

Essay

The Fallacy of Conspiracy Theories

Good on Film,
But the Motivation
Is All Wrong

11/9/92 By Ken Ringle
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When the lights went up after a preview screening of Martin Scorsese's 1976 film "Taxi Driver" in New York the year it opened, a couple in the audience, still dazed from the gore-splattered final minutes, turned to Scorsese's then-wife, Julia Cameron, for some explanation.

"What Marty's trying to say," Cameron said breezily, "is that if you keep a lot of guns around the house, you can't expect to have clean carpets."

What Scorsese was actually saying, of course, was a great deal more. In 113 extremely disturbing minutes his searing film puts us into the mind of Travis Bickle, the prototypical assassin who stalks



Gary Goldman as Lee Harvey Oswald in "JFK."

our time—the brooding, alienated loner, disconnected from society, incapable of forming any meaningful human relationship, who ultimately finds his only possible identity at the end of a trigger.

These days, in the interest of

truth, "Taxi Driver" should be running on a double bill with "JFK" anywhere Oliver Stone's much ballyhooed movie is playing. Let's not just debate Stone's outrageously twisted vision of the

See ESSAY, G2, Col. 4

Conspiracies

ESSAY, From G1

assassination of President Kennedy with facts; let's force viewers to ask themselves which vision of evil, Stone's or Scorsese's, is more recognizable in their own lives.

While conspiracies such as the one Stone imagines have long fueled the imagination of writers and directors, the greatest social violence of our time has proven again and again to be the product not of some political or military group lost in paranoia or ambition, but of the anonymous loner lost in emptiness and despair.

John Hinckley. James Earl Ray. Sirhan Sirhan. Arthur H. Bremer. The guy in the Texas Tower with the sniper rifle. The fellow who mowed down the school children in California. What's-his-name who blew away everybody in that McDonald's? Where was that? There've been so many since that numbing day in Dallas 28 years ago that we can't even remember their names. But the pattern of their lives almost always turns out to be eerily the same.

When dozens of reporters and detectives scramble to learn everything they can about a Mark David Chapman they discover he didn't shoot John Lennon because he hated him. He didn't do it because he was part of a cabal that wanted Lennon dead. He did it because he thought Lennon was *SOMEbody*, and in the half-baked broccoli of Chapman's mind, killing *SOMEbody* was better than life as *NObody*. After all, it gets you on TV.

John Hinckley didn't shoot Ronald Reagan because he hated or feared him, we discovered. He shot him to impress actress Jodie Foster. To get on TV.

There were thousands of people who had it in politically for Robert Kennedy and George Wallace and Martin Luther King Jr. There were groups who hated them and, almost certainly, talked of weaponry. But the men who shot them came from somewhere else. When Huey Long was killed in Louisiana in 1935 some of his political opponents were talking about a march on Baton Rouge. But the assassin, the one who actually pulled the trigger, turned out, as he almost always does, to be listen-

ing not to the collective voices of conspiracy, but to the individual compulsions of his own mind.

Ever since the ham-handed conspiracy that murdered Lincoln, American political assassinations in particular have been the handiwork of twisted loners beset by private thunderclouds. The man who shot Garfield in 1881 was distraught at having been denied a federal job. The man who shot McKinley 20 years later was a ranting anarchist. The man who in 1932 shot and killed Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak instead of president-elect Roosevelt, at whom he was aiming, insisted to police that he was just trying to exorcise the pain of an ulcer. The two attempts on the life of Gerald Ford were the work of emotionally disturbed women, acting alone.

Only in the imagination of the artist do intricately constructed conspiracies always bear fruit. There they become books and screenplays. For the novelist and playwright, conspiracies are irresistible. They explain motivation. They move the plot. They tie up loose ends. But life itself is rarely that tidy. Human beings never interact as single-mindedly as conspiracy theorists would have us believe—they're too human. Even if they conceive an assassination conspiracy, they almost never can carry it out. They disagree. They fall out with each other. And eventually the plot unravels and the secrets get told.

A Lee Harvey Oswald, on the other hand, makes his own plans and keeps his own counsel. He has to.

He's driven to do so by despair and by fantasies of grandiosity. Besides he can't relate to anybody else.

Few of us like to think too much or too deeply about the Lee Harvey Oswalds or Travis Bickles of the world: The randomness of their violence is too scary. We much prefer to worry about political or governmental conspiracies. To do so implies that if we steer clear of politics or government intrigue we'll never wander into the sights of an assassin's rifle. Yet our times repeatedly tell us otherwise.

All this is fairly basic psychology to anyone who pays attention to history or to life. The only problem with it is Americans spend far more time watching television and movie fantasy these days than experiencing or trying to understand their fellow man. How the human mind really works has become indistinguishable for many from how they see it work in television and movies.

The problem with Oliver Stone isn't really that his film turns the facts about President Kennedy's assassination on their ear. As Stone has said, Shakespeare took liberties with history and so, as an artist, can he. The real problem is Stone's audience: the video-stoned millions for whom his vision, however twisted, is just another headache remedy they'll buy from the screen.

According to movie theater exit polls, it's already happening. There's always a conspiracy in the detective shows on television, the viewers are saying, so why not believe there's one in government?

Why not? Because real life assassinations don't happen that way. And for film buffs, who need to be reminded how and why they do happen, Scorsese's disquieting "Taxi Driver" should be required viewing.