

The socially critical films of 1974: Part 4

Alan J. Pakula's *The Parallax View* (1974): America “is a country with many dark secrets”

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This is the fourth part of a series of articles on the socially critical films of 1974. An introduction and Part 1 were posted May 6, Part 2 May 8, Part 3 May 10 and Part 5 May 16.

The Parallax View, featuring Warren Beatty, Hume Cronyn, William Daniels and Paula Prentiss, is a 1974 political thriller that retains its relevance after fifty years. Directed by Alan J. Pakula and based on the 1970 novel of the same title by Loren Singer (1923-2009), the film expresses the broadly felt suspicion in the population—at that time and even more so today—that there is something sinister and rotten in the American state.

The second in Pakula's “paranoia trilogy” dealing with conspiracies and surveillance, *The Parallax View* was preceded by *Klute* (1971), a neo-noir film starring Jane Fonda as a call girl leaking secrets to private detective Donald Sutherland, which exudes a memorable atmosphere of ambiguity and menace. *All the President's Men* (1976) is the best known of Pakula's trilogy, with Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman as *Washington Post* journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, investigating the Watergate break-in and exposing the Nixon administration's criminality.

The Parallax View's greatest strength, its insistence that something deeply foul and violent lies beneath the surface of official political life, reflected important realities of the 1960s in the US and internationally.

The postwar order was unraveling and the ruling elites were increasingly incapable of containing the explosive social contradictions. The French general strike of May-June 1968, which threatened capitalist rule, was the highest expression of an international process. In the US, the civil rights movement mobilized masses of people, the inner city rebellions had begun, and workers continued to press in their millions for substantial improvements in living standards and social benefits.

The intense social tensions coincided with and deepened bitter conflicts within the ruling class itself, over domestic and foreign policy. One result of this overall process in the US was a wave of political assassinations. The implications of the killings, and the extent of the conspiracies behind them, were covered up by the authorities. *Political* causes were denied in every case.

Most Americans believe that John F. Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963 in a plot involving the Central Intelligence Agency or other high-level actors. The US, as the WSWWS observed on the

occasion of the 50th anniversary of Kennedy's murder, “is a country with many dark secrets.” The killing confronted Americans with “the unforeseen and explosive consequences of the interaction between the United States' malignant internal social contradictions and its reactionary and sinister post-World War II role as the world's leading imperialist power.”

Significant doubt remains around the official explanations for the assassination of black nationalist Malcolm X in 1965 and civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., as well as of Democratic Party presidential candidate Robert Kennedy in 1968. By the 1970s, it was increasingly clear to the public that to suspect assassinations and other events were being directed by shadowy government and extra-governmental actors was not paranoia, but political realism.

Pakula's *Parallax View* captures this political and social atmosphere. It opens with the pomp and ceremony of a political campaign event atop Seattle's futuristic Space Needle (built for the 1962 World's Fair). Amidst the glad-handing and back-slapping, US Senator Charles Carroll (William Joyce) is praised for his political independence. “Probably too independent for my own good,” Carroll jokes. Within moments he is shot, his blood splattered all over the panoramic windows. In the ensuing pandemonium, the apparent assassin is chased and falls to his death over the Needle's edge, while the real killer escapes detection. All this occurs within the film's first five minutes.

In a deliberate and telling allusion to the 1963-64 Warren Commission, the body appointed to investigate (and whitewash) the first Kennedy killing, the camera moves in ominously on an august group of government commissioners seated under a carved wooden eagle. A spokesman announces that, after months of investigation and weeks of hearings, the investigating committee has concluded that Carroll was assassinated by a lone gunman, who “acted entirely alone, motivated by a misguided sense of patriotism, and a psychotic desire for public recognition. The committee wishes to emphasize that there is no evidence of any wider conspiracy. No evidence whatsoever.”

No questions are allowed, and the decision is meant to put an end to any speculation in the press. Likewise, the Warren Commission concluded that the assassination of President Kennedy was the work of a “single lone gunman,” Lee Harvey Oswald, unrelated to any broader political conspiracy.

Suspensions about Carroll's assassination are rekindled three years later, when television journalist Lee Carter (Prentiss) approaches her former boyfriend and fellow journalist Joe Frady (Beatty), frantically insisting someone is trying to kill her. She points out that witnesses to the Carroll assassination are dying under suspicious circumstances, one by one. Frady dismisses her fears as paranoia—"You were always terrified about something"—but when Lee turns up dead shortly thereafter, he begins to investigate for himself, over the objections of his editor (Cronyn).

The Parallax View proceeds at a breathless clip, with car chases, barroom brawls, a hydroelectric dam unexpectedly releasing torrents of water, and bombs on yachts and planes. Frady's investigation eventually leads to his discovery of the Parallax Corporation—a sinister entity in a modern glass headquarters that recruits sociopaths to work as assassins. Posing as a sex offender with aggressive tendencies, Frady aces the personality test with the help of a friend who is a psychiatric researcher. He is recruited to Parallax by Jack Younger (Walter McGinn), who promises him the most lucrative and rewarding work of his life.

In a chilling indoctrination film shown to brainwash Beatty, idealized images of family, home, loving people and beauty are counterposed with an increasingly disturbing sequence of violent images, of Hitler, Che Guevara, Mao, images of war and hunger, the Ku Klux Klan, lynchings, social unrest and "deviants." The implication is that by suppressing political opposition, particularly among the youth, Parallax is helping suppress the lack of patriotism and "subversive" tendencies threatening the country.

Pakula's unsettling film reaches its climax at another campaign event, this time in a huge red, white and blue-bedecked auditorium, with a marching band forming mosaics of US presidents' faces from Washington to Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt. The sequence ends with the face of another candidate, Senator Hammond, who promises a return to "the promised land of liberty our forefathers created." But a chase up on the catwalks above the auditorium fails to stop yet another assassination. A panel of commissioners once again concludes that there is no evidence of a conspiracy, and no questions are allowed.

It is significant that *The Parallax View* should still hold up after fifty years. Without the help of the special effects routinely employed in action films today, its fast-paced suspense derives from engaging acting, particularly by Beatty—his long-haired, rebellious persona suggestive of "the youth"—as well as by innumerable stunt performers, combined with striking cinematography by Gordon Willis.

More importantly, the film's depiction of various criminal operations, carried out by the state directly or by shadowy corporations beyond the control even of its own intelligence agencies, resonates even more strongly with a public that has witnessed in the intervening period the use of a manufactured sex scandal in an effort to remove a president, the hijacking of a national election, a largely unexplained terrorist attack, the launching of wars and invasions based on out-and-out lies, and an attempted fascist coup and more.

US presidents, following the example of Barack Obama, now assert their authority to carry out extrajudicial killings and assassinations, including American citizens, and act upon this authority regularly. Former officials of the CIA and FBI, notorious around the world for their role in enforcing American imperialism's criminal operations, appear as "experts" on nightly news programs. Numerous former intelligence and military operatives from the CIA, Pentagon, National Security Council and State Department have run as Democratic Party candidates for Congress.

Moreover, film and television largely accepts and even valorizes the secret, violent operations of the state in a manner that would have been unacceptable in the 1960s and early 1970s. In numerous movies, from *Zero Dark Thirty* to *American Sniper*, and innumerable television and streaming series (*24*, *Jack Ryan*, *Alias*, or the recent Amazon Prime series *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*), the nefarious dealings of the military and intelligence agencies are shown as heroic, or even heroic-comic.

Likewise, the exposure of these crimes by authors like Loren Singer—who learned details of covert operations that became the themes of many of his novels from time spent working in the OSS (predecessor to the CIA) in the 1940s—is all but unthinkable today in popular culture.

It is enough to point to the different treatment of Daniel Ellsberg, who released the Pentagon Papers in 1971 and had all charges against him dismissed in 1973, and that of figures like Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden and, above all, WikiLeaks' Julian Assange to gauge the sea change that has occurred.

The integration of the media into state operations has reached an advanced stage. Various well-paid pundits are little more than pliant mouthpieces for official propaganda. Independent and determined reporters like Frady largely belong to an extinct species. Prominent editors such as the *New York Times*' Bill Keller pride themselves on their right *not* to publish crucial information.

However, as insightful and striking as it is, Pakula's film has its weaknesses. It never attempts to explain the connection between the government and Parallax, and the social interests both represent. Where does an organization like Parallax emerge from? What conditions might have prompted elements in the ruling elite to turn to murdering "independent" politicians with the help of hit men? The liberal Pakula (who began his career honorably as the producer of films like *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1962) never concerns himself with these issues, or shies away from them.

The Parallax View centers on the efforts of a lone individual to thwart the operations of a vast, state-connected criminal organization that is overthrowing or manipulating elections, with relatively little indication of what motivates Frady. In a film exposing the obvious attempt to cover up the political sources of political assassinations, there is relatively little politics. Nor is there any indication of who Frady could turn to for help.

Like other significant films released in 1974, most notably Roman Polanski's *Chinatown*, the ending is bleak, and suggests that these criminal elements will always get away with their crimes, that they are omnipotent.

The stronger aspects of Pakula's film hold up well after half a century. Given the vast explosion of the anti-democratic state-sanctioned violence and criminality of the American ruling class over the last five decades, it is a work that contains serious insight into an earlier stage of the current crisis and still serves as a sharp warning.



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