather thin on the ground. Yet, they are as important as negative ones in analysing why the complex narration of this film did not work for many audiences. They come not only from reviews but also from the comments – often for public relations purposes, but sometimes illuminating - of those who worked on the film. These comments appear in the customary DVD ‘extras’ or narrative ‘supplements’ that are an extension of some features of narrative itself, serving to broaden the definition of the cinematic text (see Cobley and Haeffner 2011). The DVD extras and positive reviews predictably see the construction and viewpoints in the film as pivotal. Unintentionally countering those reviews which evinced a feeling that the audience was short-changed by the same event being filmed a number of different times, the director reveals that filming was scheduled for a few days around each character to produce a perspective as close to that character as possible rather than filming one event with a plethora of cameras (Travis 2009). None of the reviews sees fit to even mention the hand-held-steadicam-fast cut mode of the film, so naturalized has that mode become in action movies – although *Rolling Stone* does say of Travis’s style, “the guy knows how to pump the action pedal — hell, he floors it” (Travers 2009). As regards the viewpoints and cliffhangers, Travis (2009) does insist that the film was trying to emphasize “different ways of seeing”. The rewinds were all planned to end on the face of each character to reflect the individuality of their view (Travis 2009) and, in an intention that appears to have backfired in many cases, editor Baird states that he deliberately edited the initial four sequences in order that the rewind took place when audiences did not want to leave the story that was being narrated (*An Inside* . . .). One reason why this tactic might have had only limited success is indicated in a (positive) review by the literate critic, Philip French of the *Observer*:

The movie can be seen as going back to the earliest days of the cinema when, before cross-cutting was developed, parallel events were shown consecutively rather than concurrently. It also employs a narrative device that can be found as early as the Gospels of the New Testament, where a series of events is seen from different, often conflicting, points of view (French 2008, 9).

In this assessment the film is not complex but unsettlingly simple. More telling, perhaps, is the implication that the dissatisfied audiences continued to read films largely in the way that Griffith intended. Indeed, in relation to the film’s narration, French quotes Fitzgerald on the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function, comparing the viewer’s task as akin to being “on a jury where the evidence is being presented by Oliver Stone and Jerry Bruckheimer” (French 2008, 9).

One reason why the narrative is complex in this way is put forward by the director who expresses his contention that the story is “more complicated than news”. The stated directorial intent was to frame the story as a whole with an opening sequence in the newsroom and, following some interspersing of news reports in the story such as the President watching his double on TV, conclude with the simplified news bulletin (Travis 2009). The news account of events, of course, is not just simplified but also complicit with the official US government version of what happened. In this formulation, the idea that there is a ‘true’ version of events – an idea at which the negative commentaries tended to baulk – has a point. French (2008, 9) notes that everything the audience sees in the film “is fact as viewed and interpreted from different points of view. There are no visual lies, no examples of what Wayne Booth dubbed ‘the unreliable narrator’, no false flashbacks of the sort Hitchcock pioneered in *Stage Fright*”. For French (2008, 9), the audience is put in the position of Harry Caul in *The Conversation*, constantly re-playing his tapes to try to gain an accurate understanding of what has been recorded. In this light, there is no reason why the contention that there is a true version of events to be uncovered among the web of stories is somehow less credible than ‘ambiguity’ and the contention that there is no truth beyond the characters’ accounts. In fact, it might be argued that showing the faulty perspectives of characters and, especially, the putatively objective news service, is more critical than concluding, non-committally, that ‘there is no truth’.

Numerous other features of the narration of *Vantage Point* which would be acceptable in other movies are seen to be faults. The positive reviews question this, suggesting that the assessment of the film could go either way and that the hinge is the complex storytelling. Following a negative review in the London listings magazine, *Time Out*, similarly negative comments were posted by readers of the webpage. Standing against nearly all of them was the following comment, reproduced with spelling and punctuation errors left intact:

Sorry, but those people who gave this a below 4 star rating DO NOT know what they are talking about. This film is very, very good. It’s sharp, original and extremely fast passed.
In a nutshell it’s a single event covered from the perspective of people involved within it. This is a ‘24’ style in a single movie. This must have been extremely difficult to put together – give the editor an Oscar. As for the stupid comments on the acting it’s was never written to win Oscars it’s all about the story. This basically revolves around the assignation of the President of the United States. It’s not what the film makers did it was all about how they did it and they did it stunningly well.

Every perspective act left a big question at its climax. It was all brought together with no loose ends? Was the end weak? No. I was very satisfied that Denis Quads character once again saves the day. What was wrong with that? It was set-up right at the start of the film to end that way.

This film is beautifully shot and the style enhanced the sense of urgency and drama.
If you like car chases this has one of the best ones I have ever seen. It reminded me of those in the Borne films.

Ignore all the negative comments. If you are into action, ‘24’ style passing then this is the film for you (Jason C 2008).

“What was wrong with that?” is the question, here. But the comment also points to the film’s liminal status between a thriller with demands of realist verisimilitude and complex storytelling. It points, especially, to the need for the characters to sustain the story, and this is a key issue not just in this film and thrillers in general but in the history of narrative. It has been argued elsewhere (Cobley 2013) that the Western tradition of storytelling since the Bible has promoted the psychological depth of characters as a key attribute of narrative; but this depth is often sublimated into *plot* as the repository of causality. In most thrillers, character motivation is subsumed by the consistency and verisimilitude of the plot – that is, satisfying the demands of what audiences believe is acceptable with reference to knowledge of other texts in the genre and with reference to public opinion or doxa (Cobley 2012). In this film, it seems that the demand for character and motivation are heightened by the complex narration’s creating of an expectation of nuanced yet clear psychology which the genre is not regularly compelled to meet and does not necessarily always warrant.

The film undoubtedly foregrounds human vision. Apart from the opening sequence in the newsroom and the identification of a CNN camera operator as a terrorist, and despite the use of mobile and remote devices by the attackers, the film has none of the trappings of surveillance thrillers such as *24* and *Spooks* with their constant use of monitoring technology (see Cobley 2010). But, as receptacles of witnessing, the role of human agents in the film is not always clear. Ambivalence about the status of characters is evident in the overblown claims of the film-makers, aside from the ‘luvvie’ pronouncements from actors on the promotional DVD extras, about motivation and development. For example, the director claims that “each character in each story gains a different sense of who they are” (Travis 2009), but the screenplay writer, Barry Levy, is happy to refer to both Barnes and Enrique, in a quasi-Proppian fashion, as fulfilling the function of “patsy” in the story (*Plotting an Assassination* 2009). *Screen Daily* suggests that the performances are “nuanced and compelling”, especially from the Venezuelan, French-Moroccan and Spanish actors, and that they *avoid* “inspiring well-deserved criticism of Hollywood xenophobia” (Grierson 2008). This observation does not necessarily have any bearing on complex storytelling and closer to the mark is French’s (2008, 9) argument that *Vantage Point* is not concerned with issues of conscience or psychology but more to do with how people accept and then question identities, reappraise them and are then misled by them. The film dramatizes identity as “a game into which we are thrust without knowing the rules, a jigsaw puzzle for which we’re given pieces without knowing what the completed picture will reveal”. Notwithstanding Dennis Quaid’s constipated expression for the duration of his appearance on screen, arguably the character motivations and performances are perfectly adequate for the purposes of the plot and the rewinding narrative of the film.

**When everyman = American**

Where characterisation is more problematic concerns Lewis. Some of the reviews mention this character - probably because Forest Whitaker is another high-profile actor among the stellar cast - with French (2008, 9) noting the significance of his recording of the main story events on camcorder and others dismissing Lewis for his ‘everyman’ function. None of the commentaries note how the character acts not only to stabilise the complexity of the narration but also to render it politically reactionary. One could say, then, that while the ‘text’ is a product of its readings, it is also important to the task of analying complex narrative to consider the text’s *possible* readings. The history of texts, in particular those with rich semiotic resources, reveals that what is ‘the text’ changes according to the different readings that constitute it during different epochs. As such, it is necessary for the analyst to offer also a symptomatic reading of the film, a standard procedure in academic debate for some time but still not a part of the repertoire of middle-brow commentary. It entails invoking the hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur 1970, 32), reading on the margins (Derrida 1984) and identifying fissures in the narrative (Macherey 1978). The key questions on this agenda are not so much about character motivation; nor are they about the consistency of the complex narration. For example, the brief narration close to the sleeper terrorist collaborator, Taylor, which was mentioned above, may be a flashback or may be a subsidiary narrative, but nevertheless constitutes a lacuna. However, a symptomatic reading is concerned with what is revealed about the *political* project of the narrative in its marginalia often running contra to its central features or stated intent. In one of the DVD extras, for example, Dennis Quaid denies that the film is in any way political; instead, echoing others involved with making the film as well as many of the positive and negative commentators, he claims that this is a movie about personal relations (*Plotting* . . .). Yet, of course, the film is intensely political, both in the sense that the *personal is political* and, as argued, that the narrative participates in the renegotiation of the witnessing of 9/11. One of the most palpable devices in fiction for the purpose of occluding politics is to re-cast political issues as a matter of individual preference or motivation, to pose configurations requiring political judgment as situations calling for personal moral reform instead. Hollywood narrative, like much narrative in the Western tradition, has been complaisant in this respect. It is possible that one reason that audiences found the film to be off-kilter was that the narrative fragmented the Hollywood focus on individuals to the extent that the film-makers have to assert in the DVD extras that Barnes is the hero of the film (although it is more like an ensemble piece), noting, too, that the Taylor character is really two people, the President is two people and that there are split priorities – or, one could even say ‘subjectivities’ - with Veronica, Javier and Enrique (*An Inside . . .*). The characters are not ‘complex’ in the traditional sense of having ‘depth’ but, instead, are ‘complexified’ by their priorities resulting from the conspiracy and riven by the narration of their challenged perspectives.

The problem with Lewis is a similar splitting that is, in this instance, obvious but unacknowledged in the narrative, the film-makers’ comments and in the observations of commentators. He is supposedly a tourist who is “abroad for the first time” (Travis 2009) and missing his wife and children from whom he is unhappily separated. His character and function converge around ensuring “that the little girl [Anna], the film’s innocent symbol of hope, makes it through to the closing credits” (Jeffries 2008, 7). He is an “everyman” (Travis) who puts “family first” (Levy) (*Plotting . . .*). Yet, if he is an everyman, why is he an American? According to the director, the Lewis character was originally slated to be a Pole (*An Inside . . .*) and with the history of Polish people as the butt of jokes in the USA, it is not difficult to imagine how the original choice for the character might have transformed the way that the narrative could be read. However, as an American in Europe, like the entirety of the President’s entourage, he takes on a politically-charged complexion. Roused to go abroad, his character collapses the political events of the summit and the assault into a matter of family, home and benign intervention. Observing this fact would be the standard fare of a symptomatic reading. In addition, though, Lewis is also “Zapruder” according to the claims of the director (*Plotting . . .*), referring to the individual who produced the unwittingly iconic and necessarily evidential footage of the assassination of President Kennedy. Because Lewis believes that he has seen and recorded the assassin in the shimmering curtain of an upstairs window, he is crucial to Barnes’ investigations. He is at the heart of at the heart of the film’s plot, therefore, but also at the heart of the complex narration of witnessing. Later it is revealed that there was no ‘assassin’ except for a remotely-controlled rifle. Lewis’s perspective on the shooting is as faulty as the others; but his associated perspective on life is constructed as the keynote of the narrative - an ultimately conservative organising principle.

**Conclusion**

Contemporary complex storytelling is historically specific enough to amount to a social phenomenon rather than simply an artistic trend. Clearly, as a trend it arises from the popular success of certain complexly narrated films early in the last decade; it arrives at a time when film technology has developed to facilitate complex narration; it is also a consequence of the fragmentation of media and its bequest in the fragmentation of experience and the process of witnessing (see the essays in Buckland 2009b). Yet, the over-riding factor for those concerned with the historicity of narrative must be that complex narrative in question here is a post-9/11 development. *Vantage Point* is sometimes coy about invoking 9/11; nevertheless,as a thriller with a specific regime of verisimilitude, its plot and narration are more forcibly associated with the events of 2001 and the subsequent ‘War on Terror’ than sci-fi and supernatural narratives.

The complex narration of a puzzle in *Vantage Point* is calculated to pronounce on both the process of witnessing and the trauma of terror. As Howie (2011, 32) puts it, using the phrase from the title despite not discussing this film

Without witnessing, there would be no emotional response to label *terror*. There would be no dead bodies, and ruined buildings and infrastructure, but if no one sees it, surely it cannot be called terrorism. *If a terrorist fells a tree in the woods, would the media report it?* Witnessing terrorism involves images, spectacles and a vantage point. 9/11 holds power as an image-event because that vantage point may have been anywhere across the world

In sum, Howie’s argument is that the media are responsible for witnessing. He presents a constructionist perspective on 9/11 and attendant media events, particularly during the ‘War on Terror’. The makers of *Vantage Point*, by contrast, use complex narration to show that the public sees something very partial and constructed in news because even eyewitnesses of events, on the spot, do not see reality. There is something behind news and individual perspectives which is more complicated. Potentially, this puts forth a more radical position than constructionism.

A similar approach informs the semiotic analysis in this essay. Even while the text is understood as consisting of a number of readings, plus the text’s relation to other texts, there is a need to acknowledge that the film is not only a construction of readers. It is a product of its own complex narrative techniques, inviting certain expectations within a historical context. Yet, *Vantage Point’s* complexity also delivers a political project that eludes the film makers and casual readers alike. In combination, its narration and its generic status problematize what might be expected of the film; but the narration also serves to problematize the film’s apparent basic premises about witnessing, making them processes not just of storytelling but forms of geopolitical representation. *Vantage Point* demonstrates that the politics of narration and the politics of motivation do not necessarily coincide.

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