



Essay

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When Artists Distort History



King Richard III was a monster. He poisoned his wife, stole the throne from his two young nephews and ordered them to be smothered in the Tower of London. Richard was a sort of Antichrist the King—"that bottled spider, that pois'nous bunch-back'd toad."

Anyway, that was Shakespeare's version. Shakespeare did what the playwright does: he turned history into a vivid, articulate, organized dream—repeatable nightly. He put the crouchback onstage, and sold tickets.

And who would say that the real Richard known to family and friends was not identical to Shakespeare's memorably loathsome creation? The actual Richard went dimming into the past and vanished. When all the eyewitnesses are gone, the artist's imagination begins to conjure.

Variations on the King Richard Effect are at work in Oliver Stone's *JFK*. *Richard III* was art, but it was propaganda too. Shakespeare took the details of his plot from Tudor historians who wanted to blacken Richard's name. Several centuries passed before other historians began to write about Richard's virtues and suggest that he may have been a victim of Tudor malice and what is the cleverest conspiracy of all: art.

JFK is a long and powerful harangue about the death of the man Stone keeps calling "the slain young king." What are the rules of Stone's game? Is Stone functioning as commercial entertainer? Propagandist? Documentary filmmaker? Historian? Journalist? Fantasist? Sensationalist? Paranoid conspiracy-monger? Lone hero crusading for the truth against a venal Establishment? Answer: some of the above.

The first superficial effect of *JFK* is to raise angry little scruples like welts in the conscience. Wouldn't it be absurd if a generation of younger Americans, with no memory of 1963, were to form their ideas about John Kennedy's assassination

from Oliver Stone's report of it? But worse things have happened—including, perhaps, the Warren Commission report.

Stone's movie and the Warren report are interestingly symmetrical: the Warren Commission was stolidly, one might say pathologically, unsuspecting, while in every scene of the Stone film conspiracy theories writhe underfoot like snakes. In a strange way, the two reports balance one another out. It may be ridiculous to accord Stone's movie a status coequal with the Warren report. On the other hand, the Warren report has endured through the years as a monolith of obscure suppression, a smooth tomb of denial. Stone's movie, for all its wild gesticulations, at least refreshes the memory and gets a long-cold curiosity and contempt glowing again.

The fecklessness of the Warren report somehow makes one less indignant about Stone's methods and the 500 kitchen sinks that he has heaved into his story. His technique is admirable as storytelling and now and then preposterous as historical inquiry. But why should the American people expect a moviemaker to assume responsibility for producing the last word on the Kennedy assassination when the government, historians and news media have all pursued the subject so imperfectly?

Stone uses a suspect, mongrel art form, and *JFK* raises the familiar ethical and historical problems of docudrama. But so what? Artists have always used public events as raw material, have taken history into their imaginations and transformed it. The fall of Troy vanished into the *Iliad*. The Battle of Borodino found its most memorable permanence in Tolstoy's imagining of it in *War and Peace*.

Especially in a world of insatiable electronic storytelling, real history procreates, endlessly conjuring new versions of itself. Public life has become a metaphysical breeder of fictions. Watergate became an almost continuous television miniseries—although it is interesting that the movie of Woodward and Bernstein's *All The President's Men* stayed close to the known facts and, unlike *JFK*, did not validate dark conjecture.

Some public figures have a story magic, and some do not. Richard Nixon possesses an indefinable, discomfited dark gleam that somehow fascinates. And John Kennedy, despite everything, still has the bright glamour that works best of all. Works, that is, except when the subject is his assassination. That may be a matter still too sacred, too raw and unassimilated. The long American passivity about the death in Dallas may be a sort of hypnosis—or a grief that hardened into a will not to know. Do not let daylight in upon magic.

Why is Stone's movie different from any other imaginative treatment of history? Is it because the assassination of John Kennedy was so traumatic, the baby boomers' End of Childhood? Or that Americans have enshrined it as official tragedy, a title that confers immunity from profane revisionists who would reopen the grave? Are artists and moviemakers by such logic enjoined from stories about the Holocaust? The Holocaust, of course, is known from the outset to be a satanic plot. For some reason—a native individualism, maybe—many Americans resist dark theories about J.F.K.'s death, and think those retailing them are peddling foreign, anarchist goods. Real Americans hate conspiracies as something unclean.

Perhaps the memory of the assassination is simply too fresh. An outraged movie like Stone's intrudes upon a semi-permanent mourning. Maybe the subject should be embargoed for some period of time, withheld from artists and entertainers, in the same way the Catholic Church once declined to consider sainthood until the person in question had been dead for 50 years.

No: better to opt for information and conjecture and the exhumation of all theories. Let a hundred flowers bloom, even if some of them are poisonous and paranoid. A culture is what it remembers, and what it knows. ■