

Chapter 7 - *Mr. Stone Goes To Washington: JFK 2.4*

By Mark de Valk

Introduction – ‘reel’/ ‘real’ political assassination/investigation context

Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) is an impressionistic docu-narrative examining a range of politicised characters whose motives and means intersect with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas on 22nd November, 1963. Here, a range of military intelligence types, from the lowliest lurid street informer ascending to the highest of Pentagon brass, are subjected to the (camera) lens of macroscopic scrutiny so as to interpret their (publicly documented) actions and associations; here, the resultant analysis is concocted into a finely-spun conspiratorial tapestry of internecine intelligence/military factions of whom Stone and his script co-writer, Zachary Sklar, implicate directly in Kennedy's publicly-viewed demise on Elm Street in Dealey Plaza.

The film offers us Stone's polemic, which is antithetical to the government's official findings as published in the 'Warren Report' (released September, 1964), which focused the government's and FBI's full investigative resources to enable a narrative affixing blame on a 'lone-nut' disenfranchised pro-Fidel Castro/pro-Marxist-Leninist 24-year-old former Marine, radar-operator and Russian defector, Lee Harvey Oswald. This 'lone gunman' had fortuitously landed a job in a warehouse overlooking the Presidential parade route only six weeks prior to the November 22 ambush. Oswald's job was stacking book orders at the Sexton Building (commonly denoted as, The Texas School Book Depository); from this locale, out a 6th floor window, government and police officialdom attribute that Oswald's fusillade was directed toward the presidential limousine at some 300 yards distance, moving

in a direction away from his 'sniper's nest'. The seven-member panel of the President's (Lyndon B. Johnson) Commission on the Assassination of John F. Kennedy (aka 'The Warren Commission', as fronted by Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Earl Warren) concluded in their examination, per the 'best available evidence', that there was 'no conspiracy, domestic or foreign' involved with President Kennedy's murder and that Oswald, 'to the exclusion of all others',¹ fired the fatal bullets.

Critical response to the film and its director were meted out with reddened derision. The film's plot premise and thematic conclusions were excoriated by many mainstream press and television media outlets save for some notable reasoned exceptions. In full battle-mode, Oliver Stone, with the stentorian vigour attributed to his protagonist Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner), fended off the literary and ad hominem media offensive with many an Op Ed rebuttal. Personalities, such as writer Norman Mailer and Jack Valenti, then president and chief executive of the Motion Picture Association of America (and a previous high-level advisor to President Johnson during the 1960s), pontificated about the film, correspondingly, as likened from being a Greek tragic myth through to a Leni Riefenstahl cinematic propaganda diatribe for the Nazis.² Leaked copies of the script's early draft, in advance of the film's December, 1991 release, found their way to particular magazine/newspaper columnists/editors who proceeded to denigrate the 'kaleidoscopic' Kurosawa-inspired³ narrative's 'light-shining', which aims its thematic beam to illuminate military and intelligence faction responsibility for Kennedy's obliteration on a Dallas side-street.

¹ *The Warren Report*, Government Printing Office, 1964; also see the 26 volumes of 'supporting evidence', which followed the initial publication of the summation report. Oswald was also found by the Commission to be 'responsible' for the slaying of Dallas Police Officer J.D. Tippit, but a few miles away from Dealey Plaza and less than 45 minutes after the assassination; all of Oswald's actions are disputed in Stone and Sklar's film script.

² Stone, Oliver & Sklar, Zachary, *JFK, The Book of the Film: The Documented Screenplay*, New York: Applause Books, 1992

³ Salewicz, Chris, *Oliver Stone*, New York: Orion Books, 1997

Stone and Sklar's script interweaves a cavalcade of witnesses and intelligence underworld-types that were tracked down by District Attorney Jim Garrison (Costner) of New Orleans, which was the birth-place and on-again-off-again residence/place of business of accused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald (Gary Oldman). Here, Garrisons' investigation progresses inclusive of evidentiary obstacles, colleague double-dealings and 'convenient' witness deaths. His investigation reaches a climax when criminal charges are proffered against a city-local wealthy businessman, Clay Shaw⁴ (Tommy Lee Jones), for complicity in the death of JFK; in other words, a conspiracy of anti-Kennedy, anti-Castro interests/zealots who contributed and colluded with a compartmentalised intelligence/military cabal in executing, both, the assassination and the setting-up of Oswald as 'patsy' to take the blame.

Garrison's investigation spanned three years, from 1966-1969, with the resultant court-case finding for an acquittal of Shaw. But of significant note, the jury foreman made the following public announcement to assembled television cameras and press (also written into the screenplay), "We believe there was a conspiracy, but whether Clay Shaw was a part of it is another kettle of fish" (March 1, 1969, New Orleans Parish courthouse)⁵. The jury foreman's statement was all but ignored by the media, the public and government officials; the trial's result led to Garrison's castigation and the demand for his resignation by newspaper and television pundits. *On The Trail of the Assassins* (published 1988) is Jim Garrison's personal narrative account of his evidentiary findings, the rationale for charging Shaw and the subsequent politicised 'witch-hunt' that forced him from his elected DA's office. But for the post-trial elements of Garrison's experience, the textual material was adopted by Stone and Sklar as foundation to their screenplay. Indeed, like being in the throes

⁴ In 1979, former head of CIA covert operations, Richard Helms, acknowledged in legal testimony that Shaw had 'agency connections'. Additional documents, released in 1992 through the Assassination Records & Review Board (via a Congressional act-of-law passed in the wake of public demand following the theatrical release of *JFK*), further confirmed Shaw's Agency affiliation.

⁵ Stone & Sklar, 1992

of Plato's Cave, the film forces its viewers to confront their darkest trepidations and fears that there exists a 'shadow' power-coterie, one that colluded and was duplicitous in the overthrow of the *body-politic* in 1963. History informs us, as Aldous Huxley suggests in *Propaganda in a Democratic Society*, that:

In their propaganda today's dictators rely for the most part on repetition, suppression and rationalization – the repetition of catchwords which they wish to be accepted as true, the suppression of facts which they wish to be ignored, the arousal and rationalization of passions which may be used in the interests of the Party or the State. As the art and science of manipulation come to be better understood, the dictators of the future will doubtless learn to combine these techniques with the non-stop distractions which, in the West, are now threatening to drown in a sea of irrelevance the rational propaganda essential to the maintenance of individual liberty and the survival of democratic institutions.⁶

Subjugating the 'King's body'

So as an approach to reading *JFK*, I will engage with Paul Virilio's *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (English edition, 1989), with further support via Michel Foucault's notions on the 'political technology of the body' (state tactics of subjugation of the '*body-politic*'), as analysed in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (English edition, 1991). Virilio deliberates on the 'radically changing fields of perception'⁷ per the congruency/history of the military's (Western, but particularly, American) perception of the battlefield in direct correlation with the armed forces' employment/development of cinematographic processes; here, his analysis charts the time-period from the turn of the 20th century to present-day. Virilio examines a range of logistical information, tactics and processes as garnered from the military-designed merger of 'image and space', which informed how the armed establishment's battle interpretations/requirements were planned/calculated as a means to further technological progression both in armaments and

⁶ Huxley, Aldous, *Brave New World Revisited*, London: Vintage Random House, 2004

⁷ Virilio, Paul, trans. Patrick Camiller, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, London: Verso, 1989, 10

camera/lens systems as progressed to gather intelligence. It is worth noting that Virilio's analysis of the military's interconnectedness with cinema harkens back to the period of World War I, where he considers D.W. Griffith's directorial and visionary prowess declining rapidly post 1919, with no 'war' to fuel his imagery and as narrative device. Also during this time period, the French director Abel Gance, who followed Griffith's work closely, was affiliated with the military during the Great War. Gance created films in consultation with the army, particularly examining themes pertaining to the rank and file soldier and issues of desertion. Virilio opines that Gance's fusion of military and filmmaking can be defined as, *war is cinema and cinema is war*.⁸ It is of interesting note that Jim Garrison (Stone's protagonist) was a WWII pilot who flew light single-engine aircraft, nicknamed 'Grasshoppers', that were outfitted for photographic reconnaissance ('flying observation post'⁹) of enemy territory behind the front lines; this is referenced in *JFK* during a confrontational scene where potential conspirator 'get-away' pilot, David Ferrie (Joe Pesci), is interrogated in Garrison's (Costner) office on his 'association' with the accused assassin.¹⁰

This notion of 'industrialised warfare' is helpful to draw from to examine Stone's thematic narrative assertions of political conspiracy and to read *JFK* as a 'non-war war film'. A 'war film' that narratively pits the state's Commander-in-Chief/'King' (*body-politic*), President John F. Kennedy, against a powerful compartmentalised cabal who were positioned within a range of armed services and intelligence arms of the U.S. government; here, Stone references: CIA, Pentagon, NSA, DIA, ONI, FBI elements/associations. Paul Virilio notes,

The true war film [does] not necessarily have to depict war or any actual battle [as] the cinema [is] able to create surprise (technological,

⁸ Virilio, 1989, 34

⁹ Ibid, 22

¹⁰ Stone & Sklar, 1992

psychological, etc.), it effectively [comes] under the category of weapons'¹¹

Indeed, during the climactic courtroom scene in *JFK*, Garrison (Costner) beseeches the jury (audience): 'Do not forget your dying King'. I want to suggest that Stone and Sklar's scripting of that line can be read as an appeal to consider Kennedy's demise as a planned direct attack on the 'King's body' (or *political-will* of the people), the *body-politic*. As such, an assault on the 'King' where Stone/Garrison argues to the jury/audience for a conviction against Shaw as a means to reign-in an anti-Kennedy competing sovereign (faction), which has 'taken-over' political power via an internal coup-d'état,

What kind of 'national security' do we have when we have been robbed of our leaders? [...] What 'national security' permits the removal of fundamental power from the hands of the American people and validates the ascendancy of invisible government in the United States?¹²

Just such an 'invisible government' and its impending potential for 'over-reach', which consisted of competing governmental/intelligence/corporate power interests, was forewarned in President Eisenhower's farewell television address to the American public just three days prior to Kennedy's inauguration of 20th January, 1961 (*JFK* opens with this footage/voice-over, intercut with a montage of period archival footage). Eisenhower particularly warns against the 'unwarranted power' of 'the military industrial complex'¹³; I, henceforth, refer to this conglomerate of interests as the 'sovereign'.

Correspondingly, Foucault's examination of 'state power and control systems' is instructive per his notions on the 'spectacle of the scaffold'; that is, the punished body as 'legal' ritual

¹¹ Virilio, 1989, 10

¹² Ibid, 177

¹³ Broadcast live across all three American networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) on 17th January, 1963.

of control; the acquisition of a 'political knowledge of the body; the technology of power; the politicised anatomy'.¹⁴ Here, I will discuss the fatal assault on Kennedy, that is, the 'subjugation' of his personhood/corporeality, as representative of an attack directed upon the *body-politic* ('the King's body') as meted out by a competing sovereign (intel/military) faction.¹⁵ As such, the President's daylight-demise can be equated to a pre-Enlightenment public execution, one that takes place within the public square (Dealey Plaza). There is strong evidence to suggest that *JFK* can be charted as a 'war of pictures and sounds' compiled to critique the nature of state-power that 'consumes one of its own', via the sovereign's 'war machine'.¹⁶

Developing this point, Stone's interpretation of the events that contributed to the 'removal' of the 'King's body' can also be interpreted, psychoanalytically, as a form of filmic 're-inscription'¹⁷ of the *body-politic*. Certainly, *JFK* functions as a cultural artefact, that challenges the state's 'official' account of events pertaining to the 'execution', by offering a imagery and a narrative that 're-imagines' what meaning/evidence can be affixed/gleaned from the destruction of Kennedy's own corporeality and as representative of the *body-politic*. Here, Stone's 'psychical implications' offer us the 'King's body' as one 'capable of being rewritten, reconstituted, in other terms than those of which mark[ed] it'^{18 19}

The Surveilled & Targeted ('King's') Body

¹⁴ Foucault, 1991

¹⁵ Here, Julius Caesar's Shakespearian Senatorial demise is instructive.

¹⁶ Virilio, 1989

¹⁷ Grosz, Elizabeth, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a New Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 61

¹⁹ Of note is director John Frankenheimer's prescient *Seven Days In May* (released, February, 1964), which mines the thematic of an American internal coup d'état to topple the President via elements within the U.S. military; filming of the original 1962 novel was supported by Kennedy during mid-1963, with the production almost overlapping the assassination date in late November of that year.

To understand more, we can directly observe the impending and resultant 'public spectacle' of the President's demise via Stone's narrative inter-cutting of 'authentic' 8mm film footage depicting the assassination as captured by Dallas garment manufacturer Abraham Zapruder's 'watching machine'. Zapruder was witness to the event in Dealey Plaza, but only via viewfinder, as his gaze of the presidential parade was concentrated through a consumer high-grade Bell & Howell 414 standard-8mm camera, which captured the President's exploding cranium in full 'home-movie' colour and with surveillance-like equanimity; the frame calmly and smoothly tracking the unfolding tragedy, much like a 'CCTV feed' (of which I will discuss further on) that can be replayed and examined as means of 'evidence'²⁰. This is exemplified in *JFK* during the climatic courtroom scene where the original Zapruder film is screened for the jury (cinema audience). At the framic point of bullet-impact upon Kennedy's head (known as 'frame 313')²¹, Garrison (Costner) repeats the phrase 'back and to the left', which challenges the government-line that two shots hit Kennedy from behind, one to the head and one traversing the neck/throat area (and, thus, propelling him forward). A third shot was deemed to have missed its target, altogether, striking a distant street-curb causing splintered concrete debris to injure a bystander.

Here, the Zapruder frames literally depict/denote to the jury (the audience) an unequivocal backward-motion of Kennedy's cranium/upper torso. Three times *JFK* depicts an optically enhanced series of frames presenting a grainy in-tight shot of Kennedy's skull splitting open and his body being driven against the backseat of the limousine; this repetitive succession of images casts Zapruder's lens in the role of a 'Gatling-gun', equating rapid-fire delivery/'proving' of Stone's counter-government conspiracy narrative. Stone's use of Zapruder's close-in colour imagery of pixelated blood-red brain-spray engulfs the frame to

²⁰ But not seen until 1975 as a continuous film strip; prior to that year, only government sanctioned and selected still frames had been published in various mainstream print-media for public consumption.

²¹ The extant Zapruder film comprises 486 individual frames.

'break' the government's 'hypnotic' narrative hold on the public (jury/audience). As such, *JFK*'s inclusion/optical manipulation of the Zapruder film 'original' proffers its thematic to fragment and 'obliterate' audience/public (jury) pre-conceptions of the state's official pronouncements on the parameters/investigation of the assassination up to the time of the 1969 trial (and on to today).

Developing this point, Virilio draws attention to Aldous Huxley's observations on the psychology of perception, which are apropos in terms of underscoring how Stone's/Zapruder's 'seeing' of the 'King's body', inclusive of historical hindsight, replaces/thwarts the state's 'hypnotic' hold on the public's understanding/interpretation of Kennedy's demise. I would argue that Stone offers up a replacement set of 'hypnotic' images/scenes as both anti-dote and as a re-claiming of the 'Z-film' narrative, wresting/reclaiming its 'authorial' control and pictorial dissemination for public discernment and revaluation; this is accomplished in *JFK* by:

[re]'Highjacking [the] spectator's gaze...making the body[-*politic*]
disappear into a momentary agglomeration of sense data, oscillating
between the production of luminous impressions and pure fascination
that dispels perceptual awareness and induces hypnosis'²²

In practice, District Attorney Jim Garrison's (Stone's) courtroom 'hypnotic' re-
imagination/re-investigation of state-sanctioned events, pertaining to the assassination (up to
that point during the 1969 trial), reflect the first 'official' resistance to the government's
published narrative and interpretation of the content/context of Zapruder's film, inclusive of
the first public-forum screening of the material.²³ The courtroom viewing of the Z-film (in

²² Huxley, Aldous, *The Art of Seeing* (1943) in Virilio, 1989, 14

²³ Prior to the Shaw public trial, there were numerous published works and reputable critics challenging the government's selective use of witnesses, the testimonies sought, the handling/interpretation of evidence and

JFK and the actual trial), as a complete strip of projected celluloid, is demonstrative of how powerful Zapruder's 8mm home-movie's 'mesmerising' effect was/is in terms of challenging the jury's (current-day audience's) pre-conceived notions of the Dallas events of 22nd November, 1963. Zapruder's 'entrancing' imagery, as examined within Stone's thematic contentions, invoke at least the consideration/potential of the existence/evidence of governmental malfeasance, not only in Garrison's case against Clay Shaw (as one of a group of low-level conspirators) (see Fig. 1) but also in the state's case against Oswald as the 'lone-shooter' of Kennedy.



(Fig. 7 Jim Garrison and Clay Shaw trial news article)

In the previous section I noted Zapruder's camera imagery as being representational of a 'closed-circuit-feed' that 'surveils' the transpiring events in Dealey Plaza. Therefore, I want to suggest that in the film's climactic courtroom scene the Zapruder footage functions much as how CCTV (Closed Circuit Television) security video imagery is employed, with ever-increasing fashion, in today's criminal court-cases (and in the 'court of public opinion' via

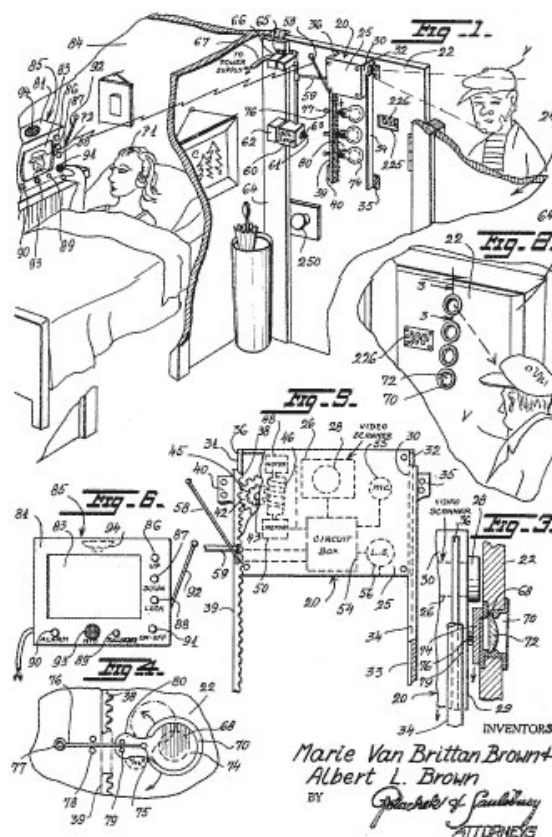
Oswald's associations/guilt as presented to the public. This included the Zapruder film as it had been 'secreted' away in 1963; Garrison was only able to secure a copy for the 1969 trial under subpoena.

social media) by defence councillors and prosecutors, alike, in furtherance of conviction or exoneration. Leading on from this point, in considering Zapruder's 'closed-circuit-feed' we witness *JFK*'s adoption/use of repetition as embodying the 'mimetic faculty of cinema', whose lineage, I would argue, traces back to the WWII development/employment of technicolour 'war painting' where colour was consciously advocated/utilised as a means to 'induce the populace out of apathy in the face of danger'.²⁴ Colour technological development was promoted in the 1940s/50s by the U.S. military (both in its own training and 'public service' productions and as lobbied to major Hollywood studios) for maximising the particular thematic message that they either concurred with in a script or that they wanted to promote via their self-produced pro-military government financed films. Here, Stone exaggerates/invokes, as 'war painting', the excesses of Zapruder's Kodachrome saturated-colour 'frame 313' of Kennedy's body-movement, which exemplifies/challenges an audience's (the jury's) 'apathy in the face of [sovereign/state] danger'.

It is worth digressing slightly to consider the military's development of the closed-circuit-feed, which occurred during WWII. American armed services first used early monitoring capabilities during the test and design phase of atomic bomb materials. Initially, these camera-monitoring systems were designed in 1942 by German engineer Walter Burch; the impetus was to be able to afford safe-distance television-type viewing to supervise the experimentation of Nazi V-2 rocket systems. These wireless systems operate across the airwaves at a frequency of 2.4GHz, which is a radio and television UHF (ultra-high frequency) carrier also used for current-day mobile phone and Wi-Fi signal transmission. It wasn't until over twenty years later, in 1966, that African-American inventor Marie Van Brittan Brown devised the first concept/use of the closed-circuit-feed for her 'CCTV' process, which was specifically created for the security purpose of monitoring of one's

²⁴ Virilio, 1989, 13

property. Brown and her husband rigged up the first home-system that included camera positioning and in-house monitor TV screens (see Fig. 2); Van Brittan Brown then filed for a patent that took three years to be formalised, of which she received during the same year as Shaw's trial (1969).



(Fig. 8 Marie Van Brittan Brown & Albert Brown's home CCTV design - 1966)

Illusion of Proximity

Virilio argues that it was during the early 1960s American incursion into Vietnam (Stone, himself, a disaffected veteran) that the notion of 'direct vision' war-waging was *a fait accompli*, as the military's battlefield surveillance/'seeing' of the 'target had [now] become a

cinema 'location', the battlefield a film set out of bounds to civilians'.²⁵ In fact, the Dealey Plaza parkette, with its overlooking railway underpass, was ordered by city officials to be kept free of spectators on November 22. The public was restricted from entering by police dictate; however, a handful of spectators did manage to find their way to a viewing-point directly in-line, and at street eye-level, with the attack on the limousine. This included Zapruder, whose back faced the encroaching line-of-fire (as argued for in *JFK*); he was positioned at an elevated level, pointing his camera downward at the slow-moving open-top motorcade. For the most, public viewing of the procession was kept to the side-walk areas with a markedly 'thinned-out' public presence at the parade's locale termination on Elm Street, which was also overlooked by the Texas School Book Depository and the higher-elevated 'grassy knoll' area. Here, Stone argues for a 'barrage of shots', from multiple angles of fire, that converged in the plaza's 'conveniently' sparsely-populated triangulated topography; as such, Zapruder's filming of the 'battlefield...field of perception'²⁶ captured this 'saturation of space'²⁷ from which Stone and the sovereign have wringed, to great effect, as means to promote competing assassination narrative outcomes.

Expanding on this theme, we can equate an inverted notion of Virilio's concept of 'direct vision' as a way to read Zapruder's/Stone's challenge to the government's narrative of events. This is accomplished by the filmmaker conscripting Zapruder's/the state's 'seeing' 'CCTV' 'supply of images' of the 'surveilled and besieged' *body-politic*/Kennedy, which affords the audience (jury) an '[re-]interpretative subjectivity that is always in play in the act of looking'²⁸; as such, an interpretation that co-opts/inverts the sovereign's (military/intel) evidentiary account of the 'targeted' 'King's body'. The *prima facie* evidence, of both the actual assassination and as narrative dénouement-device in *JFK*, centres on this 26-second

²⁵ Virilio, 1989, 16

²⁶ Ibid, 26

²⁷ Ibid, 25

²⁸ Ibid, 3

strip of amateur film footage displaying the peripatetic Presidential cavalcade as it glides past Zapruder's place of business, the Dal-Tex Building (kitty-corner to the 'lone assassin's' Texas School Depository 6th floor window). The 8-mm footage, with all rights appropriated by corporate entity within 24 hours of the assassination, is then 'packaged' to the public in a 'drip-by-drip' fashion with a limited number of chosen frames parsed-out per publication.

The early printed Zapruder frames, as published in LIFE magazine, dovetailed with the Warren Commission Report findings (1964); here, the released images editorially co-joined to outcomes as dictated by the 'official' government line of inquiry. The congruent totality of publisher (LIFE et al) and GPO (Government Printing Office) propagation of the Zapruder film's narrative, whose 'power lies in the 'illusion of proximity' they [as 'state-sanctioned' images] give to the spectator within a coherent temporal unit' (i.e. 'as homogenous witness...to objects moving before him')²⁹, is argued in Stone's *JFK* as propagandistic and as ocular deception. The Z-film's 'co-option' accords with 'their' version of the assassination events, the (select) witness testimony and the actions/motivations of the 'lone' gunman. *JFK*'s Garrison courtroom use of the assassination film is scripted to counter the government's promulgation that 'what you are seeing is what we say happened'. After screening the Zapruder film for the jury in *JFK*, Garrison (Costner) opines, 'The Official Legend is created and the media takes it from there. The glitter of official lies...confuse the eye and confound the understanding'.³⁰

As depicted in *JFK*, Zapruder's 'proximity' was fortuitous as he positioned himself in the most advantageous viewing position within Dealey Plaza³¹. Affording the most optimal sightline, he hopped atop a four-foot-high concrete abutment that permitted a 'panoptic' view

²⁹ Ibid, 17

³⁰ Stone & Sklar, 1992, 176

³¹ Also see *Parkland*, Peter Landesman (2013), which encompasses a detailed sequence dramatising Zapruder's actions that day, including the financial bartering for the rights to his home-movie; the film promulgates the 'Oswald-did-it' scenario, with no acknowledgment of any potential conspiracy.

of the triangulated grassy topography³². This perch allowed for an angled downward head-on view (much as how current-day CCTV cameras are aslant) of the advancing open-top Presidential limousine as it descended the incline of Elm Street³³; this granted a ¾ ‘field of perception’ view of the vehicle’s occupants, the transpiring assassination scenario and a cluster of parade spectators/witnesses.

David Lubin argues that the *Zapruder* film represents,

A crucial cinematic text...one that intersects in myriad ways with other cinematic texts...as a piece of discourse that we are able to “hear” only because of our extensive culturally imbibed knowledge of other, overlapping cinematic discourses: the documentary, the pseudo-documentary, the art film, the anti-art film, the big-budget thriller, the low-budget thriller, the historical epic, the 8-millimeter home movie.³⁴

For this discussion, I offer Zapruder’s *ligne de foi* (faith line), i.e. the direct sightline from lens to limousine, as one of being an ‘act of taking aim’, his gaze an ‘ocular perception along an imaginary axis’, whose cinematographic telescopic eye functions as that of state-weapon, surveying ‘the great battlefield’.³⁵ Stone (re)appropriates Zapruder’s gaze (as initially co-opted by the state/sovereign) to provide the spectator with a ‘remote’ cinematic perspective and ‘a visual perception of [the] military action underway’.³⁶ I want to suggest that this notion evidences my view that the filmmaker’s narrative decision to include the original Zapruder film footage underprops *JFK*’s thematic, which exalts a competing sovereign entity

³² Dealey Plaza was created in 1940 as a city monument to George Bannerman Dealey, one of the founding city-fathers of Dallas.

³³ Wes Craven’s *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) is a referential ‘title-ode’ to the locale of the event by the director.

³⁴ Lubin, David, *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, 37

³⁵ Virilio, 1989

³⁶ Ibid

as responsible for the removal/elimination of President John F. Kennedy from public office/'throne'. Here, we can equate Zapruder's filmic observation/lens as an implement of 'exercised' institutional/sovereign 'technological power'; a gaze that executes 'public surveillance' of the assassination scene/space/objects/characters that populate the topographical sphere within Zapruder's field-of-view.

Indeed, Stone's co-option of Zapruder's *ligne de foi* challenges/critiques the competing sovereign's 'strategic' investment in the subjugation of Kennedy's 'political anatomy' as a means/route to obtaining/seizing political control/power via the 'condemnation' of the 'King's coded body'.³⁷ Developing this point, Kennedy, as *body-politic*, is ritually marked and 'purged' via public execution (here, Dealey Plaza as 'public scaffold'). Zapruder's 'closed-circuit-feed'/imagery functions as 'traces' of the event with its murderous consequence witnessed upon the 'King's' corporeal body as meted out 'within the public square'; additionally, the home-movie ('CCTV' imagery) functions as a means for public remembrance of (repeatable/re-screenable) 'observed pain'.³⁸

Leading on from this point, Zapruder's 'surveillance imagery', whose grainy resolution can be witnessed as exemplifying the 'first' incarnation of a closed-circuit television feed (CCTV), monitors and fetishises the complete subjugation/destruction of the anthropomorphised *body-politic*. All this suggests that Stone's *JFK* can be read as an (informed and well-argued) (re)interpretation of events, per the demise of Kennedy's 'king-body', as a means to challenge the official state account of the assassination; here, the director argues (cinematically/thematically) that the sovereign's media-sanctioned narrative 'representation of events, outstripped the presentation of facts'³⁹; that is, 'facts' as presented

³⁷ Foucault, 1991

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Virilio, 1989

by the sovereign and as contested by Jim Garrison and researcher/journalist, Jim Marrs,⁴⁰ both of whose published material the screenplay draws from and is credited, as such, in *JFK*. Stone's/Zapruder's 'supply of images...become the equivalent of an ammunition supply'⁴¹ as means to 'return fire' against the sovereign's protective 'circling of wagons' with regards to its narrative control/defense of how the assassination plot unfolded, not only in 1963, but during Shaw's 1969 conspiracy trial. Here, the film argues that the state/FBI/CIA collude with Clay Shaw's (Tommy Lee Jones) defence attorneys to fend off District Attorney Garrison (Kevin Costner) and to shield/obfuscate Shaw's connection/identity to/intelligence/military consortia. Zapruder's (and by extension *JFK's*/Stone's prima facia evidence) 'CCTV' footage occupies the 'act of killing' recorded visual ground that was kept secreted away from public viewing/scrutiny in Time-Life Magazine's New York head-office. The first national public viewing of the complete home-movie was broadcast twelve years later in 1975 where it played on a late-night television show, *Goodnight America*. Prior to that airing, only selected individual still-frames of the film footage had been printed for public consumption in the pages of LIFE magazine across a number of issues, which periodically published cover-page stories on Kennedy and the assassination events throughout the 1960s. On the day after the assassination, the publisher of LIFE had authorised its managing editor to negotiate and purchase all entitlements from the Zapruder family to control access to the film's images and its movie-rights. Prior to the film's late-night appearance on a major American television network (ABC) in 1975, the only previous public screening was during the Clay Shaw trial in 1969 where Garrison subpoenaed the film from Time-Life Incorporated and projected its 486 frames, as a continuous strip of movie film, to the jury panel and assembled courtroom observers. Garrison, clearly understanding

⁴⁰See Marrs, Jim, *Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy*, New York: Carroll & Graf, 1989.

⁴¹ Virilio, 1989

the Z-film's significance, did have copies made for dissemination to many University student-body's for college campus screenings.

Cinema-trance & the Scaffold

JFK opens with a 'documentary' introduction supplying political background and context of whom the President's likely enemies included. We are then introduced to the exposed Presidential party's fanfare arrival at Love Field, in Dallas, on the morning of 22nd November, 1963. With a *Joan-of-Arc*-like entrance into the city, Kennedy greets and waves approvingly from his Ford Lincoln open-top limousine (Stone creates this through composited archival and dramatised images). The procession snakes its way through the thronging Dallasite crowds (troops), his flanking 'Praetorian guard' sans arms. Here, the film presents the onlookers as a bodily mass whose demeanour, in its varied visages and pitched choruses, contort in in a form of reflexive exhalation; an exhalation that *mirrors* a collective sanction of its *political-will*, an embodied and emboldened *body-politic*. With its surging and ebbing judgement ('friend and foe, alike' amongst the greeting faces), lined roadways direct the path of its *King* with a *will* that leads/points the way for the 'carrying-out' of the impending 'death-sentence'. This moving peripatetic, transporting its 'condemned' to a place of 'thorns' whose crown-assault awaits, a crucifixion beckoning, a triangular public plaza looming on the horizon, a grassy-scaffold from whence the *body-will/body-politic* is to be rendered for state retribution for its 'dared transgressions'⁴².

Upon this scaffold (Dealey Plaza), a new episodic convergence of 'medium and message'⁴³ is set to arise/form from via a 'surveilled' and subjugated *body-politic*; a resurgent resurrection

⁴² Foucault, 1991

⁴³ see McLuhan, Marshal, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, London: Routledge, 2005 (of interest, the first year published, 1964, coincided with the release of the government's 'Warren Commission Report').

of exerted state-power to be 're-inscribed' on a mesmerised public, both live and as replayable event. This place of execution, filmed under shimmering skies with a hand-held camera supplying a series of hallucinatory light-streaked frames, is hypnotically-captured in *JFK* abetted by Zapruder's voyeuristic Kodachrome saturated-colour strip of 8mm film; this kaleidoscopic-view affords the 'battlefield/scaffold' for this public slaying, delivering an image-system where 'the ['King'/Kennedy's] posthumous public meaning is better grasped...as the new projection of a new collective experience of reception'⁴⁴, a shared public experience that was co-opted by the state to further the 'interests' of the sovereign.

Indeed, it is the 'reception' of this 'collective experience' that is challenged via *JFK*'s 'CCTV'-like courtroom use of the Zapruder film both as evidentiary 'surveillance' footage and as a 'copy' of the event. Consequently, Stone re-imagines the 'official' assassination event as sovereign-planned and invokes a challenge to initial public 'reception' of the 'original' promoted conclusions of the Warren Report's findings in 1964, which found no conspiracy, either domestic or foreign, at play. *JFK*'s 'play' depiction of this 'public' execution signifies, arguably, the 'screen as scaffold' with Stone's dramatised docu-recreations, inclusive of incorporating both an 'original copy' and dramatisation (re-make) of the Zapruder film, itself, can be read/viewed as a 'simulacrum – the copy without an original'.⁴⁵ Here, I would argue, *JFK*'s version of the assassination occurrences is not to function as a factual represent the 'original' event, but to reclaim the public's 'reception' of how 'this house of cards' was constructed via the state's construction of its 'copy' whose 'original' never existed.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Jameson, Frederic, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 2009, 355

⁴⁵ Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Glaser, Sheila Faria, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994

⁴⁶ see Fetzer, James H., Ph.D. (ed), *The Great Zapruder Film Hoax: Deceit and Deception in the Death of JFK*, Chicago: CatFeet Press, 2003; a comprehensive series of annotated essays by technical and scientific professionals who argue that the extant Zapruder film, as available for viewing today (including the 'copy' utilised in *JFK*), was visually manipulated by state-elements prior to its public dissemination.

Turning now to Baudrillard's critique of sovereign power from the advent of the 1960s, he ruminates that the Kennedy assassination can be read as crisis of representation, which reveals the collapse of political power into a simulated version of itself. As such, the Kennedy assassination only approaches reality with the discovery of the Zapruder film (fake) copies where, 'power can stage its own murder to rediscover a glimmer of existence and legitimacy'.⁴⁷ Hence, the Zapruder film, both the original state-owned 'copy' and JFK's 'copying' (dramatisation) of Zapruder's imagery, can be read as both artefact depicting a congruency of sovereign power consolidation and as meted-out sovereign punishment occurring within the 'public square'. These dichotomous/mirroring 'CCTV' 'surveillance' Z-films (the sovereign's copy and *JFK*'s copying) function both as 'the reflection of a profound reality [and one that] masks the absence of a profound reality';⁴⁸ in practice, the captured assassination event as reflective of, and illustrative of, the Z-film's dichotomic 'reception', resultant from its co-option by dramatist and state. At one level it is possible to see that the Zapruder film, both the 'original' (state-copy) and *JFK*'s dramatised depiction/'original' (copy) usage of the Zapruder film, denotes, arguably, the first 'post-modern film' with its content depicting the execution/assassination not representing 'reality', but only ever a version of 'reality'. Developing this point, Fredric Jameson's notion on this 'collective reception' avers:

The assassination of John F. Kennedy was a unique event, not least because it was a unique collective (and media, communicational) experience, which trained people to read such events in a new way...there are grounds for thinking that his

⁴⁷ Baudrillard, Jean, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988, 177

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 6

posthumous public meaning is better grasped...as the projection of a new collective experience of reception.⁴⁹

Jameson considers the Kennedy assassination as a moment of societal transition, not from any political change that resulted from the change of power post JFK's death, but by being part of a world-wide television ('CCTV') audience who collectively witnessed the grief. Jameson distinguishes the 1963 assassination as the foundational experience of post-modernism as argued per the event's global experience, not as 'direct and unmediated' but directed through 'media representations'.⁵⁰ He reasons that the Kennedy assassination is emblematic as a defining moment whereby the television-viewing populace, on a global scale, became segregated and inert as a result of the collective grief that infused itself into the *body-politic* through the broadcast ('surveillance') gaze of the November, 22, 1963 assassination event and its follow-up government investigation findings. I would suggest that Stone's 'broadcast' of the Kennedy events, via *JFK* almost three decades subsequent, serves as antidote to this 'inertness' by diffusing and remedying the public's/*body-politic* grief-paralysis, particularly as the greater preponderance of the global-broadcast/screening of *JFK* has occurred via a television/monitor, inclusive of network/online broadcasts, VHS video-cassette(1990s), dvd and high-definition formats.⁵¹

Consequently, Stone's use of 'screen-language' challenges the 'official' authoritarian dictate of the state's 'screen language', with both scenarios' 'reception', for the most, received via televisual devices found within the 'domestic sphere' of the home; here, I would suggest as precursor/'pre-link' to Van Brittan Brown's creation of the first home 'CCTV monitor' system realised just three years after the assassination. The question of interest, here, is: was

⁴⁹ Jameson, 2009, 355

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ World-wide small screen home-viewing of *JFK* has now outstripped its initial theatrical release audience numbers from December, 1991 through 1992.

the 'medium' ('CCTV' monitor) created/manufactured subsequent to the sovereign-determined 'message' ('surveillance'/Z-film of the assassination) as a means to 'capture' its audience? This query is pertinent as the 'message' of what the Z-film's content 'showed' was not shown to the public until 1969, six years after the assassination and to the time of the patent of the Van Brittan Brown's patent for 'CCTV'. In the previous section it was noted that the first national public viewing of the Zapruder film was in 1975, some 12 years from Kennedy's demise. Had television progressed to the technological point that, as a medium, it was now 'ready' to disseminate the sovereign's (obfuscated/controlled) 'message'? I would suggest that Stone's continuous 'review' of the 'surveillance' images function as a 'medium' to affect an de-obfuscation and present an alternative 'message' of the assassination. Here, *JFK* embodies Virilio's notion of a framic 'battlefield' by summoning the camera's aim to display the 'spectacle of the scaffold'⁵² where a public-square execution, carried out by a competing sovereign (faction), is meted out upon the 'King'/body-politic as retribution for state-transgressions.⁵³ It is of interesting note that Jameson posits that conspiracy films, such as *JFK*, rely on the reoccurring premise of 'representing the technology of representation',⁵⁴ as opposed to the actual conspiratorial events of the narrative.

There is evidence to support the view that Foucault's notion of the 'spectacle of the scaffold' is in effect here, as the topographical area or 'square' (Dealey Plaza) where the assassination unfolded (as recorded by Zapruder), can be read as a return to the Pre-Enlightenment public execution, an event witnessed by the town's (city of Dallas) inhabitants. As Jameson argued per the Z-film being the first 'post-modern film', the footage is demonstrative of not only the return of the public execution but as a replayable cinematic event, which serves sovereign

⁵² Foucault, 1991

⁵³ see Douglass, James W., *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died & Why It Matters*, New York: Orbis Books, 2008; Mahoney, Richard D., *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983; Newman, John, *JFK and Vietnam: Deception, Intrigue and the Struggle for Power*, New York: Warner Books, 1992

⁵⁴ see Jameson, Fredric, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995

power projection through the Zapruder imagery's ability to act as reflexive reminder to the public of the retributive consequences as a means of 'revenge upon the body' for the digressions against the state. It is worth noting that the iconography of the Kennedy assassination, its depiction and interpretation, in both documented and dramatic form, has 'become a kind of verbal and visual shorthand for a loss of faith in the authorities'⁵⁵. This loss of 'faith' is visually demonstrative in *JFK* through Stone's central challenge to the public's pre-conceived notions/perspective of the sovereign's 'truth-telling', this is exemplified through his protagonist's epiphany/realisation that the 'accepted' narrative is riddled with inconsistency, lapses and falsehoods contrived to 'divert' attention/scrutiny from those who now occupy political power positions within the government and military hierarchies. All this suggests that the elimination of Kennedy is emblematic, as proffered by Stone, of sovereign-revenge upon the 'King's body/*body-politic*'. Kennedy was ever-increasingly seen by the public as monarchical and 'King-like' (a public/personal life/family referenced in the media of the early 1960s as 'Camelot'); as such, Stone argues that Kennedy constituted a threat to state, military and corporate reign due to the President's populist political positions per his sought-after arms/nuclear détente with the Russians (and by extension, Communist China and Cuba) in conjunction with a range of political actions/policies invoked to 'scatter' (dismantle/reconfigure) the CIA/intelligence factions and to reign in Pentagon/military incursions.⁵⁶ To these 'détente' ends, the President made it a political point to utilise the medium of television to propagate his message to the public-at-large (see Fig. 9).

The Armed Cinematic 'CCTV'-Eye

⁵⁵ Knight, Peter, *The Kennedy Assassination*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, 163

⁵⁶ see Douglass, 2008

Dziga Vertov reflected on the camera/lens as constituting an ‘armed eye’ in the capture of the ‘real’. Here, the ‘cameraman’ (Zapruder/Stone) can be equated to an ‘artilleryman’ that is in combative ‘attack’ pose to the sovereign; as such, both the *Z*-film and *JFK* equate to (Stone’s) ammunition as the ‘nitrocellulose that went into filmstock was also used in the production of explosives’.⁵⁷ Stone employs his directorial ‘armed eye’ to mount a *Rashomon*-inspired point-of-view⁵⁸ assault to fortify his polemic both in dramatising Garrison’s interweaving investigation and as ‘closed-circuit-feed’ evidence to be used in the courtroom of public opinion. Stone’s inspiration for *JFK*’s mise-en-scene and thematic/narrative pallet, from which he could historically draw from, included a rich vein of conspiratorial chronicles and ‘CCTV’-type investigative evidentiary-review narratives, including: Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1956), *North By Northwest* (1959); Antonioni’s *L’Aventura* (1961), *Blow-Up* (1966) (with distinct influence, here, via the published Zapruder film frames to that time); Coppola’s *The Conversation* (1974); DePalma’s, *Blow-Out* (1981) on through to melodramatic suspense stories portraying political consequence in Frankenheimer’s *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), *Seven Days in May* (1964); Penn’s *Bonnie & Clyde* (1967); Gavras’ *L’aveu* (1971), *State of Siege* (1973); Miller’s *Executive Action* (1973); Pakula’s *The Parallax View* (1974), *All The President’s Men* (1976), Richart’s *Winter Kills* (1979).⁵⁹

These films and their directors mine anti-autocratic narratives and points-of-view whose cultural dispositions are analogous with the Zapruder film.⁶⁰ They are a cross-section of scenarios illustrative of Virilio’s argument that ‘war is cinema, cinema is war’ and can be read as underpinning *JFK*’s filmic construction of the ‘battlefield’, which engages Stone’s

⁵⁷ Virilio, 20

⁵⁸ Salewicz, 1997

⁵⁹ Lubin, 2003, For further discussion of film, filmmaker and other cultural image analogies to the Zapruder film see his chapter *Twenty Six Seconds*, 1

⁶⁰ Post-*JFK* studio films that have mined this territory include: *In The Line of Fire* (1993); *Conspiracy Theory* (1997); *Closed Circuit* (2013)

narrative and mise-en-scene as 'weapons' to defeat an embittered sovereign assassination narrative; here, a public 'execution' as further understood by Foucault's analysis of state power and subjugation via 'body knowledge'. All this suggests that Stone's cinematic interpretation and thematic exploration/embracing of conspiratorial nexuses propagated in *JFK* are underpinned, with precedent, via a lineage of filmmakers and narratives that were produced/(re)viewed throughout the director's formative years during the 1960s/70s; this time-period included the disavowment of his Vietnam marine service, of which he employed an angst-ridden screen-pen to vilify.⁶¹

In conclusion, *JFK*'s 'non war, war film' parallel plots are fuelled by an anti-authoritarian, anti-state ideological directorial point-of-view that observes, mines and seeks to unravel the dark underbelly of coiling interests (political, criminal, industrial, military) that bear responsibility for Kennedy's termination. Here, Stone draws from a range of documentation, witness accounts and professional medical/ballistic experts⁶² in furtherance of untangling the tentacles enveloping the planning, logistics and narrative-control of the assassination in Dallas, Texas. The screenplay's central 'Capraesque everyman'⁶³ protagonist (Garrison/Costner) is dramatically constructed from autobiographical account not only from the trial experience, itself, but as drawn from a series of previous/subsequent interviews/writings that the District Attorney pontificated on per the case. The 'fragmented structure' comprising 'four DNA threads'⁶⁴ that 'closely resembles Costa Gavras' *Z* in style and impact'⁶⁵, is fully annotated in the post film-release publishing of the film's screenplay.⁶⁶ Stone's 'breaks in spatio-tempered continuity' harken to Virilio's invoking of Lewis Carroll's

⁶¹ Stone's adverse experiences in, and of, the Vietnam era were realised in his anti-war trilogy: *Platoon* (1986); *Born On The Fourth Of July* (1989); *Heaven & Earth* (1993)

⁶² See the following Congressional investigations: The Rockefeller Commission (1975), The Pike Committee (1975), The Church Committee (1975), The House Select Committee on Assassinations (1978)

⁶³ See *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*, Frank Capra, 1939, Columbia Pictures

⁶⁴ Salewicz, 1997, 81

⁶⁵ *Variety Magazine*, Dec 16, 1991, Todd McCarthy

⁶⁶ See Stone & Sklar, 1992

'discontinuity' per his consideration of *Alice In Wonderland*'s penetration of limits 'beyond the screen/mirror'.⁶⁷

Here, the 'visible' world of Garrison's machinations extend through the 'mirror' of narrative officialdom; this is slyly evidenced in the screenplay when the District Attorney (Costner) first voices a challenge to the government's case against the purported single assassin during a lunch-meeting with his prosecutorial staff, 'We're through the looking-glass. Here white is black and black is white'.⁶⁸ This 'chronological disturbance' that Stone constructs, both subversively and 'war-like', employs a 'fusion/confusion of genres' to create an 'accelerated [militaristic] realism'⁶⁹ to create/promote a new 'acceptable consensus' on the assassination events, one that attacks/challenges the sovereign's 'divine-right' to promote a self-fulfilling version of what constitutes the 'real' in how the assassination 'battlefield' unfolded in Dealey Plaza's 'theatre of operations'. Indeed, the director's quest for a reclamation of the spectacle whose scaffold must now hold to account those who transgressed the 'King'/body-politic.

In the final sequence of *JFK*, Stone challenges empire-narrativising/Shaw's defense by invoking the 'voce of the people' in a critical passionate moment during Garrison's/Costner's trial-end summation. Here, he displays for the jury a handful of letters exhorting the pleas of those who have written to him, '...quarters, dimes, dollar bills from housewives, plumbers, car salesmen, teachers, invalids...why, because they want to know the truth'⁷⁰, followed by an emotive appeal, 'Do not forget your dying King'.⁷¹ This courtroom summation and argument for sovereign complicity of the 'slain father-figure' ends with Stone bluntly

⁶⁷ Virilio, 1989, 32

⁶⁸ Stone & Sklar, 1992, 59

⁶⁹ Virilio, 35

⁷⁰ Stone & Sklar, 178

⁷¹ Ibid, 179 (the original published script line reads, 'Do not forget your young President who forfeited his life'; this line was re-written for the final shooting script and not updated for the publication of the book of the screenplay, see the end sequence in the film itself)

addressing the spectator, as jury-member, by turning Garrison's/Costner's gaze to stare directly into the centre of the camera-lens. Here, the filmmaker turns his cinematic 'armed-eye' 180 degrees to embolden/challenge the audience/public to reshape and reorder the 'visual chaos' of not only the government's co-option/propagandisation of the Zapruder ('CCTV') film's 'captured surveillance' and its assassination narrative but as a stabilising vocalised-antidote to his film's three-hour chaotic treatise pursuing his protagonist's fragmented evidentiary trail; Stone/Garrison mellifluously utters about sorting it all out, 'It's up to you'.



(Fig. 9 President John F. Kennedy's address to the nation on Cuban crisis)

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