

FILMS.

STUART KLAWANS

JFK

Naked Lunch

Paranoid 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 Joan (as did Burroughs with his Joan). He hangs out in coffee shop with a pair of younger men, Hank and Norm, who seem like Burroughs's friend Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Norm, however bohemian, seems to reigned except that Joan has got hold of an Ornette Coleman record, six years before it have existed, and shoots up not only but her husband's professional-strength roach powder. "It's a very literary she explains. "It's a Kafka high. You like a bug."

Joan's little habit, as well as her games with Hank and Martin, show who claims to have gone straight in his sense. He's off dope; he's abandoned homosexual desires; he doesn't write. "Too dangerous," he says. "I do the bugs start talking to him? them, part roach, part Talking A enlists Bill as a secret agent for some comprehensible organization, or him to kill Joan—"and make it Bill resists at first; but in a replay decisive moment in Burroughs's eventually shoots Joan dead. Wit of bug powder as his ticket, he "Tangier," where burnoose-clad pound typewriters in a quaint old house.

The ensuing phantasmagoria clearly thought out that you could gram it, if you're not too busy like or being amazed. Someday, dissection will be written on whether the woman enmity in Cronenberg's *Lunch* corresponds to a rivalry between roaches and centipedes, or whether the axis actually runs between bugs and the humanoid mug. Graduate students will compile chances showing the relationship between the various typewriter creatures and the themes that emerge on screen. Even the music is susceptible to Ornette Coleman, who wails through the whole film, broke into promise in 1959, the year that *Naked Lunch* published, and like Burroughs underwent a transformative experience in New York. It's all very neat, for being

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

liberal—he would have learned that Thomas could not make a list of the top 500 candidates. But Bush was more interested in scoring political points and playing the race card. And so he set in motion a process that brought all three branches of government into disrepute. No institutional fixes can improve the confirmation process if there is no sound judgment and generosity of spirit at the top.

JFK: The Myth

“He’s hot, he’s sexy—and he’s dead.” That memorable *Rolling Stone* headline referred to Jim Morrison, but it might well have been John F. Kennedy, the other subject of a major Oliver Stone release. Both men were American icons of the same generation, and in translating important aspects of their respective iconographies to the screen Stone was playing with fire. Though P.C. snobs may sneer at the fuss made over a couple of long-dead white men, the one a drug-enhanced, sex-crazed, promising but unfulfilled rock star; the other a drug-enhanced, sex-crazed, promising but unfulfilled politician, nevertheless the cults around the fallen idols are larger than life or death, fervently followed and vigorously, indeed viciously, defended.

Stone got off relatively easy with *The Doors*, an often rapturous movie that, unfortunately, not too many people went to see. (He told me last summer that he is especially angry at blacks, who apparently stayed away in droves for what Stone said were “racist” reasons.) *JFK* is a different matter. Even before it opened in mid-December it was a political event of phenomenal proportions: the story of the season between the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings and the end of the Soviet Union. Future conspiracy theorists will surely note that Mario Cuomo defied all expectations and announced his decision *not* to run for the presidency *on the very day that JFK opened nationwide!*

Notwithstanding the particular assassination theory Stone propounds, and his rather adoring assessment of Kennedy’s foreign policy, the furious arguments and attacks engendered by the movie have very little to do with the material of history but rather abound in the stuff of myth. For virtually every American alive and conscious of a social reality in November 1963, the assassination forms the central political myth of the public world. The myth is in the matrix of the national experience, etched by television and consecrated by ritual, and no amount of political science will demystify the memory of murder.

Those dogged researchers who have dared over the years to deconstruct the myth have made hardly a dent in the national consciousness. Most have been labeled assassination maniacs, nuts and kooks, and their works have remained on the margins of legitimacy (and some really *are* nuts). Others (like myself, and more recently in these pages, my friend Alexander Cockburn) who have tried to debunk the part of the myth that insists that Kennedy was about to withdraw troops from Vietnam, achieve détente with Khrushchev and bestow peace on the world, have similarly made little headway with

history. When the Prince of Peace is martyred, no one wants to hear that he was not a prince nor particularly pacific.

Stone neither deconstructs nor debunks. His method is to substitute another myth—consistent, compelling and just a little unconvincing—for the “official” one that seems to have been a comfort for so long but is so shot full of holes by now that it can barely float. Certainly he has every right to do what he does. John Ford’s *December Seventh*, recently remembered as the fiftieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor came around, also mixed documentary footage with reconstructions and simulations, inserted historical speculations as ironclad fact and gave heroic (or villainous) dimensions to ordinary people. It was a great film and brilliant propaganda, which is to say, what movies ought to be.

But reasonable columnists like Tom Wicker (who was in Dallas that day), cool commentators like Cokie Roberts (whose father, Hale Boggs, was a member of the Warren Commission) and what seems like the unanimous journalistic establishment are ready to burn every print of *JFK* if they could because of the damage a countermyth, an alternative paradigm, is thought to do to the national spirit and, I guess, the collective will. Monolithic myths—the manifest decency of America, the infallibility of the church, the existence of historical truth—are more fascistic than any transient leader. In that case, a little narrative pluralism can be truly subversive. Now, it may be hard for some to admit that Oliver Stone, with \$40 million per film at his disposal and virtually unlimited media access, can be a subversive force, but he has done a great service by recasting the idols in the heart of the temple.

ANDREW KOPKIND

(A review of *JFK* appears on page 62.)

Boris the Brief?

Forced out of office and deliberately humiliated, Mikhail Gorbachev nevertheless left the historical stage with the dignity of an actor who was aware of the crucial part he had played. In his final address to the Soviet people on Christmas Eve, he justified *perestroika* on the ground that when he took over, the Soviet people could not go on living as they had: “Everything had to be altered radically” both on the home front and in foreign policy. But he did not try to explain why he ultimately failed, why he ended up putting his divided country on the road to capitalism after setting out with the clear purpose of leading it, united, to some form of democratic socialism. If he intends to tackle this issue in the memoirs he now has the leisure to write, he may well draw a lesson from the farewell tributes paid to him by Bush, Thatcher and company. The Western leaders who hailed him when he surrendered had failed to help him economically when it really mattered, because they still mistrusted his conversion to capitalism.

With Boris Yeltsin, the sincerity of his conversion is not the issue. The question is whether he can deliver. There was never any doubt about his ruthless capacity to bulldoze his way to the top. This apparatchik turned born-again capitalist, the scourge of privilege converted to preacher of profit, was not