

REENACTMENT, FANTASY, AND THE PARANOIA OF HISTORY:
OLIVER STONE'S DOCUDRAMAS

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ABSTRACT

In the late 1980s and 1990s, American popular culture has been increasingly rife with conspiracy narratives of recent historical events. Among cultural producers, filmmaker Oliver Stone has had a significant impact on popular understanding of American culture in the late twentieth century through a series of docudramas which reread American history through the lens of conspiracy theory and paranoia. This paper examines the films of Oliver Stone—in particular *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *JFK*, and *Nixon*—asking why they have achieved popularity and brought about catharsis, why they are the subject of attack, and why it is useful to look beyond the debate about truth and falsehood that has surrounded them. It analyzes the ways in which Stone's status as a Vietnam veteran allowed *Platoon* to be accorded the authenticity of survivor discourse, whereas *JFK* and *Nixon* were subject to almost hysterical attack, not only because of Stone's assertions of conspiracy, but also because of his cinematic style of tampering with famous images. Taking these films as its point of departure, this paper examines the role of images in the construction of history, the form of the docudrama, the reenactment of historical images, fantasies of history, and ways in which paranoia is part of the practice of citizenship.

American society slouches toward the twenty-first century as a culture deeply suspicious of its history. We have moved from various phases of late modern optimism into cold-war fears, from 1960s disillusion to a late twentieth-century culture in which conspiracy theory forms a primary narrative. This is not the cold-war paranoia of the 1950s, though it bears many aspects of its legacy. It is, rather, a paranoia specifically about the telling of history, suspicious not only of potential dark forces in American society but also of the official narratives of history (produced by both the government and the media). History is being reread and retold in retrospect through the lens of conspiracy. The contemporary paranoia of American culture and about American history can be seen as a direct outcome of the political and social upheaval of the 1960s. The rupture of the social fabric in that moment, with its profound public reckoning with the raw fact of government lies, has produced perverse and compelling progeny. Prominent among them is filmmaker Oliver Stone. In the popular imagination of history as conspiracy, Stone holds a unique place as a controversial and

Both his supporters and his detractors recognize that Oliver Stone has had an extremely powerful role in shaping popular notions of American history of the late twentieth century for current and future generations. Through such films as *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *JFK* (1991), *Heaven and Earth* (1993), and *Nixon* (1995), Stone has, perhaps more than any other producer of popular culture, attempted to interpret, narrativize, and make meaning of late twentieth-century American history. As a consequence of his ideological stance, his position as a popular historian, and his particularly dogmatic style of filmmaking, he has been a figure upon whom tremendous hostility and anxiety have been projected. This paper proposes to intervene in the discussion of Stone as a historical filmmaker by examining the reasons why his films have been both popular and cathartic, why they are the subject of attack, and, in particular, why it is useful to look beyond the debate about truth and falsehood that has surrounded them. I would argue that Oliver Stone is in many ways the historian American culture deserves, one compellingly evocative and appropriate to his time, in all his aesthetic excesses, conspiratorial tendencies, and public audacity.

It is impossible to separate Stone's films from his personal history. As a veteran of the Vietnam War, Stone experienced combat and returned to this country deeply cynical about its values. He thus acquired the status of a particular kind of cultural figure, the Vietnam veteran. It is particularly ironic that the history of this country is being popularly written in part by a veteran of an unpopular war, whose historical viewpoint was shaped dramatically by the fact that this country sent him to fight for misguided reasons and cared little whether he lived or died. Stone speaks again and again from the perspective of the formerly naive, now deeply mistrusting veteran who realized how little his life as a soldier and his service as a citizen was worth. In this light, we can see his films as a strange and effective form of cultural revenge. In this paper, I would like to use Stone's films to reflect upon several larger issues of history-making: the role of the image in the production of history, the form of the docudrama, the reenactment of historical trauma, and the status of history as paranoia. His films reveal a contradiction between the desire to know completely the stories of history and a stylistic excess that acknowledges the role of fantasy in that knowing. For these reasons, his films offer an opportunity to examine some of the contradictions of our relationship to history-telling and the fantasy of history.

THE CAMERA IMAGE AND THE MAKING OF HISTORY

The process by which history is designated and produced in American culture is increasingly complex. It takes place through a variety of cultural arenas, including the media, Hollywood narrative films, and museums in addition to the academy; memories, artifacts, images, and events often get marked as *historical* without the aid of historians. Rather than oppose each other, memory and history are entangled, each pulling forms from the other. The boundaries be-

tween memory and history are often easily traversed, in multiple directions. Thus, a personal memory transformed into an image can acquire historical status, and the images of popular culture have the capacity to affect personal memories. Survivors of traumatic historical events often report that their personal memories are constantly reshaped into changing narratives. After a time they cannot distinguish personal memory from the memories of others or from those derived from popular culture. For example, according to Vietnam veteran William Adams:

what really happened is now so thoroughly mixed up in my mind with what has been said about what happened that the pure experience is no longer there. This is odd, even painful, in some ways. But it is also testimony to the way our memories work. The Vietnam War is no longer a definite event so much as it is a collective and mobile script in which we continue to scrawl, erase, rewrite our conflicting and changing view of ourselves.¹

The camera image is fundamental to this process of exchange between memory and history, and popular culture often incites us as viewers to acquire memories through our exposure to various cultural products. Personal and cultural memory does not reside in a photograph or film image so much as it is produced by it. Camera images can be seen as technologies of memory, mechanisms through which we can construct the past and situate it in the present. Such images have the capacity to create, interfere with, and trouble the memories we hold as individuals and as a nation. They can lend shape to histories and personal stories, often providing the material "evidence" on which claims of truth are based. Camera images are fundamentally paradoxical in that they are often imbued with a sense of the unattainable or magical at the same time that they are understood as evidence of the past. Allan Sekula writes, "The photograph is imagined to have, depending on its context, a power that is primarily affective or a power that is primarily informative. Both powers reside in the mythical truth-value of the photograph. But this folklore unknowingly distinguishes two separate truths: the truth of magic and the truth of science."²

This paradox is a primary aspect of our relationship to cinematic representations of the past. We can often be drawn in by both the realism and fantasy of popular films to feel as though we have acquired an "experience" of a particular historical event. For these reasons, the historical film and television drama have a primary role in producing a national experience of history. Indeed, it is characteristic of popular engagements with the cinematic and television narratives of the late twentieth century that a fluidity exists between the historical artifact and the Hollywood imaginary. For instance, at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., the name which visitors are most eager to touch and produce rubbings of is Arthur John Rambo.³ The fictional Rambo films,

1. William Adams, "Still Shooting after All These Years," *Mother Jones* (January 1988), 49.

2. Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (London, 1982), 94.

3. Martin Walker, "US Divided over Lessons of History," *Manchester Guardian Weekly* (April 23, 1995), 6.

which were firmly established in American political discourse, have thus been projected upon the names of the war dead and their memories on the Wall.

Popular Hollywood films have come to represent the "authentic" story of the history of the late twentieth century. Like World War II films before them, many of them have eclipsed and absorbed the documentary images of these events; indeed, many deliberately reenact iconic documentary images. Oliver Stone's films can be seen as exemplary texts within this cultural arena. In *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *JFK*, and *Nixon*, Oliver Stone has taken the images of history and dramatically reenacted, reorchestrated, and retold them through a prism of former 1960s radicalism and late-twentieth-century paranoia. He has done so in ways that have produced among critics both an uncritical embrace (in the case of *Platoon*) and a hysterical and vitriolic attack (for both *JFK* and *Nixon*). Insisting that he is only a storyteller, Stone has also provoked the ire of political pundits through the gestures he makes toward historical accuracy. While proclaiming his right as a "cinematic historian" to condense time, create character composites, and to change facts for the sake of narrative cohesion, he has also released his last two historical films with fact-laden, self-justifying books that attempt to shore up his work through the academic mechanisms of footnotes and a critical approach to evidence. The relationship of historical truth to narrative truth thus forms a primary site of debate for Oliver Stone's films, precisely because his role as a filmmaker (read: storyteller) allows him to privilege narrative truth.

That Stone's films can be bombastic, assaultive, and devoid of nuance and ambiguity is a criticism that I have no interest in countering. However, his recent films have been the subject of such a highly volatile register of criticism that I believe it is necessary to examine what other cultural fears and anxieties are at play. Stone has pushed a series of national buttons (though, one could argue, not always the right ones), and prompted public figures to attack his pretensions to the role of popular historian. He often represents these attacks as demonstrating that he has upset the political and media establishments by telling the "true" (and unwritten) story of history. However, it could also be argued that his films have provoked these critical responses both because of the ways in which they convincingly deploy the conventions of docudrama to spin conspiratorial theories, and because they have in certain ways transgressed the codes of history-telling through images.

THE DOCUDRAMA AND NARRATIVES OF AUTHENTICITY

Oliver Stone's claim to speak authoritatively on questions of American history was initially established through his status as a survivor of that history. When *Platoon* was first released, it was marketed as "the first real Vietnam film" precisely because of the autobiographical content of the script and its status as the first major Vietnam War film by a veteran. The film was praised for its realism and its ability to give spectators an experience of combat, the jungle,

American moviegoer—a citizen-consumer who, like the soldiers in Vietnam, is far from decision-making yet still accountable for its consequences—can find much to empathize with here.⁷ Stone thus achieved narrative authority (the right to produce narratives of history) precisely because he allowed viewers to feel they had experienced the war, and had suffered and absolved their guilt through identification with his cinematic stand-ins. The transference of public guilt over the war to anger at Vietnam veterans often takes the form of scapegoating the veteran for the memories that he or she represented. Yet, when this process takes place through representations in popular culture, it allows for a distanced form of resolution and a cathartic response in which viewers can feel that they too, like the naive soldier, were innocent in the beginning: we did not know what we were getting into, we had good intentions.

Characterizations of *Platoon* as a docudrama that tells the “real” story of the war ignore, however, the ways in which it is a conventional war film. It is, in fact, a morality tale in which the battles between good and evil in a platoon are presented as a microcosm of the entire war, if not a universal experience of war. As Stone’s stand-in, Chris Taylor (played by Charlie Sheen) enacts a standard narrative of masculinity as the young innocent man who, through rites of passage, is transformed into the seasoned and knowing veteran. Taylor’s moral struggle is enacted through his relationship to two sergeants in his platoon, both of whom are “lifters”: Barnes (played by Tom Berenger), the hardened and calculating fighting machine, the soldier who won’t die, a man honed by the insanity of war; and Elias (played by Willem Dafoe), who is compassionate and idealistic, a skilled guerrilla fighter and natural warrior. The film’s central metaphoric narrative recounts the internecine war of the platoon, in which, according to Taylor, “we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves.” This narrative has the impact of erasing the war of and with the Vietnamese, not only the terrible numbers of their dead but the story of the skilled Vietnamese army and guerrillas that ultimately defeated the United States. It is a hackneyed story of men being shaped by war, and *Platoon*’s only significant departure from the films of World War II, for example, is its portrayal of the ways in which men can act as cowards in the face of combat in addition to acting within the conventions of heroism.

In *Born on the Fourth of July*, Stone continued in the tradition of *Platoon* in telling the true life story of veteran activist Ron Kovic. An extended wail of sorrow for the wounded veteran and his loss of masculinity (and by extension for all veterans and all American men), *Born on the Fourth of July* also focused on a naive, unsuspecting young man who was shaped by his stunned realization of how little his life mattered. Kovic (played by Tom Cruise) is the classic noble grunt, whose realization of the consequences of government lies comes not in the battlefields of Vietnam, where he is paralyzed, but at home, where he is ignored by a country that cannot recognize his loss. The cinematic portrayal of

7. Pat Aufderheide, “Good Soldiers,” in *Seeing Through Movies*, ed. Mark Crispin Miller (New York, 1990), 84.

and the life of the American GI in Vietnam. Indeed, it was seen as providing potential veteran status for all spectators, with Steven Spielberg proclaiming, “It is more than a movie; it’s like being in Vietnam.”⁴ Through Stone’s veteran status and his deployment of codes of cinematic realism, *Platoon* was lauded as a true experience of history. David Halberstam wrote: “The other Hollywood Viet Nam films have been a rape of history. But *Platoon* is historically and politically accurate. It understands something that the architects of the war never did: how the foliage, the thickness of the jungle, negated U.S. technological superiority. . . . Thirty years from now, people will think of the Viet Nam War as *Platoon*.”⁵ *Platoon*’s status as an authentic historical document was also established through its marketing campaign, with posters for the film featuring a wartime photograph of Stone with other GIs as a parallel image to that of the actors in the film. Discussions of how the film had been produced (with Stone “at war” with Hollywood) were used to underscore its realistic representation of the war. Stone had hired a former Marine captain, Dale Dye, to put the actors through intensive combat training and simulation, forcing them to haul sixty-pound packs and eat C-rations. They were thus encouraged to view themselves as veterans; said Tom Berenger, “We didn’t even have to act. We were there.”⁶

Central to these claims for authenticity, however, was the film’s status as Stone’s autobiographical story, one that he was entitled to tamper with and reenact. Hence, Stone’s capacity to write history acquired the legitimacy of survivor testimony. Because survivors of traumatic historical events are often awarded moral authority, their testimony carries the weight of cultural value. Survivors, we believe, tell us the real story, one wrought from experience. It is part of the complex ambivalence (yet awe) with which Americans view survivors that they can be represented as figures of wisdom in popular culture while ignored in person, as has been the case with many Vietnam veterans.

Stone’s status as a survivor of a brutal history thus enhanced his credentials as a historian. This made the stakes of his role as a historical filmmaker high. In the case of *Platoon*, this translated into the notion that the true story of the war could only be told from the perspective of the grunt soldier, whose life was on the line in the jungle. While this is certainly an important story of the war, one which needed to be told, it should also be pointed out that it reveals little about other aspects of the war—its complexity as a technological and strategic war, its government and military policies, or its effect on the Vietnamese people. Yet, *Platoon*’s enormous success was due to the fact that it told the story of young men who found themselves caught up in the terror of the war, about which they understood little and over which they had no control, and with whom spectators had primary identification. As Pat Aufderheide writes, “The

4. Steven Spielberg, quoted on the back cover of Oliver Stone and Richard Boyle, *Platoon and Salvador* (New York, 1987).

5. Quoted in Richard Corliss, “*Platoon*,” *Time* (January 26, 1987), 58.

6. Quoted in Dan Goodgame, “How the War was Won,” *Time* (January 26, 1987), 58.

Hence, *JFK* sparked a volatile debate over the form of the docudrama itself, and its capacity to give narrative truth to potentially "false" stories of history. Stone responded to criticism by stating, "I defend what I'm doing as something between entertainment and fact."¹² The cinematic docudrama is often perceived as a debased form of history, sacrificing historical fact for dramatic impact, and described by critics as contaminating in its hybridity. It is worth pointing out, however, that the docudramas of World War II, which baldly rewrote history to present a nationalist narrative of unambiguous victory, did not raise these kinds of concerns about form. Rather, it is Stone's combination of conventional docudrama with a political critique of older nationalist narratives that provoked debate about the form of storytelling.

Several important issues are consistently absent from contemporary debates about Oliver Stone and the docudrama. First, this is not a new but a traditional cultural form for telling history, one which follows the tradition of the historical novel; and second, it is precisely because the docudrama combines fact and fiction, reenactment and fantasy, that it is a primary medium through which viewers' desires about history are satisfied. One could ask then, why have Stone's more recent films been the source of so much hostility and contempt, given the ways in which they remain resolutely within a conventional cinematic genre? What are their transgressions, both spoken and unspoken, that have made them the subject of such intense attack? Stone answers this question by proclaiming himself to have ferreted out the conspiracies of history, and to have thus angered the powers that be. Yet, this response is clearly disingenuous. The attacks on *JFK* and *Nixon* have been precisely about the power of these films to create the *fantasy* of history.

THE FANTASY OF HISTORY

The docudrama irritates in part because it demonstrates the inadequacy of the documentary image to engender the fantasies of history, for it is through the constructed narratives of the docudrama that the viewer can experience the fantasy of knowing, of having "been there." The popularity of the docudrama form exposes the fact that cultural and collective fantasies about what happened in specific historical events are as important in producing national meaning as any residue of the actual event. This is particularly obvious in the case of *JFK*, a film that investigates what is popularly regarded as the most pivotal moment in late-twentieth-century American history. The assassination of John F. Kennedy has been read in retrospect as a primary moment in America's loss of innocence. It is mythologized as the moment when this country went from a nation of promise, good intentions, and youthful optimism to one of cynicism, violence, and pessimism. The mythologizing of the assassination as the moment that changed everything, including the destiny of the country if not the world,

12. Oliver Stone, quoted in Walter Goodman, "With Fact in Service to Drama," *New York Times* (January 3, 1996), B2.

the noble grunt is contingent on the establishment of prior innocence—the youthful citizen who believed in America. This belief in prior innocence, which is also a necessary backdrop to paranoia, is the force that propels Stone's films forward, and forms the primary point of identification for viewers. It is the position from which Oliver Stone always speaks.

In *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*, Stone's status as an authentic witness mediated whatever excesses his docudramas were perceived to contain (as a veteran, he seemed to have earned the right to speak Kovic's story as well as his own). However, when Stone turned to the subject of the Kennedy assassination, he stepped outside of his survivor status, and was seen as trespassing upon historical terrain where he had no right to go. Ironically, Stone's motivation for examining the assassination emerged specifically from his veteran status—he wanted to understand the policy of the war and to determine whether or not the conspiracy that murdered Kennedy was working in the interest of prolonging it (at a tremendous cost of the lives of many young men like Stone). However, the public debate over *JFK* revealed that while Stone's veteran status was seen as legitimately giving him the right to speak to the experience of the veteran, it was not read as giving him the right to speak to war policy. After all, he was just a soldier.

Months before *JFK* was released, there were already many articles in print which condemned its version of history, and it ultimately generated more than twenty articles in the *New York Times* alone.⁸ The film was called "twisted" and "grotesque," with conservative columnist George Will ranting that Stone was "45 going on 8" and an "intellectual sociopath" whose "celluloid diatribe is an act of execrable history and contemptible citizenship by a man of technical skill, scant education and negligible conscience."⁹ Beyond these histrionics, however, was the larger issue that the film was being promoted by Stone as the story of the assassination that had not been told by journalists and historians—implying, in other words, that he was intervening because they had not done their job. As Barbie Zelizer writes, "*JFK* undermined the authority of nearly everyone who had been associated with the assassination story—the independent critics, the historians, and, most notably, the mainstream journalists. . . . Credentialing activity thus became positioned at the core of discussions about *JFK*."¹⁰ Zelizer suggests that the debate over the film was primarily about who had the right to shape discourse about the past, and that Stone provoked the anger of journalists precisely because his visual style exposed the parallel tactics of journalism in its use of reenactments and "simulations."¹¹

8. For an analysis of this coverage, see Peter Ehrenhaus, "Maligning the Messenger: Oliver Stone as Text," paper delivered at the Speech Communication Association conference, San Diego, November 1996.

9. George Will, "JFK: Paranoid History," *Washington Post* (December 26, 1991), A23.

10. Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory* (Chicago, 1992), 206.

11. *Ibid.*, 212.

because of the immensity of what it did not reveal. The well-known opening sequence of *JFK* marks the importance of the Zapruder film by deferring it. It builds to the moment of the assassination shot through a complex montage of documentary footage, reenacted scenes, and narrative conjecture. As the motorcade advances and shots ring out, the screen goes black and viewers can only glimpse the final fleeting frames as the limousine speeds away. *JFK* thus withholds the image of the film exactly as it was originally suppressed. While the still frames were published immediately in *Life* magazine, the moving image was not shown until 1975; similarly, we do not see it in Stone's film until a much later courtroom scene.¹⁴ The Zapruder film acquired its status in part through its promise to reveal everything through the codes of documentary truth, a promise subsequently thwarted by the withholding of any answer (both because it was restricted from public view and then revealed few clues to the assassination).

The inability of the documentary photographic image to reveal the reasons for the Kennedy assassination constituted a kind of cultural trauma. A film like *JFK* responds to the inability of the image to provide answers by "filling in" what the image could not tell, and attempting to complete the fragmented images of memory. It thus functions to fulfill the fantasies of history held by spectators, the fantasy of looking into the psyches of dead men, the fantasy of seeing the scenes-behind-the-scenes of our government, in which officials conspire to produce the lies they will tell the public, the fantasy of witnessing, the fantasy that we were there. This is the fantasy of knowing a phantom, one which we are incited to pursue yet always prevented from attaining.

Cinema is a particularly powerful tool in the incitement of desire and the fantasy of history precisely because of the classic ways in which it invites us to view the past as if we were there. The apparatus of cinema provides the spectator with an *experience* of the past, one of duration, identification, and emotion, of both anxiety and pleasure. While it may seem all too obvious to point out that we have not been there (that is, in the past) through our experience of its cinematic representation, these cinematic representations can stand in for the real. This can be seen in the fact that Ronald Reagan was able to retain his dignity even when it was clear that he had confused his cinematic experience as an actor in war films with the real-life experience of a World War II veteran and "mistakenly" claimed veteran status to reporters. Or, for instance, for director Stephen Spielberg (who is not a Vietnam veteran) to retain credibility while proclaiming about *Platoon*, "It's more than a movie; it's like being in Vietnam." Indeed, Vietnam veterans vociferously protested against the idea that watching the film of a historical event gave one any knowledge of its experience by displaying bumper stickers that read, "Vietnam Was a War Not a Movie." Veteran Henry Allen writes that he was constantly asked about Vietnam War films, "How isn't it like Vietnam?" He states, "I'd try to explain that it was just a movie, it was colored light moving around on a screen. It wasn't that these

perpetuates a simplistic and unexamined nostalgia about the 1950s and prevents healing or reexamination from taking place. Writes Michael Rogin:

The widespread feeling that America began to fall apart after Kennedy was killed prolongs national mourning; conversely, the extraordinary fixation on *JFK* is evidence of the public malaise. But the unresolved assassination, combined with Kennedy's complicity with the forces suspected of doing him in, has blocked a national mourning of the president he actually was, encouraging the regression from what [Melanie] Klein calls the depressive position, where loss can be acknowledged and overcome, to idealization, splitting, and paranoia.¹³

The trope of America's loss of innocence is one that has been consistently reiterated with historical events of the late twentieth century, including the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the Challenger explosion, and the Oklahoma City bombing. The regression and subsequent paranoia of the split self noted by Rogin are the outcome of the belief that an innocence did exist and was destroyed. In other words, the primary force of this narrative involves the establishment of a state of prior innocence. This need to keep the idea of an original national innocence intact thus sets the stage for both nostalgia and paranoia over how that innocence was lost. *JFK* reiterates this narrative of innocence and exploits the cultural anxiety about the unanswered questions of the event itself. Even before *JFK* was released, a large percentage of Americans believed that the U.S. government had not adequately explained his death and that the Warren Report constituted a coverup and was at least part fiction. *JFK* taps into the fantasy that we can know what happened and the ambivalence about the potential knowing of the "truth" of this event. The knowledge of what actually happened in the assassination, a knowledge that will clearly always be deferred, has the capacity to destroy the cultural nostalgia for the pre-assassination mythic time of innocence. An answer to the assassination question would almost certainly expose truths too painful and disruptive to know. The great flaw of *JFK* as a film is its attempt to answer, rather than to simply expose, this national state of being.

The central element of this fantasy of knowing what happened in the moment of the assassination—both its cause and its meaning—is the Zapruder film. Yet, the meaning of what took place in November 1963 can never be contained within the single-framed images of the film. The Zapruder film was autopsied, like the President's corpse, and neither yielded an answer. The existence of the film opened the door for scientific inquiry, but the sequence of images has defied such analysis. Science cannot fix the meaning of the Zapruder film precisely because the narrative of national and emotional loss outweighs empirical investigation. We cannot have, perhaps ultimately do not want to have, a definitive answer to why the assassination happened; the truth might be overwhelming.

The Zapruder film gained its status as a sacred image of history, perhaps the most famous image of late-twentieth-century American history, precisely

13. Michael Rogin, "Body and Soul Murder: *JFK*," in *Media Spectacles*, ed. Marjorie Garber, Jann Matlock, and Rebecca Walkowitz (New York, 1993), 9.

14. I examine the history and meaning of the Zapruder film at length in *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley, 1997), Chapter 1.

folks couldn't tell the difference between a war and a movie; they didn't want to. . . . In their way, I think, they wanted to be veterans, too."¹⁵

The cinematic experience of *JFK* invites us to stand, like those other innocent bystanders, in Dealey Plaza in Dallas, and relive the shock and pain of that moment as well as the unsuspecting celebration that preceded it. Yet, it is precisely its conspiratorial narrative that allows *JFK*'s cinematic fantasy to move beyond the "you are there" experience of history. Stone's film suggests that it can show us what no one saw, can give us not only what did happen but what *could have happened*. We are thus positioned by the film to participate in a speculation about history, which is an even more powerful fantasy of history, beyond the fantasy of knowing what happened to the possibility of knowing what might have been.

REENACTMENT AND THE CATHARSIS OF HISTORY

The docudrama succeeds as a form of popular culture specifically through its exploitation of the dual role of cinema as a representation of the real and a source of fantasy and identification. At the same time, it is a form of cultural reenactment and as such shares in larger cultural processes of memory and healing.

Participation in the nation often takes the form of watching or taking part in cultural reenactments. Many historical ceremonies involve the reenactment of battles, with participants sporting historical costumes. At the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, members of the Veterans Vigil camp out at the memorial, replaying the codes of war as if they are guarding it. At the fiftieth anniversary of World War II, aging veterans parachuted into the fields of Europe, reenacting their wartime moments of daring—perhaps the moment when they felt their lives held the most meaning. Cultural reenactment is a form of catharsis in which historical moments achieve a kind of narrative closure through their replaying. It is not clear, however, whether reenactment constitutes an erasure and smoothing over of the past or whether it can be an active engagement with the past. Memories and histories are often entangled, conflictual, and constitutive of each other. In addition, personal participation in reenactments carries different cultural implications than those moments when national stories are reenacted through Hollywood docudramas.

In films such as *Platoon*, *JFK*, and *Nixon*, Stone reenacts famous documentary photographs, subsuming them into his memory texts. In so doing, he enhances the claim of the historical docudrama to represent authentic historical images precisely because the reenactment of historical images has a tendency to replace and subsume those original images. In addition, Stone has tampered with several images, including the Zapruder film, which had previously attained a kind of sacred status as iconic images. I believe that these are factors, however unarticulated, that explain the intensity of the attacks on his most recent films.

The Zapruder film is seen as a sacred historical image because of the ways in which it has become synonymous with the event itself. When Stone reenacted the assassination, and reworked the Zapruder film into a new, improved closeup version—intensifying the image, cropping it tightly, and amplifying its color—he actively incorporated the image into a memory text. However, this reenactment had the effect of irrevocably altering the original film itself. Indeed, twenty years from now, the film may exist primarily as a cultural text in its form in *JFK*.

While his reconfiguration of the Zapruder film may be his most explicit image reenactment, Stone's other historical films are filled with specific historical image references. In *Platoon*, several famous documentary images of the Vietnam War are referenced as a means of establishing the realistic codes of the film. The image of a Vietcong suspect being shot at close range is reenacted in a scene which also evokes the profoundly disturbing images of My Lai. The television scenes of GIs setting fire to a village with Zippo lighters is replayed in order to invoke for some viewers the initial moment of shock when they first saw those images. Reenactment thus functions in the film both to authenticate its form of history-making as well as to provide a jolt of the originary power of the documentary image.

In *Nixon*, Stone continued in this strategy by having actor Anthony Hopkins reenact Richard Nixon's most famous moments of image history—the Khrushchev kitchen debate; the telecast of the Checkers speech, with Pat sitting stoically by his side as he leans into the camera; and the endless campaign shots of his sudden smile and waving arms, flashing V signs in the air. Indeed, Nixon provided such a rich topic for historical docudrama precisely because of the stagy unpredictability of his public image. It is worth noting that the most sensational and dramatically riveting scenes in *Nixon*—the Checkers speech, and Nixon's late night visit to debate politics with antiwar protesters at the Lincoln Memorial—might have been laughed out of the script had they not been based on fact.

That Stone has provoked anxiety in reenacting these images of history is indicated in part by the ways in which reviewers have discussed his editing style. The kind of complex intercutting of reenactment, documentary, and fiction that forms central scenes in *JFK* and *Nixon* is often characterized as being historically contaminating and potentially exploitative of unsuspecting viewers. In a typical example, critic David Armstrong wrote: "I am troubled by Stone's mix'n' match of recreated scenes and archival footage, concerned that the young viewers to whom he dedicates the film could take his far-reaching conjecture as literal truth. And I am irked by his appropriation of TV car commercial quick-cutting. For me, watching *JFK* was like watching three hours of MTV without the music."¹⁶

16. David Armstrong, "Killing the Messenger," *San Francisco Chronicle Image* (February 16, 1992), 14.

Several theorists have noted the ways in which Stone's aggressive editing style has come under criticism as a formal transgression of history-telling. Quoting Richard Griener's accusation of Stone "directing his film in a pummeling style, a left to the jaw, a right to the solar plexus, flashing forward, flashing backward, crosscutting relentlessly, shooting in tight [in close], blurring, obfuscating, bludgeoning the viewer until Stone wins, he hopes, by a TKO,"¹⁷ Hayden White sees Stone's style being "treated as if it were a violation of the spectator's powers of perception."¹⁸ Hence, Stone's techniques of editing evoke the fear among critics that viewers would be unable to decipher the difference between docudrama and documentary—that they would uncritically read Stone's history as objective truth.

The form of Stone's storytelling is thus as much at issue as the story that he chooses to tell. These critics are preoccupied with concerns about viewer susceptibility, in particular young viewers, though one could argue that, having been raised on MTV, they are actually more likely to have the image skills to read Stone's montage sequences than older viewers. Such criticism thus borrows, perhaps unknowingly, from traditional models of mass culture that perceived viewers as passive recipients of the messages of dominant culture. Yet, this infantilizing of the viewer is merely a foil for the concern that Stone's editing style will have a contaminating effect on representations of history. This position not only perceives viewers as susceptible and manipulable, but also understands memory and images as pure and unchanging texts.

Criticism of Stone's direct manipulation of historical images is thus deeply rooted in the belief that memory can remain stable and that the images of history retain their original meanings. The representation of Stone's visual techniques as contaminating and manipulative is based on a nostalgic view of the historical image as an unaltered receptacle of the past. One could argue, on the other hand, that in mixing fact, fiction, documentary, and reenactment, Stone is producing dramatic texts of memory, which exemplify in compelling ways its unstable nature. Memories are constantly rescripted, reenacted, and retold. Perhaps Stone's work is best seen as an active scripting of memory texts, which in turn have the power to affect our memories, rather than as work that subscribes to the traditional codes of historical narrative. Indeed, the reenactment of docudramas reveals the traffic between the realms of cultural memory and history, and indicates the fluid realm of memory itself.

THE PARANOIA OF HISTORY

One of the primary criticisms of Oliver Stone's films is that he tells the history of America through narratives of conspiracy theory, which are read in the media as both extreme and unbelievable. In both *JFK* and *Nixon*, Stone high-

lights the role of the military-industrial complex in dictating historical consequences, dramatically referring to it as the "beast." Charging Stone with a conspiratorial obsession and paranoid tendencies has allowed many critics to avoid discussing his work in terms of ideology—specifically, Stone's skill as a filmmaker to craft stories through the lens of unreconstructed 1960s leftism in film conventions previously reserved for dominant Hollywood ideologies. I would argue, however, that Stone's conspiratorial perspective is not exceptional but rather an essential component of the experience of citizenship. Oliver Stone is a primary cultural messenger about both our paranoia about history and our historical paranoia. In many ways, he is reflecting, rather than inciting, the paranoia of American citizenship. This accounts for the capacity of his films to inspire catharsis in their spectators. Everyone knows, of course, that just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean that they are not out to get you.

This demands that we examine paranoia as a social and historical practice, rather than simply as a part of individual psychology. At a simple level, paranoia is the belief that some kind of threat is both ongoing and imminent, and that the truth is being hidden from view. Yet, paranoia is also about understanding the world in terms of connectedness, indeed perceiving it to be organized beneath the surface.¹⁹ Rather than a pathology, paranoia as a social practice is an integral aspect of the ways in which citizens mediate their relationship to political power. Dana Polan writes,

paranoia is not a force that comes in to disturb an already stable conjunction of power and knowledge; quite the contrary, paranoia may be a condition to which power and knowledge are responses—fearful retreats to a hoped-for position of security and reestablished authority. . . . Paranoia . . . is not an eternally abstract condition but a specifically social way of responding to new permutations in everyday perception and possibility.²⁰

Paranoia and its playing out in conspiracy theory can thus be seen as a response to the ways in which government entities, and their conduits in the media, address us as citizens. For instance, every American knows that the government lies. It is given the right to do so in the name of national security, and we are framed as citizens to believe that we do not have the right to know all of the government's secrets. Hence, where we align ourselves politically as citizens merely determines the extent to which we believe this lying takes place and the degree to which we believe the government is lying with our interests at heart.

Paranoia and its shadow, cynicism, is the form through which we mediate not only our relationship to the nation, but also the daily infantilization that is a part of citizenship. The fantasy of a government coverup allows for a public venting over the daily ways in which people perceive the government as not

19. For discussion of cultural paranoia as a methodology for examining the interconnectedness of political and epistemological elements, see Patrick O'Donnell, "Engendering Paranoia in Contemporary Narrative," in *National Identities and Post-American Narratives*, ed. Donald Pease (Durham, N.C., 1994), 181–204.

20. Dana Polan, *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative and the American Cinema, 1940–1950* (New York, 1986), 15.

17. Richard Griener, "Movie Madness," *Times Literary Supplement* (January 24, 1992), 16–17.

18. Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York, 1996), 19.

they can be seen as straddling elements of both modern and postmodern history. While these films are conventional in their attempts to express a "truth" of history, one could argue that their excessiveness of style and self-consciousness about spinning historical fantasies place them within postmodern history, indicating an understanding of the limits of what can be known. Hayden White defines postmodern history as a kind of slippage between cultural categories of representation:

What happens in the postmodernist docu-drama or historical metafiction is not so much the reversal of this relationship (such that real events are given the marks of imaginary ones while imaginary events are endowed with reality) as, rather, the placing in abeyance of the distinction between the real and the imaginary. Everything is presented as if it were the same ontological order, both real and imaginary—realistically imaginary or imaginarily real, with the result that the referential function of the images is etiolated.²³

In this light, the strength of Stone's work can be seen as his stylistic capacity to show the complex mix of fantasy and fact, of real and imaginary, in historical narrative. While he feels obliged, as a cinematic historian, to shore up his films with factual references, his style, both in terms of its docudrama form and its mixing of reenacted and documentary images, deliberately obscures its referents. In the public debate over *Nixon*, for instance, *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich wrote that the film was so "nakedly subjective" that "far from masquerading as docudrama, it flaunts its fantasies."²⁴ It is precisely that excess, that "flaunting" that interrupts any notion that history can be told outside of fantasy—the fantasy of knowing what really happened, what people were really thinking, what took place, and what could have been.

Hence, Oliver Stone has accidentally hit upon a cultural form for reenacting history that exposes the fundamental questions of postmodern history. In 1991, he stated:

What is history? Some people say it's a bunch of gossip made up by soldiers who passed it around a campfire. They say such and such happened. They create, they make it bigger, they make it better. I knew guys in combat who made up shit. I'm sure the cowboys did the same. The nature of human beings is that they exaggerate. So, what is history? Who the fuck knows?²⁵

I would argue with him though, that history and cultural memory are derived precisely from the debate, the conflicting accounts, the reworking and revision, the fantasy and the archival artifacts, the arguments and the competing narratives. That is history's essence: the *work* of confronting the past, the *labor* of both confronting what cannot be known and of smoothing it over, the *stuff* of contradiction.

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23. White, "The Modernist Event," 19.

24. Frank Rich, "The Stoning of Stone," *New York Times* (December 27, 1996), A15.

25. *Esquire* (November 1991), 93.

telling them the truth, and experience the government and its public officials as treating them like children. Indeed, stories that reaffirm national ideology tend to replay the trope of "infantile citizenship" in which a naive and uninformed citizen, for instance, travels to Washington, D.C., and learns the hard way that the system works.²¹ These characters can be allied with the naive, unsuspecting citizens of Stone's films—the noble grunt, Jim Garrison in *JFK*, for example—who believed in the system, were failed by it, and were then forced to reaffirm it through different means.

History as conspiracy theory is also the consequence of our media-savvy culture, the end result of the relentless spin, political rhetoric, and doublespeak that reveal an underlying mistrust of public intelligence. Political debates, for instance, over the regulation of television and the internet always focus on their effects upon children in which the figure of the child-viewer inevitably stands in for all viewer-citizens. Similarly, when the government and military insist on denying the location of specific military facilities and test sites in the California desert, they should hardly be surprised when those sites become the source of rampant UFO stories and conspiracy theories. Treat citizens like children and they will often behave like them.

Popular culture in the 1990s is increasingly preoccupied with rewriting history through narratives of UFOs and aliens, figures that have served since the beginning of the cold war as cultural displacements of the nation's fear, fantasies, and imagined enemies. Thus, television shows like the *X-Files* and *Dark Skies* have rewritten the events of the late twentieth century through the conspiracy narrative of a government coverup of the existence of UFOs and aliens on earth. While narratives of paranoia are often culturally disruptive and can be seen as powerfully evoking the alienation of everyday life and the terror of citizenship, it is also possible to see them as providing a particular form of comfort. The smoke-filled dark rooms in the *X-Files*, *JFK*, and *Nixon* may depict the dark forces that are supposedly governing our country, but they also indicate that there is a design behind the confusion of history—that there are people who are orchestrating the daily oppression. If the apparent chaos is being organized by people with power in dark rooms, instead of being inherent in the system, then we can still believe that the system works. For this reason, I believe that conspiracy theories proliferate today precisely because they offer us a means both to vent our frustrations and to feel good about the system in which we live. Oliver Stone's version of history provides public catharsis because of his capacity to enact his fantasies of the dark forces at work while affirming the coherence of the American system.²²

Ultimately Stone's historical films struggle between their desire to uncover an untold history on the one hand, and their structural and narrative complexity (indicating the impossibility of a single narrative history) on the other. As such,

21. See Lauren Berlant, "The Theory of Infantile Citizenship," *Public Culture* 5 (1993), 395–410.

22. See Robert Burgoyne, "Modernism and the Narrative of Nation in *JFK*," in *The Persistence of History*, 113–125.