

PLOTTING THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION

The Oswald shadings, the multiple images, the split perceptions—eye color, weapons caliber—these seem a foreboding of what is to come. The endless fact-rubble of the investigations. How many shots, how many gunmen, how many directions? Powerful events breed their network of inconsistencies. The simple facts elude authentication. How many wounds on the President's body? What is the size and shape of the wounds? The multiple Oswald reappears. Isn't that *him* in a photograph of a crowd of people on the front steps of the Book Depository just before the shooting begins? A startling likeness, Branch concedes. He concedes everything. He questions everything, including the basic suppositions we make about our world of light and shadow, solid objects and ordinary sounds, and our ability to measure such things, to determine weight, mass and direction, to see things as they are, recall them clearly, be able to say what happened.

(Don DeLillo, *Libra*)

The assassination of President Kennedy in Dallas in 1963 has inspired more conspiracy thinking in America than any other event in the twentieth century. From official government enquiries to amateur websites, and from Hollywood films to literary novels, those seven seconds of mayhem in Dealey Plaza have been relentlessly examined for clues not just to a plot to kill the President, but to the hidden agenda of the last four decades of American history. In the collection of the unofficial Assassination Archives and Research Center in Washington, DC there are more than two thousand books on the JFK shooting and related topics. In the wake of Oliver Stone's film *JFK* (1991), nearly half the books on the *New York Times* top-ten bestseller list in early 1992 were about the case, and, significantly, all of them promoted conspiracy theories of one kind or another.¹

The Kennedy assassination has become synonymous with conspiracy theory, weaving its way into the cultural fabric of everyday life in the postwar United States. In phrases like "magic bullet" and "grassy knoll" the lexicon of conspiracy research has entered the public vocabulary. The assassination and its accompanying culture of conspiracy never seem to be far from the headlines, nor from popular culture. JFK assassination theories make a cameo appearance in dramas as diverse as *Annie Hall* and *The Simpsons*. In Richard Linklater's cult film *Slacker* (1991), for example, the nerdy character running the local used book store confesses that studying the minutiae of the assassination is pretty much all he has done since graduating from college, the culmination of which is a manuscript he is working on that the publisher wants to call "Conspiracy A-Go-Go." It might be not much of an exaggeration to claim, as a Dallas psychologist asserts in the opening paragraph of D. M. Thomas's 1992 assassination novel *Flying in to Love*, that "Ten thousand dreams a night . . . are dreamt about Kennedy's assassination."² Even when not directly there, the assassination seems to be an absent presence in many fictional and factual treatments of recent American history, a ghostly and unspoken moment of hidden causality. For example, in Thomas Pynchon's classic conspiracy text *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), the assassination of President Kennedy is never mentioned, yet always seems to be hovering just out of reach—much like the sinister Tristero conspiracy that the novel outlines. Written in the year after the assassination, Pynchon's novella chronicles the attempts by a regular California housewife to investigate the mysterious death of a wealthy and important man with an Irish-sounding name (Pierce Inverarity) whose legacy seems to extend to the whole of America. Once Oedipa Maas starts looking, it appears that there are ominous signs everywhere, as the whole of America becomes a tantalizing clue to a mystery that remains just beyond her grasp. For many Americans since Pynchon's pioneering journey into the abyss of infinite suspicion, the Kennedy assassination has become an inexhaustible motherlode of conspiracy theory, the primal episode from which all subsequent events, clandestine or otherwise, seem to emerge. Many contemporary conspiracy theories wager that the whole of recent American history is somehow linked to those seven seconds in Dealey Plaza, and that by understanding the details of the shooting, the larger political picture will eventually be revealed.

In the immediate aftermath of the assassination, however, it seemed far from obvious that a conspiratorial take on the shooting would become dominant. In a footnote added to the published version of his lecture on the "paranoid style" (originally delivered shortly before the assassination), Richard Hofstadter reassures himself and his readers that "conspiratorial explanations of Kennedy's assassination have a far wider currency in Europe than they do in the United States," and even then there were only a handful of presumably "un-American" writers hinting at alternative

explanations.³ It is almost as if the rugged individualism of the American dream demands that even assassins must be perceived as lone agents, with Machiavellian conspiracies and their subsequent conspiracy theories belonging to a European tradition. Once merely confined to marginal voices, however, belief in some kind of conspiracy or a cover-up in the JFK case has now come to be taken for granted by many Americans. By 1992 three-quarters of Americans—including, allegedly, even President Clinton and Vice-President Al Gore—believed that there was a conspiracy or an official cover-up involved in the assassination.⁴

Two explanations for this popularity have gained common currency. The first is that conspiracy theories provide a consoling sense of closure, gravity and coherence in the face of the seeming randomness of a disaffected loner killing the President. William Manchester, author of the classic elegy, *Death of a President*, summed up this position in a letter to the *New York Times* in 1993:

if you put the murdered President of the United States on one side of a scale and that wretched waif Oswald on the other side, it doesn't balance. You want to add something weightier to Oswald. It would invest the President's death with meaning, endowing him with martyrdom. He would have died for *something*. A conspiracy would, of course, do the job nicely.⁵

The other common explanation for the prevalence of conspiracy theories is that the traumatic assassination led to a widespread loss of faith, not just in the goodness of America that Kennedy seemed to represent, but in the legitimacy of the authorities who investigated the murder. Everything began to go wrong after that moment, the argument runs, and the story of the last four decades is one of increasing willingness to believe the worst about America in general, and the government and official agencies in particular. While there is some measure of truth to these popular claims, this chapter will argue that the turn to conspiracy theory in the Kennedy case is far more complicated than these pop-psychological explanations suggest. In many ways, the very opposite is the case. Far from providing a compensatory sense of certainty and coherence, conspiracy theories have highlighted—and fed into—an anxiety about the irredeemable strangeness of reality in postmodern times. Moreover, it is only in the subsequent climate of conspiracy emerging from the tail end of the 1960s that a mythical loss of innocence is backdated to the assassination itself.

Where Were You . . . ?

For many Americans recent history is divided into before and after the Kennedy assassination. The presentation of the early 1960s as an idyll of innocence before the fall into violence, fragmentation and cynicism has

become a common feature of numerous Hollywood films and made-for-TV movies. In *Love Field* (1992), for instance, Michelle Pfeiffer plays a Southern blue-collar housewife, obsessed with the glamorous life of the Kennedys. Against her husband's prohibition, she feels compelled to travel all the way to Washington to pay her respects to the dead President on that fateful weekend. On this voyage of discovery, she learns to respect not only the black man who ends up helping her, but also to respect herself as an independent woman. In a similar fashion, the voice-over by the main protagonist at the beginning of *Dirty Dancing* (1987) anchors the time of her own lost innocence to that of the nation: "That was the summer of 1963, when everybody called me Baby, and it didn't occur to me to mind. That was before President Kennedy was shot, before the Beatles, when I couldn't wait to join the Peace Corps, and I thought I'd never find a guy as great as my dad. That was the summer we went to Kellerman's."

For a generation of Americans the flashbulb memory of where they were when the President was shot has famously become a defining moment.⁶ Even for those too young to remember, the assassination is seen as the moment when the latent destiny of American history was knocked off its true course. In various time-travel sci-fi narratives the killing of JFK functions as the ultimate trope of irreversibility. In Gregory Benford's *Timescape*, for example, the narrative returns repeatedly to those seven seconds in Dallas in an attempt to avert the future course of history—an ecological catastrophe, in the fictional present of the novel.⁷ Even without the time-warping plots of such novels, the shooting is frequently inserted into a narrative of regret, nostalgia and loss. This tale of lost innocence manifests itself, for example, in the 1993 thriller *In the Line of Fire*, in which—for the first time in his career—Hollywood hard-man Clint Eastwood cries on screen. Eastwood plays Frank Horrigan, an ageing Secret Service agent, whose duty in the Kennedy motorcade 30 years ago in Dallas should have been to throw himself in front of the President and to "take the bullet." Horrigan's tears are occasioned not only by his eternal regret that he hesitated at the fatal moment, but also by his sense of nostalgia, a feeling that the current President is just not worth taking the bullet for. The obvious moral of the film is that despite the contemporary incumbent's self-conscious promotion of the Kennedy parallels, Clint would never cry for Clinton.

In various sites of popular culture, then, the assassination comes to be represented as not just a particularly vivid encounter with history in the making, nor even a watershed between two historical periods, but the very cause of an irreversible historical decline. It can also serve as a loss of innocence in a peculiarly personal way, a loss that is inseparable from conspiracy. For example, the late, well-known West coast conspiracy broadcaster Mae Brussell was "just a housewife, interested in tennis courts and

endless deferral and perpetual supplementarity, Pynchon's novel anticipates in a stylized form how the assassination has become submerged into an abyss of infinite interpretation and suspicion over the ensuing decades.

Oliver Stone's Oedipal Drama

In order to consider in more detail how conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination can lead more to confusion and causal incoherence than resolution, I now want to consider in detail two assassination fictions, each of which attracted much public debate. Oliver Stone's *JFK* and Don DeLillo's *Libra* offer very different responses to the vertigo of interpretation, and they suggest two very different models for the causal role of the assassination in recent American history.

Unfavorable reviewers of *JFK* were incensed by the "mixing of fact and fiction" in the film's now infamous combination of authentic assassination footage with artfully reconstructed documentary clips.⁶⁴ The *Washington Post* and *Time* began a fierce assault on *JFK* whilst it was still in production, with a headline in the former proclaiming that *JFK* was a "Dallas in Wonderland."⁶⁵ Stone replied in numerous Op-Ed pieces to these charges, sometimes claiming that the film was presenting to the cinema-going public the true version of history for the first time, and at other times arguing that the film was a "counter myth" to what he perceived as the mythical version of history told in the Warren Commission Report.⁶⁶

In many ways *JFK* operates with a dual narrative logic of both history and myth, which undermines the claims about the film that it presents a coherent and plausible version of events—reductively so in the eyes of its detractors, necessarily so in view of its supporters. On the one hand, in Stone's conspiracy theory of recent history, nothing happens by accident. The bulletproof bubble top of the presidential limousine, the film suggests, was left off on the treasonous orders of the conspiring Secret Service agents. The car likewise slowed to a virtual standstill after the first shot, and just before the fatal last shot, not because the Secret Service driver was stunned into confusion, but because it was part of the incredibly devious planning of the conspirators. *JFK*'s conspirators take care not only of the minor details, but they also have the grand sweep of history in their grasp. The argument of the film is that the conspirators planned to replace Kennedy with the more bellicose Johnson in order to promote their military-industrial interests through the escalation of the Vietnam War. In Stone's version of history there are no accidents, no coincidences, and no signs of incompetence in the assassination and its subsequent cover-up.

Stone relies on a model of causality that features individual action as the sufficient antecedent to subsequent effects. *JFK* presents the Vietnam War, the student and race riots, and the assassination of Robert Kennedy as part

of (to use Senator McCarthy's famous formulation) an "unbroken series" of events which the assassination conspiracy set in motion.⁶⁷ For Stone, the Present Situation is not the result of a complex and overdetermined set of events, processes and representations, but the inexorable consequence of purposeful decisions by individual agents. The film documents (or forges, according to many commentators) numerous inconsistencies in the Warren Commission Report, but it immediately inserts those anomalies into a tale either of an original conspiracy or of a subsequent cover-up.

JFK's detective fiction structure limits it to a restrictive model of causality and agency. When Garrison first submitted to the publishers a draft of *On the Trail of the Assassins*, on which Stone's film is based, it was a "straight-forward" presentation of the case. But he was persuaded to rewrite the book, making it into more of a detective story, into a "chronicle of the experiences of one man who tried to get to the truth about the murder."⁶⁸ Garrison takes eagerly to the genre, and his self-stylization as a real-life Philip Marlowe carries over into *JFK*, with its heroic portrayal of the rugged individualist detective. In both the book and the film the lone gunman theory is rigorously repudiated, only for its underlying assumption about agency to return in a displaced form as Garrison's Lone Detective. In keeping with its hard-boiled detective fiction fantasies of lone agency, the film contains many other noirish elements, not least in its lighting: Garrison (played by Kevin Costner) is frequently haloed by a glaring brightness, whose obvious connotations of moral and intellectual clarity are contrasted with the murky scenes of the New Orleans "gay underworld" and the shadowy glimpses of Pentagon meetings.

There is, however, a narrative countercurrent in *JFK* which works against this hard-boiled model of historical agency and causality. The detective fiction structure which gives the film its forward-moving pace and narrative drive towards the "resolution" of the case in the final courtroom scene also produces a backwards-spiraling movement which undermines and delays its narrative drive. In conventional detective fiction the episodes of the investigation lead on teleologically to the ending, set in motion and motivated by the desire to solve the initial crime.⁶⁹ But the ending is also a ghostly, anticipated presence at the beginning. It is the conclusion that allows the beginning of the sequence of events to be identified as such; only in a completed sequence can the significance of individual episodes be grasped as so many clues to the reconstruction of the underlying story. Once the ending has been reached, the presumption is that no incident or detail will appear arbitrary or accidental. The ending therefore seems to demand a return to the beginning, in order at last to insert all the confusing details into one coherent story.

In *JFK* there is indeed a gradual progression of discovery through the investigation to the revelations in the courtroom. The direction of the film, following the life of Garrison, seems to lead in a fairly obvious way from

innocence to experience. But the final courtroom sequence pieces together and replays the fragments of the assassination with which the film began. The ending thus begins to revise and color the beginning—quite literally. The initial chaos of the opening scene's black and white camera montage of gunshots in Dealey Plaza retroactively transforms itself into the comparative narrative clarity and color of the Zapruder film, which Garrison shows to the jurors. What seem like unintelligible and meaningless fragments at the beginning are coalesced into significance by Garrison's narrative commentary at the end of the film. In effect the film operates a three hour long game of hide-and-seek with its viewers, since the opening sequence takes us up to the very moment before the climactic fatal head shot, which is then only shown in the film's climax in the courtroom. The ending thus spreads its influence backwards over the narrative, initiating a retrograde movement that undermines the strong end-orientation of classic narrative plotting. As much as the opening event of the assassination determines the chain of detection, those events are themselves replotted by the subsequent detection; the beginning determines the ending, but it is the ending that shapes the beginning as a necessary origin.

In this way, Stone's *JFK* operates on an Oedipal logic. In *Oedipus Rex*, the murder of the father-king is the episode that sets in motion future events, including the forward-moving process of detection. In *JFK* Kennedy's death likewise results in Garrison's investigation. It also is the unknown origin behind Garrison's current sexual and political dissatisfaction, becoming a necessary but hidden cause which works out its logic in the course of the film.

But in *JFK* there is another narrative drive in play whose influence seeps backwards from the ending. The original murder in both Stone's film and *Oedipus Rex* is not merely a causal origin, but also a symbolically and aesthetically necessary act, demanded by the narrative coherence of the plot. In Sophocles' drama, instead of a prior event being the cause of significance for subsequent happenings, it is as if the unbearable significance felt by Oedipus in the present of the play "causes" him to imaginatively posit the original event. Meaning, as Jonathan Culler explains, "is not the effect of a prior event but its cause."⁷⁰ Similarly in *JFK* we see how Garrison feels the need to posit a grand, tragic event, an origin for the decline of both Jim Garrison and America. The state of decline felt by Garrison is so pronounced that only a correspondingly momentous original murder can do justice to the grandeur of his feelings. In *JFK*, the rhetoric of treason and the references to Kennedy as Hamlet Senior are matched only by the John Williams score, whose bombastic, funereal title music underlines the way in which the film's rhetoric pointedly recreates JFK as the fallen warrior-king.

The Oedipal subtext of the assassination produces a disturbance not only in the causal logic of historical action, but also in the "proper" teleological

path of Garrison's sexuality. In *JFK*, one effect of the assassination is Garrison's loss of heterosexual desire for his wife, played by Sissy Spacek. She complains that he cares more about Kennedy than herself, as he sits up all night, poring over the details of the Warren Commission Report with fetishistic interest. The homoerotic desire that Stone's Garrison seems to feel for Kennedy (but can't address directly) manifests itself in two ways. The first is in Garrison's Hamlet-like obsession for the figure whom he eulogizes in speech as the "slain father-leader," a retrospective idealization of the young, beautiful President. The second way in which a repressed homosexuality returns to haunt the case is the emphasis Garrison places on the perversion of the New Orleans conspirators. Although *On the Trail of the Assassins* hardly makes reference to the New Orleans gay underworld, Stone lavishes much visual attention—a parallel form of fetishism—on the scene of the confusedly intertwined and decadent bodies of Shaw, Ferrie (two of the principal conspirators) and a black servant, filmed in close-up and edited into a frenzied montage.⁷¹ The strength of Garrison's case in the film seems to depend on proving the improper connections between Shaw and the CIA in Washington. But the film insinuates that the improper connections were not the complex association of military and industrial vested interests, but the "perverted" sexual coupling of the conspirators. The film thus presents homosexual association as both the *result* of the assassination (in Garrison's fixation on the fallen father-king, and his loss of desire for his wife), and also the *cause* of the assassination. For Stone, the assassination becomes the event that un-manned America. But the weight of repressed homosexual desire felt by Garrison in the present of the film also leads him to posit retrospectively the assassination as the slaying of a father-king by the primal (homosexual) horde. In summary, then, it might be said that the effects of the assassination "produces" this particular grand conspiracy theory of the assassination as its cause. As much as Stone's film tries to assert its coherence and teleological clarity, it is repeatedly undermined by a second narrative drive which inverts cause and effect. The more it tries to suppress this narrative counter-current, the more it disrupts the manifest story with moments of rhetorical and visual excess.

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Third Line

In hindsight it might seem obvious that Stone's career as a film-maker was leading up to *JFK*. It features as both the logical culmination and the hidden origin of his conviction that Vietnam was the event that un-manned America. In *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), for example, Vietnam is the episode that induces the impotence of the Ron Kovic character, a patriotic young soldier who returns from Vietnam physically, sexually and emotionally paralyzed. *JFK* thus acts as both a prequel and a postscript to