

4-1992

# The Death of Camelot: Myth, Rhetoric, & the Kennedy Assassination Conspiracy Theory

Charles Herzog  
*Western Kentucky University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses>

 Part of the [Mass Communication Commons](#), and the [Social Influence and Political Communication Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Herzog, Charles, "The Death of Camelot: Myth, Rhetoric, & the Kennedy Assassination Conspiracy Theory" (1992). *Masters Theses & Specialist Projects*. Paper 2462.  
<https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/2462>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses & Specialist Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact [topscholar@wku.edu](mailto:topscholar@wku.edu).

Herzog,

Charles Christopher

1992

THE DEATH OF CAMELOT: MYTH, RHETORIC, AND THE KENNEDY  
ASSASSINATION CONSPIRACY THEORY .

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of Communication and  
Broadcasting

Western Kentucky University

Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Charles Christopher Herzog

April 1992

## AUTHORIZATION FOR USE OF THESIS

Permission is hereby



granted to the Western Kentucky University Library to make, or allow to be made photocopies, microfilm or other copies of this thesis for appropriate research for scholarly purposes.



reserved to the author for the making of any copies of this thesis except for brief sections for research or scholarly purposes.

Signed:

*Charles C. Ferguson*

Date:

*4/16/97*

Please place an "X" in the appropriate box.

This form will be filed with the original of the thesis and will control future use of the thesis.

THE DEATH OF CAMELOT: MYTH, RHETORIC, AND THE KENNEDY  
ASSASSINATION CONSPIRACY THEORY

Date Recommended \_\_\_\_\_

April 16, 1992

Director of Thesis \_\_\_\_\_

Judith Hoover

Larry Wisner

Dr. Carl L. Kell

Date Approved May 8, 1992

Elmer Gray

Dean of the Graduate College

Acknowledgements

I would like to first thank my family for their continued support of my education and efforts. I would also like to thank Dr. Judith Hoover, Dr. Larry Winn, and Dr. Carl Kell for their advice and aid in completing this thesis. Thanks are also due Dianna Skinner for providing company and humor during many hours of typing. Finally, this thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Virginia Hayden, who provided support and inspiration to our family for more than fifty years.

PREFACE

Rhetorical critics have long made use of the concept of myth as a way of categorizing certain types of discourse. Often, such critiques focus upon the deliberate use of mythic themes as rhetorical strategy. This approach, while valid and informative, nevertheless tends to limit critical appreciation of myth as a rhetorical phenomenon. In actuality, myth exists as much more than a resource for the persuader. In this essay, I define myth as a mode of discourse, a manner of presentation which serves to define cultural reality and to justify rhetorically certain societal beliefs and movements.

A second limitation of current rhetorical investigations of myth lies in the propensity to perceive mythos as rooted in antiquity. Certainly, the origins of many mythic themes seem intertwined with the origins of the antecedent culture. Myth itself, however, is not limited temporally. It may manifest itself at any point in the history of a culture. I intend to demonstrate this point by examining the mythic qualities and functions of a contemporary discursive phenomenon, the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theory.

The choice of the Kennedy phenomenon as a subject for critique has been motivated by the recent prominence of the topic in public discourse. Doubtless, this recent surge of interest springs largely from the success of Oliver Stone's

JFK, a well-made popular film tracing the investigations of New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison. Certainly, Stone is not the first to advance the theory that President Kennedy's assassination resulted from a conspiracy. JFK simply stands as the most recent and memorable example of such discourse. In the twenty-nine years since the assassination hundreds of books and articles criticizing the findings of the Warren Commission have appeared. While most of these works have enjoyed some measure of success, none has matched the popular appeal of JFK. It seems likely that the popular success and influence of JFK stems, at least in part, from the current cultural predominance of visual media. However, Stone's film could not achieve the success that it has without the foundation of previous discourse upon which to build its argument. JFK, then, seems a culmination of sorts.

The body of discourse pertaining to the Kennedy conspiracy represents the most popular example of a relatively common cultural phenomenon, the conspiracy theory. Allegations of the existence of powerful, hidden collaborations have always accompanied major historical changes. However, such allegations generally remain on the fringe of popular discourse, the province of radicals and fanatics. The popularity of the Kennedy conspiracy theory denotes an important distinction from the bulk of conspiracy discourse. This essay will demonstrate that the Kennedy



theory differs from conspiracy rhetoric in general in the essential fact that it has ascended to the status of myth.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	1
Preface.....	11
Abstract.....	vi
Chapter One: Introduction and Review of Literature.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Review of Literature.....	7
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework.....	15
Mythic Form and Structure.....	15
Mythic Functions.....	21
Chapter 3: The Kennedy Conspiracy as Myth.....	28
Mythic Forms.....	28
Mythic Structure.....	36
Chapter 4: The Mythic Appeal of the Kennedy Conspiracy...	41
Modern Mythic Context.....	41
Ancient Mythic Context.....	46
Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research.....	48
Works Cited.....	52

THE DEATH OF CAMELOT: MYTH, RHETORIC, AND THE KENNEDY  
ASSASSINATION CONSPIRACY THEORY

Charles C. Herzog                      April 17, 1992                      54 Pages

Directed by: Judith Hoover, Larry Winn and Carl Kell

Department of Communication and Broadcasting

Western Kentucky University

The nature of the popular allegation that President John F. Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy is addressed in this thesis. An answer is sought to the question, "What qualities of the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theory account for its relatively widespread popular appeal?" The author seeks to demonstrate that the Kennedy conspiracy theory has attained the status of myth in contemporary culture. First, a theoretical framework based upon previous research in the area of myth and rhetoric is constructed. This framework is designed to aid the researcher in identifying mythic discourse by establishing both formal and functional criteria.

Next the framework is applied to the Kennedy conspiracy theory as manifested in various artifacts of popular culture including the Oliver Stone film, JFK. The Kennedy theory is found to meet all criteria established by the framework. Additionally, the theory is found to perform a number of specific rhetorical functions.

Finally, the ascendancy of the Kennedy assassination to the status of myth is explained through a demonstration of

its consistency with both contemporary and ancient mythic themes.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Introduction

The release of the film, JFK, by Warner Brothers Pictures in late 1991 sparked a renewed interest on the part of the American public, in the circumstances surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Specifically, the findings of the Warren Commission, the government's official investigative body, have come under scrutiny by critics and under suspicion by at least two-thirds of the general public (48 Hours). Oliver Stone, director of JFK, has characterized the Commission's findings as "sacred cows" which he wishes his audience to reevaluate (Anson 98). Indeed, Stone has recently taken the role of the principle rhetor in a new surge of public discourse postulating the existence of a large-scale conspiracy behind the murder of the President.

Stone, the Academy Award winning director of Platoon, Born On The Fourth Of July, and several other films rose to prominence in the 1980's and became well known for his personal and occasionally mythic treatment of the sociopolitical events of the 1960s in popular films. Previous to JFK, he directed a

biographical sketch of the rock group, The Doors. Prior to that, he detailed the life of Ron Kovic, a former soldier and prominent protestor of the Vietnam War. These films, among others, established what Ernest Bormann would call Stone's "rhetorical vision" of the 1960s as a familiar element of contemporary popular cinema. While JFK seems consistent with the theme of the director's established body of work, a crucial difference exists between this film and his earlier work. Where Stone's previous efforts tended toward a mythologization of certain events and figures of the 1960s, in JFK, Stone makes a seemingly overt attempt at historical revisionism.

Stone's defense of his film comprises much of the current discourse surrounding JFK. In an interview on The Oprah Winfrey Show, Stone characterized his film as a "counter-myth" to the findings of the Warren Commission and as an "hypothesis." In response to critics' charges that the film subtly blends fact with sheer speculation, Stone countered that audiences should not accept the film as a factual historical account. Rather, he hopes that the movie serves as a social catalyst, promoting public discourse and inquiry into the Kennedy assassination. Stone's wish has apparently come true; the current wave of popular discourse relating to the assassination centers primarily upon allegations raised in JFK.

To be sure, however, Stone's film does not stand as the only example of popular discourse critical of the Warren Commission's findings. In 1966, Mark Lane published Rush To Judgement, generally acknowledged as the first work to question the finding that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in killing the President. Indeed, a number of subsequent works, including Jim Garrison's 1988 memoir, On The Trail Of The Assassins, the book upon which Stone based his film, have postulated that Oswald had no direct involvement at all in the assassination. While not all of the hundreds of researchers who have written on the subject agree with this assessment of Oswald's role, most do agree that Oswald did not act alone, as the Warren Commission asserted. These writers generally attribute Kennedy's murder to a conspiracy of individuals with political motives.

The allegation of the existence of a conspiracy to murder the President has tended to discredit most assassination researchers in the eyes of the general public. Mainstream society generally classifies persons who attribute the origins of major historical events to plots and conspiracies by hidden, but powerful groups or individuals as "paranoid." Indeed, clinical paranoia has as its symptoms delusions of persecution by unseen or ostensibly benign individuals. Hofstadter differentiates this medical phenomenon from

what he terms "the paranoid style" in discourse by noting that while the paranoid personality views itself as the object of persecution, the paranoid rhetor perceives a collective victim, a particular society or culture, for example (4). Hofstadter goes on to point out that, despite the pejorative nature of the "paranoid" designation of this particular style of discourse, style alone cannot be considered indicative of dubiousness or invalidity (5).

In his analysis of paranoid discourse, Hofstadter points out a number of distinguishing characteristics that are also evident in the body of Kennedy conspiracy discourse. He notes, as a central tendency of paranoid discourse, the assertion that hidden, vast collaborations among powerful individuals underlie the processes of history (29). The rhetoric of so-called "assassination buffs" relies substantially upon this theme. According to Stone, "We have had a covert government in this country since 1947; they have gotten more and more arrogant "(Oprah).

Hofstadter also points out the pedantic quality of paranoid discourse. Conspiracy rhetors possess "an elaborate concern with demonstration "(35). The work of Stone and other researchers certainly reflects this proclivity. Stone conducted hundreds of hours of research for JFK (Anson 97). Additionally, the film's plot takes the form of a progressive investigation in



which pieces of evidence are amassed into an undeniable whole, in dramatic terms, at least. Written investigations of the assassination also exhibit a tendency toward exhaustive documentation. The recent work, High Treason, by Robert J. Groden and Harrison Edward Livingstone, contains 3330 endnotes for 465 pages of text.

While this emphasis upon documentation may seem quite sound from a scholarly perspective, Hofstadter points out that the paranoid style relies ultimately upon a "curious leap in imagination" from the body of evidence to the conclusion. The paranoid rhetor amasses a heavily documented body of inconsistencies, curiosities and coincidences and then "jumps" to a predetermined conclusion. Quite often, no valid logical connection exists between evidence and conclusion (37).

The lack of logical integrity, among other flaws, tends to relegate the conspiracy argument genre to the radical fringes of public discourse. The combination of seemingly fantastic conclusions, logical leaps and frequently dubious evidence along with the similarity of the style to the symptoms of a relatively common emotional disorder works to discredit the argument in the eyes of the general public. At the time Hofstadter examined the paranoid style, he found the most salient contemporary example in the rhetoric of the American

"right-wing" (23). Revolving around allegations of an "international Communist conspiracy," the discourse he analyzed contains numerous references to massive infiltrations of the American societal infrastructure by enemy agents. In the mid-1960s, such allegations seemed almost anachronistic and much of the public regarded the proponents of such arguments as relics of McCarthyism and the darker days of the Cold War.

In the years immediately following the publication of The Paranoid Style, it became clear that the far-right had no monopoly on conspiracy theory. With the emergence of the New Left and the politicization of the hippie movement, the radical, left-wing conspiracy theory developed as a familiar element of discourse in many social circles. The most strident manifestations of the left oriented paranoid style emerged during the Nixon administration, after the apparent failure of the utopian efforts of the far left and the gradual revelation of the true extent of the covert domestic policies of the Nixon White House (Vankin 127). Despite an eventual avalanche of anti-Nixon sentiment, however, the conspiracy theory remained a marginal factor in American political thought. To some degree, the Watergate proceedings functioned rhetorically as an example of the "rational" approach to ferreting out high-level conspiracies and also as a demonstration of

the federal government's ability to police itself and prevent such plots from coming to fruition.

In the years since Watergate, conspiracy theory has remained fringe-element discourse, found only in the arguments of the radical portions of the political right and left. It is somewhat surprising then that the American public has embraced the Kennedy conspiracy theory, a virtual paradigm case of conspiracy discourse, to such a large extent. A recent Time/CNN poll reported that 75 percent of the American public holds a conspiracy of some type responsible for the shooting of the President. While this attitude does not indicate a whole-hearted acceptance of any of the numerous individual theories, it does represent a striking and atypical openness on the part of the public toward a previously radical form of discourse. This shift in public attitude suggests a rather compelling question; what unique attributes, if any, distinguish the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theory from other less widely accepted examples of the paranoid style? An examination of the work of previous researchers may suggest an answer to this question.

#### Review of Literature

Rhetorical examinations of the conspiracy theory as a discursive style remain both tentative and descriptive. Earl G. Creps postulates that conspiracy

theory functions as a rhetorical response to the problem of societal evil. According to Creps, the conspiracy argument provides a context or plot in which seemingly random or agentless "evil" events make sense (35). That is, such theories provide an acceptable explanation of the evil and redefine the rhetorical situation in terms of a plot engineered by malevolent individuals. An examination of recent history may provide an appropriate illustration of this rhetorical function.

The occurrence of a number of apparently unrelated political assassinations in the 1960s seems to have engendered, in much of the general public, a perception that violence had emerged as a norm in the American political arena. This perception, coupled with the era's various civil disorders, fostered a general impression of societal decay. The conspiracy argument counteracts this cultural anxiety by laying the blame for the assassinations at the feet of a specific cadre of individuals. The explanation that societal evils are caused by specific subgroups rather than by society as a whole functions to renew faith in traditional values and social dynamics which may have been called into question (Creps 38).

Later researchers have attempted to extend upon Creps' thesis by delineating the task faced by the conspiracy advocate. Goodnight and Poulakos have

defined conspiracy rhetoric as "a struggle to define the grounding of discourse" (301). They argue that the conspiracy theory represents an attempt to redefine social reality. As such, the success or failure of the attempt determines whether social consensus will consider the individual theory "fantasy" or "reality." That is, if the rhetor is successful, social consensus classifies the argument as a pragmatic response to a particular exigence; if the rhetor fails, the consensus dismisses the argument as delusional.

Beyond the work of these researchers, rhetorical critics have devoted surprisingly little attention to the conspiracy theory. The recent prominence of the Kennedy conspiracy theory, however, indicates that further research is merited. Specifically, the theory enjoys a peculiar status. While even its critics rarely dismiss the argument as utter fantasy, many who profess to believe in an assassination seem reluctant to embrace any particular theory as historical fact. Oliver Stone has stated, "I do not say that this is a true story..." But, he continues, he believes that the plot of his film "speaks an inner truth (Leo 18)." This ambiguity supports my contention that the Kennedy conspiracy theory has ascended to the status of myth. I intend, in this paper, to demonstrate that this particular conspiracy theory has attained the relatively powerful status of myth in American culture

and that this new myth performs very specific rhetorical functions.

In the context of this essay, "myth" does not carry the popular definition of an untrue but popular belief. Rather, for our purposes, "myth" refers to what Roland Barthes terms "a system of communication" (109). Barthes elaborates, "myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion." In other words, while we do not define myth as falsehood, neither do we consider it wholly true, in any sense of the word. Rather, we should properly consider myth as a mode of communication. Myth lends certain meanings and specific points of view to discourse (129). Myth, then, exists as a mode of discourse, not as an assessment of veracity.

As a discursive form, myths perform a specific function; according to Balthrop, they "form the ultimate patterns for attributing significance to human experience" (341). That is, myths carry an important semantic weight that a mere collection of facts cannot; they provide an audience not only with an accounting of events but with the meaning behind those events, with the lessons to be learned. Malinowski states that myth performs the fundamental function of providing precedent in support of social and moral order (292). While Malinowski based his conclusions primarily upon research with primitive societies, his findings have

proven valuable to communication theorists concerned with contemporary culture. Specifically, researchers tend to utilize Malinowski's functional approach to the study of myth. They focus their concern not so much upon the structure of myth, but rather upon the communicative functions which myth performs.

A.J.M. Sykes defines myth as "the expression of abstract ideas in concrete form." Myth, he explains, assumes a narrative form which expresses certain ideas while simultaneously providing a justification for those ideas (17). This narrative form serves to concretize certain abstract values and beliefs about the nature of the world. Importantly, Sykes also notes the "fluid" nature of myth; that is, despite its concretizing function, myth does not convey precise information. Rather, mythic discourse takes a generalized form (19). Thus, while a myth does not contain specific pieces of data, it does convey a specific meaning.

Braden, in his discussion of myth as a rhetorical strategy in oral discourse, stresses the enthymematic nature of the myth (121). A true myth, he elaborates, need not be fully recounted or explained in order to persuade. It exists as an integral component of cultural tapestry which the rhetor need only allude to in order to invoke its semantic power. As such, according to Braden, myth functions mainly as a

consubstantiating device when used deliberately in a rhetorical context (121). Similar to Sykes, Braden also notes that myth represents an "oversimplification" of events (116). That is, it seeks to convey a general meaning rather than specific facts.

In attempting to define the role of myth in the mass media and popular culture, Breen and Corcoran enumerate a number of contemporary cultural functions performed by mythic discourse. The primary function of the myth, they explain, is the organization of cultural semantics (133). They go on to theorize that the fulfillment of this role involves a number of subfunctions. These include the interpretation of unfamiliar situations in terms of easily understandable cultural referents, the creation of precedential archetypes, and positional justification for cultural conflict. Finally, myths serve to provide intelligibility to otherwise random and meaningless historical experience (128-31). Taken together, the authors conclude, these functions contribute significantly to the construction of cultural reality.

The findings of Janice Hocker Rushing seem consistent with the preceding evaluations of myth's cultural role. Rushing defines the term as "society's collectivity of persistent values, handed down from generation to generation." She concurs that myth performs the functions of rendering experience



intelligible and providing cultural precedent (15). Her examination of American Western mythos supports this definition. She notes that the American Western myth provides a fundamental context for dealing with conflicts between the individual and the community.

Balthrop, too, subscribes to the view of myth as prescriptive. To him, myth provides a "cultural image of perfection" (341). That is, the myth establishes basic values or truths from which culture emerges and through which members of a social order perceive themselves and their culture. These truths serve as a basis for behavior and social organization. Balthrop also notes that the power of the myth stems from its cultural pervasiveness, a quality attained through a circular process in which a myth lends certain meanings to events which, in turn, seem to confirm the explanatory value of the myth (342).

The assessment of myth as an explanatory tool finds further support in the work of William Burch. Burch sees myth as a way of confirming order in "a world of doubt and ambiguity" (9). Like Breen and Corcoran, he feels that myth functions mainly to convert raw cultural experience into an intelligible narrative. Burch goes on to distinguish myth from rhetoric by asserting that, while myth deals with the fundamentals of cultural unity, rhetoric is concerned mainly with cultural conflict (10).

Contemporary theorists, then, tend to concur that myth performs a number of specific cultural functions. While each theorist examines myth for a different purpose and from an individual perspective, on the whole, none of the findings described here seem mutually exclusive. Rather, it seems more than appropriate to coalesce the above definitions and conclusions into a single theoretical framework which will provide a more complete understanding of both the structure and the function of the mythic form. This framework and its applications to the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theory will be explained in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2  
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Mythic Form and Structure

According to the French theorist Jean Baudrillard, "[M]yths are not comprised of content. They are a process of exchange and circulation of a code whose form is determinant" (89). It seems appropriate then, when constructing a theoretical framework from which to examine the rhetorical function of myth, to focus critical attention primarily upon formal concerns rather than issues of content. While scholars of myth certainly concern themselves with the content of the myths they examine, they generally focus on thematic elements. Joseph Campbell's The Hero With a Thousand Faces, perhaps the most popularly known example of such a treatment, examines the mythic theme of the Heroic Journey, a prominent element found in most cultures of the world.

Campbell asserts that all world mythologies, regardless of cultural origin, represent "one shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story" (3). Campbell's use of the term "story" here refers to the most obvious consistent characteristic of myth: the

narrative form. Every cultural construct regarded as a "myth" possesses a basically narrative structure. The story may take an elaborately detailed and dramatically plotted form, as in the case of the Trojan War mythos, or it may exist in a much simpler form, as is the case with the amorphous and interchangeable deities of the Hindu tradition. Whether a stirring tale of heroic exploits or a more general cosmic allegory, the myth invariably takes the form of a narrative.

Sonya K. Foss defines the narrative as "a way of ordering and presenting a view of the world through a description of a situation involving characters, actions, and settings that changes over time." Foss goes on to specify a three step process, suggested by the work of W. Lance Bennett, by which the narrative organizes and interprets the perception of reality. She characterizes the first step as the identification of the central action of an experience. That is, the narrative helps us to focus on the most salient aspect of the experience. Next, the narrative constructs or highlights relationships between this central aspect and other elements of the story. Thus, the narrative establishes a certain coherency within the experience and indicates the particular relevance of the central aspect. Finally, we evaluate narratives based upon criteria such as "completeness" and "consistency" which

enables us to judge the validity and utility of the narrative as a depiction of "reality" (229-30).

The second, reifying function of narrative provides the functional base of mythic discourse. Myth operates in the manner in which it does because it takes the form of an organizing story. By placing semantically ambiguous events into the context of a story with a beginning, a conflict, and a resolution, the myth lends the events a specific cultural meaning which usually becomes interwoven with the already existent cultural reality. The myth shapes the culture in certain ways and implies the appropriateness of various behavioral modes. Thus, the narrative structure of the myth supports both a reifying and, by extension, a precedential function.

Though the narrative form serves as the fundamental structure of mythos, a number of characteristics distinguish myth from the more general format of the "story." For instance, unlike the traditional story form, the mythic narrative exhibits a marked tendency toward ambiguity of detail. In other words, where the impact of the story form relies upon a specific progression of events or scenes which work together to establish dramatic tension, the impact of the myth arises more from a semantic gestalt. Thus, where the typical story often contains a significant number of scenes, the average myth may contain only two

or three. This point may be disputed by those who would point out the careful attention to detail evident in the Iliad, Oedipus Rex, and other classical works. Thus, it seems appropriate here to propose the existence of a distinction crucial to the study of myth.

The bulk of classical mythology, that is Greek mythology, seems to find its way into modern cultural discourse through the epic poems and plays which form a significant portion of the classical canon. As such, the myths exist primarily in story form rather than in the true mythic mode. Classical mythology, as we perceive it today, lacks the cultural saliency of true mythos. This diminished significance results primarily from the fact that the ancient Greek culture, which originally generated the body of myth, no longer exists. It seems that the continued influence of Greek mythology upon contemporary art and culture is primarily the result of the enormous seminal impact of the ancient Greek philosophic tradition upon Western thought.

There exists, then, an important difference between true mythos, with its continual cultural saliency, and mythology, myth which exists in a state no longer fully viable or functional. Cultures often preserve the latter in literary form, with the primary story elements fleshed out through the addition of

supporting characters, expository scenes, and other such devices. True mythos generally lacks these elements and consists of only a few key characters and events. According to Barthes, "Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message" (109). In other words, the details of the story take on a lesser importance than the overall meaning of the story. Thus, the typical myth becomes remarkably fluid in its presentation, with details and story elements changing, often dramatically, from narrator to narrator, and from format to format.

I would argue that this fluidity of form endows the mythic format with two distinct advantages. Primarily, formal fluidity greatly supports the popular appeal and cultural pervasiveness of the myth. Narrators may alter story elements and even narrative focus in order to appeal to various audiences within a culture. They can usually accomplish such changes without significant semantic alteration. Thus, the myth can enjoy a cross-cultural appeal without compromising its base meaning.

The second advantage conveyed by formal fluidity distinguishes the myth from philosophical and theological discourse. The latter forms base themselves semantically upon logical appeal and are thus vulnerable to logical critique. The myth,

however, relies on logic to a much lesser extent, its meaning being implicit rather than explicit. The myth does not argue; rather, it simply presents. Audiences extract meaning from myth based upon their own perceptions of reality. They base these perceptions, in part, on other myths. Accordingly, the cultural influence of mythos surpasses that of philosophy. The apprehension of mythic meaning in no way requires intellectual sophistication.

The flexibility conveyed by mythic formal fluidity also finds support in the third major characteristic of myth: simplification. While scientific discourse seeks to interpret the universe in as great detail as possible, mythic discourse seeks to distill elaborate networks of meaning and phenomena into easily apprehended parcels of knowledge. This quality also supports the cultural appeal of the myth. In addition, simplification lies at the heart of one of the primary functions of myth, that of rendering complex sociological and natural processes in intelligible terms.

In his discussion of the myth as a rhetorical device, Braden emphasizes the form's great potential as a generator of consubstantiality. He notes, "The myth-user seldom needs to present the myth in a full blown form; instead, he suggests or insinuates it..." (121). Thus, he suggests the final formal



characteristic of myth, its enthymematic nature. The myth and its meanings exist as a component of cultural reality, shared, to some degree, by all members of a particular society. As such, myth often influences culture subtly; it shapes fundamental perceptions without resorting to overt self-reference. In this way, myth distinguishes itself from the parable and the fable.

In terms of form, then, we may define myth by the existence of four primary characteristics. The first and most basic, narrative structure, supports the structuring of formal reality and the establishment of social precedent. Formal fluidity promotes the myth's cultural appeal and protects the myth from logical critique. The simplifying tendency of myth also adds to mass appeal and, in addition, aids the narrative structure in rendering the universe intelligible. Finally, the enthymematic nature of myth contributes to the form's influence by enabling the myth to operate subtly. The combined effect of these four characteristics takes the form of three basic mythic functions which will be discussed in the next section.

#### Mythic Functions

Myth's primary cultural function as a reifier, or builder of social reality, has been well-documented and discussed by other researchers. Balthrop notes that

myths "form the ultimate patterns for attributing significance to human experience" (341). Berger and Luckmann, in their work, The Social Construction of Reality, explain that myth "is closest to the naive level of the symbolic universe--the level on which there is the least necessity for theoretical universe-maintenance beyond the actual positing of the universe in question as an objective reality" (102). In other words, the semantic messages conveyed by myth consist of "self-evident" truths which help to shape subsequent conclusions about social and even physical reality.

I contend that myth shapes cultural reality through the performance of three specific functions. These separate functions work together to create a specific world-view or perception of reality which functions rhetorically in certain situations, demanding specific responses from the cultural audience or indicating the existence of certain exigences. While rhetors may deliberately utilize myth as a persuasive device, as discussed by Balthrop, it seems important to note that myth may function rhetorically in a more passive sense. That is, rather than identifying an individual rhetor as the source of mythic discourse, we may define, in certain cases, **entire cultures** as collective rhetors.

Bormann refers to the collective rhetorical structuring of social reality as the establishment of a

"rhetorical vision." This vision consists of a "social reality filled with heroes, villains, emotions, and attitudes" (398). As such, Bormann's rhetorical vision seems consistent in form and function with the social reality created by narrative mythic discourse. The crucial difference between Bormann's chains of fantasy themes and mythic discourse lies in the more dynamic "chaining out" quality of Bormann's concept as opposed to the sedentary but formative nature of myth. In other words, where the discourse of rhetors creates a rhetorical vision, myth creates the discourse of rhetors. While both concepts involve the discursive creation of social reality, myth operates at Berger's "naive level," that is, in the realm of the pre-conscious. It seems quite possible that Bales' "chaining out" concept, as cited by Bormann, represents the ultimate origin of myth; it certainly seems active in the Kennedy conspiracy case. However, I do not intend in this paper to speculate seriously on the ultimate origins of myth, but rather on the possible rhetorical functions of myth.

Myth's reifying, or reality creating function, seems focused on the defining of situation. In this way an entire culture becomes rhetor by defining the parameters of appropriate action. Bitzer focuses his discussion of the rhetorical situation upon three constituent elements: exigence, audience, and

constraints (6). Myth works to define all three of these and thus to establish a situational orientation from which a culture may define the actions of its members, individually and collectively, as appropriate or inappropriate. Mythos defines an exigence, or urgent imperfection, in a very broad sense. Individual myths may focus upon a single exigence. For instance, the book of Exodus, taken as myth, establishes the dominant cultural theme of the Jews as a lost people in search of a "promised" homeland. Taken together, however, a particular body of myths defines cultural exigence broadly along numerous parameters and suggests appropriate behavior and responses.

The audience of a specific body of myth consists of all members of a specific culture. Mythos does not exist to influence or "speak to" audiences outside its antecedent culture. Thus, alien mythos often seems unintelligible or, at least, quaint. Bitzer notes that the rhetorical audience consists only of members capable of effecting change (8). Thus, while culture may certainly find itself changed by outside forces, "appropriate" cultural change may only originate inside the culture.

Besides exigence and audience, Bitzer also cites a set of constraints as a constituent of the rhetorical situation. These constraints set the parameters of response by the audience to the exigence. Myth also

provides these constraints by setting cultural precedent and by establishing meaning for certain processes and events. Because myth does not originate with an individual rhetor, mythic constraints tend to fall into the realm of Aristotle's " inartistic proofs." "Artisitic proofs," or proofs originating in the presentation of the rhetor, may come into play when an individual deliberately invokes a myth in order to benefit from its persuasive appeal.

Myth, then, functions rhetorically by defining a cultural situation in three specific ways. First, myth establishes behavioral and semantic precedent. Next, myth concretizes certain cultural ambiguities, such as cultural origin, purpose and status in a universal hierarchy. Finally, myth renders seemingly random, ambiguous or unacceptable historical processes in terms both intelligible and acceptable. These three functions tend to overlap, a quality consistent with mythic fluidity.

The anthropological study of myth focuses most often on the precedential function of myth. Campbell discusses such rituals as circumcision and scarification in terms of their contribution to the enforcement of "moral order" (Creative 4-5). Rituals such as these generally become established mythically and serve to highlight important themes within a given culture. Malinowski, founder of the functional

perspective for the study of myth, states flatly, "the main cultural function of myth is the establishment of precedent" (291). Myth establishes both ritual practice and semantic interpretation by lending specific meanings to cultural constructs and specifying the perpetuation of certain behaviors in order to maintain cultural integrity.

In addition to the establishment of cultural precedent, myth also concretizes beliefs about important components of a culture. Most cultures, for instance, possess some form of myth relating the circumstances of their origins. Whether it deals with the creation of the universe, as in the book of Genesis or with the founding of a certain city, as in the Romulus stories, this myth provides a solid ontological foundation from which social order proceeds. Myths may also delineate the status of a given culture, or even rival cultures, in the eyes of the Gods. The Zionist concept of a "chosen people" exemplifies the former function. Conversely, the biblical explanation that the Palestinians, or "Philistines" sprang from the descendents of a dishonored son of Noah serves to concretize, or justify, intercultural disdain.

The final function of myth, that of sorting history and experience into an intelligible framework, originates primarily in the narrative structure of myth. By creating a "story" with protagonists,

antagonists and specific thematic structure, myth organizes the cultural perception of reality and, of the three functions, defines the rhetorical situation to the greatest extent. Through myth, Breen and Corcoran note, unfamiliar experience is fitted into the established cultural framework (128). Thus, myth is the primary manner by which culture absorbs new experience. Myth explains what the new information means to the culture and suggests appropriate responses.

By setting precedent, concretizing cultural elements, and explaining ambiguous data, myth serves to establish a cultural rhetorical situation. Thus the audience comprehends a specific collective exigence or purpose and the responsive parameters or constraints which accompany it. While I have, thus far, focused my discussion upon the gestalt function of bodies of cultural mythos, it seems appropriate now to proceed to an examination of an individual myth. Specifically, I will examine the JFK assassination conspiracy myth. In the next chapter, I will establish that the phenomenon does, in fact, constitute a myth. Then, I will move to a discussion of the rhetorical situation delineated by the myth.

CHAPTER 3  
THE KENNEDY CONSPIRACY AS MYTH

Mythic Forms

In order to establish the Kennedy conspiracy as a genuine example of myth, I will first indicate the formal qualities of the theory which conform with the characteristics of myth discussed in the preceding chapter. Next, I will examine the rhetorical functions of the theory and demonstrate their consistency with the functions of myth. By confirming that the Kennedy conspiracy theory does indeed represent a contemporary mythic form, I hope to lay the groundwork for an explanation of the popularity of the theory in a modern mythic context.

In searching for a narrative form in the Kennedy legend, we need look no further for our first example than JFK. Stone's treatment of the subject matter takes the form of standard cinematic narrative in the classic Hollywood tradition. The plot moves chronologically from the morning of the assassination to a climactic courtroom scene seven years later. Kevin Costner plays Jim Garrison as a likeable protagonist with whom any audience can identify. While



the antagonists of the story remain ambiguous, Garrison's character clearly struggles against malevolent forces.

Importantly, JFK possesses a beginning and an ending. This narrative convention encapsulates a historical phenomenon semantically. That is, the film condenses the field of significance of the Kennedy Assassination to the period of time between two significant events. Semantic condensation supports the reifying function of myth by limiting the conceptual field of the event in question. Audiences can better understand the phenomenon if it involves a limited number of characters and events.

JFK does not stand alone as the only narrative treatment of the Kennedy conspiracy. Don DeLillo's 1988 best-selling novel Libra also proposes a fictional solution to the Kennedy puzzle. In the novel, Oswald is commissioned as part of a covert scheme to scare the President with a near-miss, an assassination attempt to be linked to Fidel Castro. DeLillo's conspirators, former Bay of Pigs organizers, hope to provoke Kennedy into a more aggressive stance toward Cuba. Like Stone, DeLillo draws upon real events, individuals, and theories to construct his plot. Unlike Stone, he clearly advances his story as fiction.

DeLillo's work, with its lack of an overt rhetorical agenda, actually represents a more telling

manifestation of the Kennedy assassination as myth than JFK. Where Stone's film takes the form of search for truth, DeLillo tells his tale for the sake of the story. When historical events become source material for creators of fiction, their context changes from the historical to the aesthetic. This contextual change signals the shift from the factual to the mythic. Narrative conventions, such as antagonist, protagonist, and climax do not operate in "real" life; rather, they are a perceptual conceit. Thus, when a certain chain of events comes to be understood primarily in a narrative context, we may safely say that it has mythic quality. This is certainly the case with ancient events such as the Trojan War and, more recently, with the development of the American West, as discussed by Rushing.

The narrative conceit active in the popular perception of the Kennedy assassination, also emerges in non-fiction, investigative treatments of the alleged conspiracy. Paris Flammonde begins his book The Kennedy Conspiracy with a list of important individuals labeled "Dramatis Personae," semantically converting people, many of whom were still alive and active when the book was published, into characters (xv). As characters, these individuals become important only in terms of their contribution to the narrative. DeLillo acknowledges the dichotomy between character and person

in the Author's Note to his novel when he states, "I've extended real people into...characters." In the work of Flammonde and others, however, the shift from person to character is notably subtle.

Lee Harvey Oswald, the alleged Presidential assassin, probably represents the most "characterized" individual involved in the case. Oswald's change in status began, in part, with a change in name. Known throughout his life to friends and family as Lee Oswald, he now goes by his full name in popular discourse. This seemingly insignificant change actually represents the shift from anonymous citizen to mythic figure. Certainly, Oswald's odd personality and unusual life make him an apt subject for dramatic characterization. Much of Libra consists of an internal character study of Oswald. In addition, works such as Edward Jay Epstein's Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald contribute to Oswald's characterization by focusing upon the unusual aspects of his life.

Recently, the film Ruby, starring Danny Aiello, emerged as a fictionalized character study of Oswald's killer. The film has been criticized by Ruby's family as a character assassination. By casting the Kennedy case as a narrative, with plot and characters, films like JFK, Ruby and the earlier Executive Action both limit and focus popular perceptions of the

assassination. Even if the public discounts the conspiracy theories advanced by the films, they still perceive the events of November, 1963, in the context of scenes and characters considered dramatically relevant by the filmmakers. Thus, such treatments foster a particular body of public perceptions regarding which individuals and events represent significant components of the case. These perceptions by no means constitute a unified, consistent set. In fact, they possess the fluid nature of all myth.

Ernst Cassirer, quoted by Camille Paglia, characterizes the mythical world as being "at a much more fluid and fluctuating stage than our theoretical world of things and properties" (97). This assessment accurately represents the reality presented by the various Kennedy conspiracy theories. Researchers and authors have variously laid the ultimate blame for the assassination at the feet of Fidel Castro, the Mafia, Lyndon Johnson and myriad cadres of ultra-conservative government forces. Similarly, theories of the motivation behind the killing include a conservative backlash against Kennedy's "softness" toward Cuba, a Cuban backlash against his "hardline" policies toward the country, a Mafia reprisal for Robert Kennedy's criminal prosecution and numerous others. At the risk of cliché, the theories seem as numerous as the theorists.

Recently, an alleged Kennedy decision to withdraw from Viet Nam has emerged as a possible motivation for the slaying. A number of contemporary conspiracy advocates, including Oliver Stone, subscribe to the theory that Kennedy was killed by the "military-industrial complex" which had financial interest in escalating the conflict. In fact, Stone opens JFK with footage of Dwight Eisenhower's Farewell Address in which the outgoing President warned of the dangers of such a complex gaining too much power. This particular hypothesis seems consistent with both current public attitudes about the Viet Nam conflict, and Stone's cinematic treatment of the war in several films.

The fact that the situation remains unresolved, the killers unidentified and unapprehended, at least according to conspiracy theorists, contributes to the ambiguous status of the assassination in the public consciousness. This ambiguity leads to a fluidity of meaning. Was Oswald the sole assassin or was he, as he claimed, a "patsy"? The numerous interpretations of his role in the affair embody mythic fluidity, as do the various theories as to the number of gunmen, the trajectories of the bullets, and the exact nature of the President's wounds. In all likelihood, these issues will never find a solution satisfactory to the

public as a whole. Thus, the Kennedy assassination retains the ambiguity of detail characteristic of myth.

The ambiguity inherent in the detailing of the case does not extend to the general theme of the conspiracy theories. Specifically, all of the theories postulate that a number of individuals other than, or in addition to, Oswald conspired to kill the President. This general theme represents mythic simplification. G. William Domhoff feels that conspiracy theories in general advance the notion that "if we get rid of a few bad people, all will be well in the world" (Vankin 126). Clearly, conspiracy theories, including the Kennedy theories, represent a simplification of sociopolitical process. Instead of examining the complex origins of political violence, the problem reduces in scope to a handful of agitators.

Finally, the Kennedy conspiracy theories also possess the enthymematic quality typical of the mythic form. Whether they subscribe to it or not, the general public at least understands the notion of an assassination conspiracy. Idiosyncratic terminology, such as "magic bullet" and "grassy knoll" carry near universal connotations. Conspiracy rhetors such as Oliver Stone have no need to re-explain their theories to each audience. Stone and his colleagues may correctly assume that the public has a general comprehension of the arguments involved.

The Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories collectively possess the four characteristic mythic attributes described in the preceding chapter. They contain narrative structure, fluidity of detail, thematic simplification and enthymematic qualities. In terms of form, then, the theories certainly seem mythic. In the next section, I will demonstrate that the rhetorical functions supported by the theories are also consistent with those of myth. I will then attempt to explain the mythic "success" of the Kennedy conspiracy theory by demonstrating its compatibility with other contemporary mythos.

### Mythic Functions

Just as the Kennedy conspiracy theory possesses the formal attributes of myth, so too does it function in a manner consistent with the mythic form. In addition to the generic mythic functions, discussed in the previous chapter, I will focus upon three rhetorical functions specific to Kennedy the case and supported by the three generic functions. Specifically, the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theory, as it exists today, functions rhetorically to dichotomize the American citizenry and the holders of political power, to disenfranchise the American people as democratic power holders, and to motivate the audience of citizens to respond to the exigence by regaining the lost power. These rhetorical functions emerge from the generic mythic functions of (1) precedent-setting, (2) concretization, and (3) intelligibility-forming.

The precedential function exists in the Kennedy myth in an inverted form. That is, instead of telling its audience, "Things should happen this way," the myth warns "Things should not happen this way again." The categorization of the assassination as a "coup d'etat" by Oliver Stone, Michael Canfield and others implies an undesirable and unjust power acquisition as a result of Kennedy's death. Such a power acquisition is



contradictory to the "American Way" and as such, must not occur again. The negative precedent, then, clearly operates in the Kennedy case and supports the three specific functions.

The "coup d'état" trope, a critical facet of the Kennedy myth, operates as one of the more powerful rhetorical devices of the myth. The trope dichotomizes by suggesting the existence of a locus of political control separate from the public. Canfield asserts that, as a result of the assassination, "by 1972 there were two governments existing side by side, one visible, the other invisible" (17). This rhetoric of dichotomization extends naturally into one of disenfranchisement. The depiction of the American people as no longer in control of their political system becomes the motivational imperative of the myth. Rather than "justice" or "truth," "control" becomes the ultimate ideal for the conspiracy rhetor.

The concretizing function of myth seems especially evident in the Kennedy case. Hofstadter's characterization of the paranoid rhetor as pedantic becomes especially salient when one considers that the primary practical objective of any specific conspiracy theorist lies in proving the validity of his or her theory. Each individual book, film or body of research devoted to the existence of a conspiracy to kill President Kennedy consists of meticulous documentation

and logic-based argument. The theorist seeks to establish the truth. By demonstrating conclusively that Kennedy was killed by the CIA, or by the Mafia, or by the Cubans, the theorist hopes to render concrete a particularly ambiguous historical episode. He attempts to say, "This is what happened."

Concretization supports the three specific functions through the establishment of undeniability. By exhibiting "incontrovertible" evidence, the rhetor hopes to make the appropriate conclusion inescapable. The undeniable nature of "Best Evidence" provides the underlying theme for David S. Lifton's book of the same name. Lifton's titular evidence includes what he claims to be inconsistent and fraudulent documentation from the President's autopsy. Following Lifton's lead, most JFK conspiracy books published after 1980 take as their impetus an evidence-based mandate to expose the truth. Earlier works, such as Mark Lane's Rush to Judgement, take the form of a critique of official interpretations of existing evidence. By establishing the conspiracy as truth, based on "overwhelming" evidence, the theorist makes the dichotomizing, disenfranchising and motivational implications of the myth inescapable.

Finally, the Kennedy conspiracy myth renders a convoluted portion of history intelligible by creating a narrative. The story explains the tumultuous social

disorder of the 1960s and early 1970s as a conflict between a covert government, brought to power through murder, and a noble but uninformed populace whose efforts to control their government eventually failed because of a lack of both focus and righteous moral imperative. I will examine the nature and implications of this narrative in greater detail in the next chapter. However, it must be understood that from this final mythic function, the three specific rhetorical functions of the Kennedy myth gain their greatest support. By explaining history in terms of the opposition of State and People, the myth naturally evokes attitudes of disenfranchisement and dichotomization in those who accept it. The motivational function comes about naturally when the message of the myth, "This is what it all means," emerges.

The Kennedy assassination theory, then, operates rhetorically in a manner consistent with myth. It performs the generic functions of setting cultural precedent, concretizing societal belief, and rendering cultural experience intelligible through narrative. Further, the myth performs the specific functions of establishing an ontological and ethical dichotomy between the American populace and its government, emphasizing the disenfranchisement of the American people from the control of their government, and

motivating the populace to do something about it. This consistency of function, combined with the formal consistency discussed above, justifies the conclusion that the Kennedy assassination theory does in fact constitute a modern myth. In the next chapter, I will explain the theory's achievement of mythic status by demonstrating its consistency with other modern mythic themes as well as with more archetypal mythic constructs.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE MYTHIC APPEAL OF THE KENNEDY CONSPIRACY

### Modern Mythic Context

Having established the validity of the Kennedy conspiracy theory as myth, I will now proceed to an illustration of why the theory has achieved that particular status. Such a determination requires consideration of the more general question: Why does any particular story become a myth? Barthes feels that myth originates inevitably from history. In other words, myth does not spring, at least not entirely, from archetypal or universal human experience. Rather, myth takes root in culture and operates in a culture-specific fashion (110). I accept Barthes' evaluation and choose to combine it with Campbell's concept of "creative mythology."

Campbell defines creative mythology as a reversal of the traditional mythological process in which socially transmitted rites affect the world-view or reality-ordering faculties of the individual. In the creative mythological paradigm, the individual or collective seeks to communicate experience to the cultural whole through symbols and meanings of particular salience. If the communication strikes the proper cultural chord, it will have "the value and

force of living myth" (Creative 4). I contend that the Kennedy conspiracy represents a modern example of Campbell's creative process, rooted firmly in our cultural history.

The question now becomes: What is it about this particular theory which makes it mythically salient? The appeal of the Kennedy myth lies in the fact that it provides explanation and opportunity for redemption in the face of a Post-Modern collapse of American values and purpose. The political cynicism so tangible in post-Watergate American culture conceals a longing for a return to the perceived cultural consensus of earlier times. In many real ways, the Kennedy Administration marked the peak and collapse of that perceived consensus.

The popular assessment of the Kennedy Presidency as "Camelot," though it now borders on cliché, provides a vital clue as to the nature of the mythic associations linked with the President. The story of Arthur and Camelot represents the most powerful utopian myth of English-speaking culture. A decidedly Romantic tale of the perfect society brought low by human foibles and the powers of darkness, the Camelot myth serves as a precursor and paradigm for the Kennedy myth. While the Kennedy Administration was far from idyllic, the charisma and energy of the comparatively young President brought a novel vitality to the

previously staid executive position. Before Kennedy, the image of the Elder Statesman had defined much of the persona of the executive office.

Kennedy's election coincided with the emergence of a number of political and social movements headed by the young. Rock and roll, eventually the dominant force in American popular music, emerged in the mid-1950s. The organized civil rights movement gained popularity among college students at about the same time. The Beat movement in American literature had institutionalized many of the trappings of youth culture including drugs, promiscuity and spiritual longing. Also in the mid-1950s, the cultural archetype of the Angry Young Man arose in the John Osborn play, Look Back in Anger, and became popularized in the films of James Dean and Marlon Brando.

John F. Kennedy, while far from a radical or spiritual pilgrim, nevertheless embodied his culture's increasing emphasis upon youthful energy as the primary dynamic of culture. His highly visible and attractive wife and children added a quality of active potency to the image of the Presidency. Other presidents had had children, of course; but Kennedy had a child while in office, providing a living example of his vitality. Media images of the Kennedy administration tend to include the President's wife and children to a much greater extent than those of any other President.

Kennedy's assassination, then, represented much more than a murder or a political tactic. It represented the sudden, unanticipated destruction of the living symbol of American vitality and vigor. The social unrest which followed in the 1960s seemed to many to be symptomatic of a society whose direction and focus had disintegrated. This temporal progression, from the assassination to increased social violence and dissatisfaction, carries the implicit appearance of a causal relationship. Here, the reifying function of the mythic narrative finds its basis. The impression of causality in temporally progressive events is a fundamental component of empirical thought. A strong intellectual imperative exists to construct a unifying narrative linking a series of seemingly causally related events.

Thus, when a series of undesirable events occurs, the tendency to search for a common cause naturally follows. This human tendency arises from the basic survival instinct which tells us that if we can semantically collapse a group of undesirable events into one common problem, we can exercise much more control than by addressing each problem separately. The Kennedy assassination provides a convenient starting point for the rhetorical construction of narrative justifying current political cynicism and



explaining the otherwise chaotic events of the decade following the assassination.

The narrative begins with the killing of a young and promising leader by conspirators who envy the leader's power or whose schemes he has thwarted in the past. Oliver Stone plays on this theme when he asserts that Kennedy's killers were military men angered by the President's proposed withdrawal from Viet Nam. Other theories, involving the Mafia and anti-Castro Cuban exiles, cite revenge and the prevention of further interference as the motive. The conspirators then arrange for a cover-up, to be accomplished by the highest government officials who participate either out of fear or for personal gain. The young leader is replaced by an older, less dynamic man, one more willing to acquiesce to the demands of the invisible government. Stone eagerly portrays President Lyndon Johnson as an accessory after the fact who capitulates to the demands of the conspirators.

The narrative continues with a wave of social disorder and violence brought about by a populace grasping blindly for control of its destiny. At this point, the public has begun to perceive that it no longer controls the actions of its government. This realization provokes a wave of extreme political reactions, the Yippie Movement, more assassinations, and the development of the Generation Gap. The country

divides politically into the Old, who still believe in the "lie" of a viable American democracy, and the Young who perceive corruption at the heart of the country.

At this point in the narrative, a dictator of the vilest sort seizes political control. Richard Nixon's paranoid attitudes toward the counterculture and his extensive domestic intelligence operations have attained legendary, if not mythic status. The dictator's methods eventually prove too extreme, even for the Establishment, and he is hounded from office in disgrace. Here, the mythic narrative fades. It seems likely that the relative recency of post-Watergate history disqualifies it from mythologization. The ouster of Nixon seems an appropriately triumphant ending for a mythic tale, but the exigence for the conspiracy advocates remains unresolved.

#### Ancient Mythic Context

For conspiracy theorists, the only appropriate resolution will come with the revelation of truth and the administration of justice. Only then can political power return to its rightful place in the hands of the people. This renewal of power also symbolizes spiritual renewal. For the conspiracy theorist, the resolution of the problem of the fallen leader will bring renewal and redemption to the land.

In this way, the Kennedy myth strongly resembles the ancient mythic motif of the maimed Fisher King.

Originating in ancient Celtic tradition, the Fisher King represents a recurrent motif rather than a specific myth. The Fisher King became most commonly associated with the Arthurian grail legend, but represents a much older mythic theme originating in France. Basically, the concept involves a leader who is either generally ill or has received a specific terrible wound. According to Campbell, the King's wound is associated with "the waste and sorrow of his land" (Creative 391). Thus, the condition of the King and the land become intertwined. When one heals, so will the other.

The appropriateness of the JFK/Fisher King analogy becomes clearer when one notes the symbolic importance of the President's fatal head wound. Movie trailers for the film JFK contain a particularly gruesome visual sequence in which a gunshot seems to blow a ragged hole in the screen revealing the film's title logo beneath. The shape and angle of the gunblast approximate the nature of Kennedy's head wound. A similar effect is used on the cover of the paperback edition of Jim Garrison's On the Trail of the Assassins.

A further manifestation of the Fisher King motif exists in the occasional rumors and tabloid stories attesting that Kennedy actually survived his wounds and

lives in hiding waiting for the appropriate time to re-emerge. These stories usually portray the President as brain-damaged or otherwise crippled, a clear reference to the ailing Fisher King. We should also note that the unfulfilled hope that one of the younger Kennedy brothers would renew the Kennedy presidential dynasty probably represented a practical application of the motif.

#### Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research

The body of public discourse alleging the existence of a conspiracy in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy exists as the popular cultural manifestation of a myth. The body of discourse collectively referred to as the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theory meets fully each of the criteria established by the theoretical framework for identifying myth. The Kennedy myth functions both mythically and rhetorically to explain recent historical phenomena in narrative terms. Additionally, the myth operates to establish the existence of a rhetorical exigence in need of correcting.

The elevation of this particular popular cultural theme stems from both a consistency with contemporary cultural mythos and a derivation of its thematic content from an older Western mythic motif. The Kennedy myth is continuous with American mythos as a

whole, fitting into a narrative which reinterprets recent historical events in terms of a popular struggle for truth and control. The incorporation of elements from the Fisher King mythic tradition ensures the enduring appeal of the Kennedy myth and connects it with values deeply rooted in Western culture.

The method of this essay has not been to examine the recent rhetoric of Oliver Stone and others, urging public action in the matter. Rather, the essay has focused upon the mythic basis of such rhetoric, the perceptions it fosters and the rhetorical assumptions it provides. Certainly, Stone's rhetorical posture merits analysis; such analysis, however, exists outside the scope of this paper. Perhaps these findings may provide a foundation for a future analysis of public discourse surrounding the matter. Further research into the rhetorical nature of modern myth also seems warranted. If and when more contemporary events become mythologized, that is, when they are woven into the cultural narrative outlined in this chapter, they will certainly merit attention.

An understanding of the basic assumptions and values established by myth, particularly as they pertain to rhetoric, seems crucial to modern communication theory. This assessment becomes particularly clear when we recognize the extent of the mythologization of contemporary events. In the

Information Age, the sheer amount of stimuli inflicted upon individuals and cultures strongly encourages the mythic contextualization of such information. If we can mold raw data into an understandable, satisfying format, we are likely to proceed in reality from the assumptions and constraints the format provides. A comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of rhetoric has, as a prerequisite, a critical knowledge of the methods by which we construct our discursive reality.

This essay represents an assessment of the function and origins of the Kennedy Conspiracy myth, not a speculation upon its validity as history. The massive amount of favorable research amassed by theorists indicates that some amount of concern is warranted. However, the theory has its share of reputable detractors as well, among them, David Belin. Belin compares JFK's version of "truth" to that created by Nazi propagandists (National Press Club). He and others have contended that the conspiracy theories not only represent incorrect information, but that they actually do harm. The intent here has not been the evaluation of any argument, but rather an examination of the origins of argument construction.

Recently, a number of legislators have called for the release of previously classified information concerning the Kennedy assassination. These demands seem to have come about as the direct result of the

recent public concern over the existence of a conspiracy. The ideal ending to the mythic narrative would have the ultimate truth about the assassination finally revealed with the guilty parties punished and the people regaining control of their own destiny. The actual information revealed by the documents may prove less spectacular. Nevertheless, the compelling nature of a particularly salient modern myth will have altered public policy. We cannot deny the rhetorical power of the myth.

WORKS CITED

- Anson, Robert Sam. "The Shooting of JFK." Esquire Nov  
. 1991: 93+
- Balthrop, V. William. "Culture, Myth, and Ideology as  
Public Argument: An Interpretation of the Ascent  
and Demise of 'Southern Culture'." Communication  
Monographs 51 (1984): 339-52
- Barthes, Roland. Mythologies. Trans. Annette Lavers. New  
York: Hill, 1957.
- Baudrillard, Jean. Selected Writings. Oxford: Stanford  
UP, 1988.
- Belin, David W. "Address to the National Press Club."  
National Public Radio. WKYU, Bowling Green. 27 March  
1992.
- Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckman. The Social  
Construction of Reality. Garden City: Doubleday,  
1966.
- Bitzer, Lloyd F. "The Rhetorical Situation." Philosophy  
and Rhetoric 1 (1968): 1-14.
- Bormann, Ernest G. "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The  
Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality." Quarterly  
Journal of Speech 58 (1972): 396-407.
- Braden, Waldo W. "Myths in a Rhetorical Context." Southern  
Speech Communication Journal 40 (1975): 113-26.
- Breen, Myles, and Farrel Corcoran. "Myth in Television  
Discourse." Communication Monographs 49 (1982):



127-36.

- Campbell, Joseph. The Hero With a Thousand Faces.  
 Bollingen Series 17. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1949.
- . The Masks of God: Creative Mythology. New York:  
 Penguin, 1968.
- Canfield, Michael, and Alan J. Weberman. Coup d'etat in  
 America. New York: Third, 1975.
- Creps, Earl George, III. "The Conspiracy Argument as  
 Rhetorical Genre." Diss. Northwestern U, 1980.
- Epstein, Edward Jay. Legend: The Secret World of Lee  
 Harvey Oswald. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978.
- Executive Action. Dir. David Miller. Twentieth-Century  
 Fox, 1973.
- Flammonde, Paris. The Kennedy Conspiracy. New York:  
 Meredith, 1969.
- 48 Hours--JFK CBS. WTVF, Nashville.
- Foss, Sonya K. Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and  
 Practice. Prospect Heights: Waveland, 1989.
- Goodnight, G. Thomas, and John Poulakos. "Conspiracy  
 Rhetoric: From Pragmatism to Fantasy in Public  
 Discourse." Western Journal of Speech Communication  
 45 (1981): 299-316.
- Groden, Robert J., and Harrison Edward Livingstone. High  
 Treason. New York: Berkley, 1989.
- Hofstadter, Richard. The Paranoid Style in American  
 Politics, and Other Essays. New York: Knopf, 1965.
- JFK. Dir. Oliver Stone. Warner Bros., 1991.

- Leo, John. "Oliver Stone's Paranoid Propaganda." U.S. News and World Report 13 Jan. 1992: 18.
- Lifton, David S. Best Evidence. New York: MacMillan, 1980.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. Sex, Culture, and Myth. New York: Harcourt, 1962.
- Oprah--Oliver Stone Interview. WBKO, Bowling Green.
- Paglia, Camille. Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson. New York: Vintage-Random House, 1990.
- Rushing, Janice Hocker. "The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth." Communication Monographs 50 (1983): 14-32.
- Sykes, A.J.M. "Myth in Communication." The Journal of Communication 20 (1970): 17-31.
- Vankin, Jonathan. Conspiracies, Coverups, and Crimes. New York: Paragon, 1992.