

# How to Do Conspiracy Theory with Fetishism: The Myth of the “Slain King”

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The John F. Kennedy assassination has been, without a doubt, one of the darkest moments in twentieth-century United States history. For the past four decades, this traumatic event has inspired and fueled a plethora of conspiratorial visual narratives—“crisis” films—that seek to oppose and question the official historical record. The formation of conspiracy theories, both as cultural and artistic events, has been inextricably linked to the pathological condition of paranoia. This article attempts to divorce conspiracy from the theoretical framework of paranoia by arguing that in the case of Oliver Stone’s controversial film *JFK* (1991) what informs and drives the narrative is not paranoia, but rather fetishism. Fetishism here functions as a type of defense mechanism, a means of dealing and coping with crisis. Exploring *JFK* through the theoretical framework of fetishism highlights some of the reasons why the film was met with extreme criticism as well as some of the ways the cinematic apparatus responds and creatively de-stabilizes the historical record.

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*“It’s a mystery wrapped in a riddle inside an enigma.”*

—David Ferrie in Oliver Stone’s *JFK* (1991)

## Introduction

**I**n *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (1988), Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner describe the sixties and seventies as a period when the United States “underwent a ‘legitimacy crisis.’ Major institutions that previously had been fairly immune to significant popular criticism lost the confidence of the American people” (49). This crisis, they note, was a direct response to real events—political, economic, and social—and can have two kinds of effects: “it can

promote a regressive reaction, whereby more familiar and secure traditional social models and cultural representations are revived, or it can lead to a progressive attempt to construct new representational codes and social attitudes” (49).<sup>1</sup> The authors argue that the Hollywood liberal “crisis films” of the seventies take a more conservative turn in the eighties and are symptomatic of a deep desire in the American people to restore the “crisis of confidence” in public and private institutions, move away from the pessimism and cynicism that characterized the mid-seventies, re-establish optimism, and regain the lost faith in government and business.<sup>2</sup> Crisis films continue, to this day, to draw audiences in movie theaters all around the world, revisiting and, often, revising major historical events.

One of the most popular branches of Hollywood “crisis” films has been the conspiracy genre. Conspiracy theories have been an endless source of fear, fascination, and frustration, especially during the latter half of the twentieth century. In an age defined by a growing tendency to re-think, revise, and re-articulate the historical past, recent or distant, conspiracy theories have been, by far, the most appealing and popular way of interrogating history and, in effect, historiography. Although they have been around for centuries, their renaissance began in the early 1960s, with the most devastating event in the United States up until that moment: the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.<sup>3</sup> The hyper-production of an exponentially growing body of

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1. Some of the events Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner mention include the Watergate scandal and the Pentagon Papers both of which had cast a shadow over the executive branch and the legitimacy of the presidency. Directors such as Sidney Pollack and Alan J. Pakula create memorable “crisis” films such as *All the President's Men* (1976) and *Three Days of the Condor* (1975).
  2. According to the authors, there are different types of crisis films; examples include *Jaws* (Dir. Steven Spielberg, 1975), *The Exorcist* (Dir. William Friedkin, 1973), *Airport* (Dir. George Seaton, 1970), and *The Conversation* (Dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974).
  3. The Center for Conspiracy Culture was launched in 1998 by Peter Knight, a professor at the University of Manchester, and Alasdair Parks, a professor at the University of Winchester. The collaboration was inspired by an international conference held at the University of Winchester (King Alfred's College at the time) that same year. The conference invited papers “on any aspect of the culture of conspiracy, paranoia & alternative knowledge, focusing predominantly—but not exclusively—on the United States, and on the period 1945 to the present.” Their main goal is to “examine the role of conspiracy in contemporary world, and especially the United States.” The Center perceives the Kennedy assassination as the “primal scenario in contemporary conspiracy thinking.” For more information visit (<http://www2.winchester.ac.uk/ccc/index.htm>).

“crisis” texts—literary, scientific, theoretical, and cinematic—raises questions about the reasons that *still* give rise to such conspiracy theories, as well as about the underlying mechanisms of their practice.<sup>4</sup>

In *Running Dog* (1978), Don DeLillo describes our times as “the age of conspiracy, the age of connections, links, secret relationships” (111). Timothy Melley notes that major news magazines have recently described the U.S. as “a nation in the grip of ‘conspiracy mania,’” and have pronounced the arrival of a “‘new paranoid style in the American Arts’” (7). This crisis in interpretation is in part a product of the constant political shifts between liberal and conservative ideologies. The growing pessimism and mistrust of the government and its agencies as well as the intense anxiety over powerful corporations in the sixties and seventies come in to replace, if only for a short time, the conservative fifties. Cold War paranoia ensured a clear, identifiable “enemy”; Cold War rhetoric redefined ideals such as freedom, patriotism, nationalism.

Conspiratorial thought has been inextricably linked to the pathological condition of paranoia. The two have been so tightly bound in a cause-effect relationship, it would seem almost impossible to come across a text on conspiracy theory that is *not* informed by the theoretical framework of paranoia. This essay introduces a third concept into this relationship whose long pejorative connotative and denotative meanings have stigmatized both individuals and practices in a manner similar to that of conspiracy theorists: that is the concept of fetishism. Historically, all three terms have been employed in a rather overgeneralized and negative manner to describe practices standing against dominant ideologies of normalcy and rational behavior.<sup>5</sup> This overgeneralized use, however, can often mask the ideological subtleties as well as the heterogeneity that characterizes conspiracy, paranoia, and fetishism, both in terms of structure and function.

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4. See O'Donnell; Simon; Melley. Also films such as *The Conversation* (Dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1973) and *Blow Out* (Dir. Brian De Palma, 1981) have been understood as indirect commentaries of the Zapruder film and its failure to provide concrete answers about the Kennedy assassination.

5. In *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (1999), Mark Fenster offers an insightful discussion about conspiracy theory as “an interpretive practice” that works “as a form of hyperactive semiosis in which history and politics serve as reservoirs of signs that demand (over)interpretation, and that signify, for the interpreter, far more than their conventional meaning” (xvii). The underlying mechanisms of paranoia at work inform Fenster's discussion especially in the political arena. Popular definitions of paranoia and fetishism are included.

The question that arises here is this: can we have conspiracy theory *without paranoia*? In other words, can we understand conspiracy theory outside paranoid modes of thought? Can we perceive it as anything other than a symptom, a manifestation of pathology in moments of intense crises?

This essay suggests that in a *specific type* of conspiracy theory the *primary* mechanism of coping with crisis is *not* paranoia but rather fetishism. A key assumption is that none of these concepts is monolithic; there are different types of fetishism, paranoia, and conspiracy theory, and with each type certain mechanisms become more dominant than others. The J. F. Kennedy assassination had inspired countless paranoid narratives—visual and literary—in the seventies and eighties; in the nineties, however, one might observe a slight change in aesthetic and narrative patterns. The persistence of producing and reproducing texts about Kennedy suggests a crisis that is intermittent, an acting out (rather than a working through) of a deep and permanent trauma. We will begin by considering the similarities between conspiracy theory and fetishism, both as strategies of coping with crisis and allaying anxiety. Although I will be using the generic term of conspiracy theory (CT), the focus still will remain on the conspiracies dealing with historical figures gradually transformed to mythic figures, sacred objects of special devotion. We will then proceed to investigate both the clinical and cultural definitions of paranoia, and finally, explore Oliver Stone's controversial film *JFK* (1991) as a case study of the primary role fetishism appears to have in this particular narrative.

### Conspiracy Theory, Paranoia, Fetishism

What is a conspiracy theory? Adrian Quinn sees it as “a contradiction in terms.” He defines theory as “a body of principles that attempt to develop clear, logical explanations for things,” but at the same time sees conspiracy as “necessarily a highly selective and convoluted model finding evidence anywhere, even in the very lack of evidence” (112).<sup>6</sup> Hence, he feels that conspiracy is less a theory than “a hunch or a suspicion” (112). Jane Parish argues that what conspiracy theory does is “take on what Englund and Leach call the meta-narrative of modernity” (6). Parish notes: “the popularity of the ‘traditional’ conspiracy lies in its function to provide neat explanations in an untidy and big world where there is no great center anymore” (6). In other words, conspiracy theory becomes a source of

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6. See Quinn.

comfort in an anti-determinist fashion, as it asserts that no one acts alone and things never accidentally happen; people make them happen.

The most basic common feature that CT and fetishism share is that both carry the stigma of inauthenticity, being characterized as false relationships between subject and object. From a psychoanalytic perspective, both seem to originate in loss, and both involve processes of disavowal, as there is a direct conflict about knowledge and belief.<sup>7</sup> For the classical conspiracy theorist, loss pertains mainly to “truth”; in this case, however, as we shall discuss later, a conspiratorial text seeks to compensate for a different kind of loss. Both appear highly selective and arbitrary in nature; in CT and fetishism objects attain special meaning largely through the manner in which they relate to other objects, as both, by definition, describe a relationship; both function as defense mechanisms for coping with an unacceptable reality and strive to allay anxiety; and, finally, both practices despite social condemnation are still going strong.

In addition, CT and fetishism are largely faith-based. In *Empire of Conspiracy: the Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (2000), Timothy Melley notes that “[b]ecause [conspiracy theories] are so difficult to confirm, they require a form of quasi-religious conviction, a sense that the conspiracy in question is an entity with almost supernatural powers” (8). Similarly, fetishism cannot confirm or validate the special power an object holds for the individual, whose personal relationship to the putative object is usually perceived as irrational by society. David R. Shumway asserts that, “‘[f]etishism’ in all its uses describes the attribution of strange powers to objects” (7, my emphasis). From Melley’s assertions, we can argue, accordingly, that *conspiracy theory describes the world largely through the attribution of special powers to objects* (be it in the form of individuals, social or political institutions, religious sectors, etc.). Or, perhaps, we can say that *conspiracy theory describes the world largely through fetishism*.

Paranoia, the third part of the equation, is not monolithic, even though the generic application of the term has made it almost impossible to differentiate among the various types, or divorce it from conspiracy. The subject of Sigmund Freud’s major study of paranoia was Daniel Paul Schreber’s *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903), through which Freud linked overt persecutory delusions to latent homosexuality. Schreber was convinced that the world was out to get *him*, yet maintained the cognitive capacity to document his own delusions, hallucinations, and fears, in a

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7. Freud, “Fetishism.”

manner indicating a frighteningly lucid awareness of his mental condition. In cases such as this, paranoia is defined in the *Collins English Dictionary* as a condition where individuals “wrongly believe that other people are trying to harm *them*, or believe *themselves* to be much more important than they really are.” A somewhat different type of paranoia is what Melley calls “operational paranoia,” a condition marked by an intense “self-critical *suspicion* of the world” (18). This latter type is much more frequent and much less severe, and has often been the force that drives characters in literature, film, and everyday life.

The Greek literal meaning of paranoia also refers to an *excess*, a surplus of knowledge. Melley’s analysis of conspiracy narratives in relation to these two distinct types of paranoia finds resonance with this understanding of the term. Melley notes:

This distinction [between operational and schizophrenic] would be of use in isolating cases ... that arise frequently in postwar narrative: cases where individuals not only suspect an array of invisible determinants to be at work but also suspect their own suspicions. The secondary suspicion seems to indicate the process of a rational, self-effacing, skeptical mind—precisely the opposite of irrational or delusional self-inflation. (19, emphasis in original)

Louis A. Sass’ seminal work on Schreber’s *Memoirs* successfully argues that the latter’s condition might be characterized as one of hypercognitivism and excessive self-reflection, and even goes on to say that the *Memoirs* is a work of a brilliant mind.<sup>8</sup> William G. Niederland offers his own list of symptoms regarding the paranoid individual:

Paranoia and paranoid conditions are characterized by hostility, suspiciousness, persecutory ideas, perceptual distortions, regressive tendencies, expansive grandiosity, delusional thinking, excessive righteousness, and, in severe cases, a break with reality. The paranoid individual is easily slighted (“people are against me”). He sees himself persecuted by malevolent figures (“enemies”). He may become mood and depressed because he feels menaced by conspiratorial opponents, by “overheard” accusatory remarks, by “observed” inimical actions, and/or by hostile “plots” against him. (29)

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8. See Sass 242-67.

Finally, in *Paranoia: New Psychoanalytic Perspectives* (1994), John M. Oldham and Stanley Bone cite DSM III-R's official criteria for the diagnosis of paranoia:

A pervasive and unwarranted tendency, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, to interpret the actions of people as deliberately demeaning or threatening, as indicated by at least four of the following:

- i. Expects, without sufficient basis, to be exploited or harmed by others.
- ii. Questions, without justification, the loyalty or trustworthiness of friends or associates.
- iii. Reads hidden demeaning or threatening meanings into benign remarks or events, e.g. suspects that a neighbor put out trash to annoy him.
- iv. Bears grudges or is unforgiving of insults or slights.
- v. Is reluctant to confide in others because of unwarranted fear that the information will be used against him or her.
- vi. Is easily slighted and quick to react with anger or to counterattack.
- vii. Questions, without justification, fidelity of spouse or sexual partner.<sup>9</sup> (4)

The above references indicate why conspiracy and paranoia often go hand in hand. All diagnoses posit that one of the primary elements of the paranoid is the feeling of grandeur and megalomania, a condition also similar to narcissism. Megalomania is a necessary ingredient, without which it would be difficult to account for an individual feeling so special or important that his or her specialness becomes a threat to the rest of the world. At the same time, though, all clinical definitions of paranoia appear somewhat generic, failing to account for *specific* types of conspiratorial thought. The cultural appropriation of the term as a hermeneutic tool for “abnormal” thought and behavior draws from such clinical definitions, and as such, it also fails to capture the specificity of conspiracy as a cultural phenomenon. In CTs revolving around religion or political systems, one can observe the “they’re-

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9. This is a very insightful study on paranoia, which partly employs Melanie Klein's object relations theory of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. Although I will not be employing Kleinian psychoanalytic theory here, I still believe Klein's theory can also be related to fetishism.

out-to-get-me-and-mine attitude” with much more ease. Political and religious propaganda has cultivated paranoia for centuries; there are a plethora of texts dedicated to exposing the “real” motives of Catholics, Jews, Communists, Conservatives, Liberals, and the like. In CTs, however, where the subject is not implicated—directly or indirectly—paranoia takes on a different role.

The types of CT dealing with entire social, religious, or political groups can be usually explored through the aforementioned clinical and cultural definitions, even though there are still specific aspects that fail to be accounted for. What happens, however, when CT is not a product of a megalomaniac narcissist driven by grandiosity and self-importance? How can we account for the ways the individual relates to the world? Freud introduces the concept of narcissism in his paper on Leonardo da Vinci in 1910, just before he writes on the Schreber case, in which he strongly emphasizes the role of narcissism in paranoia.<sup>10</sup> His essay “On Narcissism” follows in 1914. In the cultural fixation with figures such as JFK, however, the attitude ceases to be “they’re all out to get *me*” and becomes “they’re all out to get *him*.” This form of conviction still contains the paranoid element of intense suspicion of the world, but at the same time, narcissism and megalomania become difficult to sustain as driving forces behind conspiratorial thinking. It is here, one might argue that narcissism gives way to *fetishism* becoming the dominant element, both in anthropological and psychoanalytic terms.

William Pietz’s groundbreaking work on anthropological fetishism identifies four themes informing the idea of the fetish:

- (1) the untranscended materiality of the fetish: “matter,” or the material object, is viewed as the locus of religious activity or psychic investment;
- (2) the radical historicity of the fetish’s origin: arising in a singular event fixing together otherwise heterogeneous elements, the identity and power of the fetish consists in its enduring capacity to repeat this singular process of fixation, along with the resultant effect;
- (3) the dependence of the fetish for its meaning and value on a particular order of social relations, which it in turn reinforces; and

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10. Freud, “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood.”



- (4) the active relation of the fetish object to the individual: a kind of external controlling organ directed by powers outside the affected person's will, the fetish represents a subversion of the ideal of the autonomously determined self. (7-8)

Almost all of the above resonate with themes related to CT; one may argue that the latter also depends “for its meaning and value on a particular order of social relations, which it in turn reinforces” (7-8), it also arises in a singular event fixing together otherwise heterogeneous elements, and the mechanisms of belief it entails also involve a religious-like belief and psychic investment. This is not to say that fetishism and paranoia cannot be seen interacting with one another; fetishism can contain paranoid elements, just like the classic fetish for the paranoid has traditionally been the “truth.” The fact that fetishism is not as commonly used as a cultural term as we see with paranoia is largely due to the fact that, as a term, the former is usually employed to describe abnormal sexual behavior or fixation with parts of the human body and/or articles of clothing. Paranoia, on the other hand, despite Freud's conviction that it also originates in “abnormal” sexual behavior, is broadly used as a hermeneutic tool for unorthodox behavioral modes of thought. The truth might be the classic fetish for the typical paranoid mind, but for CTs revolving around the assassination of Kennedy, and specifically with Stone's version of the event, we need to consider a different set of questions in order to identify the mechanisms at work. Truth in conspiracy is always “already lost,” because “it exists only as a delusion of the paranoid who imagines it; the truth in conspiracy is ambiguous and in the eye of the beholder, while the experience that is fetishized and constantly called into question is the existence of conspiracy itself” (Dick 26).<sup>11</sup>

In all its uses, fetishism describes a mediated relationship between a subject and an object. In anthropological fetishism, in particular, Pietz notes:

The fetish is always a meaningful fixation of a singular event; it is above all a “historical” object, the enduring material form and force of an unrepeatable event. This object is “territorialized” in material space (an earthly matrix), whether in the form of a geographical locality, ... or a medium of inscription ... This

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11. This is one of the very few texts I came across that employs the idea of the fetish as an element of conspiracy narratives.

reified, territorialized historical object is also “personalized” in the sense that beyond its status as a collective social object it evokes an intensely personal response from individuals. (12)

The wide variety of literary and cinematic texts fixated on the Kennedy assassination is a case in point. The “unrepeatable event” is repeated over and over again in an almost ritualistic manner, seeking for rational explanations as if trying to exorcize the demons of the past. In “Three Types of Fetishism,” Lorraine Gammon and Merja Makinen point out that a social purpose of fetishism is “to allay anxieties of the individual and group and to promote social cohesion through joint rituals and common belief” (17). This idea is very similar to those describing the social purpose of CT. In *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, Melley argues that the increasing tendency to attribute causality to events stems from what he calls “agency panic,” a feeling of losing a sense of autonomy and self-control (7). Conspiracy theories allay these types of anxieties by creating a coherent narrative that eliminates ambivalence about the world, even if it means exposing it for an evil and sinister place. In a somewhat similar manner, fetishism is understood as a strategy for negotiating loss, and as highlighted in Charles DeBrosses’ work, there are national fetishes (shared delusions) and individual fetishes. The term may have originated as a cross-cultural word about a cross-cultural relationship; contemporary cultural scholars such as Gammon and Makinen employ anthropological fetishism to discuss the behavioral modes of fans.<sup>12</sup>

In “Paranoia, Terrorism, and the Fictional Condition of Knowledge,” Alan Nadel describes Dealey Plaza, the site of President Kennedy’s assassination, as a sacred space that “pilgrims” and tourists will visit every year. Nadel describes the place as “the sacred center of a ritual sacrifice ... and yet inundated by pedestrian traffic ... It is the site of several commercial enterprises, many of the most significant relying on texts that *invest the quotidian with historical excess*” (407, my emphasis). The Texas Book Depository hosts on the sixth floor the Kennedy Museum, as well as the Kennedy Museum souvenir shop. Nadel points out that,

[w]hile the plaza itself reads tragedy and conspiracy, the souvenir shop invests Kennedy’s life (and by implication his death) with a

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12. The overwhelmingly popular conspiracy theories about figures like John F. Kennedy or Princess Diana resonate with Lorraine Gammon and Merja Makinen’s study on fans and fandom.

Mount Rushmore-like normality. Kennedy there becomes the figural stuff of ashtrays, coffee-table books, and postcards; his words can be purchased in cassette, CD, and print formats; his image in varying qualities of reproduction can be taken home for private display. (408)

As the visitors move from display to display, Nadel suggests that there is one thing missing: the shooter.

When one looks out the fateful window and sees how sharply Elm Street cuts its parameters, common sense suggests that the shooter had to be missing, that is, no one using a (damaged) bolt-action rifle could get off three accurate shots through that small window of opportunity. The shooter, like the target, in other words, is missing not only visually but also logically, historically, spatially, temporally. In the shooter's absence we have an overabundance of narratives. (409, my emphases)

This is what some would agree, the “healthy” way of bringing the “true” event closer to the self. For the conspiracy theorist, however, the “window” is much more than a mere historical site. The Museum encapsulates the “official” story of “what happened” on November 22, 1963. All he or she can feel is what is missing, the *lack* of what should have been there but is not. Conspiracy texts mediate and fill this perceived lack; they become a way of negotiating the absence of the coveted shooter. In the process, though, they overcompensate for the absence by producing an excess of “shooters.” As was mentioned, paranoia is a form of assumed surplus knowledge; based on this premise, we can understand why the conspiracy theorist is readily identified as a paranoid individual. Excess of meaning, though, is not only related to paranoia but to fetishism as well, and since one of the basic diagnostic elements of paranoia is an intense fear for the self—standing at the center of evil activity—how do we account for the fact that the self is displaced in a periphery of safety and someone else is now at the center as the object of intense persecution and hostility?

Freud has been criticized for employing the terms “absence loss” and “lack” interchangeably.<sup>13</sup> His theory on fetishism identifies its origins with the little boy's realization that the mother is missing a penis. Failing to perceive it as absence (nothing was ever there), the boy experiences it as a loss (it was there and now it is not) and translates it as a lack (it should be

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13. See LaCapra.

there). Castration anxiety (fear for the self) emerges—a form of paranoia on the unconscious level—and the boy substitutes for the lack a random object of his choice. The same can be said for CT; it originates in the inability to accept that something was never there; in the attempt to fill the “empty” space, the individual overcompensates through the hyper-production of a conspiracy text that often entails randomly chosen villains.

Disavowal can be defined as a discrepancy between knowledge and belief: “I know the killer stood at the window perch, but yet ...” This is somewhat different from what happens with fandom, but the mechanisms underlying the behavior of the conspiracy theorist and the fan appear similar. Gammon and Makinen argue that the cultural phenomenon of fandom can be better understood through anthropological rather than sexual fetishism in the manner in which the fans worship their idol of choice. Fiske argues that, “... fandom is characterized by ‘discrimination,’ and since it involves choice, ‘productivity,’ since fans produce their own ‘texts,’ for example their bedrooms or hairstyles” (qtd. in Gammon and Makinen 19). Here, it is obvious that the fans will create shrines of worship and acquire memorabilia such as posters, ticket stubs, in an attempt to evoke, through them, the presence of their absent idol (Gammon and Makinen 20). Kennedy “fans” operate on a similar mode; they too, are characterized by discrimination, choice, and productivity; but in this case the “texts” they produce are not bedrooms or hairstyles, but conspiracy texts that evoke the presence of the absent villain. In the case of fans, the object of desire is more obvious; in the case of Kennedy conspiracies, the object they are trying to evoke is not Kennedy, but the object of derision, the villain. Do not both practices seem to be driven, though, by a similar desire? There does not seem to be a specific mention of the fetish as *only* an object of positive affect. If we accept Shumway’s assertion, as noted earlier in this paper, that in all its uses fetishism describes the attribution of strange powers to objects, then we can say that certain conspiratorial texts attribute special powers to “evil” objects responsible for the loss of the worshiped object, and seek to evoke and produce their presence in order to alleviate anxiety, not to get closer in the manner that fans strive to produce texts that will bring them closer to their idol. One of the best examples of this tendency is, arguably, Stone’s *JFK*. In what follows, we will consider elements that distinguish this particular “crisis” film from other visual texts on the same subject.

### JFK: How to Do Conspiracy Theory with Fetishism

Stone's *JFK* has been held as the ultimate cinematic conspiracy text of the 1990s, and, for some, of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> Since Kennedy's assassination in 1963, a variety of cinematic texts dealing, either directly or indirectly, with the "seven seconds that broke the back of the American century" (DeLillo 181),<sup>15</sup> attempted to comment, interpret, and revisit this highly traumatic event. Stone is no stranger to controversy, having directed films such as *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and *Nixon* (1995). Stone's bombastic and vitriolic attitude towards political activity, always reflected in his historical interpretations of postwar American politics, has stirred public opinion in unprecedented ways. Soon after the film's release in 1991, and spurred into action by a community of Stone followers, Congress passes, and President George Bush signs into law, the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act of 1992. According to Michael L. Kurtz, the act "mandated the appointment by the president of an Assassination Records Review Board (ARRB), whose responsibility was to locate, identify, review, and release all assassination records as expeditiously as possible."<sup>16</sup> Film critics and historians alike vehemently condemned the film as an egregious example of moral relativism and liberal propaganda, a contaminant of history infested with historical inaccuracies, an example of a sheer manipulation of the cinematic apparatus and its essential photographic properties.<sup>17</sup> With the front cover of *Newsweek*, for instance, featuring the title "The Twisted Truth of *JFK*: Why Oliver Stone's New Movie Can't Be Trusted," the media began reacting to Stone's paranoia with a rhetoric characterized by the very paranoid elements they were trying to attack. Norman Mailer sees *JFK* as the classic of the conspiracy genre and unique in its treatment of "the great paranoid myth of our times" (qtd. in McArthur 40).

No other film has quenched the spectators' thirst for knowledge and

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14. See Fenster; Simon; and Lardner.

15. Don DeLillo's famous quote in *Libra* (1988).

16. Michael L. Kurtz in "Oliver Stone, JFK, and History" notes that Congress held public hearings during the spring and summer of 1992 and discovered, to their surprise, that there was indeed a voluminous amount of documentary and other evidence relating to the assassination that various agencies had deliberately withheld from the public record (166-77).

17. Oliver Stone blends historical footage with dramatic footage in a manner that makes the two hard to distinguish. Montage sequences, flashbacks, and rapid cuts form a narrative that conflates the fictional and the historical. The Zapruder film, in particular, and the way Stone incorporates it into the narrative, has been a source of criticism.

information as much as *JFK*. Balancing the focus of the perennial question of “What happened?” with that of “Why it happened?”, it shifts the focus from the villains to the victim. A text that focuses on the “why” as much as on the “what” operates on two assumptions: first, that the victim embodied unique powers that made him both special and especially dangerous; second, that a community of villains joins forces to obliterate the worshiped object in question. What appears as most “fetishistic” about this film, as we shall see, is the discourse and the representational modes of Stone’s CT.

The film opens in a highly provocative manner, with Stone constructing his own historical trajectory of events leading up to and culminating with Kennedy’s death, using actual footage and voice-over narration of the historical context. Thus, he basically begins at the end, as the exposition he provides is supposed to allude to the reasons as to why the president was assassinated. Stone opens with Dwight D. Eisenhower’s famous farewell address of 1961 where the latter prophetically warns the nation about the potential threat posed by a growing military-industrial complex. This “crash course” in postwar American history comprises of shots of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Fidel Castro, Teddy, Rose, and Joe Kennedy; Jackie, John, and their children in intimate family moments (the only shots in color in this opening sequence; all other shots are taken from real footage in black and white); the Cuban Missile Crisis; the Bay of Pigs invasion; shots of J. Edgar Hoover, images of Laos and Vietnam, all in all everyone and everything that, according to Stone, contributed to Kennedy’s death. This montage sequence relies primarily on the paranoid style of establishing clear and simplified cause/effect relations, and understanding history as a linear chain of interconnected and interrelated events. The “Eisensteinian” brush is slightly evident in this montage sequence, not because of the rapid rhythm and violent cuts of the juxtaposing images, but mainly because of the insertion of suggestive extra-diegetic elements such as a poster of Kennedy reading “Wanted for Treason.” Ambiguity is eliminated in the same manner that Eisenstein made sure that his images would be read in a very specific way.

As already mentioned, Stone establishes Kennedy, right from the beginning of the film—using voice-over narration—as much more than the new president: he is “the symbol of the new 1960s, signifying change and upheaval to the American public.” The multiple facets of Kennedy as father to the nation and to his children, as a much anticipated “messiah” who would magically bring America into a new era of politics that promised the eradication of corruption and injustice, the elimination of

war and conflict, and the potential of a utopian society, humanize Kennedy as much as dehumanize him. Let me explain. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Slavoj Žižek offers a valuable analysis as to the reasons why the *Titanic* became the source of such deep cultural trauma:

“... the wreck of the Titanic,” he explains, “made such a tremendous impact not because of the immediate material dimensions of the catastrophe but because of its symbolic overdetermination, because of the ideological meaning invested in it: it was read as a ‘symbol,’ as a condensed, metaphorical representation of the approaching catastrophe of European civilization itself.” (70)

He goes on to note that “[t]he *Titanic* is a Thing in the Lacanian sense: the material leftover, the materialization of the terrifying, impossible *jouissance*, a kind of petrified forest of enjoyment ... the wreck of the *Titanic* therefore functions as a sublime object: a positive material object elevated to the status of the impossible Thing” (71). *JFK* paints Kennedy with the idealized colors of a symbolic, benevolent presence whose destruction changed the direction of history and politics on a global scale. What makes, thus, *JFK* stand separate from most conspiracy narratives on the same subject is Stone’s determination to not only represent the villains as a ruthless conglomerate of sinister powers, but more importantly to absolve Kennedy of any wrongdoing whatsoever, elevating him to the status of a Žižekian sublime object.<sup>18</sup> Kennedy’s re-invention as the apotheosis of virtue and selflessness is as excessive, if not more, as the villains’ degeneracy. *It is the deification of Kennedy that is unique in Stone’s film and not the multiple conspiracy scenarios in question.* This representation cannot be adequately explored through the paranoid model; it is rather a manifestation of an extreme form of anthropological fetishism.

In addition to this construction of hyperbolic binaries of extreme good and evil, what becomes also a source of frustration is the fact that “... Stone’s ‘history’ reflects a desire for multiple alternative histories and a single plot” (O’Donnell 22).<sup>19</sup> The opening sequence of *JFK* is immediately

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18. Up until *JFK*, films dealing with the Kennedy assassination remained mainly within the paranoid mode of storytelling. *Executive Action* (Dir. David Miller, 1973), *The Parallax View* (Dir. Allan J. Pakula, 1974), *Winter Kills* (Dir. William Richert, 1983), *Interview with the Assassin* (Dir. Neil Burger, 2002), are all examples of the conspiracy genre informed by the structure and aesthetics of the paranoid narrative.

19. Patrick O’Donnell discusses *JFK* as an example of a paradox where “the contradiction resides in the formation of the assassination in the cultural imaginary

followed by a black and white dramatic sequence of a hysterical woman being thrown violently out of a car; a cut to a hospital bed where the woman frantically pleads with a policeman to do something because “They’ve gone to Dallas ... Friday ... they’re gonna kill Kennedy ... call somebody! ... stop them! ... these are serious fucking guys! ...” (*JFK*). A cut to Dallas, Texas, November 22, 1963. President Kennedy’s motorcade reaches Dealey Plaza; violent editing suggests or, rather, signals the violence that is about to happen. When we come to the fatal moment of the shooting, we hear three shots, and the screen suggestively fades to black. This is the first indication that something/someone is missing; soon after, though, the screen begins to overflow with villainous figures acting suspiciously, mincing their words, betraying guilt. The film reads not as “Who killed Kennedy?” but rather as “Who didn’t kill Kennedy?”; Stone, overcompensating for the perceived loss of the shooter, does not spare anyone; from chiefs of police, to common crooks, to male prostitutes, to Lyndon Johnson, Fidel Castro, the C.I.A., the Pentagon, everyone shares part of the guilt, everyone wanted Kennedy dead for their own personal purposes. The multiple villains are stereotyped as such in a number of ways, the most obvious being the manner in which their “otherness” is communicated visually through grotesque representations: David Ferrie’s ludicrous painted eyebrows and ridiculous wig; Clay Shaw’s comical mannerisms as an elderly active homosexual; Willie O’Keefe, the male prostitute, and his perverse personality. The fact that Clay Shaw and David Ferrie are not fictional characters and were actual homosexuals is not to be overlooked. Willie O’Keefe, however, is a fictional character made up by Stone.<sup>20</sup> In an interview to Mark C. Carnes, Stone discusses Kennedy as

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as a discrete moment that arbitrarily anchors history while, at the same time, serving as the origin of a chain of events whose significance becomes clear only in the aftermath and in a determined relation to the original event” (22). Paranoid thought is characterized by the desire to transform the multiple and heterogeneous into a singular homogeneous, which in turn translates into the paradoxical relationship it holds to modernism and postmodernism.

20. In an interview to Gary Crowds, Stone notes:

... Willie O’Keefe, who was played by Kevin Bacon, is a fictitious character. I used him because there were about five homosexual characters involved in the relationship of Clay Shaw with Oswald and David Ferrie. It was impossible, however, given the length of the movie and the complexity of the relationship, to describe five characters, and there was not one significant character from the five who stood out. In my mind, that necessitated a fictitious character to represent all five, to represent the basic conclusions of the five homosexuals that Garrison involved in the trial, and some of whom he’d gotten to testify. (26)



a man that “pissed off ‘the Beast,’ the Beast being a force (or forces) greater than the presidency” (4).

Garrison’s fixation on Kennedy, as is the case with most “lone” crusaders, is deeply affecting his relationship with his wife, Liz Garrison (played by Sissy Spacek). In *The Desirable Body: Cultural Fetishism and the Erotics of Consumption* (2001), Jon Stratton notes that

... the key experience of cultural fetishism is a male pre-occupation with his perceived phallic lack ... the desire for women becomes secondary ... the desire for the phallus translates into a complex form of male-male desire which excludes women as women, their bodies marked by the “lack,” even, of the penis, including those bodies remade as phallic fetishes ... [T]his male-male desire takes two forms. One is a scheme of narcissistic identification with a man considered to have the phallic, patriarchal quality. The other constructs certain males as phallic substitutes who may, then, be “consumed” in the hope that they will provide the missing phallus. (116)

Garrison’s “paranoia”—which manifests itself as excessive knowledge and cognitive hyper-productivity (through the use of flashbacks) that validate Garrison or discredit the army of villains—is the first element to cause a rift between him and Liz. Paranoia, according to Freud—is primarily a product of a male latent homosexual desire. In 1915, Freud discusses briefly a case of female paranoia through the same theoretical framework he used for Schreber.<sup>21</sup> From a psychoanalytic perspective, women might or might not have what it takes to be paranoid, but they certainly *do not* when it comes to fetishism. According to Freud fetishism is strictly a male affair. Stratton’s observations are useful in exploring how Stone constructs Jim Garrison in his private domain. When Liz tries to “seduce” him suggesting a romantic night of sexual (but always wholesome) delights, Garrison prefers to spend the night with Kennedy and voraciously consume all twenty-six volumes of the Warren Commission Report, a feat that Liz tells us only *he* has done; no one else has ever read the “virginal” Report cover to cover before. Time and time again Garrison will refer to Kennedy as the “slain king” or to the jury/audience as “children of a slain father.” Garrison frantically “consumes” the Report in hopes of providing/evoking the

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21. See Freud, “A Case of Female Paranoia Running Counter to the Psycho-Analytical Theory of the Disease” 150-61.

missing phallus; his noble quest for justice mirrors Kennedy's noble causes for which he was eventually destroyed. Kennedy as the benevolent patriarch, whose death completely and utterly disrupts the symbolic order, is re-incarnated in Garrison, whose narcissistic disposition seeks to identify with the president's "phallic, patriarchal quality" (Stratton 116). As long as Liz refuses to acknowledge Garrison as the "subject supposed to know" the couple shares no sexual intimacy; if anything, they are drifting further and further apart. She, of course, being excluded from fetishistic desire, cannot even begin to relate to her husband's state of mind. Interestingly, order is restored in Garrison's private sphere/bed immediately following a moment of sheer *disorder* in the public sphere: the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy captured on television. As soon as Jim informs Liz of the tragic event (which he, incidentally, had prophesized only a few hours before!), Aristotelian *anagnorisis* kicks in and the couple, now basking in *homophrosune*, share an intimate night of passion. No longer feeling the threat of being a "castrated man," Garrison is able to find his way back into his wife's bed once again.

The camera work in the film is also highly suggestive of the "fetishization" of the villains. On various occasions, the camera zooms to extreme close-ups of the villains' body parts. After Kennedy's death, as we see documentary footage of Johnson being sworn president, the camera closes in on his hand in a suggestive way of saying that he had his "hand" in it too; as Garrison interviews the characters played by John Candy and Jack Lemmon, we get extreme close-ups of their mouth and eyes respectively, which suggest the synecdochical relation they might be holding to the "Beast."

Perhaps the most frustrating object in the Kennedy affair has been, and still is, the Zapruder film, the visual document that accidentally captured the truth but obstinately refused to reveal it. As in real life (the Zapruder film was not released to the public until 1975), Stone withholds the home video from his audience until the trial sequence at the end, when Garrison is unfolding the "truth" about what really happened, and successfully postponing our long awaited (*JFK* is almost three-and-a half hours long) gratification. Zapruder is portrayed as a *deus ex machina*, the fourth "shooter" no one saw coming. In the opening sequence, Stone dramatically re-enacts Zapruder "shooting" Kennedy, juxtaposing his image with the invisible presence of the three other shooters. This parallelism also aligns "truth" with the figure of the filmmaker, the benevolent "shooter" as the possessor of historical accuracy.

Stone makes Zapruder himself visible on screen and the conspirators invisible right from the start, playing on the tension between visibility (as good) and invisibility (as a threat), what is missing and what is not. “The inability of the documentary photographic image,” Marita Sturken argues, “to reveal the reasons for the Kennedy assassination constituted a kind of cultural trauma. A film such as *JFK* responds to the inability of the image to provide answers by ‘filling in’ what the image could not tell, and attempting to complete the fragmented images of memory” (73). The Zapruder film contains a “truth” we believe is *there* but cannot access. It has to be another film, *JFK*, that comes in to magically fill in for this essential lack, taking on the role of a metanarrative. Despite its inability to bring closure to the cultural trauma, or perhaps because of it, the home video itself has gained a kind of sacred status in American culture. The Zapruder film is shown in *JFK* as evidence that supposedly discredits the “magic bullet” theory. The Warren Commission’s historiographic legitimacy is put under the microscope, becoming vulnerable to such attacks, precisely because the weaving of the events that eventually prevailed as the official history was done in a manner that assigned almost supernatural (magical), or to borrow Stone’s epithet, “ridiculous” properties and abilities to an object—a single bullet—that went beyond the realm of the rational, the logical.

O’Keefe’s embodiment of the five male homosexuals, Stone’s rhetorical choices, aspects of the work itself, and especially, Garrison’s fixation with Kennedy are manifestations of a discourse driven primarily by fetishism. Borrowing again from Gammon and Makinen, the linguistic implications are not without significance; “fetishism” they note, “is itself a synecdoche (a part for the whole substitution)” (44). Each body part stands in for the role each individual had in the Kennedy assassination: one is the hand, the other is the eyes, another is the mouth, and so on and so forth. The parts of each make up the whole of the Beast, a supernatural force standing against everything that is holy and moral. The representation of brutish, non-Christian “otherness” culminates with the elaborate orgy scene; the villainous men are dressed up in eighteenth-century aristocracy costumes, while one of them has his entire body painted in a shiny gold color that resembles a statue of a Greek god. Immediately after, there is a cut to the Garrison family enjoying a nice, wholesome dinner on Easter Sunday, establishing an even more obvious dialectic between the virtuous nuclear family and the perverse group of homosexual villains.

Another interesting instance of a fetishistic representation of otherness is David Ferrie’s apartment. After his murder, the team of crusaders led by

Garrison visits Ferrie's apartment. The camera pans through the entire space which is filled with articles associated with mystical religious rituals; we enter a dark-lit room hosting a skeleton, a cross, a picture of the pope, beads, mice, needles, cigarette buds, and pills; moving to the next room, we see a boudoir covered with different kinds of make-up, wigs, and a picture of a naked man from the waste up. Stone's attempt to establish the "other" by creating a shrine-like space of paganistic or even "voodoo" practices is similar to the manner Western Europeans imagined the ritual practices of the African people of the seventeenth century. Mr. X, the film's *deus ex machina*, appears out of nowhere to consolidate Garrison's theory; for many, this mystical nameless figure stands for the director himself who, through this character, is able to unravel his own unconfirmed but highly compelling story.<sup>22</sup> It is Mr. X who asks the question: "Why did *they* want Kennedy dead?" Oliver Stone produces an elaborate response to the question of "What happened?" but leaves the key question "open" for the audience to decide; or, so he claims. Most would agree that there is nothing "open" about *JFK*; if anything, the film eliminates all ambiguity, something that becomes a source of both pleasure and displeasure. When at the end of his elaborate closing arguments Garrison looks straight at the camera—automatically placing the spectator in the position of the diegetic jury—and says the, now, infamous "It's up to you," Stone violated much more than the cinematic rules of realism: by breaking down the "fourth wall" he managed to erect a much stronger one between the characters and the audience.

What is it that caused such emotional reactions (of both positive and negative affect)? I believe that it is Kennedy's representation as a *sacred object* that places the film in a category by itself. And, how does Stone achieve this? Put simply: the "what happened" is addressed through *paranoia*; the "why it happened" through *fetishism*. Since Kennedy's death, cinema has been an active participant in what I would like to call the *Kennedy Complex*, a love-hate relationship between the American public and its most beloved "Father" who died prematurely by the hand of one (or many more?) of his own "children," materializing the Oedipal fantasy.

Most films on this subject have abstained from two things: creating an

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22. Mr. X is a fictional character based, in part, on an actual person, Col. Fletcher Prouty, who had been chief of special operations during the Kennedy years. Prouty has stated that Kennedy was, indeed, planning to withdraw the troops from Vietnam, but most of Mr. X's "soliloquy" is Stone's elaborate interpretation of Prouty's statements.

overarching, *all*-inclusive community of villains—which speaks directly to fetishism’s excess—and portraying Kennedy as a Christ-like figure—which speaks to fetishism’s tendency to infuse objects/subjects with special meaning.<sup>23</sup> Instead they remain within the conventional conspiratorial narrative modeled after the paranoid form of storytelling. Paranoia may also be characterized by excess, but in this case it is the worship of another individual that produces this alternate universe, not the worship of the self. What is more, by weaving *all* conspiracy theories (C.I.A., the Pentagon, Castro, F.B.I., Lyndon Johnson, etc.) into a single narrative, Stone ends up canceling them out and closing up the subject. His treatment of Kennedy as a sacred object makes any harsh criticisms against him almost sacrilegious. Paranoia emerges as ideological rather than pathological, mainly because the same rhetoric is employed by both sides, but whereas with Garrison it translates as the words of a brilliant mind, with Ferrie, for instance, it translates as the words of an irrational psychotic. Just like Kennedy, Garrison is an infallible man, the only “genuine” son to recognize his “Father’s” specialness as well as his enemies. This form of rhetoric so deeply invested in religious imagery and religious parables, proudly stands against the secular Warren Commission Report as a sacred document that “infidels” might question but faithful followers will religiously and, above all, unquestionably embrace. One might say that *JFK* is a manifestation of anthropological fetishism at its best and worst.

## Conclusions

This essay identifies and introduces fetishism as a third component, an active participant in the formation of conspiratorial, crisis texts that have previously been examined primarily through the theoretical framework of paranoia. This distinct mode of representation we might call *fetishistic paranoia*. One might wonder why this is important; after all, CT and, especially, Stone’s film, whether a product of fetishism or paranoia, still remain, for most, the products of “distorted” minds. This is important, I believe, for the following reasons: first and foremost, conspiracy theory in general, and in film in particular, is far too popular a phenomenon to be underestimated. More and more we have come to rely on, deal with crisis,

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23. I am referring to films such as *Executive Action* (Dir. David Miller, 1973), *The Parallax View* (Dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1974), *Winter Kills* (Dir. William Richert, 1979), and the more recent *Interview with the Assassin* (Dir. Neil Burger, 2002).

and understand history through the conspiratorial lens, to the point where paranoid thought is gradually becoming “naturalized” rather than exceptional. Second, when a phenomenon becomes so prevalent, engaging in an over-simplified dismissive discourse can be as dangerous as the narratives in question. Third, when the pathological condition of paranoia is perceived invariably as the sole (or main) justification for the emergence of such theories, and the only theoretical model through which they can be explored, this attitude tends to homogenize them in an over-generalized and limited manner. Conspiracy equals paranoia is as rigid a cause/effect relationship as those that the putative narratives establish. Finally, in order to gain a deeper and better understanding of the underlying defense mechanisms and structures against crises that give rise to this popular mode of thought and introduce other dimensions that contribute to its formation, we need to evaluate these narratives within their respective socio-historical contexts. In Kennedy’s case, fetishism works on multiple levels; it can be seen as both the driving force that compels individuals to remain fixated on an event that took place more than forty years ago, and a way of structuring and representing the Beast, the supernatural entity with the power to destroy the object of special devotion. We can identify elements of both anthropological and psychoanalytic fetishism. The former is employed as a mode of representing otherness; the latter seems to explain the force that drives the production of conspiratorial texts.

American literature and film have responded to the Kennedy assassination—for some being a national disaster and for others a global crisis—in a variety of ways during the past four decades. Authors and filmmakers revisit and re-interpret the historical event, they question it, they respond forcefully, critically, emotionally, but above all, artistically to it. These precious cultural documents—visual and/or literary—do much more than merely open Pandora’s Box and release uncomfortable ghosts from the past. They also facilitate an understanding of ourselves—readers and audiences—of ways we invent, strategies we adopt, notions and ideas we internalize and then proceed to naturalize.

Richard Hofstadter, in his seminal work *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (1966), identifies a pattern in political rhetoric which he describes as “the paranoid style” that “... represents an old and recurrent mode of expression in our public life which has frequently been linked with movements of suspicious discontent, and whose content remains much the same even when it is adopted by men of distinctly different purposes” (6). In establishing the reality of the style, Hofstadter

uses excerpts from political speeches taken from intervals of half a century, illustrating the fact that people and crises may come and go but the discourse always stays the same. Examples include a speech delivered by Senator McCarthy in June 1951, a manifesto signed in 1895 by leaders of the Populist party, a Texas newspaper article written in 1855, and a sermon preached in Massachusetts in 1798. I would like to argue that we also have adopted a “fetishistic” style for coping with crisis and relating to the world, both through patterns of discourse and through a naturalized perception of the social order which can mask the fetishism at work. The paranoid style might be a popular way of *making sense of the world*, but the fetishistic style becomes a way of *relating to it*.

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