

DANGEROUS LIAISONS: THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION, POPULAR CULTURE, AND THE SECURITY DISPOSITIF

Abstract. *The text approaches the representative (popular) cultural addresses of the JFK assassination from the point of view of their contribution to the formation of the current security dispositif. This angle allows and prompts the author to highlight an obsession with the issue of conspiracy that permeates the vast majority of assassination analyses, and examine its rationale. Furthermore, the retrospective angle and popular cultural focus allow the text to question the status of the assassination as an "inaugural event" that signified a change in (political and cultural) epochs. Rather, the author argues that the incorporation of the assassination into popular culture (and politics), in the modes of active spectatorship and a flourishing conspiracy culture, signifies a mild adaptation of a logic that can be traced back to a certain understanding of the project of the Enlightenment.*

Key words: *JFK assassination, popular culture, film, security dispositif, conspiracy culture, public reason*

»John F. Kennedy was killed, in all likelihood, not by a sick society or by some supposedly archetypal, resentful common man but by a political conspiracy his own actions may have helped set in motion. The mythology of his death can no longer prop up the mythology of his life,« concludes Christopher Lasch in his perceptive essay *The Life of Kennedy's Death*, published in Harper's Magazine in 1983, i.e. two decades after the infamous assassination. Thirty years and a myriad of analyses by scholars from various disciplines later, it does not seem any more profound meta-conclusions have been reached. Mythologies, on the other hand, both that of Kennedy's life, and assassination, have managed to live on and prosper (for more on the subject see e.g. Knight (2007), Olmsted (2011), White (2013)). Arguably put into a radically different context after 9/11, 11/22 is still far from forgotten,

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and far from foreign to the global, let alone U.S., spectator's imagination. Worldwide commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the assassination,¹ a relatively stable global production rate of popular cultural artefacts, as well as popular scientific, expert, and scholarly analyses of various aspects of the assassination leave little doubt about that. Is there, then, anything left to say? Is it possible to say anything without falling into the trap of feeding and reinforcing the mythology of a never-ending conspiracy? Perhaps, if we manage to switch between two levels: that of facts, figures, film, and photos, and that of concepts and paradigms. Trying to get a grasp on the latter, the paper examines the popular cultural dimension of the JFK assassination from the point of view of its interplay with the politics of securitization, hence viewing popular culture as a domain of "cultural governance" (Shapiro, 2004).

We argue that the aspect of conspiracy that is enacted in various ways and to various ends in popular cultural phenomena addressing the JFK assassination, in the context of global late capitalism, reinforces consumers' belief in the validity and expertise of their own judgment and investigator skills. This aspect of an individualized Western society is fruitful breeding ground for further conspiracies, and the proliferation of an atmosphere of a constant onset of crisis,² which is highly compatible with so-called states of emergency. Control over states of emergency, as we discuss further, is of crucial political importance. The text maintains that ceaseless possibilities of establishing a state of emergency, in a political environment indebted to the legacy of a certain reading of the project of the Enlightenment, favour a politics of securitization. This conception of the reach of popular cultural dimensions of the JFK assassination allows us to consider them in the context of the project and logic of the Enlightenment as articulated by Foucault (1984) in his reaction to Kant's 1784 essay, and particularly in relation to Kant's concept of public reason, which we proceed to do in the final part of our argument.

The JFK Assassination and the Popularization of Conspiracy

For the purposes of the argument, we will begin by briefly outlining the main axes, which popular cultural addresses of the JFK assassination have run along over the past 50 years. The outline attempts to preserve the original chronology, but it is necessary to retain an awareness of the fact that

¹ This article and the special thematic volume of *Theory and Practice* that it is featured in being a case in point.

² Conspiracy culture is often linked to paranoia (for a detailed account of the matter and a case-in-point analysis, see Šterk, 2013 (this volume)), but this argument would require further detailed elaboration (for countertheories, see e.g. Bakola, 2008). As the link between conspiracy and paranoia is not of central concern to our argumentation in this text, we refrain from its detailed exploration at this point.

chronology does not equal succession in the case of popular culture, especially in the age of seemingly limitless mechanical reproduction, to echo Walter Benjamin. Rather, it allows marking points of emergence of certain forms and contents within the assassination dispositif, which as such says absolutely nothing about the duration of their existence. As emphasized by Art Simon (1996), whose Foucault-inspired analysis of JFK assassination imagery in art and film we use as the basis for this part of our discussion, “discursive context is built up unevenly but decisively through a process of accumulation” (Simon, 1996: 3). It is in this process that linkages between journalistic practices, films, and artwork emerge, at times unexpectedly, potentially altering the basis for any successive address of the topic.

When exploring the origins of the key coordinates of (popular) cultural JFK assassination discourse, Simon identifies three formative periods. In the first three years after the assassination, i.e. up until 1966–7, he argues, mainstream discourse, to an important extent proliferated with governmental support, focused on suppressing extra questions regarding the assassination, building a positive image of the late President, and eliminating possibilities of the formation of alternative accounts. Peter Knight (2007), exploring the assassination and its images and discourses from the point of view of the formation of different conspiracy theories, adds that it was this period that – with Abraham Zapruder’s deal to sell his amateur film – the best video evidence of the assassination – to *Life* magazine – saw the alignment of mainstream U.S. media with the government. Over a decade that followed, the late sixties and seventies, turned things on their head: the government’s argumentation, articulated in the report of the infamous Warren Commission (1964), not only evidently failed to suffice and satisfy the public, it literally backfired. Alternative accounts of the assassination, as well as alternative evaluations of its impact³ emerge, and find their place under the Sun and in the shade, namely in cinemas and on television screens, in exhibition halls, and in various sections of the news (Olmsted, 2011: 673). The seventies mark the beginning and, in terms of focus, the first phase of the conspiracy debate focused on “the mechanics of Dealey Plaza” (Simon, 1996: 23). Knight’s (2007) analysis of American conspiracy culture supports this statement. In retrospect, the debate of the seventies appears merely as the embryonic stage of a broader phenomenon: the proliferation of a conspiracy culture, which begins to flourish in the eighties, and first peaks with the release of Oliver Stone’s highly contested film *JFK* (1991). In Simon’s account, the eighties (and nineties) demonstrate a further shift in the popular cultural debate on Kennedy’s assassination. If it first moved within the

³ These range from artistic interpretations to proper investigations, embarked upon by curious, disillusioned or emancipated individuals.

matrix of “for” or “against” conspiracy, a matrix that presupposed the existence of an ultimate, absolute closure – finding out “the truth” about the assassination, the third phase of the debate seemed to have given up on this idea. Simon maintains that, from the eighties onward, the debates around the assassination have shifted to the mode of “simultaneous movement towards” and “denial of closure”. Arguably, this completes the process of a fictionalization of the assassination, a shift from authorship to genre, from the search for ultimate truth, via desperate experimentation, to Hollywood narration (see also Cilento, 2013 (this volume)).

Indeed, it is in the eighties and nineties that famous commentaries reflecting on – and (re-)establishing! – the significance of the JFK assassination emerge. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981: 18), Jean Baudrillard notes that “the Kennedys died because they incarnated something: the political, political substance, whereas the new presidents are nothing but caricatures and fake film – curiously, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, all have this simian mug, the monkeys of power.” Baudrillard goes on to position JFK and RFK alongside Hollywood icons James Dean and Marilyn Monroe, “those who really died because they had a mythic dimension that implies death (not for romantic reasons, but because of the fundamental principle of reversal and exchange)”, those who lived in an era that “is long gone”; superseded by the era “of murder by simulation, of the generalized aesthetic of simulation, of the murder-alibi – the allegorical resurrection of death, which is only there to sanction the institution of power, without which it no longer has any substance or an autonomous reality.” This passage from *Simulacra and Simulation* is often quoted in popular scientific, and simply popular press, as an argument – logically flawed, as it typically resides on nothing but reference to authority of the famous “French philosopher” – to demonstrate that JFK’s (and RFK’s) deaths mark an end of democracy, a passage to an era of spectacle and simulation, or at least of perpetual, hyperreal play. However, hindsight, especially if reinforced by the events of 9/11, renders this argumentation more complex than it might seem at first glance. Baudrillard’s evaluation of the Kennedy assassinations allows very little speculation about presidents that came before them or the values that they might have represented. Certainly, it emphasizes the different status of simulation that takes reign with the era of deaths of iconic figures. On the other hand, it should not necessarily be read as implying that previous U.S. Heads of State also possessed the “mythic” quality that Kennedy did – and which, paradoxically, came to the fore after his death. At this point, the question of what came first: Kennedy’s death or his mythic quality seems more than timely. Furthermore, the workings of which logic does his death signify: that of a breach, a fundamental change in systems? Or, perhaps, the logic of preserving a certain continuity at all costs? In other words: did Kennedy’s death and

its popular cultural aftermath really mark a fundamental change (in systems, worldviews, politics, ...) or was it necessary to secure the existence of one particular project?

The eighties and nineties do not provide a straightforward answer to this question. Rather, they point to an inherent ambiguity of the phenomenon, which might provisionally be described as tension between its manifest contents and latent predispositions. Fredric Jameson demonstrates this rather clearly in the conclusion of his monograph *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1992). Having argued for the existence of a close relationship between contemporary cultural production, marked by rapid technological progress and seemingly endless eclecticism, and the economic premises of late capitalism,⁴ Jameson notes that the JFK assassination is an “inaugural event” which represented “something like the coming of age of the whole media culture that had been set in place in the late 1940s and the 1950s.” Furthermore, it “gave what we call a Utopian glimpse into some collective communicational ‘festival’ whose ultimate logic and promise is incompatible with our mode of production.” (Jameson, 1992: 355) Whereas most analyses of the JFK assassination in audio-visual culture usually overlook the second part of the argument, focusing on the “inaugural event”⁵ we believe it to be highly worthy of pointing out. It appears to signify an awareness of the fact that treating the JFK assassination as an “inaugural event” of a new, different epoch might be flawed, or that it, at the very least, crucially depends on the angle one perceives the assassination from. Looking at it from the angle of the late capitalist mode of production that has not, in its core, changed significantly over the past few decades, arguably dissolves the significance of the assassination and its aftermath, including its popular cultural accounts. It allows to regard the documented account of the shooting, the aforementioned Zapruder film, in the same plain as Stone’s *JFK*, together with assassination and conspiracy novels and films of the sixties, seventies, and eighties (e.g. Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* (1966)), in one way or another reminiscent of the events in Dealey Plaza and their aftermath, Andy Warhol’s pop-artistic reactions to the President’s death, and recent accounts of the assassination context, such as the miniseries *The Kennedys*, aired in 2011. The epistemological break, the loss of trust in the truth-delivering power of the image, often attributed to the event, hence seems to dilute the event as such.

⁴ This text does not fully embrace the argument advanced by Jameson. Rather, it uses a particular part of Jameson’s text – an insightful commentary into the JFK assassination – that is relevant to its discussion.

⁵ Rather than pointing out the significance of the JFK assassination transmission for the formation of a new media culture, more recent analyses (e.g. Cilento, 2013 (this volume)) often choose to focus on the retrospectively established “epistemological break” signified by the event, i.e. its decisive contribution to the loss of confidence in the “reality” of the image.

Furthermore, our retrospective angle and endorsement of post-11/22 epistemology allow us to assess the relation of the legacy of the Kennedy assassination to the post 9/11 context. Seeing the JFK assassination as a point where conspiracy culture permeates popular culture to an unprecedented scope allows to regard it as less of an “inaugural event” and more of a “thinkable development” – a development, according to a certain logic, arguably reaching deeper than the economic logic of late capitalism. This becomes ever more apparent if one examines certain formal and substantial characteristics, common to popular cultural addresses of the JFK assassination, and their recent interpretations.

Zapruder, zapruderer 28 and 48 years later

“How the assassination has been represented visually ... reflects more than anything a fundamental instability, and the Zapruder film plays a particularly important role in this, since ever-new attempts to discover some hidden truth in the images through rotoscoping, rephotography, and frame enlargement ultimately have achieved abstraction in the place of precision,” warns Vågnes (2011) in a meticulous study of the cultural impact of the Zapruder film. This warning is in fact merely an elaboration of the verb in used in the title, invented by cyberpunk guru William Gibson in his novel *Pattern Recognition* (2003).⁶ Moreover, it is tellingly symptomatic of the place in the cultural imagination, apparently occupied by the JFK assassination. Over decades, what initially seemed to have the potential of remaining a floating signifier, has acquired fairly stable traits (including a high degree of instability, as argued by Simon), which together combine into a distinct, characteristically “mythical” mix. In the following paragraphs, we examine the ingredients of this mix through formal and narrative messages, conveyed by three audio-visual accounts of the J. F. Kennedy assassination, namely the three accounts that appear as epitomic of the abovementioned myth: the Zapruder film, Oliver Stone’s highly polemical docudrama *JFK* (1991), which the director himself openly described as an attempt at a new mythology of the assassination, and the 2011 TV miniseries *The Kennedys*. The discussion is not an in-depth, frame-by-frame analysis, and its scope is evidently limited. An elaboration of our intentions, analytical criteria, and reasons for this particular selection of accounts hence seems appropriate.

The three chosen audio-visual accounts of the JFK assassination are neither presented nor discussed with the intention of providing factual,

⁶ The verb is originally used in the following phrase: “Zapruderer into surreal dimensions of purest speculation, ghost narratives have emerged and taken on shadowy but determined lives of their own.” (Gibson in Vågnes, 2011: 3)

assassination-related data. Their prime criterion for their selection is their representativeness of certain socio-cultural, political, and production contexts. They sum up many important aspects of the assassination debate at particular points in time, for particular audiences. *JFK* and *The Kennedys* reflect conclusions and opinions, based on previous evidence. All three accounts reflect conventions and approaches to audio-visual culture and its analysis in the U.S.A. at particular points in time. Certainly, the study could have chosen to include more cases, with numerous documentaries and fiction films on the assassination first springing to mind, not to mention assassination novels and other genres of literature, or other popular cultural accounts of the assassination, such as Andy Warhol's pop-art. However, analysis of assassination art for its own sake is not the intention of this text. Rather, it uses the defining characteristics of popular cultural audio-visual addresses of the assassination to point to their homologies with the socio-economic and political strategy of securitization, and the implications of this constellation.

Another issue that needs clarification is our treatment of documentary footage (the Zapruder film) alongside clearly fictional accounts (*JFK* and *The Kennedys*). Besides the retrospective angle, the importance of which has been discussed above, what allows us to proceed in this manner is aforementioned post-22/11 epistemology which infers that the Zapruder footage may hardly be approached as mere documentation, while, on the other hand, popular imagination may persuasively be argued to deny any accounts of the assassination status of pure fiction. Indeed, it has in recent years almost become common knowledge that it is Stone's account that forms many average viewers' impression of the assassination, rather than direct interpretation of the Zapruder film or other sources (see Simon (1996); Knight (2007)). Jameson goes even further, noting that it is conspiracy thrillers like *JFK* unique in their special mode of representing the technology of representation, i.e. demonstrating an "obsessive focus on the problem of interpreting all kinds of representations amidst an overload of data", that are "the poor person's cognitive mapping of the postmodern age", allegoric of the limits of technologies of representation to capture what is really going on (Jameson in Knight, 2007: 156). This is the same instability noted by Simon, only elevated to a new – and paradoxically stable – level: the emergence of a whole new filmic genre shows that this conspiracy- and insecurity-laden interpretation, to a great degree constitutive of the narrative of the assassination, is well on its way to winning the historiographical struggle which competing accounts of the events in Dealey Plaza are seemingly all about.

This characteristic instability seems to have survived different forms: if one limits themselves to audio-visual interpretations of the assassination, it is apparent in early, as well as late (and modified) treatments of the

Zapruder film, merely adapting to predominant cultural trends. It traversed attempts at structural and static analysis of the Zapruder film in the sixties, when the amateur filmmaker's footage was cut up, magnified, and analysed frame by frame, different frame-based puzzles and degrees of magnification prompting competing interpretations. It is apparent in different filmic accounts of the assassination that have been emerging from the mid-sixties to the first decade of the 21st century. It reflects the very struggle between seemingly stable and straightforward official interpretations of the event (the multi-volume Warren Commission report being the most obvious case in point), and the deceptively forthright, formalist critical reaction of Andy Warhol's pop art.

Profound instability is also reflected in the next characteristic, typical for JFK assassination addresses by popular culture: repetition. Repetition, the central trait of incessant replays of the Zapruder film (for more on the Zapruder film, see Cilento, 2013 (this volume)), of its individual frames, as well as repetition of various accounts of the assassination – all these repetitions, no matter how mechanical, necessarily fail at least on two fronts. Not only do they fail to present a persuasive, final product (be it a narrative, a static audio or visual experience, or a combination of the two), but they also fail to function as perfect repetition, fixing their own instability and always producing an unexplainable void, bound to trigger a next attempt at a “better failure”, to paraphrase Samuel Beckett. Replays and repetitive accounts of the assassination therefore not only fail in rendering its explanation satisfactory, they create a yearning for further, more detailed explanations. In combination with 21st century popular culture's tendency toward serial adaptations, coincident with its move to personalized screens of various kinds, it is no wonder that a serial account of the story of the Kennedy clan, involving the JFK and RFK assassinations was bound to emerge, and fail to satisfy anyone. Repetition thus seems to function as an attempt at appeasement, which is doomed from the start, yet ultimately necessary to proceed with: its very existence, its ability to transgress epistemologies (documentary vs. fiction in this case), artistic forms, and genres seems to function as a signal of stability, transparency, and closure. By repetition, we are not referring to the mere frequency of representations of the assassination on screen and in other media. Rather, we would like to point out that it is rooted even deeper: in an obsessive search for ultimate questions and answers that make “investigators” literally run around in circles, dashing between frame-by-frame analysis of the Zapruder film and its screenings at normal speed; between zooming in and zooming out; between comparing different accounts of the assassination, searching for two identical copies that would give an ultimate, “legitimate” story.

Oliver Stone's *JFK* takes the issue to a different level: what the – from the

point of view of film analysis – masterfully constructed myth of the assassination seems to be repeating over and over again, with its persistent mixes of fiction and documentary footage, is the fact that no evidence, no convincing fast cuts to witnesses' testimonies will ever guarantee a fully transparent, complete, and irrefutable version of the events of 22/11 1963. Or, in other words, the only version that could possibly incorporate all of these elements would have to involve a conspiracy. Knight (2007: 158; see also Sturken, 1997) nevertheless argues that *JFK*, despite its overt ambition to function as a postmodern film, playing with ambivalence and underscoring the implications of the crisis of representation, does not succeed in proving its point because of its apparent trust in the absolute accuracy of the Zapruder footage, which functions as a stable, initial cut. The argument is convincing, not only in pointing out a "weakness", seemingly undermining the postmodern epistemological aspirations of the film. Moreover, similar to Lyotard's (1984) diagnosis of "the postmodern condition", it points to the fact that the aspirations of so-called postmodernism are in fact inseparable from the project of modernity.

The Kennedys – a TV miniseries, comprising eight episodes, approximately 45 minutes in length each – seems to have fully mastered this logic of postmodern form, playing out modern conspiracy. The series does not focus on the assassination *per se*: it comes, as matters proceeded in "real-time" chronology, at the end of the story, in the seventh episode, followed by the grand finale – the RFK assassination of 1969. The first six episodes, however, function as a logical prelude to the finale, setting up a rather paranoid atmosphere, and depicting the history of the Kennedy clan as a variation on the grand master plan devised by JFK and RFK's father, Joseph P. Kennedy Sr. in the late 1930s. Here, conspiracy is not only accepted as a normal social fact, it is internalized, depicted as penetrating deeply into the realms of personal affairs and identity. The Zapruder film no longer appears relevant: such a reconstruction of context, which could be said to have been sparked off by the ambiguity of that precise film's frames and history, now functions as its better, more perfect substitute. In an environment of paranoia, where conspiracy reaches from the marital bed to the Oval office, documentary footage almost has no option but to appear ambiguous, and so for specific reasons.

The cycle is complete if one considers a third peculiar characteristic of all three accounts of the assassination analysed: the highly sceptical critiques they received. As outlined above, the Zapruder images, first interpreted by the Warren Commission, managed to achieve the opposite of "explaining": they succeeded in prompting the audience to seek loopholes, incongruences, flaws in these explanations, no matter which angle they considered the assassination from. Zapruder's footage can be easily criticized from the

point of view of technological imprecision, and various possible interpretations; *JFK* can be disclaimed as intentional mythmaking, its use of documentary and fictional footage side by side as a conspiracy of its own; *The Kennedys* may be discredited as an attack at the Kennedy family, its focus on the personal and psychological context and the events leading up to the assassination as a tactics of distraction or an attempt to compromise Kennedy's image, diminishing his achievements.

At first glance, this situation where the audience is free to question the "spectacle" reminds of Rancière's (2008: 280) vision of an emancipated community, which is "in fact a community of storytellers and translators", of emancipated spectators, functioning according to the principles of associating and dissociating, instead of passively absorbing information. However, prior to drawing such a bold conclusion, it is necessary to examine the conditions of possibility of the situation at hand.

Securing insecurity

It is at this point that Jameson's warning on the significance of the mediated perception of the JFK assassination as an "inaugural event", his insistence that it "gave what we call a Utopian glimpse into some collective communicational 'festival' *whose ultimate logic and promise is incompatible with our mode of production*,"⁷ should be recalled. The late capitalist mode of production implied by Jameson, is not subverted by the event of the emergence of a global television audience. The audience does seemingly get an opportunity to use the facilitated and accelerated access to information to its advantage. Rancière's lesson seems to have been learned: "Spectatorship is not a passivity that must be turned into activity. It is our normal situation." (Rancière, 2008: 279). However, recognizing spectatorship as a "normal situation" that one need not be ashamed of, does not necessarily imply emancipation as such. What is the rationale behind becoming an "emancipated spectator" if one gets caught up in the logic of meticulously seeking out danger, threats, and conspiracies in the entire information one is handed? Who benefits from a society of emancipated spectators if all of their emancipated potential gets diluted in their efforts to remain constantly alert, ready to act if the state of emergency suddenly turns into an actual threat? Moreover, viewing the situation from this angle makes it almost contradict, rather than support Rancière's argument for the emancipation of the spectator. "Emancipation /.../ begins when we dismiss the opposition between looking and acting and understand that the distribution of the visible itself is part of the configuration of domination and subjection," argues Rancière (2008: 277).

⁷ *Emphasized by the author of this text.*

In our case, the “distribution of the visible” acts in favour of reinforcing a certain narrative, namely that of constant threat, conspiracy, and their timelessness.

Threat and conspiracy here appear to operate in relation to various referents, coalescent in the notion of reason. Reason, by way of getting transferred from state authorities to the individual with the help of popular cultural accounts with a high degree of verisimilitude, seems to open the doors and act as one of the bedrocks of conspiracy culture. However, it actually is this very transposition of responsibility for reason and clarity from state authorities to the individual that allows the state to once again monopolize the issues of security (national, state, and individual). More than that, it gives it an opportunity to, in the best scenario, cherry-pick its favourite issues, or, in the worst case scenario, profit from all possible discourses of danger:

Different problematizations of security are comprised of different discourses of danger. Different discourses of danger revolve around different referent objects of security, such that different referent objects of security give rise to different kinds of governmental technologies and political rationalities. Security is therefore inscribed as a problematic before it gets inscribed as a value, a policy, or a politics. The problematic of security posed for example by life is simply not going to be the same as that posed by territory (la patrie), sovereignty (Volk, Reich, Fuehrer, demos), or, indeed, reason (logos, raison, rationalitaet). (Dillon, 2007: 10)

Dillon (2007: 12) further notes that the advent of biopolitics and its extension of the issue of security to life (and the average individual) has gradually transformed state policymakers into traders, selling the future, operating with the “calculus of contingency, risk, un-certainty, and probability at least as much as they do in the geostrategic calculus of state policy and sovereign wills.” Even if, for the purposes of proceeding with our own argument, we – contrary to Dillon – bracket off the implications this understanding of security has, when coupled with a new (not necessarily human or organic) understanding of life which has emerged due to technological progress of the 20th and 21st centuries, an important point comes to the fore. Cultivating conspiracy, personal responsibility for one’s own knowledge and linking knowledge to security appears to function as a securitization strategy on a so called mezzo level, extended over biopolitics reaching to the micro level, and geopolitics on a macro scale. The strategy of securitization may here be understood as the part of the security dispositif referring to “discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral

and philanthropic propositions" (Foucault, 1980: 194) enabling individuals themselves to strive towards minimizing potential risks and threats with preventive actions, presupposing an alert and vigilant attitude. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben and Carl Schmitt, Velasco Arias (2013: 363) further argues that "that the obsession with protecting order from any contingency not envisaged in the regulatory and criminal codes entails the generalisation of decisions that, in seeking to protect law and order, lie outside the law. The dire consequence is that they end up denying what they sought to protect." It is this very paradox that seems to come out most clearly in the logic of securitization: allowing anything to become a security issue, a potential threat, expands the possibilities for establishing a state of emergency, where sovereign authority can legitimately operate outside of the law.

In this sense, the dispositif of security, explored by Foucault in his lectures on biopolitics, is strongly linked to the dispositif of risk if the latter is seen as implying a type of relation to the future that determines interventions in the present aimed at controlling its potential harmful effects, as argued by Aradau and van Munster (2008: 25). Risk management is a way of organising reality, domesticating the future, disciplining contingency, and rationalising individual behaviour. Velasco Arias (2013: 370) emphasizes that in the post-9/11 world, risk is increasingly becoming understood as precaution rather than insurance, further expanding the potential of securitization strategies. Gonzalo Arias (2013: 370) concludes that "uncertainty, and, at the same time, the certainty that an absolute catastrophe is possible, justify the need for preventive penal measures that lie outside the law and break with ordinary penal logic." Furthermore, it is this level: the level of legitimizing exception, and, accordingly, the level between geopolitics and biopolitics, where the interaction between popular culture and its political discontents is to be sought. Muller (2008: 201) notes that "popular culture not only reflects how ubiquitous risk management is becoming as a mode of governance: its performances and imaginations play a constitutive role in fostering particular perceptions of these technologies of rule, their limits and (im)possibilities." Drawing on this, it is possible to argue that popular cultural accounts of the Kennedy assassination indeed acted (and still do) as a platform for the post-9/11 precautionary risk driven imaginary.

However, it does not yet explain the mechanics of the logic that enabled such a platform to develop in the first place. Agreeing with Aupers (2012) that conspiracy culture is by no means opposite to the logic of modernization, but, on the contrary, is conditioned by this very logic, we will proceed by attempting to outline the epistemological underpinnings or, in Kantian terms, the conditions of possibility that, to our mind, ultimately saw to the rise of conspiracy culture after the Kennedy assassination.

From Kennedy's public image to Kant's public reason

It has been the intention of this text to emphasize the inherent tension that seems to dominate the debates around the legacy of the JFK assassination, in particular in the domain of popular culture. The tension seems to revolve around several perplexing questions, all referring to the public's right to know. The initial presupposition is clear: the public has the right to know. Yet, difficulties occur when that same public wishes to interfere with what exactly it has the right to know and how it has the right to reason about it. In this arena, historiographical struggles about "the truth" typically take place. The very fact that these struggles are battled out, that they come to take place⁸ signifies that the promise of the emancipation of the spectator, envisaged by Rancière, and, to an extent seemingly facilitated by the newest information and communication technologies (ICTs) remains utopian. Namely, they are not battled out by or between spectators, but between self-proclaimed emancipated spectators and authorities of varying origins and legitimated through different channels (e.g. various governmental commissions and committees established to research the assassination on the one hand, or the Kennedy family on the other). It could be said that battles are played out in the domain of public reason: the domain that Kant, in his short essay "What is the Enlightenment?" perceives as a key component of a mature society; the domain where nothing should constrain reasoning. Kant's essay, defining the Enlightenment as a political project aimed at mankind's "exit out of immaturity,"⁹ can hardly be taken as an action plan or an operational definition of the Enlightenment. Rather, as argued by Foucault (1984: 33), its significance lies in the fact that it presented a timely reflection on the present – arguably the first one in the history of philosophy that conceived of the present in entirely negative terms (as an exit) – and posed a question, no doubt inspired by the political project of the Enlightenment: the question of "knowing what limits knowledge has to renounce transgressing". "The critique is, in a sense, the handbook of reason that has grown up in Enlightenment; and, conversely, the Enlightenment is the age of the critique," maintains Foucault (1984: 48). The age of critique envisaged by Kant may hardly be likened to critique as perceived by an average individual today: far from expressing subjective opinions,¹⁰ it is conceived of as

⁸ An alternative scenario would be allowing different accounts to settle peacefully along one another.

⁹ Maturity should here be understood as the capacity of a society to function in areas that require the use of reason without relying on authority.

¹⁰ In Kant's terms, this would belong to the domain of illegitimate uses of public reason, characterized as "what give rise to dogmatism and heteronomy, along with illusion; on the other hand, it is when the legitimate use of reason has been clearly defined in its principles that its autonomy can be assured." (Foucault, 1984: 47)

an incarnation of universal public reason. "The public and free use of autonomous reason will be the best guarantee of obedience, on condition, however, that the political principle that must be obeyed itself be in conformity with universal reason," elaborates Foucault (1984: 48), pointing to the conclusion that, in a mature society, the domain of public reason, limited only by an appropriate political principle, should not resemble a battlefield.

At this point, it seems that conspiracy-inspired debates triggered by the Kennedy assassination and played out at various levels of public discourse, are symptomatic of a double "trap". On the one hand, they are caught up in the logic of striving towards an epoch of public reason and the emancipated spectator, both of which are encouraged by swift technological progress and the inclusive character of contemporary media. Furthermore, these impulses are caught up into the rationalist logic of modernization, once triggered by the aspirations and development of capitalism. On the other hand, this logic seems to have been pushed to its limits and pressed against the demands posed by this very progress: demands for a redefinition of both the political principle, able to operate according to universal reason, and the legitimate topics of public reason. Hence, the question that needs to be posed indeed appears to be the inverse of Kant's search for the "limits that knowledge has to renounce transgressing." The hope to locate these limits seems illusory, as they are obscured by the seeming inclusiveness of consumer culture and new media, the superficial promise of complete accessibility of all knowledge. Foucault (1984: 50) modifies the question, adapting it to contemporary times, in the following way: "in what is given to us as universal necessary obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent and the product of arbitrary constraints?" From the point of view of the argument developed in this text, that "whatever" is conspiracy itself. The place it occupies is that of a constant, internalized security threat. This constant threat acts as a legitimization of an incessant potentiality of a state of emergency.

With the logic of the current American political system in mind, it is evident that the prerogative of announcing a state of emergency (and acting accordingly, i.e. by the rules applying to such exceptional states) is in the hands of the government. The emancipatory potential of public reason in such a system is therefore doomed to remain an illusion. As shown by the debates, enacted in and triggered by popular cultural addresses of the JFK assassination, the "universal, the public, and the free uses of reason" are, at this point in time, not superimposed on one another, but, rather, are facing different directions. Technological progress may seem to provide the ideal conditions for the development of public reason, yet the inequalities, to a large extent created, sustained by, and constitutive of the system of corporate capitalism, coupled with the American political system, limit the scope

of the “public” allowed to “reason”. And even the members of the public that is allowed to reason, do not face each other on equal footing. Reason itself hence does not prove to be the decisive component of “public reason”. Rather, what appears as public, and arguably reasonable, reflects – in the JFK case – a securitization strategy that make full use of the distracting effect of seeming instability, tempting and lulling repetition, and apparently encouraging critical thinking, to the ends of preserving an existent balance of power, played out between the political system and actors in the political arena, and rooted in a certain understanding of the project, and logic of the Enlightenment. This logic may allow for post-modernism in terms of form, but seems to be decidedly modern in its axiology.

From this angle, the JFK assassination proved to be a point where this logic found itself at a crossroads. It could have been given up, defeated, but, as implied by Jameson’s comment on the “mode of production” that hinders the potential of new media from being actualized on the level of agency, it was not. It merely adopted a different subsistence strategy, distracting and dispersing the attention and efforts of potential new actors, turning them rather harmless. Moreover, this new strategy, at the time aimed at controlling the past and present, prepared the terrain for post-9/11 politics, defined by the post-11/22 epistemological break, and, in terms of the security dispositif, by an emphasis of precautionary risk management.

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