



20th Century Fox

hind "Naked Lunch," Page 25.

# lggy

novel and transform it into a stylish pi-  
caresque born to be on screen.

Here a writer named Bill Lee, a figure  
drawn partly from Mr. Burroughs's  
work and partly from his life, takes or-  
ders from the overgrown bugs. Maybe  
they're upset that Bill is trying to kill  
them.

"So how is the exterminating business  
going, Bill?" a friend asks early in the  
film. As Bill Lee, Peter Weller is strik-  
ingly like the familiar image of William  
Burroughs, with his brown fedora and  
suit, deadpan intonation and skeletal.

Continued on Page 24

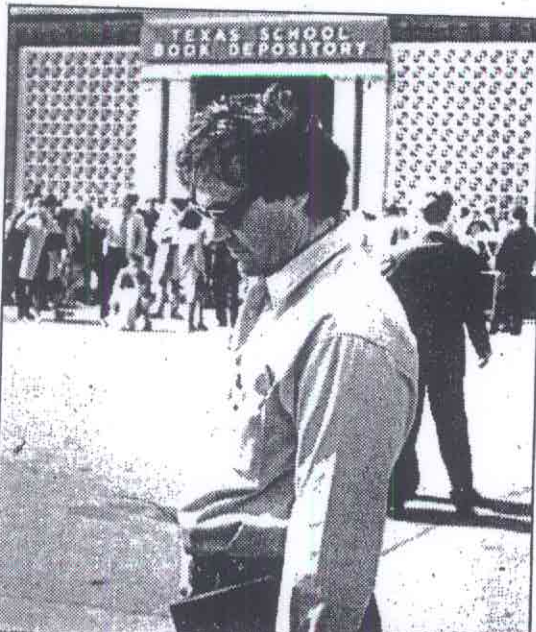
## FILM VIEW/Janet Maslin

# Oliver Stone Manipulates His Puppet

**O**LIVER 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 assas-  
sination 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-disaf-  
fected figure free to question authority and celebrate icono-  
clasm, 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."







Matthew McVay/Duena Vista Pictures

the roles of Iago and Othello

— screen. Either people love this film or it really angers them. Frankly, I tell my pregnant friends not to see it until they have their babies."

— Ms. Silver, a New Yorker and Yale graduate who wrote the screenplay as her master's thesis at film school, said she was especially surprised that some of the critical reaction came from women.

— "Some people say the film is sexist, that I was saying women should stay home and not hire nannies, which is really the last thing I would want to say," said Ms. Silver, who is the mother of a 7-month-old son. "Some people said it made no sense that a nanny would be trusted the way she was. I'm not sure. You tend to overlook some of the details in your life.

— "There are a lot of women in this country who are trying to work and have children at the same time. This film, I think, speaks to a lot of women's fears. And not just about the person watching your children. After all, you get on a plane and you don't know who's flying it. You get into a taxicab and you don't know who's driving. There are so many places in your life that you're trusting strangers. And the most trenchant example is bringing someone into your home to care for your children."

— Ms. Silver rewrote the screenplay numerous times during the period when

Continued on Page 20

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. □