

The Kennedy Assassination against the Grain

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Abstract

This study focuses on a singularly revisionary take on the Kennedy assassination undertaken by an independent filmmaker. In his 2003 mock-documentary Interview with the Assassin, Neil Burger experiments with the JFK image in its most celebratory aspect, e.g. the President's martyrdom, and with the limits of representations allowed for and encouraged by mainstream docudrama. His endeavor is worth analyzing because it marks a significant shift in John F. Kennedy's posthumous cinematic career, from the hagiographic tendency to a genuinely iconoclastic perspective, and also because it succeeds where historiography has only attempted to raise questions about the constant appeal of a major national cultural construct.

Keywords: myth, revisionism, docudrama, mock-documentary, image making, Kennedy assassination, New Frontier, Camelot

John F. Kennedy is considered to be the first American politician to have fully grasped and used the potential of visual media for politics and the first American President of the television age. His family background made him aware of the tremendous influence moving pictures may exercise on public memory and behavior, whether used for pragmatic or artistic purposes. Given the advantageous relationship he enjoyed with the camera and the privileged place of cinema in the American entertainment industry, it comes as no surprise that the American public's interest in John F. Kennedy's life, career and tragic death has manifested itself to a significant extent through this popular culture medium.

John F. Kennedy owed his political career to a concert of factors: his family background and influence, his unquestionable personal merits, and the historical context. The

tragedy of his death and its extensive coverage added to his popularity and turned him into a national hero and an icon of international scope. The backdrop of this complex cultural process was a society thriving on illusions, a socio-cultural phenomenon which Daniel Boorstin theorized as early as 1961, in his famous “image” concept. In his view, an image or “pseudo-event” is an artificial, staged, duplicitous and self-validating “synthetic novelty,” whose existence is made possible by an exacerbated desire to experience new, exciting, extraordinary events (Boorstin 10–12).

My understanding of the JFK image is that of a multilayered cultural construct steeped in reality, yet living a life of its own at the juncture between perception and deception. The first layer of the Kennedy image took firm shape during John F. Kennedy’s presidential campaign and could be summed up in the “New Frontier” slogan, which coagulated the young candidate’s solutions to the various challenges of the nuclear age. “Camelot,” which Jacqueline Kennedy envisaged days after her husband’s murder to encapsulate the Kennedy years as an epitome of uncompromising excellence, constitutes the second stratum. Finally, the various revisionist approaches to the Kennedy administration and JFK’s personal life represent the third, “Camelot-inside-out” level. In short, the popular memory of John F. Kennedy comes down to an accretive construct still in the making and equally un-making.

Contemporary historians acknowledge John F. Kennedy’s charismatic personality and his post-mortem potential to inspire, despite unflattering revelations about his personal life and instances of proactive presidential leadership. The Kennedy image, of the young, resourceful, enlightened, wise, level-headed President, whose second term in office would have made a big difference to the course of American and world history had he not been assassinated, endured in the public memory, even though it has long ago ceased to constitute the basis for historical analysis of his administration (Giglio 287, Dallek 711). The legendary aura Jacqueline Kennedy created around her husband’s personality and presidency could not be washed away by subsequent criticism because the public was not willing to discard a national symbol which had reached international prominence and which responded to their self-aggrandizing wish to have lived in a place and time made magical by an exceptional leader (White). From a pragmatic point of view, the paradoxical American monarchy, which Jackie Kennedy had established, was sanctioned into imaginary existence by the American public, who accepted and perpetuated the symbolical construct because it made the workings of the federal government more comprehensible and because it was their own way to pay their respects to the slain President (Bradley 71–72).

The positive and negative avatars of John F. Kennedy co-exist and will continue to co-exist as long as there is a public for each perspective. The success of the multi-faceted Kennedy image is due on the one hand to its underlying American-ness, as manifested in the New Frontier symbolism, and on the other hand to its audience-friendliness, which has turned it into an object of prevalent mass consumerism (Brown 106).

The undying appeal of all things Kennedy may also be accounted for in terms of a popular fascination with images as “pseudo-events,” in Daniel Boorstin’s understanding of the term. His 1961 seminal work, *The Image: a Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, postulated the existence of an exaggerated thirst for the un-usual, the un-common and the

extra-ordinary in American society, to the extent to which people have come to accept simulacra instead of real events because they meet their “extravagant expectations” (Boorstin 3).

The reason for this reversal is to be found in a contrastive analysis of real and pseudo-events. The difference between the two categories turns out to be not qualitative but one of degree. Pseudo-events appear more theatrical and thus more enjoyable than real events, like a televised debate compared to a mere speech. Taped material is more comprehensible, because it is staged primarily to entertain an audience, and only incidentally to inform them. Moreover, being conceived for dispersion, it addresses large audiences and it can be replayed, thus strengthening its initial impact (Boorstin 39–40).

The “Great Debates,” as the four televised debates between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon came to be known, constitute one example of a pseudo-event. Boorstin relies on Theodore White’s account of the first and most decisive debate to argue that television was not the real test for presidential skills because the medium did not allow the two candidates to tackle the questions as intellectual challenges but rather represented opportunities to project a certain image. Nixon tried to approach each question methodically and faced his opponent as he spoke, while Kennedy, more aware of the potential of television for politics, adopted a more general, discursive approach and always looked into the camera, thus facing the large audience at home. Moreover, in what has become a cliché statement, the camera loved Kennedy and exposed Nixon’s shortcomings (Boorstin 42–43).

John F. Kennedy’s televised funeral represents another, equally powerful, example of a pseudo-event. Even without the Lincoln-esque packaging, it would have stood out as an extended magnifying image of an event that was much too real, too violent and too tragic for people to witness it without it being previously choreographed. The Zapruder film itself could be seen as the closest translation of the Kennedy assassination because, as Umberto Eco argues, not even live broadcasting can be trusted to capture an event objectively and in its entirety, since recording does not afford a holistic perspective, but is confined to a particular, subjectively chosen angle. Interpretation is thus inevitable even at a subliminal level (107).

That the evaluation of the Kennedy legacy cannot be dissociated from the dramatic and sudden end of John Kennedy’s life has become a widely shared belief. The idealization of the President’s life and achievements began even before the funeral, with extended television coverage of the events preceding the funeral and the main TV channels replaying over and over again footage of the most important moments in Kennedy’s political career. Television offered the first textbook history lesson about President Kennedy and his times, except that it represented “history of a special sort,” i.e. “nonlinear history,” since chronology was abolished as a rule. Thus, on TV, Kennedy’s 1960 speech before the Great Ministerial Association in Houston preceded his 1956 race for the vice-presidential nomination and his press conferences mingled with funeral-related moments and the thoughts of ordinary people on the streets, all revolving around the already iconic image of Kennedy’s coffin, in what was aptly termed as “proleptic history with a vengeance: life viewed through the lens of tragic death” (Bradley 36).

The Kennedy image-making machine had been determinedly set in motion at the beginning of John Kennedy’s career in public office. The intricate process of turning him into

an appealing image could be explained in Daniel Boorstin's terms, as the transformation of a hero into a celebrity or "the human pseudo-event" (47). It should be noted, however, that John Kennedy's quality of a hero was partly gained on the World War II South Pacific Front, partly enhanced by subsequent coverage of the events. "Camelot" added an extra layer of glamour to the "New Frontier."

Subsequent revelations of image-making taking place throughout John Kennedy's career and afterlife did not manage to dispel the magic he had cast over audiences at home and abroad. "Camelot-inside-out" could invalidate neither the "New Frontier," nor "Camelot." According to Boorstin's argument, "even after we have been taken behind the scenes we can still enjoy the pleasures of deception" and "the more we know about the tricks of image building [...] the more satisfaction we have from the image itself," since "the elaborate contrivance proves to us that we are really justified (and not stupid either) in being taken in" (195). Full exposure of the pseudo-event as an entity half-way between a fake and doctored reality is not met with disenchantment, but with increased fascination at its disingenuousness. Seeing the strings used by puppeteers backstage to operate the puppets is not acknowledging the illusionary quality of the show, but believing in the ability of its artistry to provide a more fulfilling alternate dimension of existence. By the same token, revisionist thinking in the Kennedy case has rolled the snowball of illusions further, instead of causing it to melt.

The preoccupation with John Kennedy, in its main manifestations—hagiographic, debunking and balanced—continues to reveal itself in popular culture as well as among academic historians. The Kennedy image, in its now three co-existent shapes, the "New Frontier," "Camelot," and "Camelot-inside-out," remains an object of popular fascination because it addresses an audience still willing to be mesmerized and acquiescing to an ongoing escapist experience. In Daniel Boorstin's own words, "while we have given others great power to deceive us, to create pseudo-events, celebrities and images, they could not have done so without our collaboration" (260). The author diagnosed this tendency in American culture as "social narcissism," and explained it as an abandonment of the initial American ideals in favor of "images of our making, which turn out to be images of ourselves" (Boorstin 257).

JFK's posthumous film career is restricted (with one, albeit significant, exception) to one Hollywood genre: docudrama. The list includes the following titles: *PT-109* (Leslie H. Martinson, 1963), *Executive Action* (David Miller, 1973), *JFK* (Oliver Stone, 1991), *Nixon* (Oliver Stone, 1995), *In the Line of Fire* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1993), *The Rat Pack* (Rob Cohen, 1998), *Thirteen Days* (Roger Donaldson, 2003), and *Path to War* (John Frankenheimer, 2002). Watching these films separately and as a generic category reveals the fact that their portrayal of the Kennedy image limits itself to the first two layers of this cultural construct and almost without exception omits its third stratum. I argue that the reason why JFK docudramas preferably draw on the triumphant and hagiographic layers of the Kennedy image, the "New Frontier" and "Camelot," respectively, and only marginally, if at all, touch upon the unsavory Camelot-inside-out is because the nature of the docudramatic genre requires that the subject matter selected for enactment be packaged in such a way as to foreground the prevalence of good over evil, heroes over villains, and reassuringly closed over open-ended narratives.

The only exception to this rule is a film about the Kennedy assassination, *Interview with the Assassin* (2003). Written and directed by Neil Burger, this small budget production stands in Oliver Stone's conspiratorial thematic lineage, but bypasses the docudramatic code and adopts another hybrid cinematic form, namely the mock-documentary formula. Like docudrama, mock-documentary relies on the historical record or social contemporary realities for its subject matter. Unlike docudrama, which utilizes the melodramatic mode of emplotment, mock-documentary engages documentary codes and conventions, but does so ironically, in an attempt to expose recurrent cultural clichés and the artificiality of the belief in a one-to-one correspondence between the documentary image and reality (Roscoe and Hight 6–8).

Based on Bill Nichols' classification of documentary, mock-documentary's formal roots are traceable to two documentary categories: the expository and the observational modes. While the former develops according to a problem solving logic, builds an unmediated relationship with the audience and posits the objectivity of the filmmaker, the latter limits itself to closely registering aspects of everyday life, hence its claim to a transparent depiction of reality, a status of total detachment on the part of the filmmaker, and an "idealistic (voyeuristic) spectator position" (Roscoe and Hight 18–19).

Unlike docudrama, whose relation to documentary material is meant to ensure its factual relevance, mock-documentary taps into the documentary representational code in order to assimilate it from a critical perspective. In doing so, "appropriation inherently constructs a degree of latent reflexivity towards the genre" (Roscoe, Hight 50). Furthermore, viewers' engagement with mock-documentary presupposes a complex relationship, predicated on a creatively subversive acknowledgement of documentary conventions on the part of the audience. On the one hand, spectators are invited to watch a mock-documentary "as if it were a documentary," while on the other hand, they are required to be aware of the fictional nature of this cinematic form. This paradoxical type of viewer response affirms so as to be able to consciously flout the same documentary paradigm which accounts for the reflexive dimension of the genre, explaining why the genre targets a consummate audience (Roscoe, Hight 52).

Interview with the Assassin grafts this general mock-documentary profile onto a tragic event which has become a popular culture staple: the Kennedy assassination. The film begins with a framing narrative strategy which draws attention to a minimal story-within-a-story Chinese-box cinematic structure. Ron Kobelesky reveals the source of the story which viewers are about to watch and the context in which he produced this story. A recently laid-off cameraman, Ron, who lives with his wife and daughter in San Bernardino, California, is approached by his neighbor across the street, Walter Ohlinger, a former Marine, with the request to register a confession he has to make. Walter has just been diagnosed with terminal cancer and, having no more than a couple of months to live, he wants to talk about a secret he has kept for almost forty years. The cinema verite style which the director adopted makes Walter's confession even more eerie: "I was in Dallas on November, 22nd. I was the second gunman" (Burger). His deadpan tone and unflinching facial traits make the audience wonder whether his words are to be taken at face value or whether he is delusional. The immediate piece of material evidence Walter can show Ron is the shell of the bullet he claims to have fired and which he has kept in a bank safe. The

cameraman takes the shell to a local laboratory to test it for the time when it was fired. Specialist Stephen Wu informs Ron the bullet was most probably fired in 1963, but recommends further tests for more accurate results. Jokingly, he asks Ron whether it is the bullet which killed JFK and gets a negative, derisive answer.

Walter anticipates Ron's distrust and proceeds to prove his claims. He mentions his former commanding officer in the Marines, John Seymour, who chose him for the job of killing Kennedy, and tells Ron that he is the only one who could corroborate his story, if he were still alive. Walter does not seem unnerved that his only chance of ever having his story confirmed is lost. He does have a plan B. In order to put it into practice, he suggests he and Ron go to Dallas first. Back to Dealey Plaza, four decades after the fact, Walter reenacts the role he played in the Kennedy assassination. He points to the picket fence on the Grassy Knoll and acknowledges it as the place where he positioned himself and from where he shot the bullet which killed Kennedy. Asked what his feelings are, his reply betrays total detachment: "I don't feel nothing" (Burger). Walter has remained the same person whose thoughts during those long seconds before the shooting could only register his hunger: "I was thinking food. I was hungry" (Burger). Nothing could derail Walter from the task he had assumed. He was told what to do and he did it without having second thoughts or feeling remorseful afterwards. Although he describes his deed as part of the professional sniper's job, he does admit that killing Kennedy made him feel empowered in a way nothing else did: "You kill the most powerful man in the world. That makes *you* the most powerful" (Burger). Ironically enough, a couple passing through Dealey Plaza in search of Kennedy-ana asks Walter to take a picture of them: forty years later the sniper takes another shot. He then poses with the tourists, to humor Ron, who has noticed the whole irony of the situation and wants to save the moment on camera.

The trip to Dallas has helped Ron become more familiar with Walter's personality and the nature of his story, but has not brought him any closer to its validation by a third party. Walter decides that a visit to Jimmy, his old Marines comrade and Bay of Pigs veteran, might further his purpose, which turns out to be true. The veteran keeps referring the cameraman to Walter, his only input being that his friend "knows the secrets" and "some of them are true" (Burger). This incident functions as an extradiegetical comment on the part of the filmmaker about the story's potential for ambiguity. However, Jimmy does provide Walter with a piece of information which completely changes the latter's strategy, namely the fact that John Seymour has not died and is in fact living in Norfolk, Virginia.

Back to California and ready to embark on a journey to locate Seymour and discover why he ordered Kennedy's death, Walter listens to a threat-message and decides he could only have received it as a result of Jimmy having warned his former commanding officer (who is at present hospitalized in Bethesda Naval Hospital). After a violent confrontation with a police officer, whom Walter thinks has been following them around, Ron begins to suspect that Walter's pathological behavior is getting out of control. Yet, he tacitly agrees to continue to accompany him. The next trip takes them to Washington, D.C. Walter manages to get himself and Ron admitted to a public event where the current President of the United States is scheduled to be present. The tension builds up as Ron realizes in horror that Walter is carrying a gun and has made his way through the crowd to the first row. He desperately cries out that "he's got a gun" and in the ensuing chaos, the two manage to

leave the scene. This is the moment when Ron parts ways with Walter. Back home, Ron is determined to call the FBI and tell them all he knows about his neighbor. He does not have time to carry out his plan because Walter bursts into his house and threatens him with a gun. Things precipitate and Ron shoots Walter dead in self-defense. Prior to his trial, Ron refuses to provide his lawyer with elaborate information about his connection with Walter, on account that it was not going to do him any good. The screen goes blank and the audience is presented with a brief denouement in the form of an epitaph: "Ron Kobelesky was convicted of conspiracy and sentenced to three years in prison. The shell was confiscated by the police from Steven Wu and booked into evidence. It was later reported missing and is now considered lost. Ron Kobelesky died in prison on May 8th, 2001, of multiple stab wounds. At this time there is no suspect in his murder" (Burger).

Interview with an Assassin constructs an open-ended scenario which allows for at least three interpretive options, depending on the narrative agent we choose to foreground: the implied filmmaker, Walter or Ron. The implied filmmaker is an elusive entity, whose presence is overtly specified in Ron's opening statement about the actual circumstances in which he became associated with Walter, half-way alluded to in the very few instances when a second cameraman zeroes in on Ron, thus drawing attention to a superimposed recording body, and covertly suggested by the concluding remarks projected on a black screen. If we focus on the implied filmmaker, the interpretation will be concerned with the constructed-ness of the cinematic text, i.e. it will analyze its meta-narrative bent. The viewers' conclusions will address the reflexive dimension of mock-documentary and affirm the failure of documentary's original realist claim. The audience's expectations of a definite answer, given the documentary conventions employed by the film, are thwarted by the viewers' awareness of these conventions being just that: mere representational codes which are once again proven to be artificial.

If we focus on Walter, the interpretation will have to incorporate the notion of unreliable narrator, since some aspects of his story are difficult to believe, no matter how hard one might try to suspend one's common sense and think from within a conspiracy-haunted mind. Walter is an unsympathetic character for the obvious reason that he is the alleged relentlessly cynical murderer of John Kennedy and also because his confessing initiative leads nowhere and leaves the audience no less in the dark than they were at the onset. Considered in itself, Walter's 'case' represents yet another example of a delusional individual whose self-aggrandizing project fails pathetically. His paranoid excesses, even if justified by his professional background, do not shed light on the character's original statement. Nor do they account for Ron's death. While it is remotely possible that Ron was silenced by the same nameless, dark forces which killed Kennedy and worked out the perfect cover-up for the assassination, one cannot but realize that those same forces were aware of Walter's helplessness to expose a system his only knowledge of which was that it existed...

If we focus on Ron's destiny, the interpretation will lead us to conclude that he was unfortunate enough to associate himself with the wrong person. He fell victim to his own naïveté and to unfavorable circumstances, which he could have better assessed and handled had he not first fallen prey to illusions of material gain and personal grandeur.

Interview with the Assassin's dispassionate documentary format and hand-held camera technique, together with its minimalist cast and linear yet inconclusive narrative, concur

to its status of mock-documentary. The subversive element does not target the subject matter, which is treated most seriously, but the documentary frame, in an attempt to critically address the limits of representation and interpretation with particular respect to the Kennedy assassination. Director Neil Burger has stated that it was not a factual argument he sought to make, but that his aim was to play upon the documentary code in connection with a controversial topic. When asked what his personal opinion was about the Kennedy assassination, his answer was: "I just don't know." In Burger's own words, the thematic center of the film is "about truth and meaning and what you believe" (Curry).

Unlike Oliver Stone, who has claimed both factual and fictional value for his representation of the Kennedy assassination, Burger has laid stress on the meta-narrative dimension of his film, without neglecting the story. *Interview with the Assassin's* appeal does not reside in the docudramatic code and character-driven narrative, but in the filming technique, whose end product is an uncut video-like thriller which defies a conclusive ending. The viewers' engagement is not so much with the protagonists, who are unsympathetic characters, but with the documentary conventions. The promise of factuality which the documentary code makes entertains expectations of a definite and definitive answer on the part of the audience up to the end, when the final laying bare of the mock-documentary technique validates the disparate technical winks which the filmmaker has artfully inserted in the cinematic fabric, such as the presence of an omniscient cameraman.

The question of which layer of the JFK image this mock-documentary portrays is irrelevant from each of the three interpretive perspectives mentioned above. Even if one insists on seeing Camelot-inside-out enacted in *Interview with the Assassin*, one would be dissuaded from contemplating the idea by the following facts: the implied filmmaker's role is to make oblique meta-narrative comments; Walter has remained the same insensitive professional killer, whose only feelings before the Kennedy shooting were reduced to mere basic sensations of hunger and whose more elaborate argument that he sought empowerment by killing the most powerful man in the world is void of any qualitative evaluation, since his demented gesture addressed the office of the American presidency and not its actual occupant; and finally, Ron's only motivation is to get a breakthrough story featuring a stranger who gunned down America's President-celebrity. His endeavor is driven by mercantile motivation, targeting audiences interested in sensationalist scenarios, and it cannot therefore incorporate any personal or objectified JFK image bias.

Interview with the Assassin persuades through the documentary code it uses and ultimately abuses. It dramatizes an uncompromising distrust in the documentary mode of representation and, by extension, it engages docudrama critically, with respect to its factual component, and most dismissively, if not derisively, with respect to its melodramatic code. If films like *Executive Action* and *JFK* exert their docudramatic persuasion along such lines as 'this is what happened in the Kennedy assassination and this is the way in which things unfolded,' *Interview with the Assassin* relies on a paradoxical, dissuasive type of persuasion which seeks to suspend the audience's belief in 'what really happened' and therefore in the possibility of recording the un-recordable. To conclude, Neal Burger's film offers a unique and fresh perspective on a historical figure and media event as well as on its mainstream docudramatic packaging and, in the process, raises questions about the

various forces involved in the constant refashioning of a popular culture product of mythical proportions.

Note

This study constitutes an integral part of the following book: Raluca Lucia Cîmpean, *The Image: Profiles in Docudrama* (Lanham, MD, London, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).

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