



# Projecting Paranoia: Conspiratorial Visions in American Film (Culture America)

*Ray Pratt*

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A lit cigarette glows in the dark. A faceless voice describes sinister forces that are hard at work behind the scenes—a hidden conspiracy that controls our lives and perhaps even our thoughts. Then, like a ghost in the night, the voice is gone, leaving a residue of unease and a whisper of paranoia.

As emblematic as "Deep Throat" in *All the President's Men* or the "Cigarette Smoking Man" in the wildly popular *X-Files*, that ghostly presence stands in for numerous other "voices" in a wide range of American films from the classic era of film noir through Oliver Stone's *JFK* and Curtis Hanson's *L.A. Confidential*. In this sweeping and idiosyncratic synthesis of film and politics, Ray Pratt shows us how such movies are deeply rooted in postwar American culture and continue to exert an enormous influence on the national imagination.

For decades American cinema has mirrored and promoted the postmodern anxieties and paranoid perceptions embedded in our society. Tapping into the moviegoing audience's own projected fears, many Hollywood films seem to confirm our belief that there are indeed secret sinister forces at work and that our lives are at risk because of them.

Pratt revisits blockbusters and cult favorites alike and shows how their images of conspiracy have been fostered by the public's increasing distrust of large organizations, producing in turn a cinematic "narrative of resistance" that challenges the status quo. He offers *Seven Days in May* and *Dr. Strangelove* as signposts of Cold War hysteria; *Chinatown*, *The Conversation*, and *Missing* as clear reflections of our distrust of political and corporate elites in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate; and *Blue Velvet* and *The Stepfather* as dark countermyths to the "family values" touted by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. He also considers gender paranoia in films like *Klute*, *Fatal Attraction*, and *Silence of the Lambs* and reminds us that sometimes, as in *Serpico*, our guardian police forces need a bit of guarding themselves.

Deftly interweaving cultural, political, and film theory with fresh insights into film noir detectives, nuclear angst, sexual predators, and government conspiracies, *Projecting Paranoia* is essential reading for anyone interested in the American psyche or great moviemaking.

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