

John Sladek, *The New Apocrypha:
A guide to strange sciences and
occult beliefs.* New York: Stein & Day,
1975, pp. 301-305

of radio are... But the radio...
and... But the radio...
happen on... TV has...
difficulty of...
reason why... TV audiences...
audiences... (Suppose...
BBC at the height of the 1969 Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia...)

Obituaries
The sudden death of a celebrity constitutes a first-class news crisis; the media simply can't keep up with the rumours. Two books came out of Lincoln's assassination; one claiming Booth had not been caught; one claiming Booth committed suicide (like Judas).¹ Lincoln was killed on the orders of his cabinet, by a Roman Catholic group, by southerners, etc., etc.

The hysteria generated by Valentino's death provoked a riot in New York, involving sixty thousand people. He was said to be interred in a 1.5 ton bronze coffin, to be engaged to Pola Negri, to be a fascist... and of course, to be alive.*

After Valentino was alive, Amelia Earhart had to be horribly as did Glenn Miller, Hitler, James Dean (alive but horribly disfigured); then a long list of pop singers didn't really die in their car accidents, plane crashes, or drowning accidents.

Bob Dylan, who did stay alive, was of course said to have died, and an elaborate mystique enveloped the rumoured death of Paul McCartney: A message about his death was said to be recorded on the end groove of one record; the mourning scene on the cover of *Abbey Road* was genuine; various songs had hidden meanings; the word 'BEATLES' on one album could be read as a 7-digit telephone number where the Truth could be learned; on one album McCartney was photographed sitting behind a sign saying 'I WAS'; and many, many more.

President Kennedy's death set off a rumour cycle that will probably run for years to come. The Warren Commission Report attempted to lay the ghosts of most of the greatest conspiracy theories (the commission even investigated the

* As late as 1970, the aviator was said to be Mrs Irene Bellham in *Amelia Earhart Lives*. Mrs Bellham brought suit against the authors. (Source: London Evening Standard, 30 August 1971)

144, while agents from the Internal Revenue and other government agencies, but it left a number of questions and answered others in an unsatisfactory manner. This is of course to be expected in any such complex situation, but the need to know continued to set off new rumours of multiple births, multiple assassins, secret connections between Oswald and the FBI, between Ruby and the Dallas police, etc. And each item became the basis of some amateur sleuth's theory:³

1 Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgment* makes much of how one eyewitness testified to seeing something, near a wooden fence at Dealey Plaza, that I could not define precisely. He also tried to get a witness (to the killing of Patrolihan J. D. Tippit) who picked Oswald from a lineup, to change her mind. Apparently Lane completely fabricated the testimony of a third witness -- all to prove that a great conspiracy existed, involving Lyndon Johnson, the FBI, and Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren.

2 Penn Jones, Jr, a newspaper editor and publisher, printed his own book *Forgive My Grief*, trying to relate several other deaths to that of Kennedy. He claimed that, of five people who met with Jack Ruby's roommate on the day Ruby killed Oswald, two were later murdered and a third 'died under strange circumstances'. The meeting was actually a press conference, attended by Ruby's two lawyers, one detective, and a number of reporters. The 'suspicious death' was a heart attack; it happened to a man who wasn't actually at the conference. One of the reporters was murdered later, possibly by a hater of homosexuals. The policeman was accidentally shot by a colleague two years later. But the editor-publisher's death hunt carries him further and further into paranoid fantasy:

Jones actually believes that the power failure which crippled New York City... following Miss Kitzgalt's [gossip columnist who interviewed Ruby] death [by bed-turpate poisoning] was a thinly disguised ruse to shove her story off newspaper front pages.⁴

3 Edward J. Epstein's *Inquest* attacks the Commission's famous 'single bullet theory, stating that X-rays of the President's body weren't examined by the Commission. Of course non-medical men are not likely to make anything out of X-rays

at X-ray plates; the Commission relied instead on expert opinion (as they would for fingerprint or ballistics data).

4 Harold Weisburg's *Whitewash* contends that the FBI, or somebody, destroyed four critical frames of a movie of the assassination. Len Deighton has picked up this rumour and puts it as an 'unanswered question' in his 'Jackdaw' file, *The Assassination of President Kennedy*:

Examination of other frames, however, appeared to indicate that the missing frames might have recorded the piercing of a traffic sign alongside Elm Street by a bullet.⁷

This looks like a classic rumour on the wing, in the supposition that an unseen bullet is depicted in unseen film footage. The missing four frames were not actually suppressed by the FBI or anyone else: The amateur who took the film sold the original to *Life* magazine and gave copies to the FBI and Secret Service. In the rush to process pictures, someone at *Life* broke the film (diagonally, across these frames) and someone else spliced it, discarding them. The Warren Commission examined this film and also the official copies containing the four frames. It decided to publish the *Life* version, merely because it was a clearer print.

5 A few wilder theories are that there were really two assassins (Oswald and someone who impersonated him, leaving false clues); that it was all the plot of a Texas oil millionaire; that Oswald was framed; that a 'missing' tree on a nearby knoll shows that an artificial tree had been installed, to camouflage the real sniper; that blowups of photos of the area show a host of snipers lurking in shrubbery; that the assassination bullet was planted where it was finally found (on the hospital stretcher of Governor Connally); and of course that Kennedy is alive.

6 The wildest of all is that of George C. Thompson: Five people were killed in Dealey Plaza. There were at least twenty-two bullets fired. The suspect is Lyndon B. Johnson. An automatic weapon equipped with a silencer was used. Kennedy was not killed. He was impersonated in the Presidential limousine by Officer J. D. Tippit.⁸

Propaganda and Self-Deception
The fulminations of World War I propaganda are often singled

out as shameful manipulations of public opinion. Yet, even when the press is not deliberately 'managed', it can provide its own rumour system. Consider this sequence of news stories from World War I papers, following the fall of Antwerp to the Germans:

When the fall of Antwerp became known, the church bells were rung [meaning in Cologne]. - *Kölnische Zeitung*. According to the *Kölnische Zeitung*, the clergy of Antwerp were compelled to ring the church bells when the fortress was taken. - *Le Matin*.

According to what *Le Matin* has heard from Cologne, the Belgian priests who refused to ring the church bells when Antwerp was taken have been driven away from their positions. - *The (London) Times*.

According to what *The Times* has heard from Cologne via Paris, the unfortunate priests who refused to ring the church bells when Antwerp was taken have been sentenced to hard labour. - *Corriere della Sera*.

According to information to the *Corriere della Sera* from Cologne via London, it is confirmed that the barbaric conquerors of Antwerp punished the unfortunate Belgian priests for their heroic refusal to ring the church bells by hanging them as living clappers to the bells with their heads down. - *Le Matin*.

Here we can see that the misreading of a single sentence began the chain-reaction, and an atmosphere of anti-German hate propaganda provided everything necessary to keep the reaction building up. American political party propaganda, often crude, hit a new low of crudity in the 1930s:

In addition to the whispers regarding the physical and mental health of President Roosevelt, the 1936 campaign evoked the rumour that he was actually a Jew named Rosenfeldt... A story was printed prominently by the *Chicago Daily Tribune* that American Communists had been instructed to vote for Mr Roosevelt.⁹

And of course Nazi propagandists made considerable use of these rumours after America entered the war.