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BODY:

Whether or not it is a gift, artistic talent conveys a responsibility. Those who can sway emotions ought to know what they are talking about, lest emotions be swayed toward foolishness.

Unhappily, there is no law of nature that ordains that talent will be accompanied by knowledge, much less by wisdom, and the ill-informed poet, painter, musician or novelist is a commonplace in our time.

Most do little harm because art, even popular entertainment, has far less impact than either its practitioners or its critics like to think. People are smarter than artists or critics, and know better than to confuse novels, Press Alt-H for Help or Alt-Q to Quit.

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movies or plays with reality. "The Right Stuff," a good movie, did John Glenn's presidential campaign no good; and "Missing," a bad one, had no discernible impact on public attitudes toward Latin America.

Still, some insults to intelligence and decency rise (sink?) far enough to warrant objection. Such an insult now looms. It is "J.F.K.," director Oliver Stone's film based largely on a book called "On the Trail of the Assassins," by Jim Garrison.

For those who have forgotten or are too young to remember, Garrison was the bizarre New Orleans district attorney who, in 1969, claimed that the assassination of President John Kennedy was a conspiracy by some officials of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Garrison even managed to put one hapless fellow on trial for his role in this alleged conspiracy. Having no case, Garrison lost in court. Nothing if not tenacious, he expanded his arguments for the book, published in 1988.

A very clever woman once said of another writer that her only believable words were "and" and "but." With Garrison, one can't be sure even of these conjunctions. One example among many: Garrison writes that the less-than-conclusive testimony of one waitress "constituted the totality of Press Alt-H for Help or Alt-Q to Quit.

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the witness testimony identifying Lee Oswald" as the man who killed a Dallas patrolman after shooting the president. There were in fact six witnesses who either saw the patrolman get shot or saw the armed gunman running from the scene. All six identified Oswald.

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And lest you think that only movie directors and bizarre district attorneys have no shame, consider this: Warner Books, a division of Time-Warner, the largest publishing-entertainment conglomerate in human history, is paying Garrison \$137,500 to re-issue the book when the movie comes out.

Speaking of conspiracy theories, what are the odds that this transaction will influence Time magazine's review of the book or the movie, considering that Warner Bros. is distributing the film, which after its theater run could appear on HBO and Cinemax, also owned by Time-Warner?

But wait, it gets worse. According to people who have seen the script, Stone takes Garrison's fantasies one step farther. In the movie, it is not just the CIA, but Vice President Lyndon Johnson himself behind the plot to kill the president.

To remember Lyndon Johnson is not to love him. But the suggestion that Johnson would stoop to murder, stupidly plotting with men he knew enough to Press Alt-H for Help or Alt-Q to Quit.

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distrust, is even less credible than was Johnson at his worst.

Then there is the matter of evidence. Not a scintilla of it links Johnson to Kennedy's assassination. Not that there's much to link anyone at all to it other than Lee Harvey Oswald. Stone has said that "nobody" believes Oswald alone killed Kennedy. Actually, many of us do, not because anyone can be certain that there was no conspiracy, but because all conspiracies that have been alleged are unsupported by credible data and require far more suspension of disbelief than does acceptance of the prosaic likelihood that poor Oswald did it, by himself, because he was mad.

But Stone is one of those who sees conspiracies everywhere. "We have a fascist security state running this country," he told a Los Angeles Times interviewer. "Orwell did happen. But it's so subtle that no one noticed."

How fortunate is he to be so much more observant than everyone else, to see this reality hidden from us mere mortals. But then, we're all pretty fortunate, living in the world's first fascist security state that freely allows dissent of its war policies throughout a war.

Simple-mindedness has always been Stone's weakness. "Wall Street" survived despite it, but it spoiled "Platoon" at the end, pervaded "Born on the Fourth Press Alt-H for Help or Alt-Q to Quit.

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of July" and infuses "The Doors." But none of these posed the danger that millions of young people, ignorant of recent history and influenced by Stone's technique, may henceforth believe that a president of the United States got the job by having his predecessor bumped off.

There is a point at which intellectual myopia becomes morally repugnant. Stone's new movie proves that he has passed that point. But then, so has Time-Warner, and so will anyone who pays American money to see the film.

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