

ABSTRACT

PHILLIP BRYANT. Dark Things to Come: The Emerging Aesthetics of Conspiracy Moving Images. (Under the direction of Professor Devin Orgeron)

Digital conspiracy theory films operate like a conspiracy might: in the shadows, malleable and difficult to define cogently. The distribution models for conspiracy theory media range from the traditional to the social media-dependent and labeling a film a work of conspiracy theory is generally pejorative, limiting self-identification from filmmakers. Even categorizing them as *films* seems to betray their actual function. They are somewhere between online media, digital moving images, documentaries, and science fiction cinema. This paper argues that modern conspiracy moving images are all of these things, a new hybrid genre that harnesses thematic aesthetics of science fiction films like *They Live* (Carpenter, 1988) and formal stylings of paranoid-adjacent documentary films like *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore, 2002).

After examining the modes that influence these conspiratorial works, a case study is provided of one of the most influential online conspiracy theory videos of the current era: a thirty-minute YouTube video alleging the 2012 Sandy Hook Massacre in Newton, Connecticut was a hoax. The aesthetics of this video are representative of the wider emerging genre of online conspiracy rhetoric and media. In focusing on the history of conspiracy theory and technology, science fiction cinema and paranoia, and mainstream documentary films and cinema poetics, this project tries to give definition to a genre that refuses it.

Conspiracy theory media is not new and is always contemporary. Its particular use of the cinematic mode, however, has not been defined clearly. The theoretical components of the cinema itself, as this paper shows, make paranoia intrinsic to its operations; this means that conspiracy theory thrives in the moving image medium to a degree it has not before. What essentially began with Abraham Zapruder's 1963 8mm recording of President John F. Kennedy's assassination has grown and crystallized into a new ontological framework of the moving image.