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PAST IMPERFECT: HISTORY, IDEOLOGY, AND THE CULTURE OF CONSPIRACY IN OLIVER STONE'S PRESIDENTIAL TRILOGY

Raluca Moldovan[*]

Abstract

The present study is an attempt to analyse the representation of history in Oliver Stone's presidential films – JFK (1991), Nixon (1995) and W. (2008). All three films can be regarded as examples of conspiracy theory, a theme that is often present in the American director's works. The paper will also try to discuss whether these films can be considered legitimate interpretations of history, considering the impact that cinematic historical representations have in contemporary society. Critics have often argued that revisionist interpretations of history are rooted in Oliver Stone's leftist personal ideology that makes him always question the established political order. The paper discusses in turn each of the three films, arguing that JFK is Stone's most obvious attempt to formulate a revisionist history of the Kennedy assassination, Nixon is a powerful biopic portraying its protagonist as a flawed tragic hero, while W. is a less coherent and somewhat disappointing cinematic narrative of the life and presidency of George W. Bush.

Keywords: Oliver Stone, conspiracy theory, cinematic history, revisionism, JFK, Nixon, George W. Bush, political film, ideology

Preliminary considerations: film and history, film as history

One of the best-known contemporary German film critics, commenting upon the revived interest of filmmakers for historical films, referred to this phenomenon as "the return of history as film."[1] Anton Kaes's

[*] Dr. Raluca Molvovan is a Lecturer with the Department of International Relations and German Studies, Faculty of European Studies at Babes-Bolyai University.
Contact: moldovan.raluca@ubbcluj.ro

[1] This formulation is actually part of the title of Anton Kaes's work, *From Hitler to Heimat: the Return of History as Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992) in which he discusses several well-known German films belonging to the New German Cinema (Rainer Fassbinder, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, Hans Syberberg, *Hitler: A Film from Germany* and Edgar Reitz's *Heimat*, among others). For further reference, see also Kaes's article, "History as

words are an expression of a phenomenon that is overwhelmingly present in contemporary society, i.e. the way in which mass-mediated images imprint on our minds images of certain historical events, thus forming well-established criteria for comparison to any descriptions one might find in scholarly history books, for example. One might wonder, how many of us can think about the 1905 Russian Revolution without some scene from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* springing to mind? Or how many can read about the Vietnam War without recalling frames from Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*? As Kaes points out, film has come to replace both historical experience *and* historical imagination, to shape historical consciousness, becoming, in a sense, a kind of "memory bank" in which images of innumerable historical events are stored and recalled in an instant; in this respect, Kaes argues, films is transfigurated into a redemption of memory, as it preserves details that memory, given its fallibility and subjectivity, might not.[2]

Whether one agrees to Kaes's view or not, the fact remains that films seem to have become legitimate sources of historical knowledge, being quoted as such by increasingly large audiences: as Marnie Hughes-Warrington noted, "for many people, 'history' is what they see in films and television programs."[3] However, in spite of such evidence, professional historians still view cinematic representations of the past as "fake" or "distorted history", being sceptical about the medium's possibilities of providing authentic recreations of past historical events. Certainly, there

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Film. Public Memory in the Age of Electronic Dissemination": "Cinematic images have created a technological memory bank that is shared by everyone and offers little escape. It increasingly shapes and legitimizes our perception of the past". In Bruce A. Murray, Christopher J. Wickham (eds.), *Framing the Past. The Historiography of German Cinema and Television,* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992, p. 310.

[2] Kaes, *op. cit*., pp. 193-199.

[3] Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film*, London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2007, p. 1. Warrington quotes an American project entitled "Presence of the Past", designed to test people's knowledge of historical events: 81% of the 1500 subjects interviewed admitted they had watched fiction films, documentaries or television programs focused on historical events in the previous year, many more than those who admitted having read history books (53%). Almost all of them registered a stronger connection to historical events they had watched on film or television as compared to when they had studied history in school.

should be a distinction made among the various types of historical films: while historical documentaries are generally perceived as being more "authentic" representations of the past (especially if they include archival footage contemporary with the events represented), fiction films are usually dismissed by history scholars as "mere trivialisations" masquerading the past by employing devices such as mise en scene, costumes, make-up in order to attract viewers and make a profit: "The bare frame of historical events and characters quickly dissolves into the drama of the fictional protagonist and general anachronism. Costume drama is the term of disparagement often used by historians to evoke such films' shallow and opportunistic treatment of the historical past."[4] Nevertheless, in spite of the potential shortcomings of historical feature films (be them fictional, docu-dramas, biopics, etc.), I argue that any such film should also be analysed in terms of the claims it makes about itself: if the film itself claims to be an accurate representation of historical events, or if it purports to put forward a revisionist version of history, then its analysis in terms of "film as history" would be justified.

Not all professional historians have a negative view of historical films, but many such unfavourable reviews come from the fact that they routinely compare filmic history with written history, sometimes overlooking the fact that written history itself is not free from bias or criticism.[5] Robert Rosenstone has identified six major perceived shortcomings of historical films that most often form the basis of historians' criticism: i) the packaging of history as comedy, romance or heart-wrenching drama; ii) their focus on the goals and motivations of individual characters to the exclusion of wider contexts; iii) privileging the emotional over the

[4] William Guynn, *Writing History in Film*, London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006, p. 2. One such scholar who dismissed the potential of historical films to represent the past is Francois de la Bretheque; he argues that film always distorts truth, since filmic representations of history are to a large extent mediated by "the discursive, mental, ideological training" of the social grouping to which the "various 'auteurs' of a film belong." (Quoted in Guynn, 3).

[5] Robert Rosenstone, "History in Images / History in Words: Reflections on the Possibility of Really Putting History into Film", in *American Historical Review* no. 93, 1988, pp. 173-85. This apparent gap between "history in images" and "history in words" is also discussed by historian Hayden White in terms of a divide between "historiophoty" and "historiography". (Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty", in *American Historical Review*, no. 93, 1988, pp. 193-99).

intellectual dimension of historical phenomena; iv) exaggerate attention devoted to mise en scene; v) the avoidance of multiple points of view or contradictory explanations; vi) insufficient background research on historical events.[6] Defending the idea that historical films and written histories are two facets of history, Rosenstone argues that "[…] the familiar, solid world of history on the page and the equally familiar but more ephemeral world history on the screen are similar in at least two ways: they refer to actual events, moments, and movements from the past, and at the same time they partake of the unreal and the fictional, since both are made out of sets of conventions we have developed for talking about where we human beings have come from […]".[7] The purpose of many filmic histories is to make the viewer experience or re-experience the past by vicariously living its moments through story and image; to achieve this effect, filmmakers usually make the past meaningful by visioning it (turning past historical figures onto flesh and blood characters onscreen), contesting it (coming up with interpretations that run against the grain of accepted historical orthodoxy) and revisioning it (showing us the past in a new and unexpected light).[8]

Historical films are efficient tools in preserving the memory of past events that might otherwise fade into general oblivion with the passage of time, although – once again – historians tend to disagree about the adequacy of film and television to preserve an authentic, non-biased, unemotional memory of past events. However, even they grudgingly admit that cinema can impose indelible images onto collective memory and imagination that surpass any other forms and means of recollection: thus, filmic history becomes more "real" than "real history"[9] or, at least, it becomes the only form of history that ordinary people remember.

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[6] Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Understanding of History*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 49. See also a more detailed discussion on these points in Warrington, p. 22.

[7] Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film / Film on History,* London: Pearson Longman, 2006, p. 2.

[8] Rosenstone, *History on Film, p.* 118.

[9] Guynn, p. 165. See also Kaes: "[…] history films increasingly replace not only historical experience but also historical imagination." (*From Hitler to Heimat*, p. 196). For the relationship between memory and history, see also Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting,* trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, David Pellaneur, 3 vols., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-

Arguably, American filmmaker Oliver Stone was well aware of the tangled relationship involving film, memory and history when he set out to direct his presidential trilogy: *JFK* (1991), *Nixon* (2005) and *W.* (2008). Rightfully considered one of the most talented and controversial contemporary American filmmakers, Stone never shied away from tackling "dangerous" subjects: the Wall Street greed and corruption (*Wall Street*, 1989), the Vietnam war (*Platoon*, 1986; *Born on the Fourth of July*, 1989; *Heaven and Earth*, 1993), American politics (the three films mentioned earlier), the excessive violence portrayed on mass media (*Natural Born Killers*, 1994), corruption in the world of American sports (*Any Given Sunday*, 1999). His reputation as an "uncomfortable director" was established especially following the release of his 1991 *JFK*,[10] the film built around disproving the official report of the Warren Commission concerning the assassination of president Kennedy. Oliver Stone's political films are usually placed in a category of their own, considering that, more often than not, such American films tend to avoid controversial political issues or to treat them in a simplistic, superficial manner.[11] Stone has described himself on several occasions as a "cinematic historian", expressing his discontent with the fact that history seems to be the private domain of professional academics and scholars, where film and filmmakers do not belong.[12] Thus, especially in his presidential films, he tried to present the public with a revised version of accepted history, one that film critics and historians have termed "conspiracy theory"; some of them have attributed Oliver Stone's passion for controversy to the left-wing orientation that the director often hinted at: being a product of the revolutionary 1960s ferment, Stone grew up learning to be distrustful of "establishments" of any kind.[13]

1988; Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory,* trans. Francis J. Ditter jr., Vida Yazdi Ditter, New York: Harper and Row, 1980; Eric Hobsbawn, *On History*, New York: New Press, 1997; Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: Conflict and Division*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

[10] Rosenstone, *History on Film*, p. 4.

[11] M. Keith Booker, *From Box Office to Ballot Box: The American Political Film*, Westport and London: Praeger, 2007, p. 1.

[12] Oliver Stone, *Interviews,* Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2001.

[13] Tom Pendergast, Sara Pendergast (eds.), *International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers – Volume 2 (Directors)*, 4th edition, New York: St. James Press, 2000, p. 960; Jon Solomon, "The Popular Reception of *Alexander*", in Paul Cartledge, Fiona Rose Greenland (eds.), *Responses to Oliver Stone's* Alexander: *Film, History and Cultural Studies*, Madison: The University of

In what follows, I will attempt to analyse Oliver Stone's presidential films (*JFK, Nixon, W.)* through the lens of the culture of conspiracy agenda they seem to promote, while at the same time discussing the director's intention of challenging "official" history and ideology.

Conspiracy and the revision of history in JFK (1991)

"*JFK* is a superb example of a film which doesn't tell history so much as revision it – through both its form and its message, with the two of them inextricably linked".[14] Hardly anyone can speak about Oliver Stone's *JFK* – the first in his trilogy of presidential films – without using words such as "conspiracy theory" and "rewriting history". The film provoked heated debates even before its release, being attacked by both the press[15] and film critics;[16] one of the most virulent critical pieces against the film was published in *The Nation* magazine, where Alexander Cockburn argued that *JFK*, "in its truly fascist yearning for the 'father-leader' taken from the children-people by conspiracy, […] accurately catches the crippling nuttiness of what passes amid some sectors of the left as mature analysis and propaganda. […] The film from which he [Oliver Stone] stands to make millions is undoubtedly one of the most willfully error-ridden pieces of 'historical reconstruction' in the history of cinema".[17] In turn, an article published by *Newsweek* magazine attacked the film and the filmmaker along similar lines: "A movie or a television show that re-creates history inevitably distorts history. It has to compress things into a short span; it has to extract clarity out of the essential messiness of life; it has to abide by certain dramatic

Wisconsin Press, 2010, p. 45: "Stone is widely recognized as "controversial." This controversy stems both from his political position as a left-leaning filmmaker in an increasingly right-leaning sociopolitical climate and from his innovative and iconoclastic filmmaking techniques, which are in many respects very well suited to rendering his dramatized historical films."

[14] Rosenstone, *Film on History*, p. 128.

[15] Criticism coming from journalists could be justified by the fact that the film makes indirect accusations at mainstream media for failing the question the unsolved details of the JFK assassination for thirty years.

[16] Rosenstone, *Film on History*; Booker, p. 35.

[17] Alexander Cockburn, "JFK and *JFK*", in Carl Bromley (ed.), *Cinema Nation. The Best Writing on Film from* The Nation. *1913-2000*, New York: Nation Books, 2000, pp. 286, 298.

conventions: major scenes, major characters, major speeches."[18] What lies at the heart of all these attacks is probably Oliver Stone's preoccupation with history and historical issues; what critics object to is not so much the sometimes simplistic or bombastic plot lines and characters, but rather Stone's supposed misrepresentation of himself as a cinematic historian.[19] In addition, the interweaving of fictional footage with actual historical archival footage in a pseudo-documentary reconstruction style – which makes it very difficult for the average viewer to discern which scenes present events that actually happened from those that are part of Stone's script – was the target of many acid comments from film scholars and historians.[20]

Nevertheless, despite such criticism, Stone's *JFK* was hailed as "the most important political thriller of its time",[21] fact proven by its eight Academy Award nominations (including Best Picture) and the two trophies it won (for Best Cinematography and Best Film Editing). Oliver Stone's main purpose in making this film was to disprove the findings of the Warren Commission Report investigating the assassination of President John F. Kennedy (i.e., the fact the Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in killing the president). In 1991, the ground was fertile for releasing such a film: at the time, sources and surveys indicated that approximately 75% of Americans attached any credibility to the Warren Commission Report.[22] The script of the film is largely based on two books: one written by New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison (the film's main protagonist, played by Kevin

[18] "Twisted History", in *Newsweek*, December 22, 1991.

[19] Rosenstone, *Film on History*, p. 112. There even seems to be a consensus among admirers and detractors alike that "whatever Stone is doing on film, it is certainly not history" (p. 113). In response, the filmmaker adopted as extremely subjectivist position in defining history: "What is history? Some people say it's a bunch of gossip made up by soldiers who passed it around a campfire." (Oliver Stone, "Stone on Stone's Image", in Robert Brent Toplin ed., *Oliver Stone's USA: Film, History, Controversy*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000, p. 47).

[20] Nora Ephron, "The Tie that Binds", in Carl Bromley (ed.), *op. cit*., p. 293.

[21] Philip C. DiMare (ed.), *Movies in American History. An Encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2011, p. 280.

[22] Gordon B. Arnold, *Conspiracy Theory in Film, Television and Politics*, Westport: Praeger, 2008, pp. 137-38. According to a different source, the figure of those who did not believe in the findings of the Warren Commission Report was 56%, still an overwhelming percentage when compared to that representing those people who viewed the Report as truthful – 19%. ("Twisted History", *Newsweek*, December 22, 1991).

Costner), *On the Trail of the Assassins*, detailing his efforts to bring to justice those he believed were involved in the conspiracy to kill President Kennedy, and the other written by conspiracy theorist Jim Mars, *Crossfire: The Plot that Killed Kennedy*. The case presented in the film was convincing enough for the US Congress to adopt an act stipulating the reopening of the assassination investigation, although these efforts never materialized into any new evidence.

Stone's attempt to revision history on film prompted many critics to draw parallels to another very controversial American film, the notorious 1915 *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D. W. Griffith – a film almost single-handedly credited with resurrecting the Ku Klux Klan.[23] Although Stone's history in *JFK* might be speculative, the film also includes more accurate information about the assassination and its aftermath than most contemporary viewers would be likely to come across;[24] as such, it stimulated some much-needed debate about the assassination and its place in recent American history, especially since, before *JFK*, similar films tended to treat presidents as heroic figures, icons of democracy personified by Abraham Lincoln or George Washington.[25] In making *JFK*, Stone reopened a painful chapter in the recent American past, which he identified as the starting point of an ongoing crisis at the very heart of the American dream: by choosing to open the film with President Eisenhower's farewell address in which he warned against the growing power of an all-powerful military and industrial complex, the director already hinted at the main actors who would taken part in the assassination conspiracy. Moreover, at the same

[23] W. Bryan Rommel-Ruiz, *American History Goes to the Movies. Hollywood and the American Experience*, New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2011, p. 205; Rosenstone, *Film on History*, p. 114; Tony Barta, "Screening the Past: History since the Cinema", in Tony Barta (ed.), *Screening the Past. Film and the Representation of History*, Westport: Praeger, 1998, 7. The Kennedy assassination was the defining event of an era for Stone, just like the Civil War was for D. W. Griffith: "Like Griffith, Stone attempted a paradoxical recreation of history: a film that, he argues, is 'true' to the facts and yet, making use of dramatic license, creates its won facts as an interpretation, a possible version of history. Like Griffith, Stone has been much attacked for doing so, even as his film has reopened interest in an event and its aftermath for a new generation." (Pendergast and Pendergast (eds.), p. 962).

[24] David Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 3rd edition, New York: Norton, 1996, p. 953; Arnold, p. 140.

[25] Booker, *op.cit.*, pp. 36-37.

time, Stone also raised the question of whether the past was knowable and representable, especially considering the powerful and shadowy forces preventing ordinary people from finding out the truth, as his films showed in numerous scenes. The film can be viewed as a work of modernist or even postmodernist history: it combines fictional events with real archival footage, uses various kinds of film stock and editing techniques, and presents events from competing perspectives.[26] In doing so, Stone questioned history as mode of knowledge (by using multiple perspectives) and asserted the people's need for it (during Garrison's closing address at the Shaw trial, the audience plays the role of a jury trying a conspirator).[27] In the film, Jim Garrison is the embodiment of good, ordinary citizens who deserve to know the truth about their murdered president – possibly, an alter ego of Stone himself.

The film claims to represent the Kennedy assassination "as it actually happened" through cinematic reenactments, using evident to postulate a knowable truth standing in opposition to the official version of events presented in the Warren Commission Report. In other words, Oliver Stone drew on the tradition of historical positivism to present a counter-historical narrative and to put forward his own historical interpretation.[28] This historical method is visible in film in at least three moments: the film's opening, Garrison's encounter with Mr. X in Washington (who was allegedly a high-ranking government official modeled after Admiral L. Fletcher Prouty), when the district attorney learned that the threads of the Kennedy assassination plot wove together Cuban insurgents, the CIA, the FBI, going all the way to the White House, and Clay Shaw's trial in New Orleans. The film thus wants us to dismiss any later historical information that challenges the view presented in the film (about Kennedy's decisions regarding Cuba, for instance) and put all our trust in the mythic Camelot of the Kennedy age; by doing so, the force of the historical trauma represented by his death is all the more devastating, making the need to catharsis greater and more acute.

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[26] Rosenstone, *Film on History*, pp. 128-29. Rommel-Ruiz, *op.cit.*, pp. 206.

[27] Stone actually came under a lot of criticism for the fact that he chose to present some evidence during the Shaw trial that only came to light some time after the event. (DiMare, p. 281).

[28] Rommel-Ruiz, *op.cit.*, p. 207.

Oliver Stone manipulated well-known pieces of evidence – such as the Abraham Zapruder home film[29] shot during Kennedy's ride through downtown Dallas, which captures the moment of the assassination – may have fulfilled a secret wish that Americans had harboured: namely, that this film would actually clarify all the mysteries surrounding the murder. Therefore, in addition to its significance as an historical icon, the Zapruder film thus becomes *the* ultimate evidence of a conspiracy to kill the president, thus putting the final nail in the coffin of the Warren Commission Report. The Washington DC meeting between Garrison and Mr. X marks the transition from a "simple" conspiracy to kill the president to a metaconspiracy designed to involve the United States deeper into the Vietnam conflict, to the benefit of the "military industrial complex" that President Eisenhower mentioned in the film's opening scene.[30] This meeting also reveals a possible motive for Kennedy's assassination, namely the fact that the president was determined to put an end to the Vietnam war once he was re-elected.

The film's ending, presenting Garrison's closing argument before the jury (a scene that is fictional, because the real-life Jim Garrison did not deliver any closing statement), is supposed to tie up all the loose ends and answer all questions, especially the central one: "Who killed Kennedy?": in Shakespearian fashion, Garrison states: "We have all become Hamlets in our country, children of a slain father-leader, whose killers still possess the throne. The ghost of John Kennedy confronts us with the secret murder at the heart of the American dream. He forces on us the appalling question: Of what is our Constitution made? What is our citizenship – and more, our lives – worth? What is the future, where a President can be assassinated under conspicuously suspicious circumstances, while the machinery of legal action scarcely trembles?" However, despite such powerful rhetoric, the trial fails to provide an essential link between Shaw and the metaconspiracy, which is

[29] During the Clay Shaw trial, Jim Garrison claimed that the Zapruder film was being brought before the American public for the first time; although this might have been true for 1968 audiences (when the trial took place), it would have most certainly been untrue for 1991 audiences, when the film was released.

[30] Rommel-Ruiz, *op.cit.*, p. 211. The Vietnam war is actually the red thread connecting all three of Stone's presidential films: in *JFK*, it provides the motive for murdering the president; the echoes of this murder are the unspeakable secret at the heart of *Nixon*, while the desire to avoid another Vietnam-like disaster pushed forward the agenda for war in Iraq in *W.*

probably why the jury were so quick in returning a not guilty verdict. Even so, Garrison obtains his moral victory: he is the only one to know the "real truth", and vows to continue his quest to prove it to those who refuse to accept his theory: "The film's point is as clear as it is predictable: recalling Plato's image of the cave, Garrison advances towards the light, emancipated that he knows the truth about Kennedy's murder and the sinister government forces at work, while others remained enslaved to the illusions—perhaps delusions that the government is not culpable in the plot to kill President Kennedy—produced by the cave's shadows."[31] Thus, the film seems to suggest that it is our moral duty to rewrite history and produce a new narrative, one capable of providing the closure, the catharsis that might heal the trauma of JFK's assassination.[32] Critics have also argued that *JFK* appears to undermine its narrative discourse by retelling the story of Kennedy's murder in a neo-positivistic manner, narrating the facts "as they actually happened".[33]

Ultimately, whether one regards Oliver Stone as a talented filmmaker who does not shy away from controversial subjects or as a director who attempts to rewrite history in order to advance his own ideological agenda, *JFK* remains to this day the only American film that brought about the adoption of a congressional act.[34] For Oliver Stone, "The movie *JFK* is not history; it's an act of devotion, a declaration of faith."[35]

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[31] Rommel-Ruiz, *op.cit.*, p. 216.

[32] Stone's decision to retell the story of Kennedy's assassination through the eyes of Jim Garrison recalls the literary device employed by novelist Don DeLillo in *Libra*, where he tells the story from the fictional point of view of Lee Harvey Oswald. Both works adopt the method of historical narrativity in order to put their message across. (For a more detailed comparison between the film and the novel, see Rommel-Ruiz, *op.cit.*, pp. 219-25).

[33] Rommel-Ruiz, *op.cit.*, p. 225.

[34] In fact, Stone himself proved to be ambiguous with regard to the meanings of his film: on some occasions, he claimed that "a film such as JFK represented solid historical research and forced a government reexamination of the Warren Commission Report", while some other times insisted that "he is merely a dramatist and thus his political "histories" should not be subject to the same sort of vetting brought to bear on the work of academic scholars." (Quoted in DiMare, p. 877). At any rate, the film's end titles reveal the fate of its main protagonists beyond the cinematic denouement: Clay Shaw was revealed as a CIA contact agent, Garrison was re-elected as district attorney; additionally, the 1979 House Assassination Committee ruled that a conspiracy to murder president Kennedy was probable.

[35] "Twisted History", *Newsweek*, December 22, 1991.

The tragic hero with a tragic flaw: Nixon (1995)

Unlike *JFK*, Oliver Stone's *Nixon* is less focused on an era and its political events as it is on the personality and life of former American president Richard M. Nixon (played by Anthony Hopkins in the film). As such, it belongs in the biopic genre, while *JFK* is an example of political thriller. Stone claimed on more than occasion that his interpretation on Nixon's life is "a classically tragic tale of the essentially good man who overreaches and thereby dooms himself to disgrace."[36] While some critics faulted Stone for presenting an overly simplistic tale that sheds little light on the shifting tide of popular sentiment that marked Nixon's political failures and triumphs or even for committing full-blown "character assassination",[37] others acknowledge *Nixon* an un underrated masterpiece, "the finest work of cinematic art of all films about presidents […], one of the few attempts at a full-scale presidential film biography."[38] The film presents its protagonist following a Shakespearian model chronicling the rise and fall of a tragic hero with a tragic flaw: in Nixon's case, the tragic flaw seems to have been his marked tendency towards suspicion and paranoia, as well as his lifelong obsession with the difference between himself and the Kennedys.[39] *Nixon* can be regarded, in a sense, as a counterpart to the image of President Kennedy in Stone's earlier film: *Nixon*'s JFK is an inexperienced political leader (a surprising representation of an historical figure that Stone was accused of hero-worshipping) who climbs to the top aided by his father's money, the family's political connections and a blatant electoral fraud in the 1960 presidential election.[40] Richard Nixon seems to be permanently overshadowed by Kennedy's presence (the film suggests that this because of petty bourgeois resentment), so much so that the viewer gets the feeling that Kennedy pervades the filmic narrative like Banquo's ghost.

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[36] Pendergast and Pendergast (eds.), *op.cit.*, p. 962.

[37] Philip John Davies, Paul Wells (eds.), *American Film and Politics*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 66.

[38] Booker, *op.cit.*, p. 40.

[39] The protagonist's dimension as a tragic hero is also emphasised by the film's motto, a biblical passage from Matthew 16:26: "For what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

[40] Moreover, if one can speak of *JFK* as a "murder mystery", then *Nixon* would be a "moral mystery".

Oliver Stone's film shares a number of similarities with what is probably the archetypal representation of a political personality – Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*. Both figures appear as protagonists constructed on the model of classical tragedy and both are modeled on real-life personalities (Charles Foster Kane is a thinly disguised alter ego of press magnate William Randolph Hearst). In both cases, one can identify a very strong connection between childhood events (particularly lack of parental affection) and adult political behaviour; Nixon's fall, however, is explained in much greater detail than that of Kane, for whom politics is only a part of the character's thirst for power. Both films employ cinematic flashbacks and frame narration in order to present the backstory of the characters. Stone, as well as Welles did in Kane's case before him, treats Nixon's fall as a tragedy, a fact emphasized by the film's closing scene, Nixon's 1994 funeral. Both films start with a mystery of sorts – in this case, the Watergate break-in of June 1972; from that point onwards, Nixon seems to become his own accuser: it is his own voice, recorded on the White House tapes, that is heard over and over again as the president hides in the Lincoln Room. *Nixon*'s intertextual references to *Citizen Kane* are most visible in two key scenes: the scene where Richard Nixon and his wife Pat sit at opposite ends of a long dinner table, while Pat, frustrated at her failed attempts to communicate with her husband, resignedly says, "Sometimes I understand why they hate you, Dick" echoes the erosion of Charles and Emily Kane's marriage. The second scene occurs when Henry Kissinger, listening to a televised speech in which Nixon makes a final and futile attempt to distance himself from the Watergate scandal, wonders out loud, in a manner similar to Jed Leland's thoughts on Charles Kane, "Can you imagine what this man would have been had he ever been loved?"[41] In both cases, the heart of the tragedy is that the hero is unable to overcome his own greatest enemy – himself.

[41] Booker, p. 42; Philip L. Gianos, *Politics and Politicians in American Film*, Westport: Praeger, 1998, pp. 184-88; Michael Carlson, *The Pocket Essential Oliver Stone*, Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2002, pp. 12, 73.

Just like in *JFK*, conspiracy is present in *Nixon* too:[42] even from the film's opening scene – menacing dark clouds over the White House – the director suggests that the dark, sinister, unscrupulous forces hinted at in his earlier film are now taking over the government;[43] the military-industrial complex acting from the shadows in *JFK* has now become a beast (as Nixon himself says), a wild animal impossible to tame or control.[44] The film repeatedly implies that Nixon himself, while not necessarily being a part of these dark forces, often used them to advance his purposes: he appears to be behind a secret plot to invade Cuba (codenamed Track 2) while he was Eisenhower's vice-president, a plot that eventually backfired and may have led to Kennedy's assassination in 1963; the spectre of his former decisions and his alleged responsibility in Kennedy's murder come back to torment Nixon in key moments of his life.[45] As Evan Thomas argues, "Stone can't escape his favorite conspiracy theory. His Nixon is haunted by his supposed role in plots against Fidel Castro in the early 1960s--plots that somehow got out of control and killed John E Kennedy. This ghost is not the only one spooking Nixon; he suffers in the movie, as he did in real life, from hubris, inner rage and profound insecurity. But his involvement in the assassination plots is made out to be Nixon's darkest secret."[46] I believe that the film gives almost equal weight to Nixon the man and to Nixon the conspirator; the core of the conspiracy is "the whole Bay of Pigs thing", a recurrent motif in many

[42] As Alex von Tunzelmann argued in a an article published by *The Guardian*, "you don't go to an Oliver Stone movie expecting straight, canonical history with no conspiracy theories." ("Nixon: Oliver Stone's Tricky Dick Flick Is Far from Unimpeachable", *The Guardian*, June 3, 2010).

[43] DiMare, *op.cit.*, p. 369.

[44] Nixon himself is soon revealed as some sort of prince of darkness, lurking in the shadows of the Lincoln room, a creature whose ability to rise from the dead is illustrated several times in the film. (Carlson, *op.cit.* p. 73).

[45] Booker, *op.cit.*, p. 41.

[46] Evan Thomas, "Whose Obsession Is It, Anyway?", *Newsweek*,, December 10, 1995. The author also mentions the fact Nixon's dark secret may function as a sort of "rosebud" (the psychological clue that drove Charles Foster Kane in Welles's film). Moreover, the guilt that Nixon feels over the Kennedy assassination is supplemented by the guilt he feels over the death of his two brothers, whose disappearance enabled his impoverished family to provide him with the means to go to Law School: as he tells his aide, Haldeman, at some point, his rise to the top was done stepping over four bodies – the two Kennedies (JFK and Bobby) and his own two brothers. His sense of guilt is also amplified by something that his mother told him after the death of his older brother, Harold: "This Law School thing is a gift from thy brother."

of Nixon's taped conversation with his closest aides. More recent scholarly evidence (in the form of 200 hours of Nixon tapes from the National Archives) have proven that Oliver Stone was mistaken when he suggested that the president was doing his utmost to conceal from the American public CIA documents on the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961; quote the contrary, as Stanley Kutler, the author of *Abuse of Power*, a book based on these tapes, argues: Nixon was preoccupied with getting the Bay of Pigs file declassified and leaked to the press, believing that it would incriminate Kennedy for having mishandled the invasion that was supposed to depose Fidel Castro.[47] Journalist Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post*, who was instrumental in exposing the implication of the Nixon White House in the Watergate scandal, claims that "half the movie is based on facts. The other half ranges from sound speculation to borderline slander."[48] Even though *Nixon* continues the exercise of deconstructing American politics that Stone began in *JFK*, the criticism against the film on the grounds of distorting or revisioning history is less harsh than in the case of the 1991 production.[49] One possible explanation for this fact lies, as journalist Charles Colson suggests, in the preference for deconstructionism that academic history departments themselves have manifested more recently.[50] Probably as a reaction to the deeply critical views on his treatment of history in *JFK*, Oliver Stone went to great lengths to provide "legitimate" historical bases for the *Nixon* script.[51] A

[47] Christopher Matthews, "New Tapes Debunk Oliver Stone's *Nixon*", in *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 1, 1998.

[48] Quoted in Daniel J. Walkowitz, "Re-screening the Past: Subversion Narratives and the Politics of History", in Barta (ed.), *op. cit.,* p. 45.

[49] Nevertheless, some critical voices once again accused Stone of subordinating rigorous historical method to personal conspiratorial views rooted in his infatuation with the 1960s New Left hostility to the "System". (Walkowitz, in Barta (ed.), *op. cit.,* p. 45).

[50] Walkowitz in *Screening the Past*, Barta (ed.), *op. cit.,* p. 46.

[51] The disclaimer that Stone includes at the start of his film is telling in this respect: "This film is an attempt to understand the truth of Richard Nixon, 37th President of the United States. It is based on numerous public sources and on an incomplete historical record. In consideration of length, events and characters have been condensed, and some scenes among protagonists have been hypothesized or condensed." One such examples of a hypothesised scene is the meeting between White House counsel John Dean (who will later be forced by Nixon to take part of the blame for Watergate) and E. Howard Hunt, the coordinator of the Watergate break-in; in reality, no such meeting occurred. See also Rosenstone, *Film on History*: "Like *JFK,* this film abounds in government conspiracies, yet these are far better documented than the ones hinted at in the earlier film." (p. 129).

closer analysis of the film might also reveal a "double conspiracy": on the one hand, the suggestion that Nixon himself was a prisoner of the "system" and on the other, the cancer eating away the pure heart of American democracy stemming from the concerted actions of "the CIA, Mafia and Wall Street bastards", as Nixon says when he realizes that this wild beast has gone out of control.

What appears as somewhat surprising in *Nixon* is not the presence of conspiracy and a personal view of American history (manifest especially the downward spiral of American politics following Kennedy's assassination), but rather Oliver Stone's sympathetic treatment of his protagonist: the film never openly condemns Nixon; by choosing to represent him as man tormented by his own demons, a man who felt so unloved as a child (the film often emphasized these Freudian overtones, especially in the relationship between the young Nixon and his strict Quaker mother) that, ironically, he chose to enter the most public of professions – politics. The viewer empathizes with Nixon when he shouts, at the height of his despair, after concluding an honourable peace that ended the Vietnam war, "Why do they hate me so?"[52] In a 1996 interview, Oliver Stone confessed that he viewed the real-life Nixon as "a monster, a grotesque figure", explaining why his filmic portrayal does not mirror his opinion of the actual man: "We went the other way - we tried, as dramatists, to empathize with him and to walk in his shoes. One of the ways I tried to do that was to identify him with my father, who came from that generation. Very stubborn. Never wrong. For me, for most of the public, Nixon was a man who lied his whole life. I don't think he did it out of malice. He thought he was a good guy. […] Nixon is failure. I think of him in terms of Willy Loman in "Death of a Salesman.""[53]

[52] This exclamation is actually symptomatic of the fact that Nixon believed the press, among others, were his sworn enemies: during his brief intermezzo outside the world of politics after his loss in the 1962 California gubernatorial elections, in what he called as "my last press conference", Nixon told reporters that "you won't have Nixon to kick around anymore". The film presents several malicious or tendentious examples of Nixon's treatment by the press, such as the headline wondering "which Nixon is Nixon going to be today?" – a hint at Nixon's persona, his forced smiles ("his face and his smile never seem to be in the same place at the same time", as one character puts it), his constant references to himself in the third person.

[53] Lisa Nesselson, "Oliver Stone Discusses His Film *Nixon*", http://www.parisvoice.com/-archives-97-86/295-oliver-stone-discusses-his-film-qnixon, accessed February 25, 2012.

Although, as some critics argued, the explanation of childhood trauma does not fully account for Nixon's paranoia and dishonesty, they do earn him the sympathy of the audience.

Ultimately, *Nixon* is an impressive biopic featuring a brilliant performance by Anthony Hopkins, who infuses his character with all the tragic aura of a flawed hero who comes within an inch of having everything, but falls prey to his inner anguish and turmoil.

Stone's take on contemporary history: *W.* (2008)

The latest of Stone's presidential films, *W.*, is a rare example of political film focusing of the personality of a leader who, at the time of the film's release, was still in office. Given Oliver Stone's reputation as a "left-wing radical", many viewers and critics alike would have expected to see a very harsh portrayal of one of America's most reviled presidents, George W. Bush, as well as a fresh approach on the controversies leading to the military involvement of the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq. In fact, Stone's film presents neither: president Bush (played by Josh Brolin) appears as a dim-witted and hilarious character rather than a sinister figure, while the war in Iraq seems to be a consequence of Vice-president Dick Cheney's lies and deception – a perspective in keeping with what many believe to be the motives behind this conflict. While it is true that Oliver Stone is no admirer of George W. Bush, he himself admitted that his film is not for "that radical 15% that hate Bush or the 15 to 20% who love Bush. That's not our audience. Those people probably won't come. I'm interested in that 60% in the American middle who at least have a little more open mind."[54] The director intended his film to be a character study of an interesting man, not an exercise in polemic: "Bush is not a lightweight. He has determination. What did I learn? I really learned how powerful the willpower and discipline is that he has. I'm not making political judgments. We're not looking to condemn. He says what he says and does what he does. You're going to like him, and at the same time, you're going to be horrified by some of the stuff he does."[55]

[54] Quoted in Anthony Breznican, "First Look: Oliver Stone's *W.* Is Not Quite Out of Left Field", in *USA Today*, September 24, 2008.

[55] Quoted in Breznican, *art. cit.*

Consequently, the criticism against Stone's *W.* is different than the one leveled against his two earlier presidential films: "What missing [in *W.*] is the one thing Stone films never lacked: a point of view."[56] The film chronicles George W. Bush's rise to power from the days of his lost youth as the black sheep of a prominent political dynasty to political triumph as Texas governor and later, as two-time president of the United States. The driving force behind George W.'s major decisions (to quit drinking, to become involved in politics, to run for governor and then for president) is his deep desire to prove his worth to his father, the patriarch-like figure of George H. Bush that actually dominates the cinematic narrative: even at the height of his political career, George W. cannot help feeling like a disappointment to his father.[57] In many scenes following his election as president, George W. appears as shallow, boorish figure, less a decider than a tool manipulated by evil eminences such as Vice-President Cheney (played by Richard Dreyfuss) or adviser Karl Rove (Toby Jones); Cheney in particular is a Iago-like figure who does nothing but unscrupulously advance his own agenda. However, at a closer look, George W. Bush does have moments when he refuses to be manipulated by his vice-president, such as the scene where he refuses the sign the authorization to torture prisoners during interrogation in the name of "national security".[58] Therefore, the film implies that president Bush is actually an active agent in the political decisions of his administration and should be held fully responsible for its failures – especially dividing the nation following a period of unprecedented unity after the September 11 attacks -, not the victim of an administrative plot orchestrated by high-level cabinet members. Stone's criticism in the film is not so much directed against the (mostly fabricated) evidence that the Bush administration used to involve the country in a full-scale bloody war, but rather against the fact that whoever questioned the connection between the alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and the 9/11 terrorist attacks was considered unpatriotic.[59]

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[56] Richard Corliss, "Oliver Stone's Verdict on George W.", in *Time*, October 13, 2008.

[57] In a sense, *W.* could rightfully be considered the story of a proud father perpetually disappointed in his son.

[58] Rommel-Ruiz, *op.cit.*, p. 245.

[59] From this point of view, *W.* explores many of the issues present in Stone's earlier film, the 2006 *World Trade Center*; however, both films provide unsatisfactory answers to critical historical questions about how and why the September 11 attacks occurred.

Besides this connection, the film also suggests that president Bush's decision to go to war in Iraq has deeper psychological motivations: he wanted to finish what his father started in 1991, in yet another attempt to prove his worth to the former president.

If one could speak of conspiracy in *W.*, then this refers to the way in which the Bush administration gradually misinformed and deceived the American public about Saddam Hussein's military arsenal and his supposed connections to Al-Quaeda. The film thus indirectly questions the findings of the 9/11 National Commission, just like the earlier *JFK* questioned the conclusions of the Warren Commission Report.[60] Oliver Stone's film implies that the Iraqi threat was amplified by vice-president Cheney and other Bush advisers (Cheney actually says at one point that going to war in Iraq is justified even if there might be only a 1% chance of Saddam Hussein possessing weapons of mass destruction) on the one hand in order to "kick the Vietnam syndrome" and re-establish America as the real empire of the 21st century, and on the other, to gain access to invaluable natural resources. However, this threat ultimately proved to be empty: the search for weapons yielded to result, while the caves presumed to be harbouring nuclear warheads and terrorists turned out to be trenches for cattle, thus revealing the full scale of the deception perpetrated by the Bush administration, a deception that claimed the life of hundreds of American soldiers.[61] Ultimately, as was the intention of its director, the film does put forward a credible hypothesis that president Bush himself promoted and justified the war.

Many elements in the structure of *W.* remind one of *Nixon*: the flashbacks telling the character's backstory, the personal insecurities of the protagonist stemming from growing up in the shadow of overbearing parents and siblings, the insecurities, inner turmoil, self-doubt and despair

[60] The findings of the 9/11 National Commission are also challenged by academics such as Peter Dale Scott, in his work *The Road to 9/11*, where he connects the terrorist attacks to a long tradition of government deception with the purpose of encouraging military actions that stretches back to World War I and the German attack on the American ship *Lusitania*.

[61] In this light, the scene where president Bush and the First Lady visit the bedside of an American soldier who had lost both legs fighting in Iraq paint the president as a pathetic figure who's out of touch with reality and does not comprehend the scale of the destruction he helped unleash.

upon realizing that, despite their best efforts, they still do not have the love of the people.[62] The film actually contrasts president Nixon with George H. Bush, in a scene where the latter hesitates to use a biased campaign ad attacking the Democratic candidate, Governor Dukakis, saying that "Nixon did stuff like that" – namely, using negative campaigning to smear his political opponents.[63] Stone's portrayal of George W. occasionally seems built upon the same sympathetic features he included in Nixon's case: viewers may come to admire Bush's sunny disposition and empathize with his inner struggles in spite of themselves; the director reserves his cinematic venom for other figures: Vice-president Cheney, the Machiavellian Karl Rove or the complacent Condoleezza Rice.

Unlike Stone's previous two films, however, *W.* pales by comparison: it lacks both the narrative coherence of *JFK*'s historically revisionist point of view and *Nixon*'s brilliant portrayal of a tragic hero on the path to his downfall; instead, as Richard Corliss remarked, *W.* is "that rare Oliver Stone film that is not exhilarating or enraging, but boring, because the director doesn't have a fresh take on Bush."[64]

Concluding remarks

Oliver Stone is a child of the privileged 1950s America, but came of age during the turbulent period of the Vietnam War, which he experienced first hand. It is entirely possible that this "baptism of fire" shattered his youthful idealism and infused him with a moral sense that can be traced back to the Protestant ethic of the Founding Fathers.[65] This moral sense is evident in all his political films: the six films he directed about 1960s America (*Salvador*, *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Heaven and Earth*, *JFK* and *Nixon*)

[62] One of the recurrent scenes in *W.* shows the president standing in the middle of a baseball stadium, being cheered on by adoring crowds; however, it turns out that those ovations are only a product of his imagination: every time he looks up to the people, the stadium appears empty and desolate.

[63] Moreover, the film also mentions the figure of JFK, used by Bush Sr. as an example of bad behaviour that his son should avoid at all costs (namely, he should not engage in drunk driving, chasing women and other such demeaning activities): "Who do you think you are? A Kennedy? […] You are a Bush."

[64] Richard Corliss, "Oliver Stone's Verdict on George W.", in *Time*, October 13, 2008.

[65] Carlson, *op.cit.*, p. 8.

put forward a kind of collective historical argument with deep moral overtones about contemporary America; his insistence on the moral lessons of history is markedly traditional.[66]

His first two presidential films stemmed from the fascination of his youth with strong political leaders and from the array of conspiracy theories surrounding both Kennedy and Nixon's personalities. Stone referred to *JFK* as being his "J'accuse!" film, whereas *Nixon* was a "sober, winter" movie that attempted, mostly empathetically, to capture the loneliness and occasional despair of an unloved man." In it, too, Stone connected his subject to the documented conspiracies that helped destroy his presidency, as well as to other plots for which there is little credible evidence.[67] His *W.* is a less radical film, partly because, as the director himself declared, "I think I subconsciously avoided going to the bottom of this murky pond because I was scarred from the numerous personal attacks on me as a conspiracy theorist after *JFK* and *Nixon*."[68] Such attacks came from both ends of the political spectrum: he was blamed from the right for seeing conspiracies everywhere and from the left for suggesting that Kennedy was a force of liberal change.[69] Stone was also accused of making fiercely manipulative films; this may be partially true, but one can discern here the significant influence of his professor and mentor at New York University, Martin Scorsese (who often faced similar accusations), in addition to other influences coming from Orson Welles, Luis Bunuel or the directors of the French New Wave, Alain Resnais and Jean-Luc Godard.[70]

Oliver Stone's on screen history is the history of the future, especially in a society where reading scholarly history books is increasingly regarded as an elitist activity. The prevalence of visual culture in today's world may mean that whatever history people remember is the one they saw on film or

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[66] Rosenstone, *Film on History,* 132. This is the reason why Jim Garrison, the disillusioned idealist, may be Stone's most revealing hero, the closest thing to the director's alter ego.

[67] "From Man to Mockery, and Back Again", in *Newsweek*, online edition, http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2008/10/10/from-man-to-mockery-and-back-again.print.html, accessed on February 29, 2012.

[68] Oliver Stone, "Afterword", in *Responses to Oliver Stone's* Alexander: *Film, History and Cultural Studies*, eds. Paul Cartledge, Fiona Rose Greenland, p. 348.

[69] Carlson, *op.cit.*, p. 9.

[70] See also Niemi, *op.cit.*, p. 345 for further details on this issue.

on television; is this is the case, Stone is a storyteller for a new age, one who makes history by making myths and makes myths in order to tell truths. At any rate, as Davies and Wells argue, "Stone has created in his presidential films the only full-blown mythic version of American politics since 1960";[71] if nothing else, such films are necessary because they engage, comment and contest the existing body of data and arguments that form the discourse of history.

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