

National College
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The Men in Black

manifestations of conspiracy in modern media

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Dedication

My thanks to Tony Fitzmaurice,
for his ceaseless vigilance and aid
and to Bridget O'Grady, for tracking down
the man on the Grassy Knoll

Introduction

Liberty is the Freedom of operation without intercession by
a higher authority.

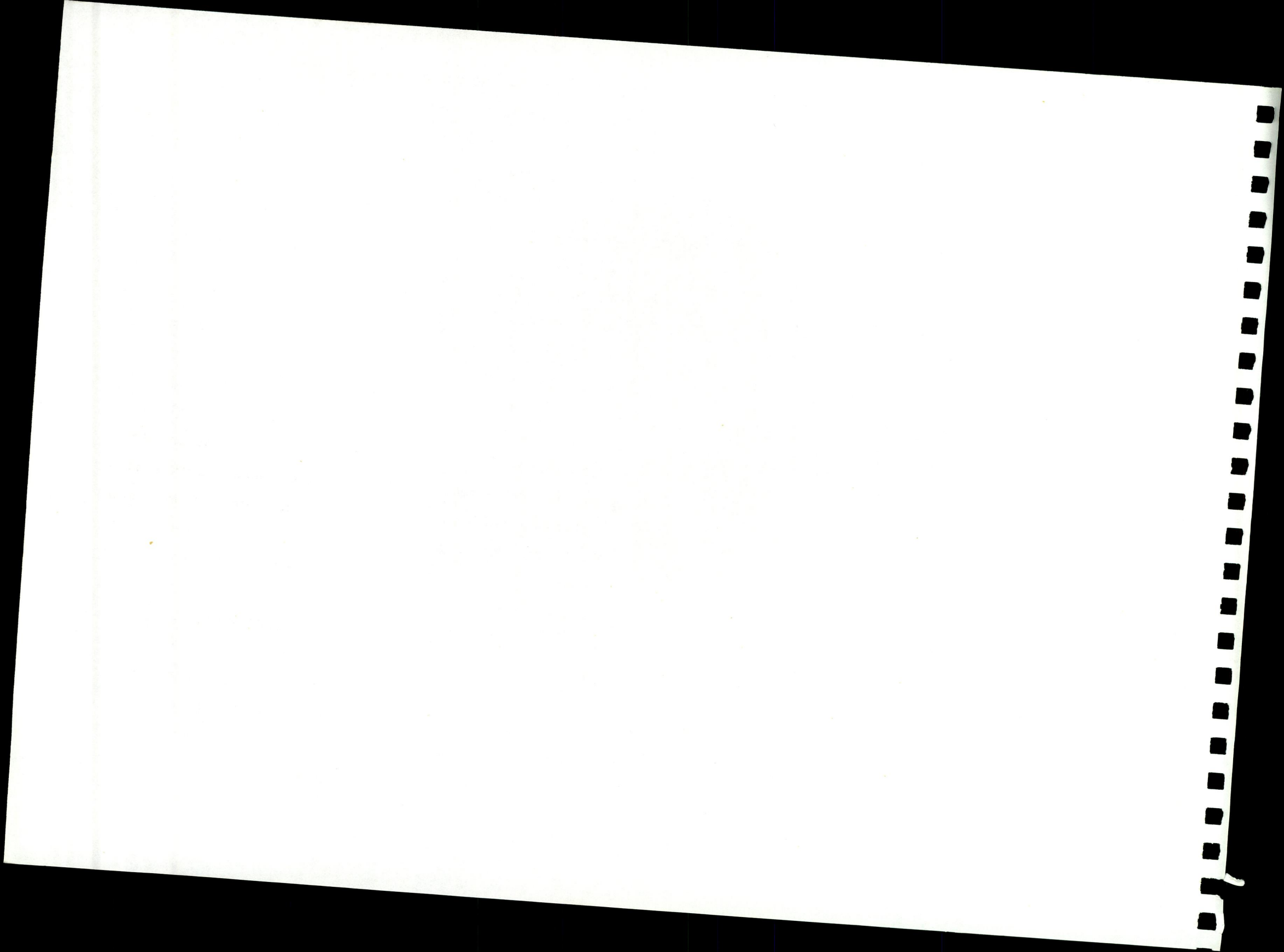
- John Stuart Mill, On Liberty

What is conspiracy theory? The Oxford English Dictionary describes a conspiracy as “-a secret plan to commit a crime or do harm, often for political ends; a plot”. This definition provides only a fragment of the answer: the words secret and political. This means that most of these plots, schemes and plans are in the twilight area of political innuendo; to remain unsubstantiated, probably forever remain so. The conspiracy theorist lives on mistrust and speculation.

Our question still remains unanswered, so we must delve into the building blocks of the theorists: history. Theorists hold there are but two views of History. These are the Accidental and the Conspiratorial Views of History (Epperson). The Accidental view holds that historical events occur by accident, for no apparent reason and that rulers are powerless to intervene. The conspiratorial view proposes that historical events occur by design for reasons that are not made generally known to the public. Of course, both views are inaccurate and fail to reflect the nature of the world- the truth hovers somewhere in between the two. As we will see, however, the visions of conspiracy theory are filled with absolutes.

Let us take the conspiratorial view of history- that everything happens for a reason. Here is where the great strength of conspiracy theory becomes evident. Let us, for a moment, create our own conspiracy. Let us suppose that a secret international right wing front, that opposes European integration, was responsible for the Landsdowne Road Football riot of 1995. The football hooligans were allowed into Ireland by sympathetic groups within the government and the police of both countries. The ensuing riot is shown internationally, far out of proportion to its importance. This happens the day before the European Parliament debates the lowering of passport controls between member states (England and Ireland are the only members of the EU to lack such controls between one another). This would sour Anglo-Irish relations, taint the Brussels debate and so strengthen our Secret Masters. These latter maintain links, incidentally, with White Supremacists in America and the Boers of South Africa. Questioning this hypothesis results in increasingly tenuous and outlandish responses as the theory mutates to accomadate the questions. History, be it current events or ancient books, provide theorists with a wealth of material; it all comes down to how it is viewed and what parts are read.

It is in the nature of History that it is broken down into narratives with causes and effects, albeit complex and multifarious ones. As a result History can be broken down into modular sections and be reconfigured into infinitely varying shapes and forms by the theorist. Coincidence and synchronisity are regarded as fallacies; everything is linked and all eventualities have been accounted for. One of the more



¹ A similar effect has been proposed in the field of post modern art theory. French sociologist Jean Baudrillard has defined four stages by which the borders between art and reality vanish and merge into the universal simulacrum. The image is

- 1 The reflection of a basic reality.
- 2 It masks and perverts a basic reality.
- 3 It marks the absence of a basic reality.
- 4 It bears no relation to any reality whatever and is its own pure simulacrum.

(Baudrillard)

popular theories held by right wing isolationists since the turn of the century, for instance, has been that about the Internationalists: that Internationalists of various kinds, ranging from International Bankers to the United Nations have been plotting to merge all nation-states into an evil super government (Johnson, pg. 20). To this end, the Soviet Union was created, the World Wars were staged and economic disasters precipitated. Anything that can be woven into the Conspiracy will invariably become another pawn in the schemes of these grand designs with their secret masters. As more and more factions, plots and hidden relationships are added, the Conspiracy becomes a fragile Cathedral of innuendo and supposition which, if viewed sympathetically, might appear solid and even plausible.

In the final, most extreme stages the conspiracy bears no semblance to anything outside itself- it has become a microcosm unto itself, complete with its own relentless logic¹. As it becomes self-perpetuating, those caught up in it become more extreme. Those who fail to accept the theory are at best blind, at worst traitors and agents of the enemy. Again there are no greys, no room for ambiguity or questions; it is either Them or Us.

If this sounds paranoid, then we are on the correct line of inquiry. If History is the bricks of conspiracy, then Paranoia is the cement that unifies the often disparate elements. True paranoia is a medical, psychological condition, in which a sufferer believes himself persecuted by those around him. The victim is usually egotistical and is convinced of his own superiority: why else would he be so singled out?

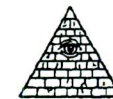
Of course, such meglomania often hides deep rooted insecurities. Lately the term has been extended to describe a deep rooted mistrust of factions within the political or social spectrum. Whether such mistrust can or cannot be justified is irrelevant; those who feel "persecuted" must require a framework of foes and allies within which they can frame their own agenda. The paranoid's rhetoric is often couched in racism, bigotry and prejudice. Fear of the unknown and resentment at the seemingly monolithic forces of economics and history can provide ample initiative for those seeking someone to blame for their troubles. So it is that conspiracy theories spring up on the fringes of the socio-political landscape, the creations of disgruntled left or right wing individuals. When these conspiracies are portrayed by the film maker that they can gain real popular credibility.

We live within the paradigms of a democratic society, with a free press. It therefore follows that all points of view, no matter how subversive, will find some expression within the spectrum of the media, often as a warning, or as a piece of gritty realist film. Of course, more extreme instances can and often were regarded as seditious, and were censured accordingly. The McCarthy communist witch - hunts were still fresh in the minds of Americans when John Frankenheimer's The Manchurian Candidate (1962) was released in a storm of controversy. This Cold War satire of brain washing, political ambiguity and assassination proved to be uncomfortably close, and was withdrawn at Frank Sinatra's insistence following the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

The conspiracy movie is usually set in its contemporary moment and is often dressed up as a thriller or allegory for current concerns. This is the case with The Manchurian Candidate. In it, the extreme Right, in the form of a boorish Congressman and his ambitious wife, make a deal with the Communists to take over the presidency of the United States. The very malleability of the democratic system when subjected to the schemes of extremism on both sides as portrayed in the film made it a dangerous and daring work. Permitting this film to be released, at a time when the Cold War was at its height, can be seen as a sign of the security or weakness of the government, depending on who you ask. Movies that deal with such sensitive issues must be released to maintain the appearance of freedom of speech. A movie may harm an administration, but it cannot effectively damage the body politic, that of a capitalist democracy. Of course, anything that can be considered truly subversive just doesn't get made. Market forces and the resulting self-censorship insure that even the most extreme films released are comparatively tame compared the inflammatory material to which it can be equated to in other media.

A less insidious, but no less important factor to remember is that there has been and still is, an audience for such work. The Duck Club, for instance, a right wing society that operates out of Florida and is coordinated by publisher Robert White, claims to have a subscription of over 100,000 (Johnson, pages 18-19). If there are such numbers for extreme theories, the demand for less volatile material is even larger, and cannot be ignored.

The Conspiracy Film, as a vehicle of political paranoia, had its heyday in the seventies, when censorship and the control by the old studio system came to an end. Of course, the mercantile forces of the mass media reasserted themselves in the eighties with the advent of the 'feel good' movie. Audiences know that there may be something rotten in Denmark, they just don't need to be constantly reminded. However, to fail to do so can be detrimental to society as a whole. Remember, the 'feel-good' movie had its heyday during the Regan administration: coincidence? Perhaps it really is that simple: to see plans where there are not any, relationships where none exist.



1- Inquisition

1940 -1970

Nothing happens by accident. If it happens, it was planned that way.

-Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The Conspiracy movie was not a spontaneous phenomenon, its roots stretch back to the cinema of the 1940s and Film Noir. Along with the gangster film, Film Noir can be seen as the first social cinema of America- a hybrid of cinema verité and expressionism, with its dark urban landscape, unlikable yet personable characters and the deep rooted fatalism common to all films of this genre.

Films Noir, or 'Black Films', were about the suburban dream gone sour. The era of Film Noir can be divided into three phases of development. The years 1940 to 1944 were the era of the private eye, the lone wolf of the urban jungle. The emphasis shifted between 1945 to 1949, dealing in crime and gritty post-war realism. The final era, between 1949 to 1953 was the most extreme, filled with psychotic action and impulsive behavior, while delivering strong invective on American society (Schrader). These movies seemed to act as a reaction to American affluence and seeming security. The American Dream of the white picket fence, the Cadillac in the garage and a feeling of well-being was prevalent. At the same time, studios, weary of period piece dramas, had taken on many writers of popular pulp detective novels. The influence of German Expressionism had finally made itself

apparent during the war years as the best of German cinema's expatriates arrived in Hollywood. The combination of contemporary, low - brow, gritty drama and innovative use of lighting and cinematography was a great success, and still resonates today.

What was it that made Film Noir, with its nightmarish landscape, emotionally deformed characters and grim plots, so engaging? What Film Noir offered, through its own laws, was the black underbelly of every American's dream. Male characters are often seen as impotent, weak or effeminate, easily lead astray by a promise of a ticket to easy street. Women come in two forms: the famous femme fatale and the insipid virgin. The characters are those left behind in the big city, those too weak or too lost to find their way to safe and sanitary suburbia. What makes Film Noir so compelling, however, is the overriding sense of predetermination and fate. All infractions, no matter how small and regardless of circumstance, must be paid for in full - in blood if necessary. No one can hide from their past misdemeanours; the reformed petty crook will die a petty crook, regardless of his subsequent actions. There are no clear good guys or bad guys; only the evil and ambiguous remain in the city. With that said, however, true paranoia appears only within the psyches of "abberants and deviants", most often repressed homosexuals. Indeed, the view that homosexuality was a psychological affliction was one prevalent in psychoanalytic circles during the 1940s and 50s. One of the more famous psychiatrists, A. A. Brill commented:

"Having encountered hundreds of homosexuals, some of

whom were prominent in artistic, philanthropic, and other fields, I have never found one who, on closer observation, did not show paranoid traits. They are all oversuspicious, "shadowy" and mistrustful. Most of them are unreliable, intriguing, picayune, and impetuous" (Fleming).

It was this image of paranoid individuals as repressed homosexuals and visa-versa that remained prevalent in medical thought and so in popular entertainment. It is not surprising, therefore, to find homosexual characterisation, projecting a weak, anaemic figure with predilections towards the perverse and degenerate, fearing and hating the everyday world around him. The Paranoid's "innate" sadism and depravity separates him from others- his fantasies, whether real or imagined, have been internalised and find no real reflection in the real, sane world. Hitchcock's murderers in Rope (1948) and Strangers on a Train (1951) are fine examples of such stereotypes.

A classic example of the paranoia as manifested in Film Noir is The Maltese Falcon (1941). In it the main antagonists to Sam Spade, Guttman, Wilmer and Cairo, carry the implicit hallmarks of their sexuality. Guttman and Wilmer at first appear to have a rather jovial paternal relationship. It is only when Spade guesses their true roles that Wilmer, a swaggering coward who acts out Guttman's sadistic urges, turns really nasty and attempts to kill Spade at every opportunity. Cairo, on the other hand, has no such bond. He is, however, an effeminate and grovelling character, usually gloating wickedly whenever the opportunity presents itself (Lorre had been type-cast in

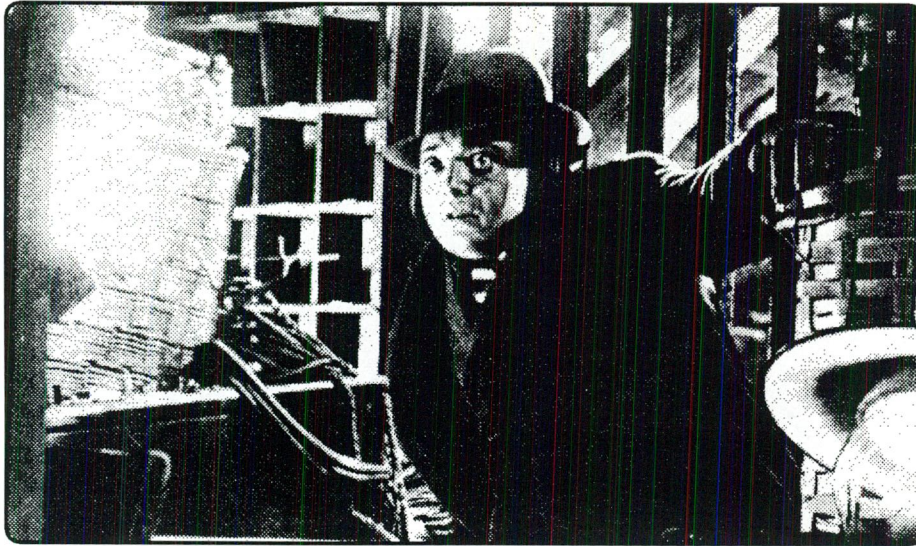


fig.1.1: Peter Lorre in *M*, the archetypal Noir degenerate



fig.1.2: The twilight underbelly of the city- Film Noir.

these roles since his portrayal of a child murdered in *M* (fig. 1.1)). As with all Film Noir, the hard justice of the city grinds all such miscreants under its wheels. The Noir Paranoid need not commit any crime (though one is usually necessary)- his very character will condemn him.

Even 'heroes', such as they are in Film Noir, can and often do face death for weakness of character or for displaying effeminate characteristics. For instance, the hero and narrator of *Double Indemnity* (1944) is easily lead along by Barbara Stanwick's vampish character. The one friend he seems to trust is his boss, Edward G. Robinson. However, their relationship seems often to teeter from paternal to almost subtle homosexuality. Such obvious weaknesses cannot be forgiven in Film Noir, so he is condemned. Indeed, the opening sequences shows him dying- his sentence is already carried out, all that remains is to discover the events leading to his doom.

While the natural justice of Film Noir is hard and blind, no corruption can thrive long there. Corrupt cops, even those who take the law into their own hands, all will be taken away or more often die in a hail of bullets. In any case, bastions of justice, the courthouse and the precinct station, are at best indifferent and dishevelled. The paranoid scene of mistrust and double-cross are the back rooms and alleys of the city and it is here that all actions and their resolutions are invariably played out (fig 1.2).

The mid-fifties saw a questioning of the Freudian link between homosexuality to paranoia. Similar tests on female paranoid schizophrenics failed to turn up any homosexual concerns. This resulted



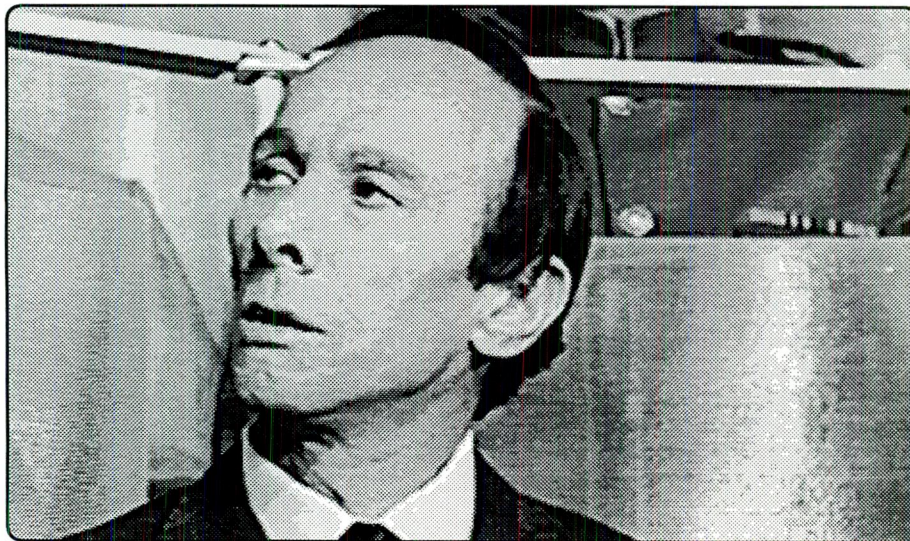


fig.1.3 -1.4 : Deviancy amongst the enemy: Communists in
The Manchurian Candidate.

in a shift from repressed sexuality and its incurring perversions to a fear of emasculation and powerlessness (Fleming, pg 152). It is a subtle difference but added ambivalence to the once personal and internalised cocktail. At the same time Film Noir was on the wane, with a desire for a more bourgeois cinema becoming prevalent: a reflection of the affect of McCarthyism (Schrader).

The supermasculinity of the military proved to be a fertile ground for exploring these new concepts of power and powerlessness. Whereas Film Noir took predestination and its inherent loss of control for granted, these new films instead looked at the loss of control itself, as in The Caine Mutiny and later in Dr. Strangelove. However, the tendency to cast homosexuals into these positions, where they can only turn on each other, was still prevalent. Still tied to Noir fatalism, those who recognise their 'deviancy' can only find peace in death, often suicide (still regarded as the coward's way out). Predominantly male institutions, such as the military, could become home to clichés of macho paranoids, but the system and its incumbent hierarchy was still portrayed as inviolate and capable of withstanding such infections.

The American Military, as portrayed in The Manchurian Candidate, is staffed by reasonable men, not hidebound by procedure; transparent and affable- worthy of trust. The tone of staff briefings are informal, almost jocular. The commanders of Communist Intelligence, in contrast, are humourless and mistrustful of each other; the Russians being a case in point. The Russians represented portray two classic paranoid homosexual stereotypes; the General is a cigar



fig.1.5: Atocity couched in normality- Brainwashing in
The Manchurian Candidate

chomping bully, his Intelligence counterpart is a pasty, thin sharp featured man who looks like he was designed to inflict and enjoy conducting torture (figs. 1.3 - 1.4).

Yen Lo, the Doctor co-ordinating the brainwashing is the only good humoured character available to the Communists. Yet unlike The Maltese Falcon's savagely jolly and polite Guttman, there is no underlying menace to the Doctor. Any sexual undertones are absent. In fact, he is good natured and humorous even when asking Raymond to shoot his compatriot in the head (fig 1.5). It is his very lack of menace that makes the Doctor so frightening and presages a change in the portrayal of paranoia and conspiracy- from the psychological and internal to paranoia as reality and conspiracy as procedure, albeit by the enemy.

While paranoia as a character trait and the tarnishing of the American Dream both find their roots in Film Noir, a second, later genre ran parallel with it. This was the genre of Science Fiction and Horror- the classic 'Red Terror' and 'Enemy within' movies of the 1950s. In the former, the wholesome American Dream came under attack by an insidious alien force, usually from Mars- the Red planet. These forces are often unleashed by well meaning but weak liberal scientists. Allegory, as used in these B movies, made possible a more overt political statement then convention or taste would permit in any more overt form..

The science fiction that followed the theme of the 'Enemy Within' tended to be of a more subtle and disturbing nature: the

invaders being indescernable from the rest of society (rather like a card-carrying Communist). In the archetype of the genre, Invasion of the Body Snatchers, the invaders- in the form of giant seed pods- land in Smallville and proceed to steal the forms and minds of sleeping residents. As one of the heroes grimly pronounces, "we mustn't sleep a wink all night, or we might wake up - changed". The true horror, evidently, was one of subversion; no one can be trusted, only Uncle Sam can truly purge society of these alien infections. Even at its worst, no blame for any invasion is apportioned to the military, no fault lies with the government, unless it is for letting these scientists explore the ungodly (the remake of this classic in the early 1980s shows just how much the paranoia of the 50s developed into apathetic cynicism). As the 1950s drew to an end, the Science Fiction/Horror genre lost favour, while the Noir-based conspiracy film continued, its couched as satire or allegory. The result was an increasingly surreal cinema, in which the resonances became more transparent.

Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove, or "How I learned to stop worrying and love the Bomb" (1964). was one of the last films of the 1960s to concern itself directly with the prospect of nuclear annihilation. Starting off as a satire against the machismo of the military establishment, it rapidly evolves into a black farce of the first order. It also says much about the nature of the audiences that made the film such a success. These same audiences had just witnessed a nuclear face-off over Cuba. A strange freedom of expression, that of national self loathing, began to make its presence felt (Hoberman, pg.19); from





fig.1.6: Senator John Iselin- Right wing tool of the Soviets

the disparaging titles given to the unsuccessful Vanguard Rocket-Flopnik, Kaputnik, Stayputnik, to the absurdist and cynical tone of the Manchurian Candidate. It might appear that the darkness of Film Noir had finally filtered into popular perception. However, this is an overly simplistic interpretation. Nuclear confrontation had come as close as it has ever come, and while it might be said that it was a sign of decadence for audiences to applaud the spectacle of their own destruction, it might also be said that audiences grew up and began to take the implications of such a confrontation seriously. The public began to recognise that their own administration could not always be trusted to hold the moral high ground. The Red scare of the 1950s was still fresh in the memories of both film makers and audiences. The political opportunism exhibited by those conducting these inquiries rose again to the surface, as can be seen by the odious character of Senator John Iselin (fig. 1.6)- a thinly disguised Senator Joe McCarthy- in The Manchurian Candidate.

Of course, not everything connected to the world of espionage was tainted by cynicism. The success of the James Bond movies (Kennedy counted From Russia with Love as one of his favourite books and identified strongly with the character), and the saturation of its spin offs in all media, from The Avengers, Mission: Impossible, to the straight comedy Get Smart and the laconic, tongue in cheek The Man from U.N.C.L.E., had given espionage a glamorous face, a reaction to the growing disaffection felt by many to their governments. Where as the cinema was based on a single project and could produce





fig.1.7 -1.8 : The Village- your home away from home- forever.

controversial work with a relatively minor degree of censure, the same cannot be said for television, which is controlled by sponsors, ratings and programme controllers. As a result, it is surprising to find one of the most paranoid political allegories of the 1960s should be aired on television and become a critical and popular success.

The Prisoner (1967) was a fifteen episode series, exploring the moral and social ramifications of espionage. Where The Prisoner differs from what was seen before in that it was a British production, shot mainly in Wales. Its sensibility too, owes little to Hollywood and more to Ian Fleming and Aldous Huxley, with its glamorous hero, charming villains and pragmatic perception of the nature of governments and their instruments.

In The Prisoner, a high ranking government agent resigns his position- giving no reason. He is drugged and awakes to find himself in The Village, a polite isolated microcosm where all those who know too much, on both sides, go (fig 1.7- 1.8). Here all information is extracted and the subjects are rendered vegetables or are converted to serve the Masters of the Village. The Agent- now called Number 6- is a valuable prize and must be won over by hook or by crook.

Given the running time available to television, The Prisoner had the leisure to address a number of different issues, ranging from the nature of authority to the infinite malleability of the human mind, given the right stimulus. What made this show stand out were two factors. The first, and most revealing, was that Number 6 was pathologically stubborn (fig. 1.9). Unable to compromise- his stance swung from one



fig.1.9: Number Six- The Prisoner

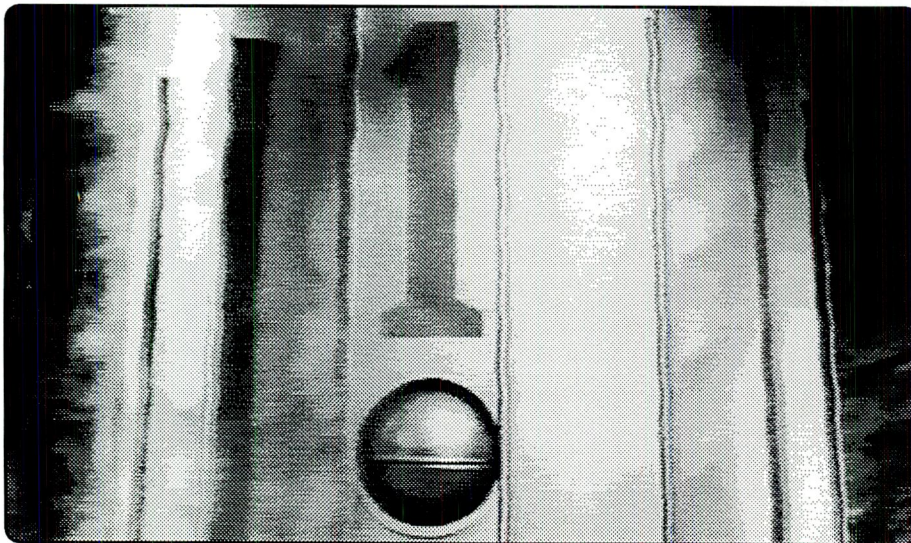


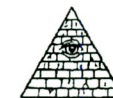
fig.1.10: The Power behind the Village- The Bomb.

of admirable principles to inhuman, undesirable individualism- he could have fitted in quite comfortably in a Film Noir role. Number 6 may have been the perfect champion of the individual, but he proves unable to relate to almost any social structure and is so not the perfect role model, rather a caricature of anarchy taken to its logical conclusion. The second, and far more interesting aspect to The Prisoner was the absence of any clearly identified imperative behind the necessary running of the state mechanism. Number 6 has no idea which side abducted him. Both use the same techniques in manipulating the masses, both hold the individual as either a tool or a liability. Indeed, at one stage, Number 2, custodian of the village says,

It doesn't matter which side runs the Village. It's run by one side or the other. Oh certainly, but both sides are becoming identical; what in fact is being created is an international community. A perfect blueprint for world order. When the sides facing each other suddenly realise they are looking into a mirror they will see that this is the pattern for the future.

As with Doctor Strangelove and many other allegorical films of the 60s (the more notable being Beneath the Planet of the Apes), the true authority of The Village turns out to be the apolitical Nuclear weapon (fig. 1.10).

As the 1960s drew to a close, the way was now clear for a decade of cinema in which the duplicity of government was taken for granted and paranoia a healthy survival instinct. It required one last element, Kennedy's long time opponent; Richard Millhouse Nixon.



2- Reformation

the 1970s

The only problem with enlightenment is that if you think you got it you didn't get it.

-J.R. "Bob" Dobbs.

The 1970s can be viewed as a golden age for the conspiracy genre- more conspicuous films of this type appeared in this decade than any other in the history of cinema. The liberal renaissance of the 1960s with the counter-culture and an increased questioning of the government led to an increased disillusionment following the debacle of Vietnam and the Kennedy assassination.

The war in Vietnam was never a particularly popular one. Initially many young men volunteered to fight as their fathers had. However, the U.S. sponsored regime in south Vietnam was not popular and soon the U.S. found itself in a bloody war it could not win, that was not supported at home- the war was the first (and some would say last) to be televised from the front line. Right wing critics blamed television, and not the army, of losing the war. America could not disengage without losing face in the Cold War. The decisions made by the U.S. administration regarding the lives of those fighting in Vietnam were suddenly regarded as questionable. The solidarity enjoyed by Roosevelt in the Second World War was conspicuously absent. The swaggering, insecure machismo portrayed by The Caine Mutiny and Dr. Strangelove, while still grotesque, no longer seemed quite so unreal.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy had been the first television politician,





fig.2.1: The television politician- the Presidential Debate of 1960.

using it in much the same way Roosevelt had used radio. Witty, handsome and charming, his debate with a bumbling and uninspired Nixon prior to the 1960 elections was one of the first clear examples of a live television broadcast having a direct effect on the electorate (fig. 2.1). While his sexual adventures took years to come to light, even at the time Kennedy exuded a swaggering self confidence - Norman Mailer compared him with Marlon Brando(Hoberman, pg.18).

Kennedy was the liberal American dream come to life. His identification with Ian Fleming's James Bond, as mentioned previously, can give one pause for thought,

He (Bond) made his own rules, but was hardly a social rebel. Without being aggressively youthful or overly anti-authoritarian, Bond embodied a new permissiveness. (Hoberman, pg. 18)

Above all else, Bond was suave, cynical, untroubled by doubts and fascinating to women.

While his opponents harboured the feelings that he was soft on Communism, the fiasco at the Bay of Pigs and the ensuing Cuban Missile Crisis also revealed a machismo not often seen in politics. This kind of new, aggressive liberalism shook up a lot of people, not least in the military/industry sector and the intelligence community. Kennedy had proven less than committed to Vietnam and had earned the animosity of the CIA, dismissing many of its leading figures following the Bay of Pigs. Of course, little of this was known to the general public, who saw only a young idealistic President putting his White House in order. It was into this scene that Kennedy's friend, Frank Sinatra, stepped. Sinatra and UA president Arthur Krim, who was also finance

chairman for the Democratic Party, sought Kennedy's approval to make The Manchurian Candidate. That the President said yes to the production of such political dynamite is indicative of his devil-may-care-attitude (the film was premiered a month before the Missile Crisis). Kennedy's prophesied assassination in Dallas was to galvanise the conspiracy movie into a mouth piece for a now disaffected and fractured left. The later assassinations of Teddy Kennedy and Martin Luther King seemed part of a chain of events, a series of orchestrated murders by lone gunmen who removed the best and brightest that liberal America had to offer. One assassination was tragedy, three was tantamount to a purge. The long-winded and apparently ineffectual Warren Commission did little to assuage such fears. One of the long term effects of the Kennedy assassination on the genre was the blossoming of conspiracy theory as a quasi-legitimate industry. Almost everyone had a pet theory as to who shot Kennedy, and there were and still are enough minority groups to support what would develop into a veritable cottage industry. A decade would pass, however, before any of these deeply held suspicions were to be expressed in The Parallax View (1974) and even then it took the Watergate scandal to make such a touchy subject permissible.

The decline of the old Studio system during the 1960s, which had operated a code of self censorship since the McCarthy witch-hunts of the 1950s, was a vital element in the production of so many of these potentially explosive films. A revival of the styles associated with Film Noir can be seen appearing in such films in the late 1960s. Point



Blank (1967), a contemporary take on the hard boiled crime story, still clung to the moral affirmation of the Kennedy era- the hero possesses the character to turn towards personal salvation. However, the films that followed, most of which were Conspiratorial or marginally Noir (such as the remake of Farewell my Lovely) proved to be usually devoid of any triumphant resolution, the world proving to be so corrupt that no amount of liberal kindness could resuscitate it.

The assassination of Kennedy may have provided a wellspring of discontent, but it took the Watergate scandal for it to resurface in the public imagination and find a voice, "The crisis of confidence gave rise to a confidence of criticism" (Ryan & Kellrer, page 76). Nixon had been Kennedy's opponent in the 1960 elections and had lost by the narrowest of margins. The ideals and aggressive liberalism of the 1960s had fizzled into lethargy and Nixon was on a high, having sealed a number of treaties with the Soviet Union. The scandal of the Watergate buggings, the hearings, blame being shifted and final resignation of Nixon himself, embittered an electorate that still remembered the Kennedy administration. The Right suddenly found itself in turmoil and unable to regroup and rally behind new President Gerald Ford. The conspiracy theorists who had sprung up in the wilderness in the intervening years suddenly found their elaborate paradigms being taken seriously (the glut of investigative works into the Kennedy assassination being a prime example). The methodology employed by conspiracy theorists, that of connecting disparate elements into a meaningful and credible whole, naturally lends itself to the narrative

process, which imposes patterns and emphasis on events and experiences and extracts meaning from them. Rarely, if ever, will a film display what Thomas Pynchon calls 'anti-paranoia'. (Sight & Sound Vol. 44, No.1 page 54) Anti-paranoia espouses a view, that there is no connection between events and that we operate in a universe of chaos, rather like the Accidental View of history cited in the Introduction. Such cinema has never proven popular as it can be a dissatisfying process. It is in popular cinemas nature to define relationships and impose a narrative order- from this connections can be made and specific goals attained.

Prior to Watergate, most conspiracy films portrayed honest patriots in the FBI or military confronted with neurotic intellectuals, weak academics and ruthless foreigners. An exception was Coppola's The Conversation (1974), which had aspects frighteningly similar to Watergate. The film concerns itself with surveillance and the men who plant the bugs. At one stage, a vulgar surveillance expert boasts:

Y'know something Harry? Twelve years ago I recorded every telephone made by a Presidential nominee of a major political party. I don't want to say which party, but everywhere he went, that's where I was, coast to coast- I was listening Harry. I'm not saying I, uh, elected the President of the United States but you can draw your own conclusions. Harry, I mean he lost.

In post-Watergate films the government is viewed with suspicion. Now the threat comes not from the left and the Communists, but from the Right and the faceless corporate interests that sponsor them.

The accidental discovery of the bugging of the Watergate



Hotel by hotel security had a noticeable affect on the Conspiracy film. An element of chaos, of randomness is brought into the medium, Plot elements go by unexplained or are tantalisingly hinted at, narratives begin In media res and end abruptly. In some cases, conspiracy cinema ceases to be in a classic narrative form; it more closely resembles a dramatic soundbite- a snatch of a larger scene, as in The Parallax View ,or more obviously in All the President's Men.

At the forefront of the Conspiracy film makers that surfaced in the 1970s, the most interesting is Alan J. Pakula. Pakula produced an unconnected but related trilogy. The first, Klute, produced in 1971, dealt with an increasing concern, that of personal privacy and the nature of voyeurism in the human condition. The second film, produced in 1974 and by far the most important, is The Parallax View. The third, All the President's Men, was a dramatisation of the events leading up to the Watergate scandal.

The importance of The Parallax View cannot be underemphasized: many previous attempts had been made to sweeten the pill of the Kennedy assassination- these were usually trite television dramas of the lone gunman theory and material based on the Warren Report. The dramatisation of "Death of a President" is typical (it must be noted however, that the theory of a conspiracy did find its way to the screen - Executive Action (1973) postulated the theory that the assassination was performed by a cartel of Right wing oilmen). Pakula's vision, however, offered scant comfort and no answers to the assassinations.



fig. 2.2- 2.3 : The Assassination "footage" - The Parallax View.

The Parallax View postulates the existence of an agency within a fictional Parallax Corporation that recruits violent and unhinged employees as political assassins and their patsys. Into this stumbles Joe Frady (Warren Beatty), a washed up, neurotic journalist. He attempts to infiltrate the organisation, but only succeeds in being set up as a fall guy for another assassination and being killed. A subsequent enquiry rules that Frady acted alone- another lone gunman.

What puts The Parallax View apart from previous forays into the Kennedy assassination was its willingness to postulate its own fictional theory, based on material accumulated by conspiracy theorists. The Parallax Corporation is a thinly disguised Permadox Corporation, which was claimed to be a CIA front for operations. The now famous mortality rate of key witnesses to the Kennedy assassination is repeated by the meticulous removal of witnesses to a killing -identical to the footage of the shooting of Teddy Kennedy- opening the film (fig. 2.2- 2.3).

The second strength of The Parallax View was that, unlike Klute and All the President's Men, it never offers a single specific solution or resolves any loose ends or unresolved questions. The corporation assassinates politicians of any ideology. Its motives are not revealed, indeed, we know as little about the Parallax Corporation at the end of the film as we do at the outset. It is therefore not surprising that the film was only a modest success and was eclipsed by the more classical All the Presidents Men.

An interesting aspect to The Parallax View lies in the character of Joe Frady. Frady is a drunken hedonist and is anti-social enough to

pass the corporation's screening tests. Being of poor moral fibre, he in many ways resembles the heroes of Film Noir and is no less doomed; not through natural justice, but through the equally immutable forces of the establishment. It is ironic that such an outlaw hero, the creature of the American dream- fails utterly to save it. Like The Prisoner's Number 6, he is a hero (of sorts) for society, but cannot operate within its structures. Like Number 6, he displays an individualism that borders on the anti-social.

The term 'Parallax' belongs to astronomy and, more importantly, photography. The Oxford dictionary describes parallax as, "an apparent displacement, or difference in the apparent position of an object, caused by actual change (or difference) of position of the point of observation". Pakula relishes the opportunity to play with this term: the disconcerting distortion of viewpoint, shifting views that change emphasis, the soaring spaces and nightmarish perspectives of modern architecture. The similarities between such expressionism and Film Noir is clear.

The final and most 'realistic' of the Pakula trilogy was All the President's Men (1976). A dramatisation of Bernstein and Woodward's exposure of the Watergate bugging and the dirty tricks campaign behind it, coming after the fact precluded anything but an overall optimistic outcome, with the reporters emerging triumphant and the safeguards of democracy assured. The film, while remaining comparatively close to the source and keeping faith with standard narrative form, nonetheless lacks the tightness and impact of Parallax.



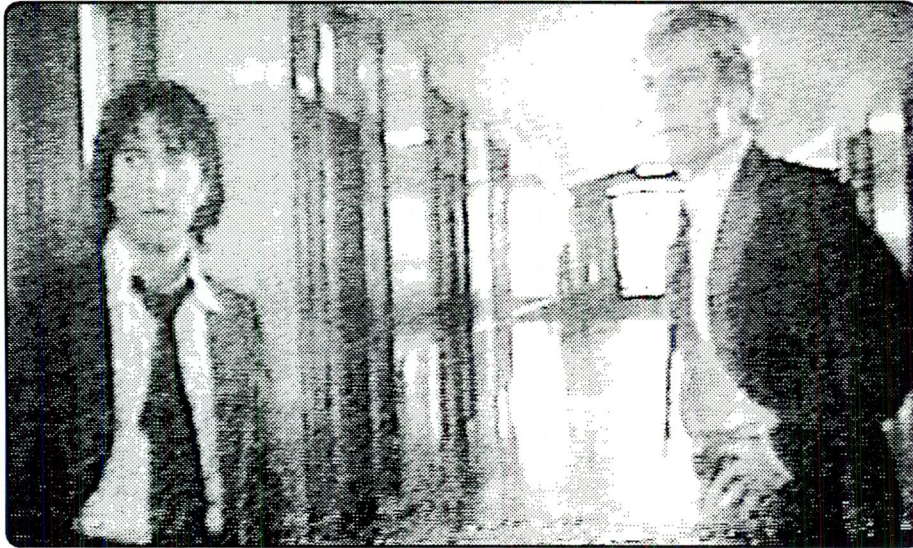


fig. 2.4: Ordinary Joes- Hoffman and Redford in All the Presidents Men.

The reporters, while glamorised for the film in the guises of Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman, remain 'ordinary guys'. They lack charisma and more closely approximate the archetypal newspaper hacks (fig. 2.4). The lines of conspiracy expounded in the film depend solely on contemporary coverage to reveal their relevance- the passage of time has not been kind to the details of the scandal.

The differences between The Parallax View and All the President's Men point in many ways to the transition of the genre of Conspiracy films during the mid 1970s. The Parallax View offered a dark, corrupt and self perpetuating institution, while offering no recourse or real alternative. The film's main weakness is in creating no real emphatic connection with the victims and anger with the victimisers:

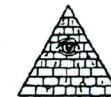
Parallax may provoke audiences to think, but at the expense of making it feel...at the end of Parallax, there are no victims; only bodies.

All the Presidents Men, on the other hand, portrays a nest of rats scurrying from the reassuring light of the Free Press. In many ways there is now a softening of the attack on the establishment. While corrupt and manipulative institutions are now the adversary, they are now standardised into a 'bad guy' mold that could just as easily fit the Mafia, the Soviets or any miscreants you could care to mention.

Conspiracy films of the mid- to -late 1970s, such Three Day of the Condor (1975) in which Redford, this time as bureaucrat, takes on a renegade faction in the CIA, sacrifice invective for predictable

Hollywood convention. Redford's character finds 'one honest newspaper editor' though the film still ends on a fashionably ambiguous note -will the paper actually print it?- typical of most thrillers and horror of the period- from The Omen to Carrie.

After the mid 1970s, the conspiracy film and the liberal agenda it espoused went into decline. Later films such as Twilight's Last Gleaming, Winter Kills, Capricorn One and Blow-Out became so readily identifiable as being of the conspiracy genre that they lost much of their power to relate to their audiences, falling into generic conventions, lacking a political will or becoming excessive parodies of themselves. The shortcomings of liberalism in setting themselves up as an alternative to the Republicans became increasingly clear, and the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter was viewed as ineffectual. While liberalism floundered in its own ideological quagmire, the affirmative conservatives with their immediate gratification and ad hoc solutions found new support. The election of Ronald Regan marked the beginning of a low ebb for the conspiracy film.



3- Reformation the 1980's and beyond

Power is the end, What other delight is there but to enjoy
the sheer sense of control.

-Richard J. Whalen.

As the 1970s drew to an end, the Conspiracy movie had become jaded- the threat from the far right had failed to materialise. The leadership offered by the Democrats proved to be lacklustre. It may also be said that liberalism is its own worst enemy, a fact that the right seized upon to its own advantage.

The liberal agenda had experienced widespread success by tapping into a popular distrust of large institutions and the scandals that arose around them. This distrust would prove to be their own undoing however, as liberals had previously mobilised animosity towards their chosen instrument of reform by placing it squarely against the individualist ethic liberalism espoused. The conservatives used their own brand of individualism, that of aggressive entrepreneurialism, and proceeded to attack the liberal welfare state. The individualism adopted by liberals also proved to be damaging to reform, as people maintained distrust of public officials yet also continued to have faith in the institution itself.

1977 marked the zenith of liberal political assertion and also revealed the inherent weaknesses of their agenda. In cinema, the conspiracy film had passed from criticism to pessimism. Jimmy Carter blamed Americans for lacking the moral fibre to prevent or withstand

the two recessions and the economic crisis they brought.

The self-flagellation of American society now culminated in a desire, reflected amongst cinema audiences, for a strong and more positive leadership and corresponding images; and is reflected in the rediscovery of the 'feelgood' movies; films that figured in a growing resurgence of social conservatism. Films such as Star Wars (1977), Rocky (1976) and The Deer Hunter (1982) all figure as manifestations of this desire. As the 1970s ended, the Republicans assumed power, their ballots aided, ironically, by liberal film makers. Emphasis now had to shift, and the conspiracy movies' final appearance was against their old foe: the Corporate sector.

The final manifestations of the conspiracy film in the 1970s and for most of the 1980s were those that resurrected the threat of nuclear devastation, a threat that had not been present in the genre since the 1960s, and then the connection had been tenuous and vague, as in The Prisoner or Dr. Strangelove, which of course was not truly of the genre. What marked these new films out was the shift from the dirty deals of the Government to the cover-ups in the Corporate Sector. The panic following the averted catastrophe in Three Mile Island provided the final gasp for that period of the conspiracy movie. In these, ordinary people slowly transform into empowered and informed opponents of their employers. The China Syndrome (1979) portrayed the power structure within the nuclear industry as lacking any scruples and willing to risk lives to save money. The overall tone of the movie, however, is optimistic: that no corruption can withstand the scrutiny of



the Free Press, as in All the President's Men.

Silkwood (1983), a dramatisation of the events leading up to the disappearance and presumed death of Karen Silkwood, an employee at a hazardous power plant, returned to the pessimism of the mid 1970s. In Silkwood, however, corporate executives are no longer faceless men in black, but part of a self-perpetuating, impersonal corporate system. The human nature of these executives and the acts they are party to, make the film closer in spirit to The Parallax View than the quasi-documentary All the President's Men, with the final outcome not one of triumph but of ambiguous moral victory in a losing war.

Much of the 1980s was a dry patch for overtly political films and for the conspiracy genre in particular. A number of attempts were made to bring up the question of American overseas involvement - Missing and Oliver Stone's Salvador (1986) being probably the more memorable. However, in general the 1980s was a decade of uninhibited capitalism- the age of Dallas and Dynasty, as endorsed by the Hollywood mainstream.

The only vocal film maker of the decade who spoke as a voice for embittered liberalism was Oliver Stone. While not yet a proponent of the conspiracy film, his work began to take its queue from the tone of reappraisal evident in films of the 1970s. Stone's treatment of his Vietnam war experiences and its aftermath, Platoon, Born on the Fourth of July and Heaven and Earth reflected a growing willingness on the part of audiences to come to terms with what was essentially an

unjust war. While no representatives of the military establishment appear in the films, no doubt is left as to who was responsible for the years of relentless genocide.

Wall Street, while essentially a morality tale of greed and redemption, marked a growing alienation with lessie faire economics and the resultant corporate boom that returned little dividends for the majority. Because no real alternative is offered apart from an individual ethical position, it is not to be wondered that Wall Street's mantra "Greed is Good" came to typify the decade. The film also coincided with the coining of the term 'yuppie' to mean a young, ruthless, ambitious and ostentatious designer executive.

Stone is a film maker who is obsessed with the 1960s, as his choice of subjects show. However, it wasn't until 1991 that Stone approached the assassination of Kennedy in his film JFK, and in doing so resurrected the entire conspiracy genre, which had been languishing in the doldrums for the best part of a decade.

It has been proposed that all art generates a 'social energy' which affects all it surrounds, as art is not created in a vacuum, but is connected deeply to the society, economy and power structures that surround it². If this is the case, then the film reawoke a war of words between right and left, with the image of a dead icon as catalyst. The effect was to give further credibility to the conspiracy theorist as watchdog of the state,

Consistently, since 1966, public opinion polls have shown a majority of Americans believe there was a conspiracy involved in the assassination. More recently, U.S. News and World Report said that only 10 percent of Americans believed the Warren Commissions

² James R. Keller, citinf Stephen Greenblat in the former's essay: Oliver Stone's JFK and the Circulation of of Social Energy and the Textuality of History

³ A CBS telephone poll taken between January 22 and 25, 1992, showed that 77 percent of those surveyed believed Oswald did not act alone; 75 percent thought there was an official coverup in the case. In a Time/CNN telephone poll taken between December 17 and 22 1991, 72 percent of the people surveyed said the American people had not been told the truth about the assassination; 73 percent thought there was a conspiracy; 50 percent said the CIA was involved, 48 percent the Mafia, 34 percent the Cuban Government.

conclusion that Oswald acted alone" (Romanowski, Journal of Popular Film and Television, pg. 64)³

Even as the film was in production, journalists at the time, to protect their own integrity, denounced the film as distortive as a result of its arbitrary blending of fact and fiction. The seamless blending of real and re-enacted footage to recreate a version of what happened in Dallas proved to be the point of contention with critics and, ironically, the film's greatest virtue. By combining and often recreating existing footage, the film sets itself up in equal standing with the original material itself:

In short, what you see represented over and over again in the film are fractals of consciousness that, altogether, add up to the reality of the moment. They are the shards of an event about which the whole is perhaps unknowable (fig. 3.1- 3.4). (Stone, quoted Gardels and Conners. New Perspectives Quarterly 9.2. pages. 51-53).

The most immediate effect of JFK was to establish the film maker in America as a legitimate storyteller and interpreter of history; equally valid as the press, the educational system and most importantly the government:

Since nobody agrees on anything, nobody is distorting history. The only official history is the Warren Commission report, and that nobody believes (Sklar, quoted Conant. GQ Jan 1992 pages. 61-67).

The accusation that the film blurs the difference between evidence and speculation, thereby misleading the audience, can easily be also levelled at the Warren report, with its infamous 'magic bullet'. The cinematographer's notes on the opening documentary sequences advised:

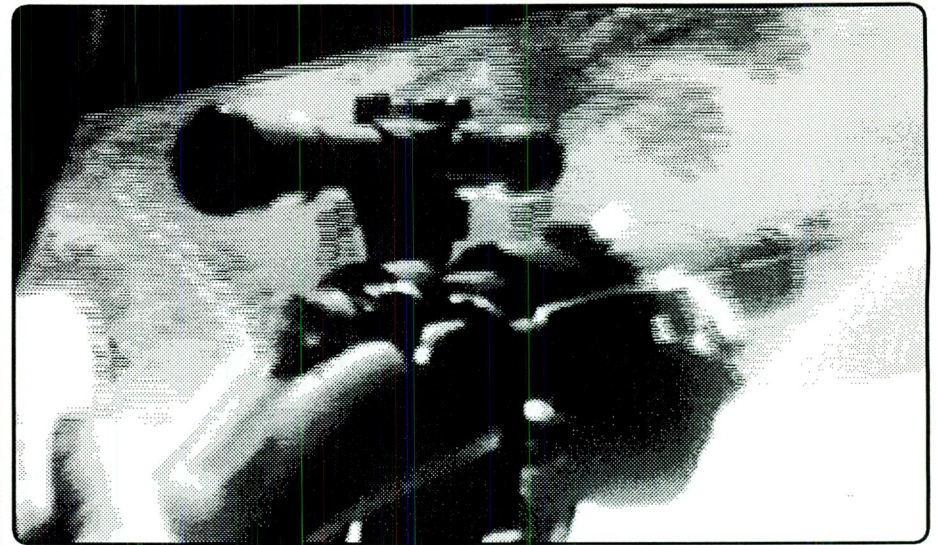


fig.3.1 -3.4 : Revising reality- the assassination of Kennedy in JFK

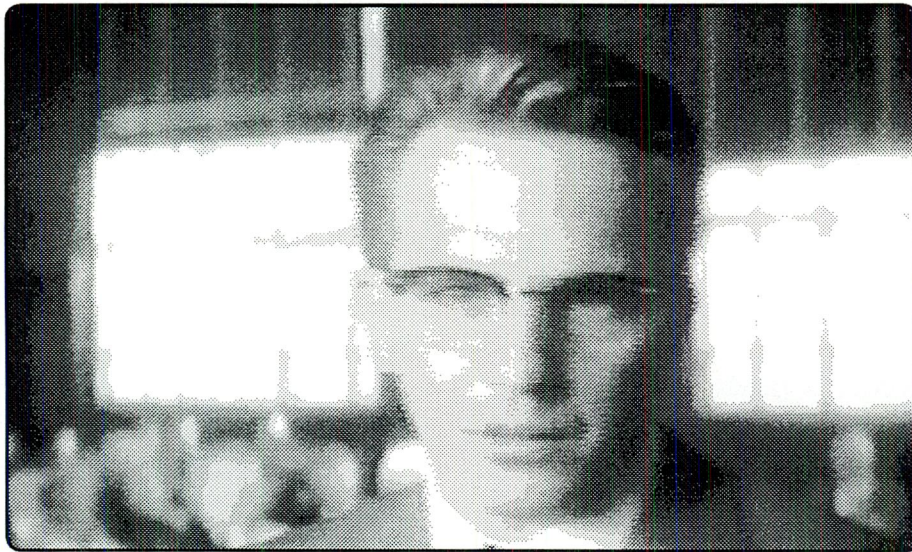


fig. 3.5 : The appeal of decency- Garrison's closing speech in JFK

Utilise the opening documentary material to establish a concrete foundation of factual reality...let the audience move through the material, never doubting its authenticity.

JFK does not claim to offer the identity of who pulled the trigger(s)- what it does offer, however, is a litany of groups who stood to benefit substantially if Kennedy was removed. The result is a film that while it names names, leaves one in no doubt that a high level conspiracy was involved. As the film progresses, the liberal motif, that of confronting the individual with choice and subsequent empowerment, begins to manifest itself. In the fictional meeting between Garrison and a 'Deep Throat' character- Mister X- the insider appeals to Garrison:

To stir the shit storm; try to reach a point of critical mass that will start a chain reaction of people coming forward; then the government will crack. Remember fundamentally, people are suckers for the truth, and the truth is on your side.

At the climax of the film, Garrison confronts the audience and shifts the burden to those watching; "It's up to you" (fig. 3.5). If the 'social energy' of JFK was to reawaken liberal sensibilities and so a new sense of paranoia, an unexpected side-affect was the reaffirmation of conservative institutions. Conservative and religious factions were quick to denounce Stone- In a not altogether unexpected melding of religion and tradition: the identification was made between faithfulness to God and defence of conservative values (Keller). It follows, then that these values, as embodied by the institutions, were inviolate- elevating the flawed Warren report to a status of untouchability. Accusations against the institutions of Government only

served to consolidate their position, as the grass roots anger at the film revealed. (Keller. Journal of Popular Film and Television. Vol 21. No.2) The uncertainty about the government and society itself that had weakened the conservatives during the 1970s was now more muted and no longer enjoyed the central position it had. The scenario of the 1970s, that of a government compromised, no was no longer evident.

The controversy generated by JFK has had many long and short term effects. In the short term, the Bush administration was forced to release thousands of pages of documentation, previously withheld by the government (not surprisingly they contribute nothing new to the debate- if any evidence had existed, it would doubtless have been shredded as in Watergate). The controversy generated by Stone has now pigeon-holed him into the role of 'hysterical liberal film maker'. The result is that those who would go to an Oliver Stone film do so to be informed of the debate the film brings. In the long term, JFK was digested by the media, producing a short squall of innuendo and accusation, emasculated into a harmless debate on chat shows and telephone polls that legitimised rather than weakened the hierarchy of power in America, by the very fact that its release and claims were permitted to enter the public arena.

While Stone is at the forefront of audience consciousness when it comes to the conspiracy genre, another, less controversial director should also be mentioned. Actor/director Tim Robbins has long maintained a visible liberal stance and is of a more overtly political nature than Stone, yet the one and only film he directed- Bob Roberts-

a biting satire of the 'New Right' - the young conservatives of the MTV generation and the corporate interests they defend- received no condemnation; only critical praise. There are a number of reasons that could be cited for such a contrast in responses. The first, and not least, reason is the size of the production. Bob Roberts was a small picture by any standard; it enjoyed only a limited release in theatres and didn't have much impact in the video store (indeed, it does not even appear to have had an Irish/ British video release). Small 'art' movies, while engaging and often provoking, do not enter the public domain as a film of Stone's scale might. The net result is a film that will only be seen by a select, often intellectual, audience and so is effectively "buried" from wider distribution or exhibition.

At the time of writing, Oliver Stone's next piece, a three hour biopic of Richard Nixon, is still unreleased. However, already the Nixon family, Kissinger and sources close to the Republicans have been strident in their dismissal of the film which, among other things, hints at Nixon's complicity in Kennedy's assassination.



4- Sermon

media in the landscape of conspiracy

They [the Secret Masters] engineered the spread of crazy conspiracy theories, because even though many of the theories are true, they still sound crazy.

-J.R. "Bob" Dobbs.

Up to this point, this thesis has dealt with the changing manifestations of the conspiracy genre in modern media, with no references to the portrayal of the media within itself. The media plays an intrinsic role and cannot be extracted from the genre of conspiracy: at the very least it is a feature in the conspiracy that must be reckoned with, at the most it is a powerful and pervasive player in the conspiracies. Before one can discuss the media and their role in and out of the conspiracy genre, one must first confront the fact that the media are shaped by the forces surrounding it.

The illusion of a free press is a comforting one to any western democracy; it places its society in a position of moral superiority to those of despots and juntas. This illusion, however, is becoming increasingly tarnished under the glare of hard reality. The truth is, that no matter how free and strident a newspaper may claim to be, it is still bound by the market forces within which it operates.

In Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's book Manufacturing Consent, five restraints or 'filters' are identified as being placed on the press to remove any overly seditious material. The first of these is the size, concentrated ownership, owner wealth and profit

motivation of the organisation. It requires a large investment of capital to establish even a small newspaper; as a result, a small number of wealthy investors control the paper. Profit margins must be maximised and any undue criticism of the investors' outside interests will not be tolerated- such activity would weaken the investors' trading power and so the paper itself. The second filter is that of advertising, which forms the primary source of revenue for a newspaper. Clients are businesses and so, likewise, is profit motivated. It would be a sign of questionable acumen for a business to advertise in a paper that editorially denounced it; the result is an accommodation of interests between the advertiser and its client. All newspapers require verifiable sources for its news- government agencies, 'experts' (usually retired employees of the establishment) and businesses can readily provide such information and so provide a third filter. The final two filters employed are usually of a disciplinary nature- 'flak', as drawn from public opinion and society as a whole, and 'anti-communism' (in its U.S. context) or anti-subversion as a control mechanism. These filters interact and reinforce each other. As news travels through these filters, it is refined into an acceptable format. As these filters describe the parameters of debate, the very premises of interpretation shift to discern what is 'newsworthy'. While the subjects treated within the parameters are often objective, the nature of the press system means the choice of news itself is subjective. Given the pervasiveness of control over the media through vested interests, it is now impossible to imagine any alternative format.

Stories that are useful or serve a political end will find their genesis as a government leak, a press conference or with the mass media itself, as in Claire Sterling and Paul Henze's article for the Reader's Digest "the Plot to Kill the Pope" (Henze was a long time CIA agent and propaganda expert). The story was based on the information revealed by the Italian Secret Service, that the would-be assassin of Pope John Paul II was an agent of the Bulgarians and so in turn the KGB. No evidence existed and the Italians were later proved to have made it up- however, despite the story's weakness, Newsweek, Time, The New York Times and CBS News all accepted and supported the theory. The story had flawed elements (the motive; to weaken NATO and silence Poland's Solidarity Party). At one point it was suggested the KGB had wanted to 'wing' the Pope as a warning, in the style of James Bond. The unfeasible costs and risks to the Soviet Bloc in such a venture are never discussed. The only proof of Soviet involvement came from the assertion by the assassin after seventeen months in prison; he offered no credible evidence or witnesses. The final part of the theory is the strongest and the most flawed: the ideological assumption that 'this is the kind of thing the KGB would do'. There is no evidence, because the KGB are professionals. Though the assassin travelled to eleven other countries, his visit to Bulgaria was crucial, because Bulgaria is a totalitarian state, ergo, they knew everything about him and hired him there.

The final result of the Bulgarian/ KGB plot to kill the pope was piece of free market disinformation being embraced and touted as

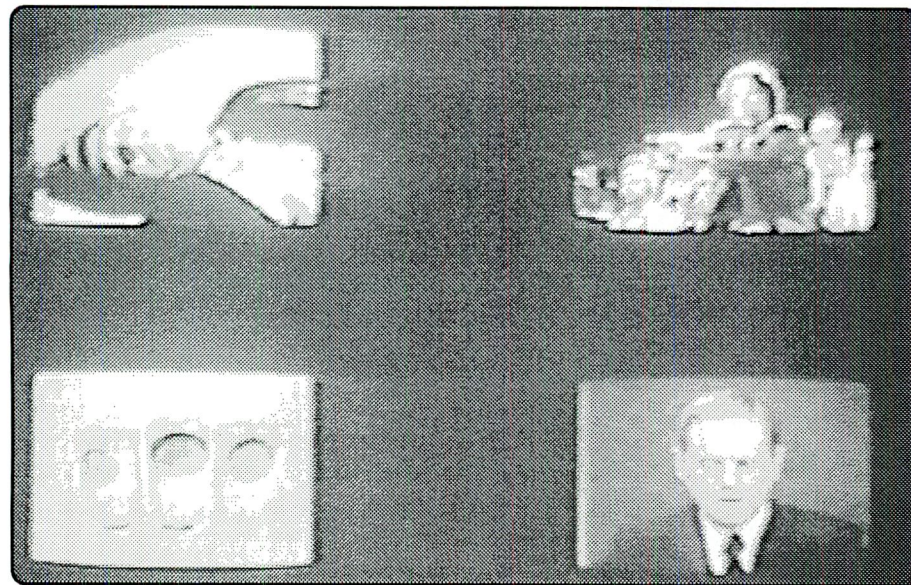


fig. 4.1 -4.2 : Media Martyr- Howard Beale is shot for his ratings in Network.

legitimate news

Another fine example of the media filters at work concerns the concept of 'worthy' and 'unworthy victims. For instance, Polish priest Andrei Sakharov, murdered by the KGB, is more newsworthy then that of activist Jose Luis Massera in Uruguay. Likewise, the shooting down of the Korean Airliner KAL 007 led to an extended campaign of vilification, whereas the Israeli shooting down of a Libyan civilian airliner had no denunciations or threats of boycotts. This difference of treatment can be succinctly summed up by the New York Times;

"No useful purpose is served by an acrimonious debate over the assignment of blame for the downing of a Libyan airliner in the Sinai peninsula last week" (Herman & Chomsky, Manufacturing Consent Chapter 1.6).

One incident was a pretext to launch a propaganda campaign, the other an embarrassment by a friendly power with a powerful native support group.

The cinema's portrayal of these controls on the media and the executives that monitor them has been, at best mixed. Network for instance, is a satire of television news, in which a doomsaying social commentator, Howard Beale, is shot for having poor ratings (fig. 4.1-4.2). The news department is portrayed as a bastion of truth and frankness in a corporate system of duplicity. In The Paper, the scenario is one of tabloid sales against social crusading and integrity. In both movies, the institution is sound, it is the personalities in control that blacken its name and twist its purpose. In The Paper the situation is redeemable, in Network the corruption is rife and the prognosis poor

(Beale is shot, and it looks unlikely the executives will be indicted) .

If one can accept that there is no such thing as a free, unbiased press in a market economy, it is relatively easy to transfer this to other media- particularly cinema and television. What is interesting are the differences of portrayal between these two media. The cinema is seen as a magical, wholesome entertainment, whereas television is portrayed as an invasive intruder to the family home in everything from The Simpsons to Poltergeist. Why is it that television has such a poor image, both in self-image and in its image as portrayed by the cinema?

To answer this question, one must first look at the social role television plays. It is a box in the living room, around which a family will gather to be entertained. It can be addictive, with many people watching it compulsively, regardless of the content. It is often employed as a pacifier for children by beleaguered parents. It brings the "world" to our homes. Television has to deal with an image of being an invasive, malignant force within our very homes, that kills social skills and stunts imagination- it bears a strong resemblance to Orwell's telescreen from 1984. Television has been cited as the cause of violence, delinquency and the stunting of child development. Every home has one; lacking a television can be regarded as a sign of poverty or aesthetic eccentricity. Since it is all- pervasive and there is no sign of it being thrown out, television can afford to have a poor media image. Cinema, on the other hand, requires a paying audience, and is slowly being subsumed by video (profitwise at least,





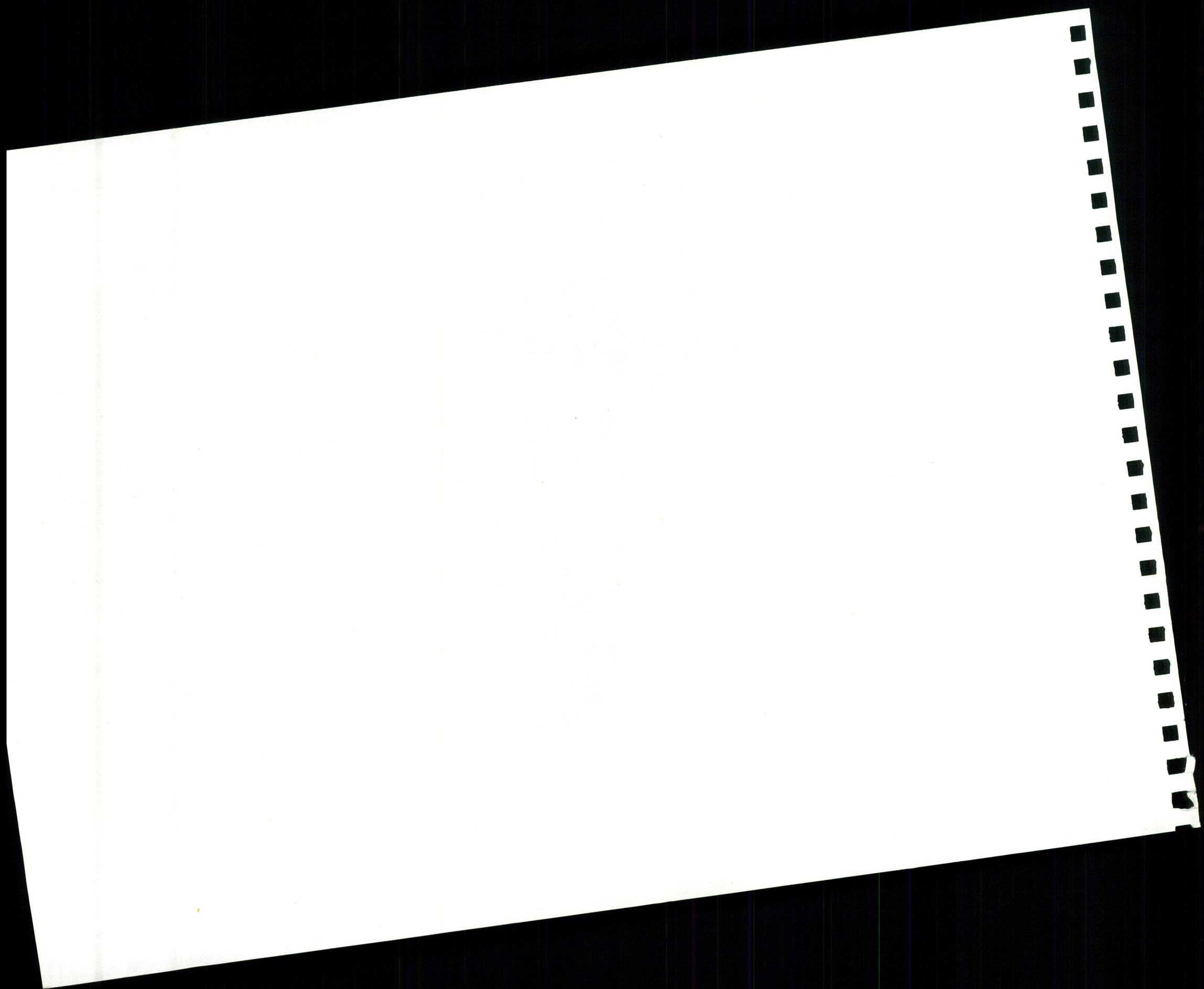
fig.4.3 -4.4 : Media nightmare- video as invasive parasite;
Videodrome

it is estimated at up to 80 percent of a production's profits now come through video rental). Cinema requires a good self image as it lacks the domestic placement that television, by its nature, enjoys. The lack of exclusiveness has made television into a bogeyman of hidden subversion and a natural creature of conspiracy, as portrayed by film and television itself.

When television is discussed in the context of conspiracy films, it is the creature of some other interest, an agent for another unseen power. In *JFK*, the media are seen as mouthpieces of misinformation, a device to discredit Jim Garrison. It is when television acts as an active participant that vistas of possibility open up in its role between the medium and its audience; David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1982) can be regarded as the best (and only) example of this form of conspiracy film.

In *Videodrome*, the owner of a pornographic station in Toronto, (James Woods), is seduced by videodrome, a signal hidden in a transmission (in this case a snuff movie). The Videodrome signal causes hallucinations and eventual brain damage and is revealed to be a perverse weapon of a right wing conspiracy against the corruption of the values they hold so dear. As the film progresses, a second group (The New Flesh) which claims transcendence through television enlists (the increasingly erratic) Woods to turn against his videodrome masters. The film climaxes with Woods shooting himself, to be a sacrificial martyr for the New Flesh.

As *Videodrome* progresses, the wall between imagination and



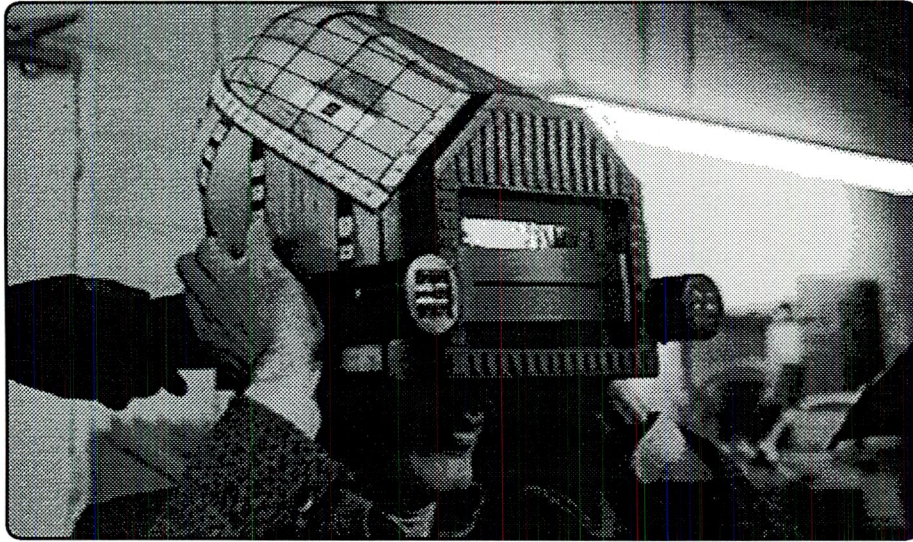


fig. 4.5 : Things to come- Virtual Reality ala. Videodrome.

reality begins to fade and shift, as does the audience's perceptions of the film. Most of Videodrome is told from Wood's perspective. The hallucinations set in and he begins to find trouble discerning reality- a problem shared by the audience too. In fact, it would appear that reality is an adaptive system and that the definitions of what is real changes as events unfold (fig. 4.3-4.4). All we can see and judge as real is by sensory input- Videodrome follows such logic to a surreal conclusion- since television is refined experience, television is more valid and real then the life it models itself on (it is interesting to note the introduction in 1982 of what can only be described as a primitive Virtual Reality helmet fig. 4.5)- employed to control Woods). As the audience follows Woods' degeneration (or evolution), all our perceptions of his reality are through him- the parameters of reality are sketchy at best. The audience itself is party to the conspiracy- both as observer and victim. Videodrome marries the voyeuristic impulse of the audience to the aesthetics of the conspiracy; by the time the film is half way through, the failure of objective reality is so complete as to relieve the audience of any responsibility to the narrative. They wander along, with Woods, towards the inevitable playback conclusion, their knowledge of the forces that control him imperfect and confused.



Apocalypse

conclusion: the future of the conspiracy

The Conspiracy genre has come a long way since the 'Reds under the Beds'. As a force for social and political reevaluation in the 1970s, it was been pushed aside by more positive and popular visions and has now re-emerged, more hard bitten and cynical than ever. The conspiracies, the films about them and the theorists who propound them have settled into a niche of quasi-respectability. Conspiracy exists now as both history and as a possibility, while still being dubbed reactionary and belonging to the 'flake politics' of the political periphery. While the films discussed here have dealt almost exclusively with the plots and machinations of the Right, it is the conservative elements that have a long and distinguished history of conspiracy theory, from extreme anti-Semitism to lambasting the Common Market. This vein of conservatism has been revitalised in recent years, through one of the more outlandish threats proposed in the 1950s: that of UFOs and their inscrutable plans for humanity. The X Files has enjoyed phenomenal success based on a distrust and cynicism about the internal workings of the American Government. Of course they know who killed Kennedy; they wouldn't be doing their job if they didn't. Yes, the Government lies- every government follows unwritten rules of utility and expediency. The series follows the careers of two FBI agents: Fox Mulder, an obsessive UFO believer and Doctor Dana Scully, a scientific sceptic. Together they handle the X files, paranormal events that fall

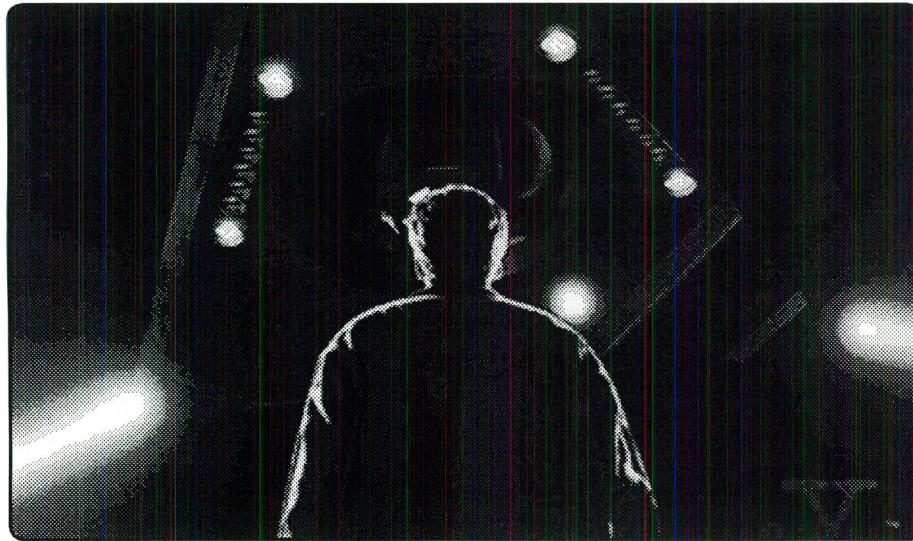


fig. 5.1 -5.2 : Trust no one- the government and the UFOs in The X Files.

within their federal jurisdiction. In dealing with these cases, they come into direct conflict with the secret government within government and corporate allies, as well as the unseen and enigmatic extra terrestrials (fig. 5.1- 5.2). Each episode reveals new aspects and facets to the vast web of conspiracy and the two agents attempt to deal with it; their efforts meet with failure or inconclusively. However thin the evidence is, though, the agents are becoming forces to be reckoned with and feared; as each episode announces at its opening, "the truth is out there".

Despite its down beat presentation and often bizarre premises, The X Files does have a strong conservative ethic at its heart. Rather than being pro-government however, the series is geared more towards lessee faire politics, with its assertion of the individual, answerability of authority and disdain for big government. Despite JFK's conservative backlash, a sizeable number of citizens still feel uneasy with their government. Three decades of assassination, scandal and government Black Projects such as Irangate have embittered the electorate and audiences.

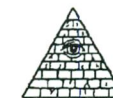
Audiences, indeed, the consumer at large, has developed a taste for conspiracy. A large Texas games company has based a core of its products on the conspiracy phenomenon. Steve Jackson Games (whose logo is the eye in the pyramid) have produced an array of tongue in cheek games called Illuminati. In one, Illuminati: The New World Order, players take the roles of the Secret Masters, building power structures, amassing wealth and twarting rivals. Factions



fig. 5.3- 5.6: Betray your friends, crush your enemies, drink some coffee- Illuminati: The New World Order by Steve Jackson Games

include: Orbital Mind Control Lasers, the Fiendish Flourinators, the Congressional Wives, the Friendly Iranians and the Boy Scouts (fig 5.3-5.6). Of course, not everyone enjoyed the joke: in 1990 the Secret Service swooped on the company and confiscated a number of files, claiming the company was suspected of publishing a guidebook to computer crime. No charges were brought, but most of the files were not returned (Jackson, GURPS Cyberpunk, pg. 5).

The hunger for conspiracies is at its highest for twenty years. However, what is supplied is no longer politically incisive or dangerous. The dirty deals of Nixon are getting a reappraisal, twenty years after the fact. The government is being accused of dangerous mismanagement, in the same breath as an accusation of colluding with aliens. While what is screened now may be entertaining, it no longer challenges us; controversy is short-lived and while it may imperil an administration, cannot challenge the longer term status quo. Forty years ago Paranoia was strictly a medical condition; subsequent events justified its validity in political terms, a preception that was quickly acted upon and subsequently trivialised through commodatisation. In many ways, the conspiracy films of the 1970s were an aberration, a result of their times. They have now been subsumed by the media and the popular culture it produces; the order of things may never be seriously questioned again, if they ever truly were.



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