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In 'JFK,' Stone turns a film into flimflam

By Richard Christiansen

I left a screening of the film "JFK" this week convinced beyond a reasonable doubt of only one thing: that the movies are, as they always have been, a very powerful emotional force.

It was true more than 100 years ago, when audiences fled theaters in the belief that the flickering image of a train they saw projected on a screen was about to run them over.

And it is true today, with far more sophisticated film techniques, when a movie about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy puts its viewers through a grueling vision of a traumatic event in recent American history.

Once more, the home-movie films of the

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president's death in Dallas are shown, and this time, for added horror, we get a recreation of the autopsy in a Dallas hospital, in which the slain man's brains are shown hanging from his head.

This is tough stuff, a real in-your-face slap that is held back until the end of the three-



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hour movie as part of a final pounding home of the movie's highly debatable thesis that Kennedy was the victim of a coup d'etat engineered by America's military-industrial complex.

Much of the rest of the heavily promoted film is piffle—stiff, sentimental and melodramatic, its borrowings from "Citizen Kane" and "All the President's Men" and "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" bathed at last in a kind of Norman Rockwellian fog.

I don't know that audiences will be willing to buy this bill of goods. It's not an enjoyable experience,

verity.

and, for all the outcry surrounding the movie's idiosyncratic view of the assassination, "JFK" is in many ways a very ordinary piece of filmmaking, filled with long, slack segments.

But when a movie repeatedly and graphically reminds an audience of the vivid incidents of a killing that shocked the country with its brute suddenness, it is bound to develop some tension and gather up some kind of gut-wrenching power.

"JFK" has that power, but at a price that deceives an audience and demeans the effort.

It is one thing to speculate on the deaths of famous individuals. The playwright Peter Shaffer did it in his drama about Mozart, "Amadeus," and Oliver Stone, the writer-director of "JFK," did it, ludicrously, in his previous film about rock singer Jim Morrison, "The Doors."

But "JFK," in its eagerness to prove its conspiracy theory, tries to make its viewers believe that speculation is truth and that fiction is verity.

The docudrama, which mingles public documents with dramatic re-creation, is by now a common form in television and film drama.

It was used to effect in a TV dramatization of the Kennedy administration's 1962 Cuban missile crisis, "The Missiles of October," and it has been used many times in films based (sometimes very loosely) on the lives of various members of the Kennedy family.

"JFK" takes this technique to an alarming level by trying to persuade its audience that because certain incidents are shot in grainy black-and-white newsreel style, these incidents did, in fact, happen.

Mingled with the actual news film of the assassination period are the "JFK" filmmaker's own insertions, carefully shot to blend into reality, as if they, too, were the genuine article.

In one particularly gross example of the movie's many distortions, after a key witness in the conspiracy case is found dead, a physician's statement that the man may have died of a heart attack suddenly is intercut with a sequence, shot in black-and-white with a hand-held camera, showing the man struggling with two assailants who are holding him down and appear to be gagging him—as if this life-and-death battle is really what caused the man's death.

This is not artistry, it is flimflam. This is not mythmaking, it is exploitation. This is not high drama, it is low propaganda.

A moviemaker has the right and freedom to make whatever movie he can, to espouse whatever cause in which he believes. But he also has the responsibility to play fair with his subject and his audience.

"JFK" is a cheat.

Richard Christiansen is the Tribune's chief critic.