

San Francisco Examiner

IMAGE

FEBRUARY 16, 1992

See No Evil: The Media and the JFK Assassination
Who Sits Where - and Why: A Maitre d' Dishes the Dish

INSIDE
SF'S
NEW
RAVE
UNDER-
GROUND

By Cynthia Brumby

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WHY DID THE PRESS REACT SO FURIOUSLY TO OLIVER STONE'S MOVIE? TWO

IT TOOK A HOLLYWOOD MOVIEMAKER TO FOCUS THE COUNTRY'S ATTENTION

once again on its deepest and most disturbing mystery: the murder of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. But instead of praising Oliver Stone for renewing the national debate about the assassination, the media were much more interested in burying him. So overheated has been the elite mainstream media's response to *JFK* that their defensiveness has become part of the story. Months after the fusillade against the film began, the public may well be asking, Why is Oliver Stone's refusal to accept the official story such an affront to the press?

The campaign against *JFK* started rolling before the cameras did, back on May 19, 1991, when *Washington Post* national security writer George Lardner Jr., working from a purloined first draft of Stone's screenplay, lit into the moviemaker for his reinterpretation of historical events. It has rolled raucously on ever since, drawing media stars such as George Will, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Tom Wicker, Ellen Goodman and Anthony Lewis, and commanding major stories in *Esquire*, *GQ*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Life*, *Time* and *Newsweek*. CBS anchor Dan Rather, who covered the Kennedy trip to Dallas, felt compelled to denounce the film, and ABC pitted Sam Donaldson against Stone on *Prime Time Live*.

It was the *New York Times*, sober voice of the East Coast establishment, that led the offensive against the film. From Dec. 15, 1991, to Jan. 16, 1992, I counted 10 *Times* stories about *JFK*—an average of one every three days. Among them: a well-argued negative review of *JFK* by film critic Vincent Canby; two signed editorials on *JFK*'s flawed utility as history; a piece that puzzled over the continuing appeal of conspiracy theories; and a feature that questioned the corporate judgment of Warner Bros., distributors of the movie. Perhaps recognizing that its animus against the film was getting out of bounds, the paper ran a hilarious critique of the media reaction to *JFK* by Garry "Doonesbury" Trudeau, who pictured Stone running a gauntlet of snipers from the Fourth Estate.

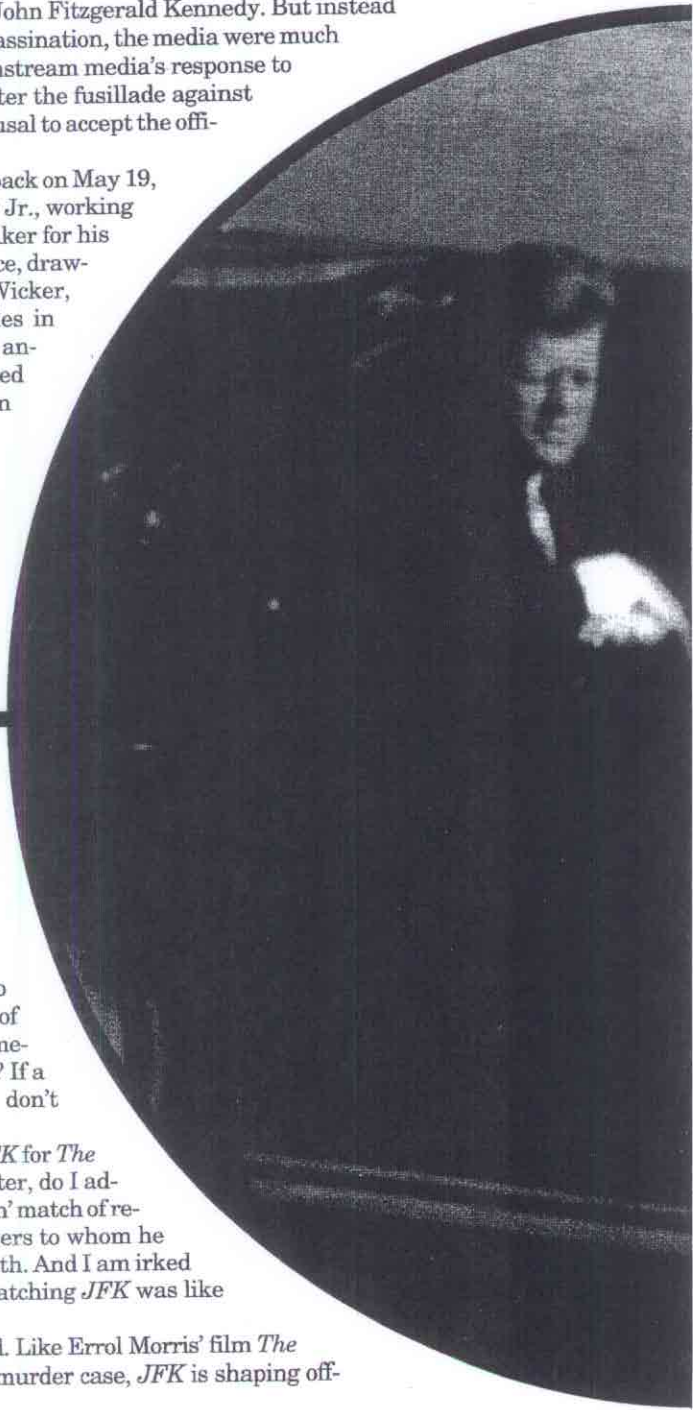
There is, in all this media huffing and puffing, the unmistakable sense that the press is covering its behind. Where were our best investigative reporters and most respected commentators when the Warren Commission report's many flaws became increasingly evident? Where were our watchdogs when the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded in 1979 that it "was 95 percent probable" that John F. Kennedy was the victim of a conspiracy?

Excuse me, but why wasn't that startling conclusion sufficient to stop the presses and jump-start a Watergate-style probe of the events of Nov. 22, 1963? What could have been more important — one of the media's inevitable "what's hot/what's not" lists that had to run that day? If a plausibly framed suggestion of a murderous conspiracy isn't *hot*, I don't know what is.

Having said all that, let me be clear about one thing: I reviewed *JFK* for *The Examiner*, and I do not admire the film as a film — nor, for that matter, do I admire much of Oliver Stone's other work. I am troubled by Stone's mix 'n' match of re-created scenes and archival footage, concerned that the young viewers to whom he dedicates the film could take his far-reaching conjecture as literal truth. And I am irked by his appropriation of TV car commercial quick-cutting. For me, watching *JFK* was like watching three hours of MTV without the music.

And yet, I think *JFK* is a contribution. It is bad art but a good deed. Like Errol Morris' film *The Thin Blue Line*, which spurred authorities to reopen another Texas murder case, *JFK* is shaping off-screen reality — except this time the stakes are vastly higher.

BY DAVID ARMSTRONG



MESSENGER

MEDIA CRITICS EXAMINE THE RESPONSE TO THE SHOOTING OF JFK ... AND JFK.

WHY THE JOURNALISTIC BARRAGE AT OLIVER STONE? WHOM DID HE SHOOT?

The first thing to understand is that the *JFK* controversy is the the latest in a series of credibility scandals.

In recent years, reputable journalists have been sounding alarms about infotainment — the blurring of lines between news and amusement. TV news uses re-enactments, coming attractions and theme music, while entertainment resorts to the shaky hand-held camera, grainy film and other conventions of documentary and behind-the-scenes reporting. Consider that Oliver Stone and the *NBC Nightly News* both avail themselves of theme music composed by the very same bombastic John Williams. As proper postmodernists, we all know that images are arranged and contrived; that the polyform villain in *Terminator 2* was produced by Industrial Light & Magic in Marin County; that Demi Moore's belly and Arnold Schwarzenegger's face and every centerfold's body have been airbrushed for effect. In fact, as a culture, we delight in being led backstage to inspect the mechanics of fakery. People like mini-documentaries on *The Making of ... this, that and the other.*

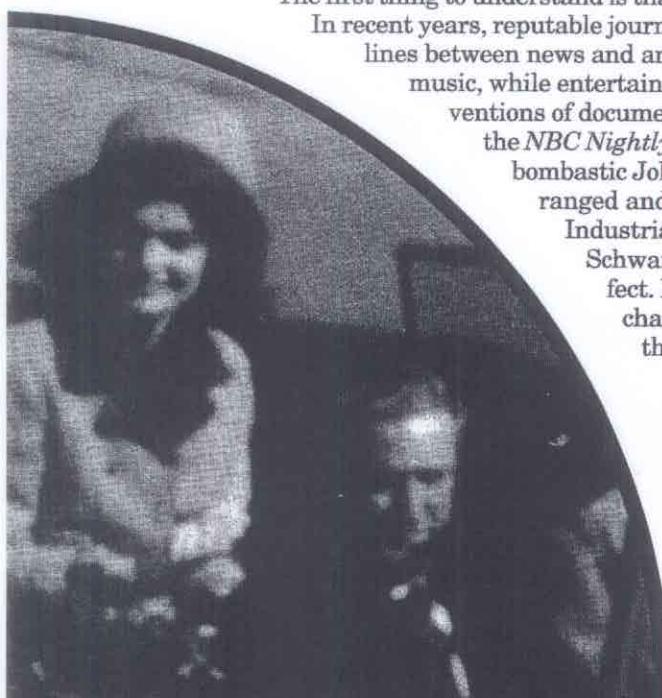
Still, whenever we are signaled that we are getting the news, nonfiction, the inside story — and when Warner's advertising campaign calls Stone's movie *The Story That Won't Go Away* — people expect the straight stuff. The more corrupt the public language, the more people want the luxury of suspending disbelief. For all our postmodern savviness, our everyday cynicism, we want to believe there remains a truth that hasn't been retouched. Curiously, no one believes in truth like a person surrounded by liars.

So, not surprisingly, our culture keeps stumbling into credibility scandals. A decade ago Janet Cooke was fired by the *Washington Post* and stripped of her Pulitzer Prize when the child heroin addict she had profiled turned out to be fictitious. Janet Malcolm of the *New Yorker* suffered a loss of prestige as many readers came to suspect that she had cooked up some quotations attributed to Jeffrey Masson. A *National Geographic* cover became scandalous when it was revealed that, with the use of electronic equipment, the editors had moved the Egyptian pyramids closer together to fit them onto their cover. ABC News came under fire for using an actor to "recreate" the passing of secrets by the accused spy Felix Bloch; Connie Chung, under the imprimatur of CBS News, made re-creations part of her weekly ritual, and took heat for it, even in-house. A *TV Guide* cover purporting to show Oprah Winfrey's reduced body became scandalous when an editor admitted that the body actually belonged to Ann-Margret.

Journalism has an occupational credo: The truth is supposed to be tamper-proof. But there they are, newspapers and networks, losing circulation in the era of *Not-So-Hard Copy* and *Not-So-Inside Story* and *A Current-Wink-Wink-Affair*. Straight-arrow journalism finds itself far down a slippery slope moving toward more photo ops, celebrity profiles and various other forms of entertainment, because of their proprietors' belief that their only responsibility is not to be boring.

So it is precisely the serious journalists, the ones who still believe in the sacred mission of truth-telling — the Anthony Lewises and Tom Wickers — who are most alarmed about what their own business is coming to. Never mind that so-called *Eyewitness News* is full of contrivance: The "character" walks into her office building, the professor processes words on cue, the president and the ambassador chat, the victim's mother poses next to his photo — *because the correspondent has asked them to.* In principle, factuality remains sacrosanct. Facts are not supposed to be factoids.

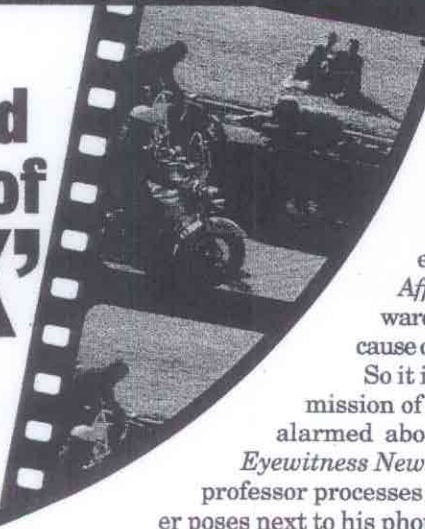
So journalists these days are prone to blowing the whistle on credibil-



Newsweek

The Twisted Truth of 'JFK'

Why Oliver Stone's New Movie Can't Be Trusted



BY TODD GITLIN

THERE IS, IN ALL THIS HUFFIN TAKABLE SENSE THAT THE PRI

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The media have become obsessed with Oliver Stone the Personality. Is he a macho knucklehead with "casting-couch" eyes (the January *GQ*)? A swaggering "jerk" (*Bay Guardian* cover, Jan. 1)? Let's say, for the sake of argument, that he is both. Aside from his friends, family and colleagues, who cares? Oliver Stone is not the issue. The murder of a president is the issue.

ALTHOUGH JOURNALISTS ARE LOATH TO ADMIT IT, *JFK*, IN ITS ham-handed way, has done what the media could and *should* have done years ago, but didn't: spark a national effort to exhume sealed records and at least try to lay to rest the persistent doubts about the assassination.

Why didn't the country's major news institutions — the ones with the resources and clout to launch a full-scale investigation — take up this task themselves?

Norman Mailer, writing in the February *Vanity Fair*, suggests one answer. While Mailer wisely eschews Stone's scattershot conspiracy theory — *JFK* fingers everyone from the CIA and FBI to Cuban exiles, military intelligence, Lyndon Johnson, Dallas police and the New Orleans gay subculture for the shooting and subsequent "coverup" — he submits that some people in those circles may know what really happened and have decided not to tell us.

Why not? Because they think it would upset us if we found out that a conspiracy of any sort had killed the president. These people elected, in a moment of great trauma, to act as stabilizing influences rather than investigators, and the media went along.

The fiercest fealty to the official version of events comes from what Mailer calls "the Washington Club." Members in good standing include journalists who, as many media critics have long argued, are much too close to their government sources, including key figures in intelligence and the military.

Stone is not a member of this club. Some of the withering fire from the *Washington Post's* Lardner, inside-the-Beltway columnist George Will and retired *Post* editor Ben Bradlee — a great personal pal of JFK's — can be understood in that light. In the ultimate insider's town, Stone is the worst thing you can be: an interloper. He's a California parvenu, for God's sake. He's more at home on Hollywood Boulevard than on Pennsylvania Avenue — and he threatens Washington's settled views.

Mailer's ruminations sent me back to Lardner's seminal article, titled "Dallas in Wonderland." Rereading Lardner, I was struck not only by what he wrote about, but what he failed to address seriously.

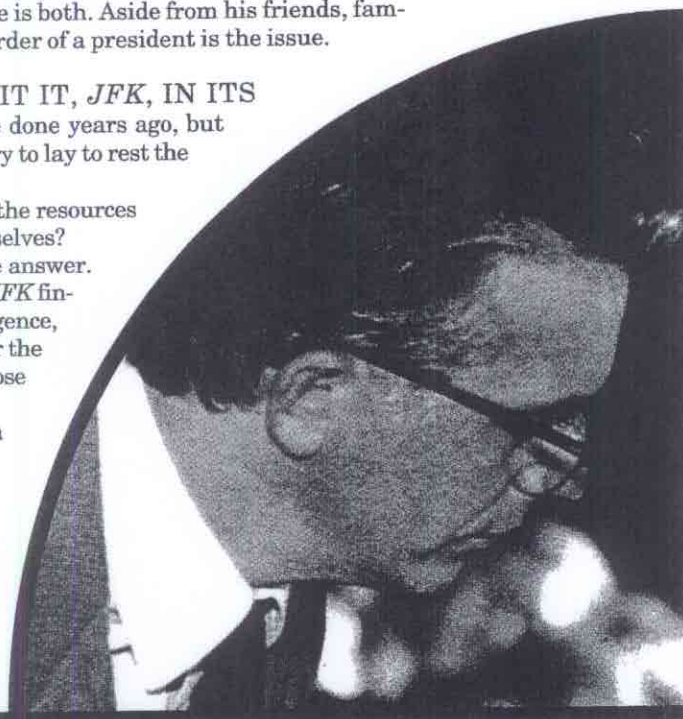
Lardner, who covered the trial of Clay Shaw for the *Post*, easily demolished the idealized version of Stone's celluloid hero, former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, whose conspiracy case against Shaw failed to convince a jury in 1969. Even Stone agrees his portrait of Garrison is air-brushed, though he insists he needed a hero to develop a story line.

Amazingly, however, Lardner made almost no effort to defend the central document in the official version of events: the 1964 Warren Commission report. Wicker, Schlesinger and most other media stars who have squeezed off shots at Stone have also carefully distanced themselves from the report.

In a *Wall Street Journal* essay, Schlesinger allowed that "There is no reason to regard the Warren Commission report as sacred. We now know that both the CIA and the FBI withheld vital information from the commission. I think these agencies withheld the information for reasons of bureaucratic self-protection; but, whatever the reason, the result was an inadequate investigation."

Wicker took a similar stance in the most important *New York Times* story, a lead Sunday Arts and Leisure section feature headlined "Does *JFK* Conspire Against Reason?" The article was printed five days before the movie opened.

Wicker, too, shredded Stone's canonization of Garrison. Even so, Wicker, who covered JFK's assassination for the news-



FILM VIEW/Janet Maslin
THE NEW YORK TIMES

Oliver Stone Manipulates His Puppet

STONE'S "J. F. K." ACHIEVES AN UN...
...when it exhorts its audience to b...
...unreliable information, since the...
...ges from this three-hour-and-...
...as the most suspect is t...
...do with Mr. Stone...
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ity scandals. And *JFK* certainly has its fictions and its deep flaws — not least, the jailhouse witness played by Kevin Bacon, who was actually a composite, and the utterly incredible character “X.” But still, why the intensity of the media’s panic? Why a preemptive strike by George Lardner Jr. in the *Washington Post* on the basis of a first draft of the script, months before its release? Why an outraged *Newsweek* cover story?

Now, Hollywood history is saturated with historically dubious movies. Among them are the hero-worshipping Westerns that romanticized cowboys and drastically underestimated the settlers’ violence against the indigenous peoples. But the only time I can recall even a trace of media animosity toward a movie before *JFK*, on the basis of its factuality or lack thereof, is the case of Costa-Gavras’ *Missing*, which, for example, Flora Lewis of the *New York Times* attacked as unfair to the American ambassador to Chile. So why cast so many stones at Oliver?

I OFFER TWO SPECULATIONS. ONE IS THAT THE MOVIE damages a deep and unexamined, even unarticulated, idea that Americans — including journalists, for all their famous cynicism — harbor about the national essence. America is the land of innocence, the shiny new world. In America, presidents do not get killed by conspiracies. Leave aside Lincoln, the victim of a political conspiracy if there ever was one; the myth springs back, perennially born again. Now, if the president of the United States can be assassinated, and the chief justice of the Supreme Court, leading members of the House and Senate, the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency and other pillars of authority can be wrong about who did it — can be at best sloppy and blind, at worst deceptive — then what remains of the idea that in America we are free to know the truth and the truth shall make us free? The creed insists that the government is, ultimately, our own. If secret forces can overturn the popular will, what becomes of our innocence? Along comes *JFK*, which, for all its bombast, questions the mythic sense of the country’s reality. As the historian Ruth Rosen points out, Oliver Stone dizzies us by starting his movie with the Camelot myth, invoking that Christ-like John F. Kennedy who had the grace to walk among us during his, and our, glory days. Kennedy, we are given to believe, would have salvaged the endangered American innocence. Instead, he was crucified. Having set up American glories, Stone punctures them. In the process, he wrenches American ideals to the breaking point.

And there is something else that must nettle the press. Striking directly at the viscera, the movie shames the press, tears at its occupational pride — its belief in its capacity to tell the big, empire-shaking, life-warping stories of the time, the stories about the legal and illegal crimes that mow down the forests and throw out the workers and undermine the social contract.

Well, the movie damn well *ought* to shake, rattle and roll the press. For all the retrospective self-congratulation to the effect that the press punctured the pretensions of the war in Vietnam, there was plenty of puffery, even from St. Walter Cronkite, while the press missed many of the big stories of the war — including the fakery of the 1964 Tonkin Gulf incident that led Congress to write a blank check for Johnson’s subsequent escalation of the war. The My Lai massacre was uncovered by Seymour Hersh, who was, at the time, working for a minuscule news agency; he and others spent months getting the establishment press to show interest. As for Watergate, credit where credit is due to the remarkable tenacity of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein and their editors; but most of the press missed the Watergate story altogether until late in the game — and then most of the investigative work was done by official government bodies, by the General

JOURNALISM IS STAGGERED KNOW WHO IS RESPONSIBLE,

ARMSTRONG

paper of record, conceded flaws in the Warren Commission report, commenting "the commission is a fair target." He pronounced himself ready to rethink it if anyone can come up with a better explanation.

One of the few members of the elite press to defend the report was *Times* columnist Anthony Lewis, who wrote that a new investigation would change nothing. Lewis, a political liberal known for his careful reporting, must be respected for daring to stand by the Warren Commission when virtually none of his well-known colleagues will go near it. But his brief on behalf of the Warren report isn't enough to redeem the study.

OF COURSE, THE MEDIA HAVE NOT BEEN MONOLITHIC in their hostility to *JFK*. *Newsweek's* Dec. 23 cover trumpeted "The Twisted Truth of *JFK*: Why Oliver Stone's New Movie Can't Be Trusted." But even that four-article package included a spirited defense of Stone by *Newsweek* film critic David Ansen. *Time's* critic, Richard Corliss, waxed rhapsodic about the movie, and *Washington Post* critic Hal Hinson also liked it. But while many reviewers were kind, their news-side colleagues — reflecting the split in media culture between arts critics and news writers — refused to give *JFK* any credit. (When *Washingtonian* magazine critic Pat Dowell gave the movie 3½ stars, her review was killed, and she resigned in protest.)

As the hoopla around the movie increased pressure on the government to release its long-sealed assassination files, the media were forced to jump on board. A dozen years after congressional investigators found that our 35th president was, in all likelihood, removed from office by armed plotters, the *New York Times* at last found the editorial voice to call for full disclosure, paying grudging respect to Oliver Stone in the process. Once again, the media find themselves scurrying behind public opinion, a familiar position for the press, which has been fearful of challenging authority ever since Watergate. Indeed, citizen support for a new investigation — boosted by Rep. Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, who chaired the 1979 House committee — is strong and seemingly growing stronger.

Would a new inquest really get to the truth about what happened in Dealey Plaza, and afterwards? Who knows? Maybe the Warren Commission would look better after a careful open review. Maybe a new inquiry would settle nothing — a real possibility, given the deaths of key players and the destruction of vital evidence, even the disappearance of the president's brain (!).

There's one way to find out. It's time for the media to begin that process by pushing for a full, no-holds-barred government investigation.

I don't share the paranoid opinion that every reporter or editor who believes that Oswald acted alone is part of a coverup. Much more likely, journalists repressed any lingering doubts, deciding for the good of the country (and maybe their own reputations) not to look too closely or too hard at the drama in Dallas. In short, they opted to be comforting, to be a stabilizing force.

But it's not the media's job to comfort the public when issues of vital national concern are at stake. It's the media's job to dig, to unearth the truth if at all possible, and to share it with the public, no matter how painful that may prove to be.

The media must do what they failed to do in 1979 and 1969 and 1964: push for a new investigation and launch investigations of their own. Failing to act will only compound the damage that this dark obsession has already done to the national psyche. *JFK* has given the media another chance, a chance not just to concede past failures, but to correct them. They must accept the challenge. In short, the media need to lead. And they need to do it now. ■

EXAMINER FILE PHOTOS

David Armstrong writes about movies and media for *The Examiner*. He is coauthor, with Elizabeth Metzger Armstrong, of *The Great American Medicine Show* (Prentice Hall).



BY THE WORLD. IT DOESN'T AND DOESN'T SEEM TO CARE.

GITLIN

Accounting Office and the congressional committees, not the fearless press. The Iran-contra link was uncovered by a newspaper — in Beirut. The discovery that 93 percent of the bombs dropped on Iraq last year were “dumb” bombs, and that 70 percent missed their targets — claiming many civilian lives — was left to the Pentagon.

And talk about momentous events of our times: For all the talking MacNeil-Lehrer heads and all the think-tankers, who in the press intimated that Communism was rotting from within, that dissident groups considered marginal were about to become governments? Who in the press dared suggest that George Bush intended to go to war from early August 1990 on? Who told the American people what the savings and loan thieves were up to? Who, today, is interested in the Justice Department's disinterest in BCCI? And for that matter, considering the endless anniversary stories on John F. Kennedy — you can guarantee one a year — where is that famous journalistic curiosity about the unsolved murder?

OLIVER STONE'S MOVIE, FOR ALL ITS PROFOUND FLAWS, produces a scandal partly because it disputes the myth that the world is as the press reports it, day after day. In its lurid and overblown way, the movie says: While reporters are dutifully at their beats, history is being moved and shaken by covert actors. It says you can work the White House beat day in and day out for years, your talking anchorheads can fly around the globe as much as they like, and they won't get any closer to the deals, the deep stuff. It says you may be able to see the homeless people in the streets, but you haven't been paying attention to the real estate transactions and tax abatements that help put them there. Most pointedly it says, as the Vietnam veteran Oliver Stone wants to say, and say, and keep on saying: The awful war in Vietnam didn't just happen: *Someone* was responsible.

Journalism, in other words, is staggered by the world. It has little grasp. It doesn't know who is responsible, and often enough it doesn't seem to care. So to many a horrified reporter and columnist, Stone is an interloper. He is not only sloppy and gullible, he is a transgressor. The gall of the man! He is obsessed with Vietnam; doesn't he know — to use the popular dismissal of the day — that Kennedy is *history*? Stone crosses the border in a lightning raid and kidnaps the Kennedy saga. He is a terrorist of the cinema. He is that most irritating of interlopers, the one who jabs at a bad conscience. The guardians of the truth blast him with loathing, but in the crevices of their souls they look upon him with fear: the secret fear that their own profession has become deeply irrelevant to its ideals; the fear that routinely they've missed the goods; the realistic fear that they're not being read. And perhaps even the fear that they have become collaborators, in ways too many to name here, in the vast corruption and hollowness that America has become. Something is severely wrong, and, like Dylan's Mr. Jones, the media don't know what it is.

Brecht has Galileo say: Unhappy is the country that has need of heroes. Unhappy is the journalism that has to wait for Oliver Stone to do its proper work — to do it for better and/or worse — to do the indispensable work of tracking the big game; to hazard an answer, however glib, to the question, What the hell is going on in this country? The movie doesn't tell us, but it has clues and a hypothesis. Eyewitness News doesn't have even that. ■

Todd Gitlin, professor of sociology at UC-Berkeley, is the author of Inside Prime Time and The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage. His first novel will be published this fall by Farrar, Straus & Giroux. This essay was excerpted from a speech delivered at a forum on JFK sponsored by Tikkun magazine.