

"VOGUE" — JANUARY, 1992



Remains of the day, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: John and Jacqueline Kennedy arriving in Dallas, November 22, 1963; Ruby at a funeral hearing; Jacqueline Kennedy; Kennedy's body (after the assassination) being taken back to Washington; the headquarters of the Warren Commission; Garrison in Oliver; flashback, JFK.

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.

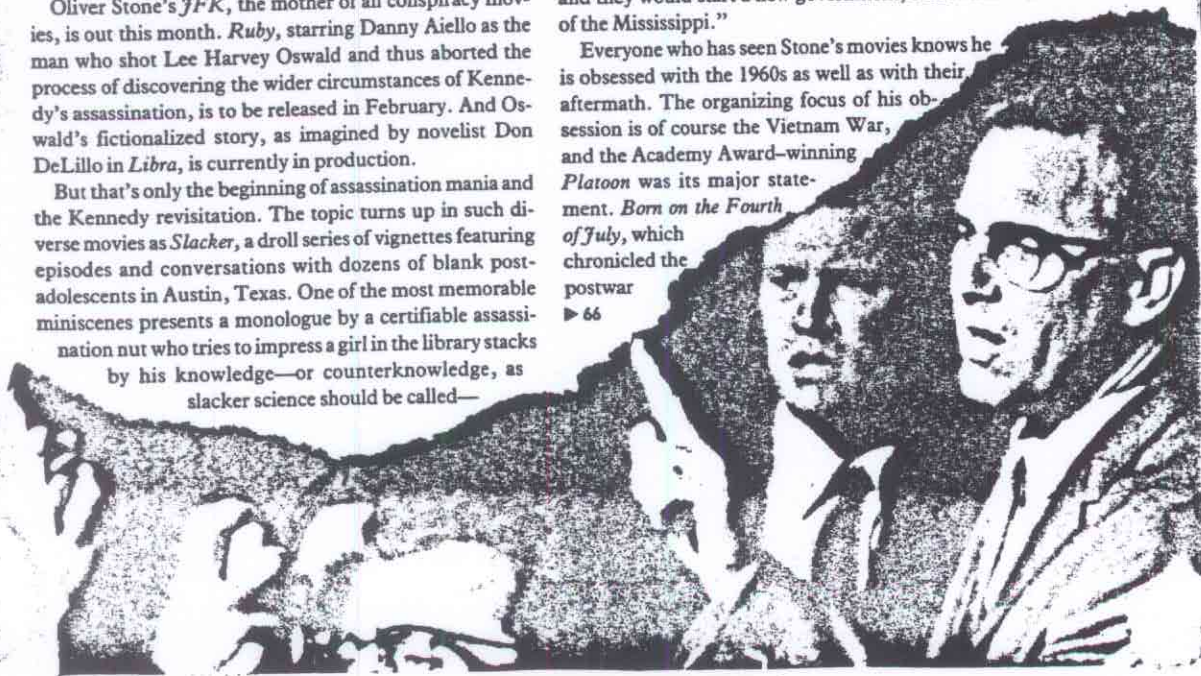
For Oliver Stone in particular, as well as the more deliberate of his fellow assassination maniacs, the Kennedy movies are not merely idle pieces of nostalgia but a return to the scene of the crime, as much in the genre of time-travel fantasies as they are of political thrillers. In movies and literature 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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physical and social struggles of paraplegic vet Ron Kovic, was a logical sequel to the in-country conflict. Next in the historical chronology was *The Doors*, which examined the rock culture and the generational attitudes profoundly influenced by the experience of the war.

Even his films that take place in the 1980s—*Salvador*, *Wall Street*, and *Talk Radio*—treat issues and personalities moving away from a baseline established in the Vietnam era. The American-funded and -directed wars in Central America, for Stone, recapitulate the ones in Southeast Asia. The rhetoric of combat in the Wall Street jungle in the Reagan years ("Greed is good!") resonates with the rationalizations of apologists for the war twenty years earlier. And Eric Bogosian's angry and nihilistic radio-talk-show host grows out of the frustrated idealism of the sixties.

JFK is a prequel to those films, and Stone is quite clear that the assassination was the trigger for the nightmare scenarios of the succeeding decades. Like several assassination buffs, he believes that Kennedy had decided to begin a de-escalation and withdrawal of forces from Vietnam, and "they" killed him to prevent the U.S. defeat that took twelve more long and bloody years to happen. Not only that, but Kennedy had become anathema to "them" for his failure to support an invasion of Cuba during the Bay of Pigs and, afterward, for his negotiation of a treaty with the Soviet Union outlawing aboveground nuclear tests and for his plans to reform and rein in the CIA. But it was Kennedy's emerging Vietnam policy that Stone insists sealed his fate at "their" hands.

Who "they" are is never entirely clear. Stone draws much of his material from the investigations of former New Orleans D.A. Jim Garrison (played by Kevin Costner in *JFK*), who actually indicted a local businessman, Clay Shaw, for conspiring to kill Kennedy. Shaw was tried and acquitted (and died), but Garrison found more evidence after the trial and remains unconvinced that Shaw was deeply involved. Garrison's book, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, is an engrossing and just a tad unconvincing exposition of his theory, and it formed the basis for the first draft, at least, of the *JFK* screenplay.

Stone, Garrison, and like-minded buffs believe that "they" who conspired to kill Kennedy were anti-Castro Cubans, veterans of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, extreme anti-communist businessmen in Europe and North America, and overall, a network of CIA regulars, renegades, informants, and assets who together formed a loose and liquid plot to kill the president. Oswald was, in his own words uttered upon his arrest, a "patsy," a straw man fashioned years before that day in Dallas to draw attention away from the real killers. And after the event, the Warren Commission, the FBI and the CIA, the Johnson administration,

key congressman and senators, and the great national newspapers and magazines conspired anew, in a so-far-successful effort to cover up the explosive reality of the entanglements and relationships around the assassination.

And that's only one version. Others who have made a career or an avocation of studying the assassination believe the Mafia ordered it in retaliation for Kennedy's refusal to invade Cuba and restore the mob's business position. There is the "big oil" scenario, which supposes that a few Texas billionaires were so annoyed with Kennedy's plan to end the industry's "depletion allowance" tax break that they did him in, in Dallas. Finally there are the cold-war theorists, who think that the Soviets or the Cubans were behind the scenes.

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Naturally partisans of the various theories dislike and in many cases denounce their fellows who happen to hold different views. Sometimes collegiality breaks down in midstream. As Stone was developing his film, he called on everyone he could find who had an angle on the assassination, but his ecumenism was not always rewarded. Harold Weisberg, one of the early conspiracy buffs, was for a time in amicable contact with the Garrison-Stone school, but he turned against the moviemakers for some theoretical deviation and attacked the *JFK* script in an interview in *The Washington Post*.

Not only that, but the producers, directors, and writers of the current assassination films are fighting a covert war to get their product out first with the most. *Ruby* publicists suspect that *JFK*'s Stone, who shot the actual assassination scenes in Dallas, tied up the city's supply of vintage open-top black limousines so that competitive productions would be delayed. Then actors began jumping ships. Gary Oldman, the great young British actor, was supposed to play Oswald in *Libra* but ended up in *JFK*. Danny Aiello, the all-purpose ethnic Italian, was supposed to be Jack Ruby in *JFK* but jumped to *Ruby*.

But no intramural challenge is as severe, or movie-set warfare as furious, as the attacks on conspiracy theorists as a whole, and individual theories one by one, from the political and journalistic establishment. The "official" version, as Stone calls it, has a mythic gravity, just as the assassination itself occupies a mythic place in American history and consciousness.

As soon as Stone started shooting, the anti-conspiracists opened their fire. George Lardner, *The Washington Post*'s longtime Pentagon correspondent, launched a virtual Desert Storm against the film in a piece that called Garrison's investigation a "fraud" and charged that "Stone's version . . . exploits the edge of paranoia." *Time* magazine, *The Chicago Tribune*, and several other publications joined the attack, while a few other papers, such as *The Los Angeles Times*, were more supportive. Stone

was stung by the early criticism, which he said was based on the first draft of a script that had since undergone major revisions. And he answered the charges with a detailed defense of his theory and Garrison's evidence.

As long as the assassination remains a public issue, the facts and their interpretation will remain in dispute. It is now almost impossible to tell whether the studies of the case constitute knowledge or counterknowledge. Whole tracts may be written on whether Oswald, on his way to the movies, shot Officer Tippit just after Kennedy's murder. Who can tell whether "Clay Bertrand," who called a New Orleans lawyer to arrange representation for Oswald, really was Clay Shaw? Were the "tramps" spotted and briefly detained by Dallas police near the grassy knoll just after the shooting part of the plot or merely tramps? And was one of them E. Howard Hunt, of Watergate infamy, in tramp drag?

Such speculations, which were fascinating to only a few for these many years, may soon be household topics. If Stone et al. are true harbingers of a Kennedy revival, the arguments of a rather rarefied group of buffs, nuts, and scholars could gain a new national currency. Just why it should all surface again at this time, after so many years of low visibility, is another imponderable that still begs to be pondered.

For one thing, the generation of Americans for whom the assassination was the first traumatic world event is now coming into early middle age. It is a point when people for the first time feel they have "arrived" somewhere in life, and they may look back to see the landmarks that led them to where they are. They think of television shows they saw as teenagers, they remember their partner at the senior prom, they recall leaving home, finding a first job, starting a family. Oliver Stone—as well as many of the people he hopes will see his movie—is at that forty-something age when the past becomes detached from the present and may be seen clearly for the first time as prologue to the rest of life.

More than that, the post-Vietnam generation of Americans continues to have the sense that something went wrong—terribly, terribly wrong—in some strange season many years ago, and it appears that nothing will set it right. There may be no connections in fact, but in many minds the assassination of John Kennedy is tied to the assassination of his brother Robert and to the killing of Martin Luther King. And those deaths are inextricably bound up with Vietnam, with racial strife, and with the counterculture of the 1960s: in other words, with the material of Stone's films. It's as if America took a wrong turn and got lost: government betrayals, economic dysfunction, interethnic hatred, scandals, and a certain sense of social devolution have not been cured by wars in Central America or the Middle East, nor by investment banking, crystals, or health clubs.

Stone believes that he has found the worm in the apple of American history, the original sin that started the deterioration and decay of the last thirty years—virtually all of his adult life. It is there in the six seconds of the Zapruder film, as the limousine swings into Dealey Plaza.

"They killed Kennedy because he was rocking the boat, he was rocking the establishment on all fronts," Stone told me. "I don't think he was a saint, and I don't think he would have saved us from all the bad things that happened. I believe that he was a good man who had integrity. He was the leader of our generation. People like me, we believed in him, he was our Godfather. I don't believe that he would have escalated the war in Vietnam the way Johnson did. They knew that, the people who wanted the war. And he paid for it." ● VOGUE ARTS ► 68



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