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'JFK': The ends don't justify this movie



Pity poor Oliver Stone. Used to fawning entertainment critics and fulsome film industry fops, the trendy writer/director/producer probably has become used to the pedestal. In vapid Tinseltown, he is considered a man of knowledge.

Now Stone is under attack. Various American journalists have exposed his film, "JFK," for the hole-ridden piece of propaganda that it is. And Stone is mad.

In a New York Times piece last month (which was reprinted in the Daily News), Stone complained that his leading detractors were not "film critics" but "political journalists" who are angry because he challenged their domain as "the sole or privileged interpreters of our history."

Stone has a point: Punditry is a clique that doesn't welcome new members.

Nonetheless, there is one way to combat the catty ways of political wags. Make a movie that is factually solid. Don't present an absurd version of historical events.

This is where defenders of people like Stone argue that a movie maker's primary goal is to entertain, hence the need to change people and places. But that excuse doesn't apply here. For one thing, if Stone had wanted to entertain a movie audience, he wouldn't have co-produced this three-hour movie that wouldn't end. Then there's Stone's pretension that he is a truth-teller.

Stone wants the audience to view his movie as history. "JFK" begins with footage of President Eisenhower warning

America about the "military-industrial complex" and a narrated history treatise.

Bill the movie as history and you have to be ready for people to dissect it — not out of "fear," as self-impressed Stone has charged — but to see if Stone's leaky vessel holds water.

It doesn't. The movie implicates so many people and groups — Lyndon Johnson, the military, the military-industrial complex, the intelligence community, the Dallas police — that there's no way details of such a scenario wouldn't have leaked out over the last 28 years. Indeed, if "JFK" were accurate, most Texans would have had an uncle or cousin involved in the Kennedy shooting.

The plot of "JFK" focuses on businessman Clay Shaw (played superbly by Tommy Lee Jones) and the unsuccessful effort of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) to prosecute him.

I am not well acquainted with the Shaw trial. But if you take Stone's version at face value, you have to believe that Garrison had no substantive case against Shaw. Garrison admits it in the film.

The film/trial's closing arguments (which the real Jim Garrison never made) are very telling. Garrison, as played by Costner, doesn't even bother to summarize the case against Shaw. He quotes the poet Tennyson more than he mentions the defendant. Garrison/Costner focuses instead on the Warren Commission (which wasn't standing trial) and the values that Stone apparently believes Americans should hold dear.

My issue: Judging by the movie, Garrison's prosecution was frivolous and malicious, yet Stone chose to lionize this man and this prosecution, even as the film admits that Garrison's case was weak.

In other words, "JFK" is an ends-justify-the-means exercise. In his portrayal of Garrison, Stone seems to be saying that Garrison was right to misuse his office and misapply the law because the Warren Commission was wrong.

You see, when you're right (especially right on the left), you don't have to act ethically. You can misuse your power. You can say whatever you want about anyone. You can mince facts. You have carte blanche, because you are right.

Stone so much as said this about Garrison and his own film when he wrote, "The failure of his case against Clay Shaw cannot be equated with a full vindication of the Warren Report."

Stone still doesn't get it. The failure to convict Shaw says more about the Shaw case than the Warren Commission. If Stone's goal really were to discredit the Warren Commission, he should have made a documentary — or a movie about a guy who worked for the commission and felt it didn't do its job. But that's not what Stone did.

Instead, he chose to co-write, co-produce and direct a film that targets real people, many of them now conveniently dead. And when you portray real people, you have an obligation to be accurate. Stone complains that journalists criticized his rewriting of history. That's peanuts compared to painting people (including a man who became a U.S. president) as co-conspirators in murder, facism and thugery.

Stone at least seems to understand that the paranoid plot he presents on film cannot be justified in the print medium. So instead of backing up his film's plot, he talks about the shortcomings of other investigations. It's sort of like the pot calling the kettle black.

Debra J. Saunders' column appears each Monday and Thursday.