

JFK

Directed by Oliver Stone
Produced by A. Kitman Ho and Oliver Stone
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures
Released in 1991

A miasma of confusion is the greatest legacy of the Kennedy assassination. It's only seemed to clear because most people have moved on to other business. Indeed, one can honestly wonder what the point is, still searching for answers into this mess. At first, the Warren Commission seemed to provide all the answers we needed. Appointed by President Lyndon Johnson to find the truth, heading off several inquiries under way in Texas and Washington, the blue ribbon panel finished their work with great haste, bringing their massive inquiry to a conclusion just ten months later, in September of 1964. But many people are not convinced the Warren Commission acted impartially. Nor did they have access to all the information necessary to paint a comprehensive picture, both critics and supporters maintain. Solid evidence now implicates the FBI and CIA, not necessarily in the assassination, but for denying the Commission the sum total of the information available at the time. Both institutions shielded their full knowledge of the mercurial Lee Harvey Oswald, an ex-Marine and apparent Communist sympathizer who, after leaving America for the Soviet Union, returned with a Russian bride. He was the man fingered by the Dallas Police and he was the man killed less than two days later, in television's only live murder. His killer, we can be certain, was night club proprietor Jack Ruby. Why he killed Oswald will be forever argued, it seems.

Part of the confusion involving the Kennedy assassination is that many unscrupulous people have seen an opportunity to take advantage of the situation by writing spurious books, claiming to have a lock on the real truth of the matter. Hundreds of these have been published. Also, many eyewitnesses to the killing, and people who had met Oswald or Ruby or others involved, have lost track of what is truth and what is fiction, inflating their stories to secure a place in history. Evidence for the Oswald-as-lone-killer and Oswald-as-the-fall-guy camps is strong, in isolation. The amount of evidence in this case, after years of diligent research by private citizens, numerous investigative committees, and the declassification of pertinent documents, is outstanding. There's enough to support just about any view one could conceive of, no matter how extreme. The difficulty is sifting through it, trying to determine what is worthwhile and what can be dismissed. Another problem, particularly for the casual researcher with a small library of books, is knowing which authors to trust and which to avoid. Some have ulterior motives, either to assume a massive conspiracy in their zeal to lionize Kennedy, or to perpetuate their lucrative careers as researchers.

Oliver Stone became interested in the Kennedy assassination after reading On The Trail of the Assassins, by Jim Garrison. Working from this template and Jim Marrs's Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy, Stone created a fictionalized account of Jim Garrison's investigation of the Kennedy murder. His own sense of betrayal over Viet Nam, in which Stone fought, infuses the narrative.

The resultant film, *JFK*, unleashed a firestorm of publicity perhaps without equal in the history of Hollywood. Many accused Stone of playing fast and loose with the truth. While knowing the full extent of his motivations is impossible, much of what he documents in the film can be verified; in some cases stronger proofs of Stone's suppositions have found the light of day in the release of government documents brought by the JFK Act of 1992.

Stone's thesis is that a consortium of like-minded individuals in the Anti-Castro Cuban crusade, CIA, and Defense establishments conspired to kill the president. A primary motivation was the Pentagon's diminishing traction, chafing against a Commander-in-Chief unwilling to take a more provocative stance against Cuba and, particularly, the Viet Nam communists. Considering it's his thesis, Stone appropriately hints that he's heading in this direction with the very first thing in the movie—Dwight Eisenhower's farewell address to the nation, warning America to take precaution against the collective strength of the burgeoning military-industrial complex.

The hero of *JFK* is the District Attorney of New Orleans, Jim Garrison, who brought local businessman Clay Shaw to trial in 1969, charged with conspiracy to murder the president. Shaw was acquitted. Many people have faulted Jim Garrison, both in and out of the conspiracy community. Some feel he was trying to gain notoriety in a bid for higher office. Others maintain that he was on the payroll of the mob, deflecting attention away from his sponsors. Still, many consider him a great leader, flawed in many respects for sure, but one who finally did something and tried to bring the truth to light, leaving a legacy of frustration, passion, and indefatigability.

The final argument, movingly given voice by star Kevin Costner, is not what was actually said at the trial's conclusion. But Garrison's speech really did touch on some of the same points and, in its shining rhetoric, certainly lay the groundwork for Costner's impassioned monologue—the real Garrison was mad about America.

Sensitive to the trouble Stone is bringing upon himself, the director portrays Garrison as a hero, fictionalizing enough of the investigation so that a wholesale endorsement of the D.A. is sidestepped.

What isn't sidestepped is the disgraceful lives of the film's many villains, each man probably as deplorable in real life. Two people in the thick of it all are David Ferrie and the aforementioned Clay Shaw. Both men were homosexual. The movie creates a scene where the men engage in an orgy. It is disgusting, particularly because Stone doesn't seem to have any proof that this happened, let alone that the men really knew each other. Other problems are: the Robert Kennedy assassination, which Stone, in the Director's Cut, has Garrison predicting, then watching on television (though it was not broadcast live); the fusion of Garrison witnesses into one man, Willie O'Keefe, which streamlines the narrative, but makes a comparison to what Garrison's witnesses actually testified to impossible; and the grave difficulty of knowing John Kennedy's true intentions for Viet Nam. On the home front, the relationship between Garrison and his wife, while rent with discord in real life, is here portrayed unimaginatively, with a heavy emphasis on the formulaic and sentimental (they didn't stay together in real life). And she's about as dumb as a doorknob.

Putting the issue of Stone's motivations and his facts aside, *JFK* falls just short of a masterpiece. It is probably the best-edited film of all time. It is full of wonderful performances

by big name stars and double-take look-alike character actors, all of whom do a lot to keep the kaleidoscopic cast of players from bewildering the uninitiated. It is imaginatively shot in color, black-and-white, 8mm, 16mm, and other formats. The lighting is impeccable, sometimes stark and brooding, sometimes clear and illuminating. Colors are imaginatively used to establish mood. Many scenes boast a subtle yellow, or a heavy blue tint, for example. The score by John Williams is beautiful, full of fright and faded glory. At the time he was heavily engaged in other work, composing most of this score before the film was completed. Music editor Ken Wannberg did an admirable job taking snippets of music provided by the composer and fitting them to the footage. The production design is incredible. Exhaustive efforts were made to reflect the feel of the time, to meticulously re-create the actual rooms where these events took place, down to matching the right color of tile on a wall (even though it was photographed in black-and-white)! Getting indoor locations right is not too difficult, with good research and a sizable budget. But getting outdoor scenes, crowd scenes, to look right—to match the buildings, the cars...it's an overwhelming challenge, but Stone meets it on all counts. The Dealey Plaza shoot lasted three weeks, which he called the most exhausting film work he's ever done. Even the women's hairstyles are exactly right (which is usually the first thing wrong in a period picture). Nothing looks out of place, nothing stands out like a sore thumb to draw a viewer out of the picture (except for some contemporary Mardi Gras footage made passable by deft editing).

The division between older footage and that shot by Stone sometimes blurs. It's like we're entering into the Time Tunnel and don't know which end is up anymore. That's definitely how the protagonist feels. Looking at the amount of flashbacks, voice-over sequences, intercut testimonials and potentially momentum-killing expositional dialogue scenes, the editing is nothing short of outstanding. Rapid changes of speed are employed, such as in the Guy Bannister pistol-whip scene. Here, when the action is slowed down, we are not given the typical number of frames-per-second (this would be a speed-ramping technique brought to the mainstream years later). Just the opposite is in evidence. We seem to have less frames than we would for the slowed film. For example, if the film is going twice as slow, we should get 12 frames instead of 24. Here there seems to be like 7. It's a very effective technique which freezes a moment of time without arresting the thrust of the scene. Joe Hutshing and Pietro Scalia had to work quickly from piles of the director's footage, while also including a lot of archival snippets. Their efforts were rewarded with the Academy Award. Many scenes deserve mention, but one in particular stands out; it condenses the feel of the movie into half a minute worth of film.

Fighting his way through the trial, Garrison uses a large model of Dealey Plaza to inform the jury of what happened that day. The D.A. is citing people in the crowd, what they saw, how they reacted. He comes to Abraham Zapruder. The flow of words halts, left to silence. We hear three sounds—the haunting swell of the score, the mechanical whir of Zapruder's camera, recording this awful scene, and piercing, reverberant screams amidst gunfire. We see Zapruder, unwittingly capturing a turning point in American history. Through his lens, we see Kennedy. It is the last time in his life he is happy, waving to the welcoming crowds. Just before the car goes behind the Stemmons Freeway sign, Kennedy jerks, hit. He disappears behind the sign. (It is this sign that obscures much of what we know of the

assassination's details. Kennedy goes behind the sign and the answers go with him). We see a close-up of Garrison's glasses, reflecting the scene, like it's running through his mind without cessation. He's not at the trial, but caught in a timeless void, dark and stagnant. Throughout the film, Costner will occasionally turn his head, his eyes becoming obscured as his glasses reflect the key light. We can't see his eyes, and he is, metaphorically, blinded. The bizarre case slowly impresses itself upon his conscious. Something is up, but he can't put all the pieces together, and he doesn't know how to proceed. His steps were stumbling, but now he can see what happened; he knows.

We jump cut to the glasses again. Next we are back in the model. The camera travels from the 6th floor of the Texas School Book Depository down to the street, where Kennedy's limousine lumbers forward vulnerably. Here, everything is still. We are granted a kind of vicarious passage into the most intensely-studied seconds of history. Apart from allowing a more detailed study, the inanimate figurines match a desire to stop time, to keep the awful event from going forward, if only to purge it from our memory. We next see an 8mm Jean Hill, looking intensely forward. She is the one eyewitness Stone dwells upon in the movie, standing in a position to the left of Kennedy at the time of the fatal strike to the head. She's looking ahead, beyond the car. We next cut to a quick shot of the grill of the car, then we see the model of the Grassy Knoll killer. Another shot rings out. Costner resumes his monologue.

For these fleeting seconds, longer than the assassination lasted, we are taken out of the trial, and returned to the vortex of confusion and regret that is Dealey Plaza. There's never been anything quite like it in cinema. A few directors possess a technique that matches Stone's, but they are not dealing with subjects as important as this one. Because this is real, because Kennedy was killed, because many people are not sure if the man or men responsible were brought to justice—from this realization the sequence derives its very persuasiveness. It is a horror prolonged, for many, over decades, not seconds.

Surmising what changes Kennedy's death wrought is an exercise fraught with difficulty. Wistfully, we may think the many problems of the '60s would have been avoided—riots, the war, all that. But Kennedy was never as consistent and as forthright in private as he was in public, despite what his boosters would have us believe. For that reason, and because none of us is omniscient, knowing that things would have been better is just wishful thinking. Obviously, seeing the president killed was undoubtedly crippling for the nation's psyche—it was a barbaric shock that negated the electorate's power to choose. For this reason alone, *JFK* is a necessary and important film. Questions should be asked. We must be an involved citizenry. If we shirk our responsibilities the system is destined for collapse, but what a blessing it has lasted this long!

Oliver Stone calls his film a counter-myth to the Warren Commission. It can be taken apart bit by bit; some of his facts are not right. A great deal hold up. But *JFK* is not about fact. It's about feeling. It doesn't cross the line into propaganda, but defends its thesis while giving other perspectives their due. Stone's burden of uncertain dread, confusion and mystery lingers even now, in the collective unconscious of America. Part detective story, part courtroom drama, it's a thriller with an informative slant on history.