

VOGUE ARTS

MOVIES Thirty years later, Hollywood is unleashing five new films that deal with the Kennedy assassination. Could it be a conspiracy? wonders ANDREW KOPKIND

The shiny stretch limousine with its top down turns sharply around a green urban plaza and speeds toward a railroad underpass. From the backseat, the handsome man and his glamorous wife wave at the cheering crowds along the roadside. An older couple in the car also acknowledge the acclaim. And then the shots ring out; they fracture the November noon, annihilate the waving man, and change forever the history of this century.

The picture is almost as vivid now as it was in 1963. It is a searing image, imprinted on the minds of Americans as the mythic symbol of a world that suddenly went crazy. For the assassination of John F. Kennedy is more than a historical event. It is a personal point of passage for everyone old enough to remember that day in Dallas, and whether a fan of the president or a foe, everyone remembers—and feels the wound. Moreover, the scar is still raw, nearly three decades after the social skin was broken. Despite a blue-ribbon investigation, congressional hearings, and countless books and articles, the questions around and about the assassination have not been answered, and justice has not undeniably been served.

The Kennedy myth abounds in the cultural product of the intervening years, from Andy Warhol's painted photographs to the volumes of reminiscences by Camelot's knights; from semiotic odes to irreverent satires; from TV miniseries and trading cards to supermarket tabloids and velvet wall hangings. But now a new spate of films are moving through the Hollywood pipeline that in one way or another revisit the scene of what must be the single most spectacular crime of our time.

Oliver Stone's *JFK*, the mother of all conspiracy movies, is out this month. *Ruby*, starring Danny Aiello as the man who shot Lee Harvey Oswald and thus aborted the process of discovering the wider circumstances of Kennedy's assassination, is to be released in February. And Oswald's fictionalized story, as imagined by novelist Don DeLillo in *Libra*, is currently in production.

But that's only the beginning of assassination mania and the Kennedy revisitation. The topic turns up in such diverse movies as *Slacker*, a droll series of vignettes featuring episodes and conversations with dozens of blank post-adolescents in Austin, Texas. One of the most memorable miniscenes presents a monologue by a certifiable assassination nut who tries to impress a girl in the library stacks by his knowledge—or counterknowledge, as slacker science should be called—

of the conspiracies around Oswald. Those days in Dallas are also the background context for *Married to It*, the new romantic comedy with Beau Bridges, Cybill Shepherd, and Stockard Channing, and *Love Field*, with Michelle Pfeiffer and Dennis Haysbert. Even more can be expected as the thirtieth anniversary of the assassination rolls around next year.

For Oliver Stone in particular, as well as the more deliberate of his fellow assassination maniacs, the Kennedy movies are not merely idle pieces of nostalgia but a return to the scene of the crime, as much in the genre of time-travel fantasies as they are of political thrillers. In movies and literature there is a purpose to the journey, and it is almost always to fix something that broke long ago—or will go haywire in the future—and thus restore history to what should have been its normal course.

From H. G. Wells to Steven Spielberg, the notion of a writer or a director playing God with human events is a compelling conceit. *JFK* does not specifically require its characters to cancel the assassination. Stone rather wants to expose the inconsistencies and contradictions of the "official" lone-assassin theory of the killing and suggest a wider conspiracy. But his deeper drive is to make America whole again by locating and then re-creating the tragic moment when it came apart. It is, on many levels, a dangerous task.

"There would be a revolution if the truth came out about the assassination," Stone told me one night in an improbable *nouvelle* Italian pizzeria in the heart of New Orleans's French Quarter, where the movie was being shot. "They would lynch major congressmen who covered it up, and they would start a new government, somewhere west of the Mississippi."

Everyone who has seen Stone's movies knows he is obsessed with the 1960s as well as with their aftermath. The organizing focus of his obsession is of course the Vietnam War, and the Academy Award-winning *Platoon* was its major statement. *Born on the Fourth of July*, which chronicled the postwar

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