

Preface to the New Paperback Edition

Since *Dangerous Knowledge* was first published, scholars of film and cultural studies have found the JFK assassination and its representation an ongoing source of fascination. Outstanding books have been written about conspiracy thinking in American political discourse and about the role that JFK-assassination imagery has played in helping us rethink the contours of visual culture. But in 1996, when my doctoral dissertation was revised into this book, the field, if it can even be called that, barely existed. Of course, a small library of books and articles was devoted to solving the assassination mystery, reviewing the investigations conducted by the government, and countering official claims. But no books were devoted to theorizing the photographic and moving image as each had operated within the assassination inquiries since 1963, nor did any books survey the artwork that had engaged in a dialogue with it.

My place on the margins of what Peter Knight has referred to as “assassinology” was made clear to me when, on the basis of *Dangerous Knowledge*, I was asked to testify before the Assassination Records Review Board (AARB) in the spring of 1997. The AARB was an independent government board assigned to oversee the implementation of the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act, a measure passed in 1992. The AARB’s Final Report stated its mission rather bluntly: “The problem was that thirty years of government secrecy relating to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy led the American public to believe that the government had something to hide. The solution was legislation that required the government to disclose whatever information it had concerning the assassination.”¹ On the day I testified, the board was, in the words of Chairman John Tunheim, “seeking public comment and advice” as it addressed how Abraham Zapruder’s family should be compensated for the government’s taking the original film that had traveled through his camera. After a prolonged negotiation, in 1999, the government paid \$16 million to the family.

Perhaps I should have known it would be a less than satisfying day when I saw my name at the bottom of the testimony list. *The film professor goes last*, I thought, not so much hitting clean-up but bringing

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up the rear behind Robert Brandeis, a George Washington University law professor; Richard Trask, who had written a comprehensive account of the Zapruder film's circulation through government and commercial locations; Moses Weitzman, a photography expert who had worked with the film at LIFE magazine; and Josiah Thompson, author of *Six Seconds in Dallas* and one of the assassination critics who had always seemed among the most level-headed and intelligent in a field that contains both reasonable investigators and crackpots. The members of the AARB struck me as thoughtful and serious people, prepared to examine some of the larger cultural, even philosophical, questions at stake in the discussion. But I was surprised by the remarks of several of my fellow speakers, particularly by the time they devoted to going over what had been repeated so many times over the years—the details about Zapruder's experience making the film and the importance of the film as a record of the assassination. Surely the board knew all this already—no one needed to hear two hours of testimony about how the Zapruder film was the most important piece of historical footage ever shot.

By 1997, such observations almost went without saying, I thought, or could at least be quickly summarized. This opportunity to testify seemed a good time to address other issues raised by three decades of looking at the Zapruder footage. I suggested that the film's evidentiary value had largely run its course, that now it functioned as exhibit one not in the murder investigation but in the recurring struggle between the idea that film was an unimpeachable witness to history, on the one hand, and the source of multiple and sometimes contradictory conclusions on the other. In other words, it seemed appropriate to see the Zapruder film from the perspective of more than thirty years, in which it now appeared as the inaugural text of a new era of image making and interpretation, or what some would call the postmodern era.

I told the AARB what I had claimed in the book: that the Zapruder film had become a thoroughly fetishized object and that its repeated scrutiny masked the lack of conclusive knowledge everyone wished it contained. I also pointed out that the footage does not provide a window onto the past but rather a perspective on the event shaped by Zapruder's decisions about what type of camera to use, his choice of film, where to stand, and how to move the camera. Afterward, to my dismay, although various board members showed some curiosity about what I had said, my fellow speakers could not have been less interested. The post-hearing chat among the two or three assassinologists in the room seemed to be locked in the past.

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Thompson asked, a bit incredulously, whether I was suggesting that he had spent thirty years chasing a fetish. The others regarded me with puzzled looks and partial smiles. In short, no one in this small group appeared to speak my language.

That language was, of course, being spoken by scholars in film and cultural studies, but few at this point had turned these concepts to the images of the JFK assassination. Moreover, when scholars did turn to the assassination, as with a chaotic multimedia presentation I saw presented at a Conference of the Popular Culture Association in Toronto a couple years earlier, the images seem detached entirely from their historical context. As I note toward the end of the book, *Dangerous Knowledge* is an attempt to ground the meaning of assassination images, and the art and film produced in relation to them, in a discursive history. My close readings of artwork by Bruce Conner and Andy Warhol and five Hollywood films only make sense within such a history.

Since this book was first published, many working in film and cultural studies have taken up a renewed interest in historical scholarship (while others, of course, never stopped), and studies of assassination imagery have tended to reflect this move. The last ten years or so have provided *Dangerous Knowledge* with some good company, and I am pleased to see how its arguments inform the work of scholars who have extended the scope of the whole problematic. In *Zaprudered: The Kennedy Assassination Film in Visual Culture* (University of Texas Press, 2011), Øyvind Vågnes offers an in-depth analysis of the cultural status of Zapruder's footage, interpreting its travels through film and video, television, and installation art. In *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images* (University of California Press, 2003), David M. Lubin uses the Dealey Plaza pictures as the foundation for a freewheeling and imaginative discussion of the intertextual connections between assassination images, 1960s photojournalism, Hollywood film, and commercial culture. In *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), Mark Fenster produces a sophisticated expansion of ideas having to do with the role of conspiracy within American political history and an analysis of conspiracy narratives in fiction and nonfiction. And in *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files* (Routledge, 2000), Peter Knight casts a wide critical gaze on conspiracy thinking across contemporary events, fiction, and media culture, characterizing the assassination as the black hole of conspiracy theory with its "exponential, all-consuming logic of paranoia."²² Knight cogently summarizes what many have suggested in one form

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or another: that the JFK assassination is the primal scene of American postmodernism.