

'JFK' fuss over mediums, messages

I went to see what the fuss was about. Controversy does wonders for the box office. Add my \$6 to the \$5.2 million that "JFK" took in last week.

I was neither a fan nor a detractor of Oliver Stone. Liked "Wall Street." Never saw "Platoon." Never saw "The Doors," or The Doors, for that matter. But I was curious about a movie that the critics liked and the commentators hated.

Here was a film that had people passionately fighting about American history. Here was a filmmaker with enough guts and egotism to take up the central event of an entire generation — the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

But when I left this didactic lesson on JFK's murder, with Kevin Costner's interminable, preposterous speech ringing in my ears, I had learned more about the controversy than about the conspiracy.

The fuss over "JFK" is not only about the Warren Commission and the Garrison report. Nor is it only about "lone nut" theories and "CIA-FBI-Cuban, Military Industrial Complex" theories. It's about Washington and Hollywood, docu and drama. It's a fuss made by a generation that reads and writes for the minds of a generation that watches and re-winds.

Those who protest this film are almost all over 40. They are not, as Oliver Stone believes, "upset when art gets political." That's the good news about "JFK." In an era when most people's politics could fit on a bumper sticker this is a movie that cares.

What they — we — are upset about is the sense that Stone has

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a claim on "exclusive rights" to JFK's death. He may now, in Hollywood-ese, own this "property."

After "JFK," I know what it must be like to have a storyteller in the family. A novelist, a memoirist, who takes the central events of a shared life and makes them his own. More to the point, a man who hands these down to the children as their memories.

Stone regards the Warren Commission report as the official version of the Kennedy assassination. It was designed to close debate. He says his own film is meant to open debate.

"It is not a true story per se," he said last summer. "It is not the Jim Garrison story. It is a film called 'JFK.'"

Indeed, Stone seems ambivalent about whether "JFK" is an assassination story or a careful investigation of who dunnit and why. He defends the film as truth one moment and as art the next.

So too, his cinematic search winds down every beaten path from docu to drama. There are real-life film clips, grainy re-enactments, black-and-white imitations, dramatizations. Every trick in the bag of "reality-based" programming is employed, tricks we have seen on television and in propa-

ganda.

"The real issue," Stone writes, "is trusting the people with their real history." He sees himself attacking a vast cover-up. But he is also putting out his version of history as "real." He isn't just opening debate. He's out to win the debate.

I have no problem with Stone's questions. Ask away. One gunman or three. Oswald as nuts or double agent or both. We exhumed Zachary Taylor's body last summer on one murder theory. We can exhume the JFK files on another.

What I find offensive are Stone's answers. His lens creates and indicts an entire shadow government. His tunnel vision sees everything through the lens of Vietnam. His baby boomer's perspective dates Nov. 22, 1963, as the moment "it" all went awry in America.

None of this would rate much more than a footnote, if in fact, I hadn't seen it in a theater full of young people. Indeed the furor over a film — it's just a movie — wouldn't be so intense if it didn't take place against a particular backdrop.

Those of us who are print people — writers and readers — are losing ground to the visual people — producers and viewers. The younger generation gets its information and infotainment from television and movies. Less information. More infotainment. The franchise over reality is passing hands.

So the fuss over "JFK" is about facts, yes, but also about mediums and messages, the past and the future. Call it a conspiracy theory if you must, but the confusion of fact and fiction, docu and drama, is Oliver Stone's own attempted coup of American history.