
# The Kennedy Assassination

Peter Knight

REPRESENTING AMERICAN EVENTS

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Patrick O'Donnell, Chair of the Department of English, Michigan State University

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# Series Editors' Preface

The principal aim of the Representing American Events series is to provide reliable books that focus on selected key events within American history from the perspective of several different disciplines, including cultural studies, politics and literary studies. In other words, the series aims not simply to provide distinctive interpretations of significant American events, but to provide a cross-sectional analysis of the 'event', offering readers a range of disciplinary perspectives on one particular historical event.

There are many American Studies books that focus upon historical events within the twentieth century. However, for the most part, these books approach the historical events in a *diachronic* manner, that is looking at *multiple* historical events and their consequences usually through the perspective of a *single* disciplinary focus through time. The main innovative aim of this series is to consider a *single* historical event through the perspective of *multiple* disciplinary foci, in a more *synchronic* manner; that is, taking a cross-section of the various discourses that represent the event. The main idea, therefore, is to provide readers with books that analyse the *contexts* and *co-texts* of historical events in different disciplines in a cross-sectional manner. These 'events' might have lasted a few minutes (the assassination of John F. Kennedy), a few hours (the 9/11 Twin Towers catastrophe), a day (the attack on Pearl Harbor), several days or months (the moonlanding project), or several years (the Great Depression), but in all cases, the 'event' has become something of a landmark in the development of the Unites States in the twentieth century. The series aims to present students with books that are informative about the historical event itself, but that take a *lateral* perspective on the ways in which the event has been represented in the principal contexts and co-texts of historical, literary, cinematic, political, sociological and artistic discourses. The series also aims to consider the ways in which the 'event' has been represented in subsequent years in these different discourses.

Characteristically, each chapter in each series volume will focus primarily on a few instances of 'case studies' of key 'co-texts' within the particular discourses under scrutiny. However, the chapters will also discuss other texts within the general domain of that particular discourse. So, for example, a chapter on literary representations might include a sample of two or three key co-texts, but situate these within a wider literary-historical perspective, i.e., within literary modernism, or within genre, or within a more general discussion of other literary texts.

In order to provide authoritative books that are organised with a particular historically informative focus rather than a primarily argumentative or ideological basis, these books aim to be a hybrid of the informed student textbook and an academically focused monograph. Taken together, the series aims to provide undergraduate students with reliable and informative contextualised surveys of the representation and development of American culture. In so doing, the Series Editors have commissioned books for the *Representing American Events* series from established authoritative scholars in their respective fields. While each volume will primarily focus on the event under consideration, we hope that this series will construct a repertoire of up-to-date and contemporary perspectives on the United States in the past century, that will in turn advance debates about American society and culture into the twenty-first century.

Tim Woods
Helena Grice

# Acknowledgements

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# 1 Introduction

On Friday, 22 November 1963 President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. Accompanied by his wife Jacqueline Kennedy, he was in Texas on a two-day tour that was designed to heal a rift in the Democratic party in the region, and as an early part of his campaign for re-election in 1964. Having made a grand arrival by presidential jet at Dallas Love Field airport from their previous stop in Forth Worth (even though it was only thirty miles by car), Kennedy and his wife were greeted by a surprisingly enthusiastic crowd on the sunny November day with bright blue skies (see fig. 1.1). Mrs Kennedy had kept out of the public limelight for several months since the death of her newborn baby in August 1963, and so was delighted to find that the Texas public greeted her warmly. The motorcade route was scheduled to pass through downtown on its way to the Dallas Trade Mart, where Kennedy was to deliver a speech at lunchtime. Despite fears that Dallas would give the liberal president a hostile welcome (only a month before, the US Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson had been jostled and spat on by a Dallas crowd), the motorcade was cheered by a large crowd as it proceeded through downtown Dallas. Just as the president's open-top limousine – also carrying Jackie beside JFK, with Texas Governor John Connally and his wife Nellie Connally in the jump seats, and two secret service agents in the driving seats – was entering Dealey Plaza at the edge of the downtown district before the freeway to the Trade Mart began, several shots rang out at 12.30 p.m. (Central Standard Time). Kennedy was hit in the back and throat, Connally was wounded in the chest, wrist and thigh, and then, as the limousine slowed down with no one quite seeming to realise what was happening, a final shot exploded Kennedy's head. Jackie Kennedy began to crawl over the rear of the car, supposedly trying to rescue fragments of her husband's skull, but Secret Service Agent Clint Hill who had been in the follow-up vehicle leapt up onto the presidential limousine and pushed the First Lady back into the seat as the car picked up

**Figure 1.1** Love Field, Dallas, 23 November 1963. Art Rickerby/Getty Images.

pace. Leaving behind scenes of chaos and disbelief in Dealey Plaza, the limousine sped off through a triple underpass to Parkland Hospital a few miles away, and, despite the efforts of local doctors to revive him, Kennedy was declared dead at 1 p.m., with the announcement made

public at 1.38 p.m. Vice President Lyndon Johnson (who had also been in the motorcade in his home state) was then sworn in as president on board Air Force One, before it took off. The plane also carried Kennedy's body and his widow back to Washington, DC.

By 1.50 p.m. a 23-year-old man named Lee Harvey Oswald had been arrested in a cinema in connection with the shooting at 1.15 p.m. of Police Officer J. D. Tippit in a residential neighbourhood of Dallas, and by the time Oswald was brought into the police headquarters the Dallas Police were indicating that he was also a prime suspect in the killing of the president. Oswald, however, denied both shootings, apparently claiming that he was just a 'patsy'. The police had found a cheap, mail-order Mannlicher-Carcano rifle and three spent cartridges on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository overlooking Dealey Plaza, where Oswald had been working as a shipping clerk. Other evidence found that weekend seemed to point to Oswald as the assassin, not least photos that showed him posing with what appeared to be the assassination rifle and left-wing magazines in the backyard of his house several months prior to the assassination. It also quickly emerged that Oswald, a native of New Orleans, was a former Marine and defector to the Soviet Union, who had returned to the US with his Russian wife and baby in 1961. Back in the US, he had had a series of short-lived jobs, and at the time of the assassination was living away from his wife and infant daughter, in a rooming house in Dallas. Apparently once again unsatisfied with life in America, he tried to become involved in activism on behalf of Communist Cuba, and also made a trip to Mexico apparently with the aim of securing a visa to Cuba.

But before Oswald could be brought to trial for the murder of Tippit and Kennedy, he was shot dead on 24 November by Jack Ruby, a local nightclub owner. Oswald's death was captured on live television, but the assassination itself was not, although several home movies of varying quality did film the limousine in Dealey Plaza, the most notable of which was taken by Abraham Zapruder. (It was not seen by the American public until 1975.) On 25 November Kennedy was buried in a state funeral in Washington, accompanied by a wave of grief in the nation and much of the world, a sense of loss that seemed to be most acutely felt within the United States by women, African Americans and Catholics. On 29 November President Johnson convened a blue-ribbon inquiry headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren, and the Commission issued its report in September 1964, concluding that Oswald acted alone.

This much is known for certain about the Kennedy assassination, but more or less everything else is the subject of fierce dispute. The

event has been represented in a myriad different ways, with thousands of books, magazine and newspaper articles, novels, films and computer animations looking at every aspect of the case, from the biography of Oswald to the possibility of a vast conspiracy within the so-called military-industrial complex (for a partial bibliography see Guth and Wrone 1980; Frewin 1993). The seven seconds of mayhem in Dealey Plaza in particular have been obsessively scrutinised by both official and amateur investigators alike, with detailed analysis of the direction and timing of the bullets based on the medical, photographic and eyewitness evidence. The event has been imagined and represented in many different genres including journalism, memoir, history, biography, government reports, sociological inquiries, popular conspiracy exposés, literary and pulp fiction, museums and monuments, Hollywood film, and avant-garde art, but the fundamental divide is between those who believe that Oswald acted alone (as the Warren Commission insisted), and those who are convinced that there was some kind of conspiracy or cover-up, even that Oswald was merely a patsy for a conspiracy orchestrated by the CIA, Cuban exiles, the Mafia, the Dallas Police, or Texas oil millionaires and carried out by professional assassins. Despite the painstaking government inquiries finding little or no evidence that Oswald had accomplices, over the last four decades there has been a slow shift in public opinion with the vast majority of Americans now believing that there was a conspiracy (see DiLouie 2003).

The rift between the conspiracy and no-conspiracy camps is part of a larger struggle over who gets to tell the story of American history. Conspiracy theorists have argued that, because the official version of events was at best negligent and at worst part of a conspiracy cover-up, and because academic historians have tended not to research the assassination, it is up to ordinary citizens to investigate and report what really happened. In a similar fashion, journalists who were on the scene at the time have asserted their authority as professional eyewitnesses to the unfolding historical drama, while novelists have claimed a special capability of understanding the event in the round, and film makers such as Oliver Stone have likewise insisted that popular cinema has an important role to play in creating an alternative version of events to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy.

The debate about the specifics of what happened in Dealey Plaza has also come to function as a way of arguing about the significance of Kennedy's legacy and the meaning of the 1960s more generally. The event has usually been represented as a watershed moment in American history, often with the implication that Kennedy's death marked the loss of innocence, hope and liberal idealism, before the onset of violence and

social breakdown later in the 1960s. In the very early days supporters of Kennedy saw the event as an outburst of the kind of right-wing anti-cosmopolitan politics of hatred that was the very antithesis of everything for which (in their eyes) Kennedy stood, but this idea was soon undermined by evidence that Oswald was not a right-wing nut but a strongly committed leftist. In the immediate aftermath of the assassination, Jackie Kennedy likewise helped promote the idea that Kennedy's one thousand days in the White House had been like the mythical legend of King Arthur's Camelot, an era of nobility and grace that had been cut short by an assassin's bullet. Some conspiracy theorists later took up the idea that the assassination was in effect a coup d'état by a shadowy cabal of military chiefs and arms manufacturers who wanted Kennedy removed because he was supposedly about to withdraw American troops from Vietnam and wind down the Cold War. But other conspiracy theorists, as they learned more about Kennedy's prolific sexual affairs, his connections with Mafia figures and his involvement in secret Cold War plans to kill Fidel Castro, portrayed the assassination as a case of Kennedy reaping what he sowed. In each case, what is at stake in the presentation of the specific details of the account of the assassination is an argument about the 1960s, whether in effect everything began to go wrong (with race riots, the assassination of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King in 1968, the Vietnam War and Watergate) only because a shadowy conspiracy had killed off the nation's last beacon of hope for a better future.

Hardwired into most accounts of the Kennedy assassination, whether conspiracist or not, is the implicit assumption that it profoundly altered the course of American and even global history, accompanied by the idea that the descent into chaos, violence and corruption of the later 1960s and the 1970s can be dated to 22 November 1963. But this common assumption is based on a naively optimistic faith in America as an exceptional nation, a beacon of light to the world, that would otherwise have remained innocent and uncorrupted if it had not been for the evil intentions of either a conspiracy or a lone gunman. It ignores the possibility that there was already a long history of trigger-happy violence towards American presidents, and that the problems of social upheaval – in particular the escalating Vietnam War as part of the continuing Cold War – that beset Johnson's and Nixon's administrations were merely a continuation of problems in which the Kennedy administration was deeply embroiled. If anything, the succession of Johnson to the presidency quickened the pace of liberal reform that Kennedy had only cautiously advanced in his brief term of office, not least in the sphere of civil rights. Perhaps the real consequence of the

assassination was to ensure that Kennedy would remain posthumously elevated to the status of mythical hero that he had occupied in the public mind while alive, despite later revisionist histories that focused on his foreign policy fiascos such as the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba in 1961 and the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 that was closer to catastrophe than was popularly perceived at the time.

Although the Kennedy assassination was indeed an event that profoundly shocked many people around the world at the time, much of the overdetermined significance with which it is now invested was not necessarily felt at the time but has been retrospectively attached to it in the light of subsequent episodes such as the revelations about the illegal activities of the US intelligence agencies in the early 1970s. It even turns out that the common phenomenon of a flashbulb memory – the idea that people can remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news about the assassination – is not as reliable as previously believed (see Brown and Kulik 1977; Wertsch 2002). In many representations of the Kennedy assassination the event is less seared at the time into memory as it is imaginatively recreated through the filter of nostalgia or grief or anger as a symbolically necessary origin and explanation for present troubles. The many versions of the event this book explores are often as much a reflection on their moment of creation in the present as they are a historical document of the bygone era of the early 1960s.

One reason that writers, film makers and artists have been repeatedly drawn to representing the Kennedy assassination is that it seems to push to the limit the very idea of realist representation and the transparency of images to reflect the world. Taking this idea further, the literary critic Fredric Jameson insists that the significance of the event is not to be found in any supposed political shift that the death of Kennedy brought about. Instead it marks a vital moment of transition in which people form a sense of solidarity not through the usual forms of political commitment, but through the artificial community of being part of a national, and indeed global, television audience for the first time. In danger of lapsing into a substitute form of exceptionalism, Jameson sees the assassination as the 'inaugural event' of the 1960s and postmodernism, a world in which experience is never direct and unmediated but always channelled through media representations. On this line of thinking, the really important outcome of that television-saturated weekend of the Kennedy assassination is not so much a national loss of innocence as 'a new collective experience of reception' that alters how we engage with the world. The assassination led to the 'coming of age of the whole media culture', Jameson continues, in a

'prodigious new display of synchronicity and a communicational situation that amounted to a dialectical leap over anything hitherto suspected' (Jameson 1991: 354–5).

Jameson finds a glimmer of utopian promise in the fact that what held the world together in its grief was a new form of collective spectatorship that seemed to promise a new kind of global consciousness. Other commentators, however, have offered a more pessimistic reading of the event and its role in the creation of the so-called society of the spectacle. The novelist Don DeLillo, for example, has argued that the assassination led to a loss of a sense of 'coherent reality most of us shared' (DeLillo 1988: 22), partly as a result of the seeming impossibility of reconciling all the excess of information and contradictions into a single coherent account, but also partly an effect of the endless mediated repetition of the event (in particular the Zapruder footage and the death of Oswald on 'live' television) that slowly desensitises the audience to the reality of the murder. On the one hand, the Kennedy assassination seemed to usher in a new mode of perception that is always filtered through media representations; on the other, in DeLillo's view it is only in the light of subsequent presidential assassinations, serial killings and high-school shootings repeated ad infinitum on the nightly news that we can rightly interpret the shooting of JFK as a moment whose aura of reality has faded with its endless recreations on screen and in print.

The postmodern media theorist Jean Baudrillard likewise sees the Kennedy assassination as being on the cusp of a crisis of representation of which we only fully became aware later. In his paradoxical account of the inexorable slide of political power into a simulated Hollywood version of itself, the Kennedy assassination only comes to take on the contours of 'originality' with the discovery of its fake copies:

> Power can stage its own murder to rediscover a glimmer of existence and legitimacy. Thus with the American presidents: the Kennedys are murdered because they still have a political dimension. Others – Johnson, Nixon, Ford – only had a right to puppet attempts, to simulated murders. But they nevertheless needed that aura of an artificial menace in order to conceal that they were nothing other than mannequins of power. (Baudrillard 1988: 177)

There is a measure of despairing nostalgia in Baudrillard's attempt to reground a coherent narrative of political power in a version of the innocence-to-experience story that structures many accounts of the Kennedy assassination. In effect it is only in the 'vertigo of interpretations' surrounding Watergate that Baudrillard can belatedly posit the

Kennedy assassinations as the real deal, and yet that sense of vertigo is itself partly an effect of a crisis of confidence in the narratives of the authorities and the authority of narrative itself that emerged from the Kennedy assassination. Characterising the Kennedy assassination as the last moment of solid ground before the infinite regress of simulations opens up is itself a convenient fiction, an imaginary moment of origin that is needed to stabilise Baudrillard's account of the political and epistemological instability of postmodernity. Like many other accounts of the significance of the Kennedy assassination, Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum of presidential power attempts to create a causally coherent narrative of before-and-after, even as it draws attention to the impossibility of telling such stories any more. In short, the endlessly repeated attempts to represent the Kennedy assassination are intimately connected to debates about the limits of realist representation that go by the name 'postmodernism'.

Each chapter in this book discusses the way that the Kennedy assassination has been represented in a different genre and for a different purpose. Although this way of organising the material reflects the struggle for authority to tell public history from competing disciplines, the division is to some extent artificial because the assassination debates have unfolded over the last four decades in a confused rush of claim and counter-claim, creating together a field of inquiry that is almost too vast for any individual to master. What follows is therefore necessarily based on only a selection of the most important milestones in the mind-boggling mountain of primary source documents and second-hand reflections on the event that have appeared since 22 November 1963. This study makes no claim to offer a solution to the case, or indeed to engage in detail with the often arcane debates about particular conspiracy scenarios or their refutations. Yet thinking about the way the event has haunted the American imagination has much to offer the student of US culture since the 1960s.

# 2 Journalism

One of the most amazing facts about the Kennedy assassination is that, according to a national opinion poll carried out in the immediate aftermath of that eventful weekend, 68 per cent of Americans had heard about the shooting by the time the president was pronounced dead at 1 p.m., and by six o'clock that evening 99.8 per cent of the nation had heard the news (Sheatsley and Feldman 1965: 152–3; Spitzer and Spitzer 1965: 101–3). The speed with which Americans (and, indeed, the rest of the world) heard the news was unprecedented, and highlighted the importance of the media – particularly television – in creating a sense of national unity in grief in the immediate aftermath of the assassination. In the period from the shooting to the funeral Americans bought record numbers of newspapers and were glued to their television sets as events unfolded. These were, according to a member of the editorial board of the *New York Times* at the time, 'four of the most tumultuous days in the life of the nation and the history of American journalism' (Semple 2003: vii).

But how exactly did the media shape people's perceptions of the assassination, and to what extent did they set the agenda for future representations of the event? Is it true, as many journalists have insisted, that the assassination was a watershed event in the history of the media? Was the media coverage of the Kennedy assassination a triumph of professionalism (as many journalists asserted), or was it a dereliction of their duty (as conspiracy critics have subsequently claimed)? How did journalists stake their claim for authority in the telling of national history? This chapter will begin by summarising what the newspapers, magazines and broadcasters actually covered, before going on to look at the wider question of how these early accounts shaped future ones, and whether the event was a success or a failure for the media.

## Reporting the Assassination

The media had to scramble hard to put together a coherent account of the assassination. The story of how the news was broken to the nation was subsequently turned into a heroic account of fast reactions, uncanny instinct and professional skill, but at the time there was a great deal of confusion that occasionally bordered on farce. Few news outlets had assigned any additional reporters to the Texas trip, relying on the White House press corps who usually covered the president – the only foreign newspaper to send a reporter was the London *Sunday Times*, based on a vague tip from a presidential assistant that there might be trouble in the fevered political atmosphere of Dallas. It was seen as a regular political vote-winning tour, with the only items of interest being the presence for the first time of Jackie Kennedy on a campaign trip, the feud brewing between two rival factions of the Texas Democrats led by Senator Yarborough and Governor Connally (sorting out the tension was the ostensible reason for the journey), and the possibility of a repeat of the right-wing hostility that had met UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson on a visit to Dallas the previous month.

Reporters were not only thin on the ground but were in the wrong place at the vital moment, and so were often not actually eyewitnesses to the main events at all. Most were on the press bus about ten cars behind the lead vehicles in the presidential motorcade, and when shots rang out few of these journalists had any idea what had happened, if indeed anything at all. One of the noteworthy features about the initial media response is that very few people had any idea what the 'event' actually was, including both the eyewitnesses in Dealey Plaza and the reporters on the scene. A reporter on the press bus called out 'What happened?' and all they could see through the windows were people running in all directions in the Plaza (Smith et al. 1964: 6). Those who heard something thought that the noises were firecrackers or a motorcycle backfiring. On seeing bystanders run up to the bridge over the freeway, the reporters on the bus speculated that 'someone might have dropped something onto the motorcade from the overpass' (Smith et al. 1964: 7), but most were unaware that anything was wrong. Some of the reporters clamoured to be let off the bus, but as the limousines carrying Kennedy and Johnson sped away to Parkland Hospital the press bus continued on its way to the Trade Mart, the intended final destination of the motorcade. Some of the reporters on the bus assumed that there had been an unpleasant incident akin to the Stevenson one (demonstrators had struck the ambassador with placards), and that the Secret Service had whisked Kennedy away from harm and embarrass-

ment. It was only when the press bus reached the Trade Mart and found the president's car not there that they knew something was up – but they still didn't know what. The assembled guests were just sitting down to the lunch that Kennedy was to have eaten when the reporters rushed in looking for the press room. A rumour about the shooting spread around the building; Tom Wicker of the *New York Times* described it as the only rumour he had ever *seen* (Smith et al. 1964: 7). In short, in the first few minutes after the shooting most of the reporters at the scene were struggling to catch up with events in an atmosphere of wild rumours and lack of hard information, yet, as we'll see, in a very short time newspapers and magazines (and to a lesser extent radio and television) had managed to assemble a reasonably coherent and measured account – and acted as if there had been no interim period of chaos.

The story of how news about the assassination spread is, understandably, littered with confusions, inaccuracies, lucky breaks and dramatic moments. The first reports came from journalists who were nearer the president's car than those in the press bus, even if they at first were equally unsure about what was happening. In particular Merriman Smith of United Press International (UPI) and Jack Bell of The Associated Press (AP) were in the White House press pool car just behind the vice president's car, and so were near enough to hear the shots clearly (and for one of the passengers to realise what they were), if not to see the shooting. As Kennedy's car took off at high speed they shouted at their own driver to give chase. In the press pool car on the way to the hospital Smith and Bell began a tug-of-war over the radio phone, an undignified struggle won by the former that led to UPI being the first news service to report the shooting, with the words, 'Three shots were fired at President Kennedy's motorcade today in downtown Dallas', a scoop for which Smith won the Pulitzer prize. An account of this epic if short-lived tussle to announce the event to the world was repeated in many early stories about the assassination as the getting of the story became a legendary part of the story itself.

Smith's UPI flash and an eyewitness report from James Altgens, an AP photographer in Dealey Plaza, were quickly picked up by radio and television stations across the nation. The ABC network broke into local programmes with a voice-over bulletin repeating the UPI flash at 12.36 p.m. (just six minutes after the shooting), and Walter Cronkite, the CBS anchorman, appeared on screen with the first flash at 12.40 p.m., with NBC following shortly after at 12.45 p.m. The reports coming from the wire services in the first half hour were sketchy and confused, with no clear sense of how seriously wounded the president was.

Picking up on a mistaken eyewitness report of Johnson rubbing his arm, AP, for example, reported that the vice president had been 'wounded slightly' (Manchester 1967: 281). Unlike the death of President Roosevelt in 1945 when the release of the news had been carefully controlled by the White House press office, with the death of President Kennedy the official sources of information were in the dark just as much as the reporters seeking authoritative confirmation from them. In the first hours after the shooting, the most powerful man in the world knew no more than anyone else: when Johnson reached Air Force One the first thing he did was to turn on the television, 'hoping to hear something new about the extent of the assassination plot' (Bishop 1968: 270). Journalists afterwards compared the Kennedy assassination to covering a natural disaster where the official channels are no more informed than anyone else (Webster 1964: 27). Reporters on the ground recounted later how they had relied on instinct in assessing which rumours and reports were to be believed, partly to emphasise the accuracy of their professional judgement, but also perhaps partly to mimic the unorthodox leadership style of the dead president himself, marked out by a charismatic disdain for pursuing proper channels (see Zelizer 1992).

When the members of the press bus turned up at Parkland Hospital, they were now nearer the scene of the action but no closer to finding out accurately what was going on. The scene in the hospital was frantic as the reporters raced to find working phones and hard information. Official confirmation of the president's death didn't come until a news conference, hastily organised in a nurse's classroom by Mac Kilduff, the White House's acting press secretary, announced that 'President Kennedy died at approximately 1 p.m. Central Standard Time today here in Dallas. He died of a gunshot wound in the brain' (Bishop 1968: 265). After that initial announcement was conveyed to the world by a quick-thinking UPI correspondent at 1.35 p.m., the press conference descended into chaos. The hundred or so reporters shouted their questions over one another; an aide to Governor Connally made repeated and confused attempts to draw a diagram showing where the respective passengers in the president's limousine had been sitting; and, most significant for future conspiracy theorists, four of the doctors who had attended Kennedy gave contradictory and potentially misleading answers to questions about the nature of the president's wounds (in particular, they talked about the possibility of the hole in the neck being an entrance wound, which would have meant that there must have been two assassins, one behind and one in front, and therefore a conspiracy rather than a lone assassin). Questions were being 'fired like Roman

candles' at the doctors, as they sat blinded by television lights and crowded by reporters thrusting their tape recorders (Bishop 1968: 283).

Similar scenes of rowdy confusion dogged the whole assassination weekend, particularly in the Dallas Police headquarters where Lee Harvey Oswald was being held and interrogated. The presidential press corps was quickly joined by more than three hundred other reporters who crowded into the narrow hallways of the police building, with very little control on who was allowed to be there. At times it seemed that the journalists stepped beyond their role of merely reporting the news and instead they began to call the shots, not least when Police Chief Curry – aware of how the world's journalists would view the failure of his men to protect the president, and thus keen to keep the press on his side – gave in to their repeated clamouring that they be allowed to see Oswald. By all accounts the impromptu press conference with the suspect was not merely a noisy fiasco in terms of gaining information, but a serious infringement of the prisoner's legal rights. The potential danger in an anarchic press mob not merely reporting but also making the news came to a head with the transfer of Oswald from the police headquarters to the Dallas County Jail on the morning of Sunday, 24 November at 11 a.m. The scheduling showed more concern for the press's convenience than the prisoner's safety, and, as the Warren Commission Report made clear, the scrum of reporters and television lights in the police basement helped make it possible for Jack Ruby to sneak in unnoticed and shoot Oswald (Warren Commission 1964: 208–16, 240–2).

Given the chaos in the first few minutes and hours after the assassination, it is remarkable that the first editions of newspapers and magazines produced such a coherent and sustained coverage of the events. The *New York Times*, for example, had just seven hours before the presses rolled for the Saturday edition, and they managed to put together a paper that was surprisingly thorough in the range of its coverage. Some newspapers issued as many as eight extras on the Friday. All the major news magazines (*US News and World Report*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Life*) had to replate their entire issues and rewrite many new pages on an extremely tight deadline; there are many tales of extraordinary dedication to the cause, with, for example, reporters working thirty-six hours straight (Rivers 1965). The newspapers and magazines were rewarded for their effort, with the *New York Times* for example selling over a million copies, 400,000 more than usual, and all the news magazines selling out completely. Although one of the major outcomes of the assassination was the realisation that print journalism could no longer compete with television news in a major breaking story, the

record sales of newspapers and magazines nevertheless demonstrated that they had something distinct to offer. In part they functioned as a collectable memorial, and some papers catered to that need: the *Miami News*, for example, used a full front page photo of Kennedy with gravestone lettering alongside a glowing obituary in its Saturday edition. But newspapers also pursued their traditional role as providers of a balanced and straightforward record of events, with the front page of the Sunday edition of the *New York Times*, for instance, offering a formally balanced composition, with a large photo of Kennedy's coffin lying in state in the centre, under the measured and all-encompassing headline, 'Kennedy's Body Lies in White House; Johnson at Helm with Wide Backing; Police Say Prisoner is the Assassin'.

Over the long weekend newspapers dedicated on average about half of their available column inches to the assassination, diverting some of the space from withdrawn advertising and the rest from the omission of other local, state and national news stories. The coverage was divided between the events (including biographies of the major players), the effects (along with reaction in the US and abroad), and the background. The *New York Times* provides a useful case study of the way newspapers represented the Kennedy assassination at the time. The first day's lead article by Tom Wicker, the paper's White House reporter travelling with the president, was jotted down as the events unfolded and then dictated to the head office from Love Field airport. It has been described as an 'extraordinary individual achievement' (Semple 2003: 24), and, like the rest of the paper's first day coverage, is indeed a testament to how quickly the nation's newspaper of record managed to mobilise its resources to produce such wide-ranging coverage. The front page also included a piece written by James Reston that was widely praised for its emotive evaluation of the event as a national tragedy in which Kennedy was the victim of a violent streak in the nation that he had sought to curb. In addition to Wicker's concise but moving account and Reston's stirring editorial, Saturday's edition had reports on the unfolding police investigation, lengthy and remarkably detailed back stories on Oswald, biographical accounts of Kennedy and Johnson, considerations of the likely political consequences, eyewitness reports, stories about the Secret Service preparations for the trip, a piece on the last rites given to Kennedy, the return of the cabinet from halfway across the Pacific, the emerging arrangements for the funeral, descriptions of Jackie Kennedy's composure, in addition to numerous vignettes of the reaction in New York, elsewhere in the US and abroad. That hastily written first day's paper also contained some surprisingly off-beat items: an article, for example, on the way that

President Kennedy's death 'continues the coincidence that presidents elected at 20-year intervals in zero-numbered years die in office' (Semple 2003: 58); a piece on previous successful and attempted presidential assassinations; an article on television coverage; and a discussion of the constitutional haziness surrounding the succession of a vice president.

Given the limited time, the range of coverage is impressive, as is the amount of factual information gleaned and distilled into reasonably polished articles. Of particular note is the detailed material on Oswald that included an account of his movements on the day, his time in Russia and return to America, his proficiency as a marksman and his interest in Marxist and pro-Castro causes. In fact, most of what the Warren Commission Report spent half a year investigating is contained in miniature on that first day's newspaper. Although the editor of the fortieth anniversary reissue of the coverage could rightly praise the *New York Times* for 'how well the coverage has held up over the years' (Semple 2003: ix), we also need to consider the inaccuracies and omissions, as well as the way that the choice of article helped set the agenda for assassination accounts for years to come. Some of the seemingly marginal yet surprisingly controversial topics – most of which revolved around information that the Kennedy family or those close to them tried to control – that were to dominate discussion of JFK's death were already in place in those early editions. For example, the question of whether Kennedy was already dead when given the last rites is given circumspect treatment in the *New York Times*, as is the thorny issue of precisely when he died (an important issue in debates about whether, in those dark days of nuclear four-minute warnings, the US was left for any length of time without a commander-in-chief). There is also a piece involving discussion about when and by whom the Kennedy children were told of their father's death, a seemingly trivial matter that became central to the bitter personal and legal disputes between the Kennedy family and William Manchester, the appointed official historian of the assassination.

Conspiracy researchers would subsequently berate the *New York Times* and other mainstream journalism for their bias towards the lone gunman position (see Hennelly and Policoff 1992). This was not surprising at the time given that all the indications from the Dallas Police (and presumably from off-the-record briefings from the FBI) pointed to Oswald as a lone assassin. Yet there are details in the *Times*' coverage that might have prompted other lines of inquiry, if only to allay the apparent inconsistencies. There are, for example, various versions of the number of shots fired and their timing, including an eyewitness

describing how the third shot rang 'almost immediately on top of' the second (Semple 2003: 48), which, if true, would have meant that there was more than one shooter. Wicker's lead article, reflecting the confusion of eyewitness accounts including from the occupants of the presidential limousine, has the first shot fired just as the vehicle was about to enter the triple underpass (as we shall see in Chapters 4 and 5, the timing and location of the shots becomes crucial to most critics' challenge to the official version of events). Although it is hard to view the *New York Times*' initial support for the lone gunman version as the result of a deliberate decision (or part of a cover-up, as later critics claimed), by the second day's edition there was an article with the headline, 'Lone Assassin the Rule in US; Plotting More Prevalent Abroad'. Unlike Russia and Japan where 'the assassinations generally were the culmination of detailed plans made by well-organized groups' and the 'motivations were political, or nationalistic', except in two cases (Lincoln and Truman) successful or attempted assassinations were carried out 'by a single person, often with little advance planning and often without any real grievance against the personage attacked' (Semple 2003: 352). In effect the article seemed to be arguing that a conspiracy was an un-American activity, and that a lone gunman was more appropriate to the national mythology. The *New York Times* has to date continued to defend the lone gunman account that they ran on 24 November 1963. (From the late 1960s onwards, many critics of the 'official' version of events began to see the mainstream media as morally culpable in their failure to provide a thorough, independent and objective investigation (see, for example, Hennelly and Policoff 1992). Although initially reluctant to consider conspiracy theories, both print journalism and television did begin to tap into the commercial possibilities of sensationalist revelations, in the same way that they pandered to – some would say helped foster – the public's endless appetite for Kennedy-related stories.)

If an almost ideological insistence on the lone assassin version was one potential weakness of the *New York Times* account, then another was its over-reliance on the Dallas Police department for information about Oswald and the case being built against him. Like most other news outlets, the *New York Times* greedily lapped up all the damning details drip-fed by Chief Curry, and the lack of time or ability to cross-check the facts led to some inaccuracies, such as a report picked up from AP that Oswald had made a map marking the presidential route and even the path of the bullets from the School Book Depository. The *Times* article speculated that 'this map may have been the "major evidence" Dallas policemen said they held against Oswald, but declined to reveal'

(Semple 2003: 326). It was later discovered, however, that the map had merely been Oswald's attempt to work out a way to visit all of the job offers in Dallas by public transport and minimise on costs by using as many free bus transfers as possible. Although much of the information fed to the newspaper from the Dallas Police and uncovered by its own reporters turned out on the whole to be commendably accurate, the papers were nevertheless too quick to assume Oswald's guilt. By the Monday, however, in one of its editorials the *Times* began to distance itself from the abuses of procedural justice – and the other media – in Dallas that had culminated in the chaotic and fatal transfer of Oswald to the county jail. 'The Dallas authorities', the editorial concluded, 'abetted and encouraged by the newspaper, TV and radio press, trampled on every principle of justice in their handling of Lee H. Oswald (Semple 2003: 446). The piece fulminated against the way the chief of police – if not its own coverage – had pronounced Oswald guilty 'before any indictment had been returned or any evidence presented and in the face of continued denials by the prisoner', with Ruby's shooting of Oswald marking a return to vigilante tradition of the old frontier (Semple 2003: 446). In hindsight the paper came to regret its complicity in helping to convict Oswald in the court of public opinion. Turner Catledge, the managing editor, later revealed that his greatest regret was the omission of the word 'alleged' from the paper's headline on 24 November, 'President's Assassin Shot to Death' (Semple 2003: ix).

In her study of journalism and the Kennedy assassination, the media historian Barbie Zelizer (1992) documents how television and print reporters highlighted their status as the voices of authority on the events, downplaying the fact that they were – at best – eyewitnesses to only part of the four-day-long saga. This process picked up pace as journalists began to produce memoirs and accounts for trade papers that recounted their involvement in covering the story, rather than the events themselves, often to the point of exaggeration. As Zelizer makes clear, media figures such as Walter Cronkite and Dan Rather became caught up in a mutually reinforcing cycle of legitimation: they asserted their cultural authority as professional eyewitness journalists to justify their sense of pre-eminence in providing comment on the death of JFK, but their personal authority in part derived from their well-known – if overstated – involvement in breaking the news of the assassination to the nation.

## Television

The American television networks were ill-prepared and ill-equipped to deal with a breaking story of such enormity (and television broadcasters

elsewhere even more so). It is worth remembering that the assassination itself was not captured on television, as the networks had located their cameras on the main section of the parade route and at the Trade Mart, but not in Dealey Plaza at the tail end of the motorcade. Nor was the home movie footage shot by Abraham Zapruder shown at the time, despite many people later falsely remembering that it was. With the technical limitations of the time, the medium of television news was not suited to fast-moving stories; the cameras, for example, were heavy and cumbersome, needed to be attached to vast amounts of cabling and took two hours to warm up. Television news had only recently expanded from a fifteen-minute nightly broadcast to half an hour, partly in response to the compelling theatre of President Kennedy's live White House press conferences. Yet the comparatively small news departments managed the unprecedented feat of seventy-one hours of continuous live broadcast over the four days from the assassination to the funeral. They cancelled all scheduled programming and all advertising, and began a television marathon that for many Americans constituted their experience of the assassination. Those four days were filled with a mixture of triumphant improvisation and technical glitches, and by most accounts were a turning point in the history of the fledgling medium.

When the first reports came from the wire services of the shooting in Dealey Plaza, network television was busy serving up what was seen – for better, but usually for worse – as its staple fare of light entertainment. CBS, for example, was showing the soap opera *As the World Turns*, which was interrupted at 12.40 p.m. by a voice-over announcement from anchorman Walter Cronkite (with the screen showing a bulletin slide): 'In Dallas, Texas, three shots were fired at President Kennedy's motorcade in downtown Dallas. The first reports say that President Kennedy has been seriously wounded by this shooting.' Minutes later Cronkite appeared live on screen from the CBS studios in New York, relaying wire service flashes and passing over to reporters in the field. He replayed an unconfirmed report of Kennedy's death (received from the two priests who had administered the last rites to the dying president) from future anchorman Dan Rather, at the time the Dallas bureau chief for CBS. Finally at 2.37 p.m. Cronkite was handed a wire service report confirming Kennedy's death. He read it himself, then solemnly made the announcement: 'From Dallas, Texas, the flash, apparently official. President Kennedy died at 1 p.m. Central Standard Time, two o'clock Eastern Standard Time.' Then, in one of the most repeated and iconic moments of the assassination coverage, Cronkite removed his heavy black-framed glasses for no apparent reason,

**Figure 2.1** Walter Cronkite announcing on CBS television the death of President Kennedy.

appeared to be trying to calm his emotions, put his glasses back on, cleared his throat, before resuming with a comment about the probable swearing-in of Johnson as the next president (see fig. 2.1).

On that Friday afternoon and evening, the network coverage included the relaying of wire service bulletins from the studio, live-to-air shots from places such as the Trade Mart and the Dallas Police headquarters, unedited 16 mm newsreel footage from earlier in the day that had been hastily processed, documentary films on Kennedy cobbled together on the fly, and on NBC a special orchestral tribute concert (CBS and ABC followed suit on the Saturday and Sunday evenings respectively). During the long hours of continuous broadcasting there was a lot of dull repetition of the scant information trickling out from the hospital and the police headquarters, and of the few film clips that were available. There were also technical problems and limitations. On NBC, for example, the anchors Chet Huntley and Bill Ryan couldn't get a phone connection to their correspondent in Dallas, and the camera sent to the movie theatre where Oswald was arrested failed to work. But there were also moments of pure TV genius, such as the arrival at Andrews Air Force Base of the presidential plane carrying

both President Johnson and the body of JFK. A live feed from the air base showed to the nation the blood stains on the normally impeccably dressed Mrs Kennedy. Jackie had been insisting all day that she not change her blood-soaked clothes: 'Let them see what they have done.' The weekend was filled with other moments that instantly became iconic. On the Saturday afternoon, for example, the television channels captured images of the Kennedy's six-year-old daughter Caroline following her mother's lead and kissing the flag draped over the president's casket as it lay it state in the rotunda of the Capitol. And during the funeral coverage, almost as if choreographed in advance (Bishop (1968) suggests that he had been learning to salute), the cameras focused on John-John, Kennedy's three-year-old son, as he saluted on the steps of St Matthews Cathedral as the caisson passed by.

The overall verdict from contemporary analysts on television's performance was that the medium had grown up and carried out a nationally important duty with professionalism. Even if some of the reporting of the breaking news was patchy and prone to glitches, the coverage of the lying in state on the Saturday and the whole funeral procession on the Monday were widely regarded at the time and since as 'television's finest hours' (Horn 1964: 18). However, the television networks came in for particular criticism (from both concerned citizens and then later the Warren Commission) for their handling and possible involvement in the death of Oswald. Of all the memorable television moments of the assassination coverage, the shooting of the president's assassin live on screen remains the most remarkable and controversial. It was not lucky coincidence that the television cameras happened to be filming in the basement of the Dallas Police headquarters on the Sunday morning as Oswald was being transferred to the county jail: managers at each of the networks were fully aware that some kind of lynching might happen in the fevered atmosphere of Dallas. However, only NBC acted on its hunch and cut away from its coverage of the funeral preparations, and thus captured live on screen the moment when Jack Ruby stepped out of the crowd and fired a fatal shot into Oswald's chest as he was being led through the basement. The journalists on the scene, however, were stunned and confused as to what had actually happened. Most notably, NBC's reporter Tom Pettit managed to keep talking into his microphone, informing viewers that 'He's been shot! He's been shot! Lee Oswald has been shot! There is absolute panic. Pandemonium has broken out.' ABC, having consulted a psychiatrist, had gambled that any incident involving the prisoner would be more likely to occur out on the open street rather than in the comparative safety of the police building, and so had positioned its cameras outside the County Jail.

CBS was receiving the live feed, but opted not to switch over from its coverage of the funeral preparations. However, using the newly invented instant replay facility on videotape, all three channels were soon able to show their viewers the clip again and again. (In the same way that many people mis-remembered having seen the Zapruder footage of the assassination of Kennedy at the time in 1963, so too did many people falsely claim that they actually watched the shooting of Oswald live on screen.) The *New York Times* television critic Jack Gould called the on-air shooting of Oswald 'easily the most extraordinary moments of TV that a set-owner ever watched' (Semple 2003: 320–2).

Most historians of television and the 1960s have seen the assassination as a turning point for the medium, a triumph of professionalism that enabled it to move beyond its perceived role as merely a peddler of entertainment to eclipsing print journalism in immediacy if not reliability: 'With its indelible images, information, immediacy, repetition and close-ups, it served to define the tragedy for the public' (Shachtman 1983: 43). The continuous broadcasts, uninterrupted even by adverts, helped to define the assassination for the public as a non-stop televisual 'event', a long weekend of shock and grief that lasted from the breaking news on Friday lunchtime to the end of the funeral on Monday afternoon, during which the reporting of the event became part of people's memory of the event itself. But the triumph of television in covering the assassination has been viewed by some commentators as a tragedy for national political life. In his introduction to the fortieth anniversary reprint of the original *New York Times* coverage in which he played a major part, Tom Wicker sees in the discovery that weekend of television's potential to turn history into spectacle the beginning of an irreversible decline. He argues that the lasting significance of Kennedy's death is less how it changed history than how it changed the media representation of history. He offers a lament for a time when all forms of journalism were more dignified and less cynical and exploitative, when 'television unquestionably held the nation together, as a wise friend might support a bereaved family at the funeral of a brother' (Semple 2003: 3). Wicker sees in the coverage of the assassination the seeds of the dumbing down of national political life in which style trumps substance, a process to which (as Wicker is forced to acknowledge) Kennedy himself was no stranger as the first president to truly exploit the public relations potential of television, not least in the televised presidential election debates with Nixon in 1960.

As we saw in Chapter 1, the theorist Fredric Jameson argues that the real significance of the Kennedy assassination is the way it ushered in a new and false kind of citizenship, based not on active and communal

participation in politics but passive and isolated spectatorship predicated on the consumption of mediated images. Television coverage of the assassination seemed to promise its viewers a new and more immediate access to historical events, but in many ways that immediacy was an illusion. When people talk about their indelible memories of the shooting of JFK often what they're really talking about is their memory of certain television images: the event they remember is not so much the Kennedy assassination per se as the four-day telethon of which they were the exhausted but compulsive viewers.

# 3 History

Reporters involved in the initial coverage of the assassination repeatedly asserted their credentials as the definitive eyewitnesses to history in the coming years, particularly as other groups began to challenge their professional authority. The first challenge came from biographers and historians, who felt that the journalists had become too caught up in the immediate chaos of unfolding events to offer anything more than a partial and subjective account. The second challenge (the subject of Chapter 5) came from amateur investigators who felt that the accounts produced by journalists – and of course official government inquiries – had failed to consider the tantalising clues to a vast conspiracy; in other words, in focusing on their status as on-the-scene eyewitnesses they had missed the real story which was hidden from immediate view. This chapter examines the popular histories, memoirs and biographies written in the five or so years after the assassination, and then turns to the later revisionist attacks on those elegiac accounts of the life and death of JFK. It also explores how the assassination has been dealt with by professional historians, including debates about the role of the death in shaping our sense of the meaning of the 1960s (is November 1963 when it all began to go horribly wrong?), and the role of counterfactual speculations about the significance of the assassination for the story of the Vietnam War (had he lived, would Kennedy have withdrawn US troops?).

The question of who is best qualified to tell the story of Kennedy's life and death has been debated heatedly ever since November 1963. While journalists were asserting their credentials, those who had been part of Kennedy's inner circle kept alive the flame of his memory and burnished the public perception of him in a series of memoirs, biographical tributes, and histories. Kennedy insiders such as Arthur Schlesinger, Theodore Sorensen, Theodore White, Ken O'Donnell, and even his secretary Evelyn Lincoln all produced memoirs in the half decade after JFK's death. Most of these accounts understandably touch

only briefly on the assassination itself, since their focus is on the life and legacy of the president they served. However, in their concern to do justice, as they saw it, to the memory of Kennedy, these hagiographic accounts end up casting the assassination in a particular light, if at times only by negative contrast. Most took the line that the assassination was a personal and national tragedy as it cut short the life of an energetic man and curtailed his potential political achievements.

Yet they also in effect turned the assassination into a mythical drama, a stirring story of a fallen warrior hero whose outline is more reminiscent of Arthurian legends than contemporary politics (see Brown 1988). In a similar fashion, many of the insider accounts of the Kennedy White House set up the argument that the assassination emerged from – and was perhaps even caused by – the forces of irrationalism, hatred and extremism against which Kennedy had striven. Schlesinger's *A Thousand Days* (1965), probably the most influential of the insiders' accounts, provides the prime example of this tendency. It was the volume that really crystallised the mythical portrait of Kennedy's presidency as Camelot. (Jackie had famously granted an exclusive interview for *LIFE* magazine to the Kennedy-friendly journalist Theodore White a few days after the assassination, in which she was very keen to reveal that her husband had enjoyed listening to a recording of the musical *Camelot* before he went to sleep, and in particular liked the line, 'Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot' (White 1963: 158–60).) The assassination and its aftermath only occupy 9 of the book's 872 pages, but in his account of the build-up to the trip Schlesinger emphasises the climate of hate in Dallas and Kennedy's courage in refusing to heed the warnings of potential danger. The more that Schlesinger emphasises the cosmopolitan sophistication of the Kennedy White House, the stronger the contrast with the assassination in Dallas becomes. He gives the argument a further twist in his concluding remarks on the political legacy of Kennedy, noting that the real tribute to his memory was 'the absence of intolerance and hatred' in response to his murder (Schlesinger 1965: 872), perhaps not so surprising given that people learned very quickly that the assassin was not a right-wing nut as many people had initially feared. Schlesinger's account of the assassination itself is a strange mixture of objective and insider viewpoints. Much of the book emphasises Schlesinger's authority as historian of the Kennedy administration because of his close personal involvement within the inner circle of power. When he describes, for example, 'the quizzical look on the President's face before he pitched over', Schlesinger's closeness to the president and

the unfolding events of history extends even to the moment of JFK's death, with the description based not on actual proximity (Schlesinger was having lunch in New York when the president was shot) but on the insider knowledge, interviews and the authority of experience that provide the book's grounding.

Partly in response to what they perceived as a conspicuous lack of objectivity in the deluge of reporters' accounts and insiders' memoirs, two major books of the late 1960s set out to produce what they claimed would be the definitive historical account of the assassination. William Manchester's *Death of a President* (1967) and Jim Bishop's *The Day Kennedy was Shot* (1968) each offer painstakingly detailed narratives of every aspect of the assassination and the immediate aftermath, with the former expanding to include the funeral and the latter focusing on the twenty-four-hour period from when Kennedy woke up in the hotel in Texas on November 22. In his preface Manchester notes that 'Jacqueline Kennedy resolved that there should be one complete, accurate account' (Manchester 1967: 9), and he is at pains to point out the accuracy of his history, achieved by, for example, his insistence on visiting every scene described. Likewise Bishop aims to counter the 'irresponsible and sensational' accounts produced by some writers, and to provide a straightforward and objective account for people who, the more they read, 'the more certain they became that they had not heard the facts' (Bishop 1968: x). Yet for all their claims to correct the errors of competing voices from the media and the Kennedy 'mafia' (as his entourage was known), Manchester's and Bishop's versions are not without their own embellishments and idiosyncrasies.

### William Manchester, *Death of a President*

Arguably more important than the actual content of Manchester's best-selling book was the controversy surrounding its publication. The work was commissioned as an authorised account by the Kennedy family, partly in order to quash what they saw as inaccurate rumours that were beginning to spread about the shooting and transfer of power, and partly to avoid having to submit to repeated interviews from other writers who were already requesting access (including Bishop, whose penchant for melodramatic history the Kennedys particularly wanted to avoid). But the idea of authorising a single book was also a way of maintaining a firm control over the shaping of Kennedy's legacy, in much the same way that the informal Kennedy PR machine had functioned to spin-doctor his image while alive. There were undoubtedly specific elements of the story that they wanted to finesse in a particular

fashion, such as the issue of how and by whom the Kennedy children had been told of their father's death, and the flouting of official rules by the Kennedy entourage in improperly removing his body from Texas jurisdiction. There is also the possibility, as conspiracy theorists have suggested, that Robert Kennedy in particular wanted to use a compliant writer who would not unearth conspiratorial connections between Oswald, anti-Castro Cubans, the Mafia and the CIA that might lead back to the secret of the Kennedy administration's own involvement in illegal CIA plots to murder Fidel Castro.

Whatever the precise reason, the Kennedys eventually settled on William Manchester. A former Navy man as Kennedy had been, Manchester had earlier published a glowing profile of President Kennedy and his wife, having been attracted by the couple's aura of cosmopolitan glamour at the White House. An agreement with him was drawn up that most of the royalties should go to the Kennedy presidential library, and, most importantly, that Robert and Jackie Kennedy should have final approval of the manuscript. Manchester was happy with these arrangements, but tensions began to arise between the author and the Kennedy family when he urged that the book be published in 1967 in order to quell what he saw as the rising tide of conspiracy-mongering, rather than waiting, as had originally been planned, until after the 1968 presidential election that might well involve a tussle between Lyndon Johnson and Robert Kennedy for the Democratic ticket. Reviewing the manuscript, Kennedy aides were concerned that Manchester had in effect become too partial to the Kennedy camp, and had taken to heart a common feeling among the inner circle that Johnson was an uncouth and undeserving successor. (The original version of the manuscript, for example, featured Johnson out hunting on his ranch, making a symbolic connection between the successor president and the forces of Texan frontier violence that many felt had led to JFK's death.) Robert Kennedy felt that this anti-Johnson sentiment would damage his efforts to appear statesmanlike in the run-up to his likely bid for the presidency in 1968. Other Kennedy advisors took issue with other passages that had faithfully transcribed comments made by Jackie Kennedy that showed the president's widow in a bad light. Manchester initially agreed to make the desired changes, but a further dispute arose over the serialisation of the book in *Look* magazine. The Kennedy camp objected to the fact that the royalties from the serialisation would not go to the Kennedy presidential library and initiated legal action against Manchester to make him comply with their reading of the initial agreement. As the legal thumbscrews were turned on Manchester (to the point where he suffered a nervous breakdown),

the author began to feel that any attempt to alter the book amounted to an attack on Kennedy, for whom he felt he was now the true guardian of the eternal flame. An agreement was reached (with many of the offending passages removed), and the final version of the supposedly authorised version of events was published with the disclaimer that 'neither Mrs John F. Kennedy nor Senator Robert F. Kennedy has in any way approved or endorsed the material appearing in this book' (Manchester 1967: 4). The disclaimer partly absolves Jackie and RFK from any political repercussions the book might have, but it might also be read as insisting on Manchester's objectivity precisely in order to distance himself from what he had come to see as the historical distortions embraced by the Kennedy insiders.

How does the book as finally published represent the assassination? The first point to note is that this highly influential account refuses to frame the death of President Kennedy as a classical tragedy, for all its high-blown rhetoric and heroicisation of Kennedy in mythic, Arthurian terms. Although the event is imbued with an aura of sadness, Manchester can find no tragic flaw lurking within JFK's character that would provide the moral and aesthetic rationale for his downfall. But he does emphasise to the point of exaggeration the exceptionalist notion of the event as a world-changing calamity: 'In the moment it takes to drive over the crack of a grey Texas asphalt his life and his country's history had been transformed' (p. 264). Manchester downplays a sense of inevitability about the shooting, despite his acknowledgement that there were some small but significant forewarnings. Although he documents a sense of foreboding about the Dallas trip from numerous sources, the wider significance of the premonitions is not their doom-laden inescapability but Kennedy's courage in defying the warnings, most notably with Kennedy's half joking, half serious comment the evening before his death that it was 'a hell of a night to assassinate a president' (p. 149). Even if Manchester does end up concluding that several aspects of the Secret Service protection procedures were at fault, in his eyes ultimately the blame rests with the climate of hate in Dallas in general and with Lee Harvey Oswald's own bitter fantasies in particular. In Manchester's analysis, the shots came out of the blue without the compensatory comfort of there being a grand design, either providential or conspiratorial. In this sense *Death of a President* closely follows the facts and conclusion of the Warren Commission (to whose hearings Manchester was granted privileged access) in its denial of a conspiracy, even if Manchester is keen to go beyond what he regards as the limited scope of its criminal and procedural investigation.

What Manchester gives his readers in addition to the facts gathered in the Warren Commission's report is an intimate, insider's account of both how Kennedy died and how his family, his retinue and his nation responded to the death. Unlike the Warren Commission Manchester deliberately sidelines Oswald's story, not wanting to dignify him with the kind of loving detail that infuses his portrait of the Kennedy camp. Indeed, the book focuses as much on the aftermath of the shooting as the events leading up to it. Along with the journalists' memoirs, *Death of a President* really helped seal people's memory of the assassination as a continuous four-day episode of national shock and mourning. More than half the book is taken up with the arrangements for the transfer of Kennedy and Johnson back to Washington, the global wave of mourning ('at the moment of the President's death, America was one enormous emergency room, with the stricken world waiting outside', p. 223), and the arrangements for the funeral, which are covered in almost mind-numbing detail.

The attention to detail is one of the defining features of Manchester's book. Some of the intricacies of the internecine politics and dull bureaucratic minutiae become important as they affect the sequence of events leading to the assassination. But other particulars are included merely because they are taken from official sources that included copious information. We learn, for instance, that as Col. Swindal piloted Air Force One back to Washington the 'rate of ascent leaped from 600 feet a minute to 4,000' and that 'he was burning a gallon of fuel every second' (p. 381). *Death of a President* is thus based in part on the official logs kept by the military, the Secret Service, and the White House staff and echoes its neutral precision (although it might be argued that the technical details of the presidential plane's climbing ability are an implicit reflection on the jet-setting glamour of Kennedy, who had commissioned and was inordinately proud of Air Force One; see Wills (1982)). Some information seems to serve merely as local colour, such as the description of the incongruously tawdry 'gasworks, a trumpery of motels, package stores, billboards, and Gulf and Esso . . . filling stations' (p. 483) along the route from Andrews Air Force Base to the White House as Jackie and Bobby Kennedy accompany Kennedy's casket in the Navy ambulance. Other particulars, though, serve to authorise the accuracy and thoroughness of Manchester's account, and his involvement in personally verifying as much as possible; he insists, for example, that 'every scene described in the book was visited' (p. 11) by him. Some snippets similarly work to emphasise his exaggerated status as an insider with privileged access to Kennedy. The sense of being on the scene as events unfold is, of course, an illusion, as Manchester was not personally

involved at all. But because much of the obsessive detail is taken more or less directly from the extensive interviews conducted by both the Warren Commission and Manchester himself, *Death of a President* does carry the authority of personal experience. Tom Wicker's review of the book in the *New York Times* rightly praised it for allowing a highly unusual insight behind the scenes into historical events involving the highest circles of power (Wicker 1967).

The near obsessive attention to the specifics of place, time and action is also motivated at times by a concern to address what Manchester identifies as inaccuracies beginning to circulate in conspiracy-minded accounts of the assassination. So, for example, his account of the debate amongst members of the Kennedy camp whether the casket lid should remain open or closed for the lying-in-state is written partly with an eye to correcting rumours that the reason for the decision to keep the lid closed was taken to hide the fact that Kennedy's face had been badly damaged because he had been shot from both the front and the rear (and hence a conspiracy). In effect Manchester's book is shaped – sometimes explicitly but at times unconsciously – by its need to reply to other rival versions of the death of Kennedy, and seemingly trivial details become blown up into super-charged emotional flash points. Although Manchester sees his mission in part as correcting 'apocryphal versions' that had begun to circulate, it comes as little surprise that his book failed to quell those critical voices. This is partly due to his lack of footnotes: he explains in the foreword that, like Schlesinger's book, he had arranged for his research materials and references to be placed in the Kennedy presidential library. Yet it was also a result of his lack of precision and detail at crucial moments, most notably in the shooting itself when Manchester fudges the vital issue of the number and timing of the shots and relegates his discussion of the 'magic bullet' problem to a footnote.

For all Manchester's insistence on sticking to a seemingly neutral, objective presentation of the factual details and his refusal to invoke a tragic symbolism, *Death of a President* nevertheless leans at times towards purple prose and overblown sentimentality. Its insistence on objectivity is also compromised by Manchester's reliance on extensive interviews as source material, which in places leads to multiple and sometimes contradictory perspectives on the same events. The book's seamless narrative also breaks down in crucial moments as Manchester struggles to capture the complexity of the 'greatest simultaneous experience' (p. 208) the world has ever known. For the hours immediately following the assassination he resorts to a timeline to plot events and their reporting in the media.

With its emphasis on military precision of detail and the minutiae of swift action and terse dialogue from powerful insiders, the book also resembles a thriller in its narrative conventions. As a genre the postwar thriller (typified by the James Bond series) provides its readers with a compensatory fantasy of cool masculinity and professionalism for an era in which the white-collar worker was becoming less a man of decisive, individual action and more a cog in the corporate machine. Of course, as critics such as Garry Wills have noted, Kennedy himself was a fan of the Bond stories and was keen to style his charismatic leadership on an image of cool, jet-setting glamour combined with a ruthless, macho efficiency that cut through the fettering red tape of bureaucratic petty-mindedness (Wills 1982). The scenes of the Kennedy entourage aboard Air Force One on the way back to Washington and then in the White House, heroically and decisively masterminding the funeral arrangements despite their personal grief, contrast implicitly with Johnson's comparative lack of action in the hour of need. As if substituting for the dead president, Jackie Kennedy in particular is repeatedly shown as being indefatigable in her clear-sighted and decisive management of the funeral, coupled with Chandleresque details such as her downing two straight whiskies: 'She never learned to like it. But it always reminded her of that trip back from Dallas, of the hours she wouldn't permit herself to forget' (p. 392). In the overall logic of *Death of a President*, then, the funeral is given equal weight to the assassination itself not merely because it offers a comforting portrait of a nation (and indeed a world) coming together in its grief but also because it allows Manchester to show the behind-the-scenes story of the Kennedy team swinging into action one last time in contrast to the supposed hesitancy and boorishness with which Johnson started his term of office. Even if the subtext of Manchester's book is the Kennedy camp's assault on dull bureaucracy, the modest overt message is the need for changes in various routine procedures to do with presidential protection and the logistics of succession. Yet despite this explicit concern for comparatively minor procedural improvements, the fantasy of outwitting petty bureaucracy wells up throughout the book, for example in the dramatic scene at Parkland Hospital where an unbelievably jobsworth local official named Earl Rose adamantly refuses to allow the dead president to leave without complying with Texas legal requirement for a post-mortem to be carried out in the state. If Oswald and Dallas are the overt culprits of the crime, then Earl Rose is the cameo villain of the book. In a scene that Manchester narrates with great dramatic tension, the Kennedy aides and Secret Service eventually end the farcical stand-off by literally sweeping aside the local functionary with their combined federal might (p. 342).

### Jim Bishop, *The Day Kennedy Was Shot*

Like Manchester's book, Jim Bishop's *The Day Kennedy Was Shot* was mired in controversy from the outset. Bishop notes in the preface that he was dubbed 'the man who made Mrs Kennedy cry' because Jackie had wanted Manchester's to be the only account, fearing 'never-ending conflicting books about that day in Dallas' (Bishop 1968: xv). However, he also notes that at one stage the Kennedy family had considered transferring their loyalties to him when the Manchester relationship began to go wrong. Bishop instead makes a virtue out of his lack of privileged, authorised access to the Kennedy camp, claiming in effect that he isn't embroiled in the conflict of loyalties that engulfed Manchester, and that he is writing an 'uncensored' version of events (as the back cover blurb proudly points out), devoid of the 'friendly superficialities' (p. xvii) of the insider accounts that had already appeared. Yet he is also keen to emphasise his credentials as a Kennedy confidant, noting, for example, that Kennedy had admired his earlier book *The Day Lincoln Was Shot* and on the strength of that had granted Bishop access to write *A Day in the White House*, a flattering behind-the-scenes portrait of the Kennedys. *The Day Kennedy Was Shot* draws on that intimate knowledge of the Kennedy family routine, describing, for instance, the codes of varying coughs Kennedy used to signal to his valet whether to enter the presidential bedroom or not. Unlike Manchester's book that is based on lengthy exclusive interviews with many of the key players in the assassination drama and inside access to the Warren Commission's hearings, Bishop's study is grounded mainly on available published sources, and the Warren Report in particular, along with some interviews. He explains in the preface that it took him two years to read and annotate the Warren Report, and, despite its 'maze of repetition and contradiction, there is a mass of solid evidence which, if used as a foundation, will help any author build a book of fascinating credibility without rancour, bias, or censorship' (Bishop 1968: xvi). He criticises the Kennedy family for 'trying to copyright the assassination' by insisting on a single authorised account, but he also notes the impossibility of doing so, given that by 1968 he was already citing ninety-two published sources.

Although Bishop is keen to distance himself from Manchester's book, their accounts are surprisingly similar in style and content. Like Manchester, his basic assumption is that Oswald acted alone and there was no conspiracy. Bishop is much more willing to include Oswald as part of the overall story, but his analysis of Oswald's motives and psychology do not go much beyond the Warren Commission's version. In

a similar vein to the Report's clunky pop-Freudianism, he asserts, for example, that Oswald 'brooded sullenly and appeared to have trouble making love to his wife' (p. 13); the only divergence is his insistence that there was an element of rationality in Oswald's behaviour, particularly after the shooting, leading him to assert that Oswald must have been planning to be captured. Also like Manchester he is concerned to correct what he regards as erroneous versions – conspiracy theories in effect – that he fears are beginning to gain currency. He complains that in the five years following the death of JFK, 'the simple became complex; the obvious, obtuse. . . . The more people read, the more certain they became that they had not heard the facts' (p. x).

Regaling 'a great number of writers [who] have spent a lot of energy bending these events to preconceived notions' (p. 679), Bishop sees his role as providing a dispassionate account of events. Bishop is responding to 'irresponsible and sensational' (p. ix) Warren Commission critics, explaining how, for example, the doctors seemed to give contradictory evidence at the medical press conference immediately after the announcement of Kennedy's death. Like Manchester, he is at pains to dampen such conspiracy talk by explaining how in the heat of the moment erroneous facts were reported, but also like his rival in key places his version only serves to fan the flames of suspicion. Although keen to clear up confusions such as the discovery of a pristine bullet in Parkland Hospital (he insists that it was found on Connally's rather than Kennedy's gurney, logically reducing the number of shots that must have hit Kennedy and hence challenging the conspiracy critics), he also introduces new puzzles with his assertion that the first shot missed the president but hit the bystander James Tague, with Kennedy pulling his arms up in reaction to the ricochet of the bullet fragments. Like *Death of a President*, Bishop's account of the number, timing and direction of the shots is oddly circumspect and confused (given the later obsessive focus on these details), reflecting in part his reliance on contradictory eyewitness testimony. Despite revealing that he had been sent an early bootleg copy of the Zapruder footage (that would lead many viewers to become convinced of the conspiracy theory), and despite his inclusion of intriguing details that might indicate a conspiracy, Bishop doggedly sticks to the no-conspiracy line.

Bishop also echoes Manchester in finding the climate of hate in Dallas (or, more vaguely, the culture of violence permeating the nation) part of the explanation for the assassination. He is quick to point out, for example, that the murder rate in Dallas exceeded that of all Europe combined, and that one in five citizens carried a gun (p. 52). He also documents the same premonitions of violence as Manchester, and

reaches a similar conclusion that the shooting was neither inevitable nor easily preventable, not least because of Kennedy's willingness to take risks that is likewise read as courage rather than arrogance or recklessness. However, he acknowledges that at the time most people found it hard to believe that Oswald had pro-Castro sympathies, 'because most knowledgeable persons were certain that the assassin must have been an extremist-right-winger' (p. 340). Even Jackie, Bishop informs us, at first 'thought [Kennedy] had been killed by a white supremacist' (p. 434); she felt that her husband's death might have had symbolic significance if he had died, as it were, for the cause of civil rights. But, like Manchester, Bishop refuses to draw especial meaning from the death of Kennedy, noting merely that America is a violent nation in which 'fanatics, the sick, transform their hate and frustration into a final, physical act' (p. 679). Instead the lasting significance is to be found in 'the shock waves which radiated from Dealey Plaza on that warm noon day [and which] seemed, like some cataclysmic sound, to pass around the world and back again many times, hardly diminished in intensity as it bruised consciences' (p. ix). Like Manchester, Bishop devotes considerable time to vignettes of personal and collective mourning around the globe, emphasising that the meaning of the event is to be found in its consequences and not its causes.

In contrast to later writers but in keeping with Manchester, Bishop's conclusions and revelations are comparatively humdrum. The origins of the feud between the Kennedy and Johnson camps is, for example, treated in detail, but by the time the book appeared in 1968 Robert Kennedy had already been assassinated and so the niceties of the political rivalry in which Manchester had become entangled no longer mattered. Like Manchester, Bishop also makes detailed and forceful – but ultimately quite narrow – observations on the need to tighten up various bureaucratic procedures surrounding presidential protection and succession (one particular bug-bear is the lack of continuity amidst the confusion of Parkland Hospital in the nation's ability to retaliate against a nuclear attack). Although he makes great play of offering an uncensored account in implicit distinction to Manchester, the most shocking revelation he can muster is that Kennedy died immediately and not in the hospital (a point that Manchester had finessed presumably so as to leave open the possibility that the last rites had been administered when there was still a chance that the president's soul had not departed his body).

If journalists were keen to assert their authority by underlining their personal involvement in the story, Bishop is eager to insist on his objectivity. On the one hand, he admonishes the media for their lack of

dispassionate professionalism, noting that their behaviour at the Dallas Police headquarters was nothing short of 'abominable' (p. 681). 'The objective press', he concludes, 'was subjective. It was a hanging jury' (p. 624). On the other, he warns against writers such as Manchester for being too willing to take their interviewee's story at face value; he refuses to believe, for example, that Jackie Kennedy cried out anything so eloquent as 'I love you, Jack!' as the dying president slumped into her arms in Dealey Plaza. In contrast Bishop sees himself as merely a neutral observer whose specialism happens to be presenting the chronology of an important day in a minute-by-minute fashion. Although he makes a great deal of his unsensational objectivity, his account is nonetheless reverential and elegiac in its own way, full of novelistic touches. Despite his desire to be thorough and realistic, key passages of his account are based on conjecture and novelised reconstruction, such as what Oswald was thinking in the sniper's nest, and how Jackie felt cradling her dead husband in the presidential limousine on the way to Parkland Hospital. He is also not averse to ramping up the pathos and the grandiloquence, especially in scenes involving Jackie. We are told, for example, that for the audience watching Jackie arrive in Washington still in the blood-stained clothes, 'the guilt was upon them and their children' (p. 408).

Like Manchester, Bishop's flights of rhetorical fancy are reined in by his repeated use of the reality effects of the thriller predicated on the accumulation of gritty details. We learn, for example, exactly what kind of hand stamp was used on the door of the nightclub that the presidential Secret Service agents went to on the night before the assassination (p. 32), and exactly which book order Oswald was filling on the day of the assassination (p. 59, 126). But Bishop comes up against the limits of realist representation in his aim to provide a thorough, accurate and objective chronological account. He describes his working method of keeping a separate notebook for each minute of the fateful day, as he pulls apart and recombines all the flux of detail. The real difficulty comes from presenting simultaneously the three separate stories of Kennedy, Oswald and Ruby. The text endlessly jumps back and forth between the multiple and at first unconnected scenes of action. Manchester limits his main focus to Kennedy, but Bishop tries to weave all the stories together. (He is also alive to some of the other more puzzling synchronicities of the day, such as the fact that former vice president Richard Nixon departed from Dallas just before Kennedy arrived for the motorcade.) Despite the book's title seeming to limit him solely to the twenty-four hours from 7 a.m. on 22 November, Bishop even manages to fold into the fabric of the single day both the immediate

aftermath and the back-story leading up to the shooting by recounting how particular facts were later discovered. It is noticeable that in the few moments that Manchester comes up against this difficulty of representing major events all happening in concert he resorts to a triple-columned timeline as a way of graphically presenting the simultaneity. But Bishop's account is on the brink of this representational collapse throughout the book. For Bishop, then, it is arguable that the real significance of the Kennedy assassination is ultimately the way it pushes up against the limits of realist representation. It is a moment in which events happen faster than participants can make sense of them, and in a more tangled fashion than writers can represent them. As events unfold at break-neck pace, time seems to slow down so that 'many who could not recreate the moment of [their] marriage would recite this moment as though their powers of absorption had been speeded enormously and the second hand had begun to beat time in milliseconds' (p. 237). When the presidential limousine screeches to a halt at Parkland Hospital, for example, Bishop comments that this 'was the second time in one day that many things would happen swiftly, and yet, in retrospect, they tumbled over each other in slow motion . . . The moment was hectic, hysterical, and historical' (p. 195). We've now become more familiar with this kind of real-time multi-scene thriller with television shows like *24*, but for Bishop the Kennedy assassination in 1963 marked a new kind of event that demanded a new kind of representation. Even though he had used the device of the single day before, he points out that the shooting of JFK is of a completely different order of complexity and simultaneity. Because of the compression of world-changing political events into a few hours and the instantaneous global repercussions of those events, Bishop's attempt to bring together all the strands of the story marks a step-change from the exploration by modernist writers of merely personal moments of synchronicity. And if Bishop's claim is inevitably exaggerated, the *perception* that the assassination ushers in a new era of global synchronicity is an important historical development in its own right.

## Historians

After the monumental works of Manchester and Bishop, few mainstream non-fictional works – other than Gerald Posner's *Case Closed* (1993), a powerful prosecutorial attack on the conspiracy accounts – have dealt with the assassination directly. Academic historians and Kennedy biographers have been noticeable in their lack of focus on the specifics of Kennedy's death. To date there has been only one book-length study by

an academic historian of the JFK assassination (a pro-conspiracy account by Michael Kurtz, 1993), while most biographers of Kennedy – despite the ever more lurid revelations about his life – have tended to deal with his death in only the most cursory way. The journalist and historian Max Holland, for example, has lamented the 'gross inattention given to the subject by serious historians', an 'abdication' of responsibility that is perhaps understandable, if not excusable in his eyes, by the insanity-producing scale of the task facing any would-be chronicler of the event (Holland 1994: 192). Since the late 1960s, the representation of the Kennedy assassination has become the province of either conspiratorial accounts written by non-professional historians beyond the pale of the establishment, or novelists, artists and film makers. But mainstream journalism, biographies and histories of the Kennedy years have implicitly shed light on the assassination, while discussions of Kennedy's death have also become caught up in the debates about the legacy of his administration and the decade he has come to represent.

In the immediate aftermath of the assassination many liberal journalists and political commentators framed JFK's death as the end of a brief era of triumphant liberalism in which the president himself had symbolised the national mood of optimism that an activist government – in contrast to the supposed passivity of the Eisenhower years – could make life better on both the domestic and international front. Because Kennedy had constructed the image of his presidency upon charismatic leadership and a cult of style that had been quick to use the glamour of the president's private family life for political gain, it made sense that his death was read as a personal tragedy by so many Americans – not least because Jackie Kennedy helped create a funeral that made private mourning into a communal ritual. As we have already seen, liberal commentators tended to divert attention from the uncomfortable knowledge that Oswald was not a right-wing nut but a left-wing sympathiser by framing their discussion of the significance of Kennedy's death in the more abstract terminology of a climate of hatred, extremism and paranoia. In effect they saw the president's death as a direct assault on the intellectual, technocratic, ultra-rational, elitist, cosmopolitan version of liberalism that they had championed and that Kennedy had encouraged with his appointment of numerous Ivy League advisers, the so-called 'best and the brightest', in the ironic title of David Halberstam's 1969 account of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. (Given Kennedy's preference for Broadway musicals such as *Camelot*, pulp fiction thrillers and Hollywood films, and his habit of falling asleep during the evenings of sophisticated high-cultural entertainments organised by Jackie, it is arguable that Kennedy

was personally more attracted to the aristocratic potential of elitism than its attendant intellectualism.) As the cultural critic Christopher Lasch argued in a perceptive essay on the afterlife of Kennedy's death, the 'mythology of JFK's assassination sustains the mythology of his career' – and, we might add, the mythology of his political career has shaped a particular mythology of the assassination.

After the assassination, Kennedy admirers promoted him as a liberal hero whose untimely death meant that his potential for energising change was never fulfilled. Biographies and memoirs characterised him in terms of youth, idealism and vigour (a favoured term of Kennedy himself), and presented his career as one of growth and learning, which in turn meant that the assassination was figured as a tragically premature ending of the narrative of development. This interpretation of Kennedy's death redirects attention from his arguably quite limited actual achievements to the wishful fantasy of what might have been. Later in the 1960s, some conspiracy-minded commentators came to reinterpret the Kennedy assassination as a deliberate attempt by reactionary forces to thwart the potential for wide-ranging potential for progressive change in areas such as economic policy, civil rights and the Cold War.

This image of denied potential has in subsequent decades come under revisionist attack, as Thomas Brown (1988) expertly documented in his study of the rise and fall of the Kennedy image. All the qualities that Kennedy had previously been praised for now became signs of his weaknesses: his idealism and vigour were reinterpreted, for example, as a naive macho recklessness in pursuing unnecessary Cold War adventures; or, in the light of the radical politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s, he was seen as too friendly towards corporate America and too slow to embrace the civil rights movement. As revelations began to emerge in the 1970s about Kennedy's involvement with clandestine Cold War adventures and his sexual escapades (long known about, but until then the press had been reluctant to tarnish their liberal hero), historians and biographers began to chip away at the heroic image of Kennedy. But in turn the post-Watergate mood of cynicism about public officials gave way in the 1980s and 1990s to a more balanced assessment of Kennedy's achievements by academic historians (if not amateur historians). Among academic historians the overall effect of the more negative retellings of Kennedy's life has been to challenge the reading of his death as a tragic curtailment of youthful promise.

Even the most ardent of scandal-mongers have tended to see Kennedy's death as separate from his life, viewing the shooting as an undeserved and unmotivated attack. Although most of the revisionist

attacks on the Kennedy mystique cast only a reflected light on the assassination itself, some of the reinterpretations of JFK's life suggest new ways of understanding his death. The most important line of inquiry is perhaps best summed up by Malcolm X's cryptic response to the assassination, namely that it was a case of 'chickens coming home to roost' (Malcolm X 1963). He was apparently referring to the idea that the assassination was a repercussion from the long history of white violence against blacks, a more extreme version of the 'climate of hate' argument espoused by liberals. (Seizing on the seemingly callous nature of Malcolm X's remarks, Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, suspended his deputy from the organisation, causing a rift between the two that led to the assassination of Malcolm X at the hands of Muhammad supporters in 1965.) But Malcolm X's remark can also be read as a prescient warning about the US suffering the same kind of violence domestically that it had been all too quick to inflict on third-world nations during the Kennedy administration. Suspected by some at the time, but only confirmed by the post-Watergate investigations into the intelligence agencies conducted by various congressional inquiries in the 1970s, in the late 1950s and early 1960s the CIA had engaged in covert counterinsurgency programmes that had included numerous attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro and other leaders of 'undesirable' regimes – some of which had involved co-operation with the Mafia. There has been fierce debate about exactly how much John and Robert Kennedy were personally involved in the commission and planning of such covert ops (the CIA's strategy of 'plausible deniability' makes the chance of proving any direct link impossible), but it is clear that the Kennedy brothers were both attracted to the idea of daring, non-bureaucratic, illegal approaches to foreign affairs. Some conspiracy theorists found in these revelations the necessary motivation for a Cuban and/or Mafia plot to kill the president. They also took a keen interest in the revelations that emerged from the 1970s congressional enquiries (and given full treatment in more recent works such as Seymour Hersh's *The Dark Side of Camelot*) about Kennedy's affair with Judith Campbell Exner, who at the time was also having an affair with the Mafia boss Sam Giancana. This has been read as a vital piece of evidence in the Mafia/Cuban exile conspiracy theory of the assassination.

Although many conspiracy theorists have latched onto such revelations, political commentators and historians such as Garry Wills and Max Holland have seen in the Kennedy's Cold Warrior willingness to pursue foreign policy through assassination the pre-condition not for a conspiracy but for Oswald's own 'executive action' (in the CIA's chilling euphemism for assassination). According to this line of thought, it

was not a vague climate of right-wing hate that gave rise to Oswald, but the much more specific Cold War covert operations against the leaders and regimes of Congo, Iraq, Vietnam, South Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, and, most prominently and obsessively, Cuba. In the case of Cuba, the CIA (with Robert Kennedy pushing them along) initiated Operation Mongoose in 1961, a campaign to destabilise the Castro regime through all manner of paramilitary activities, assassination attempts, and psychological warfare. As Max Holland notes, an interview with Castro on 7 September 1963 in which he pointedly warned that assassination attempts against Cuban officials would be met in kind was picked up by the local newspaper in New Orleans that Oswald might well have read. Even if he didn't, Holland argues, his action must still be understood as a politically motivated act within the context of Cold War aggression that the Kennedy administration did nothing to curb and might well have actively promoted.

Although most academic historians have not wanted to become embroiled in investigating Kennedy's death (virtually all of them concurring with the Warren Commission's account), they have not shied away from discussing its social and political consequences. For writers such as Tom Shachtman, the assassination of JFK is the inaugural event in a 'decade of shocks' from Dallas to Watergate, a period of turmoil that includes not only the other political assassinations (Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy, and an attempt on presidential candidate George Wallace in 1972) but also the whole panoply of 1960s upheaval. Shachtman argues that the sequence of assassinations prompted Americans to re-evaluate their political leaders and the society that had produced them and their assassins. First of all, with each murder Americans could no longer kid themselves that the US was somehow miraculously exempt from the kind of political violence that plagued both third-world countries and great powers like Russia. Second, the quartet of high-profile political murders forced Americans to face up to the inevitability of death and to accept limitations to the national faith in infinite progress. Although recognising, like commentators at the time, the remarkable resilience of American political institutions, Shachtman nevertheless finds in the post-death glorification of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King a surfeit of psychic energy that had not been worked through in the normal pattern of grieving. He also asserts that 'the assassinations began a period in which violence became a part of the country's life' (Shachtman 1983: 61), accompanied by a realisation that America's self-image of innocence was mistaken. With a familiar air of liberal nostalgia, Shachtman next argues that with the death of the Kennedy brothers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther

King Americans began to find that there were no great men to take the place of these fallen leaders, leading to (in sociologist Max Weber's term) a routinisation of charisma. Finally, Shachtman identifies a broad range of reactions that he groups under the impulse to preserve (such as increasing Secret Service protection) and the impulse to search (here he has in mind the official and amateur investigations into the events). However, like other overviews of the 1960s, *Decade of Shocks* is quite hazy about the causal relationship between the political murders and the troubled times: it is never entirely clear whether the Kennedy assassination was a result or an initial cause of a national culture of violence.

The most common way that professional historians have dealt with the Kennedy assassination is by assessing the political consequences of the event. Most of the debate revolves around the question of what Kennedy would have done had he survived into a second term, particularly in relation to civil rights, economic issues, and the Cold War in general and Vietnam in particular. The discussion is often framed either in terms of how far Johnson's administration continued the path that Kennedy seemed to be taking, or in terms of how far Kennedy himself was beginning to change direction in the months before his death. As we will see in Chapter 7, Oliver Stone's conspiratorial interpretation of the assassination in his film *JFK* is based on the premise that Kennedy was about to withdraw from Vietnam, and so he was murdered by elements of the military-industrial complex – possibly in cahoots with Johnson himself – in order to protect their lucrative, pork-barrel of a war. Stone's argument is based in part on the work of the (previously obscure) military historian John Newman, whose 1992 book *JFK and Vietnam* argued that various formerly classified documents show that Kennedy had already decided to withdraw troops from Vietnam (there indeed exists a military plan from the spring of 1963), most likely after the election in 1964. This position has been given much fuller treatment in Howard Jones' *Death of a Generation* (2003), which provides further tantalising evidence of Newman's basic case from recently declassified documents. But the argument that Kennedy would have withdrawn from Vietnam has met with fierce opposition from numerous historians of all political stripes. In *Rethinking Camelot* (1993) Noam Chomsky mounts a fierce defence of the idea that Kennedy was never anything other than hawkish in his foreign policy (see also Robert Buzzanco 1999: 64–68). Likewise Fredrik Logevall's *Choosing War* (1999) insists that Kennedy was faced with a choice between escalation and negotiation but not withdrawal, even if he did not see the war as a test of machismo in the way that Johnson did. Any lingering faith in Kennedy's decency or his lack of personal blame for

the escalating involvement of the US in the Vietnam War is given short shrift in Robert Dean's *Imperial Brotherhood* (2001), which argues that Kennedy's aristocratic, charismatic masculinity led him repeatedly to personalise Cold War struggles as a gauge of his manhood. Other historians such as George Herring (2001) have dismissed Kennedy's withdrawal plans – a thousand US personnel by Christmas 1963 – as merely a token gesture that would have had little influence on the overall policy of continuing the war. Several historians have pointed out that the speech Kennedy was to have given in the Trade Mart at lunchtime on 22 November reconfirmed his hawkish approach to the Cold War, with several key phrases designed to reassure local Texas arms manufacturers that their interests would not be ignored (see DeGroot 2000: 79). The debate often revolves around the specifics of NSAM 263 and 273 (the confidential memoranda on policy regarding Vietnam made by Kennedy and Johnson) and other disputed passages buried in declassified documents. As we have seen in much of the historical discourse on the assassination of JFK, the larger story is often displaced by a near-obsessive focus on small but seemingly symbolic details.

# 4 The Official Version

In the battle lines that have been drawn up since the assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963, critics of many different stripes have challenged what has become known as the 'establishment version' or the 'official version'. That version is in fact made up of a number of monumental investigations and reports commissioned and conducted by various branches of the federal government, not all of which are in agreement. This chapter will recount the history of the political manoeuvres that led to the establishment of each of the inquiries, before going on to analyse their main findings as well as their strategies of representation.

## Warren Commission Report

The first and still the most significant of the official versions is *The Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* (1964), popularly known as the Warren Commission Report. It concluded in essence that Kennedy was shot by Lee Harvey Oswald, a disaffected loner, who in turn was murdered by Jack Ruby, who likewise acted alone. It also made a series of recommendations for improving presidential security. This chapter focuses on the Warren Report above all others, because virtually all subsequent representations of the Kennedy assassination are in dialogue with it, either as a monument of truth, or the rotting corpse of government lies. The future president Gerald Ford, a member of the Commission, was convinced at the time of publication that 'the monumental record of the President's Commission will stand like a Gibraltar of factual literature through the ages to come' (cited in Summers 1998: 88). But just thirty years later, Norman Mailer compared the Commission's work to 'a dead whale decomposing on a beach' (Mailer 1995a: 351). Either way, the Report is one of the most remarkable documents of twentieth-century American culture. It is very well known – though few have actually read

it cover to cover. It has been hailed as one of the great postmodern novels, despite it not actually being a novel, of course. Mailer characterised it as 'a prodigious work, compendious enough to bear comparison to the Encyclopedia Britannica (had the Britannica been devoted to only one subject)', 'a species of Talmudic text begging for commentary and further elucidation', and 'a Comstock Lode of novelistic material' (Mailer 1995a: 351). Don DeLillo called it 'the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred' (DeLillo 1988: 181). Mailer's and DeLillo's comments capture the idea that this gargantuan report is an accidental American classic, whose main summary and twenty-six accompanying volumes of evidence encompass the entirety of the nation, for better or worse, with their turgid prose and endless footnotes. In a review written on the Report's publication, the cultural critic Dwight Macdonald acclaimed it ironically as a contemporary epic, an 'American-style Iliad', or, more accurately, 'an anti-Iliad that retells great and terrible events in limping prose instead of winged poetry' (Macdonald 1965: 60). The Report's phrases and conclusions have become part of the lingua franca of modern American life, and it has taken on a cultural significance that far exceeds its immediate context of presenting the results of a government enquiry into Kennedy's assassination.

Despite some initial reservations about the merits of a government rather than a Congressional or local Texan inquiry (both of which were mooted), President Johnson quickly came round to the idea of appointing a blue-ribbon non-partisan commission of inquiry. On 29 November 1963 Johnson issued Executive Order 11130, creating a commission of unimpeachable reputation that would be chaired by Earl Warren, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, with its bi-partisan panel consisting of Sen. Russell (D-GA); Sen. John Sherman Cooper (R-KY); Rep. Hale Boggs (D-LA), Rep. Gerald Ford (R-MI), future vice president and president; Allen Dulles, former director of the CIA; and John J. McCloy, former president of the World Bank. With access to a secret intelligence report from the CIA in Mexico City indicating that Oswald may have received payment from the Cuban Embassy on his trip to Mexico just prior to the assassination, Johnson was greatly concerned that popular rumours circulating about the assassination would lead to calls for reckless retaliation against Cuba, a potentially catastrophic consequence given how close the world had come to a nuclear confrontation in the recent Cuban missile crisis of 1962. (The intelligence report was soon shown to have been inaccurate.) Indeed, in persuading Warren to chair the Commission Johnson twisted the emotional thumb screws on the very reluctant chief justice – he was apparently reduced

to tears – by emphasising the possibility that unchecked rumours could lead to a catastrophic nuclear war and that it was Warren's patriotic duty to lead a panel that would dispel any talk of a communist conspiracy with absolute certainty (Holland 2004: 159–60). Johnson and the members of the Commission themselves were also acutely aware of the potential damage that the assassination had done to the reputation of the US abroad, and felt that only a thorough and convincing inquiry could dispel the fears of many influential figures outside the US who suspected that a shabby coup d'état had taken place, in which the president was assassinated in broad daylight in the home state of the man who succeeded him. In their first confidential executive session, the Commissioners expressed their anxiety that history would condemn the Commission if it failed 'to show the world that America is not a banana republic, where a government can be changed by conspiracy' (cited in Epstein 1966: 32–3).

The desire to lay to rest once and for all the many rumours that were circulating at home and abroad shaped both the process and the end product of the Warren Commission. A confidential internal memo written by Deputy Attorney General Katzenbach two days after the assassination laid out his thinking on the need for a presidential commission with an eye to public relations:

> It is important that all of the facts surrounding President Kennedy's Assassination be made public in a way which will satisfy people in the United States and abroad that all the facts have been told and that a statement to this effect be made now.
>
> 1. The public must be satisfied that Oswald was the assassin; that he did not have confederates who are still at large; and that the evidence was such that he would have been convicted at trial.
> 2. Speculation about Oswald's motivation ought to be cut off, and we should have some basis for rebutting thought that this was a Communist conspiracy or (as the Iron Curtain press is saying) a right-wing conspiracy to blame it on the Communists.
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> (US House of Representatives 1979b, vol. 3: 567)

This secret memo has been regarded by conspiracy critics as a 'smoking gun' proving that the Warren Commission was a cover-up job whose conclusion was predetermined. But the memo also makes manifest the tension between making public 'all of the facts' surrounding the assassination and creating a report that would 'satisfy people in the United States and abroad', and these potentially divergent claims of thoroughness and reassurance created serious strains in the Report. At first

Warren and the other Commissioners were inclined to see their role as merely conducting a review of the FBI investigation. But they quickly realised that they would have to conduct their own investigation as there were omissions and contradictions in the FBI's report that would never satisfy the public. However, they also decided that the inquiry was to consist only of taking testimony from witnesses, and that they would rely on the various government intelligence agencies (principally the FBI and the CIA) to furnish them with other investigative information. Based partly on pragmatic and partly on political grounds (the Warren Commission did not have the resources to conduct its own primary investigation, nor did it want to antagonise the FBI and its testy director J. Edgar Hoover unnecessarily), this decision inevitably led the Commission into difficulties, not least because of rumours that began to emerge that Oswald had been an informant for the FBI. Having to rely principally on the investigative reports fed to it by the FBI, whose director was not only convinced from the outset that Oswald was the lone assassin but who was keen to protect the reputation of the Bureau, meant that there were potentially important angles to the case that might have been pursued given full investigative powers but were not. Instead the Commission had to work out a series of political compromises: on the one hand, it insisted that the FBI must turn over all of its investigatory materials, a request that turned out to be a poisoned chalice, as the volume of trivial materials furnished at Hoover's mischievous insistence overwhelmed the Commission; on the other hand, it agreed to curtail its own inquiries into potential FBI–Oswald links in exchange for a sworn affidavit from Hoover stating that there was no such link. In the spin given to this awkward situation in the Report, however, the Commission noted proudly in the foreword that because of all the rumours surrounding the case it had not unquestioningly accepted the reports of the government agencies: 'Not only were the premises and conclusions of those reports critically reassessed, but all assertions or rumors relating to a possible conspiracy, or the complicity of others than Oswald, which have come to the attention of the Commission, were investigated' (Warren Commission 1964: x). Ultimately the Commission's commitment to discovering truth was compromised by its commitment to preserving peace by dispelling dangerous rumours. But what if, as Edward Epstein, an early critic of the Warren Report, argued, a 'rumour damaging to the national interest proved to be true? The Commission's explicit purpose would dictate that the information be exposed regardless of the consequences, while the Commission's implicit purpose would dictate that the rumour be dispelled regardless of the fact that it was true' (Epstein 1966: 33; see also McKnight 2005).

It therefore comes as little surprise that in its workings the Commission betrayed a curious mixture of publicity and secrecy. Its lines of inquiry – and indeed, the Report itself – always have one eye on its public relations function of quashing rumours and restoring the reputation of the US. Given that 'the intense public demand for facts was met by partial and frequently conflicting reports from Dallas and elsewhere' (p. ix), it devoted enormous time and resources during its enquiry and space in the final Report to countermining those conspiracy rumours. Yet this public presentation of what they regarded as the definitive version of events was conducted behind closed doors: the hearing of witnesses was not open to the public, and transcripts of the executive sessions and other documentation were classified top secret and ordered to be kept sealed in the National Archives for seventy-five years. Likewise Warren was most insistent that preliminary findings or details of the testimony should not be disclosed to the public for fear that, taken out of order or out of context, such snippets might end up misleading the public further. The task of the inquiry was thus as much about managing the release of information to the best effect as it was about digging up that information in the first place.

The Commission first met in early December, just ten days after the assassination, and, having been granted powers of subpoena by Congress, started hearing witnesses, beginning with Marina Oswald. The major witnesses were interviewed in Washington by Lee Rankin, the chief counsel and day-to-day manager of the inquiry, in the presence of the Commissioners (or, at least some of them: their attendance record was collectively rather patchy, perhaps understandable for these prominent figures with busy careers in public life), and the testimony of the minor witnesses was taken by staff lawyers in Dallas. Rankin divided his team of fourteen hand-picked lawyers and twelve other staff into sections, to work through the FBI and Secret Service reports and to prepare further lines of inquiry; these sections then became the main chapter divisions of the final report. By July the hearings had finished and Warren ordered an end to further investigation and for each section to submit its draft chapter. The deadline was extended twice, not least because of disagreement among the staff about psychological terms for describing Oswald. Eventually by the middle of August drafts were submitted to Rankin and individual Commission members, and then rewritten by the few remaining staff lawyers; some drafts were 'rewritten as many as twenty times by nearly as many hands', according to one staff member (Epstein 1966: 26). The report was finally completed on 24 September, and rushed into print by the Government Printing Office on 27 September, with the *New York Times* printing it

as a special 48-page supplement on the following day. It also teamed up with Bantam publishers to produce a one-dollar paperback that eventually sold several million copies, remaining on the best-seller list for weeks. The twenty-six volumes of accompanying evidence and testimony were published ten weeks later, with the *New York Times* publishing a one-volume selection (dismissed as biased and misleading by conspiracy critics such as Sylvia Meagher).

Arguably the first thing to note about the Report – not to mention the twenty-six accompanying volumes – is its sheer bulk. When Johnson first officially received the Report from the Commissioners in person at the White House, he was taken aback by its size and all he could muster at first on this solemn historical occasion was the comment that 'It's pretty heavy' (Holland 2004: 252). The Report itself emphasises the monumentality of the operation that cost $1.2 million: the foreword proudly declares that the FBI conducted 25,000 interviews and submitted 2,300 reports totalling 25,400 pages to the Commission; the Secret Service conducted 1,550 interviews and submitted 800 reports amounting to 4,600 pages; the Warren Commission itself took the testimony of 552 witnesses (94 before the Commissioners, 395 before the staff lawyers, 61 depositions and 2 statements). The report is 888 pages long, with 296,000 words (10 million including the hearings and exhibits), 18 appendices, and 6,710 footnotes (although – infuriating to conspiracy critics – no index).

The weightiness of the Report, however, is not just an inevitable side-effect of the complexity of the inquiry, nor, as Macdonald noted in his review in *Esquire* (1965), a product of a very American desire to couple the collection of facts on a mass industrial scale with a commitment that in the name of democracy everything – both the significant and the trivial – must be made public, or at least be seen to be made public. It is also a result of its being researched and written almost entirely by lawyers. Although Warren was keen to correct the impression that the inquiry was in effect a trial of the deceased defendant, nevertheless the staff lawyers tended to approach their task with the doggedness of a prosecutor building a case that will bludgeon the jury into submission with the sheer volume of its evidence. Instead of offering a concise account that judiciously weighs up the frequently conflicting evidence, in many places the Report suffers from an overkill of facts and footnotes that obsessively tries to prove a particular point. Where it might have been more prudent to recognise either the lack of suitable evidence or its contradictions, the Report often engages in a rhetorical sleight-of-hand in which the accumulation of painstakingly researched but ultimately trivial details has the effect – whether deliberate or not –

of deflecting attention from more substantial aspects of the case. Everything is included in the Report, from the highly significant revelation that it was probably Oswald who had attempted to assassinate General Walker in April 1963, to minutiae such as the serial number of the mail order coupon used by Oswald to purchase the Mannlicher-Carcano rifle allegedly used in the shooting – no. 2,202,130,462, it turns out (p. 119).

Time and again we are left admiring the thoroughness of the FBI's and the Commission's investigation, but confused about the ultimate point of the exercise. For example, the Report details a series of elaborate reconstructions conducted in order to determine the time it would have taken for Mrs Reid, a secretary working in the Texas School Book Depository, to run back inside after the shooting to the clerical office on the second floor, where she saw Oswald as he walked towards the door leading to the front stairway. This might be an important fact (if Mrs Reid's recollection of seeing Oswald hurrying past her is accurate, it might tell us if Oswald could have had enough time to exit the building before the police cordoned it off), but its significance is diminished as the Report details in the language of government bureaucracy the lengthy but pseudo-scientific procedures that were followed to get average timings ('Mrs Reid ran the distance three times and was timed in two minutes by stopwatch', p. 155), leaving the reader with the comical image of a middle-aged secretary having repeatedly to recreate her route, all the while timed with a stopwatch as if in some alternative, macabre Olympic event. Or, for instance, there is a huge accumulation of evidence to demonstrate that the motorcade route with the sharp left-hand turn from Main onto Elm Street was perfectly routine in the Dallas traffic regime, including even a photo of the relevant street sign, all to prove that the chosen route was not part of a conspiracy. Finally, we learn all about the FBI's remarkable persistence in tracking down every single passenger on Oswald's bus ride to Mexico City in September 1963, including even one Albert Osborne, an elderly itinerant preacher Oswald sat next to, only to find that there is no significance to any of these chance connections.

The Report often presents not just the findings of a particular forensic enquiry, but also the detailed workings that led to the conclusion, and even the scientific principles underpinning the inquiry. An example of showing the workings is the attempt to ascertain whether a bullet could have had enough velocity after exiting Kennedy's neck to inflict all the wounds on Connally: we learn in painfully lengthy detail about the sequence of bizarre experiments involving shooting into human cadavers, and fabricated neck-, skull-, and wrist-like objects. The

results are given in mind-numbing – yet ultimately pointless – accuracy. For example:

> It was determined that the bullet traveled through 13½ to 14½ centimeters of tissue in the President's neck. That substance was simulated by constructing three blocks: one with a 20-percent gelatin composition, a second one from animal meat and a third from another animal meat. . . . To reconstruct the assassination situation as closely as possible both sides of the substances were covered with material and clipped animal skin to duplicate human skin. The average exit velocity was 1779 feet from the gelatin, 1798 feet from the first animal meat and 1772 feet from the second animal meat. (p. 584)

This might be important in deciding whether the bullet that pierced Kennedy's throat could have had sufficient momentum to then go on to inflict all of Connally's wounds, and hence that the single bullet theory and the no-conspiracy argument are sustainable, but it is all too easy to lose sight of that central point amid the welter of detail about a series of experiments based on shaky premises. In the case of returning to the basic scientific principles, we are given, for example, not just the testimony of a forensics expert that one of Oswald's hairs was found on the Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, but also a miniature lesson in the science of hair follicle recognition, including a diagram of a hair. Or we learn not merely that the paper employed in the home-made brown paper parcel that Oswald probably used to carry the rifle to work on the fateful day matched the paper used at the Texas School Book Depository, but that 'the science of paper analysis enabled [the FBI expert] to distinguish between different rolls of paper even through they were produced by the same manufacturer' (p. 136). There is a manifest pride and even showmanship in the state-of-the-art achievements of the FBI's forensic science that in part aims to divert attention from the more obvious failure of the Bureau and the Secret Service to prevent the assassination, but at times the expertise becomes the main point instead of the conclusions it allows the Commission to reach.

Although there is an admirable – if tedious – thoroughness in much of the Report, there is also in places an abrupt closing down of discussion. One of the problems the Commission faced was the common phenomenon of the unreliability of eyewitness testimony. Sometimes this was of little account, such as the comical lack of agreement about the exact shade of Oswald's jacket among the witnesses who had seen him hurrying away from the Tippit shooting. Earlene Roberts, Oswald's landlady, thought that 'she may have seen the gray zipper jacket', but that it seemed 'darker than Commission Exhibit No.162'; Ted

Callaway, who saw the assailant just after the shooting, 'thought it had a little more tan in it'; Mrs Markham and Barbara Davis thought that it 'was darker than the jacket found by Westbrook'; but William Scoggins 'thought it was lighter' (p. 176). In other cases, however, the difference between eyewitnesses is potentially decisive. Sometimes the Report navigates its way through these tricky waters with a lawyerly subtleness that manages to steer the testimony to the conclusion it is trying to reach. For example, one of the key witnesses is Howard L. Brennan, who saw a man firing shots from the south-east corner window of the Texas School Book Depository, and later identified him as Oswald; however, in the police line-up on 22 November Brennan said that he was unable to positively identify Oswald, although he had given the police a description of the man that he had seen in the sixth-floor window to police immediately after the shooting. The Report carefully states that 'the Commission is satisfied that, at the least, Brennan saw a man in the window who *closely resembled* Lee Harvey Oswald, and that Brennan *believes* the man he saw was in fact Lee Harvey Oswald' (p. 146, emphasis added). This seems to suggest that at best the Commission is satisfied that Brennan believes it was Oswald, rather than the Commission being satisfied that it was actually Oswald. In other places, however, the Report either endorses testimony that fits its case (the phrase used again and again is that it has 'probative value'), or summarily dismisses contradictory testimony as having no 'probative value'.

Although the Commission is probably correct in most of its assessments of the accuracy of particular eyewitness testimony, often there is no real explanation why a witness might be reliable in one aspect of their testimony but hopelessly mistaken in another. Instead there is a tendency in the Report to rely at crucial moments on a forceful statement of the Commissioners' considered opinion that is all the more noticeably flimsy in comparison with the obsessive bolstering of other pieces of evidence. There is a tendency to indulge in dogmatic assertions such as the statement that 'no credible evidence suggests that the shots were fired from the railroad bridge over the Triple Underpass, the nearby railroad yards or any place other than the Texas School Book Depository Building' (p. 61). Leaving aside the possibility of contradictory testimony buried in the volumes of hearings, this categorical insistence is undermined, for example, by the testimony – quoted only a few pages before – of James Crawford who heard a backfire from the direction of the triple underpass (p. 68), and other testimony from the spectators who ran that way convinced that the shots had come from there. But because no one actually saw a rifleman in that vicinity the

Commission insists that therefore they must all have been mistaken. Although quite probably true, it is easy to see how future critics of the Warren Report felt that it had not always been entirely fair-handed and open-minded in its assessment of the evidence.

There is likewise a willingness to merely take on trust the word of an authority that sits uneasily with the obsessive return to first principles and laying out of the methodology of scientific expertise elsewhere in the Report. The most egregious example is the acceptance of Hoover's sworn affidavit that Oswald was not working for the FBI, but we could also point to the conclusion of chapter 6 ('Investigation of Possible Conspiracy') that wheels out all the big guns in its concluding paragraph, but without any real account of their reasoning: 'The conclusion that there is no evidence of a conspiracy was also reached independently by Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State; Robert S. McNamara, the Secretary of Defence; C. Douglas Dillon, the Secretary of the Treasury; John A. McCone, the Director of the CIA; and James J. Rowley, the Chief of the Secret Service, on the basis of the information available to each of them' (p. 374). In addition to shoring up its conclusions by appealing to the voice of authority, the Report also places great stock in the testimony of experts, although (as we have since come to learn from prominent criminal trials) alternative experts can usually be found who will swear to the opposite conclusion. Experts testified, for example, that a rifleman of Oswald's capabilities could have fired all three shots in the time scale available, or that Oswald had the 'capacity to risk all in cruel and responsible actions' (p. 23), as if both of these characteristics are immutable and observable laws of nature rather than glorified conjectures.

The Report repeatedly relies on a selective filtering of the evidence to suit its case (this is not to say, however, that its conclusions are necessarily wrong, merely that its tacit task of assuaging fears might have been fatally compromised by this clumsy use of evidence). This tendency shapes the narrative drive of the Report as a whole: too often there is a plodding, rigid determination to prove the conclusion that it seems to have drawn in advance. Rarely do you get the sense that the task of the Commission is genuinely to weigh up all the possible theories, rather than to prove beyond reasonable doubt the single conclusion that it was Oswald. Although the Report does consider alternative explanations, it usually does so only in the context of putting an end to the 'speculations and rumours' that are causing so much damage to the reputation of the US intelligence agencies and the country as a whole. This produces an effect not of tragic inevitability hovering over the event, but of the fixated, brow-beating relentlessness of a prosecutor's

case in which everything is marshalled towards the incontrovertible proof at hand. As readers we do not join the investigators on their journey of discovery as hypotheses emerge, are tested out, and new lines of inquiry unfold. Instead we are instructed in the correct conclusion time after time.

Although the Report is grimly fascinating in many ways, its narrative structure and prose style are seldom gripping. You might be forgiven for thinking that this dullness is the inevitable result of a government inquiry written by lawyers and bureaucrats, but *The 9/11 Commission Report* (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks 2004) demonstrated that such a venture could have the narrative tension and spare, compelling prose of a popular thriller, even when readers know the outcome in advance. The lack of dramatic tension in the Warren Report is, as we have seen, partly a result of the seeming predetermination of the conclusion, but it is also partly a result of the peculiar structure of the Report as a whole, which in turn stems from the division of labour in the Commission's inquiry itself. In many ways the Commission was run like a corporation, with Warren as the nominal chairman of the board of directors, but the real work was devolved to a series of relatively independent divisions, each with its own hierarchical structure of a senior and junior counsel. Unlike the writing of the 9/11 report that was under the direction of a single historian, the Warren Report was assembled out of the separate chapters put together by each of the investigatory teams. Although there was considerable rewriting and editing, many of the larger structural peculiarities remain.

The Warren Report does not follow a broadly chronological narrative thread but instead has a logical structure of slow, necessary amplification. Having determined in the first chapter that Kennedy was shot by someone from the sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository, the next chapter amasses the evidence needed to link Oswald to the gun and the location. In building its case this way, the chapters can become fragmentary and repetitious. For example, the Report gives three different versions of Oswald's biography in different places, with varying emphasis and evidence in each. Although logically the different accounts might be required in these three separate locations, it makes for frustrating reading (critics have also argued that it also serves to hammer home the Commission's argument that Oswald was the lone assassin by sheer bloody-minded repetition). Likewise much of the argument of individual chapters is implicitly in refutation of the conspiracy theories that had already begun to swirl around the case, yet these theories are laid out in coherent fashion only in an

appendix. Reading the Report is therefore like reading a very long, convoluted answer to a question that we only learn about in retrospect.

Most of the Report is written in fairly clear, straightforward – albeit unimaginative – prose that is at times painfully slow and cautious in building up its case. Sometimes the writing is just plain dull, and these sections are usually clearly taken from FBI or other internal reports and betray the bureaucratic formulae of their original source. The critic Dwight Macdonald gave short shrift to the government's prose in his book review, comparing it unfavourably but humorously to Homer's *Iliad*: 'The lawyer's drone, the clotted chunks of expert testimony, the turgidities of officialese, the bureaucrat's smooth-worn evasions. For the Homeric simile, Research; for the epic surge and thunder, the crepitating clutter of Fact' (Macdonald 1965: 60).

When the Report does move beyond the policeman's or the lawyer's recitation of facts, it lapses into hackneyed eulogy, diplomatic euphemism, or unconvincing psychobabble. The opening of the first chapter begins, for example, with the bland cliché about the assassination of Kennedy as a 'cruel and shocking act of violence directed against a man, a family, a nation, against all mankind', before going to note the tragedy of a 'young and vigorous leader' being cut down prematurely (p. 1). It then notes that Kennedy's was the fourth presidential assassination 'in the history of a country dedicated to the concepts of reasoned argument and peaceful political change' (p. 1). The potential embarrassment of the repeated violent deaths of its leaders is viewed not as a damning national failure but as an aberration in an otherwise sound system. The reference to 'a country dedicated to the concepts of reasoned argument' nods to the interpretation of the Kennedy assassination as a result of right-wing extremism that Warren and other liberals had propounded against the known facts, yet by a piece of rhetorical prestidigitation it is not Kennedy but the nation that is the embodiment of reason. On this line of thinking, anyone one who resists the 'concepts of reasoned argument' – which seem to lead inexorably to the conclusion that the assassination was the result not of political opposition but an irrational outsider – is marginalised in advance as implicitly un-American. And, by the same logic that characterises Oswald as a deranged loner rather than a political actor, any paranoid rejection of the Report's basic conclusion on the part of the public could therefore be depoliticised as a pathological failure to understand the American tradition of rationality and peaceful continuity. In short, rejecting the rationality of the Warren Commission's conclusion was equated in some political commentary of the 1960s with Oswald's violent rejection of Kennedy's lionised rationality.

We have already seen the way the Report hides behind such obfuscatory phrases as 'probative value'; we might also note phrases such as 'abortive transfer', the euphemistic title of the section on the shooting of Oswald. Two of the most telling examples of the finessing of phrasing in the Report concern key elements of the single bullet theory, the very sticking point for most subsequent criticism of the Warren Commission. The narrative summary in the opening chapter on the number and sequence of bullets is noticeably vague about the specifics: 'shots fired from a rifle mortally wounded President Kennedy and seriously injured Governor Connally. One bullet passed through the President's neck; a subsequent bullet, which was lethal, shattered the right side of his skull. Governor Connally sustained bullet wounds' (p. 48). This key sentence fudges the difference between the three-shot, two-hit theory which the Report in fact supported and the FBI's preferred three-shot, three-hit scenario, and betrays the behind-the-scenes compromises that were required in order for all the Commissioners to still agree to issuing a unanimous verdict.

The chapter on Oswald's biography and mentality offers the most significant example of the tension in the Report between relying solely on scientifically provable statements and indulging in a prosecutorial rhetoric that works as much through insinuation and misdirection as solid evidence. There was in fact a rift among the Commission staff over the use of psychological terminology for describing Oswald, prompting Rankin to arrange a colloquium with psychiatrists to shed light on the issue. It ended up lasting all day, with the Commission lawyers concluding that there was not enough evidence to draw meaningful psychological inferences about Oswald. The draft chapter on Oswald was deemed too psychological, and so was rewritten by an Air Force historian who was drafted into the Commission late in its proceedings in order to help with the writing (his other main contribution was the appendix on 'Rumours and Speculations'). However, the final version still betrays a lingering reliance on psychological generalities. In its preamble, the chapter notes in a metaphysical vein that 'Oswald's complete state of mind and character are now outside the power of man to know' (p. 375), admitting that since Oswald was dead the Commission was not able 'able to reach any definite conclusions as to whether or not he was "sane" under prevailing legal standards' (p. 375).

Having looked at many possible motives for the presumed assassin's action (including both his political and personal grievances), the Commission is then forced to note that 'none of these possibilities satisfactorily explains Oswald's act if it is judged by the standards of reasonable men' (p. 375). Some of the Commissioners were unhappy at

the lack of explanation in this most vital question. In response to President Johnson's phone conversation on 18 September 1964 inquiring what the basic conclusion of the Commission would be on Oswald's motive, Senator Russell could only reply that: 'Well, just that he was a general misanthropic kind of fella . . . that he'd . . . had never really been satisfied anywhere he was on the earth, in Russia or here, and that he had a desire to get his name in history and all' (Holland 2004: 251). The Report itself expresses it more formally, but with little more insight, gesturing towards Oswald's 'overriding hostility to his environment' and the fact that 'he does not appear to have been able to establish meaningful relationships with other people' (p. 423). Its 'most outstanding conclusion' is that 'Oswald was profoundly alienated from the world in which he lived. His life was characterized by isolation, frustration, and failure' (p. 376). These generalisations may well be true, and they may well have contributed to Oswald's action, but they leave us no closer to understanding Oswald's motive: the Commission itself recognised that they could come to no 'definitive determination'.

The conclusions the Report draws do not always add up to a convincing explanation, as well the Commissioners knew. Its final verdict is that 'out of these and the many other factors which may have molded the character of Lee Harvey Oswald there emerged a man capable of assassinating President Kennedy' (p. 424). Yet the list of 'factors' is not so unusual. Everything that is said of Oswald could also be said of thousands of other angry young men in the early 1960s, so why did a particular kind of political dissatisfaction (or generalised misanthropy, as the Report would have it) lead in Oswald's case to murder? The Report is in the end caught between, on the one hand, the need to make sense of the assassination for the general public by ascribing rational motives to Oswald, and, on the other hand, the compulsion to conclude that the killing of an American president who was felt to be the very embodiment of reason must be an irrational and even psychopathic act. So the Commission tries to suggest that the assassination is simultaneously the work of a dissatisfied but otherwise unremarkable American, and something no sane American would even consider.

Although the Report makes a great play of basing its personality judgements on specific examples, it also at times disingenuously gestures towards other kinds of psychological explanation that it cannot sustain. For example, it repeats intriguing snippets such as the revelation (recounted by his brother) that Oswald slept in the same bed as his mother until he was eleven; or the hint at fears about homosexuality with the story that Oswald disliked getting undressed in front of the other boys in the reform school where he was sent briefly at the age of

thirteen. Taking its lead from the psychological examination conducted by an in-house psychiatrist at the reform school, and an assessment of his character made by a fellow marine, the Report also diagnoses Oswald as paranoid, noting, for example, that 'the arguments he used to justify his use of the alias suggest that Oswald may have come to think that the whole world was becoming involved in an increasingly complex conspiracy against him' (p. 420). But the Report has an ambiguous attitude to this kind of anecdotal evidence pointing towards a Freudian understanding of his character: it never fully endorses a psychosexual explanation, but neither does it ever fully disavow such a possibility. We learn, for instance, that Marina complained that in sexual terms Oswald was 'not a man' (p. 418), and that he had a troubled and abusive relationship with his wife. But, having conjured up the intriguing possibility that, in effect, Oswald shot the President because he couldn't perform with his wife, the Report then informs us that the period immediately leading up to the assassination was one of comparative calm in the relations between Lee and Marina.

The Report hedges its bets on the most appropriate mode of explanation: in addition to the skeletal framework of a Freudian theory, there is also the groundwork for a behaviouralist interpretation, and a Marxist account. One of the basic conclusions of the chapter on Oswald is that his unhappiness was a result of a 'failure to adapt to his environment' (p. 382), following the behaviouralist cliché that it is not the environment to blame but the individual's failure to adjust to it. We are also given many details about the financial hardships that the Oswalds suffered, offering the basis for an economic, class-based analysis of the assassin's motives. Although the painstaking reconstruction of Oswald's finances is conducted to prove that Oswald was not in receipt of any unexplained sums of money prior to the assassination, it also creates a melancholy, unspoken commentary on the precariousness of the family's economic situation. In a similar fashion, the narrative of Oswald's life – that supposedly will open up the mind of the assassin – begins with the death of his father two months before he was born. However, this is presented not as the linchpin of an Oedipal drama that eventually is resolved with the killing of Kennedy the father figure, but as the reason that Oswald's mother had to go back to work, in effect leaving him as a lonely latch-key kid. The structure of the chapter also betrays this fundamental uncertainty about the right kind of explanatory framework. On the one hand, it follows a conventional biographical narrative, in which the events of his life slowly and causally accumulate to precipitate his final action; on the other hand, some of the chapter subdivisions are thematic rather than chronological

('Interest in Marxism', 'Personal Relations'), as if Oswald's psychological make-up operates outside of time and causality, as psychoanalytic theory argues.

The confusion between different explanatory models is in part a result of the Commission having to rely on the existing evaluations of various experts who had encountered Oswald during his life, since they were obviously unable to conduct their own assessment. Some of these experts were the psychiatrists who had made formal assessments of Oswald as a teenager, and, as we have seen, they show the pervasive influence of Freudianism in the American mental health field in the mid-twentieth century. But other 'experts' on which the Commission has to rely include the retrospective impressions of Oswald's friends and relatives. Perhaps the most interesting of these is Kerry Thornley, who had known Oswald as a Marine in California in 1959 (another unlikely Marine, Thornley later became part of the 1960s counterculture and achieved a cult following as the co-creator of the semi-ironic religion Discordianism). Unlike others called on to interpret Oswald's character only in the light of the overwhelming presumption of his having assassinated the president, Thornley's view was formulated before the event. Even more compelling is the fact that Thornley was so intrigued by Oswald and his defection to Russia that he wrote a novel loosely based on him. Leaving aside the details of Thornley's interpretation of Oswald (in his testimony he's pushed into admitting that 'it was kind of necessary to him to believe that he was being picked on. It wasn't anything extreme. I wouldn't go as far to call it, call him a paranoid, but a definite tendency there was in that direction, I think', p. 386), what's important is that Oswald was even before the assassination such an enigma that he made a fitting character for a novel. After all, as Thornley notes, how many Marines during the height of the Cold War were also avid Communists? (Thornley was not the only person at the time to find Oswald intriguing: the journalist Priscilla MacMillan (1977) interviewed Oswald during his defection in Russia, and after the assassination wrote a biography of him and his wife.)

The Commission's difficulty in interpreting Oswald is thus perhaps less a result of its failure to read the signs than an inherent, almost novelistic ambiguity in Oswald's life and character. The Report has to admit that Oswald's actions – for example his half-hearted and haphazard attempts to flee after the assassination – can equally be viewed as random or as part of a conscious plan that has yet to be discovered: 'Oswald's behavior after the assassination throws little light on his motives' (p. 423). Although sometimes the Report confidently asserts knowledge of Oswald's mind-set ('Oswald must have been thoroughly

disillusioned when he left Mexico City on October 2, 1963', p. 413), at other times it finds it is impossible to determine his genuine intentions because Oswald himself was at times unsure of what he was doing, or was merely self-consciously acting out a part to create an effect.

For all its awareness of the interpretive difficulties posed by Oswald, the Commission ultimately explains the assassin's motives in personal rather than political terms. It notes, for example, that Oswald 'used his Marxist and associated activities as excuses for his difficulties in getting along in the world, which were usually caused by entirely different factors' (p. 390). Although the Report recognises that Oswald's political convictions may have played a role, when all is said and done it refuses to see him as a would-be political actor on the Cold War stage, preferring instead to see his political disaffection as merely a symptom of a deeper malaise that was rooted in his idiosyncratic psychological make-up. This tendency to depoliticise Oswald is obviously significant in the light of the overall implicit task of the Commission in calming rumours about foreign conspiracy, but the downplaying of the Cold War political context – in particular its silence on Operation Mongoose, the CIA's programme of attempted assassination of foreign leaders, that Commissioners Dulles and Russell must have known about – makes Oswald appear more inscrutable than necessary.

## Warren Commission Hearings and Exhibits

For all the political complexity of the main summary, it is the accompanying twenty-six volumes of hearings and exhibits that makes *The Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy* such a remarkable work. Although the volumes of evidence serve to back up the Commission's case (and accidentally provide ammunition for critics who argue that the testimony in crucial places contradicts the conclusions drawn in the one-volume summary), they are also in their own right a morbidly fascinating compendium of human drama, mundane details, and bizarre trivia. It is the sheer scale of the material that is mind-boggling and that has fascinated writers and cultural commentators such as Norman Mailer and Don DeLillo: there are hundreds of pages of barely relevant testimony, an obsessive accumulation of documents that prove little or nothing, and photos of every conceivable piece of evidence. The Commission wanted the evidence to speak for itself, but the tale told by this staggering collection is more one of the melancholy and randomness of human existence than it is the back story to the gripping drama of a presidential assassination.

Perhaps the most remarkable part of all is the testimony of Marguerite Oswald that occupies 138 pages of Volume 1. Like Lee, Marguerite seems to have been waiting all her life for the solemn gaze of History to recognise her, and with the posthumous defence of her accused son she believes her moment has finally come. However, instead of an eloquent display of maternal piety or a steely-eyed rebuttal of the charges, all the frustration of Marguerite's life erupts into a lava-flow of accusations and grievances. Her testimony is animated by an overwhelming sense of self-importance; she insists that she can't reveal the full extent of her 'knowledge' that her son was a government agent (and the 'unsung hero of this thing') because she is always 'thinking of the security of my country' (Warren Commission 1964, vol. 1: 162). The commissioners are extraordinarily patient in letting her tell her story in her own words, but their patience begins to wear thin in the face of Marguerite's breathtakingly dogmatic and rude performance.

Despite the Commissioners' assurances to the contrary, Marguerite is convinced that she is in effect fighting to clear her son's name, and she is adamant that her whole story be heard. However, she finds it very difficult to know where to begin, and is continually maintaining that she must go back to the very beginning in order to answer even the most straightforward of questions. She repeatedly hints that there is a 'plot in our own government, and there is a high official involved' (1: 188), but when pressed to give specifics she insists that she cannot do that without telling the whole story:

> Rankin: I think the Commission would be very much interested in how you conclude that there was a conspiracy – if you can help on that.
> Marguerite Oswald: Yes, I can help you. But I have many, many stories. I have to start from the defection. I have a story about Lee's life age 16 that maybe you know about, maybe you don't. I have many stories, gentlemen. And I cannot do all these stories in these six hours I have been here today. I have covered quite a bit. I have many stories.
> Boggs: Why did your son defect to Russia?
> Marguerite Oswald: I cannot answer that yes or no, sir. I am going to go through the whole story, or it is no good. And that is what I have been doing for this Commission all day long – giving a story.
> Boggs: Suppose you just make it very brief?
> Marguerite Oswald: I cannot make it brief, I will say I am unable to make it brief. This is my life and my son's life going down in

> history. And I want the opportunity to tell the story with documents, as I have been doing. I am not going to answer yes or no, because it is no good'. (1: 182–3)

For several days in a row Marguerite tries to piece together this potentially explosive story, but each time it seems that she is going to get to the heart of the matter she spirals off into another anecdote that never really proves her point, with syntax that is as convoluted as her story. Again and again she insists that her revelations cannot be reduced to their essence, and that all the parts of the story are interwoven: 'I cannot pin it down to one sentence' (1: 188), she declares; or, 'Now, I have to go back a little bit. But, believe me, gentlemen, the story will get together for you to understand' (1: 155).

Marguerite's rambling story-telling is both exasperating and grimly comic (for example, she suggests that her son should be given a full hero's burial in Arlington National Cemetery, where JFK was buried!), and ultimately it sheds little light on any potential conspiracy in the assassination. Nevertheless, her repeated focus on the difficulty of assembling a coherent narrative provides an unwitting, ironic commentary on the challenges facing the Commission itself. Although we may scoff at Marguerite's repetitive, circuitous style, it must be remembered that the one-volume summary Report itself needs three different attempts at Oswald's biography, and the twenty-six accompanying volumes have the same effect of dispersing a fairly straightforward story into an endless profusion of personal anecdotes and trivial details. The question of just how much needs to be included in order to tell the whole story is a problem not just for Marguerite but for the Report as a whole:

> Now, there is another story. We have stories galore, believe me – with documents and everything. A gun will be involved in this story, that Lee had bought. But I don't want to confuse the Committee. That is another part we will have to go into. The only way I can do this and not forget things is to do the way I am doing it. And if you have any questions, if you feel the story I have told so far – I would like to know, myself, if I have forgotten anything.' (1: 163)

She even characterises being permitted to tell the whole story as a patriotic right: 'I cannot survive in this world unless I know I have my American way of life and can start from the very beginning' (1: 195).

Marguerite's testimony also draws attention to the question of the status of evidence, and what kind of evidence constitutes proof. It eventually turns out that her three most important allegations are

that: (1) Lee was working for the government when he defected; (2) that Lee was framed; and (3) that there was a conspiracy within the government to kill Kennedy. Her reasoning is fascinating: her first accusation is based on the assumption that Lee must have had a good reason to abandon his mother by defecting; the second stems from her refusal to believe that he would have left such a trail of damning evidence; and the third is predicated on the idea that the supposed lack of care and respect shown to her by the Secret Service is 'evidence' that they lacked the necessary care and professionalism to protect the president. Marguerite's reasoning is often wayward and flawed, based not on the details of forensics and ballistics but on the alternative certainties of a mother's knowledge of filial affection, or her knowledge of his character, or the synecdoche of seeing in personal affront the shadow of national trauma. She sees the most mundane of things as highly suspicious, such as her story about signing up for Russian classes and finding that the language instructor, who happens to know Lee and Marina, doesn't refer to their connection. 'I find that very peculiar' (1: 155), declares Marguerite. From a few minor inconsistencies and some vague circumstantial evidence, she extrapolates a whole conspiratorial reinterpretation of events. Anticipating some of the more fanciful forms of conspiracist thinking that came to haunt the case in the ensuing decades, she hints at a vast conspiracy (although, when pressed by the Commissioners, she objects to the word 'conspiracy'), a plot whose outline can be gleaned not from any obvious smoking gun, but from tiny fragments of seemingly inconsequential clues, and from a more general pattern of inconsistencies that she has learned to identify. In response to Rankin's question of why an anecdote about how Marina snubbed her offer to come and live with her after the assassination was evidence of a conspiracy, Marguerite replies: 'Because I am going to try to show there is discrepancies all along' (1: 189). (The logic is that Marina was not supposed to be able to speak any English, and therefore if she could indeed speak a little that was a sign that there was more to her than at first sight.) At one point she even explicitly challenges the Commission (that includes, of course, the chief justice of the Supreme Court) over what should count as evidence, insisting that her circumstantial evidence – Marina's seemingly fickle attitude to Marguerite – is no less significant than the circumstantial evidence that the Commission has against Lee. 'So I am under the impression – and this is speculation, like anything else – circumstantial evidence, let's say', Marguerite explains, 'I am just a layman. That is what you have against my son. Nobody saw him with a rifle shoot the president. So you have mostly circumstantial evidence' (1: 189). Though Marguerite's

testimony is ultimately pitiful in how far it misses the mark, it nevertheless highlights the Commission's dilemma in weighing up the 'probative value' of circumstantial evidence and conflicting testimony.

Marguerite's testimony can be infuriatingly opaque and illogical, but there is no denying that it makes for compelling reading – her voice is hard to forget. The same cannot be said of much of the rest of the accompanying testimony. These transcripts for the most part do not contain the unfolding drama of investigators making spellbinding discoveries through the cut and thrust of their questioning: instead the staff lawyers are merely trying to put on record prerehearsed statements that can then be cited in the final Report. At times, though, you can sense the exasperation of the counsel as the witnesses start to muddy the waters. The testimony of the colourfully named Garland Glenwill Slack will serve as a representative example from the hundreds of such exchanges. Slack claimed to have seen Oswald firing his gun at a rifle range in the weeks leading up to the assassination (obviously a useful piece of evidence in the Commission's case), but he adds the potentially explosive elements that Oswald was driven there by someone else (an accomplice?), and the rifle he was firing was not the Mannlicher-Carcano found at the Texas School Book Depository (might he have been framed?). But Slack's friends at the rifle range all denied seeing Oswald there (Slack suggests that they didn't want to get involved in trouble by testifying), and so Slack himself begins to doubt what he saw: 'You see, you read the papers and you get to where you imagine things and you find yourself imagining that you saw somebody, and I never had anything that made me as sick for 3 days' (1: 383). Slack is adamant about his identification of the gun (he knows guns a way a woman knows ring settings, he explains), but begins to waver when asked to identify Oswald from a photo. He agrees that the side profile looks the same, but that the hair in the full-face image is different. In an inadvertently comic exchange with the Commission counsel, he debates the relative meanness of the man he saw:

> Mr Liebeler: Do you think that any of these pictures are a picture of the man that you saw at the rifle range that day?
> Mr Slack: Those heavy eyebrows and that part in the hair, but apparently he had more hair. Maybe he got a haircut afterwards.
> Mr Liebeler: Who had more hair, the fellow?
> Mr Slack: The picture. The man I saw in this picture right here.
> Mr Liebeler: The man you saw had more hair?
> Mr Slack: Yes; he sure did.

Mr Liebeler: Do you think that any of these pictures are a picture of the man that you saw at the rifle range that day?
Mr Slack: The difference in position he was in and everything, that looked like him, but he wasn't that sleepy-eyed. He was a cocky guy.
Mr Liebeler: Referring to Exhibit 453?
Mr Slack: When he looked at me. I don't see how in the World he could ever get a pleasant look on his face like this picture here. Probably he could, but –
Mr Liebeler: You think that the picture 456 looks a little more pleasant than the fellow you remember seeing at the rifle range, is that right?
Mr Slack: He sure does. (1: 383)

Just as the long-suffering Commission lawyer is straightening out Slack's account, he dives off into a long and unrelated complaint that his phone might be being tapped by 'newshounds'. As with so many of the other witnesses, his language is – accidentally – endlessly slippery, neither fully confirming nor fully denying anything, making most of his testimony near worthless in the end.

Often in the accompanying volumes of testimony the main point is lost amid the welter of details and digressions, and the same mixture of relevance and irrelevance plagues the eleven volumes of accompanying exhibits. There are case-making items such as the backyard photos of Oswald posing with a rifle and a copy of *The Militant*, or his 'Historic Diary' composed in Russia, but there are also items that are tangential at best, and ludicrously incongruous at worse. Think, for example, of the photo of Commission Exhibit 664, a piece of string (not even the original string) tied into various knots, used by the FBI's hair and fibre expert to demonstrate the way the blanket wrapping Oswald's rifle might have been secured (17: 325). Or, what are we to make of the photo of Oswald's pubic hair found on the rifle blanket (17: 330)? Although we are given a lesson in the forensic science of hair follicle recognition in Appendix 10 of the main Report, it's hard to see how a photo will help a lay audience decide for itself one way or the other. Even worse, there are photos of little packets of different samples of hair: it may be reassuring that the evidence has all been neatly collected, but the need to photograph everything in order to make it available for inclusion in a book verges on the obsessive. Finally, it is worth considering Commission Exhibits 121 and 122, two photos of 'various medical items' found in Marina's and Lee's medicine cabinet (16: 492–3). In the photos, the items are laid out neatly to create a pleasingly symmetrical design, turning the raw material of physical evidence into abstract art in


**Figure 4.1** Contents of Marina Oswald's medicine cabinet (Commission Exhibit 121). Courtesy JFK Assassination Records Collection, NARA.

the manner of Andy Warhol (see fig. 4.1). But after four decades, these staid photos of comparatively trivial evidence take on a nostalgic beauty, like a display in a museum of long-forgotten medicinal packaging, once-familiar items of everyday ephemera preserved forever in the unlikeliest of places. In the end, beyond the drama of the assassination, the Warren Report becomes a poignant museum of a lost America, full of marginal voices and objects turned into secular relics.

## Reception of the Report

The Warren Report immediately became a best-seller, with two million copies sold in just a few months after its release. If the main aim of the Commission was to allay 'rumours and suspicions', the Report was – initially – a success. An opinion poll conducted before the Report was issued indicated that only 29 per cent of Americans believed Oswald acted alone; but after its findings became public in late 1964, 87 per cent believed the Commission's version (cited in Holland 1994: 203). In the mainstream media the Report was at first very well received, with *Time* magazine, for example, declaring that 'the Report is amazing in its detail, remarkable in its judicial caution and restraint, yet utterly convincing in all of its major conclusions' (*Time* 1964: 19). Likewise *LIFE* magazine proclaimed that 'the Report is a great public document that reflects credit on its author, and the nation it represents' (Wainwright 1964: 35). *The Nation*, usually critical of the establishment view, also admired the 'conscientious and at times brilliant job the Commission has done', in particular the way that it 'admirably fulfilled its central objective by producing an account of the circumstances under which President Kennedy was assassinated that is adequate to satisfy all reasonable doubts' (Packer 1964: 295). Even when the editors of *The Nation* published an essay on the contradictions that emerged from a close reading of the delayed volumes of testimony, they prefaced the piece with the reassurance that they still shared the original article's conclusions about the success of the Report (Cooke 1966: 705).

Publicly Johnson praised the Commission he had created and the Commissioners who served on it, but privately he expressed his lingering doubts about its conclusions for the rest of his life. In particular, he apparently remained convinced that Kennedy's murder was connected with the CIA's secret projects to remove or assassinate foreign leaders, plans whose existence Johnson was shocked to discover on becoming president. In effect Johnson held the same view of the JFK assassination – a case of 'chickens coming home to roost' – that Malcolm X was widely criticised for suggesting publicly in the wake of the assassination (see Holland 2004: 262, 363, 424–7). At various times Johnson hinted to friends and off-the-record to journalists that he believed that there was a conspiracy involved in the assassination. In his final years after leaving office and his death in 1973, he confided to a journalist that 'I never believed that Oswald acted alone, although I can accept that he pulled the trigger' (Holland 2004: 426–7). As we will see in Chapter 5, Johnson was not the only person to harbour serious doubts about the Warren Report.

## National Committee on the Causes and Prevention of Violence

Vast though it was, the Warren Commission was not the only contribution to official investigations of the Kennedy assassination during Johnson's administration. In the wake of the Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy assassinations in 1968, and partly in response to the wave of racial violence that swept the US in 1967 and 1968, Johnson convened the National Committee on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (NCCPV) on 10 June 1968 under the executive directorship of Milton S. Eisenhower (the former president's brother). Like the Warren Commission, the NCCPV was staffed with ambitious young lawyers, and its work was subdivided into an elaborate system of eight task forces, whose work proceeded via a mixture of hearings and commissioned research from academics. The Report of Task Force 1, on 'Assassination and Political Violence' (1969), runs to 752 pages, in four chapters, five appendices, and eleven supplements – there seems to be no such thing as a slimline government report – and, like the Warren Commission Report, it was issued in a special edition in association with the *New York Times*. The main sections of the report include an exhaustive survey of 'Deadly Attacks Upon Public Office-holders in the United States' (a chronology lists 81 attacks up to 1968); a chapter specifically on assassination attempts directed against the president; a cross-nation comparative study of assassination; and an analysis of the history of political violence in the US. The report represents a staggering concentration of sociological, psychological and historical research, most of it produced at short notice specifically for the Commission. Where the Warren Report attempted to cover every detail of the forensics and biography of the assassin, the 'Assassination and Political Violence' report developed in effect a science of assassinology, complete with copious tables of statistical data about the sources, features and history of political violence (Kirkham et al. 1969; Crotty 1971). Although the report demonstrates that the public was more affected by the assassination of President Kennedy than the other political murders of the 1960s (see also Greenberg and Parker 1965 for further research on public opinion), it also serves to remind readers that the event was not an aberration in the history of American politics, nor was Oswald a unique personality. Indeed, the 'Assassination and Political Violence' report shows through a detailed long-term historical survey that the assassinations of JFK, MLK and RFK were not an unprecedented calamity in US history, but only the latest in a series of outbursts of political violence that had seen previous peaks in the 1820s, 1890s and 1930s.

The 'Assassination and Political Violence' report reached a number of conclusions that in effect placed the Kennedy assassination in a much broader context. First of all, it concluded that the frequency of assassination attempts corresponds to wider patterns of unrest, and that 'political turmoil and violence have characterized the United States throughout its history' (Kirkham et al. 1969: xlv). The turn to assassination has therefore been provoked by different in-built tensions at different periods in American history: race in the 1960s, for example, and class struggle in the 1890s. It also determined that this tradition of violence is rooted in America's specific history and cultural myths of the frontier, vigilantism, direct action, independence and individualism – not forgetting the easy availability of weapons. It identifies the myth of the cowboy as a peculiarly American embodiment of the ideal of a lone vigilante using 'violence to achieve personal goals' (p. 292). Although Americans have often prided themselves on the exceptional nature of their political system that operates through peaceful consensus rather than violent, revolutionary upheaval, the report was forced to conclude that the record of political assassination in the US was far worse than comparable developed nations: in one of the many grimly fascinating 'league tables' of different aspects of comparative national political violence provided by the report, the US ranks fifth in the list of the world's most assassination-prone nations in the period 1919–68, just below Cuba, Korea, Iran and Morocco (p. 156). The only straw of comfort seems to be that assassinations in the US are usually not part of concerted efforts to redirect the course of politics through the removal of leaders; the main effects of assassinations have been not a change in political direction but a sense of personal shock and despair coupled with a willingness to believe in conspiracy theories (p. 91). Instead the report tries to show that assassinations in the US are almost wholly the work – especially in the case of presidential assassination attempts – of disaffected loners acting from an idiosyncratic, pathological need rather than a recognisable ideological commitment. The 'Assassination and Political Violence' report thus reinforces the conclusion of the Warren Report that Oswald broadly fitted the psychological profile of the presidential assassin in America as, among other things, 'short and slight of build, foreign born, and from a broken family – most probably with the father either absent or unresponsive to the child' (Kirkham et al. 1969: 83). Although the 'Assassination and Political Violence' report provides an ironic return to the idea of the lone assassin as a distinctly American phenomenon, its insistence on correlating political assassinations with wider patterns of aggression, inter-group tension and socio-economic change at least paves the way for an analysis of

Oswald that locates him within a wider culture of violence rather than merely as an inexplicably disaffected lone gunman.

## Clark Panel

Partly in response to the wave of public interest following prominent publications by assassination critics such as Mark Lane (1966) and Josiah Thompson (1967), in addition to New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's investigation and trial of a possible conspiracy in the JFK assassination (1967–69), the US Attorney General Ramsey Clark convened in February 1968 a panel of four pathology experts to reconsider the medical evidence (US Department of Justice, Clark Panel 1968). After two days of intensive work reviewing materials in the National Archives, the panel concluded that the autopsy materials offered no evidence of a conspiracy, and that the Warren Commission's account was correct that Kennedy was shot from above and behind, although they suggested that the entrance wound of the head shot was four inches higher than had previously been believed. The findings were only released in 1969, during Garrison's trial of Clay Shaw. They caused no great stir, except for the revelation that Kennedy's brain and slides of tissue samples were nowhere to be found in the National Archives (almost certainly the Kennedy family had ordered them to be removed).

## House Select Committee on Assassinations

In the wake of emerging revelations in the press in the early 1970s and during the Watergate investigations about the illegal activities of US intelligence agencies, several high-level inquiries were convened to re-examine their whole operation. One in particular contributed to the literature on the Kennedy assassination. The US Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, popularly known as the Church Committee, after its chairperson, Senator Frank Church (D-ID), carried out investigations during 1975 and 1976, and published fourteen reports, including the seven-volume interim report: *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders* (1975), and *The Investigation of the Assassination of President J.F.K.: Performance of the Intelligence Agencies* (1976; also known as the Schweiker-Hart Report, after its authors). The latter report – comparatively slim at 114 pages, although a further 500,000 pages of previously classified accompanying documents were released in the wake of the JFK Act in 1993 – concluded that the FBI and the

CIA had not been as fully co-operative as they should have during the Warren Commission's investigation, especially concerning the CIA's knowledge of its own plots to assassinate Castro.

The picture that emerged from the Church Committee and the other congressional investigations was one of intelligence agents operating far beyond the law or legislative oversight, with the CIA seemingly all too willing to conduct assassination plots on prominent political leaders abroad. The Schweiker-Hart report revisited the Kennedy assassination, but only to review the performance of the intelligence agencies in assisting the Warren Commission's investigation. Given how far the CIA seemed to have gone beyond what Congress thought they were mandated to do, some Americans began to wonder if the intelligence agencies might not have merely obstructed the original investigation but somehow been part of a conspiracy. With mounting pressure from the general public – especially after the showing of the Zapruder footage on television for the first time in 1975 – and from the Black Caucus within Congress, the House of Representatives established in 1976 the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) that was called on to re-look at both the John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations. The HCSA got off to a slow start with disputes over the extent of its powers, the size of its budget and the make-up of its staff (the initial chief counsel Richard Sprague was soon replaced by the less contentious Robert Blakey, a law professor), with its investigations only really getting underway in late 1977. The increasingly familiar pattern was repeated: a staff made up primarily of lawyers was subdivided into teams; a mixture of public and private hearings; the commissioning of elaborate scientific/forensic testing; and a lengthy final report (716 pages), twelve volumes of accompanying transcripts of hearings and appendices, together with hundreds of thousands of pages of evidence to be kept sealed at the National Archives. The *Report of the Select Committee on Assassinations* was released in March 1979 (US House of Representatives 1979a).

Although the mood in both the wider public and Congress was increasingly willing to question the existing official version, in the bulk of its work the HCSA actually corroborated the Warren Commission's account of the JFK assassination (and the original FBI report into the King shooting). Much of the HCSA report is taken up with restating and reviewing the original Warren Report findings, in the same way that the latter is in part an assessment of the original FBI investigation. The HSCA agreed with the basic conclusion that Oswald shot and killed Kennedy from the Texas School Book Depository, and that the Warren Commission's analysis of Oswald's background and motives was

fundamentally sound. It noted that the Warren Commission's conclusions 'were arrived at in good faith, but presented in a fashion that was too definitive' (US House of Representatives 1979a: 4). The HSCA also conducted a series of new scientific tests that it argued disproved many of the conspiracy allegations that had emerged in the intervening years. For example, neutron activation analysis of the bullet fragment found at General Walker's home showed that it was probably a Mannlicher-Carcano bullet, helping to confirm the Warren Commission's hunch that Oswald shot at Walker; or, for example, anthropological forensics was used to prove that one of the three tramps found near Dealey Plaza at the time of the shooting was not – as some conspiracy critics had suggested – E. Howard Hunt, ex-CIA agent and one of the Watergate burglars.

Nevertheless, in several important ways the HCSA study parted company with the Warren Report. First, it concluded that the Secret Service, the Justice Department and the CIA were deficient in the roles they played both prior to and following the assassination. Likewise, it argued that the FBI and the Warren Commission itself performed 'with varying degrees of competence'. In particular, the HSCA felt that although the various authorities had investigated Oswald thoroughly and convincingly, they had failed to look properly into the possibility of a conspiracy. The second major departure from the Warren Commission came at the eleventh hour in the work of the HSCA, causing it to revise its draft conclusion. A recording made on a police motorcycle on a primitive recording device called a dictabelt supposedly captured the assassination itself. After a detailed preliminary scientific analysis (by the firm that had worked on the Watergate tapes) that suggested the possibility of shots coming from more than one direction, the dictabelt was then sent to another set of experts who conducted an even more elaborate statistical analysis, and the results of that second investigation were received by the HSCA just before it was about to finalise its report. The experts testified that there was a 95 per cent probability – that is, beyond a reasonable doubt – that there had been four shots, and that one came from the 'grassy knoll', as the sloping area of lawn in Dealey Plaza was quickly dubbed by assassination critics who suggested it was the true location of the fatal shot. In its final version the HSCA Report now concluded that there were four shots, one of which came from the grassy knoll, and hence there were two shooters – a complete turnaround from the Warren Report.

However, lacking evidence of any particular conspirators, the HSCA Report stopped short of firmly concluding that there must have a been a conspiracy (leaving many people, the *New York Times* included,

wondering whether the implication was that there had coincidentally been two lone psychopaths shooting at Kennedy in Dealey Plaza at exactly the same moment!). The HSCA Report noted that anti-Castro Cubans or Mafia figures might have been involved in a possible conspiracy, but only as individuals rather than as representatives of their groups. (One of the reasons that conspiracy theorists point to members of the Mafia as possible culprits is that they were believed to have illegally helped Kennedy win his narrow victory in the 1960 presidential election in return for US military action to remove Castro and thereby restore the Mafia's lucrative control of the Havana casinos; but instead, so the argument goes, the Mafia felt that Kennedy had reneged on the deal, adding insult to injury by refusing to call off Robert Kennedy's single-minded pursuit of organised crime through the Justice Department.) The HSCA devoted a great deal of time to detailing the complex chains of connection between various Oswald, Ruby and/or Mafia associates such as Carlos Marcello, Sam Giancana and Santos Trafficante, a line of inquiry that is in part explained by Chief Counsel Blakey's own existing involvement in combating organised crime. The HSCA recommended that the Justice Department look into the affairs of Trafficante (among others), but, seemingly like a number of other potential witnesses in the Kennedy case, Giancana died a violent death before he could give testimony to the Church Committee investigating CIA–Mafia links. (This phenomenon has spawned a whole new group of conspiracy theories about the silencing of witnesses, but sceptics point out that the deaths are within the realms of actuarial probability.) The HSCA reached a similar conclusion for the King assassination, that there was a much greater possibility of a conspiracy than the original official investigation had considered, but that if there were one it was at most a small conspiracy of individuals, rather than any larger plot.

The HSCA Report is full of odd contradictions. On the one hand, its shocking conclusion of a second gunman in the Kennedy assassination chimes with the climate of suspicion in the mid-1970s that was all too ready to charge a wilful or negligent cover-up on the part of the Warren Commission. On the other hand, it reaffirms the basic Oswald-did-it position. Much of the HSCA Report is taken up with refuting the outpouring of conspiracy theories, yet it was itself a major contribution to Warren Commission revisionism. The contradictory conclusions smack of a last-minute committee compromise that pleased no one, and indeed the key points were put to a vote, rather than being arrived at through consensus. Unlike the Warren Report's insistence on presenting a unanimous front to allay public fears (even if it had to fudge key

passages to secure the signature of wavering members like Russell), the HSCA Report includes four dissenting opinions in its appendices – perhaps not surprising given that it represents an official challenge to the official version.

As several members of the HSCA already suspected, the acoustic evidence was soon found to be flawed, thereby undermining the major claim that there was a second gunman and hence a probable conspiracy. Although gunshots were not audible on the dictabelt, other noises were discernible, such as a bell tolling, and the steady, low revving of a motorcycle rather than the sound of frantic acceleration and sirens blazing that should have been there if the recording had genuinely captured the assassination and the ensuing race to Parkland Hospital. In 1979 Steve Barber, a rock drummer from Ohio, listened to the recording repeatedly on a plastic disc that came free with a magazine, and made out the words 'Hold everything secure', a phrase that researchers discovered was spoken by Sheriff Bill Decker about a minute after the shooting. The quirky way the major revelation of the HSCA was so quickly disproved makes the long account of the acoustic evidence in the Report all the more poignant: so much wasted effort based on such untenable premises (although even the discounted acoustic evidence has recently been revisited by conspiracy critics: see Thomas 2001). The HSCA Report painstakingly explains the arcane statistical analyses and minutiae of the experiments performed by the two teams of experts, and yet it manages to almost totally ignore the elephant in the room, namely that the tape cannot be of the assassination because there are no sirens and instead there is a bell tolling pleasantly. And this is indicative of the ultimate failure of the HSCA to satisfy either the conspiracy critics or the supporters of the original Warren Commission. If the assassination buffs can at times look obsessive and misguided with their elaborate conspiracy scenarios based on shaky foundations, so too does the official version of events – perhaps more so, given the additional resources available to the government. The fiasco of the acoustic evidence also has the unfortunate effect of casting doubt on the other scientific evidence of the HSCA, a series of new and seemingly more rigorous tests that promised to clarify many false rumours in the case.

## The JFK Act

The HSCA was, needless to say, not the final word on the case from the authorities – each administration seems doomed to add its own contribution, leading not to greater clarity but a muddying of the waters. In 1982 the Justice Department asked the National Academy of Sciences

to review the acoustical evidence. Having found what it took to be grave errors in the 1979 HSCA Report, the Justice Department once again formally closed the case in 1988. Then in a spirit of post-Cold War openness partly fuelled by a desire to help restore government credibility, and in direct response to the public outcry and heavy lobbying following Oliver Stone's film *JFK* (1991), Congress passed the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act (1992), popularly known as the JFK Act, which ordered the release of all government files pertaining to the case, subject to a security vetting procedure. The five-member independent Assassination Records Review Board (ARRB) was created to carry out this task, and it worked from 1994 until releasing in 1998 its 227-page final report (and the inevitable accompanying transcripts of hearings, exhibits, scientific tests, and internal working papers).

A major aim in re-examining for release all documents relevant to the assassination, particularly those held back by intelligence agencies under the guise of national security concerns, was to help restore confidence in government agencies. The ARRB's final report noted that 'the American public has continued to seek answers to nagging questions raised by this inexplicable act. These questions were compounded by the government penchant for secrecy. Fears sparked by the Cold War discouraged the release of documents, particularly those of the intelligence and security agencies' (Assassination Records Review Board 1998: xxiii). In effect it worked to 'uncage the documents' (as Jack Valenti, President Johnson's former press secretary argued, a comment used as the epigraph for the final report), and it was reasonably successful in that task, eventually amassing a collection of over four million pages at the National Archives. In its final report the panel also concluded, however, that they had not necessarily secured 'all that was "out there" ' (Assassination Records Review Board 1998: 174). Although its task was not to conduct another investigation into the assassination, it took a large number of depositions and hearings in order to help clarify the record, and even initiated some further forensic testing of fibres and tissue fragments found on bullet fragments (albeit with inconclusive results). It also encouraged the public to submit its own assassination records, and it received items such as the diaries of both Clay Shaw (the man tried by Garrison) and former president Gerald Ford. In its own operation the ARRB made a conspicuous effort to encourage public participation and a climate of openness rather than secrecy, by, for example, soliciting co-operation from the assassination community, and holding public hearings across the nation and participating in the annual conferences of the professional associations of historians. The distance

travelled from the Warren Commission is remarkable: the ARRB's final report begins, for example, with a lengthy discussion of the problem for American democracy of the default mode of secrecy within the government during the Cold War.

The assassination research community has hotly debated whether there is anything of major significance in the new documents. Although some conspiracy researchers have followed intriguing leads opened up by some of the newly released documents, what they really provide is 'nothing less than a peek behind the curtain into the farthest recesses of the national security state' (Holland 1998). This – to date – final government report and the collection of materials it enabled does not necessarily revise the story of the assassination itself. Instead it helps embed that story in a much wider political context, and thereby make the story itself, if not any more satisfying, at least more intelligible.

# 5 The Unofficial Version

So far we have looked at how the Kennedy assassination has been represented in a cluster of mainstream and government works, which together have come to be seen as the official version of events. This chapter will concern itself with a whole variety of 'unofficial' versions, from conspiracy theories to forms of popular memorialisation of the event. There is a vast literature on the Kennedy assassination, with over two thousand books, countless newspaper and magazine articles, along with novels and films, not to mention the dozens of journals and websites devoted to the topic. The overwhelming majority develop a conspiracy theory of one stripe or another. Over the past four decades, the public both in the US and elsewhere have come to distrust the official lone gunman version, entertaining instead a host of alternative conspiracy scenarios that have become increasingly complex and all-encompassing. Every aspect of the event has been obsessively scrutinised for clues by 'amateur' historians who refuse to accept the orthodox account, and whose detailed knowledge of the case often far exceeds that of 'professional' academic historians. For many people the Kennedy assassination is the linchpin in a whole chain of conspiracies that have shaped the postwar world. Opinion polls consistently report that at least three quarters of Americans distrust the official version (see DiLouie 2003), and conspiracy theories in general have increasingly come to occupy a less marginal and more mainstream position. Depending on one's political outlook, the Kennedy assassination led either to a powerful grass-roots challenge to the establishment, or to a descent into paranoid fantasies and the politics of disenchantment.

## Initial Reaction

In the immediate panic of the assassination, government officials had little idea about what was going on, and many feared that the shooting was part of a larger plot. Some suspected that Kennedy was the victim

of a right-wing plot in the 'hate capital' of America; others feared that the attack on the president was only the opening shot of a much larger conspiracy against the United States by Cold War enemies. 'What raced through my mind', President Johnson later recalled, 'was that if they had shot our president, driving down there, who would they shoot next? And what was going on in Washington? And when would the missiles be coming? I thought it was a conspiracy and I raised that question, and nearly everybody that was with me raised that question' (Beschloss 1997: 56). Robert Kennedy, perhaps conscious of the top-secret assassination plots on foreign leaders that he and his brother had urged the CIA to concoct, allegedly asked CIA Director John McCone on that very day, 'Did you kill my brother?' (Litchfield 1992: 227). But within days FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was nonetheless reassuring Johnson that Oswald was guilty, and that there was no conspiracy, and the new president was putting together the blue-ribbon commission that he hoped would dispel rumours of a foreign conspiracy, even as he was receiving secret CIA reports from Mexico City that seemed to suggest the opposite.

In the first week after the assassination, social scientists tracked popular reactions to the assassination, including theories about who else might have been involved in the shooting besides Oswald. Opinion surveys showed that only 29 per cent of Americans believed that Oswald acted alone, with people pinning the blame on a range of potential conspirators that included the Russians and Cubans abroad, and the far right and African Americans domestically (Knight 2003, vol. 2: 561–4; Holland 1994: 203). Public suspicions were fuelled by the inevitable errors and discrepancies that crept into the hurriedly compiled media accounts in the first few days, not least reports from the chaotic press conference convened by the Parkland Hospital doctors that 'Mr Kennedy was hit by a bullet in the throat, just below the Adam's apple . . . This wound had the appearance of a bullet's entry' (Semple 2003: 28). Compounding these initial suspicions was the shooting of Oswald by Jack Ruby: to many eyes, this was surely the work of a deliberate conspiracy to prevent the president's assassin from revealing what he knew. Although the mainstream press quickly rallied around the official version of a lone gunman, before the Warren Commission published its conclusions several nagging questions came to public attention. How could the president have been killed by an inexpert marksman with a cheap and inaccurate mail-order rifle? How come investigators had found evidence of four bullets, if only three shots were fired, as the three spent shells in the 'sniper's lair' seemed to indicate? If the doctors at Parkland Hospital were right, how could the

president have been shot in the front from behind? This last and most vexing question was tackled, for example, by *LIFE* magazine in its 6 December 1963 article, 'End to Nagging Rumors: The Six Critical Seconds'. The magazine came up with a neat – but completely false – solution in its desire to damp down the conspiracy rumours, explaining that Kennedy had turned so far round in his seat that 'his throat is exposed – toward the sniper's nest – just before he clutches it' (Mandel 1963: 52). Although during those first few months a few journalists and many of their readers suspected that the Kennedy assassination was more than the random act of a lone nut, after the Warren Commission published its report opinion polls found that 87 per cent believed that official version (Holland 1994: 203). This honeymoon period of trust in the authorities lasted only a few years, however, as the edifice of the Warren Commission Report was slowly undermined by critics.

## Emergence of Conspiracy Critics

Although many Americans privately harboured nagging doubts about the lone gunman theory before the publication of the Warren Report, the first full-blown works of conspiracy theory emerged from Europe. In Britain, prompted by the emerging work of the lawyer Mark Lane in the US, the eminent philosopher Bertrand Russell rallied support from other noteworthy and left-leaning compatriots to form a 'Who Killed Kennedy Committee', members of which included Michael Foot MP, the wife of Tony Benn MP, the publisher Victor Gollancz, the writers John Arden and J. B. Priestly, and the Oxford history professor Hugh Trevor-Roper. Russell published a highly critical article weeks before the Warren Commission Report was published, setting forth '16 Questions on the Assassination', and equating the Oswald case with the Dreyfus affair of late nineteenth-century France in which the state wrongly convicted an innocent man. Russell also criticised the American press for failing to heed any voices critical of the official version (Russell 1964: 6–8).

The first two whodunit books on the Kennedy assassination came from writers with European backgrounds or affiliations. Thomas Buchanan, an expatriate American living in Paris, published a series of dramatic articles in the popular French news magazine *L'Express*, that were then published in book form in May 1964 as *Who Killed Kennedy?* Buchanan's book alleged that there were at least eight other accomplices involved in the assassination, including Jack Ruby and Police Officer Tippit. Joachim Joesten, an émigré from Nazi Germany and one-time member of the Communist Party, asserted in *Oswald: Assassin*

*or Fall Guy* (published in September 1964, just before the Warren Report was released) that a high-level conspiracy involving the CIA must have had a hand in Kennedy's assassination.

In a footnote to the published version of a lecture on 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics' (originally delivered shortly before the assassination), the American historian Richard Hofstadter reassured himself and his readers that 'conspiratorial interpretations of Kennedy's assassination have a far wider currency in Europe than they do in the United States', with the suggestion that only a handful of unhinged and un-American writers would promote such a preposterous theory (Hofstadter 1966: 7). Even though the rest of his article presents the willingness to believe in conspiracy theories as a distinctively American tradition, Hofstadter's footnote calls up the argument that Europe and other nations have been haunted by actual conspiracies and coups d'état, whereas political violence in the US has tended to take the form of actions by lone vigilantes, a view echoed by the social scientists in the NCCPV Task Force on Assassination and Political Violence later in the decade (see Chapter 4). On this line of thinking, Buchanan and Joesten betray an un-American fixation on Machiavellian conspiratorial intrigue, rather than recognising the properly American obsession, for both better and worse, with the rugged individualism of lone gunmen. But with the opening up of the Soviet archives after the fall of the Berlin Wall, evidence has emerged that Buchanan and Joesten might have been motivated not by an implicit and vague ideological European fixation with conspiracy theories of political succession, but by a quite explicit disinformation campaign directed by the KGB to destabilise the United States by vilifying the CIA and undermining public faith in the Warren Commission (see Holland 2003, 2006; Lane 2006). In effect, it is plausible that the first seeds of the government-did-it conspiracy theory were part of a Cold War mind-games conspiracy.

Although these early salvos could at the time be dismissed as un-American and ill-informed (especially since they appeared before the Warren Commission had published its findings), in 1966 a series of mainstream media articles and two prominent books made it difficult to ignore criticism of the official version of events. Edward Jay Epstein's *Inquest* (1966) presented a careful analysis of how the Commission might have carried out a less than full and fair inquiry in its desire to dampen conspiracy rumours, an effect of its inherent conflict of interests. Mark Lane, who had offered his services to Marguerite Oswald to represent her son's case posthumously during the Warren hearings, wrote in *Rush to Judgement* (1966) a detailed defence lawyer's attack on the case against Oswald. Like many of the early critics, Lane proceeded by pointing out

the inconsistencies in the Warren Report, especially the places where – as he saw it – the Commissioners had either failed to follow up on suggestive testimony from eyewitnesses, or had drawn biased conclusions in the summary report by carefully selecting evidence that remained buried in the twenty-six volumes of accompanying hearings and exhibits.

Yet for all Lane's caution in the bulk of the book not to make wild accusations, the opening prologue sets out the suggestive testimony of a handful of witnesses, including some who claimed they saw men with rifle-shaped cases making their way to the grassy knoll before the assassination, and others who saw men behind the stockade fence on the knoll or felt that the shots had come from that vicinity. Lane doesn't voice the obvious conclusion that there were multiple shooters, instead he merely notes that the Commission failed to follow up on most of these potentially vital leads. Lane's approach is thus somewhat disingenuous, presenting his case in subsequent chapters as merely a catalogue of discrepancies, but the spectre of a conspiracy that has been conjured up in the prologue haunts the rest of the book. In the end, the book intimates that there must have been a conspiracy, and that it involved Ruby, the Dallas Police and probably right-wing Texas oil millionaires, along with a cover-up conspiracy, the specifics of which Lane doesn't fully set out. But like other early contributions to the critics' case, Lane does not mount a full-scale conspiracy theory, content merely to find flaws in the official version.

## Critical Challenges to the Official Version

Epstein's and Lane's books remained on the *New York Times* best-seller list for six months, with the latter selling more than a million copies, and Lane himself a popular figure on the college lecture circuit. Other books soon appeared, albeit less mainstream than Epstein's and Lane's, including Harold Weisberg's self-published *Whitewash* (1965), Penn Jones' *Forgive My Grief* (1966), Josiah Thompson's *Six Seconds in Dallas* (1967), Sylvia Meagher's *Accessories after the Fact* (1967), in addition to articles in small circulation left-wing journals such as *Minority of One*, *Liberation*, and *Ramparts* magazine that likewise began to chip away at the orthodox account. Although the range of inconsistencies and alternative scenarios soon became mind-boggling – *Esquire* magazine, for example, offered its readers a pair of half helpful, half humorous assassination primers (1966, 1967) that together listed sixty different theories – they can be grouped into five main categories.

One major area of concern was the direction of the shots. In addition to the testimony in the Warren Report, critics found other Dealey

Plaza witnesses (or re-interviewed existing ones) who told of gunfire and possibly gun smoke coming from either the triple underpass or the grassy knoll. Some thought they saw men in the vicinity of the railroad yards behind the stockade fence before the shooting, and others saw figures running away from the area after the shooting. Many talked of dozens of bystanders and policemen rushing up to the grassy knoll in immediate reaction to the shots. Some critics specialised in analysing the photographic and film evidence. Intense scrutiny of blown-up images seemed to reveal shadowy figures in the bushes at the top of the knoll. Repeated viewing of overlaid stills from the Zapruder footage showed that Kennedy's head snapped back and to the left in reaction to the death shot, indicating therefore that the shot must have come from the front right and not the Texas School Book Depository in the rear. Even closer examination of the head shot itself (frame 313) and the immediate reaction (frames 314 and 315) revealed Kennedy's head had in fact first been propelled slightly forward before the much larger lunge backwards and to the left, suggesting to some critics that Kennedy had been shot virtually simultaneously in a crossfire from the rear then the front (see Thompson 1967). Fuelling further suspicion critics discovered that the Warren Commission Report had printed the two frames immediately after the head shot in reverse order – Hoover later claimed it was merely a 'printing error' – making it seem more like a forwards movement (see Trask 1994). Critics also latched onto the reports from the Parkland Hospital press conference indicating that the throat wound was an entrance rather than exit wound.

The second aspect picked up by critics was the Warren Commission's single bullet theory, also popularly known as the magic bullet theory. The Warren Commission had come to the conclusion that Oswald could have fired no more than three shots in the time frame that was established by the Zapruder footage: one shot was the fatal head shot; another shot missed completely (a bullet fragment had ricocheted off the pavement and hit a bystander); and therefore the remaining shot must have caused Kennedy's throat wound and all of Connally's injuries. The Commission reached the latter conclusion because (1) it had been established by the FBI that it took at least 2.3 seconds to reload Oswald's rifle, and (2) the Zapruder footage seemed to show Connally reacting to being hit at the very most only 1.8 seconds after the president began to clutch at his throat, and probably a lot less than 1.8 seconds, i.e. not enough time for Oswald to have fired twice. But critics found numerous problems with this scenario, not least because it conflicted with the FBI report (in part based on the initial autopsy findings) which concluded that the first bullet hit Kennedy in the shoulder and lodged there,

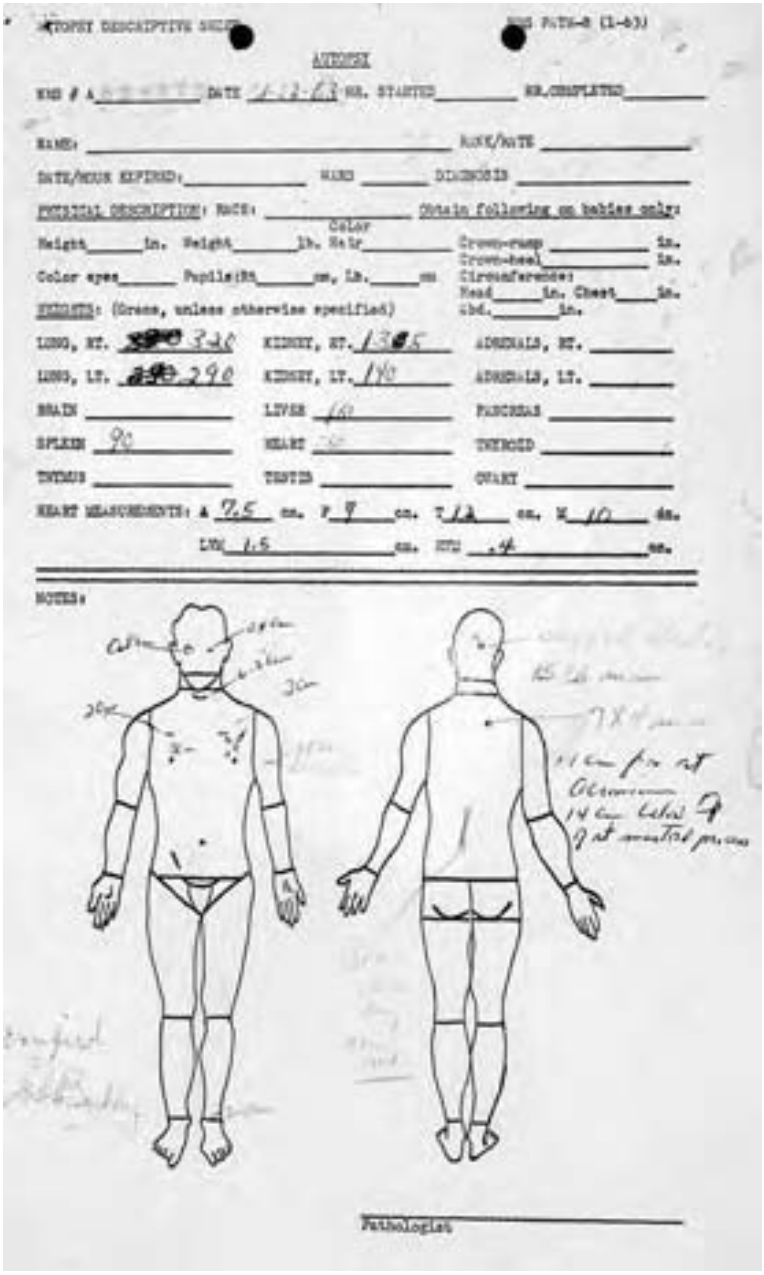

**Figure 5.1** 'Magic Bullet' (Commission Exhibit 399). Courtesy JFK Assassination Records Collection, NARA.

with the second bullet hitting Connally, and the third bullet hitting Kennedy in the head. One issue critics raised was the time delay between Kennedy and Connally reacting to being hit: if it was the same bullet, then how could it have hovered in mid-air after exiting the president and before striking the governor? They also argued that the wounds of Kennedy and Connally weren't in alignment, suggesting that only a 'magic bullet' could have followed such a zigzag path. Connally himself was adamant that he and Kennedy had been struck by different bullets, even though he remained a firm supporter of the Warren Commission. Furthermore, critics could not believe that a bullet that had caused so many injuries to the two men could have emerged in seemingly near 'pristine' condition, found on a stretcher at Parkland Hospital after apparently falling out of Connally's shallow thigh wound (see fig. 5.1, Commission Exhibit 399). In side profile the bullet indeed

looks pristine, but the bottom end is actually slightly squashed. A further problem for the single bullet theory was that the bullet had only lost three grains of weight, which was apparently less than the bullet fragments recovered from Kennedy's and Connally's wounds.

Critics also focused on the conflicting autopsy evidence from Bethesda Naval Hospital. The FBI report from the autopsy noted that the back wound (from which it claimed the bullet hadn't emerged) was in Kennedy's right shoulder, roughly six inches below his neck, a position that seemed to be corroborated by the bullet holes in the president's shirt and jacket and the 'face sheet' diagram prepared at the autopsy by Dr Boswell (see fig. 5.2, Commission Exhibit 397). But a bullet entering Kennedy's back six inches below his neck and exiting through his throat can't have been fired in a downwards trajectory, and therefore can't have been fired by Oswald on the sixth floor of the Book Depository. Critics were suspicious that medical drawings produced for the Warren Commission showing the entrance wound much higher up had been changed to fit the scenario of a downwards shot from the rear. Their concerns were further aroused when it emerged that Commander Humes, the doctor in charge of the Bethesda autopsy report, had burned his draft notes made at the time; the fact that Warren had ordered the autopsy photos to remain sealed only added to these suspicions. Critics of the Warren Report have latched onto the recent revelation that Gerald Ford made a potentially vital editorial change to the description of the first shot that hit Kennedy. The draft version had: 'A bullet had entered his back at a point slightly above the shoulder and to the right of the spine'; Ford's suggested revision read: 'A bullet had entered the back of his neck at a point slightly to the right of the spine'; and the final version included in the report was: 'A bullet had entered the base of the back of his neck slightly to the right of the spine' (p. 3). Ford defended his alteration, insisting that: 'my change had nothing to do with conspiracy theory; my changes were only an attempt to be more precise' (Feinsilber 1997).

The third area of intense interest by the critics was Oswald himself. One group picked holes in the Warren Report's chain of evidence that tied Oswald to the gun and to the sniper's lair at the time of the shooting. Some critics, for example, found flaws in the only eyewitness testimony that placed Oswald in the sixth-floor window at the time of the shooting; other witnesses were found who claimed to have seen two or three men in the window; some critics thought they saw Oswald on the doorstep of the Texas School Book Depository in one of the photos taken in Dealey Plaza at the time of the assassination. Critics also questioned how Oswald could have carried out the shooting on the sixth floor if he was discovered by a policeman calmly drinking a coke in the


AUTOPSY

WMH # A [redacted] DATE 11-2-63 HR. STARTED _____ HR. COMPLETED _____

NAME: _____ RANK/RATE _____

DATE/HOUR EXPIRED: _____ WOUND _____ DIAGNOSIS _____

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: RACE: _____ Color Hair _____ Obtain following on babies only:

Height _____ in. Weight _____ lb. Crown-rump _____ in.
Crown-heel _____ in.
Color eyes _____ Pupils: Rt _____ mm, Lt. _____ mm Circumference: Head _____ in. Chest _____ in. Abd. _____ in.

ORGANS: (Grams, unless otherwise specified)

LUNG, RT. [redacted] 340 KIDNEY, RT. 135 ADRENALS, RT. _____

LUNG, LT. [redacted] 290 KIDNEY, LT. 140 ADRENALS, LT. _____

BRAIN _____ LIVER 1610 PANCREAS _____

SPLEEN 90 HEART 340 THYROID _____

THYMUS _____ TESTIS _____ OVARY _____

HEART MEASUREMENTS: A 7.5 cm. P 9 cm. T 12 cm. M 10 dm.

LVW 1.5 cm. RVW .4 cm.

NOTES:

Pathologist

**Figure 5.2** Autopsy Face Sheet ('Boswells' face sheet') (Commission Exhibit 397). Courtesy JFK Assassination Records Collection, NARA.

second floor canteen only a minute and a half after the final shot. Critics disputed whether Oswald was a sufficient marksman to fire the necessary shots in the time frame and with sufficient accuracy. They also found inconsistencies in the Warren Commission's account of the murder of Police Officer Tippit, doubting whether Oswald had sufficient time to reach the scene, or that the bullets found at the crime scene matched his revolver, or that he even possessed such a revolver. Others suspected that there was more to Tippit's murder than met the eye, speculating that Tippit might have been killed in a bungled attempt by the conspirators to silence Oswald. Some thought the evidence against Oswald had been fabricated, arguing, for example, that the backyard photos of him holding the gun and left-wing publications were faked. Others probed Oswald's past, finding suggestive evidence that he might have had links to government intelligence agencies, or to Cuba. They wondered, for example, how Oswald could have afforded the $1,500 ticket to Russia when he only had $203 in his bank account, or why he was allowed to return so easily. Some wondered how he could have barely come to the attention of the FBI and CIA (as the Warren Report claimed), when he had been a Marine who worked on the U-2 spy plane project, while learning Russian and subscribing to leftist publications, before defecting to the Soviet Union. Some critics speculated that he might have been turned into a Soviet spy, or that he was a US intelligence agent sent on a fake defection mission. Some even concluded that he must have been part of a Manchurian candidate mind-control programme. Critics also puzzled over Oswald's intriguing friendship in Dallas with George de Mohrenschildt, a wealthy Russian émigré who had links with the CIA. They were likewise interested in Oswald's activities in New Orleans that seemed to encompass both pro- and anti-Castro groups, and were mystified how the FBI could claim to have lost contact with Oswald for two months during this period. Critics researched Oswald's Mexico City trip just prior to the assassination, drawing attention to a host of puzzling details such as the photo supplied to the Warren Commission by the CIA that supposedly showed Oswald entering the Soviet consulate, although the man in the photo was much older and stockier than Oswald. Critics also found evidence of other Oswald 'doubles' spotted in the months leading up to the assassination, in times and places when Oswald was known to have been elsewhere.

A fourth theme was the possibility that there was more to Ruby than the Commission had discovered, especially the idea that Ruby was a linchpin in a conspiracy that involved either the Dallas Police and/or the Mafia. They wondered about his numerous trips to Cuba in 1959,

and his long-distance phone calls to mob connections in the months running up to the assassination. One idea that circulated in conspiracy circles was that Ruby had deliberately been given cancer in jail where he died in 1967, in order to silence him before he could reveal what he knew in the retrial (after he had pleaded temporary insanity in the first one).

A final area pursued by critics was the idea that there had been some degree of official complicity in the event itself, rather than just a post-facto cover-up. Writers argued that a motorcade route that included a slow sharp turn at the entrance to Dealey Plaza must have been plotted in advance to give shooters maximum opportunity; even worse, the limousine seemed to slow down at the fatal moment, as if allowing ample opportunity for snipers. Others noted that the Secret Service and/or the FBI suspiciously failed to identify Oswald as a potential threat even though they knew about him in advance; some also wondered about eyewitness reports of plainclothes Secret Service agents who apparently warned bystanders away from the grassy knoll before and after the shooting; and some even suggested that Kennedy had been accidentally killed by a Secret Service agent firing a rifle from within the following car. Some wondered about the role of the Dallas Police in letting Ruby gain access to the police headquarters' basement as Oswald was being transferred, while others puzzled over the identity of the 'three tramps' who had been arrested by police in a rail carriage shortly before the assassination, but whose arrest details couldn't be found later.

## Assassination Buffs

What most of these early theories had in common was a focus on the discrepancies in the official version. Many of the early critics were not involved in active detective work uncovering new clues on site, but combing the Warren Report and the written and visual evidence in the accompanying twenty-six volumes for contradictions and puzzling details. Few developed full-blown conspiracy scenarios, preferring instead to highlight the inconsistencies in the official record. Unlike later researchers, they concentrated mainly on the mechanics of what happened in Dealey Plaza, leaving to one side the larger question of who the real conspirators might have been and why they did it, fearing that their painstakingly detailed empirical research would be undermined if they indulged in more tenuous speculation about an overarching plot. When not vilified as unpatriotic or paranoid, the early critics were characterised in the media as 'assassination buffs' (Trillin 1967), and there is a measure of truth to the description. Most of the

early theories were the work of a mere handful of amateur armchair detectives, who constituted a loose but supportive research community rather than a tight-knit activist crusade. Some were lawyers, such as Mark Lane and Vincent Salandria, attracted to the injustice of a one-sided prosecution, but others were graduate students or college professors who had become intrigued by some of the details and found themselves sucked deeper and deeper into the minutiae of research. David Lifton, for example, was a graduate engineering student at UCLA who dropped out of his studies as he became more embroiled in the research that began, as for many other critics, when he read the complete version of the Warren Report. Josiah Thompson, a young college professor who became involved in the case in 1966 after meeting Salandria, later recalled the sense of community of the pioneering researchers:

> A housewife, a lawyer for the school board, the editor of a small paper, a graduate student, a young professor, a WHO official. We were little people. People who had only a few things in common – inquiring minds, an unwillingness to be intimidated by public attitudes, more than a little tenacity, a bit of modesty and a willingness to laugh at oneself. None of us had any money or hoped to make any money out of this. We were doing it for its own sake. We formed a community . . . the closest thing to a true community of inquiry that I've ever known. (Thompson 1998)

The initial motivation for many of the assassination buffs was the inherent mystery of the case. As Thompson explained: 'I have never fallen asleep at night without thinking, in those last moments before you fall asleep, about where the hell those bullets came from' (Trillin 1967: 47). Several of the early critics were ordinary housewives whose assassination research began as a hobby and quickly became a full-time and life-changing pursuit. Mae Brussell, for example, was by her own account 'just a housewife, interested in tennis courts and dancing lessons and orthodonture for my children' until the shooting of Oswald live on television prompted her into investigating the assassination full time; she later became a cult figure in the conspiracy theory community, hosting her West Coast radio show that showcased her increasingly extreme research (Eisner 1972; Vankin 1991). The buffs saw themselves as amateur citizen-researchers, reluctantly compelled to uncover the truth of what really happened because the authorities had done such a botched job. They became self-taught experts in a range of technical disciplines, from medical forensics to ballistics, and from photo analysis to physics. 'It's just like scholarship' admitted Thompson. 'There are

good scholars and bad scholars. There are even analytical scholars and inductive scholars. But the marvellous thing about it is that there are no credentials. There's no Ph.D. in the assassination. . . . You have to make your own credentials' (Trillin 1967: 47). Although aware that they were hardly qualified to crack the case of the century, they nevertheless felt liberated by the knowledge that the government experts had, in the critics' view, disqualified themselves by their flawed investigation. 'It's possible that this is completely unscientific', admitted Raymond Marcus, a small businessman from Los Angeles turned assassination buff, 'but my answer to people saying "You're no expert" is "Where are the experts?"' (Trillin 167: 47).

Although the early assassination buffs tended to present themselves as puzzle-solving amateur detectives without an ideological axe to grind, they nevertheless became embroiled in political debates in the mid-1960s, a dispute that has been rumbling ever since. If pressed to state their political stance, many of the buffs spoke in generic terms of seeking justice and, in the words of Sylvia Meagher, one of the most assiduous of the early critics, challenging the 'deliberate, outright, demonstrable fraud' of the Warren Commission (cited in Trillin 1967: 47). Most were Kennedy liberals, suspicious of official lies and critical of the status quo, which, by 1967, meant being critical of US involvement in Vietnam. Others on the left, however, were adamant that pursuing conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination was not a challenge to authority but a distraction from real political work. The contrarian political journalist I. F. Stone, for example, wrote a devastating attack on the assassination critics in general and Bertrand Russell in particular, arguing that the left should have no truck with conspiracy theories:

> All my adult life as a newspaperman I have been fighting in defense of the Left and of sane politics, against conspiracy theories of history, character assassination, guilt by association and demonology. Now I see elements of the Left using these same tactics in the controversy over the Kennedy assassination and the Warren Commission Report. I believe that the Commission has done a first-rate job, on a level that does our country proud and is worthy of so tragic an event. (Stone 1964: 1–2)

It was a huge mistake, he intimated, to attack Warren who had in effect helped protect left-wing causes from the kind of conspiracist demonology that typified the McCarthyite witch-hunts of the 1950s and that would have been all too easy to revive given Oswald's credentials as a leftist.

Deciding whether or not to believe in conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination became a political minefield for those on the left in the 1960s. Some, like the writers of the prominent left-leaning journal *The Nation*, followed I. F. Stone's lead in condemning any attacks on the Warren Commission as misguided, but many others saw the Commission as the tip of the iceberg of government lies. This split became even more pronounced when New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison in 1967 indicted local businessman Clay Shaw for being part of a conspiracy to kill Kennedy. Garrison's case became a *cause célèbre* that divided public opinion: some saw it as finally exposing the truth of a massive high-level conspiracy and cover-up; some saw it as having set back the work of the research community; while others saw it as a farce that demonstrated the absurdity of assassination conspiracy theories.

## The Garrison Trial

His interest having been aroused by the work of the early assassination critics, Garrison began by investigating Oswald's activities in New Orleans. His attention focused on the links between Shaw, whom Garrison suspected of running a CIA-front company and of being involved with anti-Castro Cubans in plotting the assassination; Guy Banister, a former FBI agent and rabid anticommunist (who died in 1964); and his associate David Ferrie, an eccentric ex-airline pilot who was involved in training Cuban exiles for the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. An informant (a disgruntled employee of Banister) told Garrison that Ferrie was meant to have been the getaway pilot for the conspirators after the assassination. Garrison tried to get Ferrie to talk, but this manic, high-strung individual died of a brain aneurysm before revealing anything. With Banister and Ferrie dead, Garrison turned his attention to Shaw. He was convinced that Clay Shaw was the same person as the 'Clay Bertrand' who, the colourful local New Orleans lawyer Dean Andrews had claimed, had asked him to represent Oswald on the day of the assassination. Garrison's evidence was flimsy, based in part on the claim that both the mysterious Bertrand and Shaw were gay, and that Shaw also knew the homosexual Ferrie, who in turn knew Oswald. The trial finally began in 1969, and the credibility of several of Garrison's key witnesses was undermined by the prosecution lawyers. The jury returned a not guilty verdict after less than an hour's deliberation, and Garrison was widely condemned for being a self-promoting megalomaniac with little concern for truth or justice.

Garrison was discredited in the mainstream press, but his well-publicised investigation and trial marked a turning point in conspiracist

interpretations of the assassination. Although he developed a detailed assassination scenario involving as many as sixteen shooters (with the fatal head shot having been fired from a storm drain just in front of the presidential limousine), his investigation shifted the focus away from the specific mechanics of what happened in Dealey Plaza. Instead he focused on the identity and political motives of the plotters, and in doing so he ramped the conspiracy position up to a new level of complexity. Garrison asserted that Oswald was a patsy for a high-level and wide-ranging conspiracy within the 'military-intelligence complex' (Garrison 1970: 82), that involved rogue elements of the CIA, anti-Castro Cubans and military planners, and which, in order to pull off the assassination plot and to cover it up, were able to control elements of the Secret Service, the Dallas Police, the FBI and the Warren Commission itself, which Garrison dubbed 'nothing less than a continuation of pre-assassination planning' (Garrison 1970: 38). The overarching reason for the conspiracy, according to Garrison, was that the vested financial interests in the 'military-industrial complex' (in President Eisenhower's original phrase) were prepared to employ any means necessary – even assassination – to reverse Kennedy's plans to wind down the Cold War and to pull out of Vietnam. The specifics of Garrison's case are less important than the general effect they had on reorienting conspiracy-minded assassination studies. First, by claiming a link between Kennedy's death and the escalation of the war in Vietnam it tended to infuse assassination studies with a romantic nostalgia for Kennedy, animated by the suspicion that shadowy, reactionary forces had cut short the shining hope of the Camelot years and pushed America down the wrong historical path. Second, it helped make a conspiracist stance on the assassination an indispensable part of antiwar activist credentials. And third, it made prominent a growing tendency to see Kennedy's assassination not as the work of an isolated lone gunman or even a small-scale and self-contained conspiracy, but as the effect of a pervasive culture of official secrecy, lies, and clandestine intelligence agency actions far beyond the control of democratic citizens.

## A Culture of Conspiracy

A 1964 book had coined the term 'invisible government' to describe what its authors saw as the institutionalisation of a whole shadow-realm of power, policy and actions controlled by the intelligence agencies that had drifted loose of any democratic oversight (Wise and Ross 1964). To this picture of an invisible government Garrison and other late 1960s

assassination critics added a raft of suspicious characters and organisations that loosely meshed into an all-encompassing mega-conspiracy that, it was claimed, had in effect wrested control of the levers of power in the nation as a whole. In effect, assassination critics began to suspect that everything was connected in a conspiracy of vast proportions, a view that became increasingly popular with the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy in 1968, both of which the official enquiries once again insisted were the work of lone gunmen. As Todd Gitlin, the leader of the student protest movement, later recalled when explaining the significance of the 1968 assassinations:

> Serious journals like *The New Republic*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *Ramparts*, not to mention the more sensationalist underground papers, regaled their readers with tale after tale about exit wounds, gunshots from the grassy knoll, missing frames of the Zapruder film, the accuracy of Mannlicher-Carcano rifles, exotic Cuban émigrés, mysteriously murdered witnesses, double agents, double Oswalds. Many objections to the official line were convincing, but one had to become a full-time assassination obsessive to keep up with the intricacies. . . . There was trauma for young radicals, too. In the months and years after November 22, 1963, Tom Hayden, Dick Flacks [two other student leaders], and I were given to playing with the concept of Oswald as 'lurker'. History, which *we* aspired to make, was now being made behind our (and virtually everyone's) backs; we were fascinated by the conspiracy theories, impressed by their critiques of the Warren Commission, doubtful of the single-assassin idea though unconvinced of any single conspiracy. For years thereafter, late at night, amid our sage analyses of political forces, the thought of lurkers would leap up, and we would mutter about the havoc these apparently marginal men had wrought. (Gitlin 1987: 312)

By the late 1960s as trust in the government eroded, it became common sense among radicals to believe in a Kennedy assassination conspiracy theory, and to believe that everything was connected; an opinion poll in 1975, for example, showed that nearly half of Americans believed that the assassinations were connected (Goldberg 2001: 127). As Herb Blau, a contributor to the collection *The 60s Without Apology*, noted: 'it was conspiracy theory which dominated perception in the 60s, for good reason or wrong, almost more on the left than on the right' (Blau 1984: 318).

The late 1960s and early 1970s brought not just a new-found willingness on the left to believe in conspiracy theories: many people were increasingly willing to at least countenance the most extreme versions.

For example, Barbara Garson's satirical play *MacBird!* (1967) presented a spoof on *Macbeth*, in which the assassination of Kennedy was carried out at the orders of Lyndon Johnson. The idea of an all-powerful conspiracy that linked the CIA, the FBI, organised crime and anti-Castro Cubans became for many people a much more plausible interpretation of recent history when revelations about the illegal activities of the intelligence agencies began to emerge in the early 1970s. Americans learned from the Congressional inquiries (detailed in Chapter 4) that the CIA had been willing to team up with the Mafia to carry out assassination plots on foreign leaders, and to conduct mind-control experiments on unwitting victims, and that the FBI had conducted elaborate surveillance programmes designed to undermine legitimate political groups. With the Watergate investigations they also learned that even the president was willing to engage in subterfuge and cover-up conspiracies. It came to seem that the wildest suspicions might well turn out to be true, leading some to believe that 'the paranoid is the person in possession of all the facts', as the apocryphal remark of novelist William Burroughs puts it.

Along with an increasing acceptance that elements of the government might plot against its own citizens (and perhaps even, against its own president), the conspiracy position on the assassination received a major boost in 1975 when an enhanced slow-motion version of the Zapruder footage was shown for the first time on network television on Geraldo Rivera's *Goodnight America* programme. For many this was a defining moment: those who had struggled to follow the dense, technical arguments of the conspiracy critics discussing trajectories, timeframes and ballistics could now see for themselves the shocking footage that seemed to show Kennedy lurching back and to the left in reaction to the fatal shot that common sense dictated must have come from the front. Rivera's programme opened up the floodgate for many further television documentaries exploring the possibility of conspiracy. Interest in conspiracy research was no longer confined to the work of a handful of assassination buffs.

The research community capitalised on the upsurge of popular interest by lobbying for the case to be reopened. Since the late 1960s a number of activist organisations had been formed that worked to share and publicise information, and to petition the authorities to reopen the various inquiries. The most prominent were the Committee to Investigate Assassinations (formed in 1968), and the Assassination Information Bureau (1974). They took as their starting point the idea that all of the political assassinations of the 1960s were connected, and needed to be seen within the larger context of the systematic abuse of

state power. The grassroots lobbying became a bandwagon when numerous members of Congress responded to the popular outcry about the revelations of illegal intelligence agency activities by calling for an official committee to revisit the inquiries into the John Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations (see Chapter 4). The US House of Representatives Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) issued its final report in 1979, and it concluded that (in the case of Kennedy) there was a 95 per cent probability that there was more than one shooter – and hence a conspiracy – in Dealey Plaza. Although the endorsement of a conspiracy theory by the government was a major milestone in public perceptions of the assassination in the US, the HSCA's report conceded little else to the conspiracy critics. For the main part, they backed the Warren Commission's findings, and even found new evidence to support its conclusions. Moreover, the conspiracy the committee reluctantly endorsed at the eleventh hour was nothing like the all-encompassing conspiracy scenarios that had become increasingly central to the assassination research community: at most the HSCA conceded that some figures from the Mafia might have been involved, but only as individuals rather than as part of any more systematic conspiracy.

Although the HSCA's last-minute concession to the conspiracy theorists was quickly shown to be based on shaky premises, popular belief in a conspiracy theory remained constant – if anything, the American public became more willing to believe in elaborate theories. Where the 1970s had seen a comparatively sober, and increasingly radical, grassroots political expansion to the conspiracy position, the 1980s saw a drift towards more sensationalist interpretations of the assassinations of the 1960s. The research community became more fragmented, and lost some of its activist political focus, not surprising since the previous rallying cry for a reopening of the inquiries had been granted, but with little consequence. As the bibliography of conspiracy tracts piled up, the amount of highly detailed knowledge required to enter the debate was off-putting to all but the most determined newcomers. Increasingly researchers tended to specialise in particular parts of the JFK assassination story, with books focusing, for example, on the photographic evidence, or the Tippit murder, or Oswald's time in Russia. The list of theories and suspects began to seem endless: writers blamed the CIA, the FBI, renegades from both agencies, the Secret Service, Dallas Police, Cuban exiles, the Mafia, Dallas oil millionaires, right-wing Texans, left-wing sympathisers, Corsican Mafia, President Johnson, J. Edgar Hoover, Jimmy Hoffa, the military-industrial complex, an international banking cartel, the three hobos picked up in

Dealey Plaza right after the shooting, and just about every combination of these groups. The spoof newspaper *The Onion* captured the sense of a frenzied overproduction of theories in their headline, 'Kennedy Slain by CIA, Mafia, Castro, LBJ, Teamsters, Freemasons: President Shot 129 Times from 43 Different Angles' (Dikkers 1999: 101).

In the 1990s the conspiracy cause received a major boost with Oliver Stone's blockbusting three-hour epic film *JFK* (1991), which brought conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination to a new generation (see Chapter 7). Stone's film drew on a wealth of assassination research that had been produced over the preceding three decades, but followed two recent books in particular: *On the Trail of the Assassins* (1988), Garrison's memoir of his investigation; and Jim Marrs' *Crossfire* (1989), a popular and sensational grab-bag of conspiracy research. Stone's film put forward the claim that the whole tragedy of American postwar history, from Kennedy's assassination to Vietnam, and from Watergate to the Gulf War, was the result of a deliberate, ongoing conspiracy run by a ruthless and secretive power elite. The film created a popular outcry that culminated with the passage of the JFK Act in 1993, which ordered the release of all remaining documents relating to the Kennedy assassination held by the federal government (see Chapter 4).

Many new studies were published and old ones reissued on the flood of interest that followed Stone's film and the thirtieth anniversary of the assassination in 1993. In addition, a new wave of activist research organisations was established, and these groups continue to organise conferences and lectures, publish journals of research, maintain websites, and run online bookshops to sell the increasingly vast library of assassination research materials. The conferences closely resemble academic conferences, with keynote speeches from grandees of the research community, a gruelling schedule of back-to-back presentations detailing the latest research findings in specialist sub-fields of assassinology, and a chance for participants to either bond over their mutual interests or score points in attacking rival camps. The conspiracy research books also keep being published, and are often impressive in the scale of their research, even if they aren't necessarily any more accurate than previous efforts; one recent book (Waldron and Hartmann 2005) that has been widely acclaimed in the research community, for example, is over nine hundred pages long, but in essence seems to revive a theory developed in a 1988 television documentary that has since been largely discredited. Even after forty years the hardcore research community doesn't show any signs of fading away, and it has even begun to renew itself by making links with the emerging 9/11 conspiracy research groups.

## Significance of Conspiracy Theory

It's no exaggeration to say that when most Americans think of the Kennedy assassination, they think of it through the lens of conspiracy theory. So why have conspiracy theories proved such a compelling way to make sense of and represent the assassination? What ideological baggage does a conspiracy theory bring with it? Have conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination changed the nature of conspiracy thinking itself? And is it commendable or worrying that the vast majority of Americans believe in some form of conspiracy theory about the assassination?

Conspiracy theories in American culture have usually been characterised as the paranoid delusions of right-wing extremists and other misfits. Moreover, conspiracy theorists are typically dismissed as being incapable of understanding the complex forces of historical causation, preferring instead to blame bad things that happen on a small conspiracy of evildoers. Often the suggestion is that the promotion of conspiracy theories is connected to political demonology, the scapegoating of outsider groups by blaming social misfortunes on some imagined secret plot. The 'paranoid style', it is argued, is characterised by an overblown suspiciousness, a tendency to see everything in terms of an apocalyptic struggle between Them and Us, coupled with a projection onto the fantasised enemy of repressed longings within one's own group. The refusal to recognise cock-ups or random coincidences is fuelled by the conviction that 'a "vast" or "gigantic" conspiracy' is '*the motive force* in historical events' (Hofstadter 1966: 29, emphasis in original). Some critics have even insisted that conspiracy theories are necessarily mistaken forms of causal explanation, because they fail to take into account the inevitable, unexpected consequences of any intended action on the historical playing field (see Knight 2000).

The starting point for these semi-psychological diagnoses of populist paranoia is the conviction that most conspiracy theories are mistaken, and therefore we need to explain why so many people are attracted to such bizarre beliefs. In the case of the Kennedy assassination more specifically, the argument is often that conspiracy theories provide a consoling sense of closure, certainty and coherence, as a way of making sense of a tragically pointless act. William Manchester, author of the classic elegy, *Death of a President*, summed up this position in a letter to the *New York Times* in 1992:

> If you put the murdered President of the United States on one side of a scale and that wretched waif Oswald on the other side, it doesn't

> balance. You want to add something weightier to Oswald. It would invest the President's death with meaning, endowing him with martyrdom. He would have died for *something*. A conspiracy would, of course, do the job nicely. (Manchester 1992: A22)

Some of these accusations about the logic and function of conspiracy theories hold true for the Kennedy assassination. We can see, for example, a refusal to accept that the killing was just the work of a disaffected loner and a yearning to find some greater significance in the specific allegation that JFK was killed because he was going to pull out of Vietnam, as well as the more nostalgic and mainly unfounded assertion that his murder profoundly changed the course of American history. Likewise a fair proportion of Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories display an almost obsessive refusal to countenance coincidence or cock-up as causal explanations. For example, David Lifton's *Best Evidence* (finally published in 1980; he had apparently been labouring on it since 1966) develops a fantastical scenario involving Kennedy's corpse being swapped in mid-air and surgically altered to fake wounds hiding the real direction of bullets, rather than a much simpler explanation of a bungled autopsy carried out under enormously stressful conditions, or a report that was ineptly altered once it became clear that the Parkland doctors had made mistaken assumptions about an entry wound to the throat. This is not to say that Lifton's scenario is inconceivable, but the insistence that the military and the intelligence agencies are always ruthlessly efficient doesn't gel with the revelations of widespread incompetence that have emerged over recent decades. Indeed, it might be argued that this kind of conspiracy theory betrays a lingering faith in the omniscience and omnipotence of the authorities, even if those imagined, awesome capabilities are used for nefarious purposes. More recently, the assassination research community has been divided by the work of James Fetzer and others who allege that the Zapruder footage – long taken by buffs as the Rosetta Stone of the assassination – was itself doctored by a meticulously planned conspiracy as part of its massive cover-up (see for example Fetzer 2003).

But the conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination that began to emerge later in the 1960s brought a series of significant departures from the traditional pattern of American demonology. First, JFK assassination conspiracy theories see a shift from fears about the external infiltration of the structures of power (the classic example here would be McCarthyite anticommunist fears of the 'enemy within'), to fears that the structures of power in general and specific branches of the federal government such as the intelligence agencies constitute a

conspiracy against the people. Second, conspiracy theorists in the United States have usually thought of the military and the intelligence agencies as the defenders of the people from alien invasion or subversion from within, but with the Kennedy assassination – particularly after the revelations of the 1970s – many critics came to see those agencies as the plotters rather than the protectors of the people. Finally, conspiracy theories have often been used by the strong to scapegoat already victimised minorities, partly as a way of cohering the identity of the in-group (think here of nativist movements such as anti-Catholicism or anti-Mormonism in the nineteenth century, or anti-Semitism in the twentieth). But assassination conspiracy theories reversed the direction of this tendency of the powerful blaming the weak by seeing the American people – and Kennedy himself as an embodiment of the people – as victims of an all-powerful, high-level cabal within the military-industrial complex.

Conspiracy theories in the US have usually been aligned with specific, single-issue political causes, in which all ills are blamed on a particular demonised enemy. Yet theories about the Kennedy assassination have tended to become ever more elaborate, linking together a whole range of conspiracy fears into one Grand Unified Field Theory of conspiracy, in which Kennedy's death is claimed to be, say, part of a much larger chain of events that encompasses the other 1960s assassinations, Watergate, the Iran Contra scandal, and 9/11, or even a vast conspiracy to control all of human history dating back centuries led by the ultra-secret forces of the New World Order, in league with the Illuminati, international bankers, and little grey aliens (for two extreme examples of this shift to integrative mega-conspiracy theories, see Keith 1993 and Marrs 2001). It's important to note that, along with other conspiracy thinking, much Kennedy assassination research is now conducted on the Web, the infinite connectivity of which facilitates the creation of endlessly linked theories.

Some conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination have also led the way in re-imagining the enemy. Whereas traditional conspiracy theories claim that a small group of powerful plotters have secretly conspired to alter the course of history, some JFK theories represent the enemy not in individual terms but as an abstract system: an amorphous, impersonal, interlocking network of vested interests and power blocs summed up by catch-phrases such as the 'military-industrial complex', 'the system' or simply 'Them'. It is often argued that conspiracy theorists make the mistake of fixating on individual agency as the source of historical events rather than trying to understand the underlying structural forces of social and economic change. This charge is usually made

by those on the left, because they see conspiracy theorists as insufficiently radical: although the assassination critics blame elements of the establishment for either plotting or covering up a conspiracy, the argument goes, they nevertheless still assume that the conspirators are merely bad apples in an otherwise sound barrel (see for example Albert 1992). They assume, in effect, that America's ills can be solved by bringing the conspirators to justice, whereas left-wing radicals argue that obsessing about the minutiae of a presumed assassination plot distracts attention from the far more pressing problems of, say, poverty and racism. Conspiracy theories, according to Alexander Cockburn, negate 'any sensible analysis of institutions, economic trends and pressures, continuities in corporate and class interest and all the other elements constituting the open secrets and agendas of American capitalism' (Cockburn 1992: 380). But some proponents of conspiratorial interpretations of the Kennedy assassination have claimed that their research brings together both agency and structure, by in effect seeing an assassination conspiracy not as an isolated aberration in the normal workings of government but as an inevitable consequence of a corrupt system of 'invisible government' that has developed since the beginnings of the Cold War a vast, institutionalised culture of secrecy that has sanctioned the illegal operations of intelligence agencies in the name of national security. Peter Dale Scott, for example, has developed what he calls a 'deep political' analysis that tries to understand the *internal* political institutional structures of power that inevitably lead to crises such as assassinations but which are repressed from public consciousness, rather than blaming a host of demonised *external* enemies. He argues that this approach is an adaptation of structural analysis rather than a conspiracy-minded rejection of it:

> I would suggest that deep political analysis enlarges traditional structuralist analysis to include indeterminacies analogous to those which are studied in chaos theory. A deep political system is one where the processes openly acknowledged are not always securely in control, precisely because of their accommodation to unsanctioned sources of violence, through arrangements not openly acknowledged and reviewed. (Scott 1996: xiii)

But some critics of conspiracy theory are still not entirely convinced by the shift towards a quasi-structural analysis. The cultural theorist Fredric Jameson, for example, would argue that the kind of mega-conspiracy theories that have spawned around the Kennedy case (and that have increasingly become the model for a whole new wave of conspiracy thinking in the last three decades) do not ultimately get to the

bottom of what's really going on, but are instead mere substitute attempts to represent the scarcely imaginable complexity of multinational capitalism in the age of globalisation (Jameson 1988: 356).

The accusation that conspiracy theories as a form of historical interpretation arise from a sense of paranoid suspiciousness taken to extremes (at a collective, if not individual, level) is possibly true of some Kennedy assassination critics, yet the majority of the assassination buffs I have met are pleasant, helpful and fairly outgoing people (but see Delaney 1996). It is arguable, however, that the interest in Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories has helped forge a new sensibility of default suspicion, a sense that the government is bound to be lying, that nothing is as it seems, and that everything is probably connected. Kennedy conspiracy theorists often maintain this stance of limitless scepticism even if there's no smoking gun to be found – but of course, the conspiracy theorists point out, a perfect conspiracy theory leaves no traces of its existence, leading to the conclusion that the absence of telling evidence is itself evidence of a ruthlessly efficient conspiracy and cover-up. The first generation assassination critic Josiah Thompson praised his fellow researcher Vincent Salandria, for example, for his resolute refusal to trust the authorities: 'If the government says "black", Vince figures "white". He's a marvellously skeptical man' (Trillin 1967: 47). This attitude of default suspicion has fed into and itself takes sustenance from a wider shift to a routinised distrust of authorities that has been notable over the last forty years. Opinion polls indicate that in the early 1960s three quarters of Americans said that they trusted the government to do the right thing, but by the mid 1990s three quarters of Americans *distrusted* the government (American National Election Studies 2004). Of course, the Kennedy assassination is not the sole cause for this shift, but the slow erosion of faith in the official version of events in the JFK case played a significant role here. Indeed, many Americans single out the Kennedy assassination as the event that opened their eyes and made them recognise that the authorities are not to be trusted. It is important to remember, however, that Americans have a long history of responding to scandals as a cataclysmic loss of innocence and trust. Moreover, the loss of trust in the authorities that accompanied Kennedy's death is often retrospectively back-dated to 1963, since in reality a pervasive cynicism about the government was much more a response to the Vietnam War and to Watergate.

It's arguable, therefore, that Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories are no longer necessarily the sign of crackpot, delusional thinking that borders on clinical paranoia, because the possibility of government duplicity – in the form of a cover-up conspiracy, if not an actually initial

plot – holds at the very least a prima facie plausibility on account of the revelations about official wrongdoings that have cropped up repeatedly since the 1970s. The public support for the findings of Kennedy assassination critics also suggests that conspiracy theories have moved from the fringe to the mainstream of American society, no longer confined to right-wing extremists but appealing equally to the left and the silent majority of the centre. The social and political function of conspiracy rhetoric has consequently begun to change. Instead of causing a sense of group identity to cohere by imagining that group under threat from an external enemy, Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories lead to a sense of social isolation and fragmentation: if you can't trust the authorities, then who can you trust?

Although conspiracy theories are often accused of reducing the complex interactions and unpredictability of history to a simple, coherent plot, in the case of Kennedy assassination critics there is often an escalating complexity and incoherence. With all the endless inconsistencies and proliferating doubts about even the most seemingly straightforward of facts to which critics have drawn attention, it can seem that JFK conspiracy theories tend not towards a comforting closure but to an infinite regress of suspicion, a 'vertigo of interpretations' (Baudrillard 1988: 174–5) in which nothing can be taken at face value. The assassination critics have often presented theories in which the ultimate source of power – the final, highest level of the conspiracy – is always displaced and its discovery always deferred. There has been no steady convergence of opinion about the case, not only between the lone gunman and conspiracy theory camps, but *within* the latter position. For example, in a press release trying to present a united front of assassination researchers at the 'November in Dallas' convention on the thirty-fifth anniversary of the shooting, the participants could only agree on a statement that:

> We believe these basic facts in the assassination of President Kennedy and the wounding of Governor John Connally: there was more than one shooter; there has not been a true investigation of this crime by our government; the intelligence agencies did not give those investigations the information they should have; the assassination case is still open and research should be ongoing. (JFK Lancer 1997)

All agreed that the official version is not correct, but there was little or no consensus when it came to presenting an alternative account, other than that there was some kind of conspiracy or other. Members of the critical community often seem to spend more time debating with one

another than challenging their supposed common enemy of the official view. As Harrison Edward Livingstone, a prominent critic, writes:

> The facts are that there is fraud and misrepresentation in the critical community: hoaxes, opportunism, territorialism, copyright violations, bootlegging, vendettas, misinformation, serious misdirection by critics of other critics, disruption, suppression of vital evidence for commercial purposes, slandermongering, and interference with other researchers and witnesses . . . the critical community is a madhouse. (Livingstone 1993: 369)

Additional evidence likewise leads not to convergence but to further dispute: the problem is not that there is too little evidence to solve the case but too much data for anyone to master easily, much of it requiring specialist expertise. There is often no agreement between the experts, and so the dilemma becomes which experts to trust, and how to decide whether someone is indeed an expert. For most amateur inquirers, there is no obvious and agreed-upon criteria for working out which expert to believe, other than to call in a further expert, and so on, potentially for ever. Far from the assassination leading steadily and inexorably to a consensus, it has produced a free-fall of suspicion that begins to doubt everything – even the fundamental ground rules of proof and evidence. Investigations into the Kennedy assassination often reveal uncanny coincidences and contradictions, sometimes in the most mundane of facts. For example, at the 1997 'November in Dallas' convention the researcher John Armstrong gave an enormously detailed two-and-a-half-hour presentation on the multiple inconsistencies in the account of Lee Harvey Oswald's life (subsequently published as a thousand-page book: see Armstrong 2003). Armstrong produced documents which seemed to show Oswald enrolled in different high schools in different cities in the same period, and sightings of him in the months prior to the assassination in different states at the same time. He also pointed to the discrepancies in the differing official records and eyewitness accounts of Oswald's height, eye and hair colour, and, strangest of all, the divergence between, on the one hand, photographic and personal accounts of Oswald losing a front tooth in a teenage brawl and, on the other, dental records and a photograph that seems to show all the teeth intact taken when Oswald's corpse was exhumed in 1981, following speculation that it wasn't him buried there after all.

Many – perhaps all – of these anomalies can be explained away. For example, the eyewitness testimony to the Warren Commission placing Oswald in North Dakota, a place he never visited, is likely the result of

a mixture of mistaken memories, in part fuelled by a typographical error in a newspaper article on Oswald that confused the abbreviation NO (for New Orleans) with ND (North Dakota). It nevertheless seems unnerving that the most humdrum of daily details could be the cause of so much dispute. How can this kind of basic factual evidence ever be condensed into a single coherent account? One way that conspiracy theorists attempt to explain away these anomalies is, of course, by claiming that they are the accidental evidence of a conspiracy – or even evidence of a deliberate conspiracy to plant misleading clues. The bulk of Armstrong's work, for example, is concerned with documenting the anomalies, but he is also forced to put forward a hypothesis that the only explanation for the wide discrepancies and doublings in the Oswald evidence is that all along there were in fact two Oswalds, whom he designates Harvey and Lee. 'In the early 1950s', he argues, 'an intelligence operation was underway that involved two teenage boys – Lee Oswald from Fort Worth, and a Russian-speaking boy named Harvey Oswald from New York.' Beginning in 1952, Armstrong continues 'the boys lived parallel but separate lives – often in the same city. The ultimate goal was to switch their identities and send Harvey Oswald into Russia, which is exactly what happened seven years later' (Armstrong 1997). In a moment of paranoid free-fall the audience was left to wonder what kind of America they were living in if two identical but different Oswalds had been groomed from their infancy for future historical roles. How far back does the conspiracy go? Are 'They' able to plan and control every last detail with meticulous efficiency?

As much as assassination researchers speak of their determination to bring closure to the case, they also often seem to have a personal investment in keeping research going, of sustaining a research dialogue almost for the sake of discussion – not to mention a financial investment in prolonging the process of inquiry, with the proliferation of convention speaking and web merchandising funding the amateur research network. But are Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories a harmless hobby, a profound grassroots challenge to official corruption, or a distraction from real political activism? Conspiracy theories have usually been seen as necessarily tied to reactionary causes (see Berlet and Lyons 2000), but in the case of the Kennedy assassination they at first were aligned with a progressive outlook that highlighted what critics took to be a cover-up and even conspiracy on the part of the US authorities. But the initial anger of those early attacks has been diffused over the years as all manner of speculations – some plausible, some fanciful – have come under the umbrella of assassination conspiracy theories. It's often argued that conspiracy theories lead to resignation and

apathy: after all, if you believe that everything is controlled by a vast all-powerful conspiracy, you might think that there's nothing that can be done about it. But some Kennedy assassination critics have been spurred into action by the shocking facts they believe they have uncovered, and the fact that the conspiracy position is now widely accepted by the public is a testament to the energy of the campaigners (though, from the alternative position of a Warren Commission loyalist, a tragic sign of the gullibility of the American public). But for all their successes – the reopening of the case by Congress in the mid-1970s, the passage of the JFK Act in 1993 – little of lasting significance has been achieved by these groups in terms of mainstream political change, or bringing to justice the supposedly guilty parties.

## Popular Memorialisation

The ever expanding body of conspiracy accounts can be seen as a form of unofficial, popular memorialisation, an attempt to create a counter-history in the face of what is widely perceived as an official cover-up. In contrast, the official memorials were tightly controlled by the Kennedy family, with the main focus given to the funeral ceremonies, the tomb in Arlington National Cemetery, the Kennedy presidential library, the Kennedy memorial in Dallas, and the renaming of the Cape Canaveral space centre and New York's Idlewild airport (the Kennedy family were reluctant to allow a free-for-all renaming of national and international monuments; see Brown 1988). Since many Americans feel that the authorities have blown the right to speak for the nation on the Kennedy assassination, a number of non-official spaces of public memorialisation have been formed. Not surprisingly Dallas in general and Dealey Plaza in particular have become home to those who seek alternative ways of remembering the Kennedy assassination.

Dealey Plaza receives two million visitors a year, and many come not just out of respectful homage to the president who died there but to see for themselves the sixth floor window and the grassy knoll. (The near universal reaction for first-time visitors is that Dealey Plaza is much smaller than they had imagined.) Some of the visitors pay silent tribute to a death that is only officially marked by a small plaque recognising that Dealey Plaza is a National Historic Landmark District, in addition to a white cross painted on the street at the exact spot of the fatal head shot (its correct location is of course disputed). Other visitors have more ghoulish motives. When I last visited in 1997, it was possible to take a tour in an open-topped limo recreating Kennedy's route through the 'killing zone'. Most visitors check out the grassy knoll and the

picket fence behind which shooters are alleged to have stood. The picket fence used to be covered in graffiti, a mixture of sentimental wishes for the deceased president and angry references to official lies, a spontaneous 'memory wall' that recalled the tributes left at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, DC, and that anticipated the popular acts of memorialisation – and distribution of conspiracy literature – that sprung up around Ground Zero in New York after 9/11. But the picket fence itself was finally removed – a fair portion of it having been stolen by collectors over the years, anyway – and sold at auction in 2005 to an online gambling company. Usually there are assassination buffs eager to engage visitors in discussion and peddle them conspiracy books, videos and autopsy photos. This unofficial, haphazard promotion of the conspiracy case presents itself as the one last home of an authentic, underground challenge to the official lies, but it is in reality not much more than an in-person version of the online and mail-order cottage industry of conspiracy research. Each year on 22 November an unofficial ceremony of remembrance is held at 12.30 p.m., with many of the participants also attending one of several annual conspiracy research conventions held in Dallas (see Trujillo 1993).

In the Texas School Book Depository building (now used for Dallas County administrative offices) the Sixth Floor Museum was established in 1989, a non-profit, private institution with the aim of creating 'an educational and permanent historic exhibit that examines the life, times, death and legacy of President John F. Kennedy within the context of American history' (www.jfk.org). Although the Museum is keen to 'face history squarely and to recount it accurately', it is also very careful to avoid any 'artefacts of a violent or distasteful nature' – visitors are not allowed to enter the carefully recreated 'sniper's lair' in the south-east corner, for example. (The comedian Bill Hicks once joked that the Sixth Floor Museum's recreation of the 'sniper's lair' is remarkably authentic: 'they have the window set up to look exactly like it did on that day. And it's really accurate, you know, 'cause Oswald's not in it.') The Museum's exhibits concentrate more on the life than the death of Kennedy, and the sections devoted to the assassination are confined mainly to presenting the basic facts of Kennedy's visit to Dallas, the main findings and the official inquiries, and briefly noting the existence of alternative theories. The irony of this tasteful display is that – judging by the entries in the guest book (now available online) – a not insignificant portion of the Museum's 450,000 visitors a year seem to feel that the proper way to pay one's respects to the deceased president is to learn more about the specific conspiracy accounts of the assassination plots. Comments in the

guest book are a mixture of where-were-you memories, tributes to JFK, and declarations along the lines that 'Oswald did not act alone and the government needs to stop covering up the conspiracy that happened.'

In contrast to the well-funded, well-attended and slick Sixth Floor Museum, on the other side of Dealey Plaza is the Conspiracy Museum, a rather down-at-heel and idiosyncratic space established by R. B. Cutler, a millionaire and former Olympic athlete. The museum deals with several of the 1960s assassinations, but it is far from comprehensive in its coverage of those events or conspiracy theories more generally. Its quirky displays include a series of huge Japanese brush stroke murals depicting all manner of conspiracies from JFK to Chappaquiddick and beyond, all woven together into an abstract tableau. It also puts forward Cutler's own theory that the JFK shooting involved nine shots from four different locations. The Conspiracy Museum comes across as the downtrodden but populist challenger to the more establishment Sixth Floor Museum round the corner. Conspiracy critics have even begun to call for a boycott of the Sixth Floor Museum, having taken issue with the non-conspiracy stance of the displays, and the museum's refusal to stock many of the books and DVDs from the critics. The question of whether there was a conspiracy involved in Kennedy's assassination continues to rouse passions, not least because each side claims that its representation of the event is not only true in itself but the only proper way to commemorate Kennedy. One email to the boycott's organiser, for example, declares that it 'scares me that we live in a country where governmental power is so strong, and people don't question it. CONSPIRACY THEORISTS UNITE!!!!!' (http://www.prouty.org/boycott.html). Encapsulating the tendency for Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories to spiral ever outwards, becoming the motherlode of all postwar conspiracies, another email post suggests that maybe the cover-up conspiracy is even in control of the museum: 'I was told that the museum is allegedly owned and controlled by a very plugged-in community organization which has deep ties to "old texas money" and govt power structures as in (military) and has an agenda to promote the continued cover-up. He said one would probably be quite shocked at the connections of this group if all its members and their families were deeply investigated.'

# 6 Literature

The Kennedy assassination has been represented in a wide range of novels, short stories and plays. In some cases the death of the president features as merely the historical backdrop for the real action of the fiction, but in others the event itself holds a special significance for the writers. Some of the most important postwar American novelists – Don DeLillo, Norman Mailer, James Ellroy – have focused on the Kennedy assassination in particular because it raises fundamental questions about the connection between conspiracy plot and narrative plot; about the nature of character, agency and causality; about the relationship between fictional narrative and historical truth; and about the connection between the assassination and myths of national identity and destiny. Don DeLillo, Norman Mailer and James Ellroy have all been haunted by the Kennedy assassination. Each has found in the event an emblematic story for the nation: DeLillo's essay on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the shooting is titled 'American Blood' (1983); the subtitle of Mailer's 1995 novel is 'An American Mystery'; and Ellroy's novel (1995) is called *American Tabloid*. DeLillo and Mailer have also acknowledged that the Warren Commission Report might well be the ultimate postmodern novel, dwarfing any of their own efforts (see Chapter 4). Before looking at the way that DeLillo, Mailer and Ellroy have grappled with the death of JFK, this chapter will give a brief overview of other assassination fictional writings.

## Vertigo of Interpretation

As we saw in Chapter 5, the Kennedy assassination – or, more accurately, the post-Watergate rekindling of interest in the political assassinations of the 1960s – fed into a culture of paranoia, a sense of default scepticism that saw evidence everywhere of a shadow government based on institutionalised secrecy and immune to democratic control, with the vulnerable individual the victim of a vast conspiracy of interlocking and

increasingly impersonal organisations and forces. Even if the Kennedy assassination is not always directly represented, it is arguable that the simultaneous fascination with and dread of mega conspiracies that the assassination brought to the fore is central to much postwar American fiction. The kind of paranoid fixation on secrecy and conspiracy that the Kennedy assassination helped to distil is visible in works by Margaret Atwood, William Burroughs, Philip K. Dick, Diane Johnson, William Gaddis, Joseph Heller, Ken Kesey, James McElroy, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut, as well as DeLillo, Mailer and Ellroy (see Tanner 1971; Melley 1999; Knight 2000; O'Donnell 2000).

For example, in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* ([1966] 1979) the assassination is an unspoken presence in its surreal reworking of mid-1960s America. The death of JFK and the subsequent search for a conspiracy is never mentioned, yet always seems to be hovering just out of reach – much like the sinister Tristero conspiracy that the novel outlines. Written in the two years after the assassination, Pynchon's short novel chronicles the attempts by Oedipa Maas, a regular California housewife (like several prominent early assassination researchers), to investigate the mysterious death of a wealthy and important man with an Irish-sounding name (Pierce Inverarity) whose legacy seems to extend to the whole of America. Once Oedipa Maas starts looking, it appears that there are ominous signs everywhere, as the whole of America becomes a tantalising clue to a mystery that remains just beyond her grasp. Oedipa finds herself falling into an infinite abyss of suspicion and an overload of information, as she slowly learns to distrust everything and everyone she meets. When all the clues turn out to be red herrings rather than the final smoking gun, Oedipa's world is turned upside down. As with Kennedy assassination researchers, Oedipa begins to suspect that the conspiracy is vast and unfathomably complicated. She finds clues to the elusive Tristero and its underground postal system in the unlikeliest of places, from a scrawled cryptic sign on the wall of a bathroom in a San Francisco bar to minor textual variations in a Jacobean tragedy, and from rumours at the Yoyodyne weapons corporation to legends about the bones of Allied soldiers buried at the bottom of an Italian lake. The novel famously ends with Oedipa waiting at an auction for the crying of lot number 49, a stamp collection that promises to finally reveal the existence of the Tristero's involvement not only in Oedipa's own life in particular but American history in general. But, like Kennedy assassination research, it leaves its protagonist and its readers in endless suspension, permanently on the cusp of revelation, uncertain whether there is indeed a conspiracy, or only Oedipa's paranoid delusions.

*The Crying of Lot 49*'s inconclusive quest and suspended ending confronts – and perhaps even celebrates – the prospect that the final discovery will never come. But other novels have stepped back from the infinite abyss of suspicion that assassination research seemed to open up. The thriller writer Richard Condon turned to the Kennedy assassination in his 1974 thriller *Winter Kills* (made into a film in 1979). Condon was the author of *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959; made into a film in 1962) that told the tale of a mind-controlled assassin who attempts to shoot a presidential candidate (see Seed 2004). A few conspiracy critics have even suggested that Condon had inside knowledge of the CIA's top secret MK-ULTRA programme that experimented with mind control, and that the novel is therefore an accurate prediction of both Oswald and Sirhan Sirhan as brainwashed 'sleeper agents' programmed to kill the president and later his brother. Immediately after the assassination Condon was asked by a journalist whether he felt guilty for having introduced the idea of a presidential hit – not that killing the president was anything new, of course, either in real life or in novels and films. Condon felt compelled to write a piece for *The Nation*, in which he identified strong similarities between Lee Oswald and Raymond Shaw (the protagonist of *The Manchurian Candidate*), but not because Oswald was controlled by a Communist conspiracy, but because he was a victim of the conditioning to violence promoted by the American 'overcommunications industry'. Condon in effect accepted the conclusion that Oswald was a lone gunman rather than the pawn of a conspiracy, but insisted that 'Oswald was not the only violence-packed American who was capable of murdering President Kennedy. The assassination was a wasteful, impersonal, senseless act, but the United States has undergone such a massive brainwashing to violence that such a senseless waste is *à la mode*' (Condon 1963: 450).

In *Winter Kills* President Tim Kegan (note the Irish surname) is killed in a motorcade in Philadelphia, and an official inquiry blames a lone nut. Fourteen years later Nick, the dead president's brother, hears a deathbed confession from a man claiming to have been one of the shooters. Nick spends the entire novel pursuing one conspiracy theory after another, each of which at first seems entirely convincing, both for the protagonist and the reader. He learns from the deathbed confession that there was more than one rifleman involved, and hence that the police failed to uncover a conspiracy. He is then led to suspect that the man behind the conspiracy is Z. K. Dawson, an oil millionaire and arms manufacturer, who had the president killed because he showed signs of slowing down the military build-up. But Dawson informs him that in fact the police themselves were to blame. When Nick speaks to an assistant

to the former chief of police responsible for protecting the president, he is told that the police were indeed complicit, but that in fact the Mafia were responsible. Chasing up what turns out to be a series of red herrings from a fake Mafia boss, he is told that the Mafia in reality took revenge for the loss of earnings suffered by a Hollywood studio as a result of the death of a Marilyn Monroe-like character committing suicide out of love for the president. But a real Mafia boss informs Nick that a Jimmy Hoffa character is to blame, only for Nick to learn from an adviser to his father that the Mafia were actually taking revenge on the Kegans for reneging on a rigged election. Nick then finds out that the police chief he thought he had spoken to in fact died years ago, and that the chief's assistant was himself a fake, as indeed was Dawson – and even a female reporter for a news magazine whom he encounters. What's more, everyone he meets along the way seems to end up dead.

All the theories – old favourites from the Kennedy assassination – in turn prove to be red herrings, and each smoking gun turns out to be misleading. Like *The Crying of Lot 49*, the novel thus sets up the alarming possibility that the truth might never be reached, and that the search for a conspiracy ultimately leads to paranoia rather than insight. But the ever accelerating free-fall plunge into the abyss of scepticism is halted in the last few pages of the novel when we learn that in fact all the false clues have been deliberately fabricated and planted for Nick by an all-too-real conspiracy of the secret ruling élite led by his father, a super-rich, super-corrupt Joseph P. Kennedy figure. In this way the novel toys with the idea of an endless deferral of ultimate revelation and an overwhelming instability of knowledge, only for this unsettling experiment to be recuperated at the last minute in the name of realism, causality and agency. The novel thus seems to pull out of its spiralling tailspin of paranoia, but only by an aesthetically unconvincing and contrived twist of the plot that in effect finds the ultimate motivation for an assassination conspiracy in the clichéd Oedipal family drama of a cruel father and sons who love their father too much. But the hurriedly erected façade of the ending fails to paper over the cracks in the ideological wallpaper that have been opened up by the bulk of the novel.

## Time Travel

The Kennedy assassination has appealed to science fiction and other writers as the ultimate example of how the course of history can be changed irrevocably in a single moment, but a moment which can be revisited and changed if time travel is possible (for a discussion of the link between paranoia and time travel narratives, see O'Donnell 2000).

In Stanley Shapiro's *A Time to Remember* (1986) the hero travels back in time to prevent the Kennedy assassination, so that Kennedy might live to pull American troops out of Vietnam, thereby saving the hero's brother who had died in the conflict. In Gregory Benford's *Timescape* (1980), in contrast, the story returns repeatedly to the seven seconds in Dallas as the protagonist attempts to alter the course of history for the better by averting a future ecological catastrophe: natural disaster in effect replaces the Vietnam War as the consequence of the assassination in this novel. Among other 'alternate worlds' fiction is a collection of short stories called *Alternate Kennedys* (Resnick 1992) that features gems such as 'What if the Kennedy Brothers had grown up to be the hottest rock group in the world – and averted an assassination attempt on President Presley?', while Barry Malzberg's *The Destruction of the Temple* ([1974] 1975) is set in the post-apocalyptic ruins of New York in 2016 with a film director repeatedly restaging Kennedy's death.

Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson's cult novel *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* ([1975] 1988) provides a surreal satire on conspiracy theories in general and Kennedy assassination theories in particular. It weaves all manner of speculations into a vast, chaotic, cosmic plot in which the Illuminati, an ancient secret society dating back 30,000 years (and not just the short-lived eighteenth-century Bavarian brotherhood, as the historical record has it), rule the world from their bunker under Dealey Plaza – a riff on an early theory of the conspiracy critic David Lifton, who suggested that the grassy knoll had been hollowed out to provide tunnels through which the assassination team could escape. The novel's narrative structure of conspiracy revelations turning out to be merely red herrings is aimed at disorienting both the protagonist and the reader, until the searcher reaches a new spiritual and epistemological plane. *The Illuminatus! Trilogy* thus gives a psychedelic, quasi-Buddhist twist to the idea of boundless paranoia developed by Pynchon et al. What makes the 800-page novel particularly intriguing is that one of its major sources is *Principia Discordia*, a semi-spoof countercultural manifesto for an alternative religion based on the idea of chaos as primal force, written in 1965 by Greg Hill and Jerry Thornley, the latter a friend of Oswald during his time stationed in California and the author of *The Idle Warriors* ([1962] 1991), a novel based on the life of his intriguing fellow Marine with Communist sympathies (see Chapter 4).

Mark Lawson's *Idlewild* (1995) provides a more down-to-earth but also more sophisticated version of a 'what if' narrative. Its counterfactual history imagines that Kennedy survived the assassination attempt and that Marilyn Monroe also didn't die in her suicide bid in 1962.

(The novel's title refers to the name of New York's airport that was renamed John F. Kennedy International Airport after the assassination; at the end of the novel we learn that New Yorkers have voted in a poll to rename Idlewild the Elvis A. Presley International Airport.) The novel – whose subtitle is 'Everything Is Subject to Change' – is a meditation on reputation, celebrity and untimely death, and it captures neatly the theological dilemma of what God might or might not have intended in allowing some to die and some to live; one character, for example, belatedly realises that fifteen years ago he delivered the Heimlich manoeuvre to a man choking in a restaurant who is now the current president, and he wonders whether 'God sent a piece of meat to stop Sanders one day being President, and I got in the way, or he sent me to make sure he did become President' (Lawson 1995: 263). *Idlewild* explores the possibility that the assassination saved Kennedy from an old age of regret, looking back on his loss of popularity (once the Vietnam War turned sour), and the loss of his good looks and good health; in comparison, Nixon's reputation is whitewashed after his death (this happened in real life). Lawson also gives a nod to the conspiracy culture to which Kennedy's assassination actually gave birth: the Dealey Plaza Researchers, a bunch of die-hard conspiracy theorists, insist that the shooting was merely a deliberately staged assassination attempt designed to garner sympathy and support for the president in the upcoming elections. In a further twist, the current president is himself assassinated, with the official government inquiry finding it to have been the work of a lone fanatic. There's even a passing reference to a film by Oliver Stone that insists that Vietnam wouldn't have happened if Kennedy *had* been killed!

In *Flying in to Love* (1992) D. M. Thomas interweaves the known facts of the event with the outlines of an alternative, 'possible' history in which Kennedy isn't assassinated as an expression of a wish fulfilment fantasy on the part of a nation in thrall to his seductive image. The novel begins with the declaration from a Dallas psychologist, that 'ten thousand dreams a night . . . are dreamt about Kennedy's assassination', leading the narrator to warn the reader that 'fiction is a kind of dream, and history is a kind of dream, and this [novel] is both' (Thomas 1992: 3). *Flying in to Love* focuses on the dreams of three women caught up in the Kennedy mystique in differing ways: Jackie Kennedy; and two fictional nuns, namely Sister Agnes, whose gushing admiration for Kennedy is later transformed into fanatical conspiracy research; and Sister Beatrice, whose suicide bid is thwarted by the assassination and who harbours a permanent loathing for the philandering president, to the point that she masturbates while watching the Zapruder footage of

his death. The novel is self-conscious about its refusal to try and uncover the 'reality' of either Kennedy or the assassination, instead exploring the role of unconscious fantasies and projections in the way America thinks about JFK and his death (see Hellmann 1997: 164–79).

Stephen Sondheim's musical *Assassins* (1991) provides a darkly ironic take on the history of presidential assassins in the US, with a roll call of characters stretching from John Booth (who shot Lincoln) to John Hinckley (who shot Reagan). The musical's co-writer explained its basic premise:

> Thirteen people have tried to kill the President of the United States. Four have succeeded. These murderers and would-be murderers are generally dismissed as maniacs and misfits who have little in common with each other, and nothing in common with the rest of us. *Assassins* suggests otherwise. *Assassins* suggests that while these individuals are, to say the least, peculiar – taken as a group they are peculiarly *American*. And that behind the variety of motives which they articulated for their murderous outbursts, they share a common purpose: a desperate desire to reconcile intolerable feelings of impotence with an inflamed and malignant sense of entitlement. (Sondheim and Weidman 1991: x)

In a neat twist, in the final scene we see Oswald preparing to commit not murder but suicide in his sixth-floor hideout. He is interrupted by Booth – joined later by all the past and future presidential assassins – who convinces Oswald that he will solve his problems and finally become somebody by killing the president instead of himself.

Other writers have taken a more avant-garde approach to the Kennedy assassination. In some of the pieces in Derek Pell's *Assassination Rhapsody* he processes the language of the Warren Commission Report through a series of defamiliarising permutations and fragmentations with the aid of a thesaurus: 'For a soldier armed with a rifle bang situated on the sixth level of a building bang in a Southern State of the U.S. bang (area, 267,339 sq. mi. – pop., 7,711,000; capital, Austin), a book used for study in schools bang, a place where things are put for safekeeping, anything that is built, the attempts to hit bang with a missile were at a slow-moving object that is shot at bang bang bang, proceeding on a downward slope in virtually a straight fine strong cord with a hook bang used in fishing, with the arrangement in a straight line of the member bang of a medieval band of hashish-eating Moslems,' and so on (Pell 1989: 47). For Pell, the assassin's shots produce a literal interruption in the flow of language, a disturbance between signifier and signified that dislocates the relationship between fact and fiction. Finally,

J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition* considers the Kennedy assassination within the wider context of the American culture's fascination with violent death and cars, with, for example, a surreal version of events entitled 'The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race' (Ballard 1993: 122–5).

## Don DeLillo, *Libra*

For DeLillo in particular the assassination is both the logical culmination of his previous work, and the hidden origin of the cluster of concerns – paranoia and conspiracy, spectacle and violence, chaos and hidden order – that had underpinned his previous work. In DeLillo's view, 'that day in Dallas changed the way we think about the world' (DeLillo 2003). One reason is that the event has become surrounded by such ambiguity over the last forty years that it has produced a crisis in 'our trust in a coherent reality' (2003), such that 'we've all come to feel that what's been missing over these past twenty-five years is a sense of manageable reality' (DeCurtis 1991: 48). In *Libra* this sense of a postmodern crisis of knowledge finds its embodiment in the character of Nicholas Branch, a retired intelligence analyst commissioned by the CIA to write the 'secret history' of the assassination on which he is still working after fifteen years. Branch is a substitute figure for DeLillo and for all who have delved into assassination research, and ensures that *Libra* is more an exploration of the ways people have come to think about the event than the facts of the assassination themselves. With the kind of privileged access to every document that conspiracy buffs can only dream about, Branch in theory should be in the perfect position to write the final true version of events. On the other hand, he tries to resist the temptation to construct all-encompassing conspiracy theories. 'There is no need', Branch thinks, 'to invent the grand and masterful scheme, the plot that reaches flawlessly in all directions' (DeLillo 1988: 58), and he reminds himself that he is 'writing a history, not a study of the ways in which people succumb to paranoia' (p. 57).

Yet in spite – or more accurately precisely because of this unrestricted access – Branch is unable to make everything fit into a coherent account. He is overwhelmed by the sheer mass of data in his home office. He is unable even to start writing because there always seems to be new evidence that would have to be incorporated:

> Branch sits in his glove-leather chair looking at the paper hills around him. Paper is beginning to slide out of the room and across the doorway to the house proper. The floor is covered with books

> and papers. The closet is stuffed with material he has yet to read. He has to wedge new books into the shelves, force them in, insert them sideways, squeeze everything, keep everything. There is nothing in the room he can discard as irrelevant or out of date. It all matters on one level or another. This is the room of lonely facts. The stuff keeps coming. (p. 15)

More worryingly, Branch cannot tell for certain whether a particular piece of evidence is significant or trivial. Everything is potentially part of the explanation and cannot be dismissed in advance. He finds himself drowning in the maelstrom of contradictory information surrounding the assassination, questioning everything, as he begins to succumb to the free fall of paranoia that he hoped to resist:

> The Oswald shadings, the multiple images, the split perceptions – eye color, weapons caliber – these seem a foreboding of what is to come. The endless fact-rubble of the investigations. How many shots, how many gunmen, how many directions? Powerful events breed their network of inconsistencies. The simple facts elude authentication. How many wounds on the President's body? What is the size and shape of the wounds? The multiple Oswald reappears. Isn't that *him* in a photograph of a crowd of people on the front steps of the Book Depository just before the shooting begins? A startling likeness, Branch concedes. He concedes everything. He questions everything, including the basic suppositions we make about our world of light and shadow, solid objects and ordinary sounds, and our ability to measure such things, to determine weight, mass and direction, to see things as they are, recall them clearly, be able to say what happened. (p. 15)

Branch finds that the more he investigates the minutiae of the event, the less real and the less comprehensible it becomes. The assassination produces an 'aberration in the heartland of the real' (p. 15), disrupting the confidence of Americans to know how their history fits together; Branch characterises the assassination as 'the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century' (p. 181). With all the contradictory evidence, the 'official documents lost, missing, altered, classified and destroyed' and the 'flood of coincidence', it is no surprise for DeLillo that after the assassination 'a culture of distrust and paranoia began to develop, a sense of the secret manipulation of history', a feeling that has only intensified since (DeLillo 2003). Branch recognises that the most obvious way to 'regain our grip on things' is to 'build theories that gleam like jade idols, intriguing systems of assumption, four-faced, graceful' – in other words to construct elaborate conspiracy theories.

In an 'Author's Note' at the end of the hardback version of *Libra*, DeLillo insists that 'because this book makes no claim to literal truth, because it is only itself, apart and complete, readers may find refuge here – a way of thinking about the assassination without being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities, by the tide of speculation that widens with the years' (1988: n.p.). DeLillo has also talked about the way that fiction 'rescues history from its confusions', providing a form of 'redemptive truth' and 'a sense that we've arrived at a resolution' (DeCurtis 1991: 56). Looked at one way, *Libra* indeed sifts through the potentially overwhelming mass of evidence to provide an initially plausible account. The theory set out in the novel is that a group of renegade CIA agents plan to stage an attempted assassination on Kennedy with a trail of planted clues leading back to pro-Castro groups, in order to gain public support for a renewed attack on Cuba after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. At a certain point in the planning, however, the idea of a staged assassination attempt is replaced by a plot to actually kill the president, and the conspirators find in Oswald the perfect patsy.

The novel was condemned by establishment critics for the familiar reason that it took a conspiracy rather than lone gunman position. George Will, for example, writing in *The Washington Post*, accused DeLillo of being a 'bad citizen' and a 'literary vandal' for creating a fictionalised and conspiratorial version of American history (see Lentricchia 1991a: 1–6). But for all that *Libra* promises to provide a resolution to doubt, ultimately it refuses readers that comfort. For one thing, as we have seen, the sections dealing with Nicholas Branch ensure that the novel is very self-conscious about the resolutely uncanny nature of the evidence, and the politics of adopting a conspiracy theory.

Second, it does not shy away from the strange coincidences and inconsistencies surrounding the case. The main mystery of the novel is that Oswald turns out to match exactly the pre-scripted paper version of a fall guy created by the CIA conspirators before they had even come across him. The explanation for how Oswald ends up on the conspirators' doorstep is far from obvious. The even-numbered chapters of *Libra* feature the preparations of the conspirators, and the chapter titles are dates in the months leading up to 22 November: '26 April', '20 May', etc., as if they are datelines in an unfolding plan. The odd chapters, on the other hand, consist of episodes from Lee Oswald's life, and are headed by place names: 'In the Bronx,' 'In New Orleans', and so on. The conspiracy plot is marked by a chronological quickening of pace, as the increment between dates becomes less and less in the approach

to 22 November. But the Oswald chapters meander geographically, only hitting upon Dallas at the end, as if by accident. He drifts through life, and it is through a long series of chance connections that he ends up in New Orleans in the office of Guy Banister, the linchpin between the CIA conspirators and the Cuban exiles. The conspirators are then forced to realise that 'it was no longer possible to hide from the fact that Lee Oswald existed independent of the plot' (DeLillo 1988: 440). Most of the conspirators try to avoid thinking about the consequences of this strange coincidence, but it is vitally important for David Ferrie, the manic, gay ex-airline pilot and on-off associate of Banister, Cuban exiles and mobsters, who uses a semi-mystical idea of coincidence to try and persuade Oswald that he is destined to join the conspiracy and kill the president, in other words – to use the metaphor of astrology that is suggested in the book's title – it is written in his stars:

> 'Think of two parallel lines', [Ferrie] said. 'One is the life of Lee H. Oswald. One is the conspiracy to kill the President. What bridges the space between them? What makes a connection inevitable? There is a third line. It comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self. It's not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines. It's a line that cuts across causality, cuts across time. It has no history that we can recognize or understand, but it forces a connection.' (p. 339)

Ferrie goes on to inform Oswald that 'they' are interested in the 'signs that you exist', 'evidence that Lee Oswald matches the cardboard cut-out they've been shaping all along' (p. 339). *Libra* explores dreams, symbols, uncanny connections and doublings, and even the eerily suggestive and condensed 'poetry' of Oswald's odd dyslexic misspellings and aliases. This attention to the 'third line' that connects Oswald and the conspiracy in effect creates a double bluff, undermining the rational and causally coherent explanation for the air of strangeness that hovers over much of the Oswald evidence. It looks artificial and is full of contradictions, *Libra* suggests at first, because the evidence was indeed fabricated by CIA conspirators who deliberately included all manner of false and contradictory leads. But then the novel denies readers this last comfort of intentionality, insisting that Oswald's entrance into the conspiracy is after all the result of a series of inexplicable coincidences (on the ideology of coincidence and conspiracy, see Willman 2002).

Finally, the underlying narrative structure of *Libra* prevents it from offering a simplistic, 'redemptive truth'. The fundamental and seemingly unbridgeable divide in thinking about the assassination is whether it was the work of a conspiracy or a lone gunman. What is remarkable

about DeLillo's novel is that it refuses ultimately to back one side or the other, and in doing so it rethinks the basic assumptions behind both approaches. In the novel the two plot lines – of Oswald's life story and the conspiracy of renegade CIA agents – seem to converge inexorably, but in the final analysis they never fully mesh together. Moreover, the novel suggests that the stark choice between conspiracy theory and the lone-gunman version is in fact a false dilemma, since both rely on a notion of highly efficient agency and being in control of one's destiny that is shown to be a fantasy. On the one hand, Oswald sees himself as a heroic lone gunman striking a blow for Cuba, and he longs to become a somebody rather than a nobody by engaging in an act of symbolic and politically motivated violence. He wants to prove, in essence, that 'they didn't own or control him' (p. 336). When he makes a preliminary reconnoitre for his assassination attempt on General Walker, he attends a rally with a gun in his pocket 'just to do it, to get this close and show how simple, how strangely easy it is to make your existence felt' (p. 373). In his delusions of grandeur Oswald reads coincidences as signs that he has been personally chosen by fate for a special mission. Most important, he feels he has a special connection with Kennedy: they both have brothers named Robert, their wives were pregnant at the same time, they both are poor spellers, and so on. On the other hand, he also becomes caught up in a conspiracy that he never fully understands. He is a pawn in their game, a patsy and 'a zero in the system' (p. 106) who is 'swept up, swept along' (p. 322) by larger, controlling forces, the very thing he had always struggled to avoid. Looking out of the sixth-floor window in the Texas School Book Depository, at the very moment when he tries to assert the strength of his individual character and agency by killing the president it turns out that his intentions don't match up to what happens. The scene is narrated through the eyes of Oswald, as he peers through the scope on his rifle, and we see both the President Kennedy and Governor Connally injured. Just as he is squeezing the trigger for what should be the third and fatal shot, he sees the president's head explode through the telescopic sight:

> Lee was about to squeeze off the third round, he was in the act, he was actually pressing the trigger.
>
> The light was so clear it was heartbreaking.
>
> There was a white burst in the middle of the frame. A terrible splash, a burst. Something came blazing off the President's head. He was slammed back, surrounded all in dust and haze. Then suddenly clear again, down and still in his seat. Oh he's dead he's dead.
>
> Lee raised his head from the scope, looking right. (p. 400)

It is hard to work out exactly who is responsible for the action and the causal chain of events in the time-stopping frame-by-frame sentences. At first neither the reader nor Oswald realise what has happened, but then we work out that someone else has fired the fatal shot. The narrative emphasises that Oswald is 'in the act', even that he is 'actually pressing the trigger', but the resulting action is not what he intended. In the infinitesimal moment it takes to pull a trigger, it turns out that Oswald is neither fully in control of his own actions as a lone gunman, nor entirely a patsy in someone else's conspiracy. The novel in effect shows how Oswald and the renegade CIA conspirators try unsuccessfully to understand and master the social forces and institutional structures that threaten to master them.

If Oswald is less of a lone gunman than he imagines, then so too is the CIA agents' assassination plot less than the ruthless and scarily efficient operation that conspiracy theorists usually invoke:

> If we are on the outside, we assume a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme. Silent nameless men with unadorned hearts. A conspiracy is everything that ordinary life is not. It's the inside game, cold, sure, undistracted, forever closed off to us. We are the ones, the innocents, trying to make some rough sense of the daily jostle. Conspirators have a logic and a daring beyond our reach. All conspiracies are the same taut story of men who find coherence in some criminal act. (p. 440)

In *Libra* the conspiracy is not a 'perfect working of a scheme'. It succeeds because of accidents, coincidences and hastily changed plans, such as the sudden re-appearance of Oswald after the conspirators had lost track of him, or the fact that the initial conspirators' plan to stage a miss becomes a plan to kill the president once the lower level participants become involved. Like Branch we have 'learned enough about the days and months preceding November 22 to reach a determination that the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance' (p. 441).

It is, however, not simply a case of chance interfering in the well-laid plans of the renegade intelligence agents and the Cuban exiles, but the structural nature of bureaucratised secrecy that creates the conditions that ensure there is a long and tenuous chain between intention and action. DeLillo shows how the conspiracy itself is not a tight-knit cabal of like-minded plotters, but a network of loosely intersecting and sometimes competing interests that begins to take on a life of its own, as if – in the words of Winn Everett, one of the plotters – 'secrets build their own networks' (p. 152). DeLillo presents the secret inner workings of

the CIA as a complicated, bureaucratic, decentred and highly compartmentalised organisation. There is a description, for example, of the planning meeting for a clandestine operation: at first fourteen high-ranking officials get together, then eleven of them leave as another six join the meeting; then two hours later seven leave and another four join, and finally five leave and three enter. No one in particular seems to be in control or to know everything: there is a rigid compartmentalisation of knowledge, with those at the top deliberately ignorant of what those at the bottom are planning, and vice versa. The director of the CIA, we are informed, 'was not to know important things. The less he knew, the more decisively he could function. . . . The Joint Chiefs were not to know. . . . The White House was to be the summit of unknowing' (pp. 21–2).

In *Libra* one of the main structural forces that reaches from the president right down to his assassin is the power of the media. In DeLillo's portrayal, Oswald wants to join in the onward march of historical progress, and he imagines that by killing Kennedy he is becoming a significant actor on the stage of history. As a teenager he 'saw himself as part of something vast and sweeping. He was the product of a sweeping history, he and his mother, locked into a process, a system of money and property that diminished his human worth every day, as if by scientific law. . . . Something led up to his presence in this room, in this particular skin, and something would follow' (p. 41). Yet instead of becoming an agent of social and economic forces in his Marxist world view, he turns out to be merely a 'figure in one of his own bent daydreams' (DeLillo 2003).

Until Ruby cuts short his life, Oswald plans to spend his time in captivity piecing together an account of the assassination, realising that he has finally found his life's work. But the event is opaque even for the principal protagonist, who comes to see himself in the third person: 'he will have motives to analyze, the whole rich question of truth and guilt', in a crime 'that clearly yields material for deep interpretation' (DeLillo 1988: 434–5). His task will not be to reach self-understanding in the usual sense, but to comprehend that media-created construct with three names: 'His life had a single clear subject now, called Lee Harvey Oswald.' In fact, DeLillo's novel highlights how Oswald has always seen himself as if from the outside, trying to identify with a series of roles that he never quite fits. In *Libra* we encounter an Oswald whose inner life is at times a mish-mash of Hollywood B-movie and pulp fiction fantasies. In the weeks leading up to the assassination he watches films on television that seem to speak to him personally, not least *Suddenly*, a film featuring Frank Sinatra as a presidential assassin: Oswald 'felt connected to

the events on the screen. It was like secret instructions entering the network of signals and broadcast bands, the whole busy air of transmission. . . . The house was dark except for the flickering screen. An old scratchy film that carried his dreams. Perfection of rage, perfection of control, the fantasy of night . . . Lee felt he was in the middle of his own movie. They were running this thing just for him' (p. 370). Even as he carries out the shooting he imagines seeing the event on television, as if his sense of himself is no longer direct but always mediated. The novel highlights the way that Oswald seems to generate a series of endless copies, doubles and aliases without a stable original, so that, DeLillo explains, 'we are compelled to say that Oswald was his own double' (DeLillo 1983: 24), and that 'he may have seemed a little unreal to himself' (DeLillo 2003). This sense of life experienced at one remove through the media affects not just Lee but the whole of America. The crowd at Love Field airport in Dallas, for example, is thrilled to find that Kennedy lives up to his movie star image, becoming, like Oswald, his own double: he 'looked like himself, like photographs' (DeLillo 1988: 92). Kennedy barely features in *Libra*, but when he does it is always as a media creation; one of the conspirators, for example, always refers to him as 'The Haircut' (see Hellmann 1997). In sum, *Libra* employs a new postmodern form of realism, in which the world inhabited by the characters is not the real world but a media-saturated fantasy world, the 'environment of the image' (Lentricchia 1991b).

An important question raised by the novel is whether a lack of an unmediated connection with the reality of experience is a contributing cause or an effect of the assassination. Although *Libra* offers some telling examples of characters – Oswald in particular – whose sense of self is diminished by the pervasiveness of the media in their lives, it is the endless, desensitising repetition of violent death that for DeLillo is one of the most significant consequences of the Kennedy assassination: 'There's the shattering randomness of the event, the missing motive, the violence that people not only commit but seem to watch simultaneously from a disinterested distance' (Begley 1993: 299). The aura of authentic, heroic action that Oswald tries to cultivate is eroded by the endless and increasingly commodified repetition of the shooting. In *Libra*, for example, we see Beryl Parmenter, the wife of one of the CIA conspirators, watching the continuous reruns on television of Ruby shooting Oswald, while in *Underworld* a bootleg copy of the Zapruder footage is played in a continuous loop at an underground artist's party, becoming a 'found object' artwork as it floats free of its moorings as a vital piece of evidence in a historical crime scene (DeLillo 1997: 488). In the moment of his death, Oswald's mediated detachment from

himself profoundly alters the nature of the event, implicating the audience in the process as it compulsively watches him being shot over and over:

> There was something in Oswald's face, a glance at the camera before he was shot, that put him here in the audience, among the rest of us, sleepless in our homes – a glance, a way of telling us that he knows who we are and how we feel, that he has brought our perceptions and interpretations into his sense of the crime. Something in the look, the sly intelligence, exceedingly brief but far-reaching, a connection all but bleached away by glare, tells us that he is outside the moment, watching with the rest of us. . . . He is commenting on the documentary footage even as it is being shot. Then he himself is shot, and shot, and shot, and the look becomes another kind of knowledge. But he has made us part of his dying. (DeLillo 1988: 447)

The real significance of the assassination for DeLillo is the effect that endlessly watching the violent deaths of Kennedy and Oswald has on the American society at large. Oswald's murder of Kennedy becomes the prototype of an endlessly repeated scenario, 'the first of those soft white dreamy young men who plan the murder of a famous individual – a president, a presidential candidate, a rock star – as a way of organising their loneliness and misery, making a network out of it, a web of connections' (DeLillo 2003). When all is said and done, 'Oswald changed history not only through his involvement in the death of the president, but in prefiguring such moments of the American absurd' (DeLillo 2003), that long roll call of celebrity assassinations, serial killings, and high-school shootings over the last four decades.

In 'American Blood' DeLillo argues that all the presidential assassination attempts since John Kennedy's have been thoroughly mediated. DeLillo looks in detail at the shooting of President Reagan by John Hinckley, a 'self-created media event' (DeLillo 1983: 24). Hinckley, DeLillo points out, claims he was motivated by his obsessive watching of the film *Taxi Driver*, which was based on the case of Arthur Bremer, who, having watched the film *Clockwork Orange*, stalks first Richard Nixon then George Wallace. Caught up in a funhouse of representations, Hinckley shoots President Reagan, an event which was, as DeLillo describes it, 'pure TV, a minicam improvisation'. Part of the significance of these copy-cat shootings is that they allow us to see the Kennedy assassination in a different vein, as the early glimmerings of a trend of media obsession that has deformed the American mindscape ever since. For DeLillo is it only in the light of subsequent events and a 'condition of estrangement and helplessness, an undependable reality'

(DeLillo 2003) that we can see the true significance of the Kennedy assassination. In effect the Kennedy assassination functions as the primal scene of postmodernism, a symbolically necessary but imagined origin of the media saturated 'society of the spectacle' (Debord [1967] 1994) that America has come to inhabit. The assassination plays a similar role in the career of DeLillo, an event that provides the subterranean motivation for much of his work, and which only belatedly comes to the surface:

> DeCurtis: The Kennedy assassination seems perfectly in line with the concerns of your fiction. Do you feel you could have invented it if it hadn't happened?
> DeLillo: Maybe it invented me. . . . As I was working on *Libra*, it occurred to me that a lot of tendencies in my first eight novels seemed to me to be collecting around the dark center of the assassination. So it's possible I wouldn't have become the kind of writer I am if it weren't for the assassination. (DeCurtis 1991: 47–8)

## Norman Mailer, *Oswald's Tale*

Although it comes as little surprise that Norman Mailer would eventually write a book about the Kennedy assassination, the book he produced is not at first sight what might have been expected. Mailer had shown a very public commitment to the glamour of the Kennedy White House, first with 'Superman Comes to the Supermarket' (1960), his report on the 1960 Democratic national convention, and then with *The Presidential Papers* (1963), his collection of Camelot-era essays published shortly after Kennedy's death. Mailer's reaction to the news of the assassination reveals his identification with the fabled promise of Kennedy and his sense of betrayal by the forces of darkness: 'It was our country for a while. Now it's theirs again' (Manchester 1976: 4). During the 1960s and 1970s, Mailer had also publicly supported the conspiracy researchers' attack on the Warren Commission Report, taking for granted that the authorities are not to be trusted, and that a conspiracy theory was the obvious stance for someone opposed to the status quo. In a favourable review of Epstein's *Inquest* (1966), for example, he firmly supported a more radical, democratic approach to the inquiry: 'One would propose one last new commission, one real commission – a literary commission supported by public subscription to spend a few years on the case. . . . I would trust a commission headed by [literary critic] Edmund Wilson before I trusted another by Earl Warren. Wouldn't you?' (Mailer 1966: 1, 11–13). Mailer's assumption, like most countercultural figures of the 1960s, was

that the government was hiding something, and it was up to novelists and intellectuals as the conscience of the people to tell the real version of events, which inevitably seemed to involve a conspiracy theory. Indeed, Mailer has shown a life-long fascination with the intelligence community as a rich source of secrecy, ritual and covert power, a fascination which culminated in *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), a monumental semi-fictional investigation of the CIA that circled obsessively around the black hole of the Kennedy assassination without ever quite tackling it head on.

But when Mailer finally turned to the assassination with the non-fiction novel *Oswald's Tale* (1995a) he rejected a conspiracy interpretation of the event in favour of a biographical account of Oswald as the lone gunman. Mailer acknowledged that, if anything, he started with a 'prejudice in favor of the conspiracy theorists', but by the end of his minute analysis of Oswald's 'soul' he came to the conclusion that 'Oswald was a protagonist, a prime mover, a man who made things happen – in short, a figure larger than others would credit him for being' (Mailer 1995a: 605). The initial spur for Mailer writing the novel and the reason for his change of position from conspiracy theorist to lone-gunman advocate was that he secured access to what he termed 'an Oklahoma land-grab' (p. 349) of Oswald-related documents in the KGB archives in Russia that were opened up during the early years of glasnost. Reading those documents that included extensive transcripts of the KGB's electronic eavesdropping on Oswald during his time in the Soviet Union, Mailer became convinced that Oswald had killed Kennedy, and that he was almost certainly not part of a larger conspiracy.

Yet Mailer's real reason for trying to understand Oswald as a 'man who made things happen' was to try to counter the growing sense of absurdity that he felt had engulfed the Kennedy assassination. 'The sudden death of a man as large in his possibilities as John Fitzgerald Kennedy', the voice dubbed 'The Author' in *Oswald's Tale* explains, 'is more tolerable if we can perceive his killer as tragic rather than as absurd' (p. 198). He goes on to explain that 'it is virtually not assimilable to our reason that a small lonely man felled a giant in the midst of his limousines, his legions, his throng, and his security. If such a nonentity destroyed the leader of the most powerful nation on earth, then a world of disproportion engulfs us, and we live in a universe that is absurd' (p. 198). This argument is familiar from those trying to explain why Americans have been so eager to turn to conspiracy theories, but here Mailer uses it as a way of justifying his reading of Oswald as a lone agent, an almost heroic figure motivated by intelligible (if not exactly rational) political conviction, rather than private psychopathologies.

Leaving aside Mailer's continued, wilfully blind heroicising of Kennedy in the face of decades of revelations about the latter's sexual recklessness, it is possible to see in his revisionist take on Oswald a return to the themes in 'The White Negro' (1959b), Mailer's notorious essay that championed social misfits, hipsters, existentialists and violent psychopaths as a radical challenge to the conformity of the status quo. This mythical outlaw figure is someone who has a 'literal faith in the creative possibilities of the human being to envisage acts of violence as the catharsis which prepares growth' (Mailer 1959b: 328), and Oswald in Mailer's eyes becomes not a pathetic loser but a man who battles tragically against the poor cards he has been dealt by following his own sense of destiny with 'an undaunted boldness' (Mailer 1995a: 781). In effect, Mailer makes the assassination make sense by portraying Oswald not as a 'small lonely man' but as someone who aspires to be like Kennedy – the existentialist president who paradoxically succeeds in being a hipster rebel even as he is the very embodiment of the establishment. Mailer insists, most tellingly, on correcting Oswald's spelling and grammar in the extensive extracts of Oswald's would-be political writings included in the book, seeing the assassin's dyslexia not as an embodiment of his mental confusion but as a frustrating impediment to being understood as a man living out the maxim that 'it's always better to take advantage of your chances as they come along' (p. 781). Whereas DeLillo recognises that the assassination contributed to a crisis of knowledge that is now inescapable, Mailer hopes that by elevating Oswald to the status of tragedy he can stem the tide of what he describes as the 'historic scourge' of 'absurdity' (p. 606) and the 'post-modern media fling' that 'corrodes our species' (p. 198).

*Oswald's Tale* narrates Oswald's life in profuse detail, especially his defection in the Soviet Union. By employing the form of the non-fiction novel that allows both the profuse accumulation of factual details and imaginative speculation about motive, Mailer hopes to understand Oswald's character, and by understanding his character solve the mystery of the assassination. On the one hand, Mailer characterises his role as author of *Oswald's Tale* in modest terms, seeing himself merely as a 'literary usher' (p. 349), reusing the ready-made dialogue from the Warren Commission hearings and the KGB transcripts, finding, like DeLillo, that the postwar American novelist is virtually redundant in the face of that 'Comstock Lode of novelistic materials' (p. 352). On the other hand, Mailer has asserted that the unique talent of a novelist is to provide a complete perspective on a person's life, whereas other disciplines can only provide partial takes:

> I think of novelists as being a very special breed of human beings. We're somewhere between psychologists, historians, detectives, students of style and manner. We have a capacity to do things other people don't: most people are experts and they've got to find out one aspect or another of a person. *We* develop over the years the capacity to try to see the person whole. (Mailer 1995b)

However, Mailer's insistence on trying 'to see the person whole' in *Oswald's Tale* creates its own problems. First, just how much of the vast archive of documents he received from the KGB is relevant, and how can you tell if particular witnesses are reliable? As with other assassination fictions, Mailer's novel, despite its imperious authorial voice, threatens to spiral out of control. It is significant that the epigraph to *Oswald's Tale* is Marguerite's comment to the Warren Commission that in order to answer the question she 'is going to go through the whole story or it is no good' (Mailer 1995a: n.p.). But just how much is the 'whole story'? In order to determine the accuracy of the Oswald memories of a given Russian interviewee, Mailer interviews other Russians who knew the first witness and develops a life sketch for *that* person, and so on. These contextualising sketches are in danger of falling into an infinite regress of authorisation, and the novel indeed begins with a long account of the childhood of Marina Oswald's Russian grandmother. What relevance could this possibly have on the mystery of who killed Kennedy? Mailer's suggestion seems to be that in order to understand Oswald, we have to understand the whole context not only of his own life but the life of everyone who influenced him – a task of Sisyphean proportions.

The second problem raised by Mailer's insistence on telling the 'whole story' is whether Oswald's character is visible like a hologram in every anecdote and fragment from the archive. For Mailer, Oswald's character indeed leaves its signature on every action and moment; he suggests, for example, that Oswald takes a pot-shot at General Walker in the same way that he has sex, his hasty shooting becoming the symbolic equivalent of his premature ejaculation, and vice versa. In theory no moment is too insignificant to be scrutinised. There are vast amounts of information about Lee, who seemed to be under scrutiny for most of his short life: from the Truant Board and psychiatrist reports from reform school in his teens to the painstaking surveillance mounted by the KGB for his entire stay in the Soviet Union, not forgetting of course the ambiguous but persistent evidence of CIA and FBI interest in him on his return to the USA. The sheer scale of the KGB surveillance is overwhelming, and Mailer's gamble is to find

within the voluminous transcripts detailing unreflective, trivial domestic moments not a smoking gun as such but clues to Oswald's character that will answer the question of whether he could have shot Kennedy and whether he was more likely than not to have acted alone. Mailer succeeds in breathing life into mundane parts of the assassination evidence often ignored by other researchers, albeit at the price of making the book in places spectacularly dull, hours of everyday life as tedious for us to read as for it was for Oswald to live it in the first place. Mailer tries to elevate mundane details into the realm of the historical. But in focusing on everyday life, as much as Mailer tries to discover the extraordinary qualities of Oswald ignored by other writers he inevitably ends up drawing attention to the ordinariness of the assassin. Mailer partly resolves this contradiction by seeing it as fundamental to Oswald's character. In emphasising both Oswald's desire to merge into the collective will and his paranoid dread of losing his sense of self, *Oswald's Tale* follows the familiar path of many other postwar American novels (such as *Catch-22* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*) that repeatedly stage conspiracy-infused dramas about the desired and feared loss of a strong sense of possessive individualism (see Melley 1999).

Mailer's desire to find the key to the assassination in the details of Oswald's everyday life rather than the dramatic revelation of conspiracy is most striking in its handling of Lee and Marina's 'intimate moments', in the KGB's euphemism. Mailer's previous novels and biographies had repeatedly gambled on finding the truth of individuals in their sexuality, based in part on the eccentric psychiatrist Wilhelm Reich's notion of substituting sex for the Marxist category of class as the ultimate source of human history. Part of Mailer's interest in Oswald's sexuality – and in particular his possible homosexual activities – is its potential to fill in some of the puzzling gaps in the evidence (for example, Mailer speculates that the death of a fellow Marine while Oswald was on guard duty might have resulted from a scenario in which Oswald was forced to perform fellatio on his compatriot; or he wonders if a gap in Oswald's life when he disappeared from the YMCA where he had been staying in Dallas could be explained by his serving as a male prostitute for one of the Russian émigré community). But Mailer's principal concern with Oswald's homosexuality is the way it becomes part of his continuing existential struggle to achieve a sense of self-possession, recalling his assertion in 'The Homosexual Villain' (Mailer 1959a) that he had been wrong to identify homosexuality in his previous novels as merely evil, instead seeing it as part of a wider struggle to achieve true manhood. What can make us suspicious, however, about

Mailer's claim to find the truth about Oswald in these glimpses of his possible homosexuality is that he seems to find the same 'truth' repeatedly: he discusses similar rumours about Jack Ruby, General Walker and David Ferrie in *Oswald's Tale*, and about the mass murderer Gary Gilmour in *The Executioner's Song*. Speculation about Oswald's potential homosexuality therefore provides a narrative bridge in the novel between Oswald's difference and his sameness.

Mailer acknowledges that, if Theodore Dreiser had not already used it for his classic novel of 1925, he would have preferred to sub-title his novel 'An American Tragedy' rather than 'An American Mystery'. In providing a painstakingly detailed account of a moment of free will that is also completely circumscribed by the mass of social pressures surrounding the murderer, Mailer follows the pattern of Dreiser's study of determinism, the influence of social and economic forces on an individual. Dreiser's novel recounts the true-life story of a hapless and poor young man who, like Oswald, ends up killing someone (his fiancée, in this case), and is put on trial. *An American Tragedy* overwhelms the reader with the accumulated mass of mitigating sociological and biographical evidence, but the ultimate and somewhat surprising conclusion is that the killer is responsible for his action. *Oswald's Tale* likewise concludes that Oswald is still responsible for the shooting, having created his own historical action, though not under conditions of his own choosing. But in coming to this conclusion it relies on a different kind of determinism, namely the notion of character as an essence that is the source of all his actions.

In DeLillo's *Libra*, Lee Oswald becomes involved in the assassination in order to give shape to his identity, but the character he ends up becoming is a media creation, the triple monikered Lee Harvey Oswald. In contrast Oswald's character for Mailer is not so much a product of the assassination and its highly mediated aftermath as the determining cause of it. At almost precisely the mid-point of *Oswald's Tale*, after four hundred pages of painstaking accumulation of daily episodes, trivial details, anecdotes, memories, documents and transcripts, Oswald's character begins to take on an almost metaphysical solidity. Discussing for example whether Oswald could have made contact with Communist spies while in the Marines, Mailer can now assert confidently that 'it is [Oswald's] character rather than any hard evidence that enables us to assume that he did play at the edges of espionage with Japanese Communists' (p. 401). Up to that point Oswald has been neither more nor less than the sum total of all his actions, but in the second half of the book Oswald's character takes on a life and an explanatory force of its own. It becomes the determining cause of his

actions, and allows Mailer to make increasingly confident assertions about Oswald's activities. In considering the central question of whether Oswald did it, Mailer is in a position to declare that 'it violates our understanding of Oswald that he would allow his Mannlicher-Carcano to be fired by another man on the sixth floor while he lingers in the lunchroom four landings below' (p. 778). Ultimately for Mailer, 'If one's personal inclinations would find Oswald innocent, or at least part of a conspiracy, one's gloomy verdict, nonetheless, is that Lee had the *character* to kill Kennedy, and that he probably did it alone' (p. 778, emphasis added). In Mailer's rendering, Oswald's character might have been influenced by his impoverished environment, but his character nevertheless shines through and influences all his actions. Yet as much as Mailer succeeds in showing how the assassination is plausibly the product of Oswald's character, we nevertheless have to remember that Mailer's Oswald is a product of his initial assumption that Oswald must be constructed as a tragic hero in order to counter the postmodern crisis of absurdity that threatens to engulf the event. Mailer's non-fiction novel is therefore convincing in its own terms, but it also becomes virtually impossible to verify Mailer's assertions about Oswald's character. Ultimately the Oswald that Mailer creates is largely a product of the latter's yearning to produce a character who will weigh up against the historical loss of Kennedy.

### James Ellroy, *American Tabloid* and *The Cold Six Thousand*

Ellroy's two assassination-related novels continue chronologically from his previous L. A. Trilogy, a pulp fictional exploration of the seedy side of Los Angeles from the 1940s to the 1950s. Although the two assassination novels mark a shift towards the world of politics and public history in Ellroy's work, they form a seamless segue from his earlier interest in violent crime and corruption. *American Tabloid* traces the five years from 22 November 1958 to 22 November 1963, and it spins a very complicated and violent tale of underworld crime and government corruption that eventually leads to the Kennedy assassination. The novel blurs history and fiction seamlessly, with its two principal background stories being Robert Kennedy's attempts to prosecute Jimmy Hoffa and other Mafia-related figures, and the increasing obsession with getting rid of Castro among an unholy alliance of the Mafia (on account of their casinos that Castro had nationalised), the CIA, and Cuban exiles. (Some of the details of the novel are based on the claim made in 1992 by Hoffa's former lawyer that Hoffa had asked the Mafia bosses Carlos Marcello and Santos Trafficante to arrange a hit on

Kennedy.) Its numerous other plot lines (that are either entirely fictional or unprovable) include the search for secret Pension Fund account books run by the Mafia as a major loan-shark scheme; a plan to procure compromising wire-tap tapes of the philandering John Kennedy; Howard Hughes' development of a Hollywood scandal sheet; and the Hughes' plans to buy up Las Vegas. The narrative focuses on three main characters: Kemper Boyd, a suave and ruthless FBI agent who ends up working both for and against the Kennedys; Pete Bondurant, a violent ex-cop turned fixer for Howard Hughes and later Hoffa; and Ward Littell, a troubled alcoholic and former FBI partner of Boyd who ends up working for Hoffa, Hughes and Carlos Marcello, a Mafia boss.

Although summarising the plot of *American Tabloid* is nigh impossible because of its endless twists and intersecting story lines, its basic take on the Kennedy assassination is that it was the result of a conspiracy initiated by a group of Mafia bosses led by Marcello, partly as a way of closing down Robert Kennedy's relentless pursuit of organised crime, and partly as revenge for John Kennedy's reneging on the project that they had helped finance and organise to eject Castro from Cuba. Although the narrative follows the development of a detailed plan worked up by Bondurant and Boyd to assassinate the president during his motorcade in Miami using an assassination team of Cuban exiles (originally trained to hit Castro) and a right-wing fall-guy, it turns out a rival plan has been developed by Guy Banister in Dallas involving two different professional hit men, with Officer Tippit and another Dallas policeman ordered to kill Oswald who is set up as a left-wing pro-Castro patsy. Where *American Tabloid* ends just as Kennedy is about to be shot, *The Cold Six Thousand* begins just after the assassination, when Wayne Tedrow Jr, a Las Vegas policeman on an illegal mission to kill off an escaped felon, lands in Dallas airport at 1.50 p.m. on 22 November and wonders why everyone is crying. Littell and Bondurant are engaged in a plan of intimidating witnesses so as to cement the lone-gunman story that quickly becomes public wisdom, and they also pressurise mob-related Jack Ruby into silencing Oswald after the plan with Tippit is botched. *The Cold Six Thousand* (the title refers to the fee that Tedrow has received for his hit job), the second volume of a projected trilogy, then continues the story with Ward Littell working for Howard Hughes on his quest to gain control of Las Vegas. In effect, then, the assassination itself takes place in the gap between the two books. In the thousand-plus pages of gruesome and graphic violence covered by the two novels, the killing of Kennedy stands out by remaining undescribed, off-screen, but of course always

present because of readers' prior knowledge of what the first novel is leading up to (the clue is there from the first page of *American Tabloid*, that has the dateline '22 November 1958').

*American Tabloid* and *The Cold Six Thousand* mine Ellroy's favourite vein of hard-boiled pulp noir, the language of their aggressively violent realism pared down to a staccato, factual detailing of actions. For example, Littell arrives in Dallas and gets up to speed with events in a mental bullet-point summary: 'One suspect caught – a kid – a sheep-dipped leftist. Guy Banister dipped him. The kid killed a cop. Two cops were sent to kill him. Phase Two went bad. The second cop botched his assignment' (Ellroy 2001: 11). The stylised pulp fiction minimalism is combined with outbursts of jive-talking, lurid scandal journalism, and 'realistic' documentary inserts of fictional transcripts that include JFK's trysts, Mafia bosses talking about whacking Kennedy, and Hoover's conversations with his underlings. In both the language and the plot details Ellroy obsessively rips away any last vestige of pretension or vanity: all weaknesses are exposed, everyone is shown to be motivated by greed or lust, and nobody is immune to the pervasive stink of corruption. Not even the Kennedys are stainless, as we learn not only that JFK is an incorrigible and amoral womaniser but also that Kennedy's father is the real force behind the secret Mafia loan-shark business (both of these rumours are not without foundation, but have never been proved conclusively). Ellroy's fundamental stance in his two assassination novels is that crime and corruption are not isolated aberrations but are the permanent condition of American society. In this way the assassination itself is not an exceptional or even a particularly shocking event. It is just one more sordid, violent act in a world of unrelenting crime. Indeed, if the message was not clear enough in *American Tabloid*, Ellroy begins *The Cold Six Thousand* with a note from the author debunking the whole idea of American innocence, arguing that America has a long history of corruption and therefore the assassination must be seen not as a momentary and catastrophic loss of innocence, but as an event that is embedded in a long, complicated and never-ending narrative of scheming and manipulation that includes petty criminals, the Mafia, rogue cops, the CIA and FBI, as well as the Kennedys themselves.

For all that Ellroy is intent on ridding his readers of any last shred of nostalgia for the goodness of America, there nevertheless remains the suspicion of a residual naive faith in the integrity of Robert Kennedy. Although Ellroy portrays RFK as ruthless and vindictive in his pursuit of Hoffa and Marcello, he also suggests that he was initially ignorant of the CIA's conspiring with Mafia figures to kill Castro and

retake Cuba, despite some plausible historical evidence that Robert Kennedy was even more proactive than his older brother in pushing the CIA to formulate plans to remove Castro (Holland 1994). Moreover, the ultimate expression of naivety might ironically turn out to be the insistence that Oswald was merely an innocent patsy. In his rush to shine the harsh light of realism on conspiracy and corruption everywhere, Ellroy dismisses the possibility that the ultimate reality of America is that it is a nation in which a lone gunman can take a lucky pot-shot at the president.

If one of Ellroy's main contributions to assassination fiction is his insistence that the event was not exceptional, then the other is his exploration of the idea of motivation and loyalty. Most of the major characters of the two novels are shown as ruthless in the pursuit of their goals, with Kemper Boyd and Pete Bondurant in particular showing little compunction about vicious torture or even killing in order to get their own way. Ellroy is keen to divest readers of any last sentimental faith that people act out of moral principles. Although there is a lingering hope that Bobby Kennedy might be pursuing Hoffa and Marcello out of ethical conviction rather than political ambition or vindictiveness, and despite J. Edgar Hoover's protest that he is acting out of 'altruistic concerns, such as the internal security of our nation' (Ellroy 1995: 298), all the characters are merely out to get what they can, motivated only by money and power. For Boyd and Bondurant, it is always about the 'percentage' (p. 231) they can make in any particular deal, and ultimately neither lets their remaining spark of compassion – the plight of African Americans for the former, love for a nightclub singer for the latter – get in the way of their heartless pursuit of their own interests. The three main characters are each nominally friends and engage as needed in temporary alliances with one another in this dog-eat-dog world. As Littell admits in a letter to Boyd revealing his possession of the Pension Fund books that have the potential to bring down the latter's beloved Kennedys, 'I still consider you a friend, but I do not trust you one iota' (p. 337). Each is all too ready to betray the others without hesitation, not least Littell who ends up killing his one-time mentor Boyd at the behest of the Mafia. For Boyd, Bondurant and Littell crimes of extortion, intimidation, murder, betrayal and double-crossing are a game they have been playing a long time (p. 329), merely a more low-level version of the 'chess game' of power (p. 556) that Hoover on the one side and the Mafia on the other control. In Ellroy's cosmology of crime, Hoover and the Mafia are transcendent gods that rule over the lives of the mere mortals; even the ultimate hard man Bondurant gets 'the shakes' at the idea of double-crossing the

Mafia, his Cuban ally warning him that 'We must not interfere with men who are so much more powerful than we are' (p. 473).

Because all the major players in Ellroy's two assassination novels pursue their own self-interests without scruple, their long-term loyalty to any cause or motive other than their own advantage is illusory. Kemper Boyd is the ultimate embodiment of a man with no loyalty other than to himself: at one stage in the novel, he is working undercover for Hoover; spying on the Kennedys; but at the same time pursuing his own agenda of getting close to John Kennedy whose ruthless playboy style he admires; while also working for the CIA to organise anti-Castro activities with Cuban exiles in conjunction with the Mafia; and at the same time double-crossing the latter in a heroin-smuggling deal. He is a 'triple or quadruple agent', whose multiple, compartmentalised false identities inevitably mean that 'rearranging lies kept him awake at night' (p. 414). Like DeLillo, Ellroy is fascinated with the idea of compartmentalisation, seeing in the CIA's doctrine of severing the normal chains of accountability to allow plausible deniability the key not just to the story of how the US government and the Mafia became very strange bedfellows in the extra-legal campaign against Castro's Cuba in the early 1960s, but also to the nature of individual agency in a world bereft of loyalty and trust. For example, Boyd extrapolates from the knowledge that 'Eisenhower has given the Agency a tacit mandate to covertly undermine Castro. The Outfit [i.e. the Mafia] wants their casinos back. Nobody wants a Communist dictatorship ninety miles off the Florida coast' to the idea that because 'Ike's budget came in a little low' it will make sense to develop a plan to 'refinance out part of the Cuban Cause' by creaming profit off from a deal to sell heroin sourced from CIA-linked poppy farms in Mexico to black Americans in Miami using Cuban exile pushers. This project, Boyd notes, is '*implicitly* Agency-vetted' (p. 230), and *American Tabloid* and *The Cold Six Thousand* repeatedly show how ground-level agents like Boyd, Bondurant and Littell enable large organisations like the CIA, the Justice Department and the Mafia to pursue conspiratorial projects that are never officially or explicitly formulated. These multiple split loyalties that sever the connection between intention and responsibility shine a new light on the imagined conspiracy to kill Kennedy. In Ellroy's version, the assassination conspiracy is not a clear, simple plan conceived and executed by a tight-knit band of like-minded and principled plotters, but an entangled web of intersecting motives and manipulations, a temporary alliance of conflicting vested interests. Each party lights on killing Kennedy as an act that makes sense in terms of their own interests. As far as the lower-level players can tell, Hoover,

for example, does not initiate any of the plans, but his tacit agreement and subtle manipulation make the hit possible. Flying into Dallas to clear up the aftermath of the assassination, Littell surmises that Hoover 'knew the locale. He sensed the time frame. He was passively complicit' (Ellroy 2001: 10–11). The Dallas plan is only one of several competing plots hatched by various figures within the Mafia, renegade figures within the intelligence services and the Cuban exile groups, part of an 'assassination metaphysic' that emerges almost by itself. In effect Ellroy responds to the way the excess of evidence seems to suggest that the event was overdetermined, by showing how many different conspirators might have converged on the same idea simultaneously; this idea is highlighted by the narrative focus on a Miami plot, only for a Dallas plan to overtake it. As Bondurant puts it, 'Hit plans were running epidemic. Jack pissed off mucho hotheads. The cocksucker was doomed' (Ellroy 2001: 17).

Not only do the main characters act out of multiple loyalties, but their actions and motives are usually compromised in the extreme. Although Boyd, Bondurant and Littell entertain fantasies of being ruthlessly in control as they pursue their own goals in the various shifting alliances and double-crosses they make, each ends up being reluctantly forced to do things because others have some leverage against them. Everyone in the novel is a pawn in someone else's game, victim of some kind of emotional or physical extortion. Boyd, for example, pursues the plan to hit Kennedy partly as a personal revenge on the man he idolised until he learns from a wire-tap tape procured by Bondurant that Kennedy despised him, and partly as a way of redeploying the assassination team he was developing for killing Castro and in retaliation for Kennedy making conciliatory moves towards the Cuban dictator, but also partly because the Mafia boss Santos Trafficante has discovered his double-crossing theft of the heroin and removing Kennedy is the price Boyd must pay. Even Bobby Kennedy's puritanical pursuit of organised crime becomes fatally compromised when he learns (from Littell, extracting revenge for having been ignored by RFK before) that his own father is the mystery figure behind the secret Pension Fund loan-shark scheme. Ultimately in *American Tabloid* and *The Cold Six Thousand* the assassination is the product not of pure and clear motives, but the inevitable consequence of an endemic condition of crime, corruption and compromise in which the Kennedys are as much the players as victims.

# 7 Visual Culture and Film

The story of the Kennedy assassination is inseparable from the mass production and consumption of illusory images in postwar American politics and culture, not least because the Camelot White House pioneered the careful cultivation of a media image in which style seemed to replace substance. Numerous iconic images of the assassination and its aftermath have engrained themselves into the contemporary American imagination, from the Zapruder footage to John Kennedy Jr's salute of his father's coffin at the funeral, and from Oswald's death 'live' on television to bootlegged copies of Kennedy's autopsy photos. In addition to the snapshots and home movie clips captured by amateur and professional photographers on the day, the iconography of the assassination has fascinated numerous avant-garde artists, most notably Andy Warhol. Having looked at these accidental and avant-garde representations, this chapter will discuss the repeated shootings of the assassination in Hollywood films, in particular *Blow-Up* (1966), The *Parallax View* (1974), *Blow Out* (1981), and *JFK* (1991), all of which are notable for their sophisticated visual and cinematic techniques.

## The Zapruder Footage

Regarded as the Rosetta Stone of the assassination, the Zapruder footage is the single most important representation of the event, with its twenty-six seconds of blurry images the subject of unparalleled, intense scrutiny over four decades. This home movie is one of the most iconic films of the twentieth century, with the images of the pink of Jackie's suit, the black of the limousine, the green of the grass and the bright orange halo of blood and brain tissue as Kennedy's head explodes indelibly etched on the nation's psyche (see Sturken 1997: 19–43). It was shot by Abraham Zapruder, who owned a dressmaking business in Dallas, and who was delighted to find that the liberal president he admired was passing by his workplace in the Dal-Tex building on the

edge of Dealey Plaza. The film nearly wasn't made: because the day began overcast, Zapruder didn't think it was worth bringing his camera to work, and it was only at the insistence of his secretary that he returned home to fetch his Bell & Howell 8 mm cine-camera. Shortly before the motorcade passed through Dealey Plaza, Zapruder found a good vantage point on a concrete abutment at the end of the north pergola, just before the stockade fence and the grassy knoll, and – as it happened – directly opposite where the fatal head shot would be fired. As the lead motorcycles turned the corner of Houston and Elm, Zapruder shot a few seconds of film before he realised that this was just the vanguard of the parade. He started shooting again as the president's limousine turned the corner and made its way down the slight incline of Elm street, and continued shooting for the next nineteen seconds as the car came under fire and then sped away through the triple underpass. The film shows Kennedy clutching at his throat as the car emerges from behind the freeway sign that had been blocking Zapruder's view; next Connally flinches and collapses in reaction to a shot; then, as the limousine comes directly in front of Zapruder and seems to slow to a virtual halt, after a sickening pause Kennedy's head suddenly explodes and he lurches back and slumps down; and finally, as the car speeds up again Jackie Kennedy is scrambling over the boot of the car and Secret Service Agent Clint Hill just manages to cling to the back of the car and push Jackie back in (see fig. 7.1). Zapruder later described to the Warren Commission how he thought that Kennedy was only pretending to be wounded at the first shot, but then he saw 'his head open up and the blood and everything came out' (Warren Commission 1964, vol. 7: 571). Understandably distraught, Zapruder hurried away from the scene of chaos back to his office, shouting repeatedly 'They killed him!'

The tale of what happened to Zapruder's film over the ensuing days and years is long, complicated, and – needless to say in the world of assassination research – much disputed, but the basic story is of a struggle between private corporate ownership and the public's right to know (see Trask 1994). Word of the existence of a film that possibly captured the assassination quickly circulated, and within an hour the chief of the local Secret Service branch and several reporters had located Zapruder at his office. A local newspaper reporter arranged for the film to be developed immediately at the Dallas Kodak office (in addition to the original, three first generation copies were made, two of which were taken by the Secret Service). By the following morning, the major news agencies had learned of the film, and turned up at Zapruder's office. Richard Stolley, an editor for *LIFE* magazine who had flown in from Los Angeles, reached

**Figure 7.1** Zapruder frame 313. Zapruder film © 1967 (renewed 1995), The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza, Dallas, all rights reserved.

Zapruder first, and to the frustration of the other media representatives, struck an agreement with the Dallas dressmaker. Although concerned about making blood money from the tragedy, Zapruder nevertheless negotiated for $50,000 for the picture rights, half of which he donated to the widow of Officer Tippit. Zapruder was also worried that the film would end up being shown in 'sleazy Times Square movie houses, while men hawked it on the sidewalk' (cited in Trask 1994: 84), and Stolley reassured him that *LIFE*, the nation's foremost picture magazine, would handle it in a sensitive fashion. Shocked by the graphic nature of the film, C. D. Jackson, the publisher of *LIFE*, instructed Stolley to buy the exclusive motion picture rights, partly to thwart the competition, but also to control strict access to the still images and ensure that the film would never be projected in public. The original of Zapruder's film was kept locked in the vaults of *LIFE* magazine in New York.

As it turned out, of all the pictures and home movies taken in Dealey Plaza on 22 November, only Zapruder's film captured the shooting more or less in its entirety, and the fatal head shot in particular, with any clarity. And because *LIFE* exercised such tight control over the Zapruder footage, it had a profound effect on people's understanding of the assassination. The presses were stopped and the 29 November 1963 issue of *LIFE* was completely rewritten to deal with the assassination. The issue included thirty-one black and white reproductions of still frames from the Zapruder footage, merely a small selection of the total 486 frames. It showed the sequence with Kennedy reacting to the

throat shot, and Jackie crawling for help (as the magazine interpreted it), and explained that the first shot had hit Kennedy in the back, the second hit Governor Connally, with the third hitting Kennedy in the head from the rear, but crucially it omitted Z313, the frame with the fatal head shot (for reference purposes the Warren Commission numbered each frame). The magazine in effect decided that it was in poor taste to show the most graphic moment or anything resembling a full run through, and the public could not see the entire sequence until the frames containing the most important action were reprinted (again, only in black and white) in volume 18 of the Warren Commission hearings. In its 2 October 1964 issue covering the release of the Warren Commission Report, *LIFE* printed several colour enlargements including the fatal head shot, with the accompanying text written by Gerald Ford, one of the members of the Warren Commission. Further frames blown up to large scale were included in its 25 November 1966 issue, in which it raised the question of whether there were now reasonable doubts about Oswald having acted alone in an article focusing on Connally's unhappiness about the single bullet theory (*LIFE* 1966). Other than these few glimpses, *LIFE* assiduously denied public access to the film, threatening with lawsuits any violation of its corporate copyright. (Josiah Thompson, author of one of the most important early works by the assassination critics, was to substitute charcoal drawings for original Zapruder frames, and the magazine even tried to prevent him from using the drawings.) *LIFE*'s tight control meant that most people's knowledge of the film was confined to a handful of still images rather than the full sequence as a moving picture.

With the Garrison trial, however, the balance began to tip in favour of public access. Garrison obtained the Zapruder original by subpoena, and showed it repeatedly in 1969 in the first public screenings to the shocked jurors and audience in the courtroom. Perhaps more significant in terms of wider access, Garrison encouraged the maverick assassination critic Mark Lane to make numerous bootlegged duplicate copies, that were sent out to be shown at universities and other venues around the country. Other bootleg copies had in fact already begun to circulate by the late 1960s, probably made when *LIFE* executives – with ironically lax security given their tight public control – sent out the original to photo labs to have copies made for in-house use. One of those bootleg copies was made by Robert Groden, a technician at one of the photo labs *LIFE* used. At first Groden kept the copy he had made in a bank deposit box for fear of prosecution, but he then began to work on producing an enhanced version of the film. By 1973 Groden had painstakingly created a version of the Zapruder film that was much clearer than

the original: it zoomed in on only the relevant portion of Kennedy's limousine; it was now in slow motion; the colours were enhanced; and by carefully repositioning each frame against set points Groden stabilised the jiggling and blurring effect of Zapruder's erratic panning. Groden first showed this enhanced version at a conspiracy research conference organised in 1973 by the Assassination Information Bureau (AIB), and this version was shown in over six hundred presentations around the country over the next three years. Significantly, *LIFE* chose not to prosecute. The Groden version was then shown on Geraldo Rivera's *Goodnight America* talk show in 1975, and this first fully public airing fed into the calls for Congress to reopen the Kennedy inquiry with the House Select Committee on Assassinations. *LIFE* magazine, unable to maintain tight control amidst so many bootleg versions circulating, and seeing its possession of the film more as a liability than an asset, arranged for a transfer of the copyright back to the Zapruder family in 1975 for the token sum of $1 (Zapruder had died in 1970). With Oliver Stone's *JFK* the Zapruder footage achieved its broadest public viewing to date, and the film is now even available in various versions on the internet and DVD. In 1975 the Zapruder estate had requested that the National Archives maintain the original in cold storage, and in 1999, as a result of the work of the Assassination Archives Review Board in the wake of Stone's film, the US government arranged to purchase the original to be preserved for posterity. The Zapruder estate asked for $30 million, arguing that it was a priceless national document and a unique work of art akin to a DaVinci or a Warhol (see Beck 2005). The government offered $1 million, countering that it was merely a 'tiny strip of celluloid tightly wound on a plastic reel' (cited in Lubin 2005: 168). An arbitration panel settled on the sum of $16 million, with the Zapruder estate maintaining copyright, which they subsequently passed to the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas.

For both the government inquiries and the conspiracy buffs the Zapruder footage is the baseline for all investigations of the assassination. Unlike the subjective and flawed memories of eyewitnesses and even the potentially inaccurate official autopsy, the film has been regarded by both sides as providing an accurate, unbiased representation of the event, whose detailed split-second time frame and complete sequence allowed all manner of measurements to be made about alignment of bodies, bullet trajectories, locations of gunmen, and so on. Although in its first report on the assassination *LIFE* magazine had asserted that the Zapruder footage provided 'clear and overwhelming evidence' of the official version of events, in its 1966 re-examination of the case it now suggested that the film gave grounds for reasonable

doubt. It continued to insist, however, that Zapruder's home movie was the most accurate representation of the event: 'Of all the witnesses to the tragedy, the only unimpeachable one is the 8mm movie camera of Abraham Zapruder, which recorded the assassination in sequence' (*LIFE*: 1966: 41). An assassination critic like Thompson (who had been a special consultant to *LIFE* magazine in its 1966 report, before their falling out) likewise placed his faith in the Zapruder footage as the one accurate and incorruptible piece of evidence in the case:

> Abraham Zapruder's movie served as a major piece of evidence for the Warren Commission, and it has become a crucial historical document for independent researchers ever since. To an untrained eye it appears to be only a silent, hurried, somewhat blurry view of the President's limousine. Yet if it is studied with the utmost care and under optimum conditions, it can yield answers to enormous questions. Where did the shots come from, and when were they fired? Limited in scope though it is, the Zapruder film is capable of answering these questions. (Thompson 1967: 7)

Although all parties agreed that the Zapruder footage was the definitive representation of the shooting, there was no agreement on what it actually revealed about the assassination. Despite its seeming transparency, the film was always in need of interpretation. The first article in *LIFE* magazine, for example, coached its readers through the isolated sequences it had printed, including the section showing Jackie Kennedy crawling over the back of the limousine after the head shot. The caption in *LIFE* explained that it showed Jackie 'crawling for help', but others read it differently. Most notoriously, the radical stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce did a routine in 1964 in which he suggested that Jackie was not heroically risking her own life and limb to get help but was merely trying to escape the carnage – 'hauling ass to save her ass', in Bruce's words – and that *LIFE*'s interpretation was therefore a rose-tinted lie.

It was viewing the Zapruder footage that led the Warren Commission to develop the single bullet theory, the hypothesis that Connally was hit by the same bullet that hit Kennedy in the back and exited through his throat (see Chapter 5). In order to test out the theory and to see if it matched people's interpretation of the Zapruder footage, Arlen Specter, the young lawyer in charge of this aspect of the Commission's inquiry, convened several day-long viewing sessions with relevant parties, including the Parkland Hospital and the Bethesda autopsy doctors, other medical forensic and ballistics experts, and even the Connallys (see Trask 1994: 100–2). Not everyone was convinced,

especially Governor Connally, who continued to insist on the authority of his remembered experience – that he had been struck by a different bullet from the first one to hit Kennedy – rather than what the Zapruder footage might seem to show.

One of the difficulties that the Commission (and later the conspiracy critics) encountered in trying to interpret the Zapruder footage, with its supposedly definitive timeline of the assassination, was that although the fatal head shot could be clearly pinpointed at Z313 it was far from obvious which frames showed the other two – or more – shots. In the case of Connally, for example, there are a range of micro-reactions that could be interpreted as evidence of his being hit. Is the sudden flipping up of his Stetson hat in his hand a sign of that the bullet has struck, or confirmation that he can't yet have been hit in the wrist if he is still holding his hat? Is that a sudden grimace on his face? And, if the single bullet theory is correct, then do those movements occur soon enough after Kennedy's reaction to still make it plausible that they were indeed hit by the same bullet? More frustrating still, it is impossible to definitively pinpoint when Kennedy is first hit because, as with Connally, not only are there a number of micro-movements that can viably be interpreted as a reaction to a bullet wound, but the presidential limousine is also obscured from Zapruder's view behind a road sign for a few vital seconds.

In order to help the Commission interpret the Zapruder footage, Specter instructed the FBI to conduct a series of re-enactments of the drive through Dealey Plaza that involved taking still photos from a camera mounted on the rifle scope pointing out of the sixth floor window to create the sniper's view at the moment of each possible shot, as well as filming the re-enactment using the original cine-cameras of Zapruder and the two other eyewitnesses. The illustrations in the volume of Warren Commission exhibits of key moments brought together the original frame from the Zapruder footage, the photo from the same vantage point from the re-enactment, the photo of the view through the rifle scope, and a table of measurements including the distance and angle to the sixth floor window from the limousine. The Warren Commission's was only the first of many re-enactments of the shooting for various purposes, and at times it can begin to seem if the purpose is not so much to recreate the shooting itself as to recreate as accurately as possible the Zapruder footage. This has recently reached an incredibly sophisticated level with a computer simulation made by the Emmy award-winning animator Dale Myers, portions of which were included in an ABC television documentary aired on the fortieth anniversary of the assassination in 2003. Previous simulations, most

**Figure 7.2** *Secrets of a Homicide*. © Dale K. Myers. All rights reserved.

notably that conducted by Failure Analysis Associates in 1992 for a mock trial of Oswald conducted by the American Bar Association and used in Gerald Posner's anti-conspiracy book, had in a rudimentary fashion plotted the alignment of Kennedy and Connally in the limousine along with the co-ordinates of their various wounds, leading them to conclude that the trajectory of the single bullet theory was indeed quite plausible (Posner 1993: 471–80). Myers' animation, *Secrets of a Homicide*, is a 3D computer-generated re-enactment of the shooting, using triangulated co-ordinates and timings from the film itself, in addition to accurate survey data and measurements for the topography of Dealey Plaza, the Book Depository, the limousine, and the wounds of Connally and Kennedy (see fig. 7.2). The result is an amazingly detailed recreation of the Zapruder film frame by frame, that can then be digitally manipulated to view the events from any angle, and to extrapolate bullet trajectories and so on. (Partly as a result of his digital re-creation, Myers has now rejected his previous conviction that there was a conspiracy.) An implicit premise of such works seems to be that in order to truly answer the question of what happened in Dealey Plaza you have to understand the Zapruder footage, and in order to do that

you have to recreate it digitally so that it yields up its secrets because the original is so hard to interpret. In effect, the Zapruder film is both painfully transparent, and desperately in need of clarification.

Once the assassination critics started to study the Warren Commission's reprints of the Zapruder stills and bootleg copies of the film itself, they began to offer all manner of alternative interpretations. Thompson (1967), for example, argued that Kennedy had been hit by two almost simultaneous bullets, first from the rear and then from the front (see Chapter 5). As a result of his painstaking examination of the Zapruder film, Groden in contrast insisted that there were six shots fired in addition to a warning shot, and that gunmen were visible in the shadowy bushes at the end of the film as Zapruder panned all the way round to his right. Thompson and Groden have been followed by numerous other interpreters, and, although each critic claimed to find incontrovertible evidence of a conspiracy in the Zapruder footage, their interpretations are usually at odds with one another. Richard Stolley, the *LIFE* editor who bought the film from Zapruder, wryly observed about his company's prize possession that, 'depending on your point of view, it proves almost anything you want it to prove' (cited in Trask 1994: 147). In their quest to find secrets that might accidentally be revealed in the Zapruder footage (and other amateur films and snapshots capturing parts of the assassination), researchers like Groden have enlarged images to such a vast scale and subjected them to such extreme digital enhancement that they are no longer instantly recognisable as representations of the assassination. At that scale of amplification, the image decomposes into pure abstraction, a blur of light and shadow that might show a face or a rifle, or it might be a shadow of a leaf, or merely the grain of the film stock itself. The film that seemed to promise instant access to the truth of the assassination only ends up making us doubt our eyes.

The Zapruder footage has become even less transparent as a whole barrage of scientific examinations have been conducted on it by both conspiracist and establishment researchers. In 1975, for example, CBS asked Itek, a specialist photo optics company, to prepare a report for a special investigative programme on the Zapruder film to determine what exactly it showed. Using a battery of sophisticated image analysis techniques a dozen experts at Itek spent several months analysing every aspect of the Zapruder footage. One of Itek's eventual conclusions was that, contrary to what it looks like to the naked eye, the rapid forward movement of Kennedy's head in reaction to the fatal shot is much faster than the more gradual recoil of his whole body to the rear, indicating therefore that Kennedy was struck by a bullet from the rear (they

hypothesised that Jackie Kennedy might have yanked her husband rearwards in reaction to the shot). In the resulting CBS programme, Dan Rather quizzed the Itek expert about the discrepancy between the impression that the average viewer gets from watching the Zapruder footage – that Kennedy's head snaps back in reaction to the shot – and what the scientific analysis found. The Itek representative noted in reply: 'that of course is the whole point of doing this kind of – applying this kind of technique. It's to get away from the subjective impressions that are developed by looking at a blurred motion picture. My answer to your implied question is I don't know what I see, I know what I measure' (cited in Trask 1994: 127). In a recent twist to the tale, a group of scientifically minded assassination researchers have overturned the basic assumption of assassination research, that the Zapruder footage is the only 'unimpeachable witness' to the event. Their claim is that internal inconsistencies within the film, only now apparent with new, more sophisticated digital analysis, betray tell-tale signs that the film must have been manipulated by the powers that be (see for example Fetzer 2003).

Although the Zapruder film is still the object of heated debate about the specifics of the assassination, over the years it has for some viewers drifted loose from the moorings of its original forensic context. The art historian David Lubin has argued that the film needs to be seen not merely as 'fortuitous evidence of an infamous, historically significant murder', but as a 'crucial cinematic text of the twentieth century, one that intersects in myriad ways with myriad other cinematic texts both before and after' (Lubin 2005: 37). The Zapruder footage has elements of classic Hollywood cinema (with its three-part structure of scene-setting as the limousine turns the corner, a long middle section as it proceeds down Elm, then the sudden and dramatic denouement with the head shot and race to the underpass), as well as experimental avant-garde film. It sheds light on – and is itself illuminated by – the psychological thrillers of Hitchcock and the 'new wave' films of Michelangelo Antonioni. Its ending influenced the final shoot-out in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), and the enhanced, enlarged, slow-motion version likewise anticipates some of the 'structural' and pop art films of the late 1960s that are concerned with repetition, abstraction and the medium of film itself rather than narrative content. Some of its still images also resemble paintings such as David's *Death of Marat* (1793), the work of colour-field artists such as Rothko and pop artists such as Warhol, or stills from the French new wave film *Last Year at Marienbad* (see Lubin 2005: 184–90; Beck 2005). More than anything, the Zapruder footage has entered the realm of camp that investigates the intersection of death, celebrity, pornography and spectacle.

## Other Assassination Images

As with the Zapruder footage, other prominent assassination imagery has a cult status that derives partly from the shock value of its content and partly from the underground nature of its circulation. Two of the most intriguing assassination-related photos are of Oswald posing in his back yard in the spring of 1963, with his mail-order rifle and two left-wing newspapers (see fig. 7.3). Marina Oswald informed the Warren Commission that she had taken the snapshots that the police had found in his rooming house, but conspiracy theorists (and, apparently Oswald himself when questioned under arrest) have long argued that the photos are forgeries, with the top half of Oswald's face pasted onto the body of someone else in the seemingly incriminating pose. They point to apparent discrepancies in directions of the shadows, the wrong kind of foliage

**Figure 7.3** Backyard photo of Oswald (Commission Exhibit 133A). Courtesy JFK Assassination Records Collection, NARA.

for the time of year, and most of all to the squareness of Oswald's chin. The possibility of official interference in the photographic evidence is not as far-fetched as it might at first seem, given that *LIFE*, the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* had retouched the photo when they published it, with the latter subsequently admitting to the Warren Commission that in doing so they had brushed out the telescopic sight on the rifle, making the visual identification of the murder weapon tricky at best. But if his wife indeed did take the pictures, then the photo is no innocent snapshot of an afternoon spent fooling around in the back yard, but presumably a deliberate attempt by Oswald to identify his earnestly patriotic and political stance, most likely in advance of his (failed) assassination attempt on the right-wing demagogue General Walker (see Lubin 2005: 227–32). Although Oswald may well have wanted these photos to speak for themselves, they have nevertheless ended up telling a very different story than the one he might have intended.

There are few photos by professional photographers of the shooting in Dealey Plaza. The only one of note – and even that one was taken after the fatal head shot itself – is James 'Ike' Altgens' black and white photo of Secret Service Agent Clint Hill stepping onto the back of the presidential limousine to help Jackie Kennedy as she scrambles towards the rear. But in the aftermath of the event professional photographers produced some memorable images (albeit with a measure of luck), two of the most striking and ghoulish of which are of Ruby shooting Oswald. From his vantage point on a section of railing in the police basement, Jack Beers, a photographer for the *Dallas Morning News*, snatched off a shot of Oswald just as Ruby brushed past him and stepped out of the crowd to pull his revolver on Oswald. Capturing the moment almost by accident, the resulting photo is dramatic if slightly surreal, since no one in the frame – including the smirking Oswald – has noticed Ruby's lunge forward. Bob Jackson, a staff photographer for the *Dallas Times-Herald* likewise took a shot as Ruby was stepping forward, but the split second difference between the two pictures meant that he captured the very moment of the shot – and, consequently, that year's Pulitzer prize (see fig. 7.4). The photo is a mixture of the stylised and the spontaneous: the police basement and Ruby's gangster fedora and revolver recall film noir imagery, but Oswald's grimace of pain and the look of alarm on the face of his police escort are anything but staged. Jackson's photo shows an unrepeatable moment of history that, like the television footage of the event, has ironically ended up being repeated everywhere, including a postmodern pastiche that circulates on the Internet in which the famous scene is digitally transformed into Oswald, Ruby and the policeman as a rock band.

**Figure 7.4** Jack Ruby shooting Lee Harvey Oswald. © Bob Jackson.

But probably the most notorious assassination images are the forensic photographs from Kennedy's autopsy. They were deemed to be too explicit to be included in the Warren Commission Report, with the Secret Service removing them from sight, even from the autopsy doctors and the Commissioners themselves. (The only autopsy images included in the Report were an artist's drawings.) Bootleg copies of the actual photos began to appear from the mid 1970s onwards (some colour ones are included, for example, in Groden 1993) as part of the conspiracy critics' argument that the official description of Kennedy's wounds, and hence the conclusion of a single gunman from the rear, was wrong, or, as Groden and his co-author Harrison Livingstone

contended, the autopsy X-rays had been forged as they didn't tally with the photos (Livingstone and Groden 1998). But the autopsy photos also circulate among those more interested in the camp horror of, say, Kennedy's 'stare of death' image than the specifics of the forensic investigation. Along with other Kennedy assassination memorabilia, the bootleg autopsy photos – and, for the connoisseur, Oswald autopsy photos – have been peddled at collectors' fairs, by mail order, and now find their real home on the Internet, at websites such as www.celebritymorgue.com.

This fascination with the illicit imagery of the assassination at times resembles pornography, and the two realms have often converged (not least on the Web, where conspiracy and sex prove among the most popular subjects). Several of the leading soft-core porn magazines published important assassination-related articles in the late 1960s, including, for example, a lengthy interview with Jim Garrison in *Playboy*. In the 1970s, as magazines such as *Penthouse* and *Gallery* began to promote a more visually explicit pornography, the assassination articles now included more lurid images such as the bootlegged autopsy photos. The 'dangerous knowledge' (Simon 1996: 63) of the newer, anti-Establishment conspiracy theories that emerged in the early 1970s was in step with the shift of pornography from the cosmopolitan sophistication pioneered by *Playboy* to the more explicit and deliberately scandalous porn of the 1970s; the shift to more graphic imagery of death was also noticeable in the television coverage of the Vietnam War in the early 1970s. The revelations and speculations about Kennedy's rampant sex life – not least his rumoured affair with Marilyn Monroe – that began to pour out in the 1970s further cemented the connection between the forbidden worlds of conspiracy and sex. It is even arguable that the shocking assassination images functioned as the 'soft-core's hard-core insert' (Simon 1996: 67), with the Zapruder film in particular serving as a substitute snuff movie in which the ultimate 'money shot' – the moment of ejaculation in hard-core porn – is Z313, the frame with the president's head exploding.

## Pop Art

The Zapruder film could be viewed as the forerunner of a wave of avant-garde film making in the late 1960s that repudiated Hollywood cinema in favour of low-budget 'new realism' associated with handheld cameras, minimal staging, a self-conscious attention to the mechanics of the medium, and a general 'home movie' aesthetic (see Lubin 2005: 31–7). It is possible, for example, to find odd similarities

between it and experimental pieces such as Andy Warhol's notorious *Blow Job* (1963) that shows the face of a man – supposedly – receiving fellatio: both are short, realistic clips that show the moment of climax on screen, but leave viewers to imagine the hidden cause just off screen. But pop art in general and Andy Warhol in particular have a much closer relationship with the Kennedy assassination than these structural parallels.

Unlike many forms of avant-garde modernism that sought to make art that rejected the logic of the market and mass culture by glorifying the moral vision of the unique creative artist, pop art ironically embraced the crass contemporary world of advertising, consumerism, the media, celebrity and violent death. It was concerned with the superficial and artificial rather than hidden depths. Before the Kennedy assassination Warhol had already shown a fascination with topics such as car crashes, the electric chair, Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe. Of the latter, for example, Warhol produced a number of silkscreen prints in the wake of her death that reproduce endless variations of some of her most famous poses that have the paradoxical result of making them strangely unfamiliar. Warhol's concern is less with trying to get at the 'real' Marilyn beneath the gloss and the hype than trying to understand that the reality of Marilyn is her publicity image by making versions of it that are even more exaggerated than the original. It was no surprise, then, that Warhol should churn out a whole series of silkscreen portraits of Jackie Kennedy in the aftermath of the assassination, including *Jackie (The Week That Was)* (1963), *Sixteen Jackies* (1964), *Nine Jackies* (1964), *Three Jackies* (1964), *Gold Jackie* (1964), and so on. *Jackie (The Week That Was)*, for example, reproduced a varying selection of the most famous wire service images (most of them from *LIFE* magazine) of the president's widow at Love Field airport, during the motorcade, at the swearing in of President Johnson on board Airforce One, and during the funeral, cropped in on her face and arranged – like many of Warhol's subsequent Jackie silkscreens – in a seemingly random grid formation with subtle variations of tone, size and orientation (see fig. 7.5).

Looked at one way, Warhol's Jackie paintings are unlike most superficial pop art, presenting instead a poignant and perhaps even sentimental response to the tragedy of the assassination, with their unnerving repetition that disturbs the sequence of before and after, with smiling Jackies jumbled up with grief-stricken Jackies. According to a close friend, Warhol was distraught over the assassination weekend, crying and insisting that 'I don't know what it means!' (cited in Bockris 1977: 186). With their formal compositions and focus on Jackie's dignity in grief, the paintings can be seen as providing a neo-classical take on the

**Figure 7.5** Andy Warhol, *Jackie (The Week That Was*) (1963), acrylic and silkscreen ink on canvas. Private collection. © Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc/ARS, New York and DACS London.

assassination and its aftermath as a national and personal tragedy. They could even be seen alongside the work of the conspiracy critics of the 1960s, who sought to destabilise the official story by a painstaking re-examination of the images for small but significant variations, although there is also the possibility that Warhol's camp aesthetic undermines the po-faced seriousness of both the establishment investigators and the assassination buffs (see Simon 1996: 101–18).

But looked at another way, the paintings are not about the reality of Jackie's suffering or the historical event of the death of a president, but are instead a commentary on the media saturation that followed the assassination. In effect, as Lubin argues, Warhol's paintings are not of Jackie herself but of the wire service photos of her, the tragedy now reduced to a commodity – and news outlets were all too aware that Kennedy pictures sell (Lubin 2005: 258). It is therefore debatable whether Jackie's aura is enhanced or undermined by the endless mechanical reproduction of her image. Although perhaps greatly upset in private (albeit in a camp, over-the-top fashion), in public Warhol insisted that he was unmoved by the assassination precisely because of the media overload in the ensuing days: 'When President Kennedy was shot that fall, I heard the news while I was alone painting in my studio. I don't think I missed a stroke. I wanted to know what was going on out there, but that was the extent of my reaction.' He went on to explain that: 'I'd been thrilled having Kennedy as president; he was handsome, young, smart – but it didn't bother me that much that he was dead. What bothered my was the way the television and the radio were programming everybody to feel so sad' (Warhol and Hackett 1980: 60). In this light Warhol's true subject is not the assassination itself, but the dehumanising effect on people's feelings of the endless representation of the event in the media.

In addition to Warhol other pop and avant-garde artists drew on assassination pictures as a source of 'ready-made' imagery or 'found art' that could be incorporated into their own work. Artists and film makers such as Wallace Berman, Ed Kienholz, Elaine de Kooning, Ed Paschke, Robert Rauschenberg, Bruce Connor and Ant Farms/T. R. Uthco engaged with the assassination as part of the larger cultural project of the 1960s and 1970s that sought to defamiliarise and deconstruct the formerly sacred icons of national destiny such as the stars and stripes, the national anthem and the president (see Simon 1996: 101–63). Their approach was often one of camp irony that highlighted the hypocritical commercialisation and faux sentimentality of the mainstream media regarding JFK's death.

Pop art that dealt with the assassination often provoked discussion about the erosion of a sense of the sacred in national life, and the debate has continued through to the present. For example, *JFK Reloaded*, a computer game that required players to recreate Oswald's shooting of the president from the 'sniper's lair' in the Book Depository, was felt by many media commentators to be beyond the pale of decency in turning the death of Kennedy into mere entertainment. The game allowed the player to try out numerous different shooting angles and combinations,

including convincing bullet ricochets, reactions and wounds, all viewable from any vantage point, including through the rifle's scope. A spokesperson for Senator Ted Kennedy called the game 'despicable', and even a reviewer for the hip online magazine *Slate* found the idea of repeatedly and realistically trying to kill Kennedy deeply disturbing (Thompson 2004). The game was later pulled and the small Scottish company that made it collapsed, but the irony is that its digital simulation in fact served to confirm the Warren Commission version, first that firing three shots in the available time was possible, and second that in doing so the single bullet theory was plausible.

## 1970s Conspiracy Thrillers

In addition to the fascination with Kennedy assassination imagery shown by avant-garde artists and film makers, Hollywood cinema has returned repeatedly to the plot device of presidential assassination, from *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) to *24* (2001–present). In some cases the assassination is merely part of the cultural baggage carried by particular characters. In *Annie Hall* (1977), for example, the wife of Woody Allen's character accuses him in the mid-1960s of becoming obsessed with Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories: 'You're using this conspiracy theory as an excuse to avoid sex with me.' Or in Richard Linklater's cult film *Slacker* (1991), the nerdy character running the local used book store confesses that studying the minutiae of the JFK assassination is pretty much all he has done since graduating from college, the culmination of which is a manuscript he is working on that the publisher wants to call 'Conspiracy A-Go-Go'. In other cases, the Kennedy assassination provides the historical backdrop to a personal coming-of-age story. In *Love Field* (1992), for instance, Michelle Pfeiffer plays a Southern blue-collar housewife obsessed with the glamorous life of the Kennedys. Against her husband's wishes, she feels compelled to travel all the way to Washington to pay her respects to the dead President on that fateful weekend. On this voyage of discovery, she learns to respect not only the black man who ends up helping her, but also to respect herself as an independent woman at the dawn of modern feminism. A similar tale of lost innocence manifests itself, for example, in the 1993 thriller *In the Line of Fire*, in which – for the first time in his career – Hollywood hard-man Clint Eastwood cries on screen. Eastwood plays Frank Horrigan, an ageing Secret Service agent, whose duty in the Kennedy motorcade thirty years ago in Dallas should have been to throw himself in front of the President and to 'take the bullet'. (In the film, Eastwood as a Secret Service agent is digitally

morphed into original footage of the motorcade.) Horrigan's tears are occasioned not only by his eternal regret that he hesitated at the fatal moment, but also by his sense of nostalgia, a feeling that the current incumbent (President Clinton in 1993) is just not worth taking the bullet for.

A number of Hollywood films, however, have represented the assassination more directly. Based on a screenplay co-written by maverick lawyer and assassination critic Mark Lane, *Executive Action* (1973) was the first film to tackle the event head-on. In addition to Lane, several other conspiracy theorists were involved in the film as consultants, and the film in effect is a compendium of the first decade of unofficial Kennedy assassination research. Despite featuring several prominent – albeit ageing – Hollywood stars (including Burt Lancaster and Robert Ryan), *Executive Action* is oddly lacking in drama. The conspiracy theory it tells is essentially that a right-wing extremist, worried that the Kennedys are set to become a dynasty of liberal presidents, hires an ex-CIA agent to assassinate JFK. The film mainly proceeds by a series of undramatic lectures that serve to get the viewer up to speed with the state of play in the assassination debates, as well as setting forth clichéd documentary montages of Kennedy speeches and images. The mixture of real and simulated newsreel footage makes the case for Kennedy's supposedly radical liberalism – supporting the civil rights movement, ending subsidies to the oil industry, closing military bases, as well as the suggestion in a made-up news broadcast voice-over that he was imminently about to announce a withdrawal from Vietnam – that provokes the murderous conspiracy against him. Despite the reference in the film's title to the CIA's actual clandestine programme of targeting foreign leaders for assassination, details of which had begun to emerge in the early 1970s, the film is oddly reluctant to mount a more political critique of government institutions, instead relying on a nostalgic evocation of Kennedy's greatness. Later treatments on screen of the Kennedy assassination include *Ruby* (1992), the mock documentary *Interview with the Assassin* (2002), and various episodes of the conspiracy television series *The X-Files* and *Dark Skies*.

However, some of the most significant assassination films take a more oblique approach to the subject. The issues that the early conspiracy critics' investigation into the Kennedy assassination had thrown up – a pervasive culture of official secrecy and misdealing; clandestine collusion between the intelligence agencies, big business and underworld crime; an overload of information that made for doubt rather than certainty; the limits of the technologies of representation – found their most stylish expression on film in a remarkable cycle of political

thrillers of the 1970s and early 1980s, including most notably *Klute* (dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1971), *The Parallax View* (dir. Pakula, 1974), *The Conversation* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), *Three Days of the Condor* (dir. Sydney Pollack, 1975), *All the President's Men* (dir. Pakula, 1976), *Winter Kills* (dir. William Richert, 1979), and *Blow Out* (dir. Brian De Palma, 1981). The pervasive atmosphere of these conspiracy films is one of pessimism, failure, and unrelenting paranoia in which the full scale of the conspiracy is never disclosed. Their *mise-en-scène* is dominated by a gritty, urban realism of shadows, tilted angles and obscurity, with the camera at times functioning as surveillance. Unlike the earlier film noirs of the 1930s–1950s that had pioneered a cinematic style based on a world-weary sense of cynicism about *individual* corruption and crime, the conspiracy thrillers of the 1970s located the source of corruption in larger government and corporate organisations, tuning into the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate mood of distrust of the authorities. Unlike classic detective thrillers, the endings of these conspiracy films conspicuously fail to provide comforting resolutions through the unmasking of the original crime. The suggestion is often that the conspiracy is ongoing, and perhaps even unstoppable in its unfathomable scale.

Although set in a version of the present of the mid-1970s, *The Parallax View* combines elements of both the John and Robert Kennedy assassinations. Its opening sequence features a senator attending a campaign reception in the Seattle Space Needle after a triumphant rally. In a confusing, crowded scene he is shot by a man dressed as a waiter with another shooter also possibly involved, who, in a nod to the RFK assassination, might be connected with a woman in a polka dot dress (in another allusion to the 1968 assassination, we see the presidential candidate dying spread-eagled on the floor). In an abrupt transition, the next scene involves an exceptionally stylised, shadowy, long tracking shot of an official Warren Commission-like panel announcing in a sinister and categorical tone that the assassination was the work of a lone, psychotic gunman (who is killed when he falls from the Space Needle, pursued by body guards). In another disorienting cut, the film then begins to tell the story of Joe Frady (played by Warren Beatty), a disaffected newspaper reporter who witnessed the shooting, and who is now some time later visited by Lee Carter (Paula Prentiss), a female television journalist friend who was also present at the assassination. In an allusion to one of the Kennedy assassination critics' favourite theories, Carter is in a panic that she and Frady are going to be the next victims of a conspiracy that is slowly wiping out all of the witnesses that feature in a photo taken during the Space Needle assassination. Frady

reluctantly starts investigating the story, and barely avoids being killed when the boat of the senator's campaign manager (whom he is interviewing) is destroyed in an explosion. Frady takes advantage of this narrow escape to fake his own death and go undercover to chase up the conspiracy. He begins to learn about a shadowy group called the Parallax Corporation that seems to train assassins. In an effort to infiltrate the group Frady undergoes their psychological profiling and indoctrination, and ends up becoming the unwitting patsy in the assassination of another politician, who is shot while rehearsing his acceptance speech for nomination as a presidential candidate. After Frady's doomed attempt to escape the trap that he thought he could outwit, the film ends with a replication of the first government inquiry, with the conclusion that the killing was the work of a lone psychopath named Frady. Although *The Parallax View* portrays the conspiracy as sinister, there is also a great deal of moral ambiguity in the film, not least because Frady is an unsympathetic character.

In addition to the problem of identifying with the main character, the soundscape, camera angles and editing of the film likewise have a disorienting effect. The opening parade and assassination scene in particular are jarring. The film is at first deafeningly loud with the parade music, only for the sound to be muffled as the scuffle between the assassin and bodyguards takes place on the exterior platform of the Space Needle with the microphone and camera still located in the noisy interior. The rapid editing and messy visuals make it hard to determine exactly what happens during the shooting, such that the film's audience are no clearer about the event than Frady and Carter, who both later admit that although they looked hard at the time they saw no conclusive evidence of who – if anyone – the second shooter might have been. The film thus deliberately refuses its viewers the safe haven of omniscient knowledge, immersing them in the same state of doubt as the protagonists, unsure what they have seen, uncertain if they are just being unnecessarily paranoid. In this way *The Parallax View* taps into the infinite abyss of suspicion that results from the obsessive, collective efforts to interpret the Zapruder footage in the case of the Kennedy assassination. The whole film pursues a visual and aural style based on the lack of transparency. Examples include the windows and crowds in the first assassination scene; the billowing curtains in Carter's frantic dialogue with Frady in his apartment; the long-distance camera shot and noise interference (as if we are viewing a surveillance tape) when Frady meets an informant on a miniature train ride; the endless shadows in Frady's encounters with agents of the Parallax Corporation; and the disorienting reflections in the monolithic windows of their

headquarters. This *mise-en-scène* is matched by a narrative that makes a number of abrupt jumps leaving the viewer to piece together what is happening, not least in the way that it never makes fully clear what the Parallax Corporation is, or whether Frady has really discovered evidence or if he is being duped by the conspiracy (or, indeed, whether he can be trusted at all, as he comes to identify and merge with the disaffected loner that is his cover story after his faked death).

With its edgy style, refusal of a comforting ending and vague attack on the shadowy corporate–government interface, the film was hailed by some reviewers as a turn to a more politically mature style in Hollywood, in step with the turn to the all-encompassing conspiracy theories of the Kennedy and other assassinations gaining ground in the 1970s. The film offered an attack not only on the evidence of the authorities in the assassination inquiries, but on the authority of visual evidence itself in its suggestion that nothing and no one could be trusted. Other critics, however, have taken issue with *The Parallax View* and other conspiracy thrillers for not being as radical as their gritty aura of cynicism about institutional corruption initially suggests. Ryan and Kellner (1988), for example, argue that not only do these films retain a nostalgic faith in the power of a lone individual detective hero to uncover and confront the wayward conspiracies that have by-passed democratic power, but also that their vague anti-establishment critique of monolithic corporations actually anticipates the turn to the Reaganite conservatism of the 1980s that was based on a populist and equally vague distrust of 'big government'. Others have argued that, in the case of *The Parallax View*, the conspiracy to train up political assassins holds a quite old-fashioned notion that power and therefore the potential for historical change is located in the head of state; indeed, by the mid-1970s the scale of corporate and government corruption, as well as the obvious but intractable nature of America's social problems, seemed so vast that an arcane assassination plot as the source of current ills could only seem woefully wide of the mark. On this line of thinking, the film might be guilty of 'hiding the obvious behind a veil of conspiracy', in the words of Christopher Lasch's critique of Thomas Pynchon's seemingly radical conspiracy novels (Lasch 1984: 159). In short, the very vagueness in the visual and narrative outlines of the conspiracy is what makes *The Parallax View* such a striking example of 'paranoid noir', but it is also, in the eyes of some critics, what gives the film an unstable political stance (see Simon 1996: 183–90).

According to the cultural critic Fredric Jameson (1992), a recurrent theme in this cycle of conspiracy thrillers is their representation of the technology of representation. In addition to the death of witnesses

captured on a photo of the assassination, in *The Parallax View* a slide show with rapid, subliminal imagery is used to brainwash Frady (and by extension, the audience, as we shift from Frady watching the sequence to watching it ourselves on the big screen). *Blow-Up* lavishes much attention on the mechanical processes of photography. It focuses on a fashion photographer (David Hemmings) who takes a picture of a couple in a London park, and when he comes to develop it and blow it up he discovers that the woman is looking towards what seems to be a man with a gun hidden behind a fence, and blowing it up even further he discovers in the blurry shape what might be a body in the bushes. *The Conversation* is the story of an audio surveillance expert (Gene Hackman) who captures via an eavesdropping microphone a conversation in a public park that he thinks contains clues to a conspiracy to murder the people he is spying on. He eventually ends up thinking that he has become the object of audio surveillance, and, as he descends into paranoia that might or might not be justified, tears apart his apartment trying to find the hidden bugs. *Blow Out* self-consciously combines elements of both *Blow-Up* and *The Conversation*. The plot centres on a film sound effects technician (John Travolta) who accidentally captures on audiotape a tire blow out, possibly caused by a gunshot, that causes a senator's car to swerve off a bridge, drowning its occupants (in an obvious allusion to the Chappaquiddick incident, in which Ted Kennedy, the next Kennedy in line for potential succession to the presidency after Bobby's death in 1968, drove off a bridge into water, resulting in the death of his young passenger, Mary-Jo Kopechne). He then spends the rest of the film trying to interpret the tape, and ends up uncovering a shadowy, all-encompassing conspiracy that is plotting to murder another politician. In varying degrees these conspiracy films all refer to the Kennedy assassination and its investigations, with their focus on ever more detailed analysis of accidental visual and audio evidence that might provide clues to a major conspiracy. (The interest in audio tapes also undoubtedly alludes to Watergate and the infamous eighteen missing minutes on Nixon's secret White House tapes that proved to be his undoing.)

For Jameson, however, the significance of these films is not their direct representation of the themes of assassinology or conspiracy theory as such, but their obsessive focus on the problem of interpreting all kinds of representations amidst an overload of data: Does a minuscule blurry shadow in the background of a photograph show us the tip of the iceberg of a vast conspiracy? Is that sound a gunshot or merely a tire bursting? Jameson in effect reads these films (and indeed the wider contemporary interest in conspiracy theories, not just about the

Kennedy assassination) as allegories of the limits of the technologies of representation to capture what is really going on. Through their focus on the 'technological sublime', conspiracy thrillers draw attention to our inability to map out the impossibly complex connections not of a vast political or economic conspiracy but of the very nature of politics and economics in the age of global capitalism. The kind of conspiracy theories featured in these films and other Kennedy assassination representations on this line of thinking are 'the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age'; they are 'a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content' (Jameson 1988: 356). In short, these films are ultimately more than thinly veiled dramatisations of the various political murders and other conspiracies of the 1960s and 1970s. They are allegories of the inability of our current modes of representation – and conspiracy theories are one currently popular form – to make sense of the connectedness of multinational capitalism itself.

## Oliver Stone's *JFK*

Even before it was released, Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) was at the centre of a huge media storm. One issue that attracted particular ire was Stone's seemingly wanton mixing of fact and fiction in the film's rapidly edited barrage of different cinematic techniques – authentic newsreel clips, painstaking recreations of original assassination and news footage, grainy black and white pseudo-documentary scenes that might have never happened, flashbacks, and so on. These critics felt that Stone was trying to pull the wool over his viewers' eyes, sneaking in made-up scenes in documentary style that might convince some people that these events had really happened. The two most notorious examples are faked hand-held footage of a cabal of senior Pentagon officials, and repeated shots of an unknown person forging the backyard photos of Oswald. At first it seems that there is a clear division between colour sequences that are obviously speculative flashbacks, and black and white scenes that recreate documented fact, but critics noted that even that neat division doesn't hold true. Stone's answer to these charges, however, was that the film deliberately foregrounds the issue of representation, with the use of so many different visual styles and techniques being a way of disrupting our usual way of viewing realist Hollywood cinema as a transparent window on the world: the 'ambivalent and shifting style . . . makes people aware they are watching a film' (Carnes 1996: 34).

Yet for all Stone's insistence that *JFK* has a postmodern approach to representation with its self-reflexiveness about the way the past is constructed and endlessly open to multiple interpretations and revision, the film betrays at times a residual naive faith in the power of images to speak for themselves and tell the truth. As we have seen with other assassination critics, Stone appears to hold the Zapruder footage sacrosanct, as if it were the one unanswerable proof of a conspiracy. One of the opening sequences of the film stages the shooting of Kennedy in Dealey Plaza, mixing together Stone's painstaking, elaborate recreation of the Zapruder footage with clips from the original, as well as other home movies and newsreel footage. The sequence stops just short of the fatal head wound in Z313, and we are made to wait until the final courtroom scene at the end of the film for it to be shown to a shocked jury and cinema audience. Jim Garrison (played by Kevin Costner) shows the head snap sequence again and again, explaining each time that Kennedy moves 'back and to the left'. On the one hand, the head snap is meant to stand on its own as irrefutable evidence of a conspiracy. On the other, it only makes sense through Garrison's telling us what we are seeing – he could, in contrast, tell us that the head snaps first forward and then recoils as a result of the jet effect. Likewise in refilming the Zapruder footage Stone is perhaps acknowledging that the original home movie is just too blurry and confusing to really stand on its own. In the film more generally, the montage of flashbacks, newsreel footage and pseudo-documentary clips is made to make sense through the many long voice-over explanations from Garrison and X (played by Donald Sutherland), the intelligence services insider who serves as the film's Deep Throat. It is as if the images can never quite fully speak the truth on their own: they are always in need of a supplementary explanation. The film's residual faith in the power of once-hidden images to give the lie to the official version of events is also undermined by its repeated acknowledgement that images such as the backyard photos might have been faked. But if that evidence could have been tampered with, why place such faith in other items that seem to prove a conspiracy – and why trust anything that the film tries to pass off as real?

In response to critics who challenged the factual inaccuracies and fast-and-loose dramatic license of the film, Stone argued that as a film maker he was less concerned with presenting a true history than creating a myth to counter the scenario set forth by the Warren Commission, based on the idea that history is made up of competing retellings endlessly open to revision rather than a single authoritative version of events. He also suggested that the model he had in mind was

*Rashomon*, the Japanese samurai film beloved of 'new wave' film makers that presents the same event through multiple perspectives and versions. While the sheer profusion of scenes and montages of shots in *JFK* has at times a *Rashomon*-like quality, the film nevertheless tries to weave its multiple perspectives and speculations into a single, unified synthesis. *JFK* brings together three decades' worth of conspiracy research into a single, over-arching explanation that is mapped out in the lengthy speeches given by Garrison and X. In this respect the film is a tour de force of synthesis, bringing together research and speculation – although no new evidence – on the specifics of the shooting in Dealey Plaza, the life of Oswald, the Garrison case about local plotting in New Orleans, and the wider cabal of high-level plotters in Washington.

Although Stone might claim that the film is merely presenting multiple perspectives, in reality it makes a passionate case for a particular theory, namely that Kennedy was killed because he was going to bring an end to the Cold War in general and the Vietnam War in particular. The film alleges that a secret shadow government within the military-industrial-intelligence complex, in a loose alliance with Cuban exiles, the Mafia and arms manufactures, arranged to assassinate Kennedy in a triangle of gunfire to continue their stranglehold on power and for their own financial gain in an economy permanently on a war footing. At a lower level the plot involved Guy Banister, David Ferrie, Clay Shaw, along with three teams of professional shooters on the ground. The overall argument of the film is encapsulated in the opening sequence of the film, with a montage of newsreel clips interspersed with the title credits that offers not a series of competing and contradictory views of the significance of Kennedy and the meaning of the 1960s, but a very selective version of Kennedy's political trajectory. Ultimately what enables Stone to tell this larger story is Garrison's encounter with X, a scene laden with symbolism as they sit on a park bench as the sun sets over the Washington monuments. The scene is in effect a dramatised version not of a real incident in Garrison's life, but of an encounter between Stone and Fletcher Prouty, who was the US military's chief liaison officer for CIA cover operations. Prouty helped convince Stone of the conspiracy theory that Kennedy was assassinated because of his plans for an imminent withdrawal from Vietnam. Although (as we saw in Chapter 3) there is now a lengthy historiographical debate on the issue, Prouty's undoubtedly unique insider knowledge must be tempered by the fact that he has also had links with the Liberty Lobby, a far-right conspiracist group that inserts the Kennedy assassination into a wider story about the coming New World Order. In short, Garrison's

encounter with X allows the film to wrest a symbolic victory from the jaws of Garrison's defeat in the Clay Shaw trial (see Simon 1996: 205–19): the real-life Garrison may have been disgraced and the conspiracy case rejected overwhelmingly, but the information supplied by X serves to confirm that Garrison was right all along. Even though X carefully insists to Garrison that he must do his own research and make up his own mind, in effect X tries to sell the audience a whole counter-narrative as the absolute truth that is based on very little solid evidence. X tells Garrison that he should start looking at the why and not the how of the assassination ('the "how" is just "scenery" for the suckers', he suggests), but it is only by the sleight-of-hand of X's made-up speech that the film's main emphasis on the specifics of the assassination are unconvincingly bolted onto the larger speculation about motive and an all-encompassing conspiracist interpretation of recent American history. Likewise, for all Stone's insistence that the film was merely challenging the official scenario rather than laying down the law about an alternative version, his choice of Kevin Costner as the leading actor and the focus on the courtroom speech calls up – as Stone admitted – the trustworthiness of Jimmy Stewart or Gary Cooper and the moral certainties of a Frank Capra film. Despite the taint of corruption and scandal that dogged the real life Garrison, in *JFK* Costner's Garrison is often haloed in the bright light of moral clarity, in contrast to the shadowy dealings of the conspirators.

Stone's films have been concerned with challenging 'some of the givens, some of the sacred cows, some of the official story' (Stone cited in Mackey-Kallis 1996: 42) about the 'decade of shocks' from Dallas to Watergate, and the reasons for America's calamitous involvement in Vietnam in particular (on Stone's politics see McCrisken and Pepper 2005). In Stone's view recent history 'starts with the Kennedy stuff, that's where the betrayal began. Our lifetime is about betrayal as Americans' (Mackey-Kallis 1996: 27). He has sought to turn conventional ideas on their head, such that, as Garrison comments in *JFK* about the new mindset needed for comprehending the scale of the conspiracy, 'white is black and black is white.' But for all Stone's trumpeted radicalism and his strident allegations about the dark side of American politics airbrushed out of the history textbooks, *JFK* has a lingering soft spot for the goodness of American values and institutions. His basic argument about the Kennedy assassination is that it 'changed the course of history' (Mackey-Kallis 1996: 27), and that it led directly and deliberately to the catastrophe of Vietnam that – as several other of his films have explored – sucked the nation into a moral abyss of violence. But as much as it overturns other comforting falsehoods about the

United States in the 1960s, *JFK* continues to present Kennedy as a blemish-free president of tragic stature, more of a Cold War dove than the hawk he was in reality. In seeing Kennedy's death as the beginnings of America's woes, Stone in effect relies on a mythical and ultimately conservative narrative of a personal and national fall from innocence. From Stone's point of view, the violence and corruption that seemed to pull the US apart in the 1960s is not part and parcel of a long history of American brutality, but is the result of a turning away from national destiny caused by a malicious cabal that has seized power from within. The solution to the problem for Stone is not a wide-scale rethinking of the fundamental values and institutions of the nation, but the bringing of the culprits to account in a return to an idealised, Capraesque faith in courtroom justice. More problematically still, several episodes in the film make a connection between the evil of the conspiracy and deviant sexuality, in particular one frenzied montage sequence of a gay orgy involving several leading players in the New Orleans part of the conspiracy (see Rogin 1993). In a parallel fashion, the restoration of true American democratic values is linked to heterosexual family values – for example, Garrison loses sexual desire for his wife as he becomes obsessed with the case, but it returns when he learns that Robert Kennedy has been shot, confirming, in his eyes, the conspiracy theory he has been pursuing.

The whole narrative structure of *JFK* emphasises the notion that the Kennedy assassination is the root cause of the nation's current ills, rather than one more symptom of a nation long since given over to pervasive corruption. One source of the film is *On the Trail of the Assassins* (1988), Garrison's memoir of the 1969 trial. The book rewrites the events of the fiasco as hard-boiled detective fiction, emphasising the lone, heroic pursuit by Garrison of the conspiracy, pitting a myth of defiant individualism against the sinister, faceless networks of the military-industrial complex. The film likewise takes on board this detective fiction structure, in effect creating two narrative threads. One thread is the generally forward-moving plot of Garrison's attempts to retrospectively uncover the conspiracy. That narrative is usually fast paced, but it frequently needs to stop in order for Garrison or X to fill the viewer in on the other narrative of the film, namely the reconstructed story – told in flashbacks, real and simulated documentary footage, and voice-overs – of a vast conspiracy and cover-up that leads all the way back to Dallas. In this way the part of the film that wants to rush towards the grand revelations in the courtroom scene at the end is undermined by the backwards-spiralling story of the original crime that sets the subsequent detective story in motion. As with other

detective fiction, the beginning determines the ending, but it is the ending that shapes the beginning as an imaginatively necessary origin. *JFK* thus operates on the same narrative logic as *Oedipus Rex*, in which an unknown and hidden cause (Oedipus's murder of his father) belatedly turns out to be the thematically required origin of his present woes. In *JFK* we see how Garrison feels the need to posit a grand, tragic event as the origin for the decline of both Jim Garrison and America. The state of decline felt by Garrison – and implicitly by Stone, as the rest of his career suggests – is so pronounced that only a correspondingly momentous original murder can do justice to the grandeur of his feelings. As with Don DeLillo, Norman Mailer and James Ellroy, it seems that Stone's whole career was leading up to his retrospective representation of the Kennedy assassination as the symbolically necessary primal scene of his imagination.

# Conclusion

Oliver Stone's *JFK* probably represents the high-water mark for public interest in a conspiracy theory of the Kennedy assassination. It was an enormously successful and influential film, reinvigorating debates about the assassination (see Stone and Sklar 1992), with a populist groundswell of concern prompting Congress to pass the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act in 1992. At one point in the year leading up to the thirtieth anniversary of the event half the books on the *New York Times* best-seller list were about the assassination.

Although there has been a steady flow of books, television documentaries and the usual sensational revelations, it is unlikely that the Kennedy assassination will ever again command the national interest in quite the same way as it did after the Stone film, or in the agitation for a Congressional re-opening of the inquiry in the mid-1970s, or in the immediate aftermath of the event in 1963. It is remarkable how the event continues to function as a lightening rod for the charged debates about the meaning of the 1960s, yet ultimately it is almost certainly destined to go the way of other historical controversies such as Pearl Harbor and the Lincoln assassination. Both the latter, for example, are surrounded by a thriving subculture of conspiracy theory and revisionist history, along with the usual historical tourism that such controversies generate, but neither can be said to have any real impact on present-day politics (see Rosenberg 2003; Vowell 2005). The Kennedy assassination will in all likelihood slowly fade from being a live political issue to becoming a historical curiosity. It is improbable that there will be a definitive death-bed confession or the discovery of a case-breaking smoking gun that will finally prove the existence of a conspiracy, not least because there have already been so many confessions and revelations billed as such. Nor is it likely that the lone gunman version will suddenly win the day, as conspiracy theories are too deeply entrenched in the public consciousness to be easily forgotten.

Over the four decades since Kennedy's violent death in Dealey Plaza, the event has been interpreted and represented in ever-widening contexts, but several themes have become constant. The iconic phrases and images that sum up the event – the grassy knoll, the sniper's lair, the magic bullet, the head-snap, Jackie scrambling over the back of the limousine – have become a kind of verbal and visual shorthand for a loss of faith in the authorities and the official version of events, and a more general sense of nostalgic grief for the demise of the promise of youth and idealism supposedly embodied by Kennedy. In short, the flashbulb memories of the assassination (which, as this book has shown, have largely been retrospectively posited in a form of collective false memory syndrome) provide an instant iconography of the 1960s in general and the loss of an exceptionalist sense of American national destiny in particular.

If the Kennedy assassination has been the site of a struggle over the authority to retell national history, who has won the day? Perhaps it is still too early to tell, but from the current vantage point it seems – if opinion polls are accurate – that the eyewitness journalists, professional historians, and government investigators have all been trumped by a rag-tag bunch of amateur conspiracy researchers, novelists and film makers. Although by now few people are well versed in the specifics of the various conflicting conspiracy theories, three quarters of Americans claim to believe that there was some form of conspiracy involved in the Kennedy assassination, and that it was linked to the other political assassinations of the 1960s. For some commentators this has been hailed as a triumph of grass-roots democratic activism, but if it turns out (as I tend to suspect) that Oswald after all acted alone, then this victory of the people vs. the authorities might ultimately seem a hollow one. Whatever the final truth of the case, important lessons have been learned – albeit slowly and painfully – about the damage that an institutionalised practice of government secrecy has on democratic politics.

With the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the meaning of the Kennedy assassination has shifted once again. No longer is the death of JFK the most significant traumatic event for living Americans, not least because two-thirds of Americans alive today were born after 22 November 1963. If the news networks learned on the job during the Kennedy assassination how to cover a breaking story of major importance, then they had perfected the art by the time of the terrorist attacks – although 9/11, like 11/22, also seemed to defy comprehension or belief at first. Like the Kennedy assassination, the strikes on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon have been interpreted in the exaggerated, exceptionalist language of a watershed event that came out of the

blue. But one of the most interesting developments has been the emergence – slow at first, but now spreading rapidly both within the USA and abroad – of a conspiracist interpretation of 9/11. Although at first sight it seems that everything about the 9/11 attacks was painfully visible and documented from the outset in live television coverage, the case has already become mired in arcane debates that interpret the existing imagery in surprising ways. As with the Kennedy assassination, at first sceptics merely suggested that there were anomalies in the 9/11 Commission Report, another monumental effort of government investigation. But others in the so-called 9/11 Truth Movement have increasingly been focused on the idea that the Bush administration was either involved in a cover-up, or even that there was a cabal within the government and the intelligence agencies that was actively involved in planning the attacks. As with the turn to all-encompassing conspiracy theories of political assassinations in the late 1960s and early 1970s, 9/11 is now often inserted by conspiracy researchers into a long sequence of official lies and double-dealing, in some versions leading back to the Kennedy assassination and beyond, as part of a massive postwar conspiracy that secretly controls the reins of power in the Western world. Some well-known Kennedy assassination researchers such as Jim Marrs are now writing books alleging massive conspiracies in the case of 9/11, and some of the grassroots 9/11 conspiracy research organisations acknowledge their debt to JFK conspiracy buffs for their pioneering work in using the Freedom of Information Act to obtain official documents, and for showing them how to connect the dots of a vast conspiracy theory. It is entirely possible that in time 9/11 will become like the Kennedy assassination, a major event in which the path of public opinion slowly diverges from the official version (see Hargrove 2006), with representations of the event becoming a battleground for competing visions of American history.

# Further Reading

The basic divide in accounts of the assassination is between conspiracy and no-conspiracy accounts. The place to begin for the official 'lone-gunman' version is still the Warren Commission Report (1964), along with the later revisions made by the HSCA (US House of Representatives 1979a, 1979b). Both are now available online (e.g. at www.historymatters.com, and the National Archives, www.archives.gov/research/jfk). The extensive accompanying testimony, hearings and exhibits are fascinating to dip into, as much for their accidental insight into social history as the minutiae of the assassination itself. Manchester (1967) and Bishop (1968) bring the Warren Commission's account to life, while the best single defence of the Oswald-did-it position and debunking of conspiracy theories is Posner (1993). Epstein (1966) and McKnight (2005) provide critical accounts of the Warren Commission's flaws, the latter from a conspiracist viewpoint. John McAdams' website (http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/) takes a balanced, anti-conspiracy line; it also has an excellent collection of primary source material. Kenneth Rahn also has a useful bank of resources on his website (http://karws.gso.uri.edu/JFK/JFK.html), but in this case mainly from a conspiracist stance.

The bibliography of conspiracy theory accounts is vast, but some of the early books, e.g. Meagher (1967), Lane (1966), Thompson (1967), remain some of the most coherent and impassioned advocacy of the critical position. The two most accessible all-round presentations of the conspiracy case are Summers (1998) and Kurtz (1993), with Ramsay (2002) providing an incisive beginner's guide. Recent works such as Scott (1996) and Waldron and Hartmann (2005) open out the conspiracy case from the particular details to the larger story of Cold War covert operations. Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) does a good job of summarising several decades of conspiracy research, and the book of the film (Stone and Sklar, 1992) contains detailed references to his sources, along with a compendium of the lively debate about the film in the

press. Marrs (1989), Lifton (1980) and Fetzer (2003) give a flavour of some of the extremes that conspiracy research has reached. Websites of activist organisations such as JFK Lancer (www.jfklancer.com) provide a good insight into the current state of the conspiracy research community. A Google search throws up vast numbers of web pages on Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories, from the sober to the wacky. Goldberg (2001) and Knight (2000) place Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories within the wider history of American conspiracy culture.

Novels by DeLillo (1988) and Mailer (1995a) each succeed in bringing Oswald as a lone assassin to life, although the former also weaves Oswald into a CIA conspiracy. Ellroy (1995) offers a vivid, dyspeptic account of what a conspiracy might have looked like on the ground, at the level of the corrupt men who might have carried it out. Useful chapter-length discussions of the approach taken by various novelists to the assassination are included in Melley (1999), Hellmann (1997) and O'Donnell (2000).

Groden (1993) has a useful collection of the most important assassination imagery, albeit framed into a conspiracy account. Trask (1994) offers a detailed account of the photographic record of the assassination. The visual culture surrounding Kennedy and the assassination are given fascinating treatment in Lubin (2005), while Simon (1996) expertly locates the avant-garde art and Hollywood films within the unfolding assassination debates. Brown (1988), Wills (1982) and Hellman (1997) offer the most cogent accounts of the Kennedy mystique. The historiography on whether Kennedy's death changed the course of American history, especially in relation to Vietnam, is sizeable. Newman (1992) and Jones (2003) put forward the theory that JFK's death led to an escalation of the war, while Chomsky (1993) and Herring (2001) are among the most accessible presentations of the debunkers.

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