

Oliver Stone as Historian

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For anyone who lived through the Sixties on a campus, there has to be a shock of recognition on seeing the anti war demonstration in *Born on the Fourth of July*. A feeling that you were once present at this very scene, saw these very students on the steps of a university hall, with their long hair, Afros, beards, levis, bandannas; witnessed these very gestures, the clenched fists, heard this speechifying by Blacks and Whites, the denunciations of war, the shouted words *Nixon, on strike, shut it down, right on*. Even that middle aged figure on the steps, wearing a dashiki and calling for a March on Washington, looks strangely familiar –but at the same time somehow too old and out of place. Before the tear gas bombs explode and the cops descend with swinging clubs we may realize: that is Abbie Hoffman, King of the Yippies, saying precisely the kind of things he had said at such demonstrations thirty-five years before.

The sequence is based upon a real event. The film has let us know that this is Syracuse University shortly after the Cambodia “incursion” and the killings at Kent State, that moment in early May, 1970 when hundreds, thousands, of college and high school campuses went on strike. Syracuse was among them, but the demonstration there was far different from the one we see on the screen. At Syracuse the words might have been violent, but the afternoon was peaceful; the police did not shoot off tear gas and they did not wade into the crowd with clubs. Nor was the demonstration there attended by Ron Kovic, the hero of the film, and author of the book on which it is based. Nor by his girlfriend, for he did not have a girlfriend. Nor was it addressed by Abbie Hoffman.

A creation of director Oliver Stone, this sequence is not a complete fabrication, but, rather, a cunning mixture of diverse visual elements –fact, near fact, displaced fact, invention. It refers to the past, it prods the memory, but can we call it History? Surely not History as we usually use the word, not History that attempts to accurately reproduce a specific, documentable moment of the past. Yet one might see it as a generic historical moment, a moment that claims its truth by standing in for many such moments. The truth that such demonstrations were common in the late Sixties. The truth of the chaos, confusion, and violence of many such encounters between students and police. The truth of the historical questions the sequence forces viewers to confront: Why are these students gathered here? What are they protesting? Why are they so critical of our national leaders? Why do the police break up the rally with such gusto? What is at stake on the screen for our understanding of the Sixties? Of Recent America? Of the United States today?

This is an essay about Oliver Stone as Historian. About how filmmakers in general and this filmmaker in particular can and do create a meaningful sense of the past. Obviously it is possible to find hundreds of films made in the last thirty years that contain images of American social, political, and cultural life, but such images do not tell us anything important unless they are pulled together into a vision or interpretation of the American past. This is where Stone comes in. He has been the contemporary American filmmaker most committed to charting the recent American past, and has done so with a strong thesis about the meaning of that past. What's more, his problems both in making dramatic historical features and in thinking about what he has made, are the same problems faced by every filmmaker who attempts to do history by means of dramatic historical films. The sequence from *Born on the Fourth of July* set at Syracuse University is a typical example of how the historical film creates the past, creates images of a world that is at once fiction (in the sense of being "made") and History. A special kind of History that, like all forms of history across the ages, has its own particular rules of engagement with the traces of the past.

Given the way everyone has been taught history in school, the idea of History on film is not an easy one for us to accept. It is also not easy for Oliver Stone. To judge by many interviews, Stone is –or has become– as confused by the historical status of his work as is anyone else. Once upon a time, it is clear, he thought that what he was doing on the screen was History. At times he even had the temerity to proclaim himself a Historian. Then came the years of criticism from historians and members of the press denouncing him, and often viciously, for alleged inaccuracies, misrepresentations, and, even, lies in his films. In angry responses he first defended himself, then decried the whole notion of history, claiming nobody really knows or can know the past. Yet at the same time he retreated towards the rules of the academic game and apparently accepted the notion (as a marketing strategy?) that the dramatic past is different from the academic one. Why else the disclaimer preceding *Nixon*, one of his later historical films, which in part reads, "Events and characters have been condensed, and some scenes among protagonists have been conjectured."

Stone's problems with the reception of his films speaks to a larger issue: is it possible to put History on film? Here I will answer "Yes," but only by giving a particular meaning to the word, "History." A meaning that long predates our idea, which dates from the late nineteenth century, that History is a matter of telling the past as it really was -- or in the case of film, showing us the past as it really was. In a deeper sense, History is no more (and no less) than the attempt to recount, explain, and interpret the past, to give meaning to events, moments, movements, people, periods of time that have vanished. There is no doubt that Oliver Stone has been involved in such a process. Over the years, he has directed a body of work –*Salvador*, *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *JFK*, and *Nixon*– which consciously confronts some of the major historical issues of our time. As much as any historian who works in words, Stone has wrestled with the recent history of the United States –the Sixties, the war in Vietnam, the Kennedy assassination and what followed: the

presidency of Nixon, the scandals of Watergate, repeated intervention in Latin America. Doing so, he has created a powerful interpretation of contemporary American history.

To accept Stone as a Historian it is necessary to understand that the theory and practice of History today is not what it was when you went to school. Certainly it is not what it was when I received my PhD three decades ago. For at least the last half century (and more in some quarters) the practice and truth claims of History have been under major attack from philosophers, literary and cultural theorists, postmodern critics, and historians themselves. The literature on this is far too huge to deal with here, so let me only suggest that the cumulative weight of the arguments add up to the following: That written History, academic History, is not something solid and unproblematic, and certainly not a “reflection” of a past reality, but the construction of a moral story about the past out of traces that remain. That History (as we practice it) is an ideological and cultural product of the Western World at a particular time in its development, one when the notion of “scientific” Truth, based on replicable experiments, has been carried into the social sciences, including History (where no such experimentation is possible). That History is actually no more than a series of conventions for thinking about the past. That these conventions have shifted over time –from the stories of Herodotus to the scientism of a Von Ranke– and that they will obviously shift in the future. That the “Truth” of history does not reside in the verifiability of individual pieces of data, but in the overall narrative of the past, and in how well that narrative engages the discourse of History – the already existing body of data and arguments on a topic.

To think about a filmmaker as a historian is to raise the larger issues of history on the screen and to move towards and investigation of the possibilities and practices of the medium. The useful questions to ask here are not the ones that every journalist seems to put to a film: Does the screen literally represent the world of the past? Does the historical film convey facts or make arguments as well as written history? Instead of these, one must go to a more fundamental level and ask the following: What sort of historical world does film construct? How does it construct that world? How can we make judgments about that construction? How and what does that historical construction mean to us? Perhaps only after these are answered should we ask: How does the historical world on the screen relate to written history?

As a way of beginning to answer such questions, let me point to six elements that mark the historical practice of mainstream films:

1. The dramatic film tells history as a story, a tale with a beginning, middle, and an end. A tale that leaves you with a moral message and (usually) a feeling of uplift. A tale embedded in a larger view of history that is always progressive. No matter what the historical film, be the subject matter slavery, the Holocaust, the Khmer Rouge, or the horrors of Viet Nam, the message delivered on the screen is that things are getting better or have gotten better. Even a film about the Holocaust may be structured to leave us feeling (as does *Schindler's List*): Aren't we lucky that certain people kept the flag of hope

alive?

Oliver Stone's films work this way, with just enough hints at counter examples to underline the point. At the end of *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic remains paralyzed and in a wheel chair, and the problems stemming from the Viet Nam War have hardly been solved. But as Kovic gets ready to deliver a speech to the 1972 Democratic National Convention and the music swells up, he tells a reporter: "I have the feeling we have come home," leaving the audience with the feeling that after the trauma of Vietnam, everything is okay in American once again. Even *JFK*, Stone's blackest work, with its pervasive fears about the future of American democracy, pulls the sting from its condemnations by having its protagonist, District Attorney Jim Garrison, played by Kevin Costner, a big, conservative star whose very presence tends to reassure us that the problems of the nation will soon be solved.

2. Film insists on history as the story of individuals. Either men or women (but usually men) who are already renowned, or men and women who are made to seem important because they have been singled out by the camera. Those not already famous are common people who have done heroic or admirable things, or who have suffered unusually bad circumstances of exploitation and oppression. Putting individuals in the forefront of the historical process means that the solution of their personal problems tends to substitute itself for the solution of historical problems. In *Platoon* and in *Born on the Fourth of July* the experience of a single company or a single soldier is made to stand for America's Viet Nam experience; in *Salvador* the education of an American journalist becomes our education into the complicity of the United States with Central American militarists.

3. Film offers us history as the story of a closed, completed, and simple past. It provides no alternative possibilities to what we see happening on the screen, admits of no doubts, and promotes each historical assertion with the same degree of confidence. Works like *Salvador*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and *Nixon* do not give us time or space to think about situations or characters in any other way than what is shown. *JFK* gets away from this convention to some extent as Stone tells multiple stories and creates many interpretations of the assassination, including some which contradict each other. In a sense, a paradox lies at the heart of this work: Stone creates a certainty that there was conspiracy but insists it is a conspiracy so complex that we will never be able to understand it. [Interestingly, this anomalous feature of multiple interpretations, or suggestions, or plausible alternatives were a chief source of media criticism of Stone –as if journalists and historians fear ambiguity more than misinformation.]

4. Film brings us History as experience. It emotionalizes and dramatizes the past, gives us history as triumph, anguish, joy, despair, adventure, suffering, and heroism. Doing so, it collapses the measured distance part of the traditional historians stance and suggests that emotion is an important part of our historical legacy, that somehow we can gain historical knowledge through empathy. For Stone, the issue might be: too much emotion. Both *Born on Fourth* and *Salvador* are harrowing in their depiction of assassination,

war, social turmoil, and the treatment of vets at the VA hospital, harrowing too in their portrayal of the violence of interfamilial relationships. For us, assessing this sort of experiential knowledge is difficult because emotion lies so far outside the normal historical vocabulary. But scenes like those in the VA Hospitals certainly tell the audience something it did not know before and tell it in a powerful and unforgettable way.

5. Film shows history as process. The world on the screen brings together things that, for analytic or structural purposes, written history often has to split apart. Economics, politics, race, class, and gender all come together in the lives and moments of individuals, groups, and nations. This characteristic of film throws into relief a certain convention--one might call it a "fiction" --of written history. The analytic strategy that fractures the past into distinct chapters, topics, and categories. Written history may treat gender in one chapter, race in another, economy in a third. It compartmentalizes the study of politics, family life, or social mobility. History in film becomes more like real life: a process of changing social relationships where political, personal, and social questions and categories are interwoven. Ron Kovic in *Born on the Fourth of July* is at once a male, a son, a wrestler, an Anglo American, a resident of Long Island, a Catholic, a marine, a gung ho patriot, an anti-war activist.

6. Film so obviously gives us the "look" of the past--of buildings, landscapes, and artifacts--that we may not see what this does to our sense of history. Certainly film provides a sense of how common objects were used. In film, period clothing it confines, emphasizes, and expresses the moving body. In film, tools, utensils, weapons are objects that people use and misuse, objects that can help to define their livelihoods, identities, lives, and destinies. Stone particularly good at recreating this tangible feeling of reality --the confused events involving trucks and guns surrounding the assassination in *JFK.*, the sight and sound of the antiwar demonstrators in *Born on the Fourth*; the shocking realism of battles in that film and *Platoon* that led veterans to say: "that's the way it was in my Vietnam."

The six conventions are inextricably involved in the world of the past as it appears on the screen in a dramatic film. In a real sense, they both enable film to do History and provide the limits to the History that film can do. Whatever the shape of the past, or the particular historical lessons brought to us on the screen, they will be shaped by the closed story, the notion of progress, the emphasis on individuals, the single interpretation, the heightening of emotional states, the focus on the surfaces of the world.

If these conventions were not enough to ensure that History on film must be different from History on the page, there is another, even more controversial element of History on the screen: the fact is that historical film invents facts. We all feel uneasy about this, including Stone, hence the recent disclaimers preceding his films. Yet it is important to remember that written history itself is not devoid of invention. The underlying convention of History is an invention, a convention, and a fiction: this is the notion that individuals, social and political movements, decades, and nations occurred in linear stories

that have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and are moral in their implications. Daily life and past life are, in truth, an ongoing flow of stuff (we like to call this stuff “events” but even that word partakes of fiction, for the beginnings and endings of such “events” are always arbitrarily demarcated and besides, can we really call something complex as, say, the American Revolution an “event”?). Stuff so incredibly complex that we can describe but the tiniest portion of it. The notion that one can actually and truthfully tell The story of the United States, or The History of the Western World, or The Biography of Ron Kovic is itself a fiction. For what history gives us is no more than an arbitrary set of data pulled together by an ideology, a teleology, and a moral that, in the case of the story of a country or a civilization, always ends up by telling us how wonderful we are.

Fiction, invention, creation -- these mark all attempts to describe the past and make it meaningful. The point is not to decry them but to understand how such elements help to make History. As the anti war demonstration sequence in *Born on the Fourth of July* suggests, the past on the screen is shot through with invention from the smallest details to largest events. And it would be even were Stone attempting to recreate a specific, historically documented demonstration as accurately as possible. Consider, for example, a room in Kovic’s family home on Long Island in 1965. Or the Vietnam battle in which he commits atrocities. Or the firefight in which he suffers his dreadful wound. The room and the battles have to be, at best, approximate representations. They say this is more or less the way a room might have looked in 1965. This is more or less the way the battles took place. People wore these kinds of uniforms, carried these kinds of weapons, yelled these sorts of epithets. But this is not and cannot be some precise copy of what occurred because we can never know precisely what occurred.

The motion picture camera is greedy. It demands more particularity about the past than any historian can ever know. Invention is always necessary to fill out the specifics of a particular historical scene. It is also necessary or to create a coherent (and moving) visual sequence, or to create a historical characters. Think of it. The very use of an actor to "be" someone is already a fiction. In giving us a historical character the film says what cannot truly be said: that this is how this person looked, moved, and sounded -- and certainly looks, movement, and sound help to create the meaning of the past. Actor Tom Cruise can be made up to resemble Ron Kovic but at some level viewers always know he is Tom Cruise. Which means that the figure of Kovic on the screen carries a host of extra meanings (meanings we call “intertextual). With Cruise playing Kovic we have to know at some level that before us -- at least for an audience in the United States -- we have an All American hero.

If historical settings and people on the screen necessarily involve fictional or invented elements, so do the events depicted. Incidents inevitably have to be invented by the filmmaker for a variety of reasons-- to keep the story moving, to maintain intensity, to create a dramatic structure, and above all, to allow the history to fit within filmic time constraints -- a life, a war, a revolution all within two hours. For historical films, different kinds of techniques are involved in this invention, techniques we might wish to label

Compression (bringing together actual events that occurred in different times and places), *Alteration* (changing events slightly to highlight their underlying meaning), or *Metaphor* (using an invented image to stand for or sum up events too complex, lengthy or difficult to depict).

As an example of *Compression* we can consider the assassination of Cardinal Romero in *Salvador*. The film sequence brings together three historical events that took place at different times: a speech by Romero in the Cathedral denouncing right wing death squads, his assassination while giving the Eucharist in a small, rural church a week later, and a gathering of the cardinal's followers at his funeral, which was brutally broken up by the military. By compressing them into one sequence, the film works for the viewers and for history: it allows our hero, the American journalist Richard Boyle, and thus the audience, to witness these events, and it makes clear the connections between Romero's views and his assassination, as well as the complicity between the right wing death squads and the military in El Salvador.

Alteration and *Metaphor* come together in the sequence from *Born of the Fourth of July* when Kovic, paralyzed and back home, rides in a convertible as a local hero in his home town's Fourth of July parade and then later in the day, at a public gathering, becomes mute, his mind filled with flashback images from the war, while attempting to speak to the crowd about Vietnam. In truth, Kovic was one of two marines in the car and on the podium that day, but director Stone is obviously emphasizing for us the larger theme of the film -- the difficulty of conveying to those who were not there the horrific experience of Vietnam and the physical and mental toll it has taken not just on our hero, but on Kovic as a symbol of patriotic America-- of, if you will, all of us in the audience.

Another key scene in this same film works as a *Metaphor* for a psychic state that the filmmaker could express in no other way. Ron Kovic is haunted by the memory of not just the atrocities he has committed in Vietnam but, even more, by the fact that during a firefight he inadvertently killed one of his own men. One way to read his entire autobiography is as a confession of this crime (brushed aside by his military commander), an act of expiation and a plea for forgiveness. To give images for this internal process, for the guilt that prompts Kovic to write, and for authorship itself, with its confession that works as a kind of self forgiveness, Stone invents an entire sequence. He has Kovic visit the family of the man he shot, confess his crime to them, and, from the victim's mother, receive a tepid but real kind of forgiveness. Which is what, by writing his book, Kovic received from the public at large.

Normally we think of the difference between fiction and History as this: both tell stories, but the latter is a true story. The question is: what kind of truth? A "literal" truth, an exact copy of what took place in the past? Hardly. On the printed page a description of a battle or a revolution is not a literal rendering of that series of events. In our writing of the past, some sort of "fiction" (call it a "convention" if you will) is always involved, one that allows a sampling of reports to represent the collective experience of thousands or millions.

In part this happens because the word works differently from the image. The word can refer to vast amounts of data in a small space. The word can generalize, talk of abstractions like *revolution*, *evolution*, and *progress*, and make us believe that these things exist. But they do not exist, of course, except on the page. Such words are shorthand markers for incredibly complex processes, so complex that once the designation is given we continue to argue over what the word actually designates. (Witness the scholarly debates over bicentenary of the French Revolution, with certain major scholars essentially saying the Revolution never took place, that it was no more than the Terror. The same debate has more recently begun over the Russian Revolution.) To talk of such things is not to talk literally, but to talk in a metaphoric way about the past. Film, with its need for a specific image, cannot make general statements about revolution or progress. Film must summarize, synthesize, generalize, symbolize—in images.

Let me underline what has to be a counter intuitive point: Film, the most literal of media, does not open a window onto the past. What happens on screen is at best a distant approximation of what was said and done in the past, a series of visual metaphors that do not depict, but rather point to the events of the past. The Historical film will always include images that are at once invented and, at best, true. True in that they symbolize, condense, or summarize larger amounts of data; true in that they impart an overall meaning of the past. Film always mixes things which did happen with things which could have happened; things which compress a lot of what happened (data) to make it fit within the visual and time constraints of the medium and the form. Here is a paradox: this apparently most literal of media never delivers a literal representation of the past. It speaks about the past, it comments on it, it raises the issues of the past and tells us what those issues (can) mean. But it cannot show the past to us.

Yet History on film does not entirely cut loose from data. Not if it is a serious historical film rather than a costume drama. Indeed, there are ways of judging historical films, but one cannot use the same standards that we have for written history. *Historical film must be judged not on the level of detail but at the level of argument, metaphor, symbol.* Judged against what we know that can be verified, documented, or reasonably argued. In other words, we must judge it against the ongoing discourse of History, the existing body of historical texts; their data and arguments.

Any historical film, like any work of written, graphic, or oral history, enters a body of preexisting knowledge and debate. To be considered "historical," rather than simply a costume drama, a film must engage the issues, ideas, data, and arguments of that field of knowledge. The historical film does not indulge in capricious invention and does not ignore the findings and assertions of what we already know. Like any work of history, it must be evaluated in light of the knowledge of the past that we possess. Like any work of history, it situates itself within the ongoing debate over the meaning of the past.

To label Oliver Stone a Historian is to say that his films engage the discourse of history and add something to that discourse. They make the past meaningful in three different ways. Stone's films, like the best works of history, *Vision*, *Contest*, and *Revision*

History. These labels are hardly meant to be exclusive. Each film probably does to some extent all three, but for purposes of underlining the categories, let me deal with one of his films under each label.

To *VISION* History is to put flesh and blood on the past; to show us individuals in life like situations, to dramatize events, give us people to identify with, make us feel to some extent as if we have lived moments and issues long gone. To Vision is to give us the experience of the past—in this it is very different from the distancing and analyzing of a written text. In *Born on the Fourth of July* we see a small community both before and during the war; undergo the harrowing experience of battle with its atrocities; suffer the degradations of a handicapped veteran's life; and confront the gap between the rhetoric of justification and patriotism and the reality of events in and after the war itself.

Along with Vision the film provides elements that are very much part of traditional history. First: *Born on the Fourth of July* recounts, explains, and interprets a single life, and by extension, a whole period—the American experience of Vietnam. Second: in depicting the actions and attitudes of Americans in Vietnam and afterwards, the film engages and adds to the body of evidence we have from the war as carried in other books, essays, films, works of history. Third: It makes an original and interesting interpretation of American involvement in Vietnam by linking the high cost of blind patriotism so a certain kind of American masculinity—what might be called the John Wayne syndrome. Fourth: it generalizes the experiences of one man to be those of a nation, showing the way war touched not only other veterans but also civilians who lived outside the circle of experience of the war. By giving us images of a painful split in the Kovic family, the film suggests the split in the family of the nation itself.

To *CONTEST* history is to provide interpretations that run against traditional wisdom, or generally accepted views. *Salvador* provides a good example. This is the story of a once famous photographic journalist who is now a drunk and a deadbeat. Wanting to redeem his reputation in a country he already knows and loves, he convinces a friend to go with him to El Salvador. Their stories run on parallel tracks: the journalist uncovers evidence about death squads and American complicity with the reactionary elements of the nation, his friend gradually learns how different this Central American world is from the picture provided in the press back home. They and we witness the rise of the right, the death squad assassination of both Cardinal Romero and some American nuns, the crushing of a leftist revolution by the military with the aid and complicity of the United States government.

In a sense, the story of the two men becomes symbolic not just for what happened in Salvador in the early eighties, but for the whole thrust of American anti Communist foreign policy, with its history of covert actions. By telling the story obliquely, through the eyes of these two Americans, Stone engages the debates about American foreign policy since World War II. The critique made by the film is rarely heard outside history books written by leftists or the small radical press—that anti Communism is a cover for profits for

American corporations and power for our military and secret intelligence services; that the US has joyfully played in the name of this anti Communism a basically anti democratic role throughout the Western hemisphere, supporting killers and thugs who masquerade their own self interest behind anti-communism. Agree or disagree, this is at once a legitimate and exceedingly contestatory interpretation of our history rendered for the general public.

To *REVISION* history is to show us the past in new and unexpected ways, to utilize an aesthetic that violates the traditional realistic ways of telling the past, or that does not follow a normal dramatic structure, or that mixes genres and modes. Stone's best example is *JFK*, a film which that revisions history through both its form and its message -- the two of which are inextricably linked. (The violent objections to the work have had to do with both.) The film does not, of course, tell the story of JFK in office but of the assassination and its aftermath. Rejecting the Warren Commission findings that Lee Harvey Oswald was a lone assassin, the film explores the question of who was really responsible for the President's death. To do so, it recounts the events, real, possible, and imagined that lie behind the assassination; explains them as part of a major conspiracy at the highest levels of the US government, and interprets this conspiracy as one set in motion by various people, groups, agencies, and companies that had much economic gain to make from the continuation of the Cold War and the hot war (in Vietnam) against Communism. The driving force in the film is New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, a stand-in for all people of goodwill who believe in democracy and want the truth to be uncovered.

To put a label on it, *JFK* may be seen as a work of Modernist or Postmodernist history. It presents events from competing perspectives, mixes film stocks (black and white, color, and video), idioms, genres, and period styles (documentary, soviet montage, Hollywood naturalism, domestic melodrama) to represent the variety of contexts in which the event occurs. It suggests competing possibilities for what happened, thereby emphasizing the artificial and provisional reconstruction of any historical reality. In a sense, *JFK* both questions history as a mode of knowledge and asserts our need for it. Garrison questions witnesses, ferrets out documents, and tries out theories seeking a truth and at the same time showing that truth is impossible to find. History in the film thus becomes an unstable mix of fact, fiction, truth, illusion, a fragmentation of contexts, motives, beliefs, rumor. *JFK* leaves us with the feeling that we live in a dangerous, national security state that is out of control of the people, a state of hidden powers which control national and international events -- including the assassination.

The engagement of Oliver Stone with the discourse of history cannot be accidental. His works have a conscious thesis about the past, almost always stated right at the outset in a montage, or a speech, or some images which let us know that in what we are about to see great public issues are at stake. *JFK* opens with President Eisenhower's farewell address, with its warnings about the dangers to America of the growing military industrial complex. *Salvador* begins with a montage of slaughter and terror that comes to symbolize the

betrayal of democratic elements in that country. Early in *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic's family gathers to hear President Kennedy's inaugural address, with its call for Americans to bear and burden, pay any price to defend democracy. In all these works, the following dramatized history plays out this early thesis.

In Stone, you also find a larger, cumulative body of meaning. Taken together, his films create a kind of collective historical argument about contemporary America. Central to his historical vision is the assassination of his hero, JFK (Like any historian, Stone can be contradictory, for *Born on the Fourth of July* seems to point to Kennedy's rhetoric and stance as the cause of the Vietnam War.) From this he goes on to suggest the U.S. government is out of control, or in the hands of secret agencies; that lots of things being done in the name of the American people are criminal; that our democratic heritage and institutions serve as a kind of ideology to cover the activities of greedy men and scoundrels. One may ask: is this a true picture of America? Nobody can answer such a question for anyone else, but certainly enough evidence has become available since Vietnam -- of assassinations, secret wars, Watergate, Irangate, the Contras, the recent allegations concerning CIA involvement in Crack Cocaine -- to say this portrait is at the very least a historically plausible interpretation.

To what extent does Stone himself believe this interpretation? In truth, there is a kind of running contradiction in his historical work. In interviews and in the films he sometimes insists on the chaotic, multiple, relativist nature of history --in essence, on the untellability of the truth of the past. But this does not prevent him from going ahead and telling us stories that carry the force of truth. Indeed, more than simply storytelling, Stone uses the past for the purpose of delivering certain kinds of Truths about our national life. In its insistence on the moral lessons of History, he is exceedingly traditional.

Stone's dilemma springs from a simple human problem: he wants to have it both ways at once without having to reconcile the differences. He both wants to get the history right and yet he knows that such a task is essentially impossible. Perhaps this is why, in a film such as *JFK*, form can seem to be at war with the contents --the razzle dazzle multiple realities of the montage at odds with the limp realism of the domestic drama. Stone's sense that History is not a single story also can run against his notion that it is important to tell the Truth of the past. This dilemma may be why he appears angry in so many interviews about whether his works should be labeled History or Fiction. Often he tacks back and forth, claiming at one moment that he is a historian, then at another, saying he is only an entertainer. It is as if he dimly recognizes the dilemma and stymied by the contradiction, occasionally bursts into verbal violence, saying things like, "Who knows what history is? Its just a bunch of stories people tell each other around the campfire."

My suggestion is that History also resides in the kinds of works Stone has created for the screen. Given a society in which reading, particularly serious reading about the past, is increasingly an elitist endeavor, it is possible that such History on the screen is the History of the future. Perhaps in a visual culture, the truth of the individual fact is less important than the overall truth of the metaphors we create to help us to understand the

past. Fact has not always been the primary tool for telling the past. The truth of facts was never highly important to griots in Africa, or to history makers in other oral cultures. Maybe Oliver Stone is a kind of griot for a new visual age. He is in a sense making history by making myths. Making myths by wanting to tell Truths. Wanting the myths he recounts to have a truth value. And they do, but not the literal truths of the History of a scientific age as expressed in print. The problem Stone and other filmmakers face is real: how do you make the past serious to a large audience? How do you communicate lessons from the past to a public in a post literate age. Surely public history in the future is less likely to be propagated by scholarly monographs than by stories presented on the large and small screen.

However we think of it, we must admit that Film gives us a new sort of History, what we might call History as vision. Its earliest predecessor, oral history, tends to create a poetic relationship to world. Then over a two thousand year period, written history has created an increasingly linear, scientific relationship. Film changes rules of the game and creates its own sort of Truth, creates a multi-level past that has so little to do with language that it is difficult to describe adequately in words. Certainly the historical world created by film is potentially much more complex than written text. On the screen, several things occur simultaneously –image, sound, language, even text– elements that support and work against each other to create a realm of meaning as different from written history as written was from oral history. So different that it allows us to speculate that the visual media may represent a major shift in consciousness about how we think about our past. If this is true, then it may well be that a Historian like Oliver Stone is doing much more than showing us images of recent American. He is also probing the possibilities for the future of our past.

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