



That fateful day in Dealey Plaza: Stone's *JFK* is as filled with simulacra as a dissertation on Baudrillard.

The President's Brain Is Missing

By J. Hoberman

JFK

Directed by Oliver Stone
Written by Stone and Zachary Sklar based on Jim Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins* and Jim Marrs's *Crossfire*:
The Plot That Killed Kennedy
Produced by Stone and A. Kitman Ho
Released by Warner Bros.

JFK may not prove the most important movie of the year but, as much intervention as entertainment, it's certainly the most self-important. "I feel like a presidential candidate," director Oliver Stone complained to one reporter during production, wondering aloud to another whether her piece was going to "assassinate" him. Stone may have a bigger ego than D. W. Griffith but even paranoiacs have enemies, as the hysterical prerelease response to *JFK* demonstrates.

Stone takes his history personally. Ostensibly the story of New Orleans D.A. Jim Garrison's quixotic investigation into the murder of John F. Kennedy, *JFK* seems to have been made to further illuminate Stone's trip to Vietnam. Opening with a kinescope of Ike's farewell warning on the dangers of the military-industrial complex, *JFK* is hardly a seamless period piece. It skitters back and forth in time, mixing documentary footage with pseudo newsreels, flashbacks shot as if through surveillance cameras with staged events. (The first: a hooker dumped from a car on a two-lane blacktop warns the audience, "They're going to kill Kennedy!") The visuals are violently un-matched—the image shifts from black-and-white to color to a sort of diseased sepia—and the struc-

ture is obsessive. *JFK* returns again and again to the primal scene at Dealey Plaza. The fatal motorcade is scored to portentous drumbeats—and everywhere else the montage longs to reproduce that six-second burst of fire.

Self-righteous and humorless as he navigates Stone's conspiratorial *Walpurgisnacht*, Kevin Costner plays Garrison as a speechifying version of Eliot Ness. Costner can't showboat the role but he can't be self-effacing either. If the actual Garrison was a roguish con artist (in a bizarre bit of hubris, Stone gives him a cameo as a pope-eyed Earl Warren), *JFK* makes him a sober family man. With Sis-ryan's hippie concubine in the mandatory role of the great man's nagging wife, Garrison's life is set in contrast not only to Kennedy's but the orgiastic masquerades and candlelight seductions of the film's homosexual villains, David Ferrie (Joe Pesci) and Clay Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones).

As a historian, Stone is a sub-Carlyle romantic for whom heroic individuals like Kennedy, Garrison, and himself are called to perform sublime missions. You can accuse him of muddying the well, but the waters he churns weren't exactly pristine. Stone at his most simpliminded is at least as credible as the Warren Commission. So here, once more, are the grassy knoll, the litany of dead witnesses, the multiple Oswalds. *JFK* is a movie that has been made several times before—albeit never for \$40 million. The 1967 Mark Lane and Emile De Antonio documentary *Rush to Judgment*, which opened to respectful reviews soon after Garrison's investigation went public, was the first film to critique the Warren report; Lane was

also involved in the fictional *Executive Action*, released on the 10th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination and at least as vilified as *JFK*.

Like *JFK*, if far more clumsily, *Executive Action* used an assortment of TV footage and faked newsreels to posit a conspiracy of right-wing industrialists who decided to remove Kennedy because he wanted to end the Cold War and "lead a black revolution"—a reading of presidential intentions only marginally more believable than the single-bullet theory cooked up for the Warren Commission by eager beaver Arlen Specter. Midway through *JFK*, the whole scenario is laid out by a former military intelligence officer (Donald Sutherland, who once owned the rights to *Executive Action*'s screenplay). Calling the Warren Report a fiction, this X tells Garrison that JFK sealed his death warrant when he decided to break up the CIA and order the troops home from Vietnam: "It's as old as the crucifixion." (Nothing if not maximalist, *JFK* invokes Shakespeare and Jesus at every opportunity.)

Stone isn't big on dialectics; after all, without Vietnam there would have been no *Platoon* for him to make. Still, the attacks launched by establishment journalists on him and even Costner (who probably got involved with the project thinking he was going to play Kennedy) only dispose me to support *JFK*. There is nothing more disturbing about the Kennedy assassination than the idea that, in a paroxysm of confusion, America's leading citizens (including, of course, responsible journalists) gratefully seized upon the lone-nut theory and, having swept the inconvenient details under the

rug, are forever stuck in the historical equivalent of an alternate universe.

To prove a political motivation behind Kennedy's murder would be to unravel the events of the past 28 years and leave us as vulnerable as a nation of newborns without our blankets. Among other things, Stone illustrates the powerful idea that, on November 22, Kennedy himself was left uncovered and exposed—not unlike the moment in *The Godfather* when Michael Corleone discovers his father alone in the hospital.

Critics of the Warren Commission report delight in pointing out instances of retouched pictures and doctored evidence. Of course, in introducing composite characters, ascribing fictional dialogue to historical figures, and integrating (even as he improves) a number of photographic actualities, Stone is scarcely less creative. *JFK* is as filled with simulacra as a dissertation on Baudrillard. The movie doesn't have the faintest embarrassment in flashing a photograph of Gary Oldman posed as Lee Harvey Oswald posing with his rifle and asking us to notice how the shadows show that this picture of "Oswald" has obviously been retouched.

One reason *JFK* inspires such fear is that it is a piece with the canned show biz and controlled reportage that passes for our nightly news. As art, however, Stone's opus is far cruder than Don DeLillo's masterful *Libra*—a novel that uses Oswald's life to meditate on the ways in which fiction contaminates so-called reality. As spectacle, however, *JFK* has access to the first and greatest of Kennedy death films, the \$8mm home movie that was shot by Abraham Zapruder and immedi-

ately turned over to *Life* magazine.

Indeed, Garrison's single greatest achievement may have been subpoenaing the Zapruder film—something Time-Life went to the Supreme Court to prevent. (That Time-Life is now Time Warner, producer of *JFK*, only shows that what goes around comes around.) The Zapruder footage is the basis for virtually all assassination research, the "clock" by which the Dealey Plaza drama is played out, and a challenge to the ontology of the medium itself. Not just an amazing snuff film and the vulgar modernist antecedent for the "structural" cinema of the late '60s, it was made to be blown up, slowed down, computer enhanced, and overinterpreted until not just the notion of documentary investigation but the laws of physics are subsumed in its seething grain.

To study the Zapruder footage is to enter a world of subatomic particles somewhere beyond the outer limits of photographic representation. As in response, *JFK* engages in a frenzy of articulation. The film has so much overlapping dialogue that it's virtually a radio play. Everyone's some sort of mouthpiece and the most vivid turns—Oldman's Oswald, John Candy as a pumpkin-faced hipster—are the vocally most distinguished. (By contrast, Pesci—who plays Ferrie in a historically accurate orange fright wig—seems to have wandered out of Brooklyn.)

Moreover, while Garrison's investigation began in 1967 and continued into 1969, *JFK* seems to cram everything into the apocalyptic spring of 1968 so that the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy seem a response to Garrison's discoveries. (All that's missing is a bit of "Light My Fire" on the car radio. Someday, some discotheque or museum will give us a true Stone *Soul Picnic*—evoking the madness of the '60s by projecting alternate reels of *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *The Doors*, and *JFK* on the walls, floors, and ceiling.)

Film

JFK's climactic trial sequence—a 45-minute tour de force—hammers the Zapruder footage into your skull like a pop song refrain, while adding a backbeat of gruesome autopsy photos to the mix. As Garrison stuns the courtroom, Stone probes the wound, restaging Oswald's capture (in a Dallas moviehouse prophetically showing *War Is Hell*). Liberally using the words *fascism* and *coup d'état*, citing Vietnam and calling LBJ an "accessory after the fact," invoking (once again) Shakespeare and tremulously quoting martyred presidents Kennedy and Lincoln, Stone's version of Garrison's summation makes more impressive use of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* than any event since the first Oliver North hearing.

As a fetish-ridden pop-culture assemblage, *JFK* is unusually rich. It's almost as dense as Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (which had its theatrical premiere the month before Kennedy was shot) and nearly as steeped in magical thinking. Stone calls *JFK* a

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JFK's preemptive strike, along with a more frantic than usual attempt by the studios to empty their cupboards before the end of the year, has wreaked havoc on review schedules. As *JFK* is already packing them in, let me recommend two "smaller" movies now poised to premiere. *Inner Circle*, reviewed here last week, opens on Christmas Day—an odd

bit of timing for this dark comedy of life in Stalin's court, adroitly played by an international cast under the enthusiastic (if opportunistic) direction of Andrei Konchalovsky.

Even more amazing is David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* (opening this Friday)—a literate rather than literal adaptation of William S. Burroughs's unadaptable novel. Compactly noirish where such kindred portraits of boho creativity as *Henry and June* and *The Sheltering Sky* were pumped-up "prestige" pics, *Naked Lunch* mixes Burroughs's motifs and biography with the fluid sophistication of its Ornette Coleman score. The movie is extremely funny and just as smart. Pace Oliver Stone, to imagine this playing in the nation's shopping malls is almost enough to restore one's faith in America. More next week. ■

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