Movies/David Denby

THRILL OF FEAR

"... *JFK* is appalling and fascinating—unreliable, no doubt, but an amazing visual and spiritual experience nonetheless..."

BULLDOG: *Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner, left) argues his case against Clay Shaw in* JFK.

ALTHOUGH YOU'RE NOT MUCH GIVEN TO mysticism, and perhaps possess no more than a New Yorker's normal dose of paranoia, you have had, I would bet, the following weird experience:

Walking down a busy street, you are suddenly overcome by the alarming notion that the random flux around you—the people going to work or walking dogs, the guy selling franks on the corner, the buildings, the garbage cans—are all part of some sinister and portentous design. The life around you is not casual, discontinuous, and inert but unified by a single purpose. You dismiss the mood with a laugh; nevertheless, you're haunted for an instant by the possibilities of connection among the many moving and still parts of what you experience—haunted by what this glance or that open window might mean. Usually it means nothing.

But not always. This intimation of the uncanny—the design in the seeming randomness of life—is what Oliver Stone has captured so brilliantly in **JFK.** The movie is appalling and fascinating—unreliable, no doubt, but an amazing visual and spiritual experience nonetheless, an experience of dread in the flux of life. Stone, recounting the questionable investigations of Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner), the New Orleans district attorney in the sixties, fleshes out Garrison's belief in a vast conspiracy of forces to kill John F. Kennedy; he traces the movements of Lee Harvey Oswald and a variety of other figures. The movie is an amalgam of facts and speculations, but at its core—a core that no amount of ridicule in the *Times* can convince me is less than great—Stone re-creates, from many points of view, what might have happened in Dealey Plaza in Dallas on November 22, 1963.

Stone displays the assassination of John F. Kennedy in the cataclysmic home movie of Abraham Zapruder, dissects it, shows the event again in simulated form from the vantage point of different witnesses and possible participants. He gives alternate versions, works out suppositions—demonstrating, for instance, what Oswald would have done on that day if the Warren Commission were right about him. As witnesses describe a variety of odd occurrences—the phony Secret Service men, the "man with the umbrella"—we see them, and their implications are explored and tied together. After strategically placing these many pieces of visual information within the story of Garrison's investigation, Stone gathers them at the end so that they link up and comment on one another. Once again the motorcade rounds the corner of Dealey Plaza; only this time, we see a concerted plot involving three teams of trained shooters. The effect of this reconstructed assassination is emotionally devastating.

But, you ask, is the reconstruction *true*? Let's say that Stone has pushed certain fragmentary bits of information to their limits: The movie is a projection of what *might* have happened. Other people, including the British producers of a recent series on the A & E network, have offered different theories. I'm not convinced, as Stone apparently is, that the assassination was a coup d'état backed by Lyndon Johnson and executed by the upper levels of the Defense Department, the CIA, and the FBI. All these men, according to Stone and co-scenarist Zachary Sklar (who have based their speculations on Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins* and Jim Marrs's *Crossfire*), wanted to stop Kennedy from winding down America's commitment to fight Communism in Vietnam. Two problems with this: On the subject of Vietnam, Kennedy was highly ambivalent, leaning this way and that in the weeks before his death; and such a conspiracy, if it existed, would necessarily have involved hundreds of important people, some of whom, overcome by remorse at what the assassination of Kennedy and the ascension of LBJ eventually led to in Vietnam, would surely have come forward by now. Even unremorseful Americans don't keep secrets very well.

I understand the initial hostility to the subject that many of you must feel: The CIA, the Cuban exiles, the Dallas police force.... Oh, God, *that* stuff again? *JFK* is a monomaniac's treasure trove. In its ceaseless piling up of detail, it will give the untiring "conspiracy community"—American nuts of the highest salt!—enough to argue over for years. But saying that *JFK* isn't always convincing is hardly to dismiss it, as many overly literal types, blind to the powers of film, have already done. Stone has established a dense web of contingency, "coincidence," and design. He has made, if you insist, a fiction of the assassination, a counter-myth, though I hasten to add that his version, at least as an account of the events in Dealey Plaza, is a lot more convincing in its physical details than the Warren Commission's. There was, I believe, *some* sort of conspiracy to kill the president.

Perhaps Stone would have seemed more convincing in general if he had shown Garrison as he was, a figure of uncertain temperament and doubtful method. But instead, Stone the moral realist gave way to Stone the Capraesque hero-worshiper. This Garrison is a true-blue American patriot, a mild-mannered man of conscience victimized by many forces both large and small, including his nagging, petty-minded wife (Sissy Spacek). At the end, standing virtually alone in his beliefs, Garrison makes an endless grandstanding speech about patriotism, the Constitution, and what it means to be an American. Throbbing at the temples, the movie congratulates itself on its own moral commitment, as if no one but Jim Garrison and Oliver Stone *cared* who shot Kennedy. Costner, wearing a remarkably ugly pair of horn-rimmed glasses, gives an uninventive, monochromatic performance that leaves us with the awkward question of how such a dull man could entertain so many extreme ideas.

Yet if Garrison is a bore, the bunch of New Orleans citizens he investigates are as lively as water bugs. In the months after the assassination, Garrison grabs wildly at the frayed corners of the event. There are Cuban exiles and embittered ex–FBI agents; David Ferrie (Joe Pesci), a manic bewigged homosexual who hangs out with the Cubans and who may have driven Oswald around; and Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones), a wealthy gay businessman with a possible CIA connection. As Oswald, Gary Oldman, speaking in an odd, halting way, as if his brain short-circuited between words, passes in and out of the movie, a shadow of a shadow. Re-creating this obscure, hapless stuff—a corner of oblivion that just may have meant something—Stone relaxes for a change, allowing Tommy Lee Jones, for instance, to hold the camera long enough to savor Clay Shaw's elegant intonations.

A streak of mournful love for the president softens *JFK*. At the same time, Stone has restored the shock of the assassination—the autopsy photographs, for instance, strike us like stab wounds. What Stone is saying is that this event has been taken away from us, that the government is using our discomfort as fake justification for locking up evidence well into the twenty-first century.

This is undoubtedly true, but high-level conspiracy, as a movie subject, is very difficult to bring to life. Donald Sutherland shows up as a Deep Throat type (a character based on L. Fletcher Prouty, former aide to the Joint Chiefs of Staff), and as Sutherland outlines the plot against Kennedy, *JFK* collapses into shadowy narrated scenes of powerful old men pursing their lips evilly. The movie becomes vague and self-important. The assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy are thrown into the pot as further proof that "they" are controlling everything.

Yet all is not lost: Stone returns to the nuts and bolts of Dealey Plaza. Robert Richardson's cinematography is a miracle of spontaneous-seeming chaos and fleeting glimpses of trouble, and the editing by Joe Hutshing and Pietro Scalia stitches everything together brilliantly. As the new version of the assassination came together at the end, I felt a sickening thrill of dismay and fear, an intimation of mortal design in the flux, malignity revealed. Even God would be frightened.

JFK is a true adventure for the viewer. So plunge in, and for heaven's sake ignore such warnings as Tom Wicker's stuffy New York *Times* piece. Wicker sounds like a Victorian policeman in a whorehouse: He's shocked that a *movie star* and *film techniques* were used to deal with reality. He implies that you can't make a movie about an actual event unless you know the absolute truth. But that is nonsense. Whatever its flaws, *JFK* is a haunting and powerful piece of work, just possibly the jolt that a jaded and cynical American public needs.

IN **Hook,** PETER PAN ENTERS A NEVERLAND that is a cross between your local Burger King and a particularly congested page of *Where's Waldo?* That Steven Spielberg could produce such a dull mess is amazing. Spielberg, after all, created a lot of the big-movie visual panache of the seventies and eighties—the low angles and rapid cutting of *Duel*; the premonitory white light of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind;* the eccentric whirling blades of *Raiders of the Lost Ark.* But now Spielberg appears to have lost his sense of timing. *Hook* has physical movement without physical excitement. At times I thought I was stuck in Disneyland's Jungle Cruise, complete with rubber apes and wrap-around vines.

EX-BOY: *In* Hook, *Robin Williams (center) is an aging Peter Pan.*

Like a lot of other people, I've blown hot and cold on Spielberg, but this is the first time I've ever been bored. *Hook* is awfully long—135 minutes, which means, if you take your kids, one trip to the bathroom during the film and two to the candy stand. For a plot the movie comes furnished with a convoluted, meaningless high concept, propelled by enough climaxes and epiphanies to choke a locomotive. Robin Williams is touching as the grown-up Peter, a leveraged-buy-out king who has lost touch with his children. There is a moving moment when his wife, played affectingly by Caroline Goodall, turns to him and says he is blowing the few years he has with his little kids. But after Captain Hook snatches the children away and Julia Roberts shows up as a grinning, hotpants Tinkerbell, the movie becomes an embarrassment.

When he gets to Neverland to find his kids, Peter discovers he can't fly, and in a remarkably unpleasant scene, he is indoctrinated in buoyancy by a multicultural group of Lost Boys, a skateboarding crew who seemed to have spent the recent years in the jungle watching *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. As Hook, Dustin Hoffman chews on his ratty black wig and displays his teeth and nose and painted eyebrows with theatrical relish. His professionalism is a relief. And Bob Hoskins, as Smee, Hook's obsequious partner in larceny, does a great double-pump windup in the pirate baseball game, the one truly funny thing in the movie. But the rest is painful. The battles go on forever; Spielberg repeats everything over and over.

Peter, of course, needs to recover his ideals, to shed his obsession with success and big money. There he is, wedded to his cellular phone—always anxious, always guilty. *Hook* is another post-Reagan movie, in the same pathetic genre as *Regarding Henry* and *The Doctor* and *The Fisher King.* But this fantasy of a "cure" for Peter is so overproduced that it seems a product of the very corporate calculation that has brought Peter low. How can you make a $70-million movie about recovering your innocence? The sick joke about all these breast-beating movies, of course, is that they have reached the public in a recessionary period when people are worried about holding on to their jobs. At the moment, the spiritual dangers of having too much money hardly rank high among the audience's preoccupations. People just want to survive. Kids may love parts of *Hook*, but grown-ups will sit there grimly, thinking of moral vanity and waste. ■

Photograph by Murray Close/Tri Star.