

Substance and Style Criticized in 'J. F. K.'

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LOS ANGELES, Nov. 6 — Twenty-eight years after the killing of John F. Kennedy, a film by Oliver Stone about the assassination has touched off a wave of controversy and accusations involving both the movie's conclusions and the way the film was made.

With Mr. Stone working virtually round-the-clock to complete the three-hour movie, which is scheduled to be released across the nation on Dec. 20, movie executives say that the project, "J. F. K.," starring Kevin Costner, will be the most widely discussed movie of the Christmas season. Hollywood is nervous about the season because an array of expensive films, like "J. F. K.," are being released, while box office receipts have plummeted over the last year. The film's producers are plainly uneasy about the audience reaction to "J. F. K."

An Ambiguous Conspiracy

At issue in the film, written by Mr. Stone and Zachary Sklar, is the contention that the assassination was the result of a conspiracy and that the Warren Commission was wrong in its conclusion that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. The fact that the movie, budgeted at \$35 million to \$40 million, features Mr. Costner, one of the top stars in Hollywood, and is supported by one of the more prestigious studios, Warner Brothers, adds considerable weight to the impact of the film's thesis, which presents the killing as a conspiracy but does not pinpoint the conspirators.

Mr. Costner plays Jim Garrison, the District Attorney of New Orleans in the late 1960's, whose investigation

and assertions about a conspiracy were, critics said, fraudulent and driven by a desire for publicity.

"We describe the forces at play at that time," Mr. Stone said in a telephone interview. "From those forces you can draw your own conclusion. We deal to a large degree with why Kennedy was killed and the policy splits then about Cuba, Vietnam and Laos." Mr. Stone, who won an Academy Award for "Platoon," a Vietnam War film, said the conspirators were left ambiguous.

"I hope people will respond," he said. "I think people smell a rat in the Warren Commission. My film certainly opens the floorboards and looks into the vipers' nest and raises serious questions about the Warren Commission. Whether you accept my conclusion is not the point. We want people to examine this."

Asked if he was nervous about the effect of the film on the country, Mr. Stone replied: "Am I scared? Yes, I'm scared."

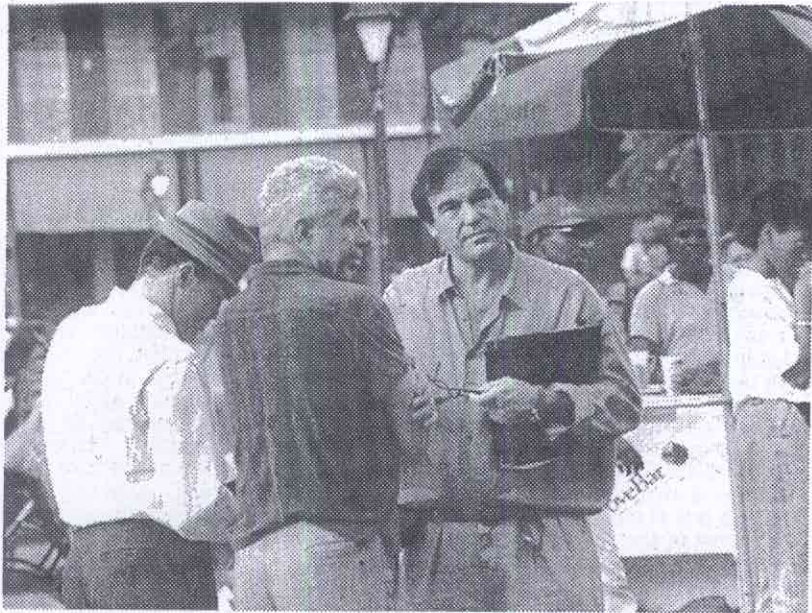
Thwarting Competitors

Beyond the questions about the film's assertions, which have been criticized for months in The Washington Post, Time magazine and other publications, is controversy about what Mr. Stone's critics call the use of muscle to thwart potentially competitive films about the assassination from appearing at the same time as his own movie.

For Mr. Stone, who relishes controversy but prides himself on his tolerance for freedom of expression, the accusations rankle.

The main allegation is that Mr. Stone and his agents, the Creative Artists Agency, tried to thwart production of "Libra," a film based on

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Matt Anderson for The New York Times

Oliver Stone on the set of "J. F. K.," which he said "looks into the vipers' nest" of the investigation of the assassination.

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the Don DeLillo novel about Oswald. Mr. Stone and the agency strongly deny any such efforts were made.

"Oliver Stone wanted to make sure he had the only movie coming out on the assassination, and he did what he had to do to insure that," said Dale Pollock, the president of A&M films, which owns the film rights to the critically acclaimed DeLillo book, a fictional exploration of Oswald.

After considerable turmoil over the production of "Libra," the film is expected to start production in April and is to be directed by John Malkovich, the actor.

It is the contention of Mr. Pollock and several others at the independent company that the "Libra" film was virtually in place when it unraveled under pressure. Mr. Pollock said that after the film's original director, Jonathan Demme, dropped out, a second director, Phil Joanou, a rising 29-year-old film maker, became in-

The director is accused of upsetting other Kennedy films.

involved in the project. But after Mr. Stone had a conversation with Mr. Joanou — the two men are clients of the Creative Artists Agency — the young director dropped out. At the same time, Home Box Office, which expressed interest in the project, also dropped out, largely because HBO is owned by Time Warner, HBO said. Warner Brothers is producing "J. F. K."

Mr. Stone and Creative Artists deny that any pressure was put on Mr. Joanou. And Mr. Joanou said: "This whole thing has been blown way out of proportion. I was sent the script of 'Libra.' I found the subject matter interesting. I was toying with the idea." But after reading a rewritten version of the screenplay, Mr. Joanou said, "I felt this wasn't the right film for me."

A Different Topic

The director said that he had met Mr. Stone but that they largely discussed a coming project together, "Panama," about the Noriega regime. "On 'Libra,'" Mr. Joanou said,

"the only thing we discussed was whether Oswald was the lone assassin. Oliver feels he wasn't. Everyone thinks Oliver prevented 'Libra' from getting made. It's the most absurd thing I've ever heard."

A widely heard report was that Creative Artists called HBO to stop the film, but Robert Cooper, a senior vice president of HBO Pictures, said that although the company considered doing it, "we heard our sister company, Warner's, was releasing 'J. F. K.' in December and at that point we realized it was foolish to compete." Creative Artists also denies putting pressure on HBO.

Mr. Stone has also been embroiled in a dispute involving a third film connected to the assassination. The movie "Ruby," starring Danny Aiello as Jack Ruby, was filmed in Dallas and was to be released early next year. Its producer, Joni Sighvatsson, and director, John Mackenzie, have contended that Mr. Stone made sure that any film project about the assassination would not have access to important Dallas locations or be able to hire actors used in "J. F. K." until long after the Stone film was released. The movie is being produced by Propaganda Films, which has made successful commercials and film videos and David Lynch's "Wild at Heart."

Mr. Stone vehemently denies these charges and says the criticisms come from "cry-baby sources." Speaking of the Ruby film as well as of "Libra," he says: "I can't tell you how many pictures I've been beaten out of. I wanted to do a civil rights movie, but Alan Parker got there first with 'Mississippi Burning.' I don't cry over it. This is a very competitive business."

Warner Brothers, meanwhile, has taken the unusual step of hiring Frank Mankiewicz, the Washington public-relations executive and former campaign manager for Robert F. Kennedy, to promote the film and seek support in the news media for Mr. Stone. Last week, Mr. Stone flew to Washington and had dinner with representatives from The New York Times, The Washington Post, People magazine and CBS.

Mr. Stone's associates said that Mr. Mankiewicz was hired partly because he has been identified with the Kennedy family and partly because the news media have criticized Mr. Stone's defense of Mr. Garrison's conspiracy theories.

"I'm trying to present a legitimate position for Oliver in light of some of the sensational and hostile stuff about him," Mr. Mankiewicz said.