

Film

Movies That Reflect Our Obsession With Conspiracy and Assassination

By STEPHEN FARBER

SINCE the Watergate disclosures, stories about conspiracy have captured the popular imagination. Therefore, it is not surprising that a number of recent movies—including "The Parallax View," "The Conversation," "Chinatown," "The Tamarind Seed," "SPYS"—have dealt explicitly with political intrigue and conspiracies of varying magnitude. These films range from incisive to inane, but as a group they illustrate an intriguing national obsession.

Alan J. Pakula's "The Parallax View" is probably the most mindless and irresponsible of the lot. The film is a political thriller in the tradition of "The Manchurian Candidate," about a reporter (played by Warren Beatty) who tries to track down the cabal responsible for the assassination of a rising young senator. Movie audiences used to be able to count on the triumph of the hero, but at the end of "The Parallax View," the conspirators kill the crusading reporter and cunningly camouflage the truth so that no one can penetrate the secret Parallax Corporation.

"The Manchurian Candidate," a uniquely prophetic movie made shortly before the assassination of President Kennedy, ended with the discovery and eradication of the conspiracy to kill a Presidential candidate; the more pessimistic conclusion of "The Parallax View" suggests how radically American attitudes have changed in the last 10 years. The plot of "The Parallax View" is full of holes, and its cynicism is glib, but the interesting point is that a large public is willing to buy such a bleak paranoid vision. Today's mass audience wants to believe in omnipotent, omniscient, indestructible conspiracies.

In analyzing the persistence of conspiracy theories of the Kennedy assassination, Henry Steele Commager once

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said that people found these theories comforting because they provided a rational explanation for a bewildering national trauma. If the assassination was actually executed by one deranged individual acting on his own, then the course of history had been changed by a freak accident. That in turn raised the possibility that life might be fundamentally senseless, chaotic, purposeless—and such a possibility was too disturbing for many Americans to contemplate. They preferred believing all the ingenious scenarios that gave the assassination the same logic as one of Perry Mason's cases.

"The Parallax View" draws plot details from both Kennedy assassinations, and manipulates these associations to titillate the audience. In making a fic-

tional movie about the assassinations of the sixties there are many possible approaches, but any filmmaker who reopens these still-painful wounds has a responsibility to illuminate the issues. Whether the movie speculates on a possible conspiracy, or explores the psychology of a single assassin, or merely tries to probe the climate of violence that fostered the assassinations, the least we should demand is a measure of fresh insight. "The Parallax View" exploits real anguish for the sake of juicy chills and spills.

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Director Pakula evades all the pertinent questions by refusing to identify any of the political factions involved in the labyrinthine conspiracy. Like last year's "Executive Action"—a semi-



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A murdered Senator's blood streaks a window as witnesses look on in horror in "The Parallax View," which draws details from the assassination of Robert Kennedy, above. The film may be "the most mindless and irresponsible" of the new "conspiracy" films, says the critic.

documentary consideration of the assassination of President Kennedy—"The Parallax View" is too cowardly to make direct accusations. We don't even know which party the murdered politicians belong to, or what philosophies they espouse, and as a result, we can't begin to guess why anyone would want them killed.

In keeping the conspirators and the candidates so shadowy, Pakula may have hoped to broaden the movie's appeal by allowing every member of the audience to nominate his own favorite demon as the evil genius behind the assassinations. If you fear the American Nazi Party or the American Communist Party, the oil industry or the C.I.A., Henry Kissinger or Ralph Nader, any or all of them might be involved

in the mysterious Parallax Corporation. This film exemplifies the empty-headed, fence-straddling approach to controversial issues that has made Hollywood's political movies such a joke.

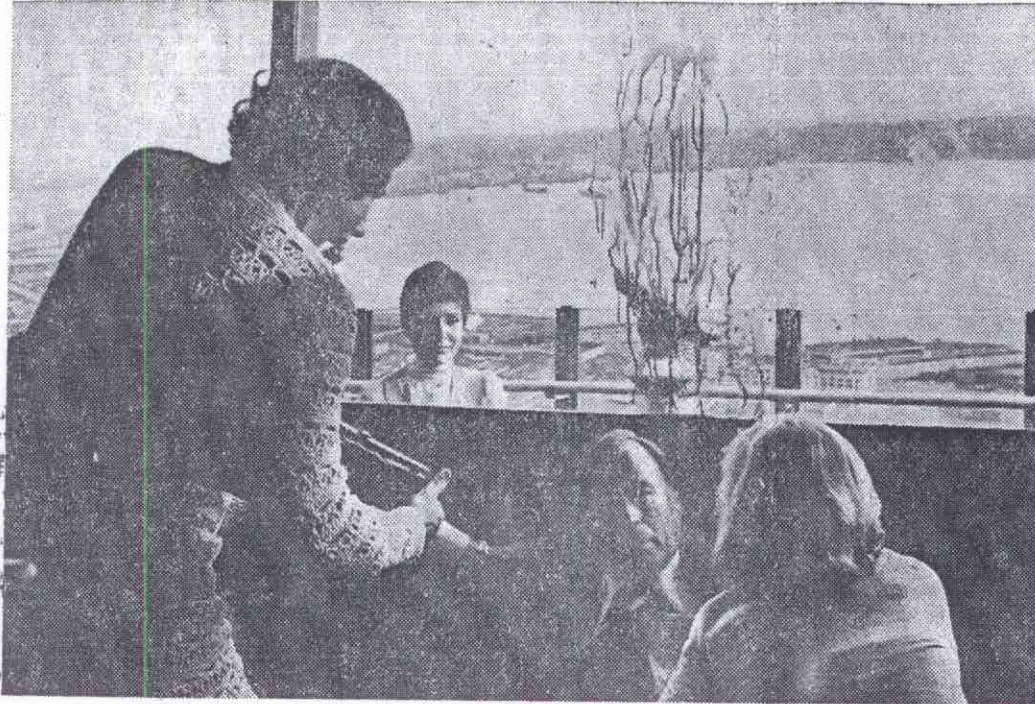
In place of any sustained political or psychological analysis, "The Parallax View" ends by suggesting that the wave of American assassinations could have been masterminded by a giant corporation without any political ideology, an organization that hires out assassins to anyone who pays and so ends up murdering both left-wing and right-wing politicians. There is a germ of a satiric idea here—the notion that America is so completely capitalistic that even assassination becomes a business proposition; maybe this solemn, ponderous movie would have

worked better as a wicked black comedy.

Although "The Parallax View" owes a great deal to "The Manchurian Candidate," it overlooks the one quality that made "The Manchurian Candidate" so abrasive—its mixture of horror and comedy. John Frankenheimer's unpredictable, electrifying thriller expressed an important paradox of contemporary political life—the fact that conspirators might be clowns or buffoons and, at the same time, dangerous madmen.

Irvin Kershner's "SPYS" takes this double-edged vision into the Watergate era. One thing we should have learned from Watergate is that while conspiracies do indeed affect the lives of all

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 Americans, they are not quite so efficient or omnipotent as even the conspirators themselves would like to believe. The bizarre fantasies of Gordon Liddy and Howard Hunt seem to have been inspired by James Bond movies, but the plumbers performed their roles like Woody Allen rather than Sean Connery.

"SPYS" perceives this surreal comedy, while the "The Parallax View," with its sinister, fiendishly brilliant conspirators, seems oddly dated; the latter recalls the apocalyptic speeches given by Mark Lane or Jim Garrison in the late sixties. "SPYS" has the sensibility of the seventies; it captures the childishness of spies and C.I.A. conspirators, and the huge disparity between their glamorous fantasies and their actual bungling performance.

Donald Sutherland and Elliott Gould play two C.I.A. operatives marked for murder by their own agency; they find themselves pursued by the Americans, the Russians and the Chinese, as well as by a youthful terrorist gang that wants to destroy the C.I.A. Chronicling their misadventures, "SPYS" blends satire, farce and violence into an original, macabre vision of Cold War politics. Memorable black comic scenes freeze the defec-

tion of a Russian gymnast, one of the spies posing as a TV newsman fires the gun concealed in his camera, and an innocent athlete gets in the way of the bullet; as the C.I.A. men put electrical wires under Sutherland's finger-nails, he sings repeated choruses of "Old MacDonald" to keep from cracking; a baby-faced anarchist who is more concerned about his father's new car than about the revolution nevertheless succeeds in bombing a building. The conspirators in this movie have crazy human quirks which only make them more dangerous. People die while the loony spies and anarchists act out their comic book fantasies: that is the true post-Watergate nightmare.

"SPYS" is lightweight and unpretentious, directed with great energy by Kershner, and played in a relaxed screwball style by the entire cast. But I think its absurdist vision of a disintegrating world where the screwballs fire real bullets and draw real blood is a lot more meaningful and provocative than the grim deterministic approach of "The Parallax View," where everything happens according to a pre-ordained diabolical plan.

The single-minded paranoid vision of "The Parallax View" appears with only a few variations in "Chinatown"

(written by Robert Towne, directed by Roman Polanski), a pretentious detective story set in the thirties. Although less overtly political than the other two films, "Chinatown" does concern a conspiracy between big business and government that has unmistakable parallels to contemporary events. Based on a real scandal from Los Angeles history, the movie indictes official corruption. In the course of investigating the murder of a Los Angeles engineer, detective Jack Nicholson unravels a plot by a group of leading citizens to divert the city's water supply to their own land holdings in the uncultivated San Fernando Valley; they are using taxpayers' money to secure a private fortune.

"Chinatown" has been praised as a hard-hitting movie because it confirms prevailing liberal prejudices. The conspirators in the film are a band of rich, decadent fascists who control the police as well as the city's water supply. Their leader—played by John Huston—is such a leering, gloating caricature of the greedy capitalist that he might have stepped out of Victorian melodrama; all that's missing is a twirlable mustache. He doesn't even have the charm that makes powerful men insidious and seductive.

Even melodrama needs a

measure of complexity. "Chinatown" allows us to remain smugly superior to its cardboard villains; we are never surprised or implicated by its expose of political corruption. Like "The Parallax View," "Chinatown" draws overly neat distinctions between good and evil, simplifying the truth in order to comfort the ignorant.

In both these movies the evil conspiracies survive, and the audience seems relieved to learn that heroism is futile and irrelevant; anyone who tries to unlock the truth—the reporter in "The Parallax View" or the detective in "Chinatown"—will be punished for his initiative. These films may have been meant to awaken concern, but they only succeed in reinforcing the passivity of a jaded public. If life is governed by evil forces too devious to understand and too powerful to defeat, then we are all completely helpless, and there is no point in getting involved in the fight for social change. Hollywood's new conspiratorial fantasies promote cynicism, self-righteousness, and complacency—an unhealthy combination.