

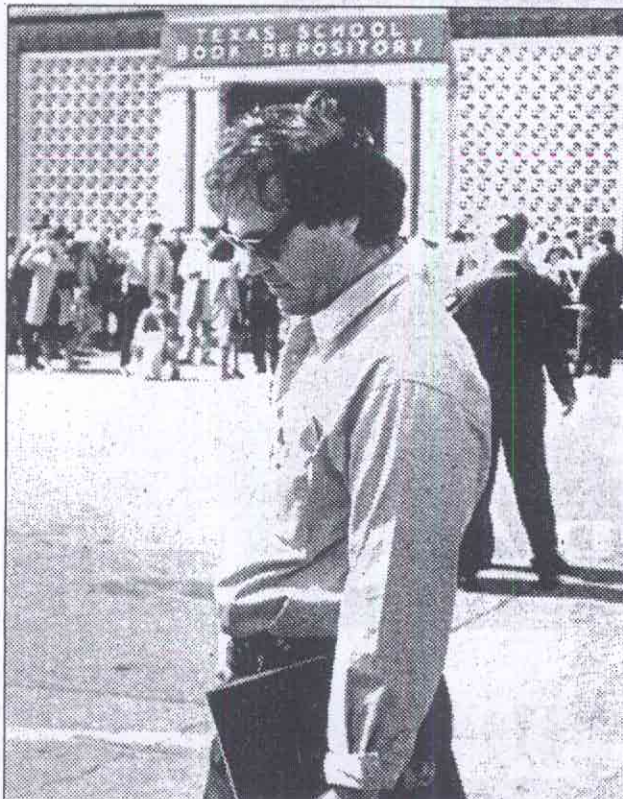
Oliver Stone Manipulates His Puppet

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OLIVER STONE'S "J. F. K." ACHIEVES AN UN-intended irony when it exhorts its audience to be suspicious of unreliable information, since the figure who emerges from this three-hour-and-eight-minute harangue as the most suspect is the film maker himself. This has nothing to do with Mr. Stone's opinions about who may have been responsible for the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and everything to do with the way those opinions are expressed.

If there's anything that the recent firestorm of front-page news about "J. F. K." makes evident, it's that Mr. Stone is his own best invention. As a once-conservative, now-disaffected figure free to question authority and celebrate iconoclasm, he has perfected a beleaguered public posture and a raffish world-weary manner. This plays very well on talk shows and even better on the screen, where most of Mr. Stone's heroes have embodied similar attitudes in their quest for truth.

There are those who bristle at Mr. Stone's steamroller tactics no matter what topic he chooses to address. Others are willing to give the benefit of the doubt to a phenomenally talented film maker whose work makes visceral sense even when it fails to add up any other way. Being in the latter camp, I find "J. F. K." all the more troubling for its failure to match the single-minded energy of "Born on the Fourth of July" or "Platoon" or even the first half of "Wall Street."



Warner Brothers

Oliver Stone—a better advocate than Jim Garrison?

Those are works in which Mr. Stone builds up such formidable momentum that he transfixes the viewer with the sheer forcefulness of his storytelling.

"J. F. K.," which gives Mr. Stone a seemingly ideal subject for his preoccupations and talents, doesn't have anything like the clarity or inexorability of these earlier films. Instead, it is facile and confusing, as if this probe of so important a chapter in American history were being conducted by MTV. Images fly by breathlessly and without identification. Composite characters are intermingled with actual ones. Real material and simulated scenes are intercut in a deliberately bewildering fashion. The camera races bewilderingly across supposedly "top secret" documents and the various charts and models being used to explain forensic evidence. Major matters and petty ones are given equal weight. Accusations are made by visual implication rather than rational deduction, as when the camera fastens on an image of Lyndon Johnson while a speaker uses the phrase "coup d'état."

Mr. Stone would say, and has said, that this amounts to creative license. And if "J. F. K." employed these tactics to tell a coherent story, he would be right, at a time when the cavalier docudrama format is widely taken for granted. But the first thing lacking in "J. F. K." is a central figure in whom the film's concerns can be unified, since Jim Garrison, the New Orleans District Attorney played by Kevin Costner, doesn't serve that purpose. As the recent furor about this film makes clear, Mr. Garrison's own conduct is too easily assailable to make him a Capraesque hero, even though Mr. Costner successfully presents him that way.

Mr. Garrison isn't specifically needed here except as a means of bringing the Kennedy assassination into focus. It is clear that Mr. Stone has re-invented Jim Garrison as a means of voicing his own ideas, and those ideas would have been expressed better without the liability of Mr. Garrison as a dramatic focus. Indeed, the film maker's sense of betrayal by his Government would offset the film's free-floating paranoia. Unlike Mr. Stone's version of Ron Kovic, who served the same purpose in "Born on the Fourth of July," Jim Garrison never becomes a flesh-and-blood character whose fate can engage the audience. And unlike Mr. Stone himself, he even lacks fire. So the film's efforts to humanize him look terribly contrived.

Mr. Stone surrounds Mr. Garrison with picturesque children, a nagging wife ("You and your Government!" exclaims poor Sissy Spacek, in one of Mr. Stone's typically paper-thin women's roles) and even Mardi Gras celebrants in an attempt to add visual interest to someone who essentially just pontificates and delivers data.

If this film were really about Mr. Garrison, it would be at the very least pointless and anticlimactic. But it is about the facts surrounding the Kennedy assassination, facts that could have been best articulated by Mr. Stone himself or a less controversial stand-in for the film maker. Only occasionally, in its startling re-enactments of events as formulated by the Warren Commission, re-enactments that underscore how farfetched the commission's conclusions were, is "J. F. K." everything it should have been: disturbing, ironic, forceful and clear. As he explains the so-called magic bullet theory in the closing courtroom scene, using a pointer and a diagram to make clear the preposterousness of the hypothetical trajectory of this single bullet, Mr. Costner makes the viewer wish "J. F. K." had more pointers and more patience.

Mr. Stone's methods are usually seductive, but in the case of "J. F. K." they have a bullying effect. Without a knowledge of conspiracy theory trivia to match the director's, and without any ability to assess the film's erratic assortment of facts and fictions, the viewer is at the film maker's mercy. This is the way Mr. Stone often likes it, and audiences might like it, too, if "J. F. K." delivered the jolt that it promises.