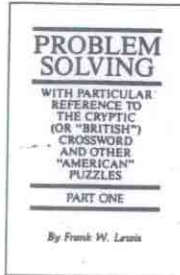


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sufficiently similar in approach and intention that I have tended not to indicate in my comments which book a particular essay is in. Three of the contributors I have cited, moreover—Berg, James and Jeffords—are represented in both volumes. The Dittmar-Michaud collection is narrower in its exclusive focus on film, but broader in the range of critical methods—Marxist, feminist, Freudian and variously poststructuralist—it includes. By contrast, the variety in the Rowe-Berg articles comes from the wide range of "texts" the essays consider and the different approaches those texts dictate. If I have a preference, it is for the latter variety of variety, because it suggests further methodological directions for critical studies, with even more kinds of cultural texts to explore.

For example, one subject that I think demands more attention in discussions of Vietnam and its representations is race and racism. A number of the white contributors to both volumes are sensitive to racial questions, and *From Hanoi to Hollywood* includes a provocative piece by a black critic, Clyde Taylor's "The Colonial Subtext in *Platoon*." But there remains a great deal to be said about attitudes toward Indochinese "friends" or "enemies," as well as about black-white issues in American society and the U.S. military. To do it justice means examining all kinds of sources as reflective of the culture: novels like John A. Williams's *Captain Blackman*, oral histories like Wallace Terry's *Bloods* and the documents of resistance to the war by Americans of color. (The first time I ever heard the "Hell no . . ." chant was when the Harlem contingent led by Stokely Carmichael joined one of the early antiwar marches, and what they were saying was "blacks won't go.")

The reciprocal action of culture itself and cultural representation could also be of enormous use in studying a subject like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, where the relevant texts might include the professional psychological literature, its popularization in the mass media and social-policy documents on veterans' affairs, as well as the versions provided in fiction, drama, poetry, film and television. Because P.T.S.D. is a social response, not only an individual disability, and because, in that sense, it's one we all suffer from, such a study would offer another way into the reiterated impact of the war within the postwar, one that might enable us to build social resistance on the basis of cultural critique. □

FILMS.

STUART KLAWANS

JFK Naked Lunch

Paranoic characters and good conspiracy-theory films such as *Winter Kills* and *Blow Out* can light up your brain like a pinball machine. Say "hat" to the average schlub, whose associations aren't free at all, and the likely response will be "head." Say "hat" to a dashing paranoid and you might get back "stovepipe; Auschwitz; *Grand Polonaise in A-Flat*; Michelin Guide." Every word sets off a four-star tour of the world (and the synapses), in which you can always get there from here. Unfortunately, paranoids spoil the fun by putting themselves at the center of this global network. It is this latter aspect of the disorder—self-importance—that dominates *JFK*.

Directed by Oliver Stone from a screenplay by himself and Zachary Sklar, *JFK* is a grand and bland docudrama packed with more celebrity cameos than a Muppet movie, more expository dialogue than a Church of Scientology training film, more types of montage than you'd get from Eisenstein with a bad case of the hiccups, more fake actualities footage than in a year's worth of *America's Most Wanted*—but shot for the widest screen, and lit like a dream. Bigger, better, more: If gonzo commitment were the only requirement, then *JFK* would be the *Intolerance* of the conspiracy-theory genre, if not its Oberammergau Passion Play.

As the story's wooden Jesus we have Kevin Costner, sulking his way through a portrayal of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison. Already glum at the start of the proceedings, he greets the news of John Kennedy's assassination with an announcement that he feels ashamed to be an American. But the full gloom descends only when he develops the habit of sitting up till all hours, reading the report of the Warren Commission. He neglects his wife (Sissy Spacek), who soon is reduced to waving her arms and thumping her chest in the hope of leaving some impression on the screen. Meanwhile, the nefarious Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones) is rioting in homosexual luxury, an activity that seems to involve the use of eighteenth-century costumes and music by Mozart. Tormented

by the thought of such goings-on, Garrison almost destroys his marriage, but recovers his sexual vigor upon the assassination of Robert Kennedy. He then hurries to court to deliver a half-hour speech in hypnotic cadences, explaining everything you've already seen in the first two and a half hours. It's the liveliest part of the picture.

Alexander Cockburn already has addressed the politics of *JFK* in these pages (January 6/13). I will add nothing to his lucid comments, except to note the dog-bites-man hysteria in *The New York Times* and *Newsweek* accusing Stone of having "twisted the truth." I should hope so. That's what filmmakers do, if they're any good. In the past, Stone has been good in about one film out of two. This time, the best I can say for him is that he's drawn enjoyable performances out of Gary Oldman, Joe Pesci, Kevin Bacon and (out of the blue) John Candy. In a cameo as a hepcat lawyer, Candy is funnier than in his last three starring roles. But where's the rest of the *SCTV* cast?

For a really good time with paranoia, see *Naked Lunch*. Based on the life and work of William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* is the latest expression of writer-director David Cronenberg's one big idea. He believes the mind and the body to be a continuum, and that scares him silly. From *The Brood* through *Dead Ringers* he's been a film poet of somatic anxiety, simultaneously obsessed and repelled by the flesh but even more so by the emotions that shape and misshape the body. Now Cronenberg collides head-on with Burroughs, pseudoscientific rhapsodist of the mind-body split. Fog rises; shadows fall; and out of the unspeakable coupling slithers a great film.

Burroughs has claimed he cannot remember writing *Naked Lunch* (having been strung out on heroin at the time). So Cronenberg has ingeniously chosen to show us what Burroughs might have thought he was doing during the hours when he was writing the book. With a single brilliant stroke, Cronenberg solves the notorious problem of dramatizing a writer's life; dispenses with the need to film an impossible "novel"; and situates the action in the area most congenial to him, midway between "out there" and "in here."

The film's protagonist—called Bill Lee, after one of Burroughs's pseudonyms—starts out in a plausible enough version of 1953 Manhattan. He works as an exterminator (as did Burroughs). He

has a troubled relationship with his wife, Joan (as did Burroughs with his wife, Joan). He hangs out in coffee shops with a pair of younger men, Hank and Martin, who seem like Burroughs's friends Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Normality, however bohemian, seems to reign—except that Joan has got hold of an Ornette Coleman record, six years before it would have existed, and shoots up not heroin but her husband's professional-strength roach powder. "It's a very literary high," she explains. "It's a Kafka high. You feel like a bug."

Joan's little habit, as well as her sexual games with Hank and Martin, shock Bill, who claims to have gone straight in every sense. He's off dope; he's abandoned his homosexual desires; he doesn't even write. "Too dangerous," he says. So why do the bugs start talking to him? One of them, part roach, part Talking Asshole, enlists Bill as a secret agent for some incomprehensible organization, ordering him to kill Joan—"and make it tasty." Bill resists at first; but in a replay of the decisive moment in Burroughs's life, he eventually shoots Joan dead. With a vial of bug powder as his ticket, he flees to "Tangier," where burnoose-clad Arabs pound typewriters in a quaint old coffeehouse.

The ensuing phantasmagoria is so clearly thought out that you could diagram it, if you're not too busy laughing or being amazed. Someday, dissertations will be written on whether the man-woman enmity in Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* corresponds to a rivalry between roaches and centipedes, or whether the axis actually runs between bugs in general and the humanoid mugwumps. Graduate students will compile concordances showing the relationship between the various typewriter creatures Bill uses and the themes that emerge on screen. Even the music is susceptible to analysis. Ornette Coleman, who wails through the whole film, broke into prominence in 1959, the year that *Naked Lunch* was published, and like Burroughs underwent a transformative experience in North Africa. It's all very neat, for being so crazy.

The neatness makes *Naked Lunch* watchable; but it's the craziness that exalts the film. As Bill Lee, Peter Weller gives an ice-cold performance, staring out of his corpse eyes as if nothing could surprise him, however creepy. As Joan Lee and a second Joan, Judy Davis provides the exact opposite: a sensualist implosion. The shadowy cinematography, in a palette of mildew and mucus, is by

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