

Eva-Mariam Ssekibenga

FMST Honors

### Honor Thesis Reflection

My honor thesis screenplay is meant to be a reflection of my four years at William and Mary. It is set at a college campus that resembles the College, and it features students who are undergoing the same journey of self-discovery that I went through during my first years in college. The plot centers around a secret society and a mysterious lake because the conspiracy genre's obsession with exposing the truth gave me ample room to explore the effect that unpleasant truths have on a person's psyche.

The main theme of the screenplay is about fantasies clashing with reality. College is a place where the dreams of naïve young people are first tested by the harsh realities of life. The script follows three characters whose fantasies are challenged. Charlie Wizcott's dream of becoming a journalist is hampered by the fact that he is a conspiracy theorist, Harold Fitzroy's dream of going to Yale can never true due to his terrible work ethic, and Peter Irving's optimism about joining a secret society gradually dwindles as he realizes the complicated moral choices the society is forced to make. The three reactions they have to their bubble bursting reflect the different ways people deal with their world view being forcefully altered. Charlie tries to adjust to his new reality, Harold remains in denial about his failures, and Peter completely gives up on his previous convictions. Touching the lake is meant to represent the feeling someone gets when their passion, their reason for living is taken away. Whenever the characters interact with lake it's as if their worst fears are confirmed: Charlie sees Amity with Diana after he touches the lake, Harold accepts the fact that he'll be disowned by his family before falling into the lake, and Peter

realizes that the Order is putting their own people in danger in order to fulfill a higher purpose. These realizations take a little of their innocence away and the lake leaves a physical mark on their bodies to emphasize that.

Another source of tension characters experience in this screenplay is between telling truth and keeping secrets. Charlie wants the truth to be heard at all costs while the Order of Bermuda wants to keep everything secret. Charlie keeps his investigation secret with the hope that the story will come to light but every attempt to share it fails. Seeing that the Order has infiltrated the honor council, a place where truth, honor and justice should be upheld convinces Charlie that there is no way that the truth will come out. Amity also struggles with secrets when she lies to Charlie about Diana forging a postcard from his father. Even though she knows that Charlie values honesty she keeps this secret because it'll break his heart. Keeping secrets for the protection of others is the Order's whole philosophy, but Peter struggles to uphold this when his friendship with Daniel starts to fall apart. All these conflicts are supposed to make the audience wonder when it's good to keep a secret or if its bound to come back to haunt them later.

Diana's camera also is an important part of the plot. Charlie steals from Diana to prove that he can become a professional journalist. Initially he struggling to use the camera but throughout the film he learns how to use it to his advantage. His first piece of evidence of the Order is a photo of Peter's tattoo and the camera ends up holding the last pieces of evidence after the Order confiscates the rest of his research. When he returns it to Diana Charlie has mastered the camera, proving to himself that he can act like a journalist. The camera represents Charlie's struggle to become the image of journalist. His conspiracies theories are seen as unprofessional, so he validates them with photographs. He has the chance to use those photos improve his reputation, but they are wiped. He then returns the camera to Diana, even though he knows that

his theories will not be believed without the concrete proof that photo provides. It's as if he borrowed Diana's sense of professionalism while he possessed the camera, but he cannot truly own it outright.

There is also a tension between technology and nature throughout the film. Charlie primarily uses older technologies like flip phones and typewriters, which makes his mastery of Diana's camera even more significant and highlights that Charlie refuses to use modern technology so that he isn't spied on. The Order of Bermuda likes to use technology to its advantage, like when Ben looks inside the school's database to learn more Harold and Charlie. The Order and Charlie also have opposing views on nature, with the Order trying to restrain the effects of lake while Charlie sees the woods as a safe place to retreat into after he finds Ben at the honor council. Charlie's anti-tech, pro-nature beliefs is the small way he fights against the modernity that the Order represents. Modern technology gives powerful people an easier means to control people due to its lack of privacy. The Order uses this technology to maintain control while Charlie retreats into the woods to retain his freedom. This conflict between freedom and control comes to a head when Charlie realizes that he can never truly be free from the Order's surveillance. He can make sure that they have as little control over his life as possible, which is one of the reasons why he refuses Ben's offer to get him into the Herald at the end of movie.

While researching for this screenplay I looked at other films that featured conspiracy theories and secret societies and observed how they used them in their stories. The 1997 film *Conspiracy Theory* is the film that most closely resembles my screenplay. Mel Gibson stars as Jerry Fletcher, an expert conspiracy theorist who turns out to be a victim of the CIA's Project MKUltra. Jerry's paranoia has made him an outcast, and even though the movie's portrayal of him is sympathetic there is still hint of mockery when they show how intensely he believes in his

theories. There is a scene where Jerry pulls out a gun in order to see the love interest he has been obsessing over, and even though the audience is on his side Jerry stills look psychotic. It's as if you cannot be completely sane and a conspiracy theorist at the same time, even if the theory is true. The fact that the MKUltra experiments messed with his mind means that his conspiracies are a symptom of a problem rather than a personality trait, and the movie wants to frame his conspiratorial mindset as temporary or abnormal. Jerry eventually kills Dr. Jonas, the doctor who tortured him, but has to fake his own death, which prevents the truth of the CIA experimentations from ever becoming public. The government is portrayed as omniscient, following Jerry's ever move and using all their resources to capture him. This is a reflection of a belief in the nineties that the we were entering into a New World Order where hidden powers control the future of the world. A government agent even outright tells Jerry this in the movie, that there are two factions of powerful people who are fighting amongst each other about how best to run the world.

The notion of powerful people who are secretly controlling sociopolitical events is also featured in the 1974 film the *Parallax View*. Like my screenplay, the movie is about a journalist, Joe Frady, who stumbles upon a conspiracy. In this movie, however, Frady attempts to infiltrate the organization he believes assassinated a presidential candidate. In order to join the Parallax Corporation Frady has to fit the profile of an assassin, which he naturally fits into. He has no real friends except his editor, and he is prone to violence. Even though he is portrayed as saner than a conspiracy theorist like Jerry, Frady is still an outcast. Throughout Frady's investigation there are several attempts to kill him, which shows Parallax's ruthlessness and makes Frady paranoid that everyone he meets might be working for Parallax. Frady tries to prevent a senator's assassination by following a Parallax operative to a political rally. His mission backfires when he fails to stop the murder and is framed as the killer. The movie ends with Frady being killed and

the Parallax Corporation continuing on unscathed. The pessimistic note the film ends on showcases the Parallax's cunning and concludes that conspiracies are unstoppable due to the power the people in charge have.

A secret organization is put into a more positive light in the 2011 film *Adjustment Bureau*. Matt Damon plays a New York senator named David Norris who fights against fate so that he can be with the one he loves, a ballerina named Elise. The Adjustment Bureau can alter events so that everything in the world goes according to a masterplan. They can bend space and alter people's memories to get what they want. David falling in love with Elise is not supposed to happen and so the Bureau goes into damage control to prevent their relationship from going further. David manages to evade the Bureau all enough to convince the Chairman of the Bureau to let he and Elise stay together. Unlike the previous two movies, David is not an outcast. Instead he is a popular senator who is debating whether to run for president. The Bureau uses this against him though, telling David that meeting Elise will ruin his chance to become president. The use of power as a bargaining chip shows how powerful the Bureau as an organization is. They are meant to represent fate, they chose when you are born, when you die, and everyone you meet in between. In this film free will is an illusion, and even though David is defying their plan by loving Elise, it is ultimately with their permission that he is free to actually be with her. One man cannot fight against a force this powerful. Since they look like ordinary humans, David and Elise can never be sure if the Bureau is around, but they know that the Bureau is watching them.

I also watched movies that centered around secret societies and their reactions to deviant behavior. The 2000 movie *the Skulls* is all about college secret society that resembles Yale's Skull and Bones society, which was an inspiration for the Order of Bermuda in my screenplay. Luke McNamara is invited to join the Skulls, a prestigious secret society at his college. At first

he enjoys the excess wealth the society gives him because he is struggling to find a way to pay for law school, but after one of the other members kills his best friend Luke has to choose who to be loyal to. The Skulls is portrayed as a boy's club, where the future leaders of the world are mentored by the currently rich and powerful. They value their secrecy so much that when Will, Luke's friend and journalist, finds a way into their headquarters he is killed before he can expose their secrets. The ruthlessness of the society is also displayed when Luke tries to investigate Will's death. He steals a tape that shows Will's murder but before he can show it to the police the Skulls force Luke into a mental hospital controlled by the Skulls. Even after he escapes the hospital Luke is followed by Skull members who want to kill him. The Skulls' willingness to take lives for their own gain makes the society look immoral. Will's murderer is killed by a Skull member, but Luke ultimately decides to leave the society once he realizes how far his mentor is willing to manipulate others to get his way. The fact that he rejected the offer to change the society from within is significant, it shows that Luke believes the society is beyond saving. Even though the film is melodramatic it reflects the belief that many people hold that secret societies like the Skull and Bones are capable of committing immoral actions in order to maintain their power.

*Eyes Wide Shut*, a 1999 movie starring Tom Cruise, is also about a secret society that is willing to do whatever it takes to keep its existence secret. Cruise, who plays Dr. Bill Hartford, manages to steal an invitation to a party at a country mansion. He soon realizes that he is out of his depth when he witnesses an intense sexual ritual and is unmasked by the master of ceremonies. He is warned not to tell anybody about the party. In the days afterward Hartford realizes that one of the party members sacrificed her life to save his, and that one of the friends was present at the orgy. His friend reveals that the party was filled with very powerful people

who had the power to ruin Hartford's life he chooses to speak about what he saw. Like *the Skulls*, this movie shows that the rich and powerful are willing to commit immoral acts to get what they want. Hartford knows the truth but cannot talk without risking his lives of his wife and daughter. His friend being the one to issue this threat also reflects the notion that anyone could be a part of a secret society and that there's no one you can truly trust.

The 1989 film, *Dead Poet's Society* counters the idea that secret societies are inherently evil, but it emphasizes the burden of keeping secrets from others. In protest of their prep school's rigid teaching methods, boys from the private school Welton Academy create a secret society called the Dead Poet's Society. They are inspired by their new English teacher John Keating to read poetry and to start thinking for themselves. These ideas are not welcome in Welton, so they retreat into the forest for their meetings. Being in the society builds up their self-confidence so the boys start to assert themselves: Neil pursues acting even though his father wants him to be a doctor, Knox pursues a love interest from a nearby public high school, Todd starts to realize his potential as a poet. Everything starts to fall apart when one of their members signs the society's name in an article demanding that girls be admitted in Welton. Neil commits suicide after his father refuses to support his acting career. Dead Poet Society members are coerced by the school to expose themselves, and one member cracks under the pressure. They are all forced to blame Keating for Neil's death so that he can be fired. Even though the secret society is the victim in this film, there are still elements from the other secret society films that are present in this movie. Revealing a secret is punished, with the act of sharing the names of the society's members to the school being seen as a betrayal. The people in power also act ruthlessly, but instead of those people being the ones in the society they oversee the school. The discovery of the Dead Poet's Society leads to beatings, expulsions and blackmail as the school tries to impose its will onto its

students. The boys can only live the lives that were designed by their school and their parents, and any attempt to deviate from that course was punished. The film associates keeping secrets with punishment, with Neil suffering after keeping his acting a secret from his father and the boys losing Keating after being inspired by him to create in Dead Poets Society. The potential of rebellion that the Dead Poets Society represented has been thoroughly squashed, and it seems like students are now even more scared of pursuing their own passions.

Over the last fifty years these films have created within their audiences a perception of secret societies and conspiracies that I challenged in my screenplay. In all these movies the secret organizations the protagonists were fighting against are portrayed as all powerful and undefeatable. It is as if by hiding in the shadows these people lost their humanity and were incapable of human error. The Order of Bermuda in my screenplay in my opinion reflects more of how any organization, no matter how secret, operates. The Order makes a few mistakes, gets outwitted by Charlie a few times, but ultimately manages to keep its secrets. Being run by the rich and powerful does afford the Order some advantages when it comes to dealing with threats, but this does not mean that everything runs smoothly for them. Making Harold a terrible leader highlighted how human failings can lead to the secret society to be less effective. Harold allows Charlie's posters to stay up and makes the erroneous choice to break into Charlie's room, two decisions that make the Order's problems worse than better. Also, shedding a light on the Order's dealings reveals how people's different ambitions can affect how a secret society is run. Ben wants the top position and is willing to lie to Eric to keep up the illusion that the Order is being run well, Harold has zero loyalties to the Order since he is focused on going to Yale, and even though Paul is following orders he is questioning them along the way. In other movies the secret society is seen as a monolith and showing audiences an alternative and more realistic



portrayal of a secret organization can lead to people questioning their assumptions about how real-life secret societies act behind closed doors.

Charlie's characterization is similar to how conspiracy theorists are portrayed in movies, but the difference lies in how much he intimidates the Order. In movies like *Conspiracy Theory* and *Parallax View* the main character is seen as a mere inconvenience that needs to be eliminated, in my film Charlie comes close to causing the Order to fall apart. He gathers enough proof to expose the Order by taking photos, reading articles and talking to witnesses. He ends up meeting Order members face to face on the bridge and forcing Ben to reveal information about the Order. This is unique because it is rare that the main character is in a position of power when they encounter the secret organization they are fighting against. Even after Dr. Jonas is dead Jerry has to evade capture from Jonas' men from the CIA, David begs to be with Elise while knowing that the alternative is that his memory would be wiped, and even though the confrontation is between friends, Hartford knows that his family is in danger if he doesn't comply. The story being set a college campus also puts Charlie and the Order on an equal playing ground since they are all college students. It is not between a school administration and its students like in *Dead Poet's Society*, or between old rich elites and college students like in *the Skulls*. There is a real possibility that Charlie might win against that Order throughout the script, unlike in other movies which frame fighting back as ultimately fruitless.

Part of why Charlie can intimidate the Order is because he has the same ruthlessness as they have. He is willing to do all it takes to expose the truth. In films like *the Skulls* it is only the secret society that is doing the threatening and the blackmailing, but in this screenplay both Charlie and the Order act immorally to get what they want. Ben's preferred method of coercion is to threaten to ruin someone's future opportunities while Harold's preferred method is bribery.

Charlie resorts to physical threats to get Peter and Ben to talk about the Order. There are no qualms about surveillance from either side. Charlie initially stalks Amity and Ben looks through Charlie and Harold's school files in order to figure out how they tick. This morally grey interpretation of the conspiracy theorist forces the audience to think about whether it is okay to use immoral methods when you feel like you're in the right.

Another element of the movie that runs counter to audience expectations is the lack of romantic subplot. Even when portrayed as outcast the protagonist often have someone they fall in love with. Jerry obsesses over his love interest but still manages to win her love. This felt unbelievable as a plot line when I realized that Jerry is acting like a stalker throughout the movie by watching her from his car with binoculars and using a gun to demand that she sees him. A conspiracy theorist like Jerry cannot be that obsessive and maintain healthy relationships at the same time. Even the movie acknowledges this, Jerry cannot truly have his happy ending until all other MKUltra agents are captured and there's no need to think about conspiracy theories. Charlie is a lifelong conspiracy theorist, and that is reflected by his inability to maintain a healthy relationship. He begins the screenplay estranged from his sister, who is willing to lie and to manipulate him for his own protection. His friendship with Amity has the potential to bloom but he soon realizes that it was all orchestrated by his sister. Even though they reconcile at the end of the movie, there is still a hint of tension in the friendship since Amity decides to keep Charlie in the dark about Diana forging the postcard he thinks is from his father. Charlie's fractured relationships make him a better conspiracy theorist since he believes that everyone is always hiding something. Changing this element of the story makes the screenplay seem more realistic than Hollywood movies like *Conspiracy Theories* and gives an alternative portrayal of a conspiracy theorist to audiences.

I used my honors thesis screenplay to explore the complicated ways truth and fiction interact. It is also a critique of other movies about secret societies and conspiracy theories that painted a too simple of a picture of how secret societies are run. Secret societies were portrayed as all powerful forces that would stop at nothing to get what they want. Fighting against them was like fighting against fate, it was impossible to win. In my story there is a more even playing field, the Order has vulnerabilities that Charlie exploits. Both sides commit questionable acts to get information, making the question of which one has a moral high ground more complicated. This screenplay exists in the place where dreams clash with reality, and it explores how hard truths and big secrets change people and make them lose themselves.

Bibliography

Cohen, R. (Director). (2000). *The Skulls* [Film]. Original Film.

Helgeland, B. (1996). *Conspiracy Theory*. [Screenplay]

Kubrick, S. (1999). *Eyes Wide Shut* [Film]. Stanley Kubrick Productions.

Nolfi, G. (2011) *The Adjustment Bureau*. [Screenplay].

Semple, L., Jr. (1974). *The Parallax View*. [Screenplay]

Weir, P. (Director). (1989). *Dead Poet's Society* [Film]. Touchstone Pictures.