

Heritage of Stone

OK, so Oliver Stone is a jerk.

At 45, old enough to know better, the man's consciousness is hopelessly mired in the 1960s. His politics are laughably naive. From "Platoon" to "Wall Street" to "Born on the Fourth of July" — and now in "JFK" — his film work has been a self-indulgent orgy of childish propaganda stunning in its stark simple-mindedness.

Still, criticism of "JFK" as bad history, which it clearly is, misses the point. Movies aren't works of history; they're works of the imagination. "JFK" isn't intended as fact. It's only one man's artistic musing on what might have been.

This film, in case you haven't heard, deals with Stone's paranoid vision of the John F. Kennedy assassination. He wrote and directed the movie. His imaginary scenario has just about every part of the American establishment involved in the plot to murder Kennedy — including the CIA, the Mafia, Lyndon Johnson and, presumably, the Benevolent Order of Elks.

Their motive for murder: that Kennedy was going to pull American forces out of Vietnam. Kennedy wanted peace, Stone imagines, while the evil power structure wanted war. That's the thrust of his reverie.

In making this point, Stone glorifies the discredited conspiracy theory of a one-time New Orleans district attorney, a crackpot named Jim Garrison. Years ago, Garrison outlined his views in a book entitled "A Heritage of Stone" — an ironic title, given who now lends such controversial support to Garrison's loony theories.

Garrison tried to prove his point in a criminal trial, and the jury laughed him out of the courthouse. Oliver Stone, not conspicuous for his sense of humor, takes Garrison's ravings seriously and presents them more forcefully than Garrison ever did.

The reality that Stone knowingly uses half-truths and outright lies to accomplish that end is in keeping with the long tradition of artists mangling facts for artistic purposes. Shakespeare did it in "Richard III," a play that qualifies as a stunning artistic achievement but as questionable history.

Sir Walter Scott did it in "Ivanhoe." Longfellow did it in "The Song of Hiawatha." George Bernard Shaw did it in "The Devil's Disciple" and "Saint Joan," to name just a few. It's done a lot.

No art form has distorted historical fact more vividly than film. Errol Flynn was a dashing and heroic George Armstrong Custer several generations ago in "They Died With



DAN LYNCH

"Their Boots On." Richard Mulligan, two decades later, played Custer as a foaming meglomaniac in "Little Big Man." Which version is historically accurate? From what I've read, both and neither. And, from an artistic standpoint, who cares?

Every Robin Hood film — including the hilarious, politically correct version issued not long ago with Kevin Costner — has portrayed King Richard the Lion-Hearted as a benevolent ruler who had the best interests of his people at heart. In actuality, Richard was a bloodthirsty militarist who spent virtually none of his reign at home, tending to his people's needs. He was too busy pillaging the public treasury so he could wage imperialistic wars overseas.

Film has given us Jesse James as folk hero instead of the thief and murderer he actually was. Film has presented Theodore Roosevelt as a posturing, warlike buffoon instead of the cultured, far-sighted statesman who emerges from the history books.

Fiction on paper and celluloid has presented us with one lying historical image after another. That's because fiction is, by definition, a lie. It's not history or journalism. Its obligation is not to accuracy but to truth in the larger, transcendent sense. There may be several versions of facts, but innumerable artistic truths can be drawn from them.

It's undeniably true that some of the simpler minds among the movie-going audience will perceive Stone's film as fact. That's because they're ill-read and ill-informed and not aware enough to recognize themselves as such. Or, more disturbingly, they're unconcerned about it. Either way, that's not Oliver Stone's fault.

But it's also true that however distorted a version of reality "JFK" presents, it also addresses a larger truth, and that's the question of whether Kennedy's murder was merely the work of an isolated madman. That's a perfectly valid question for artists to interpret. The fact that Stone seems to be a gullible fool shouldn't enter into any judgment on the artistic quality of his work.

After all, Wagner was an anti-Semite. Shaw was a fascist. Wilde was a deadbeat. Faulkner was a terrible drunk, and Picasso apparently was the vilest of human beings in almost every respect. Artists aren't always admirable. If our standard for judging their work is going to be their quality as human beings or their devotion to factual accuracy, then we're going to have to dismiss out of hand the efforts of Michelangelo, Dickens, Twain, Dali and Homer.

"JFK" is only make-believe. It's nothing much to worry about. What we should worry about is that too few people are bright enough to recognize art for what it is.

And that too many find fault with art for what it isn't.

Dan Lynch is managing editor/news for The Times Union.