

# How I Lost My Faith... in Oliver Stone

By Michel Jacques Gagné

November 22, 2013.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 1963 I was still but a twinkle in my father's eye. Like many young men of my generation not yet born when John F. Kennedy was shot, I did not learn of his assassination through first-hand experience, broadcast journalism or historical sources but through hundreds of pop culture references in rock songs, cartoons, sitcoms and Hollywood films. But none of these was as compelling as *JFK*, Oliver Stone's three-hour 1991 epic film. I took my mother to see it on mother's day during my first year of university. She walked out of it entertained. I walked out of it a changed man, initiated into a dark and ominous secret. The world in which I was raised, it turned out, was a delusion—a façade behind which lurked secret cabals of government agents who engineered wars for profit, murdered world leaders with impunity, and manipulated political and legal systems with alarming success, covering their tracks through the framing of "patsies".

With intricate detail, *JFK* retold the story of Camelot's fateful demise through the eyes of Jim Garrison, the New Orleans District Attorney who in 1968 launched the only court case ever to be tried over the death of President Kennedy. By freely mixing historical footage, dramatizations, and black and-white scenes that looked like real footage (but were in fact fanciful speculations), Stone's film had the effect of a cultural bomb, drawing hundreds of thousands of new initiates into the Kennedy conspiracy fold, soon-to-be devotees of greying veteran buffs like Mark Lane, David Lifton and James Fetzer.

As a politically-active student—a rather imaginative one raised on J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, George Lucas' *Star Wars*, and a decade of Ronald Reagan's anti-communist speeches about the Soviet "evil empire"—it didn't take much coaxing to get me, and thousands of other mistrustful Gen-X-men, to buy into Stone's revamped Kennedy myth. This was perhaps because the nightmare of evil empires was well-entrenched in our collective unconscious. In a way, Stone only finished what Tolkien, Lucas, and Reagan had started, dressing up the evil empire mythology with an unending stream of flickering stock shots of Kennedy's short tenure. Stone's film dragged us out of the world of fantasy fiction into a confusingly complex but far more realistic world of heroes and villains. Stone's Jim Garrison was a white knight for a new age, an incorruptible populist lawman more charismatic and unflinching than any pure-hearted Hobbit resisting the Dark Lord Sauron and any young Jedi boxed-in by the Evil Darth Vader. Stone's Dark Lord, however, was no otherworldly demon pulled from a comic book page but a very real—if somewhat elusive—"military industrial complex", one that could disturb young men in their

twenties better than the Freddy Krueger movies we'd grown up watching. Throw in the CIA and the rest of Stone's sordid cast of enemies—the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Vice President, Organized Crime, the FBI, big journalism, the Dallas Police, Southern racists, and a community of rabid anti-Castro homosexuals (which allegedly included a double-agent Lee Oswald)—and you find yourself eyeing an evil cabal so overwhelmingly powerful that it can hoodwink a whole nation for a half century while it manipulates every aspect of global affairs undetected. And as for the Russians who had terrified me through my youth? It turned out Reagan was wrong: the Reds were all being duped too.

*JFK* marked a sort of paranoid baptism that led me into a deep rabbit hole of conspiracist quandaries: Did the “men who killed Kennedy” also take down Bobby and King? Does the CIA brainwash unwitting civilians into a legion of programmed assassins? Did an alien ship crash in Roswell, New Mexico? Are the Freemasons running the world? Was the Pentagon hit by a missile? Once the Pandora's Box is blown open, there is no going back. Every new question is a link in a chain of interlocking theories that pulls the conspiracy hunter deeper into the chasm, ever-closer (or so he believes) to a fuller glimpse of the “oligarchy”, the “puppet masters”, “the secret tram”, or just simply “them”: that shadowy syndicate running the world. The mission is endless because its ultimate goal is not to solve the death of a President but to arrive at a grand theory of everything that can explain every question, settle every ill feeling, tie-up every confusing loose end whose explanation is sure to be buried somewhere beneath this false reality.

If you start with the assumption that you are a good person and that there are no coincidences, then you can be certain that you will solve the problem of pain if you search deeply enough. As it was for Neo in *The Matrix*, the secret world of conspiracism is frightful, evil, decrepit and inhospitable. But as with Neo, this secret “knowledge” has the power to turn any keyboard-punching nobody into an instant hero, a defender of Truth against Evil, a leader of the worldwide resistance. Who wouldn't want to be that?

Conspiracy theories are a lot like religious cults, except that cultists usually build their mythology out of a much smaller set of sources, including the imagination of a charismatic leader. The thing about conspiracy theories that makes them more popular and far more accessible than religious cults (other than their frequent lack of interest in the spiritual dimension) and far more difficult to dismiss out-of-hand, is that no conspiracy theory is an airtight compartment. Once one has committed to one theory, all theories begin to relate to each other in an endless jumble of inter-connecting tunnels leading off into different directions and yet somehow criss-crossing again. The deeper you dig, the deeper you get entrenched in a network of unanswered questions, wild speculations and paranoid expectations. It is

easy to get lost in it all, but if you spend enough time there, you begin to feel quite at home in this tangle of arbitrarily connected factoids. This is why the typical conspiracy theorist rarely sticks to trying to solve a single mystery, but rather seeks to unearth the vast mechanism that lies behind ALL unexplained events: an evil machinery of control. It is also why the typical conspiracist is unable to stop. He is too close to the truth. There is just one more link to connect...

So how did I manage to climb out of this hole?

I began to teach. More specifically, I began to teach *logic*. When a person follows their innate tendency to look only for evidence that confirms their convictions, it is not surprising that they keep finding more of it and grow more firmly convinced that they were right all along. This need not be the fruit of mental illness; this is the way most of us operate. Self-preservation is a natural reaction, and the ego is easily wounded. Most of us at some point ignore evidence that forces us to rethink our most basic beliefs. After all, which one of us walks into a bookstore looking to purchase some expensive tome that tells us how wrong we have been all our life? Most of us are quite happy living out a story that makes sense, whether or not it coheres with known facts.

The problem arises when one is hired by a college to teach students how to think critically: to evaluate the truth and relevance of popular claims, to root out contradictions, to identify fallacies, and to assess various beliefs in the light of *all* available evidence, not just cherry-picked clues that fit a foregone conclusion (this is called circular reasoning, one of the many logical fallacies found in conspiracy tales, and in Oliver Stone's film specifically). I always thought of myself as a critically-minded person, and certainly I would not have been hired to do what I do if I wasn't. But like most humans, I had my blind spots, and Oliver Stone's film had lodged a large plank in my eye.

The errors in Stone's film and in the writings of like-minded JFK buffs are numerous, though one would not know it without screening the evidence carefully, consulting the work of several historians and forensics experts, and considering the logical inconsistencies of the tale being spun on the screen. To wit, the "magic bullet theory" was a creation of the conspiracists, not of the Warren Commission; the theory of a "grassy knoll shooter" relied on hearsay and slipshod science; Oswald was a derelict Marxist utopian without a life purpose or good career prospects long before any government agency could have recruited or "programmed" him; the "evidence" of Kennedy's plan to withdraw from Vietnam turns out to be nothing of the sort; and witness testimonies—most of which were contradictory, already disproved, or recorded decades after the events in question—were chosen selectively to fit the

established conspiracist dogma. And there is no space here to talk of the large number of suspicious connections that are meticulously quilted together with little more thread than open-ended questions. In short, I had to conclude that Stone was either totally disingenuous when he made the film, or else he was completely out of touch with reality. Either way, I certainly couldn't call myself a historian and maintain trust in the man.

Though less ubiquitous today than it was two decades ago, *JFK* remains a veritable Bible to the Kennedy Assassination conspiracy movement—a gateway drug into a community that has remained active since the mid-seventies, fueled by post-Watergate disenchantment, which peaked in the nineties following the release of Stone's film, and recently branched out into a plethora of other conspiracy movements: Y2K, 9/11 Truthers, Birthers, New World Order, Occupy, Randian libertarianism and, I dare to predict, many others to come. As recent Gallup research has shown,<sup>1</sup> what was at first but a small community of liberal-minded, pro-Kennedy researchers on the intellectual fringe has managed in five decades to completely transform mainstream perceptions concerning the facts of that president's murder as well as our trust in political leaders, legal experts, scientists and academics. Its impact in counteracting the blind trust many Americans formerly placed in their (often self-serving) elites was no-doubt significant. But in terms of encouraging the average Joe to exercise critical thinking, the film's legacy is rather tragic. As Political Scientist Robert Robins and Psychologist Jerrold Post once suggested, "The social harm that the film commits goes beyond the distortion of history. It creates a broader intellectual pollution [and] gives weight to a popular mentality of paranoid belief."<sup>2</sup>

Twenty years have now passed since Stone's *magnum opus* lit up cinema billboards, and it still has much weight on our collective unconscious. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the assassination, and the world has rarely needed a greater dose of sober second thought.

---

<sup>1</sup> Darren K. Carlson: "Most Americans Believe Oswald Conspired With Others to Kill JFK: Support for conspiracy theory increased sharply in the 1970's and has been high ever since," *Gallup News Service*, April 11, 2011. (accessed 27-07-2013) <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1813/most-americans-believe-oswald-conspired-others-kill-jfk.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Robert S. Robins and Jerrold M. Post: "Political Paranoia as Cinematic Motif: Stone's *JFK*," Paper presented at the August/September, 1997, meeting of the American Political Science Association. Washington, D.C. *The Kennedy Assassination* Homepage, Dir. John McAdams. (accessed 04-09-2013) <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/robins.htm>