

THE CURRENT CINEMA

Smoke and Mirrors

OLIVER STONE'S "JFK" is a movie with a mission: it means to demonstrate that the assassination of John F. Kennedy, in Dallas in 1963, was not the act of a disturbed Marxist loner named Lee Harvey Oswald but the result of a vast, complex right-wing conspiracy that involved (at the very least) members of the intelligence community and the defense establishment. According to the movie, this wide-ranging plot to kill the President was developed primarily in response to a White House decision to withdraw some advisers from Vietnam. Stone and Zachary Sklar, who collaborated on the screenplay, tell us that Kennedy was committed to making sweeping changes in United States foreign policy: he meant to get us out of Southeast Asia, to rein in the covert activities of the Central Intelligence Agency, and, ultimately, to end the Cold War altogether. What happened in Dallas was therefore (in Stone's view) more than a murder: it was a coup d'état. And the movie thus purports to provide not only a solution to the specific mystery of who killed John Kennedy but also a key to unlock the secrets of every political crime in the past twenty-eight years of American history. Since the narrative of "JFK" is organized around the investigation conducted by the New Orleans District Attorney, Jim Garrison, between 1966 and 1969, the events that the movie can cite as "evidence" of the continuing effects of the coup are necessarily limited—to the escalation of the Vietnam War under L.B.J. and the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968. But Stone's interpretation of history is clearly intended to supply a framework for understanding the major scandals and outrages of the seventies and the eighties, too: Watergate, Iran-Contra, the alleged "October surprise" deal—Stone has mentioned them all in the many interviews he has given to promote this picture. His success in putting over the grand, vague conspiracy

theory proposed in "JFK" depends, of course, on his ability to tap into the audience's inherent distrust of the powers that be—its sense that the government officials, military brass, and covert-action cowboys fingered here are the sort of people who are capable of the most heinous crimes, the most devious cover-ups, the most arrogant contempt for the democratic process. Since our direst suspicions about the way the government operates frequently turn out to be justified, Stone knows that in 1992 very few members of the audience are likely to reject his conspiracy scenario out of hand. The assassination could have happened the way "JFK" says it did, and for this filmmaker "could have" is good enough. Platoon leader Stone carries out his mission here with his characteristic indifference to intellectual niceties. "JFK" is a guerrilla raid on our sensibilities. Stone doesn't bother to try to win the hearts and minds of the audience with coherent, rational argument; he simply takes them prisoner.

According to Gallup-poll results included in the press materials for "JFK," only sixteen per cent of the

American people now believe that Oswald acted alone; seventy-three per cent endorse the view that "others were involved." Among the majority there are presumably some who subscribe to the idea that Oswald didn't fire even a single shot on November 22, 1963, either at the President or at the Dallas police officer who was killed a mile from the suspect's rooming house less than an hour later. "JFK" accepts this thesis: that the alleged assassin was, as he loudly proclaimed after he was arrested, "a patsy," someone set up to take the fall for the real murderers. That's far from a new theory. It's just one of many variations that can be found in the hundreds of volumes of research and speculation produced over the years by students of the assassination. Nearly three decades of mostly independent, non-official examination of the event have turned up virtually no answers: the researchers all agree that the inquiry conducted by the government-appointed Warren Commission (which concluded that Oswald was the sole culprit) was deeply flawed, but, once past that common starting point, they scatter, each heading off in a different direction and no two ending up in exactly the same place.

The whole assassination-theory field is a nightmare of ambiguity and con-



*"Some people, Remson, are born to push the envelope,
and some are born to lick it."*

tradition. If you don't accept the Warren Commission's findings—and there are plenty of good reasons not to—you're still in the dark. The case for Oswald as lone-wolf killer is far from airtight, but no one has yet managed to construct a chain of evidence that leads inevitably to a more satisfying solution. There are plausible conspiracy theories implicating the C.I.A., the Mafia, military intelligence, anti-Castro Cuban exiles, and mix-and-match combinations thereof (sometimes with Oswald as triggerman, sometimes without). No one, though, can honestly claim to have the goods, the hard data that make sense of everything. The information necessary to arrive at the truth always proves to be incomplete; every case, no matter how persuasively argued, collapses for lack of some crucial piece of evidence. Even the forensic data are maddeningly inconclusive. The Dallas doctors and nurses who examined Kennedy's body immediately after the shooting reported seeing a massive exit wound in the back of the head, but the report of the official autopsy, performed later that day in Bethesda, Maryland, places the exit wound in the right temple; the discrepancy is irresolvable, because the President's brain, which was supposedly preserved for further research in the National Archives, has been missing since at least 1966.

In the late seventies, a House committee probing the assassination seemed to have—at last—discovered irrefutable proof that not all the shots fired at J.F.K. came from the direction of the Texas School Book Depository, where Oswald worked. Experts in acoustics, studying the recording of a police-radio transmission which was apparently made at the precise time of the shooting, determined that one shot had been fired from a different direction—from the famous Grassy Knoll. A few years after the committee stated its official conclusion, based primarily on the acoustical analysis, that there was a conspiracy to kill the President, this evidence, too, began to look shaky: closer study of the tape revealed the voice of a sheriff giving an order that was in fact issued after the shooting, not during it, so the sounds that the experts identified as gunfire could have been bursts of static. In the Kennedy-assassination case, nothing is solid, no one can be relied on: whatever looks

like part of the solution always turns out, sooner or later, to be part of the problem.

Delving into the literature of the Kennedy assassination can be an un-hinging, vertigo-inducing experience. Every conspiracy book should bear the legend "Abandon all hope." To maintain sanity in this murky underworld, you need a patient, judicious guide—someone like the British journalist Anthony Summers, whose 1980 book "Conspiracy" (revised and updated in 1989) is a thorough, sober, clear-eyed evaluation of the available evidence. Oliver Stone, with his overheated temperament and his propulsive, cut-to-the-chase filmmaking style, is not ideally suited for that role. "JFK" is more than three hours long, and it packs in an extraordinary amount of assassination lore: the motorcade route, the geography of Dealey Plaza, mock newsreel footage of eyewitness testimony to the shooting, portraits of suspected associates of Oswald, a graphic (and tasteless) reconstruction of the Bethesda autopsy, and a frame-by-frame analysis of the Zapruder film—the home movie, filmed by an onlooker in Dealey Plaza, that is the most detailed visual record of the killing. As if all these data weren't enough for us to assimilate, the movie adds a ton of speculative material about governmental misconduct and quite a few invented (Stone would say "composite") characters; and the whole wrenching spectacle climaxes with a thirty-five-minute courtroom oration by Garrison (Kevin Costner), in which fact, fiction, and ideology are indistinguishable from each other. For all its apparent meticulousness, "JFK" finally seems as muddled and as hastily thrown together as the Warren Commission Report. It's a thick gumbo of truths, half-truths, unverifiable hypotheses, and pure rant, and Stone ladles it out indiscriminately.

I don't think Stone is simply a victim



of assassinationologist's syndrome—the confusion and derangement that overtake even the most sensible people when they pursue this mystery. There are clear indications that the movie's elisions and distortions have been carefully thought out, and that the sensory overload "JFK" produces is a deliberate strategy. The choice of Garrison as hero is significant. The script is based largely on his 1988 chronicle of his investigation, "On the Trail of the Assassins," which is a well-written, exciting book. It's easy to understand why a filmmaker would be attracted to Garrison's story: the District Attorney and his staff tracked down leads and gathered evidence and eventually brought an alleged conspirator—a local businessman named Clay Shaw—to trial. The story has a dramatic shape that is familiar to movie audiences, and a kind of procedural suspense that we're comfortable with. Garrison portrays himself as a lonely fighter against hostile institutional forces—government, the media—that set in motion a well-orchestrated effort to stymie his inquiry. That's a movie-friendly concept, too: the combative D.A. can be seen as a Capra-style populist hero, a champion of the little guy against the big-bully establishment. More specifically, Garrison is the sort of character that Oliver Stone has always been drawn to: tenacious, obsessive, and, let's say, not averse to calling attention to himself. He would be an ideal vehicle for exploring the assassination controversy if it weren't for the embarrassing fact that the case he brought against Shaw was a shambles: the jury reached a "not guilty" verdict in less than an hour of deliberation, and it's almost impossible to find a conspiracy theorist today who thinks that Shaw had anything to do with the assassination.

Garrison tried his case mostly in the press and on television, regularly issuing wild pronouncements about evidence in his possession which would establish beyond doubt the identity of Kennedy's murderers. What he produced in court, however, was skimpy testimony from highly impeachable witnesses. Shamelessly, he turned the paucity of evidence for the conspiracy into evidence of a cover-up, and he wasn't shy (or particularly selective) about assigning blame for the supposed obstruction of his investigation. The

C.I.A., the Justice Department, and Lyndon Johnson all took their licks from Garrison in the media, and in one televised interview he suggested that Robert Kennedy was working against him, too.

Garrison's contradictory, intemperate, inflammatory public utterances, in fact, lend support to the idea that an institutional campaign to "discredit" him was never necessary: he discredited himself every time he opened his mouth. This blustering, intimidating loose-cannon prosecutor is not the Garrison of "JFK." Stone's Garrison is bespectacled and soft-spoken—a scholarly-looking seeker of truth. But even if you allow Stone the dramatic license of enhancing Garrison's reputation with Kevin Costner's aura of moral authority and regular-guy decency, you have to be suspicious of the way the movie handles the details of the Shaw case. The lengthy, expensive prosecution was a smoke-and-mirrors job, and Stone appears to know it. Garrison's shaky principal witnesses are nowhere to be found in "JFK"; the script replaces them with an invented character (played by Kevin Bacon) who tells a "composite" story that's far more compelling than anything the real Garrison elicited from his real witnesses. That is to say, when Stone comes up against a piece of material that seems inconveniently ambiguous, he fictionalizes it. Cutting a few corners here and a few more there, airbrushing the flaws in his hero's character, coloring in the sketchy outlines of the historical record, he manufactures a collage that tries to pass as a perfect, undoctored photograph of the assassination.

Stone's approach to historical truth is based on some very odd premises. In interviews, he has responded to attacks on the movie's accuracy by saying that his intention in "JFK" is to create a "countermyth" of the assassination—in opposition, that is, to the official myth represented by the Warren Commission's version of events (a myth that nearly three-quarters of the American public doesn't buy, anyway). Another myth is, I should say, pretty much the last thing most of us want from a purported investigation of the J.F.K. murder; in this field we've had

a surfeit of myth. Stone has also been saying that he's less interested in the "who" and the "how" of the conspiracy than in the "why"—that the answer to why Kennedy was killed will lead us to the truth about everything else. The most charitable interpretation of that statement is that Stone isn't a rigorous logician: how, exactly, would someone determine why a President was murdered without first knowing who did it and how it was done? You might begin to search for leads in



a simple domestic crime on the basis of a hypothesis about motivation, but political assassination presents too wide a range of possibilities: there were plenty of people and groups who hated Kennedy in 1963, all for different reasons. Stone simply selects a "why" that sounds good to him, and he makes a poor choice. Yes, Kennedy had approved an order to withdraw a few American advisers from Vietnam, but there's no evidence that this limited move signalled a fundamental change in Cold War foreign policy, or even, for that matter, in policy specific to Southeast Asia.

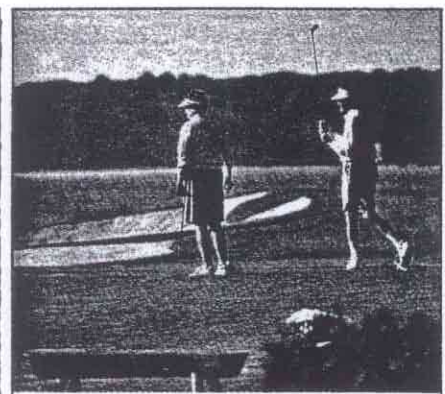
In essence, the conspiracy case that Stone makes in "JFK" amounts to a series of inferential leaps proceeding from a speculation. It's all bombast and misdirection, like a courtroom summation by a lawyer who knows that he can't win on the evidence. Stone comes on like a fearless radical, but his attitude toward the audience is firmly in the Hollywood tradition: he tries to bypass the intellect and go straight for the gut. "JFK" has the fevered tone of tabloid television; it plays like an endless episode of "America's Most Wanted." The movie's hysterical manner and its slipshod handling of the facts actually have the effect of diminishing the credibility of the case for conspiracy. The clearest sounds we hear in "JFK" are those of Oliver Stone shooting himself in the foot.

—TERRENCE RAFFERTY

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